# THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO MARGARET ATWOOD

EDITED BY

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# CONTENTS

the writing of any novel: how to make the story real at a human and individual level" ("Writing Utopia," pp. 93–94).

## *The Handmaid's Tale*

Hélène Cixous begins her polemical feminist essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" with the sentence: "I shall speak about women's writing: about *what it will do*."[15] A critical reading of *The Handmaid's Tale* might usefully begin with this statement, for Offred's fictive autobiography comes to us as a written text, and only at the end do we discover that what we have been reading was actually a spoken narrative which has been transcribed from old cassette tapes and reconstructed for publication long after the narrator is dead. This complicated transmission process from private speech act to written text illustrates the historical problem of women's silencing which Cixous has highlighted, and also the potentially disruptive effects of women's writing. Moreover, the issue of language and power has always been crucial in the construction of dystopias: "Throughout the history of dystopian fiction the conflict of the text has often turned on the control of language" (Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, p. 148), and it is Offred's attempt to "seize it [the language], to make it hers" (Cixous, "Medusa," p. 343) which gives her narrative its appeal as one woman's story of resistance against patriarchal tyranny. By an irony of history, it is Offred the silenced Handmaid who becomes Gilead's principal historian when that oral "herstory" is published two hundred years later.

However, during her lifetime Offred finds herself in the familiar dystopian predicament of being trapped inside a space and a narrative where she is denied any possibility of agency. As a Handmaid deprived of her own name and identity, she has no rights as an individual but instead has been conscripted into sexual service to the state, reduced by its doctrine of biological essentialism to her female role as a child breeder, a "two-legged womb"[16] and to the ghost of a person, "a wraith of red smoke" (*HT*, p. 219). Under such threats of erasure Offred fights for her psychological and emotional survival as she tells her story. Her storytelling has a double purpose, for not only is it her counter-narrative to the social gospel of Gilead, but it is also her way to self rehabilitation against the "deadly brainwashing" (Cixous's phrase) of the totalitarian state. Offred insists on remembering who she was and hopes to be again, treasuring her former name as her "secret talisman" or a kind of guarantee of her future life after Gilead. But "meantime" as she says, "there is so much else getting in the way" (p. 281). Offred is a virtual prisoner in her Commander's house, and even when she goes outside on her regular shopping trips or on the rare Handmaids' group

excursions, she is under constant surveillance. Within such constraints she needs to tell stories if only to herself, as a way of escape from the time trap of the present, "Otherwise you lie with your face squashed up against a wall . . . Otherwise you live in the moment. Which is not where I want to be" (p. 153).

The novel opens as a memory narrative (or is it a prison narrative?), with its rows of women in single beds patrolled by Aunts armed with cattle prods. "We slept in what had once been the gymnasium" (p. 13). Who is "we" and where is here? This scene induces a sense of dislocation, where the room is described as a haunted space full of "afterimages" – the markings on the floor for vanished games, the smells of sweat and chewing gum, and the faint imagined echoes of dance music. That faded lyricism contrasts sharply with the present, but at the same time it signals connections with the narrator's remembered past. As yet we do not know who the narrator is, for she does not identify herself in that first list of names whispered in the dormitory: "Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June" (p. 14).[17] Only when the narrative switches to the present tense do we discover that she is a Handmaid and this is her story. Much later we are told that her official name is not her real name, though by then we have been initiated into this woman's secret life and her condition of double consciousness which is her strategy for survival.

Offred survives in the present by continually slipping back into the past – and for her this is not difficult as the heartland of Gilead where she now lives is her own home town, formerly Cambridge, Massachusetts. Every day as she walks the streets "doubled" by her red-robed companion, she is retracing the old city map in her head: "I'm remembering my feet on these sidewalks, in the time before, and what I used to wear on them" (p. 34), and with her double vision she sees through the new shop signs to their former names as she makes implicit comparisons between "now" and "then." "Lilies of the Field," the shop where the Handmaids order their "habits" (and the pun is not lost on Offred) used to be a cinema showing films starring actresses like Lauren Bacall or Katharine Hepburn who wore blouses which could be "*undone*": "They seemed to be able to choose. We seemed to be able to choose, then" (p. 35). It soon becomes evident that Offred's doubled narrative is more than a device for her private reorientation; it is one of the ways by which she defies Gileadean ideology. Her memories are continually in conflict with the official version of late twentieth-century America and her story exposes the lies of official history, just as on her illicit visit to Jezebel's club with the Commander she registers the hypocrisy and inauthenticity of the regime: "I try to remember if the past was exactly like this . . . A movie about the past is not the same as the past" (p. 247). Such memories remind her of the gap between her present life and the life she once led, paradoxically

giving her a stronger sense of her own identity as separate from its present Gileadean frame.

Offred also uses memory narrative as a deliberate escape strategy which she repeatedly indulges in the "Night" sections as she lies alone in her room at the Commander's house:

> The night is mine, my own time, to do with as I will, as long as I am quiet . . . The night is my time out. Where should I go?
> Somewhere good. (p. 47)

She escapes out of time back into memories of student days with her friend Moira, the separatist feminist, or further back to childhood memories of her mother, the old-fashioned Women's Libber, both of them condemned as dissidents by the new regime. Offred resurrects these vanished women as she tells their stories of female heroism, imitating their own irreverent idioms as she simultaneously celebrates and mourns for them: "I've tried to make it sound as much like her as I can. It's a way of keeping her alive" (p. 256).

However, there is for Offred one central traumatic memory, which is the loss of her husband Luke and their small daughter. The jagged edges of that trauma show through in fragmented flashbacks of a time of "roaring and confusion" (p. 49), and only gradually does she allow herself to remember the full story of her family's failed escape attempt across the border into Canada, when Luke was shot and her child snatched from her. Although she heard the gunshots, she still cannot accept that Luke was killed, and such is the power of her longing that she continues to believe that one day she will receive a message from him and that their family life will be restored: "It's this message, which may never arrive, that keeps me alive." Where is hope located in this nightmarish culture of fear? Only, it would appear, in Offred's mind and in the cemetery: "*In Hope*, as they say on the gravestones" (p. 205).

Ironically, Offred's only real hope centers on her own body, whose femaleness has been resinscribed by Gilead's biological discourse and its oppressively Old Testament sexual practices. Though she has no power to reject her Handmaid's role and stay alive, she does have the power to defy patriarchal prescriptions by aligning herself differently through her private narrative about her body. Reversing Gilead's authority, she claims her body as her own territory which baffles male invasion: "I sink down into my body as into a swamp, fenland, where only I know the footing" (p. 83). In Offred's inner-space meditations Atwood writes her version of Cixous's *écriture féminine*: "Write yourself. Your body must be heard," as Cixous advises ("Medusa," p. 338). Offred explores her own dark continent, "though black-red rather

than black" (p. 84), where her womb expands into an image of cosmic wilderness which is regularly traversed by the moon. However, the end result is not triumph as Cixous promised, but the sad recognition that in Gilead her female body is a failure: "I have failed once again to fulfil the expectations of others, which have become my own" (p. 83). However, Offred's definition of femininity insists on those very qualities of excess that Gilead condemns. She allies female desire with natural processes of growth and fertility, like the flowers in Serena Joy's summer garden which insist on "bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light, as if to point, to say: Whatever is silenced will clamour to be heard, though silently" (p. 161).[18]

There are at least two occasions where her body refuses to be silenced. In her outburst of hysterical laughter after her first game of Scrabble with the Commander, the laughter boils up in her throat "like larva": "I'll burst. Red all over the cupboard . . . oh to die of laughter" (p. 156), and in her account of her forbidden lovemaking with Nick, the Commander's chauffeur, she confesses that she has invented the sound effects around their sexual encounter : "To cover up the sounds, which I am ashamed of making" (p. 275). Falling in love with Nick releases Offred into what Cixous calls "the marvellous text of herself" ("Medusa," p. 338): "I'm alive in my skin, again, arms around him, falling and water softly everywhere, never-ending" (p. 273). Though Offred disconcerts the reader by adding "I made that up," nevertheless she leaves it there as one version of their love story. She adds: "The way love feels is always only approximate" (p. 275), for she knows that words never represent the complexity of lived emotional experience.

If Offred is intensely conscious of her body, she also shares the postmodern narrator's self awareness of the dimensions of fabrication in her memoir. Many times she reminds us that this is only a "reconstruction," but one that she needs to tell ("tell, rather than write," p. 49) in order to invent listeners and readers who inhabit a world elsewhere, and she also likens her story to a letter, "*Dear You*, I'll say. Just *you*, without a name . . . *You* can mean thousands" (p. 50). Always aware of the dialogical nature of narrative, Offred addresses that same *you* when she engages the reader in a sympathetic act of communication, as she imagines exchanging stories at some future time: "I will hear yours too if I ever get the chance . . . Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are" (p. 279). Although she is surrounded by people, Offred has nobody to whom she can talk, so she resorts to telling other women's stories within her own, creating the impression of a multi-voiced narrative which undermines Gilead's myth of women's silence and submissiveness. She succeeds in incorporating not only her own ironic view of the new neo-conservative women's culture but also presents

a critical analysis of North American feminism since the 1960s, from the Women's Liberation Movement of her mother's generation to the rise of the New Right and Christian fundamentalism of the late 1970s and 1980s, represented here by the Commanders' Wives and the terrible Aunts. Her account dispels any singular definition of "Woman" as it emphasizes Atwood's resistance to reifying slogans, whether patriarchal or feminist: "Eternal Woman. But really, "Woman" is the sum total of women" (Ingersoll, *Conversations*, p. 201).

Offred's storytelling helps her to survive the psychological oppression of Gilead and she even manages to twist the masculine genre of dystopia into a feminine romance plot by falling in love, but her narrative ends poised on the edge of the unknown as she steps up into the Black Van. However, her gendered body has been so written into the body of the text that her typically feminine gesture of giving herself "into the hands of strangers, because it can't helped" (p. 307) might easily be read as her story offering itself to be interpreted by unknown future readers. That story is lost for two hundred years and when it is rediscovered and published by the male professor from Cambridge, his version threatens to erase its significance as thoroughly as Gilead had tried to erase her identity. The professor is not interested in her personal memoir except as evidence for his grand impersonal narrative of a fallen nation's history, and readers are left with the challenge of Offred's unfinished story. Do we understand more about the past (or is it the future?) from her story or from official history? I suspect that it is the female author's voice at the beginning of the Historical Notes which offers readers two coded words of advice on how to read Offred's dystopian narrative: "*Denay, Nunavit*" (p. 311).

## *Oryx and Crake*

Atwood has used epigraphs from Swift's satires in both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*, and I would argue that in the period between them her own dystopian vision has darkened in a way similar to Swift's. She has moved through political and social satire to a satire against mankind, as Swift did in *Gulliver's Travels*. Snowman, like Gulliver, is both mouthpiece and butt of Atwood's satire, but unlike Gulliver he does not become alienated from human beings. On the contrary, he emerges as a morally responsible man and the novel's unlikely hero, who regards the prospect of entering again into human relationships with a kind of fearful excitement. "What do you want me to do?" (*O&C*, p. 432) are his last words, which leaves a "tiny peephole" (*HT*, p. 31) for optimism in an open-ended situation unlike the ending of *Gulliver's Travels*.