

## Chapter 1

# The Politics of Envy in Academic Feminist Communities and in Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride*

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Opening this book with a study of envy enables me to focus on the primary intensity of the desire for identification and to show the often unacknowledged workings of that desire both in community dynamics and in the relations between individuals. As Lacan defines it, envy springs from the desire to be an other who is perceived as lacking nothing, as completed and fulfilled by the possession of the object *a*. This other appears to have a heightened vitality and self-possession forever denied the subject. While later chapters unfold the complications in relations between white feminists and feminists of color that derive from the will to identify with the other's supposed self-sufficiency and wholeness, here I deal with a different feminist problematic: the denial of envy, a primitive form of identification, in the name of an ethic of sisterly support. My examples combine reports from contemporary academic feminists with a fictional model of the threat that envy poses to feminist community: Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride*. I argue that denying the existence of envy between women in order to preserve feminist solidarity actually undermines solidarity and that envy, along with other hostile feelings generated by the uneven distribution of power between women, needs to be theorized and integrated into the feminist ethic of mutual support.

In Seminar VII, Lacan offers a distinction between envy and jealousy through an anecdote drawn from St. Augustine's *Confessions*. Augustine reports seeing a little boy bitterly eyeing his infant brother at the mother's breast. This is envy, Lacan says—not jealousy: "*invidia* [envy] must not be confused with jealousy" (S VII 116). It is not what the baby *has* that his older brother wants: he has no desire for breast

milk. What he wants is to *be* the figure of completion he sees before him. I want to make the same distinction: envy focuses on being, not having; envy targets what the other is, not what the other has; it is a form of identification.<sup>1</sup> “True envy,” says Lacan, is “the envy that makes the subject pale before the image of a completeness closed upon itself, before the idea that the *petit a*, the separated *a* from which he is hanging, may be for another the possession that gives satisfaction, *Befriedigung*” (S VII 116). In the small boy’s vision the breast stands in for the object *a*, completing the baby and thus enabling it to experience a closed circuit of “jouissance”—a total instinctual satisfaction. For Lacan, then, envy is the desire to be the other insofar as the other is perceived as self-complete and in possession of an untrammelled jouissance.

Behind the Lacanian structure of envy lies the subject’s relation to the object *a*. Subjectivity is founded on lack: entrance into the symbolic order of language and social law enables one to become a subject, but the price of entry is the sense of losing some part of an originary wholeness, some piece of instinctual satisfaction. That loss is figured as the loss of a part-object—of a part once integral to one’s body. Lacan explains the function of the object *a* in a matheme that represents the fundamental fantasy, the unconscious basis of desire:  $\$ \langle \rangle a$ . The barred *S* represents the subject who has been depleted, on entry into the symbolic, by the deletion of the “object *a*,” that part of the self that gave him or her (the illusion of) completion. The subject remains in a relation of attraction/repulsion ( $\langle \rangle$ ) to the lost object *a*. The “*a*” is a paradoxical object, “both that which is lost . . . and the trace of this loss, that which remains as a left-over to remind the subject of the lost jouissance” (Evans, “Jouissance” 26). This structure founds the unconscious; and from the unconscious it generates desire—desire for the ever-unattainable lost object.

Because the fundamental fantasy,  $\$ \langle \rangle a$ , is indeed fundamental to the unconscious of all subjects, everyone is susceptible to the suspicion that someone else is able to actualize the fantasy of jouissance, to enjoy possession of the object *a*. This suspicion takes the form of the belief that the other is able to enjoy a heightened state of vitality, fulfillment, and jouissance. Lacan says in Seminar VII that he is struck by some of his patients’ convictions that “jouissance [is] that which is only accessible to the other.” Only the Germans, he says, have a word for this passion of envy: *Lebensneid*. “*Lebensneid* is not an ordinary jealousy, it is the jealousy born in a subject in his relation to an other, insofar as

this other is held to enjoy a certain form of jouissance or superabundant vitality.” (The translation reads “jealousy”, but the word *neid* means envy, and Lacan is explicitly defining envy here.) The envy is extreme—“to the point of hatred and the need to destroy”—yet its intensity is remarkable given that it targets something that the subject can neither perceive nor “apprehend in any way”: the elusive, hidden object *a* that the other supposedly possesses (S VII 237).<sup>2</sup>

The other’s possession of the object *a* is an illusion, Lacan says: “The reference the subject makes to some other seems quite absurd, when we see him continually refer to the other . . . as if he were someone who . . . is happier than the analysand. . . . We don’t need to see this other come and lie down on our couch . . . to know that this [is a] mirage” (S VII 237). In other words, the other is not this mythical being fulfilled by possession of the object *a*, but an ordinary subject plagued by insufficiency like everyone else.

In actuality, then, no subject can possess the object *a*. But there is always someone else who *appears* to have the object *a*—and that is the basis for Lacan’s definition of envy. As subjects founded on lack, we are all in the position of Augustine’s small boy. From a position of lack, it looks like the other enjoys the plenitude provided by the object *a*. In *The Robber Bride*, that other is Zenia, who appears to the three protagonists to be “a completeness closed in upon [her]self,” a being complete with the object *a* whose drive energies are intact—for she exercises sexuality and aggressivity without stint, inhibition, or limit—and who possesses a heightened potency and vitality. Accordingly, each of the three protagonists envies Zenia; the wish to be Zenia is in fact so powerful that it trumps even self-preservation and the desire for romantic love. In academic institutions, I argue in the first part of this chapter, it is often the female possessor of fame who becomes the target of envy. For the contemporary feminist academics whose comments I quote, the incompatibility between feminist principles and academic structures generates both envy and the denial of envy. Both feminist communities—the fictional one in *The Robber Bride* and the actual one in contemporary U.S. academia—would benefit, I contend, from expanding feminist ethics to include an analysis of envy.

#### ENVY, THE FEMINIST ETHIC, AND ACADEMIC COMMUNITIES

The structural inequalities of the academic world breed envy. And in the culture of the academic world the elusive Thing, the prized object that the other enjoys but that remains forever beyond one’s own reach, often

takes the form of fame. Envy of the other's seeming possession of the object a is always painful, as Augustine's small boy attests. But for feminists in the academy, envy of the other woman's fame is doubly painful because it sets up an internal conflict with the ethic of sisterly solidarity.

A quick review of the evolution of feminist ethics in the 1970s will provide a historical context for the discomfort with envy voiced by contemporary feminist academics. In the early days of the women's movement, female solidarity was first of all a political imperative, a prerequisite for effectively combatting the oppressions of patriarchy. The insistence on sisterhood also derived some of its energy from the patriarchal construction of women as (only) rivals for the man. In reaction, feminist ethics seemed to require an absolute loyalty: there was no room for jealousy or envy of the other woman—remnants, both, of the patriarchal order. Instead, women were expected to feel empathy for each other. Consciousness-raising, the practice of 1970s feminism, both validated women as subjects through empathic listening and maintained that their personal stories made sense only as they were shared, only as they were understood as connected to each other in a communal text of gender oppression. Empathy—uncritical and compassionate listening—was necessary to foster trust and unguarded communication. A euphoric celebration of sisterhood as empathy resulted: "You and I are feeling the same feeling" (Benjamin, "Omnipotent" 144). The encouragement of empathy between women received a boost from feminist psychoanalysis: Nancy Chodorow's influential *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) centered on the proposition that the prolonged period of primary identification between mother and daughter generates a heightened capacity for empathy in women. In theory as in practice, then, empathy was privileged while its presumed enemy, envy of the other woman, was avoided and denied.

As feminism gradually became integrated into the university, the clash of values between feminist principles and the principles governing academic structures exacerbated feminist ambivalence about envy. In her comprehensive and fascinating history of the difficulties that arose when feminist activism moved into the university, *Disciplining Feminism*, Ellen Messer-Davidow summarizes this collision of cultures: "Enscornced in our [academic] institutions, we [feminists] demanded inclusivity from systems of selectivity, we sought equality from orders of ranking, and we fought for parity in economies of scarcity" (213). Equality between women grounded the women's movement: solidarity was based on the notion that all women are subjected to the same

oppression and that working toward one's own liberation is inseparable from working toward the liberation of all women from that same oppression.<sup>3</sup> But the academic principle of selectivity works by denying to some what it grants to others: only some get appointments, only some are awarded tenure, only some are promoted. Yet the feminist ethic enjoins, Don't compete for scarce resources: cooperate. Don't be individualistic: think collectively. It turns out, however, that it is easier to put the collectivity first when the group is excluded from participation—because then it is clear that one's self-interest coincides with, and depends on, the efforts of the group to change the status quo—than it is when the group is incorporated into a structure that rewards individual achievement. The scarcity of success builds hierarchy where there was once solidarity—and that structural inequality generates envy. Yet for feminists negative feelings like envy are banned in the name of sisterly solidarity. It seems clear, then, why the contradictions between feminist ethics and university hierarchies would produce in feminists both envy and the muting and repression of envy.

Even more than material differences in rank, salary, and tenure status, the unequal distribution of intangibles like fame and recognition generate envy in the academic world; that is because of the particular makeup of the professorate. The university operates on the basis of exclusivity—only those who have excelled academically get tenure track positions—so the men and women selected will likely have gone through years of training to “star”: they are likely to have been high achievers throughout their school years and thus to have accepted that they would be measured and evaluated at every turn and to have learned to perform in return for abstract signs of recognition like grades and honors. Throughout the years of preparation for the Ph.D. the academic pay-off for accomplishment is recognition. And once inside the professorate, it is again recognition (it is certainly not money) that is the prize: for publications that get read and cited—how many times? for charisma in teaching—how laudatory are her evaluations? how large is her student following? To star is by definition to outshine others—to involve, then, dynamics of competition and envy.

Fame is notoriously something one can never get—or, more precisely, never get enough of; and—recalling the Lacanian structure of envy—fame is also what the successful academic star seems to possess and enjoy. In other words, in the academic world fame often functions as stand-in for the object *a*. To explore the subject's relation to fame as

object *a*, I here anticipate my discussion of the gaze in chapter 5. I posit that the desire for fame is the desire for a universal gaze and that the disappointments of fame, the hollowness of fame, stem from a mistaken understanding of the nature of the gaze.

Lacan theorizes this mistake in Seminar XI: on the one hand, Lacan describes Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological model of the gaze; on the other hand he presents a psychoanalytic model of the gaze—the gaze as object *a*. It is the disjunction between these two “truths” about the human experience of the gaze that, I claim, explains both subjects' hunger for such universal abstractions as fame and recognition and the impossibility of “getting” enough fame and recognition to satisfy. In Seminar XI Lacan seems at first to adopt Merleau-Ponty's idea that “we are beings *who are looked at*, in the spectacle of the world” (S XI 75). The gaze is not on the side of the subject, but “on the side of things” (S XI 109), so that as a human being in the visual field one always feels “looked at.” Then, however, Lacan makes a distinction between his own notion of the gaze and Merleau-Ponty's by saying that this “ultimate gaze . . . is an illusion” (S XI 77). The gaze is actually the point of invisibility in the visual field; it is missing; it does not exist as such, and so it can stand in for the object *a*, which is after all only the inscription of a lack. “The *objet a* in the field of the visible is the gaze” (S XI 105). The paradoxical situation of the subject in the visual field produces desire: one wants to be the object of the Other's desire, one wants to be desirable to this gaze that seems to regard us from all sides; but the desire is unappeasable, because the gaze is after all only a manifestation of the object *a* and as such has no existence in the external world. So, as Joan Copjec says, “if you are looking for confirmation of the truth of your being or the clarity of your vision, you are on your own; the gaze of the Other is not confirming; it will not validate you” (36).

I claim that the desire for fame is a desire to be the object of the universal gaze that appears to surround us. And the hollowness of fame is an effect of the disjunction between the seeming existence of the world's gaze and the fact that the gaze in actuality does not exist. For, as Lacan is careful to say in differentiating his work from Sartre's, the gaze never coincides with the look of a particular individual; nor for that matter would it coincide with the individual looks of thousands. What one wants is the world's gaze. No matter how many individual persons look with admiration on one's work or oneself, the number of particular admirers can never add up to the generalized gaze that one

craves. That remains forever elusive: it is nonexistent, a manifestation of the object *a* and so “just an objectification of a void” (Žižek, *Sublime* 95). The desire for fame *is* the desire for the gaze—for the gaze that always eludes us. So one can never get enough.

No one possesses the object *a*. But there is always someone else who *appears* to have the object *a*. And that is the basis for envy. In the uneven distribution of status and fame in the academy, there is always a woman who appears to possess fame. As with Lacan’s clinical cases, so with academics: one looks to the other who appears to have it all—who appears to enjoy the absolute fame that one covets, but can never get, for oneself. One envies her the seeming possession of the gaze, of the object *a*; one would like to be her. In a professorial population schooled in the idea that external recognition equals self-worth, of course the inequalities of fame give rise to envy. Yet the feminist ethic of sisterhood disallows envy between women: so the enviers cannot admit their unsettling feelings of competitiveness toward a female “star”—perhaps even to themselves.

The feminist scholars and students that Evelyn Fox Keller and Helene Moglen interviewed for their study, “Competition: A Problem for Academic Women,” reported a high degree of anxiety about their own feelings of envy. On the one hand, respondents made such statements as “We compare ourselves with women, not men” and “The success of men doesn’t threaten me, but the success of women does” (22–23); on the other hand, they expressed fear at such admissions: “Competition with women gets close to things that are really very scary” (23). The reluctance to acknowledge envy and competition, like other negative feelings toward women, stems from a faith in—or, perhaps more realistically, a nostalgia for—the idea “that basically all women are bonded together,” as Jane Gallop says in a dialogue with Marianne Hirsch and Nancy Miller (“Criticizing” 361, 352). A woman does not want to articulate feelings of envy toward other women for fear of disrupting feminist solidarity.

Yet, as a case study presented by Keller and Moglen shows, envy unacknowledged and unarticulated in discourse makes its way into yet more hostile behaviors that are yet more disruptive of feminist solidarity than a straightforward expression of envy would be. Identified as one of three outstanding feminist scholars in her discipline, the woman Keller and Moglen call “Greta” is consequently watched closely by her female colleagues for signs of “unsisterly” behavior, for lack of support

for junior women—which they are not slow to find. They accuse her of a lack of generosity and she in turn “feels betrayed by a begrudging sisterhood” (32). Unable to confront and bring into discourse their own feelings of envy, the junior colleagues (I would say) displace their own guilt for “unfeminist” sentiments onto the superstar, who then becomes the depository of blame for “unfeminist” behavior.

Keller and Moglen conclude, “Envy (and their intense discomfort with it) seems to be the emotion talked about with the most urgency by the women with whom we have spoken. It is this, primarily, that makes competition with women so much more acute and painful . . . than competition with men” (32). Such an urgency and ambivalence—an envy denied as soon as expressed—calls for inclusion in feminist analysis.

Undergirding feminist guilt about envy is the assumption that envy and competitiveness among women are products of patriarchal thinking, to be extirpated along with other internalized patriarchal structures (Michie 6–7). But the distinction between jealousy and envy becomes important here. Certainly, a phallogentric system that values man as subject and positions woman as less-than-subject puts pressure on a woman to “get” a man to complete her and validate her existence, making the man the scarce resource for which women compete. The result is jealousy: the desire to have what the other has. Either the woman has a man, and I want him, or I have a man and I fear she will take him away. That fear structures her as “the other woman,” not a subject interesting in her own right, not a potential friend, but a threat to my well-being, a potential enemy. While feminist analysis has thus provided a framework for understanding jealousy as the product of a value system that privileges the male, envy remains to be analyzed.

Jane Gallop relates a graduate student fantasy that opens up an alternative theoretical approach. “There is a graduate student fantasy that if you stand up after a lecture and ask a devastating question you will get to take the place of the lecturer. They will lose everything they have and you will get it” (“Criticizing” 364). Gallop repeats the idea on the next page, this time making explicit the generational gap between established academic women and aspiring junior women: “The daughter trying to gain a voice for herself must kill the mother” (366). The fantasy throws into sharp relief the difference between the principles of the women’s movement and those of the academy: in a world of scarce resources, it’s you *or* me—instead of *we*, fighting together and winning through together. And one’s own shock at hearing a fantasy about



“killing the mother” drives home the point that envy is incommensurate with the ethic of sisterhood.

I would say the underlying structure of this fantasy is quite primitive. Its calculus goes: there is only one position, and there are two of us: therefore you must go so I can be in your place. And here the structural difference between jealousy and envy comes into play: jealousy is a three-person structure, with two rivals vying for the possession of a third; envy rests on a two-person structure, in which the one wants to be the other. Jealousy may well be the product of a male-dominant culture; envy, I would argue, has a different origin. Lacan notes the aggressivity attached to identification, saying it stems from “a rivalry over which is the self and which the other, which the ego and which the replica” (Gallop, *Reading* 62); but in my opinion his account does not explain the origin and logic of this aggressivity as well as does Freud’s model of primary identification. In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud asserts that identification constitutes the baby’s first relationship with the other: “Identification is the original form of emotional tie with an object”; “[the other] is what one would like to *be*” (107, 106). This first other is necessarily a parental figure. In infancy, Freud says, we process relations in an oral mode; so the wish to be the beloved parent takes the form, “I should like to eat this” (“Negation” 237). The first identification thus entails the destruction of the other: “the object that we long for and prize is assimilated by eating and is in that way annihilated as such” (*Group* 105).

Melanie Klein draws her definition of envy from this original relationship to a parental figure, but she moves away from the Freudian base when she goes on to posit a “primary envy”—an impulse to “spoil and destroy” the omnipotent other, based on the perception that the breast “possesses everything that [the infant] desires” but keeps “its unlimited flow of milk and love . . . for its own gratification” (213). Thus, according to Klein, in adult life “envy is the angry feeling that another person possesses and enjoys something desirable—the envious impulse being to take it away or to spoil it” (212).<sup>4</sup> To my mind, the primacy that both Freud and Lacan accord to the desire to be the other is sufficient to explain envy—both its originary moment and its adult form—without resorting to Klein’s hypothesis of a primary envy.

Countering Klein, I would argue that the venom of envy, the bitter desire to denigrate the other, is a secondary effect of the subject’s frustration that he or she cannot *be* the other. In order to mitigate the pain

of being oneself and not the other, one strives to “alleviate the sense of our disparity by lessening [the] other,” as Samuel Johnson said (197).

Gallop, Hirsch, and Miller discuss a phenomenon that I claim constitutes an enactment of this spoiler impulse—the “trashing” of feminist pioneers’ work (“Criticizing” 364–66). “A certain generation of feminist theorists . . . have really gotten it from all sides: Elaine Showalter, Nancy Chodorow, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Carol Gilligan” (“Criticizing” 364). I would say that the scholars named here, who wrote the seminal texts of second-wave feminism, are in the enviable position of superior prestige, influence, and fame; so other women “trash” their scholarship. The dynamic of envy described by Samuel Johnson is surely at work here: If I cannot be her and have her fame, then I will denigrate her work till she no longer seems enviable, till she no longer stirs these painful feelings of longing to be what she is—and I will take a lot of satisfaction in thus restoring the balance between us!<sup>5</sup>

Yet the aspiration to be the other, even if one takes into account the accompanying urge to disparage her success, does not fully account for the spite attributed to envy by previous moralists<sup>6</sup>—nor for the vehemence of the contemporary feminist “trashing” of feminist mothers and the graduate student fantasy of matricide. Freud’s theory, however, provides a rationale for the aggressive underside of envy which is consistent with the primitive intensity, violence, and resistance to the reality principle of these fantasies. If it is true, as psychoanalysis tells us, that earlier wishes and modes remain in the unconscious, envy may well draw its ambivalence from the early mode of identification Freud ascribes to infancy: I love the other and therefore want to be her; I want her destroyed so I can take her place.

If envy, the desire to be the other, along with its component of aggressivity, is as basic to human relations as Freud and Lacan assert, and if envy is continually stimulated by the culture of academic institutions, then the feminist imperative to be kind to your sisters—“the omnipresent injunction to play nice and don’t be trashy” (Zwinger 190)—won’t work; it is fruitless to expect, as Keller and Moglen say that women in academic communities often do, “that competition, conflict and envy can be avoided if only we are good enough” (33). As the examples cited above show, and as Keller and Moglen argue about competitive feelings generally, denial of envy doesn’t prevent the feared disruption of feminist bonds. “Competition [and envy] denied in principle, but unavoidable in practice, surfaces in forms that may be far more

wounding, and perhaps even fiercer and more destructive, than competition that is ideologically sanctioned” (Keller and Moglen 34). The feminist insistence on solidarity here works against solidarity: what the ban on envy and other competitive feelings between women prevents is not envy, but creative solutions to the problematics of envy.<sup>7</sup>

What is called for, what is indeed overdue, is an analysis of the power relations between women and within feminism.<sup>8</sup> As part of that analysis, feminists could begin to theorize envy as an inevitable product of the power disparities between women. In the context of the academy, that would entail a recognition of the structural inequalities that engender envy and a more complex and detached approach to collegiality; to enter envy and its attendant hostilities into the discourse of feminist solidarity might allow us to imagine relations of support flexible enough to accommodate ambivalence, competition, and envy.

#### COMMUNITY AND FEMINIST ETHICS IN *THE ROBBER BRIDE*

*The Robber Bride* reflects the ethic of loyalty that governed the second-wave feminist movement of the 1970s and 1980s—and hence affected Atwood’s middle-aged protagonists. The small community of Tony, Charis, and Roz is implicitly governed by the feminist ethic of unqualified support for one’s “sisters.” A fourth character, Zenia, poses a challenge to this ethic: uninhibited by any principle of care or consideration for others, Zenia indulges every impulse of aggressivity, sexuality, and greed: in particular, she steals away the beloved partner of each of the three protagonists in turn. Zenia’s actions challenge the feminist ethic of solidarity; and the emotions that she both expresses and arouses in other women—envy, rage, hostility—point to what that ethic leaves out. The resolution of the novel supports my argument that feminist ethics needs to become more inclusive, to incorporate an analysis of envy, ambivalence, and hostility between women into the reigning ethic of emphatic support.

Through the three protagonists’ treatment of Zenia, *The Robber Bride* implies that while feminism has liberated some of women’s capacities from the stranglehold of gender training, it has not been bold enough. In the Victorian version of womanhood that feminism has effectively deconstructed, woman is a self-sacrificing, self-effacing angel who ministers to husband and children, directly intuiting and satisfying their needs and desires while having no needs or desires of her own. The

purity of her love for children and husband is angelic as well. *The Robber Bride* suggests that feminism preserves the “angel” stereotype in at least one dimension of female experience: women are still expected to be pure in their feelings toward other women, to care for them without ambivalence.

The name, Zenia, is a transliteration (with a change of the initial letter) of *Xenia*, the guest-host relationship sacred to the ancient Greeks. It was the duty of the Greek citizen to include the stranger in his household, to give the stranger a substitute home, to make of the stranger (*xenos*) a friend (*philos*). Similarly, each of the three protagonists protects, shelters, and nurtures Zenia, extending familial care to “the other woman” (*xeina* or *xene* is the feminine form of the word for stranger/guest).<sup>9</sup> Each woman, going over her memories, pinpoints the moment that Zenia came over the threshold, welcomed into the home: “[Tony] opened the door wide and in came Zenia, like a long-lost friend, like a sister, like a wind, and Tony welcomed her” (128); “mutely Charis holds out her arms, and Zenia stumbles over the threshold and collapses into them” (250); “Roz opens her heart, and spreads her wings, her cardboard angel’s wings, her invisible dove’s wings, her warm sheltering wings, and takes her in” (412). The Greek obligation to offer the stranger shelter has become the sacred duty of “taking in” and taking care of the other woman (and to the detriment of caring for the self: Zenia’s sexual appetite for men destroys the domestic happiness of each woman in turn). Atwood thus implicitly links the Greek duty to care for the stranger to the feminist directive that all women should care for and nurture each other. By insisting on universal and unflinching support for other women, Atwood implies, the feminist ethic fails to account for negative feelings between women—especially envy.

The women’s responses to Zenia’s depredations illustrate the potency of envy. The three protagonists, I claim, see Zenia as a figure of jouissance who defies the law of the symbolic order that every subject shall be constituted by lack. In terms of Lacan’s paradigm for envy, they look at Zenia as the small boy looks at his blissful brother at the breast: they assume that she is in secure possession of the object *a*. Accordingly, they want to be Zenia: and that desire for identification with a figure who seems to possess untrammelled potency, freedom, and vitality is stronger than self-preservation, sexual desire, and romantic love. For each of the three protagonists in turn, despite ample evidence that Zenia is a robber of husbands (hence the title), insists on

keeping Zenia near and so exposes, and predictably loses, her beloved mate to Zenia's seductions.

What makes Zenia such a compelling target for identification? I argue that *The Robber Bride* constructs Zenia as the impossible figure who is *in actuality* complete with the object a. No subject can possess the object a; but Lacan names two mythic figures who do—the *père-jouissant* and The Woman. As I understand Lacan, these mythic figures play out the subject's impossible dream of attaining the object a and thus experiencing a jouissance without inhibition or limit. Through an analysis of Lacan's essay on *Hamlet*, I will argue that Zenia, like Claudius in *Hamlet*, is positioned as such a figure. In *The Robber Bride*, then, envy is the desire to be an other who does not just appear to, but actually *does*, possess the object a and so experiences unmitigated jouissance. Like Claudius (in Lacan's reading) Zenia functions as a double for the protagonists—not in the usual sense of the subject's mirror image, but in Lacan's more specific sense of the uncanny double who incarnates the fundamental fantasy, the fantasy of the subject completed by the object a.<sup>10</sup>

#### IDENTIFICATION AND DESIRE: THE LACANIAN DOUBLE

Lacan's essay, "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*," provides a way into understanding the central puzzle of *The Robber Bride*: Why does each protagonist, even when forewarned, put her own happiness at risk by exposing the man she loves to Zenia's obvious seductiveness and known rapacity for men?

Lacan's analysis begins with the fundamental fantasy discussed earlier— $\$ \langle a \rangle$ —and develops the implications of this structure for the workings of desire. The price of entering the symbolic order and so becoming a subject is the sacrifice of unified being, figured as the loss of an integral part, the object a. The formula for fantasy,  $\$ \langle a \rangle$ , represents the subject in a relation of attraction to the lost object a. This structure founds the unconscious; and from the unconscious it generates desire: "Desire . . . finds in the fantasy its reference, its substratum, its precise tuning in the imaginary register . . . in an economy of the unconscious" ("Desire" 14). "How does [the subject] respond then to the necessity of mourning [for the lost thing, for the object a]?" With "the composition of his imaginary register," says Lacan ("Desire" 48): that is, as I interpret it, the subject searches for the semblance of the object

a, the lost part of the self, in some object in the external world. “Something becomes an object in desire when it takes the place of . . . that self-sacrifice, that pound of flesh which is mortgaged in his relationship to the signifier” (“Desire” 28). In normative desire, the subject finds a substitute in the outside world for the lost object a: the object of conscious love fantasy “takes the place of what the subject is symbolically deprived of,” so that “the imaginary object is in a position to condense in itself the virtues or the dimension of being and to become that veritable delusion of being (*leurre de l'être*)” (“Desire” 15).

It is a delusion that the loved object is worthy of love, since it is lit up by virtue of its position in the subject's structure of desire, not by virtue of its own merit. But that delusion is normative: “In the fantasy [i.e., the relation of the subject to the substitute object] an essential relationship of the subject to his being is localized and fixed” (16). That is, desire is anchored to some object in the subject's local reality; this anchoring has the advantage of orienting the subject away from the self and toward the external world.<sup>11</sup>

Hamlet's desire was once on track, directed at Ophelia. But now he reviles her: once loved, once adequate as substitute for the lost object, she is no longer: Why? Because Hamlet is fascinated by Claudius, who presents a much more compelling object than an attractive woman—the image of the self completed by the object a. Claudius embodies *jouissance*: he acts as if the sacrifice that Lacan stipulates as the price of entry into the symbolic order never took place—as if he never had to sacrifice “that pound of flesh.” His drive energies are intact: he acts out uninhibited aggressivity (he kills his brother the king) and uninhibited sexuality (he takes his brother's wife into his bed). In other words, he operates on the level of *jouissance*, indulging every impulse, immune or oblivious to the Law of the Father that sets limits on action.<sup>12</sup> As Lacan points out, the death of a king—in the myth of the primal horde or in *Oedipus Rex*—is usually followed by the translation of the actual father into the Law of the Father. In *Hamlet* the king is killed, but what succeeds him is not the Law of the Father; rather, the *père-jouissant* remains on scene—not a father abstracted into social law, but a father who acts out all his impulses, sexual and aggressive.<sup>13</sup>

Hamlet knows what he wants: he wants to kill Claudius. But he cannot act because of an overlap and confusion of two dimensions. Normally, the structure  $\$ \langle a \rangle$  inhabits the unconscious, whence it generates desire for substitute objects. When Hamlet confronts Claudius,

he sees the central fantasy structure of his own unconscious—that is, the fantasy of possessing the lost wholeness, of integrating the object a: he cannot strike down an existence that inhabits his own unconscious (50). Hence, Lacan says, Hamlet can kill Claudius only when he has received his own mortal wound and knows it, when he has severed “all narcissistic investments” (51), including investment in the impossible dream of regaining intact being and jouissance.

Freud defined the uncanny as the appearance in the outside world of something familiar, yet strange—something once known, then repressed; and he listed the double as one of the manifestations of the uncanny (“The Uncanny”). Lacan refines that notion, so that the uncanny comes from an encounter with an other subject who embodies not just any signifier repressed from consciousness, but the original object, the object of primal repression that created the unconscious—the object a. “*Das Unheimliche*, the uncanny, . . . is linked not, as some believed, to all sorts of irruptions from the unconscious, but rather to an imbalance that arises when [the unconscious fantasy structure,  $\$ \langle a \rangle$ ] decomposes, crossing the limits originally assigned to it, and rejoins the image of the other subject” (“Desire” 22). The object a materializes in the body of “the other subject,” and that is the moment of the uncanny. Although he does not use the term here, I claim that this is Lacan’s version of the double: not a figure of the imaginary, not the mirror image of the subject—for the mirror image lacks the unspecularizable object a; not a figure in the symbolic, not the image of the barred subject, constituted by lack; but a figure of the real, a reflection of the self at the level of the unconscious fantasy that the subject can be completed by possession of the object a.<sup>14</sup>

Lacan’s definition of the uncanny explains Zenia’s hold on Tony, Charis, and Roz: they see in her the integration of the object a, the completion of the self impossible in the symbolic order to which they belong. And, as Mladen Dolar says of Hoffman’s doubles, “because the inclusion of the object entails the emergence of the lost part of jouissance, [the double] is somebody who enjoys, . . . who commits acts that one wouldn’t dare to commit [and] indulges in one’s repressed desire” (“I Shall Be” 13–14). Zenia is likewise a figure of unrestricted jouissance, indulging every sexual and aggressive impulse without limit. Jouissance is impossible within the symbolic order and exists only in the real. That is, the full and unlimited expression of aggression and sexuality is impossible to the symbolically castrated speaking subject. “The real is

what must be excluded in order for the subject as a speaking being to constitute itself” (Dean 15). Zenia, like the Claudius of Lacan’s interpretation, is a figure of the real—a figure who evades the ineluctable law of symbolic castration.<sup>15</sup> Zenia’s power, vitality, and impulsiveness are intact because she has not made “that self-sacrifice,” forfeited “that pound of flesh” necessary to entry into the symbolic (Lacan, “Desire” 28).

How then can Zenia be a subject? My answer would be, she is not a subject. First, textually speaking Zenia is not a subject because she never gets to be the subject of narration, so her thoughts and feelings are never recorded; no subjectivity, no inner world, confronts the reader directly. More pertinent to a Lacanian analysis, she exists outside all structures fundamental to the symbolic order. The Name-of-the-Father orders the network of intersecting signifiers that gives each subject a position in relation to other subjects. Zenia’s birth is nowhere recorded (two archivists, Harriet the detective and Tony the historian, agree that “according to the records . . . she was never born” (518; see also 420); and Zenia has no surname, carries no name-of-the-father (“Zenia didn’t seem to need a name” [141]). So she has no stable place in the kinship structure governed by the Name-of-the-Father, but fabricates a different origin and family history for each listener. Likewise, she refuses the symbolic fate of the dead—to be replaced by a signifier, by the name recorded on the gravestone. She returns after her supposed death, after her funeral, “more alive than life itself”—because, as Slavoj Žižek says, the living dead exist outside the symbolic and so have “access to the life-substance prior to its symbolic mortification” (“Grimaces” 47).

But, it will be objected, the symbolic order also designates the order of language, and Zenia certainly speaks. Yes, but because she does not acknowledge herself as a named object in a system of named objects, positioned by a signifier, she is capable of traveling up and down the signifying chain, capable of unlimited substitutions. That is, she lies. So signifiers appear to be subject to her rather than she to them.

The symbolic is also a social order. The “I” is a signifier that places me in relation to other signifiers within a system; and that position is necessarily limited by the structured relation to other positions; as subject, I recognize not just the other subject, but the relational system that governs us all. One accedes to one’s subject position by accepting that it is limited—that is, by renouncing *jouissance*. Zenia, like Claudius in *Hamlet*, does not acknowledge her position as a signifier



in relation to other signifiers, nor the necessity of abandoning jouissance as a prerequisite for joining such a system. “Raging unchecked” (152), she exercises sexuality as if there were no Law regulating desire, taking any man she likes, regardless of whom he “belongs” to in the civic order of marriage; likewise, she recognizes no limit to aggressivity, leaving only “scorched earth” (35) when she finishes with each protagonist in turn.

The three protagonists are unable to act effectively in Zenia’s presence because, like Claudius in *Hamlet*, she is out of place in the symbolic order they inhabit. She is the real, that which exceeds the symbolic order, that which no signifier can represent, that which those within the symbolic order are at a loss to account for: “She’s a given. She’s just there, like the weather” (498). Atwood is careful to show that each protagonist has lost, or repressed, something specific that Zenia embodies; but more broadly, each protagonist of *The Robber Bride* encounters in Zenia Lacan’s “uncanny,” the piece of the real, the object a, that she has had to renounce as part of the symbolic compact; and she is fascinated by the image of an uncastrated self capable of unfettered and unlimited self-expression.

Now I can hazard an answer to the riddle of desire in *The Robber Bride*. Each protagonist’s desire is for her man—clearly, unequivocally; yet each, ignoring clear warnings of Zenia’s “robber bride” propensities, is intent on keeping Zenia near and thus placing the man she loves in harm’s way: Why doesn’t each woman move in the direction of her desire? Desire is motivated by the absence of the object a. For desire to operate—for the subject to seek a substitute object in the world—the original object, the piece of the real called the object a, has to be missing. If it is present, there is no lack and so no desire. Or (another way of saying the same thing), the subject’s fantasy (§<>a) channels desire not outward, toward the external substitute for the object, but back upon the self, in a compulsion to regain the impossible unity barred by the symbolic. Each protagonist would like to be Zenia—and the desire to *be* the one with access to the jouissance afforded by the object a is much stronger than the desire to *have* the man, the (substitute) object of desire. Desire loses its way, ensnared in identification. As Hamlet knows what he wants—he wants to kill Claudius, and says so repeatedly—so Tony knows what she wants: she wants West; he is her happiness. Yet when Zenia returns and takes him away, Tony is paralyzed, like Hamlet, by a narcissistic attachment: “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, her rapacity and lawlessness" (184). Zenia incarnates Tony's jouissance, untrammelled by Law.

#### ENVY AND THE ETHIC OF CARE IN *THE ROBBER BRIDE*

While *The Robber Bride*, rich in psychological complexity, is larger than allegory, on one level it functions as a parable of a feminist community's integration of envy into an ethic of mutual nurturing. At first, the three protagonists of *The Robber Bride* follow a code that requires that they care for each other in a purely supportive way that excludes all negative feelings—including envy. Thus Roz, feeling lonely, "thinks wistfully of the dinnertime tableau at Tony's house [Tony and West at the dinner table], then decides that she is not exactly envious. . . . Instead she's glad that Tony has a man, because Tony is her friend and you want your friends to be happy" (441). The upsurge of envy, the desire to be Tony in the moment of the conjugal meal, is followed by denial. Feminist orthodoxy replaces spontaneous emotion, as Roz dutifully recites the rule that one must empathize with one's friend, be happy in her happiness.

Yet envy is the feeling that Zenia arouses in each of the protagonists: each wants to be in Zenia's place, to take over her attributes, her power—to replace her and to be her. I will give an account here of the sources of Roz's envy only, since for my purposes Roz represents an exemplary feminist subject.<sup>16</sup> She is the character most influenced by feminism: she has participated in consciousness-raising sessions and produced a feminist magazine. She envies Zenia because Zenia embodies what she has been denied, first by the social code of gender and now, in relation to other women, by feminist principles. The experience of feminist consciousness-raising has opened Roz's eyes to some of the limitations of gender, but it has only reinforced her obligatory goodness to other women. She lives by what Carol Gilligan has identified as a specifically female "ethic of care": a view of the world as "a network of connection," a web of interconnected subjects so constituted that if someone in need pulls on the thread that connects her to an other, that other is expected to respond. Roz recalls Zenia exclaiming, "'Fuck the Third World! I'm tired of it!' . . . It was a selfish, careless remark, a

daring remark, a liberated remark—to hell with guilt! It was like speeding in a convertible, tailgating, weaving in and out without signaling, stereo on full blast and screw the neighbours, throwing your leftovers out the window” (109). Zenia’s “Fuck the Third World!” defies an ethic that insists on the “response” in responsibility. Roz, tired of always “try[ing] so hard to be kind and nurturing” (332), envies Zenia the vitality that comes from putting the self first, heedless of consequences to others. Against Roz’s vision of her own timid moral self “tiptoeing through the scruples” (442), hobbled by consideration for others, she imagines Zenia speeding, tailgating, throwing her garbage out the window. “Roz—although shocked . . . had felt an answering beat, in herself. A sort of echo, an urge to go that fast, be that loose, that greedy, herself, too” (109). What wears Roz down is the eternal sameness of giving to others, all her other potencies damped down, “muffled,” by “her Lady Bountiful cloak” (442). Weighted down by her own “goodness,” she longs for excess—longs to enact “some great whopping thoroughly despicable sin. . . she would like to be someone else. But not just anyone . . . she would like to be Zenia” (442–43).<sup>17</sup>

To give her obsession with Zenia a name, Roz reviews the “Seven Deadly Sins” and realizes that her sin is “Envy, the worst, her old familiar, in the shape of Zenia herself, smiling and triumphant . . . *Let’s face it, Roz, you’re envious of Zenia. Envious as Hell*” (118). Roz pictures Zenia as a figure in the style of medieval allegory—an embodiment of the envy she both enacts and arouses in other women.<sup>18</sup>

The envy foreclosed from the feminist ethic that governs the small community of Roz, Charis, and Tony materializes in Zenia—and her presence makes that ethic founder. Or so I read the present-day sequence that opens the novel. Long after Zenia has stolen away their men, long after they have attended her funeral and seen her ashes scattered (they think), the three protagonists are having a companionable meal at the Toxique Cafe when Zenia comes in the door, seemingly risen from the dead—and her intrusion immediately destroys their solidarity. Their friendship has been based exclusively on caring for each other after each of Zenia’s man-stealing depredations. After Zenia stole each woman’s man, the other two moved in to comfort and soothe. Roz “rocked Tony back and forth, back and forth, the most mother that Tony ever had” to comfort her for the loss of West (210); “Tony makes Charis a cup of tea [and] . . . wraps Charis in a blanket” after Zenia runs off with Billy (317); and Tony and Charis mother Roz with warm

baths, massages, and tuna casseroles after Zenia robs her of Mitch. The images of devoted maternal nurturing suggest that the feminist ethic has carried forward one aspect of the Victorian “angel of the house” stereotype, transformed into a sororal imperative: a woman must now extend the care once accorded to family members to other women. I would not say that Atwood is advocating that women abandon an ethic of mutual care: after all, the three women gain both from giving and from receiving care, enabling each other to revive from loss and to regain a measure of self-esteem. But the text does show that the ethic of care, like any ideology, lives by the exclusion of some important realities.

After having attended Zenia’s “funeral,” and in the absence of a crisis that would call on their nurturing skills, the three women have continued to see each other, but their relations lack intensity. Although the focus of their reunions is Zenia—metaphorically, “she’s here at the table . . . we can’t let her go” (32)—“they don’t talk about Zenia” (31). They do not reveal aspects of themselves that are not part of the ethic of care—do not reveal, for instance, their envy of and rage against Zenia. Their friendship has grown correspondingly pale and one-dimensional: they meet mainly to commemorate, Tony thinks, “like war widows or aging vets, or the wives of those missing in action” (31). Zenia embodies what is left out of the feminist ethic of mutual support: usurping the place of the woman in each of the three heterosexual couples in turn, she enacts envy in its most primitive form: get out of the way, I want to be in your place. And her actions can be interpreted at best as a reckless fulfillment of her own impulses, regardless of the consequences to others, at worst as a no-holds-barred aggressivity toward other women.

When Zenia makes her reappearance at the door of the Toxique Cafe where the three women are lunching, she both represents and evokes in the others the envy and aggressivity they have been repressing. Because they have barred these elements from their friendship, the bond of mutual aid immediately disintegrates at their resurgence: each woman thinks privately that the others will be of no “help in the coming struggle” against Zenia (39). Roz, imagining how she will take a knife to Zenia’s jugular, “knows” that the other, peaceable, women will be of no help: she does not need “Tony’s analysis of knives through the ages or Charis’s desire not to discuss sharp items of cutlery because they are so negative” (116). Tony “hasn’t shared her plans with Roz or Charis. Each of them is a decent person; neither would condone violence. Tony knows that she

herself is not a decent person" (455). Just at the moment that the reappearance of Zenia calls for devising a common strategy for confronting her, sisterhood, powerless to deal with the anger and ambivalence between women that it has excluded, disintegrates. The three women, stumbling out of the Toxique, melt away from each other in silence.<sup>19</sup>

The concluding dinner of the three women at the Toxique is structurally parallel to this first meal, but it represents a more substantial communion. Their conversation, which takes up the 70 pages of the novel's penultimate section ("The Toxique"), is thus extended because it frames the narrative of each woman's final encounter with Zenia. Each has gone alone, that day, to Zenia's hotel room, and each has "killed" Zenia. That is, Tony went to Zenia armed with a weapon and a plan for murder, Charis enacted a murder on the spot (or thinks she did), and Roz played out multiple scenarios of killing Zenia. In the event, Zenia indeed died that day, as the three women find out after dinner. (The text mystifies the cause of her death, so that the reader cannot tell whether one, or, more probably, none of the three killed her.) While on the plane of psychological realism each of the three has ample motive for revenge—Zenia has "robbed" each of her beloved partner—the coincidence of three separate "murders" and the victim's actual death on a single day defies the reality principle and begs to be read outside the conventions of literary realism.

What the three women are acting out is the Freudian logic of envy, based on primary identification. Each of the three has envied Zenia, wanted to "be" her. Roz remains aware that her desire to be Zenia is a fantasy. But for Charis and Tony, the boundary between self and other sometimes blurs completely: Charis, especially, incorporates her ("[Charis] thinks about being Zenia"; "Charis has part of Zenia inside herself" [300, 302].) The three "murders" enact the primitive complement to envy. Like the graduate student fantasy recounted by Jane Gallop, the plot turn here recapitulates the strategy that Freud attributes to the infant: the other side of wanting to be the parental figure is the wish that he or she would disappear. Where the one wants to be the other, aggression results: the other must be removed so the one can take her place.

Feminist psychoanalysis has reinforced the feminist ethic of empathy—most obviously through Nancy Chodorow's emphasis in *The Reproduction of Mothering* on the extended mother-daughter identification that gives women permeable ego boundaries and enables them to expe-

rience what the other is feeling. The ambivalence central to Freud's model of the first identification challenges Chodorow's version of a pacific female-female relationship by emphasizing that a love that identifies with the first other and an envy that wishes her out of the way coexist. Both envy, the desire to be the other, and empathy, the capacity to imagine what the other feels, are reminders that human relations begin in identification and that human beings as a result are not the self-enclosed, solitary individuals that they appear to be, but are instead open and permeable to each other's experience and emotions.

The surreal events of the last day can be read as Atwood's attempt to bring envy, with its attendant ambivalence and violence, into the text of female friendship. It is important to *The Robber Bride*, and to the nuances of its critique of feminism, that the protagonists kill Zenia only in fantasy. " 'I must have been a little crazy,' [Tony] says, 'to think I could actually kill her.' 'Not so crazy,' says Roz. " 'To *want* to kill her, anyway'" (468). The crucial act here is a speech act: as each woman tells the story of her attempted murder, she brings her destructive feelings toward a woman into the female community's discourse, where they can be accepted as part of a complex and contradictory mix of feelings toward women. So long as the feminist ethic of sisterhood insists on empathy and denies envy and ambivalence between women, it leaves individuals to go off by themselves, like Charis, Roz, and Tony after the initial luncheon, to confront alone their guilt over hostile feelings toward women or to spin out the monstrous plots of private revenge fantasy. When the three characters bring their envy and rage into the conversation, these feelings can be contextualized, seen to coexist with positive feelings toward women. Charis, Tony, and Roz continue to care for each other, but their mutual support is more meaningful now that it is based on a fuller understanding of *all* that they share. I would suggest that feminist community can provide support to women on a realistic basis only when it acknowledges feelings of envy and ambivalence between women and learns to integrate them into an ethic of mutual support.