

Introduction

Margaret Atwood's bibliography, as it appears on her website, stretches to nearly ninety discreet items, exclusive of reviews and critical articles (which one imagines she must surely have lost count of by now). It includes sixteen novels, eight short story collections, and seventeen poetry collections; it encompasses children's books, graphic novels, non-fiction, television scripts and edited works. The earliest item is *Double Persephone*, a poetry pamphlet published with the small press, Hawkshead, in 1961, and the most recent is her contribution to the Hogarth Shakespeare Project, *Hag-Seed*, a re-imagining of *The Tempest*, published in 2016. It is, by any account, a formidable record of literary achievement. It points, most readily, of course, simply to Atwood's longevity: she is a writer approaching nearly sixty years of recorded publishing. It also, however, draws attention to her versatility as a writer. Primarily and popularly known as a novelist and also, to those more familiar with her work, as a poet and short story writer, Atwood's non-fiction texts such as *On Writers and Writing* (2002) and *Payback* (2008) – not to mention children's stories such as *Up in the Tree* (1978, with a facsimile reprint published in 2006), or her developing graphic novel series, *Angel Catbird* (2016-17) – are an inextricable element of an extraordinary career. These works are, perhaps inevitably, frequently deemed peripheral to the real business of novel writing. Nevertheless, in their disparate elements – encompassing as they do, incisive literary critical reflection, deeply serious political and environmental commentary, and a playful readiness to experiment with language and genre – these auxiliary works constitute an instructive account of what might be termed distinctively Atwoodian about Atwood.

Born in 1939 in Ottawa and raised in northern Ontario and Quebec before moving to Toronto in 1946 – where she still lives today – Atwood is inarguably Canada's most well-known living writer. As a child, she famously spent a large portion of each year in the Canadian wilderness, following her entomologist father on his extended field trips. Elements of these

early experiences recur in Atwood's work, most notably in the 1972 novel, *Surfacing*, in which the unnamed narrator travels up into the northern lakes of Quebec in search of her missing father, and in *Cat's Eye* (1988), in which Elaine is traumatically socialised into the world of little girls after an early childhood largely spent, like Atwood's own, living in tents and cabins, "like nomads on the far edges of the war," free from both gendered social conventions and formal education (*Cat's Eye* 25). These formative scenes also returned more recently in "The Boys at the Lab," the final collected story in *Moral Disorder* (2006), in which childhood experiences of the wilderness are focalised this time through the narrator's mother, who enjoys telling slightly scandalous stories of gutting fish and evading bears to the friends who thought "she'd been crazy to go way up there into nowhere with two small kids" ("The Boys at the Lab" 242). Collectively, these narratives speak of Atwood's early life as a period immersed in nature and surrounded by science, and largely shielded from the gendered social conventions of a provincial 1940s Canada: all elements that can be seen to inform her subsequent writing.

As a student, Atwood variously attended Victoria College at the University of Toronto, where she received a BA in English, Radcliffe College in Boston, Massachusetts, where she studied for an MA, and finally the University of Harvard, where she twice commenced a PhD that was never completed. These studies, as one might expect, were interspersed with occasional employment, and once again, elements of these experiences can be seen refracted in her later fiction: from Marian's uninspiring job in market research in Atwood's first published novel, *The Edible Woman* (1969), to Nell's experiences juggling sessional teaching and part-time editorial work in *Moral Disorder* (2006). In addition to these various roles, Atwood was also an aspiring young poet in Toronto in the 1960s: a time when the city had a burgeoning folk and experimental art scene. Although she remains primarily known as a novelist, before she published *The Edible Woman* – the novel that brought her wider critical attention – Atwood

had already produced *Double Persephone* and published two further collections of poetry: *The Circle Game* (1966) and *The Animals in That Country* (1968). In “Alphinland,” the first of three interconnected stories in *Stone Mattress*, Atwood describes with fond irony something of that period in her life – its freedoms and friendships, as well as the rivalries and lingering male chauvinism – as Constance recalls “the folksingers and jazz musicians and actors who were part of an amorphous, ever-shifting group of artistic risk-takers” (20) who used to gather at the Riverboat coffee house in the Yorkville area of Toronto. (For further details of this fascinating and productive period, when Atwood and other young avant-garde poets such as Fred Wah, Al Purdy and bpNichol were regularly reading in Toronto coffee houses, see Pauline Butting and Susan Rudy’s *Writing in Our Time*, 2005.)

From these early beginnings, Atwood became successful as a writer quite rapidly, and quickly gained critical recognition for her work. From its inception, the corpus of critical analyses addressing her writing has been characterised by variety, but nevertheless, three early themes have persisted. The first – commonly addressing the function of Canada and the nature of Canadianness – was arguably precipitated by Atwood’s own literary criticism. In 1972, she published her critical study, *Survival*: “a book of patterns” (*Survival* 11) in the then-popular mode of Northrop Frye. The book examined the phenomenon of the newly staked out field of “Can Lit”, and identified in Canadian writing – defined as more pragmatic and less optimistic than American writing – a recurring national preoccupation with themes of survival and victimhood, drawing out recurring imagery of nature as monster, and animals and indigenous Canadians as victims. The book was published against a backdrop of a growing cultural nationalism in Canada that had been developing throughout the 1960s and had seen the progressive development of a national publishing infrastructure and the sustained and purposeful support for the arts through the Canada Council and its programme of funding. Atwood is both product of this Canadian cultural renaissance, and also – with

Survival – an instrumental (and controversial) figure in shaping the debate around the nature of Canadian national culture and Canada's role within a global literary culture.

In addition to the lens directed at Atwood as a Canadian writer, her work has also been accompanied by an extensive body of feminist critical analysis that has looked to address her work in terms of its engagement with gender and gender politics. This is arguably inevitable, and again, is due in part to the period in which she began writing. While Atwood has taken pains to point out that *The Edible Woman* preceded second-wave feminism – “there was no women's movement in sight when I was composing the book in 1965, and I'm not gifted with clairvoyance” (Atwood, *The Edible Woman* “Introduction”) – her predominantly female protagonists have repeatedly addressed questions around power, violence, the body and autonomy that have similarly animated feminist theorists. These same themes also frequently overlap with the third longstanding and recurrent preoccupation in studies of Atwood's work – that of her fascination with myths and folklore, and with the rewriting of mythic narrative patterns. Particularly from the early 1990s, critical works that examined Atwood's use of gothic and fairy-tale tropes proliferated.

Since the first collection of critical essays addressing Atwood's work appeared in 1977 in *The Malahat Review: Margaret Atwood: A Symposium*, edited by Linda Sandler, Atwood's writing has proven a rich field for literary critics. Indeed, a longitudinal view of such studies – too extensive to explore in any detail here – provides a fascinating illustration of shifting fashions in the field. In 1983, for example, Sherrill Grace and Lorraine Weir's *Margaret Atwood: Language, Text and System* provided a collection of structuralist and poststructuralist readings, and argued that: “The object of a reading . . . is to ‘dismantle’ the system of the text in order to discover the focal points or nodes which dominate the system” (ix). In 1993, instead, Sharon Rose Wilson's *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* provided the kind of thematic study alluded to above, examining the recurring influence of

the Grimm brothers and Hans Christian Andersen on Atwood's work. More recent studies instead, include Reingard Nischik's *Engendering Genre* (2009), focusing on the manner in which gender and genre entwine in Atwood's work, and my own historicist account of Atwood's evolving and contentious relationship with feminist theory in *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction* (2007). Against these closely focused studies, one might also consider the various large overviews of Atwood and her work that exist, one of the best of which is *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, edited by Coral Ann Howells (2006), which is soon to have a second edition. This authoritative collection of essays is organised to cover Atwood's major genres – short fiction, poetry, novels – but also takes as key indicative themes, among others, Canada, female bodies, and environmentalism. While demonstrating the persistence of some themes, this perpetually developing body of criticism also pays tribute to the capacity of Atwood's work to sustain close critical analysis. As theories and approaches have lost prominence in academic culture, interest in Atwood's work has not waned, but rather diverges and evolves in new directions.

If Atwood criticism provides a window into the recent history and method of literary criticism, her career also charts a path through contemporary women's writing. In the broadest perspective, she belongs, of course, to a large history of women's writing. Wilson, for example, suggests that, "[l]ike Charlotte Bronte, Virginia Woolf, Doris Lessing, Sylvia Plath, Remedios Varo, and Frida Kahlo, Atwood usurps patriarchal power by being a woman and an artist at the same time" (Wilson 15). And Carol P. Christ's influential 1980 comparative study, *Diving Deep and Surfacing*, reads Atwood alongside Kate Chopin, Doris Lessing, Adrienne Rich and Ntozake Shange as women writers concerned with images of awakening and surfacing, where "women's quest . . . for a wholeness in which the oppositions between body and soul, nature and spirit or freedom, rationality and emotion are overcome" (26). More specifically, Atwood also takes her place within a cohort of Canadian

women writers coming to recognition in the mid-to-late twentieth century, including Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro, Anne Hébert, and American-Canadian Carol Shields. Atwood, Munro and Shields, in particular, have all spoken of reading and enjoying each other's work. And beyond national borders, her interest in fairy-tales perhaps most readily connects her to Angela Carter, while her sometimes prickly exchanges with Ursula Le Guin nevertheless mark a seemingly genuinely respectful mutual acknowledgment of the two women writers' path-breaking forays into the traditionally masculine realm of science fiction. And finally, Atwood's recent support for and collaboration with the 2017 winner of the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction, Naomi Alderman, shows her continuing role in shaping and inspiring the newer generations of contemporary women writers.

Against this sometime contested history of critical readings and writerly connections, what is indisputable is that Atwood has carved out an incredibly successful career. Since winning the Governor-General's Award for Poetry in 1967 with *The Circle Game*, she has subsequently garnered an extensive list of international accolades and honours. In 2000, she won the Booker Prize for Fiction for *The Blind Assassin* (a prize for which she has also been shortlisted a further four times, in 1987, 1989, 1996, and 2003). She has been awarded honorary doctorates from – among others – the Universities of Cambridge, Harvard, and the Sorbonne Nouvelle. Her writing is studied by students at all levels, across the world, and international researchers regularly travel to the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto to consult her donated archive of manuscripts, correspondence and research notes. There is a Margaret Atwood society “with whom she has an uneasy relationship” (Macpherson 2010, 5), and she has so far been the subject of two unauthorised biographies: Nathalie Cooke's *Margaret Atwood: A Biography* and Rosemary Sullivan's *The Red Shoes: Margaret Atwood Starting Out*, both published in 1998. All of these signifiers of critical and popular success combine to locate Atwood on the international literary stage as

one of relatively few literary authors to achieve what has been persuasively described by Lorraine Yorke, in her 2013 study of “the many industries that circulate and participate in the literary celebrity of Margaret Atwood” (12) as an international recognition of both her work and her own status as the writer of that work. From aspiring young Toronto poet, to Canada’s most famous writer, to global icon of literary celebrity, Atwood has undergone various incarnations, but at this point in 2017, what perhaps remains most remarkable is her capacity to continue to produce work that extends the parameters of her canon, and also inspires new critical perspectives.

The articles collected in this special issue are written by scholars of Atwood’s work of international standing. Some address familiar themes that have some to characterise Atwood’s work, but re-examine them in the light of more recent publications and the more extended perspective allowed for by the accumulation of work published across decades (see, for example, Howells on Atwood’s use of popular genre fiction and Shuli Barzilai on the revenge motif in the short fiction). Others take up newer themes that have increasingly come to the fore in Atwood’s work (Gina Wisker on eco-gothic, Amelia DeFalco on biocapitalism and Fiona Tolan on ageing). Madeleine Davies’s article examines Atwood’s much-discussed fictive autobiographies, but considers them in the light of visual imagery, while Kiriaki Massoura draws out intertextual relations between Homer’s *Odyssey* and Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*: both taking recognisable Atwoodian strategies of genre subversion and intertextuality and re-examining them in the light of new critical perspectives. And finally, Nischik’s essay on the comparative reception of Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin* in America and Canada furthers and extends her innovative work in this area. What each of these essays points to, cumulatively, is the continuing vitality of Atwood’s work, which continues to carve out new directions into the twenty-first century and to ensure that the remarkable career of a formidable writer continues to be open to new developments and unexpected discoveries.

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