

## Women's Complicity, Resistance, and Moral Agency: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*

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### Abstract

This article explores women's complicity in and resistance against Gilead's totalitarian patriarchy in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *The Testaments* (2019). It approaches complicity from a broader theoretical perspective, according to which individuals cannot escape being complicit with the political system in which they live since they are inextricably implicated in a web of social interactions and structural relations. Furthermore, it understands complicity as also always shaped by an individual's active role in upholding the given socio-political structures, a form of complicity that is not only tied to one's self-understanding but also to the social roles and scripts available in society. Specifically, the article parses the variegated positions of power and/or powerlessness that grant and/or deny Atwood's female protagonists different privileges and powers, which make possible varying degrees and kinds of complicity in and resistance against patriarchal oppression. Rather than evaluating the female characters' guilt in normative, i.e. legal and moral terms, the focus lies on the women's entanglements in Gilead's dehumanization of and violence against women. I argue that the acts of complicity and resistance of Atwood's protagonists are not only contingent on their specific situatedness but also ambiguous, contradictory, and, at times, strategic. Because Atwood's women characters repeatedly raise the question of moral responsibility, in the end, I also attend to the question of whether the novels provide us with a viable direction regarding questions of moral agency in the context of women's violation and subjugation by the state of Gilead.

## Introduction

More than three decades after its publication, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) has lost none of its poignancy in addressing violence against women, whether political, physical, sexual, or epistemological. With the exception of the "Historical Notes," the novel is told from the perspective of Offred, who finds herself among those women whose national duty it is to breed children for the state of Gilead. Her story thus discursively relates to a long history of state-organized domination and exploitation of women in North America from colonial times to slavery and to the present. At the same time, her tale provides a haunting testimony to women's complicity in and resistance to the coercive abuses of an authoritarian regime, not least by Offred herself. Other women characters openly collaborate with Gilead's theocratic rule by devising its misogynist ideology (Serena Joy) and enforcing it (Aunt Lydia), if necessary, with brute force. Or so it seems.

Atwood's sequel, *The Testaments* (2019), reveals that Aunt Lydia's ostensible zealotry is a carefully put-on act of loyalty that masks her secret activities to bring about Gilead's downfall. Notwithstanding the vastly different social positions of Offred and Aunt Lydia, the two women's stories share a concern with their own compliant roles while also seeking to repudiate Gilead's official justifications of systemic violence. Unlike *The Handmaid's Tale*, where Offred's story subsumes the experiences of other women, *The Testaments* places the "eyewitness narratives" (Howells 185) of Agnes and Nicole alongside that of Aunt Lydia and, thus, juxtaposes multiple voices and perspectives located in differing positions within—and also outside of—Gilead's social hierarchy. Read together, both novels explore various forms of women's complicity in and resistance against systemic violence. Furthermore, Atwood's classic feminist dystopia and its equally dystopic sequel invite us to ponder what we would do if we were in the protagonists' place and ask us to reflect on the characters' actions and reactions to Gilead's authoritarian state, whose "dynamics of domination" (Glasberg 682) complicate any clear-cut distinctions between "victim" and "perpetrator."<sup>1</sup>

This analysis assumes that while individuals cannot escape being complicit with the political system in which they live since they are embedded in a web of social interaction and structural relations,

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald P. Glasberg interrelates the testimonies of concentration camp survivors in Nazi Germany (Primo Levi) and Stalin's Soviet Union (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn) with Atwood's dystopia in *The Handmaid's Tale*. He defines domination as "the physical and spiritual violation of humanity" (679), contending that in Gilead "misogyny has a crucial role" alongside the camp systems' embrace of "thinghood" and the avoidance of assuming "personal responsibility" (682).

individuals also play an active role in upholding the given socio-political structures. Based on this understanding, it examines women's complicity and resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*. Specifically, it parses some of the variegated positions which grant—or deny—Atwood's protagonists different privileges and powers, at the same time as these positions make possible various degrees and kinds of complicity as well as resistance. Rather than aiming to determine the characters' guilt in normative, i.e. legal and moral terms, this contribution focuses on exploring the characters' entanglements in Gilead's dehumanization of and violence against women. However, because Atwood's protagonists repeatedly raise the question of moral responsibility—their own and that of society in general—I also attend to the question of whether the novels provide us with a viable direction regarding moral agency at the end of this article. I argue that the complicity and resistance of Atwood's female characters, which encompass Offred's rather passive behavior as a representative of “the ordinary woman” and Aunt Lydia's active membership in the political elite, are not only contingent on their specific situatedness and self-identification, but also ambiguous, contradictory, and, at times, strategic.

### **Critical Perspectives on Atwood's Feminist Dystopias, Complicity, and Resistance**

Before the publication of *The Testaments*, scholars above all denounced Serena Joy and Aunt Lydia's collaboration with Gilead's subjugation of women in *The Handmaid's Tale*. There was and still is, however, disagreement about the degree to which the Aunts and Commanders' Wives wield power and whether the Aunts are, in fact, subordinated to the male ruling class.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Aunt Lydia's double agency in Atwood's sequel prompts a reconsideration of her character and will, no doubt, generate a renewed debate about her dual role. The critical discussion about Offred's complicity and resistance, by contrast, is likely to continue alongside the exploration of the roles of Agnes, Becka, and Nicole.

Generally, scholars discussing Offred can be divided into those who consider her complicit with Gilead's theocracy and those who emphasize her subversive acts. Notably, the latter branch of scholarship dominates our understanding of Offred's narrative as an effective, even political act of female resistance against Gilead and its erasure of individual expression, identity, memory, and history, a reading which commonly also points to the transgressive aspects inherent in the “Historical

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<sup>2</sup> Contrary to most other scholars, Tara J. Johnson argues that the Aunts “have as much if not more power as the Commanders have” (68).

Notes.”<sup>3</sup> Even those scholars who carefully trace the contradictory aspects in Offred’s story and behavior, such as her alternating complacent passivity and sharp-witted self-reflection, tend to stress the subversive dimensions of her tale and, thus, ultimately highlight her acts of resistance.<sup>4</sup> Doing so, however, risks turning a blind eye to Offred’s own role as a handmaid in the sense of being complicit in the system’s domination of women, a question raised not least by the novel’s own ambiguous title—*The Handmaid’s Tale*. In fact, Martha Mamozai criticized already in 1990 the continuing problematic scholarly and feminist tendency to uphold and even celebrate the innocent victim status of female figures like Offred instead of also shedding light on her complicity with the regime (cf. 17).<sup>5</sup> According to Mamozai, the investigation of women’s contradictory participation in a male-dominated system constitutes a necessary counterpoint to the all-too-widespread idea of “the female victim” as opposed to “the male aggressor” (cf. 14-15). Along these lines, Shirley Neuman urged in her 2006 article to “be wary [...] of the impulse to make an unmitigated heroine of the novel’s Offred” (863).

So far, only a few scholars have focused on both Offred’s complicity in and her resistance to Gilead’s authoritarian patriarchy. While scholars who concentrate on issues of race, class, and gender are divided about the question of her white privilege,<sup>6</sup> those who foreground the novel’s

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<sup>3</sup> Examples of this position are the studies by Linda Kauffman, Michael Foley, Hilde Staels, or David Hogsette.

<sup>4</sup> Coral Ann Howells, Shirley Neuman, or Ewelina Feldman-Kołodziejuk read *The Handmaid’s Tale* as Offred’s political and feminist coming-of-age despite her passivity. The surfacing of a top secret file in *The Testaments*, which reveals that Offred/June has become a highly sought-after member of the resistance movement in Canada, whom Gilead has already tried to eliminate twice (cf. *TT* 330), can be seen as affirming this interpretation.

<sup>5</sup> With the serial adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale* by the streaming service Hulu, this trend continues unabated. An Internet search shows that the TV series has inspired numerous student essays, bachelor and master theses which define the relationship between Offred and the Commander from a predominantly psychological and medical perspective as a case of Stockholm syndrome. An engagement with Offred’s own complicity in Gilead’s theocracy, it seems, is further from readers’ and audiences’ minds than ever.

<sup>6</sup> Ben Merriman views Offred as an “improbable but extremely sympathetic” figure with which the novel glosses over the “pernicious character of White privilege” (45); whereas Danita J. Dodson and Zahra Sadeghi and Narges Mirzapour insist on the important dialogic and discursive interconnections between Offred’s marginalization and the brainwashing, silencing, and sexual exploitation of enslaved and colonized Black women and women of color (cf. Dodson 72-80; Sadeghi and Mirzapour 7-8).

dystopian aspects concur that Offred acquiesces to and even actively cooperates with Gilead's patriarchy, an attitude which they see paralleled by the post-Gileadan male academics' appropriation of her story. However, most of these studies share the implicit assumption that complicity and resistance are clearly distinguishable opposites: either one is complicit, or one is not. As a result, they produce remarkably linear readings of Offred's increasing enmeshment in Gilead's totalitarian structures. Stillman and Johnson reason that she "has no modes of resistance against Gilead, at least none that threaten [it] in any way" (75). Likewise, Weiss opposes Offred's complicity in "overt action against the regime" (par. 3), conceding only briefly that her acts of resistance are limited. Building on these brief remarks, this paper seeks to offer a more nuanced exploration of Offred's—and some of the other female protagonists'—participation in and resistance to Gilead's repressive system by applying a more theoretically refined understanding of women's complicity in state violence and repression.

Both Christopher Kutz and Giuliana Monteverde assert that the question of complicity always requires asking: complicit with whom or with what? (cf. Kutz 138; cf. Monteverde 99). But where Kutz aims to establish a moral framework in order to gauge an individual's accountability for collective action, Monteverde's interest is directed at exploring and critiquing everyday practices in American popular culture with which feminism, in all its diverse manifestations, contributes the perpetuation of oppressive patterns and ideologies among different social groups of women. In doing so, she continues as well as innovates the important work begun by Black and white third-wave feminists in the 1990s, who brought to critical attention female complicity in a male-dominated system and, furthermore, exposed white women's role in upholding hegemonic power structures without, however, actually theorizing complicity.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, Monteverde puts forth a differentiated feminist notion of complicity, which considers the contexts and intersectional positions of women and acknowledges that women can be oppressors and oppressed at the same time (cf. 103).

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<sup>7</sup> Black, queer, and working class women's critiques of the first and second feminist waves, together with the successful establishment of the concept of intersectionality, prompted questions of white women's complicity by scholars and feminist critics like Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, Hazel Carby, Kimberlé Crenshaw, or Martha Mamozai to name a few. Since then, scholars like Tania Modleski, Angela McRobbie, or Giuliana Monteverde have continued to examine white postfeminist entanglements in hegemonic patriarchal structures.

Such an approach likewise undergirds critical perspectives on complicity from the social and political sciences. Mihaela Mihai proposes that one way of attaining more nuanced insights regarding individuals' participation in authoritarian and totalitarian regimes is to view the relation between complicity and resistance as "a continuum of positions individuals can occupy" (Mihai n. p.). The specific position of an individual, according to Mihai, is contingent upon two aspects: firstly, the intersectional positionality of an individual, i.e. one's situatedness, which depends on gender, race, class, age, religion, and other relevant social categories that constrain, regulate, and/or enable individuals; and, secondly, the temporality of this position, which hinges on the interrelation of an individual's memory, hope, and future imagination. In short, complicity is "always enmeshed in complex social relations and influenced—though not fully determined—by one's situatedness within those relations, as well as the temporal horizons opened by that location" (Mihai n. p.). This understanding unfolds a "myriad of positions one can occupy on a temporally dynamic continuum between complicity and resistance" (Mihai n. p.). Even if this complex notion of a continuum of complicity cannot grasp the "diffuse" and "unconscious" patterns of complicity or the "mixed motives" (Mihai n. p.) of human beings in their entirety, specifically under undemocratic political conditions, it still provides a model that is sensitive to the contexts that shape the complicit acts—including the inaction—of an individual as well as their behavior. Moreover, conceiving of complicity and resistance in terms of a dynamic continuum with multiple positions allows us to explore the "gray areas": "just as there is no perfectly unencumbered agency, no order is ever so totalising as to annihilate all resistance" (Mihai n. p.).

According to Charlotte Knowles, there is one crucial and ambiguous aspect which these models fail to capture, namely women's active roles "in accepting and even embracing their own unfreedom" (251).<sup>8</sup> Taking her cue from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), Knowles reminds us that a thorough contextual and intersectional approach alone fails to account for the phenomenon that women often actively reinforce their own oppression, and by implication, that of other women.<sup>9</sup> While Beauvoir suggests that, in part, social privileges and material rewards

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<sup>8</sup> In *Our Treacherous Hearts: Why Women Let Men Get Their Way* (1992), Rosalind Coward already points to women's contradictory and "hidden complicity" (10) in upholding traditional social structures and expectations regarding family, motherhood, women's work, and sexuality, which she sees as resulting from a combination of systemic constraints, financial and emotional dependencies, as well as deep-seated feminine self-identifications.

<sup>9</sup> Beauvoir's implicitly white perspective on gender oppression has been critiqued for failing to acknowledge intersectional differences among women, see Sabine Broeck, pp. 167-84; or Kathryn Gines, pp. 251-73.

motivate women to embrace instances of other women's subjugation, philosopher Susan James "emphasizes the dependent situation of women as the primary cause of their complicity" (Knowles 243). Even so, Beauvoir points to one of the major contradictions with which any exploration of women's compliant behavior inevitably has to grapple, namely that women, even if they have a choice—however slight—may not automatically "gravitate toward" (Knowles 251) resistance. Here, Knowles points to the self-understanding women develop for themselves and their agency in relation to the dominant and, for women more so than for men, limited and limiting social roles and scripts available to them. It is these social roles and scripts, however constraining and misleading, to which women tend to resort when resistance requires a radical revision of who they think they are and what capacities they believe they possess (cf. Knowles 249-51). When seen from the dual perspective of structural and active complicity, Knowles concludes, women's perpetuation of patriarchal hegemony becomes an "everyday phenomenon" (255), according to which, more often than not, women "take their social roles as essentially binding" (Knowles 254). The ambiguity of women's complicity can also be discerned in Atwood's female protagonists in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*.

### **Not Without Our Handmaids and Aunts: Gilead's Special Women's Sphere**

Atwood's Gilead constitutes a totalitarian state whose sexist patriarchy reduces women to their reproductive function and their supposedly "natural" domestic and religious calling.<sup>10</sup> Yet the testimonies from *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* complicate the idea that women in Gilead are solely the victims of its patriarchy, as one of the narrators of the frame narrative, Professor Pieixoto, indicates in the "Historical Notes" (cf. *HT* 317-22). Despite their drastically curtailed rights, the female protagonists participate, passively as well as actively, and from differing positions of power and powerlessness, in the un/making of the state that oppresses them.

With Offred and Aunt Lydia, Atwood creates two first-generation Gileadan women whose positions within the system's "separate female

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<sup>10</sup> Atwood constructs Gilead's patriarchy in a palimpsestic manner, invoking cross-cultural as well as anachronistic policies of denying women their rights. For example, the idea of limiting women to reproduction, domesticity, and morals invokes the "three Ks of 'Kinder, Küche, Kirche' (children, kitchen, church)" (Krimmer 8) of the Third Reich. Aunt Lydia's statement that women in Gilead are "given freedom from" (*HT* 34) is likewise reminiscent of Nazi Germany's call for the "emancipation of woman from emancipation" (Krimmer 8).

sphere" (TT 176) could not be more different. As a fertile white woman, Offred belongs to the lower-ranked breeders or in official parlance Handmaids, whereas Aunt Lydia, an older white woman and former judge, who has outwardly proven her loyalty to the state, rules and controls Gilead's female sphere as the state's most powerful Founding Aunt. Notwithstanding their vastly disparate ranks and powers, their eyewitness accounts oscillate between strategies of defense, the admission of guilt, and mental resistance (with the important difference that Aunt Lydia also actively resists Gilead's regime, albeit in a clandestine manner). Moreover, their narratives show ruptures that indicate an awareness of their complicity, which haunts them no less than their traumatic experiences. Placing past and present events alongside each other allows them to reflect on themselves, the ways in which they reconstruct their past in the present, as well as their cooperation with Gilead.<sup>11</sup>

### **Offred, the Handmaid: One of Many**

From the beginning, Offred leaves no doubt that her aim is "to last" (HT 17), even if survival comes at the price of her cooperation with the abhorred authoritarian patriarchy. Central to her survival is what Offred calls her "choice" of being a Handmaid, which places her among those women who participate in Gilead's religiously-sanctioned rape and its ritual performance by its male ruling elite, the Commanders, in the presence of their Wives. To talk about an active "choice" in a situation in which all available alternatives to the ritualized rape as a Handmaid point toward death suggests that there is, in fact, no choice at all: either she refuses and is sent directly to work in contaminated territories as an Unwoman, where sickness and death await; or she obeys the Commander's wife and consents to secret sex with another man to finally become pregnant, which also poses the risk of death by punishment in case of her discovery; or, like the openly rebellious Moira, she subjects herself to torture before she is forced into a different form of rape as a prostitute at Jezebel's. At the same time, her remark about a "choice" suggests that Offred reconciles herself to her new role as a Handmaid,

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<sup>11</sup> Atwood complicates our reading of the novels by adding "The Historical Notes" and *The Thirteenth Symposium*, which reveal that the Professors Pieixoto and Wade have "arranged" (HT 320) the stories "in an order that made approximate narrative sense" (TT 414) to them as male historians. While their interventions certainly represent a form of epistemological violence, Atwood also parodies their academic work and perspective by exposing their blind spots regarding gender, power, and violence.



and it is this reconciliation to her situation which enmeshes her in an intricate web of complicity in her own and other women's oppression.

At first, Offred tries to resist her participation in the enforced ritual of copulation at least partly by rationalizing it as an act that impacts only her body:

My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I have not signed up for. (HT 105)

Offred here resorts to bodily passivity while internally revising the official ideology of the Ceremony into a form of "fucking" in which only the Commander is active. She thus tries to separate the "inter" from the "course," as it were, blending out the interpersonal dimension of the coitus and also her own part in it. Still, she acknowledges her passive participation. It may well be that it is this awareness of her own part in the act of breeding that causes her to render a somewhat restrained description of the Commander: she emphasizes her own "complicated" (HT 68) feelings towards him, wonders whether "there is no end to his disguises, of benevolence" (HT 98) and imagines what it would be like to "spit" down on him from her window or "hit" him with "something" (HT 67). Hence, rather than flatly demonizing him, Offred emphasizes her internal resistance against Gilead's misogynist patriarchy and its male ruling class.<sup>12</sup> However, her strategy falls apart once the Commander asks her to meet him on the sly in his study. Their relationship takes on an interpersonal dimension so that Offred can no longer maintain the separation between body and mind. Apart from playing scrabble and conversing together, Offred suddenly finds herself in a "conspiracy" (HT 149) *with* the Commander, which redefines the enforced ritual in terms of desire rather than coercion—even though their understanding of desire differs greatly.

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<sup>12</sup> Atwood theorizes victimhood in her four "basic victim positions" in *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972). Although these positions are useful for thinking about female complicity, I nevertheless see the danger that they provide too "linear" (*Survival* 39) a framework, as Atwood herself admits, and a framework that is also prescriptive. While I consider Michael Foley's application of Atwood's "basic victim positions" to *The Handmaid's Tale* as a successful demonstration of the "dynamic complexity" of the "spectrum of mental responses [by the female characters] in the face of traditionalist oppression" (57), this study wants to remind us of the multidimensional and dynamic entanglements of Atwood's protagonists *with* the patriarchal structures.

At this moment, a significant rupture occurs in Offred's narrative. She swerves from her bewilderment at this unexpected development—"one of the most bizarre things that's happened to me, ever" (*HT* 154)—to her memory of an interview with the mistress of a concentration camp commandant of the Third Reich. She remembers particularly the mistress's denial of the Jewish genocide, her lover's role in the killings and by implication her own: "She did not believe he was a monster. He was not a monster, to her. [...] She believed in decency, she was nice to the Jewish maid [...]" (*HT* 155-56). Yet "[s]everal days after this interview with her was filmed, she killed herself" (*HT* 156). Whether that was because of her terminal illness or out of guilt, Offred does not say. Neither does she explain how her past memory of the commandant's mistress in Nazi Germany relates to herself, the Commander's mistress in Gilead. Although the analogy is open for manifold interpretations, what the two allegedly apolitical "mistresses" share is their deep embeddedness in the society they inhabit, including its everyday life and pleasures as well as its violence and brutal killings.<sup>13</sup> Even more so, both occupy a position of intimacy with the powerful male elite and, therefore, power itself. Offred acknowledges these parallels only indirectly in that she admits her own enjoyment of wielding a secret power over Serena Joy (cf. *HT* 171) and that, to her, the Commander is "not a monster" either, but a man with "a little belly" and "[w]isps of hair" (*HT* 267). Later, when she reflects on the formerly democratic media's interest in the glamorous lives of celebrities rather than those of everyday people like herself, she states: "[w]e lived in the gaps between the stories" (*HT* 67). The gaps in her own testimony likewise invite us to ponder her omissions. How do the roles of everyday women like Offred's add up to Gilead's regime of terror?

Offred—contrary to the commandant's mistress—does not deny Gilead's atrocities against other women, racial and ethnic groups. She takes note of the transports of Black men and women into segregated enclosures and the expulsion and killing of Jewish Americans. Only vaguely does she distinguish between the official news and her own suspicions about what is really going on.<sup>14</sup> These references, when compared to such personal experiences as being confronted with the publicly displayed executions, Moira's torture, or her own participation in the collective killings, take up relatively little room. Indeed, Offred includes

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<sup>13</sup> According to Mihaela Frunză and Iulia Grad, at stake here is also what Hannah Arendt calls "the banality of evil," i.e. the conspicuous absence of a demoniacal villain or tragic hero. In "the dystopian world of Gilead, nobody has the monopoly on evil" since "[e]ach character is simply too banal for that" (197).

<sup>14</sup> Offred voices her doubt about Black resettlement thus: "Lord knows what they're supposed to do, once they get there. Farm is the theory" (*HT* 94); and she adds to the supposedly voluntary emigration of Jewish Americans: "if you can believe the news" (*HT* 211).

the Women Salvagings in her story, indicating that she participated more than once: "I've seen it before, [...] I don't want to see it any more. I look at the grass instead. I describe the rope" (*HT* 288).<sup>15</sup> In her tale, Offred acknowledges her "consent" and "complicity in the death of [Ofcharles]" (*HT* 288) but remains silent about what lies behind her preference not to "see." By contrast, she comments that her own "assent" (*HT* 290) to the Particution, a collective tearing apart of three male members of the resistance alive, leaves her "sick" with pain and brutalized: "[...] I'm hungry. This is monstrous" (*HT* 293).<sup>16</sup>

Contrary to Professor Pieixoto's gendered historical record, which features Offred as "one of many" who "must be seen within the broad outlines of the moment in history in which she was a part" (*HT* 317) as opposed to the detailed investigation into the individual lives of the Commanders Waterford and Judd, her own record insists on her personal implication in Gilead's crimes. I use implication for her story rather than complicity, because although Offred admits that she has reconciled herself to her position as a Handmaid and actively brought about another Handmaid's death, she also counters these confessions. Rather, she presents her own role as a mixture of consenting, actively participating, but also suffering from being dehumanized by the regime through rituals such as the Particution. Additionally, Offred reinforces her subjugation by seeking to redefine Gilead's enforced sexual relations as well as her role as the Commander's mistress by embracing her relationship with Nick as a love affair. Indeed, I want to suggest that Offred's relationship with Nick demonstrates the manifold contradictions inherent in her complicity, showing her as actively embracing her "unfreedom," as Knowles calls it, at the same time as she remains inextricably enmeshed in Gilead's perverted system of sexual exploitation.

Contrary to her relationship with the Commander, Offred shows some degree of self-determination when she is with Nick: "I went [...] on my own [...]. I did not do it for him, but for myself entirely" (*HT* 280). Her agency even fills her with some "pride" (*HT* 283) and, contrary to her sexual passivity with the Commander and her other acts of complicity, now she wants to "see" the object of her desire, Nick, "up close" (*HT*

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<sup>15</sup> To Mohr, the Salvagings are a "sarcastic word play on salvaging and savage" and the Particutions an "apt amalgam of participation and execution" (261).

<sup>16</sup> When, upon her arrival in Gilead, Offred's daughter Nicole becomes an unwitting viewer of the spectacle of the Particution, she expresses her shock at the Handmaids' enthusiastic participation in the collective killings: "It was gruesome; it was terrifying. It added a whole new dimension to my picture of Handmaids. Maybe my mother had been like that, I thought: feral" (*TT* 22).

281). Still, the affair results in her dependence—physically, mentally, and emotionally—so that she temporarily even forgets about her will to survive. And although she feels “ashamed” (*HT* 283) of herself for embracing her own unfreedom, she actively pursues this state of dependency. In doing so, she repeats the pattern of falling in love and subordinating herself to her lover that is also displayed in her memories of her affair and later marriage with Luke, and that is deeply ingrained in her own understanding about who she is:

Falling in love, I said. Falling into it, we all did then, one way or another. How could [the Commander] have made such light of it? [...] It was the central thing; it was the way *you understood yourself*; if it never happened to you, not ever, you would be like a mutant [...]. (*HT* 237; emphasis added)

Attempting to resist the Commander and, hence, Gilead's oppressive patriarchy, Offred here resorts to her past roles of lover and later wife, a self-identification according to which she falls in love with a man whom she desires yet to whom she also subordinates herself. Here, she follows a “limited number of scripts” of romantic love “provided in magazines, romance novels, [and] fairy tales,” as Madonne Miner has astutely observed (164).<sup>17</sup> In fact, Offred's report imitates these scripts by providing different variations of how she fell for Nick before she admits: “It didn't happen that way either” (*HT* 275). While these scripts allow her to redefine Gilead's forced sexual relations as love, the relationship that develops remains contradictory.<sup>18</sup>

### **Aunt Lydia and her Pearls: Ruthless, Cunning, and With an Exaggerated Thirst for Justice**

In her self-authored account, Aunt Lydia features as the larger-than-life Founding Mother and double agent who is instrumental in Gilead's rise and fall. By literally placing her story inside Cardinal Newman's *Apologia Pro Sua Vita: A Defense of One's Life* (1865), she creates a hybrid of an autobiography and a defense, which also includes highly explosive

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<sup>17</sup> Miner reads Luke and the Commander as “twins” who “mirror one another” (160) with their chauvinist mindset and heteronormative view of the world. There is, however, an important difference in the degree to which Offred is subjugated to the two, which impacts on her degree or lack of agency. Being Luke's mistress means being dependent; being the Commander's mistress means being owned and dehumanized. A similar distinction needs to be made between Nick and the Commander, which is why I would not go as far as Neuman, for whom Offred's relationship with Nick “marks a relapse into willed ignorance” (864).

<sup>18</sup> Other important roles for Offred's self-understanding are being a daughter, who opposes her mother's radical feminism, but also being a mother herself, a role which Gilead denies her. Redefining herself as a “lover” instead of a “breeder” can also be read as a compensation for losing her home, husband, family, and daughter.

intelligence files. Given her former profession as an American “family court judge” (TT 36), her story can also be read as a closing argument presented at her own trial in the court of public opinion with the readers as judges. In her summation, Lydia casts herself in the role of a powerful agent and morally righteous avenger in a retributive narrative that intertwines a higher form of justice with her personal revenge against Gilead’s misogynist theocracy (cf. TT 32). Even so, she concedes her entanglement in Gilead’s web of female victimization and, importantly, in the state’s perpetration of violence against women, two neglected aspects in Professor Pieixoto’s keynote at *The Thirteenth Symposium*. Although he stresses Agnes and Nicole’s important roles in Gilead’s demise, he calls them the “two young refugees” (TT 413) and speculates at length about the possible fabrication of *The Ardua Hall Holograph* and the “‘Lydia’ personage” (TT 410).

To this “Lydia personage,” who figures as a “true believer” (HT 139; 177) in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood adds several intriguing twists in *The Testaments*. Firstly, her life story reveals her as a woman of the ruling elite. As the top-ranking Aunt, she exerts more power than any other woman in Gilead, regularly has coffee with one of the most influential male leaders, Commander Judd, and tea with her fellow female Founders. Although Judd publically takes “the credit” (TT 178) for Lydia’s accomplishments, her influence reaches far into the uppermost echelons of Gilead. Being on intimate terms with the patriarchal rulers secures her “the pleasures of power” (Thompson 51) and privileges denied to the majority of women (even though hers is very different from the intimacy that Offred has with the Commander). As an Aunt, she is entitled to shape and authorize policy, law, and education—ideologies of (white) womanhood in particular—, dole out rewards and punishments, use and abuse violence, read and write, and decide over the careers, indeed over the lives and deaths, of Gilead’s citizens.<sup>19</sup> Even more, in her position as the most powerful of the Aunts, she can—and does—extend her sway into the lives and psyches of her fellow Aunts and the Commanders so that she is deeply enmeshed in Gilead’s totalitarian system, where intrigue and mistrust reign, where one caste keeps the other in check, and where members of the same caste are expected to denounce each other. The Founding Aunts are no exception: “Despite our pretense of amity, indeed of collegiality, the underlying currents of hostility were already building. If it’s a henyard, I thought, I intend to be the alpha hen. To do that, I need

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<sup>19</sup> Her remark about “Judd’s ridiculous Certificate of Whiteness scheme had collapsed in a welter of forgeries and bribery” (TT 64) shows that she looks through Gilead’s supremacist propaganda. Otherwise, however, she turns a blind eye to matters of race and ethnicity.

to establish pecking rights over the others" (TT 177). Determined to be the one in control, she employs "[d]ivide and conquer" (TT 177) as her motto and, thus, reinforces the system's operational modes of suspicion and denunciation.

Secondly, Lydia has been brutally reeducated by Gilead's Founding Fathers, which results in a performance of loyalty that masks her double agency. Similar to Offred, Aunt Lydia's former life was that of a privileged white woman. But unlike Offred, Lydia comes from an underclass family in the criminal milieu and passionately detests her abusive father and his anti-intellectual misogyny: "I was a girl and, worse, a smarty-pants girl. Nothing for it but to wallop those pretensions out of me, with fists or boots or whatever else was to hand. [My father] got his throat cut before the triumph of Gilead, or I would have arranged to have it done for him" (TT 112). Defying her family background, she has an abortion, chooses a career over a family, overcomes all adversities through hard work, and is proud of her achievements. But like the Handmaids, she and other white, educated professional women face the "choice" of being killed or left alive after Gilead ousts the American government. And like Offred, Lydia wants to live, so she reconciles herself to her new role, "[t]hankful enough to cooperate" (TT 147). In her reflections on the dehumanization, imprisonment, and torture which precede her collaboration with the regime, she carefully juxtaposes her lack of bravery with her resolve to retaliate one day:

Did I weep? Yes: tears came out of my two visible eyes, my moist weeping human eyes. But I had a third eye, in the middle of my forehead. I could feel it: it was cold, like a stone. It did not weep: it saw. And behind it someone was thinking: *I will get you back for this. I don't care how long it takes or how much shit I have to eat in the meantime, but I will do it.* (TT 149; emphasis in the original)

In spite of her powerful statement of revenge, in order to stay alive, Lydia first has to join the ranks of the female founders, yet she is fully aware that her position requires a loyalty test during which she must not show any hesitation to kill her fellow prisoners.

At this point in Lydia's story, trauma, nightmare, and actual experience blur. In her recurring dream, this test of loyalty is rendered in great detail and framed in terms of justice: she dreams that she is part of a killing squad, pointing a rifle at women she knows from America and Gilead and on whom she has "passed sentence [...]. But they are all smiling. What do I see in their eyes? Fear, contempt, defiance? Pity?" (TT 169). She is both judge and judged by these women. When she pulls the trigger, she "can't breathe," "choke[s]," "fall[s]" (TT 170), and wakes up; whereas the description of her dream fills a page, her actual "ordeal" (TT 172) takes up barely a paragraph and glosses over the particulars. The

contrast between the details of her dream and the truncated actual test indicates that her sense of culpability shapes her trauma and that she downplays her role as a perpetrator of state violence. According to herself, from that moment on she delivers a performance of loyalty to the state that is beyond suspicion. Unlike Offred, who continues to remark on her guilt, shame, and experience of dehumanization, Lydia redefines her performance of loyalty as one long and arduous test in her fight against the regime until the moment of payback. Rather than emphasizing her own suffering and pain as Offred does, or reflecting on her own brutalization (Offred would have called it monstrous), Lydia presents her trauma as justifying her revenge and her emotional coldness as unshakeable resolve.

However, assimilating into Gilead's authoritarian ideology and denunciatory system, it can be argued, constitutes far less of an ordeal for Lydia than she makes us believe. In fact, this process is greatly facilitated by her self-understanding from the past:

[...] none of my college-acquired polish was of any use to me here. I needed to revert to the mulish underclass child, the determined drudge, the brainy overachiever, the strategic ladder-climber who'd got me to the social perch from which I'd just been deposed. I needed to work the angles, once I could find out what the angles were. I'd been in tight corners before. I had prevailed. *That was my story to myself.* (TT 117; emphasis added)

She resorts to the familiar script of the hard-working strategist and superior achiever, assuming the seemingly non-gendered identity that had already ensured her status as a legal authority in the patriarchal pre-Gileadan social structures. Once she has fully grasped the new regime's authoritarian and misogynist "angles," she exploits the reactionary ideology of Gilead, suggesting a separate female sphere under the strict control of the Founding Aunts, while also fortifying her control over her niche of power. Unsurprisingly, Gilead's patriarchy—embodied by Commander Judd—welcomes the idea and rewards Lydia with slightly more power than the other Aunts. Over time, she exploits Gilead's totalitarian "web of guilty complicities" (Frunză and Grad 201) to tighten her "grip over Ardua Hall" (TT 178) by collecting incriminating evidence against those surrounding her. What is more, she shows an almost boastful pride in her secret cache of "shameful information" (TT 251) and expresses unabashed enjoyment when she can pit the Aunts against each other or put pressure on Commander Judd.

However, Lydia's cooperation with Gilead's authoritarian system cannot be accounted for as a strategic performance alone. Indeed, she actively embraces the system whenever there is an occasion to avenge herself for long-held resentments and injuries according to her motto "Vengeance is mine" (TT 251). It is then that she slips into her former role

as judge, not shying away from staging a crime or inflicting terror and death either. In the absence of democratic laws and human rights, she appropriates the law of Gilead to mete out justice as she sees fit. Her repeated allusions to superhuman forces such as the Wheel of Fortune (cf. *TT* 211) or calling herself “the Recording Angel” (*TT* 277) cannot obscure her desire for revenge. She intervenes in a case reminiscent of her own history of fatherly abuse, namely Dr. Grove’s sexual abuse of Becka, and arranges his death by dismemberment. She also successfully manipulates Aunt Elizabeth to eliminate her (Lydia’s) arch-enemy Aunt Vidala. In this way, she retaliates for Vidala’s attempt to denounce and dethrone her from her power position. And when Commander Judd tries to make her the scapegoat for Agnes and Nicole’s defection, she turns the tables by insisting on her subordinate position as a woman who only ever followed his “wisest” (*TT* 391) choices. Behind her performance of loyalty, however, she hides her knowledge that—thanks to her secret documents—Judd will be held accountable as one of Gilead’s most powerful and corrupt leaders, whereas she, Lydia, can withdraw to a position of enforced compliance. Upon learning that her secret files have safely arrived in Canada, the moment of “retributive vengeance” (*TT* 317) is within reach: “I had a flashback. [...] In my brown sackcloth robe I raised the gun, aimed, shot. A bullet, or no bullet? A bullet” (*TT* 391).

Finally, Aunt Lydia’s role as double agent constitutes a twist of the original novel that brings its own problems regarding her exploitation of the very structures and ideology she aims to defeat.<sup>20</sup> Her complicity in and perpetration of Gilead’s totalitarian logic is perhaps best illuminated with the help of Becka’s “sacrifice.” By this point, Lydia’s defense of her actions no longer speaks for itself but is revised by the eyewitness accounts of Agnes and Nicole, each of whom sheds light on Becka’s death from a different perspective: Agnes, the young woman and disciple of Lydia, who is a fellow victim of Dr. Grove’s sexual abuse, gives an account of her friend’s death from her perspective as an insider to Gilead, who knows its power structures and ideology since childhood; while Nicole, the teenager from Canada, who was raised by a left-leaning couple and secret members of the resistance movement, provides her perspective as an outsider.

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<sup>20</sup> Aunt Lydia belongs to a long line of powerful women in Atwood’s work. Her ambiguous role as both victim and perpetrator, as well as her involvement in the death of one of her loyal inferiors, the young Becka, shows strong parallels to Penelope’s implication in the hanging of her twelve maids in *The Penelopiad* (2005).



Contrary to Lydia's own self-aggrandizement and the fearsome and powerful reputation that she holds among the women of Gilead, Agnes and Nicole see an ordinary-looking woman with wrinkles and yellowed teeth. They soon learn, though, that Lydia's power lies in her manipulative stratagems. Looking back at their seemingly coincidental first meeting, Agnes states: "after I came to know Aunt Lydia better, I realized that luck had nothing to do with it" (TT 230). In fact, Lydia carefully calculated her visit to plant the idea into Agnes's mind to become an Aunt like Becka. At Ardua Hall, the two are "reeducated" by Aunt Lydia herself. She places her evidence against the regime into their hands to teach them that "[b]eneath its outer show of virtue and purity, Gilead was rotting" (TT 308). Moreover, Agnes learns what it means to be an Aunt:

If I remained at Ardua Hall [...] this is what I would become. All of the secrets I had learned [...] would be mine, to use as I saw fit. All of this power. All of this potential to judge the wicked in silence, and to punish them in ways they would not be able to anticipate. All of this vengeance. (TT 309)

Being an Aunt, in Lydia's teaching, means wielding power with all its responsibilities and temptations. Lydia's reeducation also contains the crucial lesson of loyalty to her and Ardua Hall. Taking into account Agnes and Becka's different temperaments, self-identifications, and personal histories, Lydia carefully prepares them for their loyalty tests. She lets Agnes know that her mother is alive in Canada and counts on the young woman's "vengeful side" (TT 309) against Gilead so that, when the critical moment for the disclosure of Gilead's crimes arrives, she can count on Agnes's support, even if that means to leave Becka behind.

Lydia's manipulation of Becka is even more perfidious and reveals that Lydia does not hesitate to exploit the friendship and devotion among others for her own purposes. She counts particularly on Becka's sense of duty, moral righteousness, and her loving devotion to Agnes, having secretly overheard the girls' conversations and pledges of sisterly love. She also knows that Becka, against her better knowledge, has internalized many of the misogynist teachings of Gilead, including a self-destructive sense of her duties as a woman and future Aunt as epitomized in a perverted version of the biblical story of the Concubine Cut into Twelve Pieces. As the teachings of the Aunts go, the concubine herself is guilty of her rape, whereas the male perpetrators' guilt is ignored. To redeem herself, the concubine nobly sacrifices herself "to help other people" (TT 80). The utmost heroic act of a woman, Gilead's ideology propagates, is to sacrifice herself for the good of others. Hence, when it is time to smuggle Nicole and the incriminating documents out of the country, Lydia suggests that Nicole leaves disguised as Becka and together with Agnes according to Gilead's protocol of the Pearl Girls, while Becka stays behind and goes into hiding. To convince Becka, Lydia

expounds once again on the importance of female selflessness: “Our entire mission, not to mention the personal safety of Aunt Victoria and Nicole, depends on you [Becka]. It is a great deal of responsibility—a renewed Gilead can be possible only through you; and you would not want the others to be caught and hanged” (TT 354). Here, Lydia does not shrink from using the very ideology that she aims to overthrow while purporting to topple the oppressive regime of Gilead for the good of others and secretly plotting for personal revenge. For Becka, however, going into hiding results in her death, a consequence that Lydia, despite all her superior knowledge, does not prevent.

Becka is not given a voice in *The Testaments*. It is Nicole who mocks the official ethos of the Pearl Girls’ noble sacrifices, and Agnes also records how Nicole calls out Gilead’s “[v]ictim-blaming” (TT 327) and Aunt Lydia’s “emotional blackmail” (TT 337) of Becka. Although Becka and Agnes see through the lies about the concubine’s death for a higher good and understand her rape as a “horrible” crime which does not leave her any “choice” (TT 303) for heroics, they fail to extricate themselves from the operative maxims that serve Gilead—and Aunt Lydia—so well. Instead, it is left to the readers to make the connection between Gilead’s misogynist ideology, Aunt Lydia’s work as a double agent, and what the two young women understand as their “choices” in the system or their tests of loyalty to Aunt Lydia and the regime of Gilead.

### **Quo Vadis, Moral Agency?**

Much more can be said about Aunt Lydia’s ambiguous, contradictory, and, at times, strategic complicity in and resistance against Gilead’s domination of women and about how these interrelated positions of complicity and resistance are transmitted to the next generation—Agnes, Becka, and their Canadian sister in the struggle, Nicole—in particular. All the women’s attempts to survive and defy their subjugation, along with that of other women, are contingent on the social hierarchies and power dynamics of Gilead (and beyond). At the same time, all the women’s backgrounds and their sense of who they are and how they self-identify shape these efforts. Offred’s tale reminds us that “the ordinary woman,” who identifies herself in apolitical terms as lover, wife, and mother, is as inextricably bound up with racial, educational, class and other privileges as she is implicated in the monstrous policies of Gilead’s misogynist totalitarianism. Aunt Lydia’s attempts at self-defense reveal that women in positions of authority can simultaneously be victims and perpetrators; it also shows that their resistance endangers their own survival as much as it harms other women who, like Becka, are deeply loyal and looking for moral guidance. Agnes’s testimony (which includes Becka’s story) provides insights into her and Becka’s ambivalent attitudes about Gilead’s

ideology of separate spheres, which empowers the powerful Aunts and allows them to live out of the reach of paternal sexual abuse but severely curtails other women's rights and agency to the point of sanctioning misogynist crimes. Also, Agnes and Aunt Lydia's stories show that revenge is not to be underrated in circumstances of dehumanization and oppression.

Nicole's eyewitness narrative, with its outsider perspective, finally provides one possible answer to the vexed question of female moral agency in a patriarchal state and society that does everything in its power to distort or even erase its citizens' moral agency in order to cement its political authority. Although Nicole is plagued by guilt like the other women in the novels—in her case guilt for the death of her (non-biological) family due to their hiding her from Gilead's spies (cf. *TT* 39), her social environment assures her that the assassination of Melanie and Neil is not her fault but a choice for resisting Gilead that the two have made. In her story, Nicole writes: "I felt that I owed Neil and Melanie, and the other dead people" (*TT* 199). It is this response to the violence and suffering committed by the state of Gilead which offers a viable direction for individual and collective moral agency: rather than succumbing to the sense that nothing can be done, or that whatever can be done requires too much or will always be flawed, Nicole takes on her part in attempting to improve the lives of the women in Gilead regardless of her own shortcomings and, one may add, acts of complicity. When examined from a critical perspective that highlights the inextricable interrelation between complicity and resistance, as this contribution has done, Atwood's dystopian novels display multifaceted and complex experiences of state violence by women belonging to different generations and occupying divergent intersectional positionalities.

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