

ESCAPING FROM ALLEGORIES:  
*CAT'S EYE AND KING LEAR*

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In her 1972 study of Canadian literature, aptly titled *Survival*, Margaret Atwood uses the symbol of the mirror to describe the difficulty faced by Canadian writers and artists, struggling to assert their voices in a country trying to define itself against a colonial past. Here, she sees Canada as squeezed between the overwhelming, colonizing powers of Great Britain on one side, and The United States on the other. In her view, a piece of art becomes a mirror. As she writes:

If a country or a culture lacks such mirrors it has no way of knowing what it looks like; it must travel blind. If, as has long been the case in [Canada], the viewer is given a mirror that reflects not him but someone else, and told at the same time that the reflection he sees is himself, he will get a very distorted idea of what he is really like. He will also get a distorted idea of what other people are like: it's hard to find out who anyone else is until you have found out who you are. (15-16)

With its roots in Lacanian psychoanalysis, the mirror Atwood describes provides an unreliable reflection for burgeoning artists in

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Canada: up against the powerful countries that surround them she sees a major identity crisis. Sixteen years later, her 1988 novel, *Cat's Eye*, treads similar ground, tracking as it does the passage of its protagonist—painter, Elaine Risley—through childhood in mid-century Canada to her development as an established artist in the 1980s. It is into this narrative that Atwood places extensive references to Shakespeare's tragedy, *King Lear*—a play that deals with the notion of identity. Here, Lear's question, "Who is it that can tell me who I am?" becomes Elaine's, as she ventures back to Toronto to attend a retrospective of her work at a women's art gallery named "Sub-Versions."

Reluctant to leave her new home, Vancouver, where she lives with her second husband and two daughters, Elaine is forced to experience not only a visual retrospective in the form of her paintings but, on a larger scale, an emotional and psychological retrospective of her life, a mental journeying back into her past. The narrative structure of *Cat's Eye* is based upon the idea of the retrospective: it shifts back and forth, from past to present, moving from the 1980s to Elaine's childhood in the 1940s, tracing her life story. Throughout the novel, Atwood's protagonist uses her recovered memories of the past in order to examine the person she has become in middle age: alienated from others, she finds that her troubled past acts as a painfully accurate mirror for her life in the present. At the forefront of her story is an antagonistic relationship with a woman named Cordelia. Named after Lear's youngest, exiled daughter, Atwood's character is a childhood bully who relentlessly torments the young Elaine and, later in life, their relationship evolves into a tenuous and sometimes fractious friendship. Their relationship becomes a catalyst for a larger discussion of the shifting and relative nature of identity for Atwood's protagonist as both an artist and a woman.

Indeed, echoing the mirror so clearly outlined in her earlier work, *Survival*, Atwood's Cordelia—part bully, part friend—forms a mirror for Elaine throughout her life, prompting her to question her identity and representing a brutal kind of reflection for her developing childhood self:

Cordelia brings a mirror to school. It's a pocket mirror, the small plain oblong kind without any rim. She takes it out of her pocket and holds the mirror up in front of me and says, "Look at yourself! Just look!" Her voice is disgusted, fed up, as if my face, all by itself, has been up to something, has gone too far. (158)

In *Cat's Eye*, a book that is ostensibly about the issue of childhood bullying, it is interesting that Atwood draws heavily on images she has used in the past in portraying Canada as a country trying to move away from its identity as a colony, in particular the mirror. Bullied by outsiders, sandwiched between two great Western cultural super-powers, Canada is, like Elaine, trying to assert some sort of voice:

"What do you have to say for yourself?" Cordelia used to ask. Nothing, I would say. It was a word I came to connect with myself, as if I was nothing, as if there was nothing there at all. (41)

Cordelia's question in *Cat's Eye*, a reversal of Lear's testing of his daughter's affections, is opened up to explore the larger dimensions of Canadian identity.

Much of Atwood's imagery seems to hinge upon the central idea of "nothingness," echoing Cordelia's profound "nothing" in Shakespeare's tragedy. Lear, dividing up his kingdom, demands that his daughters tell him how much they love him in return for a portion of his kingdom: "Which of you shall we say doth love us most,/That we our largest bounty may extend/Where nature doth with merit challenge." (1.4. 46-48). The connection between words and rewards, between language and inheritance, is broken by Cordelia's resonant response to her father's question—"nothing". The discord between language and meaning is explored in *Cat's Eye*, with a completely retooled version of Lear's youngest daughter as a major touchstone for Elaine's growing insecurity of her place in the world. This Cordelia is

mean and dangerous, leading a pack of two other girls (Carol Campbell and Grace Smeath) to lure the young Elaine into cruel situations and games and, ultimately, leaving her to die at the bottom of a ravine. At the same time, she is an absent presence in the novel that Elaine both longs to see and dreads encountering during her stay in Toronto.

"This is the middle of my life", asserts Elaine at the beginning of the novel (13) as she sees herself being pulled down into the muck and mire of her memories in Toronto: "In my dreams of this city I am always lost" (14). "Midway in the journey of our life", reads the opening line of Canto One of Dante's *Inferno*, "I found myself in a dark wood, for the straight way was lost" (3). The journey into the underworld taken by the young poet in Dante's work becomes the figure of Elaine, poised as she is to begin a Dante-esque journey into the underworld of her distant past, buried under layers of old cloth, layers of metaphorical soil. Like the figure of the Canadian artist illustrated in *Survival*, Elaine sees herself as surrounded by cultural bogeys, ruinous mirrors which she must finally confront and through which she will finally be able to construct a true retrospective of her own, formative experiences both as an artist and as a woman. And, like the figure of the lost artist in *Survival*, Elaine finds herself left with a highly distorted view of herself. Through *Cat's Eye*, Atwood conducts her own retrospective, looking back to Shakespeare's work, as well as to his position as an icon in the cultural landscape of Canada's history. Using *King Lear* as a central reference point, Atwood begins an intensive examination of Shakespeare's role as an emblem of British cultural superiority—a sort of distorting mirror in itself.

At the beginning of the novel, Atwood deliberately locates Elaine's early childhood development outside of the city, in the surrounding wilderness—a wild zone without modern amenities like television, movies or kitchen appliances. Even the Dick and Jane workbooks her mother uses to teach her how to read, with their images of suburban middle-class life, strike Elaine as completely foreign: "Nothing in these stories is anything like my life. There are no tents, no highways, no peeing in the bushes, no motels" (29); "...we didn't really live anywhere;

or we lived in so many places it was hard to remember them" (21). Existing beyond the fringes of "anywhere", Elaine's childhood seems rooted in no nameable place. Upon moving to the city, Elaine meets her first friends—Cordelia, along with two other girls, Grace Smeath and Carol Campbell. These girls orient Elaine to middle-class life in mid-twentieth century Toronto. Throughout, the voice Atwood uses for Elaine in childhood acts as a Menippean counterpoint to the clutter and middle-class aspirations of post-war Toronto, a city trying to live up to its British colonial past, where her ignorance of modern conveniences fascinates her friends—"You've never seen a *coat-tree*?" (51) her friend Carol Campbell marvels. Spending time with her friends cutting images of appliances from the Sears Catalogue, she is a student of the social mores of Toronto small-town beginnings.

Cordelia's family aims hard to achieve middle class sophistication in the form of perceived or stereotyped imitations of English life. Her interchangeable older sisters, Perdita and Miranda, are both named after women from Shakespeare's pastoral romances, while Cordelia's name comes from a tragedy. Both shorten their names to "Perdie" and "Mirrie", claiming the names as their own. But Cordelia refuses to make the same allowances as her sisters:

Cordelia ought to be Cordie, but she's not. She insists, always, on being called by her full name: Cordelia. All three of these names are peculiar; none of the girls at school have names like that. Cordelia says they're out of Shakespeare. She seems proud of this, as though it's something we should all recognize. "It was Mummie's idea," she says. (73)

The three daughters, who call their mother "Mummie" and speak in a highly-mannered, anglicized way, contrast with Elaine's own family, who never have fresh flowers in the house and are unable to afford a cleaning lady, or "woman" as she is called by Cordelia's family. The manners of her family both imitate and aspire to the class-based English system to which their family strives to adhere and, tellingly, Cordelia is

the only one of Elaine's childhood friends without a last name, as if her Shakespearean name is legitimation enough.

From the moment when she moves to Toronto, Elaine is bombarded by a series of cultural preconceptions about Canada's relationship to England, not only in the figure of Cordelia, but at the core of her education. What she encounters at the Queen Mary Public School is yet another example of the way in which the cultural influences of England become the focus of Elaine's experience in Toronto. In Miss Lumley's class, for example, she is taught to sing "Rule Britannia." Elaine wonders about the dichotomy between her identity as a Canadian and her identity as a member of the British Empire: "Because we're Britons, we will never be slaves. But we aren't real Britons, because we're also Canadians. This isn't quite as good, although it has its own song" (80). Elaine's sense of alienation springs from the problems facing English Canadians in their relationship to England. Unable to reconcile herself with the two halves of her identity, Canadian and English, her sense of Canadian history is a confused mass of facts that have little or no relevance to her sense of the world around her.

Atwood herself has described the identity crisis she experienced when, upon deciding that she wanted to be a writer, she tried to centre herself in relation to the writers she was being taught in the classroom: "...how could one become a writer and somehow manage to avoid becoming British and dead?" (*Second Words* 378). Atwood's more specific references to Shakespeare in *Cat's Eye* seem to uphold this very tangible sense in the novel that Elaine is struggling to gain a sense of herself as separate from a past to which she cannot relate, a past which bears little or no resemblance to her own experience. Canada's colonial history as it is taught to her in school becomes another sort of mirror for the young Elaine as she tries to centre herself in relation to herself and to others. Dressed up as Mary Queen of Scots, Elaine is taken by her three friends and placed ceremoniously in a large hole which Cordelia has dug in her backyard:

Up above, outside, I can hear their voices, and then I can't hear them. I lie there wondering when it will be time to come out. Nothing happens. When I was put into the hole I knew it was a game; now I know it is not one. I feel sadness, a sense of betrayal. Then I feel the darkness pressing down on me; then terror. (107)

This, for Elaine, becomes "The point at which I lost power" (107). The girls, terrifyingly, walk away from their promise to dig her out of the grave—"nothing happens". Forced to undergo a sort of death by history, Elaine inadvertently does become British and dead: at least for a moment.

By transforming Cordelia into a childhood bully, Atwood creates a fertile imaginative space where she can situate a larger discussion of the development and education of an artist coming of age in mid-twentieth century Canada, up against the powerful distorting mirror of a colonial past. But, while Cordelia is the most obvious reference to Shakespeare in the novel it is not the only one and there are other links to the play that resonate throughout, from blindness to exile, as Elaine struggles in a Lear-like quest to find out who she really is, apart from the icons and effigies of Canada's past as a colony. Indeed, the correspondences between *King Lear* and *Cat's Eye* are fluid, unlike the tighter plot and character connections in re-visions of the play such as Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*. As Suzanne Raitt notes in her excellent essay, "Out of Shakespeare?: Cordelia in *Cat's Eye*", "The relationship between *King Lear* and *Cat's Eye* cannot be reliably mapped as far as the correspondences in characters go" (183). Instead, she points to the "alternative epistemology, one built on uncertainty, relativity, and disjunction," that pervades the novel.

Notably, it is revealed later on that the grave into which Cordelia once placed Elaine during the Mary Queen of Scots ceremony was actually a hole for Cordelia—a place to hide from her overbearing father. The mirror-like nature of Cordelia and Elaine's relationship grows clearer as the novel progresses and it creates a sense of disjunction that

is also characteristic of the book's relationship to Shakespeare's tragedy. For, while she portrays Elaine as a young girl clashing against—and ultimately succumbing to—a stifling series of icons and histories as a child growing up, Atwood probes much deeper into the relationship between those icons and the shifting reality underneath. Indeed, throughout the novel, the tension between Elaine and the narrow view of Canada's colonial past that she is taught at school becomes her larger mistrust of the boundaries posed by other people's names and labels. Canadian critic Robert Kroetsch writes that:

At one time I considered it to be the task of the Canadian writer to give names to his experience, to be the namer. I now suspect that, on the contrary, it is his task to un-name. (43)

In the shifting correspondences between *Cat's Eye* and *King Lear*, Atwood creates space for a discussion of the un-naming process, rooted in Canada's relationship to its colonial past. Cordelia is probably the most obvious site of this struggle between name and experience:

Why did they name her that? Hang that weight around her neck. Heart of the moon, jewel of the sea, depending on which foreign language you're using. The third sister, the only honest one. The stubborn one, the rejected one, the one who was not heard. If she'd been called Jane, would things have been different? (263)

The weight of her name manifests itself in the doomed existence that Atwood gives her in *Cat's Eye*. Her Cordelia can't please her father, talks too much to attract boys, has stints in mental institutions and fails as a Shakespearean actress at the Stratford Festival of Canada. In pulling apart the relationship between Cordelia and the source of her name, Atwood portrays the gradual destruction of a woman who is unable to develop herself outside of the boundaries of her name, family and her inability to please her father: "nothing she can do or say will ever be



enough because she is somehow the wrong person" (249). Elaine—whose name is anagrammatic of the word "alien" switches places with Cordelia in the novel—each taking the other's place as an exile in this narrative, one inside and one outside the dominant discourse.

Her 1966 collection of poetry, *The Circle Game*, includes a poem called "Migration: C.P.R.", in which the speaker expresses her feelings about the east coast, her need to move west, to escape: "Escaping from allegories/in the misty east, where inherited events/barnacle on the mind" (65). This same ambivalence about names and labels pervades Elaine's experience in *Cat's Eye*. As both an artist and a woman, this is made clear from the beginning as she expresses her disappointment at the fact that her work is not being displayed at the more established Art Gallery of Ontario (their preference is for dead, foreign men, she tells us) and is instead being held at a feminist gallery called Sub-Versions: "one of those puns that used to delight me before they became so fashionable" (15). That she is uncomfortable with the labels inherent in both locations points us to the central struggle of Elaine—trying to navigate in the shifting space between words, language and meaning.

The effort to move both within and without labels is central to much of the story, from Cordelia's attempts to live up to the burden of her name, to Elaine's lessons about how to evade the labels and concepts thrown at girls by boys in high school:

And all the time these clouds of silent words surround them, *stunned broad, dog, hag, and bitch*, pointing at them, reducing them, cutting them down to size so they can be handled. The trick with these silent words is to walk in the spaces between them, turn sideways in your head, evade. Like walking through walls. (238)

Elaine learns to walk in the spaces between these words and labels in a way that Cordelia doesn't. She is walking in between the male and female spaces in a way that echoes Elaine Showalter's wild zone—skirting in between labels in order to overturn and question the meaning

of those signifiers. As Showalter writes of a literary tradition that exists in the overlap between the male and female experience: "Women writing are not, then, inside and outside of the male tradition; they are inside two traditions simultaneously" (264). In studying the "wild zone" of women's literature, then, Showalter advocates an approach that encompasses the multifarious factors influencing the creation of female-authored texts, an understanding of cultural differentiation rather than the universal sense of texts as specifically women-authored. Atwood, by inviting a highly prominent "dead foreign man" (Shakespeare) into the script of *Cat's Eye*, evades labels itself. It shifts the boundaries between Atwood's female-authored text and the male-authored texts of Shakespeare, mapping out a territory in the middle.

Canadian critic Coral Anne Howells has written about the nature of the female voice in Canada and its relationship to the country's political and cultural history:

There are close parallels between the historical situation of women and of Canada as a nation, for women's experience of the power politics of gender and their problematic relation to patriarchal traditions of authority have affinities with Canada's attitude to the cultural imperialism of the United States as well as its ambivalence towards its European inheritance. (2)

In *Cat's Eye*, the experiences of Elaine take place against two distinct distorting mirrors—a colonial one, as we have seen, but also a patriarchal one. As Cordelia drives Elaine to near destruction as a child, the irony of her namesake—a paragon of female virtue and truth—is always close to the surface. And that relationship instills Elaine with a clear and often disturbing mistrust of women. While her life in twentieth-century Canada chronicles much of the country's cultural history, it also traces the development of the women's movement. Elaine can't stand women's groups, going as far as to acquaint them with her early encounters with her childhood friends—"I am not Woman, and I'm

damned if I'll be shoved into it. *Bitch*, think silently. *Don't boss me around*" (379). Disturbed by Elaine's hostility towards other women, critics such as Gayle Greene have tended to identify Elaine's difficulties with other women as the author's: "[Elaine's] confusion is understandable in a child, commonplace in men, but inexcusable in Margaret Atwood" (211).

However, a more constructive approach to *Cat's Eye* lies in the clashes between female characters and the icons and allegories she consistently deploys in the novel—from the curious Barbara Ann Scott doll with her stick-like legs, to the catalogue cut-outs Elaine and her friends paste into scrapbooks in childhood. And, of course, the overarching allegory provided by Shakespeare's play, with Cordelia's "nothing" at the centre, the word that represents the disconnect between language and feeling. That disconnect is one that comes to characterize all of Elaine's relationships with women in the novel. It is distinctly cruel and merciless and times, culminating in Elaine's gradual hardening towards her friend and former nemesis as each of them moves away from the separate "BOYS" and "GIRLS" playground of grammar school and into the shared, unisex space of high school. Elaine's reaction to Cordelia's relegation to a mental institution has a harsh edge: "I harden towards her. She's acting like a jerk...*Smarten up, I want to tell her. Pull up your socks*" (258).

Significantly, however, it is through her paintings that Elaine achieves that middle ground—the wild zone—that allows Atwood's protagonist finally to "see" the significant figures in her life. Through her retrospective—viewed from the middle point in her life—the artist achieves a perspective that is characterized by an ability to see "feelingly," to echo Shakespeare's tragedy. Sharon Rose Wilson writes about the role of feeling in Atwood's narratives, "In order to free themselves from the restricting roles of fairytales, comics, television, the Bible, history, and myth and heal their split identities, Atwood's characters and personae must recover feeling" (298). For Elaine, whose ability to feel is hardened by her initial counters with Cordelia and the other girls in her circle, recovery comes in the form of her painting,

from her ability to see Mrs. Smeath as a defeated woman, "heavy with unloved duty" (405). As she finally thinks, looking at her paintings all together, "an eye for an eye leads only to more blindness" (405).

From the cat's eye marble coveted by Elaine to the collection of her own paintings at her retrospective, being able to see—to bear witness—proves central to her ability to come to terms with her past. The eye evolves into the “I” through the act of painting—or writing: “I’m not afraid of seeing Cordelia. I’m afraid of being Cordelia,” Elaine tells us in the end. Which brings us full circle to that crucial mirror in Atwood’s *Survival*—the image thrust back onto the viewer and the person holding the mirror up. In this sense, it is Cordelia’s painting—with its half face—that becomes a symbol of her connection to Elaine. So while Cordelia never shows up in person to the retrospective, disappointing her hopes that her friend is still alive and has survived into middle age, the final encounter with her friend happens in the mirror she creates through her paintings.

In the final scene of Shakespeare's tragedy, Lear, unable to believe that his daughter is dead, calls for a mirror:

LEAR: Lend me a looking-glass;  
If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,  
Why then she lives.

KENT: Is this the promised end?

EDGAR: Or image of that horror?

In *King Lear*, the possibility that Cordelia might still be alive remains unrealized, as the play reaches its horrific conclusion. Atwood's Cordelia defies that ending through her absence, ultimately escaping capture within the boundaries of Atwood's story.

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