

Atwood's 'Half-Hanged Mary' as Method-Making: Paths to Selfhood and Agency within Historical Subalternities.

'Mary Medio-Colgada' de Atwood como forma de crear método: caminos hacia la individualidad y la agencia dentro de las subalternidades históricas.



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Abstract.

Openly feminist, Atwood's 'Half-Hanged Mary' raises questions about women's voice from a literary and historical perspective. By giving voice to Mary Webster, whose only appearance in the historical record is through her survival accounts, she reclaims her story as someone historically silenced and victimized to make an incidence in her agency instead: in her claiming and defence of selfhood. In doing so, she re(de)constructs the events from a different perspective, thus reappropriating historical and socially inflicted stereotypes by exploring the 'witch' archetype as a solution for surpassing the obstacles faced by women to achieve self-realization and positive identification.

Keywords: Atwood. Literature. History. Identity.

Resumen.

Abiertamente feminista, 'Half-Hanged Mary' de Atwood plantea preguntas sobre la voz de las mujeres desde una perspectiva literaria e histórica. Al darle voz a Mary Webster, cuya única aparición en el registro histórico es a través de relatos de su supervivencia, Atwood reclama su historia como alguien silenciada y victimizada para resaltar, en su lugar, su agencia. Reivindica y defiende la identidad propia. Al hacerlo, la autora re(de)construye los eventos desde una perspectiva diferente,

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reapropiándose así de los estereotipos históricos y sociales impuestos. Lo hace a través de la exploración del arquetipo de 'bruja' como una solución, con el objetivo de empoderar esta figura para superar los obstáculos que enfrentan las mujeres a la hora de alcanzar la autorrealización.

Palabras clave: Atwood. Literatura. Historia. Identidad.

Margaret Atwood's writing has been known for its' Feminist stand, due to the concerns she has expressed regarding issues of a women's language, new spirituality or religious de(re)construction, and identities constantly in-the-making. This has placed her along other writers such as Adrienne Rich, given that their interests layer and interact, even when they differ in their views (Andrews, 1985, pp. 22-23). In the case of the poem 'Half-Hanged Mary' (Atwood, 1995), Atwood steps away from her dystopian fictional worlds she creates in prose to explore the past, to revision it, and re(de)construct it. It is important to point this out, as the poem is not completely fictional: she does the job of re-visioning by taking Mary's historical accounts of survival (Beyer, 2000, p. 286), creating an *alternative historiographical narrative* through the exercise of poetic writing.

I argue that, in doing so, she is attempting what McKittrick has denominated 'method-making', or a new way of producing knowledge that goes beyond our traditional narrative of categorization and (de)limitation within identity politics (McKittrick, 2021) and historiographical discipline. In the field of history, this method-making through the act of writing outside the academic discourse and within the artistic realm, allows to create *affect* through the placement of the poem as a 'cultural artifact' (Renolds & Ivinson, 2019). She is both offering an alternative narrative *and* reading that calls for the reader to be somehow awoken to a different discourse and *implicate* themselves in the story, therefore challenging the phantasmagorical and illusionary practice of neutrality attempted within the historical discipline. Just as language and literature are white and male (Irigaray & Burke, 1985; Fetterley, 1978), so has been historiography as a cultural institution serving to reinforce the current power relationships and monopolizing historical memory and discourse. In this sense, Atwood is challenging the very notion of historical memory in its' selective and

excluding form as male-biased, rendering countless individuals systematically absent. She is asking us to *participate* as readers in a shared historical past through identifying with (and through) Mary's coming-to-self.

There is no doubt this can be accused of being too subjective and sinning of presentism, yet I would like to argue that the researcher is always interpreting and implicated in the research (Ramazanoglu & a Holland, 2004, p. 10; Letherby, 2003), and that given the systematic silence to which individuals have been violently submitted to in an exercise of epistemological violence, it is time to explore the past from different and new perspectives and methods, in an attempt to diversify the discourse(s), but also to change the present world. In doing so, we would give equal value to a multiplicity of approaches that consider the 'location' (Mohanty, 1984) of both the researcher and the individuals being studied so that the relationship is not one-sided, reductionist, and hierarchical. Therefore, I believe Atwood is forcing us 'to recognise and acknowledge both positions and, perhaps, to imagine subject positions beyond the oppressor/ victim dualism' (Beyer, 2000, p. 290), or researcher-research, writer-narrative, etc. Her work is 'multivocal', in that by extending 'her characters historically and geo-politically as well as archetypally' (Larson, 1989, p. 27) she is 'connecting us with others beyond our immediate experience, human and non-human, present and future, as well as 'all the other people far back'' (Larson in E. M. Forster, 1989, 28).

How does Atwood, then, break the silence, and makes Mary *present* beyond her victimhood, her passivity in the historical records? I state she does so by *giving voice*, but also by making sure that this voice can be *heard*, both by calling 'readers out of passivity' (Larson, 1989, p. 32), and by placing Mary outside the social order through her rebirth: as Beyer expresses, 'it is this liminal state of having been 'dead' and having survived this which enables her, after her ordeal, to tell her story' (Beyer, 2000, p. 287). Atwood is actively positioning Mary *outside* the state of 'subalternity' by turning her away from the victimized position and making her the *agent of her own story* (Spivak & Pérez, 2009).

The poetic personae refuses to be a victim (Andrews, 1985, p. 23), and gains agency through the revision and re-writing of the 'witch' archetype (Pratts, White,

Loewenstein, & Wyer, 1981) as her main identity (one given, by the accusation). However, the price of it is tragedy and Death: she must leave the human realm, societal laws, to join that of a re-visioned God, or Nature, having re-constructed ‘witch’ through the exploration of language and fiction to create new meanings. This shows, precisely, how this ‘revision which shows that death, obliteration, is not an inevitable outcome, historically’ (Beyer, 2000, p. 287) challenges the silence through the exploration of its very own existence. It is in this point where *voice* and *identity* become extremely linked in Atwood’s poetry through the inspection of a male-biased and based language:

‘A temptation, to sink down
 into these definitions’
 (Atwood, 1995, lines 99-100)

As many theoretical propositions have pointed out, especially within the field of psychoanalysis, language is key to the structuration of our consciousness and, thus, our identities, as well as the world or the reality we perceive (Morris on Lacan, 1993, pp. 100-112). In this sense, Atwood is exploring language as a tool to construct a positive identity for Mary which is *outside* the mythical and/or archetypal image of the ‘witch’, as it is not based on her absences or Otherness-es (de Beauvoir, 2009/2011), but rather what she defines herself as:

‘I was hanged for living alone
 for having blue eyes and a sunburned skin,
 tattered skirts, few buttons,
 a weedy farm in my own name
 and a surefire cure for warts’
 (Atwood, 1995, lines 11-15)

Here she is placing Mary within her historical context(s) and challenging the social definitions of womanhood: we only count with the ‘male’ literary voice in the historical record, and thus women are always portrayed through the eyes of men. She is carrying out the difficult task

Morris expressed in that ‘women must represent themselves, literally in political practice’ (and in the historical record), ‘and equally by contesting negative verbal and visual images of themselves’ (Morris, 1993, p. 13). Atwood is denouncing the *obstacles to selfhood* placed in the very *notion of womanhood*: not being married (‘Non-wife to save your life’) (Atwood, 1995, line 43), working outside her theoretical ‘sphere’ (Susen, 2011), not keeping up social appearances, and most importantly, having both property and knowledge. These latter give her *power* in her community, which challenge the very ‘structure of dominance’ (Lloyd, 1993) that renders her powerless and expects her to remain accepting of the ‘symbolic violence’ (Bourdieu & Nice, *Masculine Domination*, 1998) exercised through these definitions based on passivity and objecthood; in submission, and silence. The moment Mary has power, she leaves the subaltern state and is thus accused of ‘witchcraft’.

While Mary is expected to align with the social order, and somehow accept, as the other women have done, ‘womanhood’ in a process of ‘somatization’ of that ‘violence’ by *performing* the feminine ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu & Nice, *Masculine Domination*, 1998; Bourdieu, *The Habitus and the Space of Life-Styles*, 1984), or performing normative femininity (Duque, 2010), she does not, which derives in her *demonisation* through the use of her embodiment as ‘marked’ negatively (Twine, 2001), being her biology the excuse or basis for the accusations:

‘Oh yes, and breasts,
 and a sweet pear hidden in my body.
 whenever there’s talk of demons
 these come in handy.’
 (Atwood, 1995, lines 16-19)

This biological determinism contributes to the binarization and dualization of womanhood in unattainable notions of, on one hand, goodness, for to become the perfect woman one must reject subjecthood in its whole (de Beauvoir, *Introduction*, 2009/2011) and one’s own identity as *presence* (Lewis, 2017)(and thus selfhood/agency). On the other hand, evil, for one is demonized when they leave or de(re)construct their *socially inflicted identity*: in this

case, womanhood. The 'witch' archetype, thus, appears here as the tool for the *de-humanisation* of Mary, who is 'marked' (Twine, 2001) not only by her body, or her differing from the flock given that she is a 'singular' raven (Atwood, 1995, line 48), but from the very structures of language themselves, in that she is excluded from the creation of meaning *for* (her)self.

Through historical and biblical memory women have been systematically *absent-ed* from the 'public' or political realm (which makes us question who chooses what and who has value in the historical record) (Blasco Herranz, 2020), being negatively portrayed in the main thought-structuring beliefs when they happen to participate, as it can be seen within Christian religion in the Western World.

The sin of Eve has long been used as an argument throughout history to portray women as naturally inclined to sin or evil. Atwood challenges this by exploring the possibilities of a different narrative through language, because it 'inscribes and reinforces the 'unconscious mythologies' and 'stereotypic associations' which maintain a subordinate position for women in patriarchy' (Beyer, 293). Therefore, she reclaims the myth by putrefying it:

'Up I go like a windfall in reverse,
 a blackened apple stuck back onto the tree'
 (Atwood, 1995, lines 23-24)

She is offering a counter-narrative to patriarchal religious practices in their (mis)representing of womanhood, by positioning them in opposition to a different ancient valuable and positive femininity related to nature, or 'the moon' (Atwood, 1995, line 26), through mythological spiritualities:

'old bone-faced goddess, old original,
 who once took blood in return for food'
 (Atwood, 1995, lines 27-28)

In this sense, the evil is transferred from Eve to the men who are 'wearing it' in their 'show of hate' (Atwood, 1995, lines 30-32); who are reducing her to a victim of her own doing using

a hegemonic discourse which locates her, paradoxically, both against and closer to nature in her relationship to the (d)evil.

Regarding this interaction between nature and embodiment, Atwood denounces patriarchal humanist practices of disconnection with nature-body as 'deadening and mechanizing' (Andrews, 1985, p. 25), challenging the very Cartesian-notions of dualist thinking between body and mind:

'I hurt, therefore I am'

(Atwood, 1995, line 73)

She is constructing a sense of womanly identity in Mary that accepts her embodiment as a positive feature, in the same line of writers such as Irigaray in her theorization of female sexuality as positive (Irigaray & Burke, 1985), for we see later how she is constantly relating Mary to the animal world in a positive sense (by being a raven, or by constantly becoming food/trash of other beings in a relationship of exchange which grounds her to the natural world).

As a post-modernist writer, identity for Atwood is a process in-the-making, multiple, diverse, and fluid. Because of it, she can engage in a revision of the notions of womanhood and selfhood through the exploration of language, creating possibilities for how to de(re)construct these from socially inflicted, and oppressive in meaning identities, to more individually-positively represented ones, by making them present in their own definition; by making the characters who attain these to be *participant* in their definitions of themselves.

By giving voice, Atwood is performing a subversive act of de-silencing which challenges our very epistemological structures, as she is practicing meaning-creation through the revisioning of the past from a present literary position, capable of '*affecting*' (Renolds & Ivinson, 2019) with a counter-narrative within the poetic realm. She is somehow practicing 'unvention' (Pratts, White, Loewenstein, & Wyer, 1981, p. 178) by reclaiming the historical space giving agency to Mary, who becomes not only an 'eye-witness' of the socio-cultural-political-historical process of silencing and victimization, but an 'I-witness' (Larson, 1989, p.

29) who can *resist* this violence exercised upon her by the institutionalized power (Heller, 1996) of patriarchy representing her own experiences and making them identifiable with others' (Larson, 1989, p. 29). In doing so, she calls us to be witnesses *alongside* her to resist the oppressive monopolization of both violence and meaning making:

'flail as if drowning I call
 on you as a witness I did
 no crime I was born I have borne I
 bear will be born this is
 a crime I will not
 acknowledge leaves and wind
 hold onto me
 I will not give in'
 (Atwood, 1995, lines 145-152)

Ultimately, Mary must die in order to leave the power structure; in order to be able to speak on her own terms even when language limits her, to be re-born in a new position of self-*outside* the patriarchal symbolic structure, as it creates womanhood in opposition to selfhood: it establishes a *graduality* in the human world by which, in order to be fully self, one must place self in a humanist liberal Cartesian definition of humanity which rejects the body. However, as many bodies are inevitably 'marked', and thus closer to 'nature' and farther from 'God' (Twine, 2001), they are biologically determined to never be able to become selves while being embodied. To solve this, Atwood uses Mary's historical account to create a (her)story in which through this 'liminal' experience she is able to speak (Beyer, 287), thus being able to achieve selfhood by stepping *outside* the humanist human realm, joining that of nature instead through a reappropriation of language:

'Mouth full of juicy adjectives
 and purple berries'
 (Atwood, 1995, lines 200-201)

However, the question remains: can this language be understood within Mary's historical context? Atwood seems to answer that question for us:

'Pinpoints of infinity riddle my brain,
 a revelation of deafness.

At the end of my rope

I testify to silence.

Don't say I am not grateful'

(Atwood, 1995, lines 167-171)

It seems that we are all required to change, just as Mary is: to liberate meaning, we are required to become aware, thus joining the audience of Nature, of 'owls'; of 'God' (Atwood, 1995 lines 218-219). Although not a historian, I argue that Atwood's narrative can help us disintegrate the notion of observation of the past without participation by asking us to become witnesses alongside Mary. She brings us closer to the individual by making us participate in a process of affection through poetic discourse.

Ultimately, Atwood's poem is offering us the possibility of doing historical analysis from the active creation of *literary-historiographical discourse*, as it fills with fiction the voids or silences that have been systematically absented individuals' experiences from the historical record by making them passive objects of a hegemonic discourse which has perpetuated the current practices of relationality based on domination. In this sense, she is offering us an alternative method which should be accounted not so much for its' logical or rational rigour, but for its' capacity to create both *agency* (Spivak & Pérez, 2009) and *affect* (Renolds & Iverson, 2019) thus making it useful for the historian, the researched, and the readership, given its' capacity to generate emotional response, challenging the very process(es) of signification in which History is embedded as well. This would, in conclusion, not only help to deconstruct patriarchal epistemological and relational practices, but to reconstruct them through new *multiple* discourses. We have reached a point in which

‘Discipline is empire. Description is not liberation’ (McKittrick, 2021, p. 48): it is time to look at the past not only with new eyes, but with new methods, and new values.

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