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Owning Gilead: franchising feminism through Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood's most famous dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), is one of those stories whose message seems to carry across the ages. The hyperreal patriarchy-as-terror-regime that *The Handmaid's Tale* portrays has become a well-known shorthand in feminist protest culture. Its presence became even more prominent in response to Donald Trump's 2016 election, and its visibility as a protest symbol there and at other events aimed at curbing women's rights was strengthened by the visual imagery of the novel's most recent adaptation. *The Handmaid's Tale* and Atwood's 2019 addition to its storyworld, *The Testaments*, with adaptations across media, have effectively given shape to what has become a media franchise. As its uses in the context of feminist politics and populism show, this franchise refers not only to commercial concerns; it also references a form of political enfranchisement in that it offers tools and language for calling out patriarchy. We argue that the conglomerate of Gilead media texts engenders a fraught franchise in both commercial and politically emancipatory senses. While only reluctantly 'offering itself up' for commercial exploitation, the franchise makes itself freely and prominently available to feminist protest culture.

KEYWORDS

Margaret Atwood; *The Handmaid's Tale*; transmedia; franchise; feminist protest; meme culture

Introduction

Margaret Atwood's most famous dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), has been adapted widely – as a film, an opera, a computer game, a television series, and a graphic novel – and is one of those stories that seems to 'speak' not just to its context of original publication, but also, and perhaps even more so, to the present. While its renewed popularity since 2017 can be linked to the Hulu television series' success that began in the same year, various authors, including Atwood herself have argued that there is something else going on as well. In the past few years, the world has been moving in the direction of which the Gilead regime is the ultimate consequence (Goggin 2021; Atwood 2017). Following a series of prominent events, including Donald Trump's election in November 2016, measures limiting or even

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forbidding access to legal abortion in nineteen US states, the rise of the #metoo movement, and the appointment of the alleged sexual aggressor Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court despite #metoo, the hyperreal patriarchy-as-terror-regime that *The Handmaid's Tale* portrays has felt increasingly relevant. In response to these various developments, and after hesitating for years, because, as she said, she felt unable to recreate Handmaid Offred's narratorial voice (Allardice 2019), in 2019 Margaret Atwood published a sequel to the novel: *The Testaments*.

When considering *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*, with their various adaptations in different media in the context of feminist politics and populism, it is important to note that the conglomerate of texts set in Gilead and its surrounding world – *The Handmaid's Tale's* universe, as we describe the set of texts that include Atwood's novels and those texts' adaptations – effectively works like a media franchise. Referring to more traditional exemplars of media franchises, such as *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, and *Game of Thrones*, Ken Gelder notes: "The term [media franchise] describes the corporate ownership of a collection of media (films, television, games, etc.) and merchandise, all derived from a source text, an original creative work" (Gelder 2019, 10). In this essay we argue that *The Handmaid's Tale* universe also functions as a media franchise, but a more political and more complex one than the classical fantasy specimens Gelder attends to. To frame this issue, we go back to the roots of the term 'franchise', which only acquired its meaning of 'commercial licencing' (the authorisation by a company to sell its products or services, or otherwise employ its 'formula') in the 1950s and 1960s.

Originally, the term franchise derives from Old French, from the word *franc* ("free from obligation"), which became *franchise*, meaning "a special privilege or right", especially one granted by a sovereign power (OED "franchise, n" 2021). Over the course of the long nineteenth century, as political enfranchisement became an increasingly central social and political concern in Europe and the United States, "franchise" came to refer primarily to the right or privilege of being able to vote or otherwise exert political influence. This essay shows that *The Handmaid's Tale* franchise addresses both the commercial and the political meanings of the word. *The Handmaid's Tale* and the various other media texts that belong to the *HT* conglomerate (including the sequel *The Testaments*) is, we argue, a fraught franchise in both the commercial and the politically emancipatory sense. While it somewhat reluctantly 'offers itself up' for commercial exploitation, this franchise makes itself freely and prominently available for feminist protest culture. Particularly the main character of *The Testaments*, Aunt Lydia, reflects this through her wielding of authority and authorship.

In the years since Trump's election in 2016, iconography from Gilead has been adopted widely in protest against misogyny in the US and worldwide. Even before the series was aired, *The Handmaid's Tale's* slogans were used in protests, both offline and on social media, and with the Hulu series, this has only increased. Atwood has described the appropriation of her work as "people

playing in a sandbox” of her making, something she is happy to see them do (Young 2019). We argue that such appropriations and the different forms in which they occur need to be taken seriously as a form of self-enfranchisement, supported by the commercial media franchise *The Handmaid's Tale* has also become. Consequently, this essay studies how *The Handmaid's Tale* universe functions as a franchise that is both commercial and part of a socio-political protest and prosumer culture, in which users can simultaneously be producers and consumers of media content. It also considers how *The Testaments* fits into this dynamic.

Franchising is a business concept that has been introduced into cultural studies via commercial comics and transmedia studies. Henry Jenkins defines it in *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, saying: “Industry insiders use the term ‘extension’ to refer to their coordinated efforts to expand the potential markets by moving content across different delivery systems, . . . and ‘franchise’ to refer to their coordinated effort to brand and market fictional content under these new conditions” (2006, 19). The “new conditions” mentioned by Jenkins primarily concern the convergence culture, of which prosumer culture is one aspect. The *HT* franchise, unlike Gilead itself, is not in the hands of a single party, which is notable in the existence of multiple versions of the same parts of the story: think, for example, of the 1990 film adaptation. However, the issue of consistency between the several ‘delivery systems’ that spread the story has become increasingly important with the popularity of the Hulu series and the media attention given to Atwood’s novel *The Testaments*. Simultaneously, Gilead’s success as a transmedia franchise relies on its adaptability and openness to change (Backmann 2014, 202). Gilead lends itself well to appropriation in post-digital protest culture, and in this sense can be said to work well as a franchise. Yet with the publication of *The Testaments*, Atwood seemed to want to reassert her ownership – whether for commercial or ideological reasons – of the world she created.

The Handmaid's Tale is narrated by Offred, a so-called handmaid, a supposedly ‘sinful’ woman, who is disenfranchised and enslaved for her fertility in a world where a variety of causes have led to most women being barren. This takes place in the future theocratic Puritan Republic of Gilead, which is located in New England, although the boundaries are not exactly clear. Offred eventually escapes, and records her story on a set of cassette tapes, which in the novel’s final ‘Historical Notes’ are revealed to have been found by late twenty-second century scholars of ‘Gileadean Studies’. The sequel, *The Testaments*, contains three narrative voices, also unearthed by scholars years after the fall of the regime. Two of them are transcripts of witness testimonies told by two young women. The first is Agnes Jemima, who has grown up in Gilead; it is implied that she is Offred’s regime-confiscated daughter. The second is the anti-Gileadean Canadian Daisy, who believes herself to be the daughter of Canadian resistance activists Neil and Melanie, but turns out to be ‘Baby Nicole’, a child who was smuggled from Gilead to Canada, whom Gilead is trying desperately to retrieve and whose name and image are used as a focal point for

protests by both pro- and anti-regime parties. The third voice is that of Aunt Lydia, a returning character from *The Handmaid's Tale*, in which she was the main 'Aunt' (re-education officer) in the Red Center – the indoctrination centre in which Offred is forcibly prepared for her life as a handmaid. It becomes clear early on in *The Testaments* that Aunt Lydia is one of the main architects of the totalitarian regime, which at the end of *The Testaments* she manages to bring down with the help of Daisy and Agnes.

According to Atwood, the central question underlying *The Handmaid's Tale* is: "if there was a totalitarian regime in the United States what kind of regime would it be?" (Allardice 2019). Conversely, *The Testaments* instead asks the question how totalitarian regimes fall apart. Both novels raise other questions as well, asking who owns fictive worlds like Gilead, who can appropriate them and in what ways, and what agency various actors have over them. While these questions are relevant in a literary studies context, their significance is not limited to theoretical debates, as stories present a reflection of a society that can either support or challenge its cultural and political position.

This essay consists of two parts. In the first section, we discuss how Atwood constructed the world of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale* and how she expands and adapts it in *The Testaments*. This section also provides examples of how franchising works in-text. In the part that follows, we go into the *HT* universe as a commercial and political franchise in relation to contemporary populist politics. We pay explicit attention to the uses made of *The Handmaid's Tale* imagery in prosumer and protest cultures, looking at popular social media and meme culture. We finish by concluding that the texts comprising *The Handmaid's Tale* universe offer a language of visuals and stock phrases that function in the service of enfranchisement and emancipatory protest. At the same time, *The Handmaid's Tale* as a media franchise remains fraught with issues of ownership and authority.

Constructing Gilead

Early in *The Testaments*, Atwood holds up a kind of metatextual mirror for the reader, stressing the significance of the written word. She describes Aunt Lydia's visit to the Hildegard Library of Ardua Hall, the Aunts' convent-like domain, as a "nocturnal pilgrimage" which leads her deeper and deeper into the recesses of a secret labyrinth. From the General Section, Aunt Lydia moves to the limited-access sections: through the Reading Room "where the Bibles brood in the darkness of their locked boxes, glowing with arcane energy" to "the Bloodlines Genealogical Archives with their classified files", where the intricate biological relations of Gilead's newborns are traced. After this she finally reaches her "inner sanctum, deep in the Forbidden World Literature Section" (Atwood 2019, 35). Here, Aunt Lydia displays her choice selection of forbidden books: "*Jane Eyre*, *Anna Karenina*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *Paradise Lost*, *Lives of Girls and Women* – what a moral panic each one

of them would cause if set loose among the Supplicants!" (35). All of these classics revolve around women who, in one way or another, deviate from the sexual and gender norms dominant in their (fictional) societies, and, as such, a parallel can be drawn between these fictions and the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. While putting it next to these classical novels on the shelf would of course violate the fictional universe that Aunt Lydia inhabits, the implicit connection parallels Atwood's writing work and Aunt Lydia's role as a writing narrator, creating a metafictional link between the two.

In Gilead, as in many other totalitarian dystopias, access to the written word is strongly controlled, with literacy being a forbidden skill for women with the exception of the Aunts. That the retreat is in a section of the library that may contain World Literature that has been forbidden, while also referencing the way literature generates Forbidden Worlds, is pointedly ambiguous. Furthermore, the prohibition links into the regime leaders' fear of the social and political impact literature can have in making other worlds imaginable. The suggestion that these books may be 'set loose' emphasises this point. If opened, the books will spawn worlds in a manner that is uncontrollable. This has, of course, happened to the *HT* universe in a commercial way, with Atwood not being able to control what happens with her created world, and in a socio-political context, with people expanding the use of the fictional imagery into the real world of online and offline protest movements.

For Aunt Lydia to present canonical texts about women not adhering to social norms as her personal selection stresses the metatextual association set up by Atwood between *The Testaments'* in-text universe and the world outside, a connection that is emphasised in various forms in the novel and its paratextual material. In different ways, Atwood and Aunt Lydia are both responsible for the (co-)creation of Gilead as a world in which women's voices are restricted, censored or even muted completely. Despite the fact that Atwood is a real-world author who has created a fictional world and Aunt Lydia is a fictional character who, within that fiction, has contributed to the creation of a 'real' world, there are most certainly parallels to be drawn when it comes to the worldbuilding both women engage in. As Ansgar Nünning argues, "narratives are one of the most powerful ways of worldmaking" (2010, 191). Narratives, he continues, are not natural things: "an event, a story, or a media event is not understood as something given or natural, but rather as something made or constructed" (2010, 195–196). When an author creates a fictional world, this may seem like an obvious statement. Naturally, they are the creators constructing a new world out of their circumstances and imagination. Even with fictional worlds, though, authors only have limited control. The *HT* universe shows overtly how its readers and viewers become active prosumers and co-creators, turning the related narratives and texts into a socio-political franchise.

The world of Gilead is not limited to Atwood's work alone. In 1990, *The Handmaid's Tale* was adapted into a film. It received lukewarm reviews and was mostly forgotten or ignored. However, more recently, Atwood was confronted with the consequences of her having sold the film rights early on, when the streaming

service Hulu bought the rights from MGM and produced a series based on the novel. Atwood's position in relation to the series is thus a complicated one: she is a respected advisor to the creators but at the same time, she has no formal say. As she has stated in an interview published online in *The New York Times*: "I have influence but no power. There's a big difference. I'm not the person who can ultimately sign off on anything" (Alter 2019). Atwood's position here demonstrates the use of her work as a commercial franchise. While she may be the owner-creator of Gilead, she has no official influence over the universe to which she has sold the rights. Atwood's statement emphasises the conception of *The Handmaid's Tale* universe as a franchise: the import lies in presenting an inclusive narrative arc, based on story and character, while the author and director have much less prominent roles. Although Atwood is in many ways a 'star author', and her book *The Handmaid's Tale* forms the original tentpole, she has little influence on the development of the franchise as a whole.

In a 2019 interview with *The Guardian's* Lisa Allardice, Atwood comments dismissively on the notion that she is using *The Testaments* to immortalise herself as the author of Gilead: "'People bang on about your legacy', she says, impatiently. 'I'm not that interested because I'm not going to be here. I'm not going to be around haunting my legacy. Unless I do an Aunt Lydia and bury little manuscripts in libraries.'" While she seems to distance herself from Aunt Lydia's strategising, Atwood also, in the same interview, describes her conversations about Gilead and its inhabitants with Bruce Miller, the TV series' showrunner, and her attempts to influence the series' plot in the interest of *The Testaments*: "'Hands off Aunt Lydia' and 'don't touch that baby' were her principal stipulations. 'I needed this child here and that child there – so that's how it's going to be.'" Thus, Atwood dismisses the suggestion of a link between herself and Aunt Lydia, while simultaneously toying with the plot in competition with the others in charge, just like Aunt Lydia in *The Testaments*. Atwood's comments illustrate the tension involved in the fraught franchise of the *HT* universe. Being the creator of the tentpole text *The Handmaid's Tale* gives Atwood implicit ownership and authority over the world of Gilead. In a commercial sense, however, her rights stretch no further than the books. The position of Aunt Lydia in *The Testaments* then offers a reflection of Atwood's own role in connection to the expanded *HT* universe.

Atwood's novels spring from her socio-cultural context as much as her imagination, even though she is wary of committing to this, at least when it concerns *The Testaments* (Bradley 2019). One of the ways in which this shows is in the novels' lack of diversity. *The Handmaid's Tale*, while very critical of American political decisions about women's sexuality and body politics, leaves the question of race completely out of the picture. Its Gilead is a white world, or at least one where colour is not spoken about explicitly. By implicitly making *The Handmaid's Tale* a white space, Atwood's dystopia depicts a world of successful white supremacy and patriarchal ideals, one that may oppress and sexually abuse its fertile women as Handmaids but offers comfort and wealth to many men and to the wives of the commanders. Thus,

though Atwood's novels challenge the United States' anti-feminist policies, their lack – or conscious ignoring – of intersectionality puts a limit on their subversiveness in a real-world context. This came to the fore when *The Testaments*, against updated rules, became the co-winner of the 2019 Booker Prize with Bernadine Evaristo's novel *Girl, Woman, Other*, a text that notably focuses on the stories of black womxn.

In reviews, too, Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* has been frequently critiqued for not acknowledging the parallels between Gileadean society and the historical context of slavery (Merriman 2009; Berlatsky 2017; Williams 2017). In the Hulu series of *The Handmaid's Tale*, race is made slightly more visible – not so much figuratively, but literally, as several of the more significant characters are played by black actors. Rather than offering a critical viewpoint that the novel does not, however, the adaptation offers what Crawley calls a “post-racial aesthetic” in which racial difference is given little to no prominence (2018, 342).

In the Introduction, we proposed to analyse Gilead, and the universe of *The Handmaid's Tale* more generally, as a franchise that expands on more traditional concepts of a media franchise. Increasingly, platforms are constructing or expanding *transmedia* franchises where the role of the tentpole material – often a film, although it can also be a TV series or, as is the case here, a book or book series – becomes “diminished or recalibrated as but one segment of a larger brand experience” (Fleury, Hartzheim, and Mamber 2019, 2–3). As is often the case with such transmedia universes, only die-hard fans will be familiar with each and every aspect of the storyworld in its different incarnations. Nevertheless, a larger group of people will know the franchise's universe well enough to ‘get the gist’ of its in-jokes and references. Such an approach is common in online popular culture when referencing larger storyworlds like *The Handmaid's Tale*. In these cases, part of the enjoyment is in knowing the world well, and being able to add to it, for instance, in the form of memes. Even without knowing the storyworld directly, though, many users will recognise signature expressions, such as ‘Blessed be the fruit’, ‘May the Lord open’, and ‘Under His Eye’, which are used in memes, much in the same way many people ‘know’ *Frankenstein* without having ever read the novel.

When Atwood was writing *The Testaments*, the broader universe of *The Handmaid's Tale* had already expanded beyond her control, both concerning the series and in online and real-life movements. The world, grounded in Atwood's 1985 novel, almost accidentally grew into a transmedia franchise: only as the story regained significance both through the starting of the series and through United States anti-feminist politics at the time, it can be said to have become “a transmedia property whose dystopic storyworld extends beyond the bounds of any single text” instead of “a novel with multiple adaptations” (Howell 2019, 216; 226). The striking visual imagery of the series found its way directly to online and real-life activism, which fed back into the way people experienced the book and its adaptation. Transmedia storytelling, as the editors of *The Franchise Era* state, means that “each text contributes different material so that the totality of a franchise presents an

overarching story” (Fleury, Hartzheim, and Mamber 2019, 1). While Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* serves as a tentpole for the franchise, *The Testaments* simply offers one more addition to the *HT* universe.

The information the reader is offered on the constructed world of Gilead adheres to the common notion that there are no new stories: it uses historical narratives, such as those around slavery and segregation, as well as political ones, responding to the traditional family values of the Reagan era and to the Trump administration’s promotion of a similar nuclear family system, with increasing limitations on women’s sexual – and other – rights. Atwood’s use of biblical tropes offers an implicit response to these Reagan-era political themes and the novel’s biblical references have been used again in protest against Trump’s revival of such politics – as mentioned above regarding the use of signature expressions in memes, for example. Religious connotations abound in the books as well as the series – after all, the entire system is based on biblical narratives: the story of Jacob and his wives, Rachel and Leah, who offer their handmaids for Jacob to impregnate and then raise the handmaids’ children as their own; and that of Hagar, servant of Sarah, whom the apparently barren Sarah gives to her husband Abraham as a kind of replacement womb/wife, and who is cast out without further ado when Sarah does eventually have a baby. The ceremony, as the monthly forced intercourse between Handmaids and commanders is called, functions as a form of ritualised rape in which the barren wives play at least as significant a role as the male commanders do, stressing the role played by women in subjugating other women.

While it appears that surveillance in Gilead is focused on women’s fertility, the control of sexuality is as significant. This is expressed through the Handmaid’s gowns, which Atwood herself describes explicitly as “modesty costumes”, with the colours coming from Western religious contexts: “the Wives wear the blue of purity, from the Virgin Mary; the Handmaids wear red, from the blood of parturition, but also from Mary Magdalene” (Atwood 2017). In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the surveillance of women’s fertility is made most explicit as, for example, Offred has to see a doctor every month to monitor her fertility. This focus is still significant in the series and in *The Testaments* (though neither offer a ‘solution’ to the low fertility levels that are a problem across the world, or the white world at least) but at the same time sexuality remains at least as significant. The surveillance of women’s bodies is linked to their sexualisation, for instance in *The Testaments* when the girls in the Aunt Vidala School are taught to cover their bodies from a young age “because the urges of men were terrible things and those urges needed to be curbed” (9). Such remarks play into a narrative of victim-blaming, with women being held responsible not only for their own behaviour but also that of their environment.

In *The Handmaid’s Tale’s* pre-Gilead era, parts of the world struggled with “plummeting Caucasian birth rates, a phenomenon observable not only in Gilead but in most northern Caucasian societies of the time”, as the reader finds in the novel’s fictional historical notes (Atwood 1996, 316). The specification of ‘Caucasian’

is once again significant of course; while we only touch on it briefly, the *HT* universe's engagement with race – or lack of it – is discussed in more detail in much popular and academic criticism (see for example Bastián 2017; Berlatsky 2017; Crawley 2018; Williams 2017; Sethna 2020). While some countries implemented different methods such as making birth control illegal, the promotion of fertility clinics and the use of surrogate mothers, Gilead, with its strong grounding in Judeo-Christian religious ideas, banned all non-marital relations but set up the polygamous structure with the Handmaids as part of otherwise infertile marriages (Atwood 1996, 317). While some wives are still able to bear children, most cannot and are therefore granted Handmaids (another example of the role of women in maintaining the system). Gilead has formalised fertility as a scarce resource and the system of Handmaids is set up to maximise the use of it. Handmaids 'offer' this scarce resource, and are all made to appear and act the same, in the manner of a traditional franchise construction, replicating a uniformity and predictability that 'consumers' of such franchise products expect. The need to procreate and continue the human species is set up as a justification for a class system where only some people have enough authority to participate.

Neither Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* nor *The Testaments* say much about how the world outside Gilead deals with the low fertility numbers. It is mentioned, and there are even state visits and clubs where people from Gilead attempt to convert other countries to become part of their system or copy it. This presents Gilead's system as a whole as a kind of franchise trying to sell its own socio-political structure – unsuccessfully, as responses range from politely distant to protests and horror. In *The Testaments*, Canada, where most of the action outside of Gilead takes place, recognises Gilead as a nation but also has regular protests against the regime; in the Hulu series the Canadian government has more difficulty dealing with the Gileadean regime, such as when a diplomatic mission into Canada is ended abruptly after letters from abused women in Gilead are released online ("Smart Power", S2E9). The possibility of Gilead 'franchising' its own socio-cultural system in-universe provides another one of those metafictional links, a kind of *mise en abyme* providing an implicit ethical question on how far franchising can go.

The Handmaid's Tale, *The Testaments* and the Hulu series all provide a response to the political situations of the time. Each of their stories, and especially the way they have been visualised in the series, also offer material which is again used in 'real-world' political protests. This is an expansion of literature's – and in this case, visual adaptations' – ability to make certain worlds imaginable, with Gilead being a world people can all too easily imagine in the current political climate, during as well as post-Trump. The imagery of the series provides a highly effective set of icons of protest, something which Atwood herself has been pleased to see (Young 2019). While the series has expanded the Gilead universe and thereby increased possibilities for using Gilead iconography in online and offline meme-making and protest settings, *The Testaments* also limits the uses to which the world can be put. The historical notes from *The Handmaid's Tale* already provide some information about

the fall of the regime – not least the fact *that* it ended. Nevertheless, *The Testaments*, and specifically Aunt Lydia's role in creating an implosion caused by resistance from within, answers a great many of the questions left open by Atwood's first novel. With *The Testaments*, Atwood has reasserted her role as author of the world of *The Handmaid's Tale*, including her ability, like Aunt Lydia's, to put an end to it in the way she sees fit.

Politics and *The Testaments*

"Only dead people are allowed to have statues, but I have been given one while still alive. Already I am petrified", *The Testaments* opens. The sentences are written, not spoken, as opposed to the narration in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and the other two 'witness testimonies' in *The Testaments*. These are all transcripts, but the narrative 'voice' in the Ardua Hall Holograph is that of Aunt Lydia, whose power is illustrated by and partly lodged in the fact that she writes rather than speaks. The irony of this opening is that Aunt Lydia, by committing her narrative to paper, both 'petrifies' or fixes herself in place and implicitly shows that she is not at all petrified in the sense of frozen with fear. In fact, setting her in stone may well have been an attempt by other powerful members of the leadership to ward off, psychologically or literally, whatever devious plans Aunt Lydia might still have in store. Although she cannot know the precise impact or reach of her writing, Lydia very consciously weaponises her power to write. Indeed, arguably she has the power of writ, as in the 'writ of habeas corpus': the power to make her words true and legal through writing. On top of her damning account of Gilead in *The Testaments*, Aunt Lydia has already collected a large archive of incriminating evidence in her 'sanctuary'.

In both the print and digital versions of the book, the parts of the story Aunt Lydia that narrates are introduced by an icon of a fountain pen, the ink hole of which takes the shape of – presumably – Aunt Lydia's own bust. Seen in passing, the ink hole looks rather like a blob, a spillage of ink leaking out of the pen, making the paratextual implication evident: Aunt Lydia leaks, and in doing so not only destabilises Gilead, but also tries to solidify her own heritage. A hint of this is already present in the ambiguous noun and verb meanings of the word 'bust'. There is an obvious parallel here between Aunt Lydia, and Atwood's attempt to solidifying her own position as the *grande dame* of the Gilead media franchise, while also acknowledging it as such.

Aunt Lydia is one of the crueller executors of the Gilead regime's plans for fertile women in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and in the sequel she turns out to be the main designer and dominant force in the strictly separated 'female sphere' of Gilead. Aunt Lydia and Commander Judd, in the process of designing Gilead's totalitarian regime, discuss the implementation of 'separate spheres' in Gilead, aiming to reinstate a gendered segregation that they accept as having existed in the fabled American past. As Commander Judd proposes to her: "We want you to help us to organise the separate sphere – the sphere for women. With, as its goal, the optimal amount of

harmony, both civic and domestic, and the optimal number of offspring” (Atwood 2019, 175). Aunt Lydia immediately recognises this as an opportunity to claim maximum power within the patriarchal system (over other women, of course): “I looked at Elizabeth and Helena, and saw grudging admiration. I’d tried for more power than they would have dared to ask for, and I’d won it” (Atwood 2019, 176).

Gilead is too totalitarian to really have either a truly public ‘public sphere’ or a private ‘private sphere’, but the notion of a separate sphere administered by women nonetheless leverages the idea that a sadly lost tradition is being revived in which women, within their limited realm, were executors of power. At the same time, the regeneration system that Aunt Lydia comes up with itself resembles the transmedia franchise of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Both the Red Center in Gilead and the media franchise are systems geared to enabling the production of identical copies, of handmaids or episodes, in the interest of optimising value or profit. The production of identical red-white handmaids under the care of Aunt Lydia is a hyperreality that is reminiscent of Andy Warhol’s Campbell Soup cans, which makes Aunt Lydia and Atwood’s parallel process clear. Atwood, like Warhol, originally set out to reflect critically on totalitarian mass production – and was understood as doing so. Yet more recently both ‘critical representations’ have become mass-produced and reproduced themselves.

The opening scene of *The Testaments* presents a – rare, and beleaguered – woman writing by herself in her reclusive ‘inner sanctum’. The scene evokes the feminist idea introduced and popularised by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own*, that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write [fiction]” (Woolf 1945, 6). However, this scene presents a very perverted version of Woolf’s original idea, as is frequently the case in *The Testaments* when it comes to thoughts about women’s place in society. Aunt Lydia is hardly oppressed, and her being able and allowed to write is actually a clearer sign of her power than the fact that she has a room of her own. Nevertheless, her having a room that eludes the all-seeing Eyes is no doubt unusual. Offred notes in the opening pages of *The Handmaid’s Tale* that “The door of the room – not my room, I refuse to say my – is not locked. In fact it doesn’t shut properly” (Atwood 1996, 18).

As Woolf’s comment implies, having one’s own space in a literal sense also reflects on having, or being allowed to have the space to think. As discussed, Margaret Atwood can be placed in a long line of white feminist authors (including Virginia Woolf). So can Aunt Lydia, although hers is an inverted and perverted legacy of this tradition, as is evidenced, for instance, by the Aunts’ café in Ardua Hall. The Schlafly Café is named after Phyllis Schlafly, the conservative leader of the movement against the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s.

One thing that both *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments* offer to feminist political activism is irony. The reference to Schlafly is wry, because she was one of the many conservative female activists who – following in the footsteps of e.g. Catherine Beecher – was politically active in a sphere in which she should not speak out, given the vantage point of the separate spheres ideology that she professed. The same

double bind can be observed in Commander's wife Serena Joy in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Serena wrote the ideological manifesto, which in its realisation bars her from reading it. Aunt Lydia of course is in a similar position, but she has clearly chosen this position as the best among bad alternatives and is playing the system consciously.

In an article using *The Handmaid's Tale* as a springboard, Meredith L. Pruden explicitly connects conservative populism to misogyny. Referring to Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, she describes populism as a "thin-centred" ideology: "populism as a thin ideology is a framework that calls for dismantling the establishment and upsetting the status quo without offering suggestions for what should replace either of them" (Pruden 2020, 14–15). Although it is generally presented as a broad and inclusive movement 'for the people', in fact it "usually only speaks to a fragment of the larger population" (Pruden 2020, 15). Pruden argues that there is an inherent connection between conservative populism and misogyny. Both are about "control, surveillance and discipline" – in the case of populism, discipline of the citizen; in the case of misogyny, discipline of the feminine. Furthermore, both misogyny and conservative populism are grounded in a nostalgic approach to the past, idealising the nuclear family as the 'right' representation of gender roles. They also portray their position as that of a struggle between those wanting to maintain or reinstate the 'right' way of doing things versus an enemy, as an 'other' that wants to destroy society from within (Pruden 2020, 25). Because of the hypervisibility of misogyny, as it is "mediated, networked and commodified through all manner of entertainment culture ... mainstream media ... and in the digital space[s]", as among others through series like *The Handmaid's Tale*, and through the sheer number of misogynistic examples, people become blind to the violence encompassed in these examples. *The Handmaid's Tale* and its associated texts become a form of entertainment rather than a disturbing dystopia, normalising the disconcerting role patterns that are portrayed in the world of Gilead. Conversely, however, the entertainment value simultaneously helps to employ a light yet engaging mode of showing the real effect of the surveillance and oppression of women that restrictions on the access to reproductive healthcare causes.

In a post-digital prosumer culture, irony sometimes seems to have been claimed entirely by the 'Alt-Right', the playful, ironic, yet ultimately misogynist and white-supremacist far right in the US, which operates similarly, though under different names, in other countries. The Alt-Right's adoption of what they present as humour can be juxtaposed to the classic criticism levelled by anti-feminists against feminism, of it being humourless. This cliché is referenced in *The Handmaid's Tale* in reference to Offred's porn mag-burning mother (Atwood 1996, 48). Atwood, however, offers a route to reclaiming ironic and pithy expressions of political positioning in a manner that reminds of Rosalind Gill's claim that "Postfeminism should be conceived of as a sensibility" (2007, 148). From this perspective, Gill elaborates,

postfeminist media culture should be our critical object—a phenomenon into which scholars of culture should inquire—rather than an analytic perspective. This approach

does not require a static notion of one single authentic feminism as a comparison point, but instead is informed by postmodernist and constructionist perspectives and seeks to examine what is distinctive about contemporary articulations of gender in the media. (2007, 148)

As a world with its own language and iconography that is mediated through Atwood's novels and the Hulu series, Gilead offers very arresting, attractive, and often hilarious possibilities for contemporary articulations of gender in the media. Protesters, online and offline, are prosumers par excellence. They are political actors who do not just consume media texts but produce and circulate them – for instance, as photos from physical demonstrations distributed through social media. Protesters are also keenly aware of the political impact of clicking, liking, and retweeting particular content, and espousing specific language and iconography, that is politically evocative while also being commodified as cool and easy to adopt.

The Hulu series' coinciding with the Trump/Pence administration lent *The Handmaid's Tale* a new political centrality in protest culture, as Stefania Marghitu and Kelsey Moore Johnson have shown (2018). The key icon in many protests that refer to *The Handmaid's Tale* from May 2017 onwards – that is, immediately following the release of the first season of the series – was the highly stylised and bright red handmaid uniform with the white 'wings' that form the basis of the series' colour scheme. Even during the first worldwide Women's March on 21 January 2017 – the day after Trump's inauguration, but before the Hulu series' release – references to *The Handmaid's Tale* were already abundant, often with slogans like "The Handmaid's Tale is not an instruction manual" (Sethna 2020).

The Women's March as a worldwide (but primarily US-based) movement functions as a franchise organisation in certain ways. It has templates for 'events' and local 'circles', and a house style and merchandise that can be adopted and bought by women's activist groups around the world. Particularly after the series' release, the striking visual and verbal language of the Gilead universe's Puritan totalitarianism took off as a widely recognised shorthand for activism against oppressive, often explicitly 'pro-life', tendencies in government on all levels in and outside of the US. This was not specific to Women's March as an activist organisation, but the organisation has at times implicitly embraced the visual language and material offered by *The Handmaid's Tale*, for example, in the spring 2021 campaign 'Maydays' (a reference to Labour Day, Mother's Day, and also to Gilead's resistance movement Mayday).

States like Texas and Ohio made significant changes to abortion laws in the spring and summer of 2017, limiting access to abortion and reproductive care. In these contexts, *The Handmaid's Tale's* red cloak and white bonnet quickly became the new look of women's rights activism. By Christmas, when the White House released photos of Melania Trump inspecting a row of massive artificial red Christmas trees, these images were immediately turned into a meme that went viral, of Melania – clearly the most powerful 'Wife' possible, in Gilead's terms –

inspecting a row of handmaids. In terms that could have been introduced by Atwood herself, but in fact exist among current-day Anglo-American lifestyles that are highly mediated, Melania, like Serena Joy, is a 'Tradwife'. This label, which traditional home-making women give themselves, is associated with the Alt-Right and other conservative populist movements (Rottenberg and Orgad 2020).

In Atwood's written work – in *The Testaments* even more so than in *The Handmaid's Tale* – Gilead iconography uses simplicity and starkness to draw readers and viewers into its world, something that has only been strengthened by the Hulu series. This way of employing dystopia as a mode of hyperreality leads to grotesque imagery of oppression. Many of the ways in which patriarchy in general functions as a terror regime are literalised in Gilead. A woman who assumes too much licence to speak has her mouth locked in the literal sense, with a gigantic padlock. The red gowns of the Handmaids both cover them and make egregiously clear that they exist for a sexual purpose, and men cannot reasonably be blamed for being triggered by them. The gowns thus contribute to the victim-blaming in which the Handmaids are made responsible for their own abuse, and these gowns, again, create a form of commodification of identical 'products'.

Aunt Lydia becomes the ultimate symbol of the way women contribute to the oppressive regime, as for her the authority to wield a pen is practically the same as the ability to penetrate ("Pen Is Envy" as Aunt Lydia quips [Atwood 2019, 140]). In her final words, she writes: "In a moment, I'll slot these pages into Cardinal Newman" (Atwood 2019, 404). This obvious pun inverts the patriarchal hierarchy implicit in heteronormative sexuality and suggests that while the 'New Man' may have chosen celibacy, he will nonetheless have to accept Aunt Lydia's intrusions on his integrity. This kind of irony coheres closely with a specifically right-wing social media sensibility sometimes referred to as 'Alt-light', which is effective in part because of its grotesqueness and the fact that it can always claim to be ironic (Tuters and Kazys 2006).

Although driven by opposing political motives, the use of the stark and ironic Gilead iconography in protests employs similar elements. This iconography affords activists a readily available visual rhetoric to expose and protest the policing of women's bodies, in a way that is immediately recognisable even if one has not read the novels or seen the series, and that simplifies the debate about issues like abortion to a level beyond reasonable dispute. This functions similarly to opponents of the right to legal abortion's use of linguistic signs such as 'pro-life'. As critics like Zeynep Tufekci (2017) observe, many protests today exist both offline in the physical world, where activists use their bodies to demonstrate, and simultaneously in the realm of social media. Many signboards are geared explicitly towards effectiveness on social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and more recently TikTok. Success on such platforms is measured by the amount of attention a post generates, and most posts therefore rely heavily upon arresting visual images.

Memes in general are "digital images . . . created with awareness of each other, and circulated, imitated, and transformed via the internet by many users" (Shifman

2013, 8). Memes generally consist of visual images, and they function as units for carrying cultural ideas, symbols, and practices. Americans under forty see memes daily, and there is ample empirical evidence that memes influence political views (Nagle 2017; Highfield 2016; Lovink 2017). As Limor Shifman argues, a key element of memes is their tendency to refer to one another, and thus to 'snowball' through and across social media platforms. This is clearly what happened with the White House image of Melania surrounded by red Christmas trees. Meme-making can be considered as a basic element of social-media prosumer culture, and the application of basic photoshopping skills allows anonymous meme producers to digitally occupy an image in the same manner in which red-gowned protestors occupy state Senate Houses and news photos. Even when no visual images are used, the referential nature of memes still works: non-visual *HT* references remain usable in popular cultural worlds. For instance, Donald Trump's daughter and Jared Kushner's wife, Ivanka Trump, whose public posturing is highly invested in framing her as an independent woman, is likened to a Handmaid in memes that refer to her as 'Ofjared'. This suggests that in the ideology of her own family and political context she is promoting her image and body to the advantage of the men who own her.

Although with *The Testaments*, Atwood specifies details about the Gileadean regime and its downfall that close off many avenues for expansion, the book does not at all limit the usage of Gilead iconography in the more loose and more metaphorical settings of resistance against right-wing and patriarchal conservatism. On the contrary, it opens up further possibilities for these protests by offering more detail on other 'classes' within Gilead, including the so-called 'Pearl Girls' – the Aunts in training – who are foils to the Handmaids: celibate, in charge of Gilead's moral character and bent on reproducing Gilead's society beyond its borders. Like Handmaids, Pearl Girls occur in pairs, and they also monitor each other constantly. They are the guardians of a certain socio-political system and are powerful within the limitations of the female sphere of a regime that does not allow women to read or do anything independently.

Conclusion

The Handmaid's Tale has become a cultural touchstone. The text has been adapted in many ways, and paratextual material relating to the *HT* universe abounds. The media industry that introduced the idea of franchising into cultural production is intensely concerned with legal ownership and the commercial monopoly of the universe it has developed. With *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood laid the foundation for a franchise that, publicly at least, she professes little interest in owning commercially or artistically. Atwood appears comfortable with *The Handmaid's Tale's* openness to grassroots appropriation in protest and meme culture, which are often two sides of the same coin in the post-digital world. Yet, *The Testaments* does claim, however tongue-in-cheek, some kind of authority over the future of Gilead, its domestic structure, place in the world, and the manner of its

ending. By detailing its implosion, Atwood imposes a point of closure, while simultaneously providing room for others, including the makers of the television series, to play with, and adding material that allows for employment by other adapters of the text.

The Testaments can be understood as a response to the transmedial world-building success of *The Handmaid's Tale* on the level of ownership and authority. However, it is also a comment on a post-digital culture in which memes and (visual) icons are the currency of political games in which populism plays a central role. The Canadian narrator Daisy, the Gileadean 'Baby Nicole', in *The Testaments* is an icon for and a literal poster child of protest culture. This is true within Gilead, which tries to aggressively propagate and spawn itself and its values beyond its borders – much like a neoliberal media conglomerate milks popular narrative universes – and also in Canada, where Daisy grows up learning about Baby Nicole and how to demonstrate against her oppressors.

Indeed, Daisy writes a paper about Baby Nicole in which she compares her to “a football” kicked back and forth “by both sides” (Atwood 2019, 45), intuiting correctly that Baby Nicole is an object that lends itself to being made into a protest symbol. Atwood, too, is very aware of the value of strong symbols in post-digital politics, despite her possible frustration with not having more control over the Hulu series, and her tendency to make light of others' creative use of Gilead iconography. She has called the red costumes “a brilliant protest symbol” (CBC News 2019). In this respect, *The Testaments* offers more than a prescient and hyperreal version of a world that we may be on the brink of. It also reflects directly on a culture that already exists and of which the novel is now a part. Despite Atwood's resistance to the idea that *The Handmaid's Tale* is a feminist novel, and despite the limitations of the novel's feminism, *The Testaments* offers rich material for ironic and playful yet arresting use in post-digital protest culture.

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