

**Coral Ann Howells, ed. 2006: *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*.
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Canadian literature written in English is now of age. Or so it would seem from the fact that this is the second of two volumes of the prestigious series *Cambridge Companions* to have been devoted to it in a fairly short time. First came *The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature* in 2004, edited by Professor Eva Maria Kröller of the University of British Columbia and long-time editor of the well-established academic journal *Canadian Literature*. The *Companion to Canadian Literature* has been followed very closely on its heels by *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood* (2006). These are no doubt encouraging signs of the vibrancy of English-Canadian literature, while certainly attesting to the merits of Margaret Atwood's wide-ranging *oeuvre* too. Of the three hundred volumes now spanning this prestigious series, only thirteen other women writers in English have so far been considered worthy of entering the collection, all of them in the last decade. From the field of British writing, they are Aphra Behn (2004), Jane Austen (1997), Mary Wollstonecraft (2002), Frances Burney (forthcoming 2007), Mary Shelley (2003), George Eliot (2001), Elizabeth Gaskell (also forthcoming 2007) and Virginia Woolf (2000). From the United States hail Emily Dickinson (2002), Harriet Beecher Stowe (2004), Edith Wharton (1995), Willa Cather (2005) and Sylvia Plath (2006). There are also occasional collective volumes, like those focusing on medieval women's writing (2003), the Brontës (2002), Nineteenth-Century American women's writing (2001), American women playwrights (1999) and modern British women playwrights (2002). All in all, less than ten per cent of the full series deals with women's writing, and Nobel Prize winners Nadine Gordimer and Toni Morrison have yet to be given their due. As a result, one does not lack for reasons to celebrate the arrival of this new volume, not least because Margaret Atwood is the first woman writer to enjoy the honour while still alive.

The *Companion to Margaret Atwood* has been edited by a Canadianist based in Europe, Prof. Coral Ann Howells of the University of Reading, who has brought together an impressive team of scholars from both sides of the Atlantic and from South Asia. Most of them are well-known Atwood scholars and the authors/editors of a book-length study, like Howells herself: David Staines, Lorraine York, Pilar Somacarrera, Shannon Hengen, Coomi S. Vevaina, Eleonora Rao, Marta Dvorak, Reingard M. Nischik and Sharon R. Wilson. Howells has also enlisted the contributions of two younger scholars, Madeleine Davies and Branko Gorjup. As stated in the 'Introduction', Howells's volume (like all *Companions*) targets students as its main readership, but this introductory text has been meant to encourage them "to see more" (2). She declares that the essays "consider [Atwood's] career from a variety of perspectives and with every different emphases, though it is her Canadianness and her international appeal as an imaginative writer which are the two *leitmotifs*" (1). Howells further admits that these are not new endeavours, for "most of these topics have been visited before. . . . However", she continues, "revisiting these same topics from different critical and

theoretical angles (e.g. recent emphases on postmodernism, postcolonialism and environmentalism) and in the light of Atwood's own continuous production, may help to re-evaluate the major dynamics in her work" (2).

As a matter of fact, Howells's task was by no means easy. The list of publications on Margaret Atwood is daunting and features many groundbreaking monographs and collections of essays. Of those, this *Companion* certainly invites close comparison with Reinghard M. Nischik's edited volume *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact* (2000), put together to commemorate the author's sixtieth birthday. In its day, Nischik's book introduced a challenging new gaze on what has allegedly become the 'Atwood industry' by including essays on the marketing, transmission, translation and reception of the writer's work over the years, alongside more intimate reminiscences and even cartoons by and about Atwood. Howells has had to work within the more restricting format of the *Companion* series as well as much shorter length, but even so the resulting volume is comprehensive and knowledgeable, although perhaps less innovative than Howells herself suggests in the above-quoted 'Introduction'. After all, those "recent emphases on postmodernism, postcolonialism and environmentalism" have been a fixture of Atwood criticism in the last twenty-odd years. Diana Brydon's masterful postcolonial analysis of Atwood in her article 'The Thematic Ancestor' was published in 1984; Atwood's postmodernism occupied Linda Hutcheon in *The Canadian Postmodern* in 1988; and environmentalism was already present in Valerie Broege's 1981 article on 'Margaret Atwood's Americans and Canadians'. Genre analysis, too, has been developed by critics such as Howells herself since at least the 1980s (Howells 1987), not to mention the even earlier psychoanalytical and archetypal approaches, as represented by Barbara Godard's 'My (M)Other, My Self' (1983) and Carol P. Christ's 'Margaret Atwood: The Surfacing of Woman's Spiritual Quest and Vision' (1976).

Although the strength of this volume may not be its innovative coverage of Atwood's work, it is a solid and well-rounded collection. First, there are the predictable but nevertheless necessary opening overviews of the writer's biography and creative context, here in the expert hands of Lorraine York and David Staines. In 'Margaret Atwood in her Canadian Context' (12-27), Staines skilfully describes the parochialism of Canada's 1950s cultural scenario, when Atwood first decided that she wanted to be a writer. He divides Atwood's career into three stages: "mapping her Canada" for her early formative years; "interpreting Canada abroad" from the early seventies until 1985, when Atwood has forged a national name for herself and her work diversifies; and "Canada in the world", after 1985, when *The Handmaid's Tale* turns her into an international figure. Staines' s article makes very clear for beginners in Atwood's studies to what extent she has been shaped by and has in turn shaped Canadian culture. In contrast, Lorraine York's 'Biography/autobiography' (28-42) may come as a surprise because it is not undergraduate student-directed at all. It stands out as a rather complex and challenging examination of Atwood as an icon and media star, that builds on earlier discussions of this subject in Canada's mainstream media (where Atwood is seen both as charmer *and* witch) as well as in books such as the above-mentioned collection *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact* (2000) or Graham Huggan's *The Post-colonial Exotic* (2001). York's piece highlights current aspects of the Atwood phenomena such as her official website, which "shows Margaret Atwood and her agents directly intervening in the flurry of media texts about her that are in circulation" (33), touches lightly on

biographies of the author, and points out the persistent preoccupation with the impact of fame and the status of the contemporary artist that surfaces in Atwood's fiction (*Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye* most of all) as well as in her essays.

The next few articles discuss certain recurrent topics in Atwood's work, starting with Pilar Somacarrera's 'Power Politics: Power and Identity' (43-57). Although better known for her work on Atwood's poetry, here Somacarrera uses some poems and the Canadian literature textbook *Survival* as a springboard for her discussion of the novels *Bodily Harm*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* through the common thread of power politics, that is, 'the interface between the public and the personal worlds [and] the blurry boundaries between them' (43) and with the help of Michel Foucault's power/knowledge lens. First, Somacarrera stresses the writer's view of heterosexual relations as warfare in the poems, as well as in *Surfacing* and *Survival*, and then moves on to how Atwood lays bare "the crudest dimensions of power" (51) at the level of national and international politics in the postcolonial thriller *Bodily Harm* and the dystopias *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*.

Madeleine Davies's article 'Margaret Atwood's female bodies' (58-71) is similar to Somacarrera's in bringing French theoretical constructs, in this case *écriture féminine*, to bear on her reading of Atwood's work. After briefly examining the main concepts in Hélène Cixous's celebrated essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa' to ease students into the subject, the essay's itinerary follows the path opened by Coral Ann Howells in her 1996 book *Margaret Atwood*, now into its second edition, particularly in chapter three – "Feminine, Female, Feminist": from *The Edible Woman* to "The Female Body" – and chapter seven, where Howells reads *The Handmaid's Tale* through the lens of Cixous's Medusa text. Nevertheless, Davies updates Howells's analysis with her comments on the Booker-Prize winning *The Blind Assassin*, thus introducing a new variation of the body politics motif so dear to Atwood, i.e. the aging female body, although one might also contend that this topic was already evidenced in *Cat's Eye*.

In the next essay, we turn with Shannon Hengen to another Atwood concern, environmentalism ('Margaret Atwood and environmentalism', 72-85). Hengen does not seem overly interested in the deployment of ecocritical concepts, and her starting points are Atwood's own writings on the subject, particularly the collection *Strange Things: the Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (1995) via Donna Haraway's cyborg¹. In her discussion, Hengen brings together some of Atwood's poetry and three landmarks of her fiction, i.e. *Surfacing* (1972), *Life Before Man* (1979) and *Oryx and Crake* (2003), tracing in them the representation of the natural world and the relation of human beings to their environment. For Hengen, "Nature—physical or human—seen as a commodity always represents betrayal in Atwood's work" (84). Of most interest is the connection she establishes between the motif of the dinosaurs' extinction in *Life Before Man* and the survival of the human species and the engineering of a new

¹ As a hybrid of machine and organism, Haraway's cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world. The starting point for Haraway's meditations on the future of gender in an increasingly technological society can be traced to her influential article 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s'. Originally published in *Socialist Review* 80 (1985): 65-108, it has been reprinted in Donna Haraway's *The Haraway Reader* (NY and London: Routledge, 2004): 6-45.

one in *Oryx and Crake*, which comes to prove the persistence of certain preoccupations in Atwood's fictional world. In 'Margaret Atwood and History' (86-99), Coomi S. Vevaina introduces students to another powerful Atwood construct, the past. Vevaina engages the main characteristics of Atwood's postmodern distrust of history and mentions some of the recurrent figures of Atwood's archives (her Puritan ancestor Mary Webster, the pioneer Susanna Moodie, the murderer Grace Marks), describing what she calls *psychohistories* insofar as these are stories of fragmentation and subjectivity rather than attempts at an objective account of the past. Vevaina also pinpoints Atwood's recurrent use of visual records of the past, pictures (paintings as well as photographs) that, like words, fail to convey reliable truths.

'Home and nation in Margaret Atwood's later fiction' (100-13) pursues one topic that has intrigued Atwood critics for a long time. Here Eleonora Rao defines Atwood's "postnationalist phase" since 1991 (101), as perceived in three novels: *Cat's Eye*, *The Robber Bride* and *Oryx and Crake*. Rao's interesting thesis is that "discourses of home are an extension of discourses of nation and national belonging, and [that] these are based on exclusion and oppression" (101). For Rao, there is growing emphasis on issues of race and ethnicity in *Cat's Eye* and *The Robber Bride*, particularly in the latter's account of post-second world war immigration and its strong concern with rootlessness, which seems to culminate in *Oryx and Crake*, where "there is no single mention of Canada. Atwood's most recent novel to date is suggestive of a thinking and feeling beyond the nation. Her quest for Canada's and Canadian literature's visibility started in the 1970s, and now fully realized, has provided room for a whole set of different themes and concerns" (112). Although Rao's essay's focus on the later fiction offers provocative insights, it tends to overemphasize new beginnings and misses the abundant connections within Atwood's *oeuvre* that other essays in this collection rightly point out. The home ground/foreign territory dichotomy can hardly be said to start in *Cat's Eye*, and it already features in Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972). One might contend that for Atwood, nobody is ever truly at home. We are all outsiders, whatever our gender, race, sexual orientation, etc. The same can be said for Atwood's concern with national and international politics, emerging in earlier novels such as *Bodily Harm* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. Most of the themes in *Oryx and Crake* are prominent too elsewhere in the writer's production. And surely Atwood does not need to mention *Canada* in order for *Oryx and Crake* to be pertinent to Canada and Canadians.

In 'Margaret Atwood's humor' (114-29), Marta Dvorak depicts Atwood's main postmodern techniques and textual practices, using a Bakhtinian approach but one that also owes much to Linda Hutcheon. Dvorak traces the prominence of the satiric impulse in the writer's multi-generic work. The carnivalesque drive takes on different strategies and devices, among which Dvorak describes with precision the major presence of multivoicedness and orality, the strong dialogue that characterises much of Atwood's output, and her intertextual and parodic games. This is an essay with wide-ranging examples, in which Atwood's whole palette of comicity, from benevolent irony to ridicule and absurd via more aggressive parody and satire, is disclosed. The next two essays provide overviews of Atwood's poetry and shorter fiction. Branko Gorjup's 'Margaret Atwood's poetry and poetics' (130-44) tackles the extraordinarily difficult task of summarily describing over thirty years of poetic output, so far published in eleven collections. The essay describes them in chronological order, briefly stopping in

some of Atwood's most celebrated poems, like 'This is a Photograph of Me' or the 'Circe/Mud Poems'. Holding the essay together is the by now long-established critical notion of dualities and metamorphosis in Atwood's poetics. Reingard M. Nischik's 'Margaret Atwood's short stories and shorter fictions' (145-60) faces another difficult task that she resolves well, challenging the genre hierarchy that condemns short stories to relative neglect in Atwood's canon. Nischik stresses their richness and variety of topics and narrative strategies, their open-endedness and their Canadianness. Furthermore, she singles out three collections of shorter pieces, a hybrid genre that defies rigid categorization and that to Nischik represents a postmodern rendering of the Baudelerian prose poem.

The collection closes with two essays by major Atwood critics, Howells herself and Sharon R. Wilson. In 'Margaret Atwood's dystopian visions: *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*' (161-75), Howells updates her previous work on Atwood's use of the dystopian genre by arguing that *Oryx and Crake* can be read as a sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*, highlighting the need for storytelling as a survival strategy in dire circumstances. Howells's comparison foregrounds their differences too, like their inspirational texts (Orwell's *1984* for *The Handmaid's Tale*, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* for *Oryx and Crake*). Sharon R. Wilson's article, 'Blindness and Survival in Margaret Atwood's major novels' (177-90) concludes the collection by discussing the importance of the visual in the writer's work, and thus also updating what has been one of Wilson's sustained line of contributions to Atwood studies. Wilson competently discusses vision imagery in *Surfacing*, *Cat's Eye*, *Alias Grace*, *The Blind Assassin* and *Oryx and Crake*, highlighting the characters' shortcomings in seeing without seeing, or in not wanting to see uncomfortable truths that would lead them to take responsibility for their actions.

All things considered, there is on the whole a bit too much emphasis on topics and genres in this collection, while one misses two strong articles from the critical approaches that have provided some of the best work on Atwood through the years: postcolonialism and psychoanalysis. Although this might not be the groundbreaking collection that Atwood scholars would hope for, it is doubtlessly an example of sound, well-informed and well-written scholarship that consolidates the achievements of several decades of Atwood criticism, as well as a commendable classroom tool. It was high time Canadian literature received due attention in a series that over the last twenty years has aspired to providing academic institutions with comprehensive tools for the discussion of key literary texts and authors. Margaret Atwood certainly qualifies as such, since she is by far the most internationally recognized of Canadian authors to date, and the addition of one more woman writer may help bring about still much needed revisions of the literary canon.

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