

# The Art of Caring

The Reversal of Gender Roles in Sarah Moss's *The Tidal Zone* (2016) and Rachel Cusk's *The Bradshaw Variations* (2009)

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# Table of Content

Preface .....	4
Introduction .....	5
Sarah Moss, <i>The Tidal Zone</i> (2016) .....	7
Rachel Cusk, <i>The Bradshaw Variations</i> (2009) .....	8
Theoretical Perspectives: Gender and Domesticity .....	10
A Brief History of Gender .....	10
The History of Domestic Roles .....	16
<i>The Tidal Zone</i> .....	24
A. Narrative Structure .....	24
B. Adam .....	25
C. Emma .....	29
D. Marriage .....	32
E. Society .....	34
<i>The Bradshaw Variations</i> .....	37
A. Narrative Structure .....	37
B. Thomas .....	38
C. Tonie .....	43
D. Marriage .....	45
E. Society .....	50
Conclusion .....	53
Bibliography .....	59
Abstract .....	62

## Preface

I would like to use this preface to thank some people without whom this master thesis would not be what it is. First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, prof. dr. Elke D'hoker. I am deeply grateful for all the wise words and the constructive criticism she gave me. Her ever kindness and patience allowed me to grow in the process of writing this thesis.

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## Introduction

“He’s her father, he doesn’t “babysit”: he *parents*.” –Jessica Valenti (*The Guardian*, 9 June 2014)

When a father takes care of his children, say, for one night, does he babysit or does he parent? If it is agreed that he parents, how can the father as a full-time parent be imagined, the so-called stay-at-home dad? Does he remain a ‘traditional’ male who happens to perform domestic tasks and spend more time than average taking care of the children? Or does he become thought of as more ‘feminine’ or more ‘motherly’ and, therefore perhaps, less of a man? Even if the stay-at-home dad challenges stereotypical gender roles, his representations are very much bound up with the gender ideologies that are part of our culture. Investigating the figure of the stay-at-home dad in literature and popular culture thus allows us to scrutinise these gender ideologies as well. In Kirk Jones’s film *What To Expect When You’re Expecting* (2012) the “Man Play Date”-scene stages four fathers who meet with a soon-to-be father in the park. They appear confident when they enter the park gates with perambulators in hand and toddlers in bag carriers, but their bold entrance is immediately countered when they explain their struggles and insecurities in taking over the day-to-day care of their children from their wives. The soon-to-be father is warned: “This is the side where happiness goes to die”. Women, they agree, “pretty much control the baby universe” and they believe that women have a kind of innate ability to know how children ought to be brought up properly. A caretaking father, however, is allowed small mistakes: putting the diaper on backwards, forgetting to heat up the milk bottle etc. Despite their complaining and warning, they all agree that a parent’s love for his/her child makes it all worth it. Though it is unclear whether these fathers have chosen to be caretaking fathers, in many other films, when fathers are depicted as primary caretakers, it is either because they find themselves suddenly responsible for their child(ren) – the mother either leaves or dies – or because the father loses his job. This is clear from numerous examples: Robin Williams in *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993; loses job), Nemo’s father Marlin in *Finding Nemo* (2003; wife dies), Ben Affleck in *Jersey Girl* (2004; wife dies), Will Smith in *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006; wife leaves), Russell Crowe in *Fathers and Daughters* (2015; wife dies) and so many others. Most examples include the wife dying and the father finding himself responsible for his child(ren) all of a sudden and in the full moment of grief still. Thus, popular culture mainly imagines the father as primary caretaker as the result of fate and obligation, never of choice.

The question then arises whether stay-at-home fathers are represented in literature as well, and how. Are male primary caretakers in literature characterised with more nuance than in said popular culture, or does literature offer the stereotype also? Overall, literature offers a more diverse array of representations. In Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), single parent “Pap” Finn is an abusive alcoholic who kidnaps his own son and, accordingly, does not set a good example. Fyodor Dostoevsky, in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879-1880), depicts with Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov a 55-year-old man who marries twice, fathers three sons (plus one illegitimate son) and who could not care for his children any less. Tony Parson’s

Harry Silver in *Man and Boy* (1999) is a happily married and successful man until he cheats on his wife and she leaves. In an instant, he loses his wife and, in his struggle to figure out how to be a single parent, he loses his job as well. He then becomes the unemployed and only caretaker of his four-year-old son. Two literary novels that depict a father who becomes a stay-at-home dad by choice are Sarah Moss's *The Tidal Zone* (2016) and Rachel Cusk's *The Bradshaw Variations* (2009). Both novels portray wives who are employed full time and unemployed husbands who take care of the household and the children, a situation otherwise known as the reversal of gender roles. Accordingly, the research questions of this master thesis are: How is the stay-at-home dad represented in Sarah Moss's *The Tidal Zone* (2016) and Rachel Cusk's *The Bradshaw Variations* (2009)? How do the novels underscore or challenge the gender norms associated with mothering and fathering: are gender roles reversed, adjusted or totally rejected? In order to address these questions, the authors and their work will be presented first. Then a brief overview is provided of the notion of gender as it has been discussed in feminist theory and gender studies over the past few decades as well as an overview of the evolution of domestic roles. These introductory chapters are followed by the analysis of each novel in turn. A conclusion brings the novels together in a comparative perspective.

## Sarah Moss, *The Tidal Zone* (2016)

Born in Glasgow in 1975, Sarah Moss moved to Manchester as a young child and lived there until she turned eighteen and left for Oxford. She characterises her childhood as ‘northern’, in the sense that her life revolved around her home, her grandparents and hiking in the surrounding mountains. For Moss, “these are still the landscapes that feel like home” (Moss 2018). She remained in Oxford for ten years as she obtained a bachelor’s degree, a Master and, finally, became a Doctor of Philosophy in English literature. Her research has dealt with the literature of the far north of Europe, and food and material culture in fiction with a focus on the Romantic and early Victorian periods. She lectured at the University of Kent from 2004 to 2009, the year in which her first novel, *Cold Earth*, was published. In 2010, she took a year’s leave to teach at the University of Iceland. On her return, she was appointed Senior Lecturer in Literature and Place at Exeter University’s Cornwall Campus, where she taught courses on various kinds of writing about nature and place. Today, she is a Professor in Creative Writing at the University of Warwick and she lives with her family in Warwickshire.

So far, Moss has published six books: five novels and one memoir. Her novels include *Cold Earth* (2009), *Night Waking* (2011), *Bodies of Light* (2014), *Signs for Lost Children* (2015) and *The Tidal Zone* (2016). *Names for the Sea: Strangers in Iceland* (2012) is a non-fictional account of her life in Reykjavik in 2009-10. In addition, she has written academic books on Romantic-era British literature, food history and gender. *Night Waking* was one of the winners in the Fiction Uncovered promotion for 2011 and was the Mumsnet Book of the Month in May 2012. *Names for the Sea* was the Mumsnet Book of the Month in July 2013 and was also shortlisted for the RSL Ondaatje Prize in 2013. *The Tidal Zone*, *Signs for Lost Children* and *Bodies of Light* were all shortlisted for the Wellcome Book Prize in 2017, 2016 and 2015 respectively.

Sarah Moss describes *The Tidal Zone* as “a rupture of ordinary life” (Moss 2018). The protagonist of the novel, Adam Goldschmidt, and his family live in a slightly-too-small house in a town in the middle of England. Adam is a stay-at-home dad who is also engaged in a research project about the history of the local cathedral. His wife, Emma, is a general practitioner who works long hours. They have two daughters, fifteen-year-old Miriam and nine-year-old Rose. One day, during lunch break at school, Miriam collapses. She cannot breathe and then her heart stops beating. She is resuscitated and taken to hospital. After staying in hospital for twelve days, Miriam returns to her family and life resumes more or less as before.

*The Tidal Zone* was shortlisted for the Wellcome Book Prize 2017 and reviewers received the novel well. In her review for *The Guardian*, fellow novelist Penelope Lively calls Moss’s story “a novel for our times” (Lively 2016). First because the National Health Service – flaws included – is one of the central themes of the novel. Miriam is diagnosed with idiopathic exercise-induced anaphylaxis – which may be genetic – and, as a seizure is likely to occur again, she is under NHS care. At the same time, Emma is exhausted to the bone because of the NHS’s demands and deficiencies. Secondly, Miriam is very much an adolescent of our times: “extremely bright, sassy, ferociously critical of practically everything, in language that can seem rather too sophisticated” (Idem). She is an example of what today is often called a “woke” teen: she is aware of and

sensitive about homophobia, misogyny and everything that is rooted in but a hint of discrimination and oppression. The novel as a whole, then, for *Lively*, is “an intensely contemporary novel... an excellent read, inviting empathy from any parent” (Idem). Lucy Scholes, writing for the *Independent*, claims that, with *The Tidal Zone*, Moss is “at the top of her game, ... [having] written a new kind of state-of-the-nation novel” (Scholes 2016). Scholes nominates Moss “one of the best British novelists writing today, and *The Tidal Zone*, which reads like the electric shock of a defibrillator ... confirms this” (Idem). In sum, most reviewers of *The Tidal Zone* praise Moss’s writing style and the credibility of her characters. Few reviewers comment on the unconventional family relations in the novel: Adam, who holds a PhD in history, voluntarily followed his wife when she moved around for her job and decided to stay at home and take care of the children. Traditional gender roles are thus reversed in *The Tidal Zone* – but how, to what extent, and with what consequences?

## Rachel Cusk, *The Bradshaw Variations* (2009)

Rachel Cusk was born in Canada in 1967 but the family soon moved to the United States so that she spent much of her childhood in Los Angeles. In 1974, the family moved again, only this time they settled in England and Cusk finished her education at St. Mary’s convent school in Cambridge. After that, she went to the University of Oxford to read English. Shortly after receiving her degree from Oxford, Cusk started writing her first novel, *Saving Agnes* (1993), because, as she explains in a 2009 interview with Lynn Barber, “leaving university facing this idea that there is something called adult life that I was going to enter and get a job – I just couldn’t. So writing became what I did as soon as I stopped studying” (Barber 2009). The decision to write right after finishing her education meant that she had no financial means to rely upon and so she accepted whatever job she could find and earned just enough to live an independent yet “lonely, precarious existence” (Idem). In the interview, she continues: “I didn’t go out unless I had to. I was frightened of the intense, solitary way I wrote, but I put everything into learning how to write a book” (Idem). But the tide turned and *Saving Agnes* brought her the Whitbread First Novel Award and, accordingly, recognition. She then met Josh Hillman, a banker, whom she married shortly afterwards, but the marriage failed. A few months after her divorce, she became reacquainted with an old fellow student from Oxford, Adrian Clarke, and when they decided to move in together Cusk became the stepmother of Clarke’s daughter from his first marriage. Cusk was primarily anxious about motherhood and its inevitable restrictions but she would soon become a mother herself: in 1999 she gave birth to Albertine and in 2000 to Jessye. Her experience of motherhood became the basis for her first non-fictional piece of writing, *A Life’s Work: On Becoming a Mother*, which was published in 2001. She married Clarke in 2001 and he put an end to his lawyer career to take care of the children and the household so that she could dedicate herself completely to her writing. The couple divorced in 2012. Cusk defines herself explicitly as feminist, a conviction she traces back to her strict Catholic upbringing: “I saw the nuns who taught us as a symbol of female powerlessness. They were passive, wore

black habits and had given up their lives. Like lots of Catholic girls, I felt shame about my body and sexuality” (quoted in De Dorlodot 2014: 14).

In 2003 Rachel Cusk was nominated by Granta magazine as one of 20 ‘Best of Young British Novelists’. Her other titles include *The Lucky Ones* (2003), a story of parenthood and life’s transformations; *Arlington Park* (2006), which was shortlisted for the 2007 Orange Prize for Fiction; *The Last Supper: A Summer in Italy* (2009), a memoir of a three-month family stay in Italy; the novel under discussion, *The Bradshaw Variations* (2009); and the *Outline*-trilogy (*Outline* (2014), *Transit* (2017) and *Kudos* (2018)) which was inspired by Cusk’s experience as a teacher of creative writing in Athens (Holcombe 2018). Cusk’s work is oriented towards contemporary debate. At the same time, she never loses awareness of the British literary heritage. She has also been successful in mixing an autobiographical writing style with a more theoretical introduction, as is the case in her non-fictional *A Life’s Work*.

*The Bradshaw Variations* offers a window into the lives of a large cast of characters and all are acquainted with a member of the Bradshaw family. The married couples the novel focuses on are Howard Bradshaw and his wife Claudia, his younger brother Thomas and his wife Tonie, and their younger brother Leo and his wife Susie. *The Bradshaw Variations* is set in contemporary England. The novel revolves around Tonie and Thomas and they undergo the biggest change: when Tonie is presented with the opportunity to become head of the English department at the university where she works part time, Thomas resigns from his job and takes over Tonie’s domestic charges. They are both confronted with unexpected difficulties and grow more and more estranged. Tonie engages in an extramarital affair, while their eight-year-old daughter Alexa falls seriously ill. In the end, they return to their previous roles.

Though Rachel Cusk’s writing has attracted more controversy than the novels of Sarah Moss – partly due to her writing on motherhood, in which she does not mince matters – this novel was well received. Hilary Mantel, in her review of *The Bradshaw Variations* for *The Guardian*, felt “delighted” by the novel, for, according to Mantel, Cusk “writes to rebut the idea that domestic life, as subject matter, is trivial and whimsical” and with this novel, Cusk has written “a subtle evocation of family life” (Mantel 2009). The quality of Cusk’s observation is “skewering”, her mix of scorn and compassion “bracing” (Idem). Yet Mantel also calls Cusk’s preoccupations “elitist” and “her stylistic ambition pronounced” (Idem). Helen Brown, in her review for *The Telegraph*, writes that she enjoyed reading this “crisp new novel by Rachel Cusk” as well: “Cusk is mercilessly acute in her dissection of the Bradshaw family. Their failures are exposed by her scalpel prose. It makes the reader feel rather protective of them, which is a clever trick” (Brown 2009). Indeed, Brown reckons she will continue thinking about the characters, wondering how the rest of their lives will unfold. Though reviewers of *The Bradshaw Variations* note the novel’s preoccupation with family life, they do not really comment on the unconventional decision of Thomas to give up his job and become a stay-at-home dad. A later chapter of this thesis is concerned with how the reversal of gender roles is represented in *The Bradshaw Variations* and how it is similar to or different from its representation in *The Tidal Zone*.

## Theoretical Perspectives: Gender and Domesticity

### *A Brief History of Gender*

“[T]ell me what your desire is and I will tell you who you are.” –Michel Foucault (quoted in Glover & Kaplan 2009: 8)

Before the reversion of gender roles in Sarah Moss’s *The Tidal Zone* and Rachel Cusk’s *The Bradshaw Variations* can be examined, the concept of gender and its ideological implications need to be discussed. In general, ‘sex’ is considered the biological identification of a body as either male or female, as opposed to ‘gender’, which is regarded as the sociological or cultural construct of a person as either masculine or feminine. In other words, a biological female body becomes a *woman* if and only if that female body exhibits the feminine traits it takes to be deemed ‘woman’ – and it is the same for men. Accordingly, a male body can adopt what are considered feminine characteristics and roles in the same way that a female body, a biological woman, can display traits or patterns of behaviour typically associated with masculinity. In the following, the conceptualisation of gender across Western history will briefly be considered as well as the way certain characteristics and roles have come to be associated with a certain gender. An interesting question to keep in mind is whether the concept of gender has always implied the same connotations as it does today. An important source of information is Claire Colebrook’s *Gender* (2004), which offers an overview of the conceptualisation of gender, its spreading and change in understanding. In addition, David Glover and Cora Kaplan’s *Genders* (2009) provides an introduction to gender as well, offering a history of the term as well as an explanation for its being *en vogue* still in literary and cultural theory. It is therefore also of great importance to this overview.

The idea of gender has already been around since Antiquity. In Plato’s allegory of the cave, Plato explains his view on life, *bios*: the world we see around us, the material world, is but a copy, a mirroring, of the *real* world, which is the world of ideas. He calls this mirroring *mimesis*, representation. To make this distinction between the sensual world we experience and the eternal world of ideas and forms more clear, he uses the idea of gender, in its antique understanding that is. At the time, gender does not entail anything physical or material but something formal, namely the way something (or someone) formally interacts, relates and positions itself. Masculinity, the male, is understood as active and life-giving, whereas to be feminine is to be passive and receptive. What is more, the notion of gender is used to explain processes beyond the human body as well, such as forces of nature or politics. As Claire Colebrook argues in her study *Gender* (2004):

Before modern science defined the genetic and anatomical differences between sexes, Western thought had defined some of its most basic notions – including being and non-being – through the image of gender. (Colebrook 2004: 2)

Plato, with his distinction between the world of ideas and the world of matter, further considers forms to be like the father, for, in his view, forms give shape and existence (to ideas) and he regards matter to be like the mother, an entity that is supplied with power (the power to create) from a source outside itself. For Plato, but for Aristotle as well, everything that is has a part to play in the cosmos and, because of this, both philosophers draw parallel lines between form/privation and maleness/femaleness: man gives form and allows something to come into being, whereas woman lacks form and seeks an external force to come into being, to become. Thus, Plato and Aristotle grasp gender either in the literal sense, as bodies being differentiated sexually, or in a figurative sense, as a metaphysical principle, capable of apprehending the physicality of the cosmos and all that inhabits it. In contrast, early Greek culture thinks of maleness and femaleness as myth, i.e. not in the sense of bodies but in the sense of tendencies – opposing tendencies. Plato, on the other hand, upholds that the world expresses “a law or logic of pure principles which could be *compared* to male and female” (Colebrook 2004: 3). Henceforth, both Plato and Aristotle, by setting themselves the task of erasing mythical thinking in talking of gender, come to dominate the very history of gender, at the bottom of which lies the question: “[H]ow does the difference of gender emerge?” (4).

The logical way of thinking about gender as introduced by Plato and Aristotle dominates human thought until the eighteenth century, when the sixth edition of Dr Samuel Johnson’s *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1785) defines ‘gender’ as: (1) “the grammatical practice of classifying nouns as masculine, feminine or neuter”; or (2) “a sex” (Glover & Kaplan 2009: 3). In a similar way, the verb ‘to gender’ means “to produce, to beget, to breed, or to copulate”, as in Shakespeare’s *Othello* (1603/4): “A cistern for foul toads/To gender in” (3). Moreover, historians generally think of the eighteenth century not only as a time of change but also as a time in which the pace of change accelerates (38). Social change, cultural change, changes in law and policy all follow each other rapidly and the use of terms such as ‘sexuality’ and ‘gender’ evolves accordingly. In the period 1790-1850 more specifically, emotion recurs as the key element in every definition of femininity. Differences in men’s and women’s feelings become defining for someone to identify as either gender. One such difference between men and women is the idea that all women – and there is consensus about this at the time – experience maternal feelings.

In this same period, women plea for more rights and more freedom. Early Victorian Britain (1832-51) is a time of social and political unease and especially the 1840s are very turbulent in both Britain and Europe. The way gender is associated with many restrictions and specific roles is questioned, together with other forms of difference and hierarchy. Men start to feel the threat of women uprising in the home and this anxious edge finds an expression in both men’s and women’s writing on gender and sexuality at the time. Social, political and medical discourse focuses on what femininity should or should not be, what is or is not feminine, and cultural critic Raymond Williams considers the 1840s “a kind of watershed decade for masculinity and femininity” (Glover & Kaplan 2009: 40). Williams argues that the distinction between proper masculinity and proper femininity, what emotions men and women ought to feel – or display –, deepens during this specific decade. Henceforth, it is improper for a man to cry, for tears are considered a sign of weakness. This gendered

division of feeling is immediately questioned and repudiated, for instance in literature. Charlotte Brontë provides one literary example with her Jane Eyre's famous and striking soliloquy:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer. (Brontë 1992: 128)

To move beyond the matrimonial or the domestic, Jane Eyre utters the language of masculine sensibility as it is publicly displayed; or, as Glover and Kaplan put it, she uses “the driving language of approved masculine ambition” (Glover & Kaplan 2009: 47) to claim “all of incident, life, fire, feeling, that I desired and had not in my actual existence” (Brontë 1992: 127).

By the 1890s, sexual identity is no longer exclusively linked to the physical body as anatomically defined by external and internal genital organs. Now, argues Arnold Davidson, it is “a matter of impulses, tastes, aptitudes, satisfactions, and psychic traits” (quoted in Glover & Kaplan 2009: 8). In other words, at the close of the nineteenth century, the connection between anatomy and sexuality loosens and another is established between sexuality and subjectivity. As Foucault states: “[T]ell me your desire and I will tell you who you are” (Ibid.). Around the same time, Freud's psychoanalysis problematises the relationship between desire and the body, though Freud also acknowledges that both psychoanalysis and sexology assume that one must seek and can only find the truth about oneself within, in one's sexual nature. This area of overlap is where the late modern concept of gender begins to emerge (10). By 1916, the feminist cause liberates the feminine stereotype and generates its replacement with the vanguard identity of the New Woman. The New Woman demands parity with her male peer in every sphere of social life (the home, the workplace, education etc.). The First World War proves a catalytic moment for thinking about gender but will also catalyse changes within other social hierarchies. In Britain especially, femininity is thought of in excesses, including “rampant expressions of women's sexuality” but also possible rejections of what ‘feminine’ ought to look like – “even women [don't] seem to want to be women any more” (50).

In 1929, British psychoanalyst Joan Riviere publishes her essay ‘Womanliness as a Masquerade’, an essay on masculine identification in (otherwise feminine) women. In a pre-Judith Butler era, Riviere writes on the performativity of gender (Glover & Kaplan 2009: 66). She pays special attention to groups of professional women emerging at the time, women who, in her view, “seem to fulfill every criterion of complete feminine development” (Idem): wives and mothers *par excellence*, experienced housewives with both a social life and knowledge of culture and with no lack of interests typically associated with the feminine (e.g. an interest in and concern for personal appearance). In other words, these women were the early foremothers of Allison Pearson's Kate Reddy in *I Don't Know How She Does It* (2002). What makes such women ‘masculine’ is their professional ambition and the way they fulfill their tasks so dutifully. However, instead of arguing that such activities – normally thought of as masculine – are cross-gender performances, she concludes that the

stereotype of ideal femininity is itself a masquerade adopted by many women as a defense mechanism against the severe form of anxiety they experience due to simultaneous masculine and feminine identification (66-7).

At the other end of the idealist spectrum is the masculine stereotype. Before, a man was not to cry or show sensitivity of any kind. At the end of the twentieth century, historian George Mosse traces the history of the masculine ideal and collects his findings in *The Image of Man* (1996). According to Mosse, renewed normative masculinity includes an emphasis on perfecting the male body as an outward signal of man's moral superiority and as an expression of inner strength. Again, this bodily self-discipline includes restraining any and every hint of emotional weakness (Glover & Kaplan 2009: 89). But, to reverse Jane Eyre's exclamation, men feel just as women feel and this ideal of masculinity requires intense effort, "man must struggle against himself" (90). Furthermore, Mosse argues that, throughout the modern era, the masculine stereotype is remarkably resilient and only starts crumbling down around the middle of the twentieth century. From the 1950s onwards, men write down their uncertainties in biographies and diaries, such as Jack Kerouac in his *Windblown World* (1947-54) (99). Men worry over ambitions and failings and what kind of man they truly want to be, they are torn between love for their family and a passionate ambition to make a career. To quote Shami Chakrabarti's *Of Women* (2017): "But like water on stone, even the most seemingly petty discrimination, segregation or injustice works away at the soul to produce self-doubt, even self-loathing, resentment and a waste of life" (Chakrabarti 2017: 20).

According to Glover and Kaplan, no one knows exactly when or where gender was used for the first time in the way that it is understood today, namely as "the social and cultural aspects of sexual difference", but it can be assumed that the term was used by sexology academics of the early 1960s (Glover & Kaplan 2009: 11). In his overview of sexual behaviour in society after the war, Alex Comfort argues that an individual adopts a 'gender role' – masculine or feminine – in accordance with the standards of the culture to which that individual belongs. That gender role is a part that one learns; gender roles are not innate, are not given to one through birth. In fact, according to Comfort, one learns a certain gender role by the age of two, a development which for most human subjects is as good as irreversible, "even if it runs counter to the physical sex of the subject" (quoted in Glover & Kaplan 2009: 11). More important, even, for this period than Comfort's study is the work of Robert Stoller, whose book *Sex and Gender: On the Development of Masculinity and Femininity* (1968) is an attempt to theorise the division between sex and gender. For Stoller, gender signals an individual's complexities in the inner as well as outer areas of behaviour, feelings, thoughts and fantasies – areas related to the sexes, yet somehow seemingly without primarily biological connotations (Ibid.). In a second phase, Stoller distinguishes 'gender role' from 'gender identity' to "indicate that one's inner and outer life may be deeply conflicted or fail to coincide. The gender role that one plays out before others may offer little clue to who one feels oneself to be" (Ibid.). As a consequence, Stoller's idea of a gender role is founded upon the possibility for an individual to experience a discord within him- or herself (Ibid.).

Claire Colebrook argues that, in the modern day, people "think of nature ... as a domain of facts, and culture ... as a domain of values; the former is what is fixed and determined, the latter is open to dispute"

(Colebrook 2004: 4). Since the late twentieth century, we have dichotomised our beings and our bodies and have referred to sex as the biological and bodily being and to gender as the cultural signification we give to that being within the operating system (Idem). When a human being of the male sex dresses up or applies make-up or shows sensitivity and emotion, he is said to have become more feminine and his gender is open to dispute. Mutatis mutandis, when a woman is rational, or consciously and actively decides to withhold from motherhood, she is refused the label of woman. Current debate concerning sex and gender centres on the “dispute whether gender is natural and essential or cultural and constructed” (5). Such debate only assumes nature and culture to be oppositional, argues Colebrook. Sex would then be natural and gender cultural. But the question arises “to what extent does our sexual difference – our genetic and bodily make-up – determine gender difference?” (Idem). Current debate thus raises a boundary between a person’s biology and his/her social identity, as if they could never genuinely meet when they differ. But, already in 1855, in a poem titled ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry’ (part five of ‘Calamus’), published in the famous poetry collection *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman writes:

I too had receiv’d identity by my body,  
 That I was I knew was of my body, and what I should be I  
 knew I should be of my body.  
 (Whitman 2013: 137)

The “nature vs. culture”-thesis was upheld by feminist anthropologists, who sought to describe the relationship between sex and gender on the basis of that dichotomy. One particular example is Gayle Rubin’s essay ‘The Traffic in Women: Notes on the “Political Economy” of Sex’ (1975). In the essay, Rubin argues that every society has a ‘sex/gender system’,

a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention and satisfied in a conventional manner, no matter how bizarre some of the conventions may be. (Rubin 1975: 165)

According to Rubin, whether certain behaviour is considered acceptable in men and women is filtered through cultural codes responsible for the attribution of a person’s sex. At the same time, these codes form the basic frame within which men and women are assigned a certain label of either “mutually exclusive categor[y]” (179). In other words, when someone displays clear masculine traits, that person must and can only be a man; vice versa, when someone shows characteristics considered feminine, that person must and can only be a woman. It is either impossible or unacceptable for a man to show feminine traits (e.g. crying, applying make-up etc.), and no woman can be rational and ambitious like a man. Rubin highlights the arbitrariness of such way of thinking and insists that

[f]ar from being an expression of natural differences, exclusive gender identity is the suppression of natural similarities. It requires repression: in men, of whatever is the local version of ‘feminine’ traits; in women, of the local definition of ‘masculine’ traits. (Rubin 1975: 180)

Rubin thus remarks not only the arbitrariness of these categorial logics but also its repressive effects in a way that reminds of Virginia Woolf’s ‘A Room of One’s Own’ (1929), in which she stresses the importance of “an androgynous mind” (Woolf 1957: 102). Rubin considers sex *and* gender cultural categories and argues that both notions describe ways of understanding human bodies as well as the relationship someone upholds with him-/herself and with others. Rubin is deeply aware of the separation the sex/gender-dichotomy creates and, with her cultural critique, she tries to mend opposite sides together:

[m]en and women are, of course, different. But they are not as different as day and night, earth and sky, yin and yang, life and death. In fact, from the standpoint of nature, men and women are closer to each other than either is to anything else... (Rubin 1975: 179)

Also important for the discussion of gender is Judith Butler, whose *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1989) has become the founding text of queer theory. *Gender Trouble* is oft misread and Butler’s theory is stereotypically summarised into the two maxims that bodies are constructed and that gender is a performance. Though not completely incorrect, Butler’s argument is slightly more nuanced. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler expresses an ethical concern for intelligible life within power/language-structures. According to her, terms such as sex, gender, sexuality and desire all relate to each other (e.g. sexuality relates to an acknowledged sense of desire) and the notion of performativity includes the argument that identity is not free play but rather includes a certain bodily enactment that can be related to language as well<sup>1</sup>.

Though many thinkers and critics have tried to change the established dichotomised view on sex and gender, today, still, natural sex is considered as ‘other’ from a culturally constructed gender. In general, men and women still think about themselves as opposites who (ought to) perform characteristics at the far ends of a spectrum of a bodily being. However, today, more and more individuals, men as well as women, overcome social limitations to publicly display traits of the opposite sex<sup>2</sup>. Transvestites, for instance, were once mocked with on the broad scale but now, due to the ever-increasing popularity of shows such as *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and artists such as Australian singer-songwriter Troye Sivan, more and more people – young men especially – out themselves as queer and dress up excessively and apply excessive make-up to highlight and exaggerate

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<sup>1</sup> This paragraph is based on notes taken during the “Gender, Literature and Theory” course taught at KU Leuven by Prof. Anke Gilleir (2018).

<sup>2</sup> Rider, McMorris, Gower, Coleman and Eisenberg did research on transgender and gender nonconforming youth in America. One of their research results was that more teenagers identify with nontraditional gender labels than they anticipated (nearly 3%, as opposed to the estimated 0.7%) (Rider et al. 2018).

their love for everything feminine. Society thus becomes more open-minded and seems to increasingly embrace men and women who transgress gender limitations. The question is only whether a more unbiased attitude towards reversed domestic roles also arises, and, if it does, to what extent.

### *The History of Domestic Roles*

“Let women stay at home and hold their peace.” –Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes* (467 B.C.)  
(quoted in Chakrabarti 2017: 50)

In *Seven Against Thebes* (467 B.C.), Aeschylus words what has long been consensus: as all women are said to experience maternal feelings, they are all to be mothers, all to take care of the children and stay at home while their men go out and work. Women’s place was (and perhaps still is) the private realm. But how did this come about more precisely? The separation of realms or spheres corresponds with a division of domestic roles. This chapter is concerned with the concept of domestic roles, how they are divided, how the repartition came about and whether their (sharp) separation was always the same. An important source of information about the early organisation of the household is John Tosh’s *A Man’s Place. Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (2007). As the title discloses, a certain understanding of masculinity was already decisive for the household division in Victorian England. For a modern-day view on domestic roles, Jane Pilcher’s ‘Domestic Divisions of Labour in the Twentieth Century: ‘Change Slow A-Coming’ (2000) is significant. She studied attitudes of both men and women and looked at role division in practice, as did Oriel Sullivan. An important longitudinal study was published in 1999 by Richard Layte, *Divided Time: Gender, Paid Employment and Domestic Labour*.

In *A Man’s Place. Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (2007), John Tosh traces the emergence of gendered role patterns in the nineteenth-century middle-class family. Up until the eighteenth century, English middling families are typified as ‘working households’: the husband does not single-handedly carry the burden of earning the family’s money but gathers all residents of his house (i.e. wife, children and subordinate non-kin such as servants and apprentices) and all are involved in production for the market. Home and work are not yet separated spaces, as a family’s source of income is produced inside the house or in an adjacent work place. In other words, in such working household, the line between work and actual business or professional work is more blurred than after the eighteenth century. Moreover, as wives are involved in market production, men engage more in domestic issues. Home, then, forms a conjunction of work, nurture and leisure – as exemplified in novels such as George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and Dinah Craik’s *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856). These productive families are patriarchal nevertheless: the father is in charge of the household and his primary concerns include decision-making and order-keeping. In the course of the eighteenth century, then, a key change in domestic organisation occurs when the wives of the more affluent households gradually withdraw from business activities and start focusing more on the private

sphere of the household. Once money-earning is physically removed from the home, the husband becomes the sole breadwinner and his wife is restricted to the role of homemaker instead of ‘help-meet’. By the 1830s the polarisation of spheres is complete: home and work have become fully independent domains, the private and the public. At the same time, this separation causes the fundament of matrimony in the nineteenth century to dissolve. As Tosh argues, with the wife ever present in the home and aware of all the goings-on, the man’s authority in the house is increasingly undermined. Though companionship within marriage stands at the heart of the Victorian domestic ideal, the husband is expected – in accordance with tradition – to be master of the house. Hence, there is no place for equality, only for a sharp repartition of roles. Moreover, Tosh argues that Victorian culture is child-centred in a way: in spite of nurseries, governesses and far-away boarding schools, he argues that the children’s needs determine domestic activity to the core and the company of children is considered a blessing for adults. With an ideological focus on a companionate marriage and the upbringing of children, Victorian families become more and more inward-looking, more and more private (Tosh 2007: 13, 15-17, 25-28). As Hippolyte Taine declares in the 1850s

[e]very Englishman has, in the matter of marriage, a romantic spot in his heart. He imagines a ‘home’, with the woman of his choice, the pair of them *alone* with their children. That is his own little universe, *closed* to the world. (quoted in Tosh 2007: 28)

In the nineteenth century, men’s relationship with and stance towards the home changes over generations and these changes mark a shift in both gender identity and family dynamics. For a long time, a household was considered to establish a man’s conditions for private life as well as his social recognition as a *man*. Though the separation of spheres between the public as the masculine sphere and the private as the feminine sphere seems to be accepted generally and is indeed widely spread by this time, the domestic sphere is also essential to recognised masculinity. The stereotype of masculinity entails not only establishing a home but also providing for it and controlling it. Moreover, domesticity includes both a psychological attachment and a physical presence as well as the merging of family members into a concept of unison called ‘home’. Understood in this sense, domesticity is invented here, in the nineteenth century, and it is so intensely practised in the upper strata of society that it soon becomes an essential part of bourgeois culture. It is, however, important to note that, as a cultural talisman, Victorians strive for an ideal of home. They pursue an arbitrary and self-made image of domestic life they have constructed in accordance with the standards, views and beliefs of their time. For Victorians, “the family [they] live *by* [is] as important as the family [they] live *with*” (Tosh 2007: 1-4).

According to Tosh, the nineteenth century is also the century in which some educated men experience a sense of alienation for the first time, mostly due to the rise of industrialism and the emergence of personal profit as principle to live by. He argues that these men consider the home “the last remnant of a vanishing social order” (Tosh 2007: 31). Before, men focused on their association and relation with all-male circles –

what is called their ‘homosociality’ –, but the moral appraisal of home life now sharply conflicts the long-standing prestige of homosociality. Furthermore, though the prestige of motherhood grows, woman continues to be predominantly seen as an asexual creature. The epitome of womanhood is now portrayed as the moral mother (45, 47). Although this depiction of the mother as moral creature diminishes the cachet of the father’s authoritarian role, masculinity is more and more associated with notions of reason and resolve – opposing tendencies of motherly associations such as love and nurture.

In the period from around 1830 to 1880 domesticity in Victorian England reaches its climax. Coventry Patmore popularises the description of the mother as ‘the angel in the house’, a divine labelling for a woman who was to uplift morality in the home as well as fulfill domestic duties and keep the house clean and orderly. A patriarchal attitude within the domestic sphere still defines a man’s masculine status and women’s subordinate position is not questioned but even justified by the fact that the husband provides and protects (and failure to provide is considered unmanly). The labour women perform within the household is not considered ‘work’ at all, though they are in charge of the actual management of the family. Put differently, the gendered division of spheres is applied in practice through the overall control the husband exercises over his wife, who truly manages domestic matters. As the wife manages the household in practice, parenting becomes her primary concern and, hence, a private matter. Fatherhood, on the other hand, knows several variants but four types can be discerned: (1) the absent father, whose work and leisure outdoors repeatedly remove him both physically and emotionally from his family; (2) the tyrannical father, whose tendency to repression and authority are likely to be traits of character; (3) the distant father, who withholds any form of intimacy from his children (intimacy is increasingly associated with the feminine); and (4) the intimate father, who does value tenderness towards his family (Tosh 2007: 55-6, 60-3, 79, 91, 95, 97, 99).

In the period from around 1870 to 1900, domesticity is under strain: Tosh observes a decline of deference to the figure of the father and Victorians take a flight from domesticity. During the 1880s and 1890s especially, patriarchal practices within the private sphere are under threat by the rise of the New Woman and Victorian England’s culture of domesticity enters a new phase. Increasing numbers of men either postpone marriage or do marry but spend most of their time moving within larger all-male societal spheres again. Tosh even perceives a general decline in the standing of fathers and fatherhood, while women still lack recognition or payment for their labour in the home. From the mid-1880s onwards, the ‘sex question’ finds firm ground and beginnings of a genuine movement can be registered: women make gains in education, employment and personal freedom and vociferously demand equal political voice. The New Woman questions and challenges established notions of domestic order while the press articulate expressions of acute anxiety that woman’s newly claimed liberties will disrupt and distort traditional ideas on gender inequality, especially in the private sphere of the home. New legislation concerning wives’ property and rights of custody over children scrutinises man’s power and privilege in the home and, at the close of the century, an era of relative domestic stability comes to an end (Tosh 2007: 146, 149, 151-5, 159-60, 168-9). The polarisation of sexual character is severe and absolute at this time. As Tosh argues, “warmth and affection were feminine traits, ... masculinity

was defined by its public destiny, in a way which excluded the so-called feminine qualities” (184). In sum, over the course of the nineteenth century, masculine domesticity flourishes, only to be reacted upon towards the turn of the century. The Edwardian period generally continues the pattern established by the late Victorians. Later on, the two World Wars profoundly condition men’s attitudes to the idea of home and the popularity of marriage rises again to unprecedented heights.

In “Change Slow A-Coming” (2000), Jane Pilcher discusses the domestic division of labour in the twentieth century. According to Pilcher, in the 1950s and 1960s the amount of women who are both married and employed significantly increases and, as a consequence, family studies begin to indicate that domestic life as it was rigorously divided between husband and wife is now undergoing change (Pilcher 2000: 771-2). Two sociologists, Michael Young and Peter Willmott, even advance the notion of the ‘symmetrical’ family and argue that a change of direction is taking place in family structure from separate to joint roles. Also in the 1950s and 1960s, labour-saving technology becomes more widely spread in homes across social classes and family life centres more on quality time and privacy. Men, however, limit their longer hours at home to merely observing the division of marital roles and tend to hold back from any emotional intimacy. In the 1970s, studies undermine the 1960s argument that households are becoming more equal. Ann Oakley, for instance, a prominent sociologist, feminist and writer, finds that, for women, the role of housewife and primary caretaker upholds (772).

In the 1980s, more and more men are unemployed whereas women are increasingly employed and research starts focusing on the distribution of paid and unpaid work. In *Husbands at Home: The Domestic Economy in a Post-Industrial Society* (1990), Jane Wheelock focuses on this specific family grouping (man unemployed, woman employed). According to her findings, less than 25 per cent of such couples undergo substantial change in the division of labour. Put differently, this new household structure fails to challenge the established role pattern. Both in 1987 and in 1991, national British Social Attitudes surveys are conducted which gauge the attitudes of men and women across the country concerning the division and organisation of paid and unpaid work. In general, woman is deemed responsible for domestic tasks in 75 per cent of British households and in 67 per cent of households with wives who work full time. Though the 1991 survey marks a shift since 1987 towards a more egalitarian arrangement, the rearing of children remains the woman’s responsibility, even in dual earner couples. Hence, Pilcher concludes, the “distribution of household and caring work ... is ... irrespective of women’s paid work status” and this unequal distribution is clearly resilient (774). Another conclusion Pilcher draws from the studies and surveys she analyses is that the husband’s attitude is a more powerful predictor of the distribution of domestic tasks than the woman’s (771-5). The man’s beliefs and ideas on how domestic work should be organised is more often decisive for the practical division of housework than the woman’s ideas.

In her study ‘The Division of Domestic Labour: Twenty Years of Change?’ (2000) Oriel Sullivan looks at the last two decades of the twentieth century specifically. She agrees with John Tosh when he argues that “[f]athers who wish to go beyond the stilted reserve of a generation ago and involve themselves in the

routines of childcare may feel marginalised, but they receive more recognition than their grandfathers would have done” (Tosh 2007: 197). Yet Sullivan adds an important nuance, namely that men may be taking on more domestic work, the question is only whether they take on domestic *responsibility* equivalent to the woman’s. Indeed, terms such as ‘the double burden’, ‘the second shift’ and ‘the stalled revolution’ find their way into common speech. Such terms signify woman’s dual responsibility for both household and children and thereby highlight the inequality of domestic labour and its relation to gendered power structures. Sullivan’s main argument, then, is that women’s overall time spent in domestic labour has remained fairly constant over time and that men’s has increased: men increasingly take care of tasks such as cooking and cleaning whereas women’s contribution to childcare and shopping has increased. Furthermore, Sullivan argues that the proportion of couples where the unequal distribution of labour is reversed, i.e. the man spends more time on housework than the woman, has increased as well. Sullivan’s final conclusion is threefold: labour inequality based on gender is reduced (e.g. tasks associated with normative femininity are decreasingly performed by women), men from the lower socioeconomic strata spend more time on domestic work as well and egalitarian couples are registered increasingly, especially among those who work full time (Sullivan 2000: 438-39, 447-8, 450-1, 453).

In 1999, Richard Layte publishes his longitudinal study *Divided Time: Gender, Paid Employment and Domestic Labour*. He compares several studies, attitude surveys and research results and argues that, at the close of the century, women who work full time identify less with the role of domestic worker (‘housewife’) than women who work either part time or as full-time housewives, and that there is a high probability that these women’s partners do not partake in this perception. Moreover, family members of a woman who is either unemployed or works full time are said to have a more accurate sense or awareness of the woman’s practices and a stronger sense of the importance of the woman’s job when she works full time (Layte 1999: 75, 84, 120). However, Layte concludes:

Changes in women’s paid work practices have been accompanied by important changes in women’s attitudes ... mean[ing] that the once taken for granted roles of housewife and breadwinner are now problematic. The changes have happened so quickly that the majority of people still inhabit the ‘transitional’ space<sup>3</sup>... Yet in this space, men are closer to the traditional and women the egalitarian. (Layte 1999: 160)

The conventional family is as under fire as ever, not so much on an ideological basis, but mostly because of life decisions people make (e.g. couples who remain unmarried, single parents, stay-at-home dads etc.). D.H.J. Morgan argues that flux and fluidity characterise modern-day family life and that domestic life should be conceptualised in terms of practices, not in terms of fixed and separate roles. More recently, sociologists tend to desegregate the task of caring from routine domestic tasks, assuming caring to be qualitatively different

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<sup>3</sup> The notion of the ‘transitional’ space was proposed by Hochschild and is said to lie between the ‘egalitarians’ and ‘traditionals’ (Layte 1999: 160).

from housework as it “involves negotiations with others and responsiveness to others’ needs; it is both a form of labour and of love”, as Tony Chapman states (Chapman 2004: 116). In his *Gender and Domestic Life: Changing Practices in Families and Households* (2004), Chapman argues that several studies demonstrate how the relationship between husband and wife can be affected deeply by conflicts or constraints concerning role division. One British study conducted in 1986 (McRae), for instance, illustrates how families with traditional views where women have a more highly paid job than their husbands struggle to cope with their unconventional situation (Chapman 2004: 35, 118). Hence, the question arises: how can a couple deal with these issues and grow beyond them? How can they solve the “problem that has no name”, as Betty Friedan originally called women’s malaise (quoted in Lewis & Sussman 1986: 23)?

From the twentieth into the twenty-first century, a division of domestic roles based on gender is increasingly changed and adapted to a couple’s personal family situation, or indeed reversed completely. According to Glover and Kaplan, this is because “[w]hat was once dutifully thought to be fixed becomes chameleon-like, a part to be played with style, a chance to mock and shock” (Glover & Kaplan 2009: 1). This captures the whole idea of the reversal of gender roles: the conventional division of marital roles – a division based on tradition – is now commonly adapted to a couple’s personal domestic life and economic situation. However, as the breadwinner model is so seeped into society still, choosing a role deviant from the norm can feel like a performance, a part one has to play, similar to the way gender theorists nominated gender ‘performative’. At the same time, adopting an unconservative role, like that of the stay-at-home father, is a chance to mock gender stereotypes and can shock family members who value tradition such as grandparents and in-laws. Tony Chapman even argues that “in making choices, householders are very much aware of the potential reaction of significant others to the way that they behave. In this sense, homes can be conceptualised as stage sets...” (Chapman 2004: 13).

According to Glover and Kaplan, after the Second World War, culture becomes the realm *par excellence* to thoroughly criticise and deconstruct exclusive gender stereotypes. The goal of this cultural critique is, on the one hand, to unmask the restrictive conception of nature that domineered human thinking (biological, social, cultural etc.) and, on the other, to liberate humankind from “the chains of social convention” and implement true human diversity (i.e. closer to nature) (Glover & Kaplan 2009: 16). Indeed, by liberating humans from cultural – and, hence, arbitrary and artificial – obstacles, the general aim of cultural critique is to overthrow gender itself. Furthermore, Glover and Kaplan consider both sex and gender *cultural* categories (not natural and cultural respectively) that entail a bodily and relational understanding of ourselves and others (14-7). The post-war women’s movement has opened up gender identity to varying forms of choice, a shift Ann Snitow, writer of the now classic essay ‘A Gender Diary’ (1989), describes as “negotiations about just how gendered we choose to be” (quoted in Glover & Kaplan 2009: 30). Snitow thus regards gender a matter of choice, not a matter of biology, culture or social convention. With post-war cultural critique such as Snitow’s, humanity seems to have entered an era of true self-exploration and -development, free from stereotypes and gender expectations, at least in theory.

Around this time, psychoanalysis increasingly permeates and influences feminist ideas and one important acquisition is the acknowledgment that “femininity and masculinity are identities which must always, in some sense, *fail*” (Glover & Kaplan 2009: 37). As domestic roles have become gendered, they too risk failing. In *Men’s Changing Roles in the Family* (1986) Michael E. Lamb, Joseph H. Pleck and James A. Levine (edited by Robert A. Lewis and Marvin B. Sussman) look at the effects of increased paternal involvement on both fathers and mothers. It is argued that commentators generally imply that, when the father becomes more involved in the family, strain experienced due to role division will be reduced and overall satisfaction within marriage will be enhanced. More involved fathers thus benefit both spouses on an individual level as well as on the level of the family. When Baruch and Barnett (1983) investigate such family situations, however, they find that women whose husbands spend more time on childcare were less satisfied with their own role they are then assigned. Increased paternal involvement may thus be beneficial to the organisation of time and economics in the family and general marital satisfaction, it also has a significant impact on a parent’s individual satisfaction with the division of domestic responsibilities. For instance, the private home has hitherto been the woman’s sphere and now woman is asked to share power in the one (and only) place she has long been in control of (Lewis & Sussman 1986: 68-9, 72-3). And this is only when paternal involvement increases. Concerning role-reversing families (but also role-sharing families), fathers report in numerous studies that “their occupational advancement was adversely affected, or that a lack of concern with this made the changed lifestyle possible” (74). This implies that a father’s devotion and participation in family life can only rise when his professional status allows it and he is either under- or unemployed – whereas woman long carried the double burden of both professional employment and housekeeping. On the other hand, men also report that fathering is increasingly experienced as rewarding and pleasant by those who realise that they can be just as competent as their wives. Nevertheless, in a longitudinal study of male primary caretakers, Russell (1982, 1983) finds that many of the families involved in the follow-up at some point return to a more traditional division of gender roles – gendered identities seem to have failed indeed. The men’s complaints echo complaints previously expressed by traditional housewives: they feel deprived of socialisation with other adults and find life generally tedious and repetitive. On top of that, these families’ neighbours, other family members and friends are not really supportive of their choice and even criticise their lifestyle. The mothers, then, feel increasingly distanced from their children. An additional finding of Russell’s study is that more devoted fathers have more realistic relationships with their children. The romantic image of the father protecting the princess daughter wears off (Lewis & Sussman 1986: 74, 77-8, 80).

Contemporary debate about (more) highly participant fathers fluctuates. On July 18, 2013 Tim Dowling reports on his life as a stay-at-home dad for *The Guardian*: “I’m here when the children need me, which is nice – but as they get older I am less of a parent, more of a neglected pet” (Dowling 2013). His story must be nuanced: Dowling is still employed, he works from the house, and he openly admits that his status as a stay-at-home dad has not effectively enhanced his child-rearing skills. One year later, the stay-at-home dad’s

original praise is met with critique. In her opinion piece for *The Guardian* (8 Oct 2014), S.A. Jones, writer and one of Australia's 100 Women of Influence, praises her husband Jason, who is a stay-at-home dad. However, one of her friends once argued in frustration that "if Jason had a vagina, no one would think what he does is so extraordinary" (Jones 2014). This is exactly what another article in *The Guardian* that appeared earlier that year also addresses: "Stop congratulating stay-at-home dads for doing their job as parents" (Valenti 2014). Jessica Valenti, writer of the article and author of multiple books on feminism, politics and culture, argues:

The truth is that everything from social expectations to policy sets up dads to assume that they shouldn't – or can't – take care of their own kids alone. My personal pet peeve – but a telling cultural tidbit – is when people ask if my husband is "babysitting" our daughter. He's her father, he doesn't "babysit": he *parents*. (Valenti 2014)

Further into her article, S.A. Jones agrees: "my husband ... [does] what women do for no pay and less praise" (Jones 2014). In an expression of societal critique, Jones continues: "My husband is praised not because he parents, cooks and cleans any better than the women around him, but because he's not "naturally" suited for it" (Idem). In June 2015, the stay-at-home dad's first personal detriment is publicly exposed: "Stay-at-home dads pay the price in job market for putting family first" reads *The Guardian's* heading (*The Guardian*, 21 June 2015). The article argues that "doting dads" face scrutiny when they try to return to the workplace, especially from their employers who doubt these men's work/life balance (Idem). On May 15, 2017 another article appears in *The Guardian*: "Stay-at-home fathers do less childcare than working mothers, research shows". The research is done by the Australian Institute of Family Studies and argues that, for many, becoming a stay-at-home dad is a choice of economics, not of lifestyle. In other words, these men do not actively choose to spend more time with their families due to emotional incompleteness or discontent with their assigned role. Yet the study fails to explain why stay-at-home fathers barely spend more time on domestic tasks than working mothers (they spend 19 and 21 hours on housework respectively). The above seems to imply that, still, motherhood is considered woman's natural role and her place is by the hearth. The question arises whether any substantial change has taken place in the home as it has with gender identity (outing as queer, gender nonconforming identification etc.). Now that a brief history is provided of the concept of gender, its shifts in meaning and its implication for domestic roles, gender roles in the two novels central to this thesis will be analysed. In the following chapters, a narratological analysis of both *The Tidal Zone* and *The Bradshaw Variations* will be followed by a literary analysis. The analyses will focus on how the novels represent, question and/or challenge the traditional gender roles within a domestic setting.

## *The Tidal Zone*

### *A. Narrative Structure*

Sarah Moss's *The Tidal Zone* is told by first-person narrator Adam. Hence, the reader knows what Adam thinks and feels and s/he is invited to empathise with him. He offers comments on the things he and his family endure as he sees their past in a different light, having gained more knowledge in the present: "We know now that the first time the music stumbled, the child was five" (Moss 2016: 3). Such episodes of self-reflection or metafictional reflection occur throughout. A moment of self-reflection occurs, for instance, when he is reading a biography in which the author's father dies but by the time the author writes the book his father is dead. Adam then says: "he [the author] is pretending not to know what will happen before the ending. So am I. So, perhaps, are you" (91). Here, Adam exceptionally addresses the narratee in order to reflect on his self and the knowledge he has gained through the years. On another instance, near the end, Adam metafictionally reflects on the writing he has done: "Now I am about to stop writing" (328). With the phrase, he ends the story he started telling in the first chapter, namely the story of him and his family.

Throughout, the main narrative is interrupted by two subordinate storylines: the history Adam is writing of Coventry Cathedral and the life story of his father, Eli Goldschmidt. Initially, the distinction between the main narrative and the cathedral's history is very clear: the history is told in separate chapters that interrupt the main storyline. Gradually, however, the novel focuses less on the history and it becomes entangled with the main storyline. The second subordinate storyline is created when Adam's father travels from Cornwall to the middle of England to help out in the house and he starts telling his life story to Miriam: "Once upon a time, my father said, a boy was born to a couple living in Brooklyn, New York" (Moss 2016: 109). Eli's life story is embedded in the main narrative in that Adam reports on his father's storytelling and after a while Adam intervenes: "Mimi had closed her eyes, was perhaps pretending not to listen..." (110). Eli, however, continues his storytelling and often addresses Miriam: "As you probably know, the mid-'60s were an interesting time in which to begin college in upstate New York" (111).

The novel starts with a flashback: in the opening chapter, Adam summarises his family's journey until he reaches the event the novel starts with, when Miriam has her third attack and collapses on the sports field at school. The novel's core is the year that follows. The discourse time is regularly slowed down by extensive and detailed descriptions of Adam's housekeeping, which offer a moment of pause in-between Adam's rushing to and from the hospital, Rose's school, friends' houses etc. Additionally, chronology is occasionally broken and the rhythm of the narrative slows down again. This is the case when he and Emma are on their way to the doctor to find out what Miriam is diagnosed with:

Once upon a time there was a clever girl. She lived with her father and her mother and her little sister, in a town in the centre of England...

For fifteen years, the family thought they had been blessed with two healthy children. Or perhaps, for fifteen years they had been blessed with two healthy children... And their parents, who for one reason and another already understood that to have children who are well is to be in a state of grace, knew their blessings. Their luck. Their blind, undeserved good fortune. This is important. They were not complacent, not heading for a fall. (Moss 2016: 99-100)

The narrative slows down because episodes of self-reflection in which he looks back on how they once were as a family and on where they are now are important. They allow both Adam and the reader to gain new insights on his family's current situation.

### ***B. Adam***

After fifteen years of taking care of the household, fulfilling chores is a matter of habit to Adam. The idea that he instantly knows what to consider concerns his children as well, for instance when he receives the phone call that Miriam is in the hospital: "my body already knew what to do" (Moss 2016: 11). Throughout the novel, much attention is given to Adam worrying repeatedly while also planning the additional requirements of running a household:

School, I should tell school that she's OK... And we'll need someone to collect Rose, we're probably not going to be out of here in time for the school run. I hadn't taken the salmon for dinner out of the freezer, would need to cook something else instead, something quick because it was going to be a rush to do homework and dinner and bedtime by the time we got back. (Moss 2016: 18)

Different thoughts follow each other rapidly, he has to consider a panoply of domestic matters, and there seems to be no end to it when he thinks to himself (and exceptionally addresses himself in the second person):

You are not going to get the fish out of the freezer or change the lightbulb in the hall and you have cancelled the plumber's visit to service the boiler and your meeting with a PhD student writing about women in the Arts and Crafts movement. Everything is paused, except that Rose still needs to go to school and to eat her meals, and the laundry must still be done and the bathroom cleaned, somehow, from the High Dependency Unit of a city fifteen miles from home. (Moss 2016: 23)

Adam worries about the household and care of Rose not only because he is accustomed to being responsible for them, but also because he is aware – from the very beginning – that his wife Emma is not likely to take over these tasks from him. On the contrary, when he first returns home from the hospital he is confronted with a neglected household:

The load of laundry that I had left washing while I went running before – well, before it happened – was still wet in the machine and now smelt fishy. The dishwasher was full of clean plates and cutlery, and the dirty ones, not many and not really dirty, as if Emma had been feeding Rose mostly on toast and apples and not eating herself, were piled on the counter. (Moss 2016: 30)

The novel pays much attention to describing day-to-day tasks in great detail, which highlights the amount of work that is required to run a household:

I took the damp laundry out of the machine and carried it up to the bathroom, where I dumped it in the bath while I set up the two clothes-airers. I took up each garment, shook and smoothed it and arranged them for maximum exposure to the radiator. Women’s pants in three sizes, Miriam’s unsuitable black nylon bra ... Emma’s plain now-off-white cotton sprouting tendrils of elastic from its worn straps. Rose’s purple flowery socks, previously worn by Mimi and going at the heels. My own boxer shorts, sombre flags among the pastel wisps of women’s underwear... (Moss 2016: 36)

The passage continues with a detailed description of every piece of clothing Adam takes out of the washing machine. The attention that is given to Adam’s housekeeping is a cardinal function of his characterisation as a stay-at-home dad and underscores that the management of the household is constantly in his mind.

Soon, a pattern is established: when Adam sits by Miriam’s hospital bed for a day or longer, Emma is responsible for Rose (picking her up, feeding her, putting her to bed) while she continues going to work. When they alternate guarding Miriam, Adam comes home to a house full of dirty laundry, dirty dishes and an empty fridge. He then has to improvise dinner (“stand-by pasta again” (Moss 2016: 79)), gives Rose a bath and reads her a bedtime story. He “put[s] on a load of laundry and [hangs] the damp-smelling clothes [he finds] wet in the washing machine” and pays the bills (Idem). He realises he still has to prepare Rose’s packed lunch – which will also be a matter of improvisation given the empty fridge – “assemble her PE kit and clean at least the kitchen and bathroom, but it was already getting late” (80).

The reader’s gaze is thus frequently directed towards Adam’s caring and housekeeping skills. They highlight that Adam displays characteristics normally associated with mothers: he worries almost constantly about his children (fathers are only rarely depicted as worriers), he finds it important his children eat healthy and nutritious foods and that they learn the right moral values<sup>4</sup>. When Miriam is home again, his father tells him he needs “to practise letting go” (Moss 2016: 168), which is something mothers are usually told to. He lacks certain characteristics that are typically associated with masculinity such as professional ambition, a manifestation of reason over emotion or a *laissez-faire* attitude. The singular emotion that characterises Adam is worry.

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<sup>4</sup> Adam’s concern for moral values opposes the traditional separation of parental concerns as described earlier; in a conservative household, the teaching of values is the moral mother’s concern.

When he sits by Miriam’s hospital bed he watches the monitors closely and worries over every minute change of pace: “It’s speeding up, I thought, her heart’s speeding up, but the nurse was unconcerned” (Moss 2016: 15). He is in a state of constant concern, which does not change when he is physically absent from the hospital: “I kept my hand on my phone in my pocket as if answering it fast would change anything... I was in a state of emergency...” (31). Adam is concerned about Emma as well, especially in the beginning. After he has called her to let her know what happened to Miriam, he thinks “Don’t drive too fast ... don’t get arrested, don’t have an accident” (16). He notices how, after a few days of alternating sitting by Miriam’s hospital bed, Emma looks pale and thin: “‘Now you’re here,’ I said, ‘I can make tea. And I’m going to do you some toast. You need to eat’” (78). He sees how the bag of groceries Emma carries only contains food for Miriam; Emma has bought nothing for herself. And then there is eight-year-old Rose, who requires looking after most of all. One time, he wants to call Rose down for her snack but when his mind “tripped over the word ‘unresponsive’ ... [he] ran up the stairs to find her” (32). When his father and Rose go out for a walk, he hopes they “were taking so long because they were having a good time rather than because he was too busy doing CPR and dialing 999 to send a text” (182). Adam is overly concerned, especially when Rose is out of his sight. Another time, he wakes in the middle of the night with a strong sense that “there was something wrong” (192). He remembers an internet story he read of “a mother who had woken in the middle of the night, followed her instinct and hurried to the bedside of a child whose heart was in the act ... of arrest” (Idem). He believes he has the same sleeping intuition as that mother, that same ‘mother instinct’. And indeed, when he goes to Miriam’s room, he hears her crying. The family’s tragedy thus makes Adam reflect on his parenting. When they go to Cornwall for a short holiday, he thinks: “I used to know the turning of the tide the way I knew the rising and setting of the sun, somewhere in my body” (303). This may be read as a metaphor for the idea that he used to know his daughters (as healthy girls), until the incident. Now, he finds himself in the tidal zone of, on the one hand, being cautious and, on the other hand, letting go.

To emphasise Adam’s caring persona as well as his non-normative position in society, Adam is confronted directly with an opponent, Dave, the father of Charlotte, one of Miriam’s friends. Dave lives up to paternal stereotypes in that he “[has] never done the school runs, despite his wife’s work ha[s] stayed firmly in the role of the breadwinner orbiting the world of cake sales [and] sports days” and, above all, “he doesn’t know what to say to a stay-at-home dad” (Moss 2016: 185). The encounter of two fathers who could not be any further from each other on the fatherhood spectrum is significant in many ways. First, Dave awkwardly tries to make conversation by complimenting Adam on his cooking skills – Adam is decorating a cake when Dave arrives – which he does by highlighting how incompetent he himself is in preparing a meal, “apart from the barbecue in the summer” (Idem). Adam is slightly startled by the masculine stereotype invading his home:

[Dave] shifted his feet, as if his balls were too big for him to stand straight. I never know what I’m supposed to say to remarks like his. Ooh, look, someone who has mastered both peeing standing up and cleaning a sink. Don’t you find, mate, that your dick shrinks every time you ice a fairy cake? (Moss 2016: 186)

The passage underscores that Adam receives remarks like this repeatedly (“I *never* know what I’m supposed to say” (86)) and emphasises how society constructs the ideal of masculinity based on the phallus. Adam makes a phallic reference thrice, thereby highlighting the idea that the stay-at-home dad – and Adam himself – lacks *the* symbol of manhood and is metaphorically castrated<sup>5</sup>. By placing Adam directly opposite Dave, the novel mocks and overthrows the existing construct of masculinity. Secondly, Dave refers to Adam’s unemployed status: “They’re not keeping you too busy up at the University, then?” (Idem). This implies that it is unimaginable that a father could combine professional work with housework, whereas women have repeatedly proven capable of carrying the double burden. Adam replies: “Just teaching once a week” and withholds the answer he wants to offer:

Just to get me out of the house... to make a change from Pilates and getting my hair done; look, mate, it’s a job, the making of cakes and the washing of sheets, the coordination of laundry with PE lessons..., and the fact that your wife does it on top of her paid work without you noticing does not make you clever. (Moss 2016: 186)

Adam knows how it feels when housework is not seen as actual work and he would like some recognition, not merely for himself but for all parents who are responsible for the management of the household. When Miriam and Charlotte finally say goodbye and hug each other “Dave tried to exchange a comradely and misogynist glance with me: girls!” (Idem). Dave is a living masculine stereotype and their conversation is an uncomfortable confrontation for Adam with his direct opponent when it comes to fatherhood and gender conformity. In its discomfort, the novel criticises the gender norms that still live in society and lays bare its arbitrariness.

In sum, Adam is depicted as a stay-at-home father who worries a lot about the household and his family. Through Adam, the novel shows that the role of the stay-at-home parent is multifaceted: there is the housework (laundry, cleaning, grocery shopping) but there is also the responsibility of care, which, as Tony Chapman explains, “involves negotiations with others and responsiveness to others’ needs; it is both a form of labour and of love” (Chapman 2004: 116). All these facets of domestic life require constant consideration but worrying and caring are not qualities considered typically masculine. The question arises whether he acquired those qualities or whether they are innate. In Adam’s case, it can be assumed that he is such a caring person because of his parents, who did not refrain from showing their emotions. He grew up in a self-providing community and saw the work it takes to manage a household from a very early age. This may further explain why his father’s life story is embedded. At the same time, Adam is also the proud owner of a PhD and the subordinate narrative layer in which he writes on the history of the local cathedral may be inserted to highlight that Adam has substantial intellectual baggage, which he still likes to engage and challenge. Hence, his role as

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<sup>5</sup> Adapted from Rebecca Walker’s “Becoming the Third Wave” (1992) (in Freedman 2007: 398).

a stay-at-home parent does not entirely define his identity. The care and concern is most prominent, especially with the event of the crisis, but he is also an intellectual with a passion for and an interest in history and art.

### *C. Emma*

In her role as breadwinner, Emma displays characteristics that are typically associated with masculinity. She often refrains from showing her emotions and allows reason to reign, for example when she has done some reading on her daughter's peculiar type of anaphylaxis and she asks Adam "Do you want me to tell you what I think?" and Adam thinks "No, let's cherish our ignorance" (Moss 2016: 78). She is fully committed to her job, so much so that she goes back to work the day after Miriam has returned home (p. 154). She is eager to feel in control of something and suggests *she* drives home when Miriam is released from the hospital (p. 149). She is a woman who works full time in medicine, which is a male-dominated profession still, and she feels the necessity to prove herself. For example, the men in her practice "take Mondays and Fridays as time off in lieu" but she "is unable or unwilling to challenge this convention" and takes Thursday off (209). The days she spends at home, she tries to do as much chores as she possibly can, which is, according to Adam, "a ball-withering reproach: I work sixty hours a week and then have to spend my day off doing your jobs" (210). Adam, on his part, resents the amount of time Emma spends at work. For instance, when she wants to change guarding Miriam in the hospital she tells him "Rose needs you and Mimi needs me too" (24). But Adam acknowledges his privilege as primary caretaker and thinks "Mimi doesn't need you the way she needs me... I'm the one who's always with her, I'm the one who saw her first steps and sat through every Nativity play, I'm the one they called" (Idem). He does not say that to her, though: "Yes, I said, I know, you're right, OK" (Idem). Eventually, he leaves and antipathy is replaced with fear: he is afraid of what might happen when he has left, mostly because he believes that, even now, Emma's commitment is to her patients and the NHS, her family comes second. As he leaves, he also thinks:

[T]his is where you pay the price, love. For fifteen years you go off every morning ... and you come home late to find your clothes clean in your drawers, your dinner in the oven and the girls in their pyjamas with their homework done. I'm the primary caretaker, the one whose name and number are first on the forms... (Moss 2016: 37)

As primary caretaker and concerned parent, Adam is critical of how Emma responds and adapts to their new situation (visiting the hospital on and off, ensuring Rose is looked after etc.). When one of the nurses suggests Emma and Adam take the train instead of the car because it is cheaper than parking and probably quicker "and frankly, Mum, you don't really look as if you ought to be driving" Adam thinks "That's a shame, I didn't say, considering that she's planning to go into work and practise medicine the day after tomorrow" (50). Another time he returns to the hospital to relieve Emma off guard duty and, finding her "dressed as if for work ... doing something on her iPad", he thinks "It is the saving grace of general practice that very little work can be

brought home, or indeed to your daughter's hospital bed, but Emma finds exceptions when she needs them" (93). His unexpressed resentment towards Emma accumulates and the tactics of silent blame only allows the irritation towards her and the distance between them to grow. The day Miriam returns home, Emma mutters something about checking in at work and the simmering tensions culminate:

The dialogue we never exchanged hung in the air like a bad smell: *Even now, you can't make it home to have dinner with your daughters?*

*Not while I earn all the money, no, not while the continuing existence of dinner depends entirely on my career.*

*They don't pay you extra for missing dinner, you know. There's no-one tabulating all the times you don't see the girls and rewarding you for each one.*

*You have no idea what it's like. You've never had a real job and you've never even lived with anyone who had a real job until you met me. Your idea of what's normal is completely fantastical.*

*My idea of what's normal is based on the priority of love over work... Most people, you know, most people put family first, and if you're not going to do it, I will.*

...

Civilisation, after all, survives on repression: probably all marriages, all families, require the silencing of words that, once spoken, could not be unsaid.

(Moss 2016: 151)

The imaginary dialogue emphasises the gender reversal in their household. In a traditional household, the husband spends little time with his family. Here, from Adam's perspective, Emma is the one who spends too little time with her family. A further question is whether Emma prioritises work over love, medicine over family. In Adam's view, she does: she spends little time with Miriam in the hospital and even less with Rose. She continues working more than sixty hours per week and Miriam critically asks her father: "[D]o you honestly believe [GPs are] all working the same hours as Mum?" and Adam replies: "She's doing her best for her patients and her best for us" (187). He cannot hide his feeling that her mother puts her patients first. As the novel continues, Adam remains critical of the amount of time Emma spends at work but he slowly finds a way to accept her commitment to her job. He realises this is what they have chosen fifteen years ago.

Just like Adam does not want to be ungrateful about Emma working so hard and providing for them, Emma cannot but acknowledge Adam's value as a stay-at-home dad. As Christmas approaches, she tells him he does not have to spend the whole day cooking and preparing a feast. In traditional households, women are responsible for cooking (especially for holidays and celebrations) and now the wife alleviates the work and, instead, suggests an easy Christmas picnic. Adam, however, is skeptical:

She ... is ... sensitive about her habitual absence from the school gates, and is occasionally moved to attempt to compensate by ... dragging herself to Mum's Nights Out where the conversation is all about the inadequacy of

husbands and she gets told repeatedly how lucky she is that I help her with the children and allow her to work full-time.

‘Do you actually want to?’ I asked. ‘I mean, setting aside any ... idiosyncratic economies of guilt, absolution and cultural pressure frankly reminiscent of the medieval church that might be running in your head?’

(Moss 2016: 241-2)

In her characterisation as a mother who works full time, Emma is occasionally struck by “idiosyncratic economies of guilt” (Idem). Her sense of guilt is further accompanied by the question whether she genuinely wants to spend more time with her daughters or whether her feeling of guilt is influenced by cultural pressure and societal norms “reminiscent of the medieval church” (Idem). As a woman and a mother, she is expected to utterly commit herself to her children. In ‘Motherhood, Paid Work and Partnering: Values and Theories’ (2003) Duncan, Edwards, Reynolds and Alldred argue that “the presence or absence of partners makes little difference to gendered moral rationalities about how motherhood and paid work should be combined” (Duncan et al. 2003: 313). One of their study’s conclusions is that (white, conventional, heterosexual) mothers find it hard to balance “two apparently moral duties to be both a good mother and a worker in the labour market” (315). In other words, these women find that being either one excludes the possibility of being the other at the same time. Society has integrated gendered moral rationalities so strongly Emma struggles with the way she fulfills her role as a working mother. Emma is additionally pressured by the NHS’s high demands and the responsibility she has over her patients. The workload and many hours she has to work are partly responsible for the little time she can spend with her family. In Emma’s struggle to juggle between her role as a mother and a GP, the novel criticises Britain’s national healthcare system as well as the culture’s conservative stereotypes surrounding motherhood.

Gradually, and as the novel comes to its close, Emma tries to spend more time with her family, especially after Rose’s incident in the swimming pool (where she, like her sister once, starts wheezing). One night, Adam is wakened by Emma’s crying: “I don’t want to lose them both, I don’t want – I don’t want – to outlive—” (Moss 2016: 258). Adam takes the time to console her but he also wonders if she would have chosen a different career path, knowing what they know now:

It crossed my mind now sometimes to wonder how Emma told herself the story of the girls’ pre-school years, whether she ever wished she had not hurried back to work before either of them sat up, ate solid food, pronounced their first words.

I wondered whether she ever wished she had understood then what I believe she saw now: the clichés that turn out, in the face of death, to be the truth.

(Moss 2016: 268)

The penultimate chapter clearly shows the effects of Emma’s insight: now, she is the one who tells Adam “You can’t go round not loving things because they’ll die” (326). She suggests complying with Rose’s wish to

have a cat because she “just want[s] to make Rose happy” and Adam can only reply “I’m not going to argue against happiness” (Idem).

All in all, some of Emma’s most outspoken characteristics are traits typically associated with masculinity, for she is presented as someone who chooses reason over emotion. She has a responsibility towards her children and her patients but Adam feels she puts the NHS first, especially in the immediate aftermath of Miriam’s cardiac event. However, Adam’s view on Emma must be nuanced: she never fails to pick up Rose from school, she insists on guarding over Miriam in the hospital as well and when she has the rare day off, she helps out in the house. After Rose’s incident she shows her emotions to Adam and they both see that she now understands the value of family and spending time with them. In the end, the quantity of the time they spend together may not change but its quality certainly does.

### *D. Marriage*

Adam and Emma react differently to the circumstances and Miriam’s crisis causes marital strain to grow between them. An important issue is money, especially for Adam. While being a stay-at-home dad, he also tries to work on a history of the local cathedral and teach an art history class on occasion. He does that partly because of the social aspect of being employed, it “gives [him] people to talk to” (Moss 2016: 41), but there is the economic aspect as well: Emma is primary breadwinner and so, whenever he goes shopping, he spends *her* money. When Emma offers changing the guard over Miriam in the hospital, Adam thinks (but does not say):

I’m the one who got here first so go home, Emma, go ... earn your money. Our money. The money that pays for the roof over all of our heads and the food on all of our plates... I am not, I hope, ungrateful. My resentment is occasional and not her fault. (Moss 2016: 37)

Here, the responsibility of children and household is seen as a commitment separate from the duty of earning money and paying the bills. In the traditional breadwinner model, the father has more authority in the house *because* he is breadwinner and he does not have to justify any spending *because* he earns the money. Here, Adam does not lack authority. He enjoys knowing of all the ins and outs of the family and deciding what groceries are bought: “We do not buy crisps or sweet drinks and *I* make sure the girls get at least five portions of fruit and vegetables every day” (52-3; my emphasis). The opposition between the plural and the singular first person pronoun highlights that Adam knows he spends Emma’s money but he is the one to cook the food he buys with it and feed the girls. What he does resent, then, is that he, in addition to taking care of the children and the household, does not bring in more money. It is always Emma’s money he spends. He might even lack a sense of independence. Indeed, a certain stigma arises from the figure of a man with no money of his own, a man who is economically dependent on his wife. One time, Emma recommends him going to the theatre during the day: “A stay-at-home mum, she says, would do such a thing, would take the odd day off, so

why don't you?" (43) and Adam thinks to himself: "Because I have something to prove... Because, despite the joint account and the rhetoric, it's not our money but hers... I'm supposed to be looking after the girls and the house and the laundry, not taking myself to matinées" (43-4). Adam feels he has to prove himself because of the stigma. After fifteen years the issue of money still weighs on him and he feels he ought not to spend her money on matinées but on groceries, school supplies etc. Nevertheless, when Miriam goes back to school after being absent for quite a while, he thinks: "I could have been earning more money than I did, taking more pressure off Emma" (235). The use of the tentative "could" underscores how he is not planning to earn more money, but also because "[t]he girls were too far away" (Idem). After all the occasional resentment towards Emma, he is content to be his daughters' primary caretaker. He prioritises taking care of them over having money of his own.

Also important to Adam and Emma's marriage is their confrontation with other, more traditionally organised marriages. One such marriage is that of the mother of the boy who shares a hospital room with Miriam. It is always she who is by the boy's bed, whereas Adam and Emma alternate and try to take care of their daughters together as much as they can. Adam and the boy's mother bond over a cup of tea in the kitchenette, where he becomes aware of how "everything about her was fallen" (Moss 2016: 64). Day after day she watches her son in the hospital – perhaps even while working also – and Adam can tell she is about to reach her breaking point. Another time, Adam and the boy's mother meet again in the kitchenette and her husband has brought in pancakes. Yet her son is not well and would probably prefer other kinds of food (if anything at all), say, the kind Adam feeds Miriam with: fresh and organic fruits, home-made muesli muffins, plenty of vegetables... Adam does not respond with a touch or a smile, sensing that "she was holding herself together by the smallest cobweb and anything could have made her break" (79). Seeing the boy's mother repeatedly in such tired state is a confrontation for Adam (and Emma) with the conventional repartition of roles: the mother is expected to selflessly take care of the child while the father continues working (and, to avert criticism, brings in pancakes).

Another marriage that directly opposes Adam and Emma's is that of Dave and his wife, Kate. Adam reminisces meeting Kate on Miriam's first day of school:

There were, as usual, only mothers and they were, as usual, not talking to me, until Charlotte's mother said, I sometimes think my daughter doesn't actually like me very much, I sometimes think I've spent so much time at work that she no longer cares if I'm there or not... (Moss 2016: 180)

Kate is depicted as the traditional mother who is employed and worries over her mothering, like Emma. Adam tries to comfort her by saying "I'm sure she cares ... you're raising an independent young woman, you probably wouldn't worry about it if she were a boy..." (Idem). Yet he suppresses saying that the six hours of that first school day would be his longest separation from Miriam since her birth, assuming "Kate ... had seen in my masculinity a fellow in employment, to whom it had not occurred that a man might be on the other side

of the great divide between gainfully employed and stay-at-home mothers” (Idem). The novel uses Kate and her representation as a woman who lives up to stereotypes surrounding the working mother to reject normative motherhood. In Dave and Kate’s marriage, too, domestic roles are distributed separately and unequally. Their marriage especially emphasises how everyone around Adam presumes he is employed merely because he is a man, that they do not consider he might be a caretaking parent, let alone a stay-at-home dad. Even in the twenty-first century, gainful employment is paramount for one’s cachet as a man and the passage is indicative of how thoroughly men and women from differing societal strata have integrated – and value – the man-as-breadwinner model. When Adam goes back to the university for the first time since long, he expresses his issues with the upheld masculine ideal: “It is not clear to me why this mode of passing time is considered more noble or manly than cleaning the loo. I would rather have been with my daughter” (234). In the confrontation with marriages so built on tradition and gender norms, the novel emphasises the equality in Adam and Emma’s marriage. Theirs is not a perfect marriage and they both struggle with their feelings vis-à-vis their own and the other’s role but they share tasks as much as they can. In their marriage, the woman is liberated from her typical role as caring mother and servant of the household. Vice versa, Adam is freed from stereotypes surrounding masculinity, for he can be as caring and concerned as he is – Emma never comments on this. The novel thus shows that conforming to a conservative division of domestic roles does not *in se* entail happiness in a relationship but, rather, that overthrowing gender stereotypes can make people happy as well.

### ***E. Society***

In ‘Challenging Men to Reject Gender Stereotypes’ (1998) Jonah Gokova calls on men to help create a ‘gender-sensitive’ society in which privileges associated with gender roles are rejected and equality between men and women is established (in Freedman 2007: 422). Although Adam and his family consider the reversal of domestic roles normal, the outside world is more doubtful of their situation – a gender-sensitive society has not yet been established. For instance, the day Miriam is released from the hospital, a nurse enters the room and says ““Hello, Miriam, Mum.”” (127). In not addressing Adam, the nurse fails (or refuses) to acknowledge Adam as Miriam’s primary caretaker. Adam is keenly aware of the disjunct between the reversed situation they have normalised and society’s upheld gender exclusivity – perhaps even ‘insensitivity’: “I accompany school trips in my role as token penis-owner” because “they like to have a father along so someone can take the boys to the loo” (43, 69). In a moment of irony, he even calls this responsibility his “service to society” (244). He also worries that the hospital will call Emma first if something were to happen to Miriam again (or to Rose (p. 182)) and, while observing other families around him, he ponders:

mostly of course mothers and children because mostly of course the dads were at work. Or had never been around, or had stopped being around, would never know the daytime world of children and women. The waiting,

the passing of the time, the knowledge that children and women can always wait, have nothing better to do...  
 (Moss 2016: 271)

As a man who participates in “the daytime world of children and women” (Idem), Adam is considered an exception and his remark implies that he would like to see more men share in his choice to partake in that world. In his view, the daytime world of children should be inhabited by both mothers and fathers.

Throughout the novel, several figures who adhere more to the masculine stereotype are placed directly opposite Adam. One such figure is Adam’s boss, Professor Simon Godneston, who is depicted as an example of normative male superiority. Adam reckons:

It must ... be exhausting for the awkward squad, for Professor Troublemaker and his henchmen, to maintain their relentless superiority at all times and in all places. They must long, sometimes, to sit on the grass or lick an ice-cream, to fall off something or to be able to offer a casual apology for unintended harm. (Moss 2016: 41)

In other words, in Adam’s view, it must be exhausting for men to always and at all times live up to masculine stereotypes and with the passage, the novel mocks such stereotypes. They are revealed as arbitrary and based on gender ideologies that are long *passé*.

Adam’s parents-in-law also uphold stereotypical ideas on femininity and masculinity and, consequently, they are critical of Adam and Emma’s role reversal. His father-in-law refuses to call him a full-time parent and instead contemptuously addresses him as “[a] man of leisure” (Moss 2016: 16). Emma’s father is one of the stereotypical men of the story world. In his view, Adam lacks machismo. Adam, on his part, describes his father-in-law as

a surgeon and the kind of man who shrinks your new cashmere jumper so he’s never asked to run another load of laundry, who has the brass neck to assert that although he can and does implant titanium replacements for worn-out knees and hips, the concept of a washing machine’s spin speed is beyond his comprehension. (Moss 2016: 16).

Adam’s description of his father-in-law denounces the stereotype that men are not suited for domestic charges. The pressure which Emma’s father lays on Adam (to be more stereotypically masculine) is released by Adam’s own father, Eli. Once Eli turned eighteen he left the safety of his home to travel across America and join several hippie communes. But the hippie communes upheld traditional gender roles: “We talked a lot about freedom and equality but we never thought to do the washing up, and we talked about raising kids communally but I never changed a nappy until [Adam] was born” (113-4). Later, when Miriam has returned home, Eli wants to speak with Adam about his mother. A new chapter then begins in which Adam reflects on his personal history:

Once upon a time, on a peninsula off a peninsula at the far edge of England, there was a beautiful young woman, and she lived in a big, old house... A group of people lived in that house, and among them were the woman's husband, who had come from across the sea ..., and their small son. (Moss 2016: 137).

Adam grew up in a community at Bryher Farm, where he and his parents lived together with a group of other people. They provided for themselves, which makes Adam the second generation of the Goldschmidt family not to enter the workplace. His father read Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and tried to liberate his mother (p. 111). Adam thus grew up in a progressive, free-spirited environment that upheld ideas of equality between men and women. This explains why Adam had no problems with becoming a stay-at-home dad and why he does have issues with traditional gender norms. It can also be noted that Adam turned his father's words and beliefs into deeds by actually reversing the gender roles and Eli offers him an approving pat on the back: "You're a good husband, Adam. A good husband and a good dad" (189).

Furthermore, there are female characters who function in a similar way. One day, Rose starts yelling at Adam at the school gates and he can feel the other parents' gaze until one of the mothers, Martha, comforts him: "Adam, it's not you she's angry with. You must be doing pretty well for her to be able to tell you how she's feeling at all just now. She feels safe enough to shout at you..." (Moss 2015: 89). Martha has seen Adam by the school gates year after year and she acknowledges his ability as a parent and as a father to cope. Here, Adam receives approval and comfort by one of the traditional mothers in the novel. She does not doubt Adam's ability to bear the burden of the stay-at-home parent but rather compliments him. With characters such as Eli and Martha, the novel shows that society can also be supportive of parents who do not conform to conservative gender roles.

To conclude, in *The Tidal Zone*, the gender reversal is rejected by outsiders such as Adam's parents-in-law and other examples of stereotypical masculinity (Prof. Simon Godnestone, Dave). They are placed directly opposite Adam to emphasise not only Adam's awareness of his non-normative position in society but also the novel's rejection of the way society endorses normative gender ideologies. The typical mothers he encounters seem to support his family's lifestyle (and, perhaps, they would like to see their husbands more committed as well). Adam and Emma decide to completely reverse gender roles: Emma is the breadwinner of the family, she works sixty hours per week and returns home late. She finds herself in the public sphere most of her time, where she displays aspects of what is perceived as her inner masculinity. Adam always finds himself in the private sphere of the home, where he exhibits traits that are normally associated with mothering. A crisis then ensures that some marital strain grows between them, but they get through that difficult time together. In the aftermath of their tragedy, Emma tries to spend more time with her family. This is made clear in the closing chapter, which offers no closure but hypothetically completes the year merrily: "So let us say there is a cat in the future, after the ending... Let us say that Emma will continue to come home in time for dinner, perhaps even, with the passage of time, to take an occasional turn at the stove" (Moss 2015: 327). The novel's final words summarise their journey as follows: "Begin with brokenness. Begin again. We are not all,

not only, the characters written by our ancestors. I have told my stories now, and we are still here, and the day is hardly begun” (329).

Overall, the novel offers a positive picture of the stay-at-home dad. With Adam, the novel is critical of society’s stance vis-à-vis the stay-at-home dad. Society is still hesitant and often negligent of the possibility that a man can actively choose to stay at home. In Adam’s view, things have to change. The first aspect that requires reconsideration is money provision for stay-at-home parents. Adam repeatedly highlights the economic aspect of one parent providing for all. He feels dependent on the money his wife earns and hates the idea of always having to spend *her* money. Perhaps, with a budget of their own, stay-at-home parents would not feel pressured to prove themselves as such or justify their expenditure. A second aspect the novel criticises is society’s overall attitude: housework ought to be seen as actual labour (it should be appreciated and acknowledged accordingly and perhaps even payed for), gender stereotypes are too frequently upheld and society at large needs to become aware of the possibility that stereotypes can be adapted, rejected or reversed.

## ***The Bradshaw Variations***

### ***A. Narrative Structure***

Rachel Cusk’s *The Bradshaw Variations* is told by a third-person neutral omniscient narrator. In 32 chapters different characters take turn as focalisers, with Thomas and Tonie as most recurring focalisers. Their perspective is rendered through (free) indirect discourse. The characters that occupy the story world belong to three following generations: the ‘old’ generation of Mr. and Mrs. Bradshaw and Mr. and Mrs. Swann (Tonie’s parents); the ‘middle’ generation, namely Howard and Claudia, Thomas and Tonie, and Leo and Susie; the ‘young’ generation, which includes Lottie, Lewis and Martha (Howard and Claudia’s children), Alexa (Thomas and Tonie’s daughter), and Madeleine and Justin (Leo and Susie’s children). In-between the middle and young generation are Olga, a woman from Poland who lives with Thomas and Tonie, and Stefan, a fellow immigrant and Olga’s boyfriend. Chapter 28 is an exception to the pattern of focalisation in that it is a dramatic rendering of a dialogue between Howard and Claudia and presents their conversation as a scene in a theatre script.

All families belong to the white, English middle class, but, again, subdivisions can be made. The ‘old’ generation belong to the genteel, well-established, well-off traditional middle class. Howard and Claudia are pictured as young *riches* who live in a wealthy suburban neighbourhood. Claudia is a housewife and Howard runs his own company. Tonie and Thomas are part of the intellectual middle class who live in “a picturesque, convenient, middle-sized town an hour from London” (Cusk 2009: 15) and live a conventional middle-class life (aside from the household organisation). Susie and Leo move within the lower middle class; Leo is a freelance copywriter, Susie’s job is undefined. They live in a busy, less prosperous district in town – Susie herself was born into a poorer milieu.

The novel starts at the beginning of a new school year, right after Tonie was promoted and became head of the English department at the university where she works. She and Thomas have decided that he will quit his job to become a stay-at-home dad. Thomas now has responsibility over their eight-year-old daughter, Alexa, and the housework. The novel follows the course of one year mostly chronologically but, occasionally, a flashback (e.g. to Thomas's London office) slows down the discourse time. The passing from one chapter to another can sometimes entail a flashforward of a couple of days or weeks to even a month.

## ***B. Thomas***

Before Tonie's promotion, Thomas worked full time and was not responsible for the housekeeping. Accordingly, it takes some time for him to become accustomed to his new role as a stay-at-home father: "Often he doesn't change out of his dressing gown until eleven or twelve o'clock. By then he is finished with the revelations of the bass clef. He turns off his music. He is ready to read" (Cusk 2009: 6). He procrastinates in doing the household chores and prioritises his new hobby, art. He considers the time he now has as newly gained leisure time and seizes the opportunity to play the piano. First he tries to be his own teacher, but he soon takes up piano lessons, which take him out of the house and into the public realm again. For him, his piano play is also about self-expression (p. 80). He dedicates himself completely to the adagio he is learning to play and he reckons "the insistent, repetitive labour he has put into it ... is how he has always got the things he wanted in life" (79). Only now, due to his new unemployed status, does he realise "[i]t has always seemed that work occupied the place where something more natural ought to have been, something instinctive and innate, something he associates with honesty, though he doesn't know exactly why" (80). He realises work, the public sphere, signifies something arbitrary and unnatural. He believes the sphere he finds himself in now, the private sphere of the home, does represent the natural and the instinctive. This early insight is not translated into action, though. He only fulfills housework late at night and for Tonie to see: "There is nothing automatic about it. It is as though male pride forbids him to acquiesce in the order of things. He has to consider the saucepan and then decide himself where it ought to go" (93). Though in his view the private sphere represents the instinctive, he *decides* where the saucepan ought to go based on reason rather than natural instincts. The remnants of his masculine pride withhold him from fulfilling the housework dutifully – let alone instinctively –, as if he does not want his domestic duties to become a matter of habit. In other words, Thomas may officially be a stay-at-home dad now, his domestic responsibility is not equivalent to that of the housewife nor to Tonie's prior responsibility.

Secondly, Thomas is also unaccustomed to the responsibility of taking care of his daughter Alexa. Previously, when Tonie worked part time, Alexa was Tonie's responsibility and his daughter was never really his concern. Accordingly, realising that he is Alexa's primary caretaker now is a slow process of trial and error. For instance, when they visit Howard and Claudia, Alexa tries out a new toy Howard imported from Japan, a miniature electric motorbike. She sits herself on the saddle and "Thomas waits for Tonie to intervene,

but she does not” (Cusk 2009: 36). At that moment, Tonie is in a conversation with Claudia and trusts Thomas to keep an eye on their daughter, until

the bike bolts from Lewis’s grasp. Alexa is carried over the grass. Her eyes are screwed shut. She makes no attempt to steer. Almost immediately the bike hits the trunk of Howard’s apple tree, head-on. Alexa is thrown forward. Thomas sees the impact from behind, then her face full of blood on the grass. (Cusk 2009: 36)

Claudia commands to “Get ice!” while pointing towards the house and Thomas sees Tonie “aghast, as though Claudia’s pointing finger were accusing her of something” (Idem). Later, Howard apologises to Tonie and when they leave, Tonie confesses “It felt like it was my fault” (39). Thomas replies that “[i]t was nobody’s fault,’... though secretly he agrees with her” (Idem). Everyone but Tonie thinks *her* responsible for Alexa. Howard apologises to her, for he regards Tonie as Alexa’s primary caretaker; she is her mother, after all. Thomas is negligent of the responsibility that has recently become his and he, too, considers Tonie primary caretaker, which is why he secretly agrees with her feeling of guilt. Before, when he was still employed, he did not (have to) think of his daughter; only when he came home was he reminded of the reality of Alexa. Now, in late September, a few weeks into his new role, he does not miss Alexa when she is away; indeed, “[h]e barely thinks of her when she is at school” (109). One morning, when Alexa complains that her stomach hurts, he is determined to send her to school: “It is as though his will were a loud sound that has drowned out everything else. Why did he want her to go so much?” (Idem). He prefers the version of reality he occupies solitarily. Gradually, however, “standing in the tarmacked playground” more often, waiting for his daughter, “he realises, [this] is where Alexa spends the majority of her waking hours” (110). He becomes aware of the fact that, when they part, not only does his life continue, so does hers. By January, he admits

[t]he year is an event he is observing, *not participating in*, like an audience watching a play. He has made himself comfortable in the audience, comfortable in its lack of ambition, but occasionally he is seized by anxiety, torn unexpectedly out of himself, like a small unwary creature suddenly gripped in the talons of a predator. (Cusk 2009: 111; my emphasis).

Although he wants to stay at home and he, in fact, likes it so (as he assures his parents, “I don’t want to go back ... I like being at home” (59)), he does not want the according responsibility. He ignores the housework and refuses to partake in his role as primary caretaker. But the passage also implies another understanding. To play the role of the stay-at-home parent is to be part of the audience, for he no longer actively goes out into the public realm. He is now bound to the private sphere of the home, where there is no place for ambition. Whenever he realises that, he is seized by anxiety. In the beginning, he tried to replace professional ambition with a musical ambition to master difficult piano adagios, but now he is “comfortable in the audience”, he has found a way to accept the situation as it is (Idem).

Notwithstanding his sense of being comfortable at home, he continues to ignore the work and effort that is required to effectively manage a household. Olga, his lodger, notices it too:

He is so untidy, so lazy, and yet in his own drawer where no one can see, everything is in order. She has come home at three or four in the afternoon and found him lying on the sofa, reading a book, while downstairs the kitchen is full of terrible sights and smells, flies buzzing around the dirty plates, the unswept floor crunching underfoot, pans with burnt food at the bottom left sitting there for days. (Cusk 2009: 75)

The passage highlights that Thomas is capable of keeping things orderly but is unwilling to make the effort for the entire house. Accordingly, “[Olga] would never have guessed that he folded his underpants” (Idem). One day, Tonie returns home in the middle of the afternoon, after a fire in the computer rooms lead to a complete evacuation of the university buildings. When she comes home, she is confronted with the neglected housework – Thomas prioritised practising the C major fugue of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* – and she starts tidying up without taking off her jacket first. Watching her, Thomas says “Don’t do that” and Tonie replies “‘Someone has to do it,’ ... ‘The place is a mess’” (114). In an attempt to defend himself, he says “I was going to do it later” but he, too, looks around the room and cannot but see its disorder (115). They then start cleaning up the house together: he gathers the dirty dishes, Tonie collects all the rubbish, she washes shelves and doors, while he cleans the dirty dishes and the cooker. When Olga returns home, she first “stands and stares” but then takes the vacuum cleaner to help clean the house thoroughly (116). This is an important moment for Thomas, for he becomes more aware of his responsibility as a stay-at-home father. After the day of the collective clean-up, he slowly becomes more involved with the care of Alexa and fulfills his role more dutifully:

He makes things for Alexa to eat, things that she likes. He washes her hair. He polishes her school shoes... He knows which days she needs to take her gym kit to school. He sits with her while she does her homework, and makes sure she gives it in on time. At night, when she changes into her pyjamas, he observes with an artist’s satisfaction the felicity of the white smocking against her skin... And the health of her hair and gums and fingernails, the acuity of her responses, even the sleep she takes...: it confirms him, reflects him... It is because she has her own existence that the confirmation comes...

The house is clean and orderly.

(Cusk 2009: 117)

He realises he can no longer be negligent of his responsibility over the housework and the care of Alexa, for, as a stay-at-home parent, he is expected to dutifully take responsibility for both. It is not feasible to continue depending on Tonie to take care of the household and Alexa, particularly not for Tonie herself. She will grow irritated towards his indifference, which, in turn, is not beneficial to their marriage. Thomas thus gradually develops from a stay-at-home dad who simply ignores all the work that has to be done to a more involved and

caretaking parent with *savoir-faire* and a decent sense of responsibility. With Thomas's development, the novel also shows that the role of the stay-at-home parent does not simply indicate the absence of employment but, rather, that there is plenty of work to be done.

However, Thomas's positive development is abruptly undermined. One morning in Spring, Alexa wakes up feeling ill. Without further inquiring (e.g. taking her temperature) Thomas tells her she can have the day off school. Somewhat later, he is on the phone with Tonie and he realises he has completely forgotten about Alexa, he has not been checking in on her. He (but Tonie, over the phone, as well) first assumes she is merely tired but by two o'clock she is still asleep. Only then does he lay his hand across her forehead and ask what the matter is. All the while, "[h]e cannot get it out of his head that she is deceiving him" (Cusk 2009: 213). But, as he touches her arms, her chest, her neck, he finds she is burning. When he then also finds vomit on her pillow, he has no idea what to do. When he lifts her up, her eyes open briefly and he sees "[t]he whites are completely yellow" (Idem). In an instant, he brings her to the car and drives her to the hospital. There, he thinks of "how angry Tonie would be, if she saw what he had done. He is certain she would have done something else, would have called on some knowledge he doesn't possess" (214). He is immediately aware of the fault he made. Later, it turns out Alexa has meningitis and she might die: "He should have brought her in earlier. They don't say it, but he knows" (Idem). He is given brochures, which, according to him, are a disclosure of "his failure in this difficult test. Yet he cannot see where the difficulty lay... To have passed this test he would have to have been a different person" (215). When he tries ringing Tonie again, "[t]here is a boulder of guilt in his chest" (Idem). With Alexa's accident in September (with the miniature motorbike) he did not feel guilty at all but rather blamed Tonie for not having seen what he had. Now, he knows he misjudged the situation and is to blame.

When Tonie still does not answer her phone, his guilt grows into anger, which "is transformed yet again into peace, the pure peace of responsibility" (Idem). The crisis makes him understand, at last, that "[h]e has to offer it up, finally: the way he was, the way he will never again be" (Idem). He realises his lack of investment in his role as a stay-at-home dad has consequences, which he now has to face. In admitting "he would have to have been a different person" (215) he apprehends the double burden Tonie continued carrying over the course of the year. Still, he was fulfilling his role more properly right before the crisis and it remains unclear why his development is thwarted so abruptly. His reaction may be explained by a combination of his lack of experience in caring (for a sick child) and his selfishness which resurfaces. Before he goes to check on Alexa, he is reading a book. When Tonie calls to remind him she is going to Janine's that night, Thomas suggests finding a babysitter so that he could come to Janine's as well. Tonie's reaction is not what he hoped for, he returns to his book and occasionally watches Alexa sleep. Around two o'clock, he realises the heat in the room comes from Alexa and he takes action. All this time, he felt too upset about Tonie's reaction and was too self-involved to prioritise his daughter's health over his own feelings.

The closing chapter is again focalised through Thomas and the first sentences read: "On the train, Thomas thinks about money. He has always had enough of it, enough money. Then, for a year, he earned

nothing at all. Now the money is flowing again. What is money?" (Cusk 2009: 232). After the crisis, Tonie and Thomas return to their previous roles. This is not said directly, which emphasises the sense of failure that pervades concerning their decision to reverse domestic roles:

Tonie has never asked him to account for what he did the day Alexa got ill, just as he has never asked her where she was that evening. There has been an exchange of territories, ratified by a treaty of silence. She did not return to work, not even for a day. She donned the plain garment of motherhood, there in the hospital... She had sent Thomas home to sleep ... to be male again. (Cusk 2009: 233-4).

Thomas assumes Tonie sends him home so that he can be male again. This makes clear that he still holds on to gender stereotyping: the responsibility of household and childcare opposes his idea of how to be 'a man'. Perhaps Thomas only liked his role as a stay-at-home dad for as long as he could still be typically masculine and not really care about Alexa or the household. When he realises he is expected to take up responsibility for duties he considers motherly, he may feel a 'lesser man'. When Tonie sends him home, then, he is glad to again be what he considers 'masculine' and to reinstate his careless attitude.

Notwithstanding how much he values upholding what he considers his 'masculinity', he cannot be completely ascribed to what is thought of as the masculine stereotype. For instance, he "has never mislaid his ability to cry" and something as simple as a bedtime story can make him tear up (Cusk 2009: 10). When he practises the C major fugue of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, right before Tonie comes home in the middle of the day, it is said that

[h]e can play the left hand and he can play the right hand, but when he tries to play them together he encounters an absolute deficiency in himself. The problem is that the hands are equal. In every other piece Thomas has played, the right hand has been dominant: he has come to depend on the leadership of the right hand, to identify with it, as he might identify with the hero of a novel. Usually, the left hand is purely supportive, making no particular sense on its own. But in the fugue the left hand is autonomous. (Cusk 2009: 112)

The passage can be read as an allegory: he values the masculine stereotype and exhibits traits that are associated with masculinity (e.g. considering his time as leisure) but, in his new role at home, he has to fulfill tasks he associates with femininity or motherhood, such as doing the housework and taking care of Alexa. He also understands that he has ignored these caring tasks to let his 'masculine' identity (i.e. his right hand) rule. He found that particularly necessary in his role as breadwinner: the important part he played in the public sphere required, in his view, playing out the stereotype of masculinity. Hence, he worked full time, did not really think of or care about Alexa nor the household and let his wife take care of those things. Yet, now, in his role as a stay-at-home dad, he encounters a deficiency. He is more successful in the private sphere when he

eschews his male pride and fulfills these ‘feminine’ duties. Hence, he must find a way to let his masculinity be equal to the fulfillment of what he considers a mother’s responsibilities.

In its characterisation of Thomas, *The Bradshaw Variations* presents the reader with a conservative gender ideology. Thomas still believes that the man should be breadwinner and that the woman should be the one responsible for the housework and the care of the children. The novel proves him right, in the sense that the reader is offered the idea that, before their role reversal, everything was fine, at least for Thomas. When they reverse domestic roles, Thomas’s sense of “male pride” refrains him from fully participating in his role as a stay-at-home parent and he maintains a careless attitude towards the housework and his daughter (Cusk 2009: 93). In this early stage, Thomas, to his own surprise, quite likes his new role. When he is confronted with the fact that such posture is actually problematic for their reversed situation, he slowly alters his attitude to become a more invested father and husband. He becomes aware that, what he thinks of as his masculine personality, should be countered in his role as a stay-at-home dad by duties he associates with motherhood he is expected to fulfill. He thus has to find a way to let his masculinity be equal to taking on those ‘feminine’ responsibilities. As he realises this, he is seized by anxiety. His egocentrism and carelessness usurp his demeanour again and his positive development is abruptly undone.

### ***C. Tonie***

Tonie displays characteristics that are associated with femininity as well as traits that are typically considered masculine. At work, she is “driven by what feels like guilt or compunction” but she later acknowledges it is rather “the desire for success” (Cusk 2009: 16). Success is stereotyped as a man’s desire (professional success, economic success, social prestige) that lures him back to the work place day after day. Though she is a woman, Tonie is not afraid to find herself in the public sphere, which is usually characterised as the man’s sphere. Whereas women are said to let their emotions reign, the realm of men is the side of rationality<sup>6</sup>. Tonie, on her part, says that she “is glad to be on the side of rationality” (62). When she realises that “existence was not single-stranded, univalent, but dual” she claims to “crav[e] ... her [own] masculinity”, “[s]he wanted her own duality ... her own conflict of female and male, her own synthesis” (201). In longing an inner synthesis, she gives special thought to her appearance: “Head of Department: tailoring for responsibility, black for rebelliousness” (161). As Head of Department, typically a man’s position, she has a certain responsibility and ought to dress accordingly. She has a part to play and she wishes to play it with style. In order to gain authority as a woman in a man’s place, she gives her ensemble a hint of rebelliousness (unconventional shoes, a Jimi Hendrix T-shirt under her jacket). She is eager to authorise herself in the man’s position: “She is in charge here now. She is alone, at the head of her life, subject only to craziness like a king in Shakespeare. It is what she has wanted, to *free herself from authority*” (162; my emphasis). Hence, for Tonie, clothing symbolises something, in this case the sense of liberation. Later, when she leaves for a

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<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Glover and Kaplan (2009).

business trip to Amsterdam, Alexa says goodbye in a dress Tonie has never seen before: “In it, she seemed to have no further need of Tonie... Yet the mark of possession was Thomas’s... When she looked at Alexa she was looking at a version of her relationship with Thomas ... in which she was his cherished object” (65). As empowered as she might feel due to her new role as breadwinner, for a moment, she objectifies herself into Thomas’s “cherished object” (Idem). Objects can easily be replaced and Tonie does indeed feel redundant. According to her, Alexa, who “seemed to have no further need of Tonie” (Idem), confirms the sense that she is no longer needed in her role as caring mother. Tonie, then, is glad that she still has the realm of rationality to return to.

Tonie’s business trip alludes to Virginia Woolf’s plea for a woman to have a room of her own. Alone in her hotel room in Amsterdam, Tonie thinks about and reflects on her self and her new role, and a sense of unease is awakened in Tonie. In the hotel’s restaurant, she wonders who she is: “What is she doing here in this room... Away from home, she is only this unit of flesh” (Cusk 2009: 65). When she phones Thomas and he sounds distant, she ponders: “[Thomas] used to go on them himself. Afterwards, did he complain of loneliness, of disenchantment?” (66). Tonie now feels out of place, as if she does not belong in the public sphere of work and going on international business trips. She feels she ought to be at home and she may even lack the sense of being a mother, considering her idea that Alexa seems to be doing so well without her. In the beginning of the year, she compares her experience of eight years of motherhood to reading a book:

What has she been doing all this time? ... Giving, caring, watching, remembering, feeling, but *not* – not truly – *participating*. It’s been like reading a great book, life represented as fully and beautifully as it could be but the commodity itself left suspended. All her sympathies have been engaged, and left her body motionless, inert. (Cusk 2009: 11-2; my emphasis)

Like Thomas, she negates the verb ‘to participate’ to describe the role of primary caretaker. Unlike Thomas, who claims to embrace his role as spectator in the audience, she does not like the idea that she has not been truly participating in her own life. The role she played for eight years of working mother and primary caretaker “left her body motionless, inert” and did not make her truly happy (Idem). She would have liked to be an active agent, an actor, in her own life instead of a passive bystander. But this is how she feels in the beginning, when she is still unaccustomed to her absence from family life. Somewhat later, she feels that “the only person who has ever loved her first-hand is Alexa. Perhaps it is this authentic love that has shown her how incomplete the others were” (96). In February, she even wishes for the first time that Thomas were back at work. Additionally, she reminds Thomas sometimes that she has inhabited the world he now inhabits and that there is nothing new for him to find that she does not already know. For instance, when Thomas reports seeing Alexa with a new friend, Clara, Tonie is surprised: “That’s new. She and Clara have never had all that much to say to each other” (148). She advises him to befriend Clara’s mother, Helen: “She’s nice. It would do you good to have a friend at the school... She’s a musician... She plays the violin” (Idem). As time passes,

Tonie realises she misses the feeling of being needed by someone, she misses feeling her daughter's love. Put differently, Tonie realises that she has a caring side, a maternal feeling but, also, that she enjoys the rationality and autonomy of the workplace. She thus acknowledges her inner duality and yearns the synthesis she feels she cannot reach in her role as caretaker alone.

In 'The Book of Repetition: Rachel Cusk and Maternal Subjectivity' (2013) Clare Hanson collects all of Cusk's writing on motherhood. In her writing, Cusk recollects how her daughter, when a baby still, cried a lot but after three months, her crying simply stopped. She realises all her daughter needed was her presence:

my affection, my silly entertainments, my doting hours, the particular self I have tried to bring to my care of her, have been as superfluous as my fury and despair. All that is required is for me to be there; an "all" that is of course everything, because being there involves not being anywhere else, being ready to drop everything.  
 (quoted in Hanson 2013: 5)

As Hanson argues, this lays bare "the tension, even collision, between motherhood and one's sense of individual identity" (Hanson 2013: 6). When Tonie starts working full time, she becomes aware of what motherhood (and society's stance on it) and the private sphere has done to her. Now, she spends her days in the public sphere at the university to rediscover "the pleasure of self", to feel like herself again and she realises she "came to crave her own masculinity" (Cusk 2009: 6, 11, 201). She has been constricted by the role of motherhood and now that she is released from such particular restriction, she feels reborn. With Tonie, Cusk also exposes "the disjunctions between subjective experience and the dominant discourses of motherhood" (Hanson 2013: 1). Baraitser notes that, in psychoanalytic discourse, the mother is valorised as almost uniquely able "to move fluidly in and out of intense emotional states, with no apparent consequences to her mental health" (quoted in Hanson 2013: 17). Cusk's writing resists such idealisation of the mother figure and "registers the toll taken by these repeated assaults on maternal subjectivity" (Hanson 2013: 17). Now that Thomas has become the caretaking parent, he, too, must gain the insight that the responsibility of care demands true presence. Simply "being there" is not enough: if his mind is elsewhere, for instance with his piano play, things are likely to go wrong. Caring means "being ready to drop everything" (quoted in Hanson 2013: 5), it means offering up "the way he was, the way he will never again be" (Cusk 2009: 215).

### ***D. Marriage***

The novel shows how the role reversal causes tension in Thomas and Tonie's marriage. Tonie is tired of and irritated by the disorderly state she finds the house in when she returns home at the end of the day. Thomas is supposed to keep everything clean and orderly but instead he neglects all the housework and occupies himself with his hobbies. Thomas, in turn, has certain resentments towards Tonie. In the beginning, he is even jealous of the self-actualisation and satisfaction he believes Tonie experiences as she goes out to work:

She will be valiant not to think about [the home], but she will derive, he knows, a rudimentary pleasure from it too. It is the pleasure of self: Thomas knows because he has felt it himself. Once it was he who stood there, clean, bright-eyed, dressed for departure, and Tonie who remained behind to witness the day's passage. (Cusk 2009: 6).

Before, when she was still primary caretaker, Tonie used to “witness the day's passage”, or as she herself puts it, “not truly participat[e]” and she experienced a loss of self (6, 11). Now, Thomas assumes she experiences a “pleasure of self”, as he regards being employed as a means to fulfill individual identity (6). Thomas himself is now the one who “remain[s] behind to witness the day's passage” and he must seek another way to find completion (which he tries with his piano play) (Idem). But it is not only Tonie's employment status that causes Thomas's resentment. On their way to visit Howard and Claudia in late September, Tonie is quiet in the passenger seat and Thomas feels she has become more self-contained since she started her new job (p. 31). This may partly explain why he later secretly blames Tonie for Alexa's motorbike accident: he blames what he feels is her lack of selflessness. When Thomas's behaviour slowly changes, however, all seems well for a while. Until they both make a big mistake: Tonie engages in an extramarital affair and Thomas misjudges Alexa's illness. Though Thomas never finds out where Tonie was the night Alexa spent in the hospital and Tonie, in turn, never asks him to account for what he did, they decide to return to their previous roles: “There has been an exchange of territories, ratified by a treaty of silence. She did not return to work, not even for a day. She donned the plain garment of motherhood, there in the hospital” (233). The novel closes with Thomas admitting that

[s]ometimes, in the evenings, they look at one another with eyes that seem to Thomas to be full of guilt... [F]or an instant something new discloses itself, a new separation between them... Yet quite what they are guilty of they will never say. (Cusk 2009: 234)

The novel thus ends with the sense that their reversal was only a temporary experiment that eventually failed and that their failure is marked by a sense of guilt. Thomas is guilty of selfishness and failing to take proper care of his daughter when she is sick. Tonie's guilt comes from, on the one hand, engaging in an extramarital affair and, on the other hand, defying social conventions on mothering and being absent when her daughter is ill. Eventually, it is her guilt that drives Tonie's decision to reclaim her role as primary caretaker.

All year long, Thomas and Tonie's marriage contrasts sharply with that of his older brother Howard and his wife Claudia, who have organised their family life in a normative way: Howard is sole breadwinner and Claudia is a housewife. Especially Howard represents a conservative ideology, of which Thomas is also aware. He even says about it: “[Howard's] more-than-average conservatism wears the fake disguise of a joke” (Cusk 2009: 28). Howard may joke around, pretending not to be what he in fact is – i.e. too conservative for

his wife's well-being –, but Thomas sees through the fake disguise. This is especially painful since Thomas has always regarded Howard the most successful Bradshaw brother, whereas, from his perspective, “nothing Leo does ever seems entirely convincing” (29). Though Howard does not esteem women highly, he tells Claudia and Tonie “all you women are too unselfish” (35), especially concerning their roles as mothers. This again supports that dominant discourses of motherhood are built on utter commitment and selflessness. According to Howard, a child's mother is supposed to be the child's primary caretaker. Hence, he apologises to Tonie and not to Thomas after Alexa's accident with the electric motorbike.

At the same time, Howard is not aware of the repression Claudia experiences due to her constricted role as a mother. One November day, he wakes up ill and stays in bed all day, calling on Claudia every few minutes and overwhelming her with requests, like a child desperate to be looked after by its mother. When he weakly asks her to bring him “a little soup ... Nothing much ... [a]nd perhaps a roll, just one, with some butter” he notices Claudia's “look of resignation, of momentary oppression” (Cusk 2009: 72). He is not merciful, however, and reckons that she “should air [the room], straighten the covers and open the windows, put flowers in a vase”, spoiled as he was by the “paralysing love” he received from his mother, especially when he was ill (Idem). He thus repeatedly assaults her maternal subjectivity, in spite of being fully aware of the toll it takes (Hanson 2013: 17). Claudia, on her part, feels constricted by her role as a housewife. One time, Howard brings home a dog and when she later talks about it on the phone with her friend Juliet, Claudia pities that, again, she was in no position of decision-making: “Howard brought him home. It wasn't up to me” (49). Juliet, however, is not very supportive: “Why do you always say that? He wouldn't do it if you didn't let him. It's the same with your painting. It's always other people stopping you doing it. It's never you” (Idem). Claudia then notices how “a childless woman will defend the man” (Idem). According to Juliet, an independent and childless woman, Claudia lacks autonomy because she allows others to take it away from her. But it is, of course, not that simple. Like Thomas, Claudia is passionate about art. They have even built a separate shed in the garden for her to paint, a place where she would have a room of her own. Thomas does not yet carry out the selflessness he is expected to and he dedicates himself completely to his piano play. Claudia, on the other hand, pushes her wish to paint aside in order to handle her duties as a housewife first (58-9). The idea of the garden shed as a place she wants to go but never can highlights how restricted Claudia feels to remain inside the house. It symbolises the traditionally assigned spheres of the home as the woman's place and the outside/working area as the man's place. Claudia feels circumscribed in the private sphere and would like to spend more time in the garden shed to paint but prioritises her duties as a housewife over her own interests nevertheless. What is more, her selflessness is all the while unacknowledged by Howard, Juliet and other friends and family.

In chapter 28, the chapter that renders an argument between Claudia and Howard like a scene in a theatre script, Claudia says how she truly feels:

CLAUDIA: You, who come home and find that the beds have miraculously been made and the house tidied, and the food bought and the children picked up from school –

HOWARD: I'm just thinking of you, Claude. Your happiness.

CLAUDIA: -- you, who have a *slave*, an actual slave, an unpaid person whose time you own!

HOWARD: Lucia's not a slave. We pay her, don't we? ...

CLAUDIA: I'm not talking about Lucia. I'm talking about me.

HOWARD: You don't have to do anything. You can have all day.

CLAUDIA: You don't pay Lucia to be your wife.

HOWARD: All day if you want.

CLAUDIA: It isn't a day – it's a hand-me-down, it's a thing made out of other people's leftover time...

(Cusk 2009: 195-6; my emphasis)

The dialogue accurately represents the issues most housewives (and stay-at-home parents in general) struggle with, issues that run deeper than Claudia and Howard's particular situation. Housewives are unpaid and unacknowledged for the work they perform, their time is not their own but a "hand-me-down ... made out of other people's leftover time", they are told they "can have all day" but, in truth, they feel enslaved and restricted to the private realm (Idem). Above all, they are expected to be utterly selfless, which narrows these women's identity to the ideal of the selfless mother/servant. Tonie shared this feeling when she still worked part time: "Tonie's time did not seem to belong to her any more ... she forgot [her work] had a form and force of its own, a power of its own" (19). In sum, Howard and Claudia's conservative repartition of roles is not more successful than his younger brother's progressive model. This is mostly due to a discord in both spouses' views: Howard upholds traditional ideas whereas Claudia would like to see things differently. In their marriage, the husband's attitude is thus a more powerful predictor of the distribution of roles than the woman's, a conclusion Jane Pilcher also obtained in her study "Change Slow A-Coming" (Pilcher 2000: 771-5).

Thomas and Howard's marriages also differ from that of their youngest brother, Leo, and his wife, Susie. In their marriage, both spouses seem to uphold liberal ideas concerning the division of domestic labour. Both Leo and Susie are employed and they do not conceive of family life in terms of strictly separate roles but rather divide the household in terms of practices. Susie's mothering is built on a "bad mother act": she is characterised as an absent-minded woman and a slightly irresponsible mother who would not mind leaving the children in the car because she "could do with a day off" (Cusk 2009: 54). She thus scrutinises the traditional ideas of motherhood the Bradshaw family so values. Similarly, Leo is uttered to mock stereotypes of masculinity, as becomes clear in the following passage when they are on their way home from a family visit:

A yellow Lamborghini is overtaking them in the fast lane. Leo has no interest in sports cars, but suddenly it cheers him, tickles him, the sight of this pointless banana-coloured contraption. He turns to Justin in the back seat. 'Look at that,' he says. (Cusk 2009: 61)

Leo considers the stereotype of the sportscar as a man's interest as pointless as the "banana-coloured contraption" itself and, consequently, he does not express any great excitement but merely remarks on its passing by (Idem). Furthermore, Susie is the stronger figure in their relationship and Leo describes her as his anchor, his "measure of all things"<sup>7</sup>. As a consequence, Leo rejects traditional norms and societal standards under Susie's guidance. Yet, Leo was brought up in a household in which the husband exercised his patriarchal authority, and his rejection of normativity is not always sincere: "If he could only leave it all to her", he thinks (168). In other words, the fact that their marriage is built on equality and joint roles is mostly because of Susie and the dominant role she plays in their relationship. Whereas in Howard and Claudia's marriage, the husband's attitude is decisive for the division of domestic roles, here, it is the wife's. With Leo and Susie's marriage as well as with Thomas and Tonie's marriage, the novel challenges and destabilises the idea of marriage that is built on conservatism and normative gender ideologies but it does not completely reject it.

Of course, the way the Bradshaw brothers work and live now is influenced by their conservative upbringing by Mr. and Mrs. Bradshaw. For instance, when Mr. Bradshaw mows his lawn, which "rises like a woman's body... He has a feeling of domination as he goes over the tender flanks and creases" (Cusk 2009: 41). Mr. Bradshaw is characterised as a stereotypically masculine figure who wishes to control the woman's body and is convinced that "work is life for a man, as children are for a woman" (59). As he says this to Thomas directly, he criticises Thomas's reversed family situation. Although Leo considers himself the black sheep of the family ("There is ... a hierarchy, an order to these conversations, and he and Susie are at the bottom of it" (58)), Thomas and Tonie are more often the subject of critique. Tonie's parents, too, Mr. and Mrs. Swann, are steady critics of their daughter's non-normative way of living. Mrs. Swann's relation with her daughter Antonia is characterised by a feeling of victimisation on Mrs. Swann's part: "even on [Antonia's] first day of life, Mrs. Swann remembers feeling very distinctly that she had lost something, and that it was Antonia who had stolen it from her" (101). She fears the day her husband allies himself with Tonie and, in order to avoid that, she always tries to stand united with her husband against their daughter. Usually, when she thinks of Tonie, she thinks of a woman who appears "to enact the qualities of contradiction and eccentricity that already define her to her audience" and when she approaches her daughter's house, she senses "a dense atmosphere of bitterness and failure" (98-9).

When she and Mr. Swann go there for a visit, she comments on Tonie's new antique silk curtains: "'What a waste!' says Mrs. Swann. 'When I think of all those curtains in the attic, all beautifully lined, with proper pelmets, just sitting there gathering dust –'" (Cusk 2009: 103). According to Douglas (1966), decorating and tidying "represents compliance with cultural expectations" and "in papering, decorating and tidying we are ... positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea" (quoted in Chapman

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<sup>7</sup> In accordance with the humanist ideal of "Man" as the alleged "measure of all things" (Braidotti 2017: 22).

2004: 24). In rejecting her daughter's new curtains, Mrs. Swann rejects her daughter's non-normativity. She thus mentions the "*boxes of old pairs*" (102) she has stocked in the attic because she wishes her daughter to conform to a more traditional lifestyle that is more like her own. Her vision on her daughter's role reversal is one of condemnation:

'What's a man doing, hanging around the house? That was the problem. A lot of those marriages,' she adds significantly, 'ended in divorce. The women simply couldn't stand it. They lost all respect for their husbands... A man isn't a man if he's in the house all day. You *need* a man, in a marriage. (Cusk 2009: 105)

Mrs. Swann echoes Mr. Bradshaw's view on the need within marriage for a strict and, above all, conservative role division. In their view, "[a] man isn't a man if he's in the house all day", his proper role is that of breadwinner; the home is the woman's place (Idem). Any other family model is clouded by "a dense atmosphere of bitterness" and ends in divorce, which is seen as failure (98-9). Briefly put, the old generation upholds traditional, patriarchal ideas the most strongly. They reduce men and women to stereotypical gender roles and endorse a strong belief in a strict separation of spheres. They are explicit about their adverse attitude towards their children's decision and are accordingly presented as unsupportive.

### ***E. Society***

The rest of society and the other men and women Tonie and Thomas encounter are also skeptical of their reversed household. It already begins at the school gates: when Tonie still worked part time, she took care of Alexa and brought her to school. Now, that is Thomas's responsibility and he has to explain "Tonie's disappearance to an imperative female audience" numerous times (Cusk 2009: 146). Tonie has to explain and justify her new role as full-time breadwinner as well. Her colleague Janine, for instance, is unmarried and mother of an only child and she critically questions whether the reversal is what Tonie wanted: "I don't *not* want it. It depends how it works out", Tonie replies (24). Instantly she can see that "[i]n Janine's eyes Tonie has done something irrational, has strayed from their particular female church with its ceaseless interpolations of the personal and the practical, its reverence for emotions..." (24-5). Tonie realises this is where she differs from Janine and most other women (and men) in their views on womanhood and motherhood:

Janine would not understand Tonie's desire for the harsh, the literal, the coldly imposing. She would not understand her decision to set down the sack of emotion. 'I'd miss the teaching,' is all she says, looking over Tonie's shoulder. She is not the first person to say this to Tonie: here, teaching is equivalent to emotion. The women Tonie knows at home say they would miss the children, in exactly the same way." (Cusk 2009: 25)

Tonie "set[s] down the sack of emotion" and "is glad to be on the side of rationality" because she "craved ... her [own] masculinity" (25, 62, 201). She refuses to inscribe herself into dominant discourses of motherhood,

which utter women as emotional beings who could not bear the thought of being removed from their children. Tonie is also confronted with conservative views on femininity outside the work place. When she goes to a party at Janine's flat, she has a conversation with her colleague Lawrence Metcalf and Dieter, a man from Germany Lawrence knows. At some point, Lawrence starts talking about Stockholm and Swedish women:

‘And they’re pretty liberated, you know, I don’t mean in terms of the – ah – cliché about the Swedes ... but in terms of their attitudes. You don’t get that female resentment you have here. Wouldn’t you say that’s true, Dieter?’

‘I’m not sure I know what you mean,’ he says.

‘Resentment, Dieter. It’s what gives English women all those little lines around their mouths.’

‘I know what resentment is,’ the man says. ‘It is the ubiquitous consequence of sexual inequality. Swedish women are better protected by the law, that’s all. But it has to be enforced.’

(Cusk 2009: 198-9)

In Sweden, women are liberated beyond the political in that society as a whole upholds a progressive and emancipated attitude on femininity and motherhood. The fragment shows how a conservative gender ideology is very much part of the English culture. It also highlights that regulation in the United Kingdom does not allow women (and men) to genuinely change the conventional and restrictive gender normativity the culture has integrated so thoroughly (e.g. short paternity leave, a stay-at-home parent's economic dependency etc.)

In conclusion, Rachel Cusk's *The Bradshaw Variations* offers varying perspectives on a household where gender roles are reversed. In the beginning, Thomas has no sense of his responsibility as a stay-at-home dad and thinks that his new role offers him new leisure time he can choose how to spend. As a consequence, when Tonie comes home in the evening, she finds the house in the same disorderly state as when she left in the morning. She thus continues carrying the double burden of earning the family's money, keeping the house clean and orderly and managing the household at large. Slowly but surely, Thomas learns to see the responsibility and effort it takes to run a household successfully and to take proper care of his daughter. Thenceforth, when Tonie comes home from work, the house is tidied and Alexa is fed and put to bed. However, this also awakens a sense of unease and even guilt in Tonie concerning her new role: she doubts her mothering, misses feeling Alexa's love and, for the first time, she wishes Thomas were back at work. Thomas's careless and failing approach when Alexa falls seriously ill as well as Tonie's engagement in an extramarital affair and her guilt cause the family to endure major strain. In the end, the reversal of gender roles is rejected and “Tonie and Thomas are metaphorically punished for breaking the conventions of gendered family roles” (Hanson 2013: 22). The turn of events is affected by their breaking of conventions as Tonie's guilt comes from the fact that her mothering is not in accordance with the traditional view society has on how to be a mother. It is mostly because of Tonie's sociosyncratic guilt that she reclaims her role as primary

caretaker and society thus triumphs over her maternal subjectivity. Overall, the novel endorses traditional gendered patterns and offers a negative view on the stay-at-home dad.

## Conclusion

In her feminist manifesto ‘We Should All Be Feminists’ (2014), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie argues that “[g]ender as it functions today is a grave injustice... Imagine how much happier we would be, how much freer to be our true individual selves, if we didn’t have the weight of gender expectations” (Adichie 2014: 21, 34). Gender expectations not only affect women; men, too, feel limited by the gendered stereotypes. While women are still expected to take on primary responsibility for the household and childcare and are criticised for not doing so, men who take up more responsibility for the children and/or the housework also meet with skepticism concerning their ‘masculine’ status or authority. The figure of the stay-at-home father, especially, defies these social conventions and is likely to be met with cynicism or scorn. For, as Adichie argues, “thinking of changing the status quo is always uncomfortable” (40). Sarah Moss’s *The Tidal Zone* (2016) and Rachel Cusk’s *The Bradshaw Variations* (2009), two novels specifically about a stay-at-home dad, have been analysed from the perspective of gendered moral rationalities. The central question of the novels’ analyses is how they underscore or challenge the gender norms that are associated with mothering and fathering: are gender roles reversed, adjusted or completely rejected? The answer to this question is based on a literary analysis of the two novels, with reference to the secondary reading that has been consulted at the beginning of the research.

The foremost difference between Adam and Thomas concerns the way they deal with the household chores. Adam fulfills his responsibility over the household dutifully: he keeps the house clean and orderly, takes care of the laundry and ensures that there is healthy food in the house. Indeed, the novel’s attention to describing day-to-day tasks in great detail is exceptional. In doing so, the novel highlights the amount of work that is required to run a household and advocates that domestic labour ought to be seen as actual work. Thomas, on the other hand, has no wish to take up full responsibility for the household and rather prioritises his own interests in music or reading over washing dishes or tidying any time. Whereas Adam’s constant housekeeping emphasises the work itself and its endlessness, Thomas’s dedication to his hobbies underscores his lack of investment in the household and his selfishness. Adam seems very much aware that managing a household requires a certain degree of selflessness. Repetitive household chores are not the most rewarding of jobs. He even occasionally admits he would like more time to meet his own needs. Thomas, on the other hand, does not lack leisure before his development, he simply does as he wishes. The exposure of the collective clean-up, however, makes him understand the investment and altruism that is required in his role as a stay-at-home father and, slowly, he takes on more responsibility for the household.

Secondly, the way in which Thomas fulfills his responsibility as primary caretaker is the opposite of Adam’s loving and worried care for his daughters. Adam worries constantly over his daughters, when he is with them and when he is not. He worries whether Miriam will ever be able to lead a normal life again, he worries when Rose goes out for a walk with her grandfather or when she is at school. Thomas, on the contrary, admits he does not even think of Alexa when she is at school. When she feels ill, he is determined to

send her to school so much so that he does not worry about her health. Then, after the big clean-up with Tonie, which, for him, was a painful confrontation with his negligence, he develops slowly but steadily: “He makes things for Alexa to eat, things that she likes... He knows which days she needs to take her gym kit to school...” (Cusk 2009: 117). He thus develops into a more involved stay-at-home dad. Yet, at the crucial moment of Alexa’s illness, he still lets matters slide and takes the wrong decisions. What causes him to misjudge the situation so is probably due to his lack of experience in caring (for a sick child) – “He wonders what to do” – combined with his selfishness which resurfaces (213). He would like to join Tonie to a party at Janine’s that night and suggests finding a babysitter but Tonie’s reaction is not what he hoped for and, as he mentions that Alexa feels unwell, he realises he has forgotten about her. He returns to his book and occasionally watches Alexa sleep. All this time, he feels too upset about Tonie’s reaction and is too self-involved to take proper care of his sick daughter. And it is only at two o’clock that he checks her more thoroughly, realises Alexa is seriously ill and decides to take action.

What contributes to his indifferent attitude in his role as a stay-at-home dad is the inner struggles he is met with. When he worked full time, he lived up to gender expectations and let his wife take care of the household and their daughter. He considers caring and housekeeping a woman’s matter and, even in his role as a stay-at-home dad, he prioritises his own leisure (playing the piano, reading a book, going for a run) over the housekeeping or the care of Alexa. As he slowly realises that he is now responsible for the household and Alexa, he also understands that, in order to fulfill his role properly, he must give in to completing tasks he considers feminine. In other words, he must allow what he thinks of as his masculinity to meet with what he considers motherly duties. Adam, on his part, is quite aware that he takes up roles others consider feminine but he is not himself overly bothered by this, nor does it lead him to question his own identity as a man. He is glad to be primary caretaker, for it is a role that allows him to be close to his daughters as they grow up. He worries a lot, but he is not afraid to express his concern nor does he fear being thought of a lesser man because of it. On the contrary, he befriends other mothers and feels their support, he finds it important his children learn the right moral values and he even displays what is traditionally called a ‘mother’s instinct’. In representing the stay-at-home dad in this way, *The Tidal Zone* ridicules gender norms *an sich* as well as society at large for attaching such value to gender conformity. Whereas Thomas’s identity can be attributed mostly to the masculine stereotype, Adam ascribes more to a masculine-feminine identity. He embraces his androgyny and thus inscribes himself in the legacy of Virginia Woolf’s ‘A Room of One’s Own’ (1929). In ‘Testimony, House Committee on Education and Labor’ Pauli Murray also talks of an individual’s androgynous identity and argues that “liberating ... humanity ... demands ... the imagination and vision to realise that an androgynous society is vastly superior to a patriarchal society” (in Freedman 2007: 286).

Tonie and Emma, then, do struggle with society’s conservative gender ideologies. Emma is a rational woman who likes to be in control and is committed to her job. As a general practitioner, she has a certain responsibility towards her patients but the NHS’s high demands and deficiencies increasingly weigh on her. With Miriam in the hospital and Adam watching her, she tries to take care of Rose as well as possible, she

tries to buy food for the girls to eat and leave the house not an absolute mess when she either goes out to work or sit by Miriam's hospital bed. For the sake of rebelling against convention, she takes other days off than her male colleagues and whenever she has a day off, she fulfills household chores. When Rose has an attack in the swimming pool that reminds of her sister's previous attacks, Emma cannot hold back her emotions and cries out in tears: "I don't want to lose them both, I don't want – I don't want – to outlive—" (Moss 2016: 258). Throughout the novel she has to explain herself to a society that has a traditional and restrictive view on how she is to fulfill her role as a mother. However, that view is not in accordance with the way she personally fulfills her role as a working mother. After all, she and Adam decided *he* would be primary caretaker and responsible for managing the household. But, as Emma is confronted with the mortality of her daughters and the fragility of life as well as with the way society expects her to be a mother, she feels guilty and tries to spend more time with her family. The question whether she genuinely wants to be home more is thus nuanced: she may want to spend more time at home, but only for a little while. Once Miriam is back from the hospital, she wants to check in at work. Hence, what mostly drives her to be with her family is societal standards and the sense of guilt they awaken in her.

Tonie, also, feels a certain guilt. She has only recently given over her role as housekeeper and primary caretaker to her husband and is glad at first to be able to fully devote herself to her new role as head of the department, a job which she considers to be on "the side of rationality" (Cusk 2009: 62). Her desire for success as well as her tailoring – she considers both at least partly masculine – emphasise that she craves what she calls "her [own] masculinity" (201). When she was still primary caretaker, she felt she was not participating in her own life. Her previous role left the 'masculine' side of her identity incomplete. But as time passes, she also misses feeling needed by someone and misses feeling her daughter's love. She then comprehends that "[s]he wanted her own duality ... female and male, her own synthesis" (Idem). When Alexa's life hangs by a thread, she feels guilty for not being there when her daughter is sick and for engaging in an extramarital affair so much so that she feels nearly compelled to reclaim her role as a mother and primary caretaker. This is where Emma and Tonie differ in the end: Emma eventually understands the importance of love and family and attempts to spend more time with them but she stays in her position as a general practitioner and mother who works full time. Tonie, on the other hand, exchanges her position as Head of Department again for the garment of motherhood – the more conservative understanding of motherhood society values that is built on selfless care and housekeeping. As much as she liked being on the rational side, Tonie's decision to return to her role as primary caretaker is influenced by society's stance on 'proper mothering'. Weighed down by guilt, she trades her individuality for a societal standard and, perhaps, general approval.

As both families face several crises, at least one of which always involves a medical urgency, both couples encounter marital strain. With Miriam's incident, Adam increasingly blames Emma for her absence from the family and resents the time she spends on her patients. But Emma tries her best and tries to guard Miriam as much as Adam so that the responsibility becomes more equally shared. Yet Adam's occasional

resentment does not come from Emma's time management alone. He also dislikes the fact that he has no money of his own and is dependent on Emma's income. At the same time, he realises he could go out and work more but he admits he would rather be with his daughters. Moreover, when he returns to his teaching job at the university one day, he criticises society's ideal that the man should be breadwinner: "It is not clear to me why this mode of passing time is considered more noble or manly than cleaning the loo", he thinks (Moss 2016: 234). Between Tonie and Thomas, tensions also simmer. Tonie is irritated by Thomas's unwillingness to invest in the household and care of Alexa and some time into the new situation she still carries the double burden. Thomas, on his part, resents Tonie for going out into the public sphere every day, finding what he considers "the pleasure of self" (Cusk 2009: 6). Although he likes being at home at first, his resentment grows once he realises staying at home means "he has to offer ... up ... the way he was, the way he will never again be" (215). When Tonie sends him back to work, in his view "to be male again", he is but too glad (234). In other words, Adam and Emma's marriage values equality within the relationship. Their reversal of gender roles represents their non-conformity to gender norms, which works fine for them. They face some hardship but overcome their marital strain and stand the test of time together. With Thomas and Tonie, *The Bradshaw Variations* upholds the idea that men and women should conform to the conservative ideologies on gender and domestic roles society has integrated so thoroughly. They reverse gender roles but the reversion leads to a sense of guilt in both and endangers their marriage (and even their daughter). In the end, they return to their original and traditional role division and confirm what is thought of as the 'success formula' of the status quo.

Both Adam and Thomas live in an urban middle-class family home in the middle of England and are similarly surrounded by upper-middle-class as well as lower-middle-class family members. Adam's father-in-law, a surgeon who "can and does implant titanium replacements for worn-out knees and hips", does not think it important for a man to participate in any housekeeping (Moss 2016: 16). He refuses to call Adam a full-time parent and refers to him as "a man of leisure" (Idem). Emma's father thus endorses and values the traditional male-breadwinner model. Adam's father, Eli, on the other hand, is an advocate of more progressive ideas and is, overall, more supportive of his son's family situation. Adam grew up in a farm community where everyone contributed to communal provision and men and women worked together. Adam's roots thus explain at least partly why he has no issues with non-normativity and equality within a relationship. Thomas's family, then, echoes the ideas of Adam's father-in-law: both Mr. and Mrs. Bradshaw and Mr. and Mrs. Swann are critical of Thomas and Tonie's reversed role division. Both couples live up to and enunciate conservative gendered patterns. Mrs. Swann even warns Thomas and Tonie: "A lot of those marriages ... ended in divorce" (105). Like Adam's father-in-law, Thomas and Tonie's parents are anything but supportive of their situation and constantly make their role reversal the subject of critique. One difference between Adam and Thomas's relationship with their family is that, unlike Thomas, who seems to have little affection for them, Adam does have an emotional connection with his father. His father travels all the way from Cornwall to the middle of England to stand by his family as they are going through a rough time. When he arrives in the hospital, Adam is on the brink of a breakdown:

‘Adam?’

Suddenly, Dad.

I found myself in his arms.

For a long time.

(Moss 2016: 106)

In sum, Emma’s father and both Thomas and Tonie’s parents condemn their decision to implement a role reversal. They recognise their children’s non-conforming gender identification but remain unsupportive. Adam’s father, on the contrary, is very supportive and compliments Adam on how well he is doing as a husband and a father. Thomas’s brother Howard, only two years older than Thomas, clearly repeats the ideas he was fed in his upbringing and is not at all aware of how circumscribed his wife Claudia feels. Thomas’s younger brother, Leo, apparently resists his parents’ conservatism and his relationship with Susie is based on equality. But his seemingly progressive attitude is not always as sincere and he sometimes wishes he could leave everything to his wife. Hence, age is not an indicator of attitude vis-à-vis a non-normative division of domestic roles and neither is gender. Claudia feels restricted in her role as a housewife and Susie finds it important to be emancipated, but Mrs. Bradshaw and Mrs. Swann’s attitudes do not contradict their husbands’.

The idea that neither age nor gender predicts how an outsider reacts to the figure of the stay-at-home dad is also clear when society at large is considered. Adam meets other mothers, for instance at the school gates, who are very supportive of his decision and often admit they would like to see their own husbands more involved as well. As he becomes acquainted with the mother of the boy who shares a hospital room with Miriam, it is but too clear that, overall, women are still expected to be responsible for their children and commit themselves entirely and selflessly to taking care of them. Men, on the other hand, are still mostly free to do as they please (without scrutiny) and generally continue working, not bothering to take care of their sick child. Indeed, working fathers often make fun of Adam’s role as a stay-at-home dad, which is made clear by Adam’s awkward conversation with Dave. Adam, on his part, cannot get his head around the conservative ideology such fathers uphold and mocks the masculine stereotype. Some women, too, value the existing stereotypes of fathering and mothering. Tonie’s colleague Janine, for instance, unmarried and mother of an only child, cannot believe Tonie would actually want to spend so little time with her daughter. Other women question Tonie’s mothering as well and insist they would miss their children too much if they were to become breadwinner. With their implicit critique they nearly refute Tonie’s identification as a mother. All this highlights one particular resemblance between Adam and Thomas: both men’s homosociality, i.e. their association and relation with other men, is undermined by their role as a stay-at-home dad. Their contact and interaction with other men is limited, as the realm of childcare and household is still predominantly occupied by women. When they do talk to another father, an uneasy interaction takes place. The men they meet are

employed and look at Adam and Thomas with slight contempt, considering them lesser men. One exception is Thomas's piano teacher, who does not really care about normativity and mutually exclusive gender categories (Rubin 1975: 179).

In conclusion, both *The Tidal Zone* and *The Bradshaw Variations* show that “fiction can serve as a laboratory for the exploration of gendered modes of consciousness”, as Glover and Kaplan argue (Glover & Kaplan 2009: 24). Both novels reverse domestic roles and thus portray the family as “the vehicle for speculation about the forms of, and determinants on, wider social relations” (Coward 1983: 17). They illustrate that “[b]alancing work and family is inherently, although not exclusively, a gender issue”, as Lewis and Campbell argue in ‘UK Work/Family Balance Policies and Gender Equality, 1997-2005’ (2007) (Lewis & Campbell 2007: 5). The protagonists of Sarah Moss's *The Tidal Zone* reject gender norms more profoundly than the main characters in Rachel Cusk's *The Bradshaw Variations*. In *The Tidal Zone*, gender normativity is repudiated on an individual level as well as on the level of the family, concerning mothering and fathering. *The Bradshaw Variations*, on the other hand, overall confirms conservative gender stereotyping. Whereas *The Tidal Zone* offers a positive picture of the stay-at-home dad, *The Bradshaw Variations* ends on a more negative note. What does stand out from both novels is that love and family are important and that we should appreciate the little things in life that make us happy. This may be a cliché but, as Adam tells Miriam, “[m]aybe clichés do make people happy, maybe that's why they're clichés” (Moss 2016: 179). And who is going to argue against happiness?

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## Abstract

In deze masterthesis analyseer ik twee hedendaagse romans, *The Tidal Zone* (2016) van Sarah Moss en *The Bradshaw Variations* (2009) van Rachel Cusk. Sarah Moss is een Schotse auteur die reeds (historische) verhalen schreef omtrent het feminisme en geneeskunde, natuur en voeding. Rachel Cusk werd geboren in Canada, groeide op in Amerika en woont tegenwoordig in Engeland. Zij schrijft vooral over emancipatie en het moederschap. In beide romans wordt de huishoudelijke rollenverdeling omgedraaid: de vrouw werkt full time, terwijl de man thuisblijft en de verantwoordelijkheid voor kinderen en huishoudelijke taken op zich neemt. Een dergelijke huisvader krijgt in het Engels de naam *stay-at-home dad*. Deze masterthesis zal kijken naar de gelijkenissen en verschillen in de representatie van en visie op de huisvader en op zulke omgekeerde situatie die in beide romans wordt aangeboden.

Eerst geef ik een bio- en bibliografische schets van de auteurs en een korte samenvatting van hun roman, alsook hoe de romans ontvangen werden door recensenten. Daarna volgt een theoretisch perspectief op de geschiedenis van de term 'gender' binnen de gender studies, huishoudelijke rollen en hoe de verdeling van die rollen verbonden werd aan sekse, wat voor een strikter onderscheid zorgde tussen man en vrouw. Er wordt ook kort gekeken naar de hedendaagse voorbeelden waarin dergelijke rollenverdeling aangepast, omgekeerd of verworpen wordt. Na het theoretisch perspectief volgt een narratologische en literaire analyse van beide romans vanuit het literair-historische kader dat gegeven wordt en in het licht van de centrale vraagstelling van deze thesis. In de conclusie worden beide romans dan vergeleken, op basis waarvan de onderzoeksvraag finaal beantwoord zal worden. De thesis wordt afgesloten met een bibliografie.

*The Tidal Zone* wordt verteld door een ik-verteller, Adam Goldschmidt, die de huisvader in het verhaal is. Het ongeluk dat zijn familie overkomt zorgt voor spanningen, een toenemende emotionele afstand tussen hem en zijn vrouw en twijfels bij beide partijen, niet alleen met betrekking tot hun keuze om de rollen om te keren maar ook met betrekking tot de manier waarop ze hun rol als ouder vervullen. Desondanks doorstaan ze hun tragedie en biedt de roman een positief beeld op de *stay-at-home dad*. *The Bradshaw Variations* biedt een veelzijdiger perspectief op de rollenomkering doordat het verhaal gefocaliseerd wordt door verschillende personages. Daardoor krijgt de lezer niet alleen het perspectief van de huisvader maar ook de directe visie van de werkende vrouw en de omringende familie en vrienden. De roman eindigt op een minder positieve noot: de toenemende spanningen culminereren in een crisis en uiteindelijk wordt de rollenverdeling teruggedraaid naar het traditionele model. Beide romans schenken veel aandacht aan de invulling (of het gebrek daaraan) van dagelijkse, repetitieve huishoudelijke taken door de twee vaders alsook hun vaak pijnlijke confrontatie met een maatschappij die nog veel belang hecht aan traditie en conventie.