

Mermaids and Sirens as Myth Fragments in Contemporary
Literature

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines three works: Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride* and *Alias Grace*, and Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*. All three novels feature female characters that contain elements or myth fragments of mermaids and sirens. The thesis asserts that the images of the mermaid and siren have undergone a gradual process of change, from literal mythical figures, to metaphorical images, and then to figures or myth fragments that reference the original mythical figures. The persistence of these female half-human images points to an underlying rationale that is independent of historical and cultural factors. Using feminist psychoanalytic theoretical frameworks, the thesis identifies the existence of the siren/mermaid myth fragments that are used as a means to construct the category of the 'bad' woman. It then identifies the function that these references serve in the narrative and in the broader context of both Victorian and contemporary societies. The thesis postulates the origin of the mermaid and siren myths as stemming from the ambivalent relationship that the male infant forms with the mother as he develops an identity as an individual. Finally, the thesis discusses the manner in which Atwood and Carter build on this foundation to deconstruct the binary oppositions that disadvantage women and to expand the category of female.

Contents

1	Introduction	
1.1	Scope of thesis	3
1.2	Historical setting	4
1.3	Definition of terms	4
1.4	Main proposition	5
1.5	Origin of mermaid and siren myths	7
1.6	Literature review	9
1.7	Context	11
1.8	Focus of research	11
2	<i>The Robber Bride</i> - Margaret Atwood	
2.1	Survival of myth fragments	15
2.1.1	Descriptions of Zenia's appearance	
2.1.2	Portrayal of Zenia's behaviour	
2.1.3	Other characters' perceptions of Zenia	
2.1.4	Atwood's narrative strategy	
2.2	Meaning and purpose	22
2.2.1	What is the purpose of identifying Zenia as mermaid/siren?	
2.2.2	Male perspective	
2.2.3	Female perspective	
2.2.4	Other halves/submerged identities	
2.2.5	How does the portrayal of these images serve to deconstruct the patriarchal view of women?	
2.3	Conclusion	40

3	<i>Nights at the Circus</i> - Angela Carter	
3.1	Survival of myth fragments	44
3.1.1	Descriptions of Fevvers' appearance	
3.1.2	Portrayal of Fevvers' behaviour	
3.1.3	Other characters' perceptions of Fevvers	
3.1.4	Basis of attraction	
3.1.5	Relationships between animals and humans	
3.2	Meaning and purpose	54
3.2.1	What function do these fragments of myths serve?	
3.2.2	The monstrous feminine in <i>Nights at the Circus</i>	
3.2.3	How does the portrayal of these images serve to deconstruct the patriarchal view of women?	
3.3	Conclusion	64
4	<i>Alias Grace</i> - Margaret Atwood	
4.1	Survival of myth fragments	68
4.1.1	Descriptions of Grace's appearance	
4.1.2	Portrayal of Grace's behaviour	
4.1.3	Other characters' perceptions of Grace	
4.2	Meaning and purpose	71
4.2.1	What function do these fragments of myths serve?	
4.2.2	How does the portrayal of these images serve to deconstruct the patriarchal view of women?	
4.3	Conclusion	81
5	Conclusion	84
6	Bibliography	90

1 Introduction

Part of our contemporary language contains references to, or fragments of, myths whose origins are lost in time. The fact that some myths contain enough power to survive to the present day is astonishing. But if we consider the extent to which symbols of mermaids and sirens abound in our society, we could be puzzled about the reasons for their continued impact. As children we listen to fairy stories such as Hans Christian Anderson's *The Little Mermaid*, and we see ubiquitous pictures of mythical creatures like the siren and mermaid. Many cultures have myths concerning sea creatures that are half-women and half-animal. Such stories are so old that it is difficult to trace their origins. They began in times when people did not understand the forces that controlled the sea, and had no real influence over them. Whilst our understanding of the oceans has improved over time, the images of the mermaid and siren have not disappeared; rather, they have evolved into powerful images that tell us much about ourselves and about our relationships with each other.

There are many definitions of myth. Mircea Eliade offers one that seems to encapsulate the critical elements of the various uses of the term:

Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the 'beginnings'. In other words, myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality – a island, a species of plant, a particular kind of behavior, an institution.¹

Myths have a far greater significance than stories designed merely to assume and entertain. A number of societies still regulate their daily activities according to guidelines established in myth.² Eliade explains that:

Myth assures man that what he is about to do *has already been done*, in other words, it helps him to overcome doubts as to the result of his undertaking. There is no reason to hesitate before setting out on a sea voyage, because the mythical Hero has already made it in a fabulous Time. All that is needed is to follow his example.³

Thus, men who embark on any great adventure (such as life itself) can take heart from the success of heroes such as Odysseus. Indeed, Peter Toohey comments that the episodes where Odysseus encounters the Sirens should be read as Odysseus needing to "resist the seductive blandishments of too easy a world."⁴

1.1 Scope of thesis

In this thesis I will examine three works: Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride* and *Alias Grace*, and Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*. These works have common characteristics that shed light on the construction of the 'bad' woman. All three novels feature female characters that contain elements or myth fragments of mermaids and sirens. Both novelists use these allusions to deconstruct the myth fragments and in the process offer new models of behaviour for women to embrace.

These novelists also have a history of engaging in the process of reinscription of fairy tales (*The Robber Bride* takes its name from the fairy tale of 'The Robber Bridegroom', and Angela Carter is well known for her work *The Bloody*

Chamber.) Cristina Bacchilega is one writer who has analysed varying representations of women in both the original and contemporary versions of fairy tales.⁵ In her text *Postmodern Fairy Tales. Gender and Narrative Strategies*, Bacchilega notes the manner in which “Angela Carter’s demythologizing narratives have exemplified the transformative powers of postmodern magic and its interpellation of women.” Bacchilega explains that:

Feminists can view the fairy tale as a powerful discourse which produces representations of gender...and studying the mechanisms of such a production can highlight the dynamic differences and complex interdependence between ‘Woman’ in fairy tales and ‘women’ storytellers/writers and listeners/readers.⁶

She uses the metaphor of the mirror image for the process whereby fairy tales are retold, and states that postmodern fairy tales both reproduce the mirror image and also “make the mirroring visible to the point of transforming its effects.”⁷ Marina Warner has also examined the manner in which fairy tales portray women, and in particular how changing prejudices about women affect the status of fairy tales.⁸ She comments that Angela Carter was drawn to fairy tales as a form, and that she: “conjures gleefully with fairytale motifs: changelings and winged beings, muted heriones, beastly metamorphoses, arduous journeys and improbable encounters, magical rediscoveries and happy endings.”⁹ Warner suggests the Carter influenced other writers, including Margaret Atwood.

1.2 Historical setting

Two of the novels are set in Victorian times and one in the very recent past. The myths of mermaid and siren enjoyed a revival in Victorian times and, whilst we might like to imagine that contemporary society has moved ahead in terms of moral values, there are aspects of these novels that indicate strong connections with contemporary society. Even though the legal position of women in the twentieth century is more favourable than that of the nineteenth century, the siren and mermaid myths are referenced by societies in both centuries. By identifying the continuing thread of the myth fragments and their impact on the position of women in patriarchal societies, we can recognise the way in which the myths are not totally dependent of historical considerations.

1.3 Definition of terms

Mermaid is used to refer to the ‘traditional’ mermaid that appears in ancient myth and folk tales. The siren (sometimes Syren) also refers to the creature of ancient myth. At various times in history, and in some cultures, the two terms (mermaid and siren) have overlapped and even merged. Berman describes the instances of sirens in literature, film and painting, and demonstrates that the reference to sirens in the arts is being overtaken by mermaids. She states that:

Mermaids have taken over most of their functions as characters in fantasy, leaving their predecessors a role primarily metaphorical.¹⁰

We see little evidence of the physical representation of sirens in contemporary society. As Berman points out, references to sirens most often involve a metaphorical element. An obvious example is the naming of loud warning devices as sirens. The 1994 Movie *Sirens*, directed by John Duigan, loosely based on the life of Australian artist Norman Lindsay, featured attractive ‘wingless’ semi-

naked women as the sirens, although Lindsay did produce one piece of art entitled 'The Siren on the Bench' which depicted a woman with wings.



Lindsay with 'The Siren on the Bench'

Whilst outside the scope of this thesis, it would be interesting to examine the manner in which the two myths have waxed and waned over the centuries. However, of greatest significance to this study are the common characteristics of both myths; the simultaneous attraction for, and danger of, the part-human female creatures. Where one figure is of more relevance to the text I will use that term on its own; at other times I will use the two terms in conjunction (mermaid/siren) where no significant difference can be ascertained between the terms or both apply equally.

1.4 Main proposition

It is my contention that the images of the mermaid and siren have undergone a gradual process of change, from literal mythical figures, to metaphorical images, and then to figures or myth fragments that reference the original mythical figures. At various time, the existence of mermaids and sirens were taken quite seriously. Bartholmaeus Anglicus in his *De Proprietatibus Rerum* (c. 1470) stated that the sirens were '...strong whores that drew men that passed by to poverty and mischief.'¹¹ A century later Borges reports that:

In the sixth century, a Siren was caught and baptized in northern Wales, and in certain old calendars took her place as a saint under the name Murgan.¹²

This literal view of mermaids and sirens persisted, and it is astonishing to read that:

An English law, still on the books in the 19th century, officially claimed for the Crown 'all mermaids found in British waters.' (see Holmes 228)¹³

However, it is doubtful that most educated people of the nineteenth century still believed in mermaids and sirens. More probably, these myths were caught up in the trend towards scientific rationalism that flourished during the Victorian era, and were seen merely as useful metaphors. For example, in 1843, William Bevan published a study of prostitution in Liverpool, noting the danger a young tradesman might encounter: 'He lounges in lassitude about the neighborhood. He is allured by a syren voice that charms but to destroy...He yields and is undone.'¹⁴ The persistence of these female half-human images over the space of many centuries, and the fact that they have changed to some degree over time, points to an underlying rationale that is partly dependent on historical and cultural factors and partly grounded in persistent psychological issues.

Dangerous and evil mythical creatures like the mermaid and siren were originally conceived of as being *either* male or female. Over a period of time their depiction became almost exclusively female. Ruth Berman states that, in the early myths of Odysseus and Jason, sirens acted primarily as ‘expressions of male fear of female sexuality.’¹⁵

There was a revival of interest in all things classical during the Victorian era.¹⁶ Mermaids and sirens took on characteristics that mirrored the current patriarchal society’s preoccupation with classifying women as either ‘good’ and ‘bad’. Writers such as Gerda Lerner contend that this set of moral rules was supported and encouraged by the Church, whose traditional writings reinforced this binary opposition through the central characters of Eve and the Virgin Mary. Lerner recounts the church’s explanation that the Serpent had been crushed by Mary, the servant of God. The Serpent (which was originally associated with the Goddess) was identified by Christianity with the Devil:

Therefore the Virgin Mary embodies the double jeopardy into which Christianity had plunged women. By accepting Mary as model, women would become complicit in their own oppression, helping to eradicate the essential mystery at the heart of life and positing a stark dualistic theological system in which good resides in the realm of the spirit and evil in the realm of their own uncontrolled sexuality. If they refused to accept the model of Mary, women would find themselves permanently consigned to the netherworld, the dark subterranean continent shortly to be inhabited by the primordial scapegoats, the witches, the embodiment of evil itself.¹⁷

Lerner also discusses the role of the church in the development of categories of women:

Since even limited sexual freedom on the part of women would obscure the lines of inheritance from men, the church’s rules on sexuality helped to keep women under control. A woman who gave birth outside the accepted rules of church and society eventually would become an outcast...¹⁸

During the twentieth century the siren took on a new manifestation through the medium of film, and became firmly entrenched in our language.¹⁹ The persistence of the symbols is a manifestation of the distrust and even fear with which men regard women. Post-Freudian (specifically Lacanian) psychoanalytic theories offer a rationale for these feelings by proposing a process by which boys make the transition into the Symbolic. This distrust is reinforced by the ambivalent feelings that children have towards the mother as the (almost always) primary caregiver in the early years of childhood. The mother is seen as the source of critical nourishment and also the source of frustration in that she both limits the movement of the child and is not always available ‘on demand’.²⁰ The child both desires to return to the secure comfort of the womb, and also fears the loss of self that such a reincorporation would entail. Nancy Hartsock notes that ‘...male ego-formation necessarily requires repressing this first relation and negating the mother.’²¹ The ambivalent feelings persist as the child matures and, in the case of the male, results in the classification of women into the ‘whore’ (the siren or mermaid) and the virgin/mother. Hence, women are not only classified as ‘other’ to the male, but also have a binary opposition operating within the category ‘female’, where all that is sexual, assertive, powerful and free is regarded as undesirable, even evil.

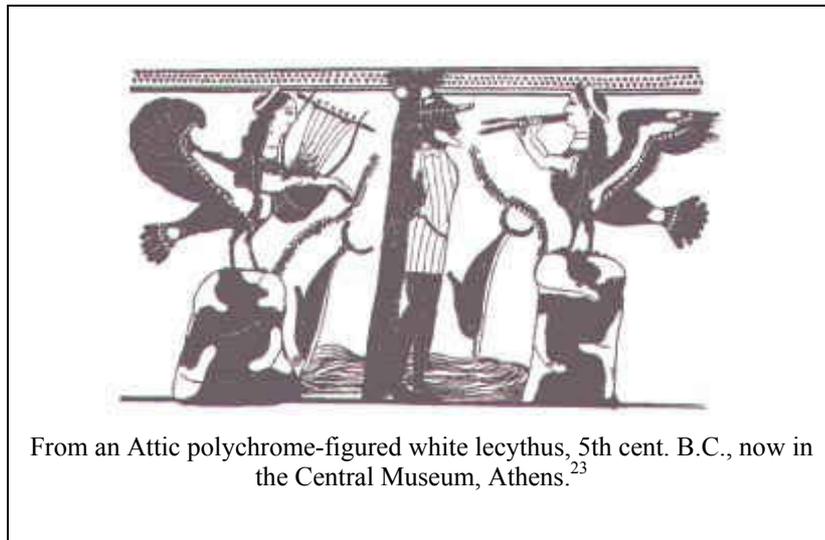
Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter are two examples of contemporary feminist writers who use the strategy of deconstruction in their texts, to expose and question this system of binary oppositions. There are examples where the myth fragments of siren and mermaid are overtly deconstructed in the text, thereby highlighting the existence of a plurality of meaning that is not fixed.

1.5 Origin of mermaid and siren myths

Tracing the origins of mermaids and sirens from their earliest occurrence in literature and art is, in itself, an interesting journey. But the journey is also highly pertinent to our understanding of how and why these imaginary creatures have endured in our culture, first as literal images, then as powerful metaphors, and finally as myth fragments that have recently begun to be deconstructed.

John Pollard, in *Seers, Shrines and Sirens*, comments that, in fact:

...the earliest sirens are, to judge from their beards, preponderantly male, though the earliest of all, from Crete, is beardless and the question of sex is complicated by the fact that women could on occasion wear beards, like the priestess of the Pedasians.²²



From an Attic polychrome-figured white lecythus, 5th cent. B.C., now in the Central Museum, Athens.²³

Beatrice Phillpotts asserts that the bird-woman Sirens:

...derived from the ancient Egyptian soul birds, the *Ba*. Like the *Ba*, the Sirens were primarily demons of death, souls sent to catch a soul, and as such often appeared as carvings on tombs, presumably as a guard to fend off their predatory sisters.²⁴

Phillpotts credits the Sirens with being the ancestors of the mermaid.²⁵ She states that:

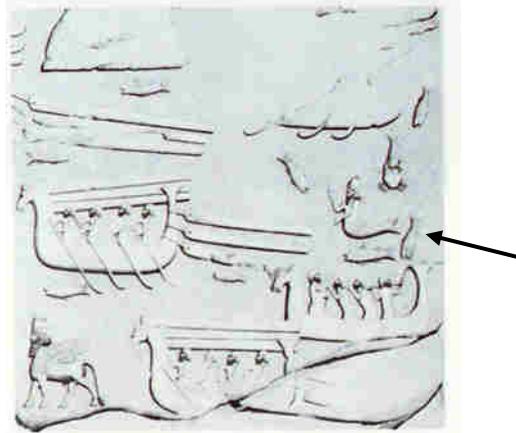
...it was the Greek Sirens who influenced the mermaid character most profoundly. Indeed the bird-woman Sirens were actually to metamorphose from bird to fish as they became more closely identified in the popular imagination with the fish-tailed mermaid.²⁶

Marta Weigle supports this view, and quotes Lawson who states:

‘The Sirens were indeed originally terrestrial...But by the sixth century the traditional habitat of the Sirens had changed’. ‘The Sirens,’ says an anonymous work on

monsters and great beasts, 'are mermaids, who by their exceeding beauty and winning song ensnare mariners; from the head to the navel they are of human and maidenly form, but they have the scaly tails of fishes.'²⁷

Phillpotts claims that the earliest recorded ancestor of the mermaid was in fact a male sea god, Oannes, the 'great fish of the ocean', worshipped by the Babylonians in Accad around 5000 BC. The Babylonians believed that the sea was the origin of all life and Oannes was therefore a supreme god.'²⁸



Oannes blessing the fleet. Part of a sculpture dating from the eighth century BC, discovered in the ruins of the palace of Sargon II at Khorsabad by Paul Emile Botta and illustrated in his *Monument de Ninive*, 1849.²⁹

Phillpotts also comments that:

Atargatis, a Semitic moon goddess worshipped by the Philistines, Syrians and Israelites provides the earliest female prototype for the mermaid. She was the feminine counterpart of the sun god Oannes, and an important fertility goddess who also personified the darker, night aspect of love as a potentially destructive force, an element integral to the mermaid legend.³⁰

Ruth Berman, in *Mythical and Fabulous Creatures: A Source Book and Research Guide* identifies the earliest mention of sirens as that in the myth of Jason and the Argonauts from the *Argonautica* of Apollonius of Rhodes (third century B.C.).³¹ She notes that the story of Jason is older than Homer's *Odyssey*.

In Greek mythology, the Sirens were:

...sea nymphs with the bodies of birds and the heads of women, the daughters of the sea god Phorcys. The Sirens had voices of such sweetness that mariners who heard their songs were lured onto the rocks on which the nymphs sang.³²

The Greek hero Odysseus, advised by the sorceress Circe, escaped the danger of their song by stopping the ears of his crew with wax so that they were deaf to the Sirens; yet he was able to hear the music and had himself tied to the mast so that he could not steer the ship out of course.

Homer was not the only ancient Greek to write of the Sirens. Another, probably earlier, story relates that when the Argonauts sailed that same route, Orpheus sang so divinely that none of them listened to the Sirens. In later legend, after one or other of these failures the Sirens committed suicide. In art they appear first as

birds with the heads of women, later as women, sometimes as winged, with bird legs. The *Smaller Classical Dictionary of Biography, Mythology, and Geography* tells us that:

Later poets represent them as provided with wings, which they are said to have received at their own request, in order to be able to search after Persephone. Once, however, they contended with the Muses, and being defeated, were deprived of their wings.³³

Pliny the Elder, in c. 80AD, wrote about mermaids:

And as for Mermaids called Nereides, it is no fabulous tale that goeth of them: for looke how painters draw them, so they are indeed: onlie their bodie is rough and skaled all over, even in those parts wherein they resemble woman.³⁴

But the siren was not confined to the Mediterranean. A somewhat similar figure, with identical name can be found in Mexican folklore.³⁵ It seems that sirens and mermaids, though varying in appearance between cultures, maintained a relatively consistent behaviour pattern, marked by being both dangerous and alluring.

1.6 Literature review

1.6.1 Early myth and the Victorian era

The literal image of the mermaid and siren gradually gave way to more metaphorical images, culminating in the Victorian era with its preoccupation with both morality and classical art. Allen's PhD Thesis, *The Femme Fatale: a Study of the Early Development of the Concept in Mid-Nineteenth Century Poetry and Painting* concerns the *femme fatale*, 'an image of woman that became popular during the later decades of the nineteenth century.'³⁶ Allen notes that the *femme fatale* is 'commonly depicted as siren, Circe, Salome, Cleopatra: seducer and destroyer of men.'³⁷ She reaches the conclusion that:

...the original source of the imagery is the dark or sinful pole of the old concept of the dual nature of the Eternal Feminine. In the Christian tradition, the dual concept is clearly illustrated by the Mary/Eve dichotomy.³⁸

Allen argues that, due to the work of a series of artists and writers, this aspect of sin and evil together with eroticism in the image became greatly exaggerated, and led to the *femme fatale* becoming a stereotype by the end of the nineteenth century.

In *Mythology and Misogyny. The Social Discourse of Nineteenth-Century British Classical-Subject Painting*, Kestner discusses male attitudes toward women of the period. He asserts that classical-subject painting, which included references to classical legends and motifs, 'was a powerful expression of male attitudes about women and their conditioning.'³⁹ Kestner shows how these motifs, including those of sirens, flowed through into everyday discourse, and became part of the common language, thereby providing a colourful and convenient way of categorising women who did not fit society's expectations.

1.6.2 Theoretical frameworks

In this thesis I make reference to a number of theorists. Particular aspects of their work assist us to explore the significance of the selected novels by Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter in relation to the existence of mermaid and siren myth fragments.

In *The Robber Bride*, Mitch constantly chases attractive young women, hoping to restore an image of himself that is similarly youthful. This behaviour masks a desire for self-completion. We can understand this behaviour by reference to Jacques Lacan, who wrote about the ‘Desire of the Mother’, which includes the desire of the child for the mother as the being that satisfies its needs. Lacan recognised that the unresolved desire is so significant that it remains a powerful force into adulthood.⁴⁰ Elizabeth Grosz is another writer who discusses the impact of the infant recognising its separate identity from the mother, thereby creating a rift that leaves the individual always searching for, but never finding, self-completion.⁴¹

Julia Kristeva reinterpreted the Lacanian process whereby the infant enters the symbolic and develops an awareness of the ‘self’ as separate to the mother. Kristeva also developed a theory of abjection, whereby the maternal container, and women in general, are identified as abject, thus rendering them an ambiguous status.⁴² Barbara Creed draws on Kristeva’s work on abjection to examine the representation of women as monstrous, thereby defining clearly the boundary of ‘male’.⁴³ The issue of the monstrous female is highly pertinent in *Nights at the Circus*, with Fevvers overtly displaying monstrous characteristics both in her behaviour and in her appearance as an ungainly bird-woman. In *Alias Grace*, Grace is variously described as a monster and a wild beast.⁴⁴

Writers including Nancy Chodorow⁴⁵ and Nancy Hartsock⁴⁶ detail the significance of the separation from the maternal and the parallel identification of the male child with the wider male society. The tendency to identify themselves as ‘other-than-the-mother’ leads to a devaluing of all female attributes and a distrust, or even fear, of women. Thus men are in danger of being torn between desire and fear. The fear leads to the tendency to attempt to control women as a means of reducing their power. I shall argue in Chapter 4 that this tendency is seen clearly in the character of Dr Simon Jordan in *Alias Grace*, in particular where he dreams of maids as mermaids but fears being ‘caught’ in marriage by eligible attractive young women.

The issue of women as the ‘other’ features strongly in the three novels. Hélène Cixous’s work concerns the way in which males categorise women as ‘other’. She discusses the process by which patriarchal society classifies through reference to binary oppositions, and she uncovers the ways in which they refer back to the underlying opposition of man/woman⁴⁷. Luce Irigaray, also concerned with binary oppositions, makes the point that nature is not highly valued, and that it is no coincidence that women are strongly associated with nature. Symbolic distribution is hierarchical: what is disrespected is split off and projected onto women.⁴⁸ Thus Grace Marks in *Alias Grace* is convicted of murder but is also regarded by the popular imagination of the day as being a sly and dangerous whore, despite the lack of evidence to support these accusations.

In this thesis I have also drawn on the work of feminist performativism as elucidated by Judith Butler.⁴⁹ The principal female characters in all three novels have their behaviour restricted by their society’s expectations. Butler asserts that bodies enact a limited range of gender behaviours, or performances, because they are constrained by historical conventions. Her work continues the discussion that

Bakhtin established of the distinction between the classical versus the grotesque body as a means for society to control, in particular, women.

1.7 Context

Both the texts that deal with early myth, and especially those by Pollard, Berman and Phillpotts, and the works that examine the development of the siren and mermaids as metaphor in Victorian times, notably those by J. A. Kestner and by V. M. Allen, provide an important historical and contextual framework for the understanding of the existence of these creatures in contemporary literature. However, they do not offer a rationale for the enduring appeal of mermaids and sirens in our 'enlightened' scientifically rational modern era.

Another explanation for the persistence of myth references to images such as mermaids has been through reference to Jungian theories. For instance, Annis Pratt suggests that:

Ladies of the lake, fairy queens, elf maidens, and mermaids are all archetypes expressing the repression of powerful women.⁵⁰

Naomi Goldenberg comments that:

...archetypes are transcendent to the physical, human world and that they are, in part at least, not dependent on human or material contingency. Instead of directing our attention to the web of past and present social contexts which give rise to psychological phenomena, archetypal thinking draws us away from exploring our human circumstances.⁵¹

In this thesis I will identify processes that contribute to the categorisation of women as 'bad'. However these processes, whilst entrenched in our society, are not immutable. Roland Barthes supports the view that myths can be changed:

One can conceive of very ancient myths, but there are no eternal ones; for it is human history which conveys reality into speech, and it alone rules the life and death of mythical language.⁵²

Estella Lauter contends that "mythic thinking is a continuing process".⁵³ She states that:

Once a myth is in place, it is nearly impossible to dislodge it by exclusively rational means. It must be replaced by another equally persuasive story or symbol.⁵⁴

Lauter advises that, in order to interpret myths we need to identify them and then examine the 'bundle of relations' among the elements, before we can attempt the re-visioning of the myths.⁵⁵ She points to Margaret Atwood as an example of a writer who undertakes the journey to re-vision myths, citing Atwood's 'Circe/Mud Poems' as an example where Atwood "transforms the image of the seductress".⁵⁶

1.8 Focus of research

Both the historical journey of siren and mermaid myths,⁵⁷ and the explanation for much of the difficulty in male relations with women,⁵⁸ have been discussed in some detail by a range of writers.

Rather than view the existence of myth fragments of siren and mermaid in contemporary western society as being an anomaly, I intend to explain that it is an

indication of the way in which gender relations are still fraught despite a surface pretence at equality.

In this thesis I will identify the manner in which the mermaid and siren images have become transformed from literal, through metaphorical, into myth fragments or references. I will explore the underlying causes of the categorisation of women into the duality of good and evil, drawing together other writings and referring to feminist psychoanalytic theory. I will then examine the ways in which some contemporary writers have subverted the myths to reclaim feminine territory. Their deconstructive strategies have enabled us to expose the existence of these myth fragments and to recognise the need for unfixed plurality of meaning in both our literature and our lives.

There have been many studies of the fiction of Margaret Atwood, examining aspects such as her use of narrative strategies and deconstructive techniques. Reviewers have identified the manner in which Atwood uses the concept of the 'other', and have discussed her deconstruction of binary oppositions to demonstrate the inadequacy of assigning fixed meaning.⁵⁹ Other writers such as Joyce Carol Oates⁶⁰ have discussed Atwood's (and Carter's) re-visioning of fairy tales. However, these writers have not identified that the female characters reside in the text as mermaid and siren myth fragments to serve the purpose of foregrounding issues relating to gender relations, the position of women in society, and the notion of fixed meaning. In Chapter 2 I will show that Atwood's intertextual references to folk stories not only serve to add interest and complexity to the narrative, but also carry layered meaning that links directly to contemporary issues.

In Chapter 3 I will discuss the ways in which Angela Carter employs the process of juxtaposition in her novels such as *Nights at the Circus*, in the metaphors she includes, and even in the structure of the narrative, which is a mixture of fantasy and realism.⁶¹ Reviewers of *Nights at the Circus* point to the way in which Carter uses the character of Fevvers to challenge the 'cultural production of femininity'.⁶² Other common themes can be found in the discussion of the nature of 'truth' or memory (as seen in the attempts to discover whether Fevvers' wings are real or not), and in the foregrounding of the connection between humans and animals, especially between women and animals. I propose to argue that there is a thread that ties the mermaid/siren myth both with the separation of the male infant from the mother and with the position of women in contemporary western society.

Atwood and Carter have used characters that make overt references and connections to the ancient myths of mermaid and siren. These references invite us to question the purpose of these connections. This thesis will explore the purposes for the existence of these myth fragments in contemporary society and provides a rationale for their deployment in contemporary feminist fiction.

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- ¹ M Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, Harper & Row, New York, pp. 5-6.
- ² Eliade mentions numerous examples of this, including the Kai of New Guinea, various tribes of Australian Aborigines, and people in Timor and Fiji.
- ³ Eliade, p. 141.
- ⁴ P. Toohey, *Reading Epic. An Introduction to the Ancient Narratives*, Routledge, London, p. 56.
- ⁵ C. Bacchilega, *Postmodern fairy tales: gender and narrative strategies*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1997.
- ⁶ Bacchilega, pp. 9-10.
- ⁷ Bacchilega, p. 10.
- ⁸ M. Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: on Fairy Tales and their Teller*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1995.
- ⁹ Warner, pp. 193-4.
- ¹⁰ R. Berman, 'Sirens' in M. South (ed), *Mythical and Fabulous Creatures: A Source Book and Research Guide*, Bedrick, New York, 1988, p. 151.
- ¹¹ B Phillpotts, *Mermaids*, Ballantine Books, New York, 1980, p. 34.
- ¹² J. L. Borges, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1969, p. 207.
- ¹³ B. G. Walker, *The Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, Pandora, London, 1983.
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- ¹⁵ R. Berman, p. 149.
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- ¹⁷ G. Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Oxford University Press, New York, p. 132.
- ¹⁸ Lerner, p. 86.
- ¹⁹ Whilst the siren became a part of filmic language as standing for any woman who was beautiful and sexually predatory, Ruth Berman notes that sirens have in fact been rare in film and dramas. See her discussion on pp. 150-151.
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- ⁴⁷ H. Cixous, in *New French Feminisms. An Anthology*, E. Marks & I. De Courtivron (eds), The University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1980.
- ⁴⁸ See L. Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, translated by C. Burke and G. C. Gill, Cornell University Press, New York, 1984, p. 100, and M. Whitford, *Luce Irigaray. Philosophy in the Feminine*, Routledge, London, 1991, p. 93.
- ⁴⁹ J. Butler, 'Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory' in Sue-Ellen Case ed., *Performing Feminisms*, John Hopkins UP, Baltimore and London, 1990.
- ⁵⁰ A. Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*, The Harvester Press, Brighton, 1981, p. 174.
- ⁵¹ N. Goldenberg, *Resurrecting the Body. Feminism, Religion, and Psychotherapy*, Crossroad, New York, 1993, p. 97.
- ⁵² Roland Barthes, quoted in Goldenberg, p. 105.
- ⁵³ E. Lauter, *Women as Mythmakers. Poetry and Visual Art by Twentieth-Century Women*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1984, p. 1.
- ⁵⁴ Lauter, p. 1.
- ⁵⁵ Lauter, pp. 1-5.
- ⁵⁶ Lauter, p. 15.
- ⁵⁷ Writers such as Berman, Pollard, Phillpotts, Allen and Kestner address aspects of this historical journey.
- ⁵⁸ We shall see in later chapters that theorists from Lacan to Kristeva, Campbell, Hartsock, Irigaray, Warner and others, have contributed to our understanding of the possible causes for these difficulties.
- ⁵⁹ See A. Hulbert, A. 'Seduction and betrayal – *The Robber Bride* by Margaret Atwood', *New Republic* v210 n1, Jan 3, 1994, and P. F. Goldblatt, 'Reconstructing Margaret Atwood's Protagonists', *World Literature Today*, Spring 99, Vol 73 Issue 2.
- ⁶⁰ J. C. Oates, J. C. 'In olden times, when wishing was having...', *Kenyon Review*, Summer/Fall 97, Vol 19 Issue 3/4 and also D. Bontatibus, 'Reconnecting with the past: Personal hauntings in Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride*', *Papers on Language & Literature*, Fall 1998.
- ⁶¹ P. Palmer, 'From "Coded Mannequin" to Bird Woman: Angela Carter's Magic Flight', in *Women Reading Women's Writing*, ed. S. Roe, St. Martin's Press, New York 1987, p. 182.
- ⁶² Palmer (p. 183) is one example.

2 *The Robber Bride* - Margaret Atwood

I will tell the secreto you,
to you, only to you.
Come closer. This song

is a cry for help: Help me!
Only you, only you can,
you are unique

at last. Alas
it is a boring song
but it works every time.¹

At the end of the Victorian era, the siren had become firmly entrenched in the vocabulary of the western world. But it would be tempting to think that, in our contemporary society, descriptions of women as mermaids or sirens would be reserved for B-grade movies or Disney cartoons.

Certainly, most countries have enacted laws that protect, at least in the letter if not the spirit, women's rights. However, we find that, while references to women as sirens are not made directly (except in jest), they have been submerged. In pushing these associations beneath the surface, they have become more deeply entrenched. By being implied rather than stated, mermaids and sirens have moved from a position of metaphor to that of myth fragment. As figures, mermaids and sirens now have such a strongly recognisable set of characteristics that they can be referenced by a small number of these characteristics alone. If mermaids and sirens were a brand name they would be more successful than Coca Cola! But here we must stop and remind ourselves that, by any 'logical' measure, mermaids and sirens should be well past their usefulness. The conditions that brought about these mythical creatures, and fuelled their revival in Victorian times, are no longer present. What function does their continued existence as myth references serve?

2.1 Survival of myth fragments

2.1.1 Descriptions of Zenia's appearance

The sirens we see in texts such as Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride* can be viewed as a development of the siren metaphor that became widespread in the Victorian period.² Indeed, the contemporary siren is a mixture of the traditional mermaid and the mythical siren. She seems to have acquired features of both characters, in the process distilling the alluring and the evil from both into one devastatingly fearful and desirable woman. Judging by the marketing copy for *The Robber Bride*, Zenia, seems to be the modern exemplar of this mermaid/siren creature. She seduces and steals the men of her best friends, defrauds a substantial amount of money from one of them, blackmails another and fakes her own death. But how deep does the resemblance go?

The contemporary mermaid/siren image relies largely on her appearance, rather than on her heavenly singing (although we will see later that the song of the siren may be replaced by heart-rending stories). In *The Robber Bride*, Atwood has endowed the character of Zenia with the traditional long flowing hair, although she has updated her clothing:

Zenia is as beautiful as ever. She's wearing black, a tight outfit with a scoop neck that shows the tops of her breasts...the full red-purple mouth, disdainful and sad; the huge deep eyes, the finely arched eyebrows, the high cheekbones tinged with terracotta. And her hair, a dense cloud of it, blows around her head by the imperceptible wind that accompanies her everywhere...³

Tony's description betrays her envy of Zenia. A little later in the narrative, although much earlier in chronological time, Tony comments on Zenia's appearance with a mixture of admiration and disquiet:

Zenia is the incarnation of how plainer, more oblong women wish to look, and therefore to be: it's a belief of theirs that such things can be arranged from the outside in. She is thought to be brilliant, and she gets top marks—though she doesn't exert herself, she hardly ever attends a lecture, so how does she do it? Brilliant, and also fearsome. Wolfish, feral, beyond the pale. (p. 133)

The association of Zenia with wild animals reminds us that, in our patriarchal society, women who are beautiful, sexy, assertive and smart are sometimes considered to be outside the normal categories of 'woman'. This assigning of some women to a category of part animal can be traced to men's fear of the 'other', and is addressed in more detail later in this chapter. Comments such as these associate Zenia with other half-animal creatures such as mermaids. But it is not just plain and unsophisticated Tony that envies Zenia's physical appearance. Roz fights a losing battle to stay looking young and attractive for her husband, and the appearance of Zenia is a threat, even before she recognises who she is: '...with a ravishing cloud of dark hair and amazing great tits, and a tiny little waist Roz would kill for' (p. 315). Although most images of mermaids have blond hair, they generally sport full breasts and long, thick hair. The association of Zenia with mermaids is made more overt because of the setting within which the comment is made: Zenia is working as a waitress in a restaurant called 'Nereids'.

2.1.2 Portrayal of Zenia's behaviour

The mermaid/siren is not only alluring; she is also predatory and sly. She will trick her victims if she cannot seduce them. Margaret Atwood reminds us of the predatory nature of Zenia, using one of many water-based analogies in the text:⁴

Maybe Zenia has forgotten all about West by now. He's small game, pleads Tony silently. A tiny fish. Why bother? But Zenia likes hunting. She likes hunting anything. She relishes it. (p. 37)

Zenia is portrayed as being predatory, animal-like and rapacious. Both Roz and Tony use animal analogies to describe Zenia's behaviour. Roz reassures Tony with the following remark in relation to West:

...She'll just take one bit out of him and throw him away. (p. 187)

But shortly after this Tony asks herself: “How long can she protect him? How long before Zenia descends on them, with her bared incisors and outstretched talons and banshee hair, demanding what is rightfully hers?” (p. 193)

These women could be referring to a creature that is a cross between a mermaid and a siren. Tony’s comment in particular conjures up a picture of a weird bird-like creature with teeth and long hair. Their general attitude to Zenia characterises her as something other than wholly human. When Tony describes Zenia’s academic performance as ‘Wolfish, feral’ (p. 133), she emphasises the way in which Zenia steps outside the accepted behaviour of a woman: the bland expected actions of the obedient passive female. By characterising Zenia as part animal, the other characters in the text may be attempting to explain behaviour that they feel is outside the range of ‘normal’ human (or female) behaviour. In this respect, they are mimicking the prevailing patriarchal view of women, and colluding to strengthen the good-woman/bad-woman binary opposition that they have been exposed to throughout their lives.

Zenia’s behavioural characteristics are not restricted to her need to devour the men with whom she crosses paths: she is devious and sly, as befits a traditional mermaid. Operating as she does in the twentieth century, Zenia is able to exercise some very effective blackmail. She persuades Tony to write a term paper for her, claiming that she will have to leave university and live as a prostitute if she fails the course. Tony nervously agrees to write a paper for her (which happens to get a better mark than the one Tony wrote for herself!) But later, Zenia suggests to Tony, in a supposed fit of depression, that they should admit to the cheating. We know that Zenia is aware of Tony’s intention to earn her living as an academic. Zenia claims that her money troubles are making her depressed: “‘How much?’ she [Tony] says in a cold, meticulous voice. It’s a neat piece of blackmail. She’s been bushwacked.” (p. 173) In this, and many other instances, Zenia does not appear to operate according to the ‘normal’ moral and ethical rules of her society. By behaving in this manner Zenia sets herself (or others set Zenia) apart from the other women with whom she has contact. Not only is Zenia viewed as the ‘other’ by men, due to her gender, but she is also viewed as other by her female acquaintances because of her deviant behaviour.

Marina Warner reminds us that:

In the folklore of the past, classical and medieval, the female beast... was sometimes cunning – and purposely concealed her true nature: the hero only learns that his beautiful lover Mélusine turns into a serpent at the weekend by peeping at her; the sirens lured men with their deceitful songs, and later tempted fierce anchorites in the desert, approaching St Anthony for instance with honeyed words, hiding their diabolical nether parts under sumptuous dresses.⁵

However, it is worth adding that, in Mélusine’s case at least, her ruse was not intended to cover a vicious intent, but rather to hide a part of her nature that would have interfered with her happiness and that of her husband. Mélusine may have been a beast, but her behaviour was not sly or vicious.

Zenia seemed to know that, if she acted in a sly and vicious manner all the time, she would gain little. Some myths tell of mermaids who feign drowning to entice their victims. Zenia lures her male victims partly because she appears to be in constant need of sympathy and rescue. Her outward appearance is of

sophistication and beauty, but she uses the ploy of the poor little girl who has been badly treated by life:

“My own mother *sold* me,” says Zenia, with a sigh.

“Sold you?” says Tony.

“Well, rented me out,” says Zenia. “For money. We had to eat. We were refugees.” (p. 163)

The need to be rescued works (if only once in some cases), as a strategy, on both the male and female characters in the text: ‘How well she did it, thinks Tony. How completely she took us in’ (p. 185). Tony writes a term paper for her out of pity. Too late, the female characters realise they have been duped. The men in the narrative are slower to realise the deception. Ruth Ratcliff relates a Scottish folk tale of an unsuccessful attempt by a mermaid to lure a young man into the water, on the pretext that she was drowning.⁶ It is only when she is outwitted that the mermaid turns nasty, just as Zenia resorts to vitriol when Tony refuses to give her a bed. Her description of Tony leaves nothing to the imagination:

A smug dog-in-the-manger prune-faced little shit with megalomaniac pretensions... I bet he’s [West] bored out of his skull, with nobody but you to stick his boring dick into! Jesus, it must be like fucking a gerbil! (p. 414)

The curse may be contemporary, but the passion is similar to that of the mermaid who was deprived of her favourite stone seat by the lady of Knockdolion, whose baby the mermaid was disturbing:

Ye may think on your cradle – I’ll think of my stane,
And there’ll ne’er by an heir to Knockdolion again.⁷

Needless to say, the baby died soon after, and there were no more babies born at Knockdolion House.

In the Scottish folk tale where the young man was nearly lured into the water, his manservant realised the deception in time to save him. One by one the female protagonists in *The Robber Bride* realise the true nature of Zenia, but their men do not heed their warnings:

“Zenia is as strong as an ox,” says Tony. “It’s just an act,” says West. “I always knew that about her. She’s a deeply scarred person.” *Deeply scarred*, thinks Tony. That can’t be anyone’s vocabulary but Zenia’s. West has been hypnotized: it’s Zenia talking, from the inside of his head. (p. 183)

The strategy employed by Zenia is similar to the Scottish mermaid: use a mixture of sexual allure and helplessness. Tony recognises this combination:

Tony can’t believe that West doesn’t see through all this, this blandishment and prestidigitation, but he doesn’t. He has a blind spot: his blind spot is Zenia’s unhappiness. Or else her body. Men, thinks Tony with new bitterness, can’t seem to tell one from the other. (p. 183)

Once the scales have fallen from Roz’s eyes, she also recognises that Zenia appeals to an ancient instinct in many men. She talks about what she expects Mitch to do after Zenia has left him:

...he'd get his strength back and be off, off in his longboat, off in his galleon, scouring the seven seas for the Holy Grail, for Helen of Troy, for Zenia, peering through the spyglass, on the watch for her pirate flag. (p. 380)

Roz acknowledges that one of the things that motivates Mitch is the desire to obtain the almost unreachable, in whatever field. The quest has the power to give men the illusion of control, accomplishment and a heroic status that mythical characters such as Ulysses possessed. Ulysses heard the siren song and survived: Mitch wanted to possess Zenia and still have his domestic existence intact.

2.1.3 Other characters' perceptions of Zenia

The female protagonists in *The Robber Bride* are both taken in by, and wise to, the mermaid-like behaviour of Zenia. Roz counsels Tony about her troubles with West:

“Sounds to me he’s acting like a jerk! Zenia’s a floozie, we all knew that. A couple of years ago she went through half the fraternities – more than half! You never heard the poem about her – ‘Trouble with your penia? Try Zenia’” (p. 177)

Later, Tony is pensive about her previous delusion:

Zenia is very good at what she does: is how she puts it.

“But I was so sorry for her!” says Charis... “So was I,” she says. “She’s an expert at that.” (p. 281)

But even Roz is swindled by Zenia, and loses both her husband, and a large amount of money. She admits that she ‘walked into it with... eyes open.’ p. 354. Once again, Zenia is accorded animal-like powers, as Roz imagines herself as a kind of lion-tamer or bullfighter.

2.1.4 Atwood's narrative strategy

Coral Ann Howells comments that Atwood recirculates images and themes in her work.⁸

The same stories are being retold, as the reader is constantly reminded through intertextual allusions to fairy tales ...so that versions that might look contemporary and new circle around old enigmas.⁹

An example of this can be seen when Charis describes her daughter August's christening:

There is a third godmother present, of course – a dark godmother, one who brings negative gifts. The shadow of Zenia falls over the cradle. Charis prays she will be able to cast enough light, from within herself, to wash it away. p. 285.

This description reminds us of the fairy tale ‘Sleeping Beauty’ where the baby girl is cursed by the evil fairy godmother who wasn't invited to the christening. Atwood's references to myths and fairy tales, such as the ‘Robber Bridegroom’, and her description of Zenia in death as a mermaid, serve to link the two, seemingly disparate, worlds together. This linkage reinforces our tendency to read a narrative through the filter of many other stories that stretch back in time. As Jacques Derrida writes:

...the signified concept is never present in and of itself, in a sufficient presence that would refer only to itself. Essentially and lawfully, every concept is inscribed in a

chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences.¹⁰

In *The Robber Bride*, the meaning of an entire narrative is constantly referenced back to other threads of narrative that hold meaning for us. A character such as Zenia never appears out of a vacuum. We may get a sense that we have known someone who is a little like Zenia, but this recognition is given depth by the further recognition of the character from other narratives, both fictional and non-fictional, modern and ancient.

Atwood uses the image of water in many of her novels, and in *The Robber Bride* water is used in association with the various female characters. In the case of Tony, water images are used to convey emotion:

This friendship [of Tony] with Zenia has been very sudden. She feels as if she's being dragged along on a rope, behind a speeding motorboat, with the waves sloshing over her and her ears full of applause... These are perilous waters. But why? They're only talking. (p. 134)

The water is used as a metaphor of threat. In this example, and others, Tony's feeling of perceived danger is strong. The water may indeed be a metaphor for Zenia. We can see this even more clearly when, after West moves out to live with Zenia, Tony has a dream that she is underwater and that West is walking away from her. When Tony opens her mouth to call out to him, water rushes into her mouth and she starts choking. On a very superficial level, this may indicate that Tony is out of her natural environment.

The linking of fluids such as water with the feminine is a very old and a very obvious connection. The human foetus grows in a watery environment, and the 'breaking of the waters' heralds the imminent birth. Babies are fed on breast milk and women issue blood each month. Julia Kristeva explains the link of fluids with both the female and with semiotics:

Even though orality - threshold of infantile regression - is displayed in the area of the breast, while the spasm at the slipping away of eroticism is translated into tears, this should not conceal what milk and tears have in common: they are the metaphors of non-speech, of a 'semiotics' that linguistic communication does not account for.¹¹

Given the common association of water with women, Tony's inability to survive in the water of her dream could indicate that she doubts aspects of her feminine self. Tony's mother, Andrea, who was never comfortable with her role as a mother and wife, drowned some time after she left her family. We are never sure whether it was an accident or suicide. Atwood also links Charis/Karen with water:

Someone is coming towards her across the lake... her colourless hair floating... It's Karen, it's banished Karen... Charis is not Karen... She pushes away with all her strength, pushes down towards the water, but this time Karen will not go under. She drifts closer and closer, and her mouth opens. She wants to speak. (pp. 231-2)

Karen, who appears from the water, is a threat to Charis because Charis will not acknowledge and accept the pain of her childhood. The 'natural' element of woman, water, is once again shown as a reminder of the need to accept all aspects of the individual.

Still inside her head, she walked to the shores of Lake Ontario and sank the leather bag into the water.

That was the end of Karen. Karen was gone. But the lake was inside Charis really, so that's where Karen was too. Down deep. (p. 265)

Both Tony and Charis regard water as a threat and both have difficulty in reconciling the seemingly conflicting aspects of their natures and histories. In Charis's case, she 'dumped' Karen because it was Karen who was hurt and abused as a child. This action was originally intended as a survival strategy, but in dumping Karen, Charis also tried to get rid of all of the things about herself that she did not like:

Karen was a leather bag, a grey one. Charis collected everything she didn't want and shoved it into this name, this leather bag, and tied it shut. She threw away as many of the old wounds and poisons as she could. She kept only the things about herself that she liked or needed. (p. 265)

Roz also associates water with threat. Charis gives her some natural products to use in a bath to relax:

Don't fight it! Go with it. Lie back. Float. Picture yourself in a warm ocean.

But every time Roz tries this, there are sharks. (p. 106)

A warm bath can be associated with the feeling of returning to the warm floating environment of the womb. Roz feels that such a return would threaten her independence, rather than provide her with comfort and security. This is consistent with Roz's need to be in total control of her environment, from the colour scheme of her bedding, to the business acquisitions she organises. But in her personal life, Roz never quite feels in control: the bedding looks inappropriate, her clothes never quite fit perfectly, her children do not behave as she would like, and she wages a constant battle to make her body fit her desired image. Roz is not at home with her body, and no amount of money and success changes that. She tries to harness the energy that water can mean in association with women, when she plans to name a range of lipsticks after powerful rivers (p. 101), but she can only harness that power for her business, never for herself.

Atwood includes a number of images that link Zenia with the water:

It's Zenia, her head framed in the wet glass square of the door like a photo under water. Her hair is soaked and streaking down her face, her teeth are chattering, her sunglasses are gone, and her eye, purple now, is piteous. (p. 222)

We can also see that there is some connection between Zenia and Tony's mother, Andrea. Zenia excuses Andrea's actions (which included leaving Tony when she was a child), and Andrea's drowning death provides a neat 'matching image' of Zenia's. The linkage of Zenia with the mermaid image is most obvious in the description of her dead body:

...there is Zenia, floating face down among the dead leaves, her hair spread out like seaweed... She reaches forward, reaches down and tugs, and Zenia revolves slowly, and looks straight at them with her white mermaid eyes. (p. 446)

The scattering of Zenia's ashes in the lake completes the association. We never find out where Zenia was born, but we see her ending in water.

2.2 Meaning and purpose

2.2.1 What is the purpose of identifying Zenia as mermaid/siren?

In some respects, the existence of the myth fragments of mermaid and siren continue to serve the same purposes as they did in earlier times. Joseph Campbell claims that myths serve many functions. For our purposes, when talking about mermaids and siren, some of the important purposes are to reconcile life-baffling oppositions, to achieve metaphysical reconciliation with the conditions of existence, and the validation of some specific social order.¹² Certainly, the categorisation of women into good and bad (with little in-between and definitely none of both bad and good in the same body!) is a 'life-baffling opposition'. The association of 'bad' women with animals/monsters provides a convenient way of explaining away the anomaly of the existence of the virtuous virgin mother and the seductress, and also neatly places women in a category that sits more closely to dumb animals. This association also serves to validate a social order that accords women less rights, less intelligence and less access to religion and other power structures. Some would argue that, despite various attempts to legislate equality, this situation still sits under the surface of our western societies, just as the myth fragments of mermaid and siren sit just below the surface. Campbell also points out that 'human beings are born some fourteen years too soon'. He reminds us that, after spending between twelve and twenty years being dependent, a human must 'respond to the challenges of life in the way of responsibility'.¹³ He claims that the entrance into adulthood is not a 'natural' progression, but the 'assumption of a social role'.¹⁴ Mythology, therefore, provides a model for the young to make that transition. The quests of heroes such as Ulysses are like initiation ceremonies 'writ large'.

In contemporary society we have lost many of the initiation ceremonies that were used in the past to mark the passage from childhood to adulthood. There are few markers for the young to follow, just a jumble of complicated and shifting milestones that deem (in some societies) a young male old enough to be killed for his country but still too young to vote. Does this mean that the old myths are no longer applicable? We can identify and deride the applicability of myths such as mermaids and sirens to our contemporary society but, as Devlin-Glass points out

...myths do not become invalid when proved untrue. Myths depend on a non-rational form of validation. They are not fully responsive to information gained from direct perception and cognition but are an integral part of our apparatus for structuring our lives and the meaning in our lives.¹⁵

Campbell asserts that:

To be effective, a mythology...must be up-to-date scientifically, based on a concept of the universe that is current, accepted, and convincing.¹⁶

If we accept this view, then it prompts the question of *why* are myths still an integral part of how we structure meaning in our lives today: what meaning do mermaids and sirens help to provide for contemporary humans?

2.2.2 Male perspective

The practice whereby men classifying women into virtuous (virgin/mother/Virgin Mary) and temptress (Eve/mermaid/siren) has occurred over many centuries. Pomeroy has noted that in classical antiquity:

The goddesses are archetypal images of human females, as envisioned by males. The distribution of desirable characteristics among a number of females rather than their concentration in one being is appropriate to a patriarchal society...A fully realised female tends to engender anxiety in the insecure male. Unable to cope with a multiplicity of powers united in one female, men from antiquity to the present have envisioned women in 'either-or' roles. As a corollary of this anxiety, virginal females are considered helpful, while sexually mature women like Hera are destructive and evil.¹⁷

This tendency is still in operation in texts such as *The Robber Bride*. When Roz's husband, Mitch, encounters Zenia he labels her 'an adventuress'. When Roz asks why he would not call her an adventurer, his reply is very interesting:

"It's not the same," says Mitch. "Adventurers live by their wits."

"And adventuresses?" says Roz.

"By their tits," says Mitch." (p. 366)

Other male characters in the text also classify women in oversimplistic ways:

"There's ladies, there's women, and there's babes," says Uncle George. "Your mother is a lady. That one, she's a babe." (p. 334)

This classification is interesting in that it categorises women into three groups rather than the more usual two. However, we are left in some doubt as to what characteristics would pertain to a 'woman'. Perhaps Uncle George's 'women' encompass the bulk of the female population and, in a more enlightened observer would happily contain the other terms, such as 'lady' and 'babe'. Uncle George clearly intends the term 'lady' to be a complimentary one, although this is not always the accepted interpretation as Charis reminds us:

Jesus lady, watch the fuck out!... Although she's not sure why, she minds being called *lady* even more than she minds being called *crazy broad*. Why is this word so offensive to her? (p. 199)

This simplistic, and often arbitrary, splitting into two of a large section of the population that displays a wide range of behaviours derives from a more fundamental cause than cultural and societal pressure. Campbell, and others, proposes a possible explanation in the early, but fraught, development of humans. "Listen to me, Antonia," says Zenia seriously. "All men are warped. This is something you must never forget" (p. 133). Zenia may be referring to the difficulty men have in forming balanced relationships, due to the process by which they develop their sense of self. When we examine the perilous emotional journey that humans make in their first few years of life, we can easily believe Zenia's proposition. Campbell reminds us of the extreme dependency of the human infant:

Human beings are born too soon; they are unfinished, unready as yet to meet the world. Consequently their whole defense from a universe of dangers is the mother, under whose protection the intra-uterine period is prolonged. Hence the dependent child and its mother constitute for months after the catastrophe of birth a dual unit, not only physically but also psychologically.¹⁸

Thus the first object of love in contemporary western society is usually the mother. However, the human infant does not live in an ideal world where its every need and desire is automatically anticipated and provided for. The infant soon

experiences the harsh reality of the struggle between its needs and the needs or desires of its carers, including its mother:

Any prolonged absence of the parent causes tension in the infant and consequent impulses of aggression; also, when the mother is obliged to hamper the child, aggressive responses are aroused. Thus the first object of the child's hostility is identical with the first object of its love, and its first ideal (which is retained as the unconscious basis of all images of bliss, truth, beauty, and perfection) is that of the dual unity of the Madonna and Bambino.¹⁹

Hence the young male child desires the mother, and desires to return to the unity he experienced before he recognised that he was a separate individual. There is some guilt associated with the desired but forbidden mother, and fear of returning to the unity, which also means losing individual identity.

The infant continues to harbour ambivalent feeling toward the mother who cherishes but also forbids and restricts. There is a deep and frustrating tension between wanting to return to being dependent (and thereby losing identity), and wanting to be independent. Campbell summarises the child's complex view of the negative aspects of the mother:

(1) the absent, unattainable mother, against whom aggressive fantasies are directed, and from whom a counter-aggression is feared; (2) the hampering, forbidding, punishing mother; (3) the mother who would hold to herself the growing child trying to push away; and finally (4) the desired but forbidden mother...whose presence is a lure to dangerous desire (castration complex)—persists in the hidden land of the adult's infant recollection...²⁰

Campbell asserts that it is these fantasies that are incorporated into myth and fairy tales, and that they become "symbols of indestructible being".²¹ I would argue that it is these fantasies that are responsible for the mermaid myth, where the mermaid incorporates both the desire for the forbidden mother, and the fear of loss of identity in returning 'to the womb'.

Lacan developed Freud's concept of desire and wrote at length of the desire of the Other:

...man's desire is the *desire de l'Autre* (the desire of the Other) in which the *de* provides what grammarians call the 'subjective determination', namely that it is *qua* Other that he desires (which is what provides the true compass of human passion).²²

Mitchell explains that Lacan also links desire with the 'Desire of the Mother':

... a double genitive referring to both the mother's desire and the desire for the mother. First, the child imagines itself to be the desire of the mother in the sense that it is all that the mother desires [the Phallus] ... Second, the 'Desire of the Mother' is the child's own desire for the mother, as that part of its experience which has been provided to satisfy its needs.²³

This desire is by definition unfulfillable because the father already is the phallus for the mother.²⁴ Lacan asserts that all other desires are only 'stand-ins' for the original desire, the mother's body.

In Lacanian theory, it is an original lost object — the mother's body — which drives forward the narrative of our lives, impelling us to pursue substitutes for this lost paradise in the endless metonymic movement of desire.²⁵

Grosz argues that although the 'mirror-stage', when the child recognises itself as a separate identity to the mother, provides the child with:

...the grounds of its identity as a being separate from other beings, it also is the basis of an alienation, a rift which it will forever unsuccessfully attempt to cover over.²⁶

For boys, the mother is forbidden; they can never return to the Imaginary phase where they and the mother are one. Lacan viewed the pain of that separation as being so great that its effects are felt throughout adult life. Mitch is an example of a character that constantly seeks fulfilment of his desire, only to find the object of his desire unfulfilling. His series of affairs demonstrate the concept of *jouissance*:

Our desires are always and continually deferred because once attained, they never provide the satisfaction they promise and are always replaced by others.²⁷

This concept, however, seems to break down in Mitch's affair with Zenia. It may be that Zenia is aware of the workings of desire, and makes sure that she always stays just out of emotional reach, so that her lovers constantly seek but never attain their object of desire. Roz ponders the nature of Zenia's attraction to Mitch:

What is her secret? How does she do it?...She tells them they're unique, then reveals to them they're not...Only by that time they refuse to see...They want to believe. (p. 380)

If the Sirens promised to tell of the future, then Zenia promises a return to the past, where men can be reunited with the bliss of a totally fulfilled and unified being. This appeal strikes a chord with memories from pre-Symbolic childhood, and defies the logic of the usually rational male. It is still somewhat unclear as to how Zenia maintains the promise of this bliss, other than, perhaps, by staying just out of reach, so that the desire is indefinitely maintained but never realised. Zenia portrayed herself to West as being frigid, supposedly because she was sexually abused in childhood: therefore West feels sorry for her. Tony comments:

It would have been a challenge for him, of course. Warm up the Ice Maiden. The first man ever to successfully explore those polar climes. But of course there was no way he could win, because Zenia's games were always rigged. (p. 407)

Passages such as these emphasise the fact that men and women are viewed as being quite separate and distinct. Mitch, in particular, demonstrates the tendency in male western society of viewing women as 'the other'. Nancy Chodorow articulates the cause of women being regarded by men as the 'other'. According to Chodorow:

...boys and girls learn to expect from women the infinite, accepting love of a mother, but they also associate with women their fears of powerlessness. In order to find their identity, boys develop themselves as other-than-the-mother; they identify with the father and turn away from emotional expression toward action in the world.²⁸

Lerner considers that the kind of personality formation described by Chodorow would not have occurred in early primitive societies. However, she does concede that:

The ego formation of the individual male, which must have taken place within a context of fear, awe, and possibly dread of the female, must have led men to create social institutions to bolster their egos, strengthen their self-confidence, and validate their sense of worth.²⁹

Ruth Berman states that, in the early myths of Odysseus and Jason, sirens acted primarily as ‘expressions of male fear of female sexuality.’³⁰ Odysseus’ success in resisting the lure of the sirens must also have assisted in bolstering men’s egos. However, it also contributed to the tendency to view women as separate, suspicious, dangerous, and to encourage at least wariness in relations between the genders.

The men and women in *The Robber Bride* do not regard each other as ‘kindred spirits’. Roz, Tony and Charis confide in each other to some degree about problems with their men, but each group regards the other with extreme wariness. It is obvious that Mitch, for instance, does not regard women as having the same feelings and complexity of personality as that of men. If he is not able to relate to them as potential sexual partners, then he must disparage them:

But he thinks Tony is a weirdo and Charis is a nut. That’s how he neutralizes them. As far as Roz knows he has never made a pass at either of them. Possibly he doesn’t place them in the category of *woman* but in some other category, not clearly defined. A sort of sexless gnome. (p. 353)

Women who cannot be easily categorised as either mother figures or prostitutes are often treated with a certain degree of mistrust, even anger, because they threaten the established social order. Nancy Hartsock notes that “...male ego-formation necessarily requires repressing this first relation and negating the mother.”³¹ Thus there is a tendency to ‘identify’ and value those attributes that society labels as male, and devalue those attributes labelled as female, including women themselves. The force of this need to identify with the father can, in the extreme, lead to a loathing of women.

Zenia understands some of the conflicting emotions that men experience towards women. Billy sexually desires Zenia, but is also rude and cold towards her:

“Oh, it’s not love,” says Zenia gently. “Not what he feels for me, I mean. It’s hate. Sometimes it’s so hard for men to tell the difference.” (p. 230)

Billy is torn between desire and fear: in the end the desire wins out and he leaves with Zenia. This combination of desire and fear results in the labelling of some women in a derogatory manner as a way of maintaining control of these women in society. Dale Spender reminds us that “Language is our means of classifying and ordering the world: our means of manipulating reality.”³² If, as has been asserted by Spender, men control language,³³ then the realities that language describes will be male realities. This presents many problems for women when they attempt to express their different realities.³⁴ If this situation is compounded by the imposition of a hierarchy in language, where all those attributes assigned to the male are given precedence in the hierarchy, then language allows little positive space for women to communicate, and little opportunity for them to exercise power through language.

Spender explains that, through our language, we have designated the male as the positive and the female as the negative. Spender refers to what she calls the ‘semantic derogation of women’, and cites some examples from Shulz of terms where the male is the positive and the female the negative: for example, *courtier* and *courtesan*, *master* and *mistress*, *king* and *queen*. Shulz notes that many of these titles or labels have retained their original and positive meaning, but that the

female equivalent has “frequently undergone a dramatic ‘downhill slide’, ending more often than not with sexually debased meanings.”³⁵

Men can control women’s behaviour to some extent by classifying their behaviour and identifying deviant behaviour as that which does not serve their interests. So, promiscuous behaviour in *Zenia* is condoned by the male characters, but the same behaviour would not be tolerated in their wives/partners. If women had sex with many partners, then a husband could not be sure of the children’s parentage: he could be providing for another man’s children.

In Mitch’s cosmology Roz’s body represents possessions, solidity, the domestic virtues, hearth and home, long usage. Mother-of-his-children. The den. Whereas whatever other body may currently be occupying his field of vision will have other nouns attached to it: adventure, youth, freedom, the unknown, sex without strings. (pp. 297-8)

The narrator in Murray Bail’s *Eucalyptus* comments on the reasons for this splitting of the category ‘woman’:

...beauty composed of porcelain niceness produces a weaker response in men than a ‘beauty’ that appears more aware of itself. Smoothness, niceness—they’re the kiss of death. In the male they activate obscure notions of the Mother! And—sexually speaking—who wants that? Whereas if the main component in beauty is a certain dissatisfaction of bad temper, it banishes in men all associations with the mother and so allows an immediate, unencumbered attraction across a broad front.³⁶

The distaste that accompanies the consideration of sexual desire of the mother could be due to good sense that prevents inbreeding. Claude Lévi-Strauss certainly regards the incest taboo as “a universal human mechanism, which lies at the root of all social organisation.”³⁷ It could also be the result of the prohibition of the father. It is a distaste that would be likely to be encouraged by the father. It makes no sense to allow a rival to live in the same house. A similar motivation has accompanied the societal norm that makes monogamy for women more important than that for men:

...women’s sexuality, containing as it did the potential for men’s immortality through the children who would bear their names and inherit their property, would have to be controlled in the future by every force patriarchy could muster. Eventually the technicalities of this arrangement became known as monogamy, or the marriage between one man and one woman.³⁸

However, it is worth remembering that patriarchal organisation is not the same in every culture. *The Robber Bride* notes in passing the situation in the Jewish religion:

Why do you inherit Jewishness through the mother’s side? Tony once asked Roz.

Because so many Jewish women were raped by Cossacks and what-have-you that they could never be sure who the father was. (p. 305)

But, it may be that Roz is not as knowledgeable about the Jewish faith and its history as she would like us to think. Gerda Lerner explains the difference thus:

As in the case of Israel, patriarchal organization is based on territory rather than on relationship, on hierarchy rather than on consensus, on contract (or law) rather than on kinship.³⁹

It is clear that the characters in *The Robber Bride* see, in general terms, a large gap in the behaviour and roles of women and men in their society. Roz tolerates Mitch's affairs, but it is doubtful that he would do the same. Roz's father and his friends do not help with the running of the rooming house even when they are not contributing financially.

Mitch's behaviour in *The Robber Bride* is in many ways a demonstration of how man regards woman as 'the other'. As Eagleton points out:

...for male-dominated society, man is the founding principle and woman the excluded opposite of this...man is what he is only by virtue of ceaselessly shutting out this other or opposite [woman], defining himself in antithesis to it, and his whole identity is therefore caught up and put at risk in the very gesture by which he seeks to assert his unique, autonomous existence...⁴⁰

Eagleton's point supports the view that the concept of 'other' is an artificial construct, and that the dominant section of society attempts to maintain this dominance by constructing and exaggerating differences. A similar process can be seen in the concept of binary oppositions, where males are assigned positive values and women are assigned negative ones. When the concept of the 'other' is deconstructed it can have a disorienting, even threatening effect on those who see their privileged position crumbling. Roz's success in business, in a male-dominated environment, is a constant threat to Mitch's self-image. Roz is aware of this, and makes many attempts to maintain a veneer of the happy housewife. Mitch's frequent affairs can be seen as a demonstration of his need to make 'male' gestures and assert his influence and power.

Mitch takes the role of exemplar of the patriarchal male in the text. Roz relates that during their courtship: "He'd made it clear by then that there were jumpers and jumpees, kissers and kissees, and he was to be the former and she the latter" (p. 312). (She also notes that he probably had a 'side dish' tucked away to help him cope with the frustration of their almost-chaste courtship (p. 312).) This is an example of the way in which our society classifies women. In *La Jeune Née* Hélène Cixous lists a number of binary oppositions, all of which she claims correspond to the underlying opposition man/woman.⁴¹ One of these pairs is Activity/Passivity. Women who are not passive do not fall within the 'accepted' side of the binary opposition. Their lack of conformity often earns them a negative label. Hence whore, slut, temptress, siren and mermaid are all labels for women who refuse to be passive. These can be contrasted with other labels for 'good' women, such as virgin, mother, nun and wife. Cixous' list of binary oppositions also includes the pairs Sun/Moon, Day/Night and Culture/Nature.⁴² Mermaids are closely associated with the moon and the night, and both mermaids and sirens are seen as being more closely aligned to nature than the males in the same myths.

Even women collude in this type of labelling and assignment of blame for negative behaviour: "*It's not West's fault, she wanted to say. It's her*" (p. 186).

2.2.3 Female perspective

Women too, experience a deeply ambivalent relationship with the mother. Luce Irigaray writes eloquently of this ambivalence:

But we have never, never spoken to each other. And such an abyss now separates us that I never leave you whole, for I am always held back in your womb. Shrouded in shadow. Captives of our confinement.⁴³

Irigaray describes the almost contradictory state in which women live: they have a strong unspoken bond that ties them to the mother, and holds them back from being truly independent. But they also experience a profound separation of identity, from their need to move away from the influence of the mother, and establish a bond with the father, that they can never fully express all these feelings to the mother. In many instances a feeling of slight distrust and even jealousy is experienced by both the mother and the daughter. The female protagonists in *The Robber Bride* demonstrate this confused range of emotions towards their own mothers. Tony's first recollection of her mother, in the text, prompts: 'Begone, Mother, she thinks. *Rehtom, enogeb*. She banishes her, not for the first time' (p. 9). We learn of the efforts that Tony made as a child to please her mother, and how her mother leaves the family with only a note for Tony and a dress that does not fit. Tony attempts to keep her feelings for her mother neatly contained but, just as Tony attempts to repress other aspects of her troubled childhood, she has difficulty in maintaining an unemotional response to her mother:

Tony can't quite understand why Zenia wants to excuse her mother. She herself has not done so, she realizes now...' (p. 162)

Zenia has several different stories about her own mother, but all involve Zenia being mistreated but turning out apparently strong and emotionally untouched:

"Rented?" she says. "But how old were you?"

"Who knows?" says Zenia. "It must've started when I was five, six, earlier maybe. Really, I can't remember. I can't remember a time when I didn't have some man's hand in my pants." (p. 164)

Atwood constructs the character of Roz to be well aware of the binary oppositions operating in the world, in regard to women:

She had hard hands with enlarged knuckles, red from washing. 'Look at my hands,' she would say, as if her hands proved something. 'Your mother is a saint,' said little Miss Hines, who lived on the third floor. But if Roz's mother was a saint, Roz did not especially want to be one. (p. 319)

Roz had little love for her own mother, but loves her daughters with a passion:

Zenia, she thinks, you bitch! Maybe you had everything else, but you never had such a blessing. You never had daughters. (p. 78)

In their relationships with their men, the female protagonists in *The Robber Bride* attempt to balance their desires for dependence and independence, as they once did with their mothers. Each of the women alternate between playing 'mother' and 'daughter' to their lovers, just as if it were not possible to have a relationship of equals between the genders. Irigaray writes of the process where the young girl recognises the existence of the 'law of the father' and seeks to gain acceptance from the father, thereby moving her affection partly away from the mother:

I'll turn to my father. I'll leave you for someone who seems more alive than you. For someone who doesn't prepare anything for me to eat. For someone who leaves me empty of him, mouth gaping on his truth. I'll follow him with my eyes, I'll listen to what he says, I'll try to walk behind him.⁴⁴

The young girl observes the relationship between her parents. In Roz's case, she not only emulates her father's business prowess, but she is doomed to find a man who matches her father's sexual behaviour:

...if Roz can figure out what story she's in, then they will be able to spot the erroneous turns she took, they can retract her steps, they can change the ending. They work out a tentative plot. Maybe Roz married Mitch because, although she thought at the time that Mitch was very different from her father, she sensed he was the same underneath. He would cheat on her the way her father had cheated on her mother, and she would keep forgiving him and taking him back just the way her mother had. (p. 383)

The presence, or absence, of a father has important consequences for these female characters. Charis ponders whether her daughter Augusta is 'hard' because she had an 'invisible' father. Charis realises that she cannot know '...because she never had one herself.' (p. 40)

If women experience an ambivalent relationship with the mother, they also accept stand-ins in the place of the original desire for the mother. Even Zenia finds that, a desire once fulfilled, is no longer desired:

...she's the kind of woman who wants what she doesn't have and gets what she wants and then despises what she gets. (p. 380)

Hence she 'steals' Mitch, West and Billy from their women, then discards them once they are thoroughly besotted with her. Roz constantly seeks more money and power. As a child she never measured up to her mother's standards, and she watched as her father was treated largely with respect and love. Her emulation of her father's behaviour may stem from a desire to gain similar admiration from those around her.

* * * * *

The issues outlined above make the development of a secure identity a problematic journey, as we can see from the experiences of the three female protagonists in *The Robber Bride*. Atwood draws our attention to the importance of Zenia in this process by posing the following questions:

Was she in any way like us? Thinks Tony. Or, to put it the other way around: Are we in any way like her? (p. 470)

The three women each have painful childhoods: Charis does not ever meet her father, and has a mother who cannot cope with what fate has given. Life has also disappointed Tony's mother, who also escapes (not to a mental hospital, but to a lover and then by drowning). Tony's father slowly falls apart until he kills himself. Roz has an absent father for much of her childhood, and a mother who sees herself as badly done by. All three repress aspects of themselves that are unacceptable to their mothers, or that they recognise in their mothers. Each of the three women finds Zenia attractive. This attraction is in some respects an unwilling attraction, even a compulsion. The principal reason for this attraction is that all three have aspects of their repressed selves uncovered by Zenia. By acknowledging these repressed aspects of themselves each of the women is able to gain strength. Tony not only confronts her past, but also acknowledges her capacity for anger through confrontation with Zenia. Roz is able to forgive her father for his long absence, and Charis is finally able to recognise that, in keeping

Karen and Charis separated she is risking severe consequences for her mental health. This is shown graphically when Charis imagines (or does she?) that Karen has murdered Zenia:

It was Karen, who was left behind somehow... Karen has murdered Zenia, and it's Charis's fault for holding Karen away, separate from herself, for trying to keep her outside, for not taking her in... (p. 445)

Charis now understands that, in mentally 'leaving Karen behind' she has not managed to obliterate her. Karen still exists, and is all the more dangerous because she is outside of Charis's control. Charis knows that she must accept Karen back and integrate her into a healed personality. But Atwood refuses to offer a neat ending, even for Charis. Although Charis has acknowledged the importance of accepting her past, she has not articulated the role of Zenia in this process:

Zenia was sent into her life—was *chosen* by her—to teach her something. Charis doesn't know what it was yet, but in time she will uncover it. (p. 451)

The Robber Bride contains many references to the ways in which the female characters are expected to conform to patriarchal concepts of the appropriate roles of women. Toril Moi states that Cixous':

...whole theoretical project can in one sense be summed up as the effort to undo [this] logocentric ideology: to proclaim woman as the source of life, power and energy and to hail the advent of a new, feminine language that ceaselessly subverts these patriarchal binary schemes where logocentrism colludes with phallogentrism in an effort to oppress and silence women.⁴⁵

Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride* can, however, also be seen as an exemplar of this 'new feminine language'.

Margaret Atwood flags her intention to deconstruct the binary oppositions in *The Robber Bride* by its very title. Later in the text we discover the origins of the title: Tony begins to read, to Roz's twin girls, a fairy tale called *The Robber Bridegroom*.

The beautiful maiden, the search for a husband, the arrival of the rich and handsome stranger who lures innocent girls to his stronghold in the woods and then chops them up and eats them. The twins want the main character to be a woman, so Tony changes the story to *The Robber Bride*. "In that case," says Tony, "who do you want her to murder? Men victims, or women victims? Or maybe an assortment?" The twins remain true to their principles, they do not flinch. They opt for women, in every single role. (p. 294)

By this, we may well conclude that, in the text of *The Robber Bride*, the women also take all the roles, including victim, evil perpetrator, and saviour. Or, equally, we may decide that the idea of women having all the roles, and holding all the power over their destiny, is just a fairy tale!

The Robber Bride, thinks Roz. Well, why not? Let the grooms take it in the neck for once. The Robber Bride, lurking in her mansion in the dark forest, preying upon the innocent, enticing youths to their doom in her evil cauldron. Like Zenia. No. Too melodramatic for Zenia, who was, after all – who *is* surely nothing more than an up-market slut. The Rubber Broad is more like it – her and those pneumatic tits. (p. 295)

In this paragraph we are reminded that the characters in the text are portrayed as being humans, not fairy tale characters who have magical powers. But by situating a fictional story inside this text we are also prompted to question the applicability of the fictional story of *The Robber Bride* to women's lives. Atwood has used the reference to the lesser-known fairy tale as a jumping-off point for this novel. *The Robber Bridegroom* by The Brothers Grimm tells of a man who murders young women and eats them. His betrothed observes this behaviour from a hiding place and discloses the truth at her wedding breakfast, resulting in the Robbers being arrested and punished. Atwood writes of the original bridegroom in her poem 'The Robber Bridegroom'. Atwood's poem tells of a man who desires 'what he imagines other men have': he desires a loving relationship with a woman. But his perverted desire to join with the women's souls results in their death, leaving him without 'the one thing he needs to live'.⁴⁶ Atwood's version accords the robber far more sympathy than did the Brothers Grimm, but then Atwood is attempting to relate far more than a cautionary tale of hasty marriage agreements. This poem seems to relate (albeit in a violent manifestation) the desire of many men to regain their original identity that was lost when they separated from the mother and began to develop their independent destiny. It nominates the mother as the source of both fulfilment and frustration.

By inverting the original fairy tale in Tony's feminist retelling of *The Robber Bridegroom*, Atwood has signalled a number of concerns. She has performed a straightforward reversal of the binary opposition, by making the woman as the main character and the initiator of the action. However, Atwood has also broken open the original text for us to examine. We may conclude that the result of the reversal is implausible or even humorous, as is implied by Tony's comment regarding the new version. This is a technique that is used often, by writers such as Dale Spender,⁴⁷ to examine critically the possible sexism in our language. Does it make sense to reverse the roles? The traditional structure and gender roles in fairy tales are now so familiar that it can be slightly shocking to see them reversed. But, by reversing the characters in the fairy tale, Atwood has also succeeded in prompting us to look behind the original story, to deconstruct the messages implicit in the narrative: why are some men violent towards women; what do they lack; what do they hope to possess? By asking these questions of ourselves, we are then drawn to make a connection between the man in *The Robber Bridegroom*, and the men in *The Robber Bride*, and with contemporary men in general. The tale of 'The Robber Bridegroom' becomes a key we can use to interpret the narrative of *The Robber Bride*.

Writers such as Ania Walwicz⁴⁸ and Angela Carter⁴⁹ have successfully reinterpreted traditional fairy tales, or created new ones that empower women. By revising fairy tales, writers like Carter succeed in altering the reader's reality, by placing women in positions of mastery over their own destinies. This process of altering fairy tales, and hence the perceptions of women and their place in society, demonstrates the point that the term 'woman' is not a fixed category, and subverts the classification of 'woman' as either angel or crone.⁵⁰

In stories such as these, women are sometimes attributed with traditional male characteristics or behaviours. At various points in the text, Zenia is also associated strongly with male behaviours.⁵¹ When Zenia returns 'from the dead', Roz regards her as like a character in a western movie:

She's *back in town*, like the guy in the black hat in Western movies. The way she's striding through the room proclaims her sense of re-entry, of staking out the territory...as if she's got two pearl-handled revolvers slung on her hips...Her perfume trails behind her like the smoke from an indolent cigar. (pp. 101-102)

Through references such as this, Atwood imbues the character of Zenia with power and self-determination. Zenia has taken on characteristics more commonly associated with men, but Atwood has turned the traditional image of the macho male of the Western movies on its head by substituting perfume for cigar smoke. Not only has she used a 'male' image to strengthen the image of Zenia, but she has also broken open the image of the 'macho male', by painting an amusing picture of a female in the male role. In the process, Atwood has also succeeded in highlighting the ingrained assumptions in the influential story of the male taming the American West.

Later in the narrative, Roz ponders:

Most women disapprove of man-eaters; not so much because of the activity itself, or the promiscuity involved, but because of the greed. Women don't want all the men eaten up by man-eaters; they want a few left over so they can eat some themselves. (p. 392)

Again, this proposes an assertive role for *all* women. Atwood implies that it is not only women 'like Zenia' for whom the passive side of the binary opposition is an inadequate description.

These and other comments in *The Robber Bride* propose the need for a broad and multi-faceted characterisation of women; but a traditional image is still a powerful and restrictive reality for many women. In developing a secure and stable identity, women have to grapple with, and often counteract, the images of themselves that they are presented with daily. In *The Robber Bride*, Atwood presents some powerful images that force us to examine our perceptions of self-representation. John Berger asserts that, since women are born into the 'keeping of men', they have developed the ability to live within that restricted environment, and have inevitably developed the ability to 'watch themselves'. He summarises this situation by stating that:

Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor or woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object...⁵²

In *The Robber Bride*, Roz articulates this paradox:

Even pretending you aren't catering to male fantasies is a male fantasy: pretending you're unseen, pretending you have a life of your own, that you can wash your feet and comb your hair unconscious of the ever-present watcher peering through the keyhole, peering through the keyhole in your head, if nowhere else. You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur. (p. 392)

The mere recognition of this paradox can be, in itself, liberating. But Roz regards it as just a regrettable 'given'. Zenia also recognises the limitations inherent in a world where 'the male gaze' establishes the framework of women's behaviour:

I had big ideas, but nobody seemed to share them. Looking the way I do doesn't help, you know. Men don't see you as a person, they just see the body, and so that's all you

see yourself. You think of your body as a tool, something to use. God, I'm tired of men! They're too easy to amuse. All you have to do to get their attention is take off your clothes. After a while you want a bit more of a challenge, you know? (p. 364)

However, Atwood subverts the expected framework of the male gaze in her portrayal of Zenia. Roz recognises both her own inability to break from the 'male inside the female watching', and Zenia's ability to turn it on its head:

The Zenias of this world have studied this situation and turned it to their own advantage; they haven't let themselves be moulded into male fantasies; they've done it themselves. They've slipped sideways into dreams; the dreams of women too, because women are fantasies for other women, just as they are for men. But fantasies of a different kind. (p. 392)

The types of people who constructed fantasies called 'mermaids' and 'sirens' are really the forerunners of those that construct fantasies of virgin mothers and nymphomaniacs. Roz does not elaborate on how 'women are fantasies for other women', but we could conclude that women see other women such as Zenia as possibilities of what they could be. Zenia takes whatever characteristics of male or female are useful to her at the time. She plays the passive female in need of rescue, and the next minute she is the assertive, powerful businesswoman. Her refusal to play by any set of rules is both a source of frustration and anger to the other female protagonists, and a cause for grudging admiration. The possibilities of both female and male gender roles are treated like a toolkit to Zenia.

Tony experiences a highly ambivalent attitude towards Zenia:

Though part of what Tony feels is admiration. Despite her disapproval, her dismay, all her past anguish, there's a part of her that has wanted to cheer Zenia on, even to encourage her... To participate in her daring, her contempt for almost everything, her rapacity and lawlessness. (p. 185)

Roz appears to have a greater depth of understanding of Zenia's ability to be an 'extreme' character. Roz considers the attractions of being wicked, then ponders:

Or maybe she could go in for superhuman goodness, instead. Hair shirts, stigmata, succouring the poor, a kind of outsized Mother Teresa. Saint Roz, it sounds good, though Saint Rosalind would be classier... She can see herself in a halo, with her hand languidly on her heart and a wimple, great for sagging chins, and her eyes rolled up in ecstasy. It's the extremes that attract her. Extreme good, extreme evil: the abilities required are similar. (p. 393)

In this extract, Roz regards extreme good and extreme evil as being similar, thereby subverting the accepted order. In undertaking this subversive narrative, Atwood does not attempt merely to rebalance the binary oppositions so that the feminine is positive and the male negative. She breaks open the meaning of the categories to demonstrate the fluidity of meaning of such complex categories as 'male' and 'female'. Atwood's characterisation has much more in common with Moi's examples of adjectives or adverbs of degree (much-more-most, little-less-least), which seem to produce their meaning in relation to the other items in the same series, not in relation to their binary opposites.⁵³ Uncle George categorises women into more than one pigeon-hole ('lady, woman and babe'.) Even in her choice of female protagonists, Atwood shows us a range of personalities rather than two ends of the spectrum. Roz is the successful businesswoman, Tony is the academic and Charis is the new-age hippy. We have the strong sense that these are just three of the possibilities available.

In discussing these extremes Atwood emphasises that almost all women are *not* saints or devils: they are a complex mixture of characters. But even for women, being a mermaid or a saint sounds a lot more exciting than being a run-of-the-mill second-class citizen:

Either way, she would like to be someone else. But not just anyone. Sometimes – for a day at least, or even for an hour, or if nothing else was available then five minutes would do – sometimes she would like to be Zenia. (p. 393)

Atwood's characters do, however, discuss their own and others' behaviour in terms of binary oppositions. Charis takes on the traditional role of wife and housekeeper for Billy. Roz also wears an apron, and comments that:

...he likes the image of Roz with an apron and a frying pan, and an apron and a feather duster...the Good Housekeeping guarantee that Roz will always be home whenever Mitch chooses to get back there. (p. 357)

But these instances have the effect of highlighting the inadequacy of seeing the world, and men and women in particular, in terms of these opposites. In Charis and Billy's relationship, Charis's housekeeper role is uncovered as Billy merely taking advantage of her easy-going nature, as she also earns their sole income, carts the wood for the stove and feeds the hens. Roz's apron-wearing behaviour is merely a way of reassuring Mitch that he is still manly, even though Roz makes all the tough business decisions and brings in most of the money.

Cixous' concept of multiple, heterogeneous difference, which has some similarities with Derrida's critique of binary logic, can be seen to operate quite clearly in the character of Roz in *The Robber Bride*. In a Derridean manner, the character of Roz is approached by reference to 'other, absent signifiers' — her mother, father, nuns at school, historical figures, husband, daughters, son, male secretary, Zenia, and so on. But, she is never fully defined by these references any more than she can be categorised into one half of a binary opposition. Roz (and for that matter, Tony and Charis) is a complex character who cannot be contained within the patriarchal definition of 'female'. Thus, the character of Roz, as created by Atwood, subverts the binary oppositions:

Activity/passivity,

Sun/Moon,

Culture/Nature,

Day/Night,

Father/Mother,

Head/Heart,

Intelligible/sensitive,

Logos/Pathos.⁵⁴

Cixous reflects on the question:

What would become of logocentrism, of the great philosophical systems, of world order in general if the rock upon which they founded their church were to crumble?...Then all the stories would have to be told differently...⁵⁵

The portrayal of both Zenia and Roz in *The Robber Bride* break open the binary oppositions and form part of a larger body of feminist literature that acts to 'shake the rock' upon which logocentrism is founded.

2.2.4 Other halves/submerged identities

One of the difficulties of living in a society where gender roles are closely prescribed is that people will frequently repress those characteristics that are not acceptable to society in general or to their family. The results of this tendency are clearly demonstrated in the 'other halves' of the three female protagonists.

As a child Tony would sometimes write and speak by reversing the order of letter and words. By reversing her own name she invented an invisible twin:

TNOMERF YNOT:

...when she was little her twin was merely an invention, the incarnation of her sense that part of her was missing. Although she was a twin, Tnomerf Ynot was a good deal taller than Tony herself. Taller, stronger, more daring. (p. 137).

The three characters Tony, Charis and Roz, all have 'other halves'. Charis was Karen as a child, until repeated sexual abuse by her uncle forced her to leave Karen behind and evolve into Charis, who could fly away from the abuse. But whilst Charis is the embodiment of self-sacrificing and naïve woman, she fears that Karen is still there, waiting for an opportunity to exact revenge. Charis has separated the two parts of herself into the two personas: and has deposited all the dark side into Karen. Karen is supposedly kept packed away, but she threatens to re-emerge at times of great stress. Through this vehicle, Atwood demonstrates the necessary consequences of our tendency to submerge behaviours that society finds unacceptable. But, at one point, Charis does accept her other half:

Karen is coming back...she's walked through the bedroom wall...She no longer looks like Karen. She looks like Zenia...and now she's inside Charis's body. With her she brings the ancient shame, which feels warm...but Charis doesn't float away...she can feel the pleasure shoot through her like electricity...Everything in her has been fused together. (p. 266)

It is at this point that Charis's sexuality is most potent, and she conceives her daughter. It is important to note that Atwood links Charis's acceptance of her sexuality with the persona of Zenia.

Tony's other half is also the 'darker' side, principally because it is associated with her left-handedness. Tony grew up in the days when it was not acceptable to be left-handed, and she experienced an internal conflict between her need to live according to society's rules, and her need to live according to her inner voice and feelings:

Secretly Tony continued to write left-handed; but she felt guilty about it. She knew there must be something shameful about her left hand or it would not have been humiliated like that. It was the hand she loved best, all the same. (p. 138)

This experience of Tony's can be seen as an analogy of the general situation in which women find themselves in attempting to live comfortably in a patriarchal society. Like Tony, many women express themselves with an alternative type of language. Tony reverses her letters and words, whereas women in general communicate with a range of techniques that similarly place them outside the accepted symbolic language. But women can share their communication with other women, whilst Tony can only use her language for self-expression rather

than communication. Sometimes, alternative language can infiltrate the main symbolic structure. Tony achieves this when she changes Stew's name to West.

The anthropologist Edwin Ardener describes one of the consequences of women's lives and experiences being marginalised by the dominant patriarchal culture:

Where the experiences and perspectives of men and women overlap, then the dominant culture and language will be adequate to describe them. But since cultures are all patriarchal, those areas of experience which are specific to women are excluded, and cannot be articulated or shared within the available discourse. This is the wild zone.⁵⁶

Charis also expresses herself, and attempts to communicate, in ways that are outside the symbolic system. Her ability to see people's auras, and her belief in the prophetic power of crystals, although not in any way purely 'female', is a direct defiance of the prevailing patriarchal, logical, rational, Christian system. Part of her attempt to gain some control over her destiny can be seen in the change from Karen to Charis:

When she was twenty-six she dumped her old name. A lot of people were changing their names, then, because names were not just labels, they were also containers. (p. 265)

The name 'Karen' contained many painful memories of abuse and also the anger the accumulated as a result of that abuse. But, whether a name is a label or a container, it still carries with it a set of expectations and restrictions. *The Robber Bride* addresses the issue of labelling of women, particularly of women who transgress. One example of this is the discussion of the term 'mistress'.

She's read about mistresses in the murder mysteries. *Mistress* was the word she preferred, because it was more elevated than the other words available: 'floozy,' 'whore,' 'easy lay.' Those other words implied... legs that did nothing but lie there... Whereas *mistress* hinted at a certain refinement, an expensive wardrobe, a well-furnished establishment, and also at the power and cunning and beauty it took to get such things. (p. 339)

The description of mistress reminds us of siren or mermaid, particularly in the way that the mistress has 'power and cunning and beauty'. Catholic though she is in her education, Roz seems attracted to the concept of the mistress, and to the degree of control that she imagines such women have over their environment and destiny. In some respects, terms such as 'mistress' refer back to the much older labels of mermaid and siren. Both constitute a threat to the established patriarchal order and its desire to control women's sexuality. This imperative resulted in an excess of vitriol against women and their anatomy, as this comment from Roz about mini-skirts demonstrates:

...you had to sit down with your legs glued together or all would be on view, the once-mentionable, the central item, the foul and disgraceful blot, the priceless treasure, an invitation to male peering, to lustful pinching and leering, to foaming at the mouth, to rape and pillage, just as the nuns had always warned... (p. 356)

2.2.5 How does the portrayal of these images serve to deconstruct the patriarchal view of women?

This view of women's sexuality and their role in society is well described in *The Robber Bride*. In fact, it is so well described that we can see immediately the

inconsistencies and contradictions of such a simplistic and distorted view of gender roles. The narrowly inscribed rendering of female characters does, however, provide ample opportunity for Atwood to deconstruct this patriarchal view of women. Just as Atwood deconstructs the Brothers Grimm fairy tale of 'The Robber Bridegroom', so she deconstructs a story of a manipulative modern-day siren.

One of the ways in which this deconstruction of the myth of the siren or mermaid is achieved is by demonstrating the impossibility of accurately describing Zenia. The character of Zenia that we see in *The Robber Bride* is constructed through the lenses of the other three major female characters. Zenia is able to speak to us only through the recollections of Roz, Tony and Charis. And, as in *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye*, "the stories the protagonists tell offer multiple versions of their lives which never quite fit together to form the image of a unified and coherent self."⁵⁷ But the image of Zenia is given further complexity because it is viewed through several external viewpoints. This technique is a powerful way of breaking open the narrow view of women from a patriarchal viewpoint. The contradictions in Zenia's character offer a direct confrontation to any attempt to contain women within a narrow set of characteristics and behaviours. Zenia becomes whatever the three women believe her to be. Whilst we suspect that much of Zenia's stories are pure fiction (in some instances this is verified by the other women, and admitted to by Zenia), we are left in a position where we cannot say definitively where this story's fiction begins and ends. Hence we are led to conclude that we cannot be sure where the 'truth' of the work of fiction begins and ends. In true postmodernist style, truth becomes, at best, provisional. Howells points out that *The Robber Bride* is much more a postmodern novel than a gothic one, because there are female victims but no rescuing heroes.⁵⁸ In this novel, the victims rescue themselves or, at least attempt to do so.

One of the interesting aspects of the way in which Atwood has constructed the narrative and characters of *The Robber Bride* is the value judgements that the reader is drawn into, which are subsequently dismantled. We see that Zenia tells many versions of her life story. Occasional clues lead us to assume that most of her story telling is just that. Roz, Tony and Charis are initially very trusting of Zenia, and they appear to the reader to be naïve in their assessments of Zenia. The uncovering of some inconsistencies in Zenia's stories is therefore unsurprising. In fact, the way in which the character of Zenia is drawn tempts the reader to categorise her as beautiful, cunning, amoral and dishonest: just the type of description that is traditionally used for mermaids. Roz, Tony and Charis however, are drawn sympathetically, as victims of both difficult/abusive childhoods, and of Zenia. But, as we come to realise the truth of Tony's self-reflection:

Was she in any way like us?...Or, to put it the other way round: Are we in any way like her? (p. 470)

we realise the trap into which we have fallen. In distrusting Zenia's statements, we are also trusting the other female protagonists' statements regarding their childhoods. Crucially, the comments about Roz, Tony and Charis are just as liable to exaggeration or untruth as those about Zenia, since they are not reported by any 'objective' third-party (if there is such a thing!). We hear Zenia's stories only through the filter of the other women. On the last page of the text Tony comments:

Roz is telling a story. That's what they will do, increasingly in their lives: tell stories. Tonight their stories will be about Zenia. (p. 470)

Whilst Zenia is portrayed as a highly manipulative character, we must realise that, in damning Zenia, we are damning the other female characters, and women in general. In believing the recollections of the other women we are denying a voice to, not only Zenia, but to all other women. In distancing Zenia by categorising her as the 'other', we deny empowering aspects of our own characters. Bontatibus points out that:

Even though she plays an antagonistic role in the novel, Zenia allows the protagonists to become acquainted with values and aspects of their personalities that they preferred not to look at too closely.⁵⁹

The power of Zenia, and of the myths of mermaid and siren that she represents, can be seen in the recognition that the 'other' resides within the self. Zenia represents the 'other' in several respects. Firstly, she is the 'other woman' (the mistress) in a very traditional sense. The concept and behaviour of the 'mistress' has long been problematic for feminists:

"The Other Woman will soon be with *us*", the feminists used to say. But how long will it take, thinks Roz, and why hasn't it happened yet? (p. 392)

However, this thinking also labels such women as deviant, and supports the existing patriarchal order. It is not until Roz acknowledges the Zenia/the 'other' woman within herself that she can move beyond this thinking. Hulbert quotes Atwood in 'The Curse of Eve' (1978) when she says:

If I create a female character, I would like to be able to show her having the emotions all human beings have — hate, envy, spite, lust, anger and fear, as well as love, compassion, tolerance and joy — without having her pronounced a monster, a slur or a bad example.⁶⁰

Zenia also embodies much that is not male, so she is the 'other' to the men in the narrative. When the concept of the 'other' is deconstructed it can have a disorienting, even threatening effect on those who see their privileged position crumbling. Mitch maintains control of an 'imagined' privileged position by having affairs that keep Roz constantly focussed on him and his needs. Billy begins to behave like a small child when Charis asserts her right to have Zenia stay in Charis's house (the house is not Billy's) and puts Zenia's needs before Billy's. Maintaining the boundary between 'me' and the 'other' requires constant vigilance and can cause those who establish the boundary to overreact at the smallest sign of its being breached.

Zenia also represents the 'other' to the female protagonists, as she behaves in ways that they feel they cannot, due to constraints within their society. However, in each of these senses Zenia's behaviour deconstructs the sense of 'otherness'. Zenia contains a wide range of behaviours, some of which could be classified as traditionally 'feminine', and many that would not be so classified. Zenia is able to travel alone, and live on her wits, but she is also a clever cook and can recite many: "...recipes, shortcuts, wrinkles, and twists." (p. 161). She confides in, and sympathises with, each of the female protagonists, but she also turns against each one, and pours scorn on their virtues. Howells points to a key comment from Tony at the end of the narrative:

...although she [Zenja] was many other things, she was also courageous. What side she was on doesn't matter... (p. 469)

Howells reads this as being: "a recognition of the 'otherness' of Zenja, which cannot be accommodated within the parameters of the friends' stories."⁶¹

However, I would suggest that his use of the term 'otherness' should be interpreted as 'going beyond' rather than 'different from'. This comment from Tony indicates that she forgives Zenja her injuries because she recognises the quality of courage within her: a quality that Tony would like to acknowledge in herself.

2.3 Conclusion

In this chapter I have identified, through her appearance, behaviour, identification by the other character, and authorial intent, the ways in which Zenja in *The Robber Bride* retains characteristics of the mermaid or siren.

The underlying imperative for identifying particular women as mermaid or siren image types is connected strongly to the reasons for the origin of the myths and their use of metaphors in the Victorian era. This connection through history and across cultures is, I believe, only satisfactorily explained by reference to the early development of the child and its relationship to the mother. The mother functions as both the source of early nourishment and the principal source of frustration for the growing infant. As boys become conscious of their gender identity, and increasingly take the father as a role model, they grow to regard the mother, and finally all women, as the 'other', whilst at the same time desiring, but fearing, a return to a state where they are part of and completely dependent on the mother. This response to women is made more complex by the early memory (often not consciously recognised) of the mother as both good and bad. As young men begin to relate to women as sexual partners and as potential mothers of their children, the concept of a woman becomes polarised into a strong binary opposition. The mermaid myth contains all the elements of the forbidden desire of the mother, and the fear of the consuming female. By siting these emotions externally, men are able, at least temporarily, to control them. The result of women, however, is a further distance from men, and a further restriction of acceptable behaviour in an already patriarchal society.

This problematic early childhood development, and its consequent distorted view of women, has made the development of a secure identity a difficult road for many women. This is highlighted by the experiences of the female protagonists in *The Robber Bride*.

In *The Robber Bride*, Margaret Atwood has successfully deconstructed the mermaid/siren myth. In so doing she has 'challenged the mythic structures of patriarchy and invented ones more comfortable for women.'⁶²

However, if these myth fragments continue to exist because of a deep psychological need, then how successful can Atwood's strategy be in changing or disassembling these myths? Recognition of their existence, and the uncovering of the root causes of their continued use may indeed lead to a gradual shift in the behaviours and social constructions that predispose us to categorise women in false binary oppositions. At one point in the narrative Tony states:

In order to defeat Zenia she will have to become Zenia, at least enough to anticipate her next move. It would help if she knew what Zenia wanted. (p. 191)

We can reinterpret this statement in order to see more clearly the journey that Tony is undertaking: 'In order to accept Tony, she will have to accept the 'Zenia' aspects within herself, at least enough to survive in the world. It would help if she knew what Tony wanted.' The character of Zenia breaks open, in a forceful and vivid manner, the binary opposition that limits the possibilities for many women. Zenia may be 'writ larger than life', but she acts as a lens through which we can view the three friends with sharp focus. And, in doing so, we might also see that there is a small amount of a Zenia character in each of them. But even more than the suspicion that there is a Zenia tucked away in the corner of their personalities, she represents:

...everything they want most and everything they fear, for she represents their unfulfilled desires just as she represents their repressed pain-filled childhood selves.⁶³

- ¹ M. Atwood, 'Siren Song', in *Two-headed poems*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1978.
- ² As mentioned in the Introduction, writers including Kestner, Allen and Auerbach describe the use of references to mermaids and sirens.
- ³ M. Atwood, *The Robber Bride*, Virago Press, London, 1994, p. 33. Subsequent page numbers at the end of quotes refer to this text.
- ⁴ The significance of water is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4. J. Deery notes that, in *Robber Bride*, the women are depicted as very 'fluid' whereas the men "...are mostly perceived as solid, fixed, linear, sterling, predictable." See J. Deery, 'Science for feminists: Margaret Atwood's body of knowledge,' *Twentieth Century Literature*, Winter 1997, v43 n4, p. 473.
- ⁵ M. Warner, *Managing Monsters: Six Myths of Our Time*, Vintage, London, 1994, p. 5.
- ⁶ R. Ratcliff, *Scottish Folk Tales*, Frederick Muller Ltd, London, 1976, p. 127.
- ⁷ Ratcliff, p. 126.
- ⁸ Goldblatt also comments that "Atwood herself was fascinated by transformations in fairy stories..." See P. F. Goldblatt, 'Reconstructing Margaret Atwood's Protagonists', *World Literature Today*, Spring 99, Vol 73 Issue 2.
- ⁹ C. A. Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1995, p. 65.
- ¹⁰ J. Derrida, 'Différance', in *Margins of Philosophy* (trans. A. Bass), University of Chicago Press, 1982, reproduced in <http://www.hydra.umn.edu/derrida/diff.html> accessed 25/10/2002.
- ¹¹ J. Kristeva, 'Sabat Mater', in Moi, T. (ed) *The Kristeva Reader*, Basil Blackwell, London, 1986, p. 174. Irigaray (and Cixous to a lesser extent) also makes use of the water metaphor: see Devlin-Glass, F. & Comte, A. *Flying 'In Between'*, p. 132.
- ¹² J. Campbell, 'Mythical themes in creative literature and art', in Joseph Campbell (ed.), *Myths, Dreams and Religion*, Spring Publications, Texas, 1970, pp. 139-42.
- ¹³ Campbell, p. 141.
- ¹⁴ Campbell, p. 142.
- ¹⁵ F. Devlin-Glass & A. Comte, *Flying 'In Between'. Literature and Feminist Theory since 'Frankenstein'*, Deakin University, Geelong, Australia, 1997, p. 7.
- ¹⁶ Campbell, p. 144.
- ¹⁷ S. B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves. Women in Classical Antiquity*, Robert Hale & Company, London, 1975, pp 8-9.
- ¹⁸ J. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1968, p. 6.
- ¹⁹ Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p. 6.
- ²⁰ Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p. 111.
- ²¹ Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p. 177.
- ²² J. Lacan, *Écrits. A Selection*, Sheridan, A. (trans.), Tavistock, London, 1977, p. 312.
- ²³ E. Wright, *Psychoanalytic Criticism. Theory in Practice*, Methuen, London, 1984, p. 108.
- ²⁴ J. Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1974, pp. 396-7.
- ²⁵ T. Eagleton, *Literary Theory. An Introduction*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1996, p. 161.
- ²⁶ E. Grosz, *Sexual Subversions. Three French Feminists*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1989, p.22.
- ²⁷ Devlin-Glass & Comte, p. 134.
- ²⁸ G. Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1986, p.44.
- ²⁹ Lerner, p. 45.
- ³⁰ R. Berman, 'Sirens' in M. South (ed), *Mythical and Fabulous Creatures: A Source Book and Research Guide*, Bedrick, New York, 1988, p.149.
- ³¹ N. Hartsock, 'The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism', in S. Harding and M. B. Hintikka, eds, *Discovering Reality. Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and the Philosophy of Science*, D. Reidel Publishing Company, Boston, 1983, p. 295.
- ³² D. Spender, *Man Made Language*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1980, p. 2.
- ³³ Spender, p. 138.
- ³⁴ It is important to acknowledge at this point that there is no unified reality for women, since their experiences are influenced by many factors including class and race.
- ³⁵ Spender, p. 16.
- ³⁶ M. Bail, *Eucalyptus*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 1998, p. 46.
- ³⁷ Lerner, p. 24.
- ³⁸ Lerner, p. 40.
- ³⁹ Lerner, p. 59.
- ⁴⁰ Eagleton, pp. 114-5.

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- ⁴¹ H. Cixous, 'Sorties', in *New French Feminisms. An Anthology*, Marks, E. & de Courtivron, I. (eds) University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1980, p. 90.
- ⁴² Cixous, pp. 90-91.
- ⁴³ L. Irigaray, 'And the one doesn't stir without the other', *Signs*, 7:1, 1981, p. 67.
- ⁴⁴ Irigaray, p. 62.
- ⁴⁵ Moi, p. 105.
- ⁴⁶ M. Atwood, 'The Robber Bridegroom', in *Interlunar*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1984, p. 62.
- ⁴⁷ Spender, pp. 16-19.
- ⁴⁸ A. Walwicz, 'fairytale,' in S. Hawthorne (comp.), *Difference: Writings by Women*, Waterloo Press, Sydney, 1985, pp. 68-9.
- ⁴⁹ A. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, Penguin Books, London, 1989.
- ⁵⁰ J. C. Oates discusses this 're-visioning' of fairy tales by authors such as Atwood and Carter, in her article 'In olden times, when wishing was having...', *Kenyon Review*, Summer/Fall 97, Vol 19 Issue 3/4.
- ⁵¹ Hulbert writes that Atwood's text aims to force women to '...acknowledge that they choose, they are not forced, to be good or evil, subservient or independent in spirit...' See A. Hulbert, 'Seduction and betrayal – *The Robber Bride* by Margaret Atwood', *New Republic* v210 n1, Jan 3, 1994.
- ⁵² J. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1972, pp. 46-47.
- ⁵³ Moi, p. 105.
- ⁵⁴ H. Cixous, in *New French Feminisms. An Anthology*, E. Marks & I. De Courtivron (eds), The University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1980, pp. 90.
- ⁵⁵ H. Cixous, pp. 92-93.
- ⁵⁶ J. Wolff, *Women's Knowledge and Women's Art*, Griffith University, 1989, p. 2.
- ⁵⁷ C. A. Howells, p. 65.
- ⁵⁸ Howells, p. 77.
- ⁵⁹ D. Bontatibus, 'Reconnecting with the Past: Personal Hauntings in Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride*', *Papers on Language & Literature*, Fall 1998, p. 362.
- ⁶⁰ Hulbert, p. 37.
- ⁶¹ Howells, p. 79.
- ⁶² Devlin-Glass & Comte, p. 8.
- ⁶³ Howells, p. 81-82.

3 *Nights at the Circus* – Angela Carter

3.1 Survival of myth fragments

Fevvers, the most famous *aerialiste* of the day; her slogan, ‘Is she fact or is she fiction?’¹ (p. 7.)

It would be logical to think that once man moved beyond the primitive state of superstition that accompanied the rise of many early myths, he might abandon reference to creatures such as mermaids and sirens. Unlike Carl Jung, Roland Barthes would certainly see this as logical:

One can conceive of very ancient myths, but there are no eternal ones; for it is human history which conveys reality into speech, and it alone rules the life and death of mythical language.²

But we can trace a continual thread of images and textual references to mermaids and sirens through the centuries. For example, I have already mentioned in Chapter 1 that Bartholmaeus Anglicus wrote of sirens as ‘strong whores’ in his *De Proprietatibus Rerum* (c. 1470).³ Indeed, in the Victorian era fragments of the siren and mermaid myths came together in something of a revival of these myths. If, as Barthes asserts, there are no ‘eternal myths’, we must investigate the reasons for the existence of enduring fragments of these myths into the Victorian era and beyond, to the present day.

The revival of images associated with mermaids and sirens tells us much about male attitudes towards women. Kestner states that:

In the social discourse of nineteenth-century Britain, classicism and classical allusions constituted a code which was known thoroughly by the men who directed and guided social policy, and which was used to reinforce patriarchal privilege and authority.⁴

Women were seen as either sensuous and sinister, or submissive and unintelligent. Kestner explains that:

These polarities defined women’s nature for patriarchal society... The femme fatale in particular was disturbing because she exhibited beauty independent of morality, a separation that confuted the idea of women as the Angel of the House, the arbiter and guardian of familial morals.⁵

Hence, the *femme fatale* represented a threat to the existing social structure that benefited men.

Naomi Goldenberg supports Barthes’ earlier comment when she writes: ‘We must investigate how our human agency—conscious and unconscious—has created our myths, images, and psychic structures.’⁶ *Nights at the Circus*, a contemporary work of fiction, is set at the end of the Victorian era, and suggests much about how ‘human agency’ at that time, revived the myths of mermaid and siren, without the need for most of the population to believe that they were actual living creatures. It can also raise many questions about how fragments of these early myths persist to the present day, despite the changed historical position of women. *Nights at the Circus* is set at a time when some of the assumptions of that patriarchal society were beginning to be questioned. Even though Mary

Wollstonecraft wrote her now-famous paper *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* over a century prior to this, little had changed for women, in a practical sense, during that time. As Elizabeth Cady Stanton stated in 1888: ‘The true woman is as yet a dream of the future.’⁷ The character of Fevvers, in *Nights at the Circus*, is an ambiguous figure: in some senses she embodies this ‘true woman’, but she is (probably) only part-woman. In *Nights at the Circus*, Carter raises many questions, and in so doing, decentres the privileged masculinist discourse.

3.1.1 Descriptions of Fevvers’ appearance

Many male artists of Victorian times used sirens and mermaids as principal characters in their paintings. For example, Waterhouse’s *Ulysses and the Sirens* (1891) shows the figures of the Sirens:

...as figures with birds’ bodies, true evolutionary atavisms...The Sirens encircle him, several staring at him, one directly above his head; one Siren threatens a crew member in the foreground...By representing them as perching and hovering, Waterhouse emphasizes that these women are not only alluring but predatory. The fact that the Siren was so frequently a code word for prostitute during the period indicates that female sensuality was conceived of as beastly but natural for women.⁸

In Herbert Draper’s *Ulysses and the Sirens* (c. 1909) the sirens look remarkably like almost-naked women. These sirens have no wings or other bird-like features. They have the long hair traditionally associated with mermaids, but two of the three obviously have legs rather than tails. These females look like they are trying to seduce the sailors rather than peck them to death! The threat in any case appears to be as great, if we can gauge by the reaction of the sailors.

Armand Point’s *The Siren*, 1897,⁹ features a female creature who bears a passing but important resemblance to the sirens of ancient myth. The creature’s wings are dominant, but Point has replaced the bird-like body with a sensuous human’s one, and has included long flowing hair much like a mermaid. Indeed, this image is a representation of how, throughout various times in history, the mermaid and siren images were melded together. Point’s siren seems unlikely to be able to fly, with a body obviously too heavy for her wings.

If we place the image of Armand Point’s siren alongside an artist’s impression of Fevvers from *Nights at the Circus* we see a striking resemblance. If Zenia is associated with water, and is even described as a mermaid, Fevvers in *Nights at the Circus* is firmly associated with the bird-like sirens of ancient myth. However she, like the siren as imagined by Point, has a woman’s body rather than a bird’s. In the early part of the text Fevvers is associated strongly with the image of the angel, and there is much to suggest that she is more appropriately categorised as a siren. If we imagine angels to be softly spoken, light, gentle, and concerned with matters of the soul rather than the body, then Fevvers is far from angelic. Indeed, Angela Carter has constructed a character who is, in herself, a contradiction:

At close quarters, it must be said that she looked more like a dray mare than an angel. At six feet two in her stockings, she would have to give Walser a couple of inches in order to match him and, though they said she was ‘divinely tall’, there was, off-stage, not much of the divine about her unless there were gin palaces in heaven where she might preside behind the bar. Her face, broad and oval as a meat dish, had been thrown on a common wheel out of coarse clay... (p. 12)

Fevvers is not the only female character in *Nights at the Circus* whose appearance is worthy of note. Fevvers' companion/protector, Lizzie is also a character to be reckoned with, and is portrayed in a largely unflattering light:

Lizzie was a tiny, wizened, gnome-like apparition who might have been any age between thirty and fifty; snapping, black eyes, sallow skin, an incipient moustache on the upper lip and a close-cropped frizzle of tri-coloured hair... She had a brisk air of bristle, like a terrier bitch. There was ex-whore written all over her. (p. 13)

This description suggests that the life of a prostitute makes a woman hard, unattractive and unhealthy, even animal-like.

Nights at the Circus is a work of fiction that raises many issues concerning the human/animal border and the one that exists between men and women. It is one example of the narrative to which Lidia Curti refers:

Strange unfamiliar shapes, freakish bodies, disquieting forms and hybrid creatures have been creeping into women's narratives, putting in question the frontier between foulness and loveliness, the human and animal, me and you, female and male.¹⁰

Carter uses the part-human/part-animal character of Fevvers as a strategy to not only question frontiers, but to break them down. By constructing a character that 'slips' back and forwards between traditionally stable categories, Carter succeeds in deconstructing these categories and, by demonstrating their inadequacy, diminishes their power.

Throughout the text, Fevvers is described as being like a variety of animals. Not only does Fevvers look 'more like a dray mare', but we read that: 'Her exuberant hair was beginning to escape from Lizzie's hairpins and frolic here and there along her bullish nape' (p. 57). Fevvers is associated, however, not only with the gentler animals, such as dray mares:

Fevvers yawned with prodigious energy, opening up a crimson maw the size of that of a basking shark, taking in enough air to lift a Montgolfier... (p. 52)

We might stop to ponder whether a shark 'basks'. Carter successfully combines the dangerous with the placid, and we are left with a slight feeling of unease. A little earlier in the narrative Carter introduces a stronger element of potential menace, or at least unease, into the character of Fevvers: '...her white teeth are big and carnivorous as those of Red Riding Hood's grandmother.' (p. 18.) This description signals Carter's intention to disrupt the expected narrative conventions. In the original version of the fairy tale it is the wolf that has big and carnivorous teeth, not the grandmother. Therefore, in this reading, is the grandmother the victim, or the predator? Carter uses the same technique to subvert the expected function of the character of Fevvers in *Nights at the Circus*. Carter explores the question as to whether Fevvers is bird-woman or fake, victim or predator, angel or siren. To the extent that Fevvers is portrayed as being the exemplar of the 'new woman' living at the beginning of the new century ('And Fevvers has all the *éclat* of a new era about to take off. '), she can be seen to display some characteristics common to all women. Hence, we can use the character of Fevvers to explore the extent to which woman is viewed as being both angel and siren, sometimes simultaneously.

Early in the narrative, Walser ponders the logical difficulty inherent in a bird-woman such as Fevvers, who has both arms and wings:

But Walser whimsically reasoned with himself, thus: now, the wings of the birds are nothing more than the forelegs, or, we should say, the arms, and the skeleton of a wing does indeed show elbows, wrists and fingers, all complete. So, if this lovely lady is indeed, as her publicity alleges, a fabulous bird-woman, then she, by all the laws of evolution and human reason, ought to possess no arms at all, for it's her arms that ought to be her wings! (p. 15)

In this chapter we will begin to see similar logical difficulties inherent in viewing women as sirens.

3.1.2 Portrayal of Fevvers' behaviour

Fevvers lives in a different time period to Zenia from *The Robber Bride*, but displays many similarities to her: they are both brash, confident, unerringly attractive to men (and many women too), and mysterious. Both women tell stories of their early years that are difficult to believe, and both seem to survive and prosper against the odds (although Zenia does eventually die). Fevvers has the added advantage of being a curiosity, so she is also able to behave in a vulgar manner:

She gave him another queer look, as if she half hoped the spectacle of her gluttony would drive him away, but, since he remained, notebook on knee, pencil in hand, sitting on her sofa, she sighed, belched again, and continued... (p. 22)

She does display the occasional hints of being a seductress:

The blond guffawed uproariously, slapped the marbly thigh on which her wrap fell open and flashed a pair of vast, blue, indecorous eyes at the young reporter... (p. 7)

But Fevvers does not make much overt display of being a seductress. Fevvers' main motivations in life seem to be to make money, to eat well, and to be treated as someone of great importance. However, she does agree to the occasional 'seduction dinner', but only when lured by the promise of something valuable in return. Fevvers professes a certain honesty in her dealings with men:

"Besides, sir, I am an honest woman. And the poor bugger had put his cash down on the nail, hadn't he, even if I'd pocketed none of it so far." (p. 81)

She makes this comment about a man whose intentions were dubious to say the least. In this case, Fevvers' desire for honest dealings nearly cost her her life. In a similar fashion, Fevvers deals with another man who has no regard for her safety or well-being:

All the same, since fair is fair and he deserved *something* for going to so much trouble, she reached round behind her and unfastened the hooks and eyes at the back of her dress. (p. 191)

At a time when most women had restricted freedoms, and were 'given away' in marriage, from the father to the husband, Fevvers makes apt comment about the issue of autonomy and affection:

"But it is not possible that I should give myself," said Fevvers. Her diction was exceedingly precise. "My being, my me-ness, is unique and indivisible... But the essence of myself may not be given or taken, or what would there be left of me?" (pp. 260-281)

Through the character of Fevvers, Carter makes comment about not only the position of women in Victorian times, but also the still-present problem of women's position in our own society. Despite laws to protect the rights of women in the workplace and elsewhere, a large proportion of women are still 'given away' in marriage, dressed in the symbol of virginity (the white wedding dress), and dream of 'giving themselves' to a man. This collusion in a submissive role can, on the surface, be difficult to understand. But it points to a deep-seated and complex cause which cannot be changed by legislation or even advertising. In *Nights at the Circus* Lizzie makes an interesting observation about marriage:

"Marriage? Pah!" snapped Lizzie in a pet. "Out of the frying pan into the fire! What is marriage but prostitution to one man instead of many? No different!" (p. 21)

Lizzie reminds us that, at least in Victorian times, the dependent role of married women can be seen as being little different in principle from that of prostitutes. However, a married woman was seen as being respectable, and was regarded as maintaining her honour. Carter also makes comment about the interesting issue of 'honour'. The meaning of honour differs from a man to a woman. A man's word is his honour, but a woman's purity is her honour. Fevvers questions this assumption:

"Wherein does a woman's honour reside, old chap? In her vagina or in her spirit?" (p. 230)

Fevvers questions the sets of assumptions by which society operates, and to ponder why women must operate by different rules from men.

3.1.3 Other characters' perceptions of Fevvers

Despite Fevver's appearance and behaviour, she was a prodigious source of attraction:

...Parisians shot themselves in droves for her sake...In Vienna, she deformed the dreams of that entire generation who would immediately commit themselves wholeheartedly to psychoanalysis. Everywhere she went, rivers parted for her, wars were threatened, suns eclipsed, showers of frogs and footwear were reported in the press... (p. 11)

With large wings, it is not surprising that Fevvers is associated in other characters' minds with various mythical beasts. Rosencreutz, one of the assortment of strange men in the text, refers to her thus:

"Welcome, Azrael," he says. "Azrael, Azrail, Ashriel, Azriel, Azaril, Gabriel; dark angel of many names. Welcome to me, from your home in the third heaven. See, I welcome you with roses no less paradoxically vernal than your presence, who, like Proserpine, comes from the Land of the Dead to herald new life!" (p. 75)

He regards Fevvers as a threat, as an evil creature, despite having no evidence to support this conclusion. Rosencreutz has convinced himself that by having sex with Fevvers, and then killing her, he will attain eternal life. Her passing resemblance to some mythical creatures almost results in her death. Fevvers is repeatedly treated as a creature, an object, with no rights. This extreme example makes the point that women's passing resemblance to a variety of evil mythical women also affects the ways in which they were and are treated.

Even in his demented state, Rosencreutz serves to express an extreme view of the difficulty in which every woman finds herself:

Queen of ambiguities, goddess of in-between states, being on the borderline of species, manifestation of Arioriph, Venus, Achamatoth, Sophia...Lady of the hub of the celestial wheel, creature half of earth and half of air, virgin and whore, reconciler of fundament and firmament, reconciler of opposing states through the mediation of your ambivalent body, reconciler of the grand opposites of death and life, you who come to me neither naked or clothed, wait with me for the hour when it is neither dark nor light, that of dawn before daybreak, when you shall give yourself to me but I shall not possess you. (p. 81)

As not-male, woman is in effect viewed as being 'on the borderline of species'. Gallagher and Laqueur have edited a collection of essays that discuss the ways in which women are viewed as being equated with the body and somehow closer to nature than men.¹¹ By seeking to define themselves as entirely opposite to women, men have claimed closeness to the 'superior' spiritual or mental arena and assigned women to the 'inferior' bodily arena, shared with the animals. This separateness from women must be patrolled vigilantly, lest men realise that they and women are alike, and they risk the feared reabsorption into the mother's body. Women are seen as occupying a marginal position in patriarchal society. Kristeva regards women as occupying a position on the borderline of the symbolic order. She states:

Women seen as the limit of the symbolic order will in other words share in the disconcerting properties of *all* frontiers: they will be neither inside nor outside, neither known or unknown. It is this position that has enabled male culture sometimes to vilify women as representing darkness and chaos, to view them as Lilith or the Whore of Babylon, and sometimes to elevate them as Virgins or Mothers of God. In the first instance the borderline is seen as part of the chaotic wilderness outside, and in the second it is seen as an inherent part of the inside: the part that protects and shields the symbolic order from the imaginary chaos.¹²

To stray beyond the border of the symbolic order (to associate too closely with woman) risks loss of identity for the male. This male fear of loss of identity has resulted in women being associated with death as well as life. It is this association that encourages Rosencreutz to see Azrael, the Angel of Death, as a female and not a male. Rosencreutz persuades himself that Fevvers is actually Azrael:

...the bright angel who will release him from the bonds of the material, the winged spirit of universal springtime...by uniting his body with that of Azrael, the Angel of Death, on the threshold of spring, he would cheat death itself and live forever... (p. 79)

3.1.4 Basis of attraction

Music

In the original siren story, the beasts (or half-beasts), the Sirens, use their voices to control and enslave men. Although the early versions of the story have the Sirens promising vast knowledge through their song, 'Over all the generous earth we know everything that happens'¹³, later references more commonly concentrate on the seduction of the song itself rather than of the knowledge it promises to relate:

The Sirens had voices of such sweetness that mariners who heard their songs were lured onto the rocks on which the nymphs sang.¹⁴

In *Nights at the Circus*, it is women who use music to lure, control or enslave both men and beasts. In most cases in the text, it is women who are associated with music.

Walser's eyes prickled and that vertiginous sensation he by now associated with the presence of the *aerialiste* overwhelmed him, although he knew, this time, the music was as much to blame as she. (p. 162)

We are aware that music exerts a powerful influence over humans and, reputedly, some animals.¹⁵ Certainly, the tigers in *Nights at the Circus* are controlled by a combination of the Princess' gestures and her music.

Fevvers performs to the accompaniment of 'The Ride of the Valkyries', but she is also associated with 'Only a bird in a gilded cage'. The use of these two pieces of music highlights the way in which Fevvers is both the captive, passive female, and the assertive, siren-like 'new woman'. In the use of these analogies Fevvers can be seen to exemplify the difficult dual roles that women at the end of the Victorian era, and even today, are assigned. In viewing women as either mother figure or mistress, society does not allow women the room to exercise their natural freedom. Fevvers is either the flying stage performer, with dyed wing feathers and hair, pursued by greedy powerful men, or an ungainly creature on the ground, with broken wing, out of her natural element.

Like the early Sirens, Fevvers succeeds in luring Walser with her voice:

Her voice. It was as if Walser had become a prisoner of her voice, her cavernous, sombre voice, a voice made for shouting about the tempest, her voice of a celestial fishwife. Musical as it strangely was, yet not a voice for singing with; it contained discords, her scale contained twelve tones. Her voice, with its warped, homely, cockney vowels and random aspirates. Her dark, rusty, dipping, swooping voice, imperious as a siren's. (p. 43)

The miserable Mignon is used as a punching bag by various men, until she meets up with Walser and Fevvers. Mignon's singing also has a marked effect on the characters in the text:

All three who listened felt the hairs rise on the napes of their necks, as if that voice were something uncanny, its possessor either herself a sorceress or under some spell. (p. 132)

The irony of Mignon's singing is that, unlike the sirens, who were all too aware of what they sang or told, Mignon is completely unaware of the meaning of the songs that she sings (p. 132). Later in the narrative, Walser sings snatches of her songs, and is similarly unaware of the meaning of the words, although Walser is in a worse confusion than Mignon: his loss of memory means that he can understand the individual words that he sings, but not their meaning.

The keeper of the cats, the Princess, does not speak, but she plays the piano, and uses music to charm the tigers:

...early in her career, she discovered how they grumbled at the back of their throats and laid their ears flat when she used that medium of human speech which nature denied them. (p. 149)

The Princess and Mignon form an attraction for each other through the medium of their shared love of music and find that they do not need speech to communicate their love.

3.1.5 Relationships between animals and humans

Fevvers is portrayed as part-human, part-animal, and this allows Carter to raise issues related both to the ways in which women are commonly regarded and treated as less than fully human, and the extent to which all humans have a commonality with animals. The relationship between the Princess and the tigers is portrayed as being of a complex and fluid nature:

[the princess]...played the piano and the tigers danced...Then, for just one unprotected minute, they pondered the mystery of their obedience and were astonished by it. (p. 148)

Although seemingly in control of the animals, and experiencing great empathy with them, the Princess also understands the tenuous nature of her influence. As she plays the piano with her back to the beasts, she: ‘...felt a little scared, and, perhaps, more fully human than she was used to feeling.’ (p. 149.) These quotations show both the connection between the woman and the animals, and also the gulf of distrust that remains between the two species.

But, by assigning some human characteristics to the animals in *Nights at the Circus*, Carter also opens up the question of how far the reverse holds true: to what extent does the animal still survive within the human?

Once the paying customer successfully negotiated the ticket window, one left one’s furs in a cloakroom that, during performance, became a treasury of skins of sable, fox and precious little rats, as though there one left behind the skin of one’s own beastliness so as not to embarrass the beasts with it. (p. 105)

In portraying women as being associated with animals, Carter is commenting on a long-standing tradition. In the male-female binary oppositions, women are associated with nature rather than culture. It is the women in *Nights at the Circus* who train the tigers. Patriarchal societies have long regarded nature as something to be conquered and tamed. Hence the association of women with nature (including animals) fits neatly with man’s desire to control and dominate women.

Sherry Ortner has argued that:

...in every known society women are identified as being closer to nature than to culture. Since every culture devalues nature as it strives to rise above it through mastery, women become symbolic of an inferior, intermediate order of being.¹⁶

Even though, Gerda Lerner notes that acceptance of this view can also lead one to accept the universality of female subordination in the meaning systems of society,¹⁷ we can only hope that the wisdom of embracing nature alongside culture will be further accepted, and will lead to more equality of women in those same, but revised, meaning systems.

As Eagleton points out:

...perhaps what is outside is also somehow inside, what is alien also intimate — so that man needs to police the absolute frontier between the two realms as vigilantly as

he does just because it may always be transgressed, has always been transgressed already, and is much less absolute than it appears.¹⁸

The concept of binary oppositions can be seen as a logical extension of this need to maintain a frontier between what is male and what is 'not male'. As noted in Chapter 1, Cixous discusses the way in which all the binary oppositions can be reduced to the pair male/female, with a hierarchy in which the male is always privileged.¹⁹ Hence, when man assigns himself an association with culture, and assigns to woman an association with nature, both nature and woman become negative values. This process can be seen even more clearly when woman is associated with animal, becoming part animal, and in the process, more dangerous, less intelligent, less-than-equal. This process demonstrates an almost hysterical response of one group to delineate and control the other group.

When the concept of the 'other' is deconstructed it can have a disorienting, even threatening effect on those who see their privileged position crumbling. The idea that Fevvers is, possibly, part animal rather than merely 'like' an animal, makes her both more desirable and more dangerous. We see evidence of this in the outrageous responses of men such as Mr Rosencreutz and the Grand Duke. They both go to great lengths to possess her, and to take away her powers and freedom (and life, in one case).

Certainly, Rosencreutz seems to be an example of someone who seeks to control the threat of corruption in himself by locating its cause in the other. Schaffer's point about locating that which is undesirable or repellent in the other also has some application in the manner that patriarchal Victorian society treated its women.²⁰ The two categories of whore and virgin/mother served different but equally important purposes. The whore became the location for all the extreme sexual, moral and physical corruption that society deemed to be undesirable in both men and women. The virgin/mother however, became the repository of purity, chastity and moral virtue that society deemed desirable. But it was very difficult, and probably less fun, for most men to live out these virtues in their daily lives. In practice, the allocation of these two extremes allowed men to take the middle ground and be both good and a little bad in moderation as circumstances dictated. Both could be satisfactorily connected with any animal instincts, including bearing offspring, so that men could continue to be more closely associated with the spirit and the mind.

Luce Irigaray has written at length on the subject of binary oppositions and on how this operates to the disadvantage of women. Margaret Whitford explains that Irigaray uses the notion of the 'double syntax' to explain the way in which men have allotted 'nature' to women, allowing men to transcend nature. The double syntax is:

...the idea that there is a logic or syntax, the logic of the unconscious, which is quite other than the Greek *logos* or rationality.²¹

Because of the operation of the double syntax:

...the unwanted or transcended functions have been subject to cultural repression and splitting; they are, in a certain sense, unconscious.²²

Irigaray writes that man experiences 'love of sameness', and that:

Love of sameness is transformed, transmuted into an architecture of world or worlds, into a system of symbolic and mercantile exchanges... Instead of germination, birth, and growth... man substitutes the instrument and the product. Harvests become a mere outcome of agriculture, as products do of industry. Man cultivates nature and manages its conservation, but often at the price of birth and growth. The cultivation of nature becomes exploitation, which risks destroying the vitality of the soil and the fertility of the great cosmic rhythms. This is the danger we incur when we forget what we have received from the body, our debt toward that which gives and renews life.²³

Whitford explains that:

It is significant that Irigaray stresses that nature (the natural world) is not respected. This is not simply a version of ecofeminism (though it is that too), but part of her argument about the symbolic distribution, and the allocation of the 'lower functions' to women. The symbolic distribution is hierarchical. What is being disrespected is those parts of himself that the male imaginary has split off and projected – into the world, on to women.²⁴

One of these parts is the part that is still closely related to the animal world.

In *Nights at the Circus*, the line between human and animal instincts, and even between humans and animals, is blurred. Some of the people behave like animals, and some of the animals behave, or are treated more like people. Sybil the pig is treated far better than most of the employees of the Colonel. She is claimed to have special powers:

This lucky one, the very good friend of the great impresario, was particularly accomplished; she could spell out your fate and fortune with the aid of the alphabet written out in cards – yes indeed! could truffle the future out of four-and-twenty Roman capitals if they were laid out in order before her and that wasn't the half of her talents. (p. 98)

The Colonel has such affection for the pig that, when her life is threatened due to lack of other food he, almost seriously, offers to be eaten in her place (p. 248).

It is the chimps, however, that come closest to confusing the distinction between humans and animals. Monsieur Lamarck's Educated Apes are portrayed as being more intelligent than their owner:

The chimps put themselves through their own paces; the trainer's woman was no more than their keeper and Monsieur Lamarck, a feckless drunkard, left them to rehearse on their own. (p. 107)

The chimps are portrayed as being every bit as clever at acting as the clowns. They have two sets of behaviours: one for their audience, the humans, and the other for each other. Walser observes this difference when the chimps are supposedly rehearsing their classroom act: "Walser...knew he had stumbled on a secret when the lesson immediately stopped." (p. 108). When the chimps realised they were being observed they changed back into the animals 'aping' humans. But the chimps did not appreciate being spied on and persuaded Walser to wear the dunce's hat. This action is one example of the way in which they are shown as being rational beings. Walser has some inkling of the significance of their actions:

Walser never forgot this first, intimate exchange with one of these beings whose life ran parallel to his, this inhabitant of the magic circle of difference, unreachable...but not unknowable; this exchange with the speaking eyes of the dumb. It was like the clearing of a haze. (p. 108)

This comment acts to highlight the manner in which Walser shortly after, and then much later, acts more like an animal than a human. Immediately after this episode, the escaped tiger stalks first Sybil, then Mignon, and Walser attacks the tiger in a spontaneous and entirely irrational manner. Later in the text, when Walser loses his memory after the train derailment, he lives in a mental haze, almost like an animal, with a Russian tribe. Carter's characterisation of the chimps and of Walser makes explicit the issue of the animal in the human. Walser's reaction to the attentions of the leader of the chimps, the Professor, points directly to the issue:

After that, he stared directly into Walser's eyes, producing afresh in Walser that dizzy uncertainty about what was human and what was not. (p. 110)

These references serve to sensitise us to the dilemma of the classification of Fevvers. Is she a woman pretending to be half-bird, or a freak of nature? It is as if the animal-like part that lies within all humans has manifested itself in Fevvers, and is on the outside rather than hiding within. And, having her animal nature showing, she attracts the, often unwholesome, attentions of a variety of men who are fascinated by this combination of woman and animal.

3.2 Meaning and purpose

3.2.1 What function do these fragments of myths serve?

It is very easy to lose stories. In order to survive and to become embedded in the language, stories and myths must retain a relevance to the culture over an extended period of time. The continued existence of fragments, or echoes, of the siren and mermaid myths owes much to the continuing patriarchal structures of western society. On one level, men can be seen to benefit by categorising women as either whores or virgins/mothers. By reducing women to narrow categories, they can be viewed as less complicated or less sophisticated. The process of labelling some women as sirens and mermaids (i.e. whores) enables men to assign the less desirable parts of themselves to the 'other'. The association of women with animals strengthens the association of women with the, less valued, body rather than the mind.

In 1838, John Mitchell Kemble denounced the Custody of Infants Bill, in the process denominating women as 'she-beasts' (Bauer, *Free and Ennobled* 241).²⁵

Animals are so much easier to disregard, and even mistreat, than people. If women are closer to animals than are men, then it could be argued that they have lesser rights. In privileging mind/spirit over body, men in effect place themselves in a superior position. And since the gods of our contemporary western religions also privilege mind over body, this places men (unsurprisingly) closer to their God.

The need to move away from the body, and its natural inclinations, became an obsession in Victorian times that was, literally, pursued with religious zeal:

"...the 'woman' of Eden loses her identity in the syren of the streets; the minister of heaven gives place to the accomplice of hell."²⁶

But the vitriol of the rhetoric belied the motivation behind it. This is aptly expressed by Fevvers, referring to the French poet Baudelaire, a regular visitor to brothels:

“The French poet, sir; a poor fellow who loved whores not for the pleasure of it but, as he perceived it, the *horror* of it, as if we was, not working women doing it for money but *damned souls* who did it solely to lure men to their dooms, as if we’d got nothing better to do...” (p. 38)

Women who were labelled as ‘good’ were coerced into appropriate behaviours, partially through fear of ‘falling’ into the life of the whore. Once fallen, and hence losing her virtue, a woman could never regain it. We see an example of this in the character from *Nights at the Circus* called ‘the wonder’. Fevvers explains her fate after she had run off with the seven dwarfs:

So you see how this lovely creature truly believed herself to have tumbled so far from grace that she could never climb out of the Abyss, and she regarded her pretty, spotless self with the utmost detestation. Nothing I could say would make her feel she was worth more than a farthing in the world’s exchange. p. 68.

Men had become so convinced that women were essentially different, that they viewed them with increasing horror as well as contempt. As the sexual desire for women grew stronger, the response of horror and fear increased proportionally. The dwarfs abandoned ‘the wonder’ once they had tired of abusing her. Now that she was ‘tainted’ they felt no compulsion to treat her humanely, leaving her penniless in a strange city. We may experience some revulsion when considering the manner in which ‘the wonder’ is treated by the seven dwarfs because of the obvious intertextual reference. The Disney version of *Snow White* featured kindly asexual dwarfs and a pretty young woman who remained a virgin. Carter uses the image of ‘the wonder’ to reinforce the point that the categorisation of women has a universality, and that the media has the ability to sanitise the more unpleasant aspects of society, and to create myths that perpetuate the categorisation of women.

3.2.2 The monstrous feminine in *Nights at the Circus*

Marina Warner begins her text *Managing Monsters: Six Myths of Our Time*, with a poem by Suniti Namjoshi, which points to us all being part of the monster:

And all the little monsters said in a chorus:
You must kiss us...

Because, they said, cheering up.
You might as well. You are part of us.²⁷

In reading this poem I am reminded of the fact that, in denigrating women, men can sometimes forget that they are part of women, and vice versa. The concept of the ‘monstrous feminine’ has been widely discussed in feminist texts over the past couple of decades.²⁸ Marina Warner discusses the prevalence of the ‘deadly female predator’ in contemporary literature, and notes that in all cases:

All such she-monsters must in one way or another be despatched by the plot – or by the hero – as securely as any mythological dragon or monster of classical myth – preferable before they’ve perpetuated themselves.²⁹

Certainly, Zenia in *The Robber Bride* is ‘despatched’, but Fevvers is even nearer to the traditional image of the female monster, and she survives numerous mishaps to finally ‘mate’ with the hero (we do not find out whether she also procreates). Not only does Fevvers manage to survive, but she does not need to be rescued at any stage by the male hero – quite the reverse – Fevvers saves Walser.

This female character, who is clearly ‘coded nature’ whilst the male is ‘coded male’ does, however, use both her animal powers to escape danger:

“Before he’d gathered his wits together, I was off and out of that open casement like greased lightning, I can tell you, although it was a tight squeeze and I left enough feathers to stuff a mattress caught on the frame.” (p. 83)

and her female skills to survive:

He dragged his feet, growing so blissful he scarcely noticed her open the case with her free hand. (p. 191)

Despite Fevvers’ obvious intelligence, she is still treated as a she-monster by most of the men in the text, who attempt to imprison or closely control her in various ways. Marina Warner comments that this behaviour is not new:

The idea of a female, untamed nature which must be leashed, or else will wreak havoc, closely reflects anthropocentric and mythological encounters with monsters...³⁰

This tendency to regard women as monsters can be seen as a symptom of what Bakhtin terms the ‘classical body’ versus the ‘grotesque’ body. Janet Wolff asserts that:

In the civilizing process, the body is increasingly patrolled, the range of acceptable behaviour increasingly carefully and narrowly defined...the classical body has no orifices and engages in no base bodily functions.³¹

Bakhtin’s distinction of the grotesque body, with orifices everywhere, is reminiscent of Sartre’s description of the female sex: “the obscenity...of everything which gapes open.”³² Rosencreutz refers to:

...the female part, or absence, or atrocious hole, or dreadful chasm, the Abyss, Down Below, the vortex that sucks everything dreadfully down, down, down where Terror rules... (p. 77)

The fear that Rosencreutz feels of the female vagina may be associated with the fear, and desire, of returning to the womb. As discussed earlier, the comfort and security that may come from returning to a state of total dependency is also connected with a fear of losing autonomy, and being ‘sucked down’ into the unknown. This vague fear to being lost in a vortex often becomes more focussed and is translated into fear and aggression towards the female as the agent that limits and strangles the male potency and ambition. Fevvers alludes to this in her description of the decoration on Rosencreutz’s medallion:

“So *that* was the signification of his gold medallion! The penis, represented by itself, aspires upwards, represented by the wings, but is dragged downwards, represented by the twining stem, by the female part, represented by the rose...” (p. 77)

As is so often the case, it is the fear, rather than the actual object of supposed threat that does the damage. Rosencreutz seems to live in a highly stressed state of desire and fear that he finds almost impossible to hide:

“He’s so appalled himself at the notion of the orifice that the poor old sod mumbles and whimpers himself to a halt, though he’s no stranger to the Abyss, himself, used to come every Sunday, just to convince himself it was as ‘orrible as he’s always thought.” (p. 77)

As a character in the text, Rosencreutz exaggerates the tendency in many men to both desire and fear women. These feelings can be traced back to the reactions of the young child to the mother who both provides sustenance and protection, but also restricts and punishes. As we have seen in the earlier chapter on *The Robber Bride*, these ambivalent feelings can result in damaged relationships between men and women in adult life. Both Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray place at least some of the blame for this on society's tendency to define women in terms of their maternal function. Janet Wolff comments that, in Kristeva's psychoanalytic account:

...the maternal body is the object of horror, a feeling based in the fear of reincorporation into the mother, as well as in the fear of the mother's generative power. In becoming a subject, with defined boundaries, the child is separating from the body of the mother. As a result the maternal body becomes 'abject' – an object of horror and threat. Although Kristeva does not discuss this as a specifically gendered process, other recent work in psychoanalytic theory suggests that it is particularly the *male* child who confronts the trauma of separation, and who retains into adulthood the fear of reincorporation (and, hence, the loss of masculinity and self). This psychic process, undergone in a culture where it is women who do the mothering, explains the barely concealed level of violent fantasy men often manifest against women, the well-known construction of the virgin/whore dichotomy which counterposes the 'pure' woman (the classical body?) to the slut (the grotesque?).³³

Even in ancient times this ambiguity of men's relations to women also existed. Ulysses can be cited as an example of this behaviour. Robert Graves alludes to this in his poem 'Ulysses':

To the much-tossed Ulysses, never done
With woman whether gowned as wife or whore,
Penelope and Circe seemed as one...
Their counter-changings terrified his way...
Now angry storms frosting the sea with spray
And now the lotus island's drunken ease.³⁴

Ruth Berman asserts that Graves 'portrayed the sirens as projections of one aspect of Ulysses' fear of and desire for any woman.'³⁵

Kelly Oliver offers an explanation for this damaging behaviour:

Kristeva describes a phase in which the child must abject its mother in order to separate from her. Actually, what the child must abject is the 'maternal container.' It does not need to abject its mother's body as the body of a woman. It does not need to abject its mother herself as a person. Rather, it needs to abject the maternal container upon which it has been dependent in order to be weaned from the mother. In our culture, however, since the maternal function is not separated from our representations of women or the feminine, women themselves have become abjected within our society.³⁶

Luce Irigaray also discusses the problem of women being associated with the maternal:

You look at yourself in the mirror? And already you see your own mother there. And soon your daughter, a mother. Between the two, what are you? What space is yours alone?³⁷

The result of women being associated with the maternal is that, in rejecting the maternal, man rejects women in general. In fearing the maternal, fearing reincorporation into the maternal container, man fears woman. Woman becomes dangerous, but also desirable.

Barbara Creed comments on the fact that the monstrous-feminine is always constructed as an abject figure. She states that:

The monstrous-feminine draws attention to the 'frailty of the symbolic order' through her evocation of the natural, animal order and its terrifying associations with the passage all human beings must inevitably take from birth through life to death.³⁸

Women, in being associated with birth and with nature, are also associated with death, both in a general sense, and through their all-powerful role in the survival of the young infant. Women are seen as dangerous because they hold this power.

The notion of the 'dangerous woman' reaches almost a crescendo in the nineteenth century with the Hawthorne character of Beatrice in *Rappaccini's Daughter*. In a garden that the hero, Giovanni, likens to a present world Eden, Beatrice gathers strange flowers, and Giovanni falls in love with her. However, the reptile that appears in the garden is a harmless lizard, and it is the plant that exudes poisonous liquid, killing the lizard. It seems that Hawthorne developed his story of *Rappaccini's Daughter* from an earlier reference by Sir Thomas Browne, written in 1646, of an Indian woman who had been nourished since birth on poisons, so that she became the deadliest poison in existence.³⁹ Giovanni is warned about Beatrice, but by then he is already affected by the poison, and becomes poisonous himself. Giovanni is not content to live with Beatrice in their 'poisonous' state, and suggests that they both drink an antidote that he has procured. Beatrice gladly drinks the antidote, which kills her.

In this tale, Beatrice is made dangerous by her father, and obediently stays within the bounds of the enclosed garden, tending her father's poisonous plants. Her self-sacrificing behaviour not only includes devoting her life to her father's whim, but to sacrificing her life to the wish of her beloved, partly from desire and partly from guilt at being the cause of poisoned state. She is well aware that the antidote will kill her, hence her comment: 'I will drink; but do not await the result.'⁴⁰ Thus Beatrice embodies the dual characteristics of the mermaid: the dangerous and the self-sacrificing female. But in Beatrice, as in many such characterisations of women, the evil was not in her original nature, but was forced upon her. Beatrice's behaviour was never consciously evil: in fact, she actively attempted to shield Giovanni from the danger in the garden. As Beatrice is dying, she seems to realise where the blame for the ending lies, when she says to Giovanni: 'Oh, was there not, from the first, more poison in thy nature than in mine?'⁴¹

Beatrice was confined to an enclosed garden because she was dangerous. Women have had their freedom restricted in a myriad of ways. Carter alludes to this practice through repeated reference to the concept of the 'bird in a gilded cage'. Fevvers almost loses her freedom to the Grand Duke in the miniature gilded cage he has made to house her. Another of the Grand Duke's jewelled eggs even contains a bird that sings 'Only a bird in a gilded cage'. The Grand Duke, like many other men in the narrative, seeks to possess Fevvers and keep her imprisoned. Fevvers is viewed as a woman, but also a curiosity. She is 'the other' to the men in the narrative, both in terms of her gender and because she may well

be part animal. The response of many of the men in *Nights at the Circus* (the Grand Duke, the Colonel and Rosencreutz) to Fevvers is to possess and control that which they do not understand, that which is 'not-me'. Part of the impetus for this behaviour is the desire to understand what makes Fevvers different, but in pursuing this understanding they risk damaging that which they attempt to study. Fevvers represents a threat to these men because she has an element of mystery and uncertainty about her, combined with power and confidence.

The Victorian era was dangerous for women, and the carnival provided an opportunity for women who were on the edges of society to seek a, possibly, tenuous refuge. Carter comments on the precarious position of women in those times:

There were many reasons, most of them good ones, why a woman should want to murder her husband; homicide might be the only way for her to preserve a shred of dignity at a time, in a place, where women were deemed chattels, or, in the famous analogy of Tolstoy, like wine bottles that might conveniently be smashed when their contents were consumed. (pp. 201-211)

The *femme fatale* usually contained much 'otherness', not only in term of the obvious gender differences. Virginia Allen notes that:

...for the French...she was frequently oriental; for many others, she was an amalgam of ancient classic and later central European folklore, as in Lamia, Siren, vampire. English writers also drew on these sources, but for them, even when a *femme fatale* was not clearly intended, a dangerous woman was often automatically understood to be at least partly French. Becky Sharp is a prime example.⁴²

A number of the characters in *Vanity Fair* use language to refer to Becky Sharp as a serpent. Miss Pinkerton, her headmistress concluded: "I have nourished a viper in my bosom."⁴³ whilst Miss Crawley later states: "It is that little serpent of a governess who rules him."⁴⁴ Whilst these can be regarded as biblical expressions, they also provide evidence that Becky is seen as animal-like, predatory, and without the morals of genteel women.

The author tells us near the end of the narrative:

In describing this syren, singing and smiling, coaxing and cajoling, the author, with modest pride, asks his readers all round, has he once forgotten the laws of politeness, and showed the monster's hideous tail above water?... Those who like may peep down under waves that are pretty transparent, and see it writhing and twirling, diabolically hideous and slimy, flapping amongst bone, or curling round corpses.⁴⁵

Auerbach makes the point, however, that characters such as Becky Sharp:

...forge lives in full realization of their humiliating dependency. Perhaps it is this social self-knowledge that makes these heroines demons, for that, in Thackeray's terms, is what they are...His stock euphemism of 'demon' is 'siren' or 'mermaid'.⁴⁶

Certainly, Becky is aware of her dependency. Even at her most influential, she is still dependent on one or other male in the narrative. We are shown the alternative, the long-suffering Amelia, who loses her husband, and gives away her son 'for his own good'. Both women are dependent on the men in their lives, but Becky uses the full extent of her power and influence to make her way, whereas Amelia accepts what life throws at her with relative silence and passivity. Whatever we may think of Becky Sharp's morality, we can at least identify with

her need for self-determination. Such self-determination was not well accepted in Victorian times. Auerbach believes that, in Victorian iconography, the ambiguous nature of the mermaid as creature, typifies ‘...the mysterious, broadly and evocatively demonic powers of womanhood in general.’⁴⁷ In *Vanity Fair*, the men generally desire Becky, but they are also somewhat suspicious of her and quick to denounce when they cannot control. Most of the women in the narrative disapprove of Becky, largely because she dares to do what they feel they cannot. It is interesting to note the way in which Thackeray creates the character of Becky as the bad mother, in classic femme fatale mould.

Nights at the Circus is set at the turn of the century, at the end of the Victorian era. This was an era in which freaks of all kinds were common objects of entertainment. Phillipotts refers to instances of supposed mermaids being displayed in circuses and museums.⁴⁸ At that time, it was a popular past-time to speculate on whether the freak was fact or fiction. Existing alongside these freaks, women were also rigidly categorised as either ‘ladies’ (virgins or mothers/wives) or ‘whores’. It was possible to move from being a lady to a whore, but not the reverse.

The character of Fevvers puts into question these rigid categories that determined women’s destiny. Judith Butler points out that ‘...those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished.’⁴⁹ Women who live under extremist Islamic states exist only by following very strict rules which regulate how they ‘do their gender’. But a more subtle example can be seen at any school social function where the inability or refusal to perform in strictly prescribed ways results in a girl being ostracised from her social group. The social punishment can be almost as painful as a beating, and may leave as many scars.

The situation where females perform their gender not only results in restrictions in contemporary society. Butler comments that the feminist impulse:

...has often emerged in the recognition that my pain or my silence or my anger or my perception is finally not mine alone, and that it delimits me in a shared cultural situation which in turn enables and empowers me in certain unanticipated ways.⁵⁰

The effect of Fevvers’, however, is somewhat revolutionary because Carter has not only allowed for the expansion of the category ‘woman’ in her portrayal of Fevvers, but has also retained a recognisable core of humanity that both women and men can recognise and embrace. It is this recognition of common feelings and foibles that empowers us all, rather than some special handshake or sexist joke.

3.2.3 How does the portrayal of these images serve to deconstruct the patriarchal view of women?

“Lor’ love you, sir!” Fevvers sang out in a voice that clanged like dustbin lids. (p. 7)

Fevvers’ loud voice and ponderous size is firmly at odds with the accepted view of the ‘classical’ body. Janet Wolff points out that:

The classical ballet has colluded in the preservation of the classical body, emphasizing in its commitment to line, weightlessness, lift, and extension an ethereal presence rather than a real corporality.⁵¹

Fevvers, who performs a type of ballet in mid-air, is far from the image of the classical ballerina:

God, she looked *huge*. Her crimson, purple wings, in flight, obscured the roof-tree of the Imperial Circus. (p. 159)

Early in the narrative Walser ponders the difficulty of being Fevvers, the monstrous:

For, in order to earn a living, might not a genuine bird-woman – in the implausible event that such a thing existed – have to pretend she was an artificial one? (p. 17)

Fevvers' saving grace is not her size or unclassical proportions, but her status as part-bird. We are reminded that, if she were a woman, without the wings, she would fit into neither the trapeze tent nor the freak's sideshow. We are told that:

The ideal female flyer turns the scale at, say, a hundred pounds and stands no higher in her slippers than five feet two. (p. 158)

Mary Russo discusses the position of the female grotesques of carnival, and concludes that they are deeply ambivalent.⁵² She claims that the very existence of women in these settings is already transgressive, and that:

These cases and images of women 'in excess' of the idealized feminine may operate as threat (as well as example to other women).⁵³

Whether fictional cases such as Fevvers operate as threat or example partly depends on the degree of sympathetic portrayal in the text. In *Nights at the Circus* the character of Fevvers operates to show the feasibility of other models of relatively happy, popular and successful women. But Carter also makes the point that freedom of action also brings its own dangers and that life is a spectrum of choice to be actively embraced. As Wolff states: "...the appearance itself of such transgressive images, practices, and ideas...render visible the suppressed."⁵⁴ The very *fact* of Fevvers renders visible the countless score of oppressed women of that era. Fevvers is strongly contrasted with other female characters in the text. For much of the narrative, the pitiful Mignon suffers the fate of too many women of that era:

From the monkey house, echoing on the night air, came a rhythmic thud as the Ape-Man beat his wife as though she were a carpet. (p. 115)

When Mignon is not being actually beaten, she nonetheless assumes a negative and powerless role:

In all this, Mignon assumed a women's place – that of the cause of discord between men; how else, to these men, could she play any real part in their lives. (p. 150.)

But, placed as the narrative is, at the beginning of a new century, a new era, we are entitled to feel a certain degree of optimism, as does Lizzie:

"Oh, my little one, I think you must be the pure child of the century that just now is waiting in the wings, the New Age in which no women will be bound down to the ground." And then she wept. (p. 25)

Curti comments that:

The monsters that have recently invaded female fiction may be instances of a new freedom, signs of the possibility of bringing them to life, after the times when

monsters and doubles, just as witches and freaks, had to be suppressed and repressed.⁵⁵

The setting of the narrative in the Victorian era prompts us to remember another famous monster of the time, and also one that was never brought into existence because her ability to reproduce was thought to be too dangerous.⁵⁶ Curti also refers to Frankenstein and his fate of never having a mate. Carter's Fevvers, however, *is* a woman, and is a joyful survivor. She succeeds in brushing away the dour ghosts of her more famous contemporary.

...I waited, I waited... although I could not have told you for what it was I waited. Except, I assure you, I did *not* await the kiss of a magic prince, sir! With my two eyes, I nightly saw how such a kiss would seal up in my *appearance* for ever!' (p. 39)

The character of Fevvers can be viewed as being loosely based also on Leda. But Carter reverses the Leda myth, by making the female Fevvers the active, assertive, swan-like character, as Walser takes the role of the confused, and used, earthly Leda: and just as Zeus fathered Helen of Troy, Fevvers makes love to Walser and will give birth to—what—we wonder. The significance of this, as Theo D'Haen points out is that, whereas the Leda myth resulted in:

Homer founding a male line in Western literature, Carter offers us a rewrite of Homer that defines the future of humanity from a feminist ideology.⁵⁷

In effect, Carter substitutes one myth for another.

Carter's use of a fantastic, or impossible, bird-woman as the central character in *Nights at the Circus* enables her to spotlight certain features of female identity and power that are problematic for our patriarchal society. She loads the image of Fevvers with meaning that the reader assigns by association. Fevvers has wings, like an angel, and spends much of her early life as a passive, innocent virgin. Fevvers also has some less 'feminine' habits, and her speech and manners often seem more *fowl* than fair; more animal than human. In these, and other respects, Fevvers is a mass of contradictions. By hugely exaggerating the characteristics often assigned to women, Carter deconstructs femininity in western society. The image of the angelic virgin being brought up in a brothel is both amusing and ironic. Fevvers is also portrayed as being sentimental, but selfish and greedy. Her greed is beautifully portrayed by a scene where she visits the Grand Duke:

In his marble halls, she smiled like a predator. Here comes Property Distribution Inc. to take away your diamonds, Grand Duke! (p. 185)

In her greed, she almost risks becoming a prisoner.

Nights at the Circus also uses the divide between animals and humans to explore power relations. Whilst we can assert that language is the means by which reality is interpreted, explained, and also manipulated, we see examples in the text where the language is appropriated by a grossly disadvantaged group for its own purposes. The apes' ability, in the absence of man's spoken language, to construct and secure agreement to a highly favourable contract, although somewhat implausible, is a liberating idea. If a group of animals can negotiate such an outcome, then it is surely possible for women, who are, after all, only viewed as being on the border of animality, to achieve at least the same advantages. Indeed, the apes can be seen to provide an even stronger metaphor for the position of women. At one point in the narrative, Walser interrupts a scene where the apes are

participating in a class. He has great difficulty in understanding the meaning of their exchanges, although they appear to be engaged in a familiar activity. Once Walser's presence is observed, the apes resume their 'role' as circus apes acting the part of humans. Walser could well have been observing a group of women communicating with each other in what Irigaray terms 'womanspeak'. She claims that this specific woman's language emerges when women are together but disappears as soon as men appear.⁵⁸

Carter uses Fevvers' first attempt to fly as a metaphor for the separation of a human from its mother and the consequent ambivalent desires to both develop as a individual, and to return to the security of the womb:

"I feared the proof of my own singularity."

"Yet, if it could speak, would not any wise child cry out from the womb: 'Keep me in the darkness here! keep me warm! keep me in contingency!' But nature will not be denied." (p. 34)

The desire to stay warm and safe is balanced by the fear of being reincorporated into the mother, and results in a highly ambivalent attitude to the mother, and to women in general. If this is experienced by the male, it is compounded by the drive to secure an identity that is separate from the mother and aligned to other males, particularly the father. In this situation the male experiences a much stronger set of emotions of both desire and fear. As Barbara Ehrenreich states:

For that which they loved first – woman and mother – is that which they must learn to despise in others and suppress in themselves. Under these conditions, which are all we know, so far, as the human condition, men will continue to see the world as divided into 'them' and 'us', male and female, hard and soft, solid and liquid – and they will, in every way possible, fight and flee the threat of submersion.⁵⁹

The critical factor in this assertion is that woman is equated with mother, and hence all women suffer from this association with the maternal. However, Kristeva suggests that:

...the maternal operates as a function that, in principle, can be performed by both men and women. Kristeva wants to take us beyond categories that have traditionally been used to limit us, all of us, both women and men. She wants to conceive of a notion of difference that does not operate according to a dualist logic of opposition.⁶⁰

Despite her somewhat feminine dress, Fevvers does not allow traditional categories to limit her behaviour:

This time it was Fevvers who flourished the hosepipe with which the Princess had already rescued Walser once before. She shook out a last few drops in a disturbingly masculine fashion and laid it aside. (p. 166)

It is Fevvers who takes the initiative normally assigned to the man.

Fevvers, nestling under a Venetian chandelier in the Hotel de l'Europe, has seen nothing of the city in which Walser lodges. (p. 104)

This comment, referring as it does to the physical environments of the two characters, also implies a discrepancy between their psychological states and even cultural environments. The physical environment is used as a metaphor for a much wider context in the following description of the Princess:

On the rare, random occasions when she took some other human back to her bed in the straw beside the sleeping tigers, she always made love in the dark because her body was, every inch, scarred with clawmarks, as if tattooed. That was the price they made her pay for taming them. (p. 149)

The physical scars of the Princess are a metaphor for the psychological scars that women bear from the process of being ‘tamed’ by patriarchal society. Just as the tigers are tamed reluctantly, so are women. But tigers are large and powerful, with sharp claws and small brains. They can inflict injury in the process of being tamed, but we cannot estimate the extent of the mental scars with which they live. Women are not very large and powerful – they do not, in general, inflict physical damage in the, more subtle, process of taming. And their much larger brains contain an awareness of their fate. The mental scars are no less real because they are invisible.

Curti notes that:

In contemplating her body, Walser discovers that it is impossible to know whether she is ‘a real or feigned bird-woman, genuine miracle or trick’ and, by the end, that it does not really matter.⁶¹

However, even though it does not matter to Walser whether Fevvers is genuine or a fraud, it should matter to us that we never find out. The uncertainty and the ambiguity are critical to our need to see Fevvers, and perhaps ourselves, as complex, multiple beings that cannot be reduced to unitary and stable identities.

3.3 Conclusion

Naomi Goldenberg states that Barthes’ assertion that there are no eternal myths:

...point[s] to a direction which contemporary theory must take in order to foster the collective will to change patterns that look inevitable.⁶²

Carter’s text does not serve the purpose of recreating an accurate historical image; it uses this turning point in history to highlight the opportunity that we still have to identify the existence of the fragments of the siren myth. Only by recognising the existence of these fragments can we hope to move beyond their influence.

The character of Fevvers holds many associations, including that of angel and of siren. Her appearance is both excessive, even monstrous, but desirable. Her behaviour is flirtatious, but gross. We are not sure, until the very end of the narrative, whether Fevvers is a virgin or a prostitute. Indeed, Carter shows Fevvers’ wings to be the least of her ambiguities. Yet the obvious association of woman and animal, as exemplified in the character of Fevvers is a pointer to the important issues of the animal in humans, and the strong historical association of women with nature, which results in a tendency to see women as being ‘almost animal’ and, sometimes, less than human.

Fevvers’ employer takes full advantage of the desire to see Fevvers, and perhaps all women, as ‘less than human’:

That morning, the newspapers carry an anonymous letter which claims that Fevvers is not a woman at all but a cunningly constructed automaton made up of whalebone, india-rubber and strings. (p. 147)

However, it is, more accurately, the ambiguity of the status of women that titillates the Victorian public:

...He plots a news item, tomorrow, inserted in the foreign news by his contacts. This, contradicting the vicious 'clockwork' rumour, will proclaim that Fevvers, all woman that she is, is, back home in England, secretly engaged to *the Prince of Wales*. (p. 147)

It is the tendency to view women as 'lesser' that masks a deeply ambivalent attitude on the part of men, both in Victorian times and in contemporary society. The mixed desire and fear that many men feel towards women is as a result of their difficult journey away from the secure but restrictive environment of the mother. A consequence of these fraught emotions is the distancing and categorisation of women as 'other', 'lesser', and either virgin or whore.

Through the narrative device of the half-woman half-bird Fevvers, Carter shows the slipperiness between categories of animals and humans, whores and virgins, and demonstrates the inadequacy of the fixed categories. We are prompted to question the meaning of being a 'woman'. Walser highlights for us the importance of the character of Fevvers in the discussion of the meaning of the term woman. By crossing back and forward between the binary oppositions of whore and virgin, woman and animal, Fevvers expands the category of woman for those that follow:

She owes it to herself to remain a woman, he thought. It is her human duty. As a symbolic woman, she has a meaning, as an anomaly, none. As an anomaly, she would become again, as she once had been, an exhibit in a museum of curiosities. But what would she become, if she continued to be a woman? (p. 161)

Perhaps the answer to this question is that Fevvers would be much like other women: a complex being who cannot be reduced to a unitary and stable identity.

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- ¹ A. Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, Vintage, London, 1994, p. 7. Subsequent page numbers at the end of quotes refer to this text.
- ² N. Goldenberg, *Resurrecting the Body. Feminism, Religion, and Psychotherapy*, Crossroad, New York, 1993, p. 105.
- ³ B. Phillpotts, *Mermaids*, Ballantine Books, New York, 1980, p. 34.
- ⁴ J. A. Kestner, *Mythology and Misogyny. The Social Discourse of Nineteenth-Century British Classical-Subject Painting*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1989, p. 9.
- ⁵ Kestner, p. 14.
- ⁶ Goldenberg, p. 105.
- ⁷ M. Schneir, *Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings*, Vintage, New York, 1994, Preface.
- ⁸ Kestner, p. 297.
- ⁹ Phillpotts, p. 33.
- ¹⁰ L. Curti, *Female Stories, Female Bodies: Narrative, Identity and Representation*, New York University Press, New York, 1998, p. 107.
- ¹¹ J. Wolff, *Feminine Sentences. Essays on Women & Culture*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1990, p. 126.
- ¹² T. Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, Routledge, London, 1985, p. 166.
- ¹³ Homer, *The Odyssey*, HarperCollins, New York, 1991, p. 190.
- ¹⁴ 'Sirens', Microsoft® Encarta, 1994.
- ¹⁵ Hence sayings such as 'music soothes the savage beast'.
- ¹⁶ G. Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1986, p. 25.
- ¹⁷ Lerner, p. 25.
- ¹⁸ T. Eagleton, *Literary Theory An Introduction*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1996, pp. 114-5.
- ¹⁹ H. Cixous, 'Sorties', in Marks and de Courtivron (eds) *New French Feminisms. An Anthology*, The University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1980, pp. 90-91.
- ²⁰ Writers such as Kestner detail numerous examples of this.
- ²¹ M. Whitford, *Luce Irigaray. Philosophy in the Feminine*, Routledge, London, 1991, p. 93.
- ²² Whitford, p. 93.
- ²³ L. Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, translated by C. Burke and G. C. Gill, Cornell University Press, New York, 1984, p. 100.
- ²⁴ Whitford, p. 95.
- ²⁵ N. Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon. The Life of a Victorian Myth*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1982, p. 7.
- ²⁶ Auerbach, p. 5.
- ²⁷ M. Warner, *Managing Monsters: Six Myths of Our Time*, Vintage, London, 1994, Foreword.
- ²⁸ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine. Film, feminism, psychoanalysis*, and Cynthia Lee Henthorn, *Downright Dangerous and Dirty: Tainted Trademarks of the Monstrous Feminine*, are two of the many examples.
- ²⁹ Warner, p. 3.
- ³⁰ Warner, p. 4.
- ³¹ Wolff, p. 124.
- ³² P. Waugh, 'Stalemates?: Feminists, Postmodernists and Unfinished Issues in Modern Aesthetics', *Modern Literary Theory. A Reader*, Arnold, London, 1996, p. 338.
- ³³ Wolff, pp. 129-130.
- ³⁴ R. Graves, 'Ulysses', *Collected Poems 1975*, Cassell, London, 1975, p. 56.
- ³⁵ R. Berman, 'Sirens', in M. South (ed) *Mythical and Fabulous Creatures: A Source Book and Research Guide*, Bedrick, New York, 1988, p. 150.
- ³⁶ K. Oliver, *Reading Kristeva. Unraveling the Double-Bind*, Indiana University, Bloomington, 1993, p. 6.
- ³⁷ L. Irigaray, 'And the one doesn't stir without the other', *Signs*, 7:1, 1981, p.63.
- ³⁸ Creed, p. 83.
- ³⁹ N. Hawthorne, 'Rappaccini's Daughter', in G. Perkins and B. Perkins, *The American Tradition in Literature 8th edn*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1994, p. 790.
- ⁴⁰ Hawthorne, p. 795
- ⁴¹ Hawthorne, p. 795.
- ⁴² V. M. Allen, *The Femme Fatale: A Study of the Early Development of the Concept in Mid-Nineteenth Century Poetry and Painting*, Boston University Graduate School, 1979, p. 9.
- ⁴³ W. M. Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, Dent, London, 1961, p. 16.
- ⁴⁴ Thackeray, p. 247.
- ⁴⁵ Thackeray, p. 645.

⁴⁶ Auerbach, p. 90.

⁴⁷ Auerbach, p. 94.

⁴⁸ Phillpotts, p. 56.

⁴⁹ J. Butler, 'Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory' in Sue-Ellen Case ed., *Performing Feminisms*, John Hopkins UP, Baltimore and London, 1990, p. 273.

⁵⁰ Butler, p. 273.

⁵¹ Wolff, p. 136.

⁵² Wolff, p. 128.

⁵³ Wolff, p. 129.

⁵⁴ Wolff, p. 129.

⁵⁵ Curti, p. 117.

⁵⁶ See M. Shelley, *Frankenstein*, Penguin, London, 1994.

⁵⁷ T. L. D'Haen, 'Magical Realism and Postmodernism: Decentering Privileged Centers', in L.P. Zamora & W. B. Faris, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1995, p. 192.

⁵⁸ Moi, p. 144.

⁵⁹ Wolff, p. 130.

⁶⁰ Oliver, p. 7.

⁶¹ Curti, p. 121.

⁶² Goldenberg, p. 105.

4 *Alias Grace* – Margaret Atwood

...the truth eludes him.¹

4.1 Survival of myth fragments

Like *Nights at the Circus*, *Alias Grace*, by Margaret Atwood, is also set in the Victorian period. The main part of the action takes place in Canada, a country that, at that time, is represented as following similar social codes to England. However, the geographic isolation and relative lack of facilities in the Canadian society of the mid-nineteenth century results in a tendency to relax social standards to some extent, as is evident in the text. *Alias Grace* differs from *Nights at the Circus* in a number of respects. The female protagonist is, in every physical respect, a normal woman. Grace is the victim of circumstances and of her society's prejudices and superstitions, whereas Fevvers manipulates society's attitudes. Fevvers can be seen as being a 'surface' character: we get what we 'see', but *Alias Grace* operates from a very interior viewpoint: we are privy to many of the thoughts and feelings of the main characters in addition to their dialogue.

Yet Grace, in *Alias Grace*, is identified as animal-like and is strongly associated with the alluring but dangerous mermaid. The perception of her character, rather than the consistent display of it, firmly categorises Grace as a whore, a dangerous and evil woman, a desirable object. Atwood uses the many voices in the text to show the ambiguity of this labelling, and to break open the paper-thin unity of personality that patriarchal society applies to women in general.

4.1.1 Descriptions of Grace's appearance

Prior to the murders that took place in the house where Grace was working, her appearance is described in terms that are consistent with her youth and innocence. When Grace acquires a new dress at her first place of employment, she comments:

...even Mrs Honey said what a difference it made in my appearance, and how trim and respectable I looked, now that I was decently dressed. (p. 180)

After Grace is convicted of murder the descriptions of her appearance change dramatically. Grace has occasional access to newspapers clippings, and recalls their descriptions of her:

My hair is coming out from under my cap. Red hair of an ogre. A wild beast, the newspaper said. A monster. (p. 35)

Dr Simon Jordan, the physician who studies Grace and her psychological state of mind, is to some degree affected by the publicity surrounding her. He is also given to dreams and day-dreams about the women he meets. Simon is fascinated by Grace, and by whether she is bad, mad or simply an unfortunate victim. Simon observes Grace closely and, early in their series of interviews he views her as distinctly animal-like:

But in the closeness of the sewing room, Simon can smell her as well as look at her. She smells like smoke...Ferns and mushrooms; fruits crushed and fermenting...Although her hair is braided and coiled up under her cap, it too gives off

an odour, a strong musky odour of scalp. He is in the presence of a female animal; something fox-like and alert. (p. 103)

Simon is very drawn to Grace, and allows even the most mundane act to acquire erotic significance. For instance, as Grace wets the end of a piece of cotton to thread it, Simon sees this act as:

...unbearably intimate. He felt as if he was watching her undress, through a chink in the wall; as if she was washing herself with her tongue, like a cat. (p. 105)

4.1.2 Portrayal of Grace's behaviour

Throughout the text, Grace's behaviour is portrayed as being inconsistent or ambiguous. The descriptions of her behaviour depend on her current circumstances as well as the preconceptions of those who observe her. Early in the text, while Grace is in prison, she comments:

If I am good enough and quiet enough, perhaps after all they will let me go... (p. 6)

It is clear from the text that women were not expected to be either intelligent or assertive. A woman who was intelligent and articulate was treated with respect and admiration, as Mr Kinnear's reaction to Grace's passing knowledge of art shows:

"Mr Kinnear said I was very inquisitive for such a young person, and soon he would have the most learned maidservant in Richmond Hill, and he would have to put me on display, and charge money for me, like the mathematical pig in Toronto." (p. 259)

Grace's behaviour is reported as being both dangerous and exemplary. The descriptions in the narrative point to the conclusion that Grace's behaviour was, on the whole, quite consistent, but that the perceptions of her behaviour varied according to the time, the situation and the observer. Both Dr Jordan and the Governor's family are highly distrustful of Grace when they first meet her, but gradually come to realise that she poses no physical threat to them. An example of the inconsistency of description of Grace's behaviour can be seen in these extracts from three textual entries that have been included on the same page of the text:

Her boldness does not show that she is a sensitive person and her want of gratitude is a convincing proof of her unfortunate disposition. (1863) (p. 483)

This unfortunate woman has become a dangerous creature...(1863) (p. 483)

...her exemplary conduct during the whole of her thirty years incarceration in the penitentiary...all tend to show that there is room for grave doubts as to her having been the awful female demon incarnate...(1908) (p. 483)

It is important to note that the perceptions of Grace's behaviour and motivations vary according to the speaker/writer, the time and the circumstances, but that we cannot be as sure whether Grace changes during the same period. We might expect that, given the conditions under which females were imprisoned during the mid-nineteenth century, many of them would have experienced temporary insanity, or at the least, adopted furtive, distrustful manners. As soon as Grace was allowed to work under more favourable conditions, not surprisingly, the reports of her behaviour also improved.

Even though the Grace that existed prior to the murders is essentially the same as the Grace that was locked away in prison, she was regarded as being quite different in character. In the Victorian era, most women modified their behaviour to fit with that which was socially acceptable. Grace explains her candid responses to some of Simon's questions thus:

“A lady might conceal things, as she has her reputation to lose; but I am beyond that,”... “Only, I was never a lady, Sir, and I've already lost whatever reputation I ever had. I can say anything I like; or if I don't wish to, I needn't say anything at all.” (p. 104)

Grace's comments regarding her own behaviour and that of other women foregrounds the issue of the construction of gender. Through the articulation of her private thoughts, we see that Grace does not feel comfortable with the expected behaviours assigned to the accepted image of the Canadian nineteenth-century female servant. Michel Foucault makes reference to the extent to which the Victorian regime confined behaviour, particularly in terms of sexuality.² Janet Wolff makes reference to the way in which women's bodies are patrolled and their behaviour narrowly defined.³

Grace makes frequent reference to the ways in which women's bodies and behaviours are narrowly defined.⁴ Whilst this patrolling of the body affects both men and women, its effect on women is more damaging. The civilizing process restricts the physical nature of a woman's behaviour, as Grace Marks notes:

They [wire crinolines] are like birdcages; but what is being caged in? Legs, the legs of ladies; legs penned in so they cannot get out and go rubbing up against the gentlemen's trousers. (p. 24)

Grace also feels the effect of this patrolling of the body and its behaviour when she contemplates release from prison: she is too old to work as a servant and also too old to catch a husband. Her narrowly defined range of activities during her imprisonment has left her with no occupation to pursue. The irony of Grace's situation is that, whilst in prison or mental hospital her behaviour is in some respects less regulated than when she is a free woman. Foucault makes the point that sexuality that was not tolerated in mainstream society had other places to reside:

The brothel and the mental hospital would be those places of tolerance: the prostitute, the client, and the pimp, together with the psychiatrist and his hysteric – those 'other Victorians,' as Steven Marcus would say – seem to have surreptitiously transferred the pleasures that are unspoken into the order of things that are counted... Everywhere else, modern Puritanism imposed its triple edict of taboo, non-existence, and silence.⁵

Grace's position as a mental patient and prisoner leaves her open to sexual advances from visiting doctors and guards, who seem to assume a difference in morals due to her status and even greater lack of power than usual.

4.1.3 Other characters' perceptions of Grace

Grace's status is both an attraction and a repulsion to others. She recognises the ambiguous nature of this reaction:

Murderess is a strong word to have attached to you. It has a smell to it, that word – musky and oppressive, like dead flowers in a vase...It rustles, like a taffeta skirt across the floor.

Murderer is merely brutal. It's like a hammer, or a lump of metal. (p. 25)

We see that despite (or is that *because of*) Simon's training and passion as a doctor, he experiences the dangerous thrill that he associates with a highly wicked woman like a murderess:

Before the murders Grace would have been entirely different from the woman he now knows. A young girl, scarcely formed; tepid, bland and tasteless. A flat landscape.

Murderess, murderess, he whispers to himself. It has an allure, a scent almost. Hothouse gardenias. Lurid, but also furtive. He imagines himself breathing it as he draws Grace towards him, pressing his mouth against her. *Murderess*. He applies it to her throat like a brand. (p. 453)

Simon Jordan is warned about Grace by a fellow doctor:

Many older and wiser heads have been enmeshed in her toils, and you would do well to stop your ears with wax, as Ulysses made his sailors do, to escape the Sirens. (pp. 81-82)

At the time he discards the warning as biased and unwarranted. Simon feels very much in control of himself and of the situation. He acts the part of the detached clinical observer, not realising that he is gradually being drawn into the grey areas of morals, memory and perception. As his affair with the married landlady becomes murkier, so he imagines that it is Grace who has something to hide:

If she has anything to hide, she may want to stay in the water, in the dark, in her element. She may be afraid she won't be able to breathe, otherwise. (p. 374)

But it is Simon who is having difficulty breathing. As we read Grace's thoughts that accompany her conversations with Simon, we are struck by the vast difference between her recollections and intentions, and Simon's speculations. Grace does not openly flirt with Dr Jordan and, whilst she does not tell all that is in her mind, she appears not to lie or deliberately mislead. However, Simon persists in his conclusion that she is a mysterious, alluring, but dangerous woman:

Like my namesake the apostle, I have cast my nets into deep waters; though unlike him, I may have drawn up a mermaid, neither fish nor flesh but both at once, and whose song is sweet but dangerous. (p. 490)

4.2 Meaning and purpose

4.2.1 What function do these fragments of myths serve?

In *Alias Grace*, the female characters are seen through the eyes of Simon as being less intelligent, more underhand in their interpersonal relations, in short, inferior to males. The women in the narrative are regarded as being 'unknowable'. Whilst Simon recognises that the females in his life do not share all the same characteristics, they do share that most central one: they are 'not-male'. As Nancy Jay points out, the effect of this structure of binary oppositions can be seen as much in their use as political weapons as intellectual categories.⁶ The process by which women are placed in a different category to men (indeed as 'not-men') allows for the assignment of many behaviour patterns and other characteristics that can be generalised as being 'female'. It also allows for the assignment of

different moral values to men and women, with the rationalisation that they are 'natural'. Grace's comment regarding the level of interest in her case is one example of this:

That is what really interests them — the gentlemen and the ladies both. They don't care if I killed anyone, I could have cut dozens of throats, it's only what they admire in a soldier, they'd scarcely blink. No: was I really a paramour, is their chief concern, and they don't even know themselves whether they want the answer to be no or yes. (p. 30)

The Victorian era also demonstrated the extent to which societal rules regarding behaviour can be further refined to suit the interests of one group over another. Grace comments on the inequities encountered when two women fall pregnant, but in different circumstances (one unmarried, and the other married):

Why should the one be rewarded and the other punished, for the same sin? (p. 321)

Grace is an astute observer of the condition of women, and also comments on the peculiar position that a woman can find herself in if her husband dies:

...the men would wink and nod when a young and rich widow was mentioned, and how a widow was a respectable thing to be if old and poor, but not otherwise; which is quite strange when you come to consider it. (p. 189)

Even though women such as Grace might notice these illogical values, they were almost powerless to change them until the weight of numbers gave political voice to the feminist movement.

Significance of water and mermaid characters

The young doctor who interviews Grace, Simon Jordan, is a bachelor, and he seems to have some strange and unusual views about women (strange and unusual in his era, at least). Simon also day-dreams a good deal, and we note that water features in his visions:

Her hair is loose, her feet bare; she's smiling. Then he sees that what she walks on is not grass but water; and as he reaches to embrace her, she melts away like mist. (p. 480)

Simon also sees water, and mermaid-like creatures in his night dreams:

Inside it is the sea... In his ears he hears a ringing, a faint and shivery laughter; then many hands caress him. It's the maids; only they can swim. But now they are swimming away from him, abandoning him.

Simon seems either to imagine himself imprisoned by women, or to view women in the role of whore. On the one hand he despises Dora, his landlady's maid-of-all-work, for being lazy, dirty and insolent. But he is also attracted to her:

He has tried imagining her as a prostitute — he often plays this private mental game with various women he encounters... (p. 65)

Both imaginings seem to produce a mixture of fear and eroticism. Simon appears to only be able to categorise women as whores or as insipid virgins/mothers. It may be that Simon is suffering from abjection. His attitude to the young women that his mother parades as possible wives is that of repulsion (despite their obvious physical charms). As Kristeva notes, abjection:

...is above all a revolt of the person against an external menace from which one wants to keep oneself at a distance, but of which one has the impression that is not only an external menace but that it may menace us from inside. So it is a desire for separation, for becoming autonomous and also the feeling of an impossibility of doing so...⁷

It is, however, his mother that Simon wants to abject. The young women that his mother introduces to him represent stand-ins for the mother, and Simon fears that, once he has 'chosen' a wife, she will be remade in the image of his mother. Together with the attraction of a warm fire and bed, he fears being smothered by the maternal.⁸

Significance of hair

Alias Grace contains a number of references to women's hair. Prior to meeting Grace, Simon imagines how she might look. Grace was not exactly as he expects:

There was even less escaped hair than he'd thought: most of it was tucked up under a white cap. (p. 68)

We have already seen that Simon dreams of enticing women: women who are very different from the prim young ladies whom his mother invites to the house. In one dream Simon imagines himself as a boy, and sees:

Women, the maids. Sitting on the edges of their narrow beds, in their white cotton shifts, their hair unbound and rippling down over their shoulders, their lips parted, their eyes gleaming. Waiting for him. (p. 160)

Simon also recalls an incident where, as a youth, he has an encounter with one of the maids:

Her cap had fallen off, and her hair came tumbling down; long dark-blond hair, voluptuous, non too clean, smelling of curdled milk. (p. 218)

These references can be identified as part of a wider pattern. We may recall that Fevvers, in *Nights at the Circus*, has long luxurious hair. Fevvers' hair was no ordinary endowment, as we can see from the following description:

It was a sufficiently startling head of hair, yellow and inexhaustible as sand, thick as cream, sizzling and whispering under the brush.⁹

Zenia, in *The Robber Bride*, is also portrayed as possessing "...a ravishing cloud of dark hair..."¹⁰. These representations are strongly reminiscent of the descriptions of mermaids' or sirens' hair. Isabella Valancy Crawford describes a siren who 'combed gold locks with golden comb...'¹¹ Beatrice Phillpotts tells us that:

An abundance of hair had traditionally signified an abundant love potential...continued in much mermaid imagery, served to provide a veiled reference to her [mermaid's] role as fertility figure.¹²

Sir James George Frazer tells of many rituals in antiquity where maidens (and sometimes young men) dedicated locks of their hair to one of the gods. He mentions that:

[Hippolytus']...untimely fate was yearly mourned, with weeping and doleful chants, by unwedded maids, who also dedicated locks of their hair in his temple before marriage.¹³

Frazer also relates the rituals that are said to have occurred at the sanctuary of the Phoenician goddess Astarte at Byblus at the annual mourning for the dead Adonis:

...the women had to shave their heads, and such of them as refused to do so were bound to prostitute themselves to strangers and to sacrifice to the goddess with the wages of their shame...there are some grounds for thinking that the women in question were generally maidens, of whom this act of devotion was required as a preliminary to marriage...The meaning of this sacrifice was that the women gave of their fecundity to the goddess, whether they offered their hair or their chastity.¹⁴

It is clear that in these mythical traditions the maidens' hair represented fertility. We should note, however, that all three of the female protagonists, Fevvers, Zenia and Grace are portrayed as having abundant, exuberant hair, and all three have in no way demonstrated their fertility. Marina Warner writes that:

The long hair which the mermaid combs out has been bequeathed to her by Venus, too, who traditionally rises from the sea and wrings out her long hair. But the mermaid's hair also represents the toils in which she ensnares her prey, as well as the flowing abundance of her appetites, and its bears an interesting, complex relation both to voice and to water.¹⁵

Hair has long been associated with strength.¹⁶ *Alias Grace* includes an interesting reference to hair as a source of strength:

...though it was true that washing it too much would take all the strength out of your body, and she had known a girl who had faded away and died from too much hair washing... (p. 174-5)

Gerda Lerner also comments on the significance of women's hair:

Hair in the old religions of Europe had been a potent sign of women's power, so much so that one of the first things that the witch-hunters did was to shave the hair of those whom they accused.¹⁷

We could surmise that the main source of these women's power was their fertility. Long flowing hair was seen as a symbol of this power through fertility. As women's power lessened, and the Christian religion supplanted earlier religions, the way in which fertility was viewed also changed. Fertility outside the tightly inscribed rules of the church (ie outside church-sanctioned marriage) was regarded as evil. Hence, flowing locks on women were eventually associated with disreputable women. Some religions even insist on women covering their hair, viewing the hair as being a sexual temptation (Christian nuns, as well as Muslim and Amish women, cover their hair). In recent generations, women were expected to pin their hair up once they were married, presumably as a further indication that they were not available as sexual partners. Soft-porn magazines include a predominance of women who have long, full hair.

Murray Bail also reflects on the role of female hair in society:

Hair is the only changeable part of the face. And it is hair that frames—and makes distinctive—the various concepts of feminine beauty. Shorn of hair a woman is reduced to essentials: hence, the all-too-appropriate symbolism of a woman having her head shorn before being paraded for sleeping with the enemy.¹⁸

Earlier this century the Surrealists, an art movement, used women, and their hair, to comment on society's preconceptions about erotic love, and on the position of women (among many other themes). Robert Short comments that:

In its campaign against the stifling stereotypes of angel and courtesan – Virgin Mary and the Magdalene – to which Christian civilization had confined the image of women, Surrealism proposed an open-ended range of alternatives...¹⁹

For instance, René Magritte's famous painting, *Rape* (1934), foregrounds the way in which women are viewed as purely sexual bodies.



Rape, René Magritte (1934)

Where the woman's head should be, we see her breasts and pubis. Most interestingly, the hair on her head is obviously similar to her pubic hair. The model's mouth is replaced by her pubis, and in place of her eyes we see her breasts. We could read this as Magritte confronting us with the image that men fear: the *vagina dentata* – the vagina with teeth that will devour or castrate the male. Barbara Creed discusses the issue of the *vagina dentata* in relation to horror movies such as *Alien*. She identifies instances where the horrifying woman is portrayed as the maternal character, ready to either castrate or cannibalise the male.²⁰ This image reminds us of the male's fear of being reincorporated into the maternal container. On a more superficial level, the painted image is also confronting because it takes away woman's voice and replaces it with her sexual organ, emphasizing that women are sometimes viewed as being only sexual. However, Magritte's *Rape* can also be read as an indictment of the way in which women are silenced and abused, both politically and at times physically. This image is doubly shocking in that it uncovers the object of fear and denial, and it starkly presents an image of how women are viewed by many men. The hair on a woman's head can be a reminder of her pubic hair (how can we forget the joke about how to tell if a woman is a natural blond!). Perhaps the concentration on the head hair is a way of denying the other hair. The mermaid is given long, beautiful, hair, but has the tail of a fish, with no obvious vagina. But it is still her hair that ensnares unwary sailors.

It is interesting to ponder to what extent the fascination and fear of the long mermaid hair is connected to the fact that hair is a bodily refuse, and is thus made abject. Mary Douglas reminds us that:

...the rituals, rules, and boundaries concerning bodily behaviour can be understood as the functioning of social rules and hierarchies...In its [bodily refuse's] marginality, in the way in which it traverses the boundaries of the body, it comes to represent particular threats and powers, which ultimately symbolize social boundaries, transgressions, and threats.²¹

In *Alias Grace*, Simon is bothered by dreams and imaginings that involve being ensnared by hair. In one instance he dreams of a scarf or veil blowing in the wind:

The cloth has tangled in the branches of a small tree covered with green apples. He tugs it down and it falls across his face; and then he understands that it isn't cloth at all but hair, the long fragrant hair of an unseen woman, which is twining around his neck. He struggles; he is being closely embraced; he can scarcely breathe. The sensation is painful and almost unbearably erotic... (p. 226)

In this instance, the object of his fantasy is a woman whom he desires but also is reluctant to commit himself to. Another young woman, whom his mother would like to have as a daughter-in-law produces a stronger feeling of entrapment, but one lacking the erotic element of hair:

Does his mother really believe that he can be charmed by such a vision of himself – married to Faith Cartwright and imprisoned in an armchair by the fire, frozen in a kind of paralysed stupor, with his dear wife winding him up gradually in coloured silk threads like a cocoon, or like a fly snarled in the web of a spider. (p. 340)

Atwood plays strongly on the traditional association of women with water. At times she reminds us that women are not always safe, even in their natural element. Grace's mother dies on the ship out from Ireland to Canada and her body is disposed of at sea. Viewing the burial at sea of her mother would have been very distressing for a young girl, and Grace is haunted by the image of her mother slowly sinking down in her winding sheet. But in the following extract Grace also pictures a woman, still alive, being dragged down in a similar winding sheet:

Instead I dreamt of my mother in her winding sheet, drifting down through the cold water, which was blue-green in colour; and the sheet began to come undone at the top, and it waved as if in the wind, and her hair floated out, rippling like seaweed; but the hair was over her face so I could not see it, and it was darker than my mother's hair had been; and then I knew that this was not my mother at all, but some other woman, and she was not dead inside the sheet at all, but still alive. (p. 193)

This is a powerful and frightening image, and graphically represents what Grace sees as the fate of women, and perhaps herself, in the world. The image functions as a metaphor for the slow mental and emotional drowning of many women in Victorian society. Like the woman in the dream, many women were bound tightly by society's restrictions, and effectively silenced by the expectations of their men. The dream-woman's symbol of beauty, her hair, covers her face and prevents her from articulating her condition.

4.2.2 How does the portrayal of these images serve to deconstruct the patriarchal view of women?

Both of the principal characters in *Alias Grace* portray ambiguities that work against the concept of unitary, fixed meaning.

The character of Simon displays some interesting logic not commonly associated with Victorian times. He can, in some respects only, be seen as the exemplar of the 'enlightened man'. His character also serves to help carry the deconstructive thread that runs through the text. For example, he tells us that his view on prostitution did not accord with most in his acquaintance:

In his student days, he used to argue that if a woman has no other course open to her but starvation, prostitution, or throwing herself from a bridge, then surely the prostitute, who has shown the most tenacious instinct for self-preservation, should be considered stronger and saner than her frailer and no longer living sisters. One couldn't have it both ways, he'd point out: if women are seduced and abandoned they're supposed to go mad, but if they survive, and seduce in their turn, then they are mad to begin with. He'd said that it seemed to him a dubious piece of reasoning; which got him the reputation either of a cynic or of a puritanical hypocrite, depending on his audience. (p. 349)

However, like Mitch in *The Robber Bride*, Simon is an example of a character that constantly seeks fulfilment of his desire, only to find the object of his desire unfulfilling. Simon has an affair (against his own common sense and better judgement) with his landlady. Prior to the beginning of this affair, Simon day-dreams about his landlady, Mrs Humphrey:

He is both sane and normal, and he has developed the rational faculties of his mind to a high degree; and yet he cannot always control such pictures. The difference between a civilized man and a barbarous fiend – a madman, say – lies, perhaps, merely in a thin veneer of willed self-restraint. (p. 163)

Whilst this affair fulfils a temporary erotic function, the novelty soon wears off, and he uses his duty to his mother as an excuse to escape both his landlady and also the impasse he has reached with Grace. He states in his letter to the landlady:

One who has sacrificed so much for her son, must surely deserve some not inconsiderable sacrifice from him in return. (p. 485)

The comment is completely disingenuous and manipulative.

Simon's relationship with his mother is, of itself, worthy of further comment. Simon corresponds with his mother on an irregular basis, mainly because it is expected of him. His private thoughts about her, to which we are privy, are characterised by disdain or at least a paternal attitude:

She believes she is making sacrifices for Simon, and he doesn't want to disillusion her. His father was self-made, but his mother was constructed by others, and such edifices are notoriously fragile. (p. 64)

However, Simon has not completely removed himself from the mother's sphere of influence. He feels some pressure to conform (in particular, to marry the girl that his mother has chosen as being most suitable), and is very willing to return to her care when relationships become too difficult. Simon's mother takes on the task of 'warning the landlady away', and cares for her son when he is injured in the Civil War. The behaviour that he displays towards his mother, of being both drawn to her care, and wanting to establish himself as somewhat superior and independent, can also be seen in his relationship with Grace. His attitude towards her is a mixture of erotic attraction and fatherly concern.

Through much of the narrative, Simon identifies women as being associated with the body, and as having little intellect. As Naomi Goldenberg points out:

The better thing is always thought to be closer to the mind, while the worse thing is seen as nearer to body.²²

However, it is Simon's mother, the 'weakest' of all the women, who survives to give wise advice to her fellows and to care for her son whose mind is damaged by the Civil War. As Cixous observes:

In the end, victory is equated with activity and defeat with passivity; under patriarchy, the male is always the victor...²³

Even Grace, imprisoned for many years, and displaying high levels of passivity, attains a kind of contentment, with a home and a caring husband. It is Simon's mind that is his downfall. His drive to separate the mind and body, and to control the body with the mind, leads to confusion and tormented dreams. Simon seems to be an example of the result of the refusal to "recognize and cope with the problematic reality of bodily existence."²⁴ Rather than trying to understand his own emotions and motives, Simon seeks to understand the human condition through studying others, such as Grace.

The character of Simon is able to draw out many issues relating to the difficulties faced by humans in their quest to become fully functioning beings. But it is the character of Grace that most powerfully carries the deconstructive thread of the text.

By using the vehicle of a suspected 'double consciousness', Atwood is able to draw out of the character of Grace Marks an ambiguity that highlights the reality of multi-faceted personality in women. Atwood layers this repertoire of behaviours with a change of perception about Grace over time. We are left with the questions: is Grace good or evil? Does she really change over time? Does the perception of her behaviour change? Grace herself points to the reality of good and evil living alongside one another in the same body by the following metaphor:

...[the Bible] says there were two different trees, the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge; but I believe there was only the one, and that the Fruit of Life and the Fruit of Good and Evil were the same. And if you ate of it you would die, but if you didn't eat of it you would die also; although if you did eat of it, you would be less bone-ignorant by the time you got around to your death.

Such an arrangement would appear to be more the way life is.

I am telling this to no one but you, as I am aware it is not the approved reading. (p. 534)

Grace's acknowledgement of the existence of more than one aspect to personality is supported by the multiple, often contradictory, readings that Atwood includes at the beginning of each chapter. Writers such as Magali Cornier Michael discuss the ways in which Atwood presents the character of Grace as a 'patchwork'.²⁵ Just as the framework of the novel is organised around a theme of patchwork patterns, so the character of Grace is seen through a patchwork of perspectives. Atwood includes extracts from a variety of sources: Susanna Moodie's *Life in the Clearing*; the poetry of Browning, Rossetti and others, newspaper reports from the time of the murders, and various prison documents. These extracts are interspersed with (fictional) letters and with narratives by both Grace and Simon

Jordan. Michael points out that the effect of the deliberate inclusion of this seemingly contradictory multitude of materials leads to:

...a certain overdetermination of meaning that signals the impossibility of locating a single privileged meaning; instead, the novel allows meanings — in the plural — to proliferate.²⁶

One of the areas where the novel allows meanings to proliferate is in the character of Grace. The extracts that precede each chapter form a dialogue about Grace that results in a giddy see-saw between Grace as demure virgin and Grace the murderess and siren. If all these texts are given an equally privileged status, then how is the reader to determine the correct categorisation of this woman? If meaning, in the plural, is allowed, then it follows that Grace is able to be, simultaneously, a lady and a whore. Michael also points out that:

...a recognition of the complexes of emotions that mediate any experience of a person or event becomes on one level an implicit critique of the other epigraphs for their unself-conscious 'objective' stances.²⁷

Therefore, the plurality of character in Grace implies a plurality in other characters referenced by the text, such as Rappaccini's daughter (as we saw in the earlier chapter on *Nights at the Circus*). Furthermore, it implies a complexity of character in non-fictional characters, both in the sense that Atwood is drawing on human traits, and also due to the association of the text with an historical event. Michael asserts that *Alias Grace*:

...acknowledges...that there is no 'Grace herself,' that Grace exists as a composite of various subject positions that can be accessed only through countless mediating (and sometimes contradictory) narratives.²⁸

Hilda Staels also discusses the ways in which Atwood gives the reader information about Grace's character. She comments that:

Both historical documents and fictional ones contain so-called truths about Grace's character and representations of her inner essence. These interpretations are assigned by representatives of natural science (medicine), history, or law, in short, the world of conventions — the Kristevan symbolic order.²⁹

We have already seen how Atwood includes interpretations that are clearly contradictory. In this way she subverts the notion of a unified stable representation of identity. Staels points out that:

...the historical and fictitious Grace remain enigmatic in spite of all these biographical facts. The endless 'realistic' details do not explain Grace's 'character.'³⁰

There are many reasons why Grace's true character remains an enigma. As a woman in Victorian Canada, Grace would be conscious of how she should 'perform' her gender. Such performance would give little indication of a woman's underlying emotions and motives. Grace had an unreliable and possibly abusive father and learnt as a child how to minimise 'trouble'. As a prisoner who is watched, and punished, Grace also learnt how to behave as expected, or suffer the consequences. Just as importantly, the male observers and commentators of Grace describe Grace in terms that fit within their language and culture (and even the female commentators write from within this paradigm). The effect of this is to give a distorted and incomplete picture of Grace. If women are viewed in terms of siren or innocent, witless virgin, then it is unlikely that descriptions of them, and

an understanding of them, will ever approach the dynamic plurality that is her reality. Simon Jordan makes it clear very early in their relationship that he has expectations about the way in which Grace should communicate. Staels comments that, in response to Simon's expectation, Grace:

...restrains herself and transforms her memories into a coherent, 'acceptable' narrative. In other words, reason is a force of repression that imposes limits on the discursive representation of irrational processes. Grace's personal 'other' voice is silenced, or forced to remain imprisoned.³¹

Simon only wants to hear Grace's rational, linear, scientific voice in his search for the solution to the mystery. Staels points out that his objective is: "...to know her 'character' – is she in essence good or evil, sane or insane?"³² but that "the truth eludes him"(p. 407). We might ask for which 'truth' Simon is searching. If he wants to dissect and analyse Grace in order to discover a fixed and unified meaning, then his quest is doomed to failure. This failure will not be caused by lack of evidence, nor even by the mental disturbances that appear to visit Grace: it will be caused by the misinformed assumption that Grace, or any women, possesses a character that can be assigned a fixed and unified meaning.

The concept of the self as not being fixed and unified is strengthened by the metaphor of the quilting in *Alias Grace*. The quilting trope has been open to numerous interpretations.³³ Ingersoll comments that Coomi Veviana:

...sees the trope as particularly apt for a postmodern understanding of 'self' as no longer 'unique, unitary and unencumbered,' so that the novel represents Grace's being as a kind of patchwork of differing selves.³⁴

I would like to extend this metaphor even further by suggesting that, just as the patchwork is a lengthy work in progress, so is the 'self.' Even when the patchwork is finished, it needs cleaning and mending as it becomes worn with use. We recognise that the world around us, including our bodies, changes with age: so our personalities/characters/'selves' also change. In this way, we are wholly part of a dynamic and fluid process. The human tendency to seek fixed meaning that denies change is part of a fear or insecurity that reaches back to the first major emotional change: the separation from the mother and recognition of the infant as a separate entity. In all that we seek to fix in place we betray that insecurity.

Hilde Staels discusses the ways in which fantastic intertexts intermingle with the realistic code in *Alias Grace*. Staels states that the intermingling of these:

...is a means for Atwood to explore the self-division that the writers of nineteenth-century English literature experienced as typical of the period, that is, the division between conscious and unconscious life, 'between rationality and irrationality, self-control and passion, intellect and imagination... generally speaking, the lawful and the unlawful.'³⁵

I believe that, rather than always viewing life as having such a division between the conscious and unconscious, we often see a division between behaviour that is socially acceptable (and therefore able to be safely performed) and behaviour that is not socially acceptable. As van Herk notes:

The lesson of *Alias Grace* is embedded in the ongoing attraction/repulsion of the 'criminal' woman. Everyone is afraid of Grace because a woman like her is a temptation.³⁶

The siren that men so desire and fear resides not in the woman's unconscious, but exists as part of a continuum of behaviours that are usually kept hidden from public view. In the case of *Alias Grace*, we should distinguish between the double personality that Grace appeared to be experiencing, and her public versus private thoughts and expressions. Even though Grace is less bound by social conventions, due to her position and her reputation after the murder trial, she censors (as we all do) what she says. We are privy to her conscious thoughts as well as her conversations. For example:

Take your hand off my tit, you filthy bastard, Mary Whitney would have said, but all I could say was Oh no, oh no... (p. 37)

The punishment for saying that latter was undoubtedly less than if she had spoken as she imagines Mary Whitney would have. Nevertheless, both the thoughts and word originated from her conscious mind. We do not need to refer to the unconscious to subvert the idea of a unified, stable self: the thoughts and behaviours, taken together, constitute a dynamic, multiple 'self', as the character of Grace Marks amply demonstrates.

4.3 Conclusion

The character of Grace in *Alias Grace* is not overtly drawn as a mermaid or siren character. However, when we look more closely at the text we see repeated instances where she is associated with mermaid or siren images. It is particularly interesting to note that it is in the perception of other characters (usually Simon) that these associations are made. Simon dreams of mermaids, but also of being abandoned in the water, and of being smothered by hair or scarves. These images highlight the frequency with which men in Victorian times viewed unattached women as both erotic and frightening. The extent that the narrative concentrates on the male's view of women points clearly to the tendency for men in Victorian times to classify women and describe their behaviour in terms that benefit males. As Margaret Atwood, in her Author's Afterword states:

Attitudes towards her [Grace] reflected contemporary ambiguity about the nature of women: was Grace a female fiend and temptress...or was she an unwilling victim, forced to keep silent by McDermott's threats and by fear for her own life? (p. 538)

In *Alias Grace*, Margaret Atwood achieves an important insight into the representation of women in the nineteenth century. Through the largely patriarchal discourses offered at the beginning of each chapter we see the contradictory nature of the discourses concerning women of this era. These contradictory textual extracts are treated with the same authority, and this underscores the ineffectual attempts to fix meaning to the character of Grace.

Grace's descriptions of her own behaviour and motivations support this ambiguity, but also provide some explanation of why women of this era were viewed as either virgins/mothers or whores. Even within the tight strictures of her society and circumstances, Grace manages to show her range of personality traits. Her character demonstrates the fluid, dynamic manner of the 'self' that can contain within itself multiple meanings. But beyond a mere demonstration of the manner in which woman is not a fixed category, Atwood opens up new

possibilities for women. We begin the text with a highly unequal power balance between Simon and Grace, the respected doctor and the convicted murderess who exhibits signs of mental illness. As we learn more about these characters we grow to understand that it is Simon who is confused and searching for meaning in his life, whereas Grace works with what the world has thrown at her. In many senses, Grace accepts the ambiguities within herself and seeks to act to the edges of her boundaries. Simon struggles with his desire and fear, and ends by losing a part of the mind: that which he sought to understand is totally lost to him, as is his cognisance of this. The reader is left with an unresolved ambiguity, or enigma, which mirrors the reality of the self. Through the vehicle of *Alias Grace* Margaret Atwood asserts that the traditional, patriarchal methods of attempting to understand human motivation and desire are flawed: new models that allow for ambiguity need to be constructed. A lack of closure must be accepted in the search for understanding of the 'self, as is demonstrated by the text of *Alias Grace*. As Atwood tells us:

The true character of the historical Grace Marks remains an enigma. (p. 539)

Our own characters are also an enigma but, unlike the finite body of work that encloses the fictional Grace Marks, the human spirit is a storehouse of endless possibilities that we must both search for and accept the limitations.

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- ¹ M. Atwood, *Alias Grace*, Virago Press, London, 1997, p. 407. Subsequent page numbers at the end of quotes refer to this text.
- ² P. Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader. An Introduction to Foucault's Thought*, Penguin Books, London, 1984, pp. 292-300.
- ³ J. Wolff, *Feminine Sentences. Essays on Women and Culture*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1990, p. 124.
- ⁴ These references remind us of another Atwood novel where gender has to be 'performed' or else severe penalties are enforced: *The Handmaid's Tail*. Goldblatt comments: "Every step, every mouthful of food, every move is observed, reported, circumvented, or approved..." See P. F. Goldblatt, 'Reconstructing Margaret Atwood's Protagonists', *World Literature Today*, Spring 99, Vol 73 Issue 2.
- ⁵ Rabinow, p. 293.
- ⁶ E. Grosz, *Sexual Subversions. Three French Feminists*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1989, p. 106.
- ⁷ K. Oliver, *Reading Kristeva. Unraveling the Double-bind*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1993, p. 55.
- ⁸ As discussed in earlier chapters, young males need to establish a separate identity apart from the mother, as 'other-than-the-mother', but consequently retain both a desire and a fear of returning to the maternal protection enjoyed whilst in the womb and under the constant care of the mother whilst a young infant. The ambivalent feeling can remain unresolved, to surface later in life and disrupt male-female relationships.
- ⁹ A. Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, Vintage, London, 1994, p. 19.
- ¹⁰ M. Atwood, *The Robber Bride*, Virago Press, London, 1993, p. 315.
- ¹¹ I. V. Crawford, 'True and False', from *Collected Poems*, Canadian Poetry Archive, National Library of Canada.
- ¹² B. Phillpotts, *Mermaids*, Ballantine Books, New York, 1980, p. 10.
- ¹³ J. G. Frazer, *The Illustrated Golden Bough*, Macmillan, London, 1978, p. 26.
- ¹⁴ Frazer, p. 28.
- ¹⁵ M. Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde. On Fairy Tales and their Tellers*, Farrarm Straus and Giroux, New York, 1994, p. 406.
- ¹⁶ The biblical character Samson is a notable example.
- ¹⁷ G. Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1986, p. 105.
- ¹⁸ M. Bail, *Eucalyptus*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, Vic, 1998, p.168.
- ¹⁹ R. Short, *Dada and Surrealism*, Octopus Books, London, 1980, p. 156.
- ²⁰ B. Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine. Film, feminism, psychoanalysis*, Routledge, London, 1993, pp. 22-24.
- ²¹ Wolff, p. 122.
- ²² N. R. Goldenberg, *Resurrecting the Body. Feminism, Religion, and Psychotherapy*, Crossroad, New York, 1990, p. 76.
- ²³ T. Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, Routledge, London, 1985, p. 105.
- ²⁴ Goldenberg (referring to Simone de Beauvoir's views), p. 79.
- ²⁵ M. C. Michael, 'Rethinking History as Patchwork: The Case of Atwood's *Alias Grace*', *Modern Fiction Studies* 47.2, 2001, p. 429.
- ²⁶ Michael, p. 431.
- ²⁷ Michael, p. 433.
- ²⁸ Michael, p. 438.
- ²⁹ H. Staels, 'Intertexts of Margaret Atwood *Alias Grace*', *Modern Fiction Studies* 46.2, 2000, pp. 430-1.
- ³⁰ Staels, pp. 431-2.
- ³¹ Staels, p. 434.
- ³² Staels, p. 435.
- ³³ Earl Ingersoll mentions several of these in his article 'Engendering metafiction: Textuality and closure in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*', *American Review of Canadian Studies*, Autumn 2001 v31 i3, pp 385-403.
- ³⁴ Ingersoll, p. 389.
- ³⁵ Staels, p. 439.
- ³⁶ A. van Herk, 'Partners in Crime', *Canadian Literature*, Spring 1998, Issue 156, p. 112.

5 Conclusion

When we hear the sound of a siren, we immediately think, ‘Danger!’, or maybe even, ‘Death!’... The sound of sirens invokes the stillness of time; it freezes the moment and petrifies the hearers.¹

The sound of the original Syrens, and their close relations the mermaids, have resonated through the centuries, across cultures, into the language of contemporary society and its fiction. The fragments of these myths still exert a powerful influence on the modern-day imagination, warning of danger and death. But, unlike the electronic siren, the female versions hold an equally powerful attraction to men.

In this thesis we have visited both the Victorian era and the recent past, to listen to fictional characters that are used by Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter to explore some of the critical issues that bedevil women in contemporary western society. I have mapped the movement of the mermaid and siren myths from the early, literal stage, through a more metaphorical existence during the Victorian era, to continuing manifestation as myth fragments in contemporary society. I have discussed, within a feminist psychoanalytic framework, a possible cause for the existence of these myths and myth fragments in the process whereby male infants abject the maternal and develop a sense of self that view all women as the ‘other’. The resulting categorisation of women into either whore or virgin/mother serves to control women within our patriarchal society. I have also identified how Atwood and Carter use myth references to dismantle the binary oppositions and offer new possibilities of behaviour for women.

The existence of depictions of mermaids date from at least 5000 B.C.,² and the sirens featured prominently in Homer’s *The Odyssey*³. Both sirens and mermaids reappear throughout texts over many subsequent centuries. By the end of the nineteenth Century it appears that most, if not all, of the population realised that mermaids and sirens did not exist in physical form, since the terms were used to describe the behaviour of women such as prostitutes.⁴ In contemporary society, mermaid and siren ‘types’ are not often named directly, but referenced by a set of characteristics that the reader would usually recognise as related to the original myths. I hope to have demonstrated that this is the case with the three novels that are the subject of this thesis: *The Robber Bride*, and *Alias Grace*, by Margaret Atwood, and *Nights at the Circus* by Angela Carter.

In Chapter 2 I have shown how the character of Zenia in *The Robber Bride* is clearly identified as a mermaid/siren character, both in the descriptions of her appearance and behaviour, and by other characters in the narrative. Like the Syrens of ancient times, she draws people to her (with stories rather than song), sucks them dry and leaves them for dead. We have seen that each of the other three principal female characters contains aspects of Zenia within themselves. Each of these characters faces difficulties in developing a sense of self that is both ‘approved’ by their society, and a comfortable fit with their personalities and aspirations. The male protagonists in the text also demonstrate, to a greater or lesser degree, the difficult journey the males make in developing a sense of self and in forming balanced relationships with women. Zenia recognises that Billy feels both desire and hate for her. Mitch finds desirable those things in Zenia that

he would not tolerate in his wife. In the end the ambiguity and its logical consequences destroys him.

Zenia is also associated with animals, thereby strengthening the concept of the 'monstrous' female. By highlighting this association, society is able to label any female deviant behaviour as 'less-than-human' and inviting condemnation and fear. However, Zenia is portrayed as both a sympathetic and unsympathetic character. By identifying characteristics of Zenia in each of the other female characters, Atwood paints a portrait of a more normal (if somewhat exaggerated) character, and in the process breaks open the binary opposition that limits the possibilities for many women.

In Chapter 3 I have demonstrated the way in which Carter uses the character of Fevvers to challenge the cultural production of femininity. We have seen that Carter attempts, through the character of Fevvers to rewrite the Leda myth and construct a new image for women to draw on. Carter's decision to give Fevvers wings serves a number of purposes. It highlights the connection between humans and animals and allows her to explore issues concerning the human/animal border, and the associated power relations. The image of Fevvers as part-animal also raises the issues regarding the status of women as being closer to nature and as being monstrous. The indeterminate nature of Fevvers' wings (are they real or not?) foregrounds the ambiguity of women's position in Victorian society, and the manner in which appearance is confused with reality. Fevvers' position as a part-human, earning her living in a circus, establishes her as an exemplar of a female occupying a marginal position in patriarchal society. The narrative builds a picture of a woman (or part-woman) who breaks free of the notion of unitary and stable identities.

Carter supports the principal female character with a male protagonist who both fears and desires Fevvers. However, Walser discovers, by the end of the narrative, that Fevvers' status of fake or bird-woman does not matter. Her wings turn out to be the least of her ambiguities.

I have shown in Chapter 4 that Grace Marks, in *Alias Grace* by Margaret Atwood, is also firmly connected to images of animals (wild beast, fox, cat) and is pictured by her doctor/analyst, Simon Jordan, as walking on water rather than on grass. She is portrayed as being desirable to men, and seems to attract the doctor despite his 'better judgement'. However, we have seen that Grace's character and behaviour also seem to display ambiguities. It remains unclear whether or not Grace assisted in the murders of Kinneer and Nancy but, after her conviction, Grace is variously described as a monster and a dangerous woman. Throughout the narrative, Grace's behaviour is narrowly defined, even when she receives a pardon, but is too old to work either as a servant or as a prostitute. However, in some ways, Grace is able to express herself more freely than many other women, due to her status as a convicted murderess. The bachelor doctor who seeks to analyse and understand Grace, Dr Simon Jordan, can be seen as the victim of the development process whereby the male infant develops an ambivalent relationship with the mother whilst entering the symbolic. He is strongly attracted to Grace because she is 'bad' but goes to great lengths to avoid entanglements with 'eligible' young women.

We have seen in this thesis that characters such as Simon (in *Alias Grace*) and Mitch (in *The Robber Bride*) have great difficulty in forming balanced relationships with the women in their lives. When considering the reason for the categorisation of women into siren and virgin/mother, a strong case can be made for the primary cause being the difficulties in development of a separate identity. Grosz argues that the 'mirror-stage', when the child recognises itself as a separate identity to the mother, leaves the individual in the position of always desiring self-completion.⁵ Nancy Chodorow views the cause of women being regarded by men as the 'other' as the process whereby boys:

...come to define themselves as more separate and distinct...[whereas] the basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world.⁶

Those characteristics that are viewed as being 'male' are more highly valued. Our western society has so closely connected the maternal with the female that, in abjecting the maternal container, the male infant also abjects the mother as a female.⁷

The categorisation of some women into siren/mermaid enables men to split off the undesirable parts of themselves and assign it to the 'other'. Eagleton points out that:

...man is what he is only by virtue of ceaselessly shutting out this other or opposite [woman], defining himself in antithesis to it.⁸

This labelling also works to control women's behaviour by demonising all that is a threat to the male. Hélène Cixous explores the issue of binary oppositions, all of which she claims correspond to the underlying opposition man/woman.⁹ Women whose behaviour does not fall within the 'accepted' side of the binary opposition can be categorised in a negative manner. Hence whore, slut, temptress, siren and mermaid are all labels for women who refuse to conform. These can be contrasted with other labels for 'good' women, such as virgin, mother, nun and wife.¹⁰

The structure of binary oppositions can therefore be viewed as politically motivated. Deviant behaviour is always that which does not serve the interests of the dominant or most powerful group in society. One of the ways in which women's power is reduced is by the labelling of some women as 'monstrous'. Marina Warner comments that:

The idea of a female, untamed nature which must be leashed, or else will wreak havoc, closely reflects anthropocentric and mythological encounters with monsters...¹¹

Fevvers is a notable example of the monstrous feminine, and she refuses to conform to the 'civilizing process' where Janet Wolff asserts:

...the body is increasingly patrolled, the range of acceptable behaviour increasingly carefully and narrowly defined...¹²

However, it would be hard to imagine Fevvers being able to lead a 'normal' life outside the environment of either the circus or the brothel, where both men and women who were on the edges of society could seek a kind of refuge.

In this thesis I have discussed the manner in which writers such as Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter have drawn characters that contain within them references to the early siren and mermaid myths. These allusions add another

layer of meaning to the text by their multiple intertextual referencing. However, by being easily identified, but also subverted, they function to deconstruct the patriarchal assumptions that perpetuate these myth fragments. This deconstruction does not destroy the rich meaning of the siren and mermaid myths, but serves to break them open and offer multiple meanings and opportunities for women. As Marina Warner asserts:

...myths are not always delusions, that deconstructing them does not necessarily mean wiping them, but that they can represent ways of making sense of universal matters, like sexual identity and family relations, and they enjoy a more vigorous life than we perhaps acknowledge, and exert more of an inspiration and influence than we think.¹³

Both Atwood and Carter present characters who have clearly identifiable elements of the siren and mermaid mythical creatures. However, both writers assign a wide range of behaviours and other characteristics to these characters, some of which are at odds with the traditional view of the siren/mermaid. The process of identifying the characters as siren/mermaid, then describing them as multiple, ambiguous characters, successfully deconstructs the binary oppositions upon which these myths are based, thereby decentering the privileged discourse. This strategy also succeeds in expanding the category of 'woman', offering a much broader and more fluid definition of identity for women.

The practice of producing texts that deconstruct the binary oppositions and decentre the privileged discourse is, in the view of Kristeva, an important pursuit. Kelly Oliver explains that:

Kristeva maintains that it is not maternity or reproduction that are responsible for women's oppression but the representations of them. She suggests that we need to be able to consider the *maternal function* apart from women and individual mothers...Kristeva believes that the representations of woman and motherhood can be changed through the power of texts.¹⁴

All three texts examined in this thesis use ambiguity to alert the reader to the problematic state of women in patriarchal society. The character Fevvers, in *Nights at the Circus*, is portrayed as a 'monstrous feminine', in the sense that she has ambiguous physical features. The character of Grace in *Alias Grace* also contains an ambiguity: in this text it is her mental state that confounds the experts. Zenia, in *The Robber Bride*, appears to die and then return to life. By pondering the status of each of the characters, the reader is drawn into closer consideration of their behaviour and character. The two texts set in the nineteenth century demonstrate the ways in which women's behaviour was highly constrained by societal expectations. Both Grace and Fevvers lived at the edge of society and both operated within the boundaries set by patriarchal society. Fevvers may have enjoyed more latitude, but only when she remained within the realm of the carnival, where the grotesque was tolerated. *The Robber Bride* is set in the mid-twentieth century, and Zenia appears to experience more freedom than her Victorian sisters. Zenia is able to travel the world as a single woman, and undertake a range of work. But she also trades on her sexuality and feminine behaviour to gain sympathy and money.

Atwood continues her interest in the 'bad' woman in her latest novel *The Blind Assassin*.¹⁵ The two sisters, Iris and Laura Chase, grow up in a fairy-tale mansion called Avilion, with Laura being portrayed as a slightly wayward girl who is somewhat out of touch with her society, but fully in tune with her own morals and

ethics. We see part of the story of how the men in Laura's life attempt to regulate her behaviour. Both Laura and her abusive brother-in-law die in possibly mysterious circumstances. We are left to question who was responsible for each of these deaths. In this text, Atwood explores the complexity in women's personalities and further questions the nature of 'truth' by presenting many versions of events, in a similar manner to that in *Alias Grace*. The text is set in the early part of the twentieth century, and in some senses provides a time bridge between *The Robber Bride* and *Alias Grace*. But *The Blind Assassin* shows the reader a portrait of two women performing their gender, unsuccessfully railing against the expectations of their class and their society. Another interesting example of mermaid myth fragments in recent literature is Ada in Campion's film, *The Piano*. Marina Warner comments that Ada is 'born' out of the sea, communicates through her piano (she is mute for a large part of the film), and is almost reclaimed by the sea in the film's climax. However, Ada survives and begins to learn to speak.¹⁶ The film is dominated by the sea, the piano and Ada's muteness in the face of great misery. Campion's 'bad' woman finds happiness through rejecting her assigned role as wife: when she achieves her liberty Ada no longer needs her piano.

In this thesis I have focussed almost exclusively on the impact of early childhood development of the male 'self' on women both in terms of their relationships with men and in the context of their position in society. The point of view largely has been from that of the woman. However, it would be naïve to maintain that the negative impact of this process has affected only women. In Chapter 4 I began to explore the dynamic link between male and female in *Alias Grace*. A more detailed discussion of the impact of early childhood development, from the perspective of the male, is outside the scope of this thesis, but would provide fertile ground for further investigation. This could be investigated within the context of the mermaid/siren myths, or approached from the perspective of other myth images that recur in contemporary literature. It is also important to note that each of the texts examined in this thesis have focussed on the 'bad' woman who is childless. The image of the bad mother presents another layer (or more) of complexity that is worthy of examination, but is also outside the scope of this thesis. I have touched on the issue of women's relationship with the mother in the texts by Atwood and Carter. Writers such as Irigaray¹⁷ focus on this difficult relationship, but I have not had the space to explore any connections of mother/daughter relationships with the broader mermaid and siren myths.

The challenge for contemporary women is remarkably similar to that expressed by Grace: "...how can I be all of these different things at once?"¹⁸

Grace was puzzled by multiple meaning, imprisoned as she was in the Victorian era, but contemporary women have the opportunity to accept our ambiguities and embrace the opportunities that they offer.

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- ¹³ Warner, p. xiii.
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- ¹⁷ L. Irigaray, 'And the one doesn't stir without the other', *Signs*, 7:1, 1981.
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