

THE MASQUERADE AND BISEXUALITY
IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE ROBBER BRIDE*

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ABSTRACT

I continue the current discussion of identity construction through the theories of Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Catherine Clément. By focusing on Irigaray's "masquerade of femininity" and Cixous and Clément's "bisexuality," I analyze Margaret Atwood's four female characters in her novel, *The Robber Bride*. I apply Irigaray, Cixous, and Clément's theories while exploring the primary character's journey and development from slaves of patriarchal society to independent women and conclude with an analysis of Zenia as villain and mentor.

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DEDICATION

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Introduction

In her works, Canadian novelist and poet Margaret Atwood attempts to share the importance of the act of “finding oneself” for contemporary women. As Elspeth Cameron explains in her article, “Margaret Atwood: A Patchwork Self,” Atwood actually sees her characters as “a series of transformations in the form of imagined personae who, chameleon-like, enable the inner ‘self’ to survive” (45). Several of Atwood’s novels, including *The Edible Woman* (1969) and *Surfacing* (1972), explore the journey of characters as they come to their understanding of an individual female identity—one that has not been shaped by patriarchal ideology; perhaps her most poignant and successful tale of female growth is *The Robber Bride* (1993), her thirteenth published work. In the novel, Atwood tells the life stories of three women, Tony, Charis, and Roz, who are drawn together through their interactions with a woman named Zenia. In the course of the novel, Tony, Charis, and Roz all learn their own individual strength and explore their hopes and desires. Through their friendship, the characters emerge as strong, independent women able to come to terms with the traumas in their lives and who they are—as individuals who do not subscribe to patriarchal rules.

Drawing on the insights of Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Catherine Clément, in the pages that follow I will explore the maturation of each of Atwood’s primary characters through the course of her journey to become an individual who lives outside of patriarchy’s expectations. Each journey follows a similar trajectory. Each character moves away from actively participating in what Irigaray terms “the masquerade of femininity” by placing her own needs before the needs of her male partner, by adopting a new name, by acknowledging her friendship with other women, by creating her own feminine space, and, finally, by understanding how Zenia, the

implied villain of the novel, manipulates patriarchy to place herself in positions of power but still remains subject to it.¹

Before we turn to Atwood, I would like to briefly explore a few critical concepts relevant to this study by influential feminist theorists of the past century, Irigaray, Cixous, and Clément. They can help us to better understand Atwood's novel and the functions of the characters within it. Irigaray, in her pioneering collection of essays, *This Sex Which is Not One* (1977), claims that what is considered normal or acceptable in contemporary culture can only be understood from a masculine point of view (134). For example, to remain "desirable" by conventional standards, a woman sacrifices what she may want in order to give man what he wants.² This act of submission to culture, particularly to masculine norms, is what Irigaray refers to as "the masquerade of femininity" (134). To "become" appropriately, conventionally feminine, each woman must enter into this masquerade. In other words, she must enter "into a system of values that is not hers, and in which she can 'appear' and circulate only when enveloped in the needs/desires/fantasies of others, namely men" (134). Irigaray claims that to escape this masquerade, women must develop what the theorist terms a new "syntax" for themselves that does not rely on the conventional dichotomy of masculinity and femininity. According to Irigaray, for a woman to become all that she is capable of becoming, she must escape conventional language and conventional understandings of identity.

Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément offer an alternative understanding of femininity in their 1975 work, *The Newly Born Woman*, when they claim that a woman is "bisexual" because she automatically transgresses conventional standards of sexuality that are inherently "monosexual" and phallic—in other words, focused on the attainment of Lacan's hypothetical "phallus" (85). Cixous and Clément explain that bisexuality is "the location within oneself of the

presence of both sexes, evident and insistent in different ways according to the individual, the nonexclusion of difference or of a sex” (85). I suggest that bisexuality is the new “syntax” that Irigaray calls for. To become bisexual, it is necessary to acknowledge the “presence of both sexes” in terms of the traits that society connects with being masculine or feminine. None of the traits of either sex should be disregarded; to achieve bisexuality, a woman must incorporate the traits of both sexes which she holds in esteem.³ In this way, bisexuality may be different for each individual. Although Cixous and Clément claim that the “location” where both sexes exist is present in every woman, I contend that many women are not aware of its presence. I suggest that in order to become a fully “bisexual being” and to fully combine the traits of both sexes into oneself—to effectively escape the patriarchal masquerade—a woman must undertake a journey to understand her own unique identity and to find the individual “location” within the self where bisexuality resides. By acknowledging her bisexuality and the limitations of conventional ways of thinking, a woman can throw off the expectations associated with the term “feminine” and can integrate masculine traits to become “bisexual.” This existence would allow a woman to acknowledge her personal desires without fear of being deemed unacceptable or undesirable by society. This journey is the one Atwood describes in *The Robber Bride*—the movement from participation in the masquerade of femininity described by Irigaray to acceptance of bisexuality such as described by Cixous and Clément.⁴

The Robber Bride begins as the three protagonists, Tony, Charis, and Roz, meet for lunch, a tradition they have carried on since their involvement with the elusive, evasive, and destructive Zenia. On this particular day, Zenia herself, whom they had thought dead, walks into their restaurant. We are then treated to each woman’s story as she reminisces while at the same time tries to decide how to deal with Zenia’s reentry into her life. Tony tells of her isolated

childhood, her marriage to Zenia's ex-boyfriend West, and Zenia's earlier attempt to reclaim him. Meanwhile, Charis recalls her traumatic childhood of sexual abuse, Zenia's entrance into her house, her seduction of Charis's boyfriend, Billy, and how the two abandoned her while she was pregnant. Lastly, Roz recalls her childhood as an outcast, her marriage, her husband's constant unfaithfulness, and his eventual suicide when Zenia leaves him. Eventually, all of the women meet with Zenia and learn to withstand her manipulations as they had not been able to in the past. At the novel's end, Zenia is found dead in a fountain, an apparent (though questionable) suicide, and Tony, Charis, and Roz find that they all have a certain respect for Zenia as they give her a ceremonious burial on Lake Ontario.

In the following analysis, I will follow each of the women's progression through her journey to bisexuality.⁵ I will begin by discussing the first step in each individual journey—how each woman renames herself or is given a new name and learns to adjust to it so that she can escape her prior name and the conventional, patriarchal constructs that are tied to it. Next, I will analyze each woman's relationships—with her boyfriend or husband and with each other. By growing in her relationship with her partner, each woman gradually establishes independence whether that is gained by leaving him or by adjusting her current view of their relationship. This movement allows her to enjoy her independence and to be open to an interdependence with the other women as she realizes it is fundamentally different from her heterosexual, romantic love affair. I will then explain how the woman's comfort with herself and others leads to her creation of a female-centered space in which her developing bisexual identity can flourish. The final step in achieving bisexuality comes for each woman when she understands Zenia's role in her life. Zenia shows all of the women how she has used the masquerade as a source of power rather than as a source of weakness; even more importantly, Zenia shows Tony, Charis, and Roz how they

have been victims of the masquerade, and, how, in their denial of that victimization, they have been lying to themselves.

Names

Even though the women take part in the masquerade throughout the novel and their lives, they have also been taking steps towards achieving bisexuality. One way in which they begin the process is through the acceptance of a new name. In her article, “A Worm in the Apple: French Critical Theory and the Metaphor of the Child in the Work of Atwood and Broner,” Sally L. Kitch comments on the importance of naming for women in a patriarchal society: “language—especially the processes of naming and renaming—effects cultural transformation through its expression of female conscious and unconscious desires” (37). A new name is one of the ways in which the characters can dig beneath the surface of the masquerade to their own desires—the desires they have been taught to hide while they focus on accommodating male desires. By throwing off the name given to them by their parents, they can throw off parts of the role given to them by society.

All three women are renamed before they even meet Zenia. As each woman takes a new name, her respective personality transforms as well. Tony creates her alter ego Tnomerf Ynot as a means of escape as well as a method of asserting herself—even if this assertion only takes place in her fantasies. Charis renames herself in order to leave behind the sexual abuse she experiences as a child named Karen. Roz is transformed three times: from Rosalind Greenwood to Roz Grunwald, and then again in marriage to Roz Andrews. Each renaming symbolizes a life change for Roz—from poor and ostracized to rich and accepted.

Each of the women suffers a difficult and alienating childhood that leads to her individual need for renaming. Most of Tony's problems revolve around her relationship with her mother, Anthea, who hates living in Canada and is terribly unhappy with her life as a "war" wife and mother. Anthea does not suffer alone; rather she spreads her discontent by constantly finding fault with Tony, cheating on her husband, and eventually abandoning them both. Throughout her childhood, Tony spends her time trying to win her mother's affection. She brings cups of tea to her mother, but Anthea never drinks Tony's "offerings" (9). Yet Tony cannot seem to make a connection with her father either. He cuts himself off from both women and focuses on his business life. When her parents do interact, Tony is caught in the middle—a casualty of her parents' war. When she finds herself in a room with them that is full of silent tension, "Tony feels as if there's a thick elastic band stretching right through her own head, with one end of it attached to each of them: any tighter and it would snap" (162). She finds herself unable to escape the arguments, unable to ignore the broken glass that results from their fights.

As a child she attempts to combat her loneliness and escape her victimized status by renaming herself Tnomerf Ynot, her name written backwards. One of the things Tony finds most comfort in is that she and Tnomerf both understand her language of speaking backwards. This ability has been natural to Tony from childhood but is an act that no one else seems to understand or be able to do. Tony sees Tnomerf, her twin, as "the incarnation of her sense that part of her was missing" (153). The missing part, Tony will later understand, is the part of her self that she is repressing because of her desire to live up to what her mother expects of her as well as her desire to be loved by her mother.⁶ Her mother's expectations anticipate and direct Tony's original enactment of the masquerade.

The reason that Tony admires the fictional Tnomerf is because Tnomerf is stronger and more capable while Tony is a small, weak, and scared young girl. Tnomerf is not afraid of anything. Each time Tony is faced with a difficult situation, she escapes to fantasies of Tnomerf:

Bulc Egdirb, she murmurs to herself in the darkness. The barbarians gallop across the plains. At their head rides Tnomerf Ynot, her long ragged hair flying in the wind, a sword in each of her hands. *Bulc egdirb!* she calls, urging them forward. It's a battle cry, and they are on the rampage. They are sweeping all before them, trampling down crops and burning villages. They loot and plunder and smash pianos, and kill children. At night they put up their tents and eat supper with their hands, whole cows roasted on bonfires. They wipe their greasy fingers on their leather clothes. They have no manners at all.

Tnomerf Ynot herself drinks from a skull, with silver handles attached where the ears used to be. She raises the skull high in a toast to victory, and to the war god of the barbarians: *Ettovag!* she yells, and the hordes answer, cheering:

Ettovag! Ettovag! (163-64)

It is through the image of Tnomerf and her strength and courage—and most likely her ability to smash pianos and drink from a skull—that Tony masters the courage to face the unhappiness in her life which includes her parents' fighting. Carol Ann Howells explains that Tnomerf “speaks out of the anger and frustration that ... [Tony] has assiduously repressed” (93). Rather than honestly addressing her personal situation, Tony is able to use Tnomerf as her imaginary outlet—she can do what Tony cannot. Because Tnomerf serves as Tony's alter-ego, she is the symbol of what kind of woman Tony wants to be—strong and able to stand on her own. Yet Tnomerf is not the only powerful woman that Tony admires. In college, she wants to write a

paper on Theophano—a Byzantine empress who plots and takes part in the death of her husband and, in fact, stands over him laughing while her lover kills him. Tony admires Theophano for her cunning and feels that she can secretly relate to the murderess (188).

Tony admires these women because they have a type of freedom that she does not. Neither Tnomerf nor Theophano adhere to traditional female roles—they may act out of these roles in violent ways—killing husbands and children—but through these acts, they are symbolically killing those that may place them in a submissive role.⁷ For Tony to achieve these advantages, she must take control of her life and stand up against the patriarchal structures that surrounds her as these women have. She develops a passion in a subject that is often perceived as masculine—she begins to devote her studies to the history of war. Once in college, she does not want to be a part of any of the groups of girls in her dorm because “she was happier in the company of people who had died a long time ago. That way there was no painful suspense, no disappointment. Nothing to lose” (128). Her self-inflicted isolation is much like her childhood fantasies of Tnomerf. She immerses herself in history so that she does not have to fully connect with her present life. At the same time, her refusal to interact with society works as a means to avoid the restrictions that society would place upon her in the same ways her mother had. To escape the masquerade, Tony must continue to isolate herself from society.

As a young student and as an adult, Tony has not yet constructed any part of her own identity—she is simply acting according to the guidelines of the feminine masquerade. Later, as she is marking her students’ papers ambidextrously, “her two halves are superimposed: there’s only a slight penumbra, a slight degree of slippage” (9). While the two halves of her identity (Tony and Tnomerf) are finally matched, they still do not come together completely. The foreignness that Tony feels as a child (161) does not fade even after she has grown confident in

her relationship with West. Yet when she imagines Tnomerf or immerses herself in her study of war, she feels stronger and becomes more capable; the anticipation of a “bisexuality” is emerging as she begins to form powerful psychosexual identifications that exceeds those scripted by the patriarchal system.

Similarly, Charis gives herself a new name in order to recover from the trauma of her childhood. Like Tony, Charis—named Karen at birth—struggles with her relationship with a mother who is dissatisfied with her. Karen, too, is a product of the war—only her father is killed before he can marry her mother. Karen’s illegitimacy mars her self image and her role in her mother’s family; she is the incarnation of her mother’s sin. She is more than aware of this fact because of her treatment in the family and through the conversations she observes: “There was something in Aunt Vi’s tone of voice that alerted Karen: she was an embarrassment, someone who could only be spoken of obliquely. She wasn’t quite an orphan but she had the taint of one” (258). She is not sure what makes her stand apart, but Karen accepts her difference, convinced that she “was born to the wrong parents” (257). Her mother repeatedly beats her legs with “a shoe or a broom handle or whatever was around” (45). She endures this abuse until she is seven years old, when her mother leaves her with her grandmother for the summer. After that visit, her mother is placed in an institution and Karen is sent to live with her mother’s sister and her husband.

The entire time that she lives with them, Karen feels like a visitor, not a part of the family. Her bedroom “is still called ‘the guest room,’ although Karen is living in it” (287). She is not given a space of her own in which to develop as a person.⁸ Despite that, “Charis” will emerge in this room. One night, her Uncle Vern enters the room and rapes her: “he falls on top of Karen and puts his slabby hand over her mouth, and splits her in two. He splits her in two right up the

middle and her skin comes open like the dry skin of a cocoon, and Charis flies out. Her new body is light as a feather, light as air. There's no pain in it at all" (290). From this early point in her life, Charis realizes her role as an object made for the pleasure of men. Because Uncle Vern can abuse her body to gratify his own desires, and because Aunt Vi does not put a stop to it once she finds out, Charis ignores her feelings of fear and loathing and accepts the abuse as normal and acceptable behavior, causing her to be an unknowing actress in the masquerade. Even later in life, she freely offers her body to the men she encounters because she thinks it is expected (236).

Luckily, the rape does bring about a positive change for the character. It leads her to mentally leave her physical body behind and create a new "inner" self—a self that her aunt and uncle know nothing about, and a self that she does not publicly share until she is twenty-six. At that age, she is able to imagine that "*Karen* was a leather bag...Charis collected everything she didn't want and shoved it into this name, this leather bag, and tied it shut....She kept only the things about herself that she liked or needed" (294). She imagines sinking the bag into Lake Ontario and "That was the end of *Karen*" (294). She is then able to escape of the baggage that was connected with being *Karen*—she escapes from the memories of sexual molestation and rape. As Charis, she believes she is able to live a happier, freer life. She does not keep in contact with her aunt and uncle, but rather drifts off into her own life where she hopes she will not have to abide by their rules (and therefore patriarchal society's), not knowing that even though she assumes she is leaving that part of her life behind, her notions of sex are still entwined in the guidelines of the masquerade of femininity.

Lastly, Roz undergoes several name changes throughout her life; yet unlike Tony and Charis, she does not rename herself, but is "the object" that is renamed—first by her parents, and

later through marriage. Even so, with each new name comes a transformation—in fact, each time she is renamed, she attempts to adapt to that name in hopes that, through conforming to what is expected of her, she may find out more about herself. However, as Howells points out, each name does not bring about a new beginning for Roz because “each one of her identities is shadowed by the others” (95).⁹ Ultimately, each adjustment is not an adjustment to what Roz wants, but an adjustment to suit the needs of what patriarchy expects of women. Initially named Rosalind Agnes Greenwood, she attends a Catholic school while living with her landlady mother. Her father is not there to help them run the rooming house because he is away at war; therefore, Rosalind is expected to help her mother keep the house clean. She lives a relatively normal home life, but she does not feel as if she fits in with the other children. Eager to be a part of the group, she knows that “she wasn’t like the others, she was among them but she wasn’t part of them. So she would push and shove, trying to break her way in” (360). From an early age, she is both aggressive and intent on being accepted.

When her father returns and brings home enough money to change their lifestyle—leaving behind the rooming house and purchasing a very large home—Rosalind Greenwood becomes Roz Grunwald. Not only does her name change, but her religion does as well. She is no longer Catholic; she is now Jewish. When she questions her parents, they explain that this is who Roz truly was all along (380). Yet Roz is not able to fully leave behind Rosalind Greenwood. As an adult, Roz wonders if “there’s something of Roz herself, Roz as she was then, caught in the branches of that chestnut tree” that stood outside of the rooming house (80). But as a child, Roz does attempt to move on and leave her past behind. For Roz, this movement is a second chance at fulfilling her role properly and being accepted. Unfortunately, because of her clumsiness in adjusting to the masquerade, she still does not fit in with the rich Jewish girls; however, she does

figure out a way to get them to include her—rather than being herself or imitating them, she decides “to be smarter, funnier, and richer [than the other girls]. . . She takes to making funny faces; she resorts to the rudeness of Huron Street, to get attention. Soon she has bulldozed a place for herself in the group: she is the joker” (382). Her personality evolves until this jokester becomes a part of Roz. Her joking manner not only grants her access to friendships, but also allows her to create a façade she can easily slip on when she is troubled. She uses this ability throughout her entire life as a means of dealing with her distress when she makes a mistake while enacting the masquerade.

Despite this pretense of comfortability, Roz still is not happy with who she is becoming. She meets Mitch Andrews, is blinded by his good looks, and marries him. At this point, she becomes Mrs. Roz Andrews—Mrs. Mitchell Andrews. This name introduces the roles of wife and mother—two of the primary roles of the conventional masquerade. While she adapts very well into the role of a mother, she loves her children and loves being with them, she does not fit into the mold of wife easily—at least, she admits, not the type of wife Mitch requires (329). She does not feel like she deserves him. Even though she is the one that brings the money into their family that makes them comfortably well off, Roz still feels inferior to Mitch. She places this emphasis on their ancestors and how they arrived in Canada. Roz acknowledges that her ancestors “came steerage” while Mitch’s came “cabin. Which means they threw up in a china basin instead of onto other people’s feet” (338-39). While she can acknowledge how ridiculous it is for such a thing to matter, she cannot help feeling “intimidated anyway” (339). Whereas both Tony and Charis grow toward bisexuality through their renaming, Roz only seems to confuse herself more. The only new part of herself that is positive for her is the role of mother.

Relationships: Men

The women's interactions with men most dramatically illustrate their participation in the feminine masquerade. All three artfully minimize their own contributions to the relationship to make their male counterparts feel strong and important. As Irigaray explains, a woman serves as a commodity for a man, and as a commodity, "has no mirror it can use to reflect itself, so woman serves as reflection, as image of and for man, but lacks specific qualities of her own. Her value-invested form amounts to what man inscribes in and on its matter; that is, her body" (Irigaray 187). Thus, Atwood's women allow themselves to be used—variously, as a substitute, as a meal ticket, or as a mother. All of the women are strong and, in actuality, support the ones they love. Yet each woman pretends that she is not in control or capable in an attempt to keep from emasculating her partner.

Tony is the only one of the women who is able to maintain her romantic relationship to the novel's conclusion, yet her relationship is hardly ideal. Tony spends much of her time mothering her husband, West. She does not think he is capable of taking care of himself or their marriage—she performs the "manly" chores around the house—taking out the garbage when he "forgets" (9), making certain she locks the doors behind her so that no "drug addicts" will go in to bother West while she's gone, owning "the only hammer in the house," and organizing home repairs (19). In spite of her protectiveness, she does not dominate him. Rather, she affects passivity, complying with her role as patriarchal wife.

Tony meets West while they are students in college. He sits near her in History class, borrows her notes, and notices her strange ability to write backwards. Through their mutual interest in history, they connect. Tony feels that he "was the only person she could talk to about her interest in war" (133). West is also the first person to appreciate Tony and give her a feeling

of worth: “West said nobody took better history notes than Tony. That made her feel useful—even better, indispensable. Praised” (135). As they spend more time together in and out of class, Tony begins to like West more and more. She is disappointed when she discovers he has a girlfriend, Zenia. However, she finds that she is drawn to Zenia as well and forms a friendship with her. Once Zenia realizes she has gained Tony’s trust, she takes advantage of her by asking for money to help both her and West. It is at this point that Tony begins to view West as weak and vulnerable because Zenia says he is incapable of providing for them. After all, West is a “poor angel; man-like, he has trouble cooking an egg or making himself a cup of tea” (186). This view of West is crucial to understanding why Tony treats him as an invalid throughout their shared lives.

When Zenia eventually disappears, Tony is left to comfort West. She does the best that she can to help him through his depression over losing Zenia: “Given the choice, she would not have elected the role of nurse and comforter, having been so bad at it with her father. But there isn’t a lot else on [sic] offer, and so Tony makes cups of tea for West, and pries him off his cushion, and—not knowing what else to do—takes him out for walks, like a dog or an invalid” (194). Even her first sexual encounter with West comes in the form of sympathy. Seeing West at his weakest does not give Tony the impression of West as a strong independent man; as a result, she becomes the primary caregiver in their relationship. Once she assumes this role, it sticks.

However, it is not long before Zenia returns and lures West back to her and away from Tony. He leaves in an attempt to help Zenia—Zenia who is weak while West describes Tony as “strong” (202). Because Zenia understands the importance of the masquerade and plays her part correctly in terms of needing to be supported rather than supporting, Tony is left on her own. However, it only takes a year for Zenia to tire of West for a second time. He returns to Tony,

looking “so pitiful, so pulled apart—as if he’d been on the rack, as if every one of his bones had been disconnected from every other bone, leaving only a kind of anatomical jelly—that of course she let him in” (210). She allows West back into her life, but Tony knows better than to completely reassume her former position of caregiver.

Even though Tony and West rebuild their relationship after Zenia has disappeared from their lives, Tony does not fully trust him. She finds herself lacking in comparison to Zenia, feeling that it is a “miracle” that West came back to her and wakes up with her every day (7). She does not believe that West is capable of taking care of himself after having been taken in by Zenia. She is constantly doing things for him and keeping facts from him such as the rumor she hears of Zenia’s death because “she knows how fragile he is, how subject to breakage” (10). Even as they are growing older, she sees West depending more and more on her. She envisions him “ten years older and stone blind, herself leading him tenderly by the hand. Training the seeing-eye dog, arranging the library of books-on-tape, the collection of electronic notes. What would he do without her?” (212). Thus having no faith in West’s ability to take care of himself, when Zenia returns to their lives for the third time, Tony cannot imagine that West has managed to avoid being a victim of Zenia’s deceptions once more.

Yet, after Zenia’s real death, Tony finally realizes that West is not as weak as she imagined—or as reliant upon her. When she confronts him about talking to Zenia, he admits that he had received a message from her—but that he had not told Tony in an attempt to protect *Tony* from Zenia. At the same time, he easily admits that “we both thought she was dead. I guess I would’ve liked her to stay that way....She’s always been bad news” (496). It seems that in her blindness, Tony has not given West enough credit to learn from the mistake he had made. At the novel’s end, it is Tony who is comforted and West who comforts: “He rocks her to and fro as if

she's the one who needs to be consoled, and not him at all" (497). This role reversal allows Tony to move on from her role as protector and provider for West to a partner in an egalitarian relationship. She can throw off the societal expectations that the masquerade connects with the title "wife" and her self-given role as protector and simply be West's partner. In this way, she is becoming more fully bisexual because she has incorporated both masculine and feminine traits—she has been West's protector and comforter and now she can also be protected and comforted by him.

Similarly, Charis attempts to keep her live-in boyfriend Billy, a draft dodger from the United States, happy by taking an active part in masquerading as she feels a woman is expected to. She thinks this is the only way in which he will remain with her and love her. Like Tony, she performs the chores that Billy is supposed to perform—only in her case, they both know he is not fulfilling his role as a provider, though neither mentions this fact.

When they move into their little house on the island, it is Charis, not Billy who attempts to renovate some of the house by stripping off linoleum and painting. Charis is regularly the first out of bed, going downstairs to the cold kitchen to start a fire with the wood she has scavenged, and it is Charis who slips on Billy's rubber boots to feed the chickens.¹⁰ She wears his boots because if she were to purchase her own pair, it "would violate the accepted version of reality, which is that Billy feeds the chickens" (226). They both live under this perceived reality that also justifies the fact that Billy gets to sleep as late as he likes because he "needs his sleep because of the strain he's under" (226). This supposed strain is most likely a result of his illegal status—not the result of him actually performing any type of strenuous work. In fact, the only contribution that Billy makes is building the henhouse and splitting firewood in the winter.

In the same way, Billy does not like to acknowledge that Charis is the primary breadwinner in the home, nor does Charis mention it. She simply goes to work, purchases and grows food in her own garden, and tries to make him happy in any way that she can. If she is late for work because she has spent extra time attending to Billy's needs, she is at a loss as to how she should approach the situation. She knows that she cannot remind him she must leave and go to work because "That doesn't go over well: he thinks it's a criticism of him because he doesn't have a job, and then he sulks. He prefers to believe that she's like a lily of the field; that she neither toils nor spins; that bacon and coffee are simply produced by her, like leaves from a tree" (240). Thus, she must even go to great lengths to avoid mentioning that she has a job. Similarly, Charis makes herself available any time that Billy wants to use her body. This is just another task Charis performs in the masquerade.

Yet, once Charis becomes pregnant, she realizes the inequality of their relationship. The anticipation of her own child puts Billy's laziness into relief. When Charis prepares to share the news about the baby's arrival, she acknowledges that:

Soon there would have to be some changes. She wouldn't be able to carry on with the yoga classes, so the money would have to come from elsewhere. Billy would have to get a job of some sort. He didn't have the right papers but there were jobs to be had anyway, because some of his draft-dodging friends had them. Billy would have to get off his butt. Charis wouldn't have thought like this, before the baby, but now she did. (305)

Charis is finally ready to accept the truth of their relationship and take a more assertive role for the sake of her child. As Cixous and Clément explain, pregnancy "valorizes *herself* as a woman in her own eyes" (90). In the same way, Charis is no longer desperate to do as Billy wants her to

do—no longer is she willing “to participate in man’s desire, but at the price of renouncing her own” (Irigaray 133). Charis places her own needs and desire in the forefront—her desire for a safe, loving home for her baby. By placing her own desire first, she takes an active step away from her performance in the masquerade and takes one step closer to achieving an identity as a bisexual woman.

Whereas Charis gains some freedom from the masquerade through the conception of her child, Roz’s role as a mother only complicates her participation with it. Despite the fact that her role as Mitch’s wife is less than satisfactory for her, Roz must stay in that role to keep her family together and to provide her children with security and a father.

Unlike the other women who, to a certain extent, consciously realize that they are acting in the masquerade, Roz is somewhat oblivious. Following in her mother’s footsteps, Roz feels it is expected that she be the devoted, forgiving wife. Her own mother spent years waiting for her husband to return to her—despite the fact that he was less than loyal to her. Once he does return, his affairs do as well. Later, while she is living a similar lifestyle with Mitch and turning a blind eye to his affairs, Roz considers her parents’ relationship, wondering, “What was their arrangement, her mother and father? Did they love each other?” (376). Her realization of the similarities is vital to her understanding of her and Mitch’s relationship. Roz realizes that her father had immense power over her mother—and that his return removed Roz’s mother’s power; when he came home, his word held precedence over her mother’s word. As a result, Roz respects and admires him. Even while he is having affairs, Roz imagines he goes for refined women because she “wanted to give her father some credit: he wouldn’t have gone for just any old easy lay. She wanted to be proud of him....Maybe her father was a scoundrel, but he was the one she adored” (375-76). Her admiration for her father mirrors the feelings she has for Mitch. Because

her father committed such actions and her mother worked through them to keep their family together, Roz feels that she must do the same.

Yet she goes a step further than needed—she actually takes an active role in Mitch’s affairs. She knows how to tell when he is involved in one—from his moods, from where he places his aftershave—and she pretends to be oblivious of them. When Mitch decides that he has had enough of the affair, he makes Roz confront the situation by leaving obvious clues about his activities so that she will make a scene about it. Her anger will put into motion the events that will end the affair:

She’s supposed to behave the way she did the first time (the second time, the fifth time), so he will be able to wriggle off the hook, so he can tell the other woman...that he will always adore her but he can’t bear to leave the kids; and so he will be able to tell Roz—magnanimously, and with a heroic air of self-sacrifice—that she is the most important woman in his life, no matter how badly and foolishly he may behave from time to time, and he’s given the other woman up for her, so how can she refuse to forgive him? The other women are just trivial adventures, he will imply: she’s the one he comes home to. (331-32)

Roz always goes along with Mitch’s plan, even though she eventually begins to purposely take her time before acting her role in the process to make him uncomfortable.

Roz caters to Mitch’s desires in other ways as well. They both know that she is the breadwinner of the family. She eventually becomes the president of her own magazine, and it is she who gives Mitch a position on its board of directors and “[sticks] on a couple of his legal buddies to keep him company” (388). She gives him a measure of control in her business so that he will allow her to remain in her position without causing problems at home—problems that are

no doubt a result of Roz ignoring the rule of masculine society that says Mitch should be the one with the power. He allows her the concession of her presidency as long as she continues to fulfill her role as mother and forgiving wife to his affairs and places him in a position where he will have a say in her business.

Yet Roz does have some guidelines for Mitch's affairs—guidelines that serve the purpose of keeping their family intact. When Mitch moves out of the house to live with Zenia, Roz draws the line. She refuses to allow him to return home. This time, when he tells her that he wants to return to the fold, she denies him the option: “‘You can't treat me like a rest stop,’ she says. ‘Not any more’” (420). Her ability to place her own desire for respect—from herself and from Mitch—before Mitch's need for forgiveness is necessary for Roz's advancement into bisexuality. Because she stops catering to Mitch's whims and desires and focuses on her own, she breaks free of the demands the masquerade places upon her.

However, she does not truly escape from her role as Mitch's forgiving wife until after both he and Zenia are dead. When Tony, Charis, and Roz are scattering Zenia's ashes a year after her death, Roz finally decides to take off her wedding ring. She realizes that this is more than a symbolic act, it is a crucial one for her development: “Roz will finally be a widow. No. She'll be something more, something beyond that” (517). The “something beyond” refers to Roz's future as a bisexual—she will be able to escape the restrictive roles that were forced upon her through Mitch's expectations.

Relationships: Women

Perhaps the most important lesson each character learns in her journey to be a bisexual woman is the recognition of interdependence, of a real, genuine community. Atwood celebrates

the idea of friendship by showing how each woman relies on the others and in turn saves them and is saved by them. As Patricia F. Goldbatt suggests, the friendship these women maintain eases the pain of the lack of familial relationships (276). The three very different women make a point of lunching together once a month. Atwood succinctly details the relationship through Tony's eyes:

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*.... 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. (31)

The misery they share connects them in an atypical way that is stronger than many friendships. When West leaves Tony, Roz helps Tony move on; when Zenia and Billy leave Charis pregnant and alone, Tony supports Charis during the pregnancy; and when Roz overdoses on sleeping pills, Charis gives her strength and coaxes her into trying to live.

Perhaps what is vitally important is that the women are forming a bond that encourages their individual and collective transition to and acceptance of bisexuality. In list form, Irigaray explains why it is good for women to join together:

In order to begin to escape from the spaces, roles, and gestures that they have been assigned and taught by the society of men. In order to love each other, even though men have organized a *de facto* rivalry among women. In order to discover a form of 'social existence' other than the one that has always been imposed upon them. The first issue facing liberation movements is that of making each woman

‘conscious’ of the fact that what she has felt in her personal experience is a condition shared by all women. (164)

Thus, by seeing that each of them has weak points and times in her life when she feels alone and helpless, they can all be more comfortable accepting support during their own hard times. They can band together against the parts of their lives that attempt to constrict them and help each other move on to become more confident and sure of who she can be.

When West leaves her for Zenia, Tony is “devastated” (204). Roz arrives to hold her, mothering her and giving her the opportunity to finally let her pain out. She takes care of everything that Tony cannot: her classes, food, and baths. Most importantly, she does not leave her alone to fend for herself through the difficult time. Roz moves into Tony’s apartment and keeps her company until Tony is able to function on her own again. Not only does she suggest that Tony purchase her own home, she also takes care of inspecting it and redecorating it so that Tony can simply move in and begin her new life. The friendship enables Tony—and Roz—to survive. Tony reflects on their identities as “war widows or aging vets, or wives of those missing in action” (31). They pull together to support each other because of the traumatic events that tie them together and allow them to fully empathize with one another.

The bond between Tony and Roz is only strengthened when Tony comes to Charis’s rescue. In an attempt to find Zenia and Billy, Charis calls the only person she knows is connected with Zenia: West. Luckily for her, Tony picks up the phone and immediately comes to the island to listen to Charis’s story. Tony then shares her own experience with Charis and expresses her “hostility” in a way that Charis cannot, which “brings an undeniable comfort” to her friend (313). Tony then forces Charis to lie down while she cleans up the bloody carcasses of Charis’s chickens—destruction caused by Billy or Zenia before they left in an attempt to further debilitate

Charis. Tony also quietly listens to Charis's thoughts of suicide and gently proceeds to help her plan for the baby's coming. Tony moves in and helps Charis build up her strength and prepare for August's birth. It is Tony—not August's father, Billy—who “helps Charis with her breathing exercises, timing Charis on her big-numbers wristwatch and squeezing Charis's hand in her own little hand” (315). At this point, Tony exemplifies her bisexuality—she easily fulfills the male role during Charis's pregnancy.

Similarly, Roz assists in the process of making the house Charis purchases into a home by providing a round, oak table and equipment for the nursery. These actions are the beginning of the bond between Charis and Roz because “Charis decides that—despite all appearances—Roz is a sensitive person” (315). Roz wants to help her emotionally as well as financially—she hires a lawyer to retrieve Charis's inheritance to purchase her house and also helps her invest the money she has left over. She continues to help her in little ways as Charis notes that Roz's “accounting procedures always end up with Charis paying less” on shared dinner bills (217). Charis's need is what finally connects all three women and serves to establish their friendship so that when Zenia returns, Roz does not have to deal with the resulting wreckage alone.

When Mitch commits suicide over his loss of Zenia, Roz falls into a deep depression, blaming herself for his death:

[Roz] has been a success at many things, but not at the one thing. Not at standing by her man. Because if Mitch drowned himself—if there wasn't enough left for him to live for—whose fault was it? Zenia's, yes, but also her own. She should have remembered about his own father, who took the same dark road. She should have let him back in. (426)

She blames herself for Mitch's death and for leaving her children without a father. She asks herself "how long it will take her kids to forgive her, once they've figured out exactly how much they need to forgive her for" (90). Unable to cope with her guilt, she finds that she cannot sleep, and her frustration causes her to overdose on sleeping pills mixed with alcohol—"not out of any desire to die, she doesn't want to do that, but out of simple irritation at being awake" (427). She is rushed to the hospital after her son finds her passed out on the kitchen floor.

While floating between consciousness and unconsciousness, Roz finds Charis holding her hand and urging her to live. Charis takes on some of Roz's grief and "hauls" her back to life. While Roz recovers, both Charis and Tony move into Roz's house to take care of her—Tony handling practical matters while Charis focuses on healing Roz's spiritual self.

Because of these interactions, the foundation of the life-long friendship is set. At the same time, whether any of them realize it or not, each woman has been a heroine—she has put another woman before herself in order to save a life and livelihood. These actions take a great amount of strength and love that the women do not give themselves credit for having. Most importantly, by supporting each other, they are no longer alone. They no longer live for their romantic relationships because they now have a stronger, deeply felt, shared platonic relationship. Their ability to survive in "a non-phallogentric space in which they do not have to compete against one another" allows them to be independent without having to be alone (Amano 9). But in order to continue developing, they must create a space that is solely their own.

Space

In order to move on with their lives when their partners leave them for Zenia, each woman performs a sort of "domestic makeover." By redesigning their living spaces, they create a

territory that is solely theirs—a space devoid of patriarchal influence. In this haven, they are safe whether it is in Tony’s tower room, in Charis’s garden, or in Roz’s suburban mansion. Initially, the area provides an escape from the pain of their pasts. Tony leaves behind the apartment she and West shared; Charis raises her daughter in the type of environment she dreams of; and Roz uses redecoration as an outlet for her misery. Yet the space evolves into a type of sanctuary where they can focus on their bisexuality in the absence of the pressure of male desires.

But, more importantly, each room is a woman’s space. Even if their men do return or their children also inhabit the area, the space belongs to them, as Charis firmly reminds her daughter Augusta when she fusses about the mess Charis leaves behind: “it’s my meditation, and it’s *my house* [e. a.]” (497). They take full ownership of what they have created. By creating and maintaining a personal refuge, each woman recovers from the majority of the trauma Zenia causes, begins rebuilding her life on her own terms, and accomplishes another step in her journey to bisexuality. In the same way, we can easily say that it is *because* of Zenia that they take this step; she removes the obstacle that stands in their way—the men they feel they must place before their own desires. Despite the fact that the men are gone and the women miss them—sometimes desperately—the women can focus on what *they* want and create an area that will help *them* reach for their own desires rather than focusing on keeping their men’s desires satisfied.

Tony is the first to break free. She leaves behind the apartment she shared with West and purchases her own house—a place where “things were indeed better” (207). Kyoko Amano points out that this house “becomes both the place where she is protected from outside forces and the place that she protects from them” (8). Reflecting on her home, Tony thinks that it is “A solid house, reassuring, a fort, a bastilion, a keep” (20). It serves as a place of safety for Tony but also serves as her own private “convent of one” (207). She isolates herself in the house which

she imagines to be one of the safe places of her history books and finds a way to exist without a male presence.

West returns a year later when Zenia has abandoned him for a second time, and Tony welcomes him into *her* house and heals him a second time. Yet Tony stands apart from him and is not drawn in as she had been the first time. As West clings to her as if he's drowning, she feels "strangely detached from him" (210). She has developed into a stronger, more courageous woman with her own space who can take a step back in order to focus on her own needs and desires.

While Charis does not physically change locations, she purchases the house she had been renting and redecorates it so that it will be a "home" for her baby. Her friends, Tony and Roz help her reclaim her legacy—the money her mother and grandmother left to her—that her Uncle Vern had kept from her. With this money, she is able to purchase the house as well as make it a home by "[fixing] it up, not totally but enough" (315). Charis knows that the house transformed on the island is crucial to her stability:

...her house, her fragile but steady house, her flimsy house that is still standing, her house with the lush flowers, her house with the cracked walls, her house with the cool white peaceful bed.

Her house, not theirs; not Billy's and Zenia's, even though this is where it all happened. (318)

By the time August is born, the house has been transformed and exorcised. It is now Charis's space where she can escape, celebrate the view of the city through her window, and perform her own rituals undisturbed. Even though the house is threatened by the possibility of developers, Charis finally has her own space—the space that was denied her, even in childhood.

Lastly, Roz is able to transform her situation by transforming her surroundings. Once her husband has died, Roz throws herself into redecorating the house. Seeing things as they had been while he was there depresses her mainly because she is “surprised to discover how little he had actually been involved in all that shopping, how few choices he’d helped her make; or, look at it another way, how little he’d contributed” (411). She needs to erase the physicality that she had created to share with Mitch and create a space that is just for her and her children. What she does keep of Mitch’s is banished to the dirty, unrenovated part of the basement where she can easily avoid it when she does not want to deal with it (325).

Roz’s interest in homes and their trappings has been consistent since her childhood when she read murder mystery novels. She loves these books, but “What she truly enjoyed was the furniture: rooms and rooms of it, and so exotic! Things she didn’t know existed. Tea trollies. Billiard rooms. Chandeliers. Chaises longues [sic]. She wanted to live in houses like that!” (78-79). Similarly, when her family becomes rich, she is embarrassed and uncomfortable with the furniture her mother purchases: furniture “that cost a mint but it looked straight out of a funeral parlour mail-order catalogue, in addition to which every single surface was covered with doilies” (343). Once she has the money to purchase the items of her childhood dreams and the taste that her mother lacks (with a little help from hired interior designers), Roz is able create a stylish life for herself where she is no longer obviously poor or glaringly “new” money.

In addition to changing her environment to help deal with her daily life without Mitch, the process of renovating helps Roz deal with her personal pain. When she is troubled by Zenia’s return, “Roz wanders the house, from room to room, munching pickles and revising wall colours in her head” (324). This comes not from a dissatisfaction with the current décor, but from a desire to control her environment which allows her to feel that she is also in control of her own

life. Her home and family are the foundation she draws on to deal with daily life. Each of the women now has her own personal space—a female-oriented space. By creating this safe place that is free of male negativity, they can more easily escape the restrictions of the masquerade.

It is at this point in our analysis that we can begin to understand what Atwood has accomplished through the novel. She has shown her readers that they can change the “terms” on which their own identities are constructed (through changing their names, reevaluating their relationships, etc.) and that they, like Tony, Charis, and Roz, can refuse to abide by the rules of the feminine masquerade (the rules forced upon them by patriarchal society). In doing so, Atwood opens a space for the readers to explore and develop their own bisexual identities. In short, Atwood performs for her readers what is going on within the time and space of her novel.

Zenia

However, there is still one vital step that Tony, Charis, and Roz (and by extension, the readers) must take to develop. They must understand their relationship with Zenia and forgive her for what she has done to them before they can move forward in their psychosexual development. Once they see Zenia as someone other than their enemy, they are capable of seeing the truth of how they have each been a slave to the masquerade. A paradoxical creature, Zenia has taken a step forward in conquering the masquerade even as she is a slave to it. Zenia does not try to break free of the role patriarchal society has placed her into; instead, she twists the role she is cast into to serve her own needs. She does not fight against the way men objectify her; rather, she uses their desire for her to gain power over them. Zenia lies and cheats to get what she wants—using both men and women. While we may not see her as a likely role model, and even though she does not achieve bisexuality, the characters can learn things from her. As Donna

Bontatibus explains in “Reconnecting with the Past: Personal Hauntings in Margaret Atwood’s *The Robber Bride*”:

Ultimately, the protagonists learn that they are drawn to Zenia because she represents not only repressed aspects of themselves, but also aspects that they must integrate into their beings in order to possess a more complete sense of wholeness. With this recognition comes the heroines’ acute understanding of their capabilities—their wisdom, intuition, and inner strength. (370)

Thus, they need to understand what Zenia represents and how they can emulate her strengths and disregard her weaknesses while also continuing on their own, very different, paths. Even though Zenia may seem like the villain of the novel because of the way she manipulates without remorse, she actually serves as a teacher to all of the women, showing them the truths in their lives that without her, they are unable to see. Yet in a way, Zenia also functions as a stand in for the position of Atwood herself as a guide.

Zenia is perhaps the most complicated character in the book; she is the one who catalyzes the book’s action. Never narrating the novel, Zenia is seen only through the eyes of Tony, Charis, and Roz. Each woman has been hurt by Zenia at one or more points in her life; thus, none of the women have the most reliable of viewpoints where Zenia is concerned. Rather than assuming everything that the women present is true, I think it is important to critically look at and give credit to some of Zenia’s own actions throughout the novel.

Rebecca M. Painter focuses on the importance of these actions in her dissertation chapter, “Lies, Damned Lies, and Failures of Compassion: Atwood’s *The Robber Bride*.” She suggests that Tony, Charis, and Roz did not progress enough since they do not provide comfort for Zenia when she really does need them most. She claims that it is important to remember that “each of

[the women] grew up terribly isolated, abused, and almost totally deprived of compassion and nurturing. Yet they were fortunate enough not to have been quite as isolated and desperate as Zenia” (160). While we may follow Tony, Charis, and Roz’s example and judge Zenia’s actions harshly, it is important to realize that Zenia herself may be ruled by her need to survive in a patriarchal society. While the women have each other to rely on, Zenia cannot seem to allow herself to trust or rely on anyone—instead, she selfishly uses and lies to them.

Nevertheless, Painter claims that Zenia is not the only female capable and guilty of repeatedly lying. In fact, she asserts that it is the very act of lying that connects all four women: “Zenia to others; the others, to themselves” (138). Yet one thing sets Zenia apart from the women—she does not deny that she lies while the women do not want to see that they do. When Roz confronts Zenia about lying to Tony and Charis, Zenia does not deny it. Instead, she admits, “I didn’t always tell the truth” (401). Zenia’s lies are healthy because she admits they are a means to an end where she will better her own situation. However, Painter asserts that “the kind of lies Tony, Charis and Roz tell themselves concern their very identities, concealing facts they do not wish to, or cannot, face. Lies are their means of avoiding self knowledge” (141). Zenia’s lies teach the women that they need to come to terms with their pasts and to “accept living with painful memories and contradictions, to embrace change and constructive self development” (Heilmann 180). Zenia’s ability to fully acknowledge her lies places her in a position of power that the other women cannot fill because they have not dealt with the untruths in their lives. Even though she may not realize the beneficial effects of her actions, Zenia helps the women move into the final stage of bisexuality by allowing to view their own lives and pasts in a more objective way. She does this in two ways: first, she first manipulates the women into feeling that they are like her which causes them to trust her without doubting anything she tells them. Then,

she creates her own childhood story which mirrors their own. The women contrast Zenia's account of her childhood with their own and are then able to get over the emotional distress tied to their memories and move on with their lives.

Thus, Zenia begins by playing a large part in helping Tony come to terms with her troubled childhood and her relationship with her mother. When Tony tells Zenia how her mother abandoned her family, Zenia listens. Later, Zenia returns to the subject of Tony's mother, labeling Anthea as a "romantic" and putting a realistic spin on Tony's parents' relationship. When Tony reasserts that she had been abandoned, Zenia one ups her by saying "My own mother *sold* me" (181).¹¹ She goes on to tell her story of a horrible childhood with her White Russian mother where they had to sell themselves to survive. Whether the story is true or not is unimportant. Because she creates her own stories to mimic Tony's, "Zenia cuts into the very heart of each woman...Zenias sparks off repressed memories that force [each woman] to acknowledge and give expression to her buried self" (Heilmann 179). She creates a kind of kinship with Tony—a sameness:

So far Tony has seen Zenia as very different from herself, but now she sees her as similar too, for aren't they both orphans? Both motherless war babies, making their way in the world by themselves, trudging onwards with their baskets over their arms, baskets containing their scant, their only worldly possessions—one brain apiece, for what else do they have to rely on? (184)

Because they are both orphans of the same war, Tony immediately trusts Zenia's perspective. After all, Zenia had similar, if not worse, hardships as a child.

Zenia's tale is also a mirror of Tony's story. When Tony looks at both stories, she feels that her "own little history has dwindled considerably. Beside Zenia's, it seems no more than an

incident, minor, grey, suburban; a sedate parochial anecdote; a footnote” (184). Because Tony feels that Zenia has moved on, Tony knows that she must be able to as well. It is also Zenia who convinces Tony to stop carrying around her mother’s ashes. They go together to the lake and dump them to break the “hold” Tony’s mother has on her (175-76). Thus, Tony is able to come to terms with her childhood and put it behind her.

In the same way, Zenia helps Charis to see the truth and to deal with her past in order to reunite with the imprisoned Karen. While still living on the island, Zenia tells Charis of her hard life as a daughter of a Roumanian gypsy. Zenia’s story again serves to build a connection between she and Charis as well as acts as a means of reflection. After finding that they both have a father who has been killed in the war, Charis is “glad they have a bond in common” (302). Once this connection is established, Charis is better able to see the two of them as similar, which opens a path for Karen’s later return.

When Zenia describes seeing her mother stoned to death, Charis feels that Zenia “needs to get such poisonous images out of her” (301). At the same time, it is easy to see the poisonous images which are trapped in Charis’s head—or rather, trapped in the leather bag she has sealed her child-self in. Charis realizes that she has not sunk the bag into Lake Ontario; rather, it is sunk deep inside of herself. The only way in which Charis can fully deal with these issues is to release them. After a confrontation between Charis and Zenia, Karen returns and slips back into Charis’s body and “with her she brings the ancient shame, which feels warm.” Before Charis is adjusted to the return of her childhood self, Billy instigates sex, and for the first time, Charis enjoys it. Her orgasm requires all of her focus so that “she forgets about Karen, she forgets about herself. Everything in her has been fused together” (295). She is once again whole and acknowledges that this newfound pleasure is, in part, thanks to another person. Yet she is not thinking about

Billy. When Charis “makes love with Billy she doesn’t think about being Karen, or Charis either. She thinks about being Zenia” (296). Once Charis has merged with Karen, who she considers to be the darker side of herself, she can be a stronger woman—she can be like Zenia and feel more in control of her destiny. By coming to terms with her past, Charis reconnects with her sexual side and is finally able to experience pleasure from sex.

Zenia also repeatedly attempts to make Charis see the truth about Billy. Because Zenia knows how to manipulate to get what she wants, she sees that Billy is doing the same thing to Charis. While we may not know why she does so, she attempts to uncover Billy as a user rather than as the upstanding man Charis loves. Zenia bluntly states that Billy doesn’t hate her (Zenia), he desires her. When Charis claims this is not possible because Billy loves *her*, Zenia lays the facts out harshly:

Come on, you’re not a baby. He loves your ass. Or some other body part, how would I know? Anyway, I’m sure it’s not your soul, it’s not *you*. If you didn’t put out he’d just take anyway. I’ve watched him, he’s a greedy shit, they’re all just rapists at heart. You’re an innocent, Karen. Believe me, there’s only one thing any man ever wants from a woman, and that’s sex. How much you can get them to pay for it is the important thing. (254)

Despite the fact that Zenia is cynical and blunt to the point of cruelty, she is also being honest with Charis—perhaps the most honest she has been with her up to that point. Zenia repeatedly uses her body as an item of exchange—in fact, she has done so with Charis—by claiming to have cancer, she used a “sick” body as a means of getting into Charis’s home. This fact seems to run through all three of her “life stories.” She tells each woman that her body has been sold in some way or another. Painter claims that this is because “Zenia’s predicament thus exemplifies an

acutely female crisis of restricted choice. Her means to survival consisted in the sale of her body, and/or the use of her beauty, to attract male providers” (137). She lays out a version of the truth: that men are willing to use women for their bodies with little to no interest in their “souls,” in who the women really are. When telling her story to Roz, she restates the same idea: “Men don’t see you as a person, they just see the body” (402). Zenia makes it clear to Charis that Billy sexually desires her body, implying this desire is no different from the desire he has for Charis.

At the same time, the reader can easily believe her, even if Charis does not. After all, Charis fails to see the wrongness in Billy’s treatment of her. Of their sexual involvement, Charis relays, “he was always after her then. In the mornings, in the afternoons, at night, it made no difference....His urgency confused her....Sometimes he did things that hurt—slapping her, pinching. Sometimes it hurt anyway” (230). These descriptions do not exactly paint a picture of love making or any type of tender emotion. Charis even admits to feeling “like a trampoline with someone jumping up and down” (230) yet still wonders why she does not find pleasure in the act. She simply mentally removes herself from her body during sex (as she did while being raped by her uncle) and thinks of other things. Yet she is happy because she is making Billy happy, and where sex is concerned, they both seem to agree “that what [Charis] felt about it didn’t matter” (231). These instances make Zenia’s words seem not as far fetched as they may have if Billy had been an attentive lover.

Even later, when Charis returns to Zenia to find the answers to her questions, Zenia tries to make her see the real Billy once more: “Wake up! You were a meal-ticket! He was eating off you even though he had money of his own” (471). Zenia goes on to explain that Billy was selling drugs and later turned in his fellow draft dodgers for money and clemency. Showing a bit of compassion, she advises, “Now listen to me, Charis. This is for your own good....Give him up.

Forget about him” (471). When Charis seems to ignore her advice a second time, Zenia offers to give her his address so that she can return to him. However, Charis does not take it, implying that even though she later considers that Zenia had lied to her about some of what she has said, she has learned that Zenia might have a point about Billy. Bontatibus explains, “In the end, Charis emerges a renewed individual less victimized by her unconscious mind and external circumstances and more understanding of the events of her life as part of a meaningful and purposeful plan” (365). Despite the fact that Zenia has pointed out many things that she does not want to see, Charis is still able to accept the truth that she can be happy without Billy and move on along her journey to bisexuality.

Finally, Zenia also plays a part in helping Roz face the lies she has created around her own life. Howells asserts that “Zenia’s main function seems to be to confront Roz with her own limits of power: as a wife (Zenia seduces Mitch away from Roz), as a mother (Zenia claims to have seduced Roz’s son Larry), as a feminist (Zenia causes a debacle over *WiseWomanWorld*), as a business woman (Zenia defrauds Roz in several quite spectacular ways), and as a Canadian” (95). Yet the most important of these intrusions is Zenia’s relationship with Mitch. Knowing of his repeated infidelities and accepting them, Roz constantly lies to herself about the happiness and stability of her home. It is Zenia’s appearance that causes the illusion of harmony to crumble.

Their friendship begins when, after running into Roz in a restaurant, Zenia promises to share her life story—a story that involves Roz’s father. Rather than learning from the experiences of her friends, Roz’s desire to see her father as a hero wins over her wariness in getting involved with Zenia. Zenia explains that she was a Jewish baby in Berlin whose parents were captured by the Nazis. Thanks to Roz’s father, she and her aunt were able to escape with

their lives. Roz is immediately gratified that Zenia has restored her father's name. He must be a hero if he helped save the lives of a lone woman and a helpless six-month-old baby.

It is significant that after Zenia shares her story, Roz is hesitant to believe her. She accuses Zenia of lying to Tony and Charis. She is surprised when Zenia does not deny it, and, in fact, not only acknowledges her lies, but also provides answers to Roz's unspoken questions about her nose and breast reconstructions. Then she draws Roz in and solidifies their bond of trust. She claims that she could not have told Tony or Charis the truth as she has told Roz because they would not have been able to understand. As with Tony and Charis, Zenia succeeds and "Roz is touched. She, Roz—she alone—has been chosen, to understand. And she does, she does" (402). Zenia has drawn her in and satisfied her childhood need for acceptance. Yet Roz cannot separate her business-head from her role as compassionate friend. After hearing Zenia's story and explanations for her troubled past, Roz exclaims, "I mean—what a story! It's great material!" (403). After hearing this, Zenia begins to cry.

When Zenia bursts into tears, Painter asserts that it does not matter if we are looking at the scene from Roz's perspective or from anyone else's because Zenia "really is alone, without the trite but essential 'support system' of friends, family, and connectedness to psychological and physical community" (158). And Roz is perhaps the most symbolic of the three women to represent family and connectedness. She even acknowledges her own luck "with her three children and her husband, her money, her work, her house" (401).

The mirror that Zenia's tale provides comes through her representation of Roz's father. Roz wants him to be a hero when he, in fact, contributed in illegal activities and was disloyal to his wife. Though her story returns Roz's memory of her father to a good light, Zenia removes Roz's father's mirror, Mitch, from Roz's life.

During their final confrontation, Zenia tells Roz to get over Mitch and to let him go. While Roz still wants to treasure Mitch's memory, later at the scattering of Zenia's ashes, she decides to do as Zenia suggests. She concludes that "When Zenia goes into the lake, Mitch will go too, finally" (517). Howells explains that "Roz, who has practiced her own identity performance for so long, putting on a clown face to cover up distress, finds herself saddened at the scattering of Zenia's ashes, bereft of that shadowy other, but also delivered for the first time in her life from the 'tumour' of her past" (98). Roz will finally be on her own, independent of her husband or the myriad of inauthentic roles she felt obligated to fulfill during her life with him.

In the end, only one of the women comes even close to realizing the good that Zenia caused in their lives—in their development as independent women. Charis is able to sit down and meditate on Zenia "because although she has often thought about Zenia in relation to herself, or to Billy, or even to Tony and Roz, she has never truly considered what Zenia was in and by herself: the Zenia-ness of Zenia" (498). While the others may not realize the good of Zenia, each does come to admire her or wish her well in the end. When thinking about the detectives investigating Zenia's death, Tony knows that Zenia "will outfox them, just as she's always outfoxed everyone else. She finds herself being pleased about this, elated even, as if her faith in Zenia—a faith she didn't realize she had—is being vindicated" (504). Despite the fact that Zenia has outfoxed Tony herself several times, Tony is not bitter. She mentally cheers Zenia on in carrying out another deception. Similarly, Charis does not have negative feelings towards Zenia at the conclusion of the novel. After meditating on Zenia, Charis thinks about Zenia's spirit and writes "*Zenia has returned to the Light....*She hopes that Zenia is not still hovering around, alone and lost, somewhere out there in the night" (499). She wants Zenia to experience a connection that she did not seem to have while she was alive—she does not want her to be alone as she was

in life. Lastly, Roz also finds that she has moved past the bitterness she felt towards Zenia while she was alive. As they are preparing to pour Zenia's ashes into Lake Ontario, Roz "feels something else she never thought she would feel, towards Zenia. Oddly enough, it's gratitude" (515). These thoughts come on the heels of her symbolic burial of her relationship with Mitch. Roz has realized that she will be able to stand on her own, and perhaps, to be happier that way.

The last few lines of the book sum up the way the women feel about Zenia: "From the kitchen [Tony] hears laughter, and the clatter of dishes. Charis is setting out the food, Roz is telling a story. That's what they will do, increasingly in their lives: tell stories. Tonight their stories will be about Zenia" (519-20). Even though during her life Zenia was never included in the women's circle of friendship, after her death, she is there in spirit—through the stories the women tell of her. Their final step in their journey to bisexuality comes in the form of their forgiveness and perhaps understanding of a woman who shared the their position as women in a patriarchal society. Charis realizes that her former inability to see Zenia apart from her actions and interactions with her and her friends had kept "her from perceiving what that essence of another's selfhood (soul) [could] teach her, what truths would be available to her if she were open to the Zenia-ness of Zenia" (Painter 154). When Charis is able to do this, she realizes that Zenia was placed in her life for a reason—even if Charis does not understand what she was meant to learn at that point (499).

Yet all of the women *have* learned valuable lessons about themselves and about seeing through the lies they had been telling themselves about their present and past lives. Once they see the truth, they are able to reach the desired goal—individuality and bisexuality—even though Zenia never reaches it herself. Following Zenia's lead, Tony, Charis, and Roz are able to accept themselves as bisexual beings. However, they can go further than Zenia could because of their

friendship. They can embrace “loving to be other, another, without its necessarily going the route of abasing what is same, herself” (Cixous 86). They do not need Zenia’s misogyny. They can love men, and they can love women, because they relate to both.

Conclusion

As Cixous explains, one cannot achieve bisexuality “without danger, without pain, without loss—of moments of self, of consciousness, of persons one has been, goes beyond, leaves. It doesn’t happen without expense—of sense, time, direction” (86). As Tony, Charis, and Roz show, this holds true. It takes them most of their lifetimes and several painful moments to forge their own identities. They escape society’s dictated masquerade by changing names (changing the terms of their subjugation), readjusting their relationships so that they can focus on their own desires (transgressing patriarchal law and exploring relationships with each other that do not require them to follow patriarchy’s rules), and creating a space (both literal and psychological) that allows them to grow unhindered. Finally, they come to an understanding of a woman who chose the alternate way of manipulation and deceit to find power in a man’s world (a guide of sorts, who leads a life more extreme than they but from whom they can learn). All of these steps have revealed to them their own weaknesses and how they devoted themselves to a masquerade that does not suit their personal needs, desires, or good.

This novel, itself, seeks to perform what it describes. Through the mask of Zenia, Atwood serves as an “extreme” and misjudged guide for her readers, showing them that they too can change the terms of their own subjugation and dare to transgress the rules of patriarchal society (even choosing to read one of her texts accomplishes this to some small degree). In indulging

such psychosexual fantasies as her novels construct, Atwood opens a space for her readers own respective transformations towards a more bisexual identity.¹²

NOTES

¹ Irigaray describes “the masquerade of femininity” in *This Sex Which is Not One*, when showing how females adjust to the position patriarchal society places them in.

² I use the word “may” because many women do not even realize that they may want something other than what patriarchal society tells them they want.

³ While it is possible for men to achieve bisexuality, Cixous and Clément focus mainly on females achieving bisexuality.

⁴ Donna L. Potts also acknowledges Atwood’s characters’ search for what she calls a “hybrid” self in her article “‘The Old Maps Are Dissolving’: Intertextuality and Identity in Atwood’s *The Robber Bride*.” Potts explains that Atwood “demonstrates her belief in the potential for an empowering ‘hybrid’ self, one that crosses the boundaries between colonizer and colonized, male and female, self and other” (281). Potts’s “hybrid” self does not seem unlike Cixous’s “bisexual” woman.

⁵ When using the term “bisexuality” from this point on, I do not refer to the conventional definition. I refer to the idea of “bisexuality” which Cixous and Clément introduce in *The Newly Born Woman* where “bisexuality” refers to a merging of the traits of both sexes.

⁶ Here one might think of the Lacanian idea of “lack” which is articulated by Atwood and against which she works.

⁷ It is possible to see Anthea’s influence on these desires. She feels most oppressed by marriage (husband) and role as mother (Tony). It is not surprising that Tony admires those that can kill husbands and children in order to escape patriarchal oppression. However, I do not suggest that murder is an act Tony wishes to carry out in her own life.

⁸ Feminists from Virginia Woolf to Irigaray note that the demarcation of a “space” is crucial for the construction of personal identity, and the denial of access to such spaces is an effective strategy of patriarchal domination.

⁹ Atwood intuitively follows a Derridian argument regarding language, which is that in renaming a “thing” one changes that thing; of course, the characters are nevertheless haunted by the traces of former selves.

¹⁰ At this point in her growth to becoming bisexual, Charis masquerades as a man until she can come to terms with her own masculine traits and accept them without having “dress up” as a man.

¹¹ In terms of Zenia acting as a the creation or “child” of Atwood, one cannot help think of Anne Bradstreet’s poem, “The Author to her Book.”

¹² Arguably, this is not done unwittingly. There is much irony in naming her spiritual guide Zenia and drowning her Zenobia-like in a fountain. Thankfully, Atwood takes up the pen herself and writes her part in an newly imagined *Blithedale Romance*—rather than playing a Margaret Fuller derided from a distance.

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