

# Turning the Pages: Rereading Atwood's Novels

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DESCRIBING A BOOK AS A “PAGE TURNER” is often taken as an insult: a dismissal of the book on the grounds that its primary, and possibly only, appeal is at the level of plot. But all fiction attempts to appeal to its readers, and those readers should be tempted to turn the pages. In the case of Margaret Atwood's fiction, however, readers are tempted to turn the pages both ways. Her fiction urges first-time readers forward, forward toward richly satisfying, if not entirely conclusive, moments of closure. But her fiction also demands readers to turn backwards, to turn the pages in the other direction as well: to go back to read again and reassess in light of the new insights they have gleaned as they have read forward. Think, for instance, of the difference between a reader's first encounter with Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* and that same reader's return to the novel once s/he understands that Offred's story has been pieced together by the insidious Pieixoto.

Similarly, with each new addition to the oeuvre of this prolific author, while readers find themselves moving on to meet new fictional characters and landscapes, they also find themselves returning, turning back as it were, to earlier Atwood works in order to read those works through a new lens and with new insights. Take, for example, *Blind Assassin*, which,

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upon first reading, appears to be a character study of a woman's journey through life to old age, occupying thereby a similar position to *The Stone Angel* in the oeuvre of Margaret Laurence or *The Stone Diaries* in that of Carol Shields. As readers reach the concluding pages, however, they recognize that the old lady is one of the titular "blind assassins," as she confesses both her crime and the complex nature of her culpability. This is a novel-length version of Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess," a poem that becomes the focus of explication in Atwood's 2007 short story of the same name, where the central characters disagree to such an extent on the nature of the Duke's villainy that it contributes to a growing distance in their relationship to one another ("Moral Disorder," 63–95). In *Margaret Atwood, A Critical Companion*, I argue that *Blind Assassin* is the third of Atwood's villainess novels, the first two being *The Robber Bride* and *Alias Grace*. As such, it differs in kind from the "old lady" novels of Laurence and Atwood, and its protagonist more closely resembles Alice Munro's crafty Et, who confesses both her crime and exposes her cunning to the reader in "Something I Have Been Meaning to Tell You." Compared with these other heroines of the Canadian canon, *The Blind Assassin's* Iris "scales greater heights of villainy" (Cooke, 155), but also wins greater sympathy than the other villainess, Munro's Et. I suggest that, with more time and critical distance, Iris of *The Blind Assassin* will come to be compared at greater length with the villainesses of Roman and Greek antiquity. The figure of Ismene in Sophocles' *Antigone* strikes me as one fruitful avenue of critical inquiry for future scholars (Cooke, 153–54).

The recent stripping away of veils from Atwood's fictional villainesses has also invited us to recognize acts of violence in some of her earlier works. In this issue of *English Studies in Canada*, for example, Kiley Kapuscinski holds up to scrutiny both the national myth casting Canadians as pacifists, as nonviolent victims rather than victimizers, and the very binary structures upon which such meta-narratives are based: pacifism and violence, victim and victimizer, Canadian its seeming antithesis (as articulated in *Surfacing* at least), American. Kapuscinski locates violence in the acts of Atwood's female characters—the titular protagonists of the villainess novels, *The Robber Bride* and *The Blind Assassin*, and the antagonist of *Cat's Eye*—and ascribes to them the role of "challenging myths of vulnerability and other narratives central to the Canadian imaginary." The specific focus in Kapuscinski's article, however, is on the unnamed protagonist of *Surfacing*: on her growing awareness of her own complicity in acts of violence, on the inaccuracies of equating the Canadian imaginary only with pacifism, and on the "surfacing" more generally of her awareness

that the old binaries of victim and victimizer, Canadian and American, no longer hold.

In another article of reassessment in this issue, Janine Rogers re-examines *Cat's Eye*. Her re-examination is prompted by her sense that the critical dialogue surrounding that novel has resulted in the development of an unfairly negative portrayal of science and has essentially flattened what she perceives to be the novel's nuanced glimpse at the potential of both science and art as ways of seeing and understanding the world. Like Kapuscinski, Rogers undermines the false binaries that have emerged in recent critical commentary. With reference to Elaine and the wonderful Dr Banerji of *Cat's Eye*, Rogers argues that victims are not always victims and are not permanently defeated, that the female artist and the male scientist are, in fact, allies in that they are both "see-ers," that while classical science is perhaps "male" it is not "patriarchal," that women are both victims and are complicit in victimizing others, and that "The classical science in *Cat's Eye* is egalitarian, organic, and artistic *in the very tradition of the scientific method* [that] aligns it with feminist values, even while the scientists that practise it are neither female nor (overtly) feminist."

Turning the pages another way, I couldn't help but see support for, and validation of, Rogers's reassessment of science in *Cat's Eye* in two powerful stories collected in Atwood's *Moral Disorder* (2007): "The Labrador Fiasco," a story written in 1995<sup>1</sup> at about the same time as Rogers was beginning to see a disconnect between critical assessments of science in *Cat's Eye* and the reactions expressed by her students, and "The Boys at the Lab." These stories, like Rogers's article, explore the potential power and possible limitations of science as a vehicle for understanding the world around us.

A third article on Atwood's oeuvre in this issue by Kimberly Fairbrother Canton turns from page, to screen and stage, and back again—as Atwood herself has done through her explorations of genre that have led her to write poetry, fiction and nonfiction, children's books, screenplays, and librettos. The adaptation of Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* by Poul Ruders and librettist Paul Bentley provides a striking example of how adaptations can provide audiences with new ways of seeing and can energize both creative and critical dialogue. *The Handmaid's Tale* was first published to critical acclaim in 1985; the opera premiered in Denmark in 2000 and appeared in London, England, in 2002. Staged in Toronto

1 Atwood explains that she wrote this story at about the same time as she wrote the decidedly autobiographical poem about the death of her father that appears in *Morning in the Burned House* (interview with Charlie Rose).

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in 2006, the opera's production was complemented by a special issue of the *University of Toronto Quarterly* devoted to this powerful adaption of Atwood's novel and, more generally, by the publication of Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaption*. Canton's article itself complements the other articles appearing in this special issue of *University of Toronto Quarterly*: its concern for close "listening" to musical phrase and key extends the astute audience response commentary of Helmut Reichenbacher, and its focus on the implications of the operatic adaptation for audiences raises issues entertained also by the analyses of Eric Domville and Shirley Neuman. Although Neuman ultimately argues that the nuances of political and ideological context, specifically feminist, are lost in the operatic adaptation, Canton evokes George Lipitz's notion of counter-memory to argue for the opera's ability to force the audience to think about political and ideological issues through a sustained focus on a powerful and specific instance. Canton further argues that while the opera engages the audience through discourse, it also does so through melody and mood, echo and evocation, and incremental repetition.

When I was first asked to write an introductory essay about these three new articles about Atwood's work, I had anticipated seeing articles about her most recent publications—an article on *Blind Assassin*, perhaps, another looking at the protagonist of *The Penelopiad* in relation to some of the feisty heroines of her poems, and one on *Moral Disorder*, possibly in relation to the U.S. edition of *Bluebeard's Egg and Other Stories*, which contains the "other" stories, both nuanced and partly autobiographical, not included in the Canadian version of that collection. I was therefore very struck that all three articles revisited Atwood's earlier novels and, further, that the earlier novels they revisited were those that were themselves deeply concerned with past events, the passing of time and the power of the retrospective glance. What I came to realize is that all three articles were participating in a reassessment of Atwood's fictions: in close reading, in close re-reading, and, in that, in turning the pages backward so as to read Atwood forward.<sup>2</sup>

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