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Tongue-Untied: Rebellion Through Linguistic Manipulation in Margaret Atwood's Works

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If the mind were a sculpture, molded in the shape of a person's memories, thoughts and beliefs, language would be one of the primary tools for shaping the clay. Words and phrases form the basis of conscious thought, and changing the words and phrases one uses can have a significant impact on thought. For instance, Romance languages include formal and informal forms of address that shape social interactions, and people of ambiguous gender challenge language norms by using atypical pronouns. Many governments have used language to affect the thoughts of their citizens, whether in a minor context such as the U.S. government's adoption of the term "freedom fries" to express dissatisfaction with France, or in a major context such as the Japanese government's command that citizens of Japanese-occupied Korea surrender their Korean names and adopt Japanese appellations. Linguistic influence can flow from society to an individual, or vice versa. Margaret Atwood explores the relationship between language, thought and society in many of her works, including her novels *The Edible Woman*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Robber Bride*, and *Oryx and Crake*. Within these works, Atwood contrasts modern societies that exert little influence over the language their citizens use with dystopian worlds that heavily shape their inhabitants' speech. By including characters in both modern and dystopian novels who question and manipulate language in defiance of linguistic norms, Atwood critiques current trends of linguistic commercialization and patriarchalization, and reveals how linguistic awareness can shape mental awareness to help individuals fight both mild and severe forms of societal oppression.

In *The Edible Woman* and *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood depicts two progressive stages of society's movement toward capitalistic control of language: in the present-day world of *The Edible Woman*, characters struggle to elicit meaning from sanitized business jargon, while in the

dystopian future of *Oryx and Crake*, the struggle is simply to remember words that once had meaning, as corporate slang terms and portmanteaus have replaced many elements of refined speech. By drawing attention to corporate-influenced language construction in both works, and by including characters who appreciate the power of words despite corporate trends, Atwood questions the validity of commercialization and criticizes its detrimental effect on sophisticated patterns of speech and thought.

Although many characters in both works take for granted the corporate alteration of language, Atwood specifically emphasizes its prevalence to the reader, raising the question of whether words and phrases retain their dignity and clarity when businesses exploit them for profitable purposes. In *The Edible Woman*, where mass marketing has just begun to take hold, language distortion is mainly visible in the context of the main character, Marian's, job at market-research firm Seymour Surveys. Despite working at Seymour for several years, Marian remains conscious of the deceitful nature of the language-related work she performs—for instance, when drafting a letter to a survey participant who finds a fly in her box of Seymour-sponsored cereal, Marian thinks to herself that "[t]he main thing…[is] to avoid calling the housefly by its actual name" (24). Marian's search for professional phrases to salvage Seymour's reputation highlights the tendency of businesses to bend language away from its real meaning if necessary. Atwood also uses the Seymour storyline to call attention to commercial disapproval of certain words, such as when she portrays participants in a survey about a beer commercial "object[ing] to the word 'Tingly' as being 'Too light,'" or Marian "trying to make the word [beer] sound as skim-milk-like as possible" while recruiting subjects for the same survey (47; 44). The words *tingly* and *beer* do not seem to fully suit the purposes of the companies that utilize them, creating tension between respecting semantics and pushing a

product. Jayne Patterson asserts that Marian's language, not the language of Seymour Surveys, represents the outcome of capitalist oppression when she states that "[Marian's] whole identity is buried in consumerism…she is forever providing us with useless descriptions of labels, brands and wrappings. Her language is such a nimiety of modifiers and qualifiers that the head is imperceivable" (par. 10-25). Although Marian's language does include many adjectives and modifiers, as is evident when she describes her cheese-and-lettuce sandwich as "a slice of plastic cheese between two pieces of solidified bubble-bath with several flaps of pallid greenery," Patterson misses the mark when she disparages these additions as useless and Marian as indoctrinated into consumerism (Atwood, *Edible* 137). On the contrary, the plethora of verbiage that Marian uses identifies her as an anti-consumerist, one who allows her words to flow naturally rather than succumbing to the word-pruning and circumlocution propagated by Seymour Surveys and capitalist culture in general. Marian's creative, entertaining sketch of the sandwich plainly betrays the fact that it is unappetizing—if Marian were truly capitalistically brainwashed, she would try to conceal the truth and utilize her adjectives to extoll the delicious taste and low cost of the sandwich to readers, the metaphorical "buyers" of her story. From *The Edible Woman*, the astute reader might extrapolate a future in which companies invent entirely novel words to convey just the right message to customers, and this is exactly what happens in *Oryx and Crake*, where commercialization of language becomes more extreme. Names of corporations such as "NooSkins," "RejoovenEsense," and "AnooYoo" illustrate how businesses in *Oryx and Crake* have discarded the rules of spelling and the individuality of each word in favor of catchier, more salable combinations (53; 225; 245). Similarly, when corporations create genetically modified animals, the animals often earn hybrid monikers like "snat" for snake/rat or "rakunk" for raccoon/skunk, showing the companies' disregard for scientific taxonomy in the

pursuit of a sharp-sounding product (51). In contrast with Seymour Surveys and the generically-named merchandise it sponsors in *The Edible Woman*, business and product names in *Oryx and Crake* have evolved to take on a garish life of their own. Advertising language has also changed, as shown when the main character, Jimmy, takes a job writing ads for AnooYoo: "Once in a while he'd make up a word—*tensicity, fibracionous, pheremonimal*…His proprietors liked those kinds of words in the small print" (249). Jimmy's free-wheeling fabrication demonstrates how, since Marian's time, corporations have grown bolder in their willingness to sell their wares with false language. Where Marian would simply omit words that do not agree with the goals of her corporation, Jimmy designs an entirely novel lexicon of words that exist solely for the purpose of promoting sales. By stressing the commercial pruning and misuse of words and phrases, first in the isolated, present-day example of Seymour Surveys and then in many widespread instances in a corpocratic future society, Atwood asks whether language, and by extension thought, can retain its refined precision in an increasingly commercialized world.

Once she has set the scene with examples of the commercial manipulation of language, Atwood adds characters in each work who value words and meanings outside of society's accepted range, illustrating the loss to both thought and speech patterns when people only view language in a corporate capacity. Duncan, a graduate student whom Marian first meets while conducting her beer-commercial survey, epitomizes this rebellious role in *The Edible Woman*. Through his unusual responses to the word-association component of the survey, Duncan reveals his ability to think outside the constraints that marketers place on semantics, such as when he tells Marian that "'Tang of the Wilderness' is obviously a dog, part wolf, part husky, who saves his master three times" and that the phrase "healthy hearty taste" refers to "heartburn…Or no…one of those cannibal stories" (53; 52). Rather than focusing on the phrases in the

commercial only as they pertain to beer, Duncan provides more intriguing answers that open Marian and the reader's minds to the creative possibilities immanent in every part of speech—possibilities which advertisers rarely explore. Jennifer Hobgood underemphasizes Duncan's influence on Marian, proposing that "Duncan is constructed almost as a dream figure that Marian conjures as an object-cause of her desire to be freed from systemic repression. He is best understood as a catalyst for an experiment activated by Marian on her own terms" (par. 26). Though Marian decides on her own to begin challenging the linguistic status quo, Hobgood seems not to realize that without encountering Duncan, Marian would never have acquired the necessary inspiration to activate this "experiment." Duncan's roommate Fischer strikes another blow against corporate language restriction when he invokes Latin roots during a discourse on early views of poetry: "[The poet's] poem was something begotten on him so to speak by the Muses…hence the term 'inspiration,' the instillation of breath as it were" (216). Atwood depicts Fischer recalling the historical beginnings of the word *inspiration* to pique interest in the rich past of language, and to remind the reader that every word carries its own unique story of origin and development through various iterations. This historical digression hints at everything language stands to lose if the capitalist establishment begins assigning new, arbitrary word meanings. While in *The Edible Woman*, language remains intact enough so that opposing corporate trends is an intellectual task, in *Oryx and Crake*, where new, shallow words and meanings already exist, a dissident role consists simply of remembering pieces of language from an earlier time. Jimmy commits such an act when he "compile[s] lists of old words… of a precision and suggestiveness that no longer ha[ve] a meaningful application in today's world…*wheelwright, lodestone, saturnine*, *adamant*" (195). By memorializing these words, so unlike the names of corporations and GMOs that permeate his existence, Jimmy displays his

refusal to believe that the commercial reality he sees around him is the only meaningful reality. Suparna Banerjee contends that Jimmy's wordlists represent not only rebellion but cultural preservation, since "language…is presented in *Oryx and Crake* as an epitome of human culture…and as a symbol of the unique wholeness of the human" (par. 31). Banerjee's assertion that language and culture are linked becomes applicable to Jimmy after a global plague leaves him as the sole survivor, struggling to stay sane. Despite forgetting much of his old life, post-apocalyptic Jimmy sustains his memories of antique words, as shown when he is relaxing in the forest and "[f]rom nowhere, a word appears: *Mesozoic*. He can see the word…but he can't reach the word" (Atwood, *Oryx* 39). As Banerjee implies, the words from the past that remain in Jimmy's mind after the apocalypse constitute his only connection to his old culture and his essential humanity. The fact that Jimmy retains only words from the distant past, rather than the corporate language of his recent past at AnooYoo—even though the demise of humanity has placed both types of speech in danger—strengthens the idea that only language without a corporate agenda contains the true spirit of human culture. Through the inclusion of characters who celebrate language outside of its corporate-influenced iterations, Atwood shows all that society has to lose to commercialization, from alternate word meanings to rich linguistic histories to the very nature of humanity itself.

To the casual observer, Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* and *Oryx and Crake* deal with totally separate themes and settings, but both works share a common message about the sanctity of language in the face of commercialization. There exists a similar common theme, this time relating to women's linguistic freedom, between *The Robber Bride* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. Juxtaposing these two works reveals a possible negative outcome of bringing language into the patriarchal domain. Linguistic patriarchalization, the removal of linguistic gender

equality in favor of language control by men, is not exactly the same as linguistic commercialization, but the two movements exhibit several of the same traits. Both involve the suppression of free speech—in one case, corporations compromise all people's linguistic independence to promote their agenda of advertising and increased sales; in the other case, men's desire for power leads them to reduce women's ability to verbalize. Additionally, commercialization and patriarchalization both embody a linguistic shift away from humanity's deepest roots: matriarchal, goddess-worshipping cultures powered by oral storytelling and barter economies. As Atwood's societies migrate from money-conscious to money-centric and from male-influenced to male-controlled, they draw ever further away from a past where women ruled, currency did not exist, and every group passed down its traditions via spoken word alone. This idea of detrimental forward progress links the present-future pairing of *The Edible Woman* and *Oryx and Crake* with its mirror image, the present-future set of *The Robber Bride* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. In the imagined future world of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood describes a nightmarish dystopia called Gilead where men have restricted women's speech in quantity and phrasing, while in the modern setting of *The Robber Bride*, women are mostly free to use diverse language despite sexist undertones in their societal values. By including female characters in both works who use altered or unusual language as both a link to their censored pasts and a forum of interaction with their sexist presents, Atwood exposes the unsettling parallels between the egalitarian and repressive worlds, and reveals the potential of language manipulation as a form of feminist resistance that can free women's minds from patriarchal domination.

Atwood's female characters invoke unconventional uses of language to help them connect to aspects of the past that their societies conceal or underemphasize, illustrating the role of language in forging a mnemonic link with a more feminist version of history. In *The*

Handmaid's Tale, this linguistic memory appears in the words that Offred, the narrator, recalls from the time before Gileadean patriarchy forced her to become a concubine and forbade her to read. The "history" in question does not lie far in the past, since Offred grew up, married, and had a daughter prior to the Gileadean takeover of the government, but Handmaid laws dictate that Offred must behave and speak as if her former life never happened. Meeting clandestinely with the Commander, the head of her household, Offred plays Scrabble, utilizing "all the old tricks with consonants [she] could dream up or remember" to spell words that her position as a Handmaid no longer requires her to know (155). Offred also learns an old Latin phrase, "*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*," from the Commander; he explains that it once meant "Don't let the bastards grind you down" (187). Through the simple act of thinking about and speaking words that link her to history—her own history, or the past in general—Offred defies Gileadean society's mandate that women must be silent, uneducated and unconnected to their previous lives. Cavalcanti specifically defines Offred's linguistic nonconformity as a rebellion, stating that "[t]he act of resistance is further revealed in the narrator's careful and conscious use of language in countermoves against the verbal hygiene [linguistic regulation] imposed upon women" (par. 20). Cavalcanti highlights a vital point when she emphasizes that Offred's conscious awareness elevates her linguistic recall into a true insurrection: Offred recognizes that words from the past represent "freedom, an eyeblink of it," as she muses during one Scrabble game, and she chooses to partake of this freedom despite pressure from the Gileadean patriarchy to renounce it (139). While women in *The Robber Bride* do not have to fight against historical censorship to the same degree that Offred does, Atwood shows several female characters in *The Robber Bride* employing nontraditional language to interpret the uncensored past from a feminist viewpoint. For instance, Roz, one of the main characters, has young twin daughters who reject

conventional male-focused accounts of past events when at bedtime, they "[decide] that all the characters in every story [have] to be female…If Roz slip[s] up and [says] 'he,' they would correct her" (326). The twins grasp that even a seemingly egalitarian society can under-represent women in its fictional or true accounts of the past, and they attempt to remedy this exclusion by modifying the language their mother uses. Roz herself also strengthens women's connection to traditional histories when she re-imagines the names of historically significant rivers as potential lipstick names for her company to sell: "*Rubicon*, a bright holly-berry. *Jordan*, a rich grape-tinged red" (110). Although Roz's world, unlike Offred's, encourages her knowledge of these pieces of language from the past, the river names still carry a connotation of male wars and conquest, which Roz subverts through her re-conceptualization of the words as feminine cosmetic titles. In her examples of Offred's, Roz's, and the twins' uses of language that contradicts traditional, male-dictated ways of speaking about the past, Atwood shows that linguistic creativity can constitute a valuable weapon in women's fight to preserve their place in the patriarchally dominated historical record.

Not content with utilizing language to help them recall the role of women in the past, Atwood's female characters manipulate language as it flows in the present, showing how language alteration can constitute a means of questioning and critiquing society's sexist norms. Although Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* never deviates publicly from the narrow range of acceptable speech for Gileadean women, Atwood depicts her playing with language in her thoughts, such as when she muses on the meanings of the word *job*: "It's a job for a man. Do a jobbie, they'd say to children who were being toilet trained. Or of dogs; he did a job on the carpet…The Book of Job" (173). Offred's fluid and idiomatic extrapolation on a single word contradicts the rigid restrictions Gilead places on female speech and on women's activity in

general, suggesting that Offred does not accept Gileadean antifeminist ideals. Lucy M. Freibert explains the significance of the system Offred is defying when she states that "[t]he formulaic speech patterns imposed on the Handmaids, 'Blessed be the fruit', 'May the Lord open', 'Praise be' [9]..., serve to perpetuate the religious nature of their role and to prevent practical conversation" (qtd. in Johnson 42). Limiting the Handmaids' conversation via prescribed speech patterns, as Freibert points out, aids the government of Gilead in its quest to eradicate conversation and with it the opportunity for political rebellion. Offred cannot escape the confines of Handmaid speech scripts in public, but her meditations on the meaning of "job" and other words show that the rebellious spirit survives at least in her thoughts. In a related instance, Offred refutes a linguistic concept entirely when she asks herself, "Why is it that night falls, instead of rising, like the dawn?" (191). This insurrection against the rules of phrase construction occurs only in Offred's mind, but it reflects her thoughts of rebelling against other overarching rules, such as the rule that women must be submissive to men. Even the content of her question reflects Offred's feminist leanings, since her wish to describe night as rising instead of falling parallels the feminist ideal that women should rise up against the dominance of men. The men in *The Robber Bride* impose no such rigid mandates of dominance on women's behavior, but female characters still question and alter language in reaction to the chauvinistic undertones they sense in social pressures. While contemplating her husband's mistress, Roz dissects the phrase *man-eater* on a literal level, thinking to herself, "Women don't want all the men eaten up by man-eaters; they want a few left over so they can eat some themselves" (433). By separating the literal components of the phrase, Roz overcomes pressure from society to take idioms—and by extension, other social constructs—for granted, and not to examine them too closely. Her interpretation of the saying from a woman's perspective defies conventional views of "man-eaters" as anomalous, implying

instead that it is normal for all women to exert control in romantic relationships to some degree. Another key female character, Tony, counters sexist ways of thinking even more dramatically when she imagines an alternate language in which English words are spelled backwards. A left-hander whose teachers force her to switch to her right hand, Tony secretly continues to use her left hand to write about her alter ego, "Tnomerf Ynot [Tony Fremont]," who she pictures as a twin who is nonetheless "a good deal taller than Tony herself. Taller, stronger, more daring" (153). Not only does Tony resist pressure to give up her natural writing hand, she escapes the traditional idea of women as the weaker sex through her vision of bold, brave Tnomerf Ynot. Irshad and Banerji accurately summarize the significance of Tony's linguistic inversion when they argue that "[b]y reversing the hands and letters from right to left, Tony constructs her own language. By doing this she not only rejects the Patriarchal language but also laws of patriarchy" (par. 38). The implication that women can only resist societal sexism via completely novel forms of speech is not valid, but Tony's drastically altered personal language does serve as an effective outlet for the assertive side of herself that male-focused paradigms usually marginalize. Atwood depicts Offred, Roz and Tony modifying and examining words and phrases in the present to illustrate that, no matter how many or how few restrictions a society places on them, women can still subvert patriarchal concepts of femininity by rejecting their world's current patriarchal norms of language.

Most people cannot imagine a future that differs drastically from the present, but Atwood effectively accomplishes this feat by magnifying aspects of current life until they seem foreign. One element that Atwood explores extensively is the evolution of language—how might people speak fifty years from now? What factions might try to gain control of language for their own purposes? By comparing *The Edible Woman* and *The Robber Bride*, two of Atwood's works set

in the current day, to *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*, two of her futuristic dystopias, it is possible to discern a cautionary message to speakers and writers of days yet to come. Atwood's present-day works depict language as most readers recognize it in daily life—slightly commercialized in *The Edible Woman*, slightly sexist in *The Robber Bride*. Then, in her dystopias, she extrapolates these mild tendencies into nightmare scenarios of corporate mutilation of language in *Oryx and Crake*, and linguistic oppression of women in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Taken together, these two pairs of stories warn readers of the potential outcomes of language development; they suggest that in the future, the pendulum of language might swing further away from its starting point in early female-ruled, barter-driven societies, losing dignity and historical meaning as it travels. However, the four novels also suggest a possible solution to prevent this outcome from occurring. In each work, whether set in the present or future, Atwood includes at least one character who questions linguistic norms and uses language unconventionally, implying that linguistic nonconformity is the key to survival. Through these rebellious characters, Atwood seems to be saying that as long as members of present-day society can maintain a certain level of linguistic creativity, an appreciation of the history of language, and a desire for linguistic equality between genders and other groups, society need not fall victim to the linguistic ills she imagines for the future. Even in a world where words have lost their nuances and their historical value, the fight is not over if one person still "speaks outside the box." For, as Atwood illustrates so forcefully in these four works, speaking outside the box means that one is also actively thinking outside the box, and this mental resistance to oppression can endure much longer than any physical protest.

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