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Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: Scheherazade in Dystopia

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* is narrated by a Scheherazade of the future, telling her story to save her life. But whereas the Sultan of the *Arabian Nights* asks for Scheherazade's stories, Atwood's handmaid is locked into silence; to tell her tale is to risk her life. Her narrative itself is a criminal act, performed in secret and lost for many years. By narrating the story of the repressive republic of Gilead, the handmaid inscribes both her victimization and her resistance. Built on a woman's desire to tell her story, the novel is a provocative inquiry into the origins and meanings of narrative. Among the issues it explores are, first, the narrator's relation to her tale: the simultaneous fear and desire to narrate one's story, and the attempt to create a self through language; second, the nature of narrative itself: the ambiguity of language, and the multiplicity of interpretation.

In the novel Atwood brilliantly juxtaposes the feminist project – the desire to 'steal the language' of/from patriarchy – and the postmodern critique of language. The novel emphasizes the constraint and limitation Gilead imposes, and the narrator's growing resistance. The novel begins by describing two enclosed and silent living spaces, the 'reeducation center' and the handmaid's small room. The narrator, Offred, speaks of herself as 'in reduced circumstances' (10). (In a text where puns carry a weight of meaning, the similarity of re-education and reduction in Gilead is noteworthy.) Just when the narrator's tale seems to promise larger possibilities, it is silenced. Thus the dilemma of Scheherazade is revised, re-visited.

Feminists are particularly interested in stories, because, as a marginal group in society, women have often been the objects rather than the creators of narrative: their stories have often been untold. People on the margins of societies often find they are denied access to the discourses that confer power and status. A substantial body of work focuses on the theoretical and practical implications of women's problematic relations to these discourses. Adrienne Rich writes of women's need to explore 'how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative' (35). Elaine Showalter describes women's writing as a 'double-voiced discourse' that draws from both the 'dominant' men's and the 'muted' women's 'social, literary, and cultural heritages' (263). According to Linda Hutcheon, both Blacks and

feminists have 'linked racial and/or gender difference to questions of discourse and of authority and power that are at the heart of the post-modernist enterprise in general and, in particular, of both black theory and feminism' (21).

To speak, to write, is to assert one's personhood, inscribe one's subjectivity. According to Emile Benveniste, 'the basis of subjectivity is the exercise of language' (226). Hence, to lose language is to lose subjectivity. Not surprisingly, feminist dystopias often deal with women's loss of language. *The Handmaid's Tale* participates in the current theoretical debate about women's vexed relation to discourse. The narrative is both shaped and threatened by political repression, interpretation, and the fundamental instability of language itself.

Atwood's novel begins – with the handmaid's narrative – exploring silence and speech, oppression and resistance. The novel ends – with a male scholar's narrative – questioning the limits of narrative and interpretation. The subtexts of both narratives are the respective narrators' (handmaid's and scholar's) meditations on storytelling and meaning. Both face the storyteller's paradox: they are eager to communicate, but anxious about the limits of communication; they find language simultaneously empowering and constraining. This article is a critic's tale that rereads and reinterprets the novel.

OFFRED

Atwood's novel inscribes a contemporary nightmare, the erasure of speech. Government restriction of speech and storytelling is an important theme in twentieth-century dystopian fiction, as in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit Four Fifty-One*. Gilead, the patriarchal, fundamentalist society in Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel, has silenced women and rendered them invisible. The narrator, whose birth name we never learn, creates her subjectivity through her narrative. Although she is marginalized by her society, her use of narrative opens a space for her within the cramped quarters of Gilead.

Reading the handmaid's tale, we are drawn into complicity with her in the illegal act of narrative: our reading validates her narrative and her subjectivity. Yet, at the same time, all readings also distort and change her narrative, as we shall see. The story moves by flashback, meditation, and present-tense narration as the narrator pieces together what she remembers of her past life and knows of her present situation. Through her storytelling, she grows more politically aware and self-conscious. She resists the reduction of Gilead (her 'reduced circumstances') by small acts of self-assertion, by fantasies of becoming strikingly visible (she imagines stripping in front of the guards at the barriers) and by the act of narrating her tale and thereby constructing a self. Offred's storytelling violates the

rules of Gilead, for handmaids are supposed to be not only speechless but invisible as well. Yet, dressed in their red robes and white wimples, they are highly visible. Colour-coded in this way, the handmaids become interchangeable, identified only by their biological function, child-bearing.

To complete their loss of individuality, the handmaids lose their names as well. Each is labelled as a possession of the Commander she serves. When a new handmaid replaces Offred's neighbour, Ofglen, she answers Offred's surprised query: 'I am Ofglen' (363). This casual acknowledgment of their infinite interchangeability seems to me the most chilling moment of the novel. Forbidden to acknowledge their names, their selves, they must submit to their use as objects, possessions.

As their names are erased, so is their discourse. They are denied access to writing, and restricted in their use of speech. Tokens replace money, and pictorial signs appear instead of written words on storefronts. Although the handmaids are most severely repressed, private discourse is constrained at all levels of Gileadean society, replaced by a shallow and hypocritical rhetoric. One of the controls on women's speech is the institution of the Aunts, a quasi-police institution which runs the 'reeducation' centres where divorced or remarried young women with viable ovaries are trained to become handmaids. The Aunts' speech consists of platitudes, admonitions, and iterations of codes of behaviour such as 'modesty is invisibility,' 'pen is envy.' The Aunts transmit the words of the patriarchal government, and they silence unwanted speech. They script the authorized speech of the handmaids, 'testifying,' a kind of brainwashing in which women are required to revise the narratives of their past lives: for example, blaming themselves for the rapes they suffered (92-3). In this discourse, both the Aunts and the young women must rewrite their stories to fit the political demands of Gilead.

When the handmaids are posted to their Commanders' homes, their discourse is officially limited to stock phrases and responses, as in the greeting rituals which stress passive receptivity.

'May the Lord open.'

'Praise be.'

'We are given good weather.'

'Which I receive with joy.' (26)

To speak with each other about larger issues is forbidden. When Ofglen and Offred do speak briefly, Ofglen warns, 'keep your head down ... Don't talk when there's anyone coming' (218).

Not only the handmaids have lost control over discourse; the women of the ruling class are also silenced. Serena Joy, the wife of Offred's Commander, was a public speaker advocating woman's place in the home. Now, Offred observes ironically, 'she doesn't make speeches any more. She

has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her' (61).

The restrictions on women's speech are a part of the larger limitation of discourse throughout Gilead. Thinking of her Commander's life, Offred muses 'it must be hell, to be a man, like that. ... It must be very silent' (114). The powerful elite are themselves constrained by the repression they impose on others. Political repression, fear, caution, contribute to the silence of Gilead. But emotional repression is the root of silence. When the Commander asks her what the creators of Gilead overlooked, Offred's answer is simple: 'Love' (284). In a puritanical, totalitarian state where love, passion, and desire are repressed, the context for private discourse is attenuated. Political rhetoric drives personal speech underground.

In a world where language is taboo for women, the narrator finds solace in her meditation, and her play with words. She 'composes' herself by meditating on language, punning, and playing with words such as 'invalid,' 'Mayday,' 'habit,' 'lie/lay.' She takes great pleasure in finding a message scratched into the floor of her cupboard. Although she does not know the meaning of the words (a schoolboy's Latin joke – *nolite te bastardes carborundorum*), they are a link to another woman who lived here before she did (69). When the Commander begins a clandestine relationship with the narrator, he lures her with a game of Scrabble. Because writing is forbidden, the game is eroticized (179–80) (whereas the obligatory sexual ritual retains no vestige of pleasure).

Through her appropriation of language, Offred constitutes herself as a subject, and makes herself visible to the reader. 'My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech' (86). Implicit in the storytelling impulse is the wish to communicate and thereby to connect with others, a problematic activity in Gilead. Offred commits the rebellious act of communication: 'A story is like a letter. ... I'll pretend you can hear me' (53). In storytelling she creates a self and an other, a listener.

Offred does reach listeners in Gilead. As she questions the regime in secret phrases murmured to her counterparts, she becomes a rebel. Her rebellion apparently saves her life. Eager to gain the child Offred is supposed to produce, Serena Joy arranges a sexual encounter for her with the chauffeur, Nick. Although it is potentially dangerous for all of them, Offred continues to meet him. In the course of their affair, she possibly becomes pregnant, and she divulges her name. Revealing her name, she reveals herself to him, and becomes vulnerable. But Nick may be more than just a servant. As a possible Eye, a secret agent, he apparently has the power to rescue her.

Atwood's book creates for Offred a theft of language and possible flight from Gilead. The narrative critiques a patriarchy which denies women control of language and their bodies. If the novel ended here, we would see the triumph of the Scheherazade figure saving herself through her body/

sexuality and her narrativity. But counterposed to Offred's narrative is another story which calls its utopian possibilities into question. Turning to this part of the novel, we will discover that the framing story explores the ambiguities of interpretation, and compels us to reconsider the handmaid's tale.

PIEIXOTO'S TALE

The book closes with a flash-forward to a post-Gileadean society. Atwood's frame for the handmaid's narrative is a panel on sociocultural interpretations of Gilead at an interdisciplinary conference (at the University of Denay, Nunavit). In this postscript, Atwood both satirizes academic pretensions and suggests a less utopian outcome for Offred's story. This device calls into question Offred's fate, and makes her story the text of a male interpretation.

Because women in Gilead were denied writing implements, Offred recorded her narrative on an audiotape which is found and transcribed by an archivist – Professor James Darcy Pieixoto – long after Gilead has been destroyed. His talk at the conference creates a new context and a new reading of Offred's tale. Michele Lacombe terms the novel a palimpsest in which Pieixoto reinscribes Offred's tale (Lacombe 5). The relationship of narration to interpretation is problematized here. In retelling Offred's tale, Professor Pieixoto both resurrects and reinterprets it, as do all readers – including the author of this article. Without the reader, the text is dead, but each new reading creates a new tale.

The scholar's project is to find out if the tapes are authentic: did Offred really exist? If so, who was she? His next question is: what happened to her after the tape ends? Most of Pieixoto's questions remain unanswered: thus the irony of his final words, 'Are there any questions?' He suggests alternative versions of her life after Gilead, just as Offred herself poses alternative versions of events in her life and the lives of friends. Thus, without closure, the ending of Offred's story continues to be deferred, untold.

The relationship between the handmaid's narrative and the scholar's tale raises the question of language and power in a new context. Here again, the words of a woman are subjected to interpretation by a male authority figure, an academician, a master of language. Her desires – for love, for the freedom to choose – are interpreted through the prism of his desires – for status, for knowledge, for achievement. He is long-winded and given to sexist puns. He is eager to promote his reputation and perhaps more concerned with the form of the narrative than its substance. In Gilead and in the hands of the scholar (just as in the American society of her previous life), she is reduced to her utility value (Hammer, 43). In Gilead she is a 'walking womb,' an incubator of children for high-ranking officials. For the scholar, she is a stepstone for professional advancement, and a possible

source of information about his real interest, the male elite of Gilead. The contrasting styles of their discourses inscribe the status difference of male professor and female handmaid. Her narrative is tentative, fragmentary, sensuous, moving loosely by stream of consciousness, by revision. The scholar's narrative is logical, abstract, polished. Both, however, make frequent use of puns. Although privileged in his society, the scholar may be viewed as a voyeur, a parasite. He is to Offred as Sigmund Freud is to 'Dora' (the subject of his analysis of hysteria). Both men depend on the woman to provide material for interpretation; their reputations rest on their power to fix meaning and to explain the women (Bernheimer and Kahane). But just as Freud failed to resolve the problems Dora raised, so Pieixoto fails to discover who Offred was and what became of her. Further, both men use the women's texts for their own purposes, looking through the texts to satisfy their own desires.

And yet – Pieixoto reconstructs the story, which would have been lost without his intervention. Thus, the novel remains deliberately ambiguous: it first constructs, then reverses an optimistic conclusion to the tale.

OFFRED

Moreover, the novel questions the role of the storyteller and the limits of language itself. Offred has told her tale and inscribed her voice. But presence in discourse turns out to be problematic because language, the medium through which we experience our existence, is imperfect. In the late twentieth century, we have become acutely aware that language mediates all knowledge, all the manifestations of political, economic, and social power, and our subjective existence. Yet language is a system of conventional symbols; it can only point to, or suggest, meanings. Therefore, gaps always remain between intention and expression, the signified and the signifier.

When we reread Offred's tale in the light of the 'Historical Notes,' we realize that she must have written the entire tale some time after the events it narrates and not, as the present-tense narration implies, during the time the events were occurring. This fact immediately distances the narrator from her tale, and thus it renders her version suspect. Her use of present tense for recollection of the past suggests fiction, perhaps even trickery, deceit. Furthermore, her memory may not be exact: can we be sure that each event occurred exactly as she retells it? Because her tale is obviously a recreation after the fact, it is closer to fiction than to diary.

But Offred herself problematizes the narrative. Throughout her tale, she plays with and questions the limits of language and of storytelling. Even while telling her tale, she deconstructs it. This is accomplished within Offred's narrative by the use of word-play and metafictional interventions.

Her word-plays expose the multiple meanings of words and point to the

impossibility of finding exact equivalents between language and experience. Words become counters in the games she plays with herself, survival games. (For examples of such word-plays, see her discussion of 'work out' [293-4]; of word derivations, see her discussion of 'Mayday' [58]).

The metafictional interventions are Offred's revisions of her story: her attempts to write, rewrite, and re-create experience. In these passages, she questions the possibility of representing experience. We have seen that for political reasons the handmaids are forced to revise the narratives of their previous lives. Under the political pressures of Gilead, they must disclaim their memories and rescript them to fit the demands of their society. But any narration is set into a particular context, hence shaped by both external as well as internal needs; a narrative is composed according to the narrator's awareness of both audience and self. Offred's revisions of her tale stem from semiotic pressures: as she retells her story, she questions the limits of narration, of memory, of language itself.

Some of her revisions are prompted by limited knowledge. Because she does not know her husband's fate, she imagines three versions (132-5). Similarly, she wishes she could complete the story of Moira according to her fantasy (325). However, the revisions of her first encounter with Nick point to the difficulties of remembering and reconstructing one's own experience: 'All I can hope for is a reconstruction: the way love feels is always only approximate' (340). In this passage, the narrator undercuts any claims to a special truth of experience. Her role becomes that of the novelist who must construct the events she describes. Thus, the boundaries between character and author, between truth and fiction, between past and present are blurred (Hutcheon, 16).

Yet, Offred's multiple versions of her story function in another way, as well. They subvert 'the linear logic of the system which controls her ... and ... assign[s] her one function and one vocabulary' (Letcher, 95). In her story she chooses more roles for herself (lover, author, speaking self) than Gilead offers her. In her word-plays and puns, she extends her vocabulary and enlarges the allowable definitions. In the revisions and reconstructions of her story, she suggests a larger realm of possibility. If there are many versions, the tale can never achieve closure. If we never learn the end of her story, all endings are possible (Letcher, 95).

Offred is both eager to tell her story and reluctant: 'I don't want to be telling this story' (291). Her narrative is a game, a story, an inscription of the self:

I would like to believe that this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it ... If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending. ... It isn't a story I'm telling. It's also a story I'm telling, in my head, as I go along (52).

The story is one of marginality: 'We were the people who were not in the

papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between the stories' (72). Storytelling is thus a paradoxical project. While it appears to provide some degree of control and agency for the teller, it remains suspect, even dangerous. To be fixed in words is to be vulnerable, visible, and, therefore, less free than those who live in the gaps. Paradoxically, however, if meaning is unstable the story is never completed; its meanings are always in flux, the author may lose control of the ending, or avoid ending entirely.

We have already seen that the book remains problematic on the level of plot: the narrator is both oppressed victim and resisting agent; we cannot be sure whether or not she successfully escapes from Gilead. More significantly, the novel presents Offred's narrative as a theoretical problematic as well. Is storytelling enough? Can women gain power through language alone? After all, years later, in the conclusion, it is a male scholar who excavates and interprets the handmaid's tale; his voice is the last word of the story. Offred's tale has become his possession:

We may call Eurydice forth from the world of the dead, but we cannot make her answer; and when we turn to look at her we glimpse her only for a moment, before she slips from our grasp and flees. ... The past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes. Voices may reach us from it; but what they say to us is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come. (395)

In the carefully crafted, allusive language of the scholar (far removed from the sensuous immediacy of Offred's narration), Pieixoto distances himself from the handmaid and recapitulates the difficulties of interpretation.

ATWOOD'S TALE

Margaret Atwood is of course a Scheherazade herself; she is the invisible teller of all the book's tales. She has juxtaposed the voices of Offred and Pieixoto. *The Handmaid's Tale* has been termed a palimpsest (Lacombe, 5), but I will suggest the more complex image of a series of multiply reflecting mirrors in which storytellers and interpreters continually inscribe and reinscribe the narrative.

To begin with, Offred herself tells two stories which reinscribe and comment on each other: the story of Gilead and the story of America. As many readers of the novel have pointed out, Gilead replicates American society's oppression of women. Both of Offred's tales illustrate censorship and sexual repression: Gilead builds on American foundations.

Women in both societies participate in their own repression. The Aunts, as we have seen, limit and rescript women's discourse. However, feminists from America also participated in censorship: Offred's mother joined other women to burn pornographic magazines (50-1). The novel thus establishes

a continuum of repression: once people begin to burn books, the door is open for further censorship.

Offred's memories of pornography, sex shops, and frequent rapes provide a thematic link between her past and present. Despite the Aunts' doctrine of 'freedom from' (as opposed to America's 'freedom to'), the women of Gilead are *not* free from rape or violence. Rather, rape has been institutionalized. Sexuality in Gilead is politicized; it has lost its emotional, communicative value and become a function of one's status. Yet, Offred implies that the separation of sexuality and love in Gilead is merely an exaggeration of conditions in the time before. Indeed, as Stephanie Hammer points out, Offred's position in Gilead as part of a sexual triangle replicates her previous position as Luke's mistress before he divorced his first wife (41). Further, as we have seen, Hammer suggests that Pieixoto's use of Offred's tale repeats the use men in both America and Gilead make of women to further their own purposes.

Just as the plots of Offred's two stories mirror each other, her narrative technique is built on doubling, through its puns and through the strategy of revising and postulating multiple versions. Tina Letcher discusses doubling of characters in Offred's tale as a means of deconstructing and reconstructing Offred's subjectivity.

Similarly, punning is a way of insinuating connections between apparently different words. The origin of the word 'pun' in the Latin root 'pug,' meaning 'to strike with the fist' (as in pugilist), supports the idea of contestation, struggle, inherent in the term. Puns are distorting mirrors of language, used here to suggest the slipperiness of meaning, the endless possibilities of language.

To Offred's doubled, punning narrative, Atwood adds the next layer, Pieixoto's reinscription at the University of Denay, Nunavit, a satirical version of an American university. This future is, like the America of Atwood's tale, another mirror of Gilead. The scholar speaks sympathetically and eloquently of Gilead's women, yet his puns (handmaid's tale/tail; 'enjoy' the Arctic Chair) suggest his reduction of women to sexual objects. Here again, puns and multiple versions point to the difficulties of fixing meaning. By setting Pieixoto's version in the post-Gilead future, Atwood implies that Offred's is a tale which – like Scheherazade's – needs to be told and retold because repression is a continuing condition of human society.

Offred's tale and Atwood's novel are cautionary tales, warning of the consequences of silencing and repressing others, of turning an other into an it (249). But at the same time that the tale describes constraint and entrapment, it also suggests an escape from limitation through the strategies of storytelling. As this study argues, Offred's storytelling enables her to create a more complex subjectivity than Gilead allows, and to become a visible presence for us.

Thus, the tale becomes one of hope as well as of caution. This is yet

another of the paradoxes of the storyteller's art. The act of storytelling itself, for Scheherazade, for Offred, for Pieixoto, for Atwood (and, indeed, also for Stein) is a gesture of hope, of love, of reaching for connection with other readers and hearers. But once the storyteller makes this gesture, the story achieves an independent existence. Others will reread, reinterpret, critique it (or, worse, they will not reread, reinterpret, critique it). A diagram might look like this:

Offred < Pieixoto < Atwood < (critic < reader

The book asks disturbing questions which are at once political and discursive. Its concluding sentence: 'Are there any questions?' is ironically appropriate. What is the status of a woman's narrative in a society where men often control the interpretation of texts? To what extent can any narrator/narrative escape or resist interpretation? Is discourse itself an adequate form of political action? What possibilities does narrative open, what doors does it close? In asking these questions, the novel compels us to read beyond the ending. Through its multiple narrators and theoretical self-reflexivity, it addresses serious issues for feminist, postmodern, and narrative theory.

Atwood has written an open-ended text, (play)fully conscious of the possibilities of deconstruction, reconstruction, and reinterpretation. By deliberately inserting gaps in the text, by punning and playing with words, and by suggesting multiple versions, she engages in metafictional commentary on the storytelling process – at the same time that she tells a good tale. By the time the critic/reader arrives at the text, Atwood has already told and retold the story, questioned and hedged, changed the context, deconstructed and reconstructed the narrative.

As *Offred's*/Atwood's stories are reread and reinterpreted, the ending is postponed, rewritten. Readers and critics join Atwood in the process she has already begun, the project of reinscribing the text. Scheherazade tells her tale(s) in spite of, or because of, the Sultans, the Commanders, and the scholars who seek to silence her or to rewrite her words.

NOTE

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