

Jenny Lawn

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## **Born Under the Sign of Joan Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, Mommie Dearest, and the Uses of Maternal Ambivalence**

I think Joan really did go a little batty in the '50s—that is when most of the really bad stories are told about her. I think she kind of mellowed out in the '60s and was finally at peace w[ith] herself in the '70s. But oh, those '50s....

—Darwin Bell, e-mail to *Joan Crawford Digest*, 6 October 1999

When bad women get into literature, what are they doing there, and are they permissible, and what, if anything, do we need them for?

—Margaret Atwood, "Spotty Handed Villainesses," 1994: n.p.

In Margaret Atwood's parodic romance *Lady Oracle* (1976), the protagonist, searching for a clue to the meandering fortunes of her life, ponders her mother's purpose in naming her Joan.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps, like Miss Havesham of Dickens's *Great Expectations*, Frances Delacourt instrumentalizes her daughter to wreak revenge upon men: "Did she name me after Joan Crawford because she wanted me to be like the screen characters she played—beautiful, ambitious, ruthless, destructive to men [ ... ]?" (Atwood, 1976: 38). Or perhaps Frances is upholding Joan Crawford as the model of success in clambering up the social ranks: "Joan Crawford worked hard, she had willpower, she built herself up from nothing, according to my mother" (38). Conversely, perhaps her mother foresaw unhappiness: "In fact there was something tragic about Joan Crawford, she had big serious eyes, an unhappy mouth and high cheekbones, unfortunate things happened to her" (38-39). Thus the iconic moment at which identity is conferred—the naming of the child—simultaneously endows and strips Joan of her "proper" name: "Did she give me someone else's name because she wanted me never to have a name of my own?" (38). Endowed with this name,

the infant Joan enters into the treacherous world of duplicitous signs that is Atwood's post-war suburban Toronto, where Brownies turn terrorist, "good men" flip into "bad men," nightmares stalk little girls, and WASP families implode in the self-amassed gravity of resentment and frustrated ambition.

The fact of being named after someone else, someone who is herself an actress playing many roles in both on and off screen, propels Joan into what Eleonora Rao terms the "polyhedric" subjectivity of multiple identifications (1994: 144), both lived and fantasised. Various persecuted victim, Gothic heroine, trapeze artist, butterfly, ill-fated dancer, spy, adultress, mistress, and wife, Joan's development from childhood to adulthood represents a kind of parodic *bildung* achieved through the textual imbibing of popular culture and escapist fantasy. In separate articles John Thieme (1992: 72) and Kim Worthington (1996: 295) have suggested that the naming foregrounds the necessity of acting, fantasy, and self-concealment in women's lives under patriarchy, though neither critic pursues the fact that numerous male characters equally engage in impersonations of various kinds. After all, any actress might stand equally well for the principle of dissimulation. Why not call the daughter Bette [Davis], for example, or Moira [Shearer], actresses who both starred in cautionary Hollywood tales about the proper role and destiny of daughters (*Now, Voyager* [1942] and *The Red Shoes* [1948])? Or indeed, perhaps Frances should have called the baby Shirley [Temple], whose mother also "professionalized" her relationship with her daughter from an early stage (Atwood, 1976: 68). Furthermore, these commentators elide the gender specificity of Joan's naming. It is Joan's mother, not her father, who tries to possess her with the name—a name that, in later revelations about Joan Crawford, would itself become the emblem of possessiveness and hostility between mother and daughter. What seems to be at issue, in other words, is not the duplicity of identity but the interfolding of identities in the moment that could be punningly termed, in response to Lacan's "nom du père," the "nom de la mère," a name which functions simultaneously as incentive, blessing, curse, gift, and weapon of reproach.

My project in this paper is to intensively study from a synchronic perspective this textual conjunction of Margaret Atwood and Joan Crawford within the context of popular representations of monstrous mothers and resisting daughters in mid-1970s North America. If film stars expose ideological contradictions (Robertson, 1996: 87), how exactly does this process occur in one specific, highly charged textual example? For "Joan Crawford" is not merely a polysemic sign (Dyer, 1979: 3)—one with many meanings, some of them contradictory—but a sign of changeableness itself, most particularly in the domain of motherhood: "When [her public] tired of Joan, the Blue-Collar Goddess, she gave them Joan, the Domestic Martyr [*Mildred Pierce*, 1945], and when that image ran out of vim, Crawford restyled herself as the Untamable Shrew [*Queen Bee*, 1955]" (Pardi, 1997: 265). In a further, posthumous twist, one of Crawford's most famous "roles," that of controlling, abusive mother, was

created by her adopted daughter, Christina. With its relentless scenes of domestic terror, from Joan's notorious "night raids" and regimented routines to sexual jealousy and forced ingestion of raw meat, the first edition of *Mommie Dearest* (Crawford, 1979) stayed on the *New York Times* non-fiction best-seller list for 42 weeks, was translated into six languages, and in 1981 was released as a "super campy" film (Bouldry, 1998), directed by Frank Perry and starring Faye Dunaway as Crawford.

To read *Lady Oracle* through "Joan" is thus to engage with a complex of meanings exposing contradictions of both mothering and what I will term "daughtering," the daughter's narrative struggle to negotiate her subjective autonomy following her mother's death.<sup>2</sup> Barbara Johnson has brilliantly speculated that self-narration may adhere to matricidal impulses: "Is autobiography somehow always in the process of symbolically killing the mother off by telling her the lie that we have given birth to ourselves?" (1987: 147). In a kind of zero sum game between competing subjectivities, the mother whose originary presence relativises the daughter's autonomy must first be magnified and then rejected as monstrous. In contrast, my analysis suggests an oscillating tension between impulses of love and hate on the part of both mother and daughter. Rather than addressing the level of representation (what happens in the story) or narrating instance (what emotional processes the narrator undergoes), I ask what model of psychic functioning emerges from the Joan Crawford intertext. At the level of a textual unconscious (rather than the representational or narratorial levels), the "Joan function" in *Lady Oracle* acts as a kind of textual introject, layering, splitting, and populating the subjectivities of the fictional mother and daughter, with implications for how we might theorize, and evaluate, the negative pole of ambivalence in this relationship. Simultaneously Good Mother and Bad Mother, Joan Crawford serves both as a figure, and a symbolic mediation, of this necessary ambivalence.

*Lady Oracle* and *Mommie Dearest* could be described, in terms of narrative genre, as Cinderella tales without a prince, and with the protagonist's mother replacing the evil stepmother. *Lady Oracle* consists of the retrospective first-person narration of novelist Joan Foster, writing in the mid 1970s at the age of around 30. Joan writes costume Gothic romances for a living, and the developing plot of her current manuscript, "Stalked by Love," counterpoints events of her own life, equally enmeshed in complicity and intrigue. Of particular interest here is Joan's childhood battle with her controlling mother, in which she compulsively eats, using her body as a weapon of reproach (Restuccia, 1996: 367). However, in a comic peripeteia, after leaving school she loses 100 pounds to meet the terms of her Aunt Lou's will (Atwood, 1976: 117).<sup>3</sup> Following her mother's death, Joan experiences four visitations, culminating in a conciliatory fantasy and the understanding that "[my mother had] never really let go of me because I had never let her go" (Atwood, 1976: 331).

To start unravelling what "Joan" might mean, consider, for a moment, the idea that Joan Foster's fortunes in *Lady Oracle* reproduce in a bathetic, inept,

and Canadian manner the biography of Joan Crawford's life. Both Joans are redheads who do not bear their "own" name. Joan Crawford was born Lucille LeSueur, but knew herself only as Billie Cassin until the age of seven (Raeburn, 1986: n.p.). Her on-screen name was decided by a public competition held by the Metro Goldwyn Meyer studio, though even then the name "Joan Crawford" was second choice: Joan Arden was preferred, until it was discovered that another actress already bore that name (Raeburn, n.p.; Robertson 90).<sup>4</sup> Like her namesake in *Lady Oracle*, Joan Crawford loses weight (Raeburn, n.p.), suffers an apparent confusion of life and art (Crawford, 1979: 23), and confess to a tendency to embellish and distort events of childhood (Guiles, 1995: 29). Both have multiple sex partners. And, curiously, both Joans cut their feet on glass (Guiles, 1995: 25; Atwood, 1976: 335-36).<sup>5</sup>

Yet Joan Crawford was known less as a daughter than as a mother, and in many ways it seems more appropriate to align Frances Delacourt herself with the celebrated actress. Closer in generation and socialization, Frances aspires to the glamour and public success of the actress.<sup>6</sup> In the 1940s, the period of Joan Foster's childhood, Joan Crawford was cultivating an image as the model mother of four adopted children, Christina, Christopher, Cathy, and Cynthia. "We were paraded out one by one, in our darling little starched outfits and pseudo-British manners," complains Christina in *Mommie Dearest*, adding, with sardonic reference to one of her mother's roles: "We were the best-mannered, best-behaved, most perfect child-mannequins the queen bee could produce" (1979: 182). The publicity shots included in *Mommie Dearest* confirm the careful staging of the family at the hands of "pandering publicity hacks" (182): again and again the composition of the shots reinforces symmetry (Joan with a child on each arm) or mother-daughter identification (Joan and Christina in parallel poses with matching costumes).

Details of some photographs, however, show that even the publicity stills could not gloss over the unhappiness between mother and daughter. In one shot, Joan holds her son by the hand on one side but her daughter by the wrist on the other. In another, taken at a toy store opening, Joan leers like a sideshow clown-mouth while Christina stares unhappily into the middle distance; in the background, slightly out of focus, we see an actual clown with his eyes downcast, reinforcing the grotesqueness and pathos of this forced moment. And as details unfold, we discover further parallels between the mothers of *Lady Oracle* and *Mommie Dearest*, suggesting certain set scenes of 1940s-style domestic tyranny. Both mothers develop a fanaticism for cleanliness, covering furniture with plastic wrap and insisting on white gloves; Frances won't even touch her own daughter without her gloves as a protection against defilement. Both characters rip out the faces of former boyfriends from photographs, an act seen by their respective daughters as a threatening expression of omnipotence ("Somehow my Mommie dearest could make grown people like Phillip [Terry] disappear. That thought scared me so much it was like falling into eternal darkness" [Crawford, 1979: 42-43]). Both Frances and Joan Crawford disliked

their own mothers, detest fat people, refuse counselling, cover up suspected sexual improprieties in their youth. And both, in middle age, begin to drink “more than just socially” (Crawford, 1979: 83).

Thus the namer becomes the named: in a rebounding, ironic prolepsis it is Frances, and not her daughter, who ends up “becoming” Joan Crawford, for the glamour mother of 1940s Hollywood was really the bad mother that Frances herself is. The fairy godmother screen star who presided at the daughter’s christening in *Lady Oracle* has flipped into the wicked witch, and in naming her daughter, Frances names disavowed parts of herself—her possessive mothering and her hatred of her daughter. Equally, the mother’s barbed ambition for her daughter functions also as a reproach against her own lack of advancement and frustrated desire: where Joan Crawford as success figure was not (Frances’s own failure to “work hard” and “build herself up from nothing”), Joan Crawford as monster will be.

Thus the circulation of this split signifier “Joan” serves simultaneously as mechanism, symptom, and effect of the multiple transfusions of desire passing between mother, internalized mother, and daughter. Through a process of projective identification, the mother’s projections in *Lady Oracle* become absurdly somatized in her daughter’s ballooning weight:

I swelled visibly, relentlessly, before her very eyes, I rose like dough, my body advanced inch by inch towards her across the dining-room table, in this at least I was undefeated. I was five feet four and still growing, and I weighed a hundred and eighty-two pounds. (Atwood, 1976: 67)

The inept genius of the daughter’s resistance lies in her very passivity: Frances’s psychic incursions into her daughter are absorbed, like punching a giant marshmallow or, more aptly, the psychological equivalent of a tar baby. The more Frances “offloads” her internal bad objects onto her daughter, the more bloated and intolerable (to Frances) these objects become, fuelling a further defensive round of projections as “the interior which is expelled and located in others is *still* attached to the self” (Ian Parker, 100).<sup>7</sup>

One possible answer could now be advanced in response to Atwood’s question posed in the epigraph above: “When bad women get into literature, what are they doing there...?” Bad mothers, at least, foreground the fact that aggressivity, as well as nurturance, structures mother-daughter relations at the ineradicable level of the unconscious. The most influential psychoanalytic theorist of this dialectic of love and hate is Melanie Klein, who asserts that the newborn infant, unable to integrate its mother’s alternate gratification and frustration of its needs, fantasmatically splits the mother into “hating” and “loving” selves, which are respectively hated and loved by the child. As the infant gradually becomes aware that the good and bad object adhere to the same identity, reparatory impulses come into play to compensate for the

perceived harm done to the mother. Infantile hate, from this point of view, is not simply a “disagreeable passion,” to use Burack’s phrase (1994:71), but a family value, serving as a developmental waystation toward the infant’s integrated subjectivity:

Ambivalence carried out in a splitting of the imagos [into “good” and “bad” objects] enables a small child to gain more trust and belief in its real objects and thus in its internalized ones—to love them more and to carry out in increasing degrees its fantasies of restoration of the loved object. (Klein, qtd. in R. Parker, 1995: 92, with Parker’s insertion)

Although Western representation polarizes these “good” and “bad” objects into idealized and demonized mothers (Kaplan, 1992; Caplan, 1989; Thurer, 1994), in fantasy both are necessary for the development and maintenance of the self, not merely in infancy but throughout life (Burack, 1994: 78). However, “full and permanent integration is never possible” between these extremes (Klein, qtd. in R. Parker, 1995: 6). Rozsika Parker’s mother-centered revision of Kleinian principles extend categories of infantile fantasy to the mother, asserting the “creative role of the mother’s hatred in the development of maternal thinking, not restricted to its role in the infant’s capacity to think” (63). While not condoning abusive hatred—“hatred outside of ambivalence”—hatred “accompanied by terrible shame and fear, fostered by a culture which cannot bear to contemplate maternal ambivalence” (136) can also be destructive.

The figure of Joan Crawford maintains these polarities in tension, implying that the Good Mother and the Bad Mother are not mutually exclusive positions but rather implicated in each other. Joan Crawford tried so hard to be good, according to her values of cleanliness, order, and discipline, that she was bad: “[Crawford is] providing her kids with the perfection she yearned for,” writes Pauline Kael of Dunaway’s interpretation of Joan, “and they don’t appreciate it. So she blows sky-high and shows them real disorder—the mess [she feels] they deserve” (1996: 906). This paradox of the mother who is perfect to a fault was presaged in Crawford’s Oscar-winning performance as Mildred Pierce (1945), the mother-martyr bearing a “halo of face powder and pastry flour” (Pardi, 1997: 265). When her marriage fails, Mildred starts working outside the home in what proves to be a highly successful catering business. To compensate for her domestic absence, Mildred sacrifices herself to indulge her daughter, Veda, to the point of making a loveless marriage and covering up Veda’s murder of Mildred’s second husband. “It’s your fault I’m the way I am!” screams Veda in the film’s denouement, and plot causality and a series of parallels established between mother and daughter in the *mise en scene* encourage the audience to take the same point of view (Haralovich, 1992: 44, 46).

As an unconscious process, ambivalence cannot be expunged but rather managed and adapted through the capacity to “accept responsibility for the destructiveness that is part of life” (R. Parker, 1995: 95). Now the Good Mother turns bad to the extent that she denies—to herself and to her daughter—the cycles of aggressivity, guilt, and reparative acts of kindness that Kleinian theory foregrounds. Indeed, part of the rage of the “angry young women” of the 1970s is to smash the lovely surface of the Good Mother image, a motivation which perhaps propelled subsequent feminist theorising of maternal ambivalence more than detractors such as Marianne Hirsch (1989: 192) and Paula Caplan (1989: 7) allow. Nancy Friday’s *My Mother, My Self* (1977) depicts a daughter in search of a maternal ambivalence as expressly felt, acknowledged, owned, and stated, as she feels her own to be. Friday’s text represents, in one sense, an extended chastising of her mother for failing to say expressly to her daughter (I am paraphrasing here), “Sometimes I am incompetent, sometimes I hate you, and I actually cannot meet all your needs.” This failure, as Friday sees it, would ease the pressure on both mother and daughter to make perfect the one relationship that popular object relations psychology posited as essential to the well-being of all other relationships (“virtually all psychologists agree that you cannot hate your mother and love yourself,” as Victoria Secunda sums it up [1993: 265]). Finally, after her mother’s death, “anger [on Friday’s part] broke the pane of glass between us,” a barrier established by the self-imposed, controlling “myth that mothers always love their children” (28).<sup>8</sup>

Christina Crawford meets an embarrassed silence when she attempts to expose what Secunda (1993) has called “the Bad Mommy taboo.” Complaining of migraine headaches, Christina is referred by her school first to a medical doctor and then a psychiatrist:

She [the psychiatrist] asked if I knew what might be causing my headaches.

I looked her squarely in the face and said to her directly: “Yes, I hate my mother.”

That was the end of the interview. That was also the end of my visits to the doctor. That was not the end of my headaches. (Crawford, 1979: 206)

In Christina’s depiction, psychiatry seemed to have no tools, in 1956, to manage the adult daughter’s assertion of hatred and her self-diagnosis (implicitly accurate, given the persistence of the purported symptom). Film stars were good mothers, and good mothers simply could not be hateful, so no hatred could be owned to exist between daughter and mother.

The advantage of Kleinian accounts of ambivalence is that they maintain elements of unconscious desire that tend to be omitted from more cognitive, dialogic, mediatory, or “mental-health”-oriented accounts of the mother-

daughter bond, and help explain both the persistence and power of fascination maintained by the Joan Crawford mythology.<sup>9</sup> The restless circulation of desire means that daughters will never fully “write off” the maternal introjections passed on as an unconscious legacy from their mothers (this, no doubt, is the force of the ending of *Mommie Dearest*, in which Christina and her brother are cut off from Joan’s legal inheritance, but overwhelmed with her emotional legacy). The process of “daughtering” thus becomes one of negotiation and balance with the “internal presences” (Pruyser, 1975: 38) constituting the daughter’s subjectivity, rather than self-extrication or an impossible symbolic annihilation of the internalized mother.

Finally, the coalescence of Good Mother and Bad Mother inheres in the double-voiced title of Christina Crawford’s memoir and the film derived from it, a phrase which becomes voiced and revoiced between the daughter and the mother in an attempt to gain control of its meaning, rather like the children’s game of topping hands. In the funeral sequence that frames the (auto)biography, the daughter addresses her mother’s corpse: “We had so much pain together, you and I, but now, Mother, God has set us both free.... God has set us free, Mommie Dearest. Go in peace” (Crawford, 1979: 17). Christina appears frankly to bless her mother, assuming the power to absolve her in a conciliatory manner. A later comment reveals, however, that the endearment is compulsory: “I had to say ‘Yes, Mommie dearest’ so many times that the very sound of it made me vomit. She made me call her ‘Mommie dearest’ now whether I wanted to or not” (141). Perhaps the daughter’s address to her dead mother nonetheless constitutes a final attempt to please her with one last verbal gift—a final request to be loved, or to be redeemed rather than to redeem. Yet as the narrative develops further, the phrase increasingly picks up sarcasm. While Christina is at high school, Joan signs her letters with “Mommie dearest” in inverted commas, an act interpreted by the daughter as an unconscious acknowledgment of fraudulence: “Usually she signed ‘Mommie’ with quotation marks as though it were a pseudonym. Perhaps it was” (208).

The screen adaptation of *Mommie Dearest* renders this determination to finalize meaning through a final twist, in which Christina’s controlling focalization is retrospectively imposed on the film:

CHRISTOPHER CRAWFORD: As usual, she has the last word.

CHRISTINA CRAWFORD: Does she?

This moment loops us back to the beginning, recasting the events of the film as a motivated, tendentious representation designed to get back at “Mommie.” Yet the very attempt to exorcise “Joan” only makes her stronger, as through the film vehicle she rises magnificently, regally, in a sublime reincarnation of the Bad Mother: “Dunaway sees a grandeur in Joan Crawford, and by the size and severity of the torments she acts out she makes Crawford seem tragic” (Kael, 1996: 908). The negative pole of maternal ambivalence cannot be

broken (or repaired) by words, as the persistence of the mythology emerges from that of the Kleinian unconscious.

<sup>1</sup>Grateful thanks are due to Bronwyn Beatty (1999), who has kindly allowed me to develop an intriguing footnote in her work on *Lady Oracle*.

<sup>2</sup>On the use of the verb “daughtering,” see van Mens-Verhulst *et al.* (1993: xiv); Walters (1992:10).

<sup>3</sup>Atwood (1976) thus plays upon the narrative convention, established in films such as *Now, Voyager* (1942), that the intervention of a male suitor (and/or male psychiatrist) is necessary to break the excessively close psychological bind between mother and daughter; see Walters (1992: 20 and passim). Rozsika Parker (1995) also discusses the capacity for mother-child relations to be worked through on their own emotional and psychological resources, without resorting to the mediating male “third party” posited by Freud and Lacan (135). The protagonist of *Lady Oracle* encounters three such “would be” male rescuers, all of them too feckless or self-absorbed to play the role of rescuing prince, a role fulfilled more by Aunt Lou.

<sup>4</sup>David Houston (1983) ends *Jazz Baby*, a biography of Joan Crawford’s childhood and youth, on the day on which her screen name was assigned, implying that the moment of naming is both an arrival and a departure: after searching desperately for her true father throughout her youth (in Houston’s depiction), the young woman finally takes on the name endowed by her substitute “daddies” at Metro Goldwyn Meyer, and from there her identity as a “star” can coalesce. See further Allen and Gomery (1985: 180).

<sup>5</sup>When she was eight Joan Crawford jumped off a porch, landed on a broken milk bottle and severed an artery. The fictional Joan Foster dances through a plate glass window, with an allusion to *The Red Shoes* (see Emily Jensen’s [1986] extensive commentary in “Margaret Atwood’s *Lady Oracle*: A Modern Parable”).

<sup>6</sup>Frances also emulates Betty Davis, suggesting her self-division: “[Frances’s] lips were thin but she made a larger mouth with lipstick over and around them, like Bette Davis, which gave her a curious mouth, the real one showing through the false one like a shadow” (Atwood, 1976: 65). Davis was Joan Crawford’s arch-rival at Metro Goldwyn Meyer studios.

<sup>7</sup>Other “ballooning” characters who are psychically victimized and inhabited by parental introjections can be found in Sarah Paretsky’s “A Taste of Life” (1995) and William Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily” (1992). Frances Restuccia (1996) argues that at the point of narrating, the “depressed” Joan psychically retains her dead mother through melancholic introjection: “Joan embeds Frances within herself so as not to lose her” (Atwood, 1976: 366), and thus she symbolically “kills off” herself, rather than the maternal introject, through a series of identities that are cancelled and then reproduced.

<sup>8</sup>In *Lady Oracle*’s dominant mode of bathos, this failed “I hate you” on Frances’s

part is displaced into threats of retribution by a punitive God and an ineffectual attack with a kitchen knife, immediately foreclosed by Joan's reaffirmation of the good mother-good daughter scenario: "I think I'll make myself a cup of tea,' I said conversationally, 'Would you like one, Mother?'" (Atwood, 1976: 124).<sup>9</sup>By "cognitive approach" I refer to such self-help texts as Paula Caplan's *Don't Blame Mother: Mending the Mother-Daughter Relationship* (1989). Caplan argues that "the biggest reason daughters are upset and angry with their mothers is that they have been *taught* to be so. Largely unaware that our culture's polarized mother-images create barriers between mothers and daughters, we have held each other responsible" (2). She advocates a series of tasks, such as guided interviews with one's mother, to enhance the daughter's capacity to understand the constraints on, and motivations for, mothers' behaviour. For an example of a mediatory approach, consider Suzanne Juhasz's (2000) theorizing of daughters as authors who employ language as a transitional space to both establish their own autonomous subjectivity and—as a corollary—that of their mothers. The intersubjective, playful elements of language itself are held to facilitate emotional process as the "daughter will write the mother into subjectivity, and she will write herself into subjectivity" (174).

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