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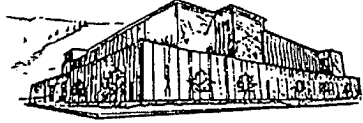
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MARGARET ATWOOD'S EVIL WOMEN IN *LADY ORACLE*,
CAT'S EYE, AND *THE ROBBER BRIDE*

by

Laura Gronewold

B.A. Michigan State University, 1993

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

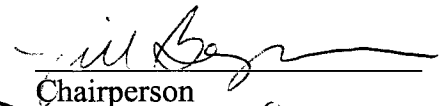
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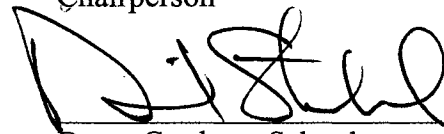
Master of Arts

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Analysis of the role of the archetypal “evil woman” character in three novels by Margaret Atwood: *Lady Oracle*, *Cat’s Eye*, and *The Robber Bride*.

Chairperson: Jill Bergman 

My thesis project emerges out of my training in feminist theory and literature, as well as cultural studies and gender studies, and analyzes the archetypal “evil woman” in three Atwood novels: *Lady Oracle*, *Cat’s Eye*, and *The Robber Bride*. I demonstrate in my study how the evil woman symbolizes a latent power source within the protagonists that they must recover in order to claim agency over their subjectivity. By creating well-drawn, three-dimensional “evil” characters, Atwood highlights how these “evil women” and archtypally negative characteristics are, in fact, a potentially *positive* source of power for the protagonists when they accept the evil woman and embrace the power that she represents. Drawing on a variety of insights from feminist and gender theory, I primarily build my investigation on Judith Butler’s notions of gender construction and gender performativity, and her examination of the interface between psychological dynamics and power structures. Butler’s interrogations of how Freudian methods of internalization blend with Foucauldian notions of power, particularly in her work *The Psychic Life of Power*, read well onto Atwood because the protagonists in these three novels internalize a power structure the evil woman establishes, and then become involved in the hegemonic maintenance of their subordinate subject position to which they become attached. When they recognize their subject position and can embrace the powerful characteristics of the evil woman they formerly perceived as dangerous or scary, they throw off the shackles of subordination and begin to find agency as the novels close.

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Margaret Atwood's Evil Women: Introduction

Far too often, powerful women have been bastardized within the literary canon, deemed “evil women” because they transgress gender norms or desire power. Labels such as ball-busters, wicked stepmothers, femme fatales, witches, hags, and crones separated the “evil women” from the “good girls” of literature who did not challenge gender norms or desire power. These “evil women,” tradition had it, were out to satisfy their own needs and ignored their “natural,” feminine care-taking role, defying the patriarchal ideal that defined womanhood as dedication to one’s husband and children. During the second wave of feminism, a number of feminist authors undertook the important mission of creating an antidote to wholly negative archetypes of powerful women as evil. This concerted effort to re-vision literary portrayals of women took many forms, from Adrienne Rich’s poetry and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* to Anne Sexton’s recuperation of fairy tale characters and Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying*, and yielded a more complex portrayal of women that allowed female characters to be sexual and powerful, to seek fulfillment outside marriage and children, and most importantly, to claim a subjectivity of their own definition, rather than one imposed on them by a literary tradition perpetuating an existing social order.

But the second-wave’s effort at revising risked replacing one inadequate portrayal of women with another that had limitations of its own. Critic Sarah Appleton Aguiar writes, “Ironically, in feminism’s goal to eradicate the traditional stereotyping of female characters—particularly the demons and fiends that have proliferated throughout literary history—the resulting literature may seem equally as biased in its promotion of female

nobility” (3). While expanding the portrayals of women in the literary canon is of utmost importance, eliminating the archetypal “evil woman” from literature may foreclose a closer examination that can ultimately liberate her from a literary pigeonhole. When we rethink the evil woman, her use of power, and the challenge she presents to gender norms, we start to understand her as rebelling against a literary canon that has carved out a narrow role for her.

Therefore, the “evil woman” deserves a more thorough analysis to understand the intricacies of her character, specifically one that considers second-wave and contemporary portrayals of the evil woman by female authors such as Margaret Atwood who reject limiting characterizations that are either too negative *or* too positive. Even in current manifestations of “wicked women” such as those detailed by Aguiar, we see how this strong female character remains typically negative. Although the second-wave effort to re-vision females in literature was admirable and necessary, in the endeavor of *re*characterizing female characters in a positive light, “somehow, somewhere along that road to subjectivity ... something had been lost. That vital woman, empowered with anger, wit, ruthless survival instincts—the *bitch*—had been banished from the pages of feminist fiction” (1). Margaret Atwood did not banish the *bitch* from her novels, however; in fact, Atwood embraced the evil woman. Atwood’s evil women are smart, shrewd, cunning, and aggressive—traits that when possessed by a woman are often characterized, by both men and women, as malevolent, manipulative, overzealous, and cruel. But Atwood’s evil women may also be scared, loving, confused, or lost; they are multifaceted characters who do not succumb to archetypes and become stock characters with negative stereotypes stamped on them. By bringing the evil woman to the forefront,

Atwood addresses a literary tradition and a feminist canon, and she tackles the question of why we perceive powerful women as threatening beings and relegate them as “evil.”

These narrow definitions of powerful women may be rescued from patriarchal castigation when we use the lens of Judith Butler’s theories of performativity and gender construction to explore the multiplicity and fluidity of the evil woman in Atwood’s fiction. In fact, as we examine Atwood’s evil women more carefully, we discover how they vary their repetition of gendered behavior to achieve agency—and ultimately to show protagonists in three Atwood novels, *Lady Oracle*, *Cat’s Eye*, and *The Robber Bride*, the route to finding and claiming agency for themselves. The evil woman sometimes subverts gender norms by borrowing typically masculine behavior, while other times she upholds gender norms by repeating feminine behavior. In either case, she highlights the construction of gender and demonstrates how a more thorough understanding of the gender matrix leads the protagonists to power.

The archetype of the evil woman is a long-standing tradition in the Western literary canon. In *Fantasies of Female Evil*, Cristina León Alfar writes that the archetype of the evil woman relies on many cultural associations, and “Of course, the concept depends on religious associations of women with Eve, whose sin propelled man into his mortal, transitory, and subjected state” (23). The evil woman’s reputation is thus grounded in a stereotypical definition of woman as inherently sinful, and any woman who appears similar to Eve will suffer the same judgment Eve does. Eve’s sin is one against man and patriarchal power, and Aguiar explains, “the Bible perpetuates the notion that women, unless firmly kept under the patriarchal thumb, are to be approached with extreme

caution. Biblical representations of the bitch include many such infamous women, such as Eve, accused for generations as the ostensible cause of man's fall from grace" (35). Aguiar goes on later to state, "Eve, subservient to Adam and held responsible for the fall, is given little in the way of female dimensions" (134). Placing the blame for man's fall on Eve raises questions about any woman displaying behavior associated with Eve. Hence, a woman seeking knowledge, a woman expressing her sexuality, a woman with power, or a woman who desires escape from a one-dimensional portrait may find her motives challenged or even condemned. Failure to seek a more complex portrait of Eve reduces our ability to see her as a subject who may yearn for liberation from the subservient and "evil" role prescribed to her through patriarchal literature.

In spite of Eve's literary and cultural presence, her literary characterization was not itself responsible for the association of women with "evil." According to Alfar, linking all women with the sins of Eve was a project undertaken by early modern male authors of pamphlets, such as Juan Luis Vives and Joseph Swetnam, who "sought to contain the chaos of the female body as a guarantee of patrilineal structures of power" (47). Fearing a lack of control over progeny and a desire to locate power solely within the male realm, these authors evoked the character of Eve and tied women to "evil" through the female body to maintain the male subject position. Alfar writes,

Thus women become evil in the sense that I wish to pursue throughout this study. Rather than seeing it as originating in a Christian tradition, I am interested in female evil as culturally produced out of the patrilineal structure's anxieties about the female body's ability to threaten its investment in prestige and power. These

socioeconomic anxieties subsequently became moralized through Christian philosophies. (31-32)

Alfar clarifies that woman as “evil” was not born of a religious association with Eve; rather, the Eve connection upheld an idea that was based in socioeconomic concerns. Collapsing all women into a community with Eve created a framework for judging female behavior and controlling women through social regulations. By linking the female body to a chaotic state, men created a binary that yokes the female existence to the body while it joins the male existence with the mind. Yet, paradoxically, that proved threatening to males, for females then became a “potential danger to patrilineal systems of power” (30). Thus male authors struggled to construct notions of gender that would relocate the power of procreation in the male realm, and would castigate Eve-like behavior that desired knowledge or threatened to uproot existing male power.

The link between all women and Eve consequently served to establish gender norms and regulate behavior that are then reified through a literary example. Alfar writes, “Having introduced, first, all women’s sisterhood with Eve, [male authors] can argue for a multitude of sins that are familiar to their readers and resonate as long-established historical and religious truths” (40). Because contemporaneous readers are so familiar with, Eve became a symbol of a gender (and power) transgression that was interpreted as un-natural and sinful, and Eve’s relationship to Adam established a tradition of male dominance and female subservience. Therefore, women displaying Eve-like behaviors may be viewed as un-natural because they challenge the patriarchal social order; labeling them as “evil” works to subjugate them and police their behavior. Eve becomes an archetypal “evil woman” because she challenges male authority, uses her sexuality in her

relations with men, and occupies a position where “she is regarded as both giver of life and, paradoxically, taker of life” (Aguilar 27). Atwood does not reject the “evil woman” archetype characterized by Eve, nor does Atwood eliminate her characters’ correlation with Eve’s condemned behavior. Rather than shy away from the portrait of a powerful woman or capitulate to contemporaneous expectations of revising evil women, Atwood addresses the vital role of the evil woman in literature by writing a multifaceted characters who, through their challenge to gender norms, assume a crucial dimension in her protagonists’ character development. She refuses to either perpetuate a stereotype or submit to the elimination of the evil woman from her literature. In doing so, Atwood works to re-write an established trope that will place her evil women alongside such foremothers as Eve.

If Eve establishes an archetype of woman as “evil,” she also becomes a literary foremother for powerful women in other genres, such as traditional folk and fairy tales. Atwood often alludes to fairy tales in her fiction, where she re-imagines the archetypes of the “evil woman,” as well as other feminine stereotypes, through an intertextual conversation. In her study *Margaret Atwood’s Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*, Sharon Wilson details these intertextual relationships of Atwood’s characters to their fairy tale predecessors. Wilson writes,

Like Shakespeare, Margaret Atwood reuses the old, great stories, modifying and usually subverting them, hiding their traces in order to reveal contemporary landscapes, characters, and problems. On several occasions, Atwood has admitted that fairy tales, particularly those of the Grimm brothers and Hans Christian Andersen, have influenced her work. (xi)

Atwood's forthright admission of her desire to create intertextual relationships puts her work in conversation with specific fairy tales and the genre at large, but it also seeks to update the conventions of the genre by placing archetypal characters and situations within current contexts. For instance, many Atwood protagonists struggle with the fragmented existence of artist and woman, traditionally personified in the famous folk tale "The Red Shoes." There, a little girl must choose between dancing and being a "regular" girl; with Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle*, Atwood transfers the setting to contemporary Toronto, and re-imagines the tale as one woman's struggle to reconcile different aspects of herself, including being an author of Costume Gothic romances, an "authoress" of feminist poetry, and a wife of a Canadian political activist.

But Wilson points out that many critics have often overlooked or even misunderstood Atwood's use of fairy tale allusions. Atwood does not desire the eradication of evil women from her work; instead she objects to the cleaned-up and Disneyfied versions of fairy tales that shape their portrayals of women strictly within the binary of good girls and evil women. In fact, Atwood is concerned with this "sanitation" of fairy tale interpretations from the 1950s and 1960s that "not only further restrict female action but highlight female passivity" (8). Wilson underscores the importance of understanding Atwood's allusions to fairy tales, for Atwood calls for a return to the gruesomeness of the Grimm brothers' original tales.

One of the reasons Atwood is attracted to the Grimms may be that there are examples of strong and clever females within their tales, and that "The unexpurgated *Grimm's Fairy Tales* contain a number of fairy tales in which women are not only central characters but win by using their own intelligence" (qtd in Wilson 11). We cannot

relegate the women in Grimms solely to negativity and wickedness, therefore, but must acknowledge the complicated gender roles at play within this tradition. Still, according to Wilson “we continue to read fairy tales through a phallogocentric lens, blaming the apparently passive females for their passivity and seeing the wicked stepmothers or stepsisters as the incarnation of evil” (14). Rather than placing blame on either the protagonists or their evil women, Atwood seeks to portray all of these women as multidimensional, refusing to lock them into a stereotype that limits them because of traditions or cultural conditioning. This forces us to rethink the heroines of fairy tales and the economy of femininity that socially rewards “good girls” and punishes “evil women.”

Atwood’s metafiction addresses fairy tale plots as well as archetypal characters; she parodies romance traditions and subverts plots centered around the exchange of women through marriage. In her creation of the evil woman, Atwood transposes the fairy tale love story (active male rescues passive female) on to female friendships, creating a homosocial relationship (with sexual undertones) of dominance and submission between the protagonist and the protagonists’ evil woman. This spotlights the power struggle inherent in female friendships, suggesting there is no natural ideal of “sisterhood.” Furthermore, it blurs heteronormative ideals of sexuality and lays the foundation for Atwood’s evil women’s use of sexuality to entrance and control the protagonists. As Wilson thoroughly demonstrates, “In Atwood’s metanarratives, her self-conscious narrators ... tell the ‘other side’ of fairy-tale, mythic, biblical, literary, other popular culture, historical, and life stories. Usually, they and most of us knew only one version anyway” (30). Through creating well-drawn female characters, Atwood broadens our

conception of powerful women, opening up the possibility for re-interpretation of an archetype like the “evil woman.”

My work is informed by a number of scholars who address the trope of the “evil woman,” specifically Mary Dockray-Miller’s analysis of *Beowulf*, Sheila Cavanagh’s study of *The Fairie Queene*, and Alfar’s work with (primarily) Shakespeare’s tragedies. As these scholars demonstrate, much of the attention placed on the “evil woman” focuses on male-female power dynamics; these scholars seek redemption for evil females and their bids for power. The “evil woman,” they argue, is usually interpreted by men, delivered to the reader through the patriarchal viewpoint of male characters that requires the reader to trust the men’s judgment and abstain from questioning gender norms. Thus, Dockray-Miller, Cavanagh, and Alfar discuss the way the evil woman uses her power to usurp the power of men—but the scholars’ effort resides in recuperating characters like Goneril or Regan (from *King Lear*) and Duessa (from *The Fairie Queene*) from reputations of utter negativity. My project builds on the work of these scholars, examining how Atwood addresses archetypes and tropes of the “evil woman,” but I also explore the way Atwood shifts the focus from male-female relationships to female-female friendships. Atwood’s evil women are perceived as “evil” in the same generalized way that Lady Macbeth is—a woman seeking power is cast as evil. But with Atwood’s evil women, because they operate within a homosocial world of women, an analysis of their gender performances encourages rethinking the way characters repeat gendered behavior in a same-sex context in order to achieve agency.

The character Modthrydo in *Beowulf* is one early example of the evil woman, as Mary Dockray-Miller discusses in “The masculine queen of Beowulf.” Dockray-Miller

analyzes the trope of the evil woman in *Beowulf*, using Butlerian theory to challenge the traditionally masculinist readings of this so-called “evil queen” (3). Using Butler’s conceptualization of gender as a series of repeated performances that, in sum, constitute ideals of masculinity and femininity, Dockray-Miller shows the “disidentification, or slippage from those norms, [as] what reveals their very un-natural constructedness and provides ways to challenge those norms” (3). To that end, Dockray-Miller proceeds to look at the etymology of the words “mundgripe” and “handgewrithene” in order to show how the so-called evil queen is not evil, but rather in the process of trying to claim agency. Modthrydo disrupts gender norms by aligning herself with the masculine behavior of Beowulf, and the author exposes how the “ambiguity surrounding Modthrydo forces an examination of the construction of gender in the poem” (6). Dockray-Miller points to Butler’s notion of cultural intelligibility found in *Gender Trouble*, where Butler asserts “Intelligible genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire (23). With the concept of cultural intelligibility, Butler acknowledges the possibility of remaining understandable as male or female within one’s culture, even while one simultaneously may vary the repetition of gendered behavior in order to gain power.

In the scheme of *Beowulf*, Modthrydo may remain culturally intelligible as a woman and as a queen, even while she repeats the same masculine behavior as Beowulf in order to increase her power and claim agency. Dockray-Miller thus demystifies the idea of the queen’s “wickedness” (6), showing how Modthrydo adopts masculine behavior to gain power, while remaining culturally intelligible vis-à-vis Butler’s theorization of gender trouble. Applying Butlerian theories to *Beowulf*, Dockray-Miller

shows the patriarchal view of Modthrydo is a negative one, and, therefore, “it is usual to assume that Modthrydo is evil ... since she is acting against the usual assumption about females in Anglo-Saxon literature (and perhaps in late twentieth century Western culture as well)” (6). As Modthrydo creates a parallel between Beowulf and herself, she threatens the male-female binary that establishes power as residing in the male sphere. Modthrydo’s attempt to gain power thus places her in the category of un-natural and relegates her desires as evil. Yet the fact that she remains intelligible as a female, marrying as a “conventional woman” (9) would, confuses the binary of good/evil and creates the ambiguity Dockray-Miller describes, for in marriage she Modthrydo not un-natural or “evil.” But Modthrydo is not wholly positive in her feminine role, either, for she manages to find agency within the convention of marriage.

Modthrydo’s evil nature is centered in her ability to gain power over men, for “only men have the power of violence and the power of wealth in the social systems described in *Beowulf*” (6). A critical part of Modthrydo’s cultural intelligibility comes from her eventual marriage, yet paradoxically it is through her marriage that Modthrydo may successfully prioritize peace over violence and influence the power structure in her culture. Rather than interpret Modthrydo as a passive queen who succumbs to the patriarchal order of marriage, Dockray-Miller contends, “I prefer to interpret Modthrydo more specifically as an active subject who has constructed her own gender. ... Since Modthrydo performs within a masculine gender, we can now read the passage as a story of a queen who bound and decapitated with her own hands those men who offended her” (8). Thus we see Dockray-Miller re-inscribing the medieval trope of the evil woman, taking Modthrydo from a stereotype of negative female and re-casting her as a woman

engaged in the reconstruction of her gender role, using both masculine and feminine behavior to achieve her goals and maintain power.

While a prominent sexual element does not exist for Modthrydo in *Beowulf*, the threat of female sexuality plays a powerful role in Spenser's *The Fairie Queene*. According to Sheila Cavanagh, "'Female' powers of seduction and deception join forces ... in order to draw men into these vulnerable positions" (6). Just as Modthrydo's bids for power in *Beowulf* reside in the realm of male-female relationships, the evil women of *The Fairie Queene* fulfill stereotypes of sexual women that further establish a heterosexual tradition where women who threaten male power are perceived as "evil." Cavanagh describes how in the world of *The Fairie Queene*, the method through which "evil women" are controlled is because they only appear in the knights' dreams, writing that the "evil women" are "Shaped from the projections of male fears and fantasies, [and embody ...] the threats which seem most terrifying. (2) Locating the evil women (here witches, hags, and succubi) in the world of dreams forecloses a chance for women and men to interact in reality—the wicked, sexual females are forever imprisoned in a dream state that is simultaneously powerful and powerless. Yet this "distance[s] human women from the power and danger these demonic females represent" (3). It also forbids human women from claiming agency through varying the repetition of gender norms, and it robs them of sexuality, because in female sexuality lies the concept of "evil." Therefore another binary comes into play for the "evil woman" of *The Fairie Queene*—the "good girl" is not sexual and safe, the "evil woman" is sexual and threatening.

The evil women of *The Fairie Queene* invade the knights' psyches, asserting their presence and threatening the men's virtue. More importantly, the malevolent females

jeopardize the knights chances to produce an heir—an unforgiveable sin. Cavanagh illustrates her argument with her discussion of the character Duessa, “the villain with a thousand faces [who] magnifies the dangers often perceived as inherent within the female sex” (8). Duessa in all her multiplicity and sexuality embodies contemporaneous notions that support the idea that “women possess naturally hungry vital organs [... and] a malicious woman might literally engulf her partner’s manhood” (4). Fearing castration and/or emasculation by such wicked women, the knights interact with them only in their nightmares. Relegating women to a dream world does not seemingly diminish, their power, however, as Cavanagh continues to detail their threats to male sexuality and power simply through the hags, witches, and succubi’s presence in their dreams.

Duessa uses her sexuality to negatively influence knights, threatening both their morality and their virility. With her “thousand faces,” Duessa is a fluid performer who provides an precursor to Atwood’s evil women in her ability to assess her audience and tailor her performance to their desires. While Cavanagh does not focus on whether Duessa uses stereotypically masculine or feminine behavior in her performances, her ability to “fashion the images [the knights] most desire” (9) suggests that she chooses from a variety of performances—and, more importantly, it implies that she is attuned to each individual performance. As we shall see with Zenia in *The Robber Bride*, she follows in Duessa’s footsteps in her propensity to choose either masculine or feminine behavior in order to gain and then uphold her subject position and power.

Cavanagh’s final assessment of evil women in *The Fairie Queene* highlights the importance of them residing in the knights’ dreams. As Cavanagh comments, “This company of nightmares gives rein to the most terrifying and desirable male fantasies,

while keeping the female figures who fulfill them ultimately manageable” (11). None of the powerful, evil females are human, which allows women of the flesh to remain disempowered and locked in a patriarchal power structure. Thus the women in *The Fairie Queene*—including Duessa, because she lives in the world of nightmares—maintain a cultural intelligibility that endorses the gender norms and behavior, and they stay “manageable” in their dream-like existence. By contrast, we will see Atwood’s evil women straddle the world of the psyche and the world of reality, becoming unmanageable in their active desire and quest for power. While Duessa can never provide a living example to the virtuous women of *The Fairie Queene*, Zenia is an agent of change for the protagonists of *The Robber Bride*, providing a human example of a powerful woman who brings the evil woman from a subconscious nightmare realm to an empowering, conscious reality.

Also seeking to provide a more complex view of powerful women that liberates them from “evil,” Cristina León Alfar undertakes an examination of evil females in Shakespeare’s tragedies in *Fantasies of Female Evil*. Alfar focuses primarily on Goneril and Regan from *King Lear* and Lady Macbeth from *Macbeth*, again situating the perception of the evil woman within the heteronormative power struggles of male-female relationships. Alfar argues that critical reception of these Shakespearean women have relied unquestionably on the judgments of the male characters, who castigate powerful women as “unnatural women, manipulative deceivers, and, by association, ‘evil’” (16). But Alfar questions the traditional categorization of Shakespeare’s “troublesome female characters” (17) as “evil,” and it becomes clear that this type of taxonomy was an attempt by male characters to circumvent female power. That critics trusted the judgments made

by male characters reifies social codes and gender norms of power, as well as controlling and/or changing the character's impact on readers.

Because Goneril, Regan, and Lady Macbeth have not received the thorough analysis they deserve concerns Alfar, who writes, "The lack of any argument at all reveals just how entrenched our assumptions are in regard to female 'evil'" (18). Seeking to expand the discussion of these women, Alfar contextualizes critiques of Goneril and Regan that describe them as "evil" because they behave like men; Alfar also spotlights the general perception by critics (and readers) that Lady Macbeth is the "epitome ... of evil motherhood" (16). These women are perceived as evil because they transgress normative gender boundaries, laying the groundwork for female characters, like Atwood's, who will follow in their wake. The evil females in Alfar's study cause the kind of gender trouble Butler describes, for as Alfar comments, "They reject 'natural' forms of femininity, such as sympathy, nurturance, and obedience, for the masculine, and therefore 'unnatural,' performance of rationality, ruthlessness, and ambition. They are, as a result of their gender transgression, evil" (19). Noting the Butlerian use of gender "performance" in Alfar's work, we see that Shakespeare's evil females challenge gender norms the way Atwood's evil women do—through adopting masculine behavior in their refusal to have their subjectivity determined for them by someone else. As they play with both masculine and feminine behavior, Atwood's evil women will bring to mind Shakespeare's evil women who are not bound by strict gender roles, but Atwood's evil women also at times evoke stereotypes of "nurturance" that Shakespeare's evil females reject. This demonstrates the increased fluidity in gender performance, and the level at which Atwood's evil women operate in their quest for power.

Alfar seeks to destabilize traditional categorizations of Shakespeare's evil females, and she argues that "apprehensions about female evil in Shakespeare's tragedies owe less to the plays' dramatization of that evil than to attempts to purge the terms feminine and femininity of what we would like to believe are unfeminine tendencies: self-interest, violence, and the will to power" (22). The demystification of femininity as the site of passiveness and masculinity as the site of action is central to Alfar's work and my own. The recognition of the "evil woman" as a cultural construction leads us to more questions of gender construction—and Alfar points to the use of binaries to uphold male and female behavior within the gender matrix. Alfar relies on the binaries of male/female, mind/body, active/passive, and good/evil; my study also acknowledges the crucial role binaries play in our conceptualization of evil women. Through my analysis of the protagonists of *Lady Oracle*, *Cat's Eye*, and *The Robber Bride*, I demonstrate how in addition to the binaries of male/female and good/evil, Atwood's protagonists must work within the psychological binary of Self/Other in order to fully understand that the power of the evil woman can be redeployed for positive effects. Still, a primary goal of my study is to foster an admiration for Atwood's evil women, and to create a broader understanding of how and why they use their power (a critical step for all three protagonists, as well).

Like the evil women in *Beowulf*, *The Fairie Queene*, Shakespeare's tragedies, and Grimms' fairy tales, Atwood's evil woman in *Lady Oracle*, *Cat's Eye*, and *The Robber Bride* perform actions that are easily understood by the protagonists of the novels. And they bear many similarities to their literary foremothers. Like Modthrydo, Atwood's evil women repeat traditionally masculine behavior in order to maintain their powerful

subject position. Similarly, Atwood's evil women assert their presence in the protagonists' psyches just as the nightmare-dwelling women of *The Fairie Queene* do, but Atwood's evil women also claim a strong presence through their interactions with the protagonists in their everyday lives. And as with the so-called wicked women in Shakespeare's tragedies, there exists a desire to categorize powerful women as evil in an effort to regulate behavior and limit authority. However, Modthrydo, Duessa, Regan, Goneril and Lady Macbeth, are perceived as evil because they use their power against men. Atwood shifts this power dynamic to a female-female power relationship in her exploration of the evil woman, and my study aims to examine how Atwood works within the framework of this literary trope and then transcends it with her portrayals of evil women.

Thus Atwood's evil women build on a literary tradition that stretches back centuries, from *The Bible's* depiction of Eve, to traditional folk- and fairy-tale representations, to medieval and Renaissance versions of the "evil woman" that Shelia Cavanagh categorizes as "what modern parlance might term 'ball-busting, castrating bitches'" (11). Through conjuring up the trope of the "evil woman" so familiar in medieval and Renaissance literature, Atwood places her evil women alongside these illustrious women, but she shifts the power struggle to the world of female power politics. This forces the questions of gender conditioning and norms to the forefront and transposes questions of subjectivity and identity into a new framework, from the world of heteronormative relations to that of homosocial bonding and power. Thus, Atwood's evil women—Elizabeth and Felicia in *Lady Oracle*, Cordelia in *Cat's Eye*, and Zenia in *The Robber Bride*—work within long-established archetypes of "evil" females, but they

reverse the trope of evil onto female friendships. For the purposes of this study, the concept of evil focuses more on the homosocial world of female friendship than on the male/female binary power struggle. My definition of “evil woman” builds on fairy-tale, Renaissance, and Medieval tropes of evil women, where powerful females borrow masculine behavior to gain power, vary their gendered behavior, possess an awareness of their audience, and challenge social codes that foreclose their power. With Atwood’s evil women, we will see them display overt sexuality with female friends, deploy both masculine and feminine behavior to achieve power within female friendships, utilize a keen understanding of audience desires, defy social codes that limit their power. In addition, we will observe Atwood’s evil women boldly combine all of these methods in their quest for power. As I will detail in the following chapters, Atwood’s evil women work within this world of female-female relationships rather than male-female relationships, choosing from an arsenal of gendered behaviors, and they repeat their selected behavior to gain (or maintain) power in a given situation. As Wilson indicates, “Atwood’s texts mean more to us than we may be able to explain because they tell the untold and muted female subtexts of the old, great stories, now our stories” (22-23). Working against—and within—the archetype of “evil” females, we observe how Atwood’s evil woman begins to represent more than the power she uses for herself and the goals she seeks to accomplish. The evil woman symbolizes a latent power source within Atwood’s protagonists that they must recover in order to claim agency. Atwood’s well-drawn, three-dimensional evil women highlight the constructed nature of the “evil” female archetype; through their clever repetition of gendered behavior, the evil women and their “evil” characteristics become a *positive* source of power for the protagonists

when they accept the evil woman and her power. Elizabeth, Felicia, Cordelia, and Zenia transcend reductive stereotypes of female wickedness, joining the community of foremothers to be viewed as multi-dimensional women who struggle within the confines of gender construction. Not only does Atwood liberate her evil woman from an archetype of utter negativity, in a sense she endows the evil woman with life-giving and life-affirming qualities that resurrect parts of her protagonists. Through close examination of the “evil woman” in Atwood’s *Lady Oracle*, *Cat’s Eye*, and *The Robber Bride*, this project investigates the role of evil woman and explores how the evil woman is crucial to the character development of Joan Foster, Elaine Risley, and Tony Fremont.

At a 1995 Toronto Council of Teachers of English luncheon, Atwood answered the question, “To what extent are *Cat’s Eye* and *The Robber Bride* based on actual acquaintances and experiences?” (www.owtoad.com). She explained to the audience that, of course, her characters are inventions, but inventions based on real-life people. She says, “Let us say that fiction uses a certain amount of character conventions, and so does real life” (www.owtoad.com). Drawing from “real life” experiences and people allows Atwood to challenge expectations of gendered behavior through her astute observations and bitingly clever wit. According to Linda Hutcheon, Atwood considers the novel “a social vehicle which posits common ideological assumptions between reader and writer” (13). Thus, Atwood uses her novels to challenge gender norms and power structures, as well as the “character conventions” of masculinity and femininity that seek to control women and men to regulate behavior. As Danita Dodson puts it, “What Atwood wants to do, above all things, is to give people ideas, for she feels literature is attached to politics”

(1). Moreover, Atwood creates characters that force readers to examine their preconceived notions of masculinity and femininity. Through her obsession with transformation—a variation of which appears in every novel—Atwood suggests that we all have the power to transcend gender roles and transform ourselves.

Operating within a cultural ideology and lexicon where we accept gender as constructed, Atwood highlights and mocks the gender constructions that underscore everyday behavior. If North American society attempts to dictate that men and women fulfill certain “masculine” and “feminine” roles and behaviors to support a capitalist economy and patriarchal societal order, then Atwood illustrates how this gender matrix seeks to control subjectivity, especially that of women. Critic Reingard M. Nischik comments that Atwood’s writing encompasses, “the self-consciously postmodern aesthetic inherent in her duplicitous narrators and narrative constructions, and her challenging engagement with questions of femininity, identity, and gender” (6). In addition, Atwood highlights the necessary acknowledgement of gender constructions that include norms of dress; expectations for life, particularly career, parenting, and sexuality; modes of material and physical consumption; and the influence of a popular culture that directs gender to further society’s dominant ideology. Atwood describes our world with a cynical, sarcastic, and very humorous eye, demonstrating how ridiculous these gendered constructions can be. Additionally, she suggests we do not have to accept the roles furnished to us: once we understand the gender norms and the archetypes that accompany masculinity and femininity, we may choose to either accept or reject societal roles. Or, we can accept certain aspects and reject others, thus *recreating* (and transforming)

masculinity and femininity and rewriting gender roles—something Atwood does herself in her retelling of traditional fairy and folk tales.

Through a close reading of *Lady Oracle*, *Cat's Eye*, and *The Robber Bride*, we begin to recognize that for Atwood's protagonists, rejecting gender stereotypes that relegate the evil woman to negativity is crucial to their development as subjects. No matter how hard these women struggle to survive, they will remain locked within the gendered power structure that forecloses their growth unless they begin to embrace the evil woman. Understanding this gendered power play is critical for both Atwood's protagonists and Atwood's readers, for the author seeks to demystify the archetype of "evil woman"—a term that must always be considered in quotations here to signify the societal associations of powerful women as evil women. Understanding the power struggles between women in their quest to claim agency over their identities means that we can remove the quotations around "evil woman" and view her as a power source rather than a threat. Through an investigation of Atwood's evil women, we learn how embracing the evil woman emancipates her from her negative archetype and creates the possibility of channeling her power that ultimately sets the protagonists free from a gender matrix that fears a powerful woman. Aguiar's work in *The Bitch is Back* provides a helpful and thorough overview of the bitch character in literature, and grounds Atwood within the context of other authors who have portrayed powerful and "wicked" women. In her study, Aguiar discusses many different authors—both male and female—and explains that there is a key difference between male-authored and female-authored evil women. She writes, "The bitch, in all of her formulaic glory, maintains little gender bias in terms of her creation", and Aguiar continues to explain that the crucial distinction in

female-authored depictions is “the inscription of motivations for the behavior of the bitch character” (57). Atwood rewrites the traditional ideologies of evil women that we learn in childhood through fairy tales and myths, often creating an intertextual dialogue with popular culture romance novels or traditional folk tales like the Grimms’ “The Robber Bridegroom.” With Atwood’s evil women, their responses and actions are not solely determined as *reactions* to male (and/or female) actions. Furthermore, the binary established by the evil woman (Self to the protagonist’s Other) is reassigned through the protagonists’ reclamation of the evil woman within them—and the protagonists subsequently become active agents, as well.

Throughout *Lady Oracle*, *Cat’s Eye*, and *The Robber Bride*, we observe how the evil woman assesses her audience and caters her performance—often redeploying gender stereotypes to attain her goal. As Karen Stein writes about *The Robber Bride*, “[Zenja] is uncannily aware of the other characters’ secret dreams and aspirations. In turn, in their mixture of fear and admiration for Zenja, they grow to understand that she represents unacknowledged parts of themselves, their desires for power, their secret wishes for revenge” (164). The evil woman’s agenda maintains a power structure preserving her privileged position as Self to the protagonists’ subordinate position as Other. Atwood demonstrates how the evil woman represents the power potential within the protagonists, and how the evil woman is crucial to the protagonists’ development and integral to their journey to subjectivity.

For Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle*, Elaine Risley in *Cat’s Eye*, and Tony Fremont in *The Robber Bride*, there is a fear of these dormant characteristics, qualities they have internalized through their interactions with their respective evil women, but consequently

repressed because of conditioning that signifies these stereotypical characteristics as “evil.” In order to subvert this archetype, Atwood does not eliminate the evil woman, but rather welcomes her into the conversation about power female relations. (She would have been there anyway, even if subconsciously in the psyche.) But by forcing Joan, Elaine, and Tony as adults to interrogate the evil woman they’ve incorporated into their individual psyches, Atwood asks about the right to power of the evil woman, and consequently of all women. She crucially questions whether women are not entitled to the same power as men, and whether women are not interested in the same kind of control over their own lives.

Hence in *Lady Oracle*, *Cat’s Eye*, and *The Robber Bride*, the evil woman represents much more than the power she exercises. Atwood’s evil woman becomes an opportunity through which the author challenges essentialist notions of gender and female friendship that proliferate in North American culture. When freed from the bounds a patriarchally endorsed, gendered construction of “evil woman,” Atwood shows that not all women are nurturers who inherently form supportive female communities. We see in these three novels that there is no guarantee of “sisterly” goodwill that is free from power relations. In fact, because women operate within a patriarchal framework and are conditioned differently than men, that conditioning affects the power play between women and becomes infused its gendered ideology. Breaking down female stereotypes of women as more emotional and as “nurturers” who are safe, Atwood counters those assumptions with portrayals of women who are also shrewd and power hungry. We see women who understand how to subvert gender expectations and discern when to employ “male” or “female” characteristics to achieve power. Thus, instead of adopting a facile

view of these characters as “evil,” we must transcend the impulse to categorize Atwood’s evil women as wholly negative, and identify the potentially positive power they represent. As Atwood herself wrote in *The New York Times Book Review*, “Despite their late blooming, women’s friendships are now firmly on the literary map as valid and multidimensional novelistic material” (39). In exploring their multiplicity and fluidity, we discover why the evil women are so critical to Atwood’s protagonists, and explore how the protagonists eventually claim agency by embracing and utilizing the power of the evil woman.

My theoretical framework hinges on Judith Butler’s notions of gender construction and gender performativity, and her integration of psychological dynamics with power structures. Butler’s interrogations of how Freudian methods of internalization blend with Foucauldian notions of power work well with Atwood because the protagonists of *Lady Oracle*, *Cat’s Eye*, and *The Robber Bride* internalize the power structure the evil woman creates, and then become involved in the hegemonic maintenance of their subordinate subject position to which they become attached before they discover they must embrace the evil woman to claim agency.

Butler’s early work in *Gender Trouble* introduces her key concept of gender performativity and its role in subject development. This assumption that gender is “performative” means it is not determined through a prediscursive, “natural” state that exists outside or before language, but rather through a repetition of everyday acts that constitute and construct gender as “natural” and prediscursive. In other words, when we see certain behaviors repeatedly associated with the concepts of masculinity or

femininity, then we begin to believe that the behaviors are inextricably linked to the respective gender. Thus, when we view power in a woman and hear it named “evil,” we eventually accept as truth that a powerful woman is an evil woman. Butler goes on to argue in her more recent work *The Psychic Life of Power* that if there is no “inner gender core” (144), then there is no credence to the belief that men and women should act in certain ways because those behaviors are “natural.” When we consider Atwood’s evil women negative, we must recognize this is because we have been conditioned to restrict women’s aggressive and/or sexual behavior—or desire for power—and taught to *perceive* that behavior in women as evil or unnatural. The more we acknowledge the gender ideals that form the power matrix that constantly surrounds us, the better equipped we are to interpret the cultural messages that encourage conformity to existing models of masculinity and femininity. Acknowledging the construction of powerful woman as evil woman assists us as we analyze the actions of Atwood’s evil women and discover the ways we have been conditioned to conceptualize that powerful women equal malevolent creatures.

Butler’s theory of performativity empowers us to dismantle repetitive gender acts in order to understand the gendered power matrix within which we operate. It is the sum of our actions that accounts for gender—we don’t act in specific ways because gender compels us to do so; rather, performing certain actions over and over *results* in the creation of a norm labeled masculinity or femininity. Butler encourages us to see the “illusion ... [of] an inner gender core,” and writes “‘agency,’ then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition” (*Gender Trouble* 185). The key to the power of performativity arrives through varying the repetition of gendered norms in order

to subvert gendered constructions that limit behavior. Butler continues, “If the rules of governing signification not only restrict, but enable the assertion of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility, i.e., new possibilities for gender that contest the rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms, then it is only *within* the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible” (185). We must operate “within the practices of repetitive signifying” to subvert the dominant ideology that governs gender roles. Because we are products of the gendered power structure, we must work within it to redeploy actions that traditionally subordinate certain behaviors (that challenge gender norms) as abject and meanwhile reify other behaviors (that uphold gender norms) as privileged. Atwood’s evil women have the ability to help us discover that the desire for power allows for a fluidity to work *within* the practices of gender, using masculinity and femininity to channel the power within us that we use to claim agency.

What I hope to show is through an understanding of the matrix of gender norms, the evil woman subverts these norms in order to attain power. She may evoke the sweet bonds of sisterhood or play the role of victim in order to bestow a false sense of subjectivity upon her victim (the protagonist). And she may be grappling with gendered behavior expectations along with the protagonist—even if the manifestation of that struggle assumes a very different form. More than anything, the evil woman should not be either pitied or hated. As we shall see, the protagonists gain nothing by wholly rejecting the evil woman, and begin to gain power and self-assurance only when they reassess the evil woman as a source of empowerment and agency.

In addition, Butler’s integration of the interface between the gendered power matrix with the subject’s potential desire to be subjected—to form a “passionate

attachment” to subordinate subject position—informs all three protagonists examined in this study. Joan, Elaine, and Tony all incorporate the power structure the evil woman establishes and internalize their abject subject position, initially repressing the evil woman out of fear of becoming “evil.” They become locked into a dialectic of Self and Other where their evil woman assumes the Self position and the protagonist capitulates to the Other. Butler discusses this desire to be subjected in *The Psychic Life of Power*, stating, “power imposes itself on us, and, weakened by its force, we come to internalize or accept its terms. ... Subjection consists precisely in this fundamental dependency on a discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains or agency” (2). As we will see, Joan, Elaine, and Tony all internalize the power structure imposed on them by the evil woman—one that relies heavily on gender norms that govern behavior. In addition, the concept of their subjectivity evolves to a dependence on an abject subject position, and, for a while, they find comfort in the familiarity of their subordination. They thus become “passionately attached to [their] own subordination” (6), and a critical part of their character development is admitting that they have formed this kind of attachment to the evil woman.

Furthermore, even after the protagonists initially break away from the evil woman (which they all do), they cannot progress in their character development until they acknowledge their incorporation of the Self-Other binary the evil woman establishes. In their internalization process, they paradoxically cling to this dialectic that upholds the power structure the evil woman erects. Butler writes, “the formative and fabricating dimension of psychic life, which travels under the name of the ‘will,’ and which is usually associated with a restrictively aesthetic domain, proves central to refashioning the

normative shackles that no subject can do without, but which no subject is condemned to repeat in exactly the same way” (*PLP* 64-65). Because they have repressed the Self-Other binary they have internalized, the protagonists feel a sense of “will,” as if they are the full agents of their subjectivity. But they remain “passionately attached” to their subjectivity until they face the evil woman as adults, with their arsenal of experiences and growing self-awareness. The action of the evil woman, then “proves central to refashioning” the protagonists’ subjectivity. As Joan, Elaine, and Tony admit their subordinate Other status, they realize that they cannot “do without” the evil woman that they have incorporated, but they must assume control over the power she represents within them. Perhaps Atwood’s evil women do have goodness in them after all—even if that goodness is the power potential lying undeveloped in the protagonists that, once reclaimed, leads to their self-empowerment.

Examining the progression of the evil woman from *Lady Oracle* through *Cat’s Eye* and on to *The Robber Bride* reveals the influence this powerful, vital woman has on the protagonists. In *Lady Oracle*, Atwood introduces her examination of the evil woman but offsets her threat with the myth of the scary man prowling the urban wilderness—a threat that detracts protagonist Joan Foster’s attention from the very real challenge of the evil woman embodied in childhood acquaintance Elizabeth. When men do appear in this urban wilderness, they are benevolent, which questions the ideologies of gender that inform our behavior. With *Cat’s Eye*, this mythical threat of the lurking man still exists, but no “bad man” ever appears, which illuminates the point that this is simply an aspect of gender conditioning that strips power from women accept the gendered ideology.

Protagonist Elaine Risley must realize that her evil woman, Cordelia, presents a much larger test to her subjectivity than a gendered myth does. That Cordelia persists as a friend through Elaine's teen and young adult years indicates Atwood's more thorough investigation of the potential power the evil woman represents. Finally in *The Robber Bride*, Atwood dispenses with the need for a perceived male threat, moving directly to her inquiry of female power politics with evil woman Zenia. By having Zenia interact with three protagonists, Atwood urges an even more meticulous assessment of the evil woman that accounts for multiple, shifting perspectives and demonstrates the multiplicity inherent in the evil woman.

Through her portrayals of the evil woman, Atwood also challenges essentialist notions of female friendships that regulate behavior through gender norms. Joan Foster and Elaine Risley both initially meet their evil woman in childhood, and they subsequently accept their abject role within a community of three young girls, led by their respective evil women. As critic Patricia Goldblatt points out, Joan and Elaine have not yet discovered "the power of betrayal by members of [their] own sex" (5). In fact, in their search for the "warming society of girls" (5), Joan and Elaine are blinded by the perceived safety of gender, and Atwood shows how gender stereotypes serve as a powerful method of control and manipulation. Here, the *idea* of male power usurps the reality of female power, for it not only limits Joan's and Elaine's freedom by using fear as a method of control, it also dulls their sense of self-protection when they are supposedly in the safety of girls. Emotionally and physically, the girls pose a much more dangerous threat to Joan and Elaine.

As we shall see, the betrayal of female friendship takes a similar form in *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye*, where a community of women stands apart from the protagonist, dangling the prospect of acceptance in front of her. By contrast, in *The Robber Bride* a community of women forms *because* of three friends' mutual distrust of the evil woman. Again questioning and countering the essentialist notions of female community, Atwood asks readers to examine the role that gender expectations plays in our collective knowledge and awareness of interpersonal relationships. Particularly in reference to power politics between women, Atwood infers that it might just be more dangerous to enter the "safety" of groups of women than it is to confront the gendered myths and realities of male/female power politics. A sense of apprehension and doubt persist in all the protagonists throughout their adult lives—an apprehension about whether or not essential "sisterhood" exists among women, and about whether or not the ideal of "natural" female friendship is itself a gendered construction.

Atwood's fascination with the pervasiveness of gender conditioning and the indoctrination of gendered power politics at a young age comes from her own experience growing up. She comments,

When I was eight we moved again, to another postwar bungalow, this time nearer the center of Toronto ... I was now faced with real life, in the form of other little girls—their prudery and snobbery, their Byzantine social life based on whispering and vicious gossip, and an inability to pick up earthworms without wriggling all over and making mewing noises like a kitten. I was more familiar with the forthright mindset of boys: the rope burn on the wrist and the dead-finger trick

were familiar to me—but little girls were almost an alien species. I was very curious about them, and remain so. (*Negotiating With the Dead* 10)

The protagonists in *Lady Oracle*, *Cat's Eye*, and *The Robber Bride* must confront this world of female power, the “real life” of “prudery and snobbery ... whispering and vicious gossip.” Building on her examination of girls’ early dalliances with power relations, Atwood examines the protagonists’ adult reflections about their childhoods, and addresses how that foregrounds their capitulation to the evil woman. The protagonists learn about gender norms from social interactions in their teens, but it is not until they are adults that they truly have the chance to reflect on their experiences. By that time they have surrendered to the Other position and formed a “passionate attachment” to their subjectivity, rendering the evil woman more powerful until they recognize how they have allowed their power to slip away. They also have their critical interaction with the evil woman in adulthood, where they finally understand how they have internalized the evil woman and may tap her power potential in order to claim agency.

Protagonists like Joan in *Lady Oracle*, Elaine in *Cat's Eye*, and Tony in *The Robber Bride* are not so different from ourselves, and that seems to be the point: gendered power structures and gendered power politics exist in our lives every day, just as they do in the everyday lives of Atwood’s characters. Yet in spite of acknowledging the significance the evil woman plays in the protagonists’ lives, we may still ultimately grapple with whether we like or dislike these evil women. For instance, are we supposed to hate shape-shifting evil woman Zenia from *The Robber Bride*, who simultaneously wreaks havoc on Tony’s, Charis’s, and Roz’s lives, or are we supposed to admire her?

Atwood answers the question herself in her 1995 Toronto Council of Teachers of English luncheon:

It's the business of the fiction writer to be plausible. That's another way of saying it's the business of the fiction writer to tell you lies you will believe! That's why, when people say to me, "Which of the characters in *The Robber Bride* do you identify with most closely?" I say, "I identify with Zenia. She is the professional liar, and what else to fiction writers do but create lies that other people will believe?" That takes them aback somewhat; they thought I would say Tony; but no, it is Zenia. She's the liar. (www.owtoad.com)

Here, we see Atwood's compassion for Zenia, and an admiration for Zenia's lying and a respect for Zenia's ability to transform herself. Atwood's aim with her evil women seems to be to transcend reductive stereotypes of "the evil woman," and to show her evil women as multi-dimensional individuals, however fragmented, who struggle within the confines of gender construction the same way that her protagonists do.

In *Lady Oracle*, *Cat's Eye*, and *The Robber Bride*, I examine the progression of the evil woman that reflects Atwood's desire to humanistically characterize an archetyp, a pinnacle which she reaches with Zenia in *The Robber Bride*. Recognizing the essential qualities and power that the evil woman possesses, Aguiar comments,

The bitch is found to have *vital existence*. No apologies, no excuses. Each woman comes to the realization that she has been seriously hampered by her rejection of the bitch. These characters engage in processes of individuation, successfully connecting their outer selves to their inner psyches without rejecting their negative projections. In fact, their socially branded 'evil' selves are as necessary

to their individuation as are their traditionally labeled 'positive' qualities. (115-116, my italics)

As I will show, through the progression of these three novels, Atwood builds, refines, and then redefines this theme of female empowerment through the evil woman, which creates redemption for the archetype of the evil woman. Atwood does not aim to draw a evil woman that readers will hate or set themselves against in opposition. Instead, she creates a complex portrayal of women who use power in a different way from the protagonists, and yet who should not be wholly condemned for it. In fact, Atwood suggests that we all have much to learn from the evil woman. Because of the power that the evil woman helps the protagonists discover within themselves, they reject their abject subjectivities and assert the position of Self in their journey of character development.

Sympathy for Felicia: Accepting the Evil Woman in *Lady Oracle*

In the introduction, we learn about the “evil woman,” an archetype whose composite of negative characteristics serves to discourage other female characters from recognizing the power the evil woman represents for them. When attributed to a woman, characteristics such as shrewdness and aggression often gain the monikers of “evil woman” or “bitch.” And, as Aguiar details, feminist writers of the 1970s made a concerted effort to eliminate stereotypical and narrowly-defined characterizations of powerful women as man-eaters or utter bitches, instead focusing on positive portrayals of women that, admittedly, foreclosed the presence of an “evil woman” who might destabilize the distinctions between “good” and “evil” women. However, in Atwood novels, there *is* an evil woman, and the evil woman is complex in many ways—she could be bad, but she also could be good—which destabilizes the binary of good/evil and redeploys the role of archetypal evil woman from the realm of well-defined gender norms to the realm where she works within the gendered matrix but borrows from either male or female (as she sees fit) and disrupts gender norms. As we will see in this chapter (and the two following chapters as well), Atwood’s evil woman is not just an antidote to ‘70s feminist characterizations or archetypal characterizations. Instead, Atwood’s characterizations re-signify the evil woman as a character who empowers protagonists to recognize and claim the power that may have stereotypically been cast as male. In these novels, we see that the protagonists have internalized Self-Other binary the evil woman establishes, and their acceptance of their subject position allows the evil woman to maintain the privileged Self position. The protagonists’ character development relies on embracing the internalized evil woman so

they can finally recognize how they already possesses some of these potent characteristics. Then, through accepting them she will achieve agency and subjectivity.

Published in the midst of the second-wave feminist movement of the 1970s, Atwood's third novel *Lady Oracle* (1976) is her first foray into the realm of the evil woman. Her two earlier novels address power politics between men and women: *The Edible Woman* (1969) tackles the physical manifestation of patriarchal ideology and the female search for self, and *Surfacing* (1973) addresses one woman's struggle to reconcile an abortion in her past while simultaneously fighting to establish her own identity amid a patriarchal social order. Atwood also concentrates on male-female power dynamics in *Lady Oracle*; however, here she begins to construct the theme she will further illuminate in *Cat's Eye* and *The Robber Bride*, that of power relationships between women. Critics have focused on many different aspects of *Lady Oracle*, ranging from Bok's comparison of Joan's "automatic writing" to *écriture féminine* pioneered by Irigaray and Cixous, to Bouson's focus on "the high comedy ... of the romance plot" (63), to Parsons's analysis of Joan's lying and storytelling as a process of transformation. Others have focused on the "intertexts"—Atwood's re-imagining of traditional myths and folk tales, while more recent voices, such as Kirtz, emphasize the post-colonial aspects of Atwood's Canadian nationalism in the novel, as well as her concern for "Anglophone Canadians' inability to distinguish themselves from Americans" (58). The purpose of this study is to add another perspective to the existing analysis by integrating the important role of the evil women in Joan's character development.

Specifically, Atwood examines the role a powerful woman—the evil woman—plays in the development of protagonist Joan Foster, interrogating how Joan must learn to

accept the evil woman's power in order to begin her subject development. As we will see, Joan lacks agency because she is "lonely" and doesn't "have anyone to play with" (*LO* 75) as a young girl, so she turns to popular culture, consuming its gender myths and remaining socially paralyzed in her social life through most of her teen years. She falls prey to the evil woman because she longs for acceptance into a girl group. When Joan understands the evil woman, she understands that she may be a much more powerful person than she had previously perceived. *Lady Oracle* traces the influences that inform power dynamics between women in a gendered society, investigating the female-female power relationships that govern—and are governed by—norms of gender ideals.

Through Joan's first-person narrative, Atwood shows that power dynamics start at a young age. Whereas young boys tussle on the playground, throw a punch, or succumb to conditioning that admonishes crying because it is not behavior appropriate to "being a man," for young girls the dynamics are born from what Atwood deems girls' "prudery and snobbery, their Byzantine social life based on whispering and vicious gossip" (*ND* 10). Atwood begins her exploration of female power dynamics when Joan, as a child, encounters the evil woman. Joan is ill-equipped to negotiate the power dynamics between girls because she grows up overweight and socially isolated, and she has no close friendships. For example, Elizabeth, Joan's acquaintance from Brownies, initially appears benign to Joan, and Joan admires Elizabeth's Brownie uniform, "plastered with badges like a diplomat's suitcase" (*LO* 52). In spite of the initial impression of Elizabeth as diplomatic and, hopefully, sensitive, Joan eventually grasps that Elizabeth is an evil woman. When Elizabeth uses gendered behavior to achieve her goals and maintain her

subject position, it highlights how gender construction informs power relations even at an early age.

While some of Joan's lessons about gendered behavior and power come through her Brownie acquaintances and her high school friendships, Atwood also demonstrates how a variety of discursive formations influence Joan to embrace societal ideals of masculine and feminine behavior. From the text on English Tea biscuits boxes, which Joan finds "morale-building" (9) to Fellini and Walt Disney movies, popular cultural influences assume an authoring in Joan's gender conditioning that prepares (or fails to prepare) her to interact with other girls and, as an adult, with other women. This cultural conditioning profoundly affects Joan's childhood and adult life, as she cannot free herself from her feelings of inadequacy and desire for societal approval within a gendered matrix. Reflecting on how she expresses heartache, Joan comments, "I never learned to cry with style, silently ... as on the covers of *True Love* comics ... it came out as a burlesque of grief, an overblown imitation like the neon rose on White Rose Gasoline stations" (6). Joan absorbs cultural influences without analyzing about their implicit ideologies, instead re-imagining pop culture logos as symbols of romance, or emblems of escape from her mundane Toronto adolescence. Whether pulp romances or "serious" poetry, newspapers or magazines, advertisements or political pamphlets, Joan continues to incorporate the gendered messages from society into her own point of view, believing in the promise of potential transformation these products intimate, a transformation from fat "outsider" to thin "insider" which she has longed for since childhood.

With the majority of Joan's gender lessons filtering through popular culture, she undergoes a process of internalization that Butler describes in *The Psychic Life of Power*:

“Power that at first appears as external, pressed upon the subject, pressing the subject into subordination, assumes a psychic form that constitutes the subject’s self-identity” (3). Drawing on obvious popular culture examples such as pulp romances, as well as more subtly entrenched ones such as the advertising on hair care packages, Atwood shows how the power that initiates as “external” via consumer messages and romance plots “presses” Joan into “subordination.” For example, when Joan decides to color her hair in Italy (where she escapes after faking her death), she displays her penchant for romanticizing the mundane:

I finally settled for Lady Janine’s “Carissima,” a soft, glowing chestnut, autumn-kissed, laced with sunlight and sprinkled with sparkling highlights. I liked a lot of adjectives on my cosmetic boxes; I felt cheated if there were only a few.

To celebrate the birth of my new personality (a sensible girl, discreet, warm, honest and confident, with soft green eyes, regular habits and glowing chestnut hair), I bought myself a *fotoromanzo* and sat down at an outdoor café to read it and eat a *gelato*. (LO 183)

As if writing the advertising copy for her new identity, Joan uses the marketing language of the hair dye package to describe the instant transformation that she hopes awaits her. Piling up adjectives that might used to qualify a popular high school cheerleader—“discreet, warm, honest, confident, regular, glowing”—Joan displays the flair for description she brings to her own Costume Gothics. The attributes also indicate the subjectivity she desires, one of confidence, sensibility, and normality. For a girl who always stood out because of her weight and social awkwardness, what Joan wants more than anything else is to be “regular.” Joan summarizes her desires earlier in the novel,

commenting, “I was a sucker for ads, especially those that promised happiness” (27). Through employing the ad-speak of popular culture, Joan hopes to constitute a “normal” self-identity; through purchasing a superficial “transformation,” Joan desires a new psychic form where she will find “happiness” as a brunette coasting through the gendered power matrix.

In place of genuine female confidantes (such as a compassionate mother, a sister, or a good friend) with whom she can demystify cultural myths, Joan invests emotionally in the impersonal popular culture influences, intoxicated by the promise of transformation. Her lack of critical thinking skills to deconstruct advertising spin and cultural messages also prevents her from deconstructing a culture which practices a taxonomy of women that strives to clearly separate the good girls from the evil women. Gendered ideals cast the evil woman as undesirable and deter Joan from exploring the power the evil woman represents. Crucially, a large part of Joan’s struggle to accept the evil woman involves embracing the *fictional* evil women she creates in the Costume Gothic romances she writes for a living. We observe Joan work through her struggle via the character Felicia in *Stalked by Love*, the current romance within a novel that Joan attempts to complete throughout the narrative of *Lady Oracle*.

Building on her interactions with popular culture, Joan pieces together an idea of female-female relationships that does not account for the evil woman. As we will see in more detail in *Cat’s Eye*, in *Lady Oracle* Joan feels like a misfit in female communities, mostly due to the trio of girls from her Brownie troop—Elizabeth, Marlene, and Lynne—led by Elizabeth, Joan’s first evil woman. We will also learn that as an adult Joan mistrusts female friendships, preferring to remain in the fantasy world she orchestrates in

her head, furnishing roles for herself that allow her to remain emotionally distant from daily interactions with other women. This protects her from the evil woman on a conscious level, but Joan grapples with the internalized evil woman who appears in each of her Costume Gothic romances. Until she embarks on an understanding of the evil woman—specifically through her own writing—Joan will not be able to claim agency and find a subject position independent from cultural influences that mandate negative connotations of the evil woman. This is Joan’s critical journey that we observe through the novel.

The Evil Woman in *Lady Oracle*

Joan Foster grows up in Toronto, the only child of an unhappy mother and largely absent father. Although she is “merely plump” (39) as a child, her weight escalates throughout childhood until she is an obese adolescent suffering under her mother’s judging gaze. When Joan joins a local Brownie troop, she discovers the evil woman and girl power politics instead of a benevolent community of acceptance. As a teenager, Joan struggles to conform to gendered social structures, and she waddles through high school on “warmth and supportiveness,” playing the “great pal” (89) to girlfriends—a nonthreatening, nonsexual confidante privy to their confessions about boys and relationships. However, in the privacy of her home, Joan is “sullen or comatose” (89). When Joan’s Aunt Lou dies, the will specifies Joan can claim an inheritance only if she loses one hundred pounds.

Joan successfully “reduces” and escapes from Toronto for a new life in England, where she commences a love affair with a Polish Count and embarks on a career writing

Costume Gothics under the pen name Louisa K. Delacourt (in honor of Aunt Lou). She returns to Canada after her mother's death, and unceremoniously commences married life with political activist Arthur. Joan secretly continues her Costume Gothic career, eventually writing and publishing a collection of poems in spite of herself. As "Lady Oracle" garners accolades and media attention, Joan becomes increasingly uncomfortable with her public persona. When an unknown person starts harassing her, she fakes her own death, fleeing to Terremoto, Italy, where she attempts a more "real" (320) interrogation of her life and the influences—including her own Costume Gothics—that inform her subject position. The final section of *Lady Oracle* remains in the present tense, oscillating between Joan's own reality and her attempt to finish her current Costume Gothic, *Stalked by Love*. As she writes, Joan begins to understand that Felicia, the evil woman in this novel, is not unequivocally "evil," but represents someone more dynamic than the rote heroines who symbolize "good" girls.

Joan opens the narrative with a fascinating confession: "I planned my death carefully; unlike my life, which meandered along from one thing to another, despite my feeble attempts to control it" (3). Immediately we are intrigued—we might be dealing with a dead character narrating her past life or someone detailing the present from a more omniscient point of view. We are also immediately aware that this as-yet unnamed protagonist does not consider herself to be a powerful person, calling her attempts to have power in her own life "feeble." Furthermore, she is a passive rather than active agent in her own life, which "meanders," and has "a tendency to spread, to get flabby, to scroll and festoon" (3).

From the first sentence of the novel, Atwood lampoons the pulp romance genre that builds a fantasy world in which readers escape the mundane. Imagining her husband Arthur in the role of hero, Joan reflects on how the reality of *her* balcony rescue would be much different from that of a pulp romance:

I pictured [Arthur] coming to retrieve me ... He would unfold himself from the car, lock it so his scanty luggage could not be stolen, place the keys in an inside jacket pocket, peer left and right, and then ... he'd sneak past the rusty gate and start cautiously down the path" (5).

From the "scanty luggage" to Arthur's cautious demeanor, his actions belie the swash-buckling behavior of romance novels' would-be Lotharios who sweep on to the scene without bothering to lock a car or remember keys. Joan exaggerates this comparison by visualizing Arthur during the rescue wearing "his uncomfortable shoes and well-aged cotton underwear" (5). These humdrum and decidedly *unromantic* aspects of everyday life are the commonplace details her Costume Gothics seek to transcend, and their presence here serves to reinforce the differentiation between the reality of Joan's life and the fantasy she creates in her Costume Gothics.

Lady Oracle's opening locale also evokes the idyllic settings of romance novels, with the narrative beginning and ending in Terremoto, Italy. These book-end scenes frame the narrative with Italian romance, and readers enter and exit the text of *Lady Oracle* through this exotic backdrop, rather than the more pedestrian context of Toronto. *Lady Oracle* is no Costume Gothic, however, for the majority of Joan's narrative occurs not in a foreign destination but in her homeland of Canada, a crucial mechanism for grounding the story in reality rather than fantasy. In addition, locating the greater part of

Joan's story in Toronto anchors the narrative in a Canadian context, emphasizing Atwood's nationalist commitment to a Canadian literature grounded in Canadian locales and experiences. Atwood comments that her writing is "autogeographical"; that is, although characters and storylines are made up, she draws heavily from real settings to characterize her novels. In Nathalie Cooke's biography, Atwood is quoted on her approach to where she sets her novels: "I find it necessary ... in order to write about a place, to have actually been there. I can invent characters, but I am absolutely dependent on the details of the material world to make a space for my characters to move around in" (227).

Alternating between two diverse settings, then, stages a contrast of the real with the imagined, and this contrast encourages readers to question if Joan's escape from her "real" life necessarily facilitates a successful search for the answers to her questions of subjectivity. Against the backdrop of these contrasting environments, Atwood creates an additional layer contrasting perspective by orienting the narrative of *Lady Oracle* through Joan's adult, "thin" eyes. This allows Joan to reflect on her childhood retrospectively and consider the power dynamics and cultural influences that shaped her. According to critic Ann Parsons, this is a process of Joan discovering and identifying "how male notions of femininity enter into women's thinking about themselves, how the expectations of some *other*—culture, a man, a parent—interfere with the processes of self-naming and autonomy in women" (97). Telling the story through Joan's adult point of view demands she take responsibility for her actions and supports a detailed interrogation of her upbringing and the gender norms that informed it. For instance, her ballet lessons are something "girls could do" (LO 43) and Brownies fosters a norm where a girl "does NOT

give in to herself!” (51). Through her adult perspective, Joan also considers how popular culture influences, like her own Costume Gothics, affect and mandate gendered ideologies, and she remembers the effects gender norms produce in the now-aging population of formerly-popular high-school girls. Reflecting on her teenage years, Joan understands that her girlfriends’ rather vapid confessions about boys and relationships eventually provide her with “a thorough knowledge of a portion of my future audience” (91) for her Costume Gothics.

Through Atwood’s portrayal of Joan’s childhood indoctrination to gender conditioning (specifically through dance class, Brownies, and popular culture), we observe that even in girlhood gendered conduct maintains power structures and creates a framework through which Joan perceives her identity and subjectivity. But as Parsons points out, “If choice about identity is constantly subject to other-defined expectations, then internal self-image and external self-presentation will be affected in complex ways” (97). The complexities of Joan’s struggle to understand the evil woman embodied in childhood friend Elizabeth persist into adulthood and manifest themselves in the writing of her current Costume Gothic, *Stalked by Love*. Her relationship to Felicia, the evil woman in *Stalked by Love*, is crucial to Joan’s character development, for we observe Joan’s growing acceptance and understanding for the role the evil woman plays in her journey toward subjectivity. While her interaction with the evil woman begins during childhood with the Elizabeth from Brownies, the relevant self-analysis that reveals itself through *Stalked by Love* is equally important to Joan’s potential transformation.

“A Brownie does NOT give in to herself!”

Joan's crucial childhood interaction with the gendered power politics of the evil woman happens when Joan is eight years old, on her walk home from Brownies with Elizabeth, Marlene, and Lynne. This is Joan's—and Atwood's—first encounter with the evil woman. Joan “worshiped Brownies” (*LO* 50), and, as with her dancing class, being a member of a girls' group appeals to Joan's need for acceptance. Joan's mother matches her up with the three neighborhood girls as a sort of “buddy system” for their evening walks home. Ringleader Elizabeth quickly establishes herself in the position of Self and Joan in the position of Other, a Butlerian dialectic of power relying on gender norms. Joan accepts this abject position because she wants so badly to be part of a community of girls. The three girls thrill at the power they wield over Joan; they eventually leave her in a “dangerous” situation on a bridge crossing a ravine, a place of urban wilderness where “scary” men supposedly prowl. However, it is the girls themselves who pose a much greater threat to Joan—and not only in this situation on the bridge—than do the mythical, lurking men.

The girls obey gender norms that mandate no fighting, hitting, or rough-housing for little girls, but rely instead emotional manipulation. Joan comments on what Atwood deems the “Byzantine social life” (*ND* 10) of girls, detailing the reality of power relations at her grammar school:

At our school young girls weren't supposed to hit each other or fight or rub snow in each other's faces, and they didn't. During recess they stayed in the Girls' Yard, where everything was whispering and conspiracy. Words were not a prelude to war but the war itself, a devious, subterranean war that was unending

because there were no decisive acts, no knockdown blows that could be delivered, no point at which you could say I give in. She who cried first was lost. (LO 53)

Although this is a different quote from the one we saw in the introduction (see page 14), it virtually echoes the language Atwood uses when characterizing her own childhood in *Negotiating with the Dead*. Both quotes support Atwood's fascination with little girls' power politics and point out her ongoing investigation of the dynamics of female relationships. Here, we see that against this backdrop of gender-conditioned relations, a power dynamic starts to play out, particularly between Elizabeth and Joan. Joan acknowledges that there is a more covert "war" waging on the girls' playground than the one that exists for the boys. Whereas the boys have been conditioned to physically confront each other—they cannot avoid knowledge of the confrontation—for girls it is "devious, subterranean," and "unending." Joan, who grew up relatively unsocial due to being overweight, is not savvy in the politics of power relations among little girls, so she lurches along, trying not to "cry first" because then she will be "lost" and won't fit in.

But as Joan soon discovers through Brownies, this world is "unending," and a desire for acceptance is not enough to succeed in a gendered world of "whispering and conspiracy." Nevertheless, Brownies presents a seemingly more tolerant atmosphere than Joan's other experiences, and she hopes that in this community of girls she will find approval.

The trouble was that despite the terrors involved in getting there, I worshiped Brownies, even more than I had worshiped dancing classes. At Miss Flegg's [dance class] you were supposed to try to be better than everyone else, but at

Brownies you were supposed to try to be the same, and I was beginning to find this idea quite attractive. (50)

Joan thrives on the ideal of camaraderie and togetherness that Brownies represents, and she enjoys the rituals they practice because she believes she can master them and, thus, be accepted as a member of the group. She sees no conflict in the conformity encouraged through Brownies striving “to be the same.” Instead, this notion is “quite attractive” because Joan dreams she won’t be singled out because of her unacceptable, overweight appearance, but will be rewarded through the acceptance that accompanies similarity. In this way, she hopes the humiliation and estrangement she suffered during her dancing class will not repeat itself here—after all, Brownies are not about appearances, but rather about “Good Turns” and helping out, something even a chubby eight-year-old can master.

However, Joan soon discovers that being a Brownie does not make one immune to the desire for power or the “Byzantine” gender codes that girls obey. One afternoon, led by Elizabeth, the girls tempt Joan with the idea of a private club—“the first [Joan] had heard of it” and “of course I wanted to be in it” (57). Here we see Elizabeth emerge as Joan’s evil woman, demonstrating several of the archetypal stereotypes introduced in the introduction. Although we don’t learn anything about Elizabeth’s background, she demonstrates several characteristics that epitomize the evil woman, such as wit, shrewdness, and aggression. Elizabeth parades her Brownies accomplishments in the form of numerous badges, which mark her intelligence and establish her ability to succeed. Joan notices that “the conditions, directions and demands were issued by Elizabeth” (55), and comprehends that Elizabeth boldly institutes herself as the leader,

speaking for the group and exhibiting perceptive decision-making, particularly when choosing what power play the girls will inflict upon Joan.

In her quest for power as the evil woman, Elizabeth appeals to Joan's desire for acceptance, reinforcing Joan's outsider status while simultaneously affirming Elizabeth's (and by extension Marlene's and Lynne's) subject position. Elizabeth relies on Joan's knowledge that girls are rewarded for keeping quiet and for not fighting back physically, securing Joan's obedience with the promise of acceptance into their club if Joan participates in the alleged initiation. When Joan recognizes the situation is turning dangerous she "started to be frightened":

"I don't want to join the club," I said, but Elizabeth said reassuringly, "Sure you do, you'll like it," and they led me farther on. "Stand over here," Elizabeth said, and a hard surface came up against my back. "Now put your hands at your sides." I felt something being passed around each of my arms, then around my body, and pulled tight.

"Now," said Elizabeth, still in the same soothing voice, "we're going to leave you here for the bad man." The other two started to giggle uncontrollably, and I could hear them running off. Now I knew where I was: they had tied me with Elizabeth's skipping rope to the post at the end of the bridge, right where we had seen the man the week before. I started to whimper. (58)

Here, Elizabeth simultaneously calls on several gendered ideologies and myths to exercise her power. Demystifying the ideal of women as emotional nurturers, Elizabeth turns the emotional into manipulation as she "reassuringly" confirms that Joan *does* want to be a part of their club. Personifying the evil woman's cunning instincts, she employs

the “same soothing voice” as she evokes the traditional notions of femininity, of soother and preserver of peace, in order to keep Joan calm. Furthermore, she plays on the gender myth of the “bad man” who will harm Joan, maintaining the gender binary of powerful male/helpless female. Elizabeth also contradicts the schoolyard world with which Joan is acquainted, refusing to act within rigid, stereotypically female behavior, and instead utilizes physical intimidation to maintain power. In doing so, she shows her flair as an evil woman to assess her situation and use behavior associated with *either* gender to achieve her goals. Although Elizabeth doesn’t display the aggressive physical behavior associated with boys in the schoolyard—she doesn’t “hit” or “rub snow” (53) in Joan’s face—neither does she remain locked in feminine behavior that restricts itself to a “war” of “words” (53).

Thus, no sisterly goodwill exists between these girls: theirs is a power hierarchy where Elizabeth works to preserve her subject position by using Joan as the Other to her Self. It is fundamental that Atwood locates this gendered power struggle among little girls, for she shows that the power of gender conditioning impacts us at a young age. Moreover, just as Elizabeth is aware of her actions, we analyze the gender dynamics that enable her to invoke her “soothing voice” (58) and persuade Joan in the hopes of Elizabeth continuing her power role as evil woman.

In this moment of torment, however, Joan begins to understand the evil woman and discovers the possibility of resistance and power, recognizing that by simply refusing to be a part of their power politics she can work within the gendered power structure to find agency. For Joan, that means obeying rules of the schoolyard where girls don’t become physically aggressive, but work within the confines of language, where silences

can wield the same potential as words themselves. After initial whimpering, Joan changes her tactics:

Then I stopped. I knew they were probably watching to see what I would do, so I decided for a change to do nothing. . . . At first I could hear them faintly, tittering among themselves at the top of the hill, and once they called down, “How do ya like the club?” I didn’t answer; at last I was tired of them. (58)

Here, silence does not equal submission, and passivity adopts a quality of action. With their distant “tittering” and teasing, Elizabeth (accompanied by the two other girls) attempts to protect her place as the evil woman at the top of the power structure. In order to do so, though, Joan must remain on the bottom, quite literally tied to her position. But Joan’s refusal to reflect Elizabeth’s power diminishes Elizabeth’s power over her.

Writing about the Foucauldian notion of working within power structures, Butler states in *Gender Trouble* that “This critical task presumes, of course, that to operate within the matrix of power is not the same as to replicate uncritically relations of domination. It offers the possibility of a repetition of the law which is not its consolidation, but its displacement” (40). In other words, as subjects we do not simply have to repeat the dominant power structures over and over, because within the very act of repetition lies the possibility for change. That the possibility exists within the power structure means that the action is not only recognizable, but also socially acceptable. In Joan’s case, silence obeys the gender norm of women being passive or silent and upholds the cultural intelligibility of stereotypes. However, by altering the repetition slightly—remaining silent when the girls expect whining—Joan’s action becomes the law’s

“displacement” rather than its “consolidation” because it shifts the power dynamic away from Elizabeth.

While standing tied to the bridge post, a desire for power and agency forms within Joan, and she begins to find a voice through silence. By operating within Elizabeth’s established matrix of power, Joan assumes agency as a subject, an awareness that allows her to recognize the boundaries of the power structure and then look for the chance to repeat the law “which is not [the law’s] consolidation, but its displacement” (Butler 40). Joan realizes that whimpering will achieve nothing, so she changes her tactic, repeating the traditional female norm of silence, but to a subversive effect. Rather than signal consent, here silence symbolizes Joan’s defiance of Elizabeth, a rejection of the evil woman’s games that require Joan’s abject position in order to reify Elizabeth’s subject position. Joan’s silence allows her to undermine the predominant power of Elizabeth. Finally, Joan is “tired of them” (*LO* 58), exhausted from performing a role in which success in the eyes of the evil woman ultimately restricts Joan to the abject position. Joan has previously put faith in the gendered ideology of little girls “playing nicely,” but her realization on the bridge that she cannot trust these myths leads to her refusal to be manipulated any longer. In doing so, Joan recognizes that power is not unequivocally conferred on some—in this case Elizabeth, the evil woman—but is an entity and a quality that she, too, can possess. By working within the gendered matrix utilized by Elizabeth, Joan rejects Elizabeth’s power and overcomes her fear of the evil woman.

At the end of the chapter, adult Joan wonders about the myth of a dangerous man in the ravine, questioning if a man the girls passed one day was a “bad man” or not. The truth escapes Joan, who even as an adult focuses on the threat imposed by males rather

than the threat imposed by three girls under the age of ten. But Joan's reflections are misplaced in terms of power relations, for the gendered power she witnesses on her trips through the ravine has nothing to do with the myth of the bad man. Rather, Elizabeth and the two girls present the real threat—one of bodily danger if Joan cannot free herself from the bridge post—that relies on the gendered myth of a bad man while being executed politically and physically by the evil woman. The perceived threat of “bad men” exists to scare all the girls, and Elizabeth uses that myth to manipulate Joan. Adult Joan doesn't fully reflect on the power of the evil woman and the gender dynamics that inform this episode—she still seems too caught up in the emotions of the episode. But Elizabeth remains a shadowy presence in Joan's life, lingering to remind her of the power potential available to her if she chooses to embrace the evil woman. In fact, Joan's struggle to understand the evil woman returns through her Costume Gothics, where Joan finally confronts the role the evil woman plays in many aspects and stages of her life, including her development as a subject.

Stalked by the Evil Woman

Interwoven throughout Atwood's novel *Lady Oracle* is the current Costume Gothic romance penned by Joan Foster—*Stalked by Love*—the action of which mirrors the action of *Lady Oracle*. In response to the existing intertexts of popular culture that circulate around her, Joan creates her own text, a revision of both the stereotypical romance narrative and her own life's narrative. Thus through her process of trying to finish *Stalked by Love*, Joan strives to write her own fairy tale, to rewrite the story of her life apart from patriarchal, gendered expectations that would have simply written her out of the story. As

critic Sharon Wilson points out, “Echoes of fairy tales or literary folktales constitute more than simple influence or allusion. Throughout her career, Atwood has used numerous intertexts or texts within texts; frame narratives echo inner narratives’ images, motifs, themes, characterization, structures, and even plots, self-consciously reflecting, and reflecting upon, intertexts.” (*Textual* 3-4). The intertext of *Stalked by Love* provides a forum for Joan to work through the gendered ideologies she has internalized and become attached to. There is no room in a traditional romance for an overweight, awkward teenager—or any female heroine who doesn’t conform to social and gender norms, for that matter—and that is the Self Joan still relates to, in spite of her weight loss. Joan refuses to accept the future that would have been predicted for her lonely, fat teenage self. In *Stalked by Love*, we observe Joan’s effort to rewrite the ideologies promoted in her Costume Gothics (and the actual lived events of Joan’s life), she strives to transform herself again and again, her life a working script that she continues to edit in her journey of self-awareness and search for subjectivity.

The plot and themes of *Stalked by Love* strongly reflect the ideology of all Joan’s Costume Gothics. Although “well-bred” (*LO* 28), the protagonist Charlotte is an orphan who comes to Redmond Grange to work as a jewelry restorer, a trade she learned in order to support herself when her “father’s noble family” (30) refused to support her beyond childhood. Charlotte works for Redmond, an aristocratic man who is married to Felicia, a red-haired beauty with emerald eyes who has a “scandalous reputation” (127). Charlotte often spies Felicia walking the grounds with another man, which gives Charlotte, who hides her feelings for Redmond, hope that she might end up with him. For Charlotte, the disenfranchised, stereotypical “good girl” heroine, Felicia is the evil woman, an arch

nemesis with power who understands its nuances; with both women and men Felicia maintains the subject position of the evil woman. When someone mysteriously slashes Charlotte's clothing and inscribes "BEWARE in blood" (191) on her mirror, Charlotte believes someone is trying to kill her. She suspects Felicia, who seems threatened by Charlotte's presence and Redmond's interest in her.

At this point, Joan encounters difficulty finishing *Stalked by Love*, which requires salvation for Charlotte and retribution (or worse) for Felicia. Charlotte is "young and pretty" (127), spunky but conventional and ultimately unchallenging to any of the gendered ideologies in Joan's romance genre. Felicia, too, does not initially disrupt any of the gender norms in *Stalked by Love*, but as Joan progresses through the novel's narrative, her internalized evil woman begins to surface. In the past Joan relished the relatively powerless underdog characters like Charlotte (a teenage Joan in disguise) triumphing over the powerful, entitled wives like Felicia (a socially confident and empowered girl like Elizabeth); rewards, it seems, came to the formerly victimized good girls who bided their time and played by the gender rules (ultimately remaining in the role of victim as they await their male rescuer). But as the evil woman, Felicia threatens to destabilize Joan's strict binary of "good" girls versus evil women, especially as Joan increasingly finds Charlotte uninteresting, meanwhile strengthening her sympathy for Felicia. Joan's dependency on Charlotte reveals what Butler describes as a "passionate attachment" to "her own subordination" (*Psychic Life* 6), establishing Joan's stubborn attachment to gender regulations that simultaneously define and limit her. Butler continues, "If there is no formation of the subject without a passionate attachment to those by whom she or he is subordinated, then subordination proves central to the

becoming of a subject” (7). In other words, one’s subjectivity relies on the forces that seek to control behavior and mandate norms.

Joan develops an attachment to the false ideologies of her romances that reflect her ongoing desire to become a good girl, locked in a binary that separates good from evil. However, she begins to discover that this forecloses blurring gender lines that seek to paralyze women and hinder them from possessing and using power in order to uphold femininity and the gender norms that mandate more submissive behavior. For example, shortly before her death, Charlotte’s mother advises Charlotte “to always tell the truth, to be pure, circumspect and obedient” (*LO* 125). But as we saw in the introduction, according to Butler the same power that originally subordinates subjects, “paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency” (*Psychic Life* 2). The final step to fully gaining agency, therefore, requires throwing off the shackles of subordination, a measure Charlotte never effectively employs. Remaining “obedient” endangers Charlotte, for it encourages passivity and excludes the agency a character like Felicia, Charlotte’s evil woman foil, possesses.

Charlotte and Felicia begin to embody Joan’s struggle toward subjectivity that involves rejecting gender conditioning and embracing the power the evil woman represents. The narrative trajectory of *Stalked by Love* mirrors the narrative of *Lady Oracle* as Joan begins a more thorough examination of the evil woman. As she becomes more disenchanted with romantic, gendered ideals—especially as they affect her own life—her ideology begins to transform. She approaches the evil woman with a more open psychological attitude, and she begins to *re-write* the traditional Costume Gothic storyline to reflect this changing ideology. Attempting to finish the novel in Terremoto,

Joan states, “I knew what had to happen. Felicia, of course, would have to die; such was the fate of wives” (316). But Joan has been growing attached to Felicia, recognizing that the evil women represented by the Felicias of her novels exist as harbingers of the power that lives within the Charlottes and the Joans. While Joan realizes the “desired goals” of her Costume Gothics, she is “having trouble reaching them” (317).

As Felicia becomes more real, her humanity stands in contrast to Charlotte’s unnatural construction. With Joan’s growing self-realization comes a reversal in her approach to the female power politics within *Stalked by Love*. She comments,

Sympathy for Felicia was out of the question, it was against the rules, it would foul up the plot completely. I was experienced enough to know that. If she’d only been a mistress instead of a wife, her life could have been spared; as it was, she had to die. In my books all wives were eventually either mad or dead, or both. But what had she ever done to deserve it? How could I sacrifice her for the sake of Charlotte? I was getting tired of Charlotte, with her intact virtue and her tidy ways. Wearing her was like wearing a hair shirt, she made me itchy, I wanted her to fall into a mud puddle, have menstrual cramps, sweat, burp, fart. Even her terrors were too pure, her faceless murderers, her corridors, her mazes and forbidden doors. (320)

Joan’s resistance to sympathizing with Felicia indicates her fear of embracing the evil woman. She comments that it is “against the rules,” but to whose rules is Joan referring? We sense her growing dissatisfaction with the rigid gender roles she obeys in writing her Costume Gothics, an ideology that has been largely responsible for her lack of agency. She questions what Felicia had done to “deserve” death, and wonders why she must

“sacrifice” Felicia for Charlotte. But if Charlotte and Felicia represent the two parts of Joan’s psyche that she must reconcile—the evil woman and her self—then Joan must find a way to *re-imagine* this story to include not only sympathy for Felicia, but also respect for the power the evil woman represents. The storyline of *Stalked By Love* provides a safe distance from Joan’s life; here her exploration of power politics between women can demand an explanation for why the Felicias of this world must be relegated as “either mad or dead, or both.”

Joan raises the same questions with regard to Felicia that Gilbert and Gubar do in their famous book *The Madwoman in the Attic*; that is, why do women have to either be “mad or dead”? Referring to their analysis of the experience of the female writer with regard to her literary precursors, Gilbert and Gubar comment,

these precursors incarnate patriarchal authority ... they attempt to enclose her in definitions of her person and her potential which, by reducing her to extreme stereotypes (angel, monster) drastically conflict with her own sense of her self—that is, of her subjectivity, her autonomy, her creativity. (23)

Rather than allow Felicia—and by extension the evil woman—to be “enclosed in definitions” that cast her as negative and fearful, with *Stalked by Love*, Joan engages the following question: shouldn’t the evil woman have a place within society that is *not* narrowly categorized and relegated to negative associations? Through Joan’s interrogation of Charlotte and Felicia, signifying her own psychological inner workings at play, we see a woman in conflict with the powerful side of herself that is at once frightening (because of traditional societal portrayals and conditioning that classify the evil woman as a witch, bitch, or monster) and exciting (because of the potential she

represents for empowerment and reinvention). Still, even as Joan's subconscious begins working itself out and her sympathy for Felicia indicates an increasing comfort with the evil woman within herself, she does not yet make the connection between Felicia and her childhood evil woman Elizabeth. And we are not sure she *will* ever make this connection, that Elizabeth, too, deserves not only Joan's thorough examination and understanding, but also Joan's sympathy and acceptance for the power potential Elizabeth represents within Joan. Atwood cleverly characterizes Joan's process as a work-in-progress, leaving us to wonder if Joan will succeed or fail, or simply persist in trying, at understanding and embracing the evil woman.

As the novel comes to a close and Joan's journey toward subjectivity truly begins, she admits to "getting tired of Charlotte" (*LO* 320), for there is nothing new about the Charlottes of the world. They do not display the flair and creativity that Felicia does, nor do they possess the potential for disrupting gender norms the way Elizabeth does through her redeployment of stereotypically male and female power techniques. Because the Charlottes observe the social norms, they will not break out of the world of Costume Gothics to reappear as the woman in the feminist context of Joan's experimental poetry. Joan describes this woman as "enormously powerful, almost like a goddess, but it was an unhappy power. This woman puzzled me" (221). Here, Joan re-writes a powerful woman as a "goddess" rather than an evil woman like Elizabeth or Felicia, casting a positive light on powerful women. Nonetheless this power puzzles Joan, which indicates Joan's fear of powerful women. Because this woman is the result of trance-like writing, she emerges from Joan's subconscious, suggesting that Joan desires power and has internalized the evil woman, but cannot yet synthesize her presence in a concrete way. Her power

confuses Joan, who thinks it is “an unhappy power,” reflecting Joan’s inability to accept this kind of power within herself. Joan’s “goddess” character is a baby step emancipating the evil woman from the stereotype of unequivocal badness, yet even in attempting to rewrite the evil woman, Joan maintains “certainly she had nothing to do with me. I wasn’t at all like that, I was happy. Happy and inept” (221). Here again, Joan desires a world of binaries where, for women, powerful equals unhappy, while inept equals happy. This is Joan’s internalization of gendered power structures where we see the “psychic form that power takes” (Butler, *Psychic Life 2*) as Joan struggles to convince herself that she is “Happy and inept” without power.

Joan infuses this happy ineptitude into her Costume Gothic heroines so they fulfill stereotypical female norms that reify gender roles. In contrast to the goddess-like woman of Joan’s poetry, protagonists such as Charlotte are not positioned to question gender expectations that foreclose the option of embracing an “enormously powerful” woman like the evil woman and channeling her power. But the evil woman is. As Joan becomes tired of Charlotte’s “intact virtue and her tidy ways” (*LO* 320), Felicia becomes more vital to Joan’s psychological development. Crucially, Felicia remains culturally intelligible—with her long, “feminine” hair and her skirts, petticoats, and capes—but she begins to blur the boundaries of “good girls” who deserve Joan’s championing and “evil women” who markedly do *not*. As we witness Felicia grow “very sad” (318) and even “enormously fat” (323), she resembles more and more Joan’s adolescent self, and is therefore positioned to reflect Joan’s changing ideology that finds sympathy for Felicia *and* for her former self. The final working scene from *Stalked by Love* reflects Felicia’s priority over Charlotte, for it is Felicia who enters the Redmond Maze in search of

answers about her identity. As Felicia actively searches for answers, she destabilizes gender expectations in her determination to “penetrate[s] its secret at last” (341), refusing the limits of women as passive victims waiting for rescuers, and providing Joan with a new example of a woman who steps outside of gender expectations. In “penetrating,” the enigma, Felicia upsets gender norms as she assumes the male position in a sexual interaction where she enters the “secret” maze (perhaps Atwood’s subtle parody of the “mystery” of female genitalia). That Joan finally starts to get “itchy” (320) for something more “real” like Felicia is symbolized by Joan’s desire to demystify femininity by arranging for to Charlotte fart, burp, sweat, and get menstrual cramps.

As Joan processes the influences of societal conditioning, and the hegemonic ways it is disseminated through popular culture outlets—including beauty products, advertisements, the paperback novels she read as a teenager, and her own Costume Gothics—she realizes that remaining locked in the world of Costume Gothics will restrict her from accepting the evil woman. This, in turn, will prohibit the possibility for Joan to respect the aspects of the evil woman that will potentially empower her. Thus, as she struggles to rectify her internal struggle between preserving Felicia as the evil woman and re-writing the evil woman to include sympathy for Felicia, she considers turning her back on the entire Costume Gothic genre in her attempt to claim agency in her life:

Perhaps in the new life, I thought, the life to come, I would be less impressed with capes and more with holes in stockings, hangnails, body odors and stomach problems. Maybe I should try to write a *real* novel, about someone who worked in an office and had tawdry, unsatisfying affairs. But that was impossible, *it was against my nature*. I longed for happy endings, I needed the feeling of release

when everything turned out right and I could scatter joy like rice all over my characters and dismiss them into bliss. Redmond would kiss Charlotte so that her eyeballs rolled right back into her head, and then they could both vanish. When would they be joyful enough, when would my life be my own? (320, my italics)

Here again, Joan continues to work through her struggle for subjectivity by using the framework of the Costume Gothic. But the crucial aspect of this passage is that Joan is starting to incorporate something “real” that is grounded in her own experience and not something wholly created in a world separate from her own. This will be a challenge for Joan, who thinks that writing something “real” is “against my nature.” But as Butler points out, there is no prediscursive, “natural” that exists: in fact, Joan’s conception of “nature” here is constructed by cultural conditioning. That Joan proliferates the same cultural conditioning in her Costume Gothics reveals that she is currently foreclosing her confrontation with the “real,” saying that it is “impossible” because of her “nature.” Yet despite the “impossible” challenge of writing about complex lives that cannot exist in the world of *Stalked by Love*, Joan recognizes the cultural laws that imprison her if she chooses to remain in this world.

When Joan questions when her “life [will] be my own,” she recognizes that she has capitulated to the cultural forces that influence her conception of the evil woman. Joan’s protagonists will never be “joyful enough” as long as Joan remains confined within a cultural ideology that mandates gendered behavior to achieve cultural intelligibility. She realizes that locking herself into the ideology of the romance will turn her into the prisoner she perceives her readers to be. Thus her recognition of the paradigm of romance novels is a turning point in her journey from a passive to an active approach

to her identity and subjectivity, as well as an opportunity to re-write the evil woman to reflect Joan's evolved ideology. She must subvert this "longing for happy endings," in order to understand the power politics of the Felicia within her, and recognize that she can embrace her inner evil woman and use that power she already possesses.

Conclusion

Commenting on the resolution that happens for Atwood characters, Wilson writes, "In fairy tales, myth, and Atwood texts, transformation is not always positive; generally at the end of an Atwood text, transformation has just begun" (*Fairy Tale* 21). From Joan's earliest childhood episode in dancing class, a devastating moment where she is cast as a moth rather than a butterfly because she is overweight, we understand her desire to be transformed. Her desperate hope for the butterfly-winged costume the girls wear symbolizes both her need for acceptance and her taste for the fantastical, and Joan recognizes that "I was hoping for magic transformations, even then" (*LO* 43). What begins as a psychological investment in a costume evolves into an ideological investment in her own Costume Gothic romances, which is an ideology of escapism, passivity, and victimization for women. But it is also an ideology of "magic transformations" that elide the agency required in transforming one's self. In order to claim a subject position where she can re-envision her life, Joan must transcend the rigidly constructed world of Costume Gothics to the messy, "real" world of life, for only in the "real" world can Joan create a place for the evil woman that allows for the creativity, cleverness, and wisdom she possesses. Joan's essential journey to agency involves rejecting the saccharine

portrayals of “good” women in her Costume Gothics and accepting the evil woman whom she previously cast as psychotic or killed off.

By leaving the novel open-ended, Atwood suggests that Joan’s development is not yet complete. Joan still needs to achieve a fuller understanding of the inner workings of power relations between women—especially how they start at such a young age and continue to inform our subjectivity as adults—and how the evil woman persists in playing a critical role. According to Butler, “Indeed, to understand identity as a practice, and as a signifying practice, is to understand culturally intelligible subjects as the resulting effects of a rule-bound discourse that inserts itself in the pervasive and mundane signifying acts of linguistic life” (*Gender Trouble* 184). That is to say, we must understand that identity is not something conferred upon us, but it is an ideologically-fraught system that rewards “culturally intelligible subjects” through the discursive and linguistic systems that shape our daily lives. Joan Foster’s romances are strong examples of the type of discursive conditioning of gender construction that often exists unexamined—and romances that relegate evil women as wholly wicked in order to reward heroines who display traditionally-valued “feminine” traits such as passivity demand inspection. Through Atwood’s cleverly subversive portrayal of *Lady Oracle*, we see that especially in satiric form, gender construction’s “pervasive and mundane signifying acts” add up to a sum total of gender codes and social norms that seek to govern the way women interact within the power structure of “femininity.”

Thus Joan’s “transformation has just begun” (Wilson 21), and her life remains a work in progress. But in typical Atwoodian fashion, Joan’s character development suggests several different things. It might suggest that Joan will fully embrace the evil

woman, recognizing her power and understanding that there is a necessary place for the Felicias and Elizabeths of this world. It might indicate that Joan will turn her energy to the *re*-writing of her own life, embracing the “real” world instead of the staying locked in the fantasy world of Costume Gothics and gendered ideologies. However, it might also imply that Joan will *not* be able to free herself from the societal gender conditioning that causes her fear of the evil woman. Or, perhaps Joan will make some advances in her subject development, only to reverse her progress by doubting her agency. That *Stalked by Love* is also left unfinished suggests that Joan has forsaken Charlotte’s and Felicia’s journey of over-the-top constructed romance in favor of a more grounded existence that includes a place for the evil woman, both within the novel and with Joan’s self. Conversely, Joan’s admission that she will abandon Costume Gothics for “science fiction” (*LO* 345) implies that while she possesses a new self-awareness about her subject position, it still remains unanswered whether or not she will successfully leave behind the world of fantasy for a more honest endeavor for agency.

This ambiguous open ending leaves enough unanswered that it raises the issue of how difficult it is to carve out a subject position within a North American, capitalist culture that discourages individuality and rewards conformity to norms, gender and otherwise. While we hope that Joan will follow the trajectory of character development that embraces the evil woman, turning her back on the gendered ideologies that have informed her identity from childhood, we realize this will be a very difficult journey for her. Whether it involves confronting the girl politics of Brownies or admitting the ideological power of the pulp romance genre, overcoming the gendered power structures will demand a commitment from Joan that hinges on embracing the evil woman. Even

more importantly, Joan must then become an active agent in her life, utilizing the power the evil woman represents in order to combat the gender norms that have shaped her.

In the following chapter, we will explore how Atwood's examination of the evil woman becomes more thorough with protagonist Elaine Risley and her lifelong friend Cordelia in the novel *Cat's Eye*. There, the evil woman returns as an adult in the same character, rather than in fictionalized form as it does with Joan in *Lady Oracle*, intensifying the conflict with the evil woman.

“Afraid of being Cordelia”: The Evil Woman in *Cat’s Eye*

As we saw in the last chapter, Atwood introduces her encounters with the evil woman in the midst of 1970s feminism, with *Lady Oracle* in 1976. After tackling marital and extra-marital politics in *Life Before Man* (1979), male-female power dynamics and postcolonial issues of Western travel in *Bodily Harm* (1981), and a fundamentalist-inspired misogynist dystopia in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1986), Atwood turns her attention back to the evil woman with 1988’s *Cat’s Eye*. Amid big-business power dynamics and the rising yuppie movement of the 1980s, increasing numbers of women continued to advance in the workplace hierarchy, which impacted the sexual and interpersonal climate of male-female relations as power shifted to a more equity-based model. Power struggles between men and women remained lively for debate, a topic that many second-wave feminists addressed in detail. Atwood herself addressed male-female power politics in many of her earlier novels and collections of poetry. But although much attention went to the power struggle between the sexes, there was a more covert power struggle that existed between members of the same sex. In fact, as Linda Simon comments, “Atwood’s women are as likely to be treated cruelly by women ... as by men, and they are as likely to be circumscribed by their own limitations—of imagination or assertiveness—as by social constraints” (3).

In Atwood’s return to the evil woman with *Cat’s Eye*, she focuses on female-female power dynamics with her sustained portrayal of the friendship between protagonist Elaine Risley and her evil woman and childhood friend, Cordelia. The evil woman, who as we have seen in previous chapters, has traditionally been relegated to an

archetype of negative character traits, here receives a more complex characterization in Cordelia. As Alice McDermott points out in *The New York Times Book Review*, “In this girls’ world of propriety, innuendo, uncertainty, Cordelia will say anything, do anything. She is scornful, manipulative, wild” (35). She is, therefore, the next episode in a trilogy of Atwoodian evil woman. But before we smugly and hastily write off Cordelia as a simple foil for Elaine’s plotline, we must acknowledge that here, as in *Lady Oracle*, the evil woman becomes an essential ingredient in Elaine’s subject position. In fact, only through understanding the evil woman and embracing the power she represents will Elaine achieve compassion for her childhood self that ultimately leads to her agency.

In *Lady Oracle*, as a girl Joan Foster stands as a single child pitted against a trio of girls; similarly in *Cat’s Eye*, Elaine Risley is an individual against a girlhood community, which affords Atwood the opportunity to challenge the ideology that equates “sisterhood” with goodness, acceptance, and equality. Instead of fostering Elaine’s development, her community inhibits her, castigates her, and punishes her for misbehaving and insolence. Through this community of girls, Elaine learns lessons about herself, power dynamics, subjectivity, and agency that will only come through her interactions with her evil woman, Cordelia. However, unlike *Lady Oracle* where the childhood interaction with the evil woman is somewhat fleeting, Elaine’s on-again, off-again relationship with Cordelia persists consistently through high school, and then continues to haunt Elaine, even when she is no longer in contact with Cordelia. Thus the evil woman becomes more pivotal to Elaine’s development than she was to Joan’s. In *Lady Oracle* Atwood devotes more time to Joan’s romantic relationships (and treats them with her characteristic clever wit), using them to highlight aspects of Joan’s character; in

Cat's Eye Elaine's romantic relationships with ex-husband Jon and current husband Ben are subordinated to the overall trajectory of the novel and Elaine's character development.

Because Atwood spends more time examining the evil woman's role in Elaine's development, the author expands her earlier exploration of female power relations by looking at how Elaine internalizes outside, constructed power structures into her psyche in order to maintain a binary where Cordelia is the Self and Elaine is the Other in a dialectic relationship. As Butler explains, "The master, who at first appears to be 'external' to the slave, reemerges as the slave's own conscience. The unhappiness of the consciousness that emerges is its own self-beratement, the effect of the transmutation of the master into a psychic reality" (*Psychic Life* 3). As we will see throughout this analysis, Elaine incorporates Cordelia's point of view into her own psyche, internalizing Cordelia's Self position (the "master") into her "psychic reality" so that she enables the evil woman to wield power over her. By playing on gender ideals of women's and girls' behavior, Cordelia's performance of friendship demystifies gender stereotypes that suggest women and girls have an innate, "natural" understanding of each other and form bonds over similar experiences, such as being nurturers. As Elaine's evil woman, Cordelia is not bound by this stereotype, however; rather, she shows her complexity as evil woman, for she uses the cultural association of women as nurturers to manipulate the power matrix and gain control over her relationship with Elaine.

For Atwood, who admits to being fascinated by the social hierarchies and power structures enacted and maintained by little girls, the reality of little girls' experiences claims front-and-center position in *Cat's Eye*. While I don't propose that Atwood

suggests that there is more trust in the alliance between men and women, her theme of the unreliability of female friendships suggests that, for Elaine, refusing to trust other women is an important step to self-preservation. The depiction of a girl-girl power dynamic that doubts and mistrusts female friendships counters the essential notions from the second-wave that there is an instinctive nurturing condition that is uniquely female. In *Cat's Eye*, we see that away from the schoolyard, out of the watchful eyes of parents, girls engage in power struggles in a way that both obeys gender norms and defies them—when Cordelia uses her “kind voice” she evokes the essentialist notions of caretaking, gentleness, and mutual respect, yet she uses that gender norm in order to emotionally and physically manipulate and control Elaine. *Cat's Eye* shows that even if freed from patriarchal male-female dynamics, women have a hunger for power and a capacity to treat each other with cruelty in order to obtain their goals and satisfy their emotional needs. Understanding and embracing the evil woman, both external and internal to one's self, is crucial to becoming one's own master and claiming agency.

The Evil Woman in *Cat's Eye*

Cat's Eye is oriented around painter Elaine Risley's return trip to her home town of Toronto, where the gallery, Sub-Versions, mounts a retrospective of her paintings. As a child, Elaine spends most of her first eight years in the northern bush country with her family, traveling from location to location for her father's work as a scientist. When they return to Toronto, Elaine enrolls at Queen Mary Public School, where she befriends Carol Campbell, a neighbor girl, and shortly meets Carol's other “best friend” (*CE* 57), Grace Smeath. The next year, a new girl—Cordelia—appears and rises to power in the group,

and Elaine sinks to the bottom, the object of torment and manipulation. Elaine is constantly on edge because she never knows when she has done something “wrong” according to Cordelia, whose quest for power requires Elaine to be powerless. Elaine comments that “We look like girls playing” (155), but underneath a much more serious power struggle is going on. Cordelia’s manipulations and “games” become increasingly intense and cruel, culminating with a horrifying incident on the way home from school one day. When Cordelia endangers Elaine’s life by bullying her into walking onto an icy river, Elaine finally stops associating with the girls altogether, rejecting the evil woman and her power, but not yet understanding it. In high school, Elaine and Cordelia renew their friendship, but Elaine soon becomes indifferent to Cordelia’s friendship, and their relationship fades when Cordelia switches schools. During their last interaction, Elaine refuses to re-enter the hurtful memories of the past, knowing on some level that her lack of power rests there.

Elaine takes painting classes at the Toronto College of Art and eventually becomes an artist. Meanwhile, Cordelia lurks as a shadowy presence in Elaine’s psyche and memories, and occasionally resurfaces first over coffee and later when Cordelia goes to a “discreet private loony bin” (388) after a failed suicide attempt. Elaine again refuses Cordelia’s request for help, and after her own half-hearted suicide attempt, Elaine flees Toronto for Vancouver, where she carves out a life for herself amid the burgeoning artists’ community. Elaine’s artistic reputation builds, and when *Sub-Versions* produces her retrospective, she returns Toronto. Elaine revisits her childhood haunts and finally begins to accept the difficult memories from childhood. The novel ends with Elaine

returning to Vancouver with a newfound acceptance of herself and the role of the evil woman in her life.

It's no surprise that Atwood sets her novel in Toronto and Northern Ontario: first, she is invested in portraying the Canadian experience and thus uses the Canadian landscape and cityscape as her backdrop. Second, as a child she spent time with her family in the bush of Northern Ontario. Here again, as in *Lady Oracle*, Atwood uses two settings. In this case, these two diverse locales establish a binary between the "uncivilized" setting of the bush, where Elaine is isolated from gendered power relations, and the "civilized" world of Toronto, a modern city where Elaine is indoctrinated into the painful power politics of girlhood. In *Cat's Eye*, the forests of Northern Ontario are a place of contentment for Elaine, who comments, "Until we moved to Toronto I was happy" (22). By contrast, their new house in Toronto is "daunting"; its "rawness" makes Elaine "feel trapped" (35). Atwood challenges this city/country binary and alludes to the myths of what Mary A. Kirtz calls the "malevolent north" (56), portraying the urban wilderness as equally threatening—if not more so—than the untamed north. Atwood comments on how the individual's relationship to nature affects this interaction, stating, "You can see a tree as the embodiment of natural beauty ... or you can see it as something menacing that's going to get you and that depends partly on your realistic position toward it" (qtd in Simon 2). In other words, if one grows up familiar with wilderness, accustomed to the shadows cast by trees, one will not perceive them as "menacing," but will be able to acknowledge them realistically as simply shadows. However, if one matures in an environment unfamiliar with nature, one no longer sees the

“natural beauty” in nature, and the interface of nature with the urban environment give rise to questions and fear about nature.

In the city where Elaine does not expect to encounter danger, the leaves on trees are “dull green and worn-out,” and the bridge she crosses with her schoolmates is “askew, rottener than I remember” (*CE* 81). The river that runs through Toronto further emphasizes the dark danger of the urban wilderness, for Cordelia says “because the stream flows right out of the cemetery it’s made of dissolved dead people” (81). Whereas the city becomes a place of lurking death and peril, Elaine’s time in the Canadian bush is one of confidence-building where she fosters bravery, for even though the lake is “huge and cold and blue and treacherous ... Swimming in it doesn’t frighten me at all” (159). By using vivid descriptions of the bush and Toronto, Atwood questions our association of safety with the urban and danger with the wild. This contrast provides the backdrop against which Atwood flips this binary for Elaine’s experiences.

Firmly grounded as a Canadian novel in a Canadian landscape, *Cat’s Eye* calls on myths of the Canadian wilderness and uses the metropolitan setting of Toronto to foreground Elaine’s dual childhood experience living in the bush *and* the city, which emphasizes Elaine’s “outsider” perspective as she stumbles through her initiation into city life and girlhood gender norms that govern the playground. As with the first-person narrative point of view in *Lady Oracle*, we are always oriented in the present with Elaine’s story, which allows Elaine to reflect on the events with a distance and wisdom that would not have existed while the events transpired. By framing *Cat’s Eye* in the present, the narrative achieves a sense of urgency when we flash back to Elaine’s childhood, placing us in the present tense of Elaine’s memories, but slowing down

enough to carefully examine Elaine's transformation from the Other position to the Self of her subjectivity. For Elaine to liberate herself from the childhood persona who remains haunted by Cordelia, she must reconcile the memories that lurk, embodied as Cordelia, within her psyche.

That Elaine always maintains a crucial distance from the childhood events encourages her analysis of the power dynamics and the role of the evil woman in her subject development. The temporality of the novel is therefore very important because it allows Elaine space and time to reflect. As Elaine comments in the first paragraph of the novel, "Time is not a line but a dimension, like the dimensions of space. If you can bend space you can bend time also, and if you knew enough and could move faster than light you could travel backward in time and exist in two places at once" (3). Thus from the first page of the novel, Elaine grapples with a "you," almost as if she steps outside of herself in order to reflect on her experience and bend time so that she create a new confrontation for her childhood self and Cordelia—but with the adult Elaine's confidence and perspective. The blending of time and space emphasizes how inextricably linked the two are; we cannot separate the past from the present or future, as all three are dependent on each other. Therefore, Elaine must learn how to reconcile with her evil woman so she can accept and use the power the evil woman represents to claim agency.

Much of the critical analysis of *Cat's Eye* focuses on Elaine's relationships with Cordelia, Grace, and Carol. As Kirtz states, "Atwood's depiction of Elaine's childhood, particularly its focus on the nasty games young girls play, has been analyzed extensively, with people lining up on one side or the other of the claim that Atwood's description is a disservice to the feminist cause" (61). But questions surrounding the novel transcend

whether or not Atwood serves the feminist cause (which becomes clear when we assess Atwood's body of work) and Kirtz herself focuses on Atwood's intertextual connections with Canadian myths. Other critics have focused on different aspects of *Cat's Eye*, such as Bouson's address of various aspects of the novel, including the reader's emotional response to Elaine's childhood, the "monstrous mother/female" (173) of Mrs. Smeath, and Atwood's critique of marriage and romantic fulfillment in relationships. More recent investigations of the text include Liza Potvin's cultural comparison of ethnobotanist Wade Davis's theories and Atwood's application of "voodoo possession as a metaphor for the cultural and sexual appropriation of femaleness" (no pagination). Aguiar, too, participates in this conversation with her examination of how the bitch character "makes the choice, either consciously or subconsciously, to reject the traditional roles open to her and to possess power" and in many cases to "reject the social limitations of femininity" (98). The aim of this chapter is to supplement the existing scholarship with this interrogation of the crucial role the evil woman serves in Elaine's character development. In addition, I build on my prior investigation of *Lady Oracle*, where Atwood first addresses the evil woman. *Cat's Eye* further develops Atwood's examination of the evil woman by depicting Cordelia as a three-dimensional character who is much more complex Elizabeth or Felicia in *Lady Oracle*. That Elaine's and Cordelia's relationship continues into adulthood illustrates how critical understanding Cordelia and her power is to Elaine's eventual subjectivity. Without Cordelia, Elaine would never understand her own power and agency as an adult.

Doing an imitation of a girl

The doubling of and interdependence between Elaine and Cordelia is present immediately in the novel, foregrounding the Self-Other dialectic that characterizes their relationship. In fact, Elaine introduces us to Cordelia before she introduces herself, identifying Cordelia by name before Elaine reveals her own identity by naming herself. While Elaine describes Cordelia on page four, giving insight to Cordelia's personality with her description of Cordelia "roll[ing] her eyes" and "sitting with nonchalance" (*CE* 4), Elaine doesn't distinguish herself until page eight. And even then, it is an imagined reunion with Cordelia where Elaine is not asserting her identity, but rather looking for validation from outside herself: "*Cordelia. It's me, it's Elaine*" (8). Even though Elaine describes this past interaction in the present tense, she clings to the dialectic that prioritizes Cordelia's Self position and indicates Elaine's Other status. In this imagined reunion with Cordelia, Elaine remains in the subordinate position of asking Cordelia for approval, wondering if Cordelia would "turn, give a theatrical shriek? Would she ignore me?" (8). Of course, because this is Elaine's narrative she doesn't necessarily need to name herself, but Atwood chooses to privilege Cordelia—elevating Cordelia's subject position and indicating that Elaine understands her subjectivity through her subordination to Cordelia.

Atwood brilliantly portrays the character of Elaine Risley, with whom readers sympathize and identify throughout the novel. Unfolding the narrative through flashbacks allows Elaine to reflect on her childhood transition from wilderness to city, and to remember her desires as a young girl that include ordinary items such as pipecleaners and balloons, silver cigarette-carton paper and premiums from Nabisco Shredded Wheats (30). More telling, though, Elaine longs for "some friends, friends who will be girls. Girl

friends. I know that these exist, having read about them in books, but I've never had any girl friends because I've never been in one place long enough" (30). This longing and romanticizing of female friendship generates Elaine's extreme vulnerability when she finally meets Cordelia, Carol, and Grace. Thus, Elaine is wholly unprepared for the social codes that define girls' behavior that await her in the schoolyard and neighborhood. At Queen Mary Public School she no longer has her brother Stephen as an ally, for the boys and girls circulate in distinct social spheres. She comments, "So I am left to the girls, real girls at last, in the flesh. But I'm not used to girls, or familiar with their customs. I feel 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" (52). For Elaine, who is acclimated to a laissez-faire family life without strictly-defined gender roles, this new and rigidly-defined social order of boys' and girls' worlds is confusing. Yet she is also fascinated by the "real girls," and although unfamiliar with "their customs," she longs to be a part of a community of girls where she may find a place free of "calamitous blunder[s]."

This community relies, in large part, on the gender norms enforced on the playground and the urban myths that uphold that gendered matrix. At school, Elaine follows the rules where girls "can't wear pants" and "the girls hold hands; the boys don't" (50-51), even as she begins to question the gender norms and is "very curious about the BOYS door," wondering why it "merits the strap, just for seeing it" (51). We see that Elaine's examination of gender norms begins at a young age; she is "an astute observer of the culturally constructed differences between boys and girls" (Bouson 164). As Elaine increasingly understands the gendered operations of the schoolyard, she knows

she can no longer rely on her brother, Stephen, for support, and in her friendship with Carol and Grace she tries her best to perform the role of girlfriend, even as she senses “I’m only doing an imitation of a girl” (57). As Elaine struggles through her initiation into the gendered spaces and behaviors of Toronto, we observe how “the social construction of feminine identity is viewed as a formative trauma” (Bouson 164).

These demarcated gendered spaces and behavior do not translate so clearly in suburban Toronto, however, where Elaine and her friends must negotiate city streets that echo with the ever-present silhouette of the “bad man” prowling in the ravine. Once outside of the regimented behavior of the schoolyard, Elaine must learn to distinguish how gendered power operates when the obviously controlled spaces and behaviors no longer exist. Atwood develops the motif inaugurated in *Lady Oracle*, where the myth of the lurking man in the ravine is offset by two actual men whom Joan encounters—one quite benign and the other benevolent as he helps Joan find her way home. In *Cat’s Eye*, Atwood further accentuates how the perceived threat of “shadowy, nameless” (CE 53) men acts as a smokescreen and hinders Elaine’s awareness of the *actual* threat of the evil woman.



When Elaine and Carol walk home from school, Elaine describes the ever-present fear of sinister men in her childhood. Although this is one of the few mentions of “bad men” in *Cat’s Eye*, it foregrounds the ideology hovering over the bridge each day Elaine and Carol (later with Cordelia and Grace) cross over the ravine.

After school Carol and I walk home, not the way the school bus goes in the morning but a different way, along back streets and across a decaying wooden footbridge over the ravine. We’ve been told not to do this alone, and not to go

down into the ravine by ourselves. There might be men down there, is what Carol says. These are not ordinary men but the other kind, the shadowy, nameless kind who do things to you. She smiles and whispers when saying *men*, as if they are a special, thrilling joke. We cross the bridge lightly, avoiding the places where the boards have rotted through, on the lookout for men. (53)

Here again, as with *Lady Oracle*, Atwood uses the myths of gender as a counterpoint to the forthcoming actions of evil woman Cordelia, questioning a binary where adult male strangers are evil while young female friends are good and trustworthy. Carol's gender conditioning dictates her method for disseminating this information to Elaine: Carol describes a world of gender separation—the men are “down there” while the girls are up above on the bridge—and she evokes a mysterious “thrilling” world as she “smiles and whispers when saying *men*.” Carol's coy behavior demonstrates her own internalization of societal messages that differentiate spaces for men and women and determine what kind of behaviors are “dangerous” and “safe.”

Although this exchange precedes Elaine's first meeting with Cordelia, we observe how the gender matrix foregrounds all of Elaine's interactions with the girls, creating a fear of “shadowy, nameless” men that circulates as the girls navigate the Toronto streets. The critical aspect of this narrative, as opposed to *Lady Oracle*, is that no man ever appears on the bridge in *Cat's Eye*. Elaine's interactions are solely with Cordelia, Grace, and Carol. Atwood's reversal of the safe girl/dangerous man binary that applies to public spaces stresses the very real threat embodied here in Cordelia's power matrix and reflects the female power politics that accompany interpersonal “feminine” behavior between girls.

Because of Elaine's isolated early childhood, where she was not indoctrinated into the gender norms and social codes of North American culture, she is ill-prepared to land in a group of friends with a ring-leader like Cordelia. From their first interaction, where Cordelia uses a "confiding" voice to draw Elaine in to her power and "creates a circle of two, takes me in" (77), Cordelia establishes the power dynamic between the two girls with herself in the dominant position. Elaine is immediately enthralled by Cordelia's grown-up behavior and her way of fitting in with a group while simultaneously maintaining her individuality. By understanding when and how to evoke gendered behavior and distinguishing the necessary message to acquire her goal from her specific audience, Cordelia embodies the evil woman who understands how to work within the gendered power structure to achieve power.

Throughout *Cat's Eye*, Atwood highlights the awareness behind the performances involved in everyday actions that cumulatively create Cordelia's power as the evil woman. For instance, after all four girls have become a group, they visit Elaine's father's lab to watch the yearly Santa Claus Parade. While Cordelia, Grace, and Carol huddle on one window ledge surveying the parade below them, Elaine sits in exile on a second window ledge, wondering "what did I say wrong? I can't remember anything different from what I would ordinarily say" (128). Cordelia instructs Elaine to discover her mistake, but quickly changes her tactic of silence when Elaine's father stops in to check on the girls:

"We're enjoying [the parade] extremely, thank you very much" [Cordelia] says in her voice for adults. My parents think she has beautiful manners. She puts her arm around me, gives me a little squeeze, a squeeze of complicity, of

instruction. Everything will be all right as long as I sit still, say nothing, reveal nothing. I will be saved then, I will be acceptable once more. I smile, tremulous with relief, with gratitude.

But as soon as my father is out of the room, Cordelia turns to face me. Her expression is sad rather than angry. She shakes her head. “How could you?” she says. “How could you be so impolite? You didn’t even answer him. You know what this means, don’t you? I’m afraid you’ll have to be punished. What do you have to say for yourself?” And I have nothing to say. (128)

In using her “adult voice,” Cordelia controls how Elaine’s father perceives the situation. Concurrently, she controls Elaine’s perception of her by directing the group dynamic, sitting next to Elaine, giving “a squeeze of complicity, of instruction.” Cordelia’s ability to simultaneously occupy the adult’s and children’s world is characteristic of the evil woman’s ability to discern *how* and *when* to employ different behaviors to attain her goals. While Carol simply “giggles” and Grace merely utters “Thank you” (128), Cordelia performs the role of adult, assuming the upper hand and convincingly portraying her “beautiful manners.” Her cumulative actions affect how Elaine views herself, for as soon as Elaine’s father leaves the room, Elaine understands her subjectivity in relation to Cordelia. Immediately Cordelia becomes the adult, assuming the Self position and evoking adult disappointment with her “expression [that] is sad rather than angry.”

Cordelia does nothing extraordinary here. Rather, she proposes what Butler deems “the *appearance of substance* ... a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (*Gender Trouble* 179). Through Cordelia’s repetition of

the “normal,” everyday actions of close girlfriend, she constructs an identity for herself, Elaine, and the others that implies the safety of feminine friendships. Her performance relies on the mundane in order to persuade her “mundane social audience” that everything is “all right” in order to uphold her power. In the face of Elaine’s father, who potentially threatens Cordelia’s Self position, Cordelia performs a culturally intelligible role that affirms gender norms—and thus relegates Elaine to Other and constructs both Elaine’s and her father’s concept of identity. However, once Elaine’s father departs, Cordelia switches her performance from stereotypical feminine friendship to authoritarian, castigating Elaine “for [her] own good, because they are [her] best friends and they want to help [her] improve” (*CE* 128). Cordelia demonstrates the evil woman’s disruption of gender norms by actively asserting her agency through the redeployment of female camaraderie. Meanwhile Elaine passively surrenders to the abject role furnished to her, silently accepting her Otherness. As Elaine develops through the novel, she must learn to accept the evil woman she has internalized in order to channel the power Cordelia represents. First, Elaine must fully recognize her subordinate subject position—and her role in surrendering to Cordelia’s power matrix—before she can reject the ideology that fears the evil woman and seeks to negate her presence.

“This is a Watchbird watching YOU.”

In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler discusses the desire of the subject to be subjected. Subjection is paradoxical, Butler explains, because while power limits the subject, it also brings the subject into being and allows for agency. Butler writes, “power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and

what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are” (2). In other words, because of the culturally erected power matrix, the subject actually internalizes gender and power norms and social codes, and as a result the process of internalization becomes part of the regulating norm itself. Whether we want it to or not, the power structure surrounds us, and learning to work within it gives rise to the opportunity for agency. In *Cat’s Eye*, we witness Elaine’s internalization process during the years that Cordelia exercises her power as evil woman. Elaine’s internalization reveals itself externally as physical pain through her willing mutilation of her feet:

In the endless time when Cordelia had such power over me, I peeled the skin off my feet. ... Nobody but me ever looked at my feet, so nobody knew I was doing it. In the mornings I would pull my socks on, over my peeled feet. It was painful to walk, but not impossible. The pain gave me something definite to think about, something immediate. It was something to hold on to. (*CE* 124)

Elaine’s maimed feet are the physical manifestation of her subordinate position within the power structure Cordelia constructs. The behavioral norms that Cordelia establishes for Elaine—norms that are constantly shifting in response to Cordelia’s own psychological state—cause Elaine to think “I will have to do better. But better at what?” (128). Because she is never quite sure what she has done wrong in Cordelia’s eyes, Elaine creates a concrete, physical pain that supercedes her emotional pain. In addition to being “something definite to think about,” peeling her feet allows Elaine to have control over something in her life. Butler writes, “this process of internalization *fabricates the distinction between interior and exterior life*, offering us a distinction between the psychic and the social that differs significantly from an account of the psychic

internalization of norms” (*Psychic Life* 19). Thus, through peeling her feet, Elaine “fabricates” a distinction between the pain Cordelia inflicts and the pain she *herself* inflicts. Elaine never knows when she will next be the victim of Cordelia’s need to affirm her own subjectivity; Cordelia’s assertion that Elaine requires punishment re-establishes Cordelia as Self and Elaine as Other. But the randomness of Cordelia’s actions creates an even larger sense of powerlessness for Elaine. Peeling her feet gives Elaine a private power, because “nobody knew I was doing it.” Carrying her secret was “something to hold on to” that reminds Elaine that she is still an emotional human being, an essential component to maintaining her composure in a situation where she numbs herself to the pain and confusion of the evil woman.

After Elaine muddles through the first year of her friendship with Cordelia, her family departs from Toronto for a quiet summer in the northern bush, and Elaine escapes the day-to-day stresses of life with Cordelia. During summer break, Elaine feels “not gladness, but relief” from Cordelia’s relentless identity inquiries and psychological manipulation, which affects Elaine physically as well as emotionally, for “the skin on my feet has begun to grow back” (*CE* 158). Elaine passes a peaceful summer away from the city, exploring the forest, helping her mother make jelly, and playing tag with her father and brother on the beach. However, when she returns to Toronto and starts grade five, Elaine’s reality abruptly changes, for she realizes,

Cordelia has been waiting for me. I know this as soon as I see her standing at the school bus stop. ... now she is harsher, more relentless. It’s as if she’s driven by the urge to see how far she can go. She’s backing me toward an edge, like the edge of a cliff: one step back, another step, and I’ll be over and falling. (171)

That Cordelia has become “harsher, more relentless” upon Elaine’s return indicates Cordelia’s need for Elaine. Cordelia depends on Elaine’s friendship, because Elaine’s capitulation to Otherness allows Cordelia to remain in the Self position. With Elaine gone over the summer, Cordelia had no outlet for her power, which threatens the stability of her subjectivity. With Elaine back, Cordelia may once again resume her status as evil woman and exercise the privilege and authority that goes along with that. But Elaine’s position is precarious for both herself *and* Cordelia, for if Cordelia does “see how far she can go” and push Elaine over the edge, Cordelia will be marooned without her Other, risking the steadiness of the Self.

Similarly, Elaine requires Cordelia to understand her subject position, because Elaine has internalized Cordelia’s constructed power matrix and measures her identity against Cordelia’s Self, using her own subordinated Otherness in Butlerian fashion to preserve who she is (*Psychic Life 2*). As fall progresses, Elaine withdraws more and more into herself, thinking about “becoming invisible” and “eating deadly the nightshade berries” (*CE 172-73*) to slip into unconscious (or even death) in order to emancipate herself from Cordelia’s power structure. On the walk home from school one day, she lags behind the other girls, wondering why she allows Cordelia to wield power over her:

I don’t want to do these things, I’m afraid of them. But I think about Cordelia telling me to do them, not in her scornful voice, in her kind one. I hear her kind voice inside my head. *Do it. Come on.* I would be doing these things to please her.
(173)

The voice Elaine hears “inside my head” verbalizes her internalized subject position, and we observe the influence Cordelia possesses. By relying on models of female friendship

and using her feminine, “kind voice,” Cordelia maintains her subject position and penetrates Elaine’s exterior life. As Elaine comments earlier, “Cordelia doesn’t do these things or have this power over me because she’s my enemy. Far from it. I know about enemies. ... With enemies you can feel hatred, and anger. But Cordelia is my friend” (131). Once in this Self position in Elaine’s interior life, Cordelia allows the norms of female friends and enemies that Elaine has internalized to do the work for her—Cordelia’s “kind voice” speaks of this friendship and evokes the “circle of two” (77) that Cordelia created long ago. Elaine ponders confiding in her brother but realizes that without tangible battle scars, he will not understand “girls and their indirectness, their whisperings.” She also grapples with her fear of Cordelia and admits she is “ashamed” (173), emotional manifestations of the abject position to which she has become attached. But because Elaine longs to maintain her relationship with Cordelia, thinking Cordelia is a friend and not yet recognizing her own Otherness, Elaine continues to obey Cordelia in order to “please her.”

Yet Elaine does have a growing awareness of Cordelia’s power and of her own subordination to the evil woman, which she must admit before she can embrace the power Cordelia represents and to claim agency. Although Elaine is building awareness, she still cannot distinguish the actions of friendship from the power plays of the evil woman. To avoid Cordelia’s ongoing persecution, Elaine teaches herself to faint, a tentative step toward agency where she assumes an active role in her life. Elaine comments, “I slip sideways, out of my body, and I’m somewhere else” (191). Fainting enables Elaine to maintain a passive role where she can work within the gender matrix, for she is not striking Cordelia, nor is she physically affecting anyone other than herself.

But this escape does empower Elaine, who finds “my own blood on the wet white washcloth is deeply satisfying” (191). This visceral evidence of her own subjectivity also causes Elaine to grow suspicious of Cordelia and her power struggles, so even when the girls are “solicitous” Elaine realizes, “I’m far too wary” (191) for the kind of false friendship they perform. As she learns to distinguish how Cordelia manipulates the ideals of female friendship to maintain power and observes the hypocrisy inherent in Cordelia’s friendship, Elaine begins to find the “backbone” (174) her mother tells her she needs.

Later that spring, again on a walk home from school, Cordelia tumbles down the hill to the bridge. Elaine, Grace, and Carol rush down the hill, thrilled because they think Cordelia has orchestrated the stunt. Embarrassed, Cordelia rechannels the attention toward Elaine by accusing Elaine of laughing *at* her. In order to regain control of the situation, Cordelia tosses Elaine’s hat over the railing of a bridge and persuades Elaine to retrieve it, invoking her “kind voice”: “‘Go on then,’ [Cordelia] says, more gently, as if she’s encouraging me, not ordering. ‘Then you’ll be forgiven’” (206). However, Elaine falls through the ice and nearly freezes to a crippling level. She manages to climb out of the ravine, and emerges with a new perspective and countenance. When she has recovered and is back in school, on a walk home one day, Cordelia suggests that Elaine should be punished for “telling” on the other girls. But Elaine stands up for herself, finally embracing her Self as a subject with agency. She turns and walks away from the girls, realizing,

I feel daring, light-headed. They are not my best friends or even my friends.

Nothing binds me to them. I am free.

They follow along behind me, making comments on the way I walk, on how I look from behind. If I were to turn I would see them imitating me. “Stuck up! Stuck up!” they cry. I can hear the hatred, but also the need. They need me for this, and I no longer need them. I am indifferent to them. There’s something hard in me, crystalline, a kernel of glass. I cross the street and continue along, eating my licorice. (214)

In this dialectic relationship, Elaine finally comprehends the critical dependence between both positions in the binary: just as Elaine internalizes Cordelia and her need to occupy the Self position, Cordelia (and Grace and Carol) internalizes Elaine’s Other position. Elaine reifies Cordelia’s power, enabling the evil woman to remain strong. In acknowledging the power structure, however, Elaine can “hear the hatred, but also the need” in their voices. But like the cat’s eye marble she carries in her pocket, Elaine has become “hard” and “crystalline.” She finally realizes that she serves as the Other for Cordelia to know herself; more importantly, Elaine comprehends that there is no real friendship among the girls, just a power structure designed to make them appear to be friends. With Elaine “no longer need[ing] them,” Cordelia’s power is immediately diffused, while Elaine walks away, leaving behind Cordelia’s power matrix to stand on its own.

Elaine stops playing with Cordelia, Grace, and Carol altogether, even using an alternate route to walk home from school. Narratively, this section of the novel ends with Elaine still in Toronto, while other sections detailing Elaine’s friendship with Cordelia close with Elaine escaping to the bush with her family. By keeping the narrative with Elaine in Toronto, Atwood gives the impression that Elaine finally starts to find her place

in the city. She heeds her mother's advice to find her backbone and learns to manage her relationships with girls and protect herself emotionally from future manipulation. Through understanding the intricacies of the power dynamics that inform Cordelia's actions as the evil woman, Elaine moves toward subjectivity by literally turning her back on and walking away from the evil woman, no longer relying on Cordelia's malevolent behavior to determine Elaine's own subject position.

"Mean Mouth"

By the time Elaine begins to embrace the evil woman and use that power against other women to gain subjectivity, specifically when she uses it against Cordelia, we root for her. Atwood deliberately builds our trust in and sympathy for Elaine prior to empowering her with some of the same tools Cordelia uses. Yet why do we castigate Cordelia and support Elaine? It is confusing when Elaine casts Grace Smeath's family as "boring as white margarine" and "ridicule[s] their piety, their small economies," because we find it a "deeply satisfying game" (253) right alongside her. If Elaine's behavior somehow becomes justified because Elaine previously suffered, then we must question why her actions are justifiable when Cordelia's were not. Atwood creates this confusion to challenge readers to reconsider our conceptions of the evil woman, for if we are happy about the power shift and pleased with the pain that Elaine inflicts on Cordelia, then we must conceptualize the power represented by the evil woman as something that is not ultimately "evil."

With the evil woman firmly in her past, Elaine breezes through junior high school. Cordelia, Grace, and Carol fade out of Elaine's life—Cordelia and Grace because

they move on to high schools and Carol because her family moves away. Elaine comments, “I hardly notice” (223), but Elaine’s separation from the evil woman is too facile. She blocks out painful memories, commenting, “I’ve forgotten things, I’ve forgotten that I’ve forgotten them. ... I’ve forgotten all of the bad things that happened. ... Time is missing” (221). We realize that although Elaine has momentarily rejected Cordelia, she has not yet confronted her internalized evil woman. Cordelia lurks in Elaine’s psyche, much as the “bad men” lurked in the ravine, a shadowy presence that informs Elaine’s identity even though she is not yet aware of it. When Cordelia’s mother inquires whether Elaine would like to walk to Burnham High School with Cordelia, Elaine’s mother is understandably concerned—Elaine’s prior friendship with Cordelia ended with her daughter nearly frozen to death. Her mother displays the reticence that eludes Elaine: “‘Are you sure you want to?’ my mother says, a little anxiously” (224). We sympathize with Elaine’s mother’s anxiety, for we understand how tenuous Elaine’s subjectivity is in Cordelia’s presence. The crucial aspect of Elaine’s reunification with Cordelia is that even though it has only been two years, Elaine does not remember the past, and she will not be able to learn from it and accept the evil woman’s power until she does. Unlike Elaine, we cannot forget Cordelia’s cruelty and, like Elaine’s mother, are trepidatious about Elaine allowing Cordelia back into her life.

Elaine and Cordelia re-establish their friendship, and on a walk home from school early one evening, they detour through the cemetery. As they sit on a bench gazing at the mausoleum of the Eaton family (of Canadian department store fame), Elaine tells Cordelia that Mrs. Eaton is not dead, but rather a vampire. With Cordelia visibly unnerved, Elaine embellishes her story, stating that she is actually a twin—and that the

present twin, like Mrs. Eaton, is a vampire. When Cordelia tells Elaine, “You’re being silly” (256), Elaine redeploys Cordelia’s old manipulative technique of playing on the trope of female friendship:

I stand up too. “Silly?” I say. I lower my voice. “I’m just telling you the truth. You’re my friend, I thought it was time you knew. I’m really dead. I’ve been dead for years.”

“You can stop playing that,” says Cordelia sharply. I’m surprised at how much pleasure this gives me, to know she’s so uneasy, to know I have this much power over her.

“Playing what?” I say. “I’m not playing. But you don’t have to worry. I won’t suck any of your blood. You’re my friend.” (256)

The “pleasure” that Elaine derives from this encounter is twofold: first, her creative power liberates her to invent such a tale. Second, the power she increasingly lords over Cordelia serves as a just reward for the emotional manipulation she endured when they were younger, in spite of the fact that Elaine does not fully recall those memories. Elaine’s claim that “I won’t suck any of your blood” echoes the metaphorical blood-sucking Cordelia did as a child, draining the positive energy from Elaine in the hopes of propping up her own failing ego. Although not totally conscious, Elaine is aware of the thrill she receives from this newfound power dynamic, stating, “I have a denser, more malevolent little triumph to finger: energy has passed between us, and I am stronger” (256).

Elaine blossoms in high school and finds confidence through her newfound power in her relationship with Cordelia. She also derives power through the wicked wit that

earns her the nickname “mean mouth” (257), a power that she directs almost exclusively at other girls. Ironically, Elaine doesn’t lose friends but gains them, at least “on the surface” (258). This echoes Cordelia’s power position in their childhood circle of friends, where “friendship” is less about the traditional definition and more about measuring one’s Self position against weaker Others. While Elaine feels “amused disdain” when she exercises power with her mean mouth, she recognizes that “it disturbs me to learn I have hurt someone unintentionally. I want all my hurts to be intentional” (258). Here we see Elaine’s growing awareness that she can control the way she uses her power. Unlike the archetypal evil woman who uses power for solely negative purposes, Elaine desires a consciousness that reflects her potential to re-appropriate “evil” power to achieve benevolent results. But first, Elaine must face her memories and embrace the evil woman, because she will not be able to acknowledge the potential power her internalized evil woman represents until she reconciles her memories of Cordelia.

Elaine uses her mean mouth most often on Cordelia, as “target practice” (259), but eventually growing bored, especially when Cordelia fails classes and lets herself go. At a brief reunion where Cordelia desperately tries to reconnect with the glory of past memories, Elaine rejects Cordelia’s attempt to revisit old days and refuses to surrender her blossoming subjectivity. She continues on to university, and during the summer following her first year, Cordelia reappears, claiming to have run away from home at 19 years of age. Elaine meets her for coffee, but while Cordelia reminisces about the past, Elaine reflects,

I don’t want to remember. The past has become discontinuous, like stones skipped across water, like postcards: I catch an image of myself, a dark blank, an image, a

blank. ... Cordelia takes her sunglasses out of her shoulder bag and puts them on. There I am in her mirror eyes, in duplicate and monochrome, and a great deal smaller than life-sized. (329)

So intense is seeing Cordelia again that Elaine refuses to remember, because her memories of Cordelia simmer close to the surface, and the act of balance their repressed creates a precarious state. Confronting the past and acknowledging the role of the evil woman in her development is still too scary for Elaine, so instead she fragments her memories like the skipped stone that sends ripple of memory across the surface of water. Because Elaine suppresses her memories involving Cordelia, she forecloses a confrontation that will encourage reconciliation with her past. Elaine's repetition of "blank" indicates that her identity is still in flux, and, like a photograph waiting to be developed, Elaine provides the monochrome negative for Cordelia's multi-colored print. Instead of moving ahead and putting Cordelia behind her, Elaine feels "smaller than life-sized," still shrinking into the Other as Cordelia clings to the Self. Elaine becomes a mere reflection in Cordelia's "mirror eyes"—a "duplicate" of the evil woman, rather than an active agent who has learned how to redeploy the power of the evil woman. This self-inflicted Othering also allows Elaine to avoid the deep self-interrogation she will require to fully embrace the evil woman.

Because Elaine won't engage with these "discontinuous" memories of Cordelia, she prohibits the possibility of mourning the psychological scars of her childhood. She is, in effect, crafting a performance for herself where she can choose the postcard-like images that collectively reflect her childhood. But this also forbids any self-reconciliation, and Butler comments that such a performance "allegorizes a loss it cannot

grieve, allegorizes the incorporative fantasy of melancholia whereby an object is phantasmatically taken in or on as a way of refusing to let it go” (*Psychic Life* 145-46). Elaine has “phantasmatically taken in” the evil woman because she is afraid of confronting her memories and admitting that she has internalized the evil woman. Elaine cannot “let go” of Cordelia, yet, paradoxically, she cannot face the evil woman, either. Rather, Elaine reconstitutes herself as a “dark blank,” which allows her to choose what memories compose her time with Cordelia, in turn further repressing her pain and eliminating the possibility of accepting the latent power already within her.

Years later, after Elaine marries fellow art student Jon and gives birth to her daughter Sarah, she joins a women’s group. She and three other artists from the group mount an art show. Cordelia, with whom Elaine has not spoken in years, sees the press coverage and calls Elaine; they last met during Elaine’s college years when she worked at the Swiss Chalet. Now, however, Elaine travels to The Dorothy Lyndwick Rest Home, a “discreet private loony bin” (*CE* 388) where Cordelia recovers from a suicide attempt. Over coffee at a local shop, Cordelia pleads with Elaine to help her escape from the rest home:

“I can’t Cordelia,” I say gently. But I don’t feel gentle toward her. I am seething, with a fury I can neither explain nor express. *How dare you ask me?* I want to twist her arm, rub her face in the snow.

The waitress brings the bill. “Are you sufficiently sophonsified?” I say to Cordelia, trying for lightness, and a change of subject. But Cordelia has never been stupid.

“So you won’t” she says. And then, forlornly: “I guess you’ve always hated me.”

“No,” I say. “Why would I? No!” I am shocked. Why would she say such a thing? I can’t remember ever hating Cordelia.

“I’ll get out anyway,” she says. Her voice is not thick now, or hesitant. She has that stubborn, defiant look, the one I remember from years ago. *So?* (392)

Although there is still a sense of performance in Cordelia’s evocation of a forlorn tone, her formerly-sharp awareness of audience is not enough to acquire her desired goal. From Atwood’s construction of the sentence, however, we can’t be sure if Cordelia is genuinely forlorn, or if it is a performance for her audience of Elaine. Is Cordelia truly desperate and searching her mind for a solution to why Elaine won’t help her? Perhaps she merely evokes a tone of extreme anxiety in order to get money or physical assistance from Elaine. Regardless, Elaine has begun her transformation from passive Other to active Self, and she sees through Cordelia’s performance, “seething, with a fury.”

As Joan Foster did in *Lady Oracle*, Elaine has tried to repress her internalized evil woman, but has unconsciously formed what Butler terms a “passionate attachment” to Cordelia, whereby an “attachment to subjection is produced through the workings of power” (*Psychic Life* 6). With Cordelia no longer in power, however, Elaine can finally allow herself to hate Cordelia—something that Cordelia sees here even if Elaine cannot. In spite of Elaine’s refusal to confront her memories and this foreclosure of her anger, it erupts here, and her shock at Cordelia’s audacity comes through when she silently states, *How dare you ask me?* That Atwood doesn’t answer this question is typical of her refusal to provide facile answers to the difficult questions of identity. Elaine has endured her

previous interactions with Cordelia, and more importantly she has survived. But in order to reach her full development as a character she must consciously accept the evil woman as a part of herself, for only then will she truly liberate herself from the memories of Cordelia and become the agent of her own identity.

Elaine's opportunity to fully confront her past surfaces quite surprisingly on a visit to her mother in Sault Ste. Marie, shortly after her father's death. As Elaine and her mother sift through an old steamer trunk, they discover old photos and report cards, clothing and other memories. In Elaine's cracked, plastic red purse, she comes across her favorite cat's eye marble from childhood.

“A marble!” says my mother, with a child's delight. “Remember all those marbles Stephen used to collect?”

“Yes,” I say. But this one was mine.

I look into it, and see my life entire. (434)

Finally Elaine can embrace her memories, for she “see[s] her life entire”—not a life with censored memories from youth, but a life that includes Cordelia, even in her full glory as the evil woman. Elaine's quiet acceptance, signified with her calm “Yes,” is followed by her active reclamation of her marble—“this one was mine”—and Elaine exercises agency over her memories and past for the first time in the novel. No longer afraid to examine her past, Elaine faces it directly, seeing her “life entire,” a life that includes the evil woman. This is the moment for Elaine when past and present collide. The narrative of two storylines collapses into one, and we remain in the present tense with Elaine in Toronto for the rest of the novel.

By the time her retrospective opens at Sub-Versions, Elaine has begun to embrace the evil woman, evolving from a fear of Cordelia and dread of their meeting to an active need to re-connect with her. Rather than old school acquaintances or people she “should” recognize, Elaine anticipates,

Really it’s Cordelia I expect, Cordelia I want to see. There are things I need to ask her. Not what happened, back then in the time I lost, because now I know that. I need to ask her why.

If she remembers. Perhaps she’s forgotten the bad things, what she said to me, what she did. Or she does remember them, but in a minor way, as if remembering a game, or a single prank, a single trivial secret, of the kind girls tell and then forget.

She will have her own version. I am not the center of her story, because she herself is that. But I could give her something you can never have, except from another person: what you look like from outside. A reflection. This is the part of herself I could give back to her.

We are like the twins in old fables, each of whom has been given half a key.

(450)

Unlike Elaine’s “mean mouth” phase, where she exercised power over Cordelia without fully understanding it, Elaine’s desire to see Cordelia now suggests that she is finally prepared to accept the evil woman in her life. Elaine possesses a new confidence with no sense of desperation and no fear that recovering her memories will threaten her subject position. Facing her memories is the psychological route Elaine must travel to embrace the evil woman and accept her newfound subjectivity. No longer the Other, Elaine

becomes the Self who wields the power to dictate her future. She knows now that just as Cordelia offers her a crucial source of power, Elaine, too, offers a critical element to Cordelia: the ability to provide outside perspective and reflect her own acceptance and growth. By acknowledging how intertwined she is with Cordelia, Elaine can see without fear that they are a kind of “twins,” indelibly marked on each other. By finally embracing the evil woman Cordelia represents, Elaine recognizes the evil woman within herself and accepts the power source she already owns.

Yet in spite of the doubling that exists between these two women, Elaine ultimately must make her journey to self-discovery alone. While she needs to resolve her memories of Cordelia, having Cordelia materialize is beside the point—what Elaine must do is come to terms with Cordelia’s evil woman, a time in her life when Cordelia wielded power and used gendered behavior, such as evoking the nurturer with her “kind voice,” in order to maintain a subject position of Self. Now that Elaine has claimed that position, however, there is a sense of her desire to have one last interaction with Cordelia, to “ask her why” she behaved that way. But as with most Atwood texts, answers do not come easily, for either the protagonist or the reader. We, too, would like a reconciliation of sorts with Cordelia, we would like to see her admit to her actions and apologize for them. But because this is Elaine’s journey and not Cordelia’s, the answers must come from Elaine alone, for it is through her own reconciliation with her memories that she can embrace the evil woman and liberate herself from her haunting memories.

Conclusion

After a successful retrospective at Sub-Versions and many glasses of wine, Elaine returns to Jon's studio. She misses her flight back to Vancouver because she oversleeps, so she returns to the bridge where Cordelia threw her hat over the railing, where she nearly froze to death so many years ago. She allows herself to remember her fall into the icy river, and revisits the vision of the benevolent woman who hovered above her. Elaine has one final vision of Cordelia, in a nine-year-old incarnation; Elaine realizes,

I know she's looking at me, the lopsided mouth smiling a little, the face closed and defiant. There is the same shame, the sick feeling in my body, the same knowledge of my own wrongness, awkwardness, weakness; the same wish to be loved; the same loneliness; the same fear. But these are not my own emotions any more. They are Cordelia's; as they always were. (459)

Elaine's recognition that it was Cordelia's "own wrongness" and "wish to be loved"—and not her own—permit her to sympathize with and, ultimately, forgive Cordelia. Elaine is "the older one now ... the stronger" (459), and her new perspective on childhood allows her to acknowledge the power dynamics Cordelia employed in her attempt to gain agency. But it was a false agency, as Elaine sees now, for the psychological needs were always Cordelia's. As Elaine literally embraces her memories of Cordelia—"I reach out my arms to her, bend down"—she steps into the role of nurturer, telling Cordelia (and herself) "*It's all right ... You can go home now*" (459). By forgiving Cordelia, Elaine finally gives herself permission to acknowledge the internalized evil woman and "go home" with the knowledge and power she represents. Atwood's explanation for Cordelia's actions—and Elaine's acceptance and understanding of them—is crucial to the message Atwood sends to readers. Perhaps no woman is "the evil woman," because no

one can be reduced to an archetype of patriarchal ideology that ultimately serves to inhibit women's power. The challenge, rather, is to *understand* the evil woman and recognize the potential for power she inspires. As we see with Elaine, the acceptance and understanding of the evil woman are critical steps to finding our one's own power source and learning how to use it to claim agency.

Before writing *Cat's Eye*, Atwood commented on the concept of female friendship and its accompanying power politics in *The New York Times Book Review*, remarking,

Perhaps the reason it's taken women novelists so long to get around to dealing with women's friendships head on is that betrayal by a woman friend is the ultimate betrayal. In sexual love, betrayal is almost expected; if we don't allow for it, it's not for want of warning, because treacherous lovers are thoroughly built into popular mythology, from folk songs to pop songs to torch songs to mom's advice. But who warns you about your best friend? (39)

If the "ultimate betrayal" is that of a female friend, then the potential knowledge that comes from understanding that power underscores Atwood's examination of female friendships and the evil woman in this novel. Atwood suggests that there has been no need to warn against the "best friend," because the archetypal female friendship obeys gender norms of benevolence, community, and sisterhood. But as we have seen in this novel, Atwood refuses to relegate her evil woman to a negative stereotype, instead endowing her with the power to resurrect power within her protagonist. But if Elaine and Cordelia are doubles, Self and Other, which is which? Depending on the time frame of the narrative, each occupies a different role. We see that as a child Cordelia needs Elaine

in order to know her Self; crucially, though, Elaine needs Cordelia, too, to fully develop as an empowered woman. And until Elaine can confront the memories that haunt her, she cannot move into her own subjectivity and agency.

Earlier in the novel, when Elaine prepares for her gallery opening, she fantasizes about Cordelia seeing a write-up in paper and coming to the show. But she is cautious, because there is a painting of Cordelia and Elaine wonders what it will mean to see Cordelia again. Thinking about her painting of Cordelia, she reflects,

But the eyes sabotaged me. They aren't strong eyes; the look they give the face is tentative, hesitant, reproachful. Frightened.

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. (*CE* 249, my italics)

Elaine's fear is not seeing Cordelia, but of having internalized the evil woman and *becoming* the kind of confused, malicious person that Cordelia was as a child. Crucially, then, Elaine admits the power of Cordelia within her, that she must embrace and accept the evil woman so that Cordelia will no longer be a memory that haunts her, but rather a source of strength that continues to live within her. For Elaine, who had made use of the power of the evil woman as early as high school (during her "mean mouth" period), the final step in her development is the simple acknowledgement that the evil woman is part of her. To accept this is to reject gender norms that render the evil woman as wholly negative, a bitch to be feared. Killing off the archetype of the evil woman means that Elaine—painter, mother, woman—can also be the evil woman who, while complicated

and imperfect, is still a human being with a better understanding of how to gain and use power.

As we see in this chapter and in last chapter's exploration of the evil woman in *Lady Oracle*, both Elaine Risley and Joan Foster survive childhood interactions with the evil woman and triumph over a reluctance to accept the evil woman's presence that they have internalized. In the following chapter, we will examine Atwood's most true portrayal of the evil woman, Zenia in *The Robber Bride*. Moving directly to an exploration of the evil woman in the adult lives of Tony, Charis, and Roz, Atwood communicates the evil woman's multiplicity through three different perspectives and shows yet again how the evil woman embodies a primal power source that the protagonists must channel.

Becoming Zenia: The Evil Woman in *The Robber Bride*

As we saw in the last two chapters, in *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye* Atwood's explorations of the evil woman have several things in common. First, the protagonist's initial interaction with the evil woman occurs in childhood. Second, the myth of a "bad man" prowling the metropolitan wilderness of Toronto provides a perceived threat against which the real threat of the evil woman can be measured. Finally, for both Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle* and Elaine Risley in *Cat's Eye*, there is a crucial interaction with the evil woman in adulthood that allows each protagonist to consciously recognize the evil woman's power and, therefore, begin to embrace her, which brings the evil woman from a subconscious to a conscious level of recognition where the protagonists may confront her. These two novels frame childhood events through adult protagonists' point-of-view in order to show how the evil woman persists in critical relationships with Joan and Elaine; in fact, their character development in their adult years relies on a reconciliation with and acceptance of the evil woman. In *Lady Oracle*, Atwood complicates her examination of the evil woman with her critique of popular culture (especially pulp romances), and in *Cat's Eye*, Atwood carefully studies how Elaine's lifelong psychological engagement with the evil woman—and her struggle to accept the evil woman—emerges through the metaphorical struggle in her visual art.

In *The Robber Bride*, Atwood dispenses with the conventions of the "bad man" and the childhood evil woman and plunges readers directly into adulthood where three Toronto friends, Tony, Charis, and Roz, come face to face with the evil woman, Zenia. The novel further refines and problematizes Atwood's examination of the evil woman by

engaging Tony, Charis, and Roz in a psychological and interpersonal battle to recognize, understand, and ultimately recover the power they have surrendered to college friend and evil woman Zenia. Published in the early nineteen-nineties, a time of a changing third-wave feminist movement and unstable international political climate, *The Robber Bride* (1993), according to Lorrie Moore in a *The New York Times Book Review*, shows “what women do to women in a sexist world” (1). Now, Atwood reunites with an exploration of the evil woman, and this return to female power politics suggests that Atwood’s work with *Cat’s Eye* and *Lady Oracle* is not yet complete. The evil woman reaches her apex in Zenia; however, in typical Atwood fashion, there are no easy answers or excuses provided for Zenia, leaving readers to decipher the reasons a feminist writer creates such a well-developed, interesting, and intriguing character who is also manipulative, cruel, and conniving. In short, we must investigate what we can learn about the evil woman from Zenia, and understand how she impacts the lives of Tony, Charis, and Roz in a way that ultimately empowers them.

Narratively, the novel bears similarities to *Lady Oracle* and *Cat’s Eye*: all three locate the narrator and protagonist in the present tense as adults reflecting on their pasts. And Atwood does provide some background information about Zenia, a move Aguiar describes as essential to the rewriting of the bitch character by female authors:

For the feminist author, the act of revision serves a dual purpose; not only is she concerned with an updated and humanist telling of an established narrative, she also accepts the task of granting female characters previously denied subjectivity and complexity. And often those characters are the ones who have been adversely presented. (10)

Not only does Atwood break Zenia out of the archetype of evil woman as wholly negative; in a sense, she endows Zenia with life-giving and life-affirming qualities that resurrect parts of Tony, Charis, and Roz that latently waste away. Zenia's complexities embody both positive and negative characteristics, personifying masculine and feminine behaviors. Those very behaviors question norms of gender and sex in order to portray a more well-rounded character who serves multiple purposes for Tony, Charis, and Roz.

Atwood admits that she was "intrigued by the prospect of creating a female outlaw, a contemporary counterpart to 'the kind of figures who have recurred throughout literature ever since Delilah' but have been largely absent in recent decades" (Graeber 22). Building on her previous portrayals of evil women, Atwood here depicts Zenia as an uncompromising achiever, a woman who, while crucial to the character development of Tony, Charis, and Roz, does not simply fulfill the role of foil. Rather, Zenia defies categorization and refuses to uphold gender norms, an "outlaw" who uses assumptions about women to attain power. To wit, even the three protagonists hear different life stories from Zenia: for Tony, Zenia is a former child prostitute whose mother was a "White Russian"; for Charis, she morphs into a cancer victim seeking alternative cures whose mother was a "Roumanian gypsy"; and for Roz, she becomes a "mischling"—a partially Jewish orphan and international journalist who reports on women. This spotlights Zenia's shape-shifting and emphasizes her shrewdness as an evil woman to read her audience, assesses what parts of themselves they want to see reflected back, and then perform a role in order to accomplish her goals.

As we observe in the novel, when the protagonists become acquainted with Zenia in their early twenties, they hungrily consume Zenia's life stories, allying themselves

with her in a naïve belief in women's "natural" techniques for bonding over shared stories. In doing so, however, they surrender their subject position to Zenia, succumbing to a subordinate role as they increasingly rely on Zenia and capitulate to her powerful subject position. Butler addresses the kind of "passionate attachment" the women form toward Zenia, writing of this phenomenon in *The Psychic Life of Power*:

The insistence that a subject is passionately attached to his or her own subordination has been invoked cynically by those who seek to debunk the claims of the subordinated. If a subject can be shown to pursue or sustain his or her subordinated status, the reasoning goes, then perhaps final responsibility for that subordination resides with the subject. Over and against this view, I would maintain that the attachment to subjection is produced through the workings of power, and that part of the operation of power is made clear in this psychic effect, one of the most insidious of its productions. (6)

Because Zenia comprehends Tony's, Charis's, and Roz's insecurities, she delivers a performance as evil woman that deceives them, causing them to believe they assume the subject position of Self in a dialectic relationship. In reality, however, Zenia assumes the Self position, and the protagonists assume the subordination of Other. They then become "passionately attached" to their "own subordination," not yet fully understanding the "workings of power" that inform this position, and internalizing the "insidious" Other mentality as they believe they possess strength. As with *Cat's Eye*, Atwood demystifies this myth of female sisterhood, for while Tony, Charis, and Roz *do* form a community, it is not through Zenia's nurturing or sisterly goodwill, but instead as a support group in the wake of Zenia. Before they can liberate themselves from the bonds of subordination, the

women must recognize their subject position within the power structure employed by Zenia, a complex act of cognition that involves acknowledging their own attachment to their subordinate status.

For Atwood, who views Zenia as a “survivor” and thinks “she’s pretty clever” (Graeber 22), we sense the author’s respect and fondness for this evil woman. Graeber continues, “Since the novel was published ... women have written that they would like to have Zenia’s power” (22), a sentiment that Tony, Charis, and Roz all admit in the latter part of the narrative. So rather than lock Zenia in negative definitions of “evil woman,” Atwood emancipates her from the limited, stereotypical, and gendered definitions that attempt to castigate a powerful woman. In *The Robber Bride*, the protagonists must confront their fears of the evil woman—fears that include gender norms that cast her as a man-eater who steals or destroys their men—and recognize that Zenia represents a power that they all desire. Each in their turn accepts Zenia’s power, for they acknowledge it as a symbol of the repressed power that exists within themselves. Consciously accepting the Zenia within begins their journey of transformation and solidifies their community of women. Through re-opening themselves to the evil woman, Tony, Charis, and Roz overcome their fears to embrace character traits deemed inappropriate, unacceptable, or “unfeminine,” and reject the gendered ideology that seeks to relegate the evil woman to solely a negative archetype.

The Evil Woman in *The Robber Bride*

As I have suggested, Tony, Charis, and Roz are a community of women profoundly affected by the evil woman’s influence. When Zenia appears at the protagonists’ monthly

lunch date, they are shocked into a confrontation with the evil woman once again, which brings Zenia from her place in their individual and collective repressed subconsciousnesses to conscious tete-a-tete that forces Tony, Charis, and Roz to psychologically grapple with the subject positions they internalize as a result of their contact with the evil woman. When she reappears five years after Tony, Charis, and Roz have attended her funeral, Zenia immediately re-establishes a power matrix that relegates the three protagonists to the Other position. Tony, Charis, and Roz must now confront the evil woman in an attempt to understand her formerly latent and subconscious role within their psyches.

Through individual flashbacks, we learn how each woman met Zenia and invited the evil woman into her life. By employing a third person narrator, Atwood accommodates three points of view and layers each story upon the one before it, creating a complex and fragmented portrait of Zenia that requires weighing each of the stories, then interrogating the image of Zenia in order to discern an understanding of this multifaceted character. We begin to understand the polymorphous nature of Zenia: how she claims the Self position through subverting the gender norms of woman as victim, and how she shrewdly assesses her audience in order to tailor a unique performance that tricks the protagonists into surrendering power.

Tony, Charis, and Roz subsequently confront Zenia after she re-appears from the dead (the bomb explosion in Lebanon responsible for her death was apparently faked five years prior). In the face of Zenia's individually tailored threats, this time none of them surrender to Zenia's Othering, leaving Zenia in a purgatory where she is no longer the Self of their subjectivity. But just as Zenia entered their lives a mystery, she leaves a

mystery as well: in the end, there are no firm reasons for Zenia's actions, no firm answers to the identity issues she resurrects in all three protagonists. Each woman has her private parting with Zenia, but crucially they remain a strong community, finally beginning to understand the power the evil woman represents within them.

Although Tony, Charis, and Roz all suffer—and ultimately grow—because of their interactions with the evil woman, this chapter focuses on Tony's experiences with Zenia in order to examine in-depth the identity struggle involved with understanding and embracing the evil woman. Because Tony opens and closes the narrative, her voice and perspective frame all three women's experiences. Tony is also the first of the three women to befriend Zenia in college; hence, readers' impressions of Zenia are forever stamped with Tony's point of view. Even as we learn more about Zenia through Charis's and Roz's encounters with the evil woman, we compare subsequent descriptions of Zenia with our initial opinion, courtesy of Tony. Furthermore, Tony is physically small, literally and figuratively hovering beneath Zenia's shadowy influence. This is an example of what critic Reingard M. Nishchik describes as Atwood's "inverse poetics of intertextual minuteness" (7), where Atwood fashions a "dichotomy between large and small [as] a motif that recurs frequently" (1) throughout Atwood's oeuvre. Tony inherently seeks to reverse the large-small binary that renders her physically weaker than Zenia. In addition, Tony embodies gender contradictions herself as a female war historian, positioning her within a male-dominated profession that looks closely at the past, analyzes, and even questions history and memory. The three-dimensional war map Tony houses in her basement emphasizes the diverging gender influences she represents, for Tony does not use conventional symbols to personify her warring nations: "For the armies and the

populations, Tony doesn't use pins or flags, not primarily. Instead she uses kitchen spices, a different one for each tribe or ethnic grouping" (*RB* 111). Whether peppercorns or coriander seeds, chocolate sprinkles or dill, Tony's idiosyncratic habit of using household items on her war table marries the political with the domestic, and establishes Tony's propensity to study war tactics and analyze the enemy's strategy, a skill she will return to later in her interaction with the evil woman.

As with *Cat's Eye*, *The Robber Bride* begins oriented around the evil woman, introducing Zenia before we meet the protagonists, which instantly prioritizes Zenia's subject position and indicates her importance to the trajectory of the narrative and the character development of Tony, Charis, and Roz. Although Tony's presence as one of the protagonists appears directly (in the second sentence), by placing Zenia first Atwood deliberately plunges us head-first into the evil woman, and intrigues us the same way Zenia intrigues the protagonists. Tony contextualizes Zenia, saying,

The story of Zenia ought to begin when Zenia began. It must have been someplace long ago and distant in space, thinks Tony; someplace bruised, and very tangled. A European print, hand-tinted, ochre-coloured, with dusty sunlight and a lot of bushes in it—bushes with thick leaves and ancient twisted roots, behind which, out of sight in the undergrowth and hinted at only by a boot protruding, or a slack hand, something ordinary but horrifying is taking place. (3)

Immediately we see Tony's desire to categorize and label Zenia, to fix her in time like an archaic "European print." Zenia becomes a work of art, a "hand-tinted, ochre-coloured" construction, "with dusty sunlight" setting the mood. There is something intoxicating and exotic about this image; already we wonder about Zenia's influence over Tony. Yet there

is also a feeling of danger and darkness commingling with this image, with its “ancient twisted roots” and “undergrowth.” Most importantly, the marriage of the “ordinary” with the “horrifying” warns readers that we must be on guard that things are not as they appear, and even “ordinary” images and people hold potential to inflict harm.

Here again, as she does in most her other novels, Atwood firmly grounds *The Robber Bride* in the “ordinary” Canadian setting of Toronto, positioning the novel within a Canadian context in order to address the multiplicity of identity issues Tony, Charis, and Roz grapple with. As critic Coral Ann Howells suggests, Atwood problematizes her previous identity inquiries with her portrayal of Zenia, “the European postwar immigrant, the Other Woman. ... It is Zenia’s otherness that forces these women to confront dimensions of otherness within themselves” (91). Not only the evil woman but the “Other Woman” too, the complicated layers of Zenia’s identity compel Tony to recognize myriad influences on her subject position, including the Othering of Canadian identity to the Self of American identity within North America. Tony’s intense identity query involves examining her position as a woman in the male-dominated field of history, considering the psychological role her alter ego warrior Ynot Tnomerf (born out Tony’s compulsive habit of spelling words backwards), and her non-gendered desire to serve as “protector” to mild-mannered husband West. Yet Tony’s identity struggle ultimately hinges on her ability to re-claim agency from Zenia by finding a resolution with her internalized evil woman and an understanding of the power she represents.

In spite of the “ordinary” setting of Toronto, there is nothing ordinary about Zenia, whom Tony describes as “beautiful ... like a high-fashion photo done with hot light” (*RB* 33). Even with three different descriptions of Zenia, we cannot summarize her

easily, if at all. In fact, because Atwood never furnishes a coherent story of Zenia's childhood to provide excuses for her actions as evil woman, there are no facile answers for what Zenia desires or why Zenia will seemingly stop at nothing to fulfill those desires. Instead, by providing *three* versions of Zenia, Atwood forces readers to judge whether or not we should understand and/or sympathize with Zenia. Learning Tony's, Charis's, and Roz's different perspectives about Zenia helps us realize how the evil woman impacts their lives in three different scenarios. The polyvalence of the three shifting points of view on Zenia allows Atwood to engage in a postmodern psychological interrogation that calls on different narrators to piece together Zenia's fragmented personal history, which emphasizes that there is no *one* universal story. There is no one definition of Zenia.

In spite of the shape-shifting and gender-panicking presence of Zenia in this narrative, critics have concentrated on many different aspects of *The Robber Bride*, including Howells' above-mentioned interrogation of Canadian identity, Aguiar's use of Jungian archetypal theory to understand Zenia, and Palumbo's examination of Atwood's "constant use of the double voice" (73). Others have analyzed Atwood's intertextual references to folkloric tales or highlighted the Gothic elements in the novel, while Bontatibus classifies the novel as a "contemporary ghost story" (np). This chapter seeks to draw attention to the gender performances Zenia employs to both subvert and gain power, and to supplement the existing critical examinations of *The Robber Bride* with an interrogation that stresses the critical role the evil woman's plays in Tony's, Charis's, and Roz's character development.

They've Come to Depend on Zenia

Tony, Charis, and Roz represent a departure from the previous communities of women that form in support of and deference to the evil woman. Whereas in *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye*, the community serves as an antagonistic force that reminds protagonists Joan and Elaine of their status as Other, in *The Robber Bride* the three women come together as an antidote to the wounds Zenia inflicts. They meet for lunch once a month, and Tony draws strength from the community she creates with Charis and Roz. Tony's adult interactions with Zenia create the frame through which we learn about Tony's childhood, when her mother abandoned Tony and her father and Tony began her odd habit of spelling words backwards to escape the reality of her dreary home life. Before the women's crucial lunch meeting at Toxique when they witness Zenia's re-emergence, Tony reflects on the importance of these meetings:

They've come to depend on it. They don't have much in common except the catastrophe that brought them together, if Zenia can be called a catastrophe; but over time they've developed a loyalty to one another, an *esprit de corps*. Tony has come to like these women; she's come to consider them close friends, or the next thing to it. They have gallantry, they have battle scars, they've been through fire; and each of them knows things about the others, by now, that nobody else does.

(RB 29)

A quirky war historian, Tony views her camaraderie with and loyalty to these women as a bond that can't be broken, for they draw on similar past experiences. In Tony's opinion, they are veterans, survivors of a war with the evil woman that has left them with "gallantry" and "battle scars"; they are better and stronger people for the experiences

they've endured with Zenia. Moreover, they have "developed a loyalty to one another" that comes as a result of the evil woman. In spite of our growing knowledge that Zenia has damaged all of them profoundly, we also see the positive fall-out from their battles in their "*esprit de corps*." Although their friendship may be cobbled together from the wreckage of Zenia, there is real friendship and loyalty that persist in these three survivors.

In spite of this *esprit de corps*, Tony has already surrendered her subjectivity to Zenia, so even though she gleans power from her alliance with Charis and Roz, she has already Othered herself to the internalized evil woman. As Stein remarks,

[Zenia] is the perceived enemy, a sexy Siren who lures men away from other women and then abandons them. ... she gains her power by professing that she is powerless and asserting that her listener is powerful and unique; she asks for help that only the listener can provide. By means of her stories, she charms each of the characters in succession. She is the consummate trickster, a tale teller, and a liar.

The novel's other women (Roz, Charis, and Tony) believe that she is evil. (164)

Stein accurately assesses how Zenia plays on gender norms of the "powerless" woman, exploiting Tony's desire to be "powerful and unique." By asking Tony for "help that only the listener can provide," Zenia creates a false subjectivity that elevates Tony to a perceived sense of Selfhood. Tony forms a psychological attachment to her abject role and doesn't recognize that Zenia actually subverts gender norms—through playing the "victim" and evoking the bonds of sisterhood—and ultimately manipulates the situation in order to place *herself* in the role of Self. Tony unknowingly surrenders to the Other position.

Zenia's shrewd understanding of audience creates an entry point with Tony—she becomes a reflection of Tony, the feedback Tony wants to hear, the audience *Tony* requires to feel heard and acknowledged. Zenia discerns Tony's interests and insecurities and then—poof!—becomes those interests and insecurities. Tony's intellectual vanity and vulnerability to female power relations opens up a space for Zenia to enter her psyche and shove aside Tony's ideas of subjectivity, replacing it with an attachment to Tony's confirmed [??] status of Other. In addition, Zenia manipulates Tony's attachment to her husband West. Catering a performance that accounts for the differences in gender norms of male and female, Zenia borrows whatever gender expectations and subverts whatever gender norms she needs to in order to achieve her goals. In reading Tony's weaknesses, Zenia becomes the mirror that initially reflects back a stronger Tony, allowing her to perceive herself as Self. And that is the danger. For Zenia is too clever to serve as a mere reflection; rather, Zenia appears to be the mirror, when in fact it is Tony who serves as *Zenia's* mirror. Zenia's trick is in giving Tony the impression that she is the Self, when in fact she remains the Other.

When Tony initially meets Zenia, she encounters a woman with whom she feels she truly connects. Zenia opens the door for Tony to talk about her family and past, and to talk in general. For someone unaccustomed to female attention, suddenly Tony has a captive audience, one too intoxicating to ignore. Tony meets Zenia through her future-husband, West, a classmate who dates Zenia and invites Tony to a party where Tony feels incredibly awkward. In a crowd of black-clad coeds, Zenia mesmerizes Tony, a vision in a white smock against the dark backdrop. Zenia singles out Tony, wondering what Tony's "obsession" is. Tony replies,

“I want to study war.” [And then she thinks] She shouldn’t have said it, she shouldn’t have told that much about herself, she’s put it wrong. She’s been ridiculous.

Zenia laughs, but it isn’t a mocking laugh. It’s a laugh of delight. She touches Tony’s arm, lightly, as in a game of tag played with cobwebs. “Let’s have coffee,” she says. And Tony smiles. (*RB* 128-29)

Here, Tony reveals her vulnerability in admitting her interest in war, as well as her desire to be validated by another woman. Zenia does not condescend to Tony; her laugh is not “mocking.” Connecting with another woman is novel for Tony, and exciting; for that woman to be as beautiful and awe-inspiring as Zenia thrills Tony. Moreover, Zenia reaches out to Tony physically, collapsing a boundary when she “touches Tony’s arm, lightly,” penetrating the barrier around Tony in a flirtatious manner, “as in a game.” Atwood’s reference to “cobwebs” alludes to a spider, suggesting that Zenia is perhaps a black widow luring Tony into her web.

Tony wonders why she was so drawn to Zenia, reflecting, “But what about Tony herself? What was Zenia offering her, or appearing to offer, as she stood there in the black kitchen, as she smiled with her fingers lightly on Tony’s arm, shimmering in the candlelight like a mirage?” (130). Zenia, of course, embodies what Tony is not: she is sexy where Tony is platonic, glamorous where Tony is frumpy, confident where Tony is insecure, powerful where Tony is powerless. In Zenia’s presence, Tony feels “obliterate[d] ... small and absurd: she feels nonexistent” (126). Zenia’s “shimmering ... mirage” seduces Tony, and her overt sexuality confuses gender norms “with her fingers lightly on Tony’s arm,” because Zenia ignores heteronormative behavior that restricts

sexual interactions to the male- female arena. Establishing physical contact places Zenia in the role of aggressor, the stereotypically male role that initiates intimacy. By performing the norm of male behavior, Zenia quickly ascertains her subject position as socially savvy and sexually poised, actively controlling the interchange, which relegates Tony to the abject position of passive recipient, “small and absurd,” unconfident and unsexual.

Later, after coffee shop confessions and in spite of Tony’s desire for West, she resolves not to compete with Zenia over a man because “Such a thing would be dishonourable: Zenia is her friend. Her best friend. Her only friend, come to think of it. Tony has not been in the habit of having friends” (159). Echoing *Cat’s Eye* where Elaine convinces herself that Cordelia is her best friend in spite of Cordelia’s malicious actions, here Tony cannot conceive of a friendship where one friend betrays the other. She displays the same fierce loyalty to Zenia that she later dedicates to Charis and Roz; although Tony is in love with West, she stifles her feelings and remains devoted to Zenia. This demonstrates the power Zenia lords over Tony, for she has created a “passionate attachment” in Tony to her alone—Zenia is, after all, Tony’s “only friend.” Losing the friendship of girls in her dormitory is insignificant, and Tony even loses her friendship with West: “So there’s Zenia and Tony now, and Zenia and West; but no longer any West and Tony” (159). As Tony becomes emotionally isolated, her dependence on Zenia grows.

Building on Tony’s social and emotional dependence, as well as Tony’s ignorance about socialization and relationships, Zenia redeploys expectations of gendered behavior to control her relationship with Tony. Zenia upholds gender norms when it benefits her—

performing the role of devoted girlfriend for Tony, playing victim for West—but ultimately subverts gender norms to maintain control, such as when she turns to the stereotype of female weakness to obtain power:

How can Tony refuse when Zenia comes to her room one evening, in tears and minus a term paper for Modern History ...

Tony is bewildered by [Zenia's] tears; she has thought of Zenia as tearless, more tearless even than herself. And now there are not only tears but many tears, rolling fluently down Zenia's strangely immobile face, which always looks made-up even when it isn't. (167-168)

Here, Zenia employs weakness and victimization as tools to subvert gender roles— her evocation of female bonding elevates Tony to a false sense of superiority and strength. Having read Tony's vulnerabilities, Zenia becomes the mirror that initially reflects back a stronger Tony, allowing Tony to perceive herself as a Subject. And that is the danger. Zenia is too clever to serve as a mere reflection; rather, Zenia appears to be the mirror, when in fact it is Tony who serves as *Zenia's* mirror. Zenia's trick is in giving Tony the impression that she is the Self, when in fact she remains the Other.

Furthermore, there is a physical collapse of identity here, of Zenia into Tony, where Tony allows herself to believe there is an intimate reciprocity between the two women. In spite of the danger, Tony agrees to write Zenia's term paper, rationalizing her behavior in spite of her knowledge that

She's stepping over a line, a line she respects. But Zenia is doing Tony's rebelliousness for her so it's only fair that Tony should write Zenia's term paper.

Or that is the equation Tony makes, at some level below words. Tony will be Zenia's right hand, because Zenia is certainly Tony's left one. (168)

Here Zenia and Tony occupy two sides of one entity, one set of hands joined to do Zenia's bidding. But where Tony is the "right" hand of morality, loyalty, and justice, Zenia is the "left" hand, exploiting the wrong side of Tony who will ignore "a line she respects" in order to maintain both her attachment to Zenia and Zenia's attachment to her. Folding together Tony and Zenia into one set of hands emphasizes the doubling that exists between them, the crucial bond that Zenia creates as evil woman to persuade Tony that she *needs* Zenia, even as she thinks she is acting because Zenia needs her.

Zenia continues to play the role of victim in order to retain power. As she manipulates Tony's sympathy, Tony does more favors for Zenia, culminating in researching and writing a term paper. In spite of Tony's trust and devotion to Zenia, Zenia does not reciprocate Tony's emotions. When Zenia threatens to inform their professor if Tony doesn't give her \$1000, Tony is astounded, her academic career and future at stake. She questions, "How did Zenia get so much power without Tony noticing? ... she trusted Zenia to use that power well. She trusted Zenia" (172). Tony's repetition of "trusted" indicates the level of betrayal occurring—Zenia's transgression is greater than anything Tony fathoms for a best friend. But Tony has surrendered her power to Zenia and become "passionately attached" to the subordinate position she upholds for the ideals of friendship. Meanwhile Zenia flaunts her confidence in her Self, perceiving no need to pander to Tony: "Zenia doesn't beg, she doesn't plead. She knows that Tony's response is a foregone conclusion" (172). This is the turning point in Tony's relationship with Zenia where Tony recognizes her subject position and acknowledges

that through her capitulation to the Other position she has become a “foregone conclusion.” As Tony begins to recognize how Zenia manipulates gender expectations, she admits it is not “fear” or a that Zenia uses effectively to attain power: “Not a show of strength. On the contrary, it was a show of weakness. The ultimate weapon” (188). Hence, while Zenia gives the impression that she is a victim, she ultimately claims agency through her redeployment of vulnerability and victimization, and turns Tony into the victim as she establishes herself in the powerful Self position.

In spite of being the victim of Zenia’s matrix of power and subversion of gender performances, Tony survives. During many years of friendship, she grows stronger in her community with Charis and Roz that forms in support of and deference to the evil woman. Through bearing witness to Charis’s and Roz’s encounters with Zenia, Tony grows ever more aware of Zenia’s gendered performances that simultaneously evoke stereotypical female weakness as they subvert gender expectations to attain power. When Tony arrives to help Charis cope with the aftermath of Zenia, Charis complains that she has been “stupid,” and Tony sympathizes, explaining, “ ‘Zenia is very good at what she does’ ” (278). For Tony, who has the psychological distance to assess Zenia’s actions, she can acknowledge Zenia’s masterful role playing—something that Charis is not yet able to recognize. Charis complains, “ ‘But I was sorry for her!’ ” (278) with tears reflecting her emotional confusion and hurt. Again, Tony identifies with Charis’s Other status—“So was I,” she says. “She’s an expert at that.” (278)—and even though Tony has not yet re-claimed her subjectivity from Zenia, she begins to see the power in Zenia’s gender performances, even praising Zenia’s expertise in gaining the powerful Self position.

But when Roz runs into Zenia at lunch, a seemingly random occurrence, she immediately calls Tony, who advises Roz, “You never just run into Zenia ... Look out, is my advice. What’s she up to? There must be something.” When Roz defends Zenia, believing Zenia has “changed,” Tony then strengthens her warning, stating “A leopard cannot change its spots.” As Roz attempts to explain the “new” Zenia, she also confides her suspicion that Zenia has had her breasts augmented, to which Tony replies, “That wouldn’t surprise me ... She’s upping her strike capability. But tits or no tits, watch your back” (350-51). Hoping to avoid bearing witness to the after-shocks of Zenia’s gendered power matrix for the third time, Tony does her best to warn Roz away from Zenia. (Roz, of course, must encounter the evil woman for her own character development.) But as Tony anticipates Zenia’s evil-woman behavior, she once again acknowledges the gender arms Zenia assembles in her arsenal. Here Zenia embodies the wild and savage as a leopard while simultaneously possessing the civilized tactics of war with her “strike capabilities.” The suggestion that Zenia’s breasts serve as a weapon of war further reinforces the commingling of male and female in Zenia, for Tony knows that Zenia understands when to fire with female (her breasts) and when to fire with the male (her shrewd gender war tactics).

As with Tony and Charis, Roz survives her interactions with Zenia. But then, “in drizzly March, Zenia dies” (379), an event that reunites the three women. The protagonists have all now encountered—and recovered from—the evil woman, and they attend Zenia’s funeral with the assumption that the evil woman is part of the past. However, five years later at their monthly lunch date, Tony, Charis, and Roz are

flabbergasted when Zenia sweeps into the restaurant, “strid[ing] past their table as if they aren’t there” (32), completely ignoring their existence. Tony comments,

They’re whispering, like conspirators. Why? thinks Tony. We have nothing to hide. We should march up to her and demand—what? How she could have the brass-plated nerve to still be alive? ...

They feel caught out, they feel trapped, they feel guilty. It should be Zenia who feels like that. (32)

When Zenia utterly disregards Tony, Charis, and Roz, she immediately re-establishes her subject position as Self. Subverting her own Otherness as an outsider to this community of women, Zenia’s claims the Self position as Tony “senses them all fading in the glare that spreads out from [Zenia]” (32). In spite of Tony’s knowledge that it is Zenia who has committed malevolent acts in the past, Tony’s internalized negative Other feelings resurface, causing her to feeling “trapped” and “guilty.” Although Tony is aware that it is *Zenia*—not herself—who should feel guilty, Tony must understand and embrace the evil woman before she can claim agency as the Self and control her own subjectivity.

Later that day, Tony re-engages her interrogation of the power of evil woman. She realizes she must get inside Zenia’s head, thinking, “*Imagine your enemy ... Put yourself in his place. Pretend you are him. Learn to predict him*” (37). As this passage indicates, Tony conceptualizes Zenia as a “him,” which collapses the male/female binary and suggests Zenia’s possession of both male and female character traits that enable her power. In addition, Tony’s evocation of war and the tactics of attack subvert gender norms, for it places Tony in a stereotypically male point-of-view. Her internal voice suggests Tony must utilize the techniques of the evil woman to gain power, such as

pretending to be something she is not. Tony will need to put herself in the place of the evil woman—the Self position—and “learn” to “predict” Zenia’s actions in order to incorporate the power of the evil woman that will ultimately bring her agency. Crucially, Tony has this conversation with herself, which emphasizes Zenia’s internalized presence and displays the power Zenia continues to wield as the evil woman. Tony must mount a confrontation, first psychologically with herself and then in person with Zenia, in order to acknowledge the power of the evil woman and re-claim that power for use in her own life. Only through understanding her fascination for, attraction to, and desire to be Zenia will Tony embrace the evil woman and realize her power.

Tony’s willingness to engage in self-reflection creates a separation between herself and the evil woman she has internalized, and Tony’s “passionate attachment” to her subordinate position begins to crumble when she admits an attraction to Zenia’s power. In fact, Tony can’t help but admire Zenia’s flair for performance, reinvention, and transformation, and she expresses a desire to possess the power Zenia brandishes. Tony reflects,

part of what [she] feels is admiration. Despite her disapproval, her dismay, all her past anguish, there’s a part of her that has wanted to cheer Zenia on, even to encourage her. To make her into a saga. To participate in her daring, her contempt for almost everything, her rapacity and lawlessness. (184)

Tony’s admiration for Zenia is multifaceted; while she recognizes that some of Zenia’s power creates “disapproval,” for war-obsessed Tony, there is something thrilling about “participat[ing] in [Zenia’s] daring.” She fantasizes about Zenia’s “saga,” acknowledging Zenia’s charisma, hubris, and power. Tony’s desire to encourage Zenia indicates that

Tony is starting to truly yearn for that power herself. She perceives Zenia's ability to break social codes in order to achieve goals, and Tony hopes to channel that power. However, Tony will have to confront Zenia one last time to "participate" fully in her own subjectivity and finally re-claim the Self position.

Becoming Zenia

With her battle scars intact and her growing awareness of the evil woman's psychological—and newly re-emerged physical—presence, Tony prepares to confront Zenia. This is the crucial scene in Tony's character development, when she looks directly at the evil woman and for the first time comprehends the power she represents does not have to be scary and evil; quite the opposite, the evil woman's power can be used for positive and benevolent purposes. Even more importantly, this power is not Zenia's alone—it is accessible to Tony. Hélène Cixous addresses fear of a powerful woman in her classic essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa," writing that in a phallogocentric culture, there is fear of sexual women, fear that females are a sex different from males, fear of women with power—a fear that can perpetuate more fear among women. Rather than rejecting or turning away from this power, however, Cixous suggests we must address it face-to-face. She writes, "You have only to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing" (355). Cixous implies that there is nothing to fear about a powerful woman, she is not "deadly" or frightening. What is required is looking more closely to discover the beauty there. For both women and men, the powerful woman—and in the context of *The Robber Bride* the evil woman—is happy, filled with laughter at the possibilities that exist when we acknowledge the

potential of the Medusa. Just as Cixous breaks the Medusa out of the archetype that relegates her to negative associations, as Tony recognizes the beauty and possibility that Zenia represents, she breaks the evil woman out of the archetype and frees her from the repressed psychological space she occupies. Through looking at the evil woman “straight on,” Tony realizes the power within her and discerns how to use it.

As Tony prepares to face the evil woman, she knows she cannot rely on Charis or Roz, because this is her singular journey toward subjectivity, one that she must forge as an individual. She remembers, “Tony herself, lacking strength, will have to rely on cunning. In order to defeat Zenia *she will have to become Zenia*, at least enough to anticipate her next move” (*RB* 190, my italics). Finally Tony recognizes that she must incorporate Zenia’s power in order to combat the evil woman head-on. Again recalling battle imagery, Tony combines the strength of her own war expertise with the evil woman’s cunning to arrive at an astute judgment of her audience. Through placing herself in the subject position, Tony becomes a powerful woman by channeling the power the evil woman represents. Becoming Zenia does not mean that Tony will simply mimic Zenia’s actions and consequences, however; rather, Tony will become the agent of her subject position, claiming the role of Self and no longer surrendering to an abject position in this relationship with the evil woman.

During their confrontation, Tony feels herself “sliding back down, back in, into that state she remembers so well [with Zenia]. Partnership. Pal-ship. The team” (407). But to slide back into this friendship necessitates Tony remaining in an abject position, and she will no longer participate in that process of self-sacrifice for Zenia. The crucial nature of Zenia’s power matrix requires Tony to willingly surrender power in a

hegemonic process where Tony empowers Zenia to fully embody the evil woman. By recognizing how this “pal-ship” operates, Tony sees how she has internalized the evil woman, reflecting “It’s Zenia doing this” but then quickly acknowledging, “It’s a necessary transformation perhaps, because fire must be fought with fire. But every weapon is two-edged, so there will be a price to pay: Tony won’t get out of this unaltered” (399). Nor should she, for as Tony herself acknowledges, this transformation is “necessary.” She must triumph over her own psychological attachment to her subordination to become powerful. Tony understands that the Zenia within her has already caused the changes that will empower her.

When Zenia suggests that she stay with Tony and West in their upstairs study, Tony “snaps to attention” (409), realizing Zenia is once again trying to re-establish the Self position in Tony’s life. When Tony calmly refuses to surrender to the Other, Zenia’s performance crumbles, and she attempts to intimidate Tony with insults, calling her a “two-faced hypocrite” with “megalomaniac pretensions” (409). However, Zenia’s “suave velvet cloak” (410) begins to fade and her composure shatters, for Tony has already embraced the Zenia within herself. Tony shows her power by simply standing firm against the onslaught of Zenia’s “pure freewheeling malevolence” (410). Tony’s “necessary transformation” has already occurred, and now she is confident and powerful, standing up for herself and silently claiming agency in the face of the evil woman.

Yet even in the end, as Tony rejects her Other status and asserts agency to claim the Self position, Zenia is not relegated to a one-dimensional character that Tony categorizes and dismisses. In her multiplicity, Zenia redefines the evil woman, and ultimately tempts Tony to orchestrate her own transformation, demonstrating agency in

their own subjectivity. Tony, too, evolves into a complex figure whose psychological composition becomes more dynamic through her understanding of gender relations and the power matrix that informs female friendships. Through the novel's conclusion, Atwood portrays Zenia as a multifaceted and complex woman who refuses to be restricted to one definition. And through her understanding of Zenia, Tony too becomes multifaceted, liberated from the victim role of Other.

Conclusion: "The Zenia-ness of Zenia"

In the end, what is Zenia's goal? Of that, we are never quite sure.

For Tony, of course, getting to the bottom of Zenia's motives involves getting to the bottom of her own role in Zenia's hegemonic game. Recalling one of her lectures, Tony reflects that she "doesn't know why she feels compelled to know. ... Zenia was a bad business, and should be left alone. Why try to decode her motives? / But Zenia is also a puzzle, a knot: if Tony could just find a loose end and pull, a great deal would come free, for everyone involved, and for herself as well" (3-4). Through decoding Zenia's reasons for acting as the evil woman, Tony tries to comprehend how she became "passionately attached" to her subject position, complicit in her own deception. Even in the end Zenia puzzles Tony, and her search for the "loose end" that will unravel the mystery of Zenia may never be found. There is a sense for readers, as well as for Tony, however, that there might be an answer to this "puzzle" of the evil woman. Naturally, Atwood provides no explanations or answers for Zenia's actions—like Tony, Charis, and Roz, we must fend for ourselves and untie this "knot" in order to come to an understanding of the evil woman.

Thus, coming to terms with Zenia is crucial for the character development of Tony, Charis, and Roz. As Palumbo states, “Coming to terms with Zenia means accepting their own potential for hostility, anger, and rage, and integrating it into themselves. Cut yourself off from these conventionally nonfeminine emotions, and they will return to you in distorted form” (83). The three women must accept the role the evil woman plays in order to come to terms with her power and the potential that power represents within themselves. As Tony comments after Zenia’s final death, they can’t “make [Zenia] vanish. Even if she does go, she’ll be back if she wants to come back. She’s a given. She’s just *there*, like the weather” (*RB* 439). The inevitability of Zenia’s presence is not a death sentence for the protagonists, however. Rather, Zenia is a shadowy presence that exists within Tony, Charis, and Roz that they may direct in order to claim agency and channel the power the evil woman represents within them. As Tony states near the end of the novel, “Zenia continues to exist” (460). To deny Zenia her place is to deny the potential within herself to understand gender norms and work within the gender matrix, renegotiating the norms in order to reject them and embrace the “nonfeminine emotions” represented by Zenia. Only through accepting her own potential to act powerful like Zenia—without becoming malevolent like Zenia—will Tony become her Self and control the form that this power assumes.

At the end of the novel, Tony, now with Charis and Roz, stands unified on the ferry, Zenia’s ashes in tow. The narrative visits each of their reflections before they scatter Zenia’s ashes (this time her death has not been faked). Each woman has her private parting with Zenia, moments of reflection where they bid farewell to Zenia but hold on to the power within them the evil woman represents. Crucially, in the end Tony,

Charis, and Roz prevail as a strong community, with the suggestion they will continue to grow stronger with their personal—and collective—acceptance of the evil woman. As all of them acknowledge their internalized Zenia, there is a sense of quiet acceptance about her presence resides within them, rather than the anger or fear they experienced in the past. Tony even questions, “Was [Zenia] in any way like us? ... Or, to put it the other way around: Are we in any way like her?” (466). Of course, Atwood offers no answers to these questions; Tony merely enters Charis’s house to join Roz and Charis for their interpretation of Zenia’s wake. Although Atwood never makes excuses for Zenia’s behavior, she leaves us with the impression that Tony, Charis, and Roz have found sympathy and understanding, essential qualities needed to incorporate the evil woman into their own subject positions. The evil woman is a necessary part of us all, Atwood seems to suggest, and the three women find that peaceful recognition at the end of the novel. Finally they can embrace Zenia without fear of negativity or being overpowered. Discovering the evil woman’s positive attributes allows Tony, Charis, and Roz to successfully incorporate and utilize the power of the evil woman and “become Zenia” (190).

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