

## **Publishing Women in a Male Dominated Industry: A Study of Margaret Atwood**

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### **Abstract**

Based on the study of Margaret Atwood's early career and experiences in the publishing world, it is clear that she achieved fame as an author despite her gender in the male dominated 1960s. This is clear through her pre publication experiences, her later reviews and critics, and her experience with Virago.

### **Key Words**

Margaret Atwood, Feminism, Virago, Gender

## **Introduction**

Margaret Atwood has been distinguished as one of Canada's prized authors, whose works have resonated with both Canadians and foreigners alike. Her writing style is unsurpassed as is her ability to weave political and social issues with passionate story telling, into what many now believe to be literature gold. However, she has not always been given the recognition that she deserves. The publishing industry, since its beginning, has held a very strong patriarchal position in its role in the production of literary culture. Atwood's experience with the publishing world in the beginning of her career was no exception. To publish a woman with such controversial and strong-minded views was a struggle for many publishing houses in the 1960s, and greatly defied traditional gender roles that had been in practice for many years. Due to Atwood's powerful feminist writing, it is clear that she has succeeded as an author not through the help of male dominated publishing industry, but despite it. Her struggle is clearly revealed through her experiences in the pre-publication era of career, the reception and criticism of her novels and writings, and her experience with feminist publishers. These factors make it clear that the publishing industry's traditional view of gender made publishing works for Atwood extremely difficult in the beginning of her career. It is through her own perseverance that she succeeded and became the renowned writer that she is today.

### **Pre Publication Era: 1960s Canada**

The publishing world, particularly in Canada, in the early 1960s, was an extremely male dominated place. There are very few accounts of women working in publishing and even fewer as editors. Simone Murray demonstrates how disrupting this has been to the study of female authors in publishing, specifically feminist authors like Atwood, when she claims, "The enormous potential for cross-pollination between book history and feminist research has remained largely a lost opportunity" (Murray, 2004, 20). This claim represents that women simply were not a large part of the industry up until the late 1960s. This caused a great deal of difficulty for Margaret Atwood, as female authors were not given the same advantages as men. Atwood began pursuing her writing as a career in the early 1960s when there were very few opportunities for women. With no name to go on in the early days, Atwood tried to disguise her femininity as much as possible in order to break into the publishing world and get her works produced. She even went as far as publishing under her initials, in order to protect her work from being judged on its authorship instead of its literary value (Atwood, 2002, 8). Publishing is undoubtedly about giving the public what it wants, and before the women's movement in the early 1970s, what people wanted was a strong male author (Robin, 2007, 11). In her early encounters with publishers, Atwood recalls an editor describing the role of book selling as "We don't sell books, we sell solutions to marketing problems" (Nischik 2009, 56). This gives an eye opening view about who was being published and why. Mass markets were not buying women, they were buying what they knew and the women's movement was not yet in full swing in order to change what

people wanted. This meant that her works were not being judged on their own merit but merely on the sex of the author who created them. Pierre Bourdieu represents the thought extremely well when he describes the two poles of value, cultural and economic. The publishing world at this time was without a doubt running off the pole of economic value which Bourdieu describes as “the ‘economic’ logic of the literary and artistic industries which, since they make the trade in cultural goods just another trade, confer priority on distribution, on immediate temporary success...”(Bourdieu, 1996, 57). Bourdieu demonstrates the importance that the publishing industry placed on money, especially in the 1960s. Most big name publishers did not care to publish the radical thoughts and culturally diverse works that people like Atwood were coming out with. The importance was placed on the economic factor and the bottom line. The two poles rarely came together in publishing and they were certainly not working together in the early 1960s. What the publishers wanted at the time, was something tangible and successful. They did not care about the amount of cultural influence that their books could have. The lack of support for women in publishing made Atwood’s career very shaky in the beginning. She describes this struggle by comparing it to the public reception of works by a male author. She asks the question “ever hear anyone speak admiringly of work by a woman as having tits?” (Nischik, 2009, 195) demonstrating the lack of respect people held for strong-minded, brave new female authors who could produce shocking and riveting text but without the luxury of a male name to fall back on. The women trying to break into the industry were constantly being compared to their male competition. No matter what they produced, the female authors could not achieve nearly as warm a welcome from publishing houses and would not be given the same treatment. Atwood was forced to persevere through this era and continue producing works that she felt were necessary and relevant until someone was willing to pick them up and give them the chance they deserved.

### **Literary Reviewers**

Literary reviewers have been around for centuries and have always played an important role in the formation of literary culture. The role of reviewer in Atwood’s career has been exceptionally important in the formation of her works, specifically in terms of what they represented culturally. She herself often reviews the works of other authors in the same genre as her own and has therefore experienced the role from both sides. However, when her works first came to be critiqued, they entered into the very male dominated world of publishers and journalists. It was in this world that those who had pre conceived notions about what her work should be about. The opinion of a well-respected critic can shape the views of many who are unable or unwilling to make their own judgements. This is a strong example of Bourdieu’s claim that:

The critics who have the greatest reputation for conformity to the expectations of their audience can be believed when they assure us that they never espouse the opinion of their readers, and that the root of efficacy of their criticism resides not in

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a demagogic adjustment to public taste but in objective agreement, which justifies a perfect sincerity... (Bourdieu, 1996, 57)

His theory represents that people who have the power to influence society will do so regardless if they want to or not. A literary reviewer gives an opinion, which is believed because he or she is held to a higher standard than the rest. If the reviewer holds a preconceived sexist notion about the works of an author, then his readership will most likely experience this as well. Atwood's recollection of this era,, specifically in regards to reviewers and critics is recorded: "Her findings are, among others, that in many reviews of books authored by women, the author's sex is made an issue of" (Nischik, 2009, 175). The content of her work was not always the issue, clearly it was her gender and the pre conceived ideas placed on the literary audience by centuries of male dominated culture. Specifically in terms of Canadian literature, Atwood was breaking away from traditional forms of writing and was using the emergence of the second wave of the women's movement to elevate her status as a feminist author. It is because of this that she struggled to make a name for herself in the world of critics. Jean Mallinson explores this in a comprehensive study of Margaret Atwood and her critics when she states:

Criticism in Canada, perhaps more than elsewhere, tends to be entangled with ideological commitments, whether moral or political, and the poet's work must sometimes suffer the scrutiny and judgment of critics predisposed to find it wanting because it does not accord with or confirm their notions of reality. (Mallinson, 1984, 8)

Atwood certainly did not represent what these critics wanted to see as she consistently brought forth strong and independent female characters in her writing that demonstrated no notion of the traditional woman typically displayed in literature. It was early on that Atwood decided to rebel against what was expected of her in order to represent a reality, which she herself could be happy with. An early discussion with a family friend who was a journalist changed Atwood's view on writing forever. Atwood recalls the event by stating, "he said that as a girl, I would be put to work writing obituaries and ladies pages and nothing else" (Atwood, 2005, 12). This journalist's view of what would be expected of a woman during the early 1960s is extremely accurate. It is representative of the type of thought process Atwood's critics would have been facing when reading her works. What she was producing simply did not add up to the social expectations of a female author. It is exactly because of these societal expectations that Atwood came to resist the social norms and write some of her most brilliant works which were not just feminist pieces, but also real reflections of how she saw society. It is through this type of daring authorship that Atwood succeeded. According to Bourdieu "the true daring belongs to those who have the courage to defy the conformity of anti-conformity, even though they run the risk of thereby winning 'bourgeois' applause" (Bourdieu, 1996, 23). He is representing the need for the creation of culture for the sake of art and not for the sake of fame. Atwood demonstrates this

beautifully in her early career as she wrote works completely different from what the masses were producing. It is clearly through her relationship with her early critics that she began to understand the true nature of her work and the destiny of what it would one day stand for. This type of rebellion against critics is somewhat of a norm for authors like Margaret Atwood. She herself states, "I'd say writers are especially prone to retaliation by those who have the power to denounce them" (Atwood, 2002, 196). Her comment demonstrates the role in which critics and reviewers played on her early writing. The role of the reviewer has no doubt been extremely influential on the success of Margaret Atwood. It is their original unkind words and misunderstandings of her works that lead her to rebel and continue writing what she believed was culturally necessary. This inevitably led her down the path to fame and most importantly critical success. It is these same reviewers and critics who at one point loathed and disregarded Atwood and her style, who now revere her as a genius and somewhat of a hero in the literary world. All of this is due to her ability to confront social issues and deliberate between the importance of culture against the importance of recognition, despite what the majority of critics tried to say about her. Atwood herself inevitably shaped the way the public sphere now sees female writers, especially in Canada, and influenced new female authors to come out of the woodwork. For her, writing was clearly about influencing society and its norms and breaking away from traditional molds.

The social and political themes in Atwood's writing are a major shift away from her very traditional upbringing. Nischik demonstrates that Atwood's writings represent the complete opposite from her childhood. "When she grew up, the public sphere was clearly reserved for men, the domestic sphere for women" (Nischik, 2009, 177). This demonstrates how women of Atwood's generation were, without a doubt, constantly led to believe that they could not create or participate in high culture in the same ways that men did. It was the women who stayed home while the men went out and experienced the world. Northrope Frye expresses Atwood's grasp on the possibility of attaining high culture as a woman by stating, "the center of reality is wherever one happens to be, and its circumference is whatever one's imagination can make sense of" (Atwood, 2002, 20). Frye represents the shift in literary theory, which dealt with the belief that anyone could create culture as long as they had the determination and willpower to do so, and that it was relevant to those who wanted to discover it. This greatly represents the experience that Margaret Atwood had with her early critics. Determination led her away from traditional writing style and perseverance allowed her to break the molds of the male dominated publishing world. She no longer needed their approval, as there were people out there, like her, searching for the same answers. Atwood clearly succeeded as an author due to her own willpower and the evolving society in which she was writing and not due to any help from the patriarchal publishing society.

### **Feminist Presses: Virago**

Perhaps the most important issue in 1960s publishing, which Margaret Atwood entered into, was the exclusion of women from the creation of culture. Simone Murray explores this when she states:

[...] all feminist presses share an awareness of women's traditional exclusion from the privileged arena of high culture, and a concomitant awareness that in order to write women into the cultural record, their achievements must be taught and critiqued by the academy – the self-appointed arbiter of cultural value. (Murray, 2004, 175)

This represents how Atwood literally had to shape the public sphere in which she wanted her writings to be read, in order for them to be taken seriously. The exclusion of women from high culture stood in the way of her success for many years and it was through the help of both feminine presses and pro women publishers that she was able to break through and demonstrate her cultural value to society. This demonstrates a definite shift away from theories on literary culture, from people such as Pierre Bourdieu, whose theories question who has the right to experience culture and what type of culture is right for what cohort. In doing so, Atwood greatly defied the traditions of centuries old institutions and began to carve a new pathway for herself and other women without the help of males.

It cannot be seen as a surprise that Margaret Atwood eventually turned her manuscripts over to a more open minded, female oriented publisher in the UK. Virago is mostly known for its work in radical feminist literature, but also genres of subtler feminist influence. Here she was able to explore her more intimate themes and produce literature with less of a censorship. Virago opened up a completely new era of publishing following the women's movement of 1972 (Murray, 2004, 170). Simone Murray describes Virago in the following way:

The characteristic that distinguishes Virago from many other feminist presses which sprang up under the invigorating influence of women's activism from the late 1960s is the duality of the self-conception: it perceived itself simultaneously both as a commercial publishing house and as an intrinsic part of the women's liberation movement. (Murray, 2004, 170)

The creation of such a press, which was luring writers like Atwood, meant the beginning of a general shift away from the 'old boy's club' that was traditional in classic publishing models. Women were reading other female authors at an increasing rate and literary culture was forever changing (Murray, 2004, 172). Atwood's relationship with Virago allowed her to write what she wanted to write and not what people expected of her. For this first time, she was simply seen as an author and not as a female author. This break away from gender

classification allowed Atwood to produce some of her most famous works such as *Cat's Eye* and *The Robber Bride*. Her characters gained more dimensions and her story lines more intricate. She was finally becoming the author that she was meant to be through the aid of the feminist movement and her own role in changing literary culture.

According to Linda Alcoff, "Cultural feminism, the ideology of female nature or female sense re-appropriated by feminists themselves in an effort to revalidate undervalued female attributes" (Onosaka, 2006, 15). Margaret Atwood needed to uphold the ideology of cultural feminism in order to succeed as a writer. She was being undervalued because of her sex and could not continue as a creator of art without helping to develop the driving force of feminism behind her. It was this mutual support between herself and the feminist movement (and presses) that allowed Atwood to succeed as an author as it gave her a freedom of voice she had never experienced before. It is clear that the formation of Atwood's career had very little to do with men, and very much to do with those working at Virago, and the feminist culture at the time.

### Conclusion

Margaret Atwood's journey into publishing was not an easy one. Her foray caused her to question her role as a woman and most importantly as a female author. It is clear that she succeeded in becoming one of the world's most famous authors, through her own determination to create culture and to write what she believed was needed in society. It was her own struggle and unapologetic works that created a new sphere of authorship both in Canada and the rest of the English-speaking world. She did this with the aid of other feminists and female presses but certainly not with any help from male dominated society and patriarchal publishing houses. The strongly engrained gender roles in the traditional public sphere played an unquestionable role in what Atwood produced, and inspired her to create works of art that had never been culturally experienced before. She succeeded via her own beliefs and passion and produced works that would become relevant and extremely important to the coming generations.

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