

ALTERNATE STORIES

The Short Fiction of Audrey Thomas and Margaret Atwood

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She knew now that almost certainly, whenever she saw a street musician, either he was blind or lame or leprous or there was a terribly deformed creature, just out of sight, on behalf of whom he was playing his music.¹

SHORT STORIES HAVE often focused on a character's discovery of a second perspective on experience, as in Mansfield's "The Garden Party" or Joyce's "The Dead," or in Alice Munro's collection *Lives of Girls and Women* in which Del Jordan discovers Garnet French's narrow view of family life, or her mother's vision of herself as "Princess Ida." Often the discovery of such alternate perspectives has marked moments of traumatic insight or dramatic growth for the character, and has — like Del's discovery of Bobby Sheriff's banality — constituted a pivotal or terminal element in the story. In Munro's fiction, as recent criticism by Helen Hoy, Lorraine McMullen, and others² has suggested, these moments participate in oxymoronic figures and imply the paradoxical existence of multiple and conflicting "realities" — the train companion who is both a clergyman and a molester, the high school teacher who is both an extrovert and a suicide.

In the short fiction of Audrey Thomas and Margaret Atwood, there are other kinds of alternate stories, secret scripts which characters have written one for another, stories inherited from mythology and literature that become superimposed on characters' lives, stories concealed within symbolic objects, as well as stories the characters have written to rationalize their lives. These "other" stories are contained within the apparent story, becoming ironic participants in it, qualifying it, interrogating it, sometimes working against it. In Atwood the separation between the various "stories" of the characters contributes to the detached tone of many of her fictions and to special uses of language and symbol. In Thomas the presence of multiple "stories" is reflected in disjunctive narratives in which brief "stories" are abruptly contained within or juxtaposed to other "stories."

Most of the fictions of Thomas' first two collections are visibly constructed of variant scripts. In some a second script is implicit in the first, as in "One is One and All Alone" in which the young wife of a British official in Africa enacts a self-assured self to mask pervasive feelings of fear and ineptitude. When she loses a filling from a tooth, this fabricated self, like the tooth, crumbles, exposing the "raw nerves" of her irrational fears. In "A Monday Dream at Alameda Park" a married couple have created the story that they are "very liberated, very liberal" — a story which partly collapses when the husband finds himself drawn into group sex with another couple. In other fictions the alternative scripts are embedded in the first. In "Omo" the embedded diary of one character disqualifies the perceptions of the story's narrator. In "The Albatross" one character, Herman, has composed for himself a life-story of romantic World War II adventure, a story unconnected to his current hope to succeed as a life-insurance salesman. Thomas' text is in turn composed, among other things, of Herman's narrative, the sound track of an insurance company sales film, and another character's parody of Herman's stories. In "Three Women and Two Men" the main text is repeatedly interrupted by the characters' private fictions. "They must have needed to die. It must have been their karma," Peter says of the victims of a mass-murder. Of her husband's careless driving Margaret says "I think he drives that way because he's small. It makes him feel powerful."

It is easier to conjure up a fairy tale . . . than to put one's finger on the pulse of truth. In the tale it is all so easy. I, the princess, and he, the prince. We meet and of a sudden fall in love. There are dragons, of course, and wicked dukes and many other dangers; but these can all be banished, crushed or conquered. We mount the milk-white steed, ride off into the silver dawn. No sequel; nothing sordid. When the storytellers say 'The end' they mean it. Never the names of Cinderella's children.

LIKE THE NARRATOR of "A Winter's Tale," most of Thomas' characters find it easier to "conjure up" a false story than to accept "the pulse of truth." As here, the false story is usually fabricated of familiar materials. "Loving is letting go," writes Peter in "Three Women and Two Men." The bulk of these materials are those of romance, especially the fairy tale and Shakespearean comedy. The reference points include Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* ("A Winter's Tale," "Xanadu," and "Omo"), folk tales like Cinderella ("A Winter's Tale," "Crossing the Rubicon"), Andersen's "The Snow Queen" ("Elephants to Ride Upon"), *The Nibelungenlied* ("Aquarius"), the tales collected by the brothers Grimm ("Rapunzel," "Natural History"), and John Donne's love poems ("Aquarius," "A Monday Dream at Alameda Park," "The More Little Mummy in the World").

In *Ten Green Bottles* and *Ladies & Escorts* men and women seem equally vulnerable to the roles demanded by these inherited fictions, and greet these roles with varying amounts of insight. Unlike the female mental patients of "Salon des Refusés" who unquestioningly prefer their delusions of wealth and love to the facts of their actual conditions, the young woman of "A Winter's Tale" can see that her life is but a poor imitation of romantic fantasy. In "Elephants to Ride Upon" a young man who feels forced back together, after several months separation, with a young woman he has made pregnant, projects onto her and himself stereotypically evil roles — "an ice maiden, the snow queen."

He remembered how in the old romances the beautiful maiden turns into a hag if the wrong questions are asked, if the right answers are not given. He stood now, defeated, horrified to discover that he hated her — not only for what she had become, but for what he had become: a false knight, an imposter.

But his discovery that her coldness has been caused mostly by her fear of his family and by her concern for him eventually dissipates his fantasy. The male point of view character of "Aquarius," however, has no sense that, by having variously cast his wife Erica as Brunhilde to his Siegfried, as a vampire who "renewed herself with his passion," as "the very essence of female," as the "barefoot wife" of the romantic artist, he has cheated himself out of ever discovering who this Erica may actually be.

The major change between these collections and the subsequent one, *Real Mothers*, is that in the latter these inherited romantic stories appear most often as stories which women have allowed men to impose upon them. Men are seldom — like the young man of "Elephants to Ride Upon" or the husband of "Aquarius" — presented as being impoverished by such stories, but rather as receiving advantage from them. In "Galatea" and "Out in the Midday Sun" both female protagonists feel as if they have been co-opted into a script written by their husbands. In "Galatea" the woman is a painter who has stopped painting "large canvases full of brutal colours" because these "disturb" her husband, and has "gone back to watercolours" of "decorative" subjects which he finds "less disturbing." Her husband, a womanizing writer, links himself with inherited romance when he defines greatness as "one of those magic pitchers in a fairytale — you pour it out and it is still full to the top." Thomas' title, "Galatea," which invokes the inherited story of the sea-nymph who was bullied by the cyclops Polyphemos, whose lover Acis was pinned by Polyphemos beneath a rock, and who saved Acis by transforming him into a river, casts ironic light on both the narrator and her marriage. The narrator is abused by nothing but her own passivity; the French river she walks beside has never been her lover; the watercolours she paints mark not an historic affinity with sea and water but merely her own weakness.

In "Out in the Midday Sun" the woman is a beginning writer who has married a successful scholar. His script for her is that of the traditional helpmate — "he is

the kind of man," she says, "who will love you only so long as you walk a few steps behind. Only so long as you arrange the dinners and airline tickets. . . ." She has secretly written her own book (that is, written her own story) which has been accepted by a major publisher; her success will unwrite the script he has mentally composed for her. "As soon as she told him," she tells us, as she narrates a peripatetic outer story (that contains in effect both his script and her new book) "he would leave her." In "Timbuktu" Thomas presents the wife of an American B'hai convert who has naively brought her and their children to Africa to work as missionaries. Again the woman has been entangled in her husband's script. Here the script reaches to the inherited story of the Bible, its implicit definition of "motherhood," its patriarchal god, its self-presumed authority. Rona, the point-of-view character of "Timbuktu," has her own narrative of uneasy role-playing in her husband's story, a narrative which at this moment contains not only the B'hai wife's story but the Biblical story both women inherit.

'She'll do what God wants her to,' Janet said. 'It's out of our hands.'

Rona found this aphorism, coming from the mouth of a child, almost obscene. On the bedside table by the sick child was a jug of water and a book, *Baha'u'llah and the New Era*. She leafed through it . . . There was an almost Germanic profusion of capital letters: 'He, His, Servant of the Blessed Perfection, Declaration, Supreme Singleness, the Most Great Peace.' But . . . the basic tenets of the faith were harmless, indeed inarguable 'motherhood issues', one might say. B'hai. How exotic it sounded! Like *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. But also, sheep-like. Baa-Baa-Baa. . . . There were a lot of old-fashioned Biblical endings on the verbs: 'enacteth, enforceth, sitteth, cometh, shineth.'

Rona's own situation is that she has married her husband Philip out of fascination with his "stories about Gibraltar, Malta, Morocco, the Ivory Coast, and Senegal . . . she had married Africa, not Philip." Now she is travelling to another story external to herself — the legendary Timbuktu — and finding herself occasionally needing a man to protect her. "She should be wandering around the streets by herself, finding some little place that caught her fancy, not going to a meal that had been ordered in advance by someone else."

A MEAL "ordered," in all three senses of the word, in advance by someone else — such are the stories accepted by most of the men and women of Thomas' first two collections and by most of the women of the third. Almost each story contains not only smaller stories but the explicit words "story" or "fairy tale." "That story was one of her best ones" ("Aquarius"); "As he told his new tale, our steward's hands would clench with excitement" ("Joseph and his Brother"); "Marie-Anne felt as if someone had been telling her a continuous fairy story" ("Real Mothers"); "Old wives' tales came back to her" ("Natural

History”); “She felt like one of those queens in the fairy tales” (“Déjeuner sur l’herbe”); “she doesn’t look back. In my story, that is” (“Crossing the Rubicon”). A typical Thomas story is a story about characters who have so many inherited stories that they have no single authentic story. That is, it is a story about not having a story. The contained stories — the petty lies the characters tell about themselves, the scripts they accept from their spouses or from traditional mythology or literature — demolish the container.

In “Two in the Bush” a young woman, bored with her marriage, hitches a ride with another young married woman from Ghana to the Ivory Coast, expecting sexual adventure, meeting people who are implicit stories of gunrunner, freedom-fighter, shady banker, corrupt soldier, romantic lover, but returns having had no sexual adventure, no “miracle,” no story. “I know nothing about Africa, nothing,” she concludes, and for *Africa* we read *romance, story*. At its closing, the story is implicitly about a story which didn’t happen, a gunrunner who doesn’t run guns, a lover who missed his tryst. “Crossing the Rubicon” contains various stories — the narrator’s story of a love affair with a married man, of being attracted as a girl by abusive boys, the stories told by the mottoes on Valentine candy (“Be my Sugar Daddy,” “You’re a Slick Chick”), the story told and untold by the motto on a button — (“Cinderella married for money”), the story of Liza Minnelli and Michael York in *Cabaret* — but ends with the woman still unable to not “look back” at her married lover, unable to refuse the inherited story.

In “Déjeuner sur l’Herbe,” two ex-lovers pretend (one story) to be brother and sister while travelling in Europe. The woman’s “latest lover” has told her she is “too insipid” (two stories). Her husband has told her that she “leaned on him” too much” (three stories). “‘I have had this pain,’ she told the imaginary doctor, ‘all my life’” (four stories or perhaps five). In London she reads warning signs about unattended parcels: “DON’T TOUCH. DON’T GET INVOLVED” — a sixth story. She is “content, for the most part, merely to go wherever he suggested” — another story. In a Parisian garden, “slender metal chairs” have been “left in groups which seemed . . . to tell stories.” At a restaurant, she asks her lover, “Do we have to play out roles that other people impose on us?” She reads a French phrase book, each phrase a story. In a French cemetery while picnicking they encounter a distraught and incoherent woman with a kitten, who returns past them without it, her hands covered with dirt. Her companion says that he believes the woman said “that the kitten was sick. That she killed it.”

“Are you *sure*?”

“No, I’m not sure. But there really is nothing that we can do.”

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But she was already running down the path. “I’m going to find that kitten. You made it up, about what the woman said!”

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“And what if you do?” he called after her. “What then?”

What indeed. What would happen if any Thomas character found his or her authentic story?

IN MARGARET ATWOOD’S short stories there is a similarly recurrent separation between culturally “received” stories and other potentially more authentic stories available to the characters. Whereas in Thomas’ fiction these received stories seem unconsciously adopted by the characters, who may become aware of them in the course of the story, in Atwood’s they tend to be consciously followed. As in Thomas, the major source of these inherited stories is romance, but specifically gothic romance — from the gothic fairy tale, as in the title story of *Bluebeard’s Egg*,⁸ to the graveyard and dungeon melodramas invoked by “The Grave of the Famous Poet” and “Hair Jewellery.” Atwood also — following the example of Mary Shelley — repeatedly links the gothic story to yet another story — that of technological hubris. Both the gothic and the technological story are narrow, simplistic, and offer to Atwood’s usually unsure characters reassuring predictabilities. In “Under Glass” the female narrator’s gothic imagination leads her both to see her diffident lover as an “enemy soldier” and to withdraw psychologically into the silent “nowhere” of a greenhouse. In “Polarities” Louise defends herself against her fears by constructing a geometrical “electromagnetic” theory for the psychic structure of Edmonton. In “Hair Jewellery” a woman who first uses gothic necrophilia — imagining her lover to cough “like Roderick Usher” and to be “doomed and restless as Dracula” — as an escape story to avoid the responsibilities of authentic relationship later uses the banality of a regular job, a two-storey colonial house, a “salon haircut,” a “supportive” husband to identical purpose.

Throughout Atwood’s fictions the main characters are inarticulate about their personal stories, unable to express their fears to one another — as the married couple in “The Resplendent Quetzal,” unable to signal their hopes except through metaphorical acts such as Louise’s electromagnetic map in “Polarities.” Characters grope for speech. Will, in “Spring Song of the Frogs,” keeps finding he “doesn’t know what to say” to the various women he encounters — that is, he doesn’t know what story to tell. Joel, in “Uglypuss,” can only speak in clichés — “a golden oldie, a mansion that’s seen better days,” he describes his rooming house, and ironically describes his own speech. Yvonne, in “The Sunrise,” is so desperate for language that she writes jokes and pleasantries on filing cards so she will not lack words or stories in conversation.

Such characters seem afflicted by what Atwood in another story, “Loulou; or, the Domestic life of the Language,” humorously terms a language gap when

the title character's poet-friends become obsessed with an apparent disparity between her mundane name and the "earth mother" role they see her filling.

"What gap?" Loulou asked suspiciously. She knew her upper front teeth were a little wide apart and had been self-conscious about it when she was younger. "The gap between the word and the thing signified," Phil said. His hand was on her breast and he'd given an absent-minded squeeze, as if to illustrate what he meant. They were in bed at the time. Mostly Loulou doesn't like talking in bed. But she's not that fond of talking at other times, either.

The stories which characters like Loulou wish to tell often have no words and are somehow separate from the world where poets talk in bed, or where friends conduct dinner-conversation from sets of file-cards.

The unarticulated stories of these characters, in fact, have an "alternate" wordless language of symbol and aphoristic gesture. This language reveals itself in objects, like the hurricane wreckage at the end of "Hurricane Hazel" or the crystalline forms that Alma grows in "The Salt Garden." In "The Resplendent Quetzal" both husband and wife carry unspoken stories — Edward of explosive, passionate action, Sarah of bitter grief over their stillborn child — (which is in turn an unspoken story of its parents' frozen passions). Both conceal these stories, Edward under an obsession with bird-watching, Sarah under a precisely conventional code of behaviour. Atwood's text reveals their secret stories primarily through symbols — the Mayan sacrificial well at Chichen Itza, which is not the civilized "wishing well" Sarah had expected, but a large, earthy, and suggestively vaginal hole; the plaster Christ-child Sarah steals from a crèche that decorates their hotel and hurls into the well; the magical Mayan bird Edward seeks with his metal binoculars. He doesn't find it, and Sarah — she "smoothed her skirt once more . . . then collected her purse and collapsible umbrella" — after her lapse into passion resumes her usual practicality. The hidden stories here briefly declare themselves, but the received, cliché stories of bourgeois life retain, for Edward and Sarah at least, greater power.

The later story "Scarlet Ibis" makes a similar contrast between the mechanical life of a bourgeois couple and the hidden story which a tropical object — birds on an island preserve — can bring to consciousness. Christine's response to these birds emphasizes their "otherness" — "on the other side of the fence was another world, not real but at the same time more real than the one on this side, the men and women in their flimsy clothes and aging bodies. . . ." The ibis is to her a symbol almost outside of comprehension, beyond her powers of language. In "Bluebeard's Egg" the story of the wizard's egg that Sally encounters at her writing class is similarly mysterious to her. The story troubles her but she cannot intellectualize how it might apply to her own life; in the concluding lines of the story the egg remains for her an unintegrated image "glowing softly" in their imagination "as though there's something red and hot inside it."

This inarticulate and unintellectualizable level of meaning requires an extraordinarily large amount of symbolism. The alternate story is nearly always implicit, iconic, and only marginally understood by the characters — a fainting spell (“The Salt Garden”), a cosmic dream (“The Sin Eaters”), a compelling sunrise (“The Sunrise”), a depressing tone in the croaking of “Spring Song of the Frogs,” an exhilaratingly red bird (“Scarlet Ibis”). Denotative language in an Atwood fiction is the preserve of the gothic wizard, the scientist, or of characters who attempt to rationalize or trivialize the symbols that trouble them. This is the language of the official story. Both official and iconic languages are apparent at the conclusion of “Unearthing Suite,” when the narrator’s mother and father discover a fisher’s droppings on the roof of their cabin.

For my father, this dropping is an interesting biological phenomenon. He has noted it and filed it, along with all the other scraps of fascinating data he notes and files.

For my mother however, this is something else. For her this dropping — this hand-long, two-fingers thick, black, hairy dropping — not to put too fine a point on it, this deposit of animal shit — is a miraculous token, a sign of divine grace; as if their mundane, familiar, much-patched but at times still-leaking roof has been visited and made momentarily radiant by an unknown but by no means minor god.

The father views the event as knowable, but for the mother it is an “other” story, “miraculous” beyond explanation, “unknown.”

Repeatedly in Atwood’s recent fictions characters defend themselves against such iconic events by trivializing their emotional responses to them, turning away from the event much like Sarah in “The Resplendent Quetzal” turns away from the Mayan well and toward her collapsible umbrella. The title character of “Significant Moments in the Life of My Mother” deals with each major symbolic event of her life in cliché language. “‘I remember the time we almost died,’ says my mother. Many of her stories begin this way.” In “Scarlet Ibis,” after witnessing birds which evoke for her “the gardens of mediaeval paintings,” Christine jovially describes them to friends “as a form of entertainment, like the Grand Canyon: something that really ought to be seen, if you liked birds, and if you should happen to be in that part of the world.” In “Bluebeard’s Egg” Sally succumbs to a similar trivializing when she describes her night school course in writing.

She was . . . intending to belittle the course, just slightly. She always did this with her night courses, so Ed wouldn’t get the idea there was anything in her life that was even remotely as important as he.

The real “other” story is that Sally cares deeply about that part of herself that seeks to define itself through these courses. The trivialized version is merely the official story, created for her husband’s benefit.

The juxtaposition of these two kinds of narrative creates recurrently surreal effects. Many of the characters, particularly the women, live psychologically in

the hidden story while functioning physically in the official story. They dream and think in the language of symbols but they speak in cliché. They trivialize their inner lives in order to live a life of conventional fiction. Almost all of Atwood's couples remain strangers to each other because of this failure to declare the hidden story. Edward in "The Resplendent Quetzal" keeps secret his passionate fantasies and his unhappiness with Sarah's controlled behaviour! Sarah conceals her profound grief at the loss of their child beneath a pretense of control and self-righteousness. When Sarah momentarily loses her composure, however, and weeps beside the well, he is afraid. " 'This isn't like you,' Edward said, pleadingly." Despite his unhappiness, he prefers the official story.

THIS ISN'T LIKE YOU. The official story impoverishes the language of its users, not only restricting it to factual observation and cliché, but limiting its tone. It also limits the tone of those who are aware of hidden stories, like the narrators of "Under Glass," "The Grave of the Famous Poet," and "Hair Jewellery," by making them feel disconnected from the lives of others. Their narratives have a flat, passive tone that echoes their beliefs that they are forever witnesses to events rather than participants in them. The ineffectuality of characters like Sally in "Bluebeard's Egg" is in part a property of their hidden stories, stories that are unacknowledged, marginalized, trivialized even by the people who dream them.

Ladies & Escorts, *Real Mothers*, *Dancing Girls*, *Bluebeard's Egg* — all these Thomas and Atwood titles are paradigmatic, denoting received "official" stories, scripts that their characters have been asked to enter. In Atwood's story "Bluebeard's Egg," the fable of the wizard's egg assigns to each of three sisters a three-part story — an egg to protect, a room not to enter, a death by dismemberment should they fail the first two parts. The three sisters' story, like that of Sally who is told the story, like that of Edward and Sarah in "The Resplendent Quetzal," of Will in "Spring Song of the Frogs," of the mother in "Significant Moments in the Life of My Mother," or of many of Thomas' characters, is the story of having embraced no authentic story. *Ladies & Escorts* contains stories of ladies without escorts, with titular escorts, with unwanted escorts — all are qualified not only by the source assumption of the old beer parlour sign, "ladies and escorts" but by the women's private derivative fictions about themselves and an escort. The dance of Atwood's *Dancing Girls* is a similar ever-present qualifier, an inherited script of social behaviour. The title generically links as social performer a housewife, a young lady poet, a botanist, a journalist, a Blake scholar. The inheritances implicit in these titles, like the inherited stories contained generally in the fictions of these two authors, are oppressive. Perhaps most important for us to consider, a

major part of the western literary heritage — particularly the romance mode with its roots in Greek mythology and the Bible, its pervasive presence in myth and fairy tale, its huge presence in medieval and Renaissance literature, especially in Shakespeare — is marked in these books as destructive to authentic story. The romance is presented as an unyielding, unitary, and patriarchal inheritance that leads the passive character, male or female, ultimately to no story.

By implication, the romance, and all the other unitary forms that Northrop Frye tells us descend by displacement from it — the heroic, the comic, the tragic, the pastoral, the realistic novel, the ironic novel, the realistic short story — are discredited by Thomas' and Atwood's short fiction as literary models. The archetypal story Frye finds behind these, the Biblical one of a quest to re-enter the lost garden, is a "male" story — in its centralized theme, its Freudian symbolism, its Aristotelian structure. Disjunctive structure and multiplicity of story are used by Thomas and Atwood not to affirm through irony the Biblical story, as they are, for example, by Eliot in *The Waste Land*, but to suggest counter-structures. There may be other gardens, their fictions say, than the one lost by Adam or re-invented by Bluebeard; there may be unnamed, inarticulate, unchosen, or uninherited gardens; there may even be alternatives to garden. All these possibilities promise further alternatives to familiar story.

NOTES

- ¹ Audrey Thomas, "The More Little Mummy in the World," *Ladies & Escorts* (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1977), p. 138. Subsequent quotations from Thomas' work are from this book, and from *Ten Green Bottles* (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1977 [1967]), and *Real Mothers* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1981).
- ² See Hallvard Dahlie, "The Fiction of Alice Munro," *Ploughshares* 4 (Summer 1978), pp. 56-71; Helen Hoy, "'Dull, Simple, Amazing, and Unfathomable': Paradox and Double Vision in Alice Munro's Fiction," *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 5 (Spring 1980), pp. 100-15; Lorraine McMullen, "'Shameless, Marvellous, Shattering Absurdity': the Humour of Paradox in Alice Munro," in Louis J. MacKendrick, ed., *Probable Fictions: Alice Munro's Narrative Acts* (Downsview, Ont.: ECW Press, 1983), pp. 144-62; and Gerald Noonan, "The Structure of Style in Alice Munro's Fiction," in MacKendrick, pp. 163-80.
- ³ Margaret Atwood, *Bluebeard's Egg* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1983). Subsequent quotations from Atwood's work are from this book and the collection *Dancing Girls* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1977).

