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Iron Manicures: Sex, Power, and Sedition in Margaret Atwood's Writing

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Iron Manicures: Sex, Power, and Sediton in Margaret Atwood's Writing

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood has often been criticized as a bad feminist writer for featuring villainous, cruel women. Atwood has combatted this criticism by pointing out that evil women exist in life, so they should in literature as well. Every story requires a villain and a victim, for Atwood these roles are both usually played by women. This thesis will explore the idea of the woman as spectacle in both behavior and body. Women are controlled by the idea that they must care. When they stop caring, they become a threat. At the heart of Atwood's writing are the relationships between women both bitter and powerful. This thesis examines the relationships through which women control other women, as well as the destabilizing power of female alliances. The final section of this thesis will examine how in creating double or multiple versions of the self, women can act out antisocial behavior, undermine male narratives, and participate in the phallogentric practice of writing.

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Introduction

Margaret Atwood does not write happy stories about good women. Atwood's writing confronts the often-unpalatable realities of womanhood and female cruelty in respect to their relationships with the self, men, and other women. Her writing tells unpleasant tales of female power and sedition. The first section of this thesis will examine the function of the villainess, primarily through Zenia's influence on the lives of other characters in *The Robber Bride*.

Atwood's villainesses come in the form of sirens and vampires, deviant seductresses and vengeful murderesses. Atwood's murderesses in *Alias Grace* and "Stone Mattress" exact female vengeance against men who are not held responsible for their actions. Seductresses like Zenia and Helen of Troy occupy enviable positions. Even as women suffer at the hands of these villainesses, they envy more than despise them. Good women covet the power and freedom bad women have. The final part of the first section will examine Atwood's praise for an unlikely literary hero: stupid women. Each story or novel needs a stupid woman or two to fall for the traps laid by the villain.

The next section will examine the various forms of spectacular women in Atwood's work. Atwood's female characters engage in multiple forms of sedition and commit various transgressions including making a spectacle of oneself. Women become spectacular through both unacceptable behaviors, namely refusing to care about their reputation, defying societal norms, and through having an irregular body which serves a function other than existing for the aesthetic pleasure of men. Both Elaine and her mother in *Cat's Eye* make a spectacle of themselves when they refuse to care about the standards imposed upon them by others. The Handmaids in Gilead are taught to value modesty above all else, underlining how the fear of making a spectacle of oneself is used as a means to control women's behavior and bodies especially pregnant bodies.

Joan's fat body in *Lady Oracle* presents another version of a spectacular body which inspires discomfort while offering her safety from the anxieties and fears commonly associated with the sexualized female body. Atwood shows the consequences of a woman defying these control mechanisms which lead to both empowerment and ridicule.

Atwood often examines the various forms in which woman-on-woman cruelty manifests, beginning in childhood. Joan and Elaine have twin experiences with evil little girls who exert control over the protagonists under the guise of friendship. The cruelty of little girls is mirrored in the examples of bad motherhood in these novels as well as *The Robber Bride*. Women are sometimes able to break free of the controls imposed by both men and other women once they reach the furthest edge of society. Grace Marks and Mary Webster narrowly skirt death. When they return from the edge they are freed from normal pressures as they cannot be convicted again. While women will often allow others to hang in their place, Atwood also shows the undeniable existence of a sense of sisterhood and solidarity between all women. When characters look at their less fortunate friends and enemies, they realize the difference between them is a thin strand of luck.

While Atwood reveals the cruelty women are capable of inflicting on one another, she underscores the true power of female alliances and why such structures are a danger to systems which keep men in power. Gilead is carefully designed to prevent female friendships and trust. By keeping women segmented, men retain power. Within the patriarchy we see double agents like Aunt Lydia and Zenia who, rather than working toward collective feminist goals or maintaining current patriarchal structures, look out only for themselves, playing both sides of the gender war. The final part of this section will examine one of the fundamental divisions among women: class. While solidarity exists among all women to some degree, all women are not

equally free. Atwood's works show that women in disadvantaged socioeconomic positions may still wield a powerful weapon against their masters and mistresses: information.

The final section of this paper will examine the prevalent theme of double and multiple selves in Atwood's works. In *Alias Grace*, Mary is Grace's bolder double just as Zenia is for the other women in *The Robber Bride*. These twins act out antisocial behavior the good women cannot, but long to. They mirror desires and identities buried within the good versions. Women also use the multiplicity of self to protect and obscure their narrative. Zenia has a history for each woman she encounters, constructing the most useful version of herself to get what she wants and retains power through her mystery. Oryx and Grace both construct multiple, incomplete versions of themselves for the male narrators obsessed with revealing these women. Finally, this thesis will examine the existence of the artistic double. The female writers in Atwood's works segregate their writing self from their female self, the result of the anxiety they face from participating in what has historically been a male occupation. By defying social conventions these women cannot live as whole people but create several selves as a form of narrative or psychological protection.

The Good, the Bad, and the Stupid

Every story needs a villain to make something happen. In many of Atwood's stories, the villain is a woman. Atwood has frequently rebelled against criticisms which claim her work is "unfeminist" for its depiction of evil women: "...the creation of a bad female character doesn't mean that women should lose the vote. If bad male characters meant that, for men, all men would be disenfranchised immediately" ("Spotty Handed Villainesses"). Atwood has defended the bad women in her novels, citing that they reflect women who exist in life. If men are allowed to be evil in literature, so should women, Atwood argues. In a foreword to *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood addresses the question of is the novel a feminist book:

...is *The Handmaid's Tale* a 'feminist' novel? If you mean an ideological tract in which all women are angels and/or so victimized they are incapable of moral choice, no. If you mean a novel in which women are human beings—with all the variety of character and behavior that implies—and are also interesting and important, and what happens to them is crucial to the theme, structure, and plot of the book, then yes. (XVI)

By this definition, all of Atwood's novels are feminist novels; they place women, good and bad, at the center of the action and portray them as fully-realized people as opposed to stick figures designed to prop up a male characters' arcs. This section will analyze the function of good, bad, and stupid women, all three of whom are necessary to the plot.

The Function and Perversity of the Villainesses

Atwood puts women at the center of her stories as both multi-faceted protagonists and her chief antagonists. In Atwood's work, both the protagonist, and perhaps more significantly, the villain is usually female. One of Atwood's most villainous characters is *The Robber Bride's*

Zenia. *The Robber Bride* opens with the words: “The story of Zenia ought to begin when Zenia began” (3). From the start, Atwood establishes that this story is not about Roz, Tony, or Charis, it is the story of Zenia, our villainess and main mover of all the action of the novel. Tony, Charis, and Roz only come into each other’s lives in a meaningful way because Zenia whisks their men away, providing them with a common pain and common enemy. Without Zenia and her perceived wickedness, there would be no story beyond three women who went to college together and married mediocre men: “Atwood indicates that what is more important than the facts of her life is the impact she has on others. If a familiar feminist fiction is that all women are good, their problems caused externally, by cultural constraints, then Zenia as fascinating and deadly undercuts such naiveté” (Wisker 114). Zenia is a character of action who causes things to happen to others. In *The Robber Bride*, the women conclude that it is Zenia, rather than vague social ills or even the men who betray them, who makes them miserable.

By making the villain female, Atwood subverts traditional gender stereotypes of female behavior. Wisker writes that Atwood, “Often [she] deliberately change[s] the gender or sexuality of the characters involved. Refusing traditional gender role stereotyping, they expose undertones and sub-plots and offer alternative perspectives and endings” (64). One of the main themes throughout Atwood’s works is how women work against one another. In *The Robber Bride*, Roz remarks: “It’s odd what a difference it makes, changing the pronoun” (330). By making all classic tales of good versus evil into tales of women versus women, Roz, as a stand-in for Atwood herself, writes a tale with radically different power dynamics and stakes. When the men are removed, these stories reveal an uncomfortable truth about the nature of women’s relationships to one another. In revising the story of “The Robber Bridegroom” to “The Robber Bride,” Roz recognizes her own situation: “The Robber Bride, lurking in her mansion in the dark

forest, preying upon the innocent, enticing youths to their doom in her evil cauldron. Like Zenia” (331). This revision proves men are not a necessary part of the story at all as the villain and her victims are female:

Zenias constitutes Atwoods protest against the reduction of women to goody-goody wimps who are denied half their human capacities. Like Rozs twins, who demand that all fairy tales be reconfigured so that women play all the parts, Atwood presents a reconfigured "Robber Bride[groom]" that restores womens ability to play all the roles, including those of the powerful and the evil. (Wyatt 51)

The women in *The Robber Bride* are always the focal points of the story even as Zenia targets them through the men to whom they are closest. The men are side characters to whom things happen rather than who do things.

Atwood also turns gender roles on their heads by placing the men, rather than the women, in towers. Both Billy and West are described as being tucked away by Charis and Tony, respectively. In "The Female Body" (*Good Bones and Simple Murders*), Atwood writes that typically, it is the female body that is hidden away: "Catch it. Put it in a pumpkin, in a high tower, in a compound, in a chamber, in a house, in a room. Quick, stick a leash on it, a lock, a chain, some pain, settle it down, so it can never get away from you again" (77). The female body is seen as dangerous, something that needs to be protected from the world and from which the world needs to be protected. Yet, in *The Robber Bride*, a novel about the inversion of traditional gender roles in storytelling, it is the men who are kept. Tony and West's apartment is: "A solid house, reassuring; a fort, a bastion, a keep. Inside it is West, creating aural mayhem, safe from harm" (20). Charis keeps Billy: "...her very own captive draft dodger...tucked away in secret in her house" (237). The women function as the gate keepers, the witch mothers from Rapunzel's

tale, but instead of keeping a beautiful girl locked away, they are keeping their men safe from harm which comes in the form of Zenia: “A strange gender inequality exists in Atwood’s texts, for women, more than their comparatively benign male counterparts, are capable of virtually demonic power” (Rigney 64). They are not protecting these male bodies from being violated in the same way female bodies must remain pure. Rather the women are protecting the fragile men in their keeping from spiritual and emotional damages Zenia possesses the power to inflict.

Zenia functions the same way as the evil stepmother or witch in fairytales. In the lament of the evil female fairy tale characters in “Unpopular Gals” Atwood writes: “You can wipe your feet on me, twist my motives around all you like, you can dump millstones on my head and drown me in the river, but you can’t get me out of the story. I’m the plot, babe, and don’t ever forget it” (11). The evil woman is routinely treated as the scapegoat for all the bad things that happen in the story, especially bad things that happen to the good women. But without her there would be no story at all. At the end of the story, when her usefulness to the plot expires, the bad woman comes to some horrible end, justified by her wickedness. But when Roz’s daughters make her change all the pronouns in their bedtime stories to make everyone female, they also insist the pigs should die instead of the wolf. They rationalize that the pigs were stupid enough to fall for the wolf’s trick and that is not the wolf’s fault (330). This perverse moral logic disturbs Roz who is accustomed to the configuration in which the bad woman is punished in the end for hurting others: “But when our mythology instructs any class of adults that it is their role to be gentler and more virtuous or humbler than the powerful, it operates as a form of social control” (Janeway 158). In Janeway’s configuration, the pigs are the weaker women who conform to social expectations. The female wolf is the woman who defies this social conditioning and, by Roz’s logic, should be punished in the end. Fiona Tolan writes that Zenia is a supernatural

vampire figure to the women who, “By magnifying Zenia to monstrous proportions, they simultaneously validate their own status as her victims. The Gothic narrative provides a code by which they can inscribe themselves as innocent victims of an external and supernatural threat” (51). The other women in the novel see themselves as helpless victims against Zenia’s evil. They fail to take responsibility for their own part in the events which transpire, much less consider the possibility Zenia is not as villainous as they imagine her.

A key question Atwood raises through Zenia’s actions is if she was looking out for the three other women in the story. When Zenia tempts West away from Tony and then turns him out again, West settles into a happy, domestic life with Tony. When Mitch dies, Roz finds a new, kinder, faithful husband. Charis lives happily with her daughter without Billy lying to her and leeching off Charis’s generosity. One can easily make the argument that everything Zenia did was in the interest of the three main characters, something Charis recognizes after what she believes to be Zenia reincarnated as a dog bites Billy’s penis in Atwood’s short story sequel to *The Robber Bride*, “I Dream of Zenia with the Bright Red Teeth”:

In fact, says Charis, maybe Zenia’s intentions were benevolent all along. Maybe she stole Billy to protect Charis from such a bad apple as him. Maybe she stole West to teach Tony a life lesson about, well, music appreciation or something, and maybe she stole Mitch to clear the way for Roz’s much better husband, Sam. Maybe Zenia was, like, the secret alter ego of each of them, acting out stuff for them they didn’t have the strength to act out by themselves. (169)

Zenia is the necessary foil to each of the other three main characters. She works in their best interests even though she is vilified throughout the novel. Zenia acts on the impulses the three other women are unable to, an idea which will be explored in depth in later sections of this paper.

The Murderesses

Villainesses like Zenia operate in subtly violent ways, employing psychological rather than physical destruction. Atwood also features more directly violent women as her protagonists. The villainess can take several forms, one of the most subversive of which is a woman who kills: “In all of Atwood’s novels, the author is not the only criminal, for all of her protagonists have their fingerprints on the martini glass as well and especially on the hacksaw blade. They are bloodthirsty and sometimes violent” (Rigney 63). We see women engage in direct, brutal acts of violence. Grace Marks strangles Nancy to death and Verna bashes her rapists’ head in. These bloodthirsty women commit several murders against surrogates for the men who wronged them.

Atwood’s writing shows that there is something inherently more perverse about a woman who kills than a man who kills. The titular character in *Alias Grace* is a “celebrated murderess,” a category which she distinguishes from that of the unremarkable murderer:

When I first saw it I was surprised...what is there to celebrate about murder? All the same, *Murderess* is a strong word to have attached to you. It has a smell to it, that word – musky and oppressive, like dead flowers in a vase. Sometimes I whisper it over to myself: *Murderess, Murderess*. It rustles like a taffeta skirt across the floor. *Murderer* is merely brutal. It's like a hammer, or a lump of metal. I would rather be a murderess than a murderer, if those are the only choices. (23)

Grace’s mediation on the description the press the criminal justice system have affixed to her obsesses over the feminization of the term “murderer.” By comparing the title “murderess” to flowers and taffeta, Grace emphasizes that society needed to create an entirely separate, feminine category for women who kill. The word itself its softened and made more delicate even as the crime is more disturbing and unnatural. In “Spotty Handed Villainesses,” Atwood points to a

statistic that in the United States, the average jail sentence for men who kill their wives is four years; for wives who kill their husbands, it is twenty. With this statistic, Atwood suggests the criminal justice system views a woman killing her husband as a more heinous crime than a man killing his wife.

The motivation for the murders Grace, or more accurately, Grace possessed by Mary Whitney, commits is distinctly feminine. Mary Whitney gets pregnant out of wedlock and dies after a botched abortion. Nancy Montgomery, in the same situation, lives like the father's wife: "Why should one be rewarded and the other punished for the same sin?" (276). Mary's view of justice is that if she paid for her sin with death, so must all women: "The wages of sin is death. And this time the gentleman died as well, for once. Share and share alike!" (401). In her killing of Mr. Kinnear as well as Nancy, Mary enacts more than equity, but what she views as substantive justice. Janeway writes, optimistically, that: "As long as opportunities and options increase, women's energy moves toward them, and vengeance doesn't seem worth spending time on" (310). But for Mary Whitney there were no other options. The lack of possibilities for an unwed pregnant woman led Mary to seek an abortion which proved lethal. After her death, Mary Whitney's only option to exert any kind of control over the world in which she had so little choice was by a spiritually directed vengeance through Grace.

In Atwood's short story "Stone Mattresses" a woman avenges her rape, decades later, by killing her rapist on an arctic excursion. Again, we see a feminine motive for murder as the main character corrects an injustice perpetrated by the criminal justice system and society. Verna blames her rapist for her crime: "It was Bob who'd turned her into – why not say the word? – a murderer" (229). Verna self-describes as a "murderer" as opposed to a "murderess." Despite the gendered nature of her crime, Verna does not distinguish female from male killers as society

does for Grace. In blaming Bob for making her into a murderer, Verna turns the conventional model of victim blaming for female rape victims on its head. Rape victims have been frequently blamed for what happens to them. Some feminists viewed rape as an unavoidable byproduct of greater sexual freedom while conservatives argue women's greater sexual promiscuity encouraged men to rape them: "...both feminist rape deniers and conservative purity advocates place the blame on the women for what happened to them" (Raphael 58). Verna is blamed for being "slutty, drunken [and] willing" and is sent to an unwed mother's camp when her mother discovers she is pregnant—a consequence of rape that can only be borne by a woman. Like Mary, Verna alone must contend with the consequences of her female body.

Verna's narrative is a revenge narrative. Not only does Verna kill Bob, but before exacting her ultimate revenge, she kills off a slew of husbands: "Every well-heeled husband whose death she efficiently and thoughtfully precipitates over the years partly compensates for another scenario" (Shuli 330). Verna methodically kills a line of nine elderly husbands as part of her attempt to achieve justice for her rape. Mary's vengeance against Nancy serves to equalize their outcomes as Mary died when she became pregnant outside of marriage. Mary's plot necessarily includes Mr. Kinnear, a stand-in for George Parkinson, who will pay as George did not for his role in Mary's death. Verna's killings, and how she gets away with each is another element of her revenge. Verna is determined to get away with her crimes just as Bob escaped justice for his: "Quid pro quo, equitable payback, precision is what she seeks. The deed must be done in a way that allows her to go scotfree – just as he did" (Shuli 330). Just as George escapes the consequences of impregnating Mary, Bob escapes the consequences of raping and impregnating Verna: "Men such as him do not have to clean up he messes they make, but we have to clean up our own messes and theirs into the bargain" (*Alias Grace* 214). Both women

seek vengeance against stand-in male figures who represent the social inequality with which these women are forced to contend as they are the only ones to pay for the transgressions of men.

One of the most dangerous realizations Grace has is that it was the father of the child, not the abortionist, who killed Mary Whitney: “For it is not always the one that strikes the blow, that is the actual murderer; and Mary was done to death by that unknown gentleman, as surely as if he’d taken the knife and plunged it into her body himself” (178). This sentiment parallels how Grace views her own crime of murdering Mr. Kinnear and Nancy: “The kerchief killed her. Hands held it” (401). Grace’s hands strangled them, but it was Mary Whitney’s vengeance directing the action. Even the murders Grace commits can thus be tied back to George Parkinson, who readers understand to be the father of Mary’s child, since without Mary’s death, Grace would have no reason to avenge her friend through her form of displaced justice.

The Seductresses

One of the most essential rivalries between women are sexual ones. The theocratic dystopia of Gilead is designed to eliminate the possibility of sexual rivalries by prescribing sexual partners as Handmaids or Econowives. Gilead seeks to eliminate all notions of romance or sexual desire by turning sexual activity into a ceremonial rape. In theory, this would solve many problems between women. In *The Robber Bride*, Zenia’s chief indiscretion against the other women in the book is stealing their men. Roz reveals an essential truth about the nature of maneaters like Zenia:

Most women disapprove of man-eaters; not so much because of the activity itself, or the promiscuity involved, but because of the greed. Women don’t want all the men eaten up by man-eaters; they want a few left over so they can eat some themselves. (441)

All women have a concealed desire to be a man-eater, but only deviant women like Zenia enact these fantasies and so women like Roz resent them for getting everything they secretly desire. This seditious idea reveals a deeply un-feminist truth about women: it is much more fun to be the villainess than the good girl who must wait around for her stepmother to send her out into the cold and the prince to come save her: "...the horror and anger that the three friends express in the face of Zenia's atrocities is accompanied by, not just jealousy but admiration" (Tolan 54). Feminists rejected the sexist idea that women are deeply jealous of each other because they must compete for men: "Underlying feminist guilt about feeling envy for other women is the assumption that envy and competitiveness among women are products of patriarchal thinking, to be extirpated along with other internalized patriarchal structures" (Wyatt 53). Wyatt carefully distinguishes between the envy for and the envy to be. The characters in the *Robber Bride* are not jealous of what Zenia has, they envy *her*. More so than wanting the men Zenia has, these women want to be Zenia and have her power: "Each protagonist would like to *be* Zenia—and that promise of completion is much stronger than the desire to *have* the man, the object of desire" (Wyatt 43). Rather than supporting patriarchal structures designed to keep women competing with one another for men, this desire is subversive and dangerous to patriarchal power structures. These women want Zenia's power to steal, ruin, and discard men.

In *The Penelopiad*, we see Penelope's envy of her infamous cousin Helen, the seductive femme fatale who launched thousands of men to their deaths: "I was not a man-eater, I was not a siren, I was not like cousin Helen who loved to make conquests just to show she could" (29). Penelope is heralded as the good wife who is faithful and smart whereas her cousin is dangerous because of how she wields her sexual power. In Atwood's rewriting of *The Odyssey*, the reader learns Penelope is not happy with her legacy as "An edifying legend. A stick used to beat other

women with” (2). Like Roz, Penelope is the dissatisfied wife who did not get her share of men to munch on because Helen hoarded them all. Penelope is not merely resentful of Helen but admires her ability to defy the conventions Penelope herself has been forced to stand for: “It seems that Penelope is jealous of Helen and covets Helen’s desirability. Penelope is reflecting on her own life choices and Helen becomes a vehicle for her own desires and regrets” (Neethling 120). Helen is Penelope’s foil, the seductive, unapologetically transgressive woman.

But Penelope is not so different from Helen as she paints herself. Penelope is the reason Odysseus kills her suitors and the maids: ‘Tell me, little duck – how many men did Odysseus butcher because of you?’” (155). Penelope is a femme fatale, just as Helen is. The difference lies in their mechanism for arranging the death of these men. Helen uses her sexuality where Penelope uses her chastity. Both women are dangerous and can wield their powers lethally, but Helen is remembered as the great whore of Troy while Penelope is the ideal faithful housewife. While Helen relishes in her power, Penelope is reluctant to outwardly accept her role in the deaths she causes. Penelope is haunted by the maids in the afterlife: “Now you can’t get rid of us, wherever you go: in your life or your afterlife or any of your other lives” (192). Penelope is saddled with guilt from which Helen is apparently free: “...she took their deaths as a tribute to herself” (75). This lack of guilt is another source of Penelope’s envy. The seductress can not only get away with more than the good girl, but she does not feel guilty about her actions in the same way women like Penelope do.

Sexual desire and prowess have historically been seen as a male occupation. In *The Penelopiad* we see the traditional scene of what is supposed to be a marital rape on the wedding night: “All of this was play-acting: the fiction was that the bride had been stolen, and the consummation of a marriage was supposed to be a sanctioned rape. It was supposed to be a conquest, a trampling of a foe, a mock killing.

There was supposed to be blood” (44). This reinforces the idea that women are not supposed to want or enjoy sex as much as men, if at all. Seductresses upset the natural order: “Women who defy convention are frightening, now and in the past. They are and have been redefined in monstrous roles: witches and succubi, castrators and destroyers” (Janeway 294). Two of these categories, succubi and castrators, deal directly with women taking sexual power and wielding it against men in their own court. In Gilead, the highest offense for a woman is to commit adultery; the highest offense for a man is treason: “...a rebellious woman was even worse than a rebellious man because rebellious men became traitors, but rebellious women became adulteresses” (*The Testaments* 24). There is a particular configuration for seduction which places the woman as the object of seduction, anything else is a seditious violation of gender norms: “...if women are seduced and abandoned they’re supposed to go mad, but if they survive and seduce in their turn, then they were mad to begin with” (*Alias Grace* 301). When women defy sexual conventions, they are feared by men and demonized by other women who secretly wish to act the same way and get away with it. When Roz attempts to seduce Mitch, she is met with rejection and embarrassment: “But Mitch would never have forgiven her if she’d jumped him in public, or even given him a big smooch during the kiss-the-bride routine. He’d made it clear by then there were jumpers and jumpees, kissers and kissees, and he was the former and she the latter” (352). But Zenia gets away with being the jumper, inspiring envy and resentment in Roz.

Zenia uses her physical seductive power to her advantage, something which transgresses social expectations of women in the seducer-seduced relation. Meditating on the difference between herself and Zenia, Tony muses that:

Maybe that’s what West found so irresistible about Zenia...that she was raw, that she was raw sex, whereas Tony herself was only the cooked variety. Parboiled to get the dangerous wildness

out, the strong fresh-blood flavors. Zenia was gin at midnight, Tony was eggs for breakfast, and eggs in eggcups at that. It's not the category Tony would have preferred. (456)

Tony understands the appeal of a seductive woman like Zenia. Part of this appeal comes from their subversive nature. In literature, men are the seductive figures for whom seduction is a "male prerogative" (Stankevičiūtė 16). The typical configuration is that the man is the seducer to whom the woman acquiesces: "It has nonetheless been women who were most often seduced, and it has usually been men who asserted in one way or another, that a woman had given her consent to what may thereafter be thought of as a seduction" (Miller 22). In *The Robber Bride* this configuration is inverted as Zenia seduces various men. The seducer is also a person in a position of power: "Seducers are possessed of powers: sexual, magical, verbal, musical, political or intellectual powers; and those who are seduced consent to the exercise of such powers – if only temporarily – even when they know they may be harmed by them" (Miller 21). Zenia's seductive power makes her dangerous. She has the ability to ruin the men she seduces in a way that parallels the gendered concept of a ruined woman as one who has lost her virginal honor to a seducer. Rather than losing their sexual honor, the men who constitute Zenia's victims lose their dignity. Zenia uses each of the men as long as they are useful to her and then leaves them, creating shells of these men who end up crawling back to the safety of the wives and lovers they abandoned. Zenia leaves behind emotional wreckage where male seducers leave damage to a woman's bodily reputation.

By the nature of transgressing against gendered social norms, seductresses like Zenia are automatically villainous: "In Atwood's version the robber bridegroom is replaced by a kind of robber bride, Zenia, a powerful, intrusive female, who is a villainess, the embodiment of female evil" (Wisker109). Zenia's "female" evil is distinct from male evil. This female evil is tied to her sexual power and the damages she inflicts against both male and female characters with it. Both Zenia's

sexuality and villainy are transgressions against patriarchal norms which attempt to dictate and control female sexuality and ideals of feminist unity: “Female sexuality – like Zenia – is still outside the fold and on the loose, a powerfully transgressive element which continues to threaten feminist attempts to transform gender relations and concepts of sexual power politics” (Howells 133). In the traditional model of seductions, the woman is the one whose sexuality must be won and coerced open by the male seducer. Zenia is not bound by traditional sexual expectations of women. She uses sex like a man, and for that she is cast as the villain.

Seductresses like Zenia arrange their own saving by making themselves into weaker and hence more attractive versions of themselves. In “Siren Song” Atwood writes: “the song that forces men / to leap overboard in squadrons / even though they see the beached skulls” is a simple cry for help: “Help me! / Only you, only you can, / you are unique.” This trick works on both men and women. Zenia first appears to Charis as a battered woman with ovarian cancer in need of a caring home which Charis is more than willing to provide. From Tony, she asks for academic help, flattering Tony’s intelligence. To West, she is a woman on the verge of a nervous breakdown in need of a savior. As Tony says: “To West it looks like he’s on a rescue mission, and who is Tony to deny the attraction of that?” (206). Everyone wants to be a hero and women like Zenia provide them with the opportunity to be one. Zenia’s power is not purely sexual. She also used emotional and psychological manipulation to work her way into these people’s lives: “Equipped with the resulting information, Zenia offers each of the women a seductive reflection of themselves as they wish to be seen” (Tolan 53). More so than her body, Zenia uses her perceived weakness to attract men and women vying to be saviors. Zenia wields her weakness as power. In a conversation with Tony, Zenia asks her if she would rather rule by respect, love, or fear. Zenia chooses fear: “Tony remembers being impressed by this answer. But it wasn’t fear through which Zenia had stolen West. Not a show of strength. On the contrary, it was a show of weakness. The ultimate

weapon” (213). Zenia weaponizes her weakness by allowing men to feel that they are saving her and thus entraps them. Janeway compares the power of women to twists of fate: “Fate represents the rejection of the plans of the powerful by the weak...If the power loose in the world that disrupts the regular order of things is *female*, then the older order of things has indeed been shaken” (117). Feminine power, through weakness, upends the normal configurations of power. Zenia sends West, and eventually Billy, hobbling back to their former partners and drives Mitch to kill himself.

Stupid Women

Atwood reveals the advantages of the stereotypical “stupid woman” as a covertly intelligent woman who postures stupidity in the name of love in “Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women.” Just as women like Zenia transform themselves into helpless creatures in need of a male savior, women also make themselves attractive through intellectual helplessness, Atwood argues: “though stupid women are not so stupid as they pretend: they pretend for love” (59). Atwood executes a dual criticism of not only the women who present themselves as stupid, but of the men who love them for their stupidity. Just as with bad women like Zenia, other women envy the stupid women: “If they can manage not to live in [the real world], good for them. We would rather not live in it either, ourselves” (59). While others judge the stupid woman, she is blissfully unaware of her own folly.

Like the good girls who get themselves into trouble at the hands of bad women or other calamities, stupid women similarly need saving. In *Lady Oracle* Atwood introduces the configuration that bad men do things to you while good men do things for you: “Nice men did things for you, bad men did things to you” (65). It follows then that stupid men and women are those to whom things are done for and to. They are a necessary part of this configuration as there would be no distinction between nice

and bad men if there were no stupid women to experience the consequences. Just as with villains, they are a necessary part of the plot: “without them there would be no stories” (59). According to Atwood, stories require stupid women to fall for the villain’s traps, to get themselves into predicaments about which people want to read. In *The Robber Bride*, we have stupid men and women alike who fall for Zenia’s tricks and become her victims. Smart characters do not make the kind of mistakes which make interesting stories: “Ah the Eternal Stupid Woman! How we enjoy hearing about her: as she listens to the con-artist yarns of the plausible snake, and ends up eating the free sample of the apple from the Tree of Knowledge: thus giving birth to theology” (61). Eve is the original stupid woman who, through her stupidity, launched the story of humanity as we know it. Atwood uses this example to show the depth of the debt to which we owe stupid women. The Bible would be much less interesting if it were a story about two good people in a garden.

Stupid women are also often innocent women: “Innocence! Perhaps that’s the key to stupidity, we tell ourselves, who think we gave it up long ago” (61). The stupid woman gets herself into her predicaments because she does not know any better. Susie from *Cat’s Eye* is the quintessential puffball of a stupid woman:

She has full hips, and breasts that are too large for her height, like a rubber squeaky toy that’s been pushed down on the top of the head and has bulged out in places, she has a little breathless voice and a startled little laugh; even her name is like a powder puff. I think of her as a silly girl whose; just fooling around at art school, too dumb to get into university, although I don’t make judgments like this about the boys. (378)

Elaine judges Susie for her physical appearance as well as her demeanor placing herself above this stupid woman. The existence of women like Susie allows other women and men to feel superior: “Men love them because they make even stupid men feel smart: women for the same reason” (59). As long as

stupid women exist in the story and in life, men and other women will use them as a marker to make themselves feel better about their own intelligence and judgment. They benefit from the stupid women without having to be them. Later, Elaine compares Susie to the women held in towers who are too stupid to escape without the assistance of some hero who may or may not arrive: “I prefer to think of Susie as a woman shut inside a tower...gazing out the window over the top of her painted sheet metal balcony, weeping feebly, waiting for Josef to appear. I can’t imagine her having any other life apart from that...She is limp, without will, made spineless by love; as I am” (411). While Elaine creates a pitiful picture of Susie, she implicates herself as a similarly stupid woman.

Stupid women can perhaps be equated to Elaine’s “Fallen Women”: “Fallen women were women who had fallen onto men and hurt themselves” (360). Elaine places the blame on the stupid women who fall and hurt themselves, not on the men onto whom they fall:

There were no men in the painting, but it was about men, the kind who caused women to fall. I did not ascribe any intentions to these men. They were like the weather, they didn’t have a mind. They merely drenched you or struck you like lightning and moved on, mindless as blizzards. Or they were like rocks, a line of sharp slippery rocks with jagged edges. You could walk with care along between the rocks, picking your steps, and if you slipped, you’d fall and cut yourself, but it was no use blaming the rocks. (360)

Unlike bad women such as Zenia, these bad men are not conniving, they simply exist. This shows how the existence of bad men or women alone cannot make a story; someone must be injured. The plot needs a stupid woman, or sometimes a stupid man, to come along and bleed.

In “Spotty Handed Villainesses” Atwood lays out the theory that what differentiates literature from life is that something else needs to happen besides two people sitting at a table eating breakfast. Often in her stories, that “something” is a bad woman doing something to other

women and or men. These women are necessary for the story to exist, but their existence runs counter to traditional models of femininity in which women are the victims who are murdered or seduced, not the ones doing the murdering and seducing. These women are labelled as monsters in an attempt to dissuade other women from following their example: “What her history suggests is that in patriarchal culture, female speech and female ‘presumption’—that is, angry revolt against male domination—are inextricably linked and inevitably demonic” (Gilbert and Gubar 35). When women like Zenia or Helen take on these traditionally male roles, they are cast as villainesses and femme fatales and inspire envy and hatred from the women around them. Equally important, we learn that the women who are the victims, the essential stupid women, of the bad women resent the bad women not only for the things they do to them, but because they have a desire to do the same things, to some degree. What separates the bad and good women is that the bad women can do things all women want to do and get away with it.

Woman as Spectacle

Many of Atwood's female characters are guilty of making a spectacle of themselves. This spectacular behavior involves both the physical body and forms of "unladylike" behavior.

Making a spectacle of oneself is the opposite of appropriate feminine behavior, as Mary Russo writes:

Making a spectacle out of oneself seemed a specifically feminine danger. The danger was exposure...For a woman, making a spectacle out of herself had more to do with a kind of inadvertency and loss of boundaries: the possessors of large, aging, and dimpled thighs displayed at the public beach, of overly rouged cheeks, of a voice shrill in laughter, or of a sliding bra strap – a loose dingy bra strap especially – were at once caught out by fate and blameworthy. (53)

What the transgressions Russo describes and the actions Atwood's female characters commit have in common is the lack of caring. These women do not care about maintaining traditional standards of femininity. When women decide to not care about what they should do, male-dominated and women-enforced society loses control of them. The feminine grotesque spectacle is defined by the characteristic of something a woman does or some irregular bodily state that invites attention. Patriarchal social pressures control women's bodies and by extension their actions as they are pressured to care:

The sexual nausea associated with all these monster women helps explain why so many real women have for so long expressed loathing of (or at least anxiety about) their own, inexorably female bodies. The 'killing' of one's self into an art object—the pruning and preening, the mirror madness, and concern with odors and aging...all this testifies to the

efforts women have expended not just trying to be angels but trying *not* to become female monsters. (Gilbert and Gubar 34)

Women's behavior and appearances are controlled as women are convinced they must avoid being classified as a monster. The spectacular woman disregards this guidance about what she should do and what she should look like, she allows herself to be monstrous and refuses to care about that classification.

Not Giving A Hoot

In *Cat's Eye*, Elaine reclaims her power over her friends when she tells them she does not care about their vicious rules and the physical and social punishments for them: "I know and I don't care" (259). By declaring she does not care, Elaine instantly destabilizes the entire dynamic through which the other girls bullied and controlled her. Elaine realizes everything Cordelia and the other girls put her through was just part of a game that had no real bearing on her. These childhood antics mirror the adult rules society imposes on women that keep them confined to not making a spectacle of themselves. *Cat's Eye* is a novel constructed around the contrast between women who care and those who do not. Early in the book, Elaine presents us with a description of old women who talk to themselves:

This is the kind we like best. They have a certain gaiety to them, a power of invention, they don't care what people think. They have escaped, though what it is they've escaped from isn't clear to us. We think that their bizarre costumes, their verbal tics, are chosen, and that when the time comes we also will be free to choose. (5)

Elaine describes these women as having "escaped." They have escaped the confines which demand women care about being presentable. They wear whatever they want and are "free to

choose.” Yet, they have made themselves noticeable since Elaine and Cordelia cannot help marvel at them. Women who do not care cannot blend into the background. A young Elaine aspires to this level of freedom which she begins to achieve in walking away from her friends.

Feminine emotion is a form of spectacle. When Elaine catches herself crying for no reason, she fears she is becoming a spectacle by displaying emotion openly Elaine is bound by the concept that making a spectacle of oneself is inherently negative: “This is the kind of thing I should look out for: crying without reason, making a spectacle of myself. I feel it’s a spectacle, even though no one’s watching” (558). The concept of the woman as spectacle is so impressed upon Elaine that she is conscious of what actions constitute an unacceptable spectacle even where there is no spectator but herself to pass judgment. When Janine begins crying after Aunt Lydia beats her, she is reprimanded: “There is no point in making a spectacle of yourself, Janine” (194). Female emotion is an unacceptable public display. Stereotypes of women routinely categorize them as emotional and irrational compared to men: “it is often assumed that men are by nature more logical and ‘reasonable’... Women in turn are supposed to be more emotional and intuitive” (Janeway 270). Women's free expression of emotion is unacceptable and uncomfortable in public even when exclusively among other women, such as in this scene with Janine. Women are expected to be emotional, but society does not want to witness this emotionality openly: “A woman, then, in telling her own story had to maintain a fine balance between characterizing herself as “male,” a public persona, and “female,” a private one” (Siddall 128). Private matters of female emotion have no place in the public realm of men.

Elaine’s mother represents the consequences of violating the feminine norm of caring. Elaine admires her mother’s ability to ignore the social norms pressuring her to act differently: “She never says *What will people think?* The way other mothers do, or are supposed to. She says

she doesn't give a hoot...*Not giving a hoot* would be a luxury. It describes the fine, irreverent carelessness I myself would like to cultivate, in these and other matters" (289). In this way, Elaine's mother engages in behavioral spectacle. Her body does not by itself violate the norms for a female body but she as a female person does. However, because her mother does not care about presenting herself as traditionally female or engaging in typical motherly behaviors, she does not understand the problems Elaine is facing from the other girls: "Now I know what I've been suspecting: as far as this thing is concerned, she is powerless" (212). The consequences for violating norms for women are that she lacks an essential understanding of female society that is critical to her ability to help her daughter navigate early female socialization.

Spectacular Bodies

Russo defines three main categories of grotesque female bodies: "There are especial dangers for women and other excluded or marginalized groups within carnival...the taboos around the female body as grotesque (the pregnant body, the aging body, the irregular body), as unruly when set loose in the public sphere" (56). These bodies are acceptable forms of the female body only in private isolation where they cannot be seen. Female bodies which deviate from the norms and standards from feminine beauty (i.e. the young and the thin) are unacceptable in public as they will necessarily be cause for spectacle. This explanation of the woman as spectacle as a bodily condition further emphasizes how woman are regarded as sexual objects whose bodies must adhere to narrow standards: "The representation of woman as image (spectacle, object to be looked at, vision of beauty—and the concurrent representation of the female body as the *locus* of sexuality, site of visual pleasure, or lure of the gaze) is so pervasive in our culture" (De Lauretis 37). In her discussion of the male gaze De Lauretis shows the other

side of female spectacle. When the female body is presented as an acceptable, sexualized body that exists purely for the pleasure of male spectators, she is not a threatening spectacle. When that body is anomalous or the woman “makes a spectacle” of herself through her behavior, it undermines her existence within the male gaze. Atwood presents and critiques the treatment of the female body as grotesque spectacle.

One of Russo’s categories is the pregnant body. The Handmaids in Gilead are trained in modesty and against making spectacles of themselves. When a pregnant Handmaid comes to the store making a spectacle of her condition, the other Handmaids regarded her with revulsion: “She has come here to display herself. She’s glowing, rosy, she’s enjoying every minute of this” (26). This woman is showing off her pregnant body, a body which is not meant to be seen. In general, the pregnant body is a form of discomforting spectacle. Pregnancy is a specifically female and biological state. This state is not something which should be shown off or widely discussed, especially within male company. For the Handmaids however, pregnancy is an enviable state which their survival depends upon attaining. In Gilead, this woman violates two levels of spectacle making: she shows off what is a private, female condition and intentionally inspires envy in other Handmaids.

One of the values the Aunts attempt to impart on the Handmaids during their training is the inappropriateness of making a spectacle of oneself: “The spectacles women used to make of themselves. Oiling themselves like roast meat on a spit, and bare backs and shoulders, on the street, in public, and legs, not even stockings on them, no wonder those things used to happen” (55). What is unacceptable about this situation is the idea of a woman presenting her body. Female bodies are routinely objectified as sexual bodies, and in Gilead this is no exception as evidence by the existence of Jezebel’s. While the women at Jezebels do attract attention, their

actions and bodies service the male gaze of their powerful customers. This form of spectacle is not threatening because it reinforces the norms of control men force upon women rather than disregarding or contradicting them. What is unacceptable in Aunt Lydia's example is the idea of a woman presenting herself this way voluntarily and welcoming sexual gazes. Aunt Lydia blames sexual assault victims for attracting predatory men by showing off their bodies. As Paul tells Joan: "Ah but the mystery of man is of the mind...whereas that of the woman is of the body. What is a mystery but a thing which is remaining hidden?" (165). The female body is a thing designed to be covered and hidden. When that body is uncovered publicly, it becomes a spectacle.

Another category of a spectacular female body is the irregular body which includes fat bodies: "The Fat Woman has been an important figure of spectacularized womanhood in the West since the nineteenth century" (Russo 24). Joan's body is irregular and thus creates discomfort: "All fat women looked the same, they all look forty-two. Also, fat women are not more noticeable than thin women; they're less noticeable because people find them distressing and look away" (78). Joan describes people's urge to look away from her because her body, which takes up more space than a thin body, makes her an unwelcome feminine spectacle. Joan's body also negates the danger her sex would normally present: "I was as cheap as a woman but didn't cause the disruption among male employees and customers other women did" (92). Joan's gender is neutralized by her body which is not seen as a sexual body. Due to the spectacle Joan's body creates, people are more likely to turn away from her than to ogle her as they would with thin women. The ideal thin female body is non-threatening in male-dominated spaces: "Like many beauty-myth symbols, she was double-edged, suggesting to women the freedom from the constraint of reproduction of earlier generations (since female fat is categorically understood by

the subconscious as fertile sexuality), while reassuring men with her suggestion of female weakness, asexuality, and hunger” (Wolf 184). Women are constantly asked to diminish themselves before men. As women invade formerly male-dominated spaces, they must still take up as little physical and intellectual space as possible to remain innocuous to intact male power structures.

Joan’s problematic relationship with her mother has a basis in her mother’s insistence that her daughter conform to the same patriarchal beauty standards she has. Joan’s mother strives for the unspectacular body and part of her duty as a mother is to instill the same values in her daughter whose body is a discomfiting spectacle: “Frances plays the part of a cultural agent that conveys to her daughter the idea that female beauty is linked to marriage but also to male aggression, and that grotesque obesity leads to male obliviousness” (Moreno 64). In *Lady Oracle* Atwood presents contrasting models of femininity in Joan and her mother. Joan’s mother conforms to standard female actions and appearances while her daughter does not, at least initially. Joan finds that when she was fat she failed to develop appropriate female fears:

I’d never developed the usual female fears: fear of intruders, fear of the dark, fear of gasping noises over the phone, fear of bus stops and slowing cars, fear of anyone or anything outside whatever magical circle defines safety. I wasn’t whistled at or pinched on elevators, I was never followed down lonely streets. I didn’t experience men as aggressive lechers but as bashful, elusive creatures who could think of nothing to say to me and faded away at my approach. (138)

Because of the spectacle of Joan’s body, men did not regard her as a sexual object as they did thin women. By contrast, they did not know what to say to Joan, she made them uncomfortable. The threat of males was neutralized by her body.

Women are constantly reminded to not make a spectacle of themselves, unless that spectacle is in service of the male gaze. Irregular female behavior, emotion, and bodies are uncomfortable and suppressed by the patriarchy. The women in Atwood's novels represent a variety of spectacular bodily and behavioral forms, all of which come at costs for resisting social norms for women. Women are not supposed to attract attention to themselves. When their behaviors or bodies call for attention they produce anxieties and are alienated from society and subjected to harsh judgments. In refusing to care about these socially imposed rules, women may reclaim their power as Elaine does in rejecting her friends' attempts to "improve" (259) her. The desire to remain unspectacular functions as a control measure on women's behavior and bodies. When women realize they may disregard these standards, they discover a source of power.

Sisterhood and Control

While we have examples of men who do bad things to women such as Bob and George, it is more common in Atwood's novels for women to commit atrocities against each other: "Mostly men do terrible things to women in Atwood's fictions, but increasingly and particularly in the most recent novels, women do them to each other" (Rigney 63). This form of gendered cruelty begins in childhood with its roots in bad mothering. One of the key truths about the patriarchy Atwood reveals is that it is upheld through structures which discourage or outright prevent women from forming alliances with each other. Whether through the stringent caste system of Gilead or normative social standards, when women are pitted against one another, male power is more secure. Dually, Atwood exposes how some women operate as double agents for their own sex from within the patriarchy. Atwood exposes the cracks which form when women begin to understand it is not a naturally inscribed rule demanding women hate each other, rather, men pit women against each other for their own security.

Little Girls and Monster Mothers

Atwood explores the origin of female cruelty in several of her works. Both *Cat's Eye* and *Lady Oracle* showcase the evils little girls can bestow on one another. Elaine nearly freezes to death after her friends throw her hat into the ravine and Joan's friends blindfold her and tie her to a bridge in a ravine where the "bad men" lurk. Elaine compares the girls around her to the notorious Lady Macbeth (153) putting their transgressions on the same scale as plotting her murder. By exposing the evils of little girls, Atwood emphasizes that, "Little girls are cute and small only to adults. To one another they are not cute. They are life-sized" (159). To Elaine, the abuse she endures is on the same scale as a Shakespearean tragedy. Wisker describes *Cat's Eye*

as: “Its cautionary tale is ‘women beware women’ (99). Elaine learns early on that women can exert a specific form of judgmental cruelty to control other girls.

These evil little girls grow into cruel women. Elaine is scandalized to discover Mrs. Smeath is aware of the torment her daughter is inflicting on Elaine: “I hate Mrs. Smeath, because what I thought was a secret, something among girls, among children, is not one. It has been discussed before, and tolerated. Mrs. Smeath has known and approved. She has done nothing to stop it. She thinks it served me right” (242). Just as her daughter, Mrs. Smeath disapproves of Elaine and her unconventional family. Mrs. Smeath views Elaine’s non-conformity to standard gender norms as a transgression against the natural order just as the girls do. Atwood shows cruel little girls give rise to cruel women who in turn raise girls who perpetuate the cycle: “Mothers who themselves have not found acceptance, success, or ease in society persist in transmitting the old message of conformity” (Goldblatt 279). Many women do not outgrow their judgmental antics and wicked tricks they play on one another, they merely morph over time and are transposed onto their own daughters and her friends as we see in Mrs. Smeath’s case.

Elaine’s own mother is a vastly different model of motherhood. Elaine’s mother is not cruel and does not approve of her daughters’ friends. Unfortunately, she does not understand how to combat this cruelty, leaving Elaine to suffer on her own: “...her relationship with her mother left her feeling vulnerable and unprepared for reality” (Myers 7). Neither Elaine nor her mother had experience with the cruelty of little girls before Elaine began proper schooling. Elaine spent most of her childhood playing in the woods with her brother where gender roles were ill-defined: “Those once free to roam and explore as children as well as those repressed from an early age are subject to the *civilizing forces* that customize young girls to the fate of females” (Goldblatt 279). When Elaine enters the world of girls, she is unprepared: “So I am left

to the girls, real girls at last, in the flesh. But I am not used to girls, or familiar with their customs. I felt awkward around them, I don't know what to say. I know the unspoken rules of boys, but with girls I sense that I am always on the verge of some unforeseen, calamitous blunder" (62). Mrs. Smeath understands and approves of the cruelty of little girls, likely because she participated in it when she was young while Elaine's mother is helpless to understand the dynamics at play in Elaine's friend group and her. Once Elaine learns these lessons, she applies them to her own motherhood: "It's the kind of things girls of this age do to one another, or did then, but I'd had no practice in it. As my daughters approached this age, the age of nine, I watched them anxiously" (158). Elaine is committed to doing better than her own mother because Elaine understands the true nature of little girls.

The other girls warn Elaine of bad men in the ravine: "These are not the ordinary men but the other kind, the shadowy, nameless kind who do things to you" (63). But she never meets these men. The greatest danger Elaine faces in the ravine is of freezing to death when her friends abandon her. Elaine is not harmed by men in her childhood and has an easier time befriending boys. As a child, Elaine runs loose in the woods with her brother where they play many of the same games and Elaine even wears hand-me-downs from Stephen. This translates into Elaine's discomfort with her femininity: "Playing with girls is different and at first I feel strange as I do it, self-conscious as if I'm only doing an imitation of a girl" (69). Elaine is singled-out for her lack of understanding of the rules of girls. Meanwhile she is comfortable with the boys at her school, understanding their socialization better than the world of girls: "I hug my knowledge, which is new but doesn't surprise me: boys are my secret allies" (221). This shows how the cruelty of little girls is inherently feminine as Elaine suffers nothing like the torture to which Cordelia subjects her from any of the boys in her life.

In *Lady Oracle* we see many of the same examples of young female cruelty. Joan is also abandoned in a ravine by her friends:

Sometimes, when they'd left me alone in the darkness and cold, I would stand there almost hoping that the bad man would really come up out of the ravine and do whatever he was fated to do. That way, after I'd been stolen or killed, they would be punished, and they would be forced to repent at last for what they'd done. (56)

Elaine is saved from the ravine by a vision of the Virgin Mary. Joan is saved by a flasher. Joan does not see the flasher as a bad man, which is how her mother and the other girls describe him:

"Don't you know that was a bad man? You certainly had the nerve" (57). Joan did not see this man as dangerous because he did not subject her to the kind of cruelty the girls in her life do:

"Whereas the daffodil man is pictured as her childhood rescuer, however, he is also presented as the sexual deviate she meets at the ravine as her mother predicted" (Moreno 65). The sexual danger the man poses is less threatening to young Joan than the real evils of the girls who put her in the position to meet this man. Both Joan and Elaine view men and boys as their allies and saviors and girls as their enemies, defying what should be the typical gendered associations.

Joan's mother's judgement has a profound, negative impact on her daughter. Joan's mother constantly encourages her daughter to lose weight, to take up less space in the universe. When contemplating her namesake, Joan concludes: "Joan Crawford was thin. I was not, and this is one of the many things for which my mother never quite forgave me" (39). Joan's mother pressures her to fit into the confines defined by men for women, having internalized those standards for herself: "This absence of self-worth and the internalisation of her mother's male-oriented ideas increase Joan's frustration as she desires to conform to the feminine codes" (Moreno 62). The cruelty Joan experiences at her mother's hands gives rise to her central internal

conflict. When Aunt Lou dies and Joan “reduces” herself, her mother shouts: “God will not forgive you,” and stabs Joan in the arm with a paring knife (120). Joan’s mother was obsessed with controlling Joan, mainly through diminishing Joan’s sense of efficacy through her constant beratements about her weight. Once Joan loses the weight, she gains access to Aunt Lou’s money and becomes financially independent of her mother. She also becomes a more attractive woman. These two thoughts terrify her mother since “She wanted me to do well, but she wanted to be responsible for it” (63). Joan’s mother cannot tolerate the idea of her daughter being independent from her and achieving success she never did.

Tony’s mother Anthea is another example of poor mothering. Tony’s mother constantly speaks about her unhappiness with her marriage and her life while Tony is growing up. Anthea is English and is foreign to Canada, she is also foreign to the concept of motherhood: “Anthea isn’t very much like other mothers, although occasionally she tries to be” (162). Anthea abandons Tony and her father who then takes to heavy drinking and eventually kills himself. The scars of Tony’s childhood create the space into which Zenia creeps: “So far Tony has seen Zenia as very different from herself, but now she sees her as similar too, for aren’t they both orphans? Both motherless, both war babies, making their way in the world by themselves” (187). The influence of bad mothers leave lasting scars on daughters as they simultaneously experience cruelty and emotional abuse from their female peers.

Half-Hanged Women

Women in Atwood’s writing are often loath to stick their necks out for one another. In her poem “Half-Hanged Mary,” the accused witch is the only one who is tried and convicted for her crimes which implicated many other women who come to gawk at her:

You were my friend, you too.

I cured your baby, Mrs.,
and flushed yours out of you,
Non-wife, to save your life.

Help me down? You don't dare.

I might rub off on you,
like soot or gossip. Birds
of a feather burn together,
though as a rule ravens are singular.

Other women do not want the bad ones who are caught to “rub off” on them. Here again we see a lack of solidarity between women as they all look out for their own best interests, allowing others to take the fall since somebody must hang. When Mary survives her hanging, she becomes the witch she was falsely accused of because there are no longer any judicial consequences for her: “Having been hanged for something / I never said, / I can now say anything” (Atwood).

Mary becomes a free subversive agent who no longer has to play by the rules of society:

Witches are social equivalents of beetles and spiders who live in the cracks of the walls and wainscoting. They attract the fears and dislikes with other ambiguities and contradictions attract in other thought structures, and the kind of powers attributed to them symbolize their ambiguous, inarticulate status. (Douglas 102)

Witches threaten society because they are amorphous and seditious. They lurk in the world between light and dark, just as Mary hung between life and death for hours. Women are often kept in a subservient place to men by perpetuating the ideal of the woman who serves. When

Mary no longer has a need to serve anyone as a means of survival, she becomes infinitely more dangerous to the system which had convicted her. She exists beyond the typical power dynamic which entraps women in servitude to men.

We see similar themes in *Alias Grace* as Grace's conviction frees her from the normal rules of polite society. Grace acts against the normal means through which men institute social controls on women thanks to her peculiar position of being a convicted murderess: "I was never a lady, Sir, and I've already lost whatever reputation I ever had. I can say anything I like; or if I don't wish to, I needn't say anything at all...I have already been judged, Sir. Whatever you may think of me, it's all the same" (91). Just like Mary Webster, Grace has already been judged and convicted; there is nothing more anyone can do to threaten or control her. Just as Mary Webster began living as a witch after her miraculous half-death, Grace embodies what she believes people want to see from a murderess: "If they want a monster so badly they ought to be provided with one" (33). Grace morphs herself to meet others expectations of her as a seditious force in society who undercuts normal gender roles. Grace's conviction gives her permission to do as she pleases since the worst consequences have already been handed down to her.

The Threat of Female Alliances

Atwood's dystopian society of Gilead is structured to explicitly prevent the formation of female alliances. Wives are given control over all other women of the household while they themselves remain under control of their husbands: "He wouldn't be able to intervene, to save me; the transgressions of women in the household, whether Martha or Handmaid, are supposed to be under the jurisdiction of the Wives alone" (162). This hostile power dynamic Gilead constructs between women serving in different capacities supports the patriarchal theocracy:

“...the typical Atwoodian powerful/powerless dyad constituted by Offred...and Serena Joy” (Somacarrera 53). The key power dynamic in the novel is not that between Offred and the Commander, but with his Wife. The setup of Gilead breeds envy and contempt among women of different classes rather than solidarity.

The idea of women having power over one another is founded in reality as seen in *The Robber Bride*. In the boarding house Roz’s mother runs before her father returns from the war, Roz is immersed in a world full of women:

Now Roz’s life has been cut in two. On one side is Roz and her mother, and the rooming house, and the nuns and the other girls at school...That’s the side where there are mostly women, women who have power, which means they have power over Roz, because even though God and Jesus are men it’s her mother and the nuns who have the last word.”

(375)

In both settings, women like Roz’s mother and the nuns have power over populations of other women which include Roz. But once men enter these dynamics, the women lose their power since they are always subsumed by the power of a man when he is present: “On the other side is her father...filling up all the space in her mother’s gaze so that Roz is pushed off to the edge, because her mother, who is so unbending, bends” (375). Roz’s father takes up space, physically and in terms of power in a distinctly masculine way and alters the dynamics of what Roz still considers her mother’s house.

While the Aunts tell the Handmaids in training that the end goal of the system is to create a “spirit of camaraderie among women” (222), this camaraderie is only designed to go as far as it must to prevent jealousy killings of the Handmaids. The idea of sisterhood is a thinly veiled control mechanism: “The function of the Aunts in this totalitarian regime is to disseminate the

doctrine among women, exercising a matriarchal power which is disguised as a spirit of camaraderie” (Somacarrera 53). The Aunts are an essential part of the regime as women possess a unique ability to control one another while disguising it as friendship, as we see in *Cat’s Eye* and *Lady Oracle*. True alliances among women would threaten the power structure which is why Gilead does not allow women to form close friendships. The Handmaids’ walking partners must stick to an insubstantial script of phrases and are constantly suspicious of one another: “The truth is she is my spy, as I am hers” (19). If women are unable to trust one another, there is little danger of them becoming close enough to pose any significant threat to men.

However, alliances do form as Offred learns of the Mayday resistance from Ofglen and Serena conspires with her to get Offred pregnant by Nick. Offred characterizes her relationship with Serena as the two of them being “cronies” (205). This word evokes images of evil old witches conspiring; there is something inherently sinister about women working together. But this alliance is fragile. Once Serena discovers Offred went to the strip club with her husband, she orders her eviction from her household: “Just like the other one. A slut. You’ll end up the same” (287). Serena’s willingness to help Offred extends only until she realizes she is a sexual rival and had betrayed Serena’s trust. Her unsanctioned relations with the Commander give Offred a degree of power over Serena: “Since the personal and political domains are always interacting in Gilead as everywhere, power relations change continuously” (Somacarrera 53). Serena seeks to rebalance their power in kicking Offred out upon discovering her transgressions. In truth, Offred had very little choice but to do what the Commander wanted due to the great power imbalance between them. Despite this reality, Serena, unable to act against her husband can only discipline Offred since women only have power over other women, Gilead’s founders realized these dynamics would inevitably pin women against each other. Even as Gilead allows for small

windows of female allegiance or friendship, they rely on basic principles of human interaction to only allow those loyalties to go so far.

Critically, the downfall of Gilead in *The Testaments* is a direct result of a complex alliance of women directed by Aunt Lydia and executed by Nicole and Agnes. Aunt Lydia reminds Agnes: “You pledged yourself to help women and girls” (337). Agnes’ role in Aunt Lydia’s plan does help every woman and girl in Gilead, proving why the founders worked to prevent such alliances. While many of Atwood’s novels focus on the suffering women cause one another, she also shows the power of female alliances and friendships: “Atwood also restores women to women as friends, ultimately, though they may have suffered horrors at one another’s hands” (Rigney 65). Through the pain of Gilead largely orchestrated by Aunt Lydia herself, women working together topple a regime designed to prevent such relationships from forming. As part of the team responsible for the construction of Gilead, Aunt Lydia understood the danger and power of female alliances using this power as a failsafe within the system.

The Double Agent

Aunt Lydia exposes herself as one of the chief architects of Gilead’s system through her confessions in *The Testaments*. Aunt Lydia explains her motivations as a survival tactic in which she was forced to choose between helping build the system or becoming a victim of it: “Better to hurl rocks than to have them hurled at you. Or better for your chances of staying alive” (178). This explanation is a twisting of the classic biblical lesson: “He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her” (John 8:7). Stone throwing is encouraged in this case in order to deflect the rocks from herself. The architects of Gilead understand most people would rather save themselves when given the chance than defend someone else and implicate

themselves in the process. Aunt Lydia uses the master's tools to construct the master's house creating a temporary shelter for herself in the process.

Aunt Lydia is an essential part of Gilead's functioning. She is responsible for keeping the women in line. By putting women in positions of power only relative to other women, the Commanders ensure the safety of their own grip on power. But Aunt Lydia is aware of how critical she is to the regime's stability: "...the regime needs me. I control the women's side of their enterprise with an iron fist in a leather glove in a woolen mitten" (62). Aunt Lydia has layers of power and appearances that allow her to be such a powerful figure. She appears the woolen mitten to the women whom she treats with empathy, such as when she allows Agnes and Becka to join the Aunts rather than get married. To the Commanders, she is the leather glove. They are aware of the toughness of her power. But the iron fist fills both the mitten and the glove. Aunt Lydia is powerful, and she is careful to keep the true nature of that power concealed from both men and women in Gilead.

While Aunt Lydia has gained the trust of the Commanders, she creates the escape door which leads to Gilead's downfall. In retelling Aesop's fable of the fox and the cat, Aunt Lydia compares herself to both the cunning fox and the cat who simply stays in the tree to avoid capture:

In the early days of Gilead, I used to ask myself whether I was a Fox or Cat. Should I twist and turn using the secrets in my possession to manipulate others, or should I zip my lip and rejoice as others outsmarted themselves? Obviously I was both—since unlike many—here I still am. I still have a bag of tricks. And I am still high in the tree. (254)

Aunt Lydia credits her survival to her dual nature and dual allegiances. Aunt Lydia waits in the proverbial tree until it is time to break out her bag of tricks which she has kept in her possession

all along. As Atwood writes in *The Robber Bride* where Zenia is also compared to the trickster fox: “All foxes dig back doors” (416).

While Aunt Lydia’s scheme to smuggle people and information between Gilead and Canada does ultimately play a large role in the system’s downfall, readers are still forced to contend with the ethics of her actions. The question that remains at the end of *The Testaments* is if Aunt Lydia’s efforts to dismantle the system excuse her role in constructing it in the first place. In a Q & A about the book, Atwood said of her decision to include Aunt Lydia’s narrative:

There is no rule of nature that says a person must be morally admirable because female.

Why should there not be lurid female characters in fiction, as there are in life?

Authoritarian regimes have always had some women on their side, helping to keep the rest of the women in line. But such enforcers always have backstories. (424)

Atwood forces readers to contend with the questions Aunt Lydia raises through her actions and her account of those actions. In acting as the double agent who did not seem to ever truly believe in what she was preaching, Aunt Lydia plays both sides for her own benefit. Whomever else may benefit or suffer as a result of her actions are beside the point for the double agent.

Zenia is also a fox and a double agent looking out for herself. Zenia steals men away from other women, inspiring hatred and contempt. Yet at the same time, she is breaking the men she steals sending them crawling back to their girlfriends and wives with their castrated tails between their legs. As Tony observes: “In the war of the sexes, which is nothing like a real war but is instead a kind of confused scrimmage Zenia was a double agent. Or not even that, because Zenia wasn’t working on one side or the other. She was on no side but her own” (208). Zenia does not side with her fellow women, standing with feminist allies. Nor does she staunchly support traditional gender roles in a male-dominated society. Rather, she uses the limited

advantages she finds for herself within the system as she sees fit. The double agent rejects notions of unqualified sisterhood: “She is, as has been argued, defiantly aggressive and individualistic in the face of Tony, Roz and Charis’s protective ‘sisterhood’” (Tolan 49). Zenia rejects the idea that she must align with one side or the other and works for herself, which is an inherently destabilizing concept.

Sisterhood

Atwood wrote during and after the second-wave feminist movement. One of the facets of the feminist movement Atwood criticizes is the idea that women, as a broad class, want certain things and are united on most positions. Her criticism of this movement is evident in how she portrays the fatal flaws with feminist ideals of collectivism. In an interview for a local paper, Elaine rejects notions of a collective feminist artist grouping:

“A lot of people call you a feminist painter.”

‘What indeed,’ I say. ‘I hate party lines...’

‘So it’s not a meaningful classification for you?’ She says. (120)

Elaine rejects the feminist label, much as Atwood herself does. Both Elaine and Atwood create art that often focuses on women, but which presents them as people rather than feminist figures supporting a monolithic feminist agenda. Furthermore, Elaine experienced firsthand the cruelty of women from an early age: “Elaine refuses feminist commentary and questioning, not surprisingly, given the lack of sisterhood she experienced as a child” (Wisker 106). Elaine always had more positive relationships with boys and men than girls and women. But Elaine cannot escape the fact of her womanhood and the ties which bind all women to similar fates and possibilities.

When Elaine saves Susie from her self-induced abortion, Elaine is struck by the sense that she could have easily been in Susie's position: "I agree with him that she's been stupid. At the same time I know that in her place I would have been just as stupid...Everything that's happened to her could well have happened to me" (430). In this moment, Elaine recognizes herself in Susie, who she had previously dismissed as a stupid woman. Elaine did many of the same things Susie did, including sleeping with the same man. Elaine acknowledges a sense of sisterhood with Susie through the universality of the female experience. In *Alias Grace*, while it is Mary who dies from her abortion, Grace enacts revenge on her friend's behalf. In a sinister spiritual alliance, Grace and Mary's spirit avenge Mary's death. While it was not Grace who suffered, she acknowledges it could have been. At the Kinnear residence Grace did have sexual relations with McDermott and Mr. Kinnear: "I would meet him in the yard, in my nightdress, in the moonlight. I'd press up against him, I'd let him kiss me, and touch me as well...I had [McDermott] on a string, and Mr. Kinnear as well. I had the two of them dancing to my tune" (400). As female servants, Mary and Grace were expected to sleep with the men of the house: "Nevertheless, what Mary, Nancy, and Grace have definitely shared is their conditions as servants, together with their suffering due to their female corporeal vulnerability" (Lopez 174). Mary unfortunately became pregnant while Grace did not. The similarity of their situations but difference of their outcomes cements the sense of solidarity between these pairs of women.

Elaine has a similar experience considering how her and Cordelia's positions in life switch: "Cordelia is afraid of me, in this picture. I am afraid of Cordelia. I'm not afraid of seeing Cordelia. I'm afraid of being Cordelia. Because in some way we changed places, and I've forgotten when" (304). As children Cordelia was popular and dominating, exerting power over Elaine. Elaine walks away from Cordelia and their friends, when they reconnect, Cordelia was

losing her power as Elaine was gaining it. Elaine becomes the mean girl: “The person I use my mean mouth on the most is Cordelia. She doesn’t even have to provoke me, I use her as target practice” (316). Elaine criticizes Cordelia as Cordelia once criticized Elaine. Cordelia is Elaine’s twin who follows her through her life: “In one example of the twinning of Elaine and Cordelia that recurs throughout the text, Elaine also finds herself tempted by suicide. At this moment, she experiences an auditory hallucination, ‘the voice of a nine-year-old child’, and recognises Cordelia’s influence within her (Tolan 194-5). Elaine and Cordelia’s fates are tied and interchangeable as they continually save or alternatively doom one another. When Elaine visits Cordelia in the rest home, she refuses to help her friend, an act of betrayal. Even though Elaine holds the power in this situation, she still fears Cordelia’s anger since she remembers when their statuses were reversed: “I dream of her standing in the old Queen Mary schoolyard...She is wearing her snowsuit jacket but she is not a child, she’s the age she is now. She knows I deserted her, and she is angry” (484). Elaine still fears reverting to the scared little girl at Cordelia’s mercy. She realizes she was once the one pleading with Cordelia to free her from the ravine, just as Cordelia pleads with her to free her from the rest home. In Cordelia, Elaine sees her worst fears as she realizes how thin the separation between their fates is.

Economy of Secrets

One of the largest threats to female solidarity are class-based divisions and their resulting power dynamics. Gilead removes racial divisions between women as it commits large-scale genocide against all non-white people in the society. What remains are divisions based on class which support women-over-women power structures. This division of women based on class has historical precedent from ancient times which Atwood explores in *The Penelopiad*. The narrative

of *The Penelopiad* is told by Penelope and the maids. In the traditional story of *The Odyssey* Odysseus hangs the maids for sleeping with the suitors. In this version, Penelope reveals they she ordered the maids to sleep with the suitors to gather intelligence for her. The maids are treated as a monolithic entity of servants whom Penelope uses and then lets them die when they are no longer of use to her: “We’re here too, the ones without names. The other ones without names. The ones without the shame stuck onto us by others. The ones pointed at, the ones fingered” (191). The maids are nameless sexual objects who are used by upper-class men and women. Due to their lower-class status, the maids make easy scapegoats and Penelope is willing to sacrifice them. Just as the women in Mary Webster’s story allow her to be hanged to save themselves, if someone must hang, let it be the woman who is already more vulnerable.

The maids are in the same class as Grace and Mary Whitney. As servants they are expected to fulfill certain sexual obligations to their employers: “Once you were found with a man in your room you are the guilty one, no matter how they get in. As Mary used to say, there are some of the masters who think you owe them service twenty-four hours a day, and should do the main work flat on your back” (199). The maids’ official transgression in *The Penelopiad* is that “They’d had sex without permission” (178). While the reader knows this is false, as Penelope instructed the maids to have sex with her suitors, this reinforces the norm that working-class women in upper-class households were routinely prostituted out to the men of the house, at the discretion of their employer or master. The alleged wrongdoing is that these maids had sex without Odysseus’ permission, not that they had sex, which is considered part of their employment contract. Mary Whitney’s advice shows her understanding of this dynamic and that the woman will be blamed for having sex when, due to the power dynamics at play between servants and masters, she had no real choice in the matter.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* as Offred realizes she does not have any actual choice but to go with the Commander in his study: "But to refuse to see him could be worse. There's no doubt about who holds the real power" (136). Offred understands how illusory her choice is. She may go with the Commander and risk being caught, or refuse him and he, with this power and connections, could arrange for any number of horrid outcomes for her. Offred technically decides to go into the Commander's study, but it is not a truly free choice. Offred's reproductive slavery extends beyond the official requirements of being a Handmaid and into Scrabble games and strip clubs. Just as the maids in *The Penelopiad* and *Alias Grace*, Offred's job requirements include unofficial sexual expectations in which she has no option but to participate.

While working class women's sexual choices are diminished, they may still yield power in the form of knowledge. The servants listen at doors and who, by passing through the house at all hours, learn secrets: "Dr. Jordan is in the upstairs corridor again, in the attic, where the maids live. He senses them waiting behind their closed doors, listening, their eyes shining in the semi-darkness; but they don't make a sound" (351). The maids, who occupy all corners of the home, know the most intimate details of their mistresses' lives. The ability to gather and hold secret knowledge allows Grace to survive when other women in her class, namely Mary Whitney and Nancy, die:

Grace is the only one to survive, and she does so by an erotic strategy of deferral, refusing to be trapped by social and discursive categories. She transforms herself from an object in a capitalistic system of exchange, in which the servant fulfills the desire of the master, into a holder of mysterious knowledge, labor value, so to speak, inscribed with the value of forbidden knowledge. (Stanley 373)

Information has value even and especially for those who are otherwise disempowered by their class status. Grace is freed from the normal powerlessness of a servant once she holds information those around her, especially Dr. Jordan, want to know.

Penelope leverages the maids' ability to gather information unsuspectingly to spy on the suitors: "They were my most trusted eyes and ears in the place, and it was them who helped me to pick away at my weaving, behind locked doors, at dead of night" (114). Penelope trusts the maids with her secret plot to continually put off the suitors with her ever-unfinished shroud. The maids know Penelope's secrets and do not hesitate to share this knowledge with the reader. In a dramatization of Penelope's story, the maids say she did have sex with the suitors, contrary to what Penelope herself alleges:

While he as pleasuring every nymph and beauty,
Did he think I'd do nothing but my duty?
While every girl and goddess he was praising,
did he assume I'd dry up like a raisin? (149)

The maids know Penelope's secrets, both those she willingly shares with the reader and those she does not. By providing the servants space to share the truth, Atwood empowers those who are normally voiceless against their upper-class employers: "Atwood's feminist agenda predominates in *The Penelopiad* through the re-gendering of myth, the privileging of female, previously muted voices" (Wynne-Davies 83). While Penelope's voice dominates the narrative, the servants as receptacles for the secret knowledge of the household speak their truth as well, being given narrative space to confront their mistress who betrayed them.

While in a significantly higher position than household servants, Aunt Lydia uses the same politics of secrets to acquire and retain her power in Gilead. Aunt Lydia knows the

Commanders' secrets and so they are forced to trust her since she has the power to ruin them: "It was how the Aunts got their power: by finding things out" (286). The secret knowledge Aunt Lydia controls is a threat to the Commanders, but it is a threat they cannot dismantle simply: "I've become swollen with power, true, but also nebulous with it – formless, shape-shifting. I am everywhere and nowhere: even in the minds of the Commanders I cast an unsettling shadow. How can I regain myself? How to shrink back to my normal size, the size of an ordinary woman?" (32). Other women in Gilead may be neutralized more easily through reproductive slavery or exile to the Colonies. Aunt Lydia holds special power, armed with dangerous information and the tacit implications she could unleash it: "I still have a bag of tricks. And I'm still high in the tree" (254). Aunt Lydia has not needed to use the Commanders' secrets against them yet, but they know she can. This power is how she has survived in Gilead so long. It is also with this knowledge that Aunt Lydia ushers in Gilead's demise. As one of the architects of the system, Aunt Lydia knows its weakest points. She engages Agnes and Nicole in this delicate economy of secrets as an essential part of her plan: "Now that I have told you this secret...every minute that passes in which you do not divulge this secret to the Eyes will count as treachery" (337). Agnes has more power, and is in more danger, by keeping this secret. As a woman in an oppressive society, Agnes quickly realizes keeping the secret gives her much greater power.

Atwood continually questions ideals of feminist collectivism by exposing the various ways in which women compete with, abandon, and even torture one another. As H el ene Cixous warns: "Beware of diagnoses that would reduce your generative powers. 'Common' nouns are also proper nouns that disparage your singularity by classifying it into species. Break out of the circles; don't remain within the psychoanalytic closure. Take a look around then cut through!" (892). While there is an inherent danger in women's individuality being diminished and reason

to reject simplistic communal definitions, Atwood also shows how patriarchal societies like the extreme example seen in Gilead work to prevent female alliances which would threaten their power. When a woman realizes the power of working together, or even for herself armed with information, she may actively work against the structures which profit from female fracturing and competition.

Double, Double Toil, and Trouble: Multiple Selves and What They Can Get Away With

Women envy the villainous woman because she is able to get away with much more than the good girls. Atwood's villainous women act as doubles for other women in the stories representing their repressed evil desires. This dark twin is often another woman outside of the good woman. Zenia is this twin to Tony, Charis, and Roz and Helen is Penelope's wicked double. Atwood's female characters also often have double or multiple versions of the self within them. Tony, Roz, and Charis all have repressed twins that represents some disturbing element of their identity. Oryx and Grace refuse to let the male narrators in their stories pin them into a concrete interpretation. This is a protective mechanism which allows these women to retain narrative control even when they are the subject of the obsessive male gaze. Finally this section will analyze the role of the artistic, specifically authorial, double. As women participate in the phallogocentric act of writing, they necessarily split their writing self from the female self.

Bad Behavior

Atwood shows that through their doubles or alternate selves, women can act out antisocial behaviors: "In her novels, Atwood has made constant use of the double voice, depicting characters at war with themselves and their environments" (Palumbo 21). In *Alias Grace*, all of Grace's subversive actions and expressions come through the spirit or voice of her deceased double: Mary Whitney. Grace infuses her narrative as she tells it to Dr. Jordan with Mary Whitney's voice by repeating her words: "...at my age a woman is an old maid but a man is not an old bachelor until he's fifty, and even then there's still hope for the ladies, as Mary Whitney used to say" (37). Grace can get away with saying something this candid by attributing it to a dead woman who cannot be punished for impropriety anymore. Just as Mary Whitney's

spirit borrows Grace's body to commit the murders of Mr. Kinnear and Nancy (402), Grace borrows Mary Whitney's voice to exempt herself from repercussions for her impolite words.

Mary Whitney was punished for her words and desires, as Grace points out: "...you should be careful about saying what you want or even wanting anything, as you may be punished for it. This is what happened to Mary Whitney" (98). In a seditious act even greater than murdering Nancy and Mr. Kinnear, Grace avenges her friend by reanimating Mary as her double for whom no consequences exist. When Grace is hypnotized and speaks as Mary Whitney, she says: "I am beyond lying, I no longer need to lie" (402). For Grace, she is already in prison, there is little anyone can do to punish her further. Mary is dead and therefore truly infallible. In this way, Grace also acts as Mary's double. The title of the novel, *Alias Grace* can be read as referring to Mary's alias as Grace Marks rather than Grace's alias, Mary Whitney, which she gives when she is fleeing Canada. These two women act as each other's doubles. Just as Mary borrows Grace's skin to exact revenge for her death through the proxies of Nancy and Mr. Kinnear, Grace borrows Mary to speak freely.

The Robber Bride is Atwood's work in which the function of doubles is perhaps most evident and multifaceted: "Atwood utilizes almost incessant duplication in *The Robber Bride*. The novel is cast as both Gothic novel and fairy tale, each of the women has a hidden twin ...and each woman is paired with Zenia" (Palumbo 30). In *The Robber Bride*, we see the three main female characters all commit or contemplate antisocial acts as their doubles. Early in life, Tony envisions a left-handed evil twin, Ynot:

...when Tony grew up and learned more about her left-handedness she was faced with the possibility that she might in fact have been a twin, the left-handed half of a divided egg, the other half of which had died. But when she was little her twin was merely an

invention, the incarnation of her sense that part of her was missing. Although she was a twin, Tnomerf Ynot was a good deal taller than Tony herself. Taller, stronger, more daring. (155)

Ynot represents the part of Tony more able to act on her daring and sometimes dangerous impulses, the side which asks: “Why not?” When Tony brings a gun to the hotel where Zenia is staying with the intention to use it to kill her, it is Ynot, not Tony who would be capable of this action: “She is not just Tony Fremont, she is also *Tnomerf Ynot*, queen of the barbarians, and in theory, capable of much that Tony herself is not quite up to” (455). Tony uses her twin to indulge her antisocial, even evil, desires. Again, as with Mary and Grace, we see desire as something unacceptable for women and can only be expressed through an evil double.

Karen become Charis as Karen lives on as Charis’s traumatized, evil double. When Karen is sexually assaulted by her uncle, she separates herself from her body giving birth to Charis: “After the third time Karen knows she is trapped. All she can do is split in two; all she can do is turn into Charis” (295). Karen remains a dark presence in Charis’s life and when she realizes Zenia is dead, she believes it is Karen who acted on Charis’s murderous impulse and pushed Zenia out the window:

It was Karen, who was left behind somehow; who stayed hidden in Zenia’s room; who waited until Zenia had opened the door onto the balcony and then came up behind her and shoved her off. Karen has murdered Zenia, and it’s Charis’s fault for holding Karen away, separate from herself, for trying to keep her outside, for not taking her in, and Charis’s tears are tears of guilt. (500)

Karen represents not only Charis's repressed trauma, but her cruel impulses that violate the values of peace and pacifism Charis has cultivated. Charis keeps Karen locked away inside herself as a dark double who comes to bear a resemblance to Zenia.

Roz's double is tied to her ethnic heritage. She originally knows herself as Rosalind Greenwood rather than Roz Grunwald. Roz learns she is Jewish and that her father and uncles helped smuggled Jews out of Europe during World War II. Roz is rejected from both the Catholic and Jewish community because of her mixed heritage: "But whereas Roz was not Catholic, now she isn't Jewish enough. She's an oddity, a hybrid, a strange half-person" (387-8). As Roz navigates her personal duplicity, unlike Tony and Charis, she does not segregate one half of herself from the other. Rather, Roz combines her identities to compose a reconceived vision of herself: "That was me, thinks Roz. I was pastiche" (390). Just as Tony and Charis, Roz contemplates killing Zenia in her hotel room: "She could sneak up behind Zenia, bop her on the head...Make it look like a sex killing" (497). All three women have homicidal thoughts about Zenia. While none of them act on these impulses, their doubles wish they would.

These women see Zenia as a version of themselves who can act on the impulses they can only impart into their imagined twins. In *The Robber Bride* we see both the imagined bad selves as well as a real model of one in Zenia: "Zenia...is also the psychic projection of the three characters, she embodies not only the repressed pasts of the three women, who have all survived childhood traumas, but also buried aspects of their identities" (Bouson 19). While Ynot and Karen represent the unsavory things these women wish to do, Zenia actually does these things. Further riffing on the association between left-handedness and evil, Tony concludes: "Tony will be Zenia's right hand, because Zenia is certainly Tony's left one" (190). Similarly, Charis sees the grown version of Karen as Zenia: "Karen is coming back, Charis can't keep her away any

more...But she is no longer a nine-year-old girl...And her hair isn't pale any more, but dark. The sockets of her eyes are dark too, dark bruises. She no longer looks like Karen. She looks like Zenia" (299). Zenia embodies Roz's anxieties over her mixed identity in the tale she spins when she first enters Roz's life. It is through her double that Zenia makes her way into Roz's life. Zenia claims Roz's father saved her from the Holocaust. Zenia even tells Roz she is part Jewish and her mother was Catholic, just like Roz: "My father wasn't Jewish...Hell, even my mother wasn't Jewish! Not my religion. She was Catholic, as a matter of fact. But two of her four grandparents were Jewish so she was classified as a *mischling*, first degree, a mixture" (406). Zenia represents buried aspects of these women's identities as well as their antisocial desires.

Helen is Penelope's Zenia. Helen represents the dark, sexual double to Penelope's light, chaste character:

Penelope emphasizes the injustice of Helen's actions and her transgressive sexuality, and displays deep envy and resentment of Helen; this suggests regret and lamentation over her own past actions of virtue and fidelity. Penelope sees Helen as her double, and exhibits a desire to be a similarly seductive figure" (Neethling 126).

Just as Tony, Charis, and Roz desire to be Zenia, Penelope wants to have the same seductive and destructive power as her cousin. Helen represents an extreme version of Zenia's character as she starts a war and sends thousands of men to their deaths. While Penelope does disapprove of Helen's behavior, ultimately she is envious that Helen is able to get away with so much.

Penelope must put forth effort to clear her name of alleged adultery: "The charges concern my sexual conduct. It is alleged, for instance, that I slept with Amphinomus, the politest of the Suitors" (143). Helen makes no such apologies and her sexual transgressions are taken as fact, as are Penelope's absent husband's. Helen embraces her role in mythology where Penelope chafes

against hers. Through her contrast with Helen, Penelope is a fuller, more realistic character: “Atwood uses the vehicle of Helen to recast Penelope from a feminist perspective and to reveal the inherent contradictions within Homer’s patriarchal society, and its harmfully prescriptive gender roles” (Neethling 127). It is not so much Helen’s actions Penelope resents, but Helen’s freedom in contrast to her own confines as the model wife.

Unknowable Selves

Zenia’s power comes from her ability to morph herself into whatever shape her prey needs: “Zenia’s sexuality is powerful and subversive: she mimics or masquerades as a male fantasy, but like a siren, she lures men to their destruction” (Tolan 45). Each of these forms is a woman in need of salvation. Tony offers academic salvation; Charis offers spiritual and health salvation; Roz offers financial salvation. Both the men and women in *The Robber Bride* fall prey to Zenia’s siren trap:

Maybe that was Zenia’s trick. Maybe she presented herself as a vacancy, as starvation, as an empty beggar’s bowl. Maybe the posture she’d assumed was on her knees, hands upstretched for alms. Maybe Mitch wanted the opportunity to do a little coin-scattering, an opportunity never provided by Roz. He was tired of being given to, of being forgiven, of being rescued; maybe he wanted to do a little giving and rescuing of his own. Even better than a beautiful woman on her knees would be a grateful woman on her knees. (419)

These characters want to fill a vacancy Zenia presents and when they scatter their wealth into her beggar’s bowl, she breaks the bond, leaving her wreckage. Zenia provides a different tragic backstory for each of the women, intended to mirror her own experience. To Roz she is an exiled Jew from Europe, to Tony she is a white Russian forced into childhood prostitution, to Charis she is a battered

woman with ovarian cancer. Zenia does not leverage a homogenous version of herself in her interactions. Her ability to maintain multiple selves for each target is the key to her successful manipulations. Zenia masks her true self from everyone by having so many versions of Zenia that no one knows her real story. Unknowability and the power to morph oneself into one of multiple versions of herself as convenient is a critical source of power for women in Atwood's novels.

In *Oryx and Crake*, Oryx compartmentalizes her relationships to maintain an identity separate from her sexual activity with men, whether for work or pleasure. Jimmy, however, cannot understand her motives and frequently describes Oryx as having multiple, incomplete versions of herself. He asks himself: "Was there only one Oryx or was she legion?" (362). One answer to this question lies in a common practice by women in sex work who divide themselves between their public lives in the sex work industry and their private lives outside of it. Female sex workers often create separate identities to manage the discomfort they may experience with the work they do: "The process of creating different selves to protect themselves at work and in their private lives operate in relation to their unique experiences, capacities, and other internally mediated processes that constitute the fabric of their lives" (Orchard et. al, 195). Through similar layers of protection, Oryx guards her true self from the men with whom she interacts. Oryx separates having sex with Jimmy from having sex with Crake, which she views as part of her job at Paradise (368). But to Jimmy, a "legion" of Oryxs reflects a sexual fantasy he projects onto Oryx rather than acknowledging it as Oryx's method of self-protection.

Creating multiple selves also helps protect sex workers by playing into the expectations and fantasies of their customers. Oryx morphs into whatever fantasy object Jimmy imagines her as. The first time Jimmy sees who he thinks is Oryx on the child porn site, Hott Totts, the child who turns to the camera seems to see into Jimmy: "*I see you watching. I know you, I know what*

you want” (104). It is a sex worker’s job to know and fulfill client’s desires. Oryx becomes what men want her to be as a survival tactic. Jimmy says Oryx would often dress up, changing her appearance: “She liked to dress up, change her appearance, pretend to be different women. She’d strut around the room, do a little strip, wiggle, and pose. She said men liked variety” (271). Here Jimmy misattributes Oryx’s actions to her own pleasure. Jimmy transforms Oryx into his own sexualized fantasy object without acknowledging how she views her relationship with Jimmy as transactional: “Oryx exists as a fantasy object of desire; that is, there are as many ‘Oryxs’ as there are men whose fantasies call her into existence...This reinvention further signals her status as a vessel for the fantasies of the other characters” (Hall 180). Oryx does not dress up because she likes to, but rather, to keep Jimmy amused. She knows this is what Jimmy wants and expects and she will meet those expectations. She plays into his fantasies by dressing up as other women. By constantly changing herself to keep Jimmy entertained, Oryx masques her true self. Oryx keeps Jimmy at arm's-length, preventing him from getting too close to knowing her.

A key way in which Oryx protects her story from Jimmy’s misleading narrative is by herself unknowable to him. Jimmy constructs a narrative for the object of his fantasy desires through his descriptions of Oryx: “Of the three central characters, Orxy is the most difficult to locate; she refuses to offer any firm corroboration of her history to Snowman and she becomes an unsatisfying amalgamation of ‘woman’” (Wynne-Davies 79). Much of what Jimmy tells readers about Oryx based on inaccurate interpretations of the little information Oryx provides about herself. At one point, Jimmy describes this lack of communication as Oryx trying to protect him: “More often than not she acted as if she wanted to protect him, from the image of herself—herself in the past. She liked to keep only the bright side of herself turned toward him. She liked to shine” (158). A more reasonable understanding of this behavior is that Oryx is

protecting her own narrative from him by providing it a space of safe keeping within herself.

While a more obvious way to protect the truth of her narrative would be to share it herself, Oryx lacks faith in Jimmy's willingness to present any part of her that does not align with his preconceived notions of what she should be. As Helen Mundler points out: "[Oryx] allows Jimmy to compose her" (97). Oryx exhibits agency as it is her decision to allow Jimmy to create this fiction of her and she rarely contradicts him.

Jimmy merges the Oryx with a girl he saw online who cannot be the same woman, simply due to the incompatibility of the ages of Oryx and the girl, as she points out (105). This resonates with the multiplicity of Oryx in Jimmy's mind. Oryx's failure to fit into a singular continuous narrative also factors into Jimmy's imagining of Oryx as having multiple versions of self. Jimmy creates a collaged Oryx composed of different women and stereotypical images which the reader knows is untruthful: "In some ways, therefore, Oryx is as much of a construct as the Crakers, a creature to be formed by the imagination of the creator, in this case, Snowman rather than Crake" (Wynne-Davies 80). Because of the obscurity of Jimmy's gaze, the reader is never able to access a full picture of Oryx. Because we see Oryx as our male narrator sees her, we see the effect, rather than the mechanisms by which women splinter and display pieces of themselves to those around them. By contrast in *Alias Grace*, the reader accesses Grace's inner thoughts as she alters her presentation of herself before Dr. Jordan.

Grace morphs herself to meet the expectations of the men in her life who try to use her. She plays an elaborate game with Dr. Jordan as she knows exactly what he wants her to tell but denies him the pleasure.

That is how they get in through the door. Help is what they offer but gratitude is what they want, they roll around in it like cats in the catnip. He wishes to go home and say to

himself, I stuck in my thumb and pulled out the plum, what a good boy am I. but I will not be anybody's plum. I say nothing. (41)

Grace sees through these false offers of assistance and keeps Dr. Jordan entranced. This allows Grace to maintain her power in the situation, acting the part of the possibly mad, unintelligent criminal: "...Grace [is] expert in the 'good stupid look' Grace withholds knowledge so as to preserve some privacy or to revenge herself on Jordan when he has offended her or because she thinks it would not interest him" (Eagleton 81). Grace maintains a delicate balance between herself and Dr. Jordan, giving him just enough to feel as though he is making progress but never giving him the essential truth he is after, her account of the murders: "...he has an uneasy sense that the very plentitude of her recollections may be a sort of distraction, a way of drawing the mind away from some hidden but essential fact" (185). Dr. Jordan is correct in this musing, Grace is distracting him intentionally and tactfully. Just as Oryx laughs, "'Do you love me?' That laugh of hers. What had it meant? *Stupid question. Why ask? You talk too much. Or else: What is love? Or possibly: In your dreams*" (374), and ignores Jimmy's questions, Grace answers Dr. Jordan's questions incompletely.

Grace is the object of Dr. Jordan's sexual desire, something of which she is well aware: "[I'd] let him touch me as well, all over, Doctor, the same places you'd like to touch me, because I can always tell, I know what you think" (400). In this way Grace maintains her power over Dr. Jordan by refusing to give him the information about the murders or to give herself to him sexually: "Dr. Jordan has suffered from his association with Grace; the Sirens may well have helped Ulysses's career, but a paper written about Grace doesn't help Dr. Jordan as he expected it would" (Rigney 60). By refusing to allow Dr. Jordan to know her, Grace protects her narrative and body from him and sabotages his professional aspirations for her as well. Furthermore,

Grace controls her narrative to the reader. Grace tells her own story in *Alias Grace* supplemented with Dr. Jordan's interpretations and newspaper articles about her: "So, we can only know about Grace what she wants us to know, and Atwood is back to her narrative tricks" (Rigney 63).

While Oryx has sex with Jimmy but refuses to tell him anything about herself, Grace refuses to have sex with Dr. Jordan but shares just enough about herself to keep him hooked but unsatisfied.

Jimmy has a compulsive need to know Oryx, and what he cannot know, he invents. This is a common tendency of male storytellers according to De Lauretis: "What is femininity—for men?' In this sense, it is a question of desire: it is prompted by men's desire for women and men's desire to know" (111). For Jimmy his desire for Oryx and his desire "to know" coalesce. Jimmy believes that Oryx, as a woman, needs to be discoverable:

He could never get used to her, she was fresh every time, she was a casketfull of secrets.

Any moment now she would open herself up, reveal to him the essential thing, the hidden thing at the core of life, or of her life, or of his life – the thing he was longing to know.

The thing he'd always wanted. What would it be? (37)

Oryx engages in shapeshifting to escape Jimmy's desire to pin her to a single identity and give him "the thing he'd always wanted," while simultaneously indulging his fantasy of having her as a merry-go-round of women. Jimmy is determined to know or else invent Oryx's identity, but he never has similar concerns about Crake and barely asks what he is really doing in Paradise. Clearly, Jimmy feels he must know Oryx because every other woman he has been with has opened to him easily. By denying him this pleasure, Oryx defies Jimmy even as he usurps her own narrative voice. Oryx also refuses to allow Jimmy to master her and manipulate her

emotionally as he had done to so many women before her. Oryx's silence and closedness protect her story.

Jimmy and Dr. Jordan are clear parallel characters. They are two of Atwood's few male narrators who both have a consuming desire to know a woman who is protecting herself and her narrative from the men who wish to contort her into the most useful form for themselves. Jimmy and Dr. Jordan desire to have sex with their female fixations as well as to know their histories. Paul tells Joan in *Lady Oracle*: "Ah but the mystery of man is of the mind...whereas that of the woman is of the body. What is a mystery but a thing which is remaining hidden? It is more easy to uncover the body than it is the mind" (165). Oryx and Grace prove that the true mystery of a woman is both her body and her mind as the men obsessed with them cannot be contented with only having one.

A is for Author: The Artist Double

Joan creates multiple protective layers of herself. But rather than protecting her personal narrative from encroaching male narrators, she is primarily concerned with preserving the autonomy of her creative self. Joan contains within herself multiple Joans who she leverages as appropriate:

Since Joan has no sense of boundaries, her identities multiply. Changing body shape, clothes, makeup, wigs, hair length and colour, names, bank accounts and addresses, she is either consecutively or simultaneously, fat girl and thin woman, mothball and butterfly...Identities are assembled and disposed of according to the whims and exigencies of the moment. (Eagleton 129)

Joan's appearance and identity are constantly changing, but perhaps the most important double is Joan's artistic twin. Joan has an obvious artistic alter ego: Louisa K. Delacourt. Joan keeps her author identity a secret from her friends, family, and lovers: "I'd always tried to keep my two names and identities as separate as possible" (30). For Joan the ability to conceal her identity and live a separate life operates as a subversion of typical gender roles as she envisions them: "But then, I thought men who changed their names were likely to be con-men, criminals, undercover agents, or magicians, whereas women who changed their names were probably just married" (201). Joan does not change her name in order to attach herself to her husband. Joan changes her name and external appearance to create multiple versions of herself all of which keep others a safe distance away.

Lady Oracle opens with Joan killing one version of herself through the symbolic act of cutting and burning her hair: "Then, strand by strand, I began to sacrifice my hair. It shriveled, blackened, writhed like a handful of pinworms, melted and finally burned, sputtering like a fuse. The smell of singed turkey was overpowering" (11). Even through this act of self-murder, Joan maintain multiple identities, only now most people believe one is literally dead. Joan's writing allows her to support herself financially, making her independent from her spouse or lovers. She is also free to write what are often branded "cheap" period romances without judgment. Joan describes herself as being "two people at once" (212). Because Joan is not allowed to be an author, wife, and woman at once, she is forced to parse out her identity into separate spheres of existence. This multiplicity allowed Joan to protect herself from being known, specifically by Arthur: "I didn't want Arthur to understand me" (215). By refusing to open all her selves to Arthur, Joan maintains her unique sense of identity and autonomy within the confines of marriage. These multiple personalities emerge from a psychological conflict of female

masculinity in which the woman engaging in an inappropriate, masculine occupation, in this case writing, splinters herself to cope with this conflict: "...one alternative to this normative female Oedipus complex is the masculine protest in which the woman rebels against femininity by choosing masculine occupations" (Gardiner 599). Being a woman who writes creates an internal conflict in the female author who must then separate her writing self from her female self.

Aunt Lydia also contains an important double within herself. On one side, Aunt Lydia presents herself to the women and girls she oversees as a true believer. To the authorities like Commander Judd who brought her into the fold of Gilead's founding, she is someone loyal to the Republic but also worthy of being trusted with its many secrets. To the readers of her holograph she is an insurgent agent working from within the system to bring it down. Aunt Lydia only allows one of these faces to show at once: "I needed to work the angles, once I could find out what the angles were" (117). Aunt Lydia has tactfully identified each of these angles and works them individually when advantageous. The slogan of Ardua Hall is "Pen is Envy." This is a very clear homage to how the Aunts are the exception to Gilead's rule that women are not allowed to read or write. In this way, the Aunts are allowed to participate in what has been branded a male activity. Scholars have frequently viewed the pen as a phallic symbol: "Male sexuality, in other words, is not just analogically but actually the essence of literary power. The poet's pen is in some sense (even more than figuratively) a penis" (Gilbert and Gubar 4). Agnes views the Aunts as mentally androgynous: "Did they [the Aunts] have special brains? Neither female nor male? Were they even women at all underneath their uniforms?" (156). The Aunts are women and as such they are still excluded from the highest chambers of power. Yet, they are exempted from the rules which apply to all other classes of women in Gilead. Their literacy is the most

important exception. In her essay “A Room of One’s Own,” Virginia Woolf considers the idea of writers having minds which are both masculine and feminine.

If one is a man, still the woman part of his brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her. Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous. It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties. Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine, I thought. (82)

Woolf’s reflection on androgynous creative brains has direct ramifications for the Aunts, particularly Aunt Lydia who uses her androgynous power to write a testimony of her role in the construction and downfall of Gilead. Just like Joan, Aunt Lydia uses her writing to subvert gender norms. They use a secret version of themselves, specifically the writer self, to escape the confines of their womanhood as defined by a male-dominated society.

These women must create alternative versions of themselves to write because their societies and the history of writing more broadly do not welcome women writers. Reflecting on her own experience becoming a writer, Atwood writes about the prejudices she faced:

If sacrifice was demanded of the male artists, how much more so of the women? What leads us to suspect that the fancifully embroidered scarlet letter on the breast of the punished and reviled Hester Prynne...stands not only for Adulteress, but for Artist, or even Author? A man playing the role of Great Artist was expected to Live Life – this chore was part of his consecration to his art – and this Living Life meant, among other things, wine, women, and song. But if a female writer tried the wine and the men, she was likely to be considered a slut and a drunk, so she was stuck with the song: and better still if it was a swan song. (83)

This description showcases the idea that women did not fit into the model of the writer. Being an artist and being a woman is transgressive. As we see through Atwood's equation of authorship to adultery, female authors are engaging in an activity which is dangerous because of their gender. The act of writing or participating in other forms of artistic creation defies expectations for women just as much as sexual infidelity. A woman is unable to participate in the normal model for an artist while she is also unable to fulfill typical feminine role of being a wife and mother:

Ordinary women were supposed to get married, but not women artists. A male artist could have marriage and children on the side...but for women, such things were supposed to *be* the way. And so this particular way must be renounced altogether by the female artists, in order to clear the way for that other way – the way of Art. (83)

A woman artist is forced to choose between one of two incomplete options; she may be either artist or woman. Thus, the woman artist must segment her artistic self as she is not permitted to live as a fully-integrated artistic person. This incompatibility results in the “anxiety of authorship” for women writers: “an anxiety built from a complex and often only barely conscious fears of that authority which seems to the female artist to be by definition inappropriate to her sex” (Gilbert and Gubar 51). Whereas male writers may be stunted by the “anxiety of influence” of their literary forefathers, when women have no influences to turn to, they are paralyzed by the idea they should not be creating at all. Much of literary history has been dominated by men: “Nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason, of which it is at once the effect, the support, and one of the privileged alibis. It has been one with the phallogocentric tradition. It is indeed that same self-admiring, self-stimulating, self-congratulatory phallogocentrism” (Cixous 879). By inserting herself into the phallogocentric practice

of writing, the woman defies conventions of appropriate female occupations. This is a direct challenge to the male writing ego which manifests as an anxiety and rejection of female writers.

Through a conversation between Crake and Jimmy, Atwood comments on the view that women are not meant to be artists. Female artistry threatens men: "They're not in it to get laid. They'd gain no biological advantage from amplifying themselves, since potential mates would be deterred rather than attracted by that sort of amplification. Men aren't frogs, they don't want women who are ten times bigger than them" (198). Crake says the woman artist is unattractive because she is too large for men to accept. This bears a direct parallel to Joan and her artistic self. At the beginning of the novel Joan is physically larger than most men find acceptable. Through her writing she also becomes intellectually larger. An article calls her a "challenge to the male ego" (268). It is not simply Joan's work which challenges the male ego, but Joan herself for existing as a female writer. When Joan brushes this comment off, the Porcupine asserts she is indeed a threat to the male ego, including his own: "You stomp all over people's egos without even knowing you're doing it...You're emotionally clumsy" (268). The idea of emotional clumsiness reinforces the idea that Joan's existence as an artist is at odds with traditional femininity. For, as Crake says: "Female artists are biologically confused" (198). Women are expected to make themselves smaller and more palatable to patriarchal society. The female artist flies in the face of these expectations. Joan is obtrusive and threatening as an artist. The Porcupine is deeply uncomfortable with Joan's dual existence as a writer and woman. The presentation of discomfort is the reason why Joan and other women artists must separate themselves into two or more versions of themselves.

Through maintaining multiple versions of themselves, women achieve the dual purpose of acting out antisocial desires through their darker, more daring twin and maintaining authorial

control over their narrative whether through protecting their story from corrupting male narrators or being the author herself. Due to the constraints placed upon women by a patriarchal society which insists on knowing their mind and body, women must resort to splintering themselves to maintain any form of autonomy. Due to the phallogentric nature and history of writing, female artists must split their artistic, writing self into a separate piece of their identity apart from their female identity. These splintered women are threatening: “We can conclude that holiness is exemplified by completeness. Holiness requires that individuals shall conform to the class to which they belong” (Douglas 53). Women writers defy this command for singularity as they cross into the realm of the writer, a “class” in which they do not belong. To exist and write multiply is one of the most seditious things a woman can do.

Conclusion

Margaret Atwood's writing confronts harsh realities of womanhood. She explores the essential function of evil women in the story and the seditious truth that good women harbor a secret desire to have the same power as these women. She celebrates the stupid woman, without whom there would be no stories worth telling. Her female protagonists are often inherently transgressive by nature of their bodies or when the decision to stop caring. When women stop caring what others think, they discover radical freedom from the control measures used to keep women disempowered. Atwood examines how patriarchal societies use women to control each other. By keeping women divided along class lines, they will not join together and threaten male power. But, Atwood shows, when women do form alliances, they hold the power to disrupt society. Atwood's female characters are multidimensional and hold multitudes within and between themselves. In order to exist in male society, women multiply themselves to act out antisocial desires, protect their narrative from male encroachment or simply exist as women who writes. Her vivid, honest writing has led many to question Atwood's feminism, a label Atwood herself has rejected in favor of the label of female author who crafts, real, conflicted women as alive in her writing as they are in life.

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