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From Villainess to Gilead's Nemesis: The (Un)easy Rehabilitation of Aunt Lydia

Ewelina Feldman-Kołodziejuk

e.feldman@uwb.edu.pl

ORCID: 0000-0003-1205-1510

University of Białystok, Poland

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ABSTRACT

The article takes under scrutiny the evolution of the key antagonist from Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, namely, Aunt Lydia. In the sequel to her most popular novel, that is, *The Testaments*, the author boldly rewrote the villainous Aunt as Gilead's undercover agent, forcing the reader to reconsider their own perception and reception of this character retrospectively. Predictably, many critics and fans found the said transformation implausible. Taking *The Testaments* as a point of departure, the article rereads the original tale, which, astonishingly, discloses a number of equivocal passages that in fact might provide credibility to Atwood's audacious refashioning of Aunt Lydia as a Mayday spy. The article offers a reevaluation of Aunt Lydia's villainy in *The Handmaid's Tale* through the lens of her undercover identity, revealed in *The Testaments*. Firstly, it dissects the techniques and ploys the author used in the sequel to breed readers' empathy for hitherto despised Aunt Lydia. It focuses on the overlap between the transformation of her character and the shift from the original novel's criticism of second wave feminism towards the sequel's embrace of the fourth wave. Finally, and most importantly, it discusses a selection of equivocal fragments from *The Handmaid's Tale* that specifically pertain to Aunt Lydia.

Keywords

The Handmaid's Tale; *The Testaments*; Gilead; Feminism; Sisterhood; Rereading

1. Introduction

The aim of the article is to take under scrutiny the evolution of one of the key antagonists from Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, namely, Aunt Lydia. Though the vast majority of reviews of *The Testaments* are laudatory,¹ some claim the book did not live up to its predecessor.² There are also voices that have specifically found the transformation of the villainous Aunt implausible,³ while others refused to condone her deeds altogether.⁴ The most disparaging evaluation of the character of Aunt Lydia seems to come from Madeleine Kearns, who considers her "the novel's fatal flaw" and "little more than a plot device used to demonstrate female 'agency'" (42). Coral Ann Howells, an Atwoodian critic of long standing, perceives the protagonist as "the latest in a long line of 'spotty-handed villainesses,'" "a keeper of secrets and a ruthless strategist who finally gets her revenge" ("Atwood's Reinventions" 20).

For more than three decades Atwood resisted going back to the Republic of Gilead despite her readers' recurring queries about the ultimate plight of Offred and the circumstances of Gilead's fall. Yet, when history took a sudden turn with Donald Trump's victory in presidential election, the writer decided to

1 In her review of *The Testaments*, Dinah Birch applauds "Atwood's writing is at its incisive best throughout this novel" (23). Ruth Scurr concurs saying that "In *The Testaments*, Atwood succeeds in regaining control of Gilead through words" (33). Brian Bethune hails Atwood's latest novel "as creepily gothic, compulsively readable, and richly thematic and topical as its predecessor."

2 Rebecca Abrams writes that the sequel "falls far short of Atwood's best books" and finds "many of the plot twists in *The Testaments* . . . predictable and contrived." Ramona Tausz also underscores the lack of sophistication that marked Atwood's previous novels and their characters, stating that "In *Testaments*, [Atwood] has simplified her best characters" (44).

3 Tolentino observes that it is "not exactly plausible that Aunt Lydia has been waiting all this time to join the resistance. But her story functions as a parable" (56). A parable is not exactly Atwood's usual writing style. Tausz's criticism is much more bitter as she claims that by "absolving her cruellest female character, Atwood ruins one of her most interesting creations" (44).

4 Brian Bethune responds to Atwood's pronouncement that "There are various opinions about Aunt Lydia," in a light-hearted manner saying "That's not strictly true among fans right now, unless the division is over whether Lydia should be shot or hanged." Julia Kuznetski finds Aunt Lydia "the villain of the series, unredeemable even through her back-story" (293). Sophie Gilbert, nonetheless, sees this need to pardon Aunt Lydia lying beside the novel's point: "Bearing witness, [Atwood's] work has implied all along and now makes explicit, is a crucial step toward liberation in times of crisis, but witness-bearers shouldn't mistake themselves for heroes—or hope to be heralded as heroes by others" (127).

revive her theocratic regime to construct the world which the reader promptly comes to recognize as a thinly disguised America in the Trump Era (Enright). Following the character of Aunt Lydia from the initial days of religious coup, Atwood forced her readers to contemplate the complicity of women in establishing and sustaining a regime like Gilead for, as Atwood tweeted in a response to a desperate student forced to write an essay on control and power in *The Handmaid's Tale*, "Gilead is a theocratic totalitarianism, not simply a Men-have-power Women-do-not world" ("Margaret Atwood offers"). Lucy Feldman observes that Atwood "has tapped a timely nerve with her expansion of the character in *The Testaments*, probing the fraught territory of women's complicity in the bad behavior of men and walking a line that leaves room for readers to debate." Importantly, her article has a direct link that transfers the reader to the issue on infamous Ghislaine Maxwell that allegedly helped late Jeffrey Epstein "recruit and groom girls for sexual abuse" (Enright) in a manner eerily reminiscent of Aunt Lydia's favours to Commander Judd.

The following article offers a close rereading of Aunt Lydia's plot in *The Handmaid's Tale* through the lens of her undercover identity, revealed in *The Testaments*. Firstly, it dissects the techniques and ploys the author used in the sequel to breed readers' empathy for hitherto despised Aunt Lydia. It focuses on the overlap between the transformation of her character and the shift from the original novel's criticism of second-wave feminism towards the sequel's embrace of the fourth wave. Finally, and most importantly, it discusses a selection of equivocal fragments from *The Handmaid's Tale* that specifically pertain to Aunt Lydia.

2. Breeding Readers' Sympathy for Aunt Lydia and Foregrounding Sisterhood

The Ardua Hall Holograph, which is one of the three narrative strands in *The Testaments*, written by Aunt Lydia herself, provides the reader with the thus far concealed and unsuspected information about this character and "reveals a more complex female subject than the sadistic figure from *The Handmaid's Tale*" (Howells, "Atwood's Reinventions" 20). Namely, before the rise of Gilead, she was a middle-aged child-free professional who served as a family court justice. Her backstory, including an abortion at a young age, now punishable by death as the new law is retroactive, a divorce after a failed marriage and voluntary work at a rape crisis centre, reveals her to be a woman with progressive feminist views rather than a religious fanatic or the New Right supporter. Her involvement in the legal protection of women rights is now held against her, which is evident in the way Commander Judd enumerates her work experience as if it was a list of

her own criminal offences “Domestic cases? Sexual assault? Female criminals? Sex workers suing for enhanced protection? Property rights in divorces? Medical malpractice, especially by gynecologists?” (Atwood, *The Testaments* 171). Ironically then, pre-Gilead Aunt Lydia was far more devoted to women’s causes and feminist struggles than Offred and her generation, who took feminist gains for granted. In the olden days, she and Offred’s mother could have walked hand in hand in women’s marches. After the coup, along with other well-educated women past childbearing age, Aunt Lydia poses a threat to the new order for “The opposition is led by the educated, so the educated are the first to be eliminated” (Atwood, *The Testaments* 116). She is presented with an impossible choice, that is, to kill or be killed. For, as Commander Judd makes it explicit, “those who are not with us are against us” (172). Upon turning down the said commander’s offer of cooperation, she finds herself confined to the Thank Tank, a form of a solitary confinement, a dark four paces by four cell with a shelf for a bed and a bucket for “human food-by products” (147). Though she initially sets her mind on getting through that experience intact, she soon realizes it is easier said than done, “You’d be surprised how quickly the mind goes soggy in the absence of other people,” she confesses, “One person alone is not a full person: we exist in relation to others” (148). The deprivation she suffers is additionally magnified by the daily performance of cruelty and torture involving other female prisoners that pervades the detention centre’s audioscape:

[T]here would be a scream or a series of shrieks from nearby: brutalization on parade. Sometimes there would be a prolonged moaning; sometimes a series of grunts and breathy gasps that sounded sexual, and probably were. The powerless are so tempting.

I had no way of knowing whether or not these noises were real or merely recordings, intended to shatter my nerves and wear away my resolve. Whatever my resolve might be: after some days I lost track of that plotline. The plotline of my resolve. (Atwood, *The Testaments* 148)

When her defensive powers are already dwindling, the regime administers “a precise kicking, and other attentions” (148), including Tasers, to aid her make the right choice. The cruel procedure is repeated twice more as, Aunt Lydia sarcastically observes, “Three is a magic number” (149). Following her ordeal, she is treated to a three-day stay in a hotel room, where she is offered all the luxuries previously denied: a bed with sheets, towels, a shower and fancy food. And although she “was still in a state of mental disarray . . . a jigsaw puzzle thrown onto the floor,” she was able “to think the word *I*” again (150). The subsequent experiences of violence and pampering, which the protagonist compares to “a recipe for a tough steak: hammer it with a mallet, then marinate and tenderize” (170),

turns out to be effective. Confronted anew as to the prospective cooperation with the new government, Aunt Lydia accepts the offer. The test of loyalties takes place in a stadium eerily reminiscent of the venue that was used by the Chilean dictator Pinochet following the 1973 military coup as a mass imprisonment, torture, and extrajudicial execution facility (Pike 30). To prove their allegiance to the Gileadean state, its prospective members must play their part as a firing squad, annihilating those who refused to collaborate. Although Howells maintains that “[Aunt Lydia’s] survival narrative and her justification for the choices she has made do not necessarily make her more sympathetic, for she remains a morally compromised figure, who is a collaborator with the regime” (“Atwood’s Reinventions” 20), the scenes of torture and breaking of Gilead’s opponents effectively forestall the reader from passing easy judgment on her ultimate decision.

Choosing survival, Aunt Lydia joined the upper echelons of power becoming one of the Founding Aunts of Gilead.⁵ While the beginnings of her espionage are shrouded in mystery, that is, the reader never overtly learns whether she accepted the offer with every intention of bringing the new regime down, or this resolution came later in her life, she does eventually become Gilead’s nemesis through first thorough chronicling and then exposing of the crimes and trespasses committed by influential Commanders. However, she does prompt on a vengeful third eye that coldly observed her oppressors throughout beating and torture and pledged “*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*” (Atwood, *The Testaments* 133), which would suggest her hidden agenda from the onset. Machata also interprets this passage as the very instance that Aunt Lydia “starts planning her retribution” (193).

The three epigraphs that precede the main narrative seem to prepare the ground for this quite unexpected rehabilitation of Aunt Lydia:

Every woman is supposed to have the same set of motives, or else to be a monster.

When we look one another in the face, we’re neither of us just looking at a face we hate—no, we’re gazing into a mirror . . . Do you really not recognize yourselves in us . . . ?

Freedom is a heavy load, a great and strange burden for the spirit to undertake . . . It is not a gift given, but a choice made, and the choice may be a hard one.
(Atwood, *The Testaments*)

5 For an in-depth discussion of the power relations in *The Testaments* (especially the interrelation between power and the will to survive) set against other Atwood’s texts, see Pilar Somacarrera’s chapter “Margaret Atwood on Questions of Power.”

The excerpts from George Eliot, Vasily Grossman and Ursula Le Guin's novels, respectively, problematize the notion of natural and *unnatural* choices for women, the thin line that divides a victim from a victimizer or people overcome by seemingly diverging ideologies (be it Stalinism or Nazism), and the concept of freedom as a burdensome choice. Altogether, these inscriptions urge the reader to reflect sympathetically on the limited options the villainous aunt, like many people before her, was presented with and refrain from judging too harshly the choices she ultimately made. The fear of prospective condemnation paired with the hope for condonement by future generations links the characters of Offred and Aunt Lydia in the respective novels, for as Michaela Keck observes, "their narratives show ruptures that indicate an awareness of their complicity, which haunts them no less than their traumatic experiences" (19). Although Aunt Lydia is fraught with doubt as to how posterity will assess her because of her role as one of the Founding Mothers, Atwood employs a number of techniques to engender sympathy for her character. As Sarah Ditung reflects, "*The Handmaid's Tale* asked us to sympathise with the inertia of the prisoner; *The Testaments*, even more unsettlingly, invites our compassion with the jailer" (1404). The aforementioned scenes of Aunt Lydia's imprisonment and torture, which are all in all a part of witness narrative and testimony, are genuinely heartbreaking and rather unlikely to leave any reader indifferent. Megan White finds these drastic scenes reminiscent of the experience of Nazi prisoners depicted in Primo Levi's *The Drowned and The Saved*, pointing to the employment of parallel practices of systemic torture and dehumanization in order to forestall any resistance (7). Given Atwood's epigraph from Grossman's novel, White's comparison does not seem unsubstantiated.

Apart from orchestrating a devious master plan to smuggle the evidence against Gilead and its commanders out of the country to Canada, the "tyrannical and simultaneously maternal Aunt Lydia" (Somacarrera 40) is capable of acts of kindness towards other women. Namely, the help she offers to both Agnes and Becka to save them from marriage that they dread is a completely charitable gesture. Providing the girls with a place at Ardua Hall that trains prospective aunts and gives access to knowledge through teaching literacy foregrounds the sequel's shift towards the theme of sisterhood and female agency. Aunt Lydia seems to derive pleasure from Agnes and Becka's education and their progressive discovery of Gilead's fallacies as well as their true family backgrounds. Gaining access to their bloodlines, classical literary works or unaltered version of biblical stories, the girls commence to engage in critical thinking instead of taking things at a (regime's) face value. As Oana Celia Gheorghiu and Michaela Praisler observe, not only does Aunt Lydia write "*her-story*, which becomes the history of the totalitarian Gilead itself," but she also "*brings women to writing* by creating an order of feminine power in its own

right—one that would regain *language and power*, or the power of language, whichever comes first" (94). Reformulating the misogynistic concept of Freudian "penis envy" into a new assertion, namely, that "Pen Is Envy" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 140), thus, superseding the alleged biological superiority of men with literacy seen as a bona fide tool of power, she foregrounds the value of knowledge in female empowerment. Needless to say, denying women access to knowledge, not only Gilead but various regimes, many still in power, have intended to control their fertility and agency and suppress any opposition that may arise from learning that societies may be organized otherwise. The heartfelt Nobel Lecture by Malala Yousafzai (2014), possibly the most fervent supporter of education for everyone, attests to the immediacy of these concerns.

Moreover, the revenge Aunt Lydia orchestrates on Becka's father, a confirmed child molester, also testifies to her engagement in bringing sexual offenders to justice even if her methods are unorthodox since they involve a false testimony from Aunt Elizabeth. The sympathy she shows towards Shunammite, one of the least likeable characters in the sequel, by preventing her from "join[ing] Judd's Blubeard's chamber of defunct brides" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 349) may also be interpreted as a demonstration of her covert ethical stance against gendered violence. The documentation she systematically gathers to help overthrow Gilead tips the scales to her advantage despite her rather unflattering portrayal in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Her character, however, is far from one-dimensional as prescribed by the spy novel genre. The sequel's resonances of "spy thrillers by Ian Fleming and John Le Carré" (Howells, "Margaret Atwood's Recent Dystopias" 172) result in the creation of an undercover agent that is forced to make harrowing choices, including the sacrifice of someone else's life should a cause require that. Yet not all critics are convinced by the necessity for such drastic plot solutions. Michaela Keck, for example, notes that "Lydia's manipulation of Becka is . . . perfidious and reveals that Lydia does not hesitate to exploit the friendship and devotion among others for her own purposes" (28). Nonetheless, the Aunt's own misgivings about the role she played first in creating Gilead and then its fall also breed a significant degree of sympathy for the elderly figure, the way Iris Chase from *The Blind Assassin* engendered mixed response of reproof and pity. Pondering about her complicity in the manuscript known as *The Ardua Hall Holograph* discovered inside a nineteenth-century edition of Cardinal Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, Aunt Lydia provides the defence of her own life. Howells views her creation of the holograph as "a reaction to the fear of death" (Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead* 157), referring to the notion Atwood discussed extensively in her collection of essays devoted to writing per se. The critic observes that "Aunt Lydia lives in constant fear in Gilead's world of intrigue. Another of Atwood's spotty-handed villainesses, she is a morally compromised figure, liar and truth teller, keeper of secrets, 'a

female Thomas Cromwell,' as Atwood has described her" (Howells, "Margaret Atwood's Recent Dystopias" 185). Aunt Lydia seems to be fully aware of the fact that the breach between her official persona of a Founding Mother of Gilead and her true convictions that led her to conspire against the regime she had helped to establish may result in questioning the veracity of her words. Hence, the primary aim of her manuscript is to defend herself against the accusations of dishonesty, the same way John Henry Newman wished to "redeem his own personal reputation as an honest Englishman" (Turner 5). The Aunt hopes that posterity will acknowledge her role in the toppling of Gileadean regime rather than "suppose the manuscript is a forgery" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 410), the possibility prompted by Professor Pieixoto during the Thirteenth Symposium on Gileadean Studies. Just as the "powerful, seductive autobiographical narrative of the *Apologia* portrays Newman's Roman Catholic faith and personality as emerging from a Protestant chrysalis through a difficult process of self-discernment, spiritual development, and combat with opponents of dogmatic religion" (Turner 6), so does the Ardua Hall holograph confront the reader with a poignant character transformation propelled by self-reflection, moral dilemmas, deception and struggle against the opponents of gender equality.

While readers are entitled to their own opinion, the three key young heroines see Aunt Lydia as their friend and saviour. Agnes and Becka especially are extremely grateful to her for delivering them from marriage and the former for reuniting her with her half-sister and the mother. In *The Testaments*, "Atwood balances the treachery, jealousy and hatred shown in *The Handmaid's Tale* with values of female friendship and sisterhood" (Labudová 103) or, as Julia Kuznetski observes with reference to the novel and its sequel, "these works expose extreme failures of empathy alongside the quest for a new ethos of partnership and connectivity" (289). The inscription on the monument erected by Agnes, Nicole and their mother (Offred) which says "IN RECOGNITION OF THE INVALUABLE SERVICES PROVIDED BY A.L." is one of the final lines in Atwood's sequel, annotating another lecture by misogynistic Professor Pieixoto. This time the final word belongs to female characters and they choose to publicly acknowledge the role Aunt Lydia played in ousting Commanders from power and thus restoring the democratic rule. The original novel is frequently read as a critique of the exclusive and radical character of second-wave feminism that resulted in the rise of postfeminism, understood as a reactionary anti-feminist ideology that many women of the next generation subscribed to (Howells, *Margaret Atwood*; Tolan; Neuman). As Gheorghiu and Praisler note:

[I]n *The Handmaid's Tale*, the protagonist's generation (women in their thirties or just under) no longer needs the activism of their mothers. They have careers, rights, sexual freedom, and freedom of speech; in a nutshell, they already have

everything for which their predecessors fought, thus rendering the fight superfluous, until they no longer have anything, and it is too late to fight back. (89)

The Testaments, on the other hand, is unanimously interpreted as the tale of female solidarity and the power of sisterhood as evidenced in all the quoted reviews and analyses of the sequel. Whether every critic or scholar finds this woman camaraderie convincing is a different issue.

The shift in the portrayal of Aunt Lydia from someone who sustains and perpetuates Gileadan regime and wishes to divide and control women into someone that fosters a community of women in Ardua Hall and protects vulnerable teenagers from marital sexual abuse may seem initially implausible. Yet, the careful rereading of *The Handmaid's Tale* does reveal numerous spaces of ambiguity and allows for alternative interpretations of Aunt Lydia's words or deeds. Most importantly, since Offred's narrative is a first-person account of her oppression in Gilead prior to her escape, the perspective she offers is inadvertently limited to the knowledge she has, which excludes Aunt Lydia's involvement in Mayday resistance. Like many postmodern narrators, as "[t]he perceiving subject [Offred] is no longer assumed to a coherent, meaning-generating entity" and "often undermin[es] [her] own seeming omniscience" (Hutcheon 11). Aunt Lydia's presence in the original novel is primarily circumscribed to "a disembodied voice in Offred's mind which the narrator usually reiterates, but which she sometimes distorts or ridicules"; she is "a cliché, a catchphrase that is ingrained so deeply in every Handmaid's mind that it becomes inescapable" (Machala 193). Thus, in the original novel, she reads more like the narrator's projection rather than an actual character in her own right. In both novels, however, she is a larger than life, quasi Orwellian Big Sister, present "everywhere and nowhere" and "cast[ing] an unsettling shadow" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 32).

3. Rereading *The Handmaid's Tale*: Verbal and Non-Verbal Ambiguity

Taking *The Testaments* as a point of departure, I commenced rather skeptically rereading the original tale, which, to my astonishment, disclosed a number of equivocal passages that in fact might provide credibility to Atwood's bold re-fashioning of Aunt Lydia as a Mayday spy. Since the first novel "is largely silent on the workings of the aunts' minds and motives" and "we have only the deductions of their, largely hostile, observers" (Shead 5), the lacunary character of the titular handmaid's tale enabled Atwood to fill the gaps with new meaning, portraying in minute detail the various machinations among seemingly pious and faithful to the regime Aunts. First and foremost, if the reader, who is fully aware of Offred's control of the original tale and her critical assessment of the

discussed aunt, approaches some of the latter's words without prejudice they do not need to be considered as Orwellian Newspeak but might in fact mean what she says. For instance, when she states that "There is more than one kind of freedom . . . Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 39), she might be referring to the choice she was given herself. Freedom from suffering, torture and death though highly dubious is a privilege in a totalitarian rule. It is always either/or. Telling the handmaids that she is doing her best and it is not easy for her either, while simultaneously blinking, her mouth trembling (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 66), Aunt Lydia does not have to be playing a pretend game of false sympathies but actually voicing her own misgivings about Gilead and the situation all women found themselves in.⁶ Her highly sarcastic from Offred's point of view pronouncement that "The future is in your hands" (57) instead of meaning the reproductive powers of handmaids and the rebirth of a nation may refer to their potential for rebellion and the power to change their fate.

On a number of occasions Aunt Lydia's reactions, especially expressed through her body language, are incongruous with the situation. This dissonance between words and gestures might manifest the rift between her official persona and her true self that struggles to resurface. Her sudden outburst of tears at the reminiscence of men and women lying on the blankets in the park, which handmaids take for her piety and pity over fallen pre-Gilead women, can in reality result from grief and loss embedded in her own memories of dates and casual picnics in the park. What seemed to be a theatrical insincere gesture in *The Handmaid's Tale*, in the light of *The Testaments* becomes a genuine reaction stemming from actual anguish at having her own old life dispossessed. Her outburst of laughter, for a change, at Saint Paul's verse regulating the length of women's hair (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 72) clearly betrays that she finds such rules preposterous. The incongruous affect she occasionally displays

⁶ A similar observation is made by Cristina and Liviu-Augustin Chifane: "From Offred's description, we imagine the Aunts as accomplices of the regime since they run the re-education centers with torture techniques, brain washing slogans, and nursery-rhyme indoctrinations. However, there are clues embedded in the text that indicate an untold story of the Aunts" (1185). The scholars single out two fragments from *The Handmaid's Tale* as potential sites of Aunt Lydia's sincerity: "Don't think it's easy for me either" and "I'm doing my best, she said. I'm trying to give you the best chance you can have" (65). Then they go on to conclude that "Offred reproduces Aunt Lydia's words with the aim to denounce her falsehood and the discrepancy between what she says and what she does. After reading *The Testaments*, one realizes Aunt Lydia's words could have actually been much closer to the truth than we might have suspected" (1186).

signals the artificiality of her adopted persona which she must sustain in order to survive and secure the success of her undercover operations and which is in stark contrast to her actual creed. When referring to the risk that handmaids are taking through their prospective pregnancies that may result in Unbabies and Shredders, Aunt Lydia calls Offred and her colleagues "the shock troops [that] will march out in advance, into dangerous territory" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 115). Her seemingly agitprop slogan "The greater the risk the greater the glory" (115), accompanied by a gesture of clasped hands may be a way of pleading with them to take the risk and oppose Gilead. It may even serve as a clandestine gesture of pleading with and praying for those among handmaids that are already members of Mayday not to give up their subversive practices, which is not unsound for through the inclusion of the character of Ofglen in the original novel Atwood unveils the selected handmaids' involvement in the resistance movement in Gilead.

As Janet Larson observes, "Atwood's witty prose is thick with *double entendre* and allusion, including hidden puns whose meanings dawn on us only later, and outrageous jokes that don't so much dawn as 'bomb'" (496). Aunt Lydia's commentaries and pronouncements are no exception, starting with the notorious quote "Republic of Gilead . . . knows no bounds. Gilead is within you" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 38). If read as a reference to John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which is a banned book under the regime but rests securely on Aunt Lydia's private shelf, in which Satan famously claims that "The mind is its own place, and in itself/ Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n" (Milton 7-8) and hence hell can be made paradise by the power of one's mind, then Aunt Lydia might be seen as the one that encourages handmaids to resist Gilead from within.⁷ She might be telling the captive women that they can choose not to allow Gilead to penetrate their minds even if it has repossessed their bodies. In fact, that is exactly what Offred does for, as Janet Larson notes, the eponymous handmaid's "taletelling . . . is her resistance to the Gilead within that brings her to the brink of deliverance from the Gilead without" (497-98).

Aunt Lydia's metaphor of handmaids as the army (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 22), so readily undertaken by the producers of the TV series, and announced as the arrival of a new dawn at the end of season one, may indeed be read as her call for action, for consolidation of handmaids' power and ultimate rebellion. When talking about modesty as invisibility Aunt Lydia does not need to be only preaching but perchance reminding other undercover agents that

7 Aidan Johnson discerns yet another parallel between *The Testaments* and *Paradise Lost*, namely, "Like Milton's Satan, the main narrator, Lydia, is a near-perfect example of a character whose sins make her compelling and even beautiful" (48).

the more pious and humble they seem, the less likely they are to be discovered. Speaking of the mistakes that women in pre-Gilead made that women of Gilead should not repeat, she does not have to be condemning women's feminist choices but rather may be pointing to the disregard the second wave manifested towards motherhood and family structures and its exclusive white middle-class character. True sisterhood should leave no woman out. Aunt Lydia's repeated appeals to handmaids to sympathize with Wives on the account that their situation is not easy either may in fact stem from her desire to consolidate the divided women of Gilead. No woman in Gilead was granted freedom but they were all presented with more or less limited choices.

One of the most intriguing fragments that leaves room for a valid alternative interpretation is Aunt Lydia's decision to share the story of Moira's escape with Janine, who predictably related it to the rest of handmaids. While the Aunt's intention in sharing the secret with Janine is primarily to ask her to spy on her colleagues from Red Centre, her detailed account of Moira's master plan and humiliation of Aunt Elizabeth who was taken hostage did strike as odd from the very beginning, that is, prior to the publication of *The Testaments*. The way it is recounted sounds almost like a manual for a successful absconding. And Moira's getaway tale does sow seeds of hope among her fellow handmaids who share her story widely with one another. "In the light of Moira, the Aunts were less fearsome and more absurd. Their power had a flaw to it. They could be shanghaied in toilets. The audacity was what we liked" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 135). The story of Moira's escape adds fuel to handmaids' resistance, revives their faith in the possibility of breaking out of Gilead. Under the veneer of a request for infiltration, Aunt Lydia's depiction of how easily Aunt Elizabeth was tricked can be read as an attempt at offering the handmaids a beacon of hope. Their guardians can be outsmarted after all.

The other three examples that might have had a counterproductive effect on handmaids' education are connected with the propaganda movies that were shown by the Aunts. Whereas their official aim was to reform handmaids morally and brainwash them into condemning the liberated women of the second wave feminism, which in the twisted logic of Gilead was synonymous with pornography it deprecated, the documentaries acted in fact as a double-edged sword. Firstly, they served as prosthetic memory, reminding of the times when women were free to express their dissatisfaction and protest against violence or infringement of their rights. The inclusion of such slogans as "TAKE BACK THE NIGHT," "FREEDOM TO CHOOSE. EVERY BABY A WANTED BABY. RECAPTURE OUR BODIES. DO YOU BELIEVE A WOMAN'S PLACE IS ON THE KITCHEN TABLE?" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 129-30) into the broadcast videos might not have been "an oversight" (129), as Offered suspects. Since Aunt Lydia was responsible for crafting propaganda,

she might have selected these rallying cries purposefully in order to remind handmaids of their women power and of the freedom they lost and might collectively try to regain. She knows that "when memories of freedoms fade, compliance replaces complacency" (Sheed 5). The choice of these placards is curious indeed for all of them resonate with the situation handmaids found themselves in Gilead, having no control over their bodies or lives. Offred is herself astounded by the use of these films, asking if this is "an oversight, have we gotten away with something?" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 122). Similarly, when discussing another agitprop movie which showed Unwomen, that is, pre-Gilead professional child-free women like Aunt Lydia herself, she does confess that "some of their ideas were sound enough" and "We would have to condone some of their ideas, even today" (121). The comment that the government gave Unwomen money to waste time working as various professionals may also be read as a remark on the contingent nature of governments and their agendas. Reminding handmaids of the pre-Gilead times, Aunt Lydia suggests that governments come and go, or sometimes need to be ousted. Peculiar is also the inclusion of the 70s and 80s porn movies into the moral instruction of Red Centre inmates. Exposing handmaids to scenes of graphic sex, sexual violence or what seems to be snuff movies is highly debatable as an efficient tool of moral reform. Aunt Lydia's urge to "[c]onsider the alternatives" (128) does sound ambiguous. For what alternatives might she have in mind? The inclusion of *The Jezebels* in *The Handmaid's Tale* exposes the hypocrisy prevalent among the upper echelons that flies in the face of their officially declared chastity. Moreover, through the character of Commander Judd in particular, the sequel makes it evident that the broadcast porn movies do not differ significantly from what handmaids experience within the confines of Commanders' bedrooms either. Thus, the 70s and 80s porn movies, instead of providing a sense of relief from being freed from the allegedly historical and therefore non-extant abuse, *de facto* mirror the handmaids' own experiences of sexual violence in the Republic of Gilead. The alternatives therefore are out of bounds of Gilead rather than with in it. Aunt Lydia's observation "That was what they thought of women, then," (128) sounds highly ironic for how is "then" different from "now" for handmaids? Her voice trembling with indignation may easily express her resentment towards Gilead's treatment of women not merely pre-Gilead past exploitation of female body. In fact, it may refer to the way women have repeatedly been subjugated, abused and violated since times immemorial. Weirdly enough, one of the movies shown at the Red Centre portraying "a woman being slowly cut into pieces, her fingers and breasts snipped off with garden shears, her stomach slit open and her intestines pulled out" (121) is mirrored in *The Testaments* in the biblical story of the Concubine Cut into Twelve Pieces that

Agnes and Becka are taught as part of the Religion class.⁸ This Old Testament tale, whose cruelty and senselessness severely upset Becka, is, as Aunt Vidala explicates, “God’s way of telling us that we should be content with our lot and not rebel against it” (Atwood, *The Testaments* 74). In this light, violence and cruelty against women are timeless.

The last type of excerpts I wish to single out are, what I dubbed, strategies of survival. Some of Aunt Lydia’s teachings are concerned with training Red Centre inmates in forbearance. As an official tool of reeducation of fallen women that the handmaids are considered to be, these exercises in fortitude treat patience as an ultimate virtue. The direct quotation from Milton’s “On His Blindness”: “They also serve who only stand and wait” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 33) foregrounds the value of stoic acceptance of God’s will even in the face of dire circumstances. After all, the word ‘*patience*’ derives from the Latin word for ‘*suffering*’. Yet, Milton’s words juxtaposed with Aunt Lydia’s urging handmaids to think of themselves as seeds in a “wheedling, conspiratorial” (33) voice calls for a fresh reinterpretation. Perchance, they should think of themselves as seeds of dissent, of future revolution. Their patient waiting should not be tantamount to resignation to their plight but should be publicly displayed to lull the Gileadean regime’s vigilance. Their forbearance and humility are in fact duplicitous lull before the storm. The double meaning of “stand and wait” is also sustained by Aunt Lydia’s call to play a pretend game or to practise the visualization of the Ceremony beforehand. Both these mental exercises enable handmaids to master detachment from their body in the traumatic circumstances that the non-consensual character of a sexual intercourse with a Commander places them in. Dissociating from their body handmaids save up their life energy, which is necessary for survival and overthrowing Gileadean regime. The last quotation that reveals the ambiguity embedded in the character of Aunt Lydia in the original tale, about handmaids power to manipulate men, also reads like an implicit lesson of survival. Although the official doctrine of Gilead does not allow for any sexual activity but for procreational purposes, Offred reads between Aunt Lydia’s lines that their sex appeal is a potent weapon that might be wisely used to their advantage. Last but not least, there is not a single

8 In 1983, Atwood wrote an opinion column for *Chatelaine* as part of an ongoing then debate on pornography in which she argued that “it is naive to think of violent pornography as harmless entertainment” (“Atwood on Pornography” 61) especially as it entailed “women getting their nipples snipped off with garden shears, having meat hooks stuck into her vaginas, being disemboweled; little girls being raped” (118). These very concerns found their way into *The Handmaid’s Tale*, highlighting the need for censorship of pornographic material as a common goal of some feminists and religious fundamentalists in the late 70s and early 80s.

passage in *The Handmaid's Tale* that portrays Aunt Lydia being either verbally or physically cruel to anyone. It is mentioned that she would occasionally tap a handmaid with a wooden pointer to retrieve an erect pose (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 188). In one of the most poignant scenes in the original tale, when Moira is dragged by the other Aunts after having been beaten up, Aunt Lydia actually closes the curtain to obstruct the view. If she wanted Moira to serve as an example for the rest of the handmaids, shouldn't she rather force them to witness her pain and humiliation? Is it not an act of pity and compassion?

4. Conclusion

Aunt Lydia's holograph does not undermine or annul the narrative of Offred. Their stories exist rather in a dialectic relationship with one another forming a diptych. Yet, the disclosure of the Aunt's true identity as a secret Mayday agent, of which Offred was ignorant, calls for a new rereading of the original tale, which "add[s] yet another layer of context to the single most famous novel in Atwood's prolific career" (Bethune). This retrospective view on the original tale reveals multiple passages that are fraught with ambiguity or imply the Aunt's own unequivocal attitude towards Gileadean regime and its laws. Some of her decisions may be read as subversive activity which, veiled as official propaganda, allowed Aunt Lydia, nonetheless, to incite reflective resistance and fuel suppressed anger. Original pronouncements about female camaraderie and cooperation that were treated by Offred, and readers by extension, as twisted theocratic utopia, may be reinterpreted as genuine calls for the need of women's solidarity and consolidation in order to bring Gilead down together. Talking about the mistakes that women who belonged to the second generation of feminists made, Aunt Lydia did not necessarily have to embrace post-feminism, understood as anti-feminism, but, in the light of new information, could have urged the emergence of a new more inclusive feminist movement, which eventually came with the third wave. In the light of *The Testaments*, her character may be read as a female trickster or rather "trickstar,"⁹ who "assume[s]

9 It is a term coined by Marilyn Jurich to denote the character's distinctive features from her male counterpart: "The nature of trickster, then, is substantially intensified in the dealings of the woman trickster, the *trickstar*. Sometimes her artifices shock us, motivated as they are by malice and self-interest. At other times, her caprices amuse; and we admire her ability to contrive her way out of confining, even life-threatening circumstances, respect her determination to seek social justice for others. Tradition, however—that tradition supported by male power—often prefers to see the trickstar as menacing, her tricks as self-serving" (3).

a social mission once [she] refuses the status of victim, and justice becomes [her] consuming passion, even as [she] retains many of the appetites of male tricksters" (Tatar 57). Just like Scheherazade, one of the most renowned tricksters, Aunt Lydia "knows better than to reason, beg, plead, bargain, preach, or scold. Instead, she relies on the only strategy available to the powerless: deceit" (Tatar 46). She is a double agent that accomplishes her devious plan of toppling the Gileadean regime thanks to a cloak of invisibility that she is unwittingly granted by the said regime simply because she is a woman of past-bearing age.

The shift of novels' focus from Offred to Aunt Lydia forces readers to contemplate their own choices should they be required, to review their "own pragmatic indifference" (Tolentino) adopted as part of everyday survival and its consequences for the present day world. Patrick Williams aptly dubs the sequel "a masterclass in placing readers in the grayest of moral areas and asking, what would you do?" (73). In lieu of sympathizing and identifying with a handmaid, that is, a victim, the reader of *The Testaments* is faced with a harrowing question, namely, what if the only possible option of survival was the one of prospective victimizer, of a cog in a Gileadean wheel. As Sophie Gilbert (25) reflects,

The witnesses [Atwood] portrays in her fiction aren't saviors; they are (or hope to be) survivors, people constrained and compromised by circumstances, and especially worth listening to for that very reason. *The Testaments* highlights this fact by making a more loaded demand than its predecessor did—that readers place themselves in the seat of an oppressor, not one of the subjugated.

Those who read *The Handmaid's Tale* in their university classes in the twentieth century, upon the arrival of the sequel find themselves at a very different point of life, thirty five years older at most. For them, the question of uneasy identification with Aunt Lydia comes from biological changes they have or are about to experience through menopause. Their dwindling fertility would have them trapped at the stadium and faced with the impossible choice: to kill or be killed. This is the question particularly relevant in the times when in the aftermath of *The Handmaid's Tale* series the omnipresent appropriation of handmaid's apparel and phenomena has led to "An instinct toward solidarity [that] had been twisted into what seemed like a private fantasy of persecution that could flatten all differences among women" (Tolentino). Claiming that all women are victimized and persecuted to the same degree erases the complexity of power relations within the society that intersect with race, ethnicity, education, economic status, sexual orientation or gender identity, to name but a few. As Gilbert confirms, "That Atwood might harbor doubts about glorified, monolithic victimhood doesn't come as a surprise" (126). The complexity

of characters from *The Testaments*, among whom many are complicit in the flourishing of Gilead, dismisses its reading as a feminist utopia but it does unequivocally urge the necessity for female solidarity.

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