

Questioning the Triple Goddess: Myth and Meaning in Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride*

Myth is one of those terms which has been pushed in so many directions in recent years that its definition has become somewhat vague. Margaret Atwood's 1978 definition of myth does not go very far towards remedying this problem: "Myths mean stories, and traditional myths mean stories that have been repeated frequently. The term doesn't pertain to Greek myths alone. Grimm's Fairy Tales are just as much myth or story as anything else" (*Conversations* 114).¹ Personally, I have no argument with this vagueness, as, indeed, two of the forms of mythical intertext which I will discuss in relation to *The Robber Bride* are, precisely, Greek myths and fairy tales. These domains of discourse, which are closely related in the novel to the characters Charis and Roz, are two elements in a three-fold structure which also includes history, whose field of discourse is related to Tony.²

However, it is essential to address the ways in which mythical intertextuality functions. Atwood's *The Robber Bride* calls upon mythological intertexts in two different ways: first of all, by echoing pre-existing texts, mythical references make actions, characters, themes and structures pleasantly recognizable to the reader. This is an open-ended mode of intertextuality whereby familiar content is reworked into a later moment of textual production. The second function of myth in Atwood's novel is to frame meaning: to frame it in the sense of keeping it within certain boundaries, but also to frame it in the sense of setting it up as something which it is not, namely, limited in its possibilities. This is intertextuality which takes over

not so much the context as the structure of the work to which it refers. The principal intertexts which *The Robber Bride* uses in this way are the Triple Goddess and The Three Little Pigs. Because of the triple structure of each of these myths, underscored by the triple narrative of the characters' personal histories, this particular use of mythical intertext is, I will argue, the restriction which prevents the novel from opening up to the reader a range of potentially radical positions.

II

The question of myth in Atwood's work in general has been given considered attention by Sandra Djwa, notably in an article entitled "Back to the Primal: The Apprenticeship of Margaret Atwood." Therein, Djwa evokes the primary literary discourses to which Atwood was exposed during her formative years, especially during the period she spent at Victoria College in Toronto: amongst these influences were the poetry of T.S. Eliot and his conception of "the mythical method," that is, literature structured by developing a continuous parallel between classical myth and contemporary reality" (Djwa 19). Other influences included Robert Graves's *The White Goddess* which argued that patriarchal myths are in fact derivative of an earlier, matriarchal goddess myth. Finally, argues Djwa, the influence of Northrop Frye's perspective on myths and archetypes, as well as Atwood's acquaintance and discussions with Jay Macpherson, a writer who practised the "mythical method," were also important elements:

Macpherson was a guru to a group of younger poets who read, admired, and talked about her difficult, Blakean poetry, which combines snippets of Greek, Roman, and Biblical myth, fairy tale, and ballad in a style that moves from the formal to the colloquial voice. (29)

It is therefore no surprise to find traces of classical mythology in Atwood's writing, but it is more specifically the myth of the Triple Goddess, the goddess of the three ages—Maiden (Persephone), Matron (Venus) and Crone (Hecate)—which is the dominant mythical component of her work.

Readers of Atwood's work have already discussed this aspect of *The Robber Bride*: both Sandra Djwa and Hilde Staels point to the figure of the Great Goddess to clarify aspects of Zenia's identity and come to associate her more closely with the figure of Hecate (Djwa 41, Staels 201). I would suggest that the myth of the Triple Goddess is an intertext which is invoked far more extensively than its connection with Zenia would suggest: it contributes much to our understanding of the triad structure to which Tony,

Charis and Roz belong. It is not, however, the only intertext which informs the triadic structure; other dependencies are also hooked onto this framework which is sufficiently well-anchored to carry their weight. For the Triple Goddess is not a myth of action or odyssey, it is a myth of presence, a presence which is constructed so as to appear, at one and the same time, to precede those who receive it, and to live on beyond those who reactivate it through their story-telling.

As myth, the Triple Goddess is a chosen meaning-producing structure which Sandra Djwa sees as offering a universal site of identification for women: "For women the myth of the mother goddess is emotionally charged, expressing as it does the primal aspects of female experience: sexual initiation (the descent), followed by gestation and new birth" (16). What is presented here as universal experience captured by myth works at least as much the other way around. It is myth which is telling women what their experience of themselves should be, notably, that their sexuality involves a fall, and that sexual reproduction is the appropriate form of redemption from this fall. For many women today, sexuality is experienced differently and is far less strongly bound to the reproductive aspect. Djwa colludes, unconsciously I would like to think, in the tendency to see myth, and especially myths about women, as eternal. Roland Barthes refuses this view:

Y a-t-il des objets *fatalement* suggestifs, comme Baudelaire le disait de la Femme? Sûrement pas: on peut concevoir des mythes très anciens, il n'y en a pas d'éternels; car c'est l'histoire humaine qui fait passer le réel à l'état de parole, c'est elle et elle seule qui règle la vie et la mort du langage mythique. Lointain ou non, la mythologie ne peut avoir qu'un fondement historique, car le mythe est une parole choisie par l'histoire: il ne saurait surgir de la "nature" des choses. (216; Barthes's emphasis)

The type of speech in which the goddess myth participates is, as mentioned above, one which depends heavily on its structure, or in other words, on its internal organization which attempts to collapse the difference between the particular and the universal. It is "one" and it is "three," it is "always" and it is "now," it is all of life, and, at the same time, life carved up into three neat phases. It is, therefore, in every aspect of its sign, the promise of presence and fullness. In myth, long-term stability of form is often invoked as the proof and the guarantee of something beyond time, beyond reach, beyond human intervention. In Derrida's general and far-reaching attempt to wrest the concept of structure from the notion of a fixed centre or origin, he writes:

Le concept de structure centrée est en effet le concept d'un jeu *fondé*, constitué depuis une immobilité fondatrice et une certitude rassurante, elle-même soustraite au jeu. Depuis cette certitude, l'angoisse peut être maîtrisée, qui naît toujours d'une certaine manière d'être impliqué dans le jeu, d'être pris au jeu, d'être comme être d'entrée de jeu dans le jeu. (410)

The Triple Goddess, it seems fairly clear, is just this sort of centred, presence-affirming framework which allows for “les répétitions, les substitutions, les transformations, les permutations” (Derrida 410) within its walls, without the essential unity of the structure being in any way at stake. Atwood plays brilliantly, joyfully, but the deck is, to some extent, stacked. The very structure of the Triple Goddess and its variants in *The Robber Bride* allows for only one outcome, to use Atwood's terminology. The structure will remain intact, and Atwood knows that from the onset.

III

The Triple Goddess belongs to the semiotic sphere of the mysterious. Like all divine trinities, beginning with the Father, Son and Holy Ghost who is/are more familiar to many of us, she is both one and several. She is three, in her three phases: maiden, matron and crone, and yet, unified as the muse, she is at once creator and destroyer. Whether evoked through the variations on her seemingly timeless names—the Great, the White, the Triple or the Mother goddess—or situated within the various cultures which have effected these transformations—the stability and immortality of the figure never come into question. A breach in the structure, and the structure would vanish. It is this structure of immortality which serves as the basis for the construction of Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride*.

The three-in-oneness of the Triple Goddess is worked into the choice and development of the characters, as well as into the narrative organisation of their respective stories. Within the doubled framing chapters (“Onset” and “Toxique”; “Toxique” and “Outcome”), at the centre of the story, are the triple, parallel narratives of Tony, Charis and Roz. Each of these inner chapters also contains its own beginning, middle and end which are structured in a highly controlled manner. More precisely, the physical space in which each of these inner chapters begins and ends, as well as the objects present at those moments, indicates the domain of association for each character.

When, in the long inner chapter called “Black Enamel,” Tony is to begin telling of her battle with Zenia, she goes into the basement and sits beside a “large sand-table” which “contains a three-dimensional map of Europe and

the Mediterranean, made of hardened flour-and-salt paste" (125); she stays by it until her story has been told, and then she "turns out the cellar lights and climbs the stairs to the kitchen" (215). In this way, the presence of the map showing "the day of Otto the Red's fateful battle" (125) holds her narrative within the sphere of her function as historian. It is her role to evoke traditional history (Canadian and European essentially) and, in the process, to question whether traditional historical narratives have any value. The answers she provides at the end of the novel are tentative and ambiguous, as the response to the following question indicates: "But do the stories of history really teach anything at all? In a general sense, thinks Tony, *possibly not*" (518; my emphasis).

Through similar structural techniques, Charis will be associated with the mythological figure of Charon, the boatman of the Styx. This connection is provoked on the one hand by the homophonic relation between "Charon" and Karen, Charis's submerged, unhappy side, but also from the fact that, before telling her story, she boards a ferry-boat which takes her from the shores of Lake Ontario to her home on Centre Island, where, having finished the narrative of her personal history, she disembarks. Other references to the ferry-boat develop the allusion to the Charon myth in such a way that it is both visible and invisible within the overall scene described. Let us consider the following passage which recounts the last time Charis sees her companion Billy:

When she reaches the dock, the ferry is already boarding. People are going on, singly and in twos; there's something processional about their entrance, in the way they step from land to water. Right here was where she last saw Billy; and also Zenia, in the flesh. They were already aboard, and as Charis came heavily running, gasping, hands on her belly to hold it attached to her, it was dangerous for her to run like that, she could have fallen and lost the baby, the ferry men were hoisting up the gangway, the ferry was hooting and backing out, the deep water churning to a whirlpool. She couldn't have jumped. (58)

Fairly indirectly, the general atmosphere and certain details call upon the intertext of the myth of Charon. The description of the procession, for instance, suggests the solemnity which might be associated with a funeral. Charis, who is carrying a life, is excluded from the trip, and she will never see the beloved departing person again. Structurally, this creates a division between those "living on the earth" and those who have undertaken a water voyage. The water, clearly dangerous, is also associated with the river Styx because of the whirlpool which forms as the boat is leaving the harbour, recalling the whirlpool Charybdis (a name which is close to Charis in its

form). Finally, the named presence of actual “ferry men” allows us to bridge the symbolic gap between practices of contemporary life and mythological beliefs.³

Once the significant domains of history and mythology have been anchored in the characters of Tony and Charis, it is Roz’s turn to go and find an appropriate setting to tell her story. Like Tony, she goes into the basement,

sits down on the cellar floor . . . pulls books off the shelves at random . . . There on the cover is the dark forest, the dark wolfish forest, where lost children wander and foxes lurk, and anything can happen; there is the castle turret, poking through the knobbly trees. *The Three Little Pigs*, she reads. The first little pig built his house of straw. *Her house, her house*, shout the small voices in her head. (330)

In this extract, the illusion of randomness is offered, but the design is retrospectively apparent. The book which *comes into* Roz’s hands will provide another far-reaching intertext to echo that of the mythical goddess in its tripleness and in its ostensible permanence: the fairy-tale mode has in Roz its ascribed godmother, and its key tale, *The Three Little Pigs*. In its economic density, the quotation cited above interlaces analeptic references to the ways in which Tony and Charis have entered into the overall structure of the fairy tale; the reference to the castle turret has already been associated with Tony (“Tony in her turret room” 211), and there have been references to the fragility of Charis’s house on at least two previous instances (“her flimsy house that is still standing” 322, and “Charis wished there were a layer of straw under her . . . house” 307). In the attribution of relatively weak or strong houses to the characters, and through the conversion of male pronouns to female ones for the fairy tale characters, the text brings together key elements in the structuring of this intertext.

Moreover, as the guardian of the world of fairy tales, Roz has her own associated tales: she is, in her dreams, a confused Goldilocks in a lifeless house walking “through the white kitchen where nothing moves, past the table with the three chairs” (450). Yet, as other critics have pointed out, Roz is also very clearly associated with the Cinderella figure, the poor little girl who becomes rich. She is, however, an atypical Cinderella: just as Tony, the historian, is lacking in her field because she cannot uncover any real value in the practice of historiography, and Charis, with her repressed underwater self, is as much the passenger as the ferry-man in her own Charon myth, Roz lacks the prescribed beauty of her archetype, and must make do with a

prince whose charm is not reserved for her alone.

This exploration of one aspect of the structural organisation of *The Robber Bride* shows that each of the characters has a domain of human story-telling associated with her: for Tony it is history, for Charis it is mythology and for Roz it is the world of fairy tales. Beyond their attachment to a particular character, each of these domains receives in turn more extensive development within which the structural logic of the domain itself prevails. Hence, in the historical development of each character, time and the passing of generations shape the text. The starting point is the Second World War, marked clearly as “the past” through its association with the parental generation; then the story moves on to the “present” battles of the Tony-Charis-Roz generation (these battles are seen as being in some way related to the childhood experiences of the characters) and the novel finishes with speculative considerations about the next generation, through the children of Roz and Charis. The emphasis on cause-and-effect in historical narrative is tentatively affirmed, even if the future remains unpredictable.

Within the fairy tale structure, the three little pigs will all be bitten by the wolfish Zenia. There is no place which provides protection from her attacks, no house which is an absolute refuge. It is perhaps for this reason that the “three little pigs” do not run from their homes looking for shelter, but run to each other’s house to offer aid and comfort to the most recent victim. When Tony is on her own after West leaves her for Zenia, Roz goes and stays with her. Tony and Roz do the same for Charis when she is pregnant and is devastated because Billy has left with Zenia. Finally, Tony and Charis go to Roz after she attempts to commit suicide, this following Mitch’s desertion of her for Zenia, and his own subsequent suicide. According to Bettelheim, *The Three Little Pigs* in its traditional form teaches the reader that cumulative experience makes one wiser. Here, however, there is a sense of people going around in circles making consoling gestures towards each other. Nonetheless, and in spite of the transformations of the tale, the wolf gets boiled in the end, falling from her hotel balcony into the fountain/cauldron in the courtyard below. The reasons for this particular ending seem to arise, at least in part, from Atwood’s decision to respect the overall structure of the fairy tale, a choice which, as I will argue further on, imposes limitations on the potential force of the novel.

I have very briefly summarized the discourses related to Tony and Roz so as to be able to focus more intensely now on that which is related to Charis,

the sphere of mythology. While it seemed important to show that there are multiple and intricately developed intertexts at work in the novel, it is the discourse of classical mythology, the one which comes under the reign of the Triple Goddess which centres the text structurally. I will begin by looking at the triad in its fragmented form, through the characters of Tony, Charis, and Roz, in order to explore the range of play (in the form of transformations, inversions, subversions, and so on) which they are allowed within the limits of their attachment to their mythical model. I will then briefly examine the more dynamic function attributed to the goddess figure: that of the muse in her specific manifestation as Zenia.

IV

Miss Tony

Tony is, in the framework of the Triple Goddess, “the elusive Diana or Maiden figure, the young girl” (Atwood, *Survival* 199). This analogical relationship in *The Robber Bride* is not based on one over-riding element, but on the interweaving of intertextual suggestions throughout the novel. The “young girl” aspect of the mythological figure is associated with youthful beauty, hunting, chastity, and childlessness. In terms of appearances, Margaret Atwood attributes this “youthfulness” to Tony by describing her in comically inappropriate clothing: when she goes to her first university “bash” wearing “a dark green corduroy jumper with a white blouse under it, a green velvet hairband, and knee socks and brown loafers,” a young man “gives her an unfocused look” and comments: “Shit, the Girl Guides” (140). Later, well into her forties, Tony is described as wearing “a forest green rayon outfit with small white polka dots that she bought in the children’s section at Eaton’s” (18). As these descriptions suggest, Tony’s childlike appearance is, at least in part, a refusal to take on the dress codes of the adult world, and with it, the world of gendered sexuality.

Moreover, the youthfulness which characterizes Tony is not in any way that of fresh-faced innocence; indeed, she is described as looking like “a very young old person, or a very old young person” (19). She is not shown to be especially attractive to men, and does not enter into the illusory magic of make-up, feeling that “Lipstick is alarming on her” (19). The stereotypical beauty that we might readily associate with the Maiden aspect of the triad is subverted in these contradictory descriptions of Tony. Nonetheless, even as, within this comparison, the component of female beauty is being undermined, the descriptions of Tony’s clothing seem to be shooting out

associative filaments in the direction of another aspect of Diana, the forest huntress, through the words “forest green” (18) and “dark green” (140). Tony is, in many ways, a paradoxical Diana. Situated outside the stereotype of a seductive young goddess, she will have no suitors pursuing her and she will have to turn her hunting skills to the problem of tracking down a male partner.

Tony’s potential lover is West; there is no other man on her horizon. Their relationship is initially situated on the plane of platonic friendship: “Drinking coffee was about all Tony did with West” (137). In the absence of any sexual overtures, Tony is not forced to determine her own position in relation to her sexuality and, indeed, the classic position offered by her mythological role model is that of chastity. To this extent, Tony remains in line with “Diana.” Moreover, “the thought of going to bed with anyone at all is terrifying” (200). However, unlike her mythological forebear, this refusal of sexuality is not born of an ideal to defend, but of her inability to see herself as a sexual being and to project herself into such a scenario.

However, when Roz suggests that Tony should take West to bed (200), and also provides her with a reason she can believe in, or in other words, an ideal to invest, Tony responds positively, since it is not about sex, it is “really” about “saving [West’s] life” (201). Depressed after Zenia’s departure, West is perishing and Tony decides that in such an extreme situation “heroism and self-sacrifice are called for. [She] grits her teeth and sets out to seduce West” (201). This ironic discourse also serves to keep the military strategist that Tony incarnates in view, since it is in the name of “duty” and by developing a “strategy” that she will undertake her mission.

Margaret Atwood thus creates a paradoxical situation where the Maiden, who should be pursued by a suitor, whom she is, in fact, expected to resist, finds herself confronted by a lover who is not one. Moreover, this potential lover is not chasing her, and in fact seems to be resisting her. Even when Tony makes considerable efforts to court and seduce him, “cooking a candlelight dinner” for example or “[taking] him to movies . . . that give her a chance to clutch his hand in the dark” (201), West remains impassive. The total inversion of the active and passive roles is accomplished when West seems to be dying, his “eyelids . . . curved and pure, like those on carved tombstone saints” (201), and Tony employs the method which, in fairy tales, never fails: “[she] gives him a kiss,” albeit “on the forehead” (201). Through the inversion of roles, it is the male character, put to sleep by a wicked witch (Zenia) who must await the kiss of salvation which comes from a woman.

The sense of liberation nonetheless remains attached to Tony who, by her action, has freed herself from the obligation of chastity suggested by the Diana figure.

She and West make love and the experience is like a baptism for Tony:

[it's] like falling into a river, because West is what other people call him, a long drink of water, and Tony is so thirsty, she's parched, she's been wandering in the desert all of these years, and now at last somebody truly needs her. (202)

The metaphor at work here is that of descent and rebirth, the mythical structure of female sexuality which we referred to earlier. The myth of Persephone who was swallowed up by the earth and given to the violent Hades is clearly softened in Atwood's version, where the violence of the mythical version is transformed into a tender, comfy sort of sexuality. Not an ideal, but a situation which allows the character Tony to free herself from her sense of sexual inadequacy.

Mrs. Roz

Roz, as the only one of the three women to hold a discourse which invests the body, conjugal love and children with positive values, can be associated with the Matron figure of the Triple Goddess, the guardian of the hearth and family values. This reference can be understood most clearly in Roz's self-image, communicated through internal focalisation: "She tried so hard to be kind and nurturing" (332). The spheres included in this desire to nurture include, of course, the world of her children, over whom "[s]he extends her invisible wings, her warm feathery angel's wings, her fluttery hen's wings, undervalued and necessary, she enfolds them. *Secure*, is what she wants them to feel" (341). But it is especially in the eyes of her husband, Mitch, that Roz must cultivate this image which is, in fact, the basis of their relationship as a couple: "In Mitch's cosmology, Roz's body represents possessions, solidity, the domestic virtues, hearth and home, long usage. Mother-of-his-children. The den" (335). Traditionally, in exchange for this affective security, Mitch should fulfil the role of hunter (or breadwinner), and protector of the family.

This schema is not, however, respected, since the couple lives off Roz's fortune, inherited from her father. Instead of being the hard-working husband tradition would have him be, Mitch is described mostly as a skirt-chaser, and it is paradoxically Roz who is put in the position of the protector. Specifically, Roz saves Mitch from becoming entrapped by the situations he creates through his extra-marital affairs, by repeatedly taking

him back into the fold of the family whose stability he has put in danger.

Yet, after a certain time, Roz no longer finds herself sufficiently rewarded by the limited and limiting role of the eternally forgiving and loving wife, and she begins to push back the moment when she will save Mitch until, finally, she refuses to do so altogether. When, because of Zenia, things fall apart around him and Mitch comes looking for comfort, Roz does not comply:

"I want to come back," he tells her, gazing around the high, wide living room, the spacious domain that Roz has made, that was once his to share. Not *Will you let me come back?* Not *I want you back*. Nothing to do with Roz, no mention of her at all. It's the room he's claiming, the territory. He is deeply mistaken . . .

Now he does finally look at her. God knows who he sees. Some avenging angel, some giantess with a bared arm and a sword—it can't be Roz, tender and feathery Roz, not the way he's staring at her. (426-27)

Roz, through Mitch's perception of her, sees herself transformed into a warrior woman, an Amazon figure closer to Diana. Since we have no access to Mitch's thoughts, he functions as a mirror for Roz, offering a reflection which Roz processes through mythological imagery. Roz is rendered insecure by the radical nature of the shift in her self-perception, and she must fight to resist the temptation to go back to more familiar modes: "[she] clenches her fists tight because she won't let herself be fooled like that again" (429). Roz achieves a form of self-affirmation here which is that of the victim confronting the victimizer, not so much as a person, but as a pattern of abuse in which both sides have colluded. She refuses to collude any longer, because the illusion which made that possibility attractive to her (the illusion that Mitch, through his unfaithfulness and return, had always been expressing a paradoxical form of love for her) has been shattered. Affirming her self-worth is, therefore, at the same time, an act which renders the comforting illusion which had also been a part of her self-definition, definitively inaccessible.

Ms. Charis

The final phase of the Triple Goddess is that of the Crone, the mystical figure who "presides over death and has oracular powers" (Atwood, *Survival* 199). Charis has already been associated with the realm of death through her proximity with the figure of Charon and she incarnates just as clearly the mystical aspect of the Crone phase. This reference is signalled on the level of "realism" since Charis's character is based to some extent on an

affiliation with New Age beliefs. An example of the forms of mysticism involved can be seen in the following description of a very elaborate private ceremony which Charis carries out to give herself the courage to affront Zenia:

She took the book and the gloves downstairs and put them on the small table under the main window in the living room—where the sunlight would shine in on them and dispel their shadow sides—and set her amethyst geode beside them, and surrounded them with dried marigold petals. To this arrangement she added, after some thought, her grandmother's Bible, always a potent object, and a lump of earth from her garden. She meditated on this collection for twenty minutes twice a day. (470)

The hoped-for result of this ritual would be to allow Charis "to absorb the positive aspects of her friends, the things that were missing in herself" (470). For, in the same way that Tony is a paradoxical Maiden and Roz a reformed nurturer, Charis, lacking strength of will, is a problematic Hecate figure.

Fatherless, beaten and raped as a child, Charis perceives herself as divided, and she only accepts the more peaceable side of herself. Her rejection of that part of herself which knows about evil occurred when she was a child, enduring abuse at the hands of her uncle:

[H]e falls on top of Karen and puts his slabby hand over her mouth, and splits her in two. He splits her in two right up the middle and her skin comes open like the dry skin of a cocoon, and Charis flies out. Her new body is light as a feather, light as air. There's no pain in it at all . . . What she sees is a small pale girl, her face contorted and streaming, nose and eyes wet as if she's drowning—gasping for air, going under again, gasping. (294)

Although the violence of the uncle's sexual penetration of the child is suggested by the phrase "he splits her in two," this violence is immediately attenuated by the butterfly imagery ("cocoon," "flies out") which follows. This seems to be an attempt to attribute to Charis a defence mechanism which R.D. Laing describes under the heading of "the unembodied self." He writes:

In this position the individual experiences his self as being more or less divorced or detached from his body. *The body is felt more as one object among other objects in the world than as the core of the individual's own being.* Instead of being the core of his true self, the body is felt as the core of a *false self*, which a detached, disembodied, "inner," "true" self looks on at with tenderness, amusement, or hatred as the case may be. (69; Laing's emphases)

The emotion attributed to Charis's unembodied self is that of "amazement" as she watches "the man [who] grunts, as the small child wriggles and flails as if hooked through the neck" (294-95). Atwood, while constructing this psychological way out for her character, nevertheless forces the reader to take fully into account the impact of the child being martyred by the sexual violence of an adult. Through the image of the little girl "drowning—gasping for air, going under again, gasping" (294), the reader is taken beyond Charis's amazement to the more critical perspective which we, as readers and members of society, need to keep in sight.

Charis's ritual of meditation may be seen as part of her continuing attempt to negotiate her place in a world of violence. But it also has other connotations. Amongst the objects upon which Charis meditates is her Grandmother's bible, the book which first revealed Charis's oracular powers. Charis, choosing a passage in the bible with a pin, lands, on three separate occasions, on the story of Jezebel, the whore of Babylon. The grandmother, who initiates Charis into the practice of this "art" cannot see how this story could relate to Charis, and she says "Must be too far ahead" (278). This impression is confirmed on the second occasion:

"Ah," said her grandmother, squinting. "Jezebel again . . . Now that's a strange thing, for a little girl . . . You must be living ahead of yourself." (285)

The repeated prediction eventually comes to be associated with the death of Zenia which Charis also "sees" from a distance: "I saw it in the candle," says Charis. "I saw her falling. She was falling, into water. I saw it! She's dead." Charis begins to cry" (500).

Unlike the situations of Tony and Roz, where the mythological roles offered can be transposed onto life patterns and psychological possibilities that are open to all of us (sexual awakening, nurturing), Charis's psychic powers require of the reader greater suspension of disbelief. Indeed, within the novel, the reality-effect accorded to this mystical experience is never contradicted; on the contrary, it is reinforced when Charis's premonitory vision turns out to be correct. At that point, for this reader, the mythological analogy is infringing on the realist boundaries to an untenable extent. This is not to suggest that *The Robber Bride* is simply, or even mainly, a realist novel, but its realist level, established by the spatial and temporal setting (Toronto in the 1990s) and by the characters whose lives are situated within recognizable limits for the contemporary reader, cannot be ignored. Within this perspective, the magical possibilities offered by the character of Charis are problematic.

Muse

In my discussion of character construction within a mythological framework, I have noted where the different characters both meet up with and diverge from their role models. We might note, in conclusion, that the points at which the characters fail to conform to their corresponding element of the Triple Goddess, Zenia gives every appearance of filling in that gap. Thus, the elements of the Maiden to which Tony can only correspond in a comic mode are fully present in their mythological form in Zenia in her relationship to West. For him, she is beauty ("Zenia is as beautiful as ever" 36) and paradoxically, chastity: "Zenia was frigid" (457). Similarly, while Roz can provide the form of the family structure, it is to Zenia that Mitch would like to give his undying love (424, 428), and where Charis is the incarnation of a fragile Hecate figure struggling to assemble strength and will, Zenia "is a cold and treacherous bitch" (424).

Zenia functions as a sort of inverted mirror figure for the characters in their Triple Goddess roles, but also, for Charis, in her Charon aspect. This is especially striking in the following image which echoes, inverts and amplifies an earlier description of Charis on the ferry, "leaning on the railing, facing backwards" (225): "Zenia sweeps through life like a prow, like a galleon. She's magnificent, she's unique. She's the sharp edge" (463). Zenia is up front, breaking new ground, claiming territory, while Charis, prudent, is looking back, trying to read the traces of the past. This comparison will later be extended to the triad of women when, at Zenia's "wake," the "three of them stand at the back of the ferry as it churns its way through the harbour, outbound towards the Island, trailing the momentary darkness of its wake" (522). They contemplate the "momentary darkness," which is also Zenia's passage in their lives, as if it were the trace of a disaster which had crossed their paths, a disaster which they had survived, and had also learned from. The rounded polysemy of the signifier "wake" comes into play here, signifying the farewell ceremony to Zenia, the churning water following the boat's path, and the overall effect of Zenia on the lives of the three women: she has "wakened" them to other ways of approaching conflict. Through their contact with Zenia, they acquire the power to recreate their self-images; instead of continuing to perceive themselves as innocent victims of circumstances beyond their control, they begin to understand and accept that they do have the power to react, intervene, protest, and even counter-attack.

Here, however, the reader needs to be wary of transforming Zenia into an

ideal. Calling her the “good witch” as Bloom and Makowsky do (177) on the basis of the fact that the women do seem to gain in self-knowledge is not tenable. It is a form of “the end justifies the means” logic. Zenia is, for the women, a catastrophe. There is nothing in Zenia’s constructed personality which could be seen as positive within the human contexts provided and for that reason, “Zenia remains a female villain—that is, a toxic figure” (Bouson 162). It would require complete abstraction from context for us to be able to distil qualities such as the intelligence, cunning, perseverance, and strength of will which the character Zenia displays and to reinvest them positively. Such traits of character, empty of context, are meaningless. It is only to the extent that the other characters, at the end of the novel, can envisage, without guilt, the possibility of turning these traits to their own needs and desires that they take on positive potential.

V

We have had such pleasure in following the varying movements, transformations, hidden forms and reformulations of the Triple Goddess that it may seem ungenerous to question the very premises of the source of this pleasure. Let us begin by questioning instead what sort of pleasure we have been having. Has it been the pleasure of being “*impliqué dans le jeu*” as Derrida puts it, or has it been the pleasure of piecing together a puzzle which is exterior to us? We have watched the Triple Goddess take shape, shift about, be stretched in different directions, and turned upside down. We have attended the event of her modernisation, and the confrontation of her unity and her fragmentation, but we have never really doubted that she would survive. Indeed, Tony’s voice, setting the story up through hindsight in the prefatory section “Onset” allows us to know from the beginning that, whatever the dangers ahead, the voice which speaks for the “we” at stake, has come through the ordeal. Moreover, even the survival of Zenia is ensured: in the burst of energetic blue light as she returns to the underworld of collective memory (526), we recognize the same blue light which, associated with Charis and her grandmother, signifies mystical power (280, 296). We understand that Zenia is simply waving *au revoir* to us and she has no sooner disappeared than she is reinstated in iconic form as an artefact which Tony can contemplate: “an ancient statuette dug up from a Minoan palace” (527).⁴ Tony is then reunited with the other two members of the human form of the goddess, Charis and Roz, so that the structure, both in its unified and in its fragmented configurations, is symbolically intact at the

close of the novel.

The structure of the Triple Goddess is, I would conclude, the basis upon which the dominant possibilities of meaning in *The Robber Bride* rest. It is what serves to hold the text in place, and it is in place before the play of signification can begin; it is a form of “sure play,” “[c]ar il y a un jeu sûr: celui qui se limite à la *substitution de pièces données et existantes, présentes*” (Derrida 427, his emphases). I have tried, in this interpretation of *The Robber Bride*, to focus on the play of signification, remaining open to the possibility that it might, at some point, undermine the structural expectations attached to the intertext of the Triple Goddess. For example, it might have killed off the mother goddess. It might have broken up the parallelism of the women’s lives, one of the women might have joined Zenia, Zenia might have actually loved one of the men, one of the women might have killed Zenia and been forced to face the consequences of transgression. . . . That of course, would have been a radically different story, you might say. Clearly the novel is not concerned with questions of probability, but with resolving, within a predetermined framework, the questions it raises, much as fairy tales do.

But why not, we might ask ourselves? Should we not read fairy tales? It is of course an option, as long as we recognize them as fairy tales, structures of reassurance which presume that we are not yet capable of facing life without magical intervention. Indeed, Bruno Bettelheim comments on the function of such stories. He notes the importance of magic in the psychological structuring of children, but also the role these stories play in helping the child “to relinquish his infantile dependency wishes and achieve a more satisfying independent existence.” In other words,

the more secure a person feels within the world, the less he will need to hold on to “infantile” projections—mythical explanations or fairy-tale solutions to life’s external problems—and the more he can afford to seek rational explanations On the other hand, the more insecure a man is in himself and his place in the immediate world, the more he withdraws into himself because of fear or else moves outward to conquer for conquest’s sake. (51)

If someone who is insecure is prone either to turn to conquest or to social withdrawal as a form of self-defence, in *The Robber Bride*, it is Zenia who seems to incarnate the conquering spirit. In contrast, the female triad is characterized by the desire of its members to withdraw within themselves, and while they do gain an ounce of courage at the end, they are in fact finally delivered from Zenia and the threat that she represents to them by

the magical resolution of her timely accident. The genie goes back into the bottle, the wolf is boiled, and in this way, anxiety is temporarily mastered.

One might argue that the comforting resolution the novel offers is in fact tempered by its realist strain. The women do not find all their personal problems resolved, they have just taken a small step forward in terms of personal self-knowledge. Yet, as I argued earlier, the realist level is not the strongest one in the novel. What stands out most clearly for the reader is the impression of a congregation of the women, who will, “increasingly in their lives, tell stories” (528). It is the completion of the structure, the affirmation of the three-in-oneness which dominates meaning. It is, indeed, the reaffirmation of the mythical structure of the trinity, given (or given back) to matriarchal designs. Personally, I subscribe whole-heartedly to the point of view expressed by Angela Carter who, in *The Sadeian Woman*, wrote:

All the mythic versions of women from the myth of the redeeming purity of the virgin to that of the healing, reconciling mother, are consolatory nonsense; and consolatory nonsense seems to me a fair definition of myth, anyway. Mother goddesses are just as silly a notion as father gods. If a revival of the myths of these cults gives women emotional satisfaction, it does so at the price of obscuring the real conditions of life. This is why they were invented in the first place. (5)

This function of “obscuring the real conditions of life” is also underlined by Roland Barthes: “Nous sommes ici au principe même du mythe: il transforme l’histoire en nature” (237). The use of myth, or rather the imposition of myth as a structuring framework, and the maintaining of the integrity of this structure beyond the reaches of possible disruption is a strategy which attempts to do away with history: “En passant de l’histoire à la nature, le mythe fait une économie: il abolit la complexité des actes humains, leur donne la simplicité des essences . . . [I]l fonde une clarté heureuse: les choses ont l’air de signifier toutes seules” (Barthes 252).

In *The Robber Bride*, the impoverishment of the human possibilities of the characters and their world may be seen as the result of the illusory reassurance created by Atwood’s triple frame of effects: the intimations of permanence which the myth structure offers, the assurance of survival promised by the fairy tale ending, and the budding nostalgia on which the realist level finishes create an almost oppressive sense of closure. This is not to deny that Atwood’s use of traditional structures is innovative. On the contrary, her blending of the different realms of discourse does produce something new which is, at times, joyfully poetic. Yet, as the novel explores these new possibilities, it never manages to evacuate the centring force, the

anchoring presence, the fundamental logocentrism which these discursive traditions carry with them. Even as *The Robber Bride* attempts to offer women a way of reconstructing their identity more positively, acknowledging the fear and the risk of pain which the process involves, the novel cushions the reader against any such journey on the ontological level. The ending of *The Robber Bride* tries to evacuate the conflictual tension between the painful exploration of new ways of being on the one hand, and structures of reassurance on the other. The book favours the latter and thereby impoverishes, retrospectively, an important part of the reader's experience of the novel.

NOTES

- 1 Interview with Karla Hammond, "Articulating the Mute." Atwood, *Conversations* 109-20.
- 2 The frequent association of the words "history" and "story" in the novel (198, 383, 403) generally grants history the same discursive status as Greek myths and fairy tales.
- 3 Another intertextual association which emerges here from the processional aspect of the described scene is that of Noah's ark. Here, it is Charis who is "not wanted on the voyage," to quote Timothy Findley. One intertext suggests her exclusion from death, the other her exclusion from life. These are productive contradictions which feed the ambiguity of Charis's divided self.
- 4 In her conversation with Victor-Lévy Beaulieu concerning the end of *The Robber Bride*, Atwood is quite clear about Zenia's potential for resurrection: "Why scatter her ashes like that? That's a little obscure . . . At the end of a lot of vampire movies, the vampire is burned and its ashes are scattered. In a Christopher Lee movie, you know that, after a certain amount of time, the ashes of the vampire will come back together and form the vampire again. That's the image I wanted to create." *Two Solicitudes* 96.

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