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Atwood's Reinventions: So Many Atwoods

ABSTRACT

In *The Malabat Review* (1977), Canadian critic Robert Fulford described Margaret Atwood as “endlessly Protean,” predicting “There are many more Atwoods to come.” Now at eighty, over forty years later, Atwood is an international literary celebrity with more than fifty books to her credit and translated into more than forty languages. This essay focuses on the later Atwood and her apparent reinvention since 2000, where we have seen a marked shift away from realistic fiction towards popular fiction genres, especially dystopias and graphic novels. Atwood has also become increasingly engaged with digital technology as creative writer and cultural critic. As this reading of her post-2000 fiction through her extensive back catalogue across five decades will show, these developments represent a new synthesis of her perennial social, ethical and environmental concerns, refigured through new narrative possibilities as she reaches out to an ever-widening readership, astutely recognising “the need for literary culture to keep up with the times.”

Keywords: later Atwood; fiction post-2000; dystopia; popular fiction; digital technology; *MaddAddam*; *The Testaments*

Atwood v iskanju novega: Številne podobe

POVZETEK

Kanadski kritik Robert Fulford je v *The Malabat Review* (1977) Margaret Atwood opisal kot »neskončno protejsko« in napovedal: »Atwood bomo videli še v številnih podobah.« Štiri desetletja kasneje je Atwood pri osemdesetih svetovna literarna zvezdnica z več kot petdeset izdanimi knjigami, prevedenimi v več kot štirideset jezikov. Pričujoči esej se osredotoča na Atwood v poznejšem obdobju in na njeno novo podobo po letu 2000, ko se je opazno odmaknila od realistične pripovedne proze k bolj popularnim žanrom, kot so distopije in grafični romani. Atwood kot ustvarjalno pisateljico in kulturno kritičarko vse bolj zanima tudi digitalna tehnologija. V prispevku so njena dela, nastala po letu 2000, obravnavana v luči njenega ustvarjanja v obdobju petih desetletij. Njihov razvoj predstavlja novo sintezo aktualnih družbenih, etičnih in okoljskih vprašanj, obravnavanih s pomočjo novih pripovednih možnosti, ki se odpirajo ob iskanju poti do vse širšega kroga bralcev in zavedanju, da »mora iti književna kultura v korak s časom«.

Ključne besede: Atwood v poznejšem obdobju; proza po letu 2000; distopija; pop-proza; digitalna tehnologija; *MaddAddam*; *Testamenti*

1 Introduction

In 1977 when *The Malahat Review* published the first collection of critical essays on Margaret Atwood, Robert Fulford, the influential Canadian arts critic and editor of *Saturday Night* predicted, “There are many more Atwoods to come” (Fulford 1977, 98). Now at eighty, forty years later, Atwood is still displaying “that freakish combination of personal magic, artistry and infallible timing” (Sandler 1977, 5) which have made her an international literary celebrity. Her latest novel *The Testaments*, co-winner of the Booker Prize, was top English-language bestseller in 2019, while the Hulu +MGM television adaptations of *The Handmaid’s Tale* have hugely increased her popular profile as her Handmaids have escaped from the novel into the real world, where those iconic costumes have become a universally recognisable symbol of feminist protest. Her Canadian award of the Adrienne Clarkson Prize for Global Citizenship in 2018, together with her many international prizes, confirms the evolution of her global persona as a major writer and public spokesperson on human rights (especially women’s and Indigenous rights) and environmental issues. Though Fulford was referring rather slyly to Atwood’s public image when he claimed that, “For the media, Atwood is endlessly re-usable because she is endlessly Protean” (Fulford 1977, 98), her long literary career has also confirmed his prediction.

This essay will focus on the later (or rather, the latest) Atwood in its critical assessment of her apparent reinvention since 2000. In this period, she has published twenty-two new volumes of fiction and non-fiction, poetry, children’s stories, and recently four graphic novels. There has been a marked shift of emphasis away from realistic fiction towards genre fiction, especially dystopias, together with increasingly urgent warnings of environmental disaster, while the digital revolution has become a more evident presence in her storytelling, where we find frequent references to social media and new technologies featuring as transformative elements in plot construction. In *Hag-Seed*, for example, spectacular theatrical effects recreated by computer simulation as 3-D virtual reality are important agents in a secret revenge plot where political chicanery is unmasked. This essay argues that Atwood’s post-2000 fiction represents the latest stage in her revisiting of two perennial concerns with survival and the endless mystery of what being human might mean. Her themes, her ethical emphases and her narrative strategies have not changed, though there has been a widening of scope in addressing global issues and a more daring experimentalism in her mixing of highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow genres. For Atwood, “A word after a word after a word is power” (“Spelling,” Atwood 1982, 64), which is the subtitle of Nancy Lang and Peter Raymont’s new documentary previewed in Toronto in November, emphasising the importance of language and storytelling in her work (Lang and Raymont 2019). I have deliberately avoided the term “late style,” which seems inappropriate for such an endlessly inventive writer, but as Lee Clark Mitchell remarks of artists with long careers, “Even when they seem to maintain a certain continuity, they rarely persist as static or unchanging, though what we observe in late efforts often illustrates what has been latent all along” (Mitchell 2019, 25–26). This is true too of Atwood, as I argue in this retrospective reading of her work across five decades.

I shall consider first her signature reinventions post-2000, her five dystopias (all set in the United States), where Atwood resembles her aging Sybil: “I tell dark stories / before and after

they come true” (Atwood 2007, 106). Atwood believes that these narratives come straight out of reality, “these times of threat and rage” when “the ground shifts beneath our feet, and mighty winds blow, and we are no longer sure of where we are. Also, we are no longer sure of *who* we are. Whose face is that in the mirror?” (Atwood 2017, 70). In the *MaddAddam* trilogy, her post-apocalyptic epic written over ten years, she takes a decisive leap beyond her three Canadian historical novels of the 1990s to address global concerns and her ever-widening international readership. She engages with our contemporary anxieties about the climate crisis and advances in bioengineering, exploring what Amelia Defalco describes as “the uneasy relationship between contemporary biotechnology and bioethics in a biocapitalist economy” (Defalco 2017, 438).¹

2 Later Atwood

Atwood begins her fiction with a global disaster scenario in *Oryx and Crake*, a Last Man narrative where we see Snowman, the only human survivor of a pandemic plague, now living on the beach in a world wrecked by climate change, bioterrorism and genetic engineering, where his only companions are those childlike transgenic humanoids called Crakers (after their creator who also engineered the pandemic). Atwood sounds all the alarm bells from the beginning with her now-famous questions: “What if we continue down the road we’re already on? How slippery is that slope? What are our saving graces? Who’s got the will to stop us?” (Atwood 2005, 323). The trilogy offers various possible answers to all these questions as it traces a wide narrative arc from *Oryx and Crake* through *The Year of the Flood* with its eco-spiritual cult of God’s Gardeners, to *MaddAddam* where she imagines what survival might look like after apocalypse. It ends with her fantasy of a new posthuman generation of human-Craker hybrid persons and interspecies co-operation, her vision of a New Jerusalem which marks the beginning of a new historical cycle. This is close to science fiction, for the future is unknowable, and it all depends on the choices we make now. Here we see Atwood’s characteristic double vision fully displayed, where her well-documented scientific research is transformed through narrative art into speculative fiction. Certainly, the transgenic Crakers are a new departure for her, though we need to see them in context. *Oryx and Crake* was published on the 50th anniversary of Watson and Crick’s discovery of the structure of DNA and the same year that the entire human genome was sequenced. Atwood is not anti-science, but believing that “fiction writing is the guardian of the moral and ethical sense of the community” (Atwood 1982, 346), she warns against the unforeseen consequences of biotechnology experiments without ethical boundaries. Referring to the Crakers, she reflects on what it means to be human as she asks: “How far can human beings go in the alteration department before those altered cease to be human? ... Now that we ourselves can be the workmen, what pieces of this work shall we chop off?” (Atwood 2011, 91).

The transgenic Crakers represent a radical alternative to anthropocentric blindness, which threatens dire consequences for humanity and for our living planet. They form one thematic strand in her speculations on human survival in the trilogy, where her environmental

¹ For a more extensive analysis, see Coral Ann Howells, “Dire Cartographies: Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam* Trilogy (2003–2013),” *The Anglo-Canadian Novel in the Twenty-First Century: Interpretations*, eds. Maria and Martin Löschnigg (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2019), 21–32.

warnings reach a new high point of urgency. In a recent interview she pointed out that she “did climate apocalypse quite thoroughly in the *MaddAddam* trilogy,” then added “Maybe not thoroughly enough, because I think it is actually going to be worse” (Atwood 2019b). Atwood grew up in a family of early environmentalists, spending a large part of her childhood in northern Ontario and in northern Quebec, and she and her late husband Graeme Gibson were passionate environmental campaigners for decades. Art and life come together in her 1970s fiction and non-fiction, where she directly addresses her Canadian readers in *Surfacing* and *Survival*. The threat of pollution is there in the first sentence of *Surfacing*, where “The white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the south” (7), and in *Life Before Man* (1979), a central topic is extinction: “Does she care whether the human race survives or not? In her bleaker moments, of which, she realises, this is one, she feels that the human race has it coming” (Atwood 1992b, 101). Her warnings about environmental catastrophe are there throughout her poetry and short stories, in poems from the 1960s like “Elegy for the Giant Tortoises,” then in the 1980s with “Frogless” and “Marsh Languages,” and in the 1990s with “Hardball” where the future is rolling towards us “like a two-ton truck in the wrong lane” (Atwood 1992, 93). There is also a passage reminiscent of H. G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds* in *The Blind Assassin* in an old woman’s apocalyptic vision of a huge metal pterodactyl which threatens to destroy all human life (Atwood 2001, 583), while in *The Tent* “Many things are howling out there, in the howling wilderness” (Atwood 2006, 143). Wilderness, that iconic Canadian landscape image in Atwood’s early writing, returns in savage form in the trilogy as her environmental concerns have widened beyond national space to a worldwide nightmare where the human race is on the edge of extinction.

After the trilogy, Atwood turns away from global disaster back to the network of contemporary human relations, anxieties and hopes as her dystopias loop closer to our present, with *The Heart Goes Last* and *The Testaments*, her sequel to *The Handmaid’s Tale*, for “History does not repeat itself, but it rhymes” (Atwood 2019c, 407). As a sequel, *The Testaments* has a long backstory. As Atwood remarked, “Some books haunt the reader. Others haunt the writer. *The Handmaid’s Tale* has done both” (Atwood 2012a). Her return to Gilead is the latest stage in what has been labelled “the Handmaid phenomenon,” for the original novel and its hugely successful television adaptation and the new book all form part of a continuum. When she announced her new novel in 2018, she said, “Dear Readers, everything you’ve ever asked me about Gilead and its inner working is the inspiration for this book. Well, about everything. The other inspiration is the world we’ve been living in.” Atwood reclaims her story in real time, negotiating across the television series with her daring references to Trump’s America: “For a long time we were going away from Gilead and then we turned around and started going back towards Gilead, so it did seem pertinent” (Atwood 2019b). She also alludes to the rise of right-wing fundamentalism, the refugee crisis, the #MeToo movement and the global climate emergency. But once again Atwood has surprised her readers with her reinventions as she sets her narrative fifteen years after the ending of *The Handmaid’s Tale* when Offred climbs into the black van. This is not Offred’s story, nor is it principally about Handmaids, for Offred is only a shadowy presence, the Handmaids are peripheral figures, and the signature colour has changed from red to green. Is this possibly a sign of hope and renewal? Atwood has chosen a different fictional space from her earlier novel and the television series, leaving Offred’s story to Bruce Miller, the TV showrunner, though with certain provisos: “Hands off

Aunt Lydia,” and “Don’t touch that baby!” adding “I’ve given him a lot of blank space that will be his to fill” (Atwood 2019b). She remains in authority over her own story.

To quote Offred, “This is time, nor am I out of it” (Atwood 2005a, 47), and in the space between *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments* the totalitarian state of Gilead has become worse. No longer is it a society in transition, with continual tensions between a collective memory of the time before and life under a newly imposed ideology, for in this Middle and Late Period it has become embedded as a brutally repressive regime with its mass executions, its secret service of Angels and Eyes, its updated surveillance systems, and its doctrine of biological essentialism. Women’s bodies are at the service of the state as child bearers, not only with the Handmaid system but also with the new generation of girls who are raised illiterate and groomed for early arranged marriages. Like *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *The Testaments* focuses on the stories of women in Gilead, though instead of Offred’s singular narrative, there are three female narrators: wicked old Aunt Lydia and two younger women who belong to Gilead’s second generation, Agnes and Daisy (also known as Jade and finally revealed to be “Baby Nicole”). Through these different women’s voices Atwood offers a wide perspective on Gilead’s history, its present state, and the mechanisms that presage its collapse. This is completely different from Offred’s prison narrative where she tells her Commander that she would like to know:

“Know what?” he says.

“Whatever there is to know,” I say ... “What’s going on” (198).

Following the structural design of the *MaddAddam* trilogy which develops from Snowman’s single eye-witness account in *Oryx and Crake* to its multi-voiced sequels, so *The Testaments* is a multidimensional narrative. Not only are there three voices, but within these eye-witness narratives, Atwood interweaves her socio-political commentary with an array of popular fiction genres, for this is also a crime story, a spy thriller, a revenge tale, and a Girls’ Own adventure story, and this novel has two endings. Through its multiple time dimensions, Atwood has created a historically shifting novelistic structure, telescoping the narrative present (the novel as we read it) with the past, for what we have been reading is all archival evidence, as we discover in the academic conference at the end, where Atwood projects a fictive future beyond Gilead’s collapse with the “subsequent Restoration of the United States of America” (414).

If that ending reminds us of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, so do its thematic continuities, for this too is a novel about power and powerlessness, about the sexual abuse of women, and female strategies of resistance to patriarchal tyranny. However, Offred was powerless to do anything except save her own sanity in her secret defiance of the regime (as are Agnes and Nicole), whereas Aunt Lydia is a woman with power – *some* power – though she too must plot in secret. It is through the interconnectedness of these women’s voices that Atwood constructs different forms of discourse to accommodate women’s representations of their own gendered identities and their diverse forms of resistance to the patriarchal structure of oppression in which they are trapped. Originally presented as separate segments, their stories gradually intertwine as the narrative develops, so that by Chapter 20 (“Bloodlines”) we hear all three voices together.

Aunt Lydia, now the Director of Ardua Hall and the fearsome controller of the women's side of the Gileadean enterprise, is the dark centre of this novel. Night after night, she sits in her private sanctum in the college library writing the secret history of the crimes of Gilead and of her own crimes: "Over the years I've buried a lot of bones; now I'm inclined to dig them up again – if only for your edification, my unknown reader" (Atwood 2019c, 4). An old and endlessly cunning survivor, she is aware that "Knowledge is power, especially discreditable knowledge" (35), to be hoarded and used when necessary as a lethal weapon. Within her history she writes a defence of her own life, where her Ardua Hall Holograph reveals a more complex female subject than the sadistic figure from *The Handmaid's Tale* and the television series as we learn her backstory. Her survival narrative and her justification for the choices she has made do not necessarily make her more sympathetic, for she remains a morally compromised figure, who is a collaborator with the regime, a double agent for the Mayday resistance movement, and finally Gilead's nemesis. As the latest in a long line of "spotty-handed villainesses" (Atwood 2005c, 171–86), she is a keeper of secrets and a ruthless strategist who finally gets her revenge. Atwood, who is always critical of stereotypes, insists there is no simple gender division between masculine and feminine qualities: if men are capable of treachery and violence, then so are women. Aunt Lydia is also the arch-plotter in a narrative which begins in a library, then accelerates into an adventure story on the high seas, only to end with Aunt Lydia alone in that library where, her revenge accomplished, she sits waiting for exposure and a traitor's death. Ever resourceful and always one step ahead, she plans to finish off her life with a stolen phial of morphine, choosing her own way to die: "Isn't that freedom of a sort?" she wonders with her customary sense of irony (32).

The two younger narrators continue Offred's story from an oblique angle, for they are both daughters of Handmaids. Indeed, they are both the daughters of Offred, as they discover in their quest for their vanished mother, though their histories are very different. Agnes, stolen from Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* when the family tried to escape to Canada, is brought up among the Gilead elite. Educated as a good, pious, submissive, God-fearing girl, she too is capable of small gestures of resistance to Gilead's pressures, and is finally saved from a grotesque marriage to an aging Bluebeard by Aunt Lydia, to be trained as an Aunt – after which her story develops in unexpected ways. Daisy/Nicole was born in the television adaptation and smuggled out of Gilead, growing up in Toronto with foster parents who are killed on her sixteenth birthday, when she discovers that she is "a forgery done on purpose" (39). A typical rebellious teenager, she studied Gilead in high school, and disapproves of the regime and all it stands for, but all this is theoretical and in no way prepares her for the shock of the real thing when she goes there. Arriving at Ardua Hall, she recoils at her spooky welcome which reminds her of "one of those scenes in horror movies where you know the villagers will turn out to be vampires" (321). An outsider who turns out to be Gilead's original poster girl, she is the one who becomes the main agent in Gilead's downfall, for she is the messenger who carries Aunt Lydia's scandalous exposure of Gilead's corruption out to Canada on a microdot embedded in a tattoo in her arm. She and Agnes are destined to be the avenger's destroying angels. "Land safely," Aunt Lydia prays (392). And they do.

The Handmaid's Tale has been transformed into a thriller, and Offred's ambiguous exit "into the darkness within; or else the light" (307) has been refigured as a double ending here, one

light and one dark. The two girls make it to freedom in Canada where they deliver their damning document cache, which immediately goes on the news, presaging the collapse of Gilead, and they finally meet their mother – the only time that Offred appears in the novel. But this ending in the light of restoration and promise of renewal is juxtaposed with the other ending in the dark, where Aunt Lydia, her revenge accomplished, sits in the library waiting for death: “It’s late: too late for Gilead to prevent its coming destruction ... And it’s late in my life” (401). Bidding farewell to her unknown reader, she knows all that will remain as her legacy is her manuscript, hopefully to be discovered in the future by someone like her earlier self, “a young woman, bright, ambitious,” when Aunt Lydia’s ghost will “hover behind you, peering over your shoulder: your muse, your unseen inspiration, urging you on” (403). She will be the latest member of the Atwoodian parade of female ghost voices, joining Offred and Penelope and Grace Marks and Iris: “By the time you read this last page, that – if anywhere – is the only place I will be” (Atwood 2001, 637).

The supplementary academic symposium offers a kind of closure, when Gilead has become ancient history and these women’s words have been resurrected as their testaments, now facsimiles displayed by the same Cambridge professor who discovered Offred’s tapes in a metal footlocker. There is however, one final surprise, as the professor repeats the words found on a stone statue, an epitaph to “Becka, Aunt Immortelle,” another of the tragic generation of Gilead’s girls, which provide an uncanny reminder of women’s self-sacrifice and resistance to Gilead’s ideology, coded in words from the Old Testament: “A bird of the air shall carry the voice and that which hath wings shall tell the matter. Love is as strong as death.”² There is the sense of an ending here, unlike in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Is this Atwood’s farewell to Gilead? Characteristically, she leaves the way open, for when asked if there could be a third instalment, she responded: “Never say never to anything” (Atwood 2019b).

Turning to *The Heart Goes Last* (2015) and to the short story collection *Stone Mattress* which immediately preceded it, we find a wilder, stranger Atwood, a writer with a very Gothic imagination, someone who is fascinated by ghosts and hauntings, tricksters, and crimes and violence. These elements are not new, as a glance through her back catalogue indicates: a poetry collection called *Murder in the Dark* (1983) and one called *Good Bones* (1992), novels with titles like *Bodily Harm* (1981), *The Robber Bride*, *Alias Grace* and *The Blind Assassin* in the 1990s, and books of criticism with titles like *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (1995) and *Negotiating with the Dead* (2002), not to mention *Moving Targets: Writing with Intent* (2004) or *Moral Disorder* (2006). Indeed, these criminal tendencies are highlighted in Sharon Rose Wilson’s essay collection entitled *Margaret Atwood’s Textual Assassinations: Recent Poetry and Fiction*, with its focus on “Atwood’s ‘assassinations’ of traditional genres, plots, narrative voices, structure, technique, and reader expectations” (Wilson 2003, xiii). Atwood views everything through her double vision, where on the one hand, her fiction focuses on contemporary socio-political and ethical issues, and on the other, she destabilises realism by hinting at hidden worlds and dark psychological impulses beneath civilised surfaces, even in her non-fiction study of finance and economics, *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth* (2008). There is always an excess which disturbs us and stimulates our imaginations.

² These quotations are from *Ecclesiastes* 10:20 and *The Song of Solomon* 8:16.

The later Atwood returns to the popular fictional forms that have always been part of her stylistic repertoire, displaying a new freedom as she plays with genre fiction in the digital age, appealing to a younger generation who work and read online, and the digital revolution has become an insistent presence in her work. She has always loved popular fiction – comics, B movies, fairy tales and wonder tales – and has used these faintly disreputable genres throughout her career, repurposing them to fit her current agendas. Scholars have been analysing her subversive use of popular forms since the 1970s³ as she has reinvented them in her ongoing series of narrative experiments, combining fictional artifice with social critique. Glancing quickly across her oeuvre, we may note her parody of the Harlequin romances in *Lady Oracle*, her postmodern Gothic fairy tale in *The Robber Bride* and her revisionary readings of Canadian history as Gothic or crime fiction in *Alias Grace* and *The Blind Assassin*, to mention some random samples.

However, it is her increasing engagement with digital technology which has opened new possibilities for her examination of contemporary culture with her revisionary use of popular forms. Atwood herself is now an established online presence, and the history of her involvement with electronic and social media up to 2012 has been traced by Lorraine York in her study of Atwood's "growing interactivity; and multimedia celebrity" (York 2013, 123). Atwood has long been alert to the new dimensions of electronic communication, introducing her Long Pen (her remote book-signing device) in 2006, though it was with *The Year of the Flood* (2009) that she really became digital, with her Tour blog (now her environmental website) and her launch into social media with her Twitter account. She now has nearly two million followers. She has made forays into online publishing as well, with *The Happy Zombies Sunrise Home*, co-authored with Naomi Alderman for the internet story-sharing site Wattpad, and her e-serial *Positron* for Byliner, where four instalments were published (2012–2103) before she rewrote it as her novel *The Heart Goes Last*. There is very little reference to new technologies in her fiction before 2000, though since then such references have proliferated. Even Penelope, speaking from Hades, talks of "the new ethereal-wave system that now encircles the globe" (Atwood 2005, 19). We may remember that in *The Handmaid's Tale* Offred in her life before Gilead was a librarian whose job was transferring books to computer discs, but Gilead's surveillance systems were still modelled on George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (by contrast with its updated systems in *The Testaments*). In *Oryx and Crake* Jimmie thinks back to the 1990s when his teenage world had become digital with its video games like Extinctathon, its porn sites and emails, and by the second volume of the trilogy, even God's Gardeners, those environmental activists, have a secret laptop, and Crake is a master hacker, tutored by Zeb, one of God's Gardeners. Atwood's post-apocalyptic landscape is littered with the flotsam of a "modernity beyond salvage" (Hicks 2016, title page), and cross-currents of communication methods swirl through the trilogy, reflecting before and after, with a return to oral storytelling and the handwritten book in the new speculative future. However, Atwood had already initiated a new conversation with her readers, creating a social context of digital exchange in a community which stretches beyond

³ For contemporary studies of this topic, see Reingard M. Nischik, *Engendering Genre: The Works of Margaret Atwood* (2000), Gina Wisker, *Margaret Atwood: An Introduction to Critical Views of Her Fiction* (2012), and Jackie Shead, *Margaret Atwood: Crime Fiction Writer: The Reworking of a Popular Genre* (2015).

the printed book. For her, one form does not replace another: “Every prediction – radio would kill books, it didn’t; television would kill movies, it didn’t; e-reading will kill books, it hasn’t – these predictions have all been wrong. You’re never going to kill storytelling, because it’s built into the human plan. We come with it” (Atwood 2012b).

Her bravura display of storytelling in *Stone Mattress* with its nine tales is situated in a long tradition “as it evokes the world of the folk tale, the wonder tale, and the long-ago teller of tales” (Atwood 2014, Acknowledgements), while referencing the idioms and technologies of contemporary culture. “*Stone Mattress* is a veritable sampler of genre fiction revisited” (Howells 2017, 299), where Atwood segues between fantasy fiction of the “sword-and-sorcery variety” in “Alphinland,” Gothic horror in “The Freeze-Dried Groom” and “The Dead Hand Loves You,” crime fiction in the title story, to a futuristic dystopia set in an old people’s home with “Torching the Dusties.” While exploiting the appeal of popular fiction, Atwood continues in her role as cultural critic and wry observer of the human condition: “I think a lot of writing is an attempt to figure out why people do what they do. Human behaviour, both saintly and demonic, is a constant amazement to me” (Atwood 2017, 70). In these “tales about tales” she considers questions of aging and mortality, and the way that private fantasies often blur the borders between real and fictional worlds, where actions may have unforeseen consequences revealed only through the passage of time. The title story provides one fascinating example, where a sexual crime committed fifty years ago is finally punished by its female victim. Atwood is playing with the murder mystery plot here, devising a feminist detective story that turns out to be an older woman’s revenge on her teenage rapist, “a just-so story about how a naïve, small-town girl turned into a serial man-killer. It is simultaneously a story about coming-of-age in a sexist world and learning how to settle your own scores” (Barzilai 2017, 329), a story for this #MeToo age written years before the term was invented. Interestingly, Verna Pritchard, the murderess, is an avid reader of crime fiction who knows the importance of clues, getting rid of clues and laying false ones, for in this cleverly plotted narrative, she occupies all the main roles of victim, murderess and detective – and she may have committed the perfect crime. One might suspect that Verna has read Atwood’s “Murder in the Dark,” a scary game about murderers, victims and detectives, played with the lights off, where the roles may alternate: “Just remember this, when the scream at last has ended and you’ve turned on the light: by the rules of the game I must always lie” (Atwood 1983, 50).

Liars and tricksters, private obsessions and abuses of public trust all feature in *The Heart Goes Last*, another of Atwood’s reinventions of dystopia, this time as surreal, darkly comic social satire. Once again, we see her characteristic concerns with social problems, questions of human rights, and the relation between institutional or corporate power and the concept of individual freedom, unfolding this time in the context of Western capitalist consumer society. Atwood situates her dystopia specifically in time and place, in the north-eastern USA after “the big financial-crash business-wrecking meltdown that turned this part of the country into a rust bucket” (Atwood 2015a, 5). She projects a fantasised futuristic scenario, extrapolating from current trends to address our anxieties about surveillance as an insidious component of everyday life (“You never know what the central IT people are tracking” [Atwood 2015a, 57]) and our clusters of unease around advances in biotechnology and robotics. Atwood invites readers to consider serious ethical questions here, though presenting her message as

carnavalesque entertainment shimmering with fantasy, for this novel is her reinterpretation of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where dystopia fuses with Atwoodian Gothic in the digital age.

Adopting Atwood's own characteristic double vision, we might see this text as a prelude to *Hag-Seed*, her reimagining of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* set in an Ontario men's prison in 2013, or looking back, we might note its resemblance to *Lady Oracle*, her neo-Gothic novel of the 1970s, with its dimensions of ironic humour where realism collides with Gothic conventions. *The Heart Goes Last* is about prisons (or forms of imprisonment) and about escape fantasies, as Atwood speculates on the complexities of human psychology. "When you write down an account of human behaviour, the account may look a lot like activism, since language has an inherent moral dimension, and so do stories ... even if the writer claims only to be bearing witness" (Atwood 2017, 70).

Positron, a privatised prison masquerading as a gated community, which sells the American Dream of peaceful suburban living, is at the centre of this dystopia. Behind its advertising rhetoric, Positron is a closed system rigidly controlled by sophisticated electronic surveillance, offering the illusion of safety to people who have lost everything in the 2008 financial crash. Atwood's protagonists, Charmaine and Stan, a young working-class couple down on their luck, are seduced into signing the contract to join this social experiment, not bothering to decode its deceptive title (Positron / To Prison). This is the genesis of a narrative whose wild plot twists come to resemble the "fierce vexations" of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, though ending, like Shakespeare's comedy, with healing and liberation. As Atwood interprets it, the *Dream* is dark and threatening, a haunted, fearful world full of illusions, distractions, conflicting desires and transformations, an image of the disorders of fantasy and imagination, as her epigraph from the play suggests:

Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends.

Atwood embroiders on these elements, using Shakespeare's technique of *dédoublement*, "Creating an illusion through doubles – it's one of the oldest theatrical gimmicks in the box" (Atwood 2016a, 108). Atwood constructs a double plot which fractures into multiple subplots, with two main protagonists offering a dual-focused narrative perspective, and Positron as a Place "where everyone will have two lives: prisoners one month, guards or town functionaries the next. Everyone has been assigned an Alternate" (42). This rosy utopian experiment needs to be read against its own dark double, Atwood's article with its Orwellian subtitle "We are double-plus unfree," published in *The Guardian* just before her novel came out; in this article she warns against absolutist systems and our careless surrender of hard-won freedoms, specifically connected to digital technology: "Are we turning our entire society into a prison? If so, who are the inmates and who are the guards? And who decides?" (Atwood 2015b). Her novel develops the theme of imprisonment through her "strategy of excessive doubling" (Bronfen 1992, 419), but like the founders of Positron, "care has been taken to maintain the theme [though] considerable amenities have been added" (43). It is some of

these added amendments in Atwood's narrative, namely escape strategies from imprisonment of several kinds and the consequent proliferation of doubles, disguises and split identities, that I shall discuss here.

Atwood's first poetry collection was called *Double Persephone*, and both she and her critics have explored the doubles trope in its multiple iterations ever since *The Malabar Review*, when Rowland Smith in his article noted Joan Foster's double life and her "shadowy twin" in *Lady Oracle* (Smith 1977, 144). It is with *Lady Oracle*, its Gothic emphases and its feminine escape fantasies that we find a shadowy double for Charmaine returning after forty years. Certainly, the themes are different, for *Lady Oracle* is concerned with issues of feminine authorship (Bronfen 1992, 415) in this story of a woman writer trapped inside the Gothic romances that she compulsively revises. As has been pointed out, this novel draws on "postmodern anti-essentialist theories of the self that developed in the late 1970s and 80s" (Tolan 2007, 85), concepts which have since been expanded by feminist theorists like Judith Butler and subsequently reframed in the context of intersectional feminism. Charmaine is not a woman writer; so far as we know, she writes only one note, "I'm starved for you!" signed as "Jasmine" and sealed with a purple lipstick kiss (Atwood 2015a, 46), and in *Lady Oracle* there is no Positron. However, what Joan and her readers and Charmaine have in common is their desire for escape from the prison of domesticity and the boredom of their safe, conventional marriages: "Escape wasn't a luxury for them, it was a necessity" (Atwood 1982, 34). Atwood asks, "Should we choose the safe cage or the dangerous wild? Comfort, inertia and boredom, or activity, risk and peril? Being human and of mixed motives, we want both" (Atwood 2015b). This is true for both Charmaine and Stan, who embark on parallel illicit affairs after a year in Positron, rebelling against both kinds of imprisonment. Here I shall focus on Charmaine's feminine fantasies and her double lives, which resemble Joan's Gothic escape strategies with her multiple identities, though the added dimension of digital surveillance opens up wider questions about privacy and individual freedom.

Charmaine's secret affair with Max, Stan's Alternate, has all the glamour and tawdriness of True Romance: "It was like the copy on the back of the most lurid novel in the limited-titles library at Positron. Swept away. Drugged with desire ... All of that ... She'd thought it was only in books and TV, or else for other people" (53). In fact, it is on TV, for their passionate encounters are all filmed on hidden video cameras, to be used as evidence in a complex plot engineered by Max's wife, Jocelyn, who is Head of Surveillance, in her plan to sabotage the Positron project. Of course, neither Charmaine nor the reader knows this, and from Charmaine's perspective this affair spells not only release from Positron and from dailiness, but a new sexual awakening for her: "It felt safe to be caged in, now that she knew she had this other person inside her who was capable of escapades and contortions she'd never known about before. It wasn't Stan's fault, it was the fault of chemistry" (56). Her affair adds another dimension beyond married love, for "She did love Stan, but it was different. A different kind of love. Trusty, sedate. It went with pet fish ...and with Closure" (53). As Charmaine revels in her fantasies of desire, she gradually comes into focus as a more complex and duplicitous subject than Stan's sweetly retro Doris Day image of her: "He wouldn't have her any other way. That's why he married her" (48). Atwood has been exploring female subjectivity throughout her career, insisting that "women have more to them than virtue. They are fully dimensional

human beings. They too have subterranean depths; why shouldn't their many-dimensionality be given literary expression?" (Atwood 2005c, 185). An embittered Stan phrases it differently: "Everyone has a shadow side, even fluffpots like her" (101). Only much later will he discover that Charmaine has an even darker double in her role as Positron's Chief Medications Administrator, her Death Angel role of relocating dissidents "in a different sphere" by lethal injection, which has sinister implications for himself. Is Charmaine really a murderer? And did she really mean to kill him? But that is another story where nightmare fantasy is acted out in real life, a crisis and a tipping point in the plot which I shall not address here.

Charmaine's doubleness is literalised in truly Gothic form at Positron's Possibilibots factory – that lucrative department which trades in male fantasies with its manufacture of sex robots, "exact replica female sex aids ... For home and export" (165) – where the Director, who is obsessed with Charmaine, has commissioned her life-sized replica. One day in Customization Plus, Stan sees his wife's disembodied head lying on the table gazing up at him, and his shock of horror has its parallel in Charmaine's shiver of terror when, via a Posipad image (for digital tech is never absent in Positron), she too sees what Stan has seen, "Her very own head, with her very own hair on it" (232). She has come face to face with her double, her "evil twin," who then takes revenge on the Director (thanks to the intervention of Jocelyn the arch-plotter) by trapping him in his act of fantastic copulation: "There shouldn't be too much bruising. But don't be surprised if you see him walking like a duck" (236). This episode is as wickedly funny as Stan's traumatic exit from Positron carrying Jocelyn's damning evidence of its abuses on a flashdrive hidden in his silver belt buckle when he is shipped out to Las Vegas disguised as an Elvis sexbot in a blue satin-lined coffin – a parody of Gothic live burial with a digital twist. But Charmaine's double games and Stan's trials do not end there, as they become helplessly entangled in an increasingly bizarre series of plot transformations where dystopia morphs into a twistedly parodic version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Like Shakespeare's play, it ends as a comedy, though with a rather malicious Atwoodian authorial grin, as she returns her characters to the real world, and fantasies are dispelled. Charmaine is forced to face the responsibility of being a free human agent, and the novel ends with her being dragged out of her imaginary Eden of settled married bliss as she and Stan are given second chances with an echo of the final words of Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "The world is all before you, where to choose." / "How do you mean?" says Charmaine (306). Atwood does what she does so often, fusing popular fiction with literary tradition, destabilising comfortable Happy Endings with reminders of serious ethical concerns.

3 Conclusion

Naomi Alderman's comment on Atwood's 80th birthday best summarises Atwood's complex appeal: "What people sometimes seem to forget about Margaret's work is that she manages to write about the darkest and most terrifying parts of human psychology in a way that is still deeply funny and full of dark strange hope" (Alderman 2019). In my critical assessment of her fiction since 2000, reading it through the lens of her earlier work, I have traced continuities, innovations and shifts in perspective as her texts have charted her responses to what is going on in the world around us, displaying what her London agent Karolina Sutton described as her ability to read the moment and see ahead. To this I would add her ability to read our

present dystopian moment in a wider historical context which holds out an ambiguous hope for the future. After all, would she have written the first book for the Future Library, not to be opened for a hundred years, unless she hoped that there would still be people who could read? Atwood's work may look different since 2000, with its new emphasis on popular fiction and the added dimension of digital technology to her narrative strategies, but she remains a traditional storyteller, and whatever Atwoodian topic we explore has a long hinterland, refigured in response to changing circumstances. Her work is full of strong continuities, and the comment she made about aging artists and creativity in relation to Shakespeare's late plays bears repeating for its relevance to herself: "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" (Atwood 2016b, 25).

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