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Metamorphosis and Hybridity in Margaret Atwood's *Angel Catbird*

Métamorphose et hybridité dans *Angel Catbird* de Margaret Atwood

János Kenyeres

Abstract
This article examines the major themes of Margaret Atwood's comic book series *Angel Catbird*. It looks into the specificities of the genre, the role of text and visual design, and explores the notions of metamorphosis, hybridity, environmentalism and animal protection to place the work in its literary and cultural context. Although it is an animal story, where the vast majority of the characters are capable of shapeshifting, the comic series also has a social message, which the article seeks to explore.

Key words: Margaret Atwood, comic book, metamorphosis, transformation, shapeshifting, hybridity, environmental protection, nature conservation, animal protection

Résumé
Cet article examine les thèmes majeurs de la série de bandes dessinées *Angel Catbird* de Margaret Atwood. Il se penche sur les spécificités du genre, le rôle du texte et de la conception visuelle, et explore les notions de métamorphose, d'hybridité, d'environnementalisme et de protection des animaux pour replacer l'œuvre dans son contexte littéraire et culturel. Bien qu'il s'agisse d'une histoire d'animaux, où la grande majorité des personnages sont capables de se métamorphoser, la série de bandes dessinées porte également un message social, que l'article cherche à explorer.

Mots-clés : Margaret Atwood, bande dessinée, métamorphose, transformation, hybridité, protection de l'environnement, conservation de la nature, protection des animaux.

Margaret Atwood's output is extremely diverse in terms of style, genre and content; she is a poet, novelist, essayist, literary critic, short story and libretto writer and also an environmental activist, among other things. She has made her mark in various genres, from speculative to social science fiction, from dystopia to children's literature. Her three-volume comic book series *Angel Catbird* was published in 2016-2017. The story features animalistic humans with hybrid and fluid identities, most of them not fixed in a stable position but able to change back and forth.

Since comic books mostly convey simple or simplified messages due to the convention of short dialogues, usually not providing room for complex and sophisticated ideas compared to other art forms, the question arises why Atwood, author of over 40 volumes of fiction, poetry and essays, tried her hand at this particular genre. The answer lies in the fact that Atwood is not only an extremely versatile and prolific writer but also a great experimenter, and complying with the restrictions of a relatively new, popular genre clearly poses an interesting challenge for the author. In addition, Atwood has always been interested in this genre. In the 1940s, as a child, she read a lot of comic books. By her own admission, some "were funny," some "were superheroes," some "were even aimed at improving young minds," and some were "just weird" (Atwood, Introduction 5). While still a child, she also drew comics of her own, "flying rabbit superheroes" and "winged flying cats" (Atwood, Introduction 6) and then in the seventies she "drew a sort-of-political strip called *Kanadian Kultchur Komix* for a magazine called, puzzlingly, *This Magazine* […] It's no great coincidence" – as she claims – "that the narrator of [her] 1972 novel, *Surfacing*, is an illustrator, and that the narrator of [her] 1988 novel, *Cat's Eye*, is a figurative painter" (Atwood, Introduction 7). She "continued to read comics, watching the emergence of a new generation of psychologically complex characters" and then saw "the emergence of graphic novels" (Atwood, Introduction 7). Her remark on "psychologically complex characters" that could be achieved in comic books could also have been a personal challenge for her literary and artistic project within the relatively limited confines of this genre.

The other two creators of *Angel Catbird* are illustrator Johnnie Christmas and colourist Tamra Bonvillain, who can be regarded as co-authors due to the importance of the pictures and visual design. Comics as an art medium is of course composite, combining image and text, often employing panels of images, text balloons, captions and other devices, such as onomatopoeia. The precedence of text over image in comics as a genre is by no means a given; some scholars, such as Gérard Blanchard and his so-called Lascaux hypothesis, trace its history as far back as the Lascaux cave paintings of pre-historic times (10), where a narrative of hunting scenes is presented without text. Although this theory is subject to debate, the importance of images in comic books is undeniable. In *Angel Catbird*, the final form and details of the characters were

mutually agreed upon after visual details "flew back and forth through the ether" between the writer, the illustrator and the colourist (Atwood, Introduction 9). For example, Atwood wanted Angel Catbird to look sexy, like the superhero and noir comics created in the forties, and thus it was important to her that he has muscles, a detail whose implementation was left to the drawers of the volumes.

Angel Catbird presents a world of merged identities where some humans are genetically mixed with animals: cats, birds, bats and rats. Most of them are born with a genetic mixture of two or more species, but the book's superhero, a young genetic engineer, accidentally becomes a hybrid when his DNA is mixed with that of a cat and a bird. A peculiar feature of the hybrid creatures in the story is that they are shapeshifters. They can change from one form of being into another instantly, at will and with ease (except for the protagonist who either needs to be punched or must heavily concentrate on achieving the metamorphosis). The story's starting point – as Laura Hudson puts it – is this: the "hero is a genetic engineer named Strig Feleedus (an amalgam of the Latin names for cats and owls), while the villain is one Professor Muroid, the CEO of Feleedus's company, who walks around covered in rats that wear tiny surveillance cameras. Like many iconic heroes, Feleedus is transformed from an average Joe into something much more by a serendipitous accident." More specifically, what happens is that Strig Feleedus, who has a pet cat at home, spends his first day at work developing a special super-splicer serum. Only one code is missing. His boss, Professor Muroid, urges him to get results as soon as possible. Muroid says the new agent will cure diseases, replacing damaged genes with healthy ones. However, the reader is suspicious from the very beginning; Muroid looks strange, ugly and menacing and thinks Strig is a "useful idiot." It is soon revealed that Muroid wants to turn his female rats into rat-women rather than curing diseases and has other plans. Strig Feleedus develops the serum at home, but stepping out of his house, he is hit by a car with his cat and a white owl. It turns out it is a deliberate hit-and– run, and the car was driven by Muroid, who wants to get rid of Strig and steal the missing code from his computer. The serum is splashed on the young man, his cat, and the bird during the incident, and Strig Feleedus suddenly turns into Angel Catbird, a human-cat-bird hybrid. He then changes back to human form, and at work, his colleague, Cate Leone, reveals that his metamorphosis was not a dream, as he had assumed. She discloses that she is also a mutant, a half-human, half-cat, and was born that way. After his transformation, but back in human form, Strig comes to the realisation that his colleague Cate Leone is very attractive. He starts smelling new and delightful scents and has the urge to eat unusual meals, such as birds. This means that even as a human, he retains aspects of his perception as a hybrid, thus shapeshifting merges with internal transformation to some extent. Cate divulges that Professor Muroid is half-rat, half-human, and she, as cat, would love to kill him: "He stinks of rodent

and makes me hungry. I'd like to pounce on him and break his neck" (Atwood et al., *Angel Catbird Vol. 1*, 31). The reader soon learns that Professor Muroid's final plan is to turn his rats into half-humans and eventually subdue all other living creatures. As he exclaims to his "faithful rat millions":

> My subjects assemble!... My plan is succeeding! The time is at hand! ... You will be able to change your shape at will! ... You will infiltrate every level of society! You will take over all power! ... Banks, all wealth will be under your rat-man control! ... Government! Humans will be helpless against you! ... The army! Our ancient enemies, the cats and half-cats will be doomed! ... Yes, my ratty children! And ... all birds' eggs will be at your mercy! ... Humans will be your slaves ... You will reign supreme! (Atwood et al., *Angel Catbird Vol. 1*, 36–37)

This is clearly a dystopian vision of the world, often invoked in Atwood's other works as well, which must be prevented from coming true. The comic book thus warns that the achievements of science and technology can be used not only for noble purposes (in this case, to cure diseases, which Muroid hypocritically pretends to do) but also to establish an authoritarian regime. The story is therefore both an allegory of the eternal struggle between good and evil in general and the fight between an inclusive, tolerant and accepting society and its opposite, autocratic rule and dictatorship in particular.

Cate Leone introduces Strig to her mutant friends, half-humans, half-cats or birds or a mixture of these; there is also a vampire-bat-cat creature called Count Catula. Interestingly, as Etelka Lehoczky claims: "Instead of isolating him in the usual way, his cat identity is the passport into an exciting new subculture." They all represent the good cause for freedom and diversity, while Muroid and his rat army are clearly on the evil side, striving for tyranny and dictatorship. At the end of volume 1, Muroid and his soldiers, armed with explosives, manage to blow up the bar (Catastrophe) which serves as the meeting place of Strig, Cate and their friends. They must now escape to Count Catula's castle. In the subsequent two volumes, the battle between good and evil continues, and it almost seems as if evil will triumph, but as one might expect, good will win out in the end after a few dangerous twists and turns.

In *Angel Catbird*, the above apocalyptic nightmare that should be avoided is presented in the form of a tale, which can be linked more specifically to a long tradition of animal tales. In this respect, there is a clear parallel with George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, which also uses an animal story to express social criticism. Furthermore, although the contrast between open and closed societies, democracy and dictatorship, is still a relevant question today, Atwood's viewpoint adds to this the contemporary issues of environmentalism and hybridity. As for the latter, as Margaret Wappler observes, "Not all of Cate's friends welcome him [Strig] with open paws — put off by his owlish

tendencies, some call him a freak. In our era of transphobia and white nationalism, 'Angel Catbird' is a clever metaphor for people's discomfort with those who don't fit into the accepted binaries." While this is true of this particular incident, looking at the entire story, the message of the narrative is much more about acceptance and mutual understanding. In this story, on the one hand, almost all the characters are hybrids even if they are not hybrid in the same way (so hybridity is the norm), and on the other hand, it is their cooperation and teamwork that leads to the defeat of evil.

A typical feature of the story is its frequent use of puns. In fact there is hardly any page without a cat pun: Cate Leone, Catula, the bar called Catastrophe, purrrfect, cataclysm, catkin, catnip, catwalk. The second volume in particular uses a lot of verbal puns and wordplays, combined with visual jokes, where several new characters enter the story, some from the past of human history, which gives the authors the opportunity to playfully juxtapose cultural customs and traditions – for example "Bastet, Egyptian goddess of Cats, especially mummified ones" and "Sekhmet, the lion-headed goddess of war and healing… my ancestress!" (*Angel Catbird Vol. 2*, 30).

Angel Catbird adapts to the requirements of the genre; the dialogues are short and dynamic. There is also a sense of feminist masculinity emanating from the text: although Cate looks very feminine, an attractive woman, her talk and behaviour are just as firm and aggressive as those of the male characters. She is definitely an emancipated personality (and thus the most recent in a long line of comics superheroines that stretches back to Miss Fury and Wonder Woman, both of whom first appeared in 1941). The plot also displays sexuality; Strig and Cate are mutually attracted to one another and some of the dialogue reveals an intense sensuality: "Woo. Can't wait to see her with a tail," Strig says to himself at one point. Moreover, although the synopsis of volume 1 states that Strig "fell in love" with Cate (Atwood et al., *Angel Catbird Vol. 2*, 8), we see him kissing with Atheen-Owl just a few pages later (20), which somewhat calls into question the power of that love.

Early in her career, Atwood grew increasingly committed to nature conservation, including the agenda of saving cats and birds, and the consequences of pollution, genetic engineering and the cause of environmental protection have played a central role in her major works from the *Handmaid's Tale* down to the *Maddaddam Trilogy*. Environmental protection is one of the primary messages of *Angel Catbird*, too, as bird and cat conservation seems to be an absolute priority and recurring theme throughout the work. As mentioned above, Strig as cat feels an urge to consume birds; as human, however, he is dedicated to protecting these delicate creatures. At one point in the story, he sees a bird and wonders: "Do I rescue it or eat it?" (Atwood et al., *Angel Catbird Vol. 1*, 33). Fortunately (from the point of view of bird protection), his human self takes the upper hand and keeps him back from eating the bird. Moreover, environmental and animal protection is emphasised not only through the plotline but

also in the banners at the bottom of some pages disclosing factual information about cats and birds and what kind of dangers they are exposed to. Whether intended for children or adults, these parts are the most didactic ones in *Angel Catbird*. As Gavia Baker-Whitelaw puts it, somewhat sarcastically:

> The most surprising aspect of *Angel Catbird* is its educational content. Atwood mentions in the foreword that she wants the character to be used as a teaching tool for children, sharing advice about cat safety. Every few pages, the story itself is annotated with a cat safety factoid, advising readers to visit an informative website. Did you know that about 200,000 cats die from car accidents every year in Canada? Well, now you do.

At the same time, the educational content of the genre is self-evident (even without the factoids). As Kelly Sue DeConnick claims, "Comics are both multimodal and interactive" and constitute "a medium that is so cognitively engaging as to be a powerful tool for education … or persuasion" (6).

Another major feature of the series is that it draws on the idea of metamorphosis and a sense of hybridity as a result. Transformation has always been a common theme in literature from the time literature emerged in human history. It is present in the myths and mythologies of many cultures, Greco-Roman, Celtic, Norse, Armenian, Chinese, Indian and Japanese, among others. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* (from around 2100 BC) and the *Iliad* (from the 8th century BC) are just two examples where transformation plays an essential role. Gilgamesh is two-thirds god and one-third man, and Greek mythology also abounds with demi-gods, sharing human and divine features. A host of other transformations also take place in ancient texts, such as Circe's transforming Odysseus' men into pigs in Homer's *Odyssey* and Lucius becoming a donkey in Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*, a story itself based on Greek myth. The earliest known poem exclusively dealing with myths of metamorphosis is the now fragmentary *Ornithogonia* by the Greek author Boios, about the transformation of mythic figures into birds, translated into Latin by Ovid's friend Aemilius Macer. The theme of transformation became central to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* of 3–8 AD, and as such, it had a particular influence on subsequent works of Western literature. In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid defined transformation right in the opening lines of the poem: "In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas / corpora," in English, "My mind is bent to tell of bodies changed into new forms" (1–2). Margaret Atwood's comic book series *Angel Catbird* clearly falls within this tradition since it focuses on shapeshifting, which can be regarded as a subcategory of metamorphosis, with the distinction that it primarily refers to the alteration of physical form and shape. In mythology, folklore and speculative fiction, shapeshifting is usually realised by a character's inherent ability, divine intervention or the use of magic. In Atwood's work, just like in other

manifestations of speculative fiction or children's literature, it is achieved due to science, through genetic fusion by a special serum.

The story of *Angel Catbird* depicts an imaginary world through the narrative of an adventure tale, while also revealing features that make it similar to our own world. The hybrid identities embedded in the fantastical elements of the book evoke our own world, our own societies, where identity is complex, multifaceted and ever-changing. Modern societies are made up of individuals whose identities are constituted by different layers, whether in terms of ethnicity, culture or religion, and Atwood's comic book reflects this layered aspect through its metaphorical expression. The world of shapeshifters in the story reflects the lives of ordinary people who are also changing, though not as spectacularly as the characters in the story.

Biological changes in human life, such as growing up and reaching old age, with all their intermediate stages, also show signs of metamorphosis. In the process, one's mindset, worldview, way of thinking and cultural awareness also tend to change, which is sometimes barely noticeable, whereas it is striking and significant at other times. In the case of Canada, immigration-induced transformations are a separate category manifested in the change of personal, cultural, religious and national identity. In this way, the transformations presented in *Angel Catbird* figuratively correspond to these real-world metamorphoses (and, indeed, not all of the figures in the series are clearly white).

For all the merits of the *Angel Catbird* enterprise, it should be mentioned that the characters depicted are rather one-sided. We do not learn much about them, and their interpersonal relationships are quite simple. Sexual attraction rather than love predominates, Strig and Cate's relationship is based mainly on physical attraction and traditional family does not appear at all. It must be conceded, however, that it is the suspenseful nature of the storytelling that is important in a comic book, and it may even be unfair to call the story to account for something that is outside the realm of its genre.

Another aspect to note is that it is odd to divide the world into good and bad based on species. In this story, the bad ones are exclusively rats. To suggest that a species is evil and despicable is unusual in a book that is specifically designed to educate its readers about animal protection. This is not to say that rats are not parasites, but parasites also have a role to play in the order of nature. More importantly, however, this social vision can have harmful and even dangerous consequences, as it can easily be turned against some ethnic or religious groups in contemporary societies. However, the story needs to be exempted from the above charge: there are two rats who unsuccessfully rebel against Muroid and are held captive by him. They eventually manage to escape, switch to the good side, and without their help, Strig, Cate, and their team would not be able to win in the end. Thus, these two rats save their entire

species from being branded as wicked without exception.

It is also to be noted that rodents are not necessarily portrayed as evil and vile in literature when they are used to invoke features of the human world. Sometimes they express victimhood, or they stand for the weak, the oppressed or the persecuted – most famously, perhaps, in Art Spiegelman's seminal *Maus I* and *Maus II*. Other examples of such interpretations include John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, Daniel Keyes's *Flowers for Algernon* and Miklós Mészöly's "Report on Five Mice." In Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, mice represent the notion of the survival of the fittest, the idea that those who are weak are crushed in a world of natural selection where whoever is stronger will prevail; in Keyes's *Flowers for Algernon*, there is a strong bond between man and mouse, and the mouse is a prefiguration of man and his fate; in Mészöly's "Report on Five Mice," the rodents represent the world of the persecuted, the ones who are systematically exterminated without mercy. Even in popular culture, rodents are sometimes depicted as cute little creatures that outwit their natural enemies, as in the animated cartoon series *Tom and Jerry*. Although adversaries, sometimes they show sincere friendship, while at other times they unite for a common cause. In the animated film *Cat City*, mice are also considered an endangered species. Ratatouille, a computer-animated comedy film, features an anthropomorphic rat who dreams of becoming a chef.

Atwood herself wrote a poem called "Rat Song," part of the series entitled "Songs of the Transformed," which portrays rats in a very different light from their depiction in *Angel Catbird*.

> When you hear me singing
> you get the rifle down
> and the flashlight, aiming for my brain,
> but you always miss
> and when you set out the poison
> I piss on it
> to warn the others.
> You think: *That one's too clever,*
> *she's dangerous,* because
> I don't stick around to be slaughtered
> and you think I'm ugly too
> despite my fur and pretty teeth
> and my six nipples and snake tail.
> All I want is love, you stupid
> humanist. See if you can.
> Right, I'm a parasite, I live off your

leavings, gristle and rancid fat,
I take without asking
and make nests in your cupboards
out of your suits and underwear.
You'd do the same if you could,
if you could afford to share
my crystal hatreds.
It's your throat I want, my mate
trapped in your throat.
Though you try to drown him
with your greasy person voice,
he is hiding / between your syllables
I can hear him singing. (259)

Atwood's poem, published in 1974, reveals her long-standing preoccupation with transformation between humans and animals, the transition between human and animal existence, and the idea that our fear of the other makes us prejudiced, while in the other in fact we fear what is in our innermost selves. We see moral depravity in the other, whereas it is in us. What is particularly interesting about the poem is that this idea, which emerges as an epiphany, comes from the very rat we fear and loathe so much. Perhaps it will lead to a better world if humans realise that the real enemy of their humanity lies in themselves, and they only need to try and change or transform themselves.

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