Navigating the Antiheroine's Internalised Misogyny: Transformative Female Friendship in *Cat's Eye* and *The Robber Bride*

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Abstract

This paper focuses on Margaret Atwood's novels, *Cat's Eye* and *The Robber Bride*, as well as her short story "I Dream of Zenia with the Bright Red Teeth" in order to examine her complex construction of the elusive antiheroine, a figure who ultimately challenges the archetypal *femme fatale*, despite initially masquerading as the *femme*, villain, and antagonist of the text. The conclusions of *Cat's Eye* and *The Robber Bride* situate forgiveness as significantly important in the Gothic antiheroine's redemption and suggest that there is power in ambiguity, for both Cordelia and Zenia remain unknowable in their motives and perceptions. Yet while the protagonists' reconciliation with the dark Gothic double results in the relinquishment of internalised misogyny and subsequent realignment with the self, the very notion of forgiveness implies a (somewhat misplaced) wrongdoing. I argue that by framing Cordelia's and Zenia's acts as needing an explanation or absolution, their behaviour becomes unnatural, abject, and deviant, as opposed to being overtly read as consequences of a patriarchal system. The transgressions of Cordelia and Zenia in *Cat's Eye* and *The Robber Bride* thus border the line between villainy and antiheroism in ambiguous ways, reinforcing the Gothic antiheroine's liminal existence between denunciation and adherence to patriarchal norms.

Keywords: abjection, antiheroine, Atwood, female friendship, Gothic

At the conclusion to Margaret Atwood's 1988 novel, *Cat's Eye,* protagonist Elaine Risley expresses her resentment towards childhood nemesis, Cordelia, and acknowledges the internalized misogyny that has shaped both women's experiences. Atwood's centralization of female friendship in her narratives – a focus that "has been [and continues to be] distinctly peripheral in literature" (Brown, 1995, p. 197) – has received much scholarly attention. Most notably, much of the research surrounding her novels focuses on Atwood's narrative construction and use of doubling (Brown, 1995); her metanarratives and links to classic mythology (Alban, 2013); and the recurring use of symbols and metaphors across her many texts (Sternberg Perrakis, 2006). This paper focuses on her two novels, *Cat's Eye* (2009a) and *The Robber Bride* (2009b), and short story, "I Dream of Zenia with the Bright Red Teeth" (2012) in order to examine Atwood's complex construction of the elusive antiheroine, a figure who ultimately challenges the archetypal *femme fatale,* despite initially masquerading as the *femme,* villain, and antagonist of the text. Both Cordelia and Zenia (*The Robber Bride* and "I Dream") are fundamentally abject, sexually deviant, and linked with a "tainted" femininity; that is, they are ultimately punished for their (monstrous) transgressive behavior, as is typical of the antiheroine[1].

The conclusions of *Cat's Eye* and *The Robber Bride* situate forgiveness as significantly important in the Gothic antiheroine's redemption and suggest that there is power in ambiguity, for both Cordelia and Zenia remain unknowable in their motives and perceptions. Yet while the protagonists' reconciliation with the dark Gothic double results in the relinquishment of internalized misogyny and subsequent realignment with the self, the very notion of forgiveness implies a (somewhat misplaced) wrongdoing. I argue that by framing Cordelia's and Zenia's acts as needing an explanation or absolution, their behavior becomes unnatural, abject, and deviant, as opposed to being overtly read as consequences of a patriarchal system that actively silences individuals, namely women. The transgressions of Cordelia and Zenia in *Cat's Eye* and *The Robber Bride* thus border the line between villainy and antiheroism in ambiguous ways, reinforcing the Gothic antiheroine's liminal existence between denunciation and adherence to gender norms.

The Gothic Antiheroine

Indeed, and as Diana Wallace contends, while "the Female Gothic explains the ghosts, the male formula accepts the supernatural as part of the 'reality' of its world" (2013, p. 17), once again suggesting a higher standard against which female characters, and particularly antiheroines, are held. In her work on television antiheroines, Margaret Tally suggests that they "often must explain their aberrant behaviour and guilt about making choices that are perceived to be selfish or morally suspect" (2016, p. 10), and Cordelia and Zenia are no exception. Indeed, in a more recent study on the figure, Sarah Hagelin and Gillian Silverman contend that contemporary antiheroines are "characterised not by pluck but by punch and pathos… Her signature move… is a wholesale rejection of virtue and social responsibility" (2022, p. x). Cordelia and Zenia, while more essentialist in their expressions of stereotypically "feminine" behaviors such as deviancy and cunning, are positioned as generally irresponsible and inept in matters of social, cultural, and political life, much like Hagelin and Silverman's antiheroine. What is unique about these novels in the antiheroine context, though, is their thematic focus on female friendship, for as Julia Mason contends in her discussion of antihero mothers and women, "mainstream narratives often fail to include positive representations of women's friendship or sisterhood, which can serve to reinforce ideas about women not supporting each other" (2019,

[1] Edward Friedman writes that the antiheroine must suffer her "downfall" for the narrative to be complete, with "sexuality" being her "major weapon against society" (1987, p. xi).

p. 657). Atwood explores how female friendships can both perpetuate and eventually overcome internalized misogyny, despite the somewhat problematic conclusions. Elaine's relationship to her art – and thus, her expression of true self – is inextricably tied to her fraught "friendship" with her unlikely muse Cordelia, the childhood bully who led Elaine to near-death at age nine and who has haunted her for forty years. Operating as doubles for each other, "trapped in a perniciously symbiotic *doppelgänger* gaze" (Alban, 2013, p. 164), Elaine and Cordelia demonstrate the horrific impact of gendered othering on the construction of the self that continues to haunt the antiheroine's experience both in and beyond the Gothic genre. Similarly, the impact of the ambiguous, antiheroic Zenia on the lives of Tony, Charis, and Roz in *The Robber Bride* is life-altering in how she holds a mirror to their experiences and self-hatred. Both texts challenge the traditions of the Old-Gothic and reframe the villainous woman as multifaceted, ambiguous, and antiheroic, a transgressive rendering of femininity in a genre that has been historically dependent on women's subordination for the purposes of narrative intrigue.

The argument that Zenia and Cordelia act as mirrors for the protagonists in order for them to "access the dark underside of the self for the first time" (Sternberg Perrakis, 2006, p. 352) is not new, however its contextualization within the wider framework of the antiheroine narrative is largely unexplored. Despite this paper's analysis of Atwood's novels within the context of the (Female) Gothic mode, I argue that her characterization of the antiheroine transgresses genre. In both texts, there are ambiguous, liminal, and widely misunderstood antiheroines in Cordelia and Zenia, who are kept at a narrative distance from the reader. They are made monstrous by the protagonists in order for them to simultaneously denounce and understand them, and they garner sympathy, even likeability, despite their malicious behavior. Unable to fit in with her peers, Elaine comments that "sisterhood is a difficult concept for me… because I've never had a sister. Brotherhood is not" (2009a, loc. 5381).[2]

Atwood examines this problematic expression of internalized misogyny that encourages women into what feminist scholar and psychoanalyst Hélène Cixous calls acts of "antinarcissism," a "narcissism which loves itself only to be loved for what women haven't got!" (1976, p. 878). Indeed, the protagonists of both novels turn against themselves in self-hatred and fear and internalise misogynist ideals surrounding women as "other" and inferior. As contradictory figures, both Cordelia and Zenia exemplify the Gothic's tension between "mimic[king] the polarisation of women in Western society" and "challeng[ing] damaging stereotypes" (Horner & Zlosnik, 2016, p. 2), yet Atwood's short story, "I Dream," posits a new framework for understanding the antiheroine as no longer oppositional but allied.

From Childhood Enemy to Gothic Double: The Dual Antiheroism of Cordelia and Elaine in *Cat's Eye*

The thematic recurrences in *Cat's Eye* revolve around the passing of time, the inescapability of the past, and the fragility of memory. Protagonist Elaine's past is viscerally omnipresent as she recalls her time as Cordelia's friend: "You don't look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away" (Atwood, 2009a, loc. 157). The memories of Elaine's childhood are presented alongside a present-day narrative in which she returns to her hometown of Toronto for a retrospective art show of her works. Present-day Elaine is bitter, cynical, and trapped in the memories of her childhood trauma surrounding bullying and self-harm: "Get me out of this,

[2] I refer to locations ("loc.") instead of page numbers for *The Blind Assassin*, as I read a Kindle edition.

Cordelia. I'm locked in. I don't want to be nine for ever" (loc. 6260). While the classic Gothic heroine experiences entrapment of the physical kind, Elaine's prison is a mental one, an invisible force that filters through and poisons her life. As Eve Sedgwick contends, Gothic texts feature individuals who are often "spatialized" in relation to conventions and "massive[ly] blocked off from something to which [they] ought normally to have access" (1986, p. 12). This might be repressed pasts, a lover, "the free air" (p. 12), or, in Elaine's case, her authentic self. A daughter of eccentric parents, Elaine lives a nomadic life until her family settles down in Toronto where she meets Carol, Grace, and eventually, Cordelia, childhood friends who introduce her to the harsh world of femininity. She describes it as "unfolding, being revealed to me," noting that "there's a whole world of girls and their doings that has been unknown to me...I can be a part of it without making any effort at all" (loc. 891). The friendship is undeniably toxic, described by Gillian M.E. Alban as "desired yet dreaded" (2013, p. 169) in nature, much like the abject or the uncanny in the way both inspire simultaneous allure and repulsion. Subjected to constant surveillance by the girls, Elaine becomes physically and emotionally unwell, begins self-harming, and starts fainting on purpose once she realizes it is a "way out of places you want to leave…like stepping sideways, out of your own body, out of time or into another time" (2009a, loc. 2713). The turning-point of the story – one that enables Elaine to escape from the girls' influence – comes when she nearly drowns in a frozen lake after being forced to retrieve her hat, which Cordelia threw over the bridge and into the water. As the years pass, Elaine struggles to recall a formative memory of the girls, having repressed the worst of their experiences: "They're like the names of distant cousins, people who live far away, people I hardly know. Time is missing" (loc. 3117), and yet the memories are vividly detailed in their trauma. As is Atwood's style, neither Elaine nor Cordelia is perfect nor wholeheartedly evil, and it is this challenge to the rigidity of Gothic stereotypes that allows the antiheroine to flourish and evolve in her novels.

Like Zenia, Cordelia is morally ambiguous, operating as both tormentor and friend, and as Elaine's Gothic double: "We are like the twins in old fables, each of whom has been given half a key" (2009a, loc. 6406). As Alban argues, "the symbiosis of these two 'friends' ultimately paralyses both" (2013, p. 174), leading both women to "change places as Medusan severed heads" (p. 170) in the novel: Elaine is buried by the girls in an imitation of Mary Queen of Scots, and Cordelia embarrassingly drops a rotten cabbage disguised as a head in one of her stage plays. Indeed, Cordelia is first introduced to the reader and Elaine in a way that aligns her, and Carol and Grace beside her, with traditional notions of female deviancy: the girls are "standing among the apple trees, just where [Elaine] left them. But they don't look the same" (2009a, loc. 1131), and the trees are "covered with scabby apples, red ones and yellow ones…the apples mush under [Elaine's] feet" (loc. 1138). Atwood is not aligning Cordelia with female original sin but symbolizing the girls' premature introduction to the patriarchal world that is about to destroy their childhood innocence. It is this focus on both Cordelia and Elaine, specifically, as unwitting child victims to gender constraints that stops either woman from descending into unlikeable, deviant, and *femme* territory. It is only in Elaine's adult years that she begins to question that "women I have thought were stupid, or wimps, may simply have been hiding things, as I was" (loc. 5381).

Further, Cordelia is shrouded in ambiguity that allows her to operate in the liminal spaces between victim and abuser, enemy and friend. Elaine frequently dreams of Cordelia "falling, from a cliff or bridge, against a background of twilight," or "standing in the old Queen Mary schoolyard…wearing her snowsuit jacket" (2009a, loc. 5660), and it becomes clear that Cordelia's treatment of Elaine could very easily have occurred if their roles were reversed. When recalling the day of Elaine's near drowning, her mother nonchalantly states that "I never

thought she was behind it. It was that Grace, not Cordelia. Grace put her up to it, I always thought" (loc. 6170). While this could be dismissed as a mere oversight by Elaine's unobservant mother, the novel's preoccupation with the precarious nature of memory only adds to this ambiguity: "I am growing confused myself. My memory is tremulous, like water breathed on" (loc. 6176). The dual entanglement that the two women remain trapped in is symbolized in Elaine's painting of Cordelia called "Half a Face," an "odd title, because Cordelia's entire face is visible" (loc. 3519). Elaine narrates:

> It was hard for me to fix Cordelia in one time, at one age. I wanted her about thirteen, looking out with that defiant, almost belligerent stare of hers. So? 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. (Atwood, 2009a, loc. 3519)

Cordelia's face, half "covered with a white cloth" (loc. 3519) speaks to this ambiguity, to the monstrous-feminine, and to that which "beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 1). Kristeva writes that "the abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to I" (p. 1), and it is only through Elaine's identification with Cordelia as her repressed, symbolic twin that she is able to free them both. It is in this recognition of shared trauma, epitomized by internalized self-hatred, that the two women are freed from restraints of their own making and ultimately unified.

Aligning with the Female Gothic mode, *Cat's Eye* is less concerned with traditional notions of entrapment in decaying mansions and more interested in the pervasive, imprisoning threat of patriarchal violence. When Cordelia attempts to frighten the girls with tales of "dissolved dead people" (2009a, loc. 1234) lurking under the bridge, Elaine narrates that "the reason the ravine is forbidden to us is not the dead people but the men" (loc. 1241). This justified terror of patriarchal violence sits uneasily alongside Elaine's internalized misogyny and hatred of other women. Present-day Elaine imagines a scene where "some man chases Cordelia along the sidewalk…catches up with her, punches her in the ribs… throws her down," and despite not being able to "go any farther" (loc. 217) with the vision, she takes some delight in mentally punishing Cordelia. The irony in Elaine's near drowning in the ravine is that it *is* the fault of patriarchy, for the girls are representative of its most hideous ideologies:

> 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. She likes me, she wants to help me, they all do. They are my friends, my girlfriends, my best friends. I have never had any before and I'm terrified of losing them. I want to please. Hatred would have been easier. With hatred, I would have known what to do. Hatred is clear, metallic, one-handed, unwavering; unlike love. (Atwood, 2009a, loc. 1903)

Elaine's anxiety about pleasing the friends who scrutinize her under intense (patriarchal) surveillance speaks to Hélène Cixous' contention that "men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves" (1976, p. 878). Not only does this misogyny manifest outwardly towards other women, but also inwardly. Cixous writes, "we've been turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them" (p. 885), a reality which manifests early on in Elaine's life when, while under the enduring power of Cordelia, she feels "sick to [her] stomach every morning" (2009a, loc. 2199) and unexpectedly vomits

in front of the girls. She writes that it "feels like bits of carrot" (loc. 2203), a deliberate evocation of phallic imagery that echoes Cordelia's earlier comments that "men have carrots between their legs. They aren't really carrots but something worse" (loc. 1502). Elaine's abject response to the girls' abuse exposes her anxieties surrounding the expectations of women in a sexual world, one that she is on the brink of understanding for herself: "We examine our legs and underarms for sprouting hairs, our chests for swellings. But nothing is happening: so far we are safe" (loc. 1489). This abject relationship to the physical self and to the dangers of the female body, suggests that the Gothic antiheroine's unwitting prison is her own mind.

This self-surveillance emerges for Elaine out of the girls' inconsistent treatment of her – one minute they are "linking their arms through mine, asking me how I feel" (2009a, loc. 2734), the next, viciously berating her. The "major effect of the Panopticon," as Foucault writes in *Discipline and Punish,* is "to induce…a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (1979, p. 201). The pervasiveness of Cordelia's power leads to Elaine's mental imprisonment extending far beyond childhood. According to Foucault, power should be "visible and unverifiable" (p. 201), operating in a subversive way so that the subject will know they are being watched, but not know *when* this occurs. Elaine is subjected to this twofold: she is both a victim to the patriarchal system itself, and to the girls who have weaponized it against her. Indeed, "it does not matter who exercises power" for "any individual…can operate the machine" (p. 202), and both Cordelia and Zenia are the vehicles through which this patriarchal power and its associated punishments are exercised. The power dynamic between Elaine and Cordelia switches as Elaine reaches adolescence, and she narrates that she is "not afraid of seeing Cordelia," but 'afraid of being Cordelia. Because in some way [they] changed places, I've forgotten when" (2009a, loc. 3526). This fear comes to fruition as Elaine transforms into her most hated subject: "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" (loc. 3633). This patriarchal, self-fulfilling cycle of "antinarcissism" (Cixous, 1976, p. 878) causes both Elaine and Cordelia to self-harm, a physical mutilation of the body that many antiheroines exercise.[3] The pain of ripping skin off her feet gives Elaine "something definite to think about, something immediate," (2009a, loc. 1797) and it is "an old habit [she] cannot seem to break" (loc. 6166) even in adulthood. Cordelia herself is institutionalized for attempting suicide, and she begs a reluctant Elaine to help her escape: "'So you won't,' she says. And then, forlornly: 'I guess you've always hated me'" (loc. 5649). Poignantly, it is Elaine's escape from the cycle of internalized misogyny that frees both women, for "only [Elaine] can return Cordelia what she needs" (Alban, 2013, p. 169).

The conclusion of *Cat's Eye* restores order to the fractured identities of the two women, and Elaine's reconciliation with Cordelia's memory marks her true emancipation from her trauma: for "an eye for an eye leads only to more blindness" (2009a, loc. 6305). Unlike Zenia, who suffers her stereotypical "downfall" and is killed at the end of *The Robber Bride* (despite her later redemption in Atwood's short story), Cordelia's future remains unknown. As Elaine notes, "I'm headed for a future in which I sprawl propped in a wheelchair, shedding hair and drooling… While Cordelia vanishes and vanishes" (loc. 6427). Immortalized in this way, Cordelia becomes supernatural in her ambiguity, much like Zenia, forever young and unknowable, misunderstood. Returning to the bridge where she nearly lost her life, Elaine imagines Cordelia standing "halfway up the hill, gazing back over her shoulder" (loc. 6491). She narrates: "I reach out my arms to her, bend down, hands open to show I have no weapon.

[3] Examples include Amy Dunne and Camille Preaker from Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* and *Sharp Objects*; Ayoola from Oyinkan Braithwaite's *My Sister, the Serial Killer*; Lisbeth Salander from the *Millennium* trilogy (her tattooing can be figured as self-mutilation); and Eileen from Ottessa Moshfegh's novel *Eileen*.

It's all right, I say to her. *You can go home now.* The snow in my eyes withdraws like smoke" (loc. 6482). Having united the lost halves of herself, Elaine, like *The Robber Bride*'s Tony, Charis and Roz, is able to reconcile with the dark, troubling double and rather than expel her out as the Old-Gothic would encourage, accept her as part of the redemptive narrative. This subversion to the traditional dichotomy of the "good and evil woman" (Fleenor, 1983, p. 11) has indeed manifested physically and internally for the Gothic antiheroine, however it is overcome in these Atwood texts. This suggests that while the antiheroine is still limited to the oppressive patriarchal system from which she emerges, she *is* eventually able to escape its confines through the protagonist's reconciliation with her as the dark, *femme*-masquerading double: a very Gothic undertaking indeed.

The Elusive "Villain" as Antiheroic Saviour in *The Robber Bride*

The Robber Bride begins with protagonists Tony, Charis, and Roz meeting at their favorite café, the Toxique, for their monthly lunch, a regularity they had "come to depend on" since the "catastrophe" that was Zenia (Atwood, 2009b*,* p. 51). The novel switches between the past and the present, detailing each women's intense interactions and friendship with the mysterious antiheroine, who single-handedly destroys each of their romantic relationships. Zenia's ability to insert herself into the lives of each woman is what allows her to betray them so thoroughly. Yet, Atwood ultimately presents this betrayal with ambiguity, for Zenia's malicious behavior ultimately saves each woman from a toxic relationship (ironic, considering the name of the café). Consistently described via vampire imagery and abject language, Zenia is deliberately shrouded in mystery, existing as both an object of envy and a hated subject in the eyes of Tony, Charis, and Roz, each of whom markedly represents second-wave ideologies related to, as June Hannam argues in her discussion of the second wave, the bringing of "anxieties about the body, sexuality and relationships" into the political sphere (2011, p. 81). Indeed, this era saw the politicization of the personal and the centralization of (white) identity politics, where women were beginning to question the ways they "were expected to conform to particular ideas of femininity" (p. 81). Atwood's positioning of Zenia as enigmatic and elusive reinforces her liminal status, that which allows her to infiltrate the women's lives so seamlessly and impactfully. After Zenia "returns from the dead" (p. 19) at the beginning of the novel, much to the protagonists' horror, each woman confronts her one last time, in a final standoff that is filled with more of Zenia's lies and manipulation. Zenia's (actual) mysterious death at the end of the novel signifies the beginning of new life for the protagonists, and yet each is changed by their respective relationship with the "cold and treacherous bitch" that is Zenia (p. 509).

Zenia's status as an antiheroine, as opposed to gothic villain or *femme fatale,* lies partially in the ambiguity of her motives. The beginning of Atwood's novel positions Zenia as the focal point of the narrative, despite her function as an unknowable object: "the story of Zenia ought to begin where Zenia began" (2009b*,* p. 14). Of course, gaining an accurate knowledge of Zenia's history is impossible, for when asked about the truth of her life story, Zenia "would lie earnestly, with a catch in her voice, a quaver of suppressed grief" (p. 14). Tony, whose mother walked out on her at a young age, learns that Zenia's own mother sold her into child prostitution and Tony is horrified, "electrified" (p. 165) by the story, despite the fact that her "own little history has dwindled considerably" (p. 167) in the shadow of Zenia's revelation. Taking advantage of Charis' generous nature, Zenia reveals that she has cancer, which allows her an entry point into Charis' life (and couch), while for Roz, Zenia concocts a story about how Roz's father saved Zenia and her family during the war in Berlin. The gift of storytelling allows Zenia to act as a kind of double to the women, for she is "constructed…from the many stories they tell her" (Tolan, 2007, p. 53): "My own monster, thinks Roz. I thought I could control her.

Then she broke loose" (2009b, p. 102). As Tolan observes, "Zenia in her Gothic doubleness contains numerous multiplicities and contradictions" (2007, p. 54), for while she eventually steals the lovers/husbands of the three protagonists, she is, at least for a short time, also the closest friend of each. The advice that she gives the women throughout their friendships runs contradictorily to these outcomes, revealing a deeper motive. She warns the women that "all men are warped. This is something you must never forget" (2009b, p. 136) and "they're all just rapists at heart" (p. 225), and yet, to the women, she is merely the "up-market slut" (p. 286) who steals their lovers, as opposed to the fierce feminist friend they need. Zenia personifies the "phenomenon of the unstable boundary" (Murphy, 2016, p. 27) inherent in Gothic narratives, and it is this ambiguity that underpins her function as a formidable antiheroine.

Much of the critical discourse surrounding Zenia explores her embodiment of postfeminist ideals that exist in direct contrast to the second-wave characteristics of Tony, Charis, and Roz (Tolan, 2007). As a confident, sexual, manipulative "man-eater" (2009b, p. 377), Zenia is deliberately ambiguous and ultimately functions as a representation of cultural anxieties surrounding female sexuality and abjection. Zenia operates as the object of the protagonists' envy, for, as Jean Wyatt observes, "her thoughts and feelings are never recorded; no subjectivity, no inner world, confronts the reader directly" (1998, p. 41). This elusive distance allows Zenia to also represent the darker aspects of female and individual subjectivity that early feminism sought to repress in favour of a collective "sisterhood." Indeed, Zenia "both represents and evokes the feelings the women are leaving out of their friendship – rage, envy, and violence against women" (p. 58), and in writing her this way, Atwood reinforces the importance of a multifaceted and complex feminist identity. Zenia thus rejects the binary stereotypes that have historically underpinned the Female Gothic, emerging as an entirely original representation of antiheroism.

Zenia's death at the conclusion of the novel, however, complicates the subversive feminist ideal that Atwood puts forward. Fiona Tolan argues that "if postfeminism is to be read as an entirely negative phenomenon – an *anti*-feminism – then this conclusion proves satisfactory as feminism triumphs" (2007, p. 54). Highlighting the ambiguous nature of the Gothic mode, Tolan acknowledges how the genre is both "empowering and imprisoning to the female character," particularly when it comes to Zenia, who is "something to be both desired and feared" (p. 54) by the other protagonists. As a rejector of the traditional idea of the heroine, and, indeed, the *femme fatale,* Zenia must be destroyed, but not entirely. Through an analysis of the short story and sequel to *The Robber Bride,* "I Dream of Zenia with the Bright Red Teeth" (2012), I argue that through the spiritual revival of Zenia, Atwood rectifies her previous denunciation of postfeminist ideals and frames Zenia as a transformative and positive influence on the protagonists. In re-establishing Zenia within the lives of the three women who are now older, wiser, and happily independent, Atwood addresses the suggestion posed by critics that "maybe Zenia's intentions were benevolent all along" (p. 63). Read in this way, Zenia's death and subsequent revival can be viewed as a disruption to the familiar narrative that favors the antiheroine's downfall, ultimately subverting the "punishment" that death often serves these antiheroic figures.

Indeed, Zenia's confident embodiment of postfeminist sexual ideals also disrupts the notion that the antiheroine must possess "problematic sexual aspects" (Tzikas, 2011, p. 158). When confronted by Zenia's return from the dead in *The Robber Bride*, the women describe her as being "as beautiful as ever," as she "sits unmoving, as still as if she were carved" (2009b, p. 42), a modern-day Miss Havisham, in the Toxique where they regularly meet. Her perfume is "the smell of scorched earth" (p. 41), and her "purple-red angry mouth" stands out amongst her

"startling new breasts" (p. 75); in this moment, she is simultaneously the object of their envy and fear. Certainly, for Atwood's protagonists it is Zenia's physical body more than her sexual expression which poses a threat to their sense of propriety and order, with Charis feeling the overwhelming need to reassert and ground herself upon Zenia's return from the dead: "*My body, mine,* she repeats. *I am a good person. I exist*" (p. 101). As Sternberg Perrakis contends, Zenia represents the gothic notion of excess, as the "protagonists perceive her as overflowing the boundaries of the bodily envelope" (1997, p. 50). Indeed, the alignment of Zenia with vampiric imagery elevates her to a position of abjection in the eyes of the women. Zenia certainly "beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 1), and is representative of the "immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady" (p. 4) aspects of abjection that cross all boundaries of understanding and order.

Aside from the overtly monstrous and Gothic descriptions of Zenia as a literal vampire, someone who "can't cross your threshold unless you invite them in" (2009b*,* p. 58), she represents the epitome of abjection in her "return from the dead." The women equate Zenia's sexual body with death, noting that "those things don't burn when you cremate them either; that's the rumour going around, about artificial boobs" (p. 87). As Tolan notes, "by magnifying Zenia to monstrous proportions, they simultaneously validate their own status as her victims," a process through which they can "inscribe themselves as innocent victims of an external and supernatural threat" (2007, p. 50). In considering her as the abject, sexual "other" – as "Zenia, chicken murderer, drinker of innocent blood… Zenia, aphid of the soul" (2009b, p. 279) – the women can maintain their second-wave sentimentalities with dignity, without fear of the threat of postfeminism (Tolan, 2007). Rather than existing as a sexually problematic antiheroine in and of herself, Zenia functions as a mirror to the sexual anxieties of the other women, forcing them to face their own self-hatred and psychologically damaging relationships with their respective lovers. This aligns with Fleenor's contention that the Female Gothic prompts an inward reflection of the female self, an ambivalence which leads to "feelings of self-disgust and self-fear" (1983, p. 11). Atwood positions this internalization of misogyny as an obstacle to be overcome, with Zenia functioning as an agitating agent of patriarchal expectations; ultimately, the positioning of her existence as a threat to the protagonists exposes the many ways that patriarchy's policing and regulating of women's bodies forces them into self-surveillance and control.

Zenia becomes the embodiment of abjection when her corpse is discovered, her "white mermaid eyes" (2009b, p. 428) staring blankly at the women as she lies in the hotel fountain, "her cloudy hair floating" (p. 433) around her. Ironically, the women find out that Zenia was, in fact, dying from ovarian cancer, the disease she had lied to Charis about having all those years before. The unmistakable link between sexual desire, motherhood, and decay is prevalent here, and something that Zenia is positioned as having avoided in her premature death. Even in death, Tony is left wondering, "what if Zenia's cries for help really were cries for help, this time?" (p. 438), her hold over the women as strong as ever. Zenia's continued presence in their lives is hinted at in her ambiguous "return" at the end of the novel: "Tony stares up at Zenia, cornered on the balcony with her failing magic, balancing on the sharp edge, her bag of tricks finally empty" (p. 448). Tony likens Zenia to Medusa with her "dark eyes, the snaky hair" (p. 448), and yet she wonders, "was she in any way like us? ...Or, to put it the other way around: Are we in any way like her?" (p. 449). Like Cordelia, Zenia is aligned with traditional notions of deviancy, but this is ultimately challenged by Atwood. Zenia's legacy is that she allows the women to embrace the darker sides of their personality, ultimately "restoring to a feminist community the right to envy" (Wyatt, 1998, p. 59). Indeed, "the story of Zenia is insubstantial, ownerless, a rumour only, drifting from mouth to mouth and changing as it goes" (2009b, p.

440), and yet, at the conclusion of the novel, this is the narrative that they wish to tell, as they embrace the idea that "tonight their stories will be about Zenia" (p. 448). Zenia exemplifies one of the Victor Turner's "liminal *personae* ('threshold people')" in that her ambiguity causes her to "elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space" (2017 [1969], p. 95); it is in this space of intangibility where Zenia thrives as the antiheroine of Atwood's novel.

Indeed, Tolan contends that Zenia "threatens the stability of each of the women" (2007, p. 45) in her representation of postfeminist ideals, forcing them to confront and re-evaluate their assumptions about femininity and sexuality. Phillis Sternberg Perrakis suggests that "Zenia's function is ultimately transformative, forcing the three protagonists out of submissive relationships" (1997, p. 152), and subsequently allowing them to form their own sense of individualism. Within a postfeminist framework, Zenia is representative of the "double entanglement" that postfeminist scholar Angela McRobbie describes (2004, p. 255), which "comprises the co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life…with processes of liberalisation in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations" (pp. 255–256). Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon define this as a movement which "takes feminism 'into account' only to repudiate it" (2018, p. 28), and Zenia functions in such a contradictory way; she is both an enviable, empowered subject in her progressive sexual expression, while simultaneously embodying the ways in which patriarchy seeks to erode women of their sense of self. This postfeminist notion of "choice" is certainly a "modality of constraint," for "the individual is compelled to be the kind of subject who can make the right choices" (McRobbie, 2004, p. 261). Zenia is representative of the desired outcome of this internal battle in her blatant self-confidence, but her presence causes the others to reflect upon their own perceived failings as women within the context of postfeminism's rhetoric of choice.

However, Atwood's short story "I Dream of Zenia with the Bright Red Teeth" (2012) repositions Zenia as a positive influence in the protagonists' lives. In the sequel, Zenia is but a distant memory for the three women, who have "lost track" (p. 59) of when she died, yet the repercussions of her actions are still notably present. Charis, the most gothic of the three women in her propensity for clairvoyant prophecies, reveals that she had a dream about Zenia wearing "a sort of shroud thing…more like a nightgown," with "kind of pointy" (p. 60) teeth, a comment that causes her dog, Ouida, to erupt in an excited burst of energy. Dressed in white, Charis' dream-like Zenia is reminiscent of the subdued "mad-woman" of gothic literature, her mysterious "floaty" (p. 60) appearance akin to the descriptions of Bertha Mason stalking Thornfield Hall in *Jane Eyre*. Zenia's alignment with monstrosity in *The Robber Bride* is similar to Brontë's "clothed hyena" (2010, p. 296), a brutal image of Bertha with "red eyes" and a "savage face" (p. 286). However, Atwood's realignment of Zenia in "I Dream" allows her to operate in a similar way to Jean Rhys' Antoinette, in that she is stripped of her previously perceived monstrosity and reinstated as woman. Charis notes that "she wasn't menacing or anything. In fact, she seemed kind of friendly. She had a message for me. What she said was, Billy's coming back," and indeed, it is revealed that Charis rents her house next door to "deadbeat" Billy, much to her friends' dismay (2012, p. 61). Tony and Roz ponder over how to save their friend from almost certain heartbreak, but this time, it is not about another woman, but Billy the "psychopath" (p. 62). Rather than blaming the "other woman," the oft-demonised figure of gothic literature, Atwood returns to the root of the women's anguish: their problematic relationships with men. Zenia's framing as an ambivalent antiheroine is cemented in Atwood's repositioning of her as a specifically positive impact on the women's lives. Charis believes that Ouida is Zenia reincarnated, and Atwood certainly suggests this, with Ouida's perfectly timed

interruptions when Zenia is the topic of discussion. Ouida attacks Billy aggressively enough to send him to the hospital, ultimately leading to his departure from Charis' life, "never to be seen again" (p. 63). Charis contemplates Zenia's previous actions in light of these events:

> Maybe she stole Billy to protect Charis from such a bad apple as him. Maybe she stole West to teach Tony a life lesson about well, music appreciation or something, and maybe she stole Mitch to clear the way for Roz's better husband, Sam. Maybe Zenia was, like, the secret alter ego of each of them, acting out stuff for them they didn't have the strength to act out by themselves. When you looked at it that way… (Atwood, 2012, p. 63).

Surpassing the emotions of envy and jealousy, Tony, Charis, and Roz envision Zenia as a sort of guardian angel, always protecting them in the form of Ouida, as she did (indirectly) in life. Atwood's story concludes with a subtle nod to Zenia's postfeminist embracement of sexuality, noting that Ouida approves of Charis' new love-interest and "flirts with him shamelessly" (p. 63). Through this faux revival of Zenia (albeit in the form of a dog), Atwood is able to reverse her previous silencing of the antiheroine, ultimately elevating Zenia to a transcendental position in the lives of those she has impacted.

Conclusion

Atwood's protagonists in *The Robber Bride* are quick to separate themselves from an identification with Zenia, which leads to their own ambiguous sense of self. This can be contrasted to the ending of *Cat's Eye*, where Elaine finds peace and closure by her identification *with* Cordelia in her understanding of them as symbiotic twins. Helen Hanson argues that:

> …the female gothic text is interesting precisely because it explores the negotiations of 'female selfhood'. And it does so textually through the female gothic heroine's identification of another woman's story, and her determination of her own fate as different. 'Not being like that' is the formation of the heroine's self-image, as distinct from a woman in the past, and 'not being like that' also constitutes survival (2007, pp. 61–62).

"The other woman," often categorized by the *femme fatale* or deviant other, is almost always opposed to essentialist feminism, making her a contradictory and potentially transgressive figure. For Elaine, "negotiations of 'female selfhood'" (2007, p. 62) are ultimately explored not through a rejection or denunciation of "the other woman," but through an alignment with her, supporting Abel's contention that novels depicting "actual friendships" of women focus on identification rather than complementarity as the "mechanism that draws women together" (1981, p. 415). Indeed, at the end of *Cat's Eye,* Elaine ponders how differently her friendship with Cordelia could have turned out had they been amicable friends: "This is what I miss, Cordelia: not something that's gone, but something that will never happen. Two old women giggling over their tea" (2009a, loc. 6520). In *The Robber Bride* the protagonists both hate and love Zenia, while also turning this hatred toward themselves, in an act of Cixous' "antinarcissism" or "antilove" (1976, p. 878). Certainly, Elaine fears becoming Cordelia but only because she knows that they are one and the same, "twins in old fables" (2009a*,* loc. 6399); the fear is of the dark side of herself. The conclusions to *Cat's Eye* and *The Robber Bride* speak to Cixous' hope for a less fragmented notion of sisterhood: "It is necessary and sufficient that the best of herself be given to woman by another woman for her to be able to love herself and return in love the body that was 'born'" (1976, p. 882). Despite being partially responsible for

the women's inner turmoil, Cordelia and Zenia ultimately enable their victims to solve their identity crises. Unable to be inherently and inexcusably bad, Cordelia and Zenia are *forgiven* for their behavior in an emancipatory act of closure – yet the gendered ideologies responsible for their creation remain operational.

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