Poetry

CRITICISM

VOLUME

123

Poetry Criticism

Excerpts from Criticism of the Works of the Most Significant and Widely Studied Poets of World Literature

Volume 123

Michelle Lee
Project Editor

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Preface

Poetry Criticism (*PC*) presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (*CLC*), *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (*TCLC*), *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (*NCLC*), *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800* (*LC*), and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism* (*CMLC*), *PC* offers more focused attention on poetry than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries on writers in these Gale series. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by *PC* supply them with the vital information needed to write a term paper on poetic technique, to examine a poet's most prominent themes, or to lead a poetry discussion group.

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- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading, and the author's actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by the title of the work and its date of publication.

- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.

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- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
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Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." In *Interpreting Blake*, edited by Michael Phillips. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. 32-69. Rpt. in *Poetry Criticism*. Edited by Michelle Lee. Vol. 63. Detroit: Gale, 2005. 34-51. Print.

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Contents

Margaret Atwood
1939-

(Full name Margaret Eleanor Atwood) Canadian poet, novelist, short story writer, critic, and author of children's books.

For more information on Atwood's life and career, see *PC,* Volume 8.

INTRODUCTION

An internationally acclaimed writer in both poetry and prose, Atwood has produced an impressive amount of writing over a career spanning half a century. Her body of work consists of eighteen volumes of poetry, thirteen novels, several short story collections, a number of children's books, and numerous collections of nonfiction and criticism. Most of her work deals with women's issues and ecological concerns; she is best known for her 1986 dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale.*

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

The second of three children, Atwood was born in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, on November 18, 1939. Her parents were Margaret Dorothy Killam, a nutritionist, and Carl Edmund Atwood, an entomologist. The family accompanied Atwood's father on his research expeditions and she spent her early years in Northern Quebec, Toronto, and Sault Ste. Marie; she did not attend school on a regular basis until the age of eleven. In 1957, Atwood graduated from Leaside High School in Toronto, and then enrolled in the University of Toronto's Victoria College. She majored in English and minored in philosophy and French, graduating with honors in 1961. A year later Atwood earned a master's degree from Radcliffe, and spent another two years of graduate study at Harvard. She married Jim Polk in 1968; they were divorced in 1973, after which she entered into a relationship with Graeme Gibson, a novelist. They have one daughter, Eleanor Jess Atwood Gibson, born in 1976.

Atwood has won numerous awards for her writing including the Governor General's Award in 1966 and 1985; the Arthur C. Clark Award in 1987; the Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres from the Government of France in 1994; the Booker Prize in 2000; the Nelly Sachs Prize in 2010; and the Dan David Prize, also in 2010. In addition to her writing, Atwood has taught at a number of colleges and universities in the United States and Canada, including the University of British Columbia, the University of Alberta, York University in Toronto, the University of Alabama, and New York University where she served as Berg Professor of English. She currently divides her time between Toronto, northern Quebec, and Pelee Island, and is involved in a number of political and environmental groups, including the Green Party of Canada. In 2010, in her seventieth year, Atwood toured extensively to promote her novel, *The Year of the Flood,* the plot of which involves an environmental catastrophe.

MAJOR WORKS

Atwood began writing at an early age and by high school she was contributing works in both poetry and prose to her high school newspaper. In college she continued to submit work to student publications, such as the *Acta Victoria* and the *Strand* at Victoria College. In 1961, Atwood published her first book of poetry, a short volume titled *Double Persephone,* which won the E. J. Pratt Medal. Three years later, she produced *The Circle Game,* which was awarded her country's highest literary honor, the Governor General's Award. She continued to write and publish her poetry on a regular basis throughout the remainder of her career; however, her work as a poet has been overshadowed by her other writing, particularly her criticism and her many novels. Among her most highly acclaimed volumes of poetry are *Power Politics* (1971), *You Are Happy* (1974), and *Interlunar* (1984), which contains her celebrated "Snake Poems." Her poetry, like her prose, deals with such issues as feminism, the environment, and Canadian nationalism. It is characterized by a number of dichotomies, such as nature vs. culture, male vs. female, and self vs. other. Her most recent collections of poetry include *Morning in the Burned House* (1995), which contains a number of personal poems dealing with Atwood's father's illness and death; *Eating Fire: Selected Poems, 1965-1995* (1998); and *The Door* (2007).

In addition to her poetry, Atwood has produced numerous short stories, novels, essays, and children's books. Her best known novels are *The Handmaid's Tale,* winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award and the Governor General's Award; *Cat's Eye* (1988); and *The Blind As-*

sassin (2000), winner of the Booker Prize. Her most recent novels are *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and *The Year of the Flood* (2009), a dystopian sequel to *Oryx and Crake*. Atwood has also produced a number of essay collections, television scripts, and a libretto. She has edited several anthologies, including *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse* (1982), *The Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories in English* (1988), *Best American Short Stories 1989* with Shannon Ravenel (1989), and *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories in English* (1995).

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Atwood's work has been especially well received by feminist scholars, including Helene A. Shugart, who discusses Atwood's appropriation of Greek myth in her poems "Orpheus" and "Eurydice." According to Shugart, Atwood's use of her source material constitutes a threat to the ideology expressed in the myth, in that "an alternative, marginalized perspective is featured" and the two poems "effectively rupture the original hegemonic discourse and offer a glimpse of its ideological moorings and implications from without." Martine Watson Brownley also comments on Atwood's revisions of myth, in such poems as "Siren Song" and "Circe/Mud Poems," both of which deal with female intelligence and rationality. Jeri Kroll has studied the "Circe/Mud Poems," contending that they exhibit "a postmodern sensibility" in the blending of not only styles, but also "images from various literary and religious traditions and high and low culture," as a way to "critique western myths and archetypes." Charlotte Beyer explores Atwood's reworking of myth in the poetry of *Interlunar* and *Morning in the Burned House* as a means of understanding the poet's feminist vision. In her discussion of *Morning in the Burned House* Beyer reports that the volume's second section "is about deconstructing mythological figures and narratives as well as symbols of femininity, which are at the heart of patriarchal culture." Beyer notes that the mythology surrounding snakes is rewritten in the "Snake Poems" of *Interlunar*; the poem "Lies About Snakes," for example, "exposes the symbolic association between the snake, femininity, and sexuality, so deeply embedded in our cultural imagination."

While many of Atwood's poems seem to deal with the victimization of women in a fairly straightforward way, many scholars insist her work is more complicated and more subtle than that. Brownley, for example, in her analysis of "Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women," suggests that although sexist stereotypes are propagated by men, Atwood points out that some are imposed on women by women. Pilar Somacarrera contends that in Atwood's *Power Politics*, women are not simply victims, rather "the subjects of these poems . . . constitute an inseparable dyad who inflict pain on each other while they are ineluctably dependent on each other."

Another concern of Atwood's is the environment. This concern is exhibited in her later novels, but is also the subject of some of her poetry. Ecocritics such as Ian Marshall view her "Snake Poems" as "biocentric," in that they see the world from the perspective of nonhumans. Marshall contends that Atwood considers the perspective of the snake in such poems as "Lesson on Snake" and "Snake Woman," and that she offers "a not-so-subtle preservationist plea for snakes' rights." Shannon Hengen has also studied Atwood's *Interlunar*, and finds that its poems deal with "human inability to understand the natural world as both different from and constitutive of humanity, a misunderstanding that results in destruction of both the natural and human worlds." According to Hengen, "these poems become a unique counter-statement" to the ideology of technoscience, "the most obvious cultural activity determined to overcome nature."

Some of Atwood's poetry is highly personal, such as the twelve poems that form a section of *Morning in the Burned House* that consist of her memories of her father when she was a child and her painful memories of his final illness and death, which occurred two years before the appearance of the volume. These poems have been described by Sara Jamieson as "moving, spare, deceptively simple" and taken together demonstrate what Jamieson and a number of other critics have contended is "the increasingly elegiac nature of Atwood's later work."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

Double Persephone 1961
The Circle Game 1964
Expeditions 1965
Speeches for Doctor Frankenstein 1966
The Animals in That Country 1968
The Journals of Susanna Moodie 1970
Procedures for Underground 1970
Power Politics 1971
You Are Happy 1974
Selected Poems 1976
Two-Headed Poems 1978
True Stories 1981
Interlunar 1984

Selected Poems II: Poems Selected and New, 1976-1986 1987
Poems, 1965-1975 1991
Morning in the Burned House 1995
Eating Fire: Selected Poems, 1965-1995 1998
The Door 2007

Other Major Works

The Edible Woman (novel) 1969
Surfacing (novel) 1972
Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature (criticism) 1972
Lady Oracle (novel) 1976
Dancing Girls, and Other Stories (short stories) 1977
Up in the Tree (juvenilia) 1978
Life before Man (novel) 1979
Bodily Harm (novel) 1982
Second Words: Selected Critical Prose (criticism) 1982
Bluebeard's Egg (short stories) 1983
Murder in the Dark (short stories) 1983
The Handmaid's Tale (novel) 1986
Cat's Eye (novel) 1988
Wilderness Tips (short stories) 1991
Good Bones (short stories) 1992
The Robber Bride (novel) 1993
The Labrador Fiasco (short stories) 1996
Alias Grace (novel) 1997
The Blind Assassin: A Novel (novel) 2000
Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing (essays) 2002
Oryx and Crake (novel) 2003
The Penelopiad (novel) 2005
Moral Disorder and Other Stories (short stories) 2006
The Tent (short stories) 2006
Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth (nonfiction) 2008
The Year of the Flood (novel) 2009

CRITICISM

Martine Watson Brownley (essay date 1999)

SOURCE: Brownley, Martine Watson. "'The Muse as Fluffball': Margaret Atwood and the Poetry of the Intelligent Woman." In *Women Poets of the Americas: Toward a Pan-American Gathering*, edited by Jacqueline Vaught Brogan and Cordelia Chávez Candelaria, pp. 34-50. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999.

[*In the following essay, Brownley examines Atwood's poem, "Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women," and notes that the poet deals with cultural stereotypes imposed on women by men, but in some cases, imposed by women themselves.*]

As early as 1971 Adrienne Rich called for women to approach writing as "Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" ("When We Dead Awaken" 18).[1] Among the many critics who have explored this kind of feminist revision, Alicia Ostriker was one of the first to point out that "where women write strongly as women, it is clear that their intention is to subvert and transform the life and literature they inherit" (211). A complex of related terms has emerged for this literary process: *revisionist mythmaking* (Ostriker 11); *revisionary mythopoesis* (DuPlessis 105); *re-visionary mythmaking* (Yorke 13-14); and *revisionist reconstitution* (Friedman 22). One contemporary master of such writing has been Margaret Atwood. In numerous collections of poetry spanning over three decades, she has reworked myth to critique prevailing cultural inscriptions of women.

Critics have focused on Atwood's work mainly in terms of such topics as the female body, metamorphosis and magic, nature, the Gothic, and Canadian nationhood, or recurring images such as those of hands or mirrors. Less direct attention has been paid to another central element in all of Atwood's poetry: women's intelligence. Linda Wagner's comment in connection with one of Atwood's early collections, ***Procedures for Underground*** (1970), has remained an accurate assessment of her subsequent work: "Knowledge of whatever source is the prize for Atwood's persona . . ." (88). Tough-minded in pursuit of this knowledge, Atwood's poetic personae tend to be marked by thoroughgoing rationality and witty skepticism. Indeed, the coldness that many critics, particularly males, have repeatedly attacked in Atwood's poetry—*bleak* recurs as a favorite critical adjective—derives in large part from the uncompromising intellectual integrity clear in her work.

Although smart, all of Atwood's personae are at the same time inevitably fallible, whether human or nonhuman. Female fallibility is highlighted in her poems about relationships between men and women,[2] which have received the bulk of feminist critical attention given to her poetry. Women's intelligence, in turn, although clear throughout the poetry, appears especially in Atwood's rewritings of classical myth. In such mythic revisions as **"Siren Song"** and **"Circe/Mud Poems,"** she constantly reworks or supplements her poetic material to foreground female rationality.

In contrast to this pronounced tendency throughout her poetry, one of Atwood's poems offers a counterview of women's intelligence and the myths thereof. In **"Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women,"** Atwood parodies the original ironic reversal of James Agee's title in a wide-ranging critique of contemporary women's literary positions as subjects, readers, and writers.

* * *

"Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women," which appeared in the collection ***Good Bones*** in 1992 (in Canada), is a timely piece for the 1990s, given the cult of stupidity rampant in contemporary culture. Gen X of the British royal family romps through the headlines; television offers "Beavis and Butthead"; *Forrest Gump, Dumb and Dumber,* and *The Stupids* fill theaters. One film reviewer terms this rather discouraging cultural development "moron chic" (Young 50).

Atwood's poem plays with other forms of "moron chic" in connection with literature and the stupid woman. The major contention is that everybody loves stupid women, "mostly because without them there would be no stories": "No stories! No stories! Imagine a world without stories! / But that's exactly what you would have if all the women were wise" (59). Atwood uses the biblical story of the wise and foolish virgins to illustrate how stupid women produce stories:

> The Wise Virgins keep their lamps trimmed and
> filled with oil, and the bridegroom arrives, in the
> proper way, knocking at the front door, in time
> for his dinner;
> no fuss, no muss, and also no story at all.
>
> (59-60)

The persona sums up the wise virgins as finally "insupportable" because they lack "narrative vices" (60). In contrast to these "bloodless paragons" (60),

> The foolish Virgins . . . let their
> lamps go out:
> and when the bridegroom turns up and rings the
> doorbell,
> they are asleep in bed, and he has to climb in
> through the window:
> and people scream and fall over things, and identities
> get mistaken,
> and there's a chase scene, and breakage, and much
> satisfactory uproar:
> none of which would have happened if these girls
> hadn't been several bricks short of a load.
>
> (60)

This recasting of biblical parable in terms of Restoration comedy is typical of the literary blends that mark Atwood's already generically blended prosaic poem. She invokes a range of canonical and noncanonical genres dependent on the stupid woman, from *The Waste Land* to "love lyrics" that are "aimed straight at women stupid enough to find them seductive," and from the mass-market Gothic to "sagas of heroes" composed "for the admiration of women thought stupid enough to believe them" (62-63).

Atwood's poem focuses its critique at the discursive level, describing stupid women as "fictions: composed by others, but just as frequently by themselves" (59). The persona reviews the discourses that produce and are produced by the prevailing stereotypes, which, in their turn, create and are created by stupid women. From this perspective female stupidity is shown as performative, reiterated in stories and imitated by actual women. The poem opens with amused condescension in a parodic descriptive roll (role) call of contemporary stupid women in terms of their appearances and activities. Even as early as the beginning of the second stanza, however, the persona shows ambivalence, and as she moves to the representations of such women in literature, the emerging emphasis on female complicity with such fictions begins to implicate the female reader.

Toward the end of the poem Atwood traces an arc of cultural decline and female complicity in it, playing off Oliver Goldsmith's "Song" in *The Vicar of Wakefield* ("When Lovely Woman Stoops to Folly"). For Goldsmith's era cultural expectations dictated that a woman could atone for a mistake in love only by dying. Female complicity in such views is shown by the fact that in the novel the betrayed girl herself sings the "Song."[3] When T. S. Eliot redeploys Goldsmith's line in *The Waste Land,* misdirected love has degenerated into rote lust, and the typist, ignorant of her own significance or any larger meaning, reveals her complicity by simply smoothing her hair and putting on a record. It is arguably stupid to kill yourself for one mistake, and it may also be stupid to reduce potentially intimate human connections to "automatic" responses from boredom and indifference (Eliot 44). However, by the time Atwood invokes the line, female stupidity has emerged as a potential rereading of female intelligence.

In the context of contemporary cultural mores, Atwood shows how the stupid woman has merged with the smart:

> When lovely woman stoops or bungles her way into
> folly,
> . . . . .
> and is taken advantage of, especially by somebody
> famous,
> if stupid or smart-enough, she gets caught, just as in
> classic novels,
> and makes her way into the tabloids, confused and
> tearful,
> and from there straight into our hearts.
> *We forgive you!* we cry. *We understand! Now do it*
> *some more!*
>
> (63)

Atwood's lines reflect a series of progressions and regressions: from the sentimental novel through high modernism to the post-modernism that Atwood is often said to represent; from the classic novel to the tabloids, themselves compendia of minor novelistic modes; from love to death, to boredom, and ultimately to commodification and profit. The stupid woman, long produced to fill others' needs and still doing so, learns finally to manipulate the stereotype for commercial gain.

Agee's sharecroppers were not famous men, and Atwood's stupid women turn out not to be so stupid after all. Contemporary intersections of romance and marketplace dissolve the binary between smart and stupid women with which the poem opens.

The persona moves from initial condescension, to an understanding of female readerly complicity, and finally to self-indictment. Recognition of the woman writer's implication in the exploitation of the stupid woman and her share in the responsibility for the myth comes in the next-to-last stanza, which opens with Atwood's description of "the Muse as fluffball" as "our inspiration," and also "the inspiration of men as well!" (62). Thus the theme of collaboration, prominent in a number of Atwood's later poems, is considered here in literary terms.

The poem closes with a more general identification that raises questions about the validity of divisions between women, particularly those accepted or imposed by women themselves. Atwood once again revises, drawing on Baudelaire's famous line echoed by Eliot: "*Hypocrite lecteuse! Ma semblable! Ma soeur!*" (63). More significant for Atwood's regendering of the line than the two canonical male poets is Adrienne Rich's deployment of it in "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law," where the line highlights the natural connections between women that become distorted by their oppressed positions. In Rich's poem the abbreviated line ("*ma semblable, ma soeur!*") occurs in a section describing an "argument *ad feminam,*" where one woman drives "all the old knives / that have rusted" in her own back into the other woman's back—a victim victimizing another in turn. One of the recognitions toward which Atwood works in her poem is foreshadowed in Rich's, where the women know "themselves too well in one another" (*Poetry* 13).

After the regendered line from Baudelaire and Eliot via Rich, Atwood closes with two brief lines: "Let us now praise stupid women, / who have given us Literature" (63). Thus the poem has moved from stupid women as subjects of discourse, through the stupid women who consume and reflect discursive constructions of themselves, to the stupid women who create the discourses. These writers are perhaps the stupidest of all the women in the poem, because they themselves reproduce and retail the conventional derogatory literary stereotypes of their own sex. They play a central role in displacing the original male-drawn binary between intelligent man and stupid woman and redeploying it between women. The resulting artificial boundaries between women only obscure for all women their actual situations as individuals and as a group.

The poem began with stupid women's crucial roles in "stories," but it ends with their importance for "Literature"—with a capital L, to boot. Even before structuralism, stories tended to be treated primarily in terms of their major component, plot, while literature has historically involved, among *many* other elements, more polished formal properties. Appropriately enough, given the emphasis in the poem on the role of the female writer, literature also tends to be connected more directly with individual authors than are stories. **"Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women"** suggests that literary skill and sophistication cannot necessarily exempt the individual woman writer from the tyranny of traditional plots. "It's the story that counts," Atwood's Circe declares in another context, and "the story is ruthless" (***Selected Poems*** 221).

In **"Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women,"** the story that Atwood shows propelling the cultural stereotypes that create and are created by stupid woman is the romance: "even stupid women are not so stupid as they pretend: they pretend for love" (59). Probably the major literary compensation offered to women for their exile from the public sphere, the romance has proved to be an amazingly resilient form. Despite feminist critics' continuing attacks on its ideology and canonical women writers' efforts to delegitimate it throughout this century, the romance survives and thrives in multiple forms in contemporary culture. Although Rachel DuPlessis claims that "couple-based romance remains at the center, and is the privileged resolution of more significant narratives by men than by women" (xi), women still play a substantial role in the contemporary production of romances. The Harlequin "stable" of writers, overwhelmingly female, is only the most obvious example.

Atwood's point about the implication of the female writer in the production of the myth of what she calls the "Eternal Stupid Woman" (61) is interesting enough, but there are some generic problems with it. It doesn't describe Atwood's own poetry. Nor does it fit the poetry of the great majority of the women poets of the twentieth century. From H. D. and Mina Loy, through Gwendolyn Brooks, Muriel Rukeyser, and Sylvia Plath, to Adrienne Rich and many other contemporaries, women poets have been recasting stereotypical stories and myths with continuing and considerable success. Central to both their subject matter and their techniques has been the intelligent woman. They have represented her powerfully. Why, then, does Atwood connect writers of "Literature" and "the Eternal Stupid Woman"?

Atwood, of course, is not only a poet; she's a novelist as well. And any reader seeking stupid women in literature—in droves—can pick up almost any of her novels. At best many of her protagonists are criminally naive; at worst, they are willfully blind. Moreover, most of the minor genres Atwood invokes in **"Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women,"** particularly the sentimental novel and the Gothic romance, have provided many of

the conventions for her own novels. For years critics conventionally distinguished Atwood's "bubbleheaded / ladies' magazine fiction" from her "serious poetry" (Thompson 115). Even Atwood herself said in an interview that her prose evoked an "almost totally different" personality than her poetry (Ingersoll 71).[4]

It is almost impossible not to read **"Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women"** as in part Atwood the poet's critique of Atwood the novelist. Atwood's works have always been extremely self-reflexive, commenting on themselves as well as on other writings of hers. Ostriker has pointed out that in contemporary women poets, standard academic distinctions between the first person pronouns in their works and the poets themselves tend to vanish (12), and that is often the case with Atwood.

Further indirect corroboration of Atwood's self-critique in **"Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women"** comes from one of Atwood's drawings reproduced with the poem (58). The sketch shows a figure with a snake in one hand and an apple in the other, obviously connected with the poem's description of the stupid woman "as she listens to the con-artist yarns of the plausible snake, / and ends up eating the free sample of the apple from the Tree of Knowledge" (61). The figure is a reptilian adaptation of a mermaid, a woman from the chest up, with a snake's coils and tail from just above the waist down—literally a phallic woman. Her hair, which is composed entirely of snakes, is the connection with Atwood, who from relatively early in her career has been linked with Medusa by unfriendly critics.[5] Jerome H. Rosenberg traces this caricature of her to critics' "confusing Atwood and her Medusa-like personas" (155); Atwood herself dismisses it as "one of the hazards of naturally curly hair" (Ingersoll 81; see also 40). However one interprets Atwood's media image, the allusion to it in the sketch clearly suggests her own implication in the poem and in the creation of the Stupid Woman.

In her novelistic practice Atwood is not alone. Aside from feminist detective fiction, many of the female characters in contemporary women's fiction are not overly bright, and in other ways these novelists rely on various sexist myths. In general, contemporary women poets have been markedly more successful in breaking mythic stereotypes in their works than have women novelists. Following Adrienne Rich's formulation in "Diving into the Wreck," it is the women poets and not the novelists who have most successfully depicted "the wreck and not the story of the wreck / the thing itself and not the myth" (*Poetry* 67).

As with any generalization, this one of course has significant exceptions. It holds true mainly for canonical and protocanonical women novelists. It does not work for avant-garde women novelists, whose writings usually do not deal with these kinds of identity constructions. Nor is it satisfactory for many ethnic writers. Its binary treatments of poetry and prose ignore ubiquitous contemporary genre hybridization. Finally, there are individual exceptions, both works and writers. Despite these various caveats, however, on the whole the greater success of contemporary women poets in myth breaking as opposed to that of the women novelists is notable. These poets' achievements make the substantially greater attention paid to the novelists and narrative by contemporary critics all the more ironic.

A number of factors account for contemporary women poets' greater success against myth. Adequate consideration of these would require (at least) a separate essay; here I can only briefly suggest a few of them.

Any assessment is complicated in part by the amount of theoretical underbrush that needs clearing away. Questionable binary genderings have long proliferated in discussions of contemporary women writers' relationships to both poetry and prose. From a psychoanalytical perspective, for example, Hélène Cixous contrasts poets with novelists, "who stick with representation": "poetry exists only by taking strength from the unconscious, and the unconscious, the other country without boundaries, is where the repressed survive—women . . ." (98).

Like Cixous, many poststructuralists have drawn gendered binaries between narrative and poetry in order to privilege poetry, especially the lyric. Susan Stanford Friedman points out that for Barthes, Kristeva, and others, "the lyric mode and poetry . . . are tied to the repressed feminine, maternal, and preoedipal, whereas narrative and the novel . . . are linked to the repressive masculine, paternal, and oedipal" (15). A related tendency of some feminist criticism has been to associate any literary imposition of order and any linear thought, even the construction of stories in terms of beginnings, middles, and ends, with masculinity and authoritarianism, analogies that obviously work to the detriment of narrative. The sexism that fuels such binaries is clear in the descriptive language that occurs in references to them. Typical is one critic's comment that "recent theory has focused on the teleological nature of narrative, its propulsion toward mastery and closure, and has sometimes identified it with male desire," while poetry "has been gendered female because of its ahistorical character, its perceived passivity, its emphasis on enchantment and absorption" (Costello 180-181).

In addition to their sexism, these critical exclusions of women from narrative are Eurocentric, disregarding the primary roles of women as storytellers in other cultures. Even within the European context they ignore the many connections of the novel with women from its begin-

nings. For example, the suppressed history of the emergence of the English novel as a predominantly female form in both production and consumption is only now slowly being written.

Neither poetry nor prose can be adequately theorized in terms of single gender connections. As Susan Gal notes, "A simple category of 'his-and-hers' genres obscures the important insight that women's special verbal skills are often strategic *responses*—more or less successful—to positions of relative powerlessness" (182, italics Gal's). Theoretical equations or analogies between the female and poetry, then, cannot account for contemporary women poets' successes.

Story serves different functions in poems and in novels. A problem for both is the tendency for sexist formulations in myths to be reflected even in works overtly repudiating them. Contemporary poets have been partially successful in containing such implications by strategic fragmentation. Marjorie Perloff notes that in postmodern poetry story "is no longer the full-fledged *mythos* of Aristotle, . . . but a point of reference, a way of alluding, a source . . . of parody." She points out that such deployments of story frustrate readers' desires for closure, because they "foreground the narrative codes themselves and call them into question" ("From Image to Action" 417). In this process gender constructions embedded in the codes are often called into question at the same time.

Similarly, in technique Margaret Dickie has emphasized contemporary American women poets' successful incorporation into their poetry of the heteroglossia that Bakhtin associates with the novel. Beyond Dickie's excellent poetic analyses, however, larger theoretical problems remain with Bakhtin's insistence that neither the epic nor other poetry reflects heteroglossia; his polemical privileging of the novel leaves his treatments of poetry inadequate in important areas. The innovation that Bakhtin connects with the novel is also seen by Dickie in contemporary women poets, whom she presents as "unusually responsive to the multifoliate language of their time and place, unusually resistant to a privileged poetic language, and so ideal language experimenters" (314).

Joan Retallack and other critics have criticized contemporary women poets for not being experimental enough. Nevertheless, throughout this century women poets have developed substantially more experimental forms than have women novelists. Despite claims by critics for the avant-garde novel, in over two centuries the experimental novel is still not as far from Laurence Sterne as one might have expected—or wished. Although a number of theorists have shown that the tendency to associate experimental writing with more radical ideology than realistic works does not necessarily hold for women writers, in the case of contemporary poets formal experimentation seems to have played a role in their success against myth. A good example is their avoidance of traditional poetic genres, a crucial move because, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out, "Verse genres have been even more thoroughly male than fictional ones" (68).

Women novelists' experimentation has been in part constrained by market forces, which have traditionally influenced the novel much more than poetry. More recently, as publishers become subdivisions of multinational conglomerates, the pressure to produce work that will appeal to mass audiences has increased. The tendency of most contemporary novelists to remain primarily within realistic conventions has exacerbated the women novelists' difficulties with myth breaking. The realistic novel with its innumerable details has historically maintained closer ties to everyday life than has poetry. But such conventions also lessen its power against myth, which by definition resists all incursion of the particular. As Barthes points out, myth's path is away from history toward nature. Although noting poetry's vulnerability as "an ideal prey for myth," he ultimately situates it in "a position which is the reverse of that of myth" (134).

A crucial element in this connection is the temporal relationships of poetry and prose. From Aristotle on, poetry, and lyric in particular, has tended to be connected with the universal, as opposed to history and narrative. Ursula LeGuin is typical, writing that narrative, which "does not seek immortality [and] does not seek to triumph over or escape from time (as lyric poetry does)," always locates itself in the past in order to be "free to move towards its future, the present" (38-39). But whatever poetry's universal aspirations, which would move it toward the realm of myth (hence Barthes's concern with its vulnerability), lyric poetry at least is also anchored in the present, and from that position has strong potential for combating mythic formulations. Narrative, which in LeGuin's words "asserts, affirms, participates in directional time" (39), can only with the greatest difficulty avoid replicating historical configurations of the past, including gender constructions.

Locating themselves firmly in the present, women poets have ferociously combated prevailing myths with their individual experiences as women. Perloff writes: "Most contemporary feminist poetry takes as emblematic its author's own experience of power relations, her personal struggle with patriarchy, her sense of marginalization, her view of social justice" (*Poetic License* 310). Thus far women's social and political concerns have been more effectively integrated into poetry than narrative. Diane Middlebrook, for example, comments on "the enormous importance of women's poetry to the

political evolution of contemporary women's movements" (3); with two or perhaps three exceptions, the same could not be said about the novelists. From the late 1960s on, the women novelists who have dealt with contemporary issues either directly or by moving to utopic or dystopic plots have in general lacked the technical abilities of the poets.[6]

Thus **"Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women"** leads to larger questions about the poetic and novelistic achievements of contemporary women revisionists. In its treatment of similarities and differences among women, it also reflects the ongoing concern with gender issues that has marked Atwood's poetry from the beginning, while raising questions about some practical consequences of contemporary theoretical emphases on women's differences.

Critics have long noted the shift in Atwood's poetry over the course of her career from focusing on divisions between men and women to exploring the ties among women. Her recent work has been moving beyond celebrating such female bonds—as Barbara Blakely puts it, poems where "Woman discovers herself in the bloodline of women" (47)—to consider the dynamics of conflict among women. In this instance the trajectory of her literary career has paralleled that of the women's movement and feminist criticism, both of which began over the course of the 1980s to work with female difference.

What **"Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women"** suggests is certain problems with this emphasis on difference, and its practical limitations. Sherrill Grace has shown that from the beginning Atwood's work has been characterized by what Grace terms "violent duality," a focus not just on Western dichotomies themselves but on the process of overcoming such binaries. Grace sees as one of the dominant polarities in Atwood that between the self and the other, where Atwood "strives to break down the static condition of mutual exclusiveness separating the opposites" (7, 11).[7] **"Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women"** enacts just this sort of breakdown of differences between women, as it highlights paradoxically the stupidity of intelligent women and the intelligence of stupid women.

Atwood's poem reminds us that women's own valorizations of their differences become insignificant within the context of powerful social and cultural paradigms, attitudes, and stories, which in so many ways reduce all women to the same. In the context of male-dominated culture, all women are in some sense stupid, and under such conditions the only way for a woman to be smart is to behave stupidly. Atwood has always been interested in what she calls in *Survival* "Victor/Victim games" (39), and in **"Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women"** she shows that the myth of the "Eternal Stupid Woman" (61) can only make all women victims. With this victimhood Atwood's poem also reminds us—yet again—of the power of externally imposed constructions of female similarity that become internalized, those produced by stories and by the social and material constraints that the stories both reflect and create.

The open-ended play of difference crucial for feminist theory and the recognition of differences essential for creating a fair and inclusive feminist politics have rightly dominated feminist criticism for over a decade. But stories, particularly cultural myths, rest on simpler constructions. It may be time to explore whether difference can be rethought in ways that would enable construction of new models, larger and more inclusive models that, to paraphrase Shelley Sunn Wong, would not rationalize or reconcile difference but recognize and then act into difference (49). Such constructions might lead to the kind of stories that would elude, at the very least, the myth of the "Eternal Stupid Woman," and retire Atwood's "Muse as fluffball" at last (61-62).

Notes

1. Although published in 1972, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" was read as an MLA paper in December 1971 (18).
2. See Wagner 90.
3. As early as 1906 Austin Dobson objected to the "impropriety, and even inhumanity" of allotting this kind of song to the seduced girl (quoted in Lonsdale 595).
4. Thompson effectively demolishes "the Atwoodian notion that her poetry and fiction are expressed in two entirely different, stylistically unrelated, philosophically dissimilar voices" (121-22). For other assessments of Atwood as a poet, as opposed to a novelist, see Klappert 217, Woodcock 252, and McCombs and Palmer 362, 608.
5. *Double Persephone,* Atwood's first book of poetry, opened with a poem featuring a "girl with the gorgon touch" (Davey 134; significantly, in an article entitled "Atwood's Gorgon Touch"); Barbara Hill Rigney writes that the image of Medusa dominates in that collection (67). See also Ingersoll x, 118, Klappert 224.
6. Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* is a notable exception.
7. See also Grace's book-length study, *Violent Duality: A Study of Margaret Atwood* (Montreal: Véhicule, 1980).

Works Cited

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