

Gadpaille, Michelle

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Freedom

Margaret Atwood

Penguin Random House (Vintage Minis), 2018. 133 pp. ISBN 9781784874117

Michelle Gadpaille

University of Maribor, Slovenia

Keen readers know the pure pleasure of discovering that a well-loved author has published something new – and the quiet hell of knowing that another literary favourite will write no more books. In the bookshop, your eyes scan the shelves hungrily, you pounce on the single new cover, and check the colophon to rejoice in the recent date.

Nowadays, it is not often a matter of shops and shelves but, instead, of the suggestions generated by some algorithm on the bookseller's webpage. There still exists a certain satisfaction, though, at the inaudible 'kerplunk' when your purchase hits the basket and is in the mail. In these cases, you do not first read the reviews: after all, this book follows others that have been valued; it's just a new window on a familiar and trusted author. Recently, I purchased *Freedom* by Margaret Atwood, in this way; the slim red volume was eagerly anticipated. With no contents page, it offered mystery, discouraged browsing and insisted on immersion. What was my disappointment after thumbing through its 133 pages to find that much of the content was republished: from *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and from *Hag-Seed: William Shakespeare's The Tempest Retold: A Novel* (2016). Nevertheless, the opening essay, a frame for the two fictional elements, had escaped any serious attention from me. "We Are Double-Plus Unfree" was reprinted from *The Guardian* (2015), where I had somehow managed to miss this title with its breezy yet Orwellian pizza-ad language (*double plus, double crust--whatever*) and frightening negative prefix to the word *free*.

Since *The Handmaid's Tale* appeared in 1985, Atwood has claimed the state of "unfreedom" as her own fictional territory. It was time, after all: second wave feminism had washed over North America, Vietnam was no longer a war but only a place, the Cold War was receding and there was a complacent sense of achievement. But it can be hard to savour freedom without its opposite being within sight. Atwood's Gilead conjured up the unfreedom that most people thought was in the past, unthinkable as a future prospect. When the televised series later came to life, the Gilead scenario



took on prophetic resonance. Offred's lost freedoms became ours, or almost ours; her losses mirrored those that peopled the corners of feminist nightmares.

In the Vintage Minis volume, the excerpt from *The Handmaid's Tale* occupies the most space (pp. 13 to 108). A nine-line introductory summary fills in the context for the unlikely reader who has encountered neither the novel nor the series. The long passage includes the horrifying image of The Wall in Gilead, where men are murdered for betraying the regime's ideals. It shows us Offred's cell-like room, where she finds the forbidden message from her equally unfree predecessor. We follow her to the appointment with the corrupt doctor who offers impregnation and a temporary way out of bondage. The excerpt also includes the flashback to Offred's attempt to escape from Gilead with her husband and daughter. Naturally, it includes The Ceremony, exposing the reader to the banal brutishness of the pseudo-sacred threesome intended to create new subjects for the regime. The selection compresses what is most unfree about women in Gilead; it anatomizes gendered imprisonment without offering us the escape of plot resolution and is therefore minimally satisfactory. Any reader who had not yet read the original novel would want to find it and follow Offred to her narrative end.

The other fiction excerpt is from *Hag-Seed* and at 24 pages is by far the shorter. This also has a nine-line summary, which calls the novel's prison a "Correctional Institute" and ends with an explicit gesture connecting the selection to the Vintage theme: "And we readers wonder: What is freedom?" (109). These 24 pages concentrate on the anti-enslavement rant, loosely based on the rebellion by Shakespeare's character Caliban, which Atwood has morphed into a clever rap in the hands of the inmate actors. "So if I get the chance I'll rip up his book" Leggs raps, "Break his magic staff, that would be a laugh,/ Bash in his brains, pay him back for my pains" (120). The original chant from *The Tempest*, however, addresses the topic most directly: "Freedom, high-day! High-day, freedom! Freedom, high-day, freedom," and the Vintage editors have lifted these iconic words from the regular text to occupy a grey-rimmed page of their own. There are three similar pages in this volume, each highlighting something quotable, intended presumably for the thoughtful reader's meditation.

However, the *Guardian* essay that opens the volume proves the most rewarding read, despite being the most lightweight from the literary perspective. It opens with Aunt Lydia's cryptic summary of the two freedoms: freedom to and freedom from. This mantra was used in Gilead to indoctrinate the new handmaid recruits into acknowledging that pre-Gilead society had offered bondage in the name of freedom. Like her character, Atwood focuses on the efficacy of fear in creating self-imprisonment: "minus our freedom, we may find ourselves no safer; indeed we may be double-plus unfree, having handed the keys to those who promised to be our defenders but who have become, perforce, our jailers" (3). Atwood then zips through



centuries of history involving forms of enslavement. Along the way, she gets in some sly digs that upset our complacent views. Dungeons, we are told, as she skips across the middle ages, “could be valuable wealth creators.” Atwood at her blackest, this line sounds like a tip from a medieval *Country Life* magazine. The Romantic movement is boiled down to one poet and the sweeping pronouncement that, “once Byron got hold of freedom, there was no turning back: freedom as an idea was here to stay” (6). Once again, Atwood makes human fear into the main threat to the freedoms enjoyed by western society, including the major fear – that of “not having a paycheque.” The Unfree in Atwood’s vision of contemporary society are confined to warehouses, for that is how she envisions prisons. However, the warehouse as part of the global online sales industry takes its place in the creation of other kinds of unfreedom. Towards the end of the essay, Atwood lists the specific things from which we are not free: “Freedom from toxic chemicals in the air and water? Freedom from floods, droughts and famines? Freedom from defective automobiles?” (9). This litany ends, nevertheless, with a cynical, “Don’t hold your breath” (9).

The rant, for rant it is, concludes by recommending that readers recapture privacy. “Go offline,” Atwood counsels, while immediately acknowledging how unlikely this is: “I thought not. It won’t be easy” (10). And that’s why we read even Atwood’s slimmest opinion pieces: we’re here for the style, for that intimate whispered confab with the razor-sharp cynic, who is one step ahead, while being twice as humble, twice as Canadian. We relish the cultural breadth, the courage of an author who can race, in 9 pages, across William Blake (1), Homer (3), the film *Psycho* (3), and Captain Bligh (6), to end with Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (9). So, this essay redeems my purchase.

Nevertheless, the reader might wonder why just these three excerpts? The unfree gnaw their tethers in many Atwood works. *The Heart Goes Last*, the 2015 novel, is set almost entirely in a penal colony; by solving economic precarity, Positron constitutes that most modern of methods for depriving people of their freedoms. An unlikely but perennial favourite is “Half Hanged Mary” (from *Morning in the Burned House*, 1995); it’s a blackly ironic paean to the liberating effects of having been almost hanged – but despite being directly on-topic, it’s a poem, and a longish one at that. What, however, about the psychological imprisonment of childhood bullying in *Cat’s Eye* (1988)? That’s fiction at its best, and Elaine’s freedom comes with a measure of artistic revenge. If seeking more of Atwood’s unfree, look no further than the early prose poem “Bread” from *Murder in the Dark* (1983), where there’s a masterful paragraph about imprisonment: “Imagine a prison. There is something you know that you have not yet told If you refuse to tell, tonight will be like last night. . . . The bread they offered you is subversive, it’s treacherous, it does not mean life.” If you prefer the essay format, how about the confining effects of debt in *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth* (2008)? Being in debt is perhaps the currently most



ordinary way of being unfree and every whit as socially relevant as the excerpts from *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Hag-Seed*. The short and eminently quotable poems from Atwood's latest collection, *Dearly* (2020¹), also sing of freedom: the hope of gaining it ("Princess Clothing"), the exultation of achieving it ("Cicadas"), and the fear of losing it ("Shadow," with its sinister opening line, "Someone wants your body"). In the same volume, the poem "Aflame" evokes a global conflagration actually and metaphorically, with a side of mythology, and assigns a cause: the freeing of story.

All those slow-fused epics
Packed in anthracite, then buried
Under granite mountains, or else thrown
Into the deepest sea like djinns in stoneware bottles—

All, all are coming true
Because we opened the lead seals,
Ignored the warning runes,
And let the stories out.
We had to know. (52).

This is sinister wording from the winner of the 2016 PEN Pinter prize for courage in confronting global issues. For another of her clear statements on the necessity/burden of freeing the story, take a look at Atwood's few paragraphs on freedom to read and freedom of choice in "An Open Letter from Margaret Atwood to the Judson Independent School District" (243-44) in *In Other Worlds: Science Fiction and the Human Imagination* (Virago Press, 2011). That letter would have been my selection for a volume on freedom.

The series from Vintage Minis offers in each volume a sustained look at a single theme through the lens of a distinguished thinker. Each title comprises a single word: *Love* (Jeanette Winterson), *Jealousy* (Marcel Proust), *Liberty* (Virginia Woolf) and *Home* (Salman Rushdie) align with the *Freedom* theme from Atwood's volume. Less immediately promising of profundity are titles like *Swimming* (Roger Deakin), *Eating* (Nigella Lawson) and *Drinking* (John Cheever) – but then the flesh will have its due, I guess. Assigning *Dreams* to Sigmund Freud seems like typecasting, along with *Marriage* to Jane Austen. The series blurb identifies the connecting tissue as being "the experiences that make us human," thus leaving a question mark over *Rave* (Irvine Welsh) and *Psychedelics* (Aldous Huxley). If you say so, Vintage.

1) Published in 2020, *Dearly* arrived too late to have been excerpted in the Vintage collection (2018); it is, however, a pity.



In *Freedom*, the whole is better than the excerpt, as always. Thus, the short opinion piece “We are Double-Plus Unfree” dominates the book. The other selections are too long to be mere quotations but too short to survive as fiction. Decapitated and footless, these bits from *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Hag-Seed* resemble examination assignments. We expect the bossy examiner’s instruction at the end:

“Ordinary, said Aunt Lydia, is what you are used to. This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary” (*Freedom* 28).

Discuss habituation as an element in tyranny.

Or, with ominous terseness,

Discuss.

But wait, my internet feed has wafted a pertinent tidbit to my gaze: Atwood has a new book! This one is about cats; surely this material will be new. I must order it (*On Cats: An Anthology*. Notting Hill Editions 2021).

