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# 'In Love with Either/Or': Religion and Oppositional Logic in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (Chapter 3 of Irigaray, *Incarnation and Contemporary Women's Fiction*)

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## ‘In Love with Either/Or’: Religion and Oppositional Logic in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*

Margaret Atwood is a prolific and award-winning Canadian writer whose work regularly exposes the destructive and oppressive forces at work in society, particularly as they affect women. Though Atwood refers to herself as a ‘strict agnostic’, she maintains an interest in religion, which is evident in her fictional work (Moyers 2006).<sup>1</sup> Atwood’s second novel, *Surfacing* (1973), has received a fair amount of critical attention for its religious themes and is examined in both Carol Christ’s *Diving Deep and Surfacing* and Barbara Rigney’s work *Lilith’s Daughters*.<sup>2</sup> Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye* (1989), with its mystical Marian imagery, has also been explored by critics of religion and literature.<sup>3</sup> In her most recent novel, *The Year of the Flood* (2009), Atwood again turns her attention to the religious dimension of human culture through her depiction of an eco-religion called God’s Gardeners and a heroine who is a new convert. Atwood’s recurrent interest in religion stems from her belief ‘that religion – that is, the stories we tell ourselves about where we come from and where we are going – is hard-wired into us: that there is no escape, so long as we remain human beings’ (Wagner 2009). Moreover, Atwood recognizes the pervasiveness of religion in Western culture; she describes herself as not being ‘raised with religion’, but rather ‘within one. Because I grew up within a culture where it was all over the place – including in the school system in Canada’ (Wagner 2009).

The Atwood novel that engages the values and assumptions of Western religion to an arguably greater depth than the rest of her work is *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985).<sup>4</sup> This novel is an incisive exposé of women’s marginalization in Western religious discourse, particularly regarding their corporeality, sexuality and autonomy. Set in the late twentieth century, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a work of speculative fiction that depicts a United States splintered into warring religious

factions; what was once New England has become the Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian theocracy. Relying on biblical precedent, Gilead enforces extreme gender roles; women are banned from reading and writing, owning property, earning money and they are allocated to different positions in society based upon social class and fertility. In response to declining birth rates, Gilead has returned to the practise of using concubines (Handmaids), servant women who give birth on behalf of their mistresses. The novel's protagonist, Offred, is one such Handmaid and the novel is told from her perspective as she tries to cope with her newly restricted circumstances. Offred's narrative does not unfold in a linear fashion, but weaves through past and present as she recalls her former life with her husband and daughter, the swift takeover of the Gilead regime, her indoctrination at The Rachel and Leah Centre, and her present situation as a Handmaid in the house of the Commander, an important political and military figure in Gilead. The epilogue of the novel, which takes place two hundred years in the future, long after the fall of Gilead, reveals that Offred's tale has been pieced together by male historians from a series of unearthed tape recordings that were ostensibly made by Offred as she attempted to escape from Gilead through 'The Underground Femaleroad'.<sup>5</sup> The novel ends ambiguously; Offred's fate as well as many other questions about her life, ultimately, remain unknown.<sup>6</sup>

Out of Atwood's sizable canon, this novel has garnered the most critical attention, largely because of its multi-levelled irony and scathing political analysis.<sup>7</sup> While critics acknowledge that Gilead is a fundamentalist totalitarian regime, many of them fail to read past the political elements to the underlying critique of Western religious discourse. Peter Stillman and S. Anne Johnson (1994, p. 70) read *The Handmaid's Tale* as an 'explicitly political novel', while Coral Howells declares the book to be 'entirely social and political in its agenda' (2006, p. 163).<sup>8</sup> These critics rightly recognize *The Handmaid's Tale* as a novel of power and sexual politics, yet simultaneously overlook the fact that religion can be seen as antecedent to these power imbalances, not merely a manifestation of them. Stillman and Johnson, for example, read the religious elements of Gilead as a superficial means to a political end, rather than the driving force of Gilead's power: 'The founders of Gilead generated a right-wing fundamentalist reading of the Bible, grafted it onto patriarchal attitudes, and imposed it throughout society' (1994, p. 71). In other words, they primarily read religion serving politics in Gilead, rather than politics conforming to religious precepts.

A smaller number of critics recognize how the Republic of Gilead incorporates and synthesizes elements of several Western religious movements into one monolithic regime. Janet Lawson (1987) reads Gilead as the 'religion-based state of our continuing American Puritan tradition', a connection that is made within the novel itself when Offred visits a museum and refers to the Puritans as 'ancestors' (HT: 31). Perhaps the most overt textual allusion is 'the strong infusion of the American New Right Ideology of the 1980s', of which Gilead can be seen as a direct extension (Howells 1996, p. 127). Gilead, then, has tentacles throughout history, in both religious and secular societies, and can in this sense be read as a conglomeration of Western religious ideals, uniting Old Testament patriarchy with Protestant Puritanism and New Right traditional values. These so-called traditional values, i.e. enforced gender roles, male hegemony, state control over women's bodies, biological reductivism, strict (hetero)sexual mores and the equation of natural and normal, 'are expressed in terms of universal truths', truths that are underpinned by the authoritative Word of God as selectively interpreted and enforced by the men in power (Staels 1995, p. 457).

In this analysis of Atwood's novel, I will argue that *The Handmaid's Tale* is not merely a political critique, but a pessimistic evaluation of women's place in Western religious thought. Using the mode of speculative fiction, Atwood creates a world where the oppositional logic of Western religious discourse is brought into sharp relief. Through her depiction of Gilead, Atwood exposes the consequences of a religious ideology built upon hierarchies that isolate femininity from divinity, the body from the Word, and deprive women of sexual and spiritual autonomy.

### Opposites that tear the world apart

Atwood's depiction of the violent and divisive hierarchies within the Gilead regime corresponds in many ways to Luce Irigaray's analysis of Western discourse. Irigaray's oeuvre can be read as an attempt to expose and undo the oppositional logic that has 'dominated the West since the time of the Greeks' (1985b, p. 25). Similarly, Hélène Cixous' interrogation of phallogocentrism observes that in the West 'thought has always worked through opposition', and she asserts that hierarchy and dichotomization are pervasive, colouring 'all concepts, codes and values' (1986, pp. 63–4). According to the analyses of both Irigaray and Cixous, patriarchal discourse is founded on binary oppositions,



in which privileged concepts are defined against other, less valued terms. The primary of these oppositions is the unitary (masculine) self that retains coherency through its opposition to an (feminine) 'other', just as the 'master' requires a 'slave' in Hegel's dialectic. As Elizabeth Grosz explains in her work on French feminist thought, this oppositional logic creates a dialectic of dominance and oppression: 'Dichotomous thinking necessarily hierarchizes and ranks the two polarized terms so that one becomes the privileged term and the other its suppressed, subordinated, negative counterpart' (Grosz 1994b, p. 3). It is through conceptual oppositions such as Man/Woman, Mind/Body, Culture/Nature and Reason/Passion, that 'the patriarchal social body constructs itself hierarchically, excluding difference' (Irigaray 1993c, p. 45).

Irigaray's work on the religious reveals that this either/or mentality of oppositional dualism manifests itself in religious discourse as well, through the fundamental binaries of Divine/Human, Word/Body and Spirit/Flesh.<sup>9</sup> Feminine subjectivity cannot emerge in this paradigm of oppositional logic, wherein the feminine is appropriated and subjugated in order to define the masculine. And as Irigaray's work reveals, the oppositional hierarchy of Man/Woman is fundamentally connected to the way divinity has been appropriated by men in Western culture:

The positive connotation of the masculine as word gender derives from the time of the establishment of patriarchal and phallocratic power, notably by men's appropriation of the divine. This is not a secondary matter. It is very important. Without divine power, men could not have supplanted mother-daughter relations and their attributions concerning nature and society. But man becomes God by giving himself an invisible father, a father language. Man becomes God as the Word, then as the Word made flesh. (1993c, p. 68)

The God of monotheism, Irigaray writes, 'has been created out of man's gender' (1993b, p. 61), and the Father God of monotheism, the 'Self-Same He', serves as 'the sole source of sameness' that guarantees male subjectivity (1985a, p. 357). A divine conceived in the masculine perpetuates the economy of sameness and oppositional logic that enforces male subjectivity and female alterity; a transcendent, immutable, masculine God is 'indispensable . . . in distinguishing and subordinating Same and Other' (1985a, p. 331). As Irigaray asserts, the question of divinity is not peripheral but central to the construction of a feminine subjectivity. Irigaray conceptualizes subjectivity as an ongoing process, as continual becoming, and this process of becoming requires a 'horizon' that can facilitate ongoing, autonomous development.<sup>10</sup> In current discourse, women

have no such horizon, as the feminine is conceptualized only through its opposition to the masculine. Man has posited the masculine, immutable God of monotheism to guarantee his subjectivity, and without a notion of the divine conceived in feminine terms, woman is 'fated to remain a slave to the logic of the essence of man' (1993b, p. 67).

Atwood's Republic of Gilead is an eerily pitch-perfect depiction of the masculine appropriation of the divine – the 'one reality that determines identities, rights, symbols, and discourse' – and the subsequent debilitating effects on feminine subjectivity (1991a, p. 76). In the Gilead theocracy, monotheism enforces a monolithic system of values, a system that is closed and idealized into absolute truth. At the centre of this monolith is Man, with the power of the Word of God; on the fringes are the women, robbed of language and reduced to empty vessels. As Deborah Hooker points out, 'the theological imaginary that Gilead imposes with a vengeance' consists of a 'single, unembodied, all-seeing God' with a resolutely 'masculine profile' (2006, pp. 278–9). The masculinity of the monotheistic God is unquestioned and used to justify female subservience; in other words, the 'forces arrayed to silence female dissent' are not soldiers and guns, but religious ideals, which are imposed upon women by God-ordained male authority, and then internalized and enforced by the women themselves (Hooker 2006, p. 289). The figure of Aunt Lydia, who trains women to serve as Handmaids at The Rachel and Leah Centre, is the emblem of this internalization, functioning as a parrot for patriarchal values inside Offred's mind throughout her narrative.<sup>11</sup> As a sort of grotesque mother figure, Aunt Lydia soothingly assures the Handmaids that Gilead is a place of 'freedom' for women, and the unfamiliar restrictions will soon enough seem 'ordinary' (HT: 8, 24, 33). Aunt Lydia is described as 'in love with either/or' and her character continually vocalizes the violent oppositions inherent in Gilead's ideology, the most fundamental, of course, being the opposition of Man/Woman (HT: 8).

In Gilead, the opposition of sexuate difference is articulated through violent reductivism; individual women are stripped of their names and identities and relegated to specific functions according to biological and social roles. The rigidity of sexual difference is articulated primarily by Aunt Lydia and the Commander in the novel, who defend Gileadean practices through their definitions of male sexuality and female (a) sexuality.<sup>12</sup> According to Lydia, men prey upon women sexually because 'God made them that way', while women, who in contrast have no sexual urges themselves, are responsible for curbing male sexual behaviour (HT: 45).<sup>13</sup> The Commander echoes these sentiments,



appealing to the 'procreational strategy' of divinely created 'Nature', which justifies and naturalizes male promiscuity (HT: 237). Gilead, he claims, has simply returned society to 'Nature's norm' (HT: 220). The irony is that, for all these appeals to natural, God-ordained difference, Gilead is a society that *obscures* difference in favour of uniformity. This uniformity is most obviously evident in the persistence of uniforms, which point not to an economy of difference, but to sameness. In her analysis of oppositional patriarchal thought, Irigaray describes 'its power to *reduce all others to the economy of the Same*' (1985b, p. 74). This 'teleologically constructive project . . . is always also a project of diversion, deflection, reduction of the other in the same' (1985b, p. 74). Such reduction eradicates difference, propagating the unified standard of the masculine subject and defining women in contrast. Cixous refers to this economy as 'The Empire of the Selfsame', in which "difference" is always perceived and carried out as an opposition' and 'masculinity/femininity are opposed in such a way that it is male privilege that is affirmed' (1986, p. 80). Reflecting this 'male privilege', all women in Gilead wear costumes that signify their role in relation to men. The Wives wear blue, the Marthas green and the Handmaids are clad in blood-red robes with white veils. These costumes emphasize the 'infinite interchangeability' of women (Stein 1991, p. 271).<sup>14</sup> Karen Stein notes this connection between the uniforms and reductive sexual difference: 'Colour-coded in this way, the Handmaids become interchangeable, identified only by their biological function, child-bearing' (1991, p. 271).

The re-naming of the Handmaids also reflects their interchangeability, as women are deprived of individual identities and forced to take on titles which name, not themselves, but their relationships to specific men. Offred's Commander is called Fred, so Offred is Of-Fred, and if she were to be placed under another master, her name would change to reflect new ownership. When Offred's shopping partner and confidant, Ofglen, fails to appear and another Handmaid comes in her place, Offred's attempts to trace her friend's whereabouts prove futile, as she is now nameless, having been replaced by the new Ofglen who acquired the name. Through the power of de-naming and re-naming, the Handmaids are given transient identities that are governed solely by the shifting currents of male power and desire. Sheila Conboy points out in her article that the men of Gilead and their power to name women recalls Adam's privilege in the Genesis creation story, 'while the men are only implicitly Adam figures, they explicitly employ Genesis to authorize control over female identity and to restrict the female body in its most threatening and powerful capacities: sex and

childbirth' (1993, p. 351). Adam's name for Eve, 'wo-man' or 'of man', is likewise derivative, denoting man as origin and woman as different from, yet belonging to man.<sup>15</sup> Gilead, with its mandates of men as rulers and women as helpmeets and child bearers, exemplifies the model of sexual difference established in the biblical creation myth.

For the Handmaids, any potential becoming is reduced to reproduction and necessitates the obliteration of individual identity. As mentioned earlier, in her work on the development of the female subject, Irigaray maintains that the process of becoming necessitates a 'horizon that assures us the passage between past and future' (1993b, p. 67). Without such a horizon, women 'become parts or multiples without a future of our own', which 'means simply that we are leaving it up to the other, or the Other of the other, to put us together' (1993b, p. 61). In Gilead, women are not allowed to conceive subjectivity in their own terms; they are constructed by the ruling discourse and restricted to the male-defined horizon of procreation. Several critics note that within Offred's narrative, envisioning survival and subjectivity necessitates imaginable futurity. Survival is not merely physical, but requires 'seeing beyond the present moment' (1996, p. 135). The women of Gilead 'are allowed to see only the flat surfaces of the present' (Staels 1995, p. 457), which 'is the only acceptable reality' in Gilead' (LeBihan 1991, p. 96). The Handmaids' veils serve as blinders, and within this uniform(ity), it is nearly impossible to get a 'full view' of 'anything' (HT: 30). Encumbered in this way, the Handmaids learn to see the surrounding world 'in gasps' (HT: 30), because, as Staels notes, their eyes 'are not allowed to move beyond the prescribed edges' (Staels 1996, p. 457). Offred recognizes her lack of future, of horizon and its detriment to her self-conception: 'What I need is perspective. . . . Time's a trap, I'm caught in it. I must forget about my secret name and all ways back' (HT: 143). Without a horizon to orient her becoming as an autonomous subject, Offred is left only with the names and definitions ascribed to her by the ruling ideology; she 'must suffer [the] adjectives' of Gilead (HT: 114). In this state of suspended becoming, Offred begins to submit to her role as Handmaid. Staels asserts that 'Offred is forced to lead a paralyzed existence' in Gilead, 'caught in the trap of the "here and now"' (1995, p. 459). This paralysis is continually signalled by Offred herself, who describes her existence as characterized by 'blank time' and 'long parentheses of nothing'; her life is now 'a space to be filled' (HT: 70, 69, 224). Towards the end of her narrative, Offred laments that it is not merely space and time, but her very self that is empty: 'I am a blank, here, between parentheses' (HT: 228). Time

and again, Offred expresses her own paralysis, her lack of becoming, under Gilead's enforced religious ideals.

Though Offred resists internalizing the ideas and values of Gilead throughout and via her narrative, this same narrative serves to 'chronicle' her own 'shifts in perspective' under Gilead's influence, which eventually 'effect[s] change in her imaginative conceptualization of her self' (Howells 1996, p. 138). After the loss of her ally Ofglen, Offred begins, internally, to acquiesce to the God of Gilead: 'Dear God, I think, I will do anything you like. . . . I'll obliterate myself, if that's what you really want . . . I resign my body freely, to the uses of others' (HT: 286). This prayer echoes the collective prayers the Handmaids are forced to say at The Rachel and Leah Centre during their indoctrination; it is similarly a prayer of abdication, of self-sacrifice: 'Oh God, obliterate me. Make me fruitful. Mortify my flesh, that I may be multiplied' (HT: 194). For much of the narrative, Offred resists the ideology of Gilead; the prayers to be obliterated are initially empty words. However, by the end of the narrative, when Offred has lost hope, the words imposed by Aunt Lydia become her own, and the true power of patriarchal religious discourse reveals itself.

### Bodies and word(s)

The most effective control tactic of the Gilead regime is its appropriation of *Logos*, of the Word. Irigaray's interrogation of Western discourse exposes the fact that the patriarchal foundations of our culture are 'marked in the deep economy of language' and that 'sexual difference cannot therefore be reduced to a simple, extra-linguistic fact of nature' (1993c, p. 20). She writes that because women are 'excluded and denied' in the 'patriarchal linguistic order', they cannot 'be women and speak in a sensible, coherent manner' (1993c, p. 20). *The Handmaid's Tale* reflects patriarchy's deep inscription in the economy of language through portraying how Gilead grants men complete control of culture and language while relegating women to the realm of nature and pushing them into a pre-literate sphere. In Gilead, women are restricted from all forms of written language and reduced to their supposed natural function of childbearing. Reading is considered sinful for women and is punished by the severing of a hand (HT: 89). In public spaces where women are allowed to go, such as the market, words are replaced by pictorial symbols. Even women's spoken words to each other are tightly controlled and reflect the religious ideology of Gilead. Certain words, such

as *free*, are outlawed entirely (HT: 54). The Handmaids have prescribed greetings for one another – 'Blessed be the fruit' and 'May the Lord open' – that affirm their reproductive roles, and the official farewell – 'Under His Eye' – signals their lack of freedom and the regime's pervasive power over their bodies (HT: 19, 45). These sanctioned exchanges underscore the subjection of the female body and its procreative value to the authority of the masculine Word.

Irigaray cites this subjection as a fundamental failing of Western religious discourse, writing that 'as a feminine body subjected to a masculine Word going from the Father to the Son through Mary, I cannot truly love myself, nor the other, nor God' (2004e, p. 150). In Christian monotheism, the Word (*Logos*) has dual meanings as the authoritative word of God as well as God Himself.<sup>16</sup> In Gilead, men are placed in a direct position to receive, embody and convey the Word, whereas women maintain a marginal position to both language and divinity. Staels observes that the leaders of Gilead 'highly esteem the values of logocentrism' and indeed enact a tight control of language in which 'the potential polysemy of discourse is replaced by absolutely homogenous, univocal signs' (1995, p. 457). This 'univocal' Word occupies the centre of Gileadean power, and women are strictly banished to the periphery, barred from all literacy. Mario Klarer neatly summarizes women's positions in the regime: 'In Gilead, being a woman means to become pre-literate and to follow the pre-scriptions of men' (1995, p. 132). The Bible, God's revealed Word and the basis of Gilead's theocracy, is tightly controlled and used as an oppressive tool. Though its mandates dictate their existence, women have no direct access to the Bible; only select passages that prescribe gender roles are read to women, and always by a man.<sup>17</sup> Before the Ceremony, during which the Commander attempts to impregnate his Handmaid in a wordless sex ritual, he reads aloud prescriptive passages from the Bible that he alone can access, because it is kept under lock and key: 'It is an incendiary device: who knows what we'd make of it, if we ever got our hands on it? We can be read to from it, by him, but we cannot read' (HT: 87). The Commander's power lies in his power over language, specifically divine language. As Offred describes, he has something the women of Gilead lack; 'he has the word' (HT: 88). This 'word' that the Commander possesses is literally a control of written word, as well as an allusion to God-as-Word, reflecting that men alone have access to divinity. According to Janet Larson, 'the Word of the Lord licenses [Gilead's] righteous reign of terror against difference' (1989, p. 38), and Dorota Filipczak reads *The Handmaid's Tale* as pointing to 'the Bible as the source of a most pervasive and sinister myth' of female subordination and male privilege



(1993, p. 181). Gilead's monopoly on biblical interpretation serves to perpetuate this myth, and 'the possibilities of Offred's life in Gilead are . . . circumscribed . . . fixed by the literate effects of monotheistic ideology' (Hooker 2006, p. 289). When the Commander wields this power and uses the Bible, he reads only selections that emphasize the logocentrism of Gilead and the restriction of women to male-defined roles. In this way, the divine Word is appropriated and used as a weapon against women, justifying and endorsing their systematic oppression. The male appropriation of language within Gilead reinforces the fundamental binaries of Western religious discourse, which 'oppose a positive, masculine transcendence to the unfocused, irrational ontology of the mythological, nature, and women', while simultaneously stripping women of their ability to perform their own interpretations of authoritative texts and write beyond the myths of female subordination (Hooker 2006, p. 279).

Banned from literacy and categorized according to reproductive capacity, the women in Gilead are relegated to the realm of body and ruled by men, the keepers of the Word. In her analysis of Atwood's novel, Madonne Miner goes as far as to say that within Gilead, 'women and flesh are interchangeable' (1991, p. 153). This reduction of 'woman' to 'body' is continually referenced by Offred, who describes herself and her fellow Handmaids as 'two-legged wombs' and 'ambulatory chalices' (HT: 136). The bodies to which women have been reduced are devoid of identity and autonomy, and this reductive redefinition of female difference in terms of corporeality ironically creates an experience of disembodiment that Offred describes throughout her narrative:

I used to think of my body as an instrument, . . . an implement for the accomplishment of my will. . . . Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am. (HT: 73–4)

In the above quotation, Offred describes how the Word of Gilead has fundamentally altered her relationship with her own body; what used to be an integrated part of herself, an 'instrument' animated by her desires and will, has been fully subjected to the authoritative religious discourse of Gilead. Irigaray writes that 'the female body' must not 'remain the object of men's discourse', but must rather become 'the object of a female subjectivity experiencing and identifying itself' (1993c, p. 59). Offred's narrative reflects her inability to develop her own subjectivity while her body remains an 'object of men's discourse', as Irigaray describes. When Gilead's oppressive and prescriptive concept of womanhood is imposed upon Offred's individual body, she experiences a dualistic schism as her difference is

reduced to the pear-shaped womb and her destiny determined by the fertility cycle. Madeleine Davies notes that, throughout the novel, the female body 'is linked with metaphors of disembodiment, a failure to be completely *there*' (2006, p. 58). Offred describes her womb as 'more real' than she is and avoids looking at her own body, which now 'determines [her] so completely' (HT: 74, 63). Offred's narrative depicts, in intricate detail, how the Word of Gilead is inflicted upon and internalized by individual bodies. For Offred, menses becomes a fearful, dreaded event that signals her failure to meet the expectations of Gilead, 'which have become [her] own' (HT: 73). The articulation of the female body as vacant flesh, valuable only through fertility, alters Offred's sense of her own bodily experience: 'I am like a room where things once happened and now nothing does' (HT: 104).

Several critics note that Offred is not merely disembodied through Gilead's ideals; she is dismembered.<sup>18</sup> According to Glenn Willmott, Offred's 'narrative shows how the body is taken apart into fragments according to fertility, sexuality, age or whatever, and controlled and monitored in each fragment; a kind of categorical dismemberment' (1995, p. 175). Offred likens her experience of the Ceremony to 'being on an operating table' and embraces a disembodied 'state of absence' in order to cope (HT: 160–1).<sup>19</sup> In response to this tyranny of the masculine Word over the female body, which I argue is portrayed in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Irigaray asserts that women must cultivate a 'theology of incarnation':

First of all, this means not considering myself as purely body, with only a natural capacity for engendering children. . . . Putting myself in search of *my* word, *my* words, seems to be the first fidelity to a theology of incarnation. (2004e, p. 151)

As Irigaray's work and Atwood's novel show, these two gestures – no longer considering oneself as purely body and discovering one's own words – are deeply connected. Without language, Offred cannot conceive and express an alternative conception of her corporeality; without access to words, Offred cannot reclaim her body. The central thrust of Atwood's narrative is Offred's effort to carve out an identity for herself within the oppressive Gilead regime: 'My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech' (HT: 66). Yet Offred's alienation from her body and her fragmented sense of self reveal this effort to 'compose' an identity as fraught with difficulty.

Even as she narrates her story, Offred repeatedly expresses a deep-seated hunger for words. In her room, there is a cushion with the word FAITH carved on it that has been overlooked, and Offred is described as spending long



stretches of time combing her eyes over the letters; this cushion is the only thing she's been allowed to read since becoming a Handmaid (HT: 57). At one point, Offred finds a message scratched inside her cabinet, presumably left by the Handmaid who lived there before. The message reads: *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum* – Don't let the bastards grind you down – and this phrase becomes a symbol of resistance for Offred:

. . . it was a message, and it was in writing, forbidden by that very fact, and it hadn't yet been discovered. Except by me, for whom it was intended. . . . It pleases me to ponder this message. It pleases me to think I'm communing with her, this unknown woman. (HT: 52)

Even though Offred does not initially know what the words mean, the fact that they were carved by another woman, a woman in her situation, and left for her to find gives her hope and fortitude. In fact, these words become a prayer for her, the only words she feels able to say to God. This message alleviates Offred's isolation by connecting her to the presence of another woman, a woman who sat in this room and slept in her bed, a woman subjected to the same constrained fate. Yet these words are also words of rebellion, signalling the subversive potential of language and women's ability to steal back the Word.

Offred's intense desire to read and write, to express herself through language, is fuelled by this secret message and ultimately manipulated by the Commander, who brings Offred to his office for illicit sessions of reading and playing Scrabble. The Commander's office is described as 'an oasis of the forbidden', full of numerous books that are displayed openly, rather than locked away, off limits (HT: 137). Scrabble, once an innocuous board game, is now as tantalizing and illicit as a drug. For Offred, the prospect of word-making is intoxicating and described in intensely sensual, even erotic, language: 'I hold the glossy counters with their smooth edges, finger the letters. The feeling is voluptuous. The counters are like candies, made of peppermint, . . . I would like to put them into my mouth' (HT: 139). In addition to Scrabble, the Commander entices Offred with contraband women's magazines, from the pre-Gilead era. He flaunts these magazines 'like fish bait' in front of Offred, whose overwhelming desire for them makes her 'fingers ache' (HT: 156). In the Commander's office, under his voyeur's eye, she reads 'voraciously': 'If it were eating it would be the gluttony of the famished; if it were sex it would be a swift furtive stand-up in an alley somewhere' (HT: 184). Atwood's vivid descriptions of Offred's word-lust, and the intense physical pleasure Offred experiences when she reads and spells, disrupts the schism between word and body. By emphasizing the sensuality of

language, the linguistic expression of bodily desires and the pure pleasure of word-making, Atwood subverts the oppositional logic that isolates the Word from bodily experience.

At the same time, however, Atwood problematizes this subversion by highlighting the omnipresence of the Commander's gaze; Offred's limited opportunities to read and play word games are always facilitated and monitored by her master, one of the founders and leaders of Gilead. While she is in his office, the Commander never takes his eyes from her; his scrutiny is 'curiously sexual', making Offred feel naked and exposed (HT: 184). In addition to reading material, he also, upon her request, supplies Offred with hand lotion – another banned substance for Handmaids, whose physical beauty is immaterial to their reproductive potential – and he watches her rub it over her hands and face. During these illicit rendezvous, there is an illusion that Offred is able to step beyond the rigid confines of the Handmaid's existence, however fleetingly; by using lotion, making conversation, playing with words, and reading magazines, she exceeds the reductive role of a walking womb. But these 'subversive' activities always occur under the watchful eye of the Commander, never freely. By completely controlling the terms of both her imprisonment and her limited, illusory freedoms, the Commander demonstrates to Offred his 'mastery' over her world, a mastery that overpowers any fleeting subversions, including the seemingly seditious message left by Offred's predecessor (HT: 236).

The Commander regularly allows Offred to read in his office, but never to write, until she asks the meaning of *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*, but is unsure how to pronounce it. The Commander gives her a pen and paper, and for the first time in the novel, Offred *writes*. This experience is once again described in sensual terms: 'The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains' (HT: 186). Offred learns from the Commander that the Handmaid before her, who ultimately killed herself, had sat in this same office, dabbling in language games with the Commander. The phrase carved in the cabinet, the message that had inspired and galvanized Offred, was merely a school boy's joke, taken from one of the Commander's own books. *Don't let the bastards grind you down*: what was once for Offred a prayer, a symbol of hope, now becomes an emblem of futility and inevitable defeat. *The Handmaid's Tale*, by recounting Offred's attempts to overcome the oppositional hierarchy of the masculine Word and the female body, is a narrative of a feminine subjectivity attempting to emerge within patriarchal religious discourse, but the portrait Atwood paints is a bleak one that leaves little room for optimism,



instead affirming the overwhelming power of language and the damage done when women have no access to the Word.

### Chaste vessels and unholy harlots

In her essay, 'Equal to Whom?', Irigaray describes how men 'define the systems of representation and exchange by and for themselves. And while women may possibly gain access to these systems, divine identity and divine rite are not accorded them' (1991a, p. 78). The world Atwood constructs in her novel exemplifies this notion. In Gilead, the men in power define and control the systems of representation, particularly language and though Offred is able to gain illicit access to reading and writing material in the Commander's office, the terms of even this limited access are completely dictated by the Commander. Estranged from 'divine identity and divine rite', the women of Gilead remain alienated from their own words and reduced to mere corporeality. This schism between Word and the (female) body is compellingly depicted in Atwood's fictional account, and I would argue that Irigaray's work on the religious reveals Atwood's depiction to be illustrative of the status of all women in patriarchal religious discourse.

In addition to the male control of the Word, *The Handmaid's Tale* recounts the objectification of women in a patriarchal system of exchange, a system that relies on reductive notions of sexual difference, so women can be relegated to distinct, a/sexual roles. Irigaray describes how oppositional conceptualizations of female sexuality disrupt becoming and inhibit the ability of the feminine to exceed and confound such dichotomies:

She resists the limits he intends to impose on her, including his strategy of the opposites . . . . She brings together within herself the opposites: both mother(s) of god and whore, for example. But the poles between which he tears her apart . . . interrupt her becoming. (2012, p. 67)

Reflecting this 'strategy of the opposites', Gilead's monotheistic, patriarchal Word enforces an oppositional either/or conception of female sexuality by enforcing biblical female archetypes. The few, elite Wives reflect the wives of the Old Testament patriarchs. The Handmaids, whose title alludes to the Virgin Mary, are defined solely by their reproductive power. Like the Handmaids, the Marthas are asexual servants, but they have no reproductive capacity; reflecting the figure of Martha from the gospels, their role is limited to preparing food and keeping

house. In direct contrast to these are the women who work as prostitutes at the nightclub *Jezebel's*; these women, named for the biblical villainess, are reduced to sexual objects of pleasure for the powerful men of Gilead.<sup>20</sup>

Though Handmaids hold a primarily sexual function as concubines and child-bearers, the women themselves are entirely desexualized. The question of female pleasure and desire is disregarded completely within Gilead. As quoted earlier, Aunt Lydia, the parrot of patriarchal discourse throughout the novel, teaches the Handmaids that, unlike men, God did not design women as sexually charged and desiring beings (HT: 45). Offred describes the sexual ceremony as utterly devoid of 'passion or love'; the desire and arousal of the women involved is immaterial and the goal of orgasm, for women, is no longer deemed necessary (HT: 94).<sup>21</sup> The pleasure of women is seen as irrelevant to the Handmaid's sole purpose of childbearing, which is fanatically idealized in Gilead society. As noted earlier, the designation of Handmaid is an allusion to the Virgin Mary, a figure that embodies the Gileadean ideal of asexuality, chastity and fertility. On the surface, this asexuality is displayed as women are categorized according to reproductive potential. The sex act itself is no longer voluntary for women, but sacralized and institutionalized, occurring only under the authority of men. Through the Aunts, the Handmaids are schooled to be meek, modest and invisible, in order to become 'worthy vessel[s]' (HT: 28, 65). The definition of women's worth and roles through these biblical female archetypes is underpinned by the authority of the Word; prescriptive Bible passages are read by men in power on certain, official occasions, such as the Prayvaganza:

I will that women adorn themselves in modest apparel . . . with shamefacedness . . . Let the woman learn in silence with *all* subjection. . . . And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression. Notwithstanding she shall be saved by childbearing. (HT: 221)

Though Gilead enforces the obedience and asexuality of women through biblical discourse on the surface, there exists an underbelly where women are kept as sexual objects of pleasure rather than asexual objects of reproductive function. The night club *Jezebel's* finds its namesake in a notorious biblical villainess and houses the harlots of Gilead, who have all been sterilized. The juxtaposition of the Jezebels and the Handmaids demonstrates the virgin mother/whore dichotomy of female sexuality that is institutionalized in Gilead. Offred recognizes that the Handmaids are not harlots or 'courtesans', because they are so thoroughly desexualized, reduced to mere 'two-legged wombs' (HT: 136). This either/or



articulation of female sexuality – *either* chaste maternal vessel *or* sexual object – leaves no room for the expression of an autonomous, sexually empowered woman. Coad argues that the Gileadean ideal ‘not only exposes a puritan fear of the flesh, but more specifically suggests a deep-seated masculine fear of female sexuality’ (2001, p. 64).

Despite their contrasting roles, neither side of the virgin/whore spectrum presents a model of autonomous sexuality. Throughout the novel all articulations of female sexuality, sanctioned and illicit, are based on passivity. Offred’s unsanctioned sex with the Commander at *Jezebel’s* elicits the same disembodied submission as the Ceremony: ‘I lie there like a dead bird. . . . Fake it, I scream at myself inside my head. . . . Move your flesh around, breathe audibly’ (HT: 255). Even Offred’s affair with Nick, which seems to awaken her sexual desires, is steeped in passivity, as Miner argues in her article on romance in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. According to Miner’s reading, the affair between Nick and Offred is fraught with ambivalence. Though apparently a source of pleasure for Offred, she can only speak of her affair with Nick in the ‘traditional grammar’ of romance, where men play the role of rescuer and women are ‘damsels in distress’ (Miner 1991, p. 164). Offred recognizes the lie of reductive difference that subjugates women in Gilead—‘One and one and one and one doesn’t equal four. Each one remains unique [and] cannot be exchanged, one for the other’—yet she is unable to conceive of female sexuality outside passive fairy-tale romance roles (HT: 192). Miner asserts that ‘Offred can individuate neither herself nor Nick; both fall into roles assigned to them by fairy tales and romances’ (1991, p. 164). In Atwood’s novel, even seemingly positive interactions between the sexes are steeped in power inequality. It is hardly incidental that Nick remains a shadowy character of little depth; Offred’s relationship with Nick is a masquerade, an illusion, a lapse into a familiar fairy-tale plot: ‘*Falling in love*, we said; *I fell for him*. We were falling women. We believed in it, this downward motion . . . We were waiting, always, for the incarnation. That word, made flesh’ (HT: 225–6). As explored in Chapter 1, Irigaray asserts that the concept of *incarnation*, of ‘word made flesh’, has the potential to convey a collusion of opposites and subvert the hierarchical logic that upholds patriarchal discourse, but this potential remains unrealized, not yet interpreted:

*Et incarnatus est* would mean the manifestation of a paradigm that henceforward is applicable everywhere. . . . No space, no moment, no actors, no author, want to represent that tragedy as such. No work apparently. There is only a play between the forces of On High and here below, of Heaven and earth, of Truth and error,

of Good and evil, of God and idols, of divine and human nature, of Life and its mortal errancy . . . of all those pairs of opposites that continue to tear the world apart. (1991b, p. 168)

Offred’s meditation on falling in love demonstrates that women’s only experience of ‘incarnation’ in Gilead is through submissive heterosexuality. Women, alienated from the Word and reduced to maternal or sexual objects, are unable to incarnate themselves and become divine; instead, Offred seeks out incarnation through a relationship with a man. Offred is herself a falling/fallen woman; she falls for Luke and Nick, becoming ‘a woman who surrenders herself to a plot already written, a story already told’ (1991, p. 166). Through her romantic idealizations, Offred falls from autonomy into passivity. Her affair with Nick makes her want to submit to the Gilead regime, to finally acquiesce. When she begins sleeping with Nick, Offred loses interest in conspiring with Ofglen, her shopping partner and secret member of the resistance. Ofglen perceives a shift in Offred and withdraws into meaningless small talk, which makes Offred feel relieved (HT: 271). In depicting Offred’s lapse into passivity, *The Handmaid’s Tale* does not criticize heterosexual love or sex *per se*, but rather how it is, and has always been, articulated along the lines of reductive sexual difference. Irigaray’s inquisition of Western metaphysics exposes a lack of ‘fecundity’ between the sexes that stems from ‘the dissociation of body and soul, of sexuality and spirituality’ (1993a, p. 15). She asserts the need to conceive of sexual difference ‘without reducing fecundity to the reproduction of bodies and flesh’, and her analysis reveals that this conceptualization is not limited to the fictional Gilead but pervades religious thought (1993a, p. 7).

Irigaray has written extensively on how female sexuality has only ever been interpreted through the lens of male desire. In *This Sex Which is Not One*, Irigaray describes the fate of woman as ‘an obliging prop for men’s fantasies’ (1985b, p. 25). Caught in this logic of opposites, woman can no longer express her own desires, because ‘she does not know, or no longer knows, what she wants’ (1985b, p. 25). In her reading of Irigaray’s writing on the religious, Morny Joy asserts that by ‘refusing to let women remain the basis of the male economy of sameness, Irigaray’s intention is for women to recognize their own desires’ (2006, p. 11). Women’s alienation from desire is a central theme in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Despite Offred’s ‘hunger to commit the act of touch’ (HT: 11), Stillman and Johnson observe in their analysis that ‘in her acts of touch with Luke, the Commander and Nick there seems to be little or no re-writing of women’s desire into a more authentic form. All those relations appear one-sided’ (1994, p. 76). According



to Janet Montelaro, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, 'Atwood unmistakably represents a sexual economy which never quite contains feminine desire', and I would add that she explicitly links this sexual economy with patriarchal religious ideals (1995, p. 239). Montelaro notes that, in Gilead, 'women's sexuality is conveniently defined according to the reproductive function' and is 'described metonymically' by Offred as "an egg" (1995, p. 240). What Montelaro fails to note, however, is that in the same passage, Offred also envisions God as an egg; in Gilead, both female sexuality and divinity are anchored in the ideal of motherhood (HT: 110–11). Gilead's reductive ideology classifies women 'either barren or fruitful' and presents maternity as 'the primary function of women's sexuality' (1995, p. 234). The only divine horizon to which Offred can orient herself is reproduction; she cannot incarnate her own divinity, but can only hope, like the Virgin Mary, to incarnate the masculine Word of Gilead through childbearing.

In 'Divine Women', Irigaray critiques the either/or articulation of female sexuality and shows it to be emblematic of Western religious discourse as a whole:

Our tradition presents and represents the radiant glory of the mother, but rarely shows us a fulfilled woman. And it forces us to make murderous choices: either mother (given that a *boy* child is what makes us truly mothers) or woman (prostitute and property of the male). . . . But, as long as woman lacks a divine made in her image she cannot establish her subjectivity or achieve a goal of her own. She lacks an ideal that would be her goal or path in becoming. Woman scatters and becomes an agent of destruction and annihilation because she has no other of her own that she can become. (1993b, pp. 63–4)

This passage exemplifies the status of women in Gilead with almost startling accuracy: the Gilead theocracy idolizes maternity at the expense of women's desires and fulfilment. Offred, and the other Handmaids of Gilead, are forced into 'murderous choices'; they can either be servants and concubines to the men in power and bear their sons, or they can be sterilized prostitutes that the men in power turn to for pleasure. Offred's preoccupations with her body and sexuality, as well as her repeated attempts to voice her own desires and bodily experiences, do not reinforce the misogynist association of women and carnality, but rather expose its inadequacies. Patriarchal religious discourse, the discourse of Gilead, cannot express women's bodies, their sexualities, which exceed the oppositional logic of culture/nature, male/female, word/body. A central contention in this chapter, which will be further explored in the following section, is that in many ways, Gilead is not a horrific depiction of a world radically different from our own,

but rather illustrates the place of women in current religious discourse, where the embodied experiences and desires of women have yet to be articulated.

### The Gilead within

In her interview with Bill Moyers on his television series *Faith and Reason*, Atwood asserts that the world depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale* is not alien to our own, but drawn completely from it: 'I made it a rule for the writing of this book that I would not put anything into it that human societies have not already done' (2006). As Atwood's Professor Pieixoto remarks in the epilogue of *The Handmaid's Tale*, little was unique within Gilead; rather, 'its genius was synthesis' (HT: 307). The world of Gilead – its rituals, symbols, beliefs and laws – reflect the underlying values and categories of patriarchal religion, and Atwood explicitly draws from religious history and philosophy to create Gilead.

Aside from the concluding comments of Professor Pieixoto, Atwood makes the unoriginality of Gilead apparent through Offred's narration, which repeatedly links the Gilead regime to the pre-Gilead world of contemporary American society. Offred's narrative makes clear that the either/or articulation of female sexuality and male privilege is not unique to Gilead, but exists in pre-Gilead society as well. At The Rachel and Leah Centre, the Handmaids are forced to watch pornography featuring: women on their knees 'sucking penises or guns, . . . women being raped, beaten up, killed' (HT: 118). This is all part of the brainwashing process for the Handmaids, with the intent of demonstrating that female sexual exploitation is a thing of the past and no longer present in Gilead. Offred, however, makes clear that sexual exploitation continues to thrive, and her entire narrative repeatedly draws connections between pre-Gilead society and the theocratic regime. Indeed, as Sarah Morrison writes, 'Offred's plight as a Handmaid . . . comes to seem less and less a bizarre aberration occurring only in Gilead and more and more women's historical condition under patriarchy' (2002, p. 323).

That fact that *Jezebel's* is housed in the hotel where Offred once carried on an illicit affair with Luke underscores the parallel between the supposedly liberated past and the fundamentalist present (HT: 234). Despite Offred's protestations that her relationship with Luke is radically different from her relationship with the Commander, the text insists on linking the two men; they mirror one another (Miner 1991, p. 160). In each relationship, men hold the power and



are the leaders, initiators and Offred responds accordingly. Before and within Gilead, Offred remains on the outskirts of discourse, relying on Luke and the Commander to translate for her, and 'both men wield their language prowess so as to keep women in the position of the unempowered' (Miner 1991, p. 155).<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, in each relationship Offred experiences the sensation of being owned. When the Gilead takeover begins and Offred is forced to leave her job, she is disturbed by Luke's nonchalant reaction, suspecting that he might even like this shift in power dynamics: 'He doesn't mind it at all. . . . We are not each other's, anymore. Instead, I am his' (HT: 182). Due to her sudden dependence on him, Offred is afraid to question Luke's true feelings, because losing him would put her in an even more powerless position. Atwood also makes a subtle link between Luke and Aunt Lydia. Like the patriarchal puppet, Aunt Lydia, Luke voices simplistic ideas of women's difference from men. At one point, Offred presents two parallel memories of Luke and Aunt Lydia that both cite, using the same wording, unspecified studies that ostensibly prove reductive sexual difference (HT: 63, 65). By linking Luke and Lydia, Atwood emphasizes that this vision of prescriptive gender roles is not unique to Gilead, but has been used as a weapon against women throughout history.

Both before and during her life in Gilead, Offred constructs her identity around the men in her life. Offred describes heterosexual love as being 'central' to how 'you understood yourself' (HT: 225). Her narrative, in fact, conflates all three men in her life: Luke, Nick and the Commander. When she first kisses Nick, she speaks to Luke in her mind, 'It's you here, in another body' (HT: 99). As Miner writes, this 'merging' of the three men 'requires us to reassess supposed distinctions between husbands, lovers, and commanders' (1991, p. 154). Even in the epilogue depicting a future beyond Gilead, a future not unlike our present, '[Offred's] desires – for love, for the freedom to choose – are interpreted through the prism of [Pieixoto's] desires', as the professor edits and analyses Offred's account according to his own interests (Stein 1991, p. 273). Pieixoto's repeated sexual/sexist jokes reveal continuing contempt for women and the female body, and his search for a 'metaphysics of truth' and 'closed interpretation' echo the monologic and oppositional discourse of Gilead (Staels 1995, pp. 464–5). The androcentric academics express disappointment that Offred did not record more facts about the inner-workings of the male world of Gilead, its command structure and military tactics; her expressions of her own oppression, her meditations on her body and her desires hold less historical value for them than the political power plays of men. Furthermore, it is the misogynist male academics who piece

together Offred's narrative, as it is recorded on various tapes with no labels, in no particular order. This epilogue reveals that even Offred's own narrative, her attempt at 'composing a self' is edited, organized and mediated by patriarchal authority. The epilogue serves to highlight the pervasiveness of religious discourse in Western thought and culture; before, after and during Gilead, men exercise control over women's words and authoritative discourse.

Through abrasively depicting a regime of God-ordained sexism and then conflating this regime with our past and present, *The Handmaid's Tale* brings to harsh light the religious origins and ideals that continue to influence secular Western society. As Lawson (1987) succinctly puts it: 'The biblical past . . . cannot be obliterated from the Western past'. The ideal of virile male leadership and the passive, reproductive femininity prevails, though no longer merely clothed in the guise of Adam and Eve. Atwood's characterization of Aunt Lydia represents the pervasive internalization of patriarchal religious discourse. Her words continually surface throughout the novel, interrupting Offred's stream of consciousness narration and inserting the dictates of Gilead. As Aunt Lydia says in one such interjection: 'Gilead is *within* you' (HT: 23, emphasis mine). Atwood's Gilead, as a synthesis of religious history, theology and philosophy, reveals the extent to which patriarchal religious ideas are steeped within society at a collective and individual level. Gilead, indeed, is *within* Western discourse and continues to influence the ways in which man, woman and God are hierarchically defined.

Is there, then, any room for optimism in the midst of Atwood's bleak portrait of the Gilead within? While all critics duly note the overall pessimism of Atwood's speculative novel, there are small windows of possibility that gesture towards an understanding of humanity, sexuality and divinity that reach beyond the limits of patriarchal religion. One such instance is Offred's almost mystical experience in Serena's flower garden:

There is something subversive about this garden of Serena's, a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light, as if to point, to say: Whatever is silenced will clamor to be heard, though silently. . . . *Rendezvous*, it says, *terraces*; the sibilants run up my spine, a shiver as if in fever. The summer dress rustles against the flesh of my thighs . . . metamorphosis run wild. Goddesses are possible now and the air suffuses with desire. (HT: 153)

In the midst of a narrative that primarily voices disembodiment, isolation, misery and subjugation, this passage leaps from the page as it depicts the experiences for



which Offred deeply hungers. Amidst the romping sensuality of Serena's garden, Offred describes the momentary intermingling of words and flesh. Her senses, so often deprived by the blank white walls of her small room, drink in the rampant colour and the warm caresses of the sun and wind. Words that she is no longer allowed to read or write return to her as this sensual experience gives rise to language. As Coral Howells notes, Offred's 'celebration of the garden' as 'a place of fertility and sensuous delights' is a full-blown 'rhapsody of the flesh' (1996, pp. 140–1). Staels, however, sees this passage as Offred's attempt to restore 'contact with the Great Goddess and creative energy' (1995, p. 462). While creative energy certainly abounds in this passage, I disagree that Offred feels connected to any unitary transcendent deity, even one in female form.<sup>23</sup> Offred finds meaning and possibility in sensual, embodied experience, not by attempting to transcend her humanity. This experience in the garden momentarily redeems her body from the violently reductive definitions of Gilead. Goddesses are suddenly possible, because Offred's reclamation of her body, of her self, seems possible; the garden temporarily subverts the control Gilead exercises over Offred's sensuality and her use of language.

This episode in the garden upends the myth of Eve in Eden, a myth that is central to patriarchal religious discourse. In the original biblical account, Eve embraces her desire for knowledge and divinity, a desire to be like God. She accepts the fruit from the serpent and tastes its fruit, and is consequently punished by God and expelled from the garden forever. In this myth, Eve's desires push her away from divinity into the realm of humanity; she 'falls' away from the sinless, perfect garden where she and Adam walk with God into a world of sin where her fate is to painfully give birth to the human race. In Atwood's reversal of this myth, Offred mirrors Eve, as her identity has been reduced to her capacity to give birth; in this garden, however, rather than desire and sensuality luring her away from God, Offred 'tastes' the fruits of the garden and, for the first and only time in her narrative, is able to realize (however briefly) the possibility of her own divinity. Atwood's garden is not, like Eden, the place where the human and divine are violently separated; it is a realm where the divine, the human and the feminine are reconciled in a lush fusion of colour, warmth and fecundity.

For both Atwood and Irigaray, I would argue, the divine feminine relates to the development of women's subjectivity, not a transcendent Goddess. As Irigaray writes in 'Divine Women', she is 'far from suggesting today that we must once again deify ourselves' or 'regress to siren goddesses, who fight against men gods'; instead, she asserts that women must ask 'why we have been held back

from becoming *divine women*' ('Divine Women', p. 60). Similarly, when Offred is able briefly to see beyond the closed model of male divinity in the garden, she glimpses a new horizon of lived desire, new possibilities of autonomous, embodied female subjectivity. This subjectivity, as Hooker describes, is not merely a female version of the male model, but something distinct, characterized by flow and multiplicity:

In contrast to Gilead's rigidly circumscribed roles for women . . . Offred's oral, synesthetic experience of the mythologically resonant garden suggests a world of more fluid subjectivities, where the boundaries between the human and natural world are not so rigidly drawn, a realm in which, she declares, "metamorphoses run wild." And Offred associates this metamorphic freedom to move and change with an ethos that accommodates female divinity. (2006, pp. 280–1)

This 'divinity' is not depicted as transcendent to humanity or the realm of the senses, but is rooted within it, a depiction that reverses the traditional concept of the God that is enforced in Gilead and critiqued throughout Irigaray's works. The God of Western discourse is completely removed from the physical world to a 'transcendental realm where all ties to the world of sensation have been severed' (1993a, p. 15):

How, then, does God know the *sensible* face of things, given that his relationship with them must be wholly theoretical? Only in Principle does he have correspondance [sic] with existence, for his word sustains the logical and geometrical order of the life of this Universe without his ever participating in it. (1985a, p. 338)

This radical transcendence is problematic for Irigaray, because divinity is thus conceived as severed from the human experience, rather than 'interpreted as the infinite that resides within us and among us, the god in us, the Other for us, becoming with and in us' (1993b, p. 63). God's transcendence is likewise depicted as a source of alienation and paralysed becoming in *The Handmaid's Tale*. When Offred offers her own revision of the Lord's Prayer in her narrative, she addresses herself to: 'My God. Who Art in the Kingdom of Heaven, which is within. I wish you would tell me Your Name, the real one I mean' (HT: 194, emphasis mine). Offred has no interest in relating to the masculine tyrant God of Gilead; she wants to discover and cultivate her own divinity and interiority. Offred's prayer remains unanswered, however; God does not respond, and Offred feels her prayers bounce back to her (HT: 195). This prayer is Offred's attempt to speak her own God into existence, much as God speaks the world



into being in Genesis. Without access to the creative power of her own divine Word, however, she is ultimately unable to do so. Her own divinity remains nameless and silent, losing the struggle with the Gilead within, that still small voice of subjugation.

As this prayer reveals, Offred's resistance is rooted in her attempts to reclaim her identity – her own words for herself – and her capacity for divinity. Even though the Gilead regime attempts to strip the Handmaids of their identities through patronymic re-naming, Offred clings to her real name, which is never revealed in the novel, as a secret talisman: 'I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day' (HT: 84). This name functions as a password to her own horizon of subjectivity, as a 'guarantee of her future life after Gilead', as well as to the part of her that resists the definitions imposed by Gilead (Howells 2006, p. 165). This self-naming parallels Offred's attempts to repossess her body, and her subversive narrative can be read as an effort 'to give expression to repressed corporeal and affective processes' (Staels 1995, p. 460). As Howells argues, 'Offred's only real hope centres on her own body'; though she cannot outwardly resist the power of Gilead, inwardly she has 'the power to defy patriarchal prescriptions by aligning herself differently through her private narrative about her body' (2006, 167). I would build on Howell's analysis to argue that Offred's hope does not centre on her own body, but on her ability to reconcile body with word, to autonomously conceptualize, define and express her embodiment.

Offred's narrative, as her continual attempt to 'compose a self' in her own words and on her own terms, is her greatest weapon of resistance against Gilead, and if there is any hope to be found in Atwood's pessimistic account, it is that Offred does ultimately tell her story and that story survives long after Gilead has fallen. Though Offred's narrative ends ambiguously – when the Eyes come to take her away, she does not know whether it is a rescue operation, or if she is being imprisoned by the regime – the epilogue suggests that she made it into the Underground Femaleroad and somewhere along the way recorded her story. As Offred states, this story-telling is not compulsory, but is an attempt to reclaim the identity and memories that have been stripped away from her, an attempt to keep herself from acquiescing to the regime: 'I don't have to tell it. . . . I could withdraw. It's possible to go so far in, so far down and back, they could never get you out' (HT: 225). Offred does not only tell her story to maintain a connection with herself; by telling her story, she is also professing faith in an other, an audience who will receive this story: 'I keep on going with this sad and

hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story, because after all I want you to hear it . . . . By telling you anything at all . . . I believe you into being. I tell, therefore you are' (HT: 267–8). This unnamed other, this 'you' who will one day receive her story acts as a horizon for Offred, a hope that she has a future beyond Gilead, that she will one day escape. Through her narrative, Offred resists the definitions imposed upon her by the Gilead theocracy, and she also resists her overwhelming isolation by reaching out into the future for someone who will hear her story.

An important question remains, however: in the fictional world created by Atwood, which in many ways reflects our own, is Offred's voice ever heard? In her groundbreaking essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', post-colonialist feminist theorist Gayatri Spivak discusses 'the subaltern as female' and asserts that she 'cannot be heard or read' (1988, p. 308). Spivak critiques the work of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, who each assert that the oppressed (the subaltern) *can* speak, if only given the chance. According to Spivak, however, 'there is no space from which the sexed subaltern can speak' (1988, p. 307), because as soon as she tries to speak, her voice is obscured as her narrative is subsumed into the dominant discourse:

Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is double effaced. . . . both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is more deeply in shadow. (1988, p. 287)

Spivak's analysis, of course, is rooted in post-colonial theory; she is primarily concerned with the subaltern as the oppressed inhabitant of the Third World, but she also discusses the subaltern in a more general sense, as the one 'whose identity is its difference' and is denied access to systems of representation (1988, p. 285). In this way, Spivak's premise is useful in exploring the narrative frame of *The Handmaid's Tale*, which situates Offred's narrative as a fragmented object pieced together by male-centred academic discourse. In her account of Spivak's assertion of the subaltern's inescapable silence, Susan Sellers writes:

Spivak . . . suggest[s] that it is *impossible* to restore a voice that has been dispossessed, since the very act serves to re-cover it; an assessment that points to the more general dilemma of how to rewrite a text without 'mastering' its source and so reproducing the objectifying and annihilating procedures of binary law. (Sellers 2001, pp. 27–8)



There is no doubt that Atwood's epilogue depicts Professor Piexioto's attempts to 'master' Offred's text, and his dismissive, sexist remarks reveal that patriarchal discourse is alive and well and the co-opting of women's voices is not confined to Gilead. Yet is this academic 'mastery' of Offred's story successful to the point that she is completely dispossessed of a voice? On the one hand, it is important to note that Offred *does* speak; her narrative is not entirely subsumed by the hegemonic discourse, but manages to critique and unmask its violent, oppositional logic. Her self-narration exceeds and resists the limited interpretation of Piexioto. As an epilogue immediately following Offred's story in her own words – rather than a prologue, which would begin with Piexioto's interpretation – it becomes glaringly evident how much escapes Piexioto's attention and understanding, and how his misogyny blinds him to the subversive value of Offred's narrative. A more complicated question, however, is whether or not Offred is *heard* within the world of the text. Although Offred extends her words as a gift to a future, unnamed reader, in the epilogue this reader emerges with a name (Piexioto) and has clearly failed to hear and understand her story. The effect of reading his flagrant misappropriation of her voice recalls the moment when *nolite te bastardes carborundorum* lost its subversive, exhilarating meaning for Offred, through the mediation of the Commander, who reduces the meaning of those words to a schoolboy joke and reveals the dismal fate of the woman who wrote them. Both Offred and this unnamed handmaid speak, they offer up the gift of words, but once these words are twisted through the interpretation of male authority, it is unclear whether they are ever really heard. Although I would argue that the glimmers of optimism found in *The Handmaid's Tale* prevent it from lapsing into total futility, those fleeting moments of redemption do not ultimately undermine the overall pessimism of the novel, which depicts patriarchal discourse as almost insurmountable and human society as unable to learn lessons from history.

## Conclusion

*The Handmaid's Tale* presents an account of women's exclusion from divinity as sexuate difference is coded to sustain the masculine economy of sameness. In 'Fulfilling Our Humanity', Irigaray argues that Western religious discourse is characterized by a 'unique vertical transcendence annulling differences between human subjectivities' (p. 189). These religious 'models inspired by the same, the

similar, the identical, the equal' seek to obscure alterity and difference (2004c, p. 189). Offred's narrative continually highlights how the imposed uniformity of Gilead leads to the 'infinite interchangeability' of all women, and this masking of individual and sexuate difference alienates Offred from her body and her sense of self, as she gradually internalizes the reductive categories imposed upon her.

In this novel, Atwood presents a tyrannical monotheocracy that is characterized by violence, particularly violence against the female body. As stated earlier, several critics note the dismemberment and bodily alienation articulated by Offred, as well as the systemization of rape in Gilead as women are stripped of sexual autonomy. The violence done to women in Gilead's economy of the same is self-evident: they are subjugated, depersonalized and objectified. Near the end of Offred's narrative, an event occurs that underscores how the violence of reductive sexual difference generates further violence: The Particution, a ritual in which a man charged with rape and infanticide is executed by a group of Handmaids. Offred, despite her resistance to Gilead's system of violence, feels herself wanting to 'tear, gouge, rend' (HT: 279). Earlier in the novel, Offred observes that in order to do violence, one must 'create an it', and as the Handmaids begin to kill the man bare-handed, under the eyes of spectators, Offred realizes that the man has, indeed, 'become an it' (HT: 193, 280). In an economy of oppositional sameness, the violence is not always one-sided; given the opportunity, the victim may become the victimizer. The Particution is a ghoulish illustration of how, when sexuate difference is (mis)appropriated, each sex participates in the execution of the other.

Both Atwood's novel and Irigaray's theories of the religious emphasize the importance of becoming. Offred, in her blank, parenthetical existence, has no horizon to orient her development as a subject. Caught in the oppositional logic of religious discourse, she remains trapped in the limited present, seeing the world only in 'gasps', looking backwards, but never forward (HT: 30). This mirrors Irigaray's description of the paralysis of feminine becoming due to the absence of a divine horizon. As Irigaray writes, 'religious power has substituted itself, deliberately or not, for a free development of the subject towards its accomplishment' resulting in 'a permanent fossilization of the subjective in an objective, which, imposing itself as a norm, paralyzes becoming' (2004c, p. 192). Elizabeth Grosz, in her work on Irigaray and divinity, asserts that 'the divine is . . . a projection of the past into a future that gives the present new meaning and direction' (1993, p. 210). Reflecting this notion, Offred's narrative, as an effort to connect to a sympathetic, hypothetical other, weaves through past, present and



possible futures, repeatedly voicing the need for a purpose and perspective – for ‘new meaning and direction’ – that extend beyond the constraints of Western religious discourse.

Offred's narrative also serves to illuminate what is obscured or excluded within that conceptual framework – namely the reconciliation of the female body with the divine Word. As Irigaray writes, ‘what incarnation, including that of the relation to the divine, can thus be taken out of the world of becoming?’ (1991b, p. 169). Offred, no longer in a ‘world of becoming’, struggles to make her own words incarnate. In ‘Divine Women’, Irigaray writes that:

... deprived of God, [women] are forced to comply with models that do not match them, that exile, double, mask them, cut them off from themselves and from one another, stripping away their ability to move forward into love, art, thought, towards their ideal and divine fulfilment. (1993b, p. 64)

In this chapter, I have argued that this analysis of women's place in religious discourse is precisely what is portrayed in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The women of Gilead, cut off from the Word, are forced to comply with reductive models that alienate them from their own bodies and the other women around them. In recounting moments like Offred's revival in the garden, her revisionist prayer and her ongoing attempts to compose her self, Atwood's narrative occasionally points to the emergence of a subjectivity and divinity envisioned in the feminine, but under the religious regime of Gilead, where women are ‘deprived of God’, such visions are never fully realized. Atwood's novel, by depicting the regime of Gilead and the more insidious Gilead within, offers a scathing critique of Western religious ideals, particularly in relation to sexuate difference, and this critique mirrors much of Irigaray's own interrogations. While Atwood's narrative does not flesh out viable alternatives to existing discourse in an in-depth way, particularly in comparison to the works analysed in subsequent chapters, her novel does exceed mere criticism by alluding to areas that must be rethought to accommodate feminine becoming: the cultivation of non-reductive sexuate difference, the location of divinity in sensible reality and human experience, and the reconciliation of the female body with the creative power and authority of the Word.

## Notes

- 1 During an interview with Bill Moyers (2006), Atwood calls herself an agnostic, because claims about God and/or ultimate reality cannot be described as

knowledge, only belief: ‘A strict agnostic says, you cannot pronounce, as knowledge, anything you cannot demonstrate. In other words if you're going to call it knowledge you have to be able to run an experiment on it that's repeatable. You can't run an experiment on whether God exists or not, therefore you can't say anything about it as knowledge. You can have a belief if you want to, or if that is what grabs you, if you were called in that direction, if you have a subjective experience of that kind, that would be your belief system. You just can't call it knowledge.’

- 2 For more on these two works, see Chapter 2. For more on theological readings of *Surfacing*, see also Carol P. Christ, ‘Margaret Atwood: The Surfacing of Women's Spiritual Quest and Vision’ (1976), and Judith Plaskow, ‘On Carol Christ on Margaret Atwood: Some Theological Reflections,’ (1976). For a literary critic's perspective, see Ann-Janine Morey, ‘Margaret Atwood and Toni Morrison: Reflections on Postmodernism and the Study of Religion and Literature’ (1992).
- 3 See Sonia Gernes, ‘Transcendent Women: Uses of the Mystical in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*’ and Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*’ (1991), and Liza Potvin, ‘Voodooism and Female Quest Patterns in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*’ (2003).
- 4 All references to Atwood's novel in this chapter are taken from the following edition: *The Handmaid's Tale* (New York: Quality Paperback Books, 1990).
- 5 In the novel, The Underground Femaleroad is a system of stations leading oppressed women out of Gilead into Canada.
- 6 As this is one of Atwood's most well-known works, I am assuming some familiarity with the novel on the part of my audience. As such, my plot synopses will remain cursory throughout this chapter.
- 7 For articles on Atwood's use of irony and satire in *The Handmaid's Tale*, see Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor, ‘From Irony to Affiliation in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*’ (2003), and Stephanie Barbé Hammer, ‘The World as It Will Be? Female Satire and the Technology of Power in *The Handmaid's Tale*’ (1990).
- 8 Daniel Coad echoes these sentiments in his article, ‘Hymens, Lips and Masks: The Veil in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*’. He asserts that ‘Atwood's interest in *The Handmaid's Tale* is overtly political’ (2001, p. 54).
- 9 For more on the opposition between divine and human, see Irigaray's 1993 essay ‘Divine Women’. For more on the subjection of body to word, see ‘The Redemption of Women’, in *Key Writings* (2004). For more on the separation of flesh and spirit, see ‘Sexual Difference’, in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993). See also the explication of Irigaray's religious thought in Chapter 1 of this book.
- 10 See Irigaray's essay ‘Divine Women’.
- 11 ‘The Rachel and Leah Center’ alludes to the biblical wives of Jacob, the patriarch whose twelve sons establish the twelve tribes of Israel. Both Rachel and Leah,



who are sisters, bear several sons for Jacob, but Jacob also has concubines through which he produces even more children. One of the epigraphs that opens *The Handmaid's Tale* refers directly to the account of these two women in Genesis 30:1–3: 'And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister, and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die. And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her.' (NB: All biblical references throughout this book are taken from the King James Version.)

- 12 The Commander is Offred's master, as well as an important military and political figure in the Gilead regime.
- 13 Even the women who work as prostitutes at the nightclub *Jezebel's*, which will be discussed later, function purely as sexual objects, void of any sexual agency and desire.
- 14 Sheila Conboy also references the 'interchangeability' of the Handmaids in her article, 'Scripted, Conscripted, and Circumscribed: Body Language in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*' (1993, p. 354).
- 15 In the Genesis account, Adam is commissioned with naming all the animals, but none are found to be a suitable helpmate for him, so God then creates Eve out of Adam's rib. Genesis 2:21–23 reads: 'And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept; and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof. And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.' Dorota Filipczak notes the parallels between Adam's naming of Eve and the naming of Handmaids in Gilead in her article 'Is There No Balm in Gilead? – Biblical Intertext in *The Handmaid's Tale*' (1993): 'Reality in Atwood's book mirrors the limitations of the patriarchal mentality that generated the Yahwist myth. Alluding to the generosity of Yahweh, who creates the first woman as a suitable help for man, the author presents the feminine half of the Gileadite community in the role of objects that are ready for use on the horizon of male existence and provide it with biological continuum. . . . Women are defined by men in the same way as Eve is defined by Adam when he gives her the name "iszsza" derived from Hebrew "isz" (pp. 180–1). In Hebrew, 'isz' or 'ish' means man, and the word for 'woman' ('iszsza' or 'ishah') means 'of man'.
- 16 As it says in the Gospel of John 1:1–3, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.' See also Chapter 1 of this book.

- 17 Even in *The Rachel and Leah Center*, which is run by the Aunts, the women listen to the Bible on tape, and it is read in a man's voice (HT: 89).
- 18 See Roberta Rubenstein, 'Nature and Nurture in Dystopia: *The Handmaid's Tale*', and Staels. Rubenstein observes that 'imagery of mutilation and dismemberment permeates the narrator's own language' (1988, p. 105), while Staels asserts that Offred's articulation of her body 'signals its dismembered condition' (1995, p. 458).
- 19 In her analysis of the ceremony – the sex ritual in which the Commander attempts to impregnate the Handmaid, while she lies between the Wife's legs – Conboy argues that the symbolic fusion of the two women fails, because 'the result is not fusion but disembodiment for the women involved' (1993, p. 352).
- 20 Jezebel is a Queen of Israel who is vilified in the biblical books I and II Kings. A Phoenician princess who marries King Ahab of Israel, Jezebel kills numerous Jewish prophets in her efforts to oust Hebrew monotheism and reintroduce Baal worship to Israel. Though Jezebel is not a prostitute, the name has come to hold connotations of promiscuity and immorality. The phrase 'painted Jezebel' is based on II Kings 9:30–33, which describes how Jezebel paints her face and adorns her head right before she is killed and eaten by dogs.
- 21 Serena is the Commander's wife and Offred's mistress, who is also compelled to participate in the ceremony.
- 22 See also HT: 10, 44, 186–7.
- 23 Staels notes that Offred's forbidden narrative is itself a means of resistance that 'revives the capacity for individual spiritual and emotional life' (1995, p. 459), and I agree with this analysis.