A Foundation of Serial Murder and Appreciation of the Male Voice: Historical & Feminist Considerations in *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract

Violent crime, and the impulse to temper it, fuel cycles of utopian and dystopian discourse in North American literature. Dystopian fiction operates as a social document that highlight the anxieties of the time in which authoring takes place, and in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, America's violent history/(his)story is legalized and gendered. The principal narrator, Offred, manages her perspective—the only thing she can claim personal ownership over—under the pressure of a strict monotheocracy. This paper examines Atwood's novel with a historical-critical lens and posits that groundwork for Gilead was seeded during a spike of lurid serial murders in the 1970s/1980s—a discourse established, perhaps hyperbolically, by the pre-digital press—combined with the resurgence of conservative values during the Reagan administration; these conditions fertilized the neo-patriarchal legislation of the fictional Gilead—text born of context. Both historical and feminist criticism discover examples of gendered assault, contemporary to the time of the novel's authoring, bleeding into the nebulously timed present-day Gilead—for time, the narrator notes, has not been of enumerable value since the mid-1980s. *The Handmaid's Tale* repurposes the history of sexual violence and femicide; here, horror is systematically present within the Puritan womb which seeks to shield an infantilized population—women—from the monsters in dark alleys to the proliferation of Ted Bundy and Edmund Kemper doppelgangers in mass media.

Keywords: Atwood, Margaret Atwood, The Handmaid's Tale, dystopia, serial murder, Ted Bundy

Violent crime, and the impulse to control it, fuel cycles of utopian and dystopian discourse in some works of literature. In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the fictional Republic of Gilead legalizes and genders America's history of violence. The narrator, Offred, manages her perspective, the only thing she can claim personal ownership of, under the pressure of a strict monotheocracy. The groundwork for Atwood's speculative Gileadean scholarship is found within the 1970-1980s. The historical-critical approach of reading the novel is informed by the history of Atwood's space as well as that of Offred's. Both historical criticism and feminist criticism uncover examples of gendered assault,

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contemporary to the time of the novel's authoring, bleeding into the nebulously timed present-day fictional Gilead—for, in the novel, "there are no dates after the mid-eighties" (Atwood 107). Atwood's world is Gilead's history. Ultimately, a spike of lurid serial murders in the 1970s-1980s—a discourse established, perhaps hyperbolically, by the pre-digital press—combined with the resurgence of conservative values during the Reagan administration, serve the neo-patriarchal legislation of the fictional Gilead—text born of context. *The Handmaid's Tale* repurposes a history of sexual violence and femicide. Horror is systematically present within the Puritan womb which seeks to shield an infantilized population—women—from the monsters in dark alleys and the proliferation of Ted Bundy doppelgangers in mass media, however, in allegedly protecting women from these dangers, Gileadean society itself acts as assaulter, murderer, and oppressor.

Atwood's Gilead operates as a mirror of the time, space, and place(s) in which Atwood wrote. The historical era that gave rise to Gilead was liminal and existed between the second- and third-wave feminist movements. As Offred says, "[Women] lived in the gaps between the stories" (53). Within this space, a new ideology—the feminist sex-wars—emerges, and Atwood uses the real-world history of the 1970s and 1980s to frame her speculations. The novel's stress on Harvard is uncoincidental; a university is a potent symbol of a society that prioritizes the production of informed, independent citizens. In choosing Harvard as a home for the Eyes, Atwood inverts the previously established symbology of the university space. Gilead appropriates a powerful icon and turns inspiration into oppression; ideological appropriation of iconography has precedent: crosses to Christianity, swastikas to Nazism, universities to detention centers. Physical space, metaphorical place, and time management are bound together, and the presentation of Harvard legitimizes the ostensible theme of the American nightmare. Atwood anticipates the discovery of Harvard's inversion by housing Offred, and the other new handmaids, in a former high school turned indoctrination center (3). Formerly a pillar of society, Offred notes that Harvard now serves as a promotional display of submission:

> I can remember where the buildings are, inside the Wall; we used to be able to walk freely there when it was a university. We still go in there once in a while for Women's Salvagings. Most of the buildings are red brick too; some have arched doorways, a Romanesque effect, from the nineteenth century. We aren't allowed inside the buildings any more; but who would want to go in? Those buildings belong to the Eyes. (156)

The repurposed university is the Orwellian stage showcasing the performances of (freshly executed) social criminals and gender traitors. However, through the red colour-coding, the former university allies itself *with* the handmaids in their red uniforms. Like the ambiguous nature of Offred, the university is equivocally connected to both the system of oppression and the oppressed. Both Offred as she exists in the Republic of Gilead *and* as she existed in a pre-Gileadean world, understand the danger of the school space, questioning the need to even enter into that uncertainty: "who would want to go in?" (156). This fear accesses the underground narrative of the time Atwood was writing in: the simultaneous rise of educated women and serial murderers, including those who preyed on university students (otherwise known as "co-ed killers). It is no coincidence that many female victims disappeared from their campuses where predators, like Gilead's Eyes, were watching and waiting. Conventional wisdom indicates that moving into the future is, inherently, a progressive act in itself, thereby declaring the past academic achievements of women as fundamentally regressive. Gilead's theocratic state employs this strategy to great success, and a new understanding of locality in Gilead emerges as the Aunts encourage women to keep the past in mind and "remember the days of anarchy" (24)—all to enable the Gileadean zeitgeist. Universities, made to fertilize the growth of open discourse, are now put in service of new ideologies that, instead, are concerned with an alternate fertilization: new generations of bodies.

In spite of the Orwellian horror that faces women in the Gileadean present, Atwood's narrator notes that the time before—the author's present—was not a safe place. Fear, concerning the reported spike in serial murder during the 1970s-1980s, was on the rise. The lurid nature of postmodern serialized homicide often mythologizes criminology, but, as Robert Stote and Lionel Standing observe in "Serial and Multiple Homicide: Is there an Epidemic?", an examination of broad trends, based on a survey of *The New York Times Index*, indicates that "the data show[s] a sharply higher absolute level of serial homicide for the 1980's than the 1950's. The absolute level of multiple homicide is also higher in the 1980's" (315). There is a historical framework of North American sexual violence/murder at play before, during, and after the time of Gilead's scripting. Women, particularly those within campus eco-systems, appeared to be disappearing.[1] The star of media culture at the time, Ted Bundy, operated prolifically

[1] A brief and non-exhaustive list of other serial killers, who favoured female students, from this time period includes:

from 1961 to 1978 with an unknown victim count estimated between twenty and forty women and girls. Bundy was always on the lookout "for an appropriate university town in which to settle—for it was only in such an academic atmosphere that he could feel comfortable" (Leyton 109). In consideration of North Americans' relationship to the figure of the missing co-ed, subverting the university from its original pedagogical signification to a symbol of danger for women did not require much of a push from Atwood—it nearly operates as a foregone conclusion. The text attempts no reconciliation and pushes the coded hazards of university spaces to a flash point. The archival groundwork of serialized murder in North America is used to justify the Gileadean theocracy. Offred narrates her tale retrospectively, *in absentia*, like a victim impact statement. To defend women from widely televised danger—again, an inversion: in Gilead, broadcasts are employed in the service of a different propaganda. Murder becomes myth, and fables such as *Little Red Riding Hood* advise the crimson handmaids not to stray from the safety of prescribed paths—there be dragons, wolves, or charming murderers with wide grins.

Written in an economy of sensationalized murder, women lose their agency and their names; they are perceived as victims and often further dehumanized, for expediency's sake, to numbers. Atwood also addresses the sphere of personal economy—the right to name oneself. The 1970s-1980s provided fleets of Jane Does, and women named after their associations with prolific murderers; they are swallowed whole by a new etymology. As women transform into victims, thereby becoming public property, they lose ownership of their identities and stories, as the narrator of *The Handmaid's Tale* notes, "My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses" (79). Names change, meaning changes, and, in further inverting place, the novel moves the predator—an outlier—from the shadows to the chairs of government. In the past, the predator conducted his business in private, dark spaces, as Offred recalls:

> Women were not protected then.
>
> I remember the rules, rules that were never spelled out but that every woman knew: don't open your door to a stranger, even if he says he is the police. Make him slide his ID under the door. Don't stop on the road to help a motorist pretending to be in trouble. Keep the locks on and keep going. If anyone whistles, don't turn to look. Don't go into a Laundromat, by yourself, at night. (24)

For the narrator, then is now. Offred remembers the danger posed by a "motorist pretending to be in trouble." Bundy was famous for preying upon good samaritans. By posing as a student on crutches, who required assistance getting his textbooks into his car, Bundy would overwhelm any assistive young woman who was unfortunate enough to lend aid (Leyton 138). Offred remembers the risk inherent in the figure of the man who needs help—effectively an oxymoron in this context—and she foreshadows the Gileadean predator who lurks behind symbols of authority: "Don't open your door to a stranger, even if he says he is the police" (Atwood 24). In Gilead, this danger is public and militarily legalized—carnivores wear disguises that evoke protection and tutelage. Private, peripheral spaces—bathrooms, whispers, internal monologues, dark corners—are now a locus of freedom. For Atwood, the spike of sensationalized serial murder, occurring before and during the novel's creation, was a prefatory matter; all texts, even ones that invoke the past, are invariably about the time in which they are written. As the novel's thematic nature is visibly gendered, historical perspective cannot untangle itself from feminist criticism even if the feminist critique, in Offred's recollection of past danger, is somewhat monolithic—all women feared the laundromat, or, specifically, they feared what might happen within the laundromat.

In considering the hybridity of historical and feminist criticism, it is apparent that the same authority, and masculine authorship, shapes history alongside literature, even in the most speculative of genres. For example, at the end of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, a woman's documentation of what transpired is cast in doubt. Like Offred, Mina Harker *née* Murray produces an account of the perils she and her contemporaries encountered when discovering, dealing with, and defeating the nefarious Count Dracula. She consolidates the fragments—journal entries, letters—into a collective whole; the ultimate authorship belongs to her. Similarly, *The Handmaid's Tale* contains an ending epilogue, entitled "Historical Notes," where the transcript of an academic conference on Gileadean studies in the far-flung future of 2195 features the perspective and opinions of Professor Pieixoto. Offred's experiences, in the form of (now ancient) disordered audio recordings, of her time in Gilead as a handmaid have been discovered and are of great

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Edmund Kemper, known as the Co-Ed Killer, or the Co-Ed Butcher, who killed ten people from 1964 to 1973; John Norman Collins, also known as the Co-Ed Killer and the Michigan Killer, who killed an unverified number of people from approximately 1967 to 1969; the Gainesville Ripper murdered eight people, five of them female university students, from 1989 to 1990; and Marc Lépine, who killed 14 female students at École Polytechnique in 1989.

excitement to scholars. As Pieixoto assumes authority over Offred's narrative as described in the novel's "Historical Notes" section—converting Offred's experience of *her story* into *his story* or history—Mina's account is similarly dismissed by her husband as the inferior voice: "[In] all the mass of material of which the record is composed, there is hardly one authentic document; nothing but a mass of type-writing. ... We could hardly ask anyone, even did we wish to, to accept these as proofs of so wild a story" (Stoker 419). Jonathan Harker's opinion is the voice of the last journal entry. Stoker's conclusion to *Dracula* is another example of the appropriated voice belittling and claiming a woman's narrative for himself—getting the last word in. Like Harker, Pieixoto also discredits his feminine storyteller, along with her choice of media, in his last word in the novel: "This *item* [Offred's cassette tapes]—I hesitate to use the word *document*..." (Atwood 283; emphasis added). As Pieixoto finds fault with the format Offred chose, he also detects fault within Offred herself:

> Our author, then, was one of many, and must be seen within the broad outlines of the moment in history of which she was a part. But what else do we know about her, apart from her age, some physical characteristics that could be anyone's, and her place of residence? Not very much. She appears to have been an educated woman, insofar as a graduate of any North American college of the time may be said to have been educated. (*Laughter, some groans*.) But the woods, as you say, were full of these, so that is no help. (287)

It is difficult to read Pieixoto's words in any tone except that of gentle condescension. Like any Jane Doe, Offred is reduced to her physicality and circumstances. Strikingly, like the Sons of Jacob themselves, Pieixoto strips Offred of any dignities her past life afforded her: "She *appears* to have been an educated woman" (287; emphasis added). Yet, he helps himself to every word she provides.

Ironically, for an authority on Gileadean studies, Pieixoto does little to add to the scholarship. Whether it is in gothic fiction, the 1970s-1980s of and outside of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Gilead, or the year 2195 (the date of the conference at which Pieixoto speaks), a woman's voice is framed as objectively untrustworthy. Pieixoto reflects that the Commander's account would have been more legitimate; more weight is placed on male voice:

> If we could identify the elusive 'Commander,' we felt, at least some progress would have been made. We argued that such a highly placed individual had probably been a participant in the first of the top-secret Sons of Jacob Think Tanks, at which the philosophy and social structure of Gilead were hammered out. (288)

A feminist framing of this passage concludes that in placing more weight on the imaginary report of the Commander, Pieixoto continues the tradition of gendered hierarchy in/of voice—legitimacy rests with those who do, not those who have things done to them. Similarly, the words of Ted Bundy, whose conviction predates Atwood's authoring of *The Handmaid's Tale*, were imbued by the judge in his case with legitimacy.[2] "Historical Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*" confirms that the masculine voice shapes a gendered perception of history—the difference between (his)story and what is perceived as a woman's fable or a handmaid's tale. It is difficult to divorce feminism from historical criticism; Bundy, even convicted, has a voice louder than his victims; Gileadean men, even vilified, have voices more desirous to an academic's ear than the firsthand accounts of a handmaid. The text takes the abduction of Offred's voice further, for Pieixoto and his team rearrange her narrative and bring it into their possession. Offred's reflections become another part of Pieixoto's story. Interestingly, the text does not offer a binary of truth or fiction; Offred's accounts, while disparaged and repurposed, cannot be entirely trusted or dismissed. The offering of doubt, with regards to Offred's voice, serves the anti-feminist stereotype that a woman's word, or memory, is not authentic. Patriarchal victimology often favours the confession of the perpetrator over victim or eyewitness accounts; the confession is the Holy Grail. Pieixoto's scholarly redaction, combined with the male appreciation for masculine narratives, perpetuates the cycle of the unbalanced story with male expression positioned over female.

A woman's survival, in the serial murdering 1970s-1980s, or in the present of Gilead, or in the year 2195 of the conference, is based upon compliance. Taken to extremes in the American nightmare, Gilead boasts a sizeable female

[2] "[After sentencing Bundy to death, Judge] Cowart stated 'Take care of yourself young man. I say that to you sincerely; take care of yourself. It's a tragedy for this court to see such a total waste of humanity that I've experienced in this courtroom. You're a bright young man. You'd have made a good lawyer, and I'd have loved to have you practice in front of me—but you went another way partner. Take care of yourself. I don't have any animosity to you. I want you to know that.' To which Ted simply replied 'Thank You.'" (Norris 109).

population suffering from a collective cultural Stockholm syndrome. The 1970s-1980s saw a spike in Caucasian male serial killers, and this historical upswing of femicide lingers within Offred's memory, for *The Handmaid's Tale* is a social document highlighting the anxieties of the time in which it was written. Feminist criticism identifies the unbalanced power dynamics of gender-specific testimonials, in which a man's word, even in absentia or imagined, is considered more dependable than a woman's. A reading of the novel from this historical-critical perspective demonstrates a doubling in Atwood's methodology from the danger of the university space to the monsters of mass media—the Ted Bundys and Edmund Kempers waiting for women in campus parking lots and laundromats—to the fears those monsters, since removed, embody in Gilead. Atwood is not coy but forthright, and her message is plain: a proportionate fear of society's monsters makes a monster of society.

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