

## Vulnerability in Margaret Atwood's "Rape Fantasies": A Game of Cards About Life

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Volume 25, Number 2, Fall 2000

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/sc125\\_2art07](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/sc125_2art07)

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Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Workman, N. (2000). Vulnerability in Margaret Atwood's "Rape Fantasies": A Game of Cards About Life. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 25(2), 131-144.

Article abstract

Since there have been no thorough and sustained readings of Margaret Atwood's popular short story "Rape Fantasies," its serious comments on sexual assault have been ignored in favour of concentrations upon its humour and its irony. Two important aspects are the bridge game, which serves to express notions of manipulation and control, mastery and vulnerability, and Sondra's telling silence in the face of the narrator's evident failure to fully understand what the effects of rape are. In turn, Estelle unknowingly implies her own vulnerability to possible sexual assault, because of her credulity to popular myths surrounding the problem of rape.

# Vulnerability in Margaret Atwood's "Rape Fantasies": A Game of Cards About Life

NANCY WORKMAN

MARGARET ATWOOD has long been regarded as a major contemporary writer, and her short fiction has found a niche in introductory college literature anthologies where it is often praised, especially for offering a Canadian counterpoint to an American point of view. Frequently anthologized, the story "Rape Fantasies," first published in *The Fiddlehead* and then in the Canadian collection *Dancing Girls* (1977), is included in the popular text, *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*. Briefly, the story concerns a group of women co-workers who spend a lunch-hour break responding to a recent story in a women's magazine on the subject of rape. They tell one another stories of their own "fantasies" of sexual encounters with strange men, but the stories actually avoid depictions of violence and coercion. Instead, they are narratives about women who empathize with their assailants and who befriend the strange men they encounter, even if the men climb into their bathrooms uninvited. The narrator of the story, Estelle, offers commentary on the narratives, as well as providing her own stories of sexual encounter, eventually telling her stories to an unnamed man she has met at a bar after work.

Traditional interpretations of "Rape Fantasies" emphasize the narrator's amusing anecdotes and point out the situational irony inherent in the story. For example, in one of the first critical essays, Lee Briscoe Thompson contrasts the "zaniness of the monologue" by the story's narrator Estelle with the more controlled "fine intuitions" of other Atwood fiction. Thompson argues that the story actually places men into the "circle of victimhood" and suggests that the men in the story are actually "failed rapists" who are "betrayed" by their own "gullibilities" (116). Thompson acknowledges that the story suggests failed communication between men and women, but also sees the stories told by the women as largely "unimaginative" (115). She actually includes "Rape Fantasies" in a group she

labels “bubbleheaded/ladies’ magazine fiction,” a term she borrows from Atwood. Implying that the story is not worth serious critical attention, Thompson contrasts it with Atwood’s serious poetry, which she prefers. More recently, the author of *Margaret Atwood Revisited*, included in the Twayne Author Series, a standard reference collection used in college classrooms, confirms the situational irony in the scene in which Estelle befriends a strange man at a bar. Karen Stein concludes that “the situation in the story is complicated and we are left to wonder if her [Estelle’s] stories protect or endanger her” (131). Along with other critics, Stein suggests that “Rape Fantasies” may actually be about date rape, and she likens Estelle to Scheherazade, who also tells stories to a “threatening male.” Finally, in a chapter devoted to Atwood’s short fiction in the MLA series, *Approaches to Teaching World Literature*, Sally Jacobsen suggests that Estelle represents a typical Atwood heroine who can turn being a victim into an expression of independence. Jacobsen argues that Estelle embodies “early success” at turning a potentially harmful situation into one in which she is in control (75). Again, Jacobsen stresses the irony in the story and encourages her students to distinguish between narrations of actual rape and the erotic fantasy seen in the women’s narratives.

While the comments suggest the complicated nature of Atwood’s short story, no extensive readings of “Rape Fantasies” have appeared, despite its popularity. The reason, partially, is that Atwood’s short fiction has been overshadowed by her novels and poetry, and also that the story’s theme seems obvious to most critics. However, by emphasizing exclusively the humour and irony in “Rape Fantasies,” these critical comments have neglected another significant element in the story, which comments on the serious nature of sexual assault. To see the story’s full intent, it is necessary to see how a central image, that of the bridge game which the co-workers play during their lunch break, embodies a key relationship dramatized in the story. It serves as a metaphor for Estelle’s relationship with one of her co-workers, Sondra. Estelle and the other office workers ignore Sondra by telling their own rambling stories, and they misinterpret her inarticulate gestures and looks. In effect, by preferring to empathize with the perpetrators of assault in their fantasies, these women misunderstand the message of silence, and they fail to recognize what Sondra’s silence might actually be telling them. They fail to understand that rape is a violent crime which is often unreported because of the victim’s fears of disclosure. They fail to realize that actual survivors of sexual assault often remain silent and do not share their experiences, so that public perceptions of actual rapes are false and misleading, despite the sto-

ries which appear in women’s magazines. If we contextualize “Rape Fantasies” within the popular culture of the 1970s and the prevailing attitudes then held about sexual assault, we see clearly why Estelle’s confused attitude makes her extremely vulnerable, as the critics have suggested. Similarly, the bridge game functions on other levels and connects thematically to other works by Atwood. Her image of a game serves to express notions of manipulation and control, mastery and vulnerability.

### Estelle and Sondra

As “Rape Fantasies” begins, Estelle and her co-workers are lunching, discussing popular magazines and the stories they publish about women’s “rape fantasies.” Estelle casually mentions that they are simultaneously playing “our game of bridge the way we always do,” a game that she describes:

I had a bare twelve points counting the singleton with not that much of a bid in anything. So I said one club hoping Sondra would remember about the one club convention, because the time before when I used that she thought I really meant clubs and she bid us up to three, and all I had was four little ones with nothing higher than a six, and we went down two and on top of that we were vulnerable. She is not the world’s best bridge player. I mean, neither am I but there’s a limit. (94)

This brief commentary dramatizes the relationship between Estelle and her partner, Sondra. In accusing Sondra of not understanding the conventions, Estelle implies that their team has lost a round at cards because Sondra failed to see that bridge conversations are not conventional dialogues. Instead, they are highly structured codes by which experienced players announce the strengths and weaknesses of their respective hands so their partners can declare the proper trump suit and the number of “tricks” that they can achieve in a round of play. Because Sondra takes Estelle’s words literally, not as code, she misbids the hand, annoying Estelle with her inability to judge correctly how many cards they can actually win. According to Estelle, Sondra fails to comprehend how these informal but easily learned verbal exchanges can affect the outcome of their card game. As her remarks indicate, Estelle is clearly impatient with Sondra’s card playing.

The description of the bridge game is largely overshadowed by the various embedded stories of sexual fantasy that follow this passage. In their narratives the women tell one another their ideas of sexual encounter

in response to Chrissy's question about the article she is reading in a women's magazine. However, despite its brevity, the bridge game symbolically suggests that conventions govern behaviour and that not knowing the conventions leaves a player or team "vulnerable." Estelle knows the conventions of the recreational game of bridge and she berates Sondra for misplaying a hand. On another level, however, Estelle clearly does not know any of the conventions associated with actual rape, and she finds herself "vulnerable" as a result. By mistaking Sondra's failure to tell a rape fantasy as the lack of suitable narrative opportunity, Estelle fails to see that it might suggest much more. In fact, Sondra's silence presents a lacuna in the text which a more experienced "player" might interpret very differently. Thus, in real life, Estelle misplays her hand by trusting a man she has met at the bar. Thinking that she will be able to control the situation, just as she does in her fantasies, she invites danger.

When Chrissy announces that she has been reading a women's magazine in which the idea of rape fantasies is being aired, she asks her co-workers to share their own versions. Immediately Sondra reacts by saying, "What fantasies?" and later adds, "You mean, like some guy jumping you in an alley or something" (94). In response, Chrissy says, "Yeah, sort of like that," suggesting that Sondra's story is not the sort she really wants. Indeed, the first extended narrative is told by Greta instead. Greta describes being alone in her eighteenth-floor apartment when a man enters who has literally come in from outside the window. During the brief exchange between Sondra and Chrissy, Estelle notes that Sondra now has a "thoughtful expression on her face," but, as we will see, Estelle interprets this look incorrectly. As Sondra sits silently, the other women tell stories in which they empathize with their attackers and feel genuine sympathy for the men with whom they have sex. For example, in two of her own narratives, Estelle presents scenarios in which she and her rapist are alike; in one, they both have colds and cannot speak properly, so she fixes him a "NeoCitran and a scotch, her cure" (100); in another, they both suffer from leukemia, so they agree to "end up going for coffee" (103). In many ways, their stories are not about rape at all; the stories are funny and implausible; they are about rapists who listen to their victims and who hold their victim's purses while the women search for repellent. Atwood presents the stories of Chrissy, Darlene, and later Estelle, as actual stories about sexual desire, but not about the experience of rape. Altogether the "rapists" in the story are neither frightful nor scary. None appears to be the sort of man who would cause a woman to experience violence or terror. However, Sondra does not add anything to the tales being told, so that

Estelle remarks, “Sondra was miffed too, by the time she’d finished her celery and she wanted to tell about hers, but she hadn’t got in fast enough” (97). Later, Estelle adds, “so Sondra never did get a chance to tell about her rape fantasy” (98). As these remarks indicate, Estelle interprets Sondra’s actions to a desire to tell another fantasy, and ascribes Sondra’s inability to do so to circumstances and to other people’s verbal aggressiveness, not to reticence on Sondra’s part. Here, Estelle presents herself as an authority on “reading” people, yet in other parts of the story she admits to snooping through personnel files and being unduly influenced by office gossip; in truth, she is neither an astute reader of character nor a truthful one. In addition, she admits to drinking, sometimes heavily, as she had at the office party where she wound up under the table and “I knocked myself out cold” (98). It is evident that Sondra’s initial remark indicates that she perceives of rape as an attack, not as a sexual romp of her colleagues. If her “thoughtful expression” is suggestive, it might suggest interpretations quite different from the one proposed by Estelle. Misunderstood by Estelle, Sondra’s silence and untold story could represent a different silence — that of an actual victim of sexual assault. Sondra’s silence echoes that of countless women who fail to acknowledge publicly that they have been the objects of rape or sexual brutality.

Their silence can be attributed to many factors, including the nature of the crime itself. According to the contributors to *Forcible Rape: The Crime, the Victim, and the Offender* (1977), written at approximately the same time as Atwood’s short story, the crime of rape is mired in complex interactions, including the ideologies of sexual conduct, the judicial and police systems, power relationships, and psychological understanding about trauma. In the 1970s, victims of rape often preferred to remain silent rather than subject themselves to the public scrutiny of a police station or a trial, forums where their own sexual conduct was often called into question in an attempt to defend the actions of a rapist. If it could be proved, for example, that the woman victim had an extensive sexual history, the act of sex with an assailant could be presented as one of consent, not of force. In addition, rape victims often feared retaliation and violence should their charges of rape be made against attackers they personally knew, especially in cases of incest. As the preface to the collection summarizes, it was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s that the issue of forcible rape was addressed by serious historical studies and new investigations. Prior to that time, rape had been seen by criminologists, as well as the general public, as a minor street crime, overlooked by “national concern” (ix). It was only with the rise of the women’s movement and

studies such as Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (1975) that alternative explanations for crimes against women were being formulated. In addition, during this historical moment, investigations into the effect of rape on its victims were being conducted. According to Gilbert Gies, the early 1970s signalled the first serious investigations into "rape trauma syndrome," and policies of crisis intervention were being established (24-25). Gies also points out that at this time there were "few" studies of actual rapists and even those studies that existed were suspect. Since the subjects interviewed in these studies were incarcerated males, not individuals who had bypassed the judicial process, any depictions about the characteristics of rapists were actually based on inconclusive evidence (26-27). Overall, during the 1970s, studies of rape were in their infancy, and popular misconceptions of the victim, the crime, and the perpetrator were prevalent.

More recently, in *After Silence: Rape and My Journey Back* (1998), Nancy Venable Raine confirms that actual victims of rape seldom discuss their assault and its aftermath. Her experience of being raped in her own home leads to ten years of silence, to feelings of shame, confusion and fear — fear, she maintains, that comes from the realization that rape is still misunderstood by society, by "enlightened" police departments and hospitals, by social workers and psychologists, and, most importantly, by those closest to the victim. Raine stresses that her "past self" was lost when she was raped; it was replaced by someone else, not of her own choosing, who had to deal with the sense of personal violation on many levels. She underscores the fact that silence is the typical reaction of a victim. The book jacket cover encapsulates her story: "*After Silence* is Nancy Venable Raine's eloquent, profoundly moving response to her rapist's command to 'shut up,' a command echoed by society and internalized by rape victims." Raine depicts many scenes in which she tried to explain what had happened to her only to be met by friends who judged her and her behaviour, not that of the rapist. For example, on one occasion, actually six years after her rape, Raine confided to a friend that she spent the first several weeks after her rape sleeping in her mother's bed because she was so afraid to be alone. In response, the friend suggested she see a therapist ("I think you have some unresolved issues there"), never realizing how these insensitive remarks hurt Raine and made her wish that she had not shared the episode (44). Later Raine describes the sensation of thinking about her experiences as memory. Again, they evoke overpowering emotions and depression. Most tellingly, she describes the impact on her storytelling ability:

I could not connect the intense feelings that overpowered me that day in Chinatown with the rape. They did not “come with a story,” a linear narrative, the way non-traumatic memories do. They had no verbal context, and seemed to occupy another dimension, parallel to, but never intersecting with, language.

Some trauma researchers speculate that in states of high sympathetic nervous system arousal, such as those produced by trauma, the linguistic encoding of memory is actually deactivated, causing the central nervous system to revert to sensory forms of memory, such as those that characterize early life. (186)

In Raine’s analysis, then, the memory of her rape was actually processed in a non-verbal way. She discusses the advice she was given (“Get on with your life”; “Overcome your adversity”; “Put the past behind you”) all of which proved to be impossible; “heroic action” seemed well beyond her reach. Often, the only solution to her confused feelings of immobilization was to retreat from her life, to seek solitude, and to avoid friends (187). She admits that her silence was a defense against possible reactions to her story, and that her story was untellable, that it lacked linguistic correspondence, something she discovered years later after reading extensively about the trauma of rape.

According to Raine, rape is not about sex at all, but about power. In response to a male reviewer of her manuscript who noted that she had not described the “sexual part” of her three-hour rape, she replied, “Paul was right. I hadn’t described the feeling of the rapist’s penis in my vagina, the state of my vagina at the time, the feeling of the rapist’s penis in my mouth” (215). Instead, she challenges his belief that rape was a sexual or erotic act. By addressing the popular image that depicts sex as pleasurable when the man is aggressive and the woman somewhat reluctant, she suggests a causal relationship between the popular depiction of rape seen in movies and books and the public attitude. She acknowledges that for many, rape is seen within the realm of sexual conduct, although extreme in its manifestation. For these individuals, rape is perceived of as a sexual act, one which they connect to the frequent presence of male orgasm during the attack. Disagreeing with that perception, Raine insists on her right to tell her story from her point of view, and to suppress any sexual content connected with her rape as being irrelevant to her narrative. However, as this incident suggests, even telling about her own experience of being a rape victim invited censure and judgment from her listeners, many of whom seemed to think she got the story wrong by omitting certain elements. Because of experiences like this, Raine is not surprised that



of the rapes reported on college campuses, “42 percent of the victims told no one” (215).

When she insists that rape is not about sex, but about power, Raine articulates what has become a feminist position about the event, a position that has recently been challenged by other theorists. In 2000, evolutionary biologists Randy Thornhill and Craig T. Palmer published their findings regarding the causes of rape, first in an article, “Why Men Rape” (*The Sciences*), and later in *A Natural History of Rape: The Biological Bases of Sexual Coercion*. Directly challenging the feminist idea, they argue that rape should be viewed “as a natural, biological phenomenon that is a product of the human evolutionary heritage” (2). While they caution that they do not wish to justify the act, they insist that the motivation for rape is sexual and related to natural selection. Seeing themselves as victimized by a scientific community that refuses to accept their findings, Thornhill and Palmer see rape as an adaptive behaviour having genetic and environmental components (3). Although they insist that rape is a practice that may involve unconscious rather than conscious attempts at reproduction, they maintain that rapists act as “instruments of evolution” who wish to ensure that their DNA enters the gene pool, even through the body of an unwilling victim. In their view, rape is a “reproductive strategy” employed by many men who would not otherwise have mates with whom to have children. These men might include those who are “socially disenfranchised, and thus unable to gain access to women through looks, wealth or status” (5). Furthermore, the theorists insist that rapists seldom use violence gratuitously. For example, in their research, they note that “only 15 percent of the victims whom the volunteers had encountered reported having been beaten in excess of what was needed to accomplish the rape” (6). For them, the violence accompanying rape is the means to an end, not the end in itself.

Not surprisingly, Thornhill and Palmer’s theories have met with severe critiques in book reviews, many of which openly reject their perspectives. One of the most sustained rebuttals is that given by another biologist, Jerry Coyne, whose *The New Republic* review challenges both the methodology and the conclusions of the researchers. Coyne attacks two scientific assumptions on which Thornhill and Palmer base their work. In the first instance, he argues that their employment of a “by-product hypothesis” which posits rape as one of several natural selection adaptations, can be extended to any human behaviour, but that it cannot be subjected to rigorous scientific observation and verification. Regarding to the second of their assumptions, the notion that “direct selection”

governs the choice of the rapist's victim (the rapist will select a victim who is most likely able to get pregnant and who cannot successfully resist him), Coyne maintains that it fails to account for the idea of loss. Since there is no guarantee that an act of rape will result in pregnancy, there is no assurance of "net reproductive gain" (4). Coyne insists that a "calculus of rape" must be established so that accurate figures regarding rape and successful pregnancy can be determined. Furthermore, Coyne challenges many of the earlier studies cited by Thornhill and Palmer to prove their ideas about violence, and their ideas about successful intervention strategies to use with potential rapists. Overall, Coyne rejects the major thesis advanced by these writers and concludes, among many things:

While denouncing feminists and sociologists for their misguided and scientifically uninformed attempts to deal with rape, Thornhill and Palmer overlook the major improvements that these groups effected in legal and cultural attitudes toward rape. The dropping of the legal requirement for eyewitness corroboration of rape, and the restriction of use in court of a victim's prior sexual history; the founding of rape crisis centers; the establishment of more compassionate attitudes towards the victims by police, hospital staffs, psychiatric counselors, and juries: all of these constructive policy changes were brought into being by (to use Thornhill and Palmer's phrase) "individuals uninformed by evolutionary psychology." (9)

While biologists such as Coyne have the authority to challenge Thornhill and Palmer on their research, what is interesting to other readers is that their findings actually support Raine's ideas about silence, the silence which is dramatized in Atwood's story. Even Thornhill and Palmer admit that rape causes trauma and "emotional scars" including "anxiety, memory loss, obsessive thoughts and emotional numbness [which] linger after a deeply disturbing experience" (2). Ironically enough, given their thesis, they even admit that the women who suffer most from rape are those who fear they are pregnant after the attack. Furthermore, while their suggestions about how to reduce the incidence of rape seem reactionary (women should only date in public places and avoid suggestive clothing), they too see rape as an act that takes place in an elaborate context, that it is a game with frequently misunderstood rules.

Thus, it is no wonder that women of the period depicted in "Rape Fantasies" held such erroneous ideas about its true nature. By relying on women's magazines for information on the subject of rape, by using the advice given in "RAPE, TEN THINGS TO DO ABOUT IT" (93), they

absorbed many ideas that have since been challenged by more serious commentary. For example, the story articulates two rules: “it’s better not to resist” (96) and “keep a plastic lemon in your purse” (97). Estelle seems to adopt this advice, mentioning that she relies on “everything you’ve read about what to do” for moments when she finds herself in crisis. Failing to adequately prepare herself against an attack, Estelle remains quite vulnerable.

In the story, even Estelle acknowledges that the stories she and her co-workers tell cannot be considered accurate. She notes, “But if you’re being totally honest you can’t count those as rape fantasies. In a real rape fantasy, what you should feel is this anxiety, like when you think about your apartment building catching fire and whether you should use the elevator or the stairs or maybe just stick your head under a wet towel” (98-99). Indeed, a close examination of the women’s stories shows how frequently they exercise control in situations in which actual rape victims would not. Whatever Sondra’s untold story is, Estelle’s inability to correctly interpret Sondra’s appearance and comments is understandable. Nonetheless, Estelle’s actions are anticipated in the bridge game. Sondra has misunderstood the coded exchanges that take place during bidding and caused her bridge team to become “vulnerable.” Here it is Estelle who misreads the coded silence of her co-worker, mistaking Sondra’s silence to be a result of her other friends’ aggressiveness. Estelle never considers the possibility that the silence masks quite a different story.

Most importantly, Estelle also occasions her own vulnerability when she trusts an anonymous stranger. In talking to the man at the bar, she narrates her tales, punctuating them with comments that reveal her own emotional needs, ones which can easily be preyed upon. She says, “I was really lonely when I first came here” (99), and she struggles to try and imagine the psychology of a rapist. Insisting over and over again that meeting people is “different for a guy,” she imagines that rapists watch the “Late Show just like anybody else” (100), and wonders what they do in their spare time. Ultimately she pleads utter ignorance:

“Like, how could a fellow do that to a person he’s just had a long conversation with, once you let them know you’re human, you have a life too, I don’t see how they could go ahead with it, right? I mean, I know it happens but I just don’t understand it, that’s the part I really don’t understand.” (104)

In her last statement, Estelle implies that she cannot understand date rape, but her words also reveal that she cannot understand her own lack of un-

derstanding. In essence, she admits that she does not know the codes of violent sexual interaction, but she also fails to grasp that her own knowledge of rape is derived from popular culture, especially women’s magazines, not from reading the accounts of actual victims. As readers, we know that part of her lack of understanding comes from having substituted erotic fantasies for the anguished stories of actual victims. Had she “listened” to Sondra, she might have realized that she was playing her hand with her new male acquaintance incorrectly. Furthermore, as readers, we see that as Estelle tells her own stories, they increasingly come closer to the truth of actual encounters between women and strange men. They move from a story in which she feels sorry for her assailant to one that verges on being “unpleasant,” but which she deliberately suppresses in deference to her mother’s advice to avoid these sorts of revelations (101). Even she admits that unpleasantness will go away as a result, but she also does fail to confront the realities she fears most. Her lack of understanding can be attributed to her willingness to listen to other uninformed sources.

### Knowing the Score

Atwood’s use of a bridge game as the unifying metaphor for her examination of the relationships between individuals is consistent with other poems and stories in which she uses the same figurative strategy. For Atwood, games embody power relationships, and they serve as metaphors for the interactions between individuals — sometimes children and adults, more often men and women. In an early interview (1972) she said that she perceives of society as having a “great concern with tactics and strategies” so that “when you’re writing a novel about that society or when you’re acting as a lens focusing on that society, that element has to come into it” (*Conversations* 22). Although she associates “Machiavellian” “manipulation” with something that is “not my idea of the good life,” she acknowledges its pervasive presence in contemporary society. Thus, it is not surprising that games of many sorts are a central trope in her early work. For example, in “Playing Cards,” she depicts a man and woman playing double solitaire who are contrasted with the images presented in the face cards, specifically the king and queen (*Circle Game* 24–25). The players note that the card suits are immaterial, “there’s little choice between/heart and spade,” but they see that what is significant in these card faces is what the figures hold; the king has “something abstract/in his hand/that might be either/a sceptre or a sword” while the queen holds “flowers.” What is

also significant about the Queen is that her body appears to have two heads and that her smile is “part/of a set pattern.” The imagery embodies definite gendered roles; the male is powerful while the woman, although a ruler, is more dainty, having none of the accoutrements of control. Interestingly, the poem ends with a reversal of expectations: the players themselves lack the relationships of the cards they hold: “You have nothing/that serves the function of a sceptre/and I have/certainly no flowers.” Thus in a concluding stanza, Atwood’s woman narrator explores the ambiguity of male-female roles in which the norms are absent. Similarly, in another of her poems, “The Circle Game,” the lengthy and complicated poem that gives name to the early volume, Atwood dramatizes other relationships, especially between children and adults through game metaphors. In section iii, for example, the children “scarcely listened” and “fidgeted” when the adults tell them stories about “legends” and “monstrous battles.” But when the adults walk along the beach the next day, they notice that the children had built sand castles reflecting elaborate battles, indicating that the cultural transmission of glorified warfare idealized in their stories has indeed been passed down to yet another generation.

As these examples indicate, Atwood uses game imagery throughout her early poetry. Similarly, she uses it within other short stories in the *Dancing Girls* collection, the most sustained example being that included in the story “Training,” which, as the title implies, is about learning one’s role. Here a sensitive young camp counsellor befriends a nine-year-old disabled camper trapped in a wheelchair. Jordon, the camper, possesses alert intelligence, but her body imprisons her; it prevents her from speaking except through her eyes: “She couldn’t get out! She was strapped into the wheelchair, prisoned in her cage of braces, trays, steel wheels, but only because she was strapped into her own body as into some bumpy, sickening carnival ride” (172). Yet her counsellor, Rob, sees that she is friendly and mentally alert through the checkers games they frequently play. Instead of functioning as a competitive battle field, these games cement the friendship between the two. In addition, the checkers games are non-threatening to Rob, unlike the baseball games that his father insists he play. For him, the baseball field suggests the “golden Kennedys” and their “touch football” games, in which the emphasis is on excelling (176). In contrast, instead of teaching him to enjoy victory, the game of checkers teaches Rob compassion and empathy while the games his father celebrates tyrannize him because of the emphasis on defeating one’s opponent. In this story, the game imagery is complex and often undercuts conventional ideas of competitive play.

When she was writing *Dancing Girls*, Atwood was staying in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and studying at Harvard. She admits that the experience was important to her because here she “first learned urban fear. (Before I went there, I always walked around at night, didn’t bother about locked doors, etc. If you behaved that way in Cambridge you were dead.)” (*Conversations* 77). Thus, themes of personal safety, especially for single women, are central ideas depicted in the short-story collection. The possibility of sexual assault is mentioned in other stories, in which the female characters express fear of men they have encountered. For example, in “The Man From Mars,” the main character Christine fears a male acquaintance whose actions frighten her. At one point she says, “She had been afraid he would attack her, she could admit it now, and he had; but not in the usual way. He had raped, *rapeo, rapere, rapui, to seize and carry off*, not herself but her celluloid image” (25). She describes how the fear she carries with her as she walks home has changed the landscape: “Parked cars, the shrubberies near her house, the driveways on either side of it, changed as she passed them from unnoticed background to sinister shadowed foreground” (30). In another story, “Dancing Girls,” the narrator remarks that she feels safe from harm in her new apartment because her landlady was vigilant in watching out for strangers so that “You wouldn’t have to worry about getting raped or anything in this house” (211). Thus, seen within the larger context of the short-story collection, the fears and anxieties of the women in “Rape Fantasies” represent another expression of that theme in Atwood’s work and represent her “political” inclinations. In response to an interviewer who asked why she was so preoccupied with such emotions as fear and anxiety in her fiction, Atwood frankly replied,

I would love to just sort of drift around and look at waterlilies. Unfortunately, I can’t afford to. Wouldn’t it be nice if we had a world in which all we had to do was contemplate nature? Meanwhile this is the world we live in. And it’s all very well for some fellow to go sauntering off into the woods by himself. A woman thinks twice before she does that. Either she thinks twice or she’s a nut.

(*Conversations* 186).

For Atwood, today’s world is often frightful and scary, especially to those who fail to see how it is ruled by hidden and frequently indecipherable codes. To depict this in her fiction, she uses game imagery as metaphor, endowing it with symbolic potential. Although the bridge game in “Rape Fantasies” is only a paragraph in length, a miniature portrait, it clearly suggests a wider landscape of interpersonal relationships. Specifi-

cally, it points to the silence of victims of sexual assault. Until society understands this code of silence regarding rape, all women will continue to be vulnerable, just as Estelle is. If we rely on the truths presented in popular magazines, rather than those contained in women's actual stories, even those that are silent, we will never succeed in protecting ourselves.

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