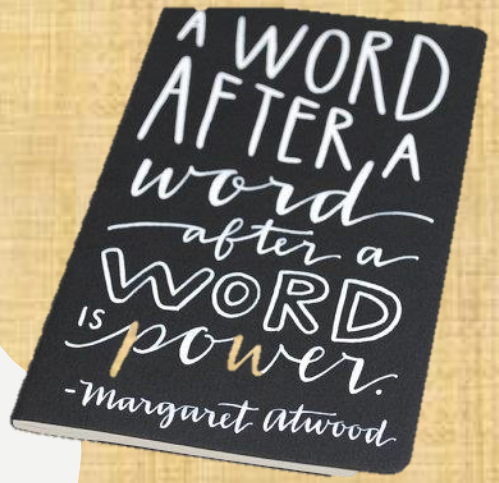


ENG 4200: MARGARET ATWOOD POETRY & FICTION

DR. HOPE JENNINGS

UNIT TWO: GENDER, WAR, AND SEXUAL POLITICS IN MYTH AND FAIRY TALE

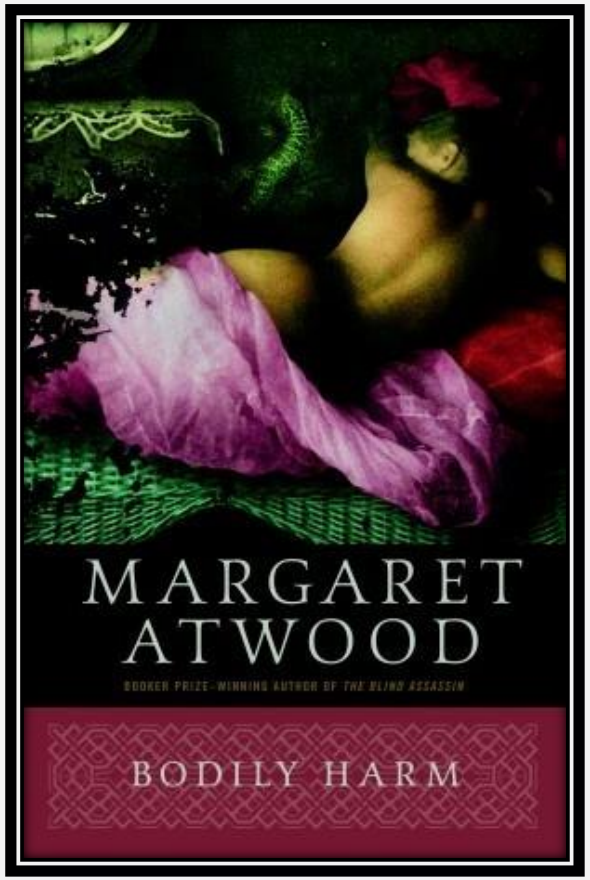
SEXUAL POLITICS

- Next to Atwood's Canadian nationalism, her feminism has been the most controversial element of her writing—the two issues are not wholly distinct, for Atwood has frequently compared the status of Canada to that of women.
- Much of her early work from the 1970s-80s plays out the "battle of the sexes" (common theme in second wave feminist and popular discourses of the time)—men and women in perpetual war, hetero/sexual desire often equated with death.
- Atwood often explores in poetry and fiction how women are victims of patriarchal violence yet also often complicit in their suffering due to internalized oppression of patriarchal clichés of femininity.
- For example, Atwood's first novel, *The Edible Woman* (1969), explores the possibilities for personal female identity in a capitalistic consumer society; here (and in many of her novels), Atwood's female protagonist must come to full knowledge and acceptance of complicity in her victimization.
- In her book of verse, *Power Politics* (1971), Atwood clearly stakes out a common theme in much of her work—the relationships between sexual and social roles and power structures: "You attempt merely power/you accomplish merely suffering."

WOMEN & SUFFERING

- Suffering is common for the female characters in Atwood's poems and novels, although they are rarely passive victims, and in later works they begin to take active measures to improve their situations.
- *West Coast Review* contributor Gloria Onley cited Atwood's focus as: "modern woman's anguish at finding herself isolated and exploited (although also exploiting) by the imposition of a sex role power structure."
- Atwood explained in the *New York Times* that her suffering characters come from real life: "My women suffer because most of the women I talk to seem to have suffered."
- By the early 1970s, the perception of Atwood as strident feminist made her into "a cult author to faithful feminist readers," noted *Chicago Tribune* reviewer Lipinski.
- This popularity within the feminist community was unsought. "I began as a profoundly apolitical writer," Atwood explained to Lindsy Van Gelder in *Ms.*, "but then I began to do what all novelists and some poets do: I began to describe the world around me."

GENDER VIOLENCE & WAR



- Contrary to much public response, the representation of sexual politics in Atwood's works is not primarily anti-male; women are often guilty too—of compliance, of creating, in fact, the male lover-monsters who victimize them (and women's own rivalries and cruelty toward each other).
- The war imagery in Atwood's early poetry also anticipates later novels that link public to private victimizing, suggesting that all humans are victims of the strife caused by the inner separation of mind and body, an inner split that mirrors all outer or social discord.
- For instance, in *Bodily Harm* (1981), themes of violation—physical, psychological, and political—give this novel a clear moral force and the weight of social commentary, a direction in which Atwood's other work had certainly been heading.
- Sexual politics have their analogue in national politics, Atwood suggests, and it is men who wield the surgeon's knives, men who dismiss by pornographic misogyny, men who rape, and men who repress and revolt (equally oppressively)—women are certainly among their victims: but so are men, for they victimize themselves.

MYTH, FAIRY TALE & WOMEN'S WRITING

A COMMON TREND WITHIN WOMEN'S WRITING—RECUPERATING AND REWRITING MYTH AND FAIRY TALE TO EXPLORE FEMINIST POLITICS AND NARRATIVES; THESE WORKS OFTEN USE POPULAR MYTHS AND FAIRY TALES TO PROJECT AND EXAMINE CERTAIN IMAGES OF MEN *AND* WOMEN.

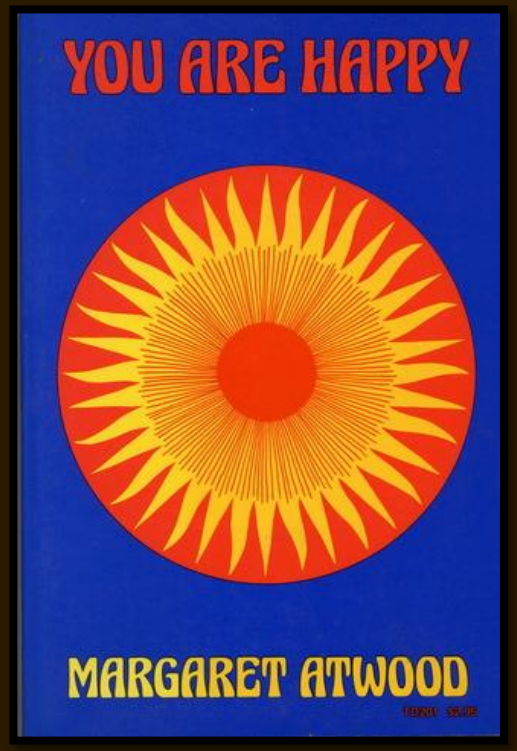
MYTH & FAIRY TALE IN ATWOOD

- Atwood's rewriting of classical myth tends to employ submersion images and quest narratives of self-discovery through which Atwood provides her own version of the mythic journey into nature and into the self that focuses on the dichotomies of death and rebirth, of past and present, of nature and society.
- Her modern revisions of myth and fairy tale question both the genre and its representations of female archetypes—such as the evil witch or seductress, the helpless princess, the monstrous mother—to expose how women are either seduced by or struggle against these static identities.
- Atwood's parodic play with these revisionist narratives is emblematic of an ironic mode congenial to many women writers who use it as a way to speak to a society from within that society but without being totally coopted by it.

MYTHIC THEMES & MOTIFS

- Atwood's first book of verse, *Double Persephone* (1961) is focused on the doubleness inherent in the classical myth of Persephone (Pluto/Hades and Demeter/earth; winter and spring)
- Here begins one of the major oppositions that structures Atwood's work over the next twenty years: the contrast between the flux of life or nature and the fixity of "man's" artificial creations; also, the doubleness of identity and the trap of binary gender roles.
- In *Procedures for Underground* (1970), we first see Atwood's enduring interest in images of diving, of figures rising from the water or appearing in it, as well as her repeated return to the Orpheus myth, which for Atwood presents the creative process in terms of a dangerous descent into the underworld—of the unconscious, of the human need to grapple with the "nature" both within and without ourselves.
- Atwood is especially fascinated with Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and in the two works that we're reading, she retells this narrative from the perspectives of Circe and Penelope (and Penelope's handmaidens).

MYTH & POETRY

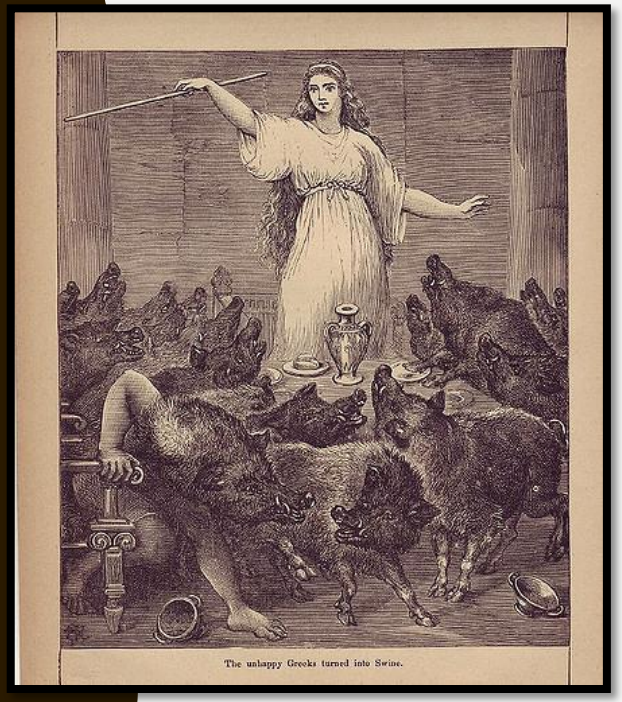


- "PIG SONG"
- "SIREN SONG"
- "CIRCE/MUD POEMS"

Awarded the Bess Hopkins Prize by *Poetry* magazine (1974)

YOU ARE HAPPY (1974)

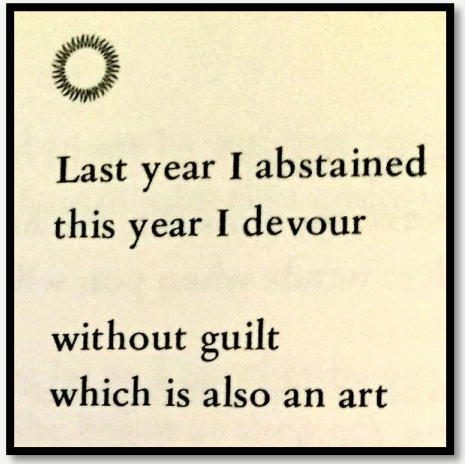
- *You Are Happy* is Atwood's seventh poetry collection, and like *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, tells an interlocking narrative through the progression of each section: "You are Happy," "Songs of the Transformed," "Circe / Mud Poems," and "There is Only One of Everything."
- In the first section, Atwood's recurring images of artistic and emotional stasis—entrapment, ice, frames, and mirrors—are opposed to dark, dangerous, chaotic underwater forces: the "crafty" mirror that serves as a perfect narcissistic lover may really be a "drowning" pool.
- This familiar theme is linked to that of metamorphosis, another of Atwood's constant preoccupations, which she connects to her childhood reading of *Grimm's Fairy Tales,* North American Indian legends, and her experiences as the daughter of an entomologist.
- The animal voices of "Songs of the Transformed" that address "Madame"—the poet or metamorphosist—are echoed in Atwood's return to Greek myth in the "Circe/Mud Poems."
- The poems of the fourth section, "There Is Only One of Everything," offer an acceptance of duality: "to offer life and remain/alive, open yourself like this and become whole."
- Here, Atwood seems to have become more hopeful in her view of sexual politics: love can transfigure as well as deform, and journey images for love replace those of war.



"CIRCE/MUD POEMS"

- In this poem sequence, Atwood engages in a complex act of remythologizing—she returns to the mythic realm of Homer's *Odyssey* to recreate and revise the story of the year-long sojourn of Odysseus with Circe from Circe's point of view.
- By refocusing our attention within the story, Atwood reveals a more essential power in Circe than her infamous ability to seduce and deform men—namely, her highly developed capacity to see into and beyond her relationships to the persons, things, and events called "reality."

- Through Circe's perspective, we are shown how the myth of the quest has become a disease in whose clutches the hero is helpless.
- Atwood provides a positive version of Circe *and* exposes the limitations of a myth that still dominates Western civilization; this strategy of participating in mythic thinking, instead of making the usual distinction between myth and truth, allows her to suggest a surprisingly radical revision of the myth itself.
- She points out that we do not yet know the ending of Circe's story after Odysseus leaves her island, and that in our visions of a new ending lie the possibilities for an alternative myth, in which there is no need to journey.
  - from Estella Lauter, "Margaret Atwood: Remythologizing Circe"



Last year I abstained
this year I devour

without guilt
which is also an art

CIRCE AS FEMINIST MYTH & FAIRY TALE

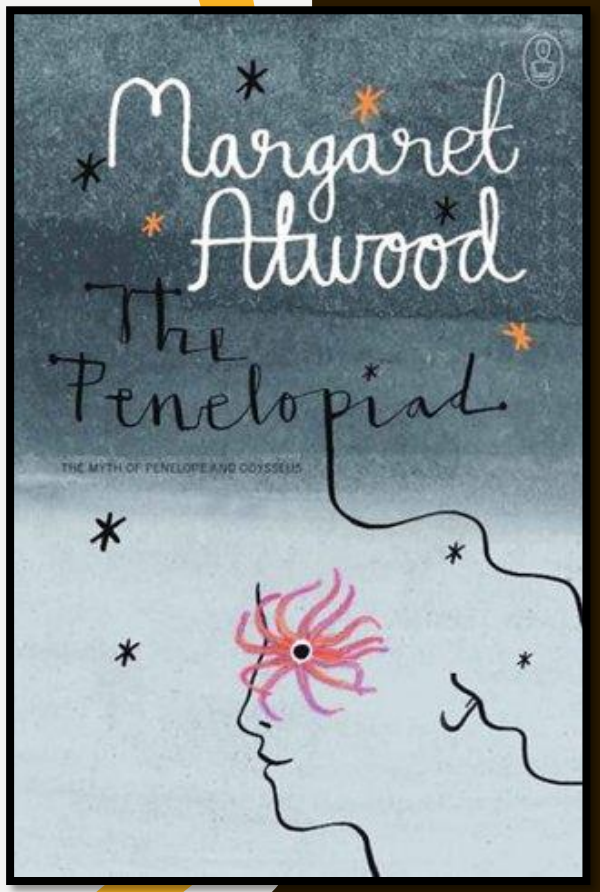
- In Circe, we find a combination of various archetypes from myth and fairy tale—she is the siren, the witch, the trapped princess—and we can read her as a Venus released from the "Rapunzel Syndrome" that Atwood describes in ***Survival*,** published two years before ***You Are Happy*.**
- Atwood observes that the literary pattern "for realistic novels about 'normal' women" includes Rapunzel, "the wicked witch who has imprisoned her," "the tower she's imprisoned in," and the Rescuer "who provides momentary escape." In the literary versions of the fairy tale, however, "the Rescuer is not much help…. Rapunzel is in fact stuck in the tower, and the best thing she can do is to learn how to cope with it."

- Atwood speculates that although the Rapunzel Syndrome transcends national boundaries, it takes a Canadian form: the Rapunzel figures have difficulty in communicating, or even acknowledging, their fears and hatreds; "they walk around with mouths like clenched fists."
- Atwood's Circe symbolizes the release from such difficulties of communication; she has not become her own tower by internalizing the values of Western culture that would consign her to the role of cold seductress, *la belle dame sans merci*. Her enjoyment of sexual pleasure in the center of the poem identifies her as a Venus who does not lose her self in expressing her sexuality; one with the capacity to conceive of a new tower (or island) in which she will not be imprisoned; one with the potential to be her own muse.
  - from Estella Lauter, "Margaret Atwood: Remythologizing Circe"

HELEN OF TROY DOES COUNTERTOP DANCING

- Note Atwood's tone of irony in this poem, as she repurposes the Greek myth within a contemporary context. How does Atwood demythologize clichés of female sexuality?
- Who has power in this poem? From where is that power derived and how is it wielded?

MYTH & FICTION



THE PENELOPIAD (2005)

Strong myths never die. Sometimes they die down, but they don't die out. They double back in the dark, they re-embody themselves, they change costumes, they change key. They speak in new languages, they take on other meanings.

~Margaret Atwood, 'The Myths and Me', *Read: Life with Books* (Random House) 6.1 (2005), 35.

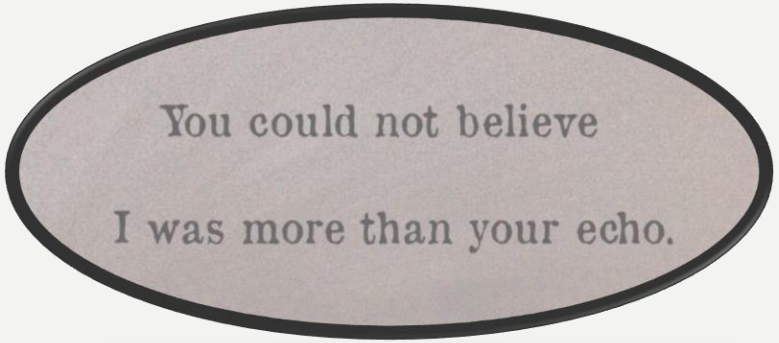
The Penelopiad: The Myth of Penelope and Odysseus is one of the first three books in a series, The Myths, published by Canongate Press in the United Kingdom and simultaneously in 32 other countries.

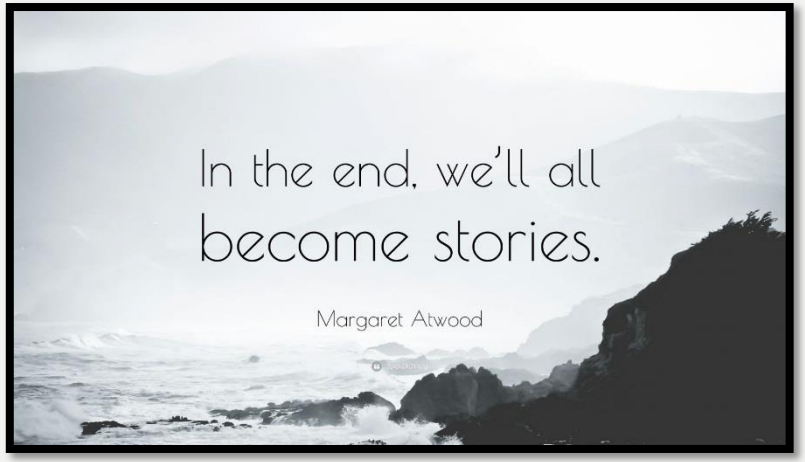
REVISIONARY CONTEXTS

- *The Penelopiad* is Atwood's Gothic version of Homer's *Odyssey* told through the voice of Penelope, speaking from beyond the grave as she tells her life story in the form of a confession, spinning "a thread of my own" (4) in self-defense and self-justification.
- However, Penelope's is not the only voice here; her tale is frequently interrupted by the voices of her twelve hanged maids, those nameless slave girls who have nothing to say in *The Odyssey*, and whose hanging is a minor element in the story of Odysseus's homecoming.
- Writing against this erasure, Atwood uses her novelistic imagination to expand Homer's text, giving voice to this group of powerless silenced women. Not surprisingly, their stories are very subversive, not only of the masculine heroics of *The Odyssey* but also of Penelope's True Confessions.
- Through their songs and burlesque dramas Atwood speculates on possible answers to two questions raised by her reading of *The Odyssey*: "what led to the hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope really up to?" (xv).
  - from Coral Ann Howells, "Five Ways of Looking at *The Penelopiad*,"

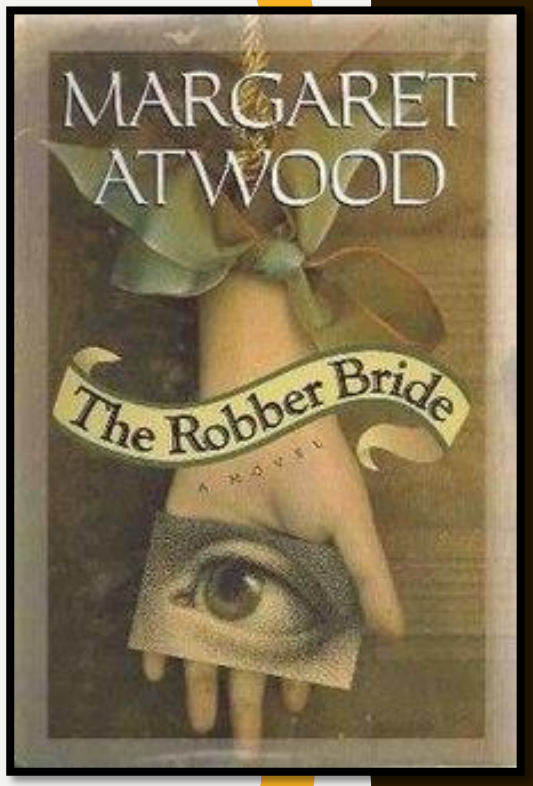
RECOVERING WOMEN'S VOICES

- As Coral Ann Howells notes, "It is curious how many of Atwood's female storytellers turn out to be disembodied voices. We only hear Offred's story two hundred years after she is dead, while Zenia in *The Robber Bride*, Grace Marks in *Alias Grace*, Iris and Laura Chase in *The Blind Assassin*, and Oryx in *Oryx and Crake* have all disappeared by the end of their life stories—into death or back into the text—and only their voices remain" (7).
- Howells argues that Atwood's project is to retell *The Odyssey* as "herstory"—she engages in the kind of feminist revisionist mythmaking at which, in common with Hélène Cixous and Adrienne Rich, she is so adept.
- As the critic Sharon R. Wilson has remarked in her study of Atwood's mythological intertexts, "Atwood has used mythology in much the same way she has used other intertexts like folk tales, fairy tales, and legends," replaying the old stories in new contexts and from different perspectives—frequently from a woman's point of view—so that the stories shimmer with new meanings (qtd. in Howells 8).





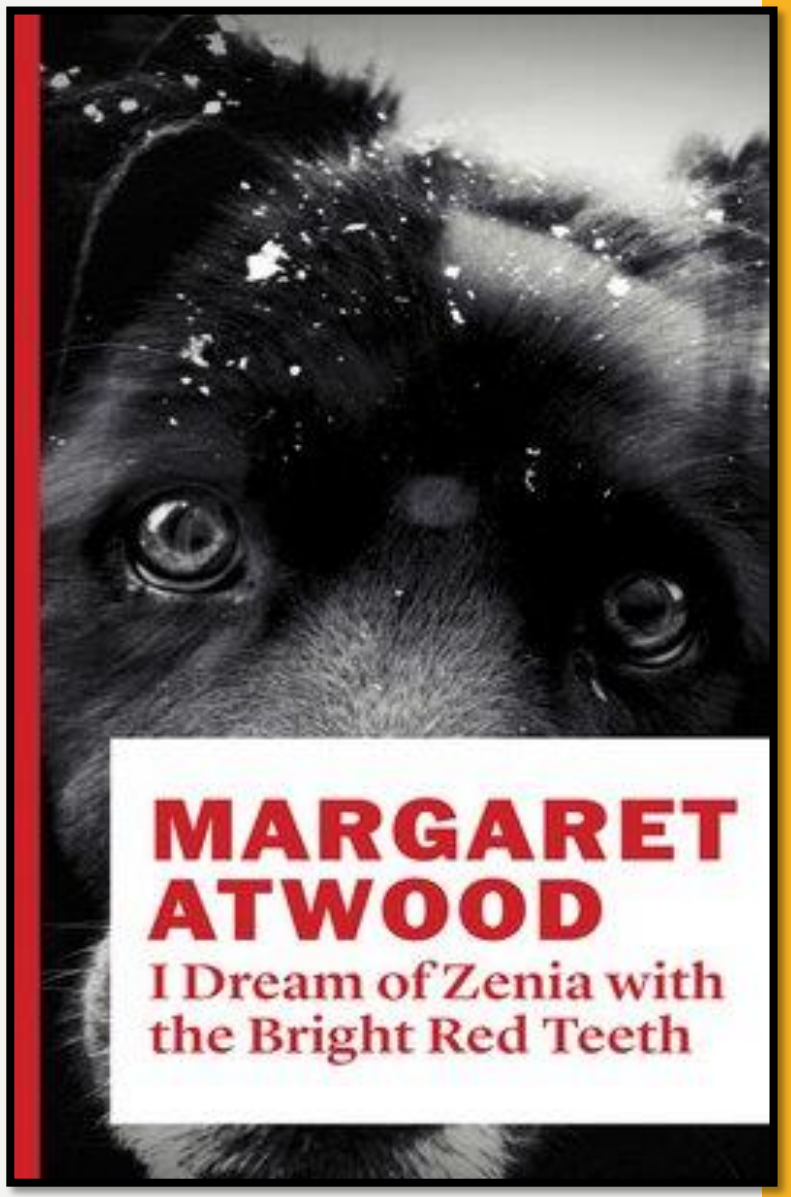
FAIRY TALE



THE ROBBER BRIDE (1993)

- IN THIS NOVEL, ATWOOD CONTINUES TO EXPLORE WOMEN'S ISSUES AND FEMINIST CONCERNS, THIS TIME CONCENTRATING ON ADULT WOMEN'S RELATIONSHIPS WITH EACH OTHER – BOTH POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE.
- INSPIRED BY THE BROTHERS GRIMM'S FAIRY TALE "THE ROBBER BRIDEGROOM," ATWOOD SUGGESTS WOMEN CAN BE THE HEROES AND VILLAINS OF THEIR OWN TALES, VICTIMS AND VICTIMIZERS, NURTURING AND MONSTROUS.

- ***The Robber Bride*** is a postmodernist fiction which exploits the shock effects that occur when Gothic fairy tale migrates into totally different genres like the failed family romance, the detective thriller, and documentary history.
- The novel is both like a fairy tale and like history, which—as Tony explains—is always "a construct" (6), being the combination of different kinds of textual evidence: social documentary, private memory narrative, and imaginative reconstruction.
- The narrative is told through the third-person perspectives of three women: a military historian (Tony), a successful businesswoman (Roz) and a New Age mystic (Charis), who are all living in Toronto on 23 October 1990, the day they are having lunch together at a fashionable Toronto restaurant called the Toxique and "Zenia returns from the dead" (4).
- In this Gothic fairy tale retold from a feminist perspective, Zenia is a disruptive figure and the otherness which Zenia represents is construed as deviant, dangerous and threatening, and it has to be annihilated again and again.
  - From Coral Ann Howells, "Atwoodian Gothic"



WHO IS ZENIA?

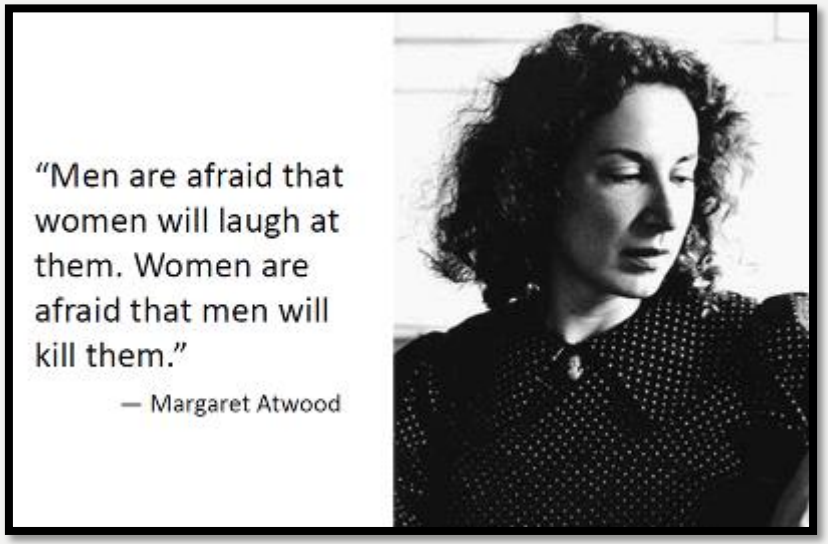
- Zenia repeatedly appears and disappears from the three women's lives and never exists independently of their stories about her—it is through her relationships that Zenia's identity is constructed, but it is also transformed as it is refigured through the women's perspectives.
- What kind of fantasy is she for Tony, Roz, and Charis? For all three, Zenia is the "Other Woman," and her existence challenges the optimistic assertion of the early 1970s feminists, which Roz recalls with some skepticism:
  - "The Other Woman will soon be with *us,*" the feminists used to say. But how long will it take, thinks Roz, and why hasn't it happened yet? (392)
- Zenia represents a powerfully transgressive element which continues to threaten feminist attempts to transform gender relations and concepts of sexual power politics.
- Her power is the power of female sexuality, and the figure of Zenia relates directly to contemporary social myths about femininity; it also relates to male (and female) fantasies about the feminine; and in addition it challenges feminist thinking about gender relations.
  - From Coral Ann Howells, "Atwoodian Gothic"

We still think of a powerful man as a born leader and a powerful woman as an anomaly.

-Margaret Atwood

- In her reading from *The Robber Bride* at the National Theatre in London in 1993 Atwood offered an important clue to an interpretation of her new novel: "It's a book about illusion: now you see it, now you don't."
- Atwood confronts the ideology of traditional female romance where "getting the power means getting the man, for the man *is* the power" (a statement made by Atwood in1982). In this novel Atwood is investigating the extent to which that old proposition about power still holds true in the feminist—or post-feminist—1990s.
- *The Robber Bride,* as Howells reminds us, is a fairy tale that examines more than anything the fantasies about female sexuality that underpin real life as well as fiction.
- Female sexuality has always been a problem for real women and real men, just as it is a problem for feminism: "Male fantasies, male fantasies, is everything run by male fantasies?," asks Roz (392). Have women internalized these fantasies to such an extent that, as Roz fears, "You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman"?
- Atwood answers Roz's rhetorical questions by investigating the effects of fantasies of desirable femininity on women themselves—Zenia inhabits that fantasy territory: "The Zenias of this world … have slipped sideways into dreams; the dreams of women too, because women are fantasies for other women, just as they are for men. But fantasies of a different kind" (392).

SOURCES



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