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INTRODUCTION

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Introducing Margaret Atwood

In November 2004 Margaret Atwood and Dame Gillian Beer engaged in a public conversation about her writing at the British Academy in London, a very “Establishment” literary event, where they discussed the image of the labyrinth as an appropriate description of the processes of writing novels and reading them. Two months later, Atwood appeared on a popular Canadian television show, rigged out in full ice hockey gear, showing the host, Richard Mercer, how to deflect a puck in Canada’s favorite national sport. These two images of Atwood, as internationally famous writer talking seriously with a Cambridge professor about the mysteries of her craft, and the other as Canadian celebrity advertising her national identity in a playful masquerade, illustrates the combination of high seriousness and witty ironic vision which is the hallmark of Atwood’s literary production. In this book, our primary concern is with Margaret Atwood the writer, but there is also Atwood the literary celebrity, media star, and public performer, Atwood the cultural critic, social historian, environmentalist, and human rights spokeswoman, and Atwood the political satirist and cartoonist. The chapters in this volume address all these features in the Atwood profile, as they consider her career from a variety of perspectives and with very different emphases, though it is her Canadianness and her international appeal as an imaginative writer which are the two *leitmotifs*.

Atwood is a popular writer; as she has often said, “I write for people who like to read books,”¹ and her novels are bestsellers all over the world. They are also taught in schools and colleges all over the world on a wide range of courses: English literature, Canadian and postcolonial literature, American literature (in the United States, where Atwood is a “North American” or sometimes an “American” writer), as well as women’s studies, gender studies, and science fiction courses. Our aim in this book is to encourage students

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to see more – not only in individual Atwood novels, short stories or poems which they happen to be studying, but also to place any single Atwood text or selection of texts in context, in relation to her other work and in a broader framework of contemporary issues and critical approaches. Appropriately for Atwood, we have assembled an international array of contributors here – there are critics from Canada, Britain, Australia, the United States, France, Germany, Italy, South Asia, and Spain – all of us Atwoodians who are engaged in this collaborative project which illustrates the variety of emphases in current Atwood scholarship.

This book does not follow a chronological design, but is arranged round a set of recurrent themes, for what emerges overwhelmingly through the multiplicity of Atwood's voices and personas and her formal experiments with language and literary conventions are the continuities across four decades of her writing. Most of the topics here have been visited before. After all, there is a huge international Atwood academic critical industry, and the Margaret Atwood Society Newsletter publishes annual updates of scholarly works on Atwood – articles and books – which average over fifty per year. However, revisiting these same topics from different critical and theoretical angles (e.g. recent emphases on postmodernism, postcolonialism, and environmentalism) and in the light of Atwood's own continuous production, may help to re-evaluate the major dynamics in her work.

The *Companion* and its chapters

To give a brief overview of this book: the first two chapters are biographical and literary, setting Atwood in her Canadian context and analyzing her role as international literary celebrity. The next five chapters are concerned with important topics with which Atwood engaged at the beginning of her career and to which she has returned again and again, exploring, expanding, and explaining these in her fiction, poetry, and essays. Chapter 8 is devoted to Atwood's language as it analyzes her distinctively Canadian brand of ironic humor; this is followed by three chapters which take an explicitly generic approach, looking at her poetry, short stories, and dystopian narratives, and highlighting her experiments across genre boundaries. The final chapter is the other "bookend" which balances the first chapter by offering a retrospective view of Atwood's whole career as a novelist. It extrapolates her Canadian themes of wilderness and survival and resituates them in relation to that other key motif in her "I" witness/eyewitness narratives, that of blindness and vision. The chapter ends with a provocative question which turns readers back with renewed attention to Atwood as writer, trickster, entertainer, moralist, and satirist.

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In chapter 1 David Staines presents a profile of Atwood as the famous writer who is, “above all else, Canadian.” Rich in biographical detail, his account traces Atwood’s career in tandem with her responses to the Canadian cultural context from the 1950s onwards, emphasizing her innovative role as interpreter of her country’s culture, first to Canadians themselves in the 1970s and since the 1980s as an increasingly popular spokesperson for Canada around the world. He sets out the major themes of her writing which are grounded in her Canadian context, like her fascination with Canadian history and landscape, but which over forty years have broadened into topics of international relevance with her scrutiny of cultural myths about women, her concern with human rights and threats to the environment, and her strong sense of moral responsibility in an increasingly globalized context of reference. Chapter 2 is also biographical in its basis, but with a difference. It is about biography and fiction, or perhaps about biography as fiction, for Lorraine York reads Atwood’s biography through the discourse of literary celebrity. Her focus is not so much on the details of Atwood’s life story (which are sketched in the Chronology) but on Atwood herself as a “star text.” York analyzes the ongoing interrelation between media constructions of Atwood and her own active intervention in those constructions through her website, her deprecating self-irony and humor in interviews, and through the negotiations with fame of many of her fictional protagonists like Joan Foster, Elaine Risley, or Grace Marks. Not surprisingly, this chapter shows up the more sinister aspects of celebrity, so helping us to interpret Atwood’s own ironic comments on the star status of the writer in her lectures and essays in *Negotiating with the Dead* and her latest invention, a remote book-signing device which would allow her to autograph copies of her novels from her desk in Toronto “without . . . having to traipse to bookshops across the globe.”²

Chapters 3 and 4 discuss the theme of power politics. Pilar Somacarrera analyzes the treatment of national and sexual power politics and their curious intersections, as Atwood continues to investigate the question of “who gets to do what to whom.”³ Reading through a Foucauldian lens, Somacarrera analyzes the sexual power games in the early poems and novels, tracing the topic as it expands into national and international dimensions in her later work. Madeleine Davies also focuses on sexual power politics with a specifically feminist emphasis on Atwood’s representation of female bodies, where social power structures are “written on to female flesh” and into women’s psyches. Adapting the French feminist theorist Hélène Cixous’s famous essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Davies shows Atwood’s ongoing engagement with the concept of *écriture féminine* as her women’s fictive autobiographies trace the emergence of female subjects from a position of

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powerlessness and silence to become duplicitous narrators as they struggle to reconnect “body” with “text.”

The four middle chapters address various facets of how Canada and Canadianness are figured within the textual spaces of Atwood’s writing, from her concern with landscape and environment to her responses to Canadian social attitudes and changing ideologies of nationhood and identity, all of which are marked by the distinctive manner of her storytelling. In her survey of Atwood’s novels, poetry and non-fictional prose in chapter 5, Shannon Hengen explores Atwood’s environmental ethics and the evolution of her ideas about what “being human” means. Her broadly ranging analysis argues for Atwood’s insistence on the symbiotic relation between human and non-human nature, as she spells out the vital connection between science and art in defining the position of human beings as the nexus of nature and culture. In chapter 6 Coomi Vevaina discusses Atwood’s postmodern versions of Canadian history, with her double focus on history as collective public memory and the private psychohistories of female immigrants, witches, criminals, and various trickster figures. These marginalized “her/stories” destabilize the truth claims of historical writing in a postmodern context. A similar skepticism about national and social myths is revealed in Eleonora Rao’s analysis in chapter 7 of Atwood’s discourses of home and nation in her later novels. Focusing on their postcolonial implications, Rao argues that any discourse about “home” is an extension of discourses of nation and national identity and related to concepts of belonging and homelessness, dislocation, and alienation. Rao traces patterns of exile and self-division from *Cat’s Eye* through to *Oryx and Crake*, where Snowman is the ultimate outsider. Here Atwood the Canadian nationalist moves beyond national boundaries in a post-catastrophe world where “home” exists nowhere but in imagination and memory. It would be an oversight, however, to neglect the wit and humor of Atwood’s storytelling, no matter how serious the subject matter, and in chapter 8 Marta Dvorak offers a fascinating rhetorical analysis of her skillful use of irony and satire. Harking back to the deadpan humor of rural Nova Scotia, the home of both Atwood’s parents, Dvorak argues that the manner of Atwood’s storytelling derives from the tall tales and yarns of that oral tradition, though she goes on to situate Atwood’s writing in a broader framework of humorous literary production that includes the burlesque, the grotesque, and the Bakhtinian carnivalesque.

The first of the three “genre” chapters, Branko Gorjup’s overview in chapter 9 of Atwood’s poetry from the 1960s through to the 1990s, also focuses on language, this time on the distinctively “Atwoodian” idiom and the evolution of her poetic voice. Whereas the early poetry was characterized by irony, emotional detachment, and a lethally precise vocabulary, there are

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shifts in her later poetry towards a multiplicity of voices and corresponding changes in tone towards compassion and elegy. Reading though imagery, Gorjup highlights Atwood's "poetics of metamorphosis" in her poetic world of mutations and mirrors and the palimpsestic quality of experience and landscape, filled with unseen presences and memories. "Nothing goes away" in the fluid reality of this created world, where Atwood is presented not as a cultural historian but as a mythographer of the Canadian imagination. In chapter 10, Reingard Nischik surveys Atwood's three short story collections and her three collections of (short) short stories written since the 1980s. Or should they be called prose poems? Dramatic monologues? Flash fictions? As Nischik comments, the critical terminology is as yet unfixd for in these new short text formats Atwood has exploded the boundaries of the short story genre. This scholarly analysis pays attention to the high degree of intertextuality and generic hybridity in these short prose pieces, while at the same time it takes up Atwood's feminist focus on the theme of gender relations, playing variations on the same themes explored in her novels and poetry. Like Dvorak, Nischik draws attention to techniques of irony and humor as she traces Atwood's development as a social and political critic. Coral Ann Howells's chapter on the two dystopian novels also stresses her role as satirist and moralist, with her urgent warning to an international readership to pay attention to the world we live in before it is too late. Howells argues that the two novels represent a synthesis of Atwood's political, social, and environmental concerns, transformed into speculative fiction, where Atwood continues to ask awkward questions. What difference does it make when a dystopian narrative is told from a marginalized feminine perspective, and perhaps more radically, what difference does it make when the tale is told by the Last Man alive? Not only do these questions challenge the limits of the dystopian genre, but they also probe the possible functions and purposes of storytelling.

The final frame is provided by Sharon Wilson in chapter 12, who begins with Atwood's endgame in *Oryx and Crake* where human beings and civilization are on the brink of extinction. Returning to Atwood's fictions as early as the 1970s, Wilson discerns signs of that end-of-the-world theme and perceives a consistent emphasis on the failure of Atwood's protagonists to see clearly – from defective sight to distorted vision and moral blindness. While symbolic blindness may be a necessary beginning for narrative quests, regaining some vision is arguably necessary for survival. But how useful would it be to emerge from moral blindness in a post-apocalyptic world? Wilson is prompted to ask, given the ferocity of Atwood's satiric vision of the future in *Oryx and Crake*, whether her vision is growing more pessimistic. This novel asks the same question as *Survival* over thirty years earlier, but

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with very different inflections in a postmodern globalized context: “Have we survived? / If so, what happens *after* Survival?”⁴ For Snowman, the implications at zero hour look dire, and his last words in the novel are, “Time to go.”⁵

Overview of Atwood criticism since the 1970s

This *Companion* is the latest in a long line of critical anthologies on Margaret Atwood’s work, and the remainder of this Introduction offers an overview of the most significant of these anthologies published since the 1970s, as a method of surveying the dominant trends and shifts of emphasis in Atwood criticism over thirty years. In 1977 the first collection of critical essays appeared in *The Malahat Review: Margaret Atwood: A Symposium*, edited by Linda Sandler. It was designed as a tenth anniversary tribute celebrating Atwood’s 1967 Governor-General’s Award for *The Circle Game*. Already Atwood was being hailed as “the presiding genius of Canadian letters,” with six collections of poetry, three novels, and one controversial book of literary criticism to her credit,⁶ and the contributors included eminent Canadian poets, novelists, and literary critics. In many ways this is a remarkably prescient volume, for it laid out the key issues in Atwood’s writing and mapped major directions for Atwood criticism throughout the 1980s; it is also a very domestic production, featuring Sandler’s interviews with Atwood at her Ontario farmhouse shortly before her daughter, Eleanor Jess, was born, together with a photograph of the young mother with her baby, and a photostat page of a worksheet for one of her “Circe/Mud” poems covered with chaotically crossed-out scribbled lines. Not surprisingly, the main emphasis was on Atwood’s relation to Canadian literary traditions, her fascination with the wilderness and her ecological concerns, and her role as a mythographer, with much of the evidence drawn from her poetry. Many essays also identified her concerns with the new North American feminist movement, and several essays on her novels paid attention to her narrative techniques of revisioning myths and fairy tales, and her use of a “derailed observer” as the central narrating voice. Interestingly, her “Swiftian” satire was flagged as a sign of her Canadianness, with her books being seen as “mirrors where almost every reader finds his own reflection,”⁷ and even her Gothic imagery was read through a Canadian lens where forests substituted for haunted castles.⁸ There were also foreshadowings of later criticism on Atwood’s postmodernism, with commentaries on the generic hybridity of *Lady Oracle* and a description of the artist as “that prime trickster”⁹ (though it is not clear whether the essay refers to Atwood or to her fictional protagonist). Here too appeared the

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first Atwood checklist and the first essay on archival research into the newly acquired Atwood papers in the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.¹⁰ Jerome Rosenberg records his excitement at looking into the professional correspondence relating the beginnings of Atwood's career and the evidence there of her "wit and energy" and her refusals to compromise with publishers' demands. At this early stage, it is perhaps surprising to find an analysis of Atwood as cult figure, and even more surprising to register the ambivalent tone of its ending: "For the media, Atwood is endlessly re-usable because she is endlessly Protean. There are many more Atwoods to come."¹¹

As Atwood's reputation in North America and Britain continued to grow through the 1980s,¹² four important anthologies were published. In 1981 Arnold and Cathy Davidson's *The Art of Margaret Atwood: Essays in Criticism* appeared, edited in Japan by these two Canadians on a sabbatical year away from teaching in the United States. This collection took up the same topics as *The Malahat Review: Atwood's Canadianness, her feminism, her woman-centered revisions of myths and fairy tales*, though developing these topics in different directions. Many of these essays emphasize Atwood's literariness and her intertextuality, some in relation to Northrop Frye's myth criticism and his theory of romance, others in relation to female literary traditions with her Circe and Penelope figures and her stories of transformation and female empowerment, while Atwoodian Gothic was doubly located in relation to European traditions and to the "wilderness Gothic" of Native mythology. That fascination with doubleness as a fundamental Atwoodian concern informed several studies of her "poetics of duplicity" and there are also signs of a new critical interest in the artifice of Atwood's fiction, where "truth" in her novels is seen as "a shifting construct, or a series of tricks with mirrors,"¹³ a phrase taken from one of her poems and used again as the title of Branko Gorjup's Italian/English selection of Atwood's poetry in 2000.

The 1983 anthology edited by Sherrill Grace and Lorraine Weir showed the influence of the new critical theories of structuralism and poststructuralism, as its title suggests: *Margaret Atwood: Language, Text, and System*. So, in the first essay, Grace argues for the coherence of Atwood's "system" (the codes that structure a writer's work), identifying patterns of binary opposition, but also demonstrating how Atwood deconstructs such dualities as culture/nature and male/female, as she searches for "a third way of being outside of the either/or alternatives which her system resists."¹⁴ These essays were preoccupied with the central importance of language and writing, best illustrated perhaps by the extreme example of Robert Cluett's detailed examination of the syntactic profile of *Surfacing* by computer analysis. More

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fascinating, however, is the essay on “Atwood’s Poetic Politics,” the most deconstructive in the book, which intimates that Atwood’s creative writing exceeds the limits of any system, and that moreover “Atwood” may be a figure created by the reader’s imagination, “to satisfy our cultural needs as these have arisen. Feminist, nationalist, literary witch, mythological poet, satirist, formulator of critical theories.”¹⁵

With the publication of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the Atwood critical industry shifted into a higher gear, and this made Judith McCombs’s anthology, *Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood* (1988) doubly welcome, for this was a retrospective of Atwood criticism up to 1987, drawn mainly from Canadian and American journals and newspapers. Arranged chronologically, these essays and reviews covered every Atwood text up to and including *The Handmaid’s Tale*, sometimes singly but often several texts grouped thematically or generically. McCombs provided an extremely useful analysis of critical trends and a summary of debates around Atwood’s major texts to date. A reminder of the historical context of the collection are her perceptive comments on what was yet to come in critical studies on Atwood: “The linguistic, formal, structuralist, postmodern, and manuscript approaches have been fewer [than thematic and genre-based criticism], but will no doubt increase.”¹⁶

The next collection, *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms*, edited by Kathryn Van Spanckeren and Jan Garden Castro, appeared at the end of 1988. Both these American editors were longstanding Atwood enthusiasts: Castro was founder of the Margaret Atwood Society and Van Spanckeren the first editor of the Atwood Society Newsletter, and this book was designed to introduce the writer to a wider American readership. The collection begins and ends with Atwood’s personal views on the United States in an autobiographical foreword and an interview, and a preoccupation with Canada–US relations characterizes the book. There are two essays on *The Handmaid’s Tale*, together with an essay based on archival research in the Atwood Papers entitled “Politics, Structure, and Poetic Development in Atwood’s Canadian–American Sequences,” which looks at two unpublished poems suggestively entitled “The Idea of Canada” and “America as the aging demon lover” and traces the evolution of Atwood’s ideas on national power games into her poetry of the late 1970s. For the first time, more attention is paid to her novels and criticism than to her poetry, and one further innovation is the inclusion of an essay by Sharon R. Wilson on Atwood’s visual art, illustrated with eight color plates of her watercolor paintings in the Fisher Library archives.

In 1994 the first anthology on Atwood was published in Britain and featured British and European critics as well as North Americans. Edited by Colin Nicholson, *Margaret Atwood: Writing and Subjectivity: New Critical*

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Essays departed from the usual agenda by considering Atwood's Canadianness not in the contexts of nationalism and Canada–US relations but from a postcolonial perspective. Twenty years after *Surfacing* and *Survival*, these texts could now be seen as writing against a colonial mindset: “*Survival* establishes parameters . . . for much of the recent theorising of postcolonial representations of literary subjectivity, whether Indian, African, Caribbean or Australian.”¹⁷ There was also a strong awareness of Atwood's “continually historicising consciousness” (Nicholson, “Introduction,” p. 15), an important feature of her work which was signaled by a few Canadian critics back in the 1970s but then neglected because of critical interest in more topical social and literary concerns like her feminism and her postmodern narrative experiments. Though these issues are represented in the essays on individual novels (now including *Cat's Eye*) and in three on her short stories up to *Wilderness Tips*, the consideration of colonial history and prehistory was privileged here. This perspective cast a new light not only on the archaeological imagery in her poetry but also on Atwood's revisionary narratives, now seen as central to her ongoing project of cultural retrieval and postcolonial differentiation.

Lorraine York's 1995 Canadian anthology, *Various Atwoods: Essays on the Later Poems, Short Fiction, and Novels*, laid out its agenda in the title, with its reference back to Robert Fulford's comments on Atwood's multiplicity and inventiveness, and its subtitle declaring its selective focus. As York explained, this was a project inherited from Arnold Davidson, joint editor of the 1981 anthology with the same publisher, and a “supplement” to it, where several of the original contributors revisited and revised their earlier critical positions, while it also introduced a new generation of Atwood critics and new theoretical approaches. Many of these essays are retrospective in impulse, tracing continuities between later and earlier works in relation to thematics (wilderness, sexual power politics, Canadian nationalism) or to narrative techniques, though the influence of postcolonial theory, deconstruction, and new ideologies of multiculturalism had altered the lenses through which more traditional topics were being considered. This collection also contained what was perhaps the first essay on the emergence of a new Atwoodian genre, the prose poems of the 1980s and 1990s in *Murder in the Dark* and *Good Bones*.

In contrast to the selectivity of York's anthology, *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact* (2000), edited by Reingard Nischik, follows a grand design which aims at a comprehensive survey and evaluative assessment of her work up to her 60th birthday in 1999; it is also the international scholarly community's tribute to her on that occasion. As well as essays by academic critics, Nischik assembled contributions from several of Atwood's editors, publishers,

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translators, and her literary agent, as well as appreciations from fellow Canadian writers, together with twelve pages of photographs, six pages of cartoons, and an interview with Atwood in Frankfurt. To accommodate such a variety of materials and contributors, the volume is designed as a series of short chapters arranged in sections: on biography, surveys of the different genres within which Atwood has worked, insights into Atwood's working practices as a creative writer, and a series of "overview" chapters which treat her work from a variety of critical and theoretical angles. These range from feminist, constructionist, generic, and mythic perspectives to environmentalism and cultural theory. As we might expect in a birthday tribute, the tone of the volume is very positive though, if anything, that enhances its value as a full dress parade of Atwoodian scholars and enthusiasts (indeed, the two cannot easily be separated), all of whom direct attention towards Atwood's versatility and the challenges that her writing presents.

It is a measure of Atwood's canonical status that the editor of a critical anthology can now assume an interested readership both for a comprehensive survey (like Nischik's or this *Companion*) and also for a more eclectic selection of essays which push out the boundaries of Atwood scholarship. *Margaret Atwood's Textual Assassinations: Recent Poetry and Fiction*, edited by Sharon Rose Wilson (2003) belongs to the latter class. This book draws attention to the allusions to violence and crime coded into the titles of many of Atwood's works since 1980 – *Murder in the Dark*, *The Robber Bride*, *Alias Grace*, *The Blind Assassin*, *Moving Targets* – and the emphasis in this collection as the editor explains, is on Atwood's "‘assassinations’ of traditional genres, plots, narrative voices, structure, techniques, and reader expectations."¹⁸ In this context, academic criticism becomes a kind of sleuthing, not only in the Atwood archives and in those of her works which have as yet received little scholarly attention, like the short stories, prose poems and later poetry, but in the novels themselves, as these essays explore the metafictional dimensions and postmodern strategies of Atwood's storytelling, with their trickster narrators and their generic hybridity. Atwood's fictional and poetic worlds are strange indeed, though that strangeness is masked by her wit and humor, challenging readers to find a critical language adequate to describe her ironic mixture of realism and fantasy, verbal artifice and moral engagement.

An introduction is not a conclusion, but at this point I would like express my thanks to all the contributors to this volume, who have worked so enthusiastically within fairly rigid constraints of time and format; also to Sarah Stanton at Cambridge University Press for her warm encouragement of this project, and to Eva-Marie Kröller for her friendly editorial advice. Special