

Messing with Atwood: Power, Reception and Writing Politics

INTRODUCTION

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While Margaret Atwood has resisted being described as a specifically feminist writer, she readily acknowledges the political elements of her work but resists readings that focus exclusively on those elements. She insists that "[n]ovels are not political tracts, although 'politics' - in the sense of human power structures - is inevitably one of their subjects. But if the author's main design is to convert us to something - whether that something be Christianity, capitalism...or feminism, we are likely to sniff it out and rebel" (Atwood 2004, 160). The result of Atwood's rebellion against clearly delineated ideological positions in her fiction has made the conversations around her writing messy and compelling. In her fiction, her poetry and her critical and political essays, Atwood insists, perversely to some, on maintaining this rebellious position and, increasingly, her readers are accepting the provocative nature of the intersection between her political and artistic visions.

In a 1985 interview, Elizabeth Meese describes Atwood's complex relation to the "monolithically ideological" as a series of "paradoxes and dilemmas" (Atwood 1990, 183). Perhaps the dilemma that Meese is describing here is Atwood's insistence upon exploring (but not explaining) the complex intersection between political, subject and other positions in her fiction. To paraphrase Atwood in her discussion of the novel: "In short, [Atwood's work is] ambiguous and multifaceted not because [she's] perverse but because [she] attempts to grapple with what was once referred to as the human condition, and [she does] so in a medium that is notoriously slippery - namely, language itself" (2004, 161). It is this slipperiness that has provoked the writers of all three of the articles in this cluster to discuss Atwood's work in relation to her political statements and to the reception of her

work in the classroom. The focus in the following articles is on the complexity of political positions in Atwood's work: on the "messiness" of any claims to positions of certainty. The intersection between the text and the world is something that Atwood advocates vociferously, as Jennifer Hoofard points out. Atwood's feminist politics, then, can only be described through its relation to power politics in general: to the dangers of nationalism, the remnants of colonialism, the environmental effects of capitalism, the politics of the body and the dangers of totalitarianism in all its forms. In this sense, Atwood's fiction and poetry enacts the interconnections that she theorizes in her prose works. For Jennifer Hoofard, Marie Lovrod and Lynne Dickson Bruckner, this intersection is central to reading Atwood's feminism.

In "It Is Her Body, Silent/and Fingerless, Writing this Poem': Margaret Atwood's Notes on a Poem that Can Never be Written," Jennifer Hoofard connects Atwood's 1981 cycle of poems with current debates about the nature and definition of torture and continuing debates about human rights in the face of imperial interventions. Hoofard reads Atwood's poems through and against Atwood's own statements about these issues and concludes that her "writing constitutes an act of witness itself." The tortured body is the site of political contestation, the point upon which politics shifts from abstract definitions of power to the real. The body functions as a similar site in Marie Lovrod's comparison of *The Handmaid's Tale* and Pakistani writer Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India*. Lovrod discusses how drawing these novels together allows her to explore the multilayered contexts, connections and cultural distinctions that make up transnational feminisms. While radically different in national and cultural setting, narrative voice and form, Lovrod

demonstrates that "reading these novels together, among shorter theoretical and topical pieces, helped [students in her class] to consider the links and disjunctions between national and international fundamentalisms, militarisms, patterns of gender domination, the globalization of capitalism, racialization, environmental degradation, and lesbo and homophobia." Lovrod's discussion of the comparison of these novels insists on recognizing the wider political contexts in which they were written and, perhaps more importantly, in which they are read. Reading Atwood's work in the classroom is also the focus of Lynne Dickson Bruckner's article "Surfacing in the Ecofeminist Classroom." Bruckner similarly focuses on Atwood's insistence on the importance of context to draw questions of violence, women, complicity and human relations to nature and the environment together to explore the complexities of any connection between these positions. As she notes, "Surfacing traffics in binaries - male/female, culture/nature, American/Canadian to name only a few - yet the text...continually complicates, blurs and dismantles the very dichotomies it evokes." Brucker focuses on the ways in which Atwood draws connections between all types of violence and the implications of those connections.

Atwood's work is "messy." The mess of human intervention in nature, of tortured human and animal bodies, of totalitarianisms that attempt to portray their worlds as somehow exempt from that messiness are all central to Atwood's political vision. The text and the world in which it is written and in which it is read, as Hoofard, Lovrod and Bruckner note, cannot be teased apart. Systems of power that are represented in her work function as complexly as the language used to transmit them. Power, as Atwood says, "is not abstract, it's not concerned with politics and free will, it's beyond slogans" (1987, 22-23). As the articles here demonstrate, Atwood's politics is articulated, in part at least, through the "agonized banner" (1987, 34) of the body in the text.

References

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