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## Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017–present)

Utopian and dystopian science fiction written by women constitutes 'a continuous literary tradition in the West from the seventeenth century until the present day' (Donawerth and Kolmerten 1994: 1). Yet, in spite of that, SF has long been conceived as territory of the male. For example, 'between 1953 (the year of its inception) and 1967 there were no women winners of the Hugo award' (Lefanu 1988: 7). The 1970s, however, marked the beginning of an extraordinary relationship between feminism and utopian and dystopian SF, one that continues today.<sup>1</sup> And since 1968, there have been at least sixty winners in the four main categories of the Hugo (novel, novella, novelette, and short story). In fact, SF informed by feminist and radical politics has provided women writers with the ideal place to explore the construction of gender roles and subjectivities – a freedom that the constraints of realism do not always afford them. As Joanna Russ puts it, '*What If* literature [is] the perfect literary mode in which to explore (and explode) our assumptions about "innate" values and "natural" social arrangements, in short, our ideas about Human Nature, Which Never Changes' (1972: 80). If the radical optimism of the 1960s and 1970s saw a flourishing of feminist SF utopias (cf. Moylan), the return to conservatism of the past thirty-some years has seen a plethora of dystopian and, most recently, post-apocalyptic fiction by women (cf. Baccolini and Moylan). Today dystopian SF seems to be the preferred genre to give voice to a critique of present society and its gender roles. The enormous popularity of Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* trilogy and the revival of Margaret Atwood's

1 Many studies have been devoted to post-1970s women's SF (e.g. Barr; Lefanu; Moylan); on the earlier period see, for example, Larbalestier.

*The Handmaid's Tale*, thanks to its TV serialization in 2017, are two of the main factors contributing to the flourishing of dystopian SF titles of recent years. Among them is Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (2016).

Feminism and SF have been 'intimately connected' for a long time, and Jane Donawerth traces this interconnection by identifying some recurring themes: women's rights to education, property, and voting as well as sexuality and self-expression (Donawerth 2009: 214). Feminist SF has allowed women writers to use the device of an imaginary society to affirm that 'women, deprived of civil rights in the real world, are fully capable of governance; and to demonstrate, with wit and ingenuity, that a world ruled by women would be a far more pleasant, peaceable, and ethical state' (Jones 2009: 484). Feminist dystopian SF, on the other hand, has concentrated on the attack against individual freedom by foregrounding, in particular, the issues of women's reproductive rights and the control of their bodies. If all-women utopias, for example, emphasize 'the essentially different nature of women' and represent 'models for a better society', feminist SF becomes 'a way of working out in narrative form central issues of 1970s and 1980s feminism' (Donawerth 2009: 216, 218). Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), Vonda McIntyre's *Dreamsnake* (1978), Sally Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground* (1979), Ursula K. Le Guin's *Always Coming Home* (1985), Joan Slonczewski's *A Door into Ocean* (1986), Pamela Sargent's *The Shore of Women* (1986), and Sherri Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country* (1988) represent some of the extremely influential narratives that have shaped women's SF. These feminist utopian SF novels of the 1970s and 1980s highlight the creation of all-female communities that are supportive of women's agency. Some of the worlds depicted are places where women live harmoniously with the environment and where nature's wholeness becomes an expression of women's natural and moral development. Technology is not rejected but is considered subservient to social priorities; therefore, it is not used to master nature but to improve human life. Technology can then be reclaimed in women's utopian SF and becomes a means to free women from patriarchal constraints.

Women's bodies and sexuality have always been a central feature in dystopian SF narratives. In classical dystopias as well as in SF, for example, the bodies of certain female characters become disturbing elements for the male protagonists and, consequently, for the totalitarian regimes they inhabit.

Within the totalitarian societies conceived by Aldous Huxley or George Orwell, for example, whether sexuality is free (as in Huxley) or controlled (as in Orwell), the female body represents a powerful subversive element for the male protagonist who, stimulated by women's sexuality, is led to challenge the ideology of the hegemonic system. However, while these female characters serve the rebellion of the male protagonist, they remain passive instruments, incapable of self-consciousness and of actively subverting society on their own. Similarly, in the future societies described in SF classics such as Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) and Harlan Ellison's 'A Boy and His Dog' (1969) the young women's bodies and sexualities act as dangerous awakenings for their male protagonists. The critique of the (patriarchal and totalitarian) societies of these dystopian texts does not address the relationship between gender and power, a theme that is present in many dystopian SF novels by women.

By setting their narratives in totalitarian future or past societies or hyper-technological worlds, women's dystopian SF identifies, in the critique and re-appropriation of sexuality and of women's bodies, a crucial means of emancipation from patriarchy. Such a revision is necessary in a critique of the patriarchal roots of totalitarianism and the abuse of technology, but also in the redefinition of women's agency and subjectivity. In dystopian SF novels like Katharine Burdekin's *Swastika Night* (1937), Suzy McKee Charnas's *Walk to the End of the World* (1974), Zoe Fairbairns's *Benefits* (1979), Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue* (1984), and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), the authors describe oppressive societies where reproduction is controlled or compulsory, thus showing how gendered identities are the products of an androcentric, totalitarian discourse. The reduction of women to their biological function, even when performed in silence and passivity, is not an innate, essential quality; rather it is forced upon them through the use of institutionalized rape and violence, and it is constructed by the totalitarian discourse of male supremacy.

Central to women's dystopias – whether written in the 1930s and 1940s or in more recent years – are gender issues, such as violence against women and the exclusively reproductive function of women, which, in these texts, are seen as inextricably linked to the cult of virility and the idea of masculinity that underlie totalitarian regimes. These works expose the relationship between totalitarianism, violence, and gender discrimination, thus identifying in the

climate, rituals, and mentality of the extreme right in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s, and of the fundamentalist and populist forces of today, which constitute some of the main threats to women's freedom and agency.

It is no surprise then, that Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale* has enjoyed a revival in the past couple of years – years that have been characterized by a series of crises (Brexit; the election of Trump; the rise of populism; femicides; the migrant crisis; ongoing conflicts and wars; and ethnic and racial hatred) that have brought Atwood's future society extremely close to home (see Figure 30).<sup>2</sup> Set in a not-so-distant future in what was once the United States and is now a repressive theocracy where reproduction is compulsory, the novel describes a tragic and grotesque society (that takes the Book of Genesis at its word) from the perspective of one of the unfortunate Handmaids, Offred, who under the new regime is exploited as a surrogate mother. Rape is thus institutionalized in the new Republic of Gilead: a Handmaid is assigned to each household, consisting of an officially barren Wife and a Commander, who is also likely to be sterile (but officially only women can be fertile or not). Once a month, in the presence of his Wife, the Commander has sex with the Handmaid, in order to produce a child.

At once a dystopia and a work of speculative fiction, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a powerful feminist critique of patriarchal definitions of womanhood. In the novel, women are considered to be the property of the male-run State. They cannot work nor have possessions; reproduction is compulsory; and language – reading, writing, or speaking – is forbidden, with the exception of empty and trite religious phrases. Women are completely disempowered: they are reduced to their biological function, possess no proper name, and have no language, freedom or identity besides that defined by the State (see Figure 31). Their new names exemplify their new condition: they are forced to take a patronym composed of the possessive preposition 'of' and the first names of the Commanders who own them.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Atwood's own account on (re)reading her novel in the age of Trump.

Figure 30. *The Handmaid's Tale* TV adaptation, episode 2.7, 'Say Her Name' (Bruce Miller, 2017–).

Passivity and silence are not, however, innate qualities of women, and like other feminist authors of SF, Atwood demonstrates that these are forced upon the women of Gilead. Another recent dystopian SF work written by a woman, Naomi Alderman, can be and has been read in a direct dialogue with Atwood's text. Alderman's recent novel, *The Power*, is a battle of the sexes story, with a shocking sex-role reversal.<sup>3</sup> While at the heart of traditional battle-of-the-sexes texts 'is the struggle to restore male rule and the "natural order of things"' (Larbalastier 40), *The Power* presents a thought-provoking experiment about domination and violence, possibility and change.

Set some 5,000 years into the future, after a great event known as The Cataclysm that establishes women as the dominant sex, the novel is presented as a 'hybrid piece, ... a sort of "novelization" of what archaeologists agree is the most plausible narrative' (Alderman 2016: ix). The story, a manuscript written by a man (Neil Adam Armon, an anagram of the author's name) and sent to a woman fellow-writer (Naomi), is framed by the correspondence between the two. It begins when girls, all over the world, develop a 'skein', or a strip of muscles and nerves in their collarbones that conducts electricity, giving them the power to hurt, torture, and kill. Alderman therefore imagines the transition to an upside-down world, where men are afraid to walk alone at night and women's bodies become an instrument of power. Through the eyes of four different characters, she challenges traditional assumptions about gender and explores the ways power affects and changes relations at all levels. The result is a disturbing, thought-provoking dystopian SF novel: if, at first, the revolution may sound exhilarating, especially to female readers, Alderman makes sure to challenge our initial enthusiasm by showing that a (true) feminist revolution cannot just reproduce, in reverse, the values and norms of an androcentric society.

The various social, political, and religious developments produced by the simple overturning of hierarchies and gender relations show that the spread of female power rapidly degenerates from just retribution into gratuitous cruelty.

<sup>3</sup> Daphne Patai (1982) has used the expression 'sex-role reversal,' while Joanna Russ and Justine Larbalastier have used the phrase 'battle of the sexes' to describe 'a body of stories explicitly about relations between men and women' (2002: 39). Alderman herself acknowledges Atwood's role as a mentor (340).

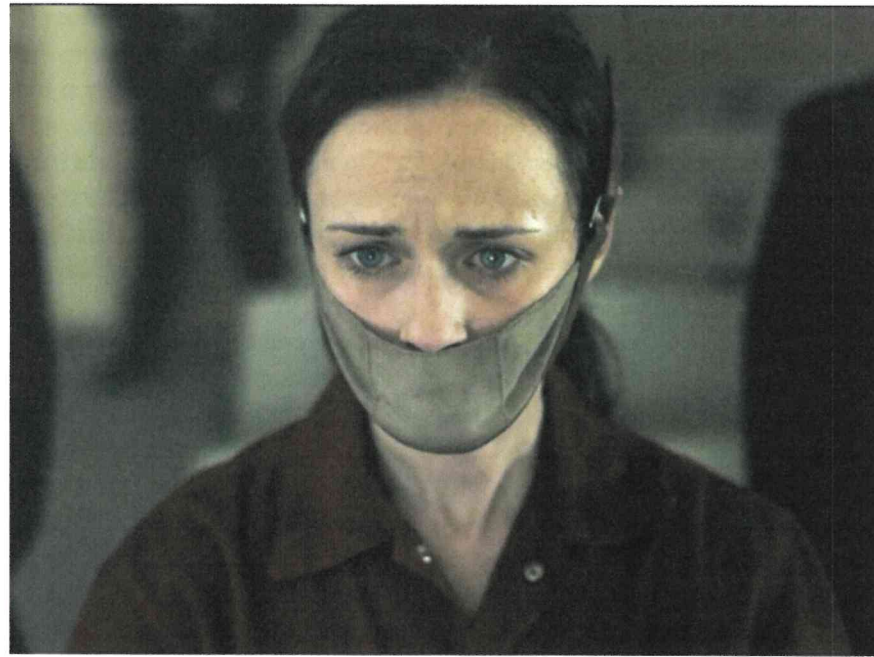


Figure 31. *The Handmaid's Tale*, episode 1.03, 'Late' (Bruce Miller, 2017–).

Women come to destroy, rape, torture, and kill, just as men did before them. Both societies – our patriarchal present and the dystopian future where women rule – are based on violence and the ruthless use of power. Why do people, regardless of gender or race, abuse power? 'They do it because they can', is the simple, yet disturbing answer (Alderman 2016: 283). Because in societies that thrive on inequality, impunity becomes the norm and accountability, even if demanded, can easily be ignored.

Can a universe ruled by women alone produce a better society? Not if the dynamics of power and the values at the basis of the new society remain the same, says Alderman. The sex-role reversal does not portray a utopian world run by women who rule with righteousness and justice. But Alderman does not call for a return to a natural order of things by showing only the reversal of sexism. Rather, by portraying the damages inflicted on women who become victims of the same system they are creating, she invites readers to reflect also

on the damage that patriarchy does to males themselves. Alderman seems to evoke, then, Audre Lorde's famous claim that '*the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*'. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change' (1984: 112, emphasis original). Feminism is not the simple reversal of the status quo. Likewise, the book suggests that gender is not 'natural' and invites us to go beyond traditional binaries:

the world is the way it is now because of five thousand years of ingrained structures of power based on darker times when things were much more violent ... but we don't have to act that way now. We can think and imagine ourselves differently. (Alderman 2016: 338)

Some may think that by now, these are obvious ideas. But it is still useful to reflect on them. And it is certainly useful to recognize the similarities and parallelism with our present.

The recent publication of Alderman's novel as well as of Leni Zumas's *Red Clocks* (a disturbing meditation on motherhood, identity, women's rights, and freedom) and Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* (a reflection on female agency, self-determination, biology, and natural rights) are signs of the exciting richness and variety of women's dystopian SF. Women's and feminist SF is still flourishing today 'in a way that would have been unthinkable before the 1970s, and the genre continues to be enriched by the alternative narratives of feminism' (Jones 2009: 488). Whether it speaks of dystopian future societies where women or man are enslaved, or it imagines future imperfect worlds where hybridity challenges and expands our understanding of gender, women's and feminist SF represents a still vital terrain for exploring and questioning injustice, inequality, and patriarchy.