

Margaret Atwood and the Hierarchy of Contempt¹

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Start with a metaphor for literary respectability: a spectrum, ranging from sullen infrared up to high-strung ultraviolet. Literature with a capital L (all characters, no plot) sits enthroned at the top. Genre fiction, including science fiction (all plot, no characters) is relegated to the basement. Certain types of fantasy hover in between, depending on subspecies: the Magic Realists get loads of respect, for example. Tolkein gets respect. (His myriad imitators, thank God, do not.) Down in the red-light district, science fiction's own subspectrum runs from "soft" to "hard", and it's generally acknowledged that the soft stuff at least leaves the door open for something approaching Art—Lessing, Le Guin, the New Wave stylists of the late sixties—while the hardcore types are too caught up in chrome and circuitry to bother with character development or actual literary technique.

I call it *The Hierarchy of Contempt*, and although you might point to exceptions at any wavelength, it seems a reasonable approximation of the literary "credscape"—according to the current regime at least, who hold the realist novel to be the benchmark against which all else is judged.

Given that realist benchmark, you might expect respectability to correlate with real-world plausibility in the narrative itself. You would be wrong. The same critics who roll their eyes at aliens and warp drive don't seem to have any problems with a woman ascending into heaven while hanging laundry in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, just so long as Gabriel Garcia Marquez doesn't get published by Tor or Del Ray. In this sense the Hierarchy is neither consistent nor rational; it is therefore unsurprising that those who live by its tenets tend to develop psychological problems.

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Margaret Atwood, for example.

Here is a woman so terrified of sf-cooties that she'll happily redefine the entire genre for no other reason than to exclude herself from it. Of her latest novel—a near-future dystopia detailing baseline-Humanity's replacement by a genetically-engineered daughter species—she has said: "*Oryx and Crake* is not science fiction. Science fiction is when you have chemicals and rockets." It was not an isolated slip. Atwood has also characterised science fiction as the stuff that involves "monsters and spaceships", and "Beam me up, Scotty".

Atwood claims to write something entirely different: *speculative* fiction, she calls it, the difference being that it is based on rigorously-researched science, extrapolating real technological and social trends into the future (as opposed to that escapist nonsense about fictitious things like chemicals and rockets, presumably). The irony, of course, is that Atwood's very explanation as to why she *doesn't* write science fiction not only places *Oryx and Crake* squarely in the science fiction realm, but at the least respectable end of that realm—the hard, extrapolative depths of the deep infrared.

Whenever Atwood makes such remarks—she trotted out the same horseshit for *The Handmaid's Tale* back in the eighties—I suffer mixed reactions. Sheer dumbfounded awe, for one—that this bloody tourist could blow into town and presume to lecture the world on the geography of the ghetto, blithely contradicting generations of real geographers who've spent their whole lives there. It stirs something violent in me. And yet, above the gut I just can't believe that Atwood could possibly be that stupid. She can tell Wyndham from Gibson, she reads them both. She's certainly not an idiot. She may not even be a liar. But I suspect that a terrible truth lurks in the back of her mind, a dark, commonsensical thing barely repressed by literary peer pressure and the rearguard efforts of marketing gurus. She can feel it deep

in the id, gnawing towards the light; should it ever escape the very world of OprahLit would fall, the peaceful sanctimony of its inhabitants laid forever waste.

Here is the unbearable truth that Margaret Atwood struggles so heroically to deny: science fiction has become more relevant than "Literature".

It could hardly be otherwise. Here in the real world, people run software with their brainwaves. Robot dogs are passé. Teleportation is a fact. It has become routine to genetically cross goats with spiders, fish with tomatoes. Every week seems to herald the arrival of some new and virulent plague. What has stronger resonance in such a world: a story about the ramifications of human cloning, or a memoir about growing up poor in post-WWII Ireland?

Atwood must know this, on some level. She knows she can't stay relevant by ignoring world-changing events. She knows that many of those events are rooted in science and technology, so her fiction must deal with science. She knows, in other words, that she has to write *science fiction*.

But she just can't bring herself to admit it, and her resulting backflips and contortions remind me of an old trope that would be science-fictional even by Atwood's limited understanding of the term. I'm thinking of the stereotypic malign computer from sixties Star Trek, haplessly trying to parse James Kirk's ingenious claim that "Everything I say is a lie". Unable to resolve the contradiction, it sparks. It fizzes. It cries "Does not compute", its once-stentorian voice gone all high and squeaky. Finally, in a puff of pink smoke, it expires.

Margaret Atwood deserves our pity. Cognitive dissonance can't be an easy way to go.