

BLUEBEARDS AND BODIES:  
MARGARET ATWOOD'S MEN

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**Abstract**

While most of the critical work on the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood focuses on her representation of women, this essays delves into the author's portrayal of men and the masculine economy in "Alien Territory" and *The Blind Assassin*.

**Keywords:** Canadian literature – masculine economy – gender relations

**Resumo**

Enquanto a maioria dos críticos da escritora canadense Margaret Atwood concentram-se na representação das personagens femininas, este trabalho se aprofunda na caracterização dos homens e em uma economia masculina em "Alien Territory" e *The Blind Assassin*.

Most critical work on Margaret Atwood has focused on her representation of women, and men are included in the discussion only tangentially as they contribute to the situation, if not the oppression of women. Atwood's women are most often analysed in one of two ways: either as falling into categories (such as victim, rival sister, bad mother, more or less triumphant survivor) or as plural complex voices, dissolving boundaries between categories, including those of self and

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other. The act of categorisation may be what enables us to weave narratives about Atwood's characters, and what they mean; the dissolving of categories prevents these stories from coming to too neat an end. It is impossible to analyse Atwood's female characters without touching upon the men, but the touch is usually a glancing one. In this essay, I should like to linger a little longer, and ask what Atwood's fiction suggests to her reader about men and masculine economies; although inevitably any such analysis of her male characters still has to present them in relation to women. I shall do this largely through reference to two texts: Atwood's recent novel *The Blind Assassin* (2000)<sup>1</sup> and a short text, "Alien Territory", from the collection *Good Bones* (1992),<sup>2</sup> which provides some suggestive pointers about the direction a reading of the male characters in *The Blind Assassin* could take. The two economies which are of interest in this connection are the masculine economy of quantifiable exchange (here shown to be underpinned by a violence outside quantification), and an ambiguous gift economy.

In "Alien Territory", and in other texts in the same collection, men are represented as solitary exiles searching for "their true country. The place they came from, which can't possibly be here" (77). They are in flight from the horror and shame of the maternal body as a possible origin; they are also escaping from the male body "one with size and therefore pain" (78). Quantification and comparison have to be transferred from the body onto something else, and hence we have the obsession with science and also economy. Men escape via abstract calculation, but also through killing – mostly the bodies of other men "but also women and children, as a side-effect, you might say" (79). "What men are most afraid of is the body of another man." (79). Men's bodies are so dangerous that they are rendered invisible in cultural terms unless clearly marked as entertainment (rock stars or athletes can have bodies). The problem with men's bodies for men is that they are not dependable and are in fact even detachable – "Consider the history of statuary" (81), and the way in which a crucial appendage can be knocked off – what we might term castration anxiety, and its reproduction in an economy of scarcity, underpinned by violence.

“Alien Territory” includes a section which rewrites the story of Bluebeard, a figure to whom Atwood makes reference in a number of texts,<sup>3</sup> including of course the ambiguous title story of the collection *Bluebeard’s Egg*.<sup>4</sup> Bluebeard is notorious for his secret collection of dismembered women, and for his final comeuppance at the hands of his last bride (with, or without, help from various members of her family). In “Alien Territory”, the collection of previous women is not the forbidden secret – they are easily found, cut up and stored in a closet. Instead, behind the locked door, the latest wife finds a small dead child with its eyes wide open. Bluebeard tells her “*I gave birth to it.*” and “*It is me*” (84-85). He had presumably achieved what all men desire: he had given birth to himself. The story of Bluebeard, to which Atwood frequently returns, has a number of key elements which can be reworked, and which will be reworked again though not so explicitly in *The Blind Assassin*: the patriarch who, however bad he seems in the first place, is always worse than imagined; the bloody secret; desire; mutilation or dismemberment; and the survival of the intelligent and brave woman albeit at a cost – the cost of knowing, and perhaps telling, the story.

Stereotypes of patriarchy abound in Atwood’s work: the once economically-powerful father and, even more strikingly, the Bluebeard-like husband in *The Blind Assassin*. However, there are also examples of ambiguity – use of a limited point of view as in “Bluebeard’s Egg” which leaves the reader unsure of the accuracy of any of the reported perceptions or conjectures. There is also a crucial instance of a man who falls into the final, uneconomic, category evoked in “Alien Territory”: “Those ones. Why do women like them? They have nothing to offer, none of the usual things [...] They offer their poverty, an empty wooden bowl; the bowl of a beggar, whose gift is to ask” (85-86). These men are different from most men because: “They have bodies, however. Their bodies are unlike the bodies of other men. Their bodies are verbalized” (86). Like women. These men might, we conjecture, be able to welcome birth rather than insist on abortion. They might be able to tell stories. In *The Blind Assassin*, the lover (Alex Thomas) tells stories – he is perhaps

a hack rather than an artist – but his science fiction stories of alien territories are lifted out of the sell-out context and embraced, as well as encased by, a double female narrative, a dual feminine frame. The feminine narrative is one that bears witness to hidden violence.

### **Hollow men and Bluebeards in *The Blind Assassin***

In *The Blind Assassin* there is a panoply of more or less patriarchal stereotypes. The most striking examples fall into two categories: the failed paternalist, whom I shall call the hollow man, and the true Bluebeard. The Chase men fall into the first category, notably the father of the protagonist, Iris Griffen (née Chase). Her husband, on the other hand, is a true Bluebeard figure. He is interestingly prefigured by another authoritarian figure, Mr. Erskine, whose role as tutor to Iris and her younger sister, Laura, consists most memorably in abusing both girls physically and Laura sexually. The girls' responses to him also prefigure their responses to Richard Griffen.

The girls' father has been turned into a shambling monster by his experiences in the First World War. He represents the paternalist patriarch, who believes (mistakenly) that he knows what is best, and that he is doing his best, both for his daughters and for "his men" in the factories. While his men (including the women amongst them) are not altogether duped by the flowers on the chains that keep them bound to the factory system, Iris worships him. After his death, she still insists to her more critical younger sister that "He tried as hard as he could" (384), citing the time when they were small children and he dressed up as Santa Claus. Laura responds that she hated those kind of surprises. Iris recalls:

There was a man in red, a red giant towering upwards. Behind him was the night darkness, and a blaze of flame. His face was covered with white smoke. His head was on fire. He

lurched forward: his arms were outstretched. Out of his mouth came a sound of hooting, or of shouting.

Iris feels superior in her more adult and rational understanding of the situation, agreeing with her mother who “used to say he never knew his own strength; he never knew how big he was in relation to everyone else. He wouldn’t have known how frightening he might seem” (385). She says to Laura: “You didn’t understand he was just pretending”, but her sister rejoins that it was worse than that – she thought he was pretending the rest of the time. She thought that underneath he was burning up all the time. She characteristically reads the figural literally. The apparently flaming Santa is indeed more frightening because more revealing. Chase’s attempts to distribute appropriate largesse are to be unsuccessful in a way which has appalling consequences for his workers and family. He does not know his own strength or size in the literal and opposite sense to that of the pious cliché of his wife – he does not know how small or weak he really is. He thinks he is a big man, but his measure is too limited, and his grasp of the reality of economics is inadequate. Really he is small fry in a world of sharks, and his attempts to protect those whom he regards as his responsibility will bring about their downfall.

Just as Chase burns inside, Chase’s button factory is burned to the ground during a strike. This (and the associated death of a watchman) is blamed on communist agitators, notably Alex Thomas. This is the motivating plot element that keeps Alex in hiding throughout most of the narrative, and thus sets off a different economy which shapes his relationship with Iris and Laura, allowing them to offer him gifts. At one point, Griffen claims that the girls’ father burned the factory down himself for the insurance money. A far more likely hypothesis for the reader is the one proffered by Iris, that Griffen’s men set fire to it in order to bring Chase’s business finally to its knees, adding to Griffen’s own business empire and also his personal dominion in delivering the two young women into his hands. Thus, in terms of explanation, we shift first from a focus on the big economic picture, of an international

communist conspiracy against world capitalism, to a rational, if criminal, microeconomic calculation that the insurance compensation is now greater than the value of the factory. The second shift takes us to something more sinister, related to Bluebeard's secret, and Griffen's first attempt to shift the blame, onto Alex, helps to seal the particular intimate bond between Alex and the two sisters, which, narrated, will bring about Bluebeard's downfall.

Richard Griffen is not the well-meaning and outmoded conservative that his father-in-law is, but rather the ruthless fascist Bluebeard although his admiration for Hitler is of course subordinate to his own self-interest. He chooses a young wife whom he can keep ignorant of anything important, including her father's illness and death during their honeymoon. He brutally relishes her sexual ignorance and lack of pleasure. She is given even less dominion than Bluebeard's wives in the fairytale, since even the smallest details of the organisation and decoration of their home are handed over to his sister. In a final ugly twist, we learn that he coerced his young sister-in-law into a sexual relationship (manipulating her concern for Alex), and that, when she attempted to reveal her pregnancy, he had her incarcerated in a nursing home where she was forced into an abortion and treated as insane. This is the secret violence that Iris finally uncovers.

Iris, at eighteen, is traded by her father – who persuades her to give her hand in marriage to Griffen on the understanding that his teetering business (and so his men as well as his daughters) will be saved. Iris has always endeavoured to be father's dutiful daughter to the best of her ability, inevitably failing since she will never be the son he desired. In his brief introduction to "the put-up job between [the two men]" (226), Iris's father repeats several times the phrase "a certain amount". As a businessman he needs to be able to quantify, and, at an earlier stage, he tries to teach Iris "the simple principles of economics" (101), adding up imaginary buttons in an attempt to make her see what is profit and what is cost. Where the marriage is concerned he evades too precise a calculation, or putting things in terms which are too explicit in his preparatory manoeuvres. He tells Iris: "A certain amount depends

on it" and then: "A certain amount of resolve might be required. A certain amount of courage. Biting the bullet and so forth." (226). This delicacy, however, backfires since it allows the far more ruthless Griffen to extract more from the deal than the father imagined (or chose to imagine) with his "a certain amount of courage" and his tragically ironic comment to Iris: "You'd be in good hands. And Laura too, of course." It allows Griffen not only to take more, but also to give less and so to bring about Chase's death. Iris has to learn that her self-sacrificing gesture 'hadn't saved the factories, and [...] certainly hadn't saved Father' (314).

The episode in which Richard proposes to Iris is, in typical allusively poetic Atwood style, full of harbingers of the future. After Iris is prepared by her father in the anterior and impersonal space of a hotel lobby:

Richard joined [them] as if on cue, and the two men shook hands. My own hand was taken, squeezed briefly. Then my elbow. That was how men steered women around in those days by the elbow – and so I was steered by the elbow into the Imperial Room. (226)

Hands, apparently disembodied, haunt the narrative and the images (including a key photograph) of *The Blind Assassin*. Here men have the upper hand, and any fragmentation of the female body is purely for control or for fetishistic pleasure – Bluebeard's dismemberment in a milder form. Later the desiring hand and writing hand will be recuperated by Iris. For the moment Iris is in the "biggest dining room" in the "tallest building" in Toronto: "Richard was fond of big." She is surrounded by emblems of male power, of an aging potency: "a congealed opulence. It felt leathery, ponderous, paunchy – veined somehow", the drapes are heavy and the odour is "of hot metal and smouldering cloth" (227). When Iris is alone again in bed that night, she relives the phallic suffocation of the immense imperial dining room as its polar reflection:

I spent that night lying huddled and shivering in the vast bed of the hotel. My feet were icy, my knees drawn up, my head sideways on the pillow; in front of me the arctic waste of starched white bedsheet stretched out to infinity. I knew I could never traverse it, regain the track, get back to where it was warm; I knew I was directionless; I knew I was lost. I would be discovered here years later by some intrepid team – fallen in my tracks, one arm outflung as if grasping at straws, my features desiccated, my fingers gnawed by wolves. (228)

The brilliant white diamond of the engagement ring is turned to ice;<sup>5</sup> the fingers on which such tokens of bondage are placed are eaten by wolves, that favourite fairy-tale image of the dangerous male. Iris's night-time dread is not of Richard as such or Richard alone, but of the structure within which he operates – which she calls God, "a malign presence" in which she fails to believe. As a child, Laura mistakes her father's drunken footsteps up in the turret for those of God (138) and Iris reassures her. However, Iris's failure to believe in 'God' while more obviously sensible than Laura's poetic literalism, also leaves her insensible to the real horror which lurks beneath the rational masculine exterior of her fiancé or indeed her erstwhile tutor.

### **Robbers and beggars**

Economic relations are very important in *The Blind Assassin* both on the grand scale, industrial-military relations which enrich and impoverish, and also on the micro-scale of inter-personal relations. In "Alien Territory", Atwood suggests that women can be fascinated by men who "offer their poverty". It is important to unpick what this means.

Female self-sacrificing givers are ambiguous figures in Atwood. She is alert to the possibility that they will be exploited, and can be ironic at their expense. In "The Little Red Hen Tells All" (*Good Bones*, 11-14), Atwood rewrites the folk tale of the prudent and smug (capitalist)



hen who, having done all the work to produce a loaf of bread, refuses to share it with those who refused to help her in her work. Atwood's version in the voice of the hen has her giving all her profit away, a feminine gesture which, in a world still generally regulated by self-interest, may seem like willing martyrdom. The hen refers back to the traditional tale, and concludes:

Don't believe a word of it. As I've pointed out, I'm a hen, not a rooster. *Here, I said. I apologize for having the idea in the first place. I apologize for luck. I apologize for self-denial. [...] I apologize for that crack about roosters. [...]*  
Have some more.  
*Have mine.* (14)

Laura is the embodiment of self-sacrificing giving in the novel, and the recipients of her charity are not always grateful: "Of course [the unemployed] resented Laura and all the churchy do-gooders like her. Of course they had ways of letting their feelings be known. A joke, a sneer, a jostle, a sullen leer. There is nothing more onerous than enforced gratitude" (196). It is a mistake if working-class men in a bar take Iris for someone like her sister: "Perhaps they've mistaken her for a church worker or some other sniffy do-gooder. Poking scrubbed fingers into their lives, asking questions, offering table scraps of patronizing help. But she's dressed too well for that" (260). Iris is certainly better dressed than Laura, and less likely to become a martyr. It is also of course an error if the men mistake her for a whore. She is not selling her services in a market exchange any more than she is a charitable do-gooder whose one-way gift maintains as fixed the hierarchy between donor and recipient. However, these two paradigms haunt her intercourse with Alex and have constantly to be conjured up and then dispelled. Iris's relationship with Alex is prefigured by her hiding him at her father's house as a young girl. This is a joint endeavour with Laura, and she believes she is helping him only to help her sister

(211). Both her love-affair with Alex and her writing about the love-affair are curiously intertwined with her sister as her other self.

Exchanges of gifts or services take place between women as well as between women and men. Atwood does not allow either to settle comfortably into a feminine gift economy. Exchanges between women often involve the theft of a man. Sisterhood, whether literal (the exchanges between Iris and Laura) or metaphorical, can end with words which bring about death – and then words which provide a kind of life after death. I shall turn briefly to *The Robber Bride*<sup>6</sup> to show that this question of gift relations is significant in a number of Atwood's works. This novel as a whole portrays intimate giving – woman to woman – and reveals the absolute hatred of the recipient. The three heroines, an academic, a New Ager and a business woman (Roz) all give of themselves eagerly and lovingly when their pity is awoken by the (calculated) narratives told by Zenia who constantly remakes herself as the image of what each friend would most like to help. Zenia displays vulnerability, a spectacle of beauty in distress who cannot help herself intellectually, then spiritually and then commercially. Zenia swallows up every gift with boundless greed, but actually desires to steal. In each case she steals a man – whom she chews up and spits out. In each case she also obtains money which she also consumes with an endless appetite for more. This story may have something to say about maternal giving – the fantasy that the helpless baby will commit acts of uncontrolled aggression against the nurturing breast, chew it into little pieces and bite it up.

Zenia is (like the infant or “new arrival”) the stranger in the house. As the academic Tony points out to us (461), a number of the imagined etymologies for her name point to *foreigner* or to *hospitality* or to *the women's quarters*, setting up a web of significations around the potentially hostile other, welcoming the other in (hopefully thereby neutralising any threat), and the place where the other should not enter, such as the harem. The harem is a female community that is usually understood as the property of a man and guarded against the intrusion of the predatory other male, here a community of women is created by

the predations of a man-hungry female stealing the property of these sisters. (In each case the man is the weaker party in almost every sense except that he is the beloved.) Other imagined etymologies include a warrior Queen or an Eastern practitioner of heretical magic: violence and witchcraft. Tony also evokes the Hebrew *Zillah* meaning a shadow. Her final questions to herself, closing and opening up the book, doing the academic's task (and she is a historian of war) of analysis while Charis sets out food and Roz tells a story, is "Are we in any way like her?" (470). In different ways each of the women wonders if Zenia is an alter ego.

In summaries of Hélène Cixous's references to a feminine gift economy, it can appear an almost cozy story about female generosity. And yet Cixous herself threads her account with elements of violence. References to witches or to Medusa (Zenia has snaky hair, p. 240) should not be too quickly sanitised. Nor should the privileging of *voler* – flying and stealing.<sup>7</sup> Cixous picks out for particular praise in the work of her beloved Clarice Lispector "The Foreign Legion" – which she calls "A Text of Strangeness."<sup>8</sup> In this story "guilt and innocence are in continuous exchange" (75). The first part of the story is, Cixous tells us, masculine. The narrator (Clarice) is asked by a "little boy", in what Cixous terms an Oedipal scene, to be mummy to a "little chick". In the second, feminine, part of the story, a young girl, Ofélia "gives birth to herself because Clarice-as-mother allows her to bring herself into the world" (76).

A telling exchange follows Alex's retort to Iris when she reproaches him for his lack of kindness to her:

I detest kindness, he says. I detest people who pride themselves on being kind. Snot-nosed nickle-and-dime do-gooders, doling out the kindness. They're contemptible. I'm kind, she says, trying to smile. I'm kind to you, at any rate. If I thought that's all it was - lukewarm milk-and-water kindness - I'd be gone. Midnight train, bat out of hell. I'd

take my chances. I'm no charity case, I not looking for nooky handouts.

[...]

Perhaps it isn't kindness then, she says. Perhaps it's selfishness. Perhaps I'm ruthlessly selfish.

I'd like that better, he says. I prefer you greedy. He stubs out his cigarette, reaches for another. He's still smoking ready-mades, a luxury for him. He must be rationing them. She wonders if he's got enough money, but she can't ask. (106)

The verbal exchange brings together a number of elements: kindness in the sense of politeness or pleasantness (social exchange), charity, economic need, luxury, sexual desire, and amorous passion. Alex wants Iris to want him (greedily); her best gift to him is not scraps of food, alcohol or even cashing his cheques, but her desire for what he can give her.

Alex's moments of tender care for Iris (such as changing bed-sheets in one of his dingy hiding-places) "cause her a pang of something like pity, as if a starving peasant has offered her his last piece of bread. Pity isn't what she wants to feel. She doesn't want to feel that he is in any way vulnerable. Only she is allowed to be that" (111). It is crucial that his need for her (to need him) is skirted around, treated only delicately, glancingly in narrative.

Sometimes she brings him cigarettes, handfuls of them – largesse, opulence. She nicks them out of the silver cigarette box on the glass coffee table, crams them into her purse. But she doesn't do this every time. It's best to keep him in suspense, it's best to keep him hungry.

He lies on his back, replete, smoking. If she wants avowals, she has to get them beforehand - make sure of them first, like a whore and her money. [...] Afterwards, she has to fish. [...] No wonder they resort to stories. (262-63)

The stories they resort to are science-fiction tales, most often of the love between a blind boy assassin and a mute girl. More precisely, a boy blinded in the service of industry (the production of luxury carpets), and a girl whose tongue has been cut out to prevent her from crying out and thus revealing patriarchal violence (rape and then death by sacrifice). Ironically, they do not know how Griffen is silencing his sister-in-law (by threatening to endanger Alex) and will sacrifice her (and his) unborn child, but, in one sense, such concrete details are unnecessary. The structural violence is more significant, and Laura's pact is not only with Griffen, but also with 'God'. Cigarettes are a key gift in *The Blind Assassin*, as in so many other texts. Not a necessity in the strictest sense, they both are and are not a luxury. They are strongly linked to sexual pleasure both metaphorically and metonymically.<sup>9</sup> Iris defers his (and her own) pleasure for greater gratification – another economy.

### **Concluding categories**

Atwood's male characters may thus be said to fall into three main categories. Hollow men, like Chase, are would-be paternalists, liberal capitalists, running factories for the good of their men, and exchanging women for their own good. This is shown to be doomed to failure, whether it be the death of his wife (who should not have been pregnant) in childbirth or the suicide of his younger daughter. Chase, who spent his youth killing the bodies of other men in the First World War believing at first in the righteousness of the cause, burns up inside with his failures, consumed like his factory. Bluebeards, like Griffen, exercise the unquantifiable violence that underpins the facade of polite society, rationality and exchange. The desire for omnipotence, giving birth to himself unaided, cannot, however, stand the revelation which is his doom. Griffen commits suicide when Iris publishes the *roman à clef* which both reveals and conceals her affair with Alex. Griffen believes that it is the tale of Laura's affair. The ambiguous 'she', never named in the novel, is appropriate where women have been used as objects of

exchange, substitutable one for the other. But substitutability becomes the victims' weapon, showing Griffen his power is not absolute. Alex, and I have deliberately used his androgynous first name, allows his body to give and receive pleasure. He teasingly weaves narratives with his lover, which will counterpoint the story of their affair in the first novel Iris published – and, in the novel we finally read, details of Iris's later and earlier life, newspaper clippings and so on. He could be said to be the beggar that women love.

However, we should end by muddying, if not dissolving, these nice categories a little. Do the characters in the novel fit unambiguously into categories on the textual evidence we have about them? Who presents us with the evidence, and guides our interpretation of it? Are women in *The Blind Assassin* only victims and survivors; are men the only villains? The masculine economy of comparing categories seems necessary, but is it also deadly?

Iris's relation with Alex is not unambiguous in its economy. This is already the case in "Alien Territory" where the men women *adore* "go on long walks from which they forget to return" (85) and "tell trivial fibs" (86). Yet:

*Love*, they say, and at the time they always mean it, as you do also. They can say *lust* as well, and *disgust*; you wouldn't trust them otherwise. They say the worst things you have ever dreamed. They open locked doors. All this is given to them for nothing. (86-87)

To some extent this is the Alex we see, but we see Alex through Iris's needy memory and hungry imagination. And he is not only the construct of her desire, but also her weapon.

Both Chase and Griffen are also focalised through Iris, who may, we finally guess, be "the blind assassin" of the title in a number of ways. She is blind to much throughout the main part of the narrative. She is an assassin by name, the messenger of the Gods who cuts Dido's agonizing soul from her body (499). She is the final cause of Laura's

death in that she reveals to her Alex's death, and therefore the failure of "God" to keep his part of the unholy bargain Laura believed she had made with him. At the same time, she alludes to her own love-affair with the man Laura idolised and for whose sake Laura had taken unwitting Iris's place as chief object of Griffen's unwelcome and brutal affection. She also, more happily, assassinates Griffen with her pen – at least according to his devoted sister. Iris's blindness, and her murderous side, may not make her the most reliable of narrators, or no more reliable than Laura whose own tales, for instance of sexual abuse at the hands of Mr Erskine, Iris finds hard to swallow. Each sister has a hand in the other's picture – literally, Laura cuts up a stolen photograph of Alex with the two of them so that each has an image of herself alone with her beloved, save for an inevitable severed and tinted sisterly hand at the edge of the image. Laura's interest in hand-tinting and mutilating photographs is another mark of her literal interpretation of the figural, and vice versa. The two sisters, Martha and Mary, are bound and confused by others in love and death, however much they struggle to be distinct and independent. Iris's daughter and grand-daughter, raised in an atmosphere of lies by Griffen's sister, choose not to believe that Iris is their true mother or grand-mother any more than Griffen is their true father or grandfather. The parentage of the novel is equally long misascribed (by Iris's choice). There is complete breakdown of maternal (or paternal) relations in the text – the best mothering we encounter is the adoptive mothering of the girls by the faithful servant, Reenie. In a reversal of even natural hierarchies of age, Reenie's daughter Myra continues to mother the aging Iris. In one more final and disturbing twist, Iris, the assassin, throws (in writing) a bombshell at the maternally filial Myra just in case she ever dares read this second novel. Iris suggests that Myra may be Iris's father's daughter, rather than the daughter of the man she always knew as her father, her mother Reenie's husband. This example of idle and cruel speculation, based on no evidence but Iris's sense of what is likely, could lead the reader to re-read in a more critical and sceptical frame. Thus Atwood at once gives us men as patriarchal types, and as perhaps a more hope-inspiring

type of lover, and simultaneously suggests that the writer, her narrator who supplies these images, may not be a dependable mother to a true account, but a blind boy assassin.

### Notes

- 1 Bloomsbury Publishing.
- 2 *Good Bones*, Virago, 1993, 75-88.
- 3 See, for example, Sharon R. Wilson, 'Bluebeard's Forbidden Room: Gender Images in Margaret Atwood's Visual and Literary Art', *American Review of Canadian Studies*, XVI: 4, 1986, 385-97 or W. J. Keith, 'Interpreting and Misinterpreting "Bluebeard's Egg": A Cautionary Tale' in Colin Nicholson, ed., *Margaret Atwood: Writing and Subjectivity*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1994, 248-57.
- 4 First published 1983; Croydon, Vintage 1996.
- 5 Alex will later muse (or Iris will imagine him musing): 'An ex-professor once told him he had a diamond-hard intellect and he'd been flattered at the time. Now he considers the nature of diamonds. Although sharp and glittering and useful for cutting glass, they shine with reflected light only. They're no use at all in the dark.' (276)
- 6 London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 1993.
- 7 Both Iris and Laura steal without compunction in order, for example, to give to Alex. They each have their own logic regarding ownership.
- 8 *Readings. The Poetics of Blanchot, Joyce, Kafka, Kleist, Lispector, and Tsvetayeva*, edited, translated and introduced by Verean Andermatt Conley, University of Minnesota Press, 1991, 74-109.
- 9 "I guess we shouldn't do this, she says. Smoking in bed. We'll catch on fire. Burn ourselves up." (461).