

The Aunts as an Analysis of Feminine Power in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

Tara J. Johnson

Many scholars, both male and female alike, dismiss the Aunts in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as having a token power granted to them by the Commanders in Gilead. In fact, the males in positions of Commanders are given full responsibility for creating and maintaining the Gileadan theocracy many years after the dissolution of Gilead in the novel's blatantly satiric epilogue. Lee Briscoe Thompson in her book *Scarlet Letters: Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale* believes that lecturer Professor James Darcy Pieixoto's "real interest" is in "the male power elite of Gilead" which means that he would dismiss any female involvement (53). Karen Stein in her article "Margaret Atwood's Modest Proposal: *The Handmaid's Tale*" describes the dystopic Gilead in this manner: "In the guise of a re-population program, Gilead reads the biblical text literally and makes it the basis for the state-sanctioned rape, the impregnation ceremony the handmaids must undergo each month" (195). The society is obviously founded upon principles that negate the rights of women, which would lead readers to believe that no woman, let alone a group of women, could have the type and the strength of the power of the Commanders. Critics such as Roberta Rubenstein in her article "Nature and Nurture in Dystopia: *The Handmaid's Tale*" believe that the Aunts only "retain power in the puritanical state through their role as indoctrinators of the handmaids" (104). This paper would argue that the Aunts were created by Atwood and portrayed in such a manner as to suggest that they have as much if not more power as the Commanders have.

Atwood has a history of placing powerful females in her novels who use their power against other females, and the Aunts in *The Handmaid's Tale* are a clear type of this feminine power. The Aunts fall into the long tradition of females with power in Atwood's novels. *Cat's Eye*, Atwood's novel immediately following *The Handmaid's Tale* continues this tradition. While most of the criticism concerning *Cat's Eye* is about Elaine Risley's ability to find her own power (after being tortured by her childhood friend), Cordelia and her treatment of Elaine are reminiscent of the Aunts and their treatment of females, and the handmaids in particular. According to J. Brooks Bouson, *The Handmaid's Tale* anticipates *Cat's Eye's* dramatization of the female-directed oppression of women (which begins during the girlhood socialization process) and it describes the brutal reeducation of the Handmaids, who are coerced by the Aunts to forego the ideology of women's liberation and to revert to the 'traditional' values of a male-dominated system" (141).

Atwood intentionally created the Aunts as powerful females in a dystopia. In a radio conversation with fellow writer Victor-Levy Beaulieu, she said that the character of Aunt Lydia "is based on the history of imperialisms. For example, the British in India raised an army of Indians to control the rest of the Indians...So, if you want to control women, you have to grant some women a tiny bit more power so that they'll control the others" (Atwood and Beaulieu 78). In a BBC World Book Club radio program last year, Margaret Atwood stated: "I think the Aunts [in *The Handmaid's Tale*] have quite a bit of power...Naturally, they would have to answer to a top level of men" (4 Aug. 2003). And during Professor Pieixoto's examination of the Gileadan theocracy in the novel's epilogue, he clearly notes Atwood's observation:

Judd – according to the Limkin material – was of the opinion from the outset that the best and most cost-effective way to control women...was through women themselves. For this there were many historical precedents; in fact, no empire imposed by force or otherwise has ever been without this feature: control of the indigenous members by their own group (390).

By taking this power offered to them, the Aunts were therefore able to “escape redundancy, and consequent shipment to the infamous Colonies, which were composed of portable populations used mainly as expendable toxic-cleanup squads, though if lucky could be assigned to less hazardous tasks, such as cotton picking and fruit harvesting” (390-91). According to Thompson, it is “the pleasures of power” that “seal the deal” along with the “small perks” and “personal security.” Thompson claims the Aunts to be “a classic depiction of Victim Position #1 as described in Atwood’s analysis of victimhood in her literary study *Survival*” (51). While the Aunts may be victims of a male hierarchy, they certainly choose to utilize the power that they have over other women.

Linda Myrsiades in her article “Law, Medicine, and the Sex Slave in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*” simply categorizes the Aunts as “a class of women assigned to educate the handmaids to their roles as surrogates” (227). David Coad in his article “Hymens, Lips and Masks: The Veil in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*” limits the role of the Aunts by saying that they are merely “sadistic propagandists” (54). It could be argued, however, that the Aunts are responsible for sustaining the rituals of the Gileadan society, and not only the training of the Handmaids at the Rachel and Leah Reeducation Center. When Janine, or Ofwarren, is ready to give birth, Aunt Elizabeth

plays an integral part in the birthing process for both Janine and the Commander's wife (158-62). At the assembly of the Handmaids, Aunt Lydia directs both the Salvaging and the Particution ceremonies (352-60). Lucy M. Freibert in her article "Control and Creativity: The Politics of Risks in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*" describes both ceremonies in this manner: "At the hangings each Handmaid must touch the rope in assent to the murders. At Particutions the Handmaids ritually dismember any man accused of rape. The Aunts supply the rhetoric that arouses the women to savagery" (284-85). The Aunts are also responsible for directing the females who are not Handmaids. When Offred goes with the Commander to the club, which serves as a brothel for the Commanders, she is surprised to see that an Aunt is responsible for regulating the behavior of her friend Moira and the other prostitutes. The Aunt determines when the prostitutes take their breaks and for how long the breaks are (313). The Aunt also determines whether they need to lose weight in their positions and will punish them if they are overweight (309). A comparison of the Aunts' responsibility and the Commanders' responsibility shows that the Commanders are in charge of much lighter duties. A Commander officiates the arranged marriages service (282-83). The Commander is responsible for reading Bible passages to his household (114). The Commander is also responsible for impregnating the Handmaid in order to continue Gilead (122). It is clear that that the Aunts have more responsibilities in the Gileadan theocracy than merely educating women for service as Handmaids.

Most scholarly criticism focuses on the Aunts' responsibility for maintaining the Rachel and Leah Reeducation Center. According to Barbara Hill Rigney in her book *Margaret Atwood*, "the control agency in this novel is, not the commanders, but the

'Aunts', who run their re-education centres with cattle prods, torture techniques, and brain washing slogans" (118). The Aunts have very clear goals that they want to accomplish with their training of the Handmaids. The first is to delete the women from history: "All official records of the handmaids would have been destroyed upon their entry into the Rachel and Leah Re-education Center" (387). The second goal is to teach women how to betray other women. Offred learns from the Aunts that "the only storytellings permitted or rewarded are informing on others or testifying against oneself" (Thompson 59). The handmaids learn that their behavior will be reported if it is thought to undermine the Gileadan regime. According to the Aunts, "friendships were suspicious" (91). Aunt Lydia wants Janine to listen to the other handmaids and tell her if anyone had helped Moira to escape (171). Ironically, after all of Janine's efforts to appease the Aunts, she has a mental breakdown when her baby is deemed a Shredder rather than a Keeper (361). The Aunts' final goal is to teach the handmaids that rape is acceptable. They are able to utilize Janine's gang rape to further this lesson as they wear her down and make her realize that her gang rape was her fault (93). The other handmaids learn how to call Janine a crybaby and jeer at her when she cries and is upset (93). Janine's gang rape story is a pivotal element in teaching the handmaids that ritualistic rape at the hands of their Commanders will not only be tolerated but also encouraged. Eleonora Rao in her book *Strategies for Identity: The Fiction of Margaret Atwood* notes that Moira is one female who "survives intact the programme of conditioning into the acceptance of female guilt and evil imposed on the handmaids at the Centre" (20). The Aunts are not only training the Handmaids, they are creating women who will not only submit to their Commanders but also further the goals of the Gileadan theocracy.

A clear indication that the Aunts have a more elevated status than other females in Gilead, including the wives, is the power that they hold above other females. Thompson agrees with me about this, describing the Aunts as “a paramilitary cadre in charge of indoctrinating Handmaids and enforcing female (even Wifely) obedience to the new rules” (32). Thompson goes on to say that “the Aunts wear army khaki without veils, befitting their quasi-military role, and reminiscent of the fascistic Brownshirts of World War II (not to mention the no less fascist childhood Brownie troop uniforms of other Atwood fiction!)” (32). Thompson states that the other females are not allowed to wear the “Aunt khaki since they have no administrative powers” (32). Included in the Aunts’ administrative powers is the use of violence and other methods to fight resistance from other females. At the Rachel and Leah Reeducation Center, the Aunts have the power to put “some kind of pill or drug” in the food to keep the handmaids disoriented so that they won’t resist in the beginning (91). Offred notes that when Moira arrives at the Center she has a bruise on her left cheek (91). When Dolores, a handmaid in training, wets the floor because she isn’t allowed to go to the bathroom, the Aunts haul her away and the handmaids listen to her moan all night after she returns (93). For Moira’s first attempt at escaping from the Center, she is beaten with steel cables on both of her feet and the other handmaids have to carry her because she can’t walk (118). The Aunts are very honest about their willingness to use violence to accomplish their goals: “Remember. For our purposes your feet and your hands are not essential” (118). The Aunts’ use of violence is important because even the wives are not allowed to use force to abuse or punish the handmaids. Another power that the Aunts have in comparison to the other female characters is the permission to publicly read and write. No woman is allowed to read and

write in Gileadan society. On the night of the handmaid's impregnation Ceremony, the Commander unlocks the drawer that holds the Bible and reads aloud to the women in his household (112). Only the Commanders and the Aunts are allowed to read and write.

Central to understanding the power of the Aunts is Moira's successful escape in the guise of an Aunt from the Rachel and Leah Reeducation Center and future servitude as a handmaid. Moira forcibly exchanges clothing with an Aunt and instantly becomes a respectable, powerful woman in Gileadan society (170-71). Moira had previously attempted to use her own power and wit by faking the symptoms of scurvy and was unable to escape from the Center (115). Wearing Aunt Elizabeth's clothing, Moira walks out of the Center and past the barricades set up to prevent women from leaving Gilead (170-71). Moira doesn't have to explain the nature of her business to any of the male security personnel (170-71). She does end up at the Commanders' club under the watchful eye of an Aunt, but she isn't executed nor is she banished to an Unwoman colony (324). As Moira explains to Offred when they find each other at the club, "I couldn't believe how easy it was to get out of the Center. In that brown outfit I just walked right through. I kept on going as if I knew where I was heading, till I was out of sight. I didn't have any great plan; it wasn't an organized thing, like they thought..." (317). Even Moira and Offred are surprised that Aunts are respected in the Gileadan theocracy.

The Commanders' behavior is more suggestive of freedom for women than the Aunts' behavior. Sema Kormali in her article "Feminist Science Fiction: The Alternative Worlds of Piercy, Elgin and Atwood" states that "it is the Aunts, as best exemplified by Aunt Lydia, who are probably the most guilty of enforcing this patriarchal/totalitarian

rule on the members of their own sex” (75). Furthermore, Karen Stein in her book *Margaret Atwood Revisited* states that the role of Aunt Lydia [and the other Aunts] is to control “women’s appetites for freedom and knowledge, slimming down their minds and behaviors to be acceptable to Gilead’s social standards” (82). When Offred goes with the Commander to the club, she views her and the Commander’s behavior as “...flaunting, such a sneer at the Aunts, so sinful, so free” (299). The Commander allows Offred rights that the Gileadan regime and the Aunts deny her. In his study, the Commander shares women’s magazines such as *Vogue* and novels with her (200-03, 238). Offred is able to write out words while she is playing Scrabble with the Commander (199). Furthermore, Offred says “the Commander was patient when I hesitated, or asked him for a correct spelling” (199). This behavior of the Commander’s demonstrates his willingness for her to possibly relearn what she has forgotten and to increase her own vocabulary. Another way that he helps her is by explaining what the saying “*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*” inscribed on her bedroom floor means (242). When Serena Joy later reprimands Offred for spending intimate time with her husband, she alludes to the fact that the Commander engaged in similar activities with the former handmaid in their household (368-69). This admission of Serena’s confirms Offred’s suspicion that she is not the only handmaid to have been inside the Commander’s study to learn what “*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*” means (240).

While the Commanders are undermining the Gileadan theocracy with their behavior, the Aunts are promoting the future of Gilead. The Aunts consider the group of women that Offred is a part of to be the “transitional generation. It is the hardest for you....For the ones who come after you, it will be easier” (151). The Aunts tell the

handmaids that the next generation “will accept their duties with willing hearts.... Because they won’t want what they can’t have” (151). The Aunts have a greater capacity for imagining what the future will be like for women in Gilead: “what we’re aiming for is a spirit of camaraderie among women” (287). Bouson finds this aim “ironic” because the Aunts “uphold the male supremacist power structure of Gilead with its hierarchical arrangement of the sexes, and they play an active role in the state’s sexual enslavement of the Handmaids” (141). When the Commander takes Offred to the club, he makes it very clear that the club was created so that “it’s like walking into the past” (306). The costumes that Offred and the other women wear at the club are reminiscent of the time before Gilead. Even Offred is shocked: “such cloth – feathers, mauve, pink” (298). And when they arrive, the Commander announces proudly to her that there are “no nicotine-and-alcohol taboos here!” (310). Offred observes that the Commander is “in the courtly phase” like past relations between men and women (297). Not only has the Commander kissed Offred on her mouth, which is a forbidden act between a Commander and a handmaid, but also at the club he takes her hand “and kisses it, on the palm” (310). As if they were two teenagers learning the rules of love at a high school dance, at the club the Commander surprises Offred with a room key: “I thought you might enjoy it for a change” (331).

Corel Ann Howells observes that in *The Handmaid’s Tale* “individual freedom of choice has been outlawed and everyone has been drafted into the service of the state, classified according to prescribed roles: Commanders, Wives, Aunts, Handmaids, Eyes, down to Guardians and Econowives” (127-28). What stands out in her observation is how she has used the word “everyone,” which suggests that the Commanders do not have

power over the Aunts. In contradistinction, Freibert refuses to acknowledge that the Aunts have any type of power or knowledge in Gilead's society. She places the Commanders, Eyes, Angels, and Guardians in a military hierarchy and only points out that "at the Rachel and Leah Center, the Aunts use electric cattle prods to keep the Handmaids in line" (Freibert 281-82). Freibert's hierarchy of power is refuted by Atwood's own skillful portrayal of exactly how involved the Aunts were with the design of the Gileadan society in a conversation between Moira and Offred. Moira explains to Offred: "What I didn't know of course was that in those early days the Aunts and even the [Reeducation] Center were hardly common knowledge. It was all secret at first, behind barbed wire. There might have been objections to what they were doing, even then. So, although people had seen the odd Aunt around, they weren't really aware of what they were for" (319). The Aunts are part of the long tradition of powerful females in Atwood's fiction and *The Handmaid's Tale* provides much evidence to support this claim. Atwood portrays the Aunts in such a manner as to suggest that they have as much if not more power as the males in positions of Commanders in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

List of Works Consulted

Atwood, Margaret. "The Handmaid's Tale and Oryx and Crake in Context." *PMLA*. 119.3 (2004): 513-17.

---. *The Handmaid's Tale*. New York: Ballantine, 1985.

---. *Cat's Eye*. New York: Bantam, 1988.

---. and Victor-Levy Beaulieu. *Two Solitudes*. Trans. Phyllis Arnoff and Howard Scott. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1996.

Bouson, J. Brooks. *Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Novels of Margaret Atwood*. Amherst: Massachusetts UP, 1993.

- Coad, David. "Hymens, Lips and Masks: The Veil in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Literature and psychology*. 47.1-2 (2001) 54-67.
- Dopp, Jamie. "Subject-Position as Victim-Position in *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Studies in Canadian Literature*. 19.1 (1994): 43-57.
- Freibert, Lucy M. "Control and Creativity: The Politics of Risk in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood*. Ed. Judith McCombs. *Critical Essays on World Literature*. Ed. Robert Lecker. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1988. 280-292.
- Gardner, Laurel J. "Pornography as a Matter of Power in *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Notes on Contemporary Literature*. 24.5 (1994): 5-7.
- Howells, Corel Ann. *Margaret Atwood. Modern Novelists*. Ed. Norman Page. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995.
- Kormali, Sema. "Feminist Science Fiction: The Alternative Worlds of Piercy, Elgin and Atwood." *Journal of American Studies of Turkey*. 4 (1996): 69-77.
- "Margaret Atwood." Narr. Harriet Gilbert. *BBC World Book Club*. BBC World Service Radio. 4 Aug. 2003.
- Myrsiades, Linda. "Law, Medicine, and the Sex Slave in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Un-Disciplining Literature: Literature, Law, and Culture*. Eds. Kostas Myrsiades and Linda Myrsiades. Vol. 121. *Counterpoints: Studies in the Postmodern Theory of Education*. Eds. Joe L. Kincheloe and Shirley R. Steinberg. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1999. 219-245.
- Rao, Eleonora. *Strategies for Identity: The Fiction of Margaret Atwood. Writing About Women: Feminist Literary Studies*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1993.
- Rigney, Barbara Hill. *Margaret Atwood. Women Writers*. Totowa: Barnes & Noble Books, 1987.
- Rubenstein, Roberta. "Nature and Nuture in Dystopia: *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms*. Eds. Kathryn VanSpanckeren and Jan Garden Castro. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1988. 101-112.
- Stein, Karen F. *Margaret Atwood Revisited. Twayne World Author Series*. Ed. Robert Lecker. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999.
- Stein, Karen. "Margaret Atwood's Modest Proposal: *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Margaret Atwood*. Ed. Harold Bloom. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2000, 2001. 191-204.

Thompson, Lee Briscoe. *Scarlet Letters: Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale. Canadian Fiction Studies*. Toronto: EWC Press, 1997.