

Freed from the Salt Mines of Virtue: Wicked Women in Margaret Atwood's Novels

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[In literature,] were women to be condemned to virtue for life, slaves in the salt-mines of goodness? How intolerable. (Margaret Atwood)

In her well-known essay entitled "Spotty-Handed Villainesses: Problems of Female Bad Behaviour in the Creation of Literature," Margaret Atwood asks, "But is it not, today—well, somehow *unfeminist* to depict a woman behaving badly?" She continues: "When bad women get into literature, what are they doing there? Are they permissible? And what, if anything, do we need them for?" (126). Atwood, who insists that literature cannot do without bad behavior, clearly shows the worth of less-than-virtuous women in her works. Villainesses are important not only in fictional plots in Atwood's view, but also in helping readers understand that women are multidimensional individuals who should never be condemned, even by feminists, to stereotypical roles.

"Create a flawless character and you create an insufferable one," Atwood insists ("Spotty" 125). Her interest in female badness, she explains, started at an early age when she was "exposed to the complete, unexpurgated Grimms' fairy tales," which were originally "told and retold by women" ("Spotty" 134). While she was delighted by the "Cinderellas and "Snow Whites found in fairy tales, she also knew that there were "spellbinding evil parts for women" in such stories ("Spotty" 134). For while fairy tales feature passive and adventuresome girls and resourceful and wise women, they also contain "a variety of evil witches, both in disguise and not, and bad stepmothers and wicked, ugly sisters and false brides as well" ("Spotty" 134–35). In her novels, Atwood delights in portraying contemporary versions of these maybe evil, but maybe—more importantly—powerful women who must develop survival strategies of their own: in particular, in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), Serena Joy is a wicked stepmother" type; in *Cat's Eye*

(1988), the child Cordelia is tormentor of another girl; in *The Blind Assassin* (2000), Iris is the treacherous sister; and in *The Robber Bride* (1993), Zenia is the false friend who betrays her female friends and steals their men.

Atwood, who began writing during the second-wave feminist movement, is often called a feminist writer. While she feels indebted to the movement, she also has been troubled by the restrictions placed on writers like her by feminist orthodoxy. Second-wave feminism, as she remarks, has offered real benefits to women writers by expanding the "territory available to writers" and by providing a "sharp-eyed examination of the way power works in gender relations" ("Spotty" 132) But she also has objected to the "tendency to cookie-cut" found in the second-wave's polarizing model of men as oppressors and women as victims, making "women intrinsically good and men bad." Such "oversimplifications," she asserts, are "problematical for novelists unless the novelist has a secret desire to be in billboard advertising" ("Spotty" 132).

To Atwood, such a model, as it dictates that heroines must be "spotless of soul" as they struggle against male oppression, confines women "yet again to that alabaster pedestal so beloved of the Victorian age" and it condemns them "to virtue for life, [as] slaves in the salt mines of goodness" ("Spotty" 132–33). Although feminism has made certain kinds of formerly "bad" behavior available to the woman author—who can depict her heroine leaving her husband and deserting her children—it is still not acceptable to "talk about women's will to power" since women are supposedly "communal egalitarians" ("Spotty" 133). Can the woman writer, asks Atwood, "examine the Seven Deadly Sins in their female versions— . . . Pride, Anger, Lust, Envy, Avarice, Greed, and Sloth—without being considered antifeminist?" Or will woman authors who write about such things be accused of "aiding and abetting the enemy, namely the male power structure" since men have been "giving women a bad reputation for centuries?" ("Spotty" 133). Just as prefeminist images of women tended toward stereotypes of the

totally good or bad woman but never a combination of the two—such as the innocent Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz* or the Wicked Witch of the West, the good Cinderella or her evil stepmother, the licentious Scarlett O'Hara or the dutiful Melanie—so second-wave feminist images of women have ended up emphasizing a new set of stereotypes by depicting women as victims of men. To Atwood, this development has been distressing. As she states, “[Are] women to be homogenized—one woman the same as another—and deprived of free will—as in, *The patriarchy made her do it?*” (“Spotty” 134).

“Writing and *isms* are two different things,” Atwood has long asserted, and people who are loyal to *isms* “often hate and fear artists and their perverse loyalty to their art, because art is uncontrollable and has a habit of exploring the shadow side, the unspoken, the unthought” (“If You Can’t” 21). Atwood strongly supports “women’s efforts to improve their shoddy lot in this world which is, globally, dangerous for women, biased against them, and at the moment, in a state of reaction against their efforts.” (“If You Can’t” 21) But she also views “with some alarm the attempts being made to dictate to women writers, on ideological grounds, various ‘acceptable’ modes of approach, style, form, language, subject, and voice” (“If You Can’t” 22). Indeed, “if the women’s movement is not an open door but a closed book, reserved for some right-thinking elite, then I’ve been misled,” she states (“If You Can’t” 24). Thus Atwood insists on her right to depict women as villains in her art. As she argues: “Evil women are necessary in story traditions for . . . obvious reasons, of course. First, they exist in life, so why shouldn’t they exist in literature? Second—which may be another way of saying the same thing—women have more to them than virtue” (“Spotty” 133). Atwood, in her contemporary revival of the villainess, creates a cast of female characters that are most certainly wicked and have questionable morality. Her works contain stories of female treachery, betrayal, deceit, lies, vindictiveness, and a whole host of similar evils. In her cultural re-visioning of the bad female character, Atwood is intent on going beyond stereotypes, for her female villains

are never wholly evil and, in fact, often we end up seeing them as individuals who have made mistakes, or who have maintained a wicked facade as a means of protection, or who have found that the lives they have chosen have not allowed for generosity of spirit. While readers might want to disidentify with the villainess character—saying that she is “not-me”—Atwood insists that we take a second look. For as she remarks, such characters can “act as keys to doors we need to open, and as mirrors in which we can see more than just a pretty face” (“Spotty” 135). Thus, as we shall see, Atwood’s wicked women, like *Cat’s Eye’s* Cordelia and *The Robber Bride’s* Zenia, do act as mirrors even as they allow other characters—and readers—to explore the necessity of sometimes acting badly.

The Handmaid’s Tale: Serena Joy as the Wicked Stepmother

The Handmaid’s Tale, published in 1985, relates a possible future United States that has been taken over by a fundamentalist religious regime intent on repopulating the white race, many of whom are now sterile due to pollutants and toxic waste. A Handmaid in the Gilead Republic, Offred recalls her pre-Gilead past in a society much like our own—one in which second-wave feminism had succeeded in gaining new freedoms for women—even as she describes her present in a repressive society in which women have been relegated to roles such as Wives, Marthas (domestic servants), and Handmaids (surrogate mothers). In Gilead, women are forbidden to read and write, own property, or live in any independent circumstances. The thirty-three-year-old Offred is a Handmaid to Commander Fred and his unhappy Wife, Serena Joy. As a breeder woman, Offred must bear a child to the Commander and relinquish her child to Serena Joy, who, as a Wife, is expected to inculcate Gileadean values in the children she raises.

A witch-like woman who uses a cane and has knobby hands, Serena Joy is past child-bearing age and so she is forced to rely upon her Handmaid to become a mother herself, the only “occupation” that will

validate her status as a Wife in the new regime as well as ensure her safety. But, of course, she does not like having in her home a strange woman who, during monthly ceremonies, is to be impregnated by Serena Joy's husband. "I want to see you as little as possible," she tells Offred when they meet (20). Like Offred, Serena Joy is imprisoned in her role as she spends her days knitting, gardening, feigning illness so she can receive other Wives as guests, and watching videos of her former self as a famous gospel singer.

"I wanted," Offred says of Serena Joy, "to turn her into an older sister, a motherly figure, someone who would understand and protect me" (21). Instead, because Serena Joy is full of cold and angry contempt, Offred reacts with her own countercontempt, seeing Serena Joy as "withered" (105). Later, when the Commander secretly entertains Offred in his private study with games of Scrabble and forbidden fashion magazines, Offred initially feels little sense of betrayal in deceiving Serena Joy, and she does not understand that Serena Joy is also living a precarious life; each woman's potential fate is the mirror of the other woman's. While Offred will be sent to clean up toxic wastes if she fails to conceive a child—a certain death sentence—Serena Joy, as a disempowered female in the new regime, is also at the mercy of her powerful Commander husband; without his protection Serena Joy, too, could be sent to clean up toxic wastes.

In her training to become a Handmaid, Offred is instructed that life will become easier for the Handmaids in the future. "The women will live in harmony together, all in one family; you will be like daughters to [the wives]," she is told" (209). Although Offred contends that she hates Serena Joy, she nevertheless begins to feel guilty because she is "an intruder, in a territory that ought to have been" Serena Joy's: "I was taking something away from her, although she didn't know it" (208). Offred starts to understand that Serena Joy's coldness and rage is born of her awareness that her own position as a Wife is precarious. Serena Joy does not have the luxury of being a benign "stepmother"; she must use all of her strength for self-preservation.

At the novel's end, Serena Joy discovers that Offred has been secretly seeing the Commander. Offred awaits punishment, but Serena Joy only says, "You could have left me something" (369). When the van arrives to arrest Offred—or save her—Serena Joy is the one who reacts with the most fear; without a Handmaid to provide her with a child, Serena Joy has no value. If in her portrayal of Serena Joy, Atwood invokes the wicked stepmother stereotype, she also insists that her villainess character acts as a mirror in which we can see how female oppressors like Serena Joy may be acting out of fear. That is, the reader, instead of dismissing Serena Joy as a mere stereotype, a simple evil stepmother, must see herself in the mirror of Serena Joy, who is wary of other women because she is aware of the precariousness of her own position as a Wife. Thus, the cause of Serena Joy's ostensibly villainous nature can be explained: her very survival is at risk.

Cat's Eye: The Villainess Cordelia as the Victimizer/Victim

When the middle-aged Elaine Risley returns to Toronto for a retrospective exhibition of her artwork, she undergoes a troubling journey into her past as she recalls her girlhood torment at the hands of her so-called girlfriends. Even as *Cat's Eye* reveals the depths of the treachery that girls (and women) will engage in against each other and offers some insight into female bullying, it also draws connections between the victim Elaine and her chief tormentor Cordelia, who ends up acting as the dark double and mirror image of Elaine.

Elaine spends her early childhood up until age eight in the Canadian bush with her family. Because her chief playmate during those years is her brother, when her family moves to Toronto, the school-aged Elaine enters the utterly foreign world of 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" (50). Carol Campbell and Grace Smeath, the two girls Elaine initially befriends, introduce her to a strange world ruled by absent, but somewhat menacing, fathers

and bib-aproned mothers who are apparently unaware of their daughters' cruel behavior to others. As she learns about the rules governing the feminine world of girls, Elaine at first feels "strange" and "self-conscious" as if she is "doing an imitation of a girl" (55). But over time she begins to identify with the feminine world represented in the "hope chest" scrapbooks she makes with her friends, which include cut-out pictures of women and household items from the Eaton's catalogue. As Elaine notes, "I begin to want things I've never wanted before: braids, a dressing gown, a purse of my own. Something is unfolding, being revealed to me" (57). She begins to realize that her parents are considered strange because they do not fill their home with decorations, appliances, and other possessions.

"She creates a circle of two, takes me in," Elaine remarks of her first encounter with Cordelia (75). Becoming the group leader of the girls, Cordelia begins to bully Elaine. "Look at yourself! Just look!" Cordelia says as she holds a mirror up to Elaine's face. "Her voice is disgusted, fed up, as if my face, all by itself, has been up to something, has gone too far" (168). As Cordelia victimizes Elaine, her tactics escalate from acts of taunting and shunning to more dangerous forms of bullying. When Elaine is buried in a hole in the ground, she is terrified: "I have no image of myself in the hole; only a black square filled with nothing, a square like a door," which marks the point at which she loses "power" (112–13). Another time Cordelia punishes Elaine by throwing her hat into the ravine and then ordering her to navigate the ravine and its icy creek to retrieve it. When Elaine falls through the ice, she thinks: "If I don't move soon I will be frozen in the creek. I will be a dead person" (199). Elaine almost freezes to death before she sees or imagines a protective and all-good female figure—like the Virgin Mary or a fairy godmother—who walks on the air toward her and leads her to safety. Taking on the sacrificial role of the scapegoat, Elaine, as Molly Hite has observed, "is the surrogate victim . . . for the others who use her . . . in order to displace their own suffering as members of a patriarchy" (137). Indeed, Cordelia torments Elaine to avoid becom-

ing the victim herself. "Wipe that smirk off your face," as Cordelia's bullying father said to her when she was growing up, and later Cordelia uses the very same words when she bullies Elaine (268, 183). Thus, as Stephen Ahern explains, "Cordelia uses Elaine in this classic pattern of projecting what one is trying to escape/reject within oneself onto an 'Other.' Elaine rapidly internalizes Cordelia's insecurity, and the malice it generates" (13). If Cordelia is the chief female villainess in *Cat's Eye*, Grace, the silent leader of the group, represents the patriarchal ideal of the complicit female. She participates in the brutalization of Elaine, as does her mother, the "perfect" housewife and mother. While Elaine originally believes that the mothers are unaware of their daughters' sadistic behavior, she overhears Mrs. Smeath defending Grace. When asked if the girls are being "too hard" on Elaine, Mrs. Smeath responds, "It's God's punishment. . . . It serves her right" (190–91). Shamed, Elaine harbors a lasting hatred of Mrs. Smeath.

Over time, Elaine begins to suffer from severe anxiety and starts to mutilate herself in an attempt to control her pain and fear: "In the endless time when Cordelia had such power over me, I peeled the skin from my feet. . . . I would go down as far as the blood" (120). She is torn between being afraid of the girls and her fear of rejection. She would rather be tormented by Cordelia than be ostracized from the world of girls. But if, when Elaine is buried in the hole by Cordelia she feels "sadness, a sense of betrayal" and then "terror" after she falls through the ice in the ravine, she chooses to free herself by walking away from her friends: "Nothing binds me to them. I am free" (205). Even though Elaine suppresses her memories of her childhood torment at the hands of Cordelia, she acts suspiciously like someone who is enjoying a belated revenge when she becomes friends once again with Cordelia in high school. Cordelia now demonstrates all of the vulnerability Elaine once had, and Elaine, who has developed a "mean mouth," uses it mostly on Cordelia: "I use her as target practice" (248). Yet Elaine's newfound toughness cannot be equated with gaining strength. In fact, it is during this period of her life that Elaine has her deepest feelings of

social inadequacy. What Elaine has learned from Cordelia is not how to be powerful, but how to cover up feelings of powerlessness.

Elaine's last encounter with Cordelia takes place at an asylum following Cordelia's suicide attempt. Alternating between feelings of anger and pity, Elaine thinks, "It's as if Cordelia has placed herself beyond me, out of my reach, where I can't get at her" (376). What infuriates and terrifies Elaine is her own likeness to Cordelia: "There's a frantic child in there, behind that locked, sagging face," she thinks of Cordelia (377). As the middle-aged Elaine reflects on her life, she sees the villainess Cordelia as part of her own identity. In one of her paintings, *Half a Face*, Elaine attempts to depict Cordelia as cruel and aggressive. But Cordelia's frightened eyes "sabotage" her. "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" (239).

During an introspective walk back into her old neighborhood, re-endowed with the memories of her lost childhood, the adult Elaine "prays" to Cordelia: "Get me out of this, Cordelia. I'm locked in. I don't want to be nine years old forever" (421). And Cordelia, it appears, responds. In her mind, Elaine replays the scene at the ravine. This time, Elaine first thinks she imagines herself as a child, but then she recognizes that the child is Cordelia with her "face closed and defiant" (443). Elaine recognizes that they share "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" (443). In her vision, Elaine opens her arms to save Cordelia from being "left behind, in the wrong time" and tells her, "*It's all right. . . You can go home now*" (443). Because, as Atwood insists, the villainous Cordelia and her victim Elaine are mirror reflections, Elaine, through her relationship with Cordelia, not only comes to a deepened understanding of her own capacity for the cruelty that grows out of feelings of powerlessness but she also, by forgiving Cordelia, comes to forgive herself.

The Blind Assassin: Iris as the Treacherous Sister

Like *The Handmaid's Tale's* Serena Joy and *Cat's Eye's* Cordelia, who wield a limited but vicious power against other women, *The Blind Assassin's* Iris Chase Griffen is a woman whose rage at her powerlessness in a patriarchal world is used—with disastrous results—against another woman: her own sister. As the eighty-two-year-old Iris writes her memoir, she attempts to justify her past. Even though she insists she has no ill will toward her dead sister Laura, the novel reads like an elaborate excuse for her utter betrayal of the younger Laura. As Sharon Wilson notes, because Iris is "so blind, lacking insight into history, current events, mythology, her father, husband, sister Laura, and her own motivations, she threatens the survival of others as well as of herself" (185). While Iris is not a deliberately villainous woman, she has created havoc for her family and, as she writes her memoir, she confesses her role in her sister Laura's suicide.

As Iris looks to the past to reconstruct what has happened to Laura, she depicts the power of patriarchy in the lives of women from her generation, who come of age early in the twentieth century. The Chase sisters, living in an old Victorian house, are sheltered from the lower-class citizens of the town; both sisters are alienated and have difficulty communicating with others. The daughter of an industrialist who faces economic problems and a mother who died as a consequence of childbirth, Iris describes herself as she recounts her past as both a victim and a victimizer. Iris is four years old when her sister Laura is born. Understanding that the birth has deteriorated her mother's health, Iris resents Laura. She does not understand her more naive sister and becomes irritated by what she considers to be Laura's eccentricities: "Laura was *different*. *Different* meant *strange*" (89). And when her dying Mother asks her to take care of Laura, Iris resentfully thinks, "why was it always me who was supposed to be a good sister to Laura, instead of the other way around? Surely my mother loved Laura more than she loved me" (93). When Iris, on the day after the funeral, pushes Laura off the ledge of the lily pond, she enjoys hearing Laura's cry: "I wanted her to

suffer too—as much as me. I was tired of her getting away with being so young” (97). Making a pact with God that she will sacrifice herself in order to bring her mother back to life, Laura jumps in the river. Although Iris pulls her out, she also thinks about how “close” she had come to “letting go” of Laura before she was out of the water (151).

As the elderly Iris reflects on her past, she sees herself as the sacrificial daughter and thus as a victim. Iris’s father marries her to the wealthy Richard Griffen in return for the false promise of capital infusion for the failing Chase factories. Thus, “Iris’s identity,” as Coral Ann Howells remarks, “is defined by her gender, her class and her role as ‘good sister to Laura,’ and her feminine destiny is already laid out for her: as the eldest daughter of an old Anglo-Canadian family it is her duty to marry well in order to restore the family fortunes and to safeguard Laura’s interests” (159). Unlike the industrialist and “sweatshop tycoon” Richard, labor activist and socialist Alex—the man Iris ends up having an affair with—is, in Richard’s view, “an armchair pinko” (*Blind Assassin* 177, 188). When Alex is accused of burning down the Chase factory, Iris and Laura hide him until he can escape, and each of the sisters falls in love with him. Laura is fascinated with Alex’s political doctrine, and Iris is sexually attracted to him. Whereas he calls the fourteen-year-old Laura “a saint in training” (212) while he is hiding at Avilion, he is sexually provocative toward Iris, kissing her and unbuttoning her blouse. After Alex leaves, both sisters continue to have a secret relationship with him, and it is their sisterly rivalry over Alex that later leads to Iris’s betrayal of Laura and Laura’s subsequent suicide.

When Richard reneges on his promise to Iris’s father, Iris realizes that she has sacrificed herself by marrying him “for nothing” (314). A ruthless businessman, Richard has “too much money, too much presence” in the world so that “what was average in him seemed like deficiency” (480). Dominated by Richard and his sinister sister, Winifred, Iris protects herself by appearing to sleepwalk through her life, turning a blind eye toward most, including Laura. Richard, though he claims to be “besotted” by Iris, is sadistic, bruising her and causing her pain,

and he claims ownership rights over both Iris and Laura. Laura, with her heightened sense of perception, her ability to see beyond facades, recognizes that Richard is “very evil” (485). Yet, publicly, Richard is well regarded and his political success is practically ensured.

Trapped in a loveless and abusive marriage, Iris begins a clandestine affair with the fugitive Alex even though she is aware of Laura’s feelings for him. For Laura, the allure of Alex is her conviction that she can “save” him, both from police capture and from his loss of faith in God. If she has any sexual attraction toward Alex, she does not acknowledge it. In contrast, Iris has a passionate sexual affair with Alex. Experiencing an “extreme pleasure” that is “also a humiliation,” Iris is unable to “resist” Alex and so she “renders herself up, is blotted out” (261). Ultimately Iris views her clandestine encounters with Alex as an antidote to powerlessness; she possesses a truth that is unknown to others.

“Should I have behaved differently?” the elderly and dying Iris asks as she writes her memoir. “Should I have been able to read Laura’s mind? Should I have known what was going on? . . . Was I my sister’s keeper?” (428). When Laura, in yet another pact with God, sexually sacrifices herself to Richard to save Alex, she gets pregnant and Richard sends her to a clinic to have an abortion. Years later, in their final conversation, when Laura confirms that she was pregnant and sacrificed herself to save Alex, Iris misunderstands and thinks that Alex fathered Laura’s child. In a moment of “spite,” Iris pushes Laura “over the edge” by telling her that she had had an affair with Alex. By destroying the “words” Laura has relied on to sustain her life—“*God. Trust. Sacrifice. Justice. Faith. Hope. Love.* Not to mention *sister*” (490)—Iris drives her to suicide (488, 490). Just as Iris acts spitefully toward Laura, so she also gets revenge against Richard by publishing under Laura’s name a romance novel called *The Blind Assassin*, which offers a lurid account of her affair with Alex. As Iris says to Richard after he reads the book, “You can’t face the possibility that all the time you were having your squalid little fling with her, she must have been

in and out of bed with another man—one she loved, unlike you. Or I assume that's what the book means—doesn't it?" (510). Afterward Richard is found dead, with a copy of *The Blind Assassin* at his elbow.

An Atwoodian villainess, Iris, who learned as a girl "that revenge is a dish best eaten cold" (167), ends up acting as an agent of revenge as she destroys Richard for Laura's sake. And as she writes her memoir, she thinks of it as a "memorial" to the past injustices she and her sister Laura suffered: "But what is a memorial, when you get right down to it, but a commemoration of wounds endured? Endured, and resented. Without memory, there can be no revenge" (508). Iris and Laura, as mirror images, both offer models of negative female sacrifice. While Laura deliberately attempts several sacrificial actions such as drowning herself and submitting to Richard, Iris feels as if her sacrifices have been imposed upon her. Yet as she writes to justify herself, she ends up confessing the truth, and she writes, ultimately, to leave a message for her granddaughter Sabrina, seeking in her "a listener" and "someone who will see" her. But she also insists, "Don't prettify me, though, whatever else you do" (521).

The Robber Bride: Zenia as the Betrayer of Friendship

For most readers, *The Robber Bride*'s Zenia is Atwood's most vile villainess and yet she ends up acting as a kind of mirror to Tony, Charis, and Roz, the middle-aged women she has befriended and betrayed. Tony, Charis, and Roz, who first meet in college, come from different backgrounds and have different personalities, yet they become close friends, bound together by their mutual fear of Zenia. When at the beginning of the novel, the three women are having lunch at the Toxique restaurant on the eve on the Gulf War in the early 1990s, they believe that Zenia is dead only to have her magically reappear "on this side of the mirror" (34). When Zenia comes back from the dead, the three women are forced into a necessary mirror confrontation with Zenia, who comes to embody the shadow side of their identities. Thus even while Zenia has an uncanny knack of leading the three friends into

betraying their most precious convictions, she also, in true Atwoodian fashion, ends up having an important and even a positive effect upon her weaker friends.

The child of a father who committed suicide and a mother who abandoned her, Antonia, known as Tony, compensates by living an imaginary life during her girlhood as a female warrior; as an adult, she becomes a history professor who specializes in war. Yet outwardly, Tony seems anything but a warrior. In the 1960s, Zenia befriends Tony, who is a quiet and dedicated college student. Tony becomes fascinated with Zenia's irreverence and daring, and her admiration of Zenia is so compelling, she even forgives Zenia for dating West, the man Tony secretly loves. In the course of their friendship, Zenia talks Tony into writing a term paper for her, dumps West, and leaves town with the money she has gotten by blackmailing Tony by threatening to expose the fact that Tony has ghostwritten Zenia's term paper. Zenia returns later after Tony and West are married and takes West away again only to dump him again a year later. Believing that West is "frangible" and "subject to breakage," Tony spends her time protecting him, for she feels he has been "damaged enough" by Zenia. "For kindly and susceptible souls like West's, the real world, especially the real world of women, is far too harsh a place" (110). Tony sees Zenia as an utterly destructive villainess, yet there is still a part of her that secretly identifies with Zenia and wants to "participate in her daring, her contempt for almost everything, her rapacity and lawlessness" (184). But even as Tony secretly admires Zenia's power, she does not realize that she can have the same power herself.

Charis, originally named Karen, has also had a difficult childhood. Physically abused by her mother and then, after her mother died, sexually abused by the uncle who helped raise her, Charis ends up deeply traumatized. When her uncle begins to rape her, she splits in two as the victimized Karen is taken over by Charis, who watches the "flailing and sobbing" Karen from a safe distance (260) "Charis is more serene than Karen, because the bad things have stayed behind, with

small Karen" (261). When Zenia enters her life in the 1970s, Charis is a yoga teacher living in a virtual shack on an island. An idealist who has adopted some of the era's hippie philosophy, Charis is living with an American draft dodger, Billy. Blind to Billy's faults—he is a free-loader, an uncaring lover, and he abuses her—Charis imagines him to be much better than he really is. Claiming that she has cancer, Zenia induces Charis to tend to her so she can get access to Billy and turn him in to the authorities. Charis is able to be betrayed by Zenia because she is gullible: "she realizes she has no weapons, no weapons that will work against Zenia. All Charis has on her side is a wish to be good, and goodness is an absence, it's the absence of evil; whereas Zenia has the real story" (473). Yet Charis also has a secret attraction to Zenia; in particular, Charis seems to admire Zenia for her easy sexuality. In fact, Charis believes her daughter Augusta was conceived during the one occasion she had felt sexual pleasure with Billy and wonders if both she and Zenia are Augusta's mother.

The daughter of a bitter woman and a war-profiteering father, Roz grows up conflicted about her mixed Jewish-Catholic heritage and harbors the idea that she is not good enough. Like Tony and Charis, Roz carries her childhood traumas with her as an adult, hiding behind a mask of cheer and humor. Even though she is a wealthy and highly successful businesswoman and the owner of a feminist magazine, Roz puts up with the constant womanizing of her husband Mitch and constantly forgives him for cheating on her. Zenia enters Roz's life in the 1980s when Roz hires her to work as the editor of her women's magazine, which Zenia revamps into a successful and glossy fashion magazine. When Zenia has an affair with Mitch and then dumps him, he kills himself, leaving Roz as a widowed mother of three. Even though Zenia victimizes Roz by feeding into her inability to assert herself with her husband, Roz is still secretly attracted to Zenia. For while Roz tries to be worthy, "to be nice, to be ethical, to behave well," there are times when she would like "to cast off her muffling Lady Bountiful cloak, stop tiptoeing through the scruples, cut loose" and commit a "great

whopping thoroughly despicable sin." Thus, as Roz comes to realize, there are times that "she would like to be Zenia" (389).

"What is she doing here, on this side of the mirror?" (37), Tony wonders at the beginning of the novel when Zenia returns from the dead. Zenia is the villainess robber bride who betrays her friends and steals their men. But it is telling that the name "Zenia" is a combination of the last letters of the women's real names—Roz, Karen, Antonia—for each woman secretly identifies with Zenia. Thus, while Zenia has victimized each woman, Tony, Charis, and Roz find it difficult to let her go because she is a part of each one of them. As Lynn Bloom and Veronica Makowsky observe, Zenia is important to Tony, Charis, and Roz because she represents "power" to them, "the power within each woman" and yet they are "ambivalent toward her since they are confused about the power within themselves" (172).

Because the three women want to be perceived as "good" women, they, in essence, "allow" Zenia to do their dirty work. Roz needs to get rid of her philandering husband; Charis needs to save herself from Billy's brutality and needs to stop saving every person she meets; and Tony needs a reason to find West interesting. If Zenia performs the necessary but perhaps not "good" tasks, she can be blamed for their hidden badness, even as she "menaces the carefully constructed shells" that permit the three women to remain "good" (Bloom and Makowsky 167). By embracing Zenia, as Shannon Hengen aptly comments, the three women "find relief from thralldom to the men in their lives" and because she brings the three women together as friends, she also has a positive effect on them by helping them overcome their "negative views of other women" (279). When Zenia returns from the dead, she forces the women to confront the truth and also to take ownership of their own hidden badness. "Zenia may be a shadow cast by men, but she's a shadow cast by women, as well," as Atwood insists ("If You Can't"). By confronting Zenia—the bad woman and the shadow self—the women recover the power hidden in the shadows that comes from the recognition of attributes that "good girls" should not have: anger,

indignation, resentment, aggression, ambition, self-centeredness, artifice, and egoism. Zenia returns to force each woman to reclaim all of those “bad girl” qualities, essential qualities not just for success but for survival as well.

In “Spotty-Handed Villainesses,” Atwood notes that important “bad” female characters “act as keys to doors we need to open, and as mirrors in which we can see more than just a pretty face. They can be explorations of moral freedom—because everyone’s choices are limited, and women’s choices have been more limited than men’s, but that doesn’t mean women can’t make choices.” She explains, “Such characters can pose the question of responsibility, because if you want power you have to accept responsibility, and actions produce consequences” (“Spotty” 135). Her vivid portrayals of evil women allow other characters—and readers—to explore the necessity of sometimes acting badly. Thus, Serena Joy, Cordelia, Iris, and Zenia, as well-known Atwoodian villainous characters, serve to open up possibilities to their readers. These characters are not monstrously evil women; in fact, as each is metaphorically suggested as a mirror image to another character, these characters then represent the presence of wickedness in all women. By using the “evil” characters as doubles for the “virtuous” characters such as Offred, Laura, Elaine, Tony, Charis, and Roz, Atwood clearly demonstrates the ineffectual nature of women attempting to maintain only the commonly accepted attitudes of “good girls.” Because each “bad” girl operates as a source of strength to her ostensible victims, each then becomes the triumphant face in the mirror.

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