

Introduction

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Margaret Atwood: A Writer for Our Times

In September 2019 when Margaret Atwood's novel *The Testaments* was published, two spectacular events took place launching her sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale* – a midnight release at Waterstones bookshop in Piccadilly, followed the next evening by an interview with Atwood at London's National Theatre, livestreamed to more than 1,400 cinema screens worldwide. Now *The Testaments* has won the 2019 Booker Prize, with Atwood as joint winner with Bernardine Evaristo. Atwood is a literary superstar with more than fifty books to her credit and translated into more than forty languages. Writing for more than fifty years as a witness of Canadian and international events, she has become a Canadian voice in global culture as a major thinker, writer, and public spokesperson on issues of environmentalism and human rights, especially women's and Indigenous rights. Atwood is absolutely topical, or perhaps "prescient" is the right word: "She is always before her time. Each novel is about something people become incredibly interested in half an hour later," as her former Virago publisher recently remarked.¹ The very popular television series on *The Handmaid's Tale* has further enhanced her profile. (The novel has now sold more than 8 million copies, and as Atwood explained, "A lot of people who haven't read the book but who have seen the show . . . go back and read the book.")² She is on the front line, "an icon of resistance and change and hope,"³ and it is her combination of high seriousness and witty ironic vision that is the hallmark of her public performances and literary production. "So what is the story we are telling ourselves about this present moment and its tribulations?"⁴

Since the first edition of *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood* (2006), which ended with *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood has published twelve new literary works: four dystopias, three collections of short fiction, two nonfiction books, two revisions of classic texts, and two poetry collections,

as well as three children's stories and four graphic novels. This generic variety displays Atwood's unflagging creative energy, her experimentalism, and her sustained attention to cultural and political change. "It's true you can't write novels without looking at the world, and that when you look at the world you will wonder what's going on, and then try to describe it; I think a lot of writing is an attempt to figure out why people do what they do" (Friedenpreis speech, p. 72). This revised *Companion* represents both a revisiting of Atwood's earlier work and a charting of new directions since 2000 in Atwood's oeuvre and in critical trends, for the aim of our group of international Atwoodians is to encourage students and general readers to understand the evolving facets of Atwood's work over nearly sixty years.

It might seem that since *The Blind Assassin* (2000) Atwood has reinvented herself, for there has been a significant shift of emphasis with her increasing engagement with popular fiction genres and her active involvement with digital technology, which has become an important feature of her storytelling and of her social activism. In 2009, she launched her *Year of the Flood* blog (now her environmental website) and her Twitter account. With nearly 2 million followers, she has become an influential and sometimes controversial online presence, using social media for environmental commentary and sociopolitical activism in an ongoing dialogue with a new generation of younger readers, responding to profound changes in reading practices and conditions of publishing and marketing.⁵ Interestingly, publicity for *The Testaments* has included the online Margaret Atwood Diaries released by her publisher to subscribers, and as we have noted, the live-streaming of Atwood's London launch event. The recent television adaptations of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Alias Grace*, for which she was a consultant, introduce a whole new dimension to Atwood's work and to the field of Atwood critical studies.

Yet we need to remember that Atwood has always been an enthusiast for popular cultural forms and that from the beginning she has blurred genre boundaries to fulfill her own agendas in her scrutiny of cultural myths and contemporary social trends, and that these works of "an award-winning nice literary old lady"⁶ merely represent the latest stage of her evolution as a creative writer.⁷ When discussing *The Tempest* as an example of Shakespeare's late style, she remarked, "Age doesn't make you a different person, or a different writer for that matter. I think it makes you a different version of who you already were."⁸ So with Atwood; her emphases have shifted over six decades, though her Canadianness remains in central focus even as her global persona has evolved. From early in her career Atwood saw Canadian issues as "part of a larger, non-exclusive picture," and that

doubleness of vision has become a hallmark and part of the wide appeal of her narratives.⁹ Similarly, the distinctive Atwoodian voice is instantly recognizable, just as her themes and topics remain familiar, even within their contemporary figurations. These complex interconnections and recurrences are explored in the chapters of this volume, where Atwood's Canadianness and her international appeal as an imaginative writer are its two leitmotifs.

In 2018, Atwood was awarded the Adrienne Clarkson Prize for Global Citizenship. This Canadian award elegantly synthesizes the double strands of Atwood's career, with its focus on the responsibilities of citizenship in the national context and in the global community. Lately she has received numerous international awards, including the PEN Pinter Prize in the UK (2016), the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, and the PEN Center USA's Lifetime Achievement Award (2017), and was appointed a Companion of Honour by the Queen (2018). Atwood operates in a transnational context of publishing and reception, as do many other contemporary Canadian writers like Michael Ondaatje, Madeleine Thien, and Esi Edugyan, whose fictions engage with "the shifting relations between national and global imaginaries."¹⁰ She sees these issues from a different perspective from multicultural and transcultural writers, speaking from her own position as a white anglophone woman, born in Ontario and living in Toronto, yet as David Staines shows in his chapter that opens this volume, she has consistently viewed her home territory through widening frames of reference: "When you begin to write, you deal with your immediate surroundings; as you grow, your immediate surroundings become larger. There's no contradiction."¹¹ Fiction and real life fuse together in an image from *The Robber Bride* (1992) where Antonia Fremont, her Canadian military historian, lays a street map of downtown Toronto over her sandtray map of medieval Europe, a reminder of the global context in which her home city (a synecdoche for Canada) is situated. Tony's private frame of reference may be Toronto, but both maps are accommodated within the "infinitely receding headspace" of her mind, a suggestive parallel with Atwood's position as a writer and the multiple shifting perspectives contained in her fictions.¹²

Canada provides the context from which Atwood writes and speaks, though themes and topics rooted in her Canadian experience have increasingly assumed global resonance, and it may surprise some Canadians to learn that her Canadian locations and references are immaterial to her appeal to an international readership. As she has often remarked, "We are a storytelling species," and readers identify with her narrative

representations of key issues that affect us all. It is worth remarking that all her dystopias have been set in the USA, coding in Canada's ambivalent relations with her southern neighbor, a situation that has become increasingly fraught since the American presidential election in 2016 and on which Atwood has become much more outspoken. Canadian-American differences are highlighted in the Hulu and MGM television adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*, where Canada features as a Promised Land over the border, though as Atwood notes, there are historical precedents: "Canada has always been the place where people escape to when things go pear-shaped in the US."¹³ However, there may be no safe place in a possible future of global collapse, as she warns in the *MaddAddam* trilogy.

That widening perspective on environmental issues can be easily traced through her treatment of the wilderness trope, where she has moved from representing wilderness to her fellow Canadians in the 1970s as distinctive national space, to bleaker revisionary readings in the 1990s with *Wilderness Tips*. Here not only does she record slippages in the narrative of national identity but she also speaks to her international readership about the dangers of pollution, arguing for our recognition of complicity in her increasingly urgent warnings against environmental disaster. Wilderness makes its uncanny return in the *MaddAddam* trilogy, where as the result of global warming, climate change, and a pandemic the whole world has become a jungle and the human race is on the edge of extinction. Closely linked is the concept of survival, originally cast in a nationalist context and now assuming global dimensions: "The citizens of every country must ask themselves the same questions: what sort of world do they want to live in. . . . I would reduce that sentence to: Do they want to live?" (Friedenpreis speech, pp. 75–76). Atwood's Canadian topics have expanded to become symptoms of a general malaise.¹⁴

Atwood has been writing about women's issues and the systemic gendered power imbalance for decades, and testimonies with the woman as "I-witness" have become one of the staples of her fiction, but she has always been an awkward feminist icon, skeptical of loose ideological definitions of feminism and resistant to generalizations about "Woman, capital W."¹⁵ She is interested in individuals in all their moral complexity, as she declared again in her *Globe and Mail* article in 2018: "My fundamental position is that women are human beings, with the full range of saintly and demonic behaviors this entails, including criminal ones. They're not angels, incapable of wrongdoing."¹⁶ Ironically, at the very time when the first television series of *The Handmaid's Tale* was receiving international acclaim, Atwood was involved in a homegrown controversy specifically linked to issues around

sexual harassment, which centered on her role in what became known as the UBC Accountable debacle.¹⁷ A professor of creative writing at the University of British Columbia was charged with sexual misconduct against several women students, and though the university announced publicly that he had been suspended over “serious allegations” these were not specified, and after a private inquiry he was dismissed; the university refused to allow that report to be released. In protest against these flawed proceedings an open letter was sent to UBC signed by ninety Canadian writers including Atwood, calling for due process and fair treatment for the accused, though it omitted to mention fair treatment for the female complainants – which was a serious mistake. What began as a local academic matter turned into a Canadian culture war where Atwood and other signatories were blamed for supporting a male literary colleague while disregarding the concerns of the female students. Though Atwood insisted that the university had failed both the accused and the complainants, social media attacks on her continued, and in January 2018 she published her controversial article “Am I a Bad Feminist?”

She began by defending her stance in the UBC affair, based on principles of equality: “I believe that in order to have civil and human rights for women, there have to be civil and human rights, period, including the right to fundamental justice. . . . Do Good Feminists believe that only women should have such rights? Surely not.” Venturing into dangerous territory, she warned against extremism and “vigilante justice,” which she saw as an implicit danger in the #MeToo movement then at its height: “The #MeToo moment is a symptom of a broken legal system.” Atwood’s critique did not appeal to many younger women, who saw her stance as a betrayal of feminist ideology, and her article provoked a furious backlash on social media across North America. But they had underestimated Atwood and her genuine feminist concerns, for within a few months she became one of the first funders of a new Canadian anti-sexual harassment program, AfterMeToo, which provided immediate legal counseling to victims of sexual violence and professional investigation of every claim. As she commented, “It takes you out of a place of anger into something positive.” Now we have *The Testaments*, reflecting Atwood’s latest nuanced definition of feminism, while the charity partner for its launch is Equality Now, an international network for women’s and girls’ rights.

Overview of Atwood’s Literary Production since 2000

The most striking feature of Atwood’s publications since 2000 is her return to the popular science fiction genre of the dystopia with her

postapocalyptic *MaddAddam* trilogy stretching over ten years, quickly followed by the more localized social satire of *The Heart Goes Last*, and then the publication of *The Testaments*, her long-awaited sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*. These scenarios of prophecy and warning form the spine of her recent literary production as she investigates different ways of addressing the multiple challenges of what she has variously called “our strange historical moment” and “a hinge moment, in many different ways.” Interspersed with these “What if?” narratives are other texts in diverse genres, for as Atwood has remarked, “I’ve always written more than one thing; nobody told me not to.”

Atwood entered the new millennium with her Booker Prize-winning novel *The Blind Assassin* and her Cambridge Empson lectures in 2000, published two years later as *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*. Addressing the questions: “*Who are you writing for? Why do you do it? Where does it come from?*”¹⁸ Atwood combines personal memoir and literary criticism as she explores topics like creativity, fame, and her relation to literary tradition in what reads as a valuable meta-commentary on her writing: “All writers learn from the dead. As long as you continue to write, you continue to explore the work of writers who have preceded you” (p. 178). The *Penelopiad* (her feminist rewriting of Homer’s *Odyssey*) and *Hag-Seed* (her reinterpretation of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* ten years later) are the most obvious examples of her direct engagements with literary predecessors, though her wide range of intertextual allusions to myths and ancient history, the Bible, and Western literary tradition from Shakespeare and Milton to contemporary popular genres pervade her storytelling and her poetry as she flits across the boundaries between highbrow and lowbrow, realism and fantasy.

Her other two nonfiction texts of this period, *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth* and *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*, though written out of entirely different contexts, share the same predilections as her fiction. One, based on her CBC Massey Lectures 2008, offers a novelist’s imaginative perspective on the concept of debt, which eerily coincided with the 2008 financial crash; the other, a collection of her lectures and writings on science fiction dating back to a 1976 review of Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*, was published in the middle of writing the third volume of the *MaddAddam* trilogy. Here we find her insistence on the term “speculative fiction” to describe her dystopias, extending the parameters of science fiction (“Science Fiction, Speculative Fiction, Sword and Sorcery Fantasy, and Slipstream Fiction”), while she also offers insights into the genesis of *The Handmaid’s Tale* and the first

two volumes of her trilogy.¹⁹ In the appendix she includes her 2011 essay, “*Weird Tales* Covers of the 1930s,” published in *Playboy* magazine, at which a few feminist eyebrows might be raised. But we shouldn’t underestimate Atwood’s versatility and wit – or her interest in popular culture – for in this essay she ironically suggests a parallel between the luridly sexy covers of that pioneering sci-fi and fantasy pulp magazine (on which she drew for some of Alex Thomas’s stories in *The Blind Assassin*) and *Playboy*’s nude centerfolds. She also draws attention to the role of women in early science fiction, making the point that these covers were drawn by Margaret Brundage, “the only female pulp cover artist of her era,” while producing a semiotic analysis of what she calls “the Brundage dress code” where women were “sometimes totally nude, but otherwise dressed in colourful and revealing outfits involving metal brassieres, translucent veils, and ankle chains . . . often accessorized with whips and shackles” (p. 246). It is mischievous and funny, sending up male fantasy images of femininity while acknowledging their enduring appeal, for these pulp magazine covers offer “just one example of the way cultural memes transmit themselves, taking their meaning in part from their context and from our knowledge of it” (p. 250). A similar impulse to reinvent cultural memes animates her recent *Angel Catbird* series, her playful tribute to the Golden Age comics of her childhood, now combined with an educational message about animal welfare and the safety of cats and birds. Referencing that tradition of vividly illustrated wonder tales of heroes, heroines and villains, her trans-genic flying superhero with the shape-changing powers of Superman and Captain Marvel has now become an eco-friendly warrior.

Her three short fiction collections since 2000 range from the realism of the linked stories in *Moral Disorder* to the later “tales” of *Stone Mattress*, where she again acknowledges her literary debt to “tales through the ages,” though it is her darkest collection of flash fiction, *The Tent*, that resonates most clearly against her *MaddAddam* trilogy and its concerns with threats to the survival of the human race and of our living planet.²⁰ Over the past five years Atwood’s storytelling in *The Heart Goes Last*, *Hag-Seed*, and *The Testaments* has turned away from the cliff edge of global survival anxieties to those ethical preoccupations focused on human subjectivity and social relations that are central to all her dystopias. Yet as she insisted at her recent National Theatre event, “They are all on the same map.” Indeed, the closer we look at the cluster of post-2000 texts the more clearly we may understand the rhizomatic pattern of Atwood’s art where everything connects with everything else: “Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away.”²¹

Overview of Atwood Criticism since 2000

The first collection of critical essays on Atwood appeared in *The Malabar Review: Margaret Atwood: A Symposium* in 1977. Since then critics have been analyzing and interpreting her work, and now there is a well-established international Atwood academic critical industry supplemented by innumerable interviews, newspaper articles, and online commentaries. This outline surveys dominant critical trends since 2000, for the field of Atwood studies keeps shifting, thanks to her continued production and inventiveness, together with changes in critical fashions. Significant new areas of inquiry have opened up with her *MaddAddam* trilogy and the popularity of *The Handmaid's Tale* with its TV adaptations, now augmented with the publication of *The Testaments*. This has resulted in a major shift in critical attention to the evolution of her dystopian visions. These changes are reflected in our updated Further Reading list, which also includes a selection of earlier critical works, and Gina Wisker's *Margaret Atwood: An Introduction to Critical Views of Her Fiction* (2012) provides an authoritative overview of trends and key debates up to 2010. *Margaret Atwood Studies*, the online journal of the Margaret Atwood Society, publishes an annual checklist of new scholarly works on Atwood, and the Margaret Atwood Papers in the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto, provide the primary source for further research.

A brief analysis of the Atwood archive may be useful to researchers, particularly graduate students. Atwood made the first donation of her manuscripts and correspondence to the Fisher Library in 1970, followed by major accessions since, and she continues to add to the collection regularly; the latest accession was in 2018. There is now a massive collection of 678 boxes and items, though back in the mid-1970s there were only 11 boxes. The Atwood archive contains drafts and typescripts, galleys and page proofs of all her published works (including *The Heart Goes Last* and *Angel Catbird*, plus Atwood's first handwritten draft of *The Handmaid's Tale*) together with research materials, editorial correspondence, examples of her juvenilia and comic art, and much unpublished material. Fisher has provided detailed online Finding Aids, where the manuscript collections are itemized chronologically under accession dates with description of their contents. This is particularly valuable for *The Handmaid's Tale* and the *MaddAddam* trilogy, where for example MS Collection 335 (Accessions 2003–4) contains her Alphabetical Research Files for *Oryx and Crake*; MS Collections 595 and 717 provide similar resource materials for *Year of the Flood* and *MaddAddam*. (Website details are listed in the Further Reading

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section of this volume.) As evidence of the scholarly interest in Atwood's work, her collection is the most accessed of all the manuscript collections in the Fisher Library.²² In his analysis of the value and significance of this collection, Robert McGill states in "Negotiations with the Living Archive": "The archive is a monument to Margaret Atwood's reputation [as a 'major author'] as much as it is a resource in the study of her work."²³

The *MaddAddam* trilogy has spawned a network of critical approaches – multidisciplinary, postapocalyptic, postcolonial, posthumanist, eco-critical, ecofeminist – with a common emphasis on the ethical dimensions of Atwood's speculative fictions. Many of these elements are familiar in Atwood studies though the synthesis is new, for there has been a continuous recontextualization of these novels with the publication of every new volume. Initially the focus was on *Oryx and Crake* as a single text marking Atwood's return to the dystopian genre after *The Handmaid's Tale*, signaling new developments in the Atwoodian canon with her speculations on human survival in the era of biotechnology and neoliberalism and her urgent concern with global environmental ethics.²⁴ Those questions asked of a single novel laid out the lines of critical interpretation that have assumed prominence in the context of the whole trilogy, and there has also been a shift toward locating Atwood's dystopias within a broad international tradition of recent apocalyptic fictions. These studies range from reading *Oryx and Crake* in the frame of feminist speculative fictions as Atwood's critique of "a deeply masculinist and materialist ideology of science, technology and capitalism" typified in Crake's post-humanist "utopian bodies,"²⁵ to positioning *Oryx and Crake*, together with Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*, as interrogations of modernity through the postapocalyptic genre.²⁶ Andrew Tate's narratological approach in *Apocalyptic Fiction* assesses Atwood's contribution to the dystopian genre in terms of her focus on storytelling and the persistence of forms of religious belief as signifiers of the distinctively human condition.²⁷ Amelia Defalco's 2017 essay offers a neat summary of these approaches where she argues that "these novels imagine the social, cultural, affective, and ecological implications of the convergence of capitalism and biotechnology."²⁸

Of course not all Atwood criticism is directed to her dystopias, and many monographs, periodical essays, and edited collections offer a reliable sketch of the variety of critical preoccupations over the past two decades. These include reassessments of Atwood's narrative strategies – her "textual assassinations" as one collection names them²⁹ – and a continuing interest in her revisionist mythmaking, led by Sharon Rose

Wilson's *Myths and Fairy Tales in Contemporary Women's Fiction: From Atwood to Morrison* (2008), where she reframes Atwood's narratives in a globalized context of feminist, postmodernist, and postcolonial women's writing, a version of Adrienne Rich's revisionist principle "of entering an old text from a new critical direction."³⁰ After forty years of feminist criticism on Atwood, Fiona Tolan's *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction* (2007) offers an important historical analysis of Atwood's often fraught negotiations with feminist discourse in her novels from *The Edible Woman* to *Oryx and Crake*, while addressing Atwood's ongoing dialogue with science and political issues around human rights. Her book establishes a context within which Atwood's recent fictions may be assessed.³¹ Feminist perspectives inform much genre-based criticism after 2000, of which Reingard Nischik's *Engendering Genre: The Works of Margaret Atwood* (2009) is the prime example. This comprehensive survey focuses on the formal effects of Atwood's gendered perspective on her narrative art. It also offers the first detailed analysis of Atwood's prose poems and short fictions, plus an extensive critical survey of her comic art from the 1970s, another popular genre to which she has lately returned with *Angel Catbird* and the graphic novel of *The Handmaid's Tale*, now produced in collaboration with professional illustrators. Two other genre studies are worth noting for their fusion of feminist, postcolonial, and ethical perspectives: Ellen McWilliams's *Margaret Atwood and the Female Bildungsroman* (2009), which offers new insights into her refiguring of Canadian identity in the feminine through a rehabilitated masculine genre, and Jackie Shead's *Margaret Atwood: Crime Fiction Writer: The Reworking of a Popular Genre* (2015). Her emphasis is on Atwood's narrative artifice and how, like many other female crime writers, she reinvents crime fiction to show how "in the process of uncovering and exorcising particular traumatic and transgressive acts, wider, socially embedded crimes are revealed."³²

Atwood's celebrity as a best-selling author and public intellectual is now beyond question, and Lorraine York offers a refreshing workaday perspective on that glamorous image in *Margaret Atwood and the Labour of Literary Celebrity* (2013) in her investigation of the Atwood cultural industry and Atwood's professionalism. The chapter "@Margaret Atwood: Interactive Media and the Management of Literary Celebrity" is particularly intriguing with its analysis of Atwood's engagement with new digital technologies and social media. Atwood scholarship is expanding to include wider questions focused on the relation between authorship, book publishing, and marketing.