dystopia, gerontology and the writing of Margaret Atwood

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abstract

Old age and visions of the future are inherently bound with one another, and the realms of dystopian fiction provide scope for a gerontological focus within contemporary literature. A theme that is now being revisited in speculative fiction, this paper aims to assess the role of the elderly within Margaret Atwood's dystopian tales, specifically looking at the role of gerontology in her collection of short stories *Stone Mattress: Nine Wicked Tales* (2014). I argue that Atwood utilises the dystopian narrative in order to address broader social issues that stem from immobility and declining virility. Focussing on Atwood's feminist politics and representations of the elderly woman in the dystopian narrative, this paper proposes that older women in Atwood's fiction seek to move beyond the asexual, immobile and matronly gerontological stereotype that is often portrayed in literature. Instead, the elderly, and in particular elder women, adapt to their environment, often becoming figures of their community. They are aware of sexual desires and look to move within and beyond societal constraints, utilising the realms of cyberspace in order to forge their own identity. The role of the elderly in a distinctly *dys*topian narrative allows for a new utopian strategy to be constructed.

keywords

The transition to old age is a feminist issue. If Simone de Beauvoir's (1972 [1949], p. 301) dictum 'One is not born but rather becomes, a woman' underpins the social construction of the second sex, then it stands that women must undergo more than one act of 'becoming' in their lifetime. Unlike men, for whom the transition to old age is more often represented as a continuous process, old age for women is marked by a disruption to the reproductive process, a 'rupture' that is followed by an assumed decline in sexual desire. For de Beauvoir, the eventful nature of the transition to old age represents a 'crisis in femininity', resulting in what Marilyn Pearsall (1997, pp. 1–3) refers to as 'a shock to female narcissism'. Certainly, de Beauvoir's self-proclaimed 'crisis' paves the way to a host of issues surrounding the elderly female figure and perceptions of 'the other within us': as feminists, how do we engage with (and challenge) perceptions of elderly women within contemporary literature? Although de Beauvoir refers to a crisis of femininity, there seems to be a much larger crisis at hand: that is, the neglect of gerontology within contemporary literature from a feminist perspective (*ibid.*).

As a way of seeking to redress this imbalance, this paper will explore the role of the elderly in the writing of Margaret Atwood, specifically focussing on the importance of gerontological sexual activity, technology and the perspectives of ageing women in speculative, science and feminist fiction. Centring on the tales that appear in *Stone Mattress: Nine Wicked Tales* (2014f), this paper argues that the dystopian narrative provides a landscape in which Atwood deliberately subverts the standardised behaviours of old age. Six of the nine tales in *Stone Mattress* focus on elderly women,[1] and it is telling that Atwood labels these stories as 'wicked' in the collection's title. The elderly female protagonists deliberately challenge the stereotypes of old age through persistently centring their own sexual desires. Old age therefore functions as a mechanism that allows older women to enact revenge on the men who have wronged them in the past, rectifying their dystopic sexual histories (as Verna neatly demonstrates in 'Stone mattress' [Atwood, 2014e] when she murders her ex-lover).

Atwood uses gerontology in a number of specific ways in order to challenge the stereotype of the elderly woman as an inactive, matronly and asexual figure. Old age is presupposed as a personal dystopia demonstrated through the limitations of sex, mobility and motility. However, Atwood utilises the science fiction motif of cyberspace in order to transcend these limitations, thus subverting the stereotype of the older woman. The dystopian narrative provides a vehicle in which these tensions and challenges can be managed and current issues surrounding the stigma around old age addressed. The following pages will assess how successful Atwood is in delivering alternative narratives to these challenges, offering radical approaches to the perceptions of the elderly woman. The role of speculative fiction is a pertinent factor in how Atwood manages to deliver a new mode of gerontological narrative discourse. *Stone Mattress* blurs the boundaries between fiction and speculative fiction due to the persistent presence of the elderly, focussing on older women in particular as the key protagonists within the tales. Specifically, this paper will address the collapsing boundaries between fiction and speculative fiction and the importance of female generations configured through the existence and persistence of gerontological protagonists.

The dystopian narrative has been extensively explored by Atwood over the last two decades, although she insists that her literature be read as 'speculative' fiction, not 'science' fiction: 'the divide is "couldn't happen"' (Hoby, 2013). A significant portion of critical analysis of Atwood's speculative fiction lies in two

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[1] 'Alphinland' (Atwood, 2014a), 'Revenant' (Atwood, 2014d), 'Dark lady' (Atwood, 2014b), 'I dream of Zenia with the bright red teeth' (Atwood, 2014c), 'Stone mattress' (Atwood, 2014e) and 'Torching the dusties' (Atwood, 2014g).

parts: firstly in the analysis of the seminal text *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), a feminist dystopia wherein women are categorised by their ability to reproduce; and secondly through the assessment of the *MaddAddam* trilogy—*Oryx and Crake* (2004a), *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013)—in which the majority of the world's population has been wiped out by a man-made disease. In these novels, Atwood utilises the dystopian narrative structure to 'play out one of the contemporary world's trajectories as a sort of pre-emptive warning' (Evans, 2010, p. 452), drawing upon current cultural anxieties to explore possible futures for humankind.[2] It is striking that Atwood's interpretation of speculative fiction does not fit neatly into the science fiction narrative, and she readily acknowledges a 'bendiness of terminology, literary gene-swapping, and inter-genre visiting' within the science fiction genre (Atwood, 2011). Instead, Atwood perceives her speculative fiction (specifically *The Handmaid's Tale* and the *Maddaddam* trilogy) as a form of 'ustopia'. A word that combines utopia and dystopia, ustopia represents 'the imagined perfect society and its opposite—because in [Atwood's] view, each contains a latent version of the other' (*ibid.*). In a pertinent discussion on the emerging nature of ustopia, Atwood's reflections on her underpinning ideas for *The Handmaid's Tale* (specifically in relation to women's reproductive rights) are an uncanny foreshadowing of political tensions in 2017 North America:

> How thin is the ice on which supposedly "liberated" modern western women stand? How far can they go? How much trouble are they in? What's down there if they fall? And further: if you were attempting a totalitarian takeover of the United States, how would you do it? [...] How much social instability would it take before people renounced their hard-won civil liberties in a trade-off for "safety"? And, since most totalitarianisms we know about have attempted to control reproduction in one way or another—limiting births, demanding births, specifying who can marry whom and who owns the kids—how would that play out for women? (*ibid.*)

It is perhaps fitting that interest in *The Handmaid's Tale* is experiencing a resurgence over thirty years after its original publication,[3] and the resonance with American political affairs and the impact on women's reproductive rights correlates with this interest.

Both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *the Maddaddam* trilogy explore the idea of what it means to be an ageing woman. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, women are defined by their ability to reproduce and are separated into distinct categories based on their potential to bear children. When the novel's key protagonist, Offred, visits the doctor for her monthly check-up, her breasts are 'fingered in their turn, a search for ripeness, rot', and the importance of her young, fertile body is iterated when she is told 'you don't have a lot of time left' (Atwood, 1985, pp. 70–71). The novel is a reflection of de Beauvoir's 'crisis in femininity' writ large, and age is a significant barrier to women's primary purpose in Atwood's dystopic state of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Handmaids who fail to bear children are exiled to the Colonies to join the Unwomen—a group of females who are sterile, unmarried, widowed or political activists. To avoid going to the Colonies, older women can become Marthas (servants) or Aunts, women who train handmaidens, but are themselves infertile and unmarried. The 'censorious matron figure' is a consistent theme used by Atwood in her earlier fiction to depict older women, whose roles are defined in relation to their younger counterparts: 'Joan Foster's mother in *Lady Oracle*; the landlady ("that bitch") in *The Edible Woman*;

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[2]See Brooker (1994), Vevaina and Howells (1998), Howells (2005 [1996]), Evans (2010), Hoogheem (2012) and Dunlap (2013) for extensive discussions, through Atwood's writing, on ecology (*The Year of the Flood*), gender (*The Handmaid's Tale*) and technology (*Oryx and Crake*).
[3]Due in part to the recent release of its television series adaptation (*The Handmaid's Tale*, 2017).

older wives in *The Handmaid's Tale* ... are regarded externally through younger locators' (Comiskey, 1997, p. 134). This is not to say that Atwood fails to challenge the matron figure in her early fiction; older women in *The Robber Bride* (1993), for example, subvert the stereotype through excessive sexual promiscuity. If '*The Handmaid's Tale* is at one level a mistress' story, *The Robber Bride* is that of the wronged older wives' (Comiskey, 1997, p. 134). *The Robber Bride's* titular character, Zenia, is constructed as an entirely erotic being with 'her richly textured dress, her long legs, her startling new breasts, her glossy hair nebulous around her shoulders, her purple-red angry mouth' (Atwood, 1993, p. 79). Although Zenia is of a post-menopausal age, she is very much a sexual force at play: she has not reached de Beauvoir's crisis point—nor does she plan to.

However, the realms of Atwood's most recent speculative fiction allow space to explore more radicalised representations of the older woman. The dissolution of social structures in the *Maddadam* trilogy permits a fluidity in which elderly women are perceived as leaders of the community, the most prominent of these being Pilar, or 'Eve Six', in *The Year of the Flood*. Rather than conforming to the gerontological stereotype that portrays elderly women as matronly and asexual, Pilar invokes wisdom, kindness and leadership, and is not entirely above making references to her sex life. Perceived as eternal, 'who'd surely always been there ... like a boulder or an ancient stump' (Atwood, 2009, p. 170), she is literally the 'pillar' of the community. Unlike traditional science fiction narratives in which the elderly are forcibly euthanised,[4] when Pilar dies it is within her own control as she uses herbal remedies to end her life. There are no forced executions here—just belief that the aged body is being donated to the 'matrix of Life' (*ibid.*, p. 179) through Pilar's own volition.

Much like *The Robber Bride* and *The Year of the Flood*, Atwood's more recent short stories can be read as a vehicle for disrupting the stereotype associated with senior women in literature. Indeed, it is perhaps fitting that Atwood should return to the women of *The Robber Bride* in one of the tales of *Stone Mattress*, an indication perhaps that a return to reignite these radical approaches surrounding gerontology is a conscious redress to the current neglect in contemporary feminist literature. Atwood utilises the dystopian model in order to highlight the social issues that are associated with the treatment of the elderly. It is through the identification of these very tensions that Atwood thus challenges the image of the older woman in literature, allowing her protagonists to move beyond both spatial and sexual restrictions within new structures offered within the realms of cyberspace and rejecting a sexually dystopic historical narrative.

'torching the dusties': age as dystopia

The final tale in Atwood's *Stone Mattress* collection, 'Torching the dusties' (2014g), is a dystopian narrative that depicts an intergenerational conflict between the young and the elderly. A gerontological dystopia, the story depicts the rise of 'Our Turn', a movement of young people who travel up and down the country burning down care homes in order to clear away the 'parasitic dead wood at the top' (*ibid.*, p. 256). The story's central protagonist, Wilma, is a resident in the Early Assisted Living quarters in

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[4]As is explored in William F. Nolan's *Logan's Run* (2015 [1967]), Anthony Trollope's *The Fixed Period* (1990 [1882]) and Thomas Middleton's *The Old Law* (2007 [1656]).

Ambrosia Manor. Suffering from Charles Bonnet syndrome, Wilma shows signs of both mental and physical degradation through her visions of miniature people ('Chuckies') and through her failing eyesight. Ambrosia acts as a safe space for Wilma and, accompanied by her male companion Tobias, she manages to live out her days in relative independence—until the care home is laid siege by 'Our Turn' and is burnt to the ground.

As the final instalment in *Stone Mattress*, 'Torching the dusties' complements the collection's opening story, 'Alphinland' (Atwood, 2014a), in its representation of elderly women. There are clear similarities between Wilma and the protagonist of Alphinland, Constance—the references to their now-dead husbands, a bitter resentment towards their families who no longer visit them, and hints from Wilma of some financial stability during her younger years are difficult to ignore. The persistence of the elderly female protagonist—centred in both the opening and closing tales of *Stone Mattress*—is a pertinent reminder of the visibility of the older woman, appearing and reappearing time and time again. 'Reading' the final tale through the failing eyes of Wilma also becomes critical in engaging with broader issues around an ageist society. If we are to interpret the events of 'Torching the dusties' through the failing eyes of Wilma, then it stands to reason that our understanding of the issues, much like Wilma's understanding, is limited. Therefore, Wilma's failing sight becomes analogous to our own limitations and ability to 'see' the potential failures of society in life outside of fiction. Writ large, the limitations of Wilma's own sensory experience is a reminder that we should not restrict our understanding of gerontology and intersectional groups more broadly.

The ageist society that underpins the framework of 'Torching the dusties' is not a new motif to the dystopian narrative: Anthony Trollope's *The Fixed Period* (1990 [1882]) sees people euthanised at 68 years of age, and William F. Nolan's *Logan's Run* (2015 [1967]) takes this idea to its most extreme with an age cap of 21 years. The rationale behind the execution is consistent throughout these stories, as the younger generation seek to 'collect the remnants of the net worth—the legacy, the leftovers, the remains' (Atwood, 2014g, p. 238) in an almost cannibalistic desperation to rid the world of the financial and economic drain of the elderly. The youth are robbed of opportunity, of resources and of the possibility of financial successes as they (politely) cry 'TIMES UP. TORCH THE DUSTIES. HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME' (*ibid.*, p. 262).

As the dystopian narrative suggests, the intergenerational conflict between 'Our Turn' and the elderly residents of the country's care homes is driven by a need to allocate a finite number of resources. Sparking a political debate on the functionality and the usefulness of the aged population, Wilma listens to a number of experts and members of the public on the radio as they consider the future of the elderly:

> ... they quibble to and fro about whether this thing that's going on is an outbreak of thuggery, an assault on the whole notion of elders and civility and families, or is on the other hand, understandable, considering the challenges and provocations and, to speak quite frankly, the shambles, both economic and environmental, that those under, say, twenty-five have been saddled with. (*ibid.*, p. 257)

Rather than discussing their moral obligations, the callers assess the role of the elderly in relation to their economic value, with one individual noting how 'this turn of affairs is not without precedent in history ... the elderly used to bow out gracefully to make room for young mouths' (*ibid.*, p. 256). The anthropologist speaking here is not wrong and the recurrence of the forced execution of the elderly that

runs throughout literature exposes this inhumane approach. Adopted in *The Fixed Period*, *Logan's Run* and Thomas Middleton's *The Old Law* (2007 [1656]), once a man fails to produce any economic value, he is perceived as a burden on the state and is executed. It is perhaps by no means a coincidence that Atwood inverts the age used in *The Old Law* in 'Torching the dusties', with one radio caller claiming, 'Don't trust anyone under sixty' (Atwood, 2014g, p. 257), a direct challenge perhaps to the executions that are littered throughout dystopian literature.

The tensions between generations can be understood by investigating exactly what drives the disconnection *beyond* that of economic and financial security on a far more granular level. As suggested at the beginning of this paper, there is a difficulty in reconciling notions of youth with an image of the older 'version' of ourselves. For women in particular, this disconnect is marked by the discontinuous process of ageing that de Beauvoir has already identified—an idea that is articulated by Atwood (*ibid.*, p. 250) in 'Torching the dusties', writing, '"Oh, we weren't *underestimating* it. [...] We were just *ignoring* it!" "Ignorance is bliss!"'. As we gradually move into old age, argues de Beauvoir (1970, p. 315), and realise we have become the Other version of ourselves, the Self and the body are already at odds with one another. Thus, the physical ageing body becomes a form of personal dystopia creating a radically disharmonious relationship as the 'Self grows and develops, whilst the body increasingly lets it down' (Biggs, 1993, p. 36).[5] For example, in 'Torching the dusties', Wilma's disability is 'most discouraging' as she battles against the need to maintain a lifestyle that is as normal as possible and commensurate with her sense of Self. However, when Wilma looks at herself in the mirror, she can barely see her own face: 'it's like one of those face shaped blanks that once appeared on Internet accounts when you hadn't added your picture' (Atwood, 2014g, p. 229). The transition to old age is 'particularly difficult to assume because we have always regarded it as something alien, a foreign species' and poses the question: 'Can I have become a different being while I still remain myself?' (de Beauvoir, 1970, p.315).

Featherstone and Hepworth (1990, 1991; Featherstone, 1995) have written extensively on the physical appearance of the elderly, and argue that the image of the mask encapsulates the tensions between the external aged body and a youthful inner self. As Wilma turns away from the mirror, she manages to catch a glimpse of herself and thinks she sees 'a woman disconcertingly like her own mother as she was in old age, white hair, crumpled tissue-paper skin and all' (Atwood, 2014g, p. 230). Despite her deteriorations, Wilma still attempts to disconnect herself from the face that looks back at her, refusing to believe that she is the image of the Other. Hoping that 'perhaps she can deceive her mirror' (de Beauvoir, 1972 [1949], p. 588), Wilma adopts the masquerade of her mother in order to understand the gerontological processes of her body. This self-deception allows Wilma to distance herself from the ageing process in a bid to link the mirror self with a figure she associates with old age.

Wilma's refusal to reconcile the Self with her body, and her denial of the 'Other within', creates a new form of dystopian narrative: that is, the aged body as the dystopian self. The extreme lack that is demonstrated by the ageing female form (the castrated body that can no longer offer fertility as a form of recompense) becomes so far disassociated with social expectations that it can no longer find its place in reality; instead, it is sent to occupy space in the margins of society (for example, a care home). However, these issues around ageing are specifically gendered, as woman's loss of fertility is not

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[5]de Beauvoir (1970), Sontag (1997) and Woodward (1991) all comment on the tensions within this relationship.

countered (to the same extent) by man's loss of virility and there is a 'double standard of ageing' specifically around sexual activity. As Susan Sontag claims:

> The double standard about aging shows up most brutally in the conventions of sexual feeling, which presuppose a disparity between men and women that operates permanently to women's disadvantage [...] Women become sexually ineligible much earlier than men do. (Sontag, 1997, p. 20)

In order to challenge the double standards of ageing, older women must be brought back in from the margins and learn to identify the Self with the body. The dystopian model employed by Atwood serves to address these tensions in contemporaneous literature, offering a new model from a feminist perspective. Alternative narrative strategies are employed through the interaction of cyber technology in 'Alphinland', and the persistent centring of Wilma's voice in 'Torching the dusties'. In 'Torching the dusties' in particular, Wilma is the interpreter of events—not, as we may expect, the actors within 'Our Turn' or Wilma's elderly companion Tobias (despite his repeated attempts to centre himself throughout the narrative). This deliberative subversion of narrative should be integrated with contemporary narratives in order to create new, utopian spaces in which the elderly can move freely from the margins of society.

coming out of the care home: cyberspace as ustopia

The restrictive dystopian landscape of 'Torching the dusties' is inherently connected with the residential care home. One of the reasons that 'Our Turn' are successful in their swift execution of the elderly is because they are able to lay siege to nursing homes in such an efficient manner, and it is only through escaping the confines of Ambrosia that Wilma and Tobias are able to survive. The use of the residential home in Atwood's tale creates a paradox: Ambrosia can be interpreted as both private *and* public space. Its residents continue to live out their lives in their individual suites with assisted care when required, thus achieving a 'degree of privacy and autonomy' (Biggs, 1993, pp. 147). However, this private, domestic space is challenged through the use of staff and the imposed regulations of the working environment, 'which wider society has charged to manage the difficulties circumscribed within' (*ibid.*). Thus, what is initially perceived as a form of independent living evolves into compliance with a public regulatory body. This is not to say that managed space is always a negated (and in this instance, dystopian) space. Implementing restrictions of spatiality can be interpreted as a form of positive reaffirmation, reducing anxiety and providing a source of safety for senior members of society (*ibid.*). Wilma's dependency on her cleaner Katia, for example, is essential to maintaining her independent way of living and demonstrates her own awareness of the increasing limitations of her physical body. Such provisions are required to ensure normality in Wilma's life. The confines of space can be interpreted as a metaphor of the physical restrictions of the body; as Glenda Laws (1997, pp. 90–91) argues, 'As we age our *place* in society, both materially and metaphorically, changes. The material spaces and places in which we work, live and engage in leisure activities are age-graded and, in turn, age is associated with particular places and spaces'. Spaces such as retirement communities and nursing homes, according to Laws (*ibid.*), can be interpreted as deliberately constructed places born out of social practices. The implications of these restrictions on gerontological sexual activity are twofold, and can broadly be understood as being 'managed' by both self and socially-imposed boundaries. Firstly, the socially

imposed boundaries dictate that as residential space is interpreted as public domain, it therefore becomes an inappropriate area in which to exercise sexual desire. Secondly, boundaries imposed by the *self* are created as a reflection of this space and a (mis)identification with self as Other. The Self's failure (or refusal) to identify with the ageing Other creates a personal dystopia in which the Self and body are at odds with one another. The inability to reconcile these two aspects results in an age 'limbo' in which elderly women are denied their femininity, yet refuse to embrace the potential that the 'Other within' within may hold.

An understanding of the restrictive nature of space is required in order to understand exactly how we can escape it to create a new narrative strategy. For Laws (*ibid.*, p. 93), spatial limitations of the elderly fall under five categories: accessibility, mobility, motility (how far we are able to move), scale (how far we are *allowed* to move) and segregation. As we grow older, our metaphorical position varies and we find ourselves spatially bounded into a 'discrete location'; in direct opposition to these restrictions, we find that 'youth is everywhere', unbounded and limitless in it possibilities (*ibid.*, p. 91). Consideration of factors affecting spatiality are essential to ensure the physical and mental well-being of the elderly, and it is the exploitation of motility and accessibility of which 'Our Turn' most violently takes advantage in order to gain the upper hand in 'Torching the dusties'.

How then, do we disrupt limits of spatiality to ensure that the elderly are not restricted in modes of accessibility and mobility and are able to successfully explore beyond socially imposed boundaries? It is difficult to challenge restrictions that are biologically imposed, and issues that are associated with motility and physical disabilities associated with ageing pose a difficult area to overcome. There is, however, one approach that Atwood adopts in her speculative fiction as a means of movement beyond the realm of reality: the use of cyberspace. Described by M. Keith Brooker (1994, p. 149) as a 'classic dystopian motif', the advantages of virtual reality and cyberspace should not be underestimated. Moving beyond the fantasy realm of science fiction, information technology offers a viable solution to those who suffer from mobility and/or disability:

> [F]or those who are in deep old age, who are weak, frail or disabled, the body is not only a masking device which conceals and distorts the self which others interact with, in addition the lack of mobility and functioning capacity may make the body seem like a prison. One potential avenue of escape is the new modes of disembodiment and re-embodiment which are becoming possible through developments in information technology. In virtual reality it is possible for disabled people to enter a simulated environment … (Featherstone and Wernick, 1995, p. 11)

The potential of virtual reality offers the elderly a mode in which they can explore fantasy worlds beyond the confines of their physical 'real' boundaries. The potential of this new landscape sees a shift from the perceived dystopia of old age to a new utopian world that can be carried out in cyberspace. Atwood (2014a) describes the difficulties Constance encounters—in part created by the storm around her and in part created by her advanced age—and the mental comfort she experiences entering Alphinland, a world that provides Constance with the mobility she requires. The privacy afforded by cyberspace also makes it an ideal vehicle in which the elderly can explore their own fantasies (sexual or otherwise). However, appropriate behaviours within the public domain still exercise restrictions over the use of information technology, and this is a significant barrier to creating a virtual utopia online. In 'Torching the dusties', Ambrosia imposes access restrictions on the internet, and none of the residents are allowed to own a

personal computer. Wilma suggests that these restrictions are put into place in order to control sexual desires, as she suspects that:

> the real reason [for the controls] is that they're afraid the women will fall victim to online scammers and start up unsuitable romances ... and the men will be sucked into the Internet porn and then get overheated and have heart attacks (Atwood, 2014g, p. 242)

Not only do the restrictions on accessibility to online content actively attempt to oppress the sexual desires of the residents of Ambrosia, but Wilma's limited motility due to her deteriorating eyesight also has negative implications on how she perceives herself: 'Now she can no longer fool around on the Internet, Wilma has lost track of how people talk. Real people, younger people' (*ibid.*, p. 236). The body works in opposition to the Self, refusing to comply with emotional and mental demands. In Wilma's instance, it is her own perception of herself—her 'discouraging' disabilities and her poor eyesight—that results in her inability to reconcile her body with her sense of identity. As such, she no longer reads herself as a 'real person': unable to effectively communicate in a modern age, she is denied the ability to communicate beyond the walls of Ambrosia.

What happens, then, when elderly women are freed from the limitations imposed on them by modes of accessibility and have free reign in cyberspace? In 'Alphinland', the recently widowed Constance introduces us to an imaginary world that is stored on her computer. The author of a hugely successful science fiction series also called *Alphinland*, Constance's mode of writing is commensurate with the progression of technology: once written on an electronic typewriter 'now obsolete' (Atwood, 2014a, p. 14), the fantasy world now exists as a complex cyber hive, with Constance acting as 'creator, puppet mistress, its determining Fate' (*ibid.*, p. 17). Cyberspace acts as a form of escapism for Constance, offering an interactive environment in which she can carry out her fantasies. As Constance clicks on the gated entry to Alphinland, we are led down the path to her imaginary world:

> On the other side of the gateway there's no sunny landscape. Instead there's a small narrow road, almost a trail. It winds downhill to a bridge, which is lit—because it's night—by yellowish lights shaped like eggs or water drops. Beyond the bridge is a dark wood. (*ibid.*, p. 16)

Although she is its creator, Alphinland provides Constance with a space where she does not know 'exactly where she might end up' (*ibid.*, p. 17). Unrestricted by issues of mobility that Constance experiences in real life, as she admits to feeling like a 'prisoner in her own home' (*ibid.*, p. 6), Alphinland provides Constance with a version of utopia that she so desperately desires. A source of economic and financial success throughout Constance's life, it is natural that the cyber version of her literary fantasy series should provide a source of autonomy for her as she grows older. It is perhaps fitting that the story which follows 'Alphinland' in the *Stone Mattress*, 'Revenant' (Atwood, 2014d) (a tale that looks at Constance's ex-lover Gavin in his old age), deliberately mocks literary criticism of fantasy and science fiction through its representation of gender. Gavin re-emerges as the protagonist in 'Revenant', no longer confined to his box in Alphinland, yet physically trapped within the limits of his ageing body, living his life with a (much younger) wife as a celebrated poet. Yet, the story recentres itself on Constance again after it is revealed that a young PhD student interviewing Gavin for her thesis is actually speaking to him for her research into Alphinland.

Although Alphinland may be read as a personal utopia for Constance, this does not mean that it is a utopia for all, particularly for those she has 'trapped' in her fantasy land. Specifically, Atwood's ustopias function as gendered space in which wronged women are allowed to enact a 'revenge' of sorts for the sexual indiscretions suffered at the hands of men in their younger years. For example, in 'Stone mattress', Verna murders her unrepentant rapist from high school; similarly, Alphinland functions as a ustopian space in which Constance rights the wrongs of her (dystopian) sexual relationship with Gavin. As she recalls how she was cheated on by her lover Gavin when she was in her early twenties, Constance reveals that she has kept her ex-boyfriend 'in a state of suspended animation' (Atwood, 2014a, p. 19) for fifty years in an old oak cask in a remotely situated winery in Alphinland. In order to keep Gavin 'safe', he is not allowed to be tortured by the creatures residing in Alphinland—a fate not afforded to his other lover, Marjorie. Stung by 'a hundred emerald and indigo bees at noon everyday' bearing a pain 'beyond excruciating' (*ibid.*, pp. 25–26), Alphinland is a dystopian vision for those who have wronged Constance. Andrew Hooghem (2012, p. 67) identifies this trend throughout Atwood's speculative fiction, articulating that 'utopia is in the eye of the beholder'. It is perhaps by no means a coincidence that Constance's version of utopia contains remnants of her earlier memories, as 'much utopian thought is clearly related to an atavistic desire to return to what is perceived as an earlier, better time in history or in one's life' (Brooker, 1994, p. 5). Unburdened by the responsibilities of her 'real' life—her children pressuring her to move into a care home, her recently deceased husband, the suspicion of Ewan having an affair many years ago, and of course issues surrounding physical limitations correlative with her age—Alphinland gives Constance the permission to control, create and enact revenge on those who have hurt her in the past.

There is one issue that is associated with the use of cyberspace: although it can increase spatial limitations, overcome issues of segregation and accessibility, and provide a space whereby issues with mobility can widely (if only temporarily) be put to one side, it is ultimately an artificially composed world and does not address the problems of the 'real' world. Cyberspace is also not available to all who wish to use it. Wilma for example, with her failing eyesight and restricted access to online material is unable to create her own cyber utopia due to social and biological impositions out of her control. Likewise, Constance reveals that she has no desire in engaging with her fans via social media, primarily due to concerns of her own self-perception and that 'she doesn't wish to disappoint them' (Atwood, 2014a, p. 29).

Similar issues surrounding technology are also explored in *Oryx and Crake*, as Atwood interrogates the spatial limits of technology. In her extensive publication on Atwood's work, Howells (2005 [1996], p. 175) argues, 'Though Atwood does not venture into cyberspace territory … she does explore the psychological effects of living in a high-tech world of artificially constructed reality'. Crake and Jimmy's use of the word 'bogus' is, according to Howells (*ibid.*), a 'convenient way of blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality'. The lines between real and artificial are highly ambiguous in *Oryx and Crake*, and the entire premise of the dystopian narrative relies on the blurring of these boundaries. Even the names 'Oryx' and 'Crake' originate from the names of dead animals and are inspired by the online game *Extinctathon* (*ibid.*, p. 172). The effect of living in such an artificial world places Jimmy and Crake in a 'decadent postmodern culture' similar to the one that Jean Baudrillard outlines in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994 [1981]). Threatening the difference between '"true" and "false" [and] between "real"

and "imaginary" by undermining the foundations of referential reality' (Howells, 2005 [1996], p. 176), the spatiality of Alphinland also sees a crossover into the real world. As 'the process of simulation is always imperfect and it is impossible to keep it entirely separate from reality' (*ibid.*), so Constance experiences an interchange between Alphinland and the real world. Believing that 'the rules of Alphinland no longer hold' (Atwood, 2014a, p. 34) when Gavin 'escapes' from his casket and into her dream, the boundaries between cyberspace and the real world are no longer defined, allowing for discrete movement between the two. If these boundaries can no longer be held, then we must consider for how long Alphinland can be considered a safe place for Constance in which to move around. It appears that the artificial nature of cyberspace is still vulnerable to attacks from reality; although it offers utopian space for Constance at the moment, it may not always provide the refuge she requires.

disrupting the stereotype: sexuality in old age

The use of online technology in both 'Torching the dusties' and 'Alphinland' is strongly associated with forbidden desire: the controlled online access in the residential care home is used to prevent elderly men from looking at pornographic material, and Constance's visit to Alphinland is followed up by a highly sexual dream with her old flame, Gavin. Overt sexuality amongst the elderly is a prominent theme throughout the tales that appear in *Stone Mattress*, and is one of Atwood's greater successes in inverting the gerontological stereotype in her fiction. Given her approaches to ageing women as outlined in the beginning of this paper, it is fitting that Atwood should return to *The Robber Bride* in the *Stone Mattress* collection with 'I dream of Zenia with the bright red teeth' (2014c). Haunting the wives of the husbands she stole, even in death Zenia maintains her image of a vampiric predator, preying on her victims. Similarly, in the short story from which the collection draws its title, Atwood (2014a, p. 202) depicts a sexually active older woman, Verna, who flirts with men as 'warm-up practice, if only to demonstrate to herself that she can still knock one off if she wishes to'. Sexuality for Verna is exploited as a power move, a fact made clear when she murders an old love by whom she was once wronged. Atwood's contemporaries, such as Angela Carter, also openly subvert the behaviours of old age, specifically s*exuality* in old age. Carter's *Wise Children* (1991) culminates in an energetic sexual liaison between Dora and her Uncle Peregrine (aged 75 and 100, respectively): age is clearly no barrier to sexual aptitude in this instance. Writing over twenty-six years ago, Carter was certainly ahead of her time in her approaches to gerontological sexual activity. These stories are not dystopian in nature, nor do they fall into the genre of speculative fiction, and so they will not be discussed at length here. However, it is remarkable to note the sexual voracity of the older women in Atwood's short stories and in Carter's final novel—a trend that is not often imitated in contemporary feminist literature.

Thus far, the present analysis of 'Torching the dusties' has highlighted it as a dystopian tale for the elderly: throughout the story, there are socially imposed spatial limitations and violent intergenerational conflicts and the frailties of Wilma's physical body are made clear through references to her Charles Bonnet syndrome. However, Atwood manages to successfully invert the role of the asexual elderly woman throughout the entirety of the narrative and openly challenges the conventional role we expect older women to fill. This stereotypical image in Western culture, argues Linda Gannon (1999, p. 112), takes on two forms: the grandmotherly matron and the irritable, depressed crone. Both images 'presuppose the

absence of sexuality': the grandmother has fulfilled her role in the form of maternity and does not desire sex without a meaningful (reproductive) end, and the crone has and will continue to be sexually dissatisfied (*ibid.*). This dual image is not applied to men of the same age: whereas women lose their sexuality and their femininity, as they grow older, men are still perceived as sexually active beings. Gannon (*ibid.*, p. 113) claims, 'The cultural stereotype of sexuality in the ageing man is one of continuity, virility and potency—a form of arrogance emerging from patriarchal society and being fertilized by a cultural preoccupation with sexual activity'. Founded by cultural misconceptions of the menopause and a confusion 'between fertility and potency' (*ibid.*), women are stripped of their femininity, 'whereas man grows old gradually' (de Beauvoir, 1972 [1949], p. 587). These assumptions surrounding sexuality based on gender are false, and such misconceptions can be highlighted and corrected through literary studies. Atwood (2004b, p. 514) for her own part addresses this issue of sexuality in her speculative fiction, drawing attention to the false image of women: 'The majority of dystopias—Orwell's included—have been written by men, and the point of view has been male. When women have appeared in them, they have been either sexless automatons or rebels who've defied the sex rules of the regime'. Overt sexuality is often interpreted as a disruption to the dystopian narrative and as an open challenge to an oppressive state. For example, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, public intimacy is discouraged and sex is only perceived as a means to an end. Sexual enjoyment is carried out in a private and discrete manner, and only afforded to the wealthier classes. In *Stone Mattress*, we see a dual challenge to the dystopian oppressors in the openness of older females about their sexual desires, dreams and fantasies. Although there is no sexual activity in the physical sense in the stories of *Stone Mattress*, Atwood's acknowledgement of sexual desire amongst the older generation plays an important part in rewriting the gerontological narrative. Whereas more often than not in both literature and life in North America, female sexual desire is invisible and extinguished, within Atwood's 'wicked' tales, it is normalised, present and rendered unexceptional through repetition.

In 'Alphinland', the role of speculative fiction and the integration of cyberspace spurs on Constance's romantic dream with her ex-lover: 'What a night. Who would have thought she was capable of having such an intense erotic dream, at her age?' (Atwood, 2014a, p. 31). The potential of an online reality that can offer her a viable space in which to explore these fantasies is only one that can be provided by a utopian future: one that does not stereotype or consider age, disability or other affects, but instead offers a neutral ground on which to act out one's desires (be these sexual or otherwise). This is not to say that she is not capable of fulfilling sexual desires. The story 'Alphinland' is littered with references to Constance's sex life when she was younger as she reminisces about the 'vigorous and impromptu sex' (*ibid.*, p. 18) she had with Gavin in her twenties. Constance's paranoia over her husband's affair also makes it clear that sex and past infidelities play at the very forefront of her mind. The haunting of sexual violence, abuse and infidelity inflicted upon the female protagonists within Atwood's tales has acted to silence and repress their own sexual lives. It is through exercising alternative strategies within the mechanisms of old age (e.g. through technology, through an understanding of autonomous sexual desire) that these women are successfully able to kill off their histories of sexual violence and oppression.

Sexual desire amongst the elderly is at its peak in 'Torching the dusties'. Tobias conforms to Gannon's stereotype of the charming older man, revealing that he has been married four times—and that all his

wives have cheated on him, but 'it would be hard to respect a woman who wasn't desired by other men' (Atwood, 2014g, p. 230). He frequently has sexually charged dreams and openly shares them with Wilma, 'I had such a dream! ... Purple, Maroon. It was very sexual, with music' (*ibid.*, p. 232). Sexual energies are not restricted to older men—although some of the 'craft lechers' attempt to look at online pornography on their phones, as they are unable to access the content on their computers. Wilma and other female residents, such as Jo-Anne and Noreen, continue to consider men in a sexual manner, and Wilma notes her companions' 'impressive flirting skills' (*ibid.*, p. 248) when engaging with men. Age and sexuality are recognised as not being mutually inclusive of one another, and Wilma admits to still having some desire left in her yet. Sexual energies that ought to be suppressed and act as a transgressive force are allowed to circulate freely within the text, and although no sexual intimacies take place, it is not at the restriction of the elderly body. As Wilma considers what it would be like to be with Tobias, she reflects that it would 'be too painful' for her, not on a physical level but on an emotional one: 'the silent comparisons that would be going on: the luscious, chocolate-sampling mistresses, the divine breasts, the marble thighs. Then only her' (*ibid.*, p. 252). Just as Verna and Constance are haunted by their own sexual histories, so Tobias' long list of lovers haunts Wilma. He has, in effect, created his own dystopian history around his flippant disregard for women in his younger years.

Atwood's deliberate approach to the sexual desires amongst the elderly—in *The Robber Bride* and the short stories that appear in *Stone Mattress*—brings us full circle to the dystopian narrative strategy. As Brooker (1994, p. 12) notes, 'sexuality [is seen] as a potential source of inherently transgressive energies and regard the attainment of sexual liberation as an important step toward a more general freedom from social and political repression'. Thus, the topic of sex both successfully challenges the dystopian structure and refuses to conform to the stereotypes of gerontology that are portrayed in literature. By actively demonstrating the sexual needs and desires of the elderly female characters in *Stone Mattress*, Atwood paves the way for a new gerontological discourse that refuses to ignore the needs of the older generation.

conclusion

Through her collection of short stories in *Stone Mattress: Nine Wicked Tales*, Atwood radically destabilises the stereotype of the older figure, specifically challenging our perceptions of the older women. Disrupting the asexual, matronly figure that is so often characterised within literature, Atwood utilises science fiction motifs to explore new modes of delivering an alternative gerontological narrative. Her short stories—'Alphinland' and 'Torching the dusties' in particular—demonstrate that cyberspace can be utilised as a temporary place of escape from biologically and socially imposed restrictions and the forging of imagined utopias. The importance of this 'new space' for the elderly should not be undervalued as 'virtual reality clearly has some very important implications for our notions of embodiment, the structure and ordering of social encounters and out-of-body experiences' (Featherstone and Wernick, 1995, p. 233). Virtual reality and the role of cyberspace (specifically for the elderly) 'could well have significant implications for the creation of a new set of images of what it is to be old' (*ibid.*). Likewise, elderly women refuse to conform to the stereotypical, asexual, matronly grandmother role. Although the body is

'constrained by its biological limits ... these constraints are perpetually able to be superseded' (Grosz, 1994, pp. 187–188), and Atwood persistently draws attention to the continued sexual desire in older women that is 'normalised' in these stories, as well as within her dystopian works (for example, through Pilar in the *MaddAddam* trilogy). Atwood's *Stone Mattress* tales rewrite the role of the elderly in speculative fiction, centring their own experiences within a dystopian framework. The centring of the perspectives of elderly women (with Constance opening the collection and Wilma having the final say) correlates with an interplay between technology and sexuality, and it is within these boundaries of speculative fiction that Atwood suggests a new gerontological discourse.

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