

Locating Lost Masculinities in Margaret
Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the
requirements of Manchester Metropolitan
University Cheshire for the degree of
MA by Research

Department of Interdisciplinary Studies

March 2015

Abstract

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a prophetic, fearfully realistic portrayal of a dystopian future in which women are forced to live in a patriarchal theocracy, Republic of Gilead. It is a fictional amalgamation of every fear of the feminist movement, as such there exists an abundance of critical work focused on the disenfranchised narrator of the tale, coupled with an exploration into the rights of woman, and how female authorship lends insight into this. This focus has given rise to a gap in critical work upon Atwood; the neglect of the critical consideration of her masculine characters, their presentation, and their function within the text as stand-alone characters.

By focusing upon the masculine characters, this thesis begins to create a critical discussion upon their function outside of an oppressive back-drop for the female. This thesis demonstrates that by exploring the masculine power present in the novel, as rendered through the male characters, critical understanding of the feminine is advanced, and so a balanced, comprehensive mastery of the text is promoted.

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Introduction

Margaret Atwood's body of work is immense, covering everything from poetry and critical studies to novels and short stories. Her work has been received to critical acclaim across the globe; she has been nominated for the Man-Booker Prize for multiple novels, winning it in 2000 with *The Blind Assassin*. In the last year she has published two works; "*Stone Mattress*" (2014), a collection of short fiction, and a libretto for the chamber opera "*Pauline*" (2014). Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the focus of this thesis, was published in 1985. It was nominated for the Booker Prize in 1986, and won both the Governor General's Award for English language fiction the year of its publication, and the Arthur C. Clarke Award two years later. The novel has divided critical and public opinion; it appears at number 37 on the American Library Association's list of the "100 Most Frequently Challenged Books of 1990 – 1999", and with its strong anti-fundamentalist and prophetically cautionary message, the novel seems even more applicable in today's post 9/11 world than in 1985 when it first graced bookshelves.

Throughout Margaret Atwood's career critical reception of her work has, as with any author, been mixed, but two common themes appear above all else; a primary concern with the females presented within her work, and a preoccupation with the feminist theories and tropes present within it. To call this a preoccupation is not to discount or disparage the critical work that has gone before; quite the opposite in fact, and I wish to make it clear that this female-centric approach to Atwood's works has provided a bountiful supply of critical resources for this project. However, within this thesis, I approach *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), from what could be argued to be the mirrored-opposite direction to these critical works. There exists a gap within the current critical work on Atwood, and that is the study

of the male, and the presentation of masculinity, within her novels. That is not to say that they have been entirely neglected, simply that there exists little by way of critical study into the masculine figures in their own right within her novels, taking the male as the primary subject, as opposed to their present role in criticism as the backdrop to the female.

The economic rights that women were experiencing during the 1980s when Atwood was writing the novel, resulted in a redrawing, or at the very least, a reconsidering of existing gender boundaries. Gina Wisker indicates that the political climate was changing when Atwood wrote the novel: "*The Handmaid's Tale* was published in 1985, in a period in which second wave feminism flourished" (3). During this second wave, women were experiencing another increase in rights and self-awareness, and Atwood's novel reflects the imagining of that increased consciousness taken forward to an American future where a male-dominated religious elite have seized control. In this imaginative construction, Atwood places the reader in the centre of a dystopian future, in a world that has been marred by some unnamed catastrophe. The setting is the Republic of Gilead, a patriarchal theocracy that heavily censors everything within its boundaries; the narrator is one of the disenfranchised breeding class, Handmaid Offred. The novel presents a future American nation where the gains made by feminism have been lost and women are once again seen as the property of men. During the early 1970s "...women were experiencing a new sense of possibilities, a breaking away from the constraints of the past" (Greene 82). Offred's nostalgic moments, when she harks back to her life before the Republic, highlight the reactionary measures that the Republic has taken to re-establish a strict segregation between the sexes and their subsequent rights.

Locating *The Handmaid's Tale* in literary criticism for the purposes of this thesis has not been without its complications. There are two, seemingly contradictory, schools of criticism that it will defer to in order to develop a balanced and critically comprehensive analysis, those of feminist literary theory and the relatively young academic arena of masculinity studies. For obvious reasons, Atwood's work has largely been explored through the lens of feminist literary criticism; much of the most recent and most popular critical work has been developed within this critical landscape, giving rise to theories and interpretations of her works along feminist theoretical views.

Gill Plain and Susan Sellers define feminist literary theory in the introduction to their text *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism*, stating that: "Feminist literary criticism properly begins in the aftermath of 'second-wave' feminism, the term usually given to the emergence of women's movements in the United States and Europe during the Civil rights campaigns of the 1960s" (2). This 'second-wave' feminism is embodied in the text by Offred's mother, who fulfils this role in an active and vocal manner throughout the text with statements such as: "Don't you know how many women's lives, how many women's *bodies*, the tanks had to roll over just to get that far?" (Atwood 131). She is shown to be the activist, taking Offred as a young girl to public demonstrations where she is encouraged to burn sexually degrading magazines by her mother's female counterparts. This second-wave feminism is picked up by the character of Moira, Offred's compatriot from college, who embodies a second feminist stereotype; the new feminist, a dungaree-wearing homosexual woman who is educated and reactionary in her stance to all things that the regime embodies. Plain and Sellers go on to state that feminist literary criticism developed as a result of "centuries of women's writing, of women writing about women writing, and of women – and men – writing about women's minds, bodies, art and ideas" (2). The birth of

feminist criticism emerged as a reaction to the masculine dominated theatre of academic criticism, and in an echo of this, Offred's story emerges from a masculine dominated regime to lend voice to the females, and lower status males, trapped within it.

Gayle Green, in her work: "Feminist Fiction, Feminist Form" states that the difference between Anglo-American feminism and French feminism exists in their relationship to their stereotype: "Whereas feminist criticism that grew up in the United States in the early seventies is concerned with liberating women from confining stereotypes, Franco-feminist theory seeks to dismantle the system that produces these stereotypes" (84). These two fields of feminism are apparent within Atwood's novel; Anglo-American theory appearing as the character of Offred's mother, and Franco-feminism being embodied in the character of Moira. This bridging of the disjointed feminist theories present within the novel provides an all-inclusive, united presentation of feminism, placing *The Handmaid's Tale* firmly within the feminist literary tradition.

Masculinity studies, as a sub-area of gender studies, is still a developing critical field, and it has been a largely neglected field until recently; as Rowland, Liggins and Uskalis state in their introduction to *Signs of Masculinity: Men in Literature 1700 to Present*:

Feminist theory and books on the representation of Woman/women have threatened to monopolise gender criticism and gender studies: it seems essential to redress this balance by asking what the 'empty' category of masculinity can reveal about gender relations, sexuality and men's social roles, and how it can offer alternative ways of reading and evaluating literary texts. (3)

Within this thesis, the masculine roles presented in *The Handmaid's Tale* are used to develop an understanding of the gender roles and interactions that the novel portrays. The 'empty'

category of masculinity provides us with a new approach to Atwood's work, and an opportunity to develop a critical understanding of both the male and female characters within it from a different perspective. The aim in casting *The Handmaid's Tale* under a different light, and studying the portrayal of masculine power and males within its pages, is that this thesis will develop an understanding of the novel within an area of critical study still in the adolescent stage of its development.

In comparison to the field of feminist literary theory, the area of masculinity studies has developed as a sub-genre of gender studies. It did not develop as a standalone arena of literary theory – indeed, writing in 2005, Robert A. Nye states that: “The field originally profited from a conjunction of feminist theory and women's studies, but as the harvest of books under review reveals, a current boom area is masculinity studies” (1938). He goes on to name “pioneers in the study of masculinity” such as Lynne Segal, Michal S. Kimmel and R. W. Connell (193). These figures form the foundation of masculinity studies, develop the theories upon which it rests, and have served as an access point for my study of Atwood's texts.

In the Foreword to *Theorizing Masculinities*, Michael S. Kimmel states that:

For decades, it was feminist women who had been theorizing about the meanings of masculinity – and with good reason: Men's efforts to live up to some vaguely defined notions of masculinity had some disastrous consequences for women. Institutionally, women lived in a world in which men held virtually all the positions of power.

Interpersonally, individual women felt powerless to effect the kinds of changes in their lives they wanted. (vii)

This interpersonal powerlessness also translates to the masculine, as Kimmel goes on to explain: “it was empirically quite true that men occupied virtually all positions of power, and

thus it could be accurately said that men were *in* power. But this power did not translate to a feeling of *being powerful* at the individual level” (viii). The status of women within the novel is reflective of Kimmel’s opening statement on the historical situation of women: Offred sees the males as powerful because they are granted power by the regime, and by default, views herself as powerless. She is unable to effect any change to her life apart from to bear a child and save herself from the possibility of banishment to the Colonies. This translation of males-in-power to males-feeling-powerful is represented in the pages of Offred’s story; but the question that must be answered is as Kimmel presents it, are they actually powerful? And, if they are, does this power make them feel powerful? Tim Carrigan, Bob Connell, and John Lee state in their article “Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity” (1987), that: “The political meaning of writing about masculinity turns mainly on its treatment of power. Our touchstone is the essential feminist insight that the overall relationship between men and women is one involving domination or oppression” (100). This ‘essential feminist insight’ into masculinity is the voice of the narrator, Offred, and her story describes the oppressed state in which she lives. Her position within the novel’s social class structure results in a portrayal of the relationship between men and women that is reduced to its most basic, most base, and most oppressive form. She is a servant, her master is male – arguably the only reading that can be made is one in which the male is cast as the powerful oppressor, and the woman as the weak and dominated. This thesis, whilst exploring this depiction of written masculinity also explores the notion that the masculine is also disenfranchised, and that it is not as powerful as perhaps first indicated.

R. W. Connell’s ground-breaking works upon masculinity studies have developed lines of enquiry alongside feminist literary theory, whilst also exploring how masculinity studies has an equally important role to play within the study of texts. His work *Gender and*

Power (1987) developed a timeline of the study into the field of power in relation to gender. What resulted is a comparative study of the relationship between the gender and power, as well as a timeline charting the social development of gender. His other works have appeared in anthologies as seminal works for those compiling volumes on masculinity studies. In his work *The History of Masculinity* (1995), which appears in a collection entitled *The Masculinity Studies Reader* (2002), Connell states that “Since masculinity exists only in the context of a whole structure of gender relations, we need to locate it in the formation of the modern gender order as a whole” (245). This attempt to locate masculinity – overt or not – is what this study of *The Handmaid’s Tale* traces. Once it has been located and mapped, it is developed by utilising theories from both feminist literary theory and masculinity studies. This furthers our understanding of a novel that has captured the first theoretical field but has been widely ignored by the second.

In the Introduction to their 1998 text, *Signs of Masculinity: Men in Literature 1700 to the Present*, Antony Rowland, Emma Liggins, and Erikas Usalis state: “Patriarchy proves an almost insurmountable stumbling-block for critics aiming to provide an affirmative reading of masculinity, as men have been historically categorised as oppressors, exercising their power over women at every opportunity and at every level of society” (6). This statement points out the negative implications of a masculine dominated reading of *The Handmaid’s Tale*; as this thesis is locating masculinity within a patriarchy, one which has denied women every single right that it possibly could, and then more, this critical acknowledgment of some of the difficulties the field of masculinity studies has had to overcome also serves as a point of access for this thesis. Whilst a stumbling block, patriarchy within Atwood’s text in fact permits an affirmative reading of masculinity– the character of Nick proves to be this affirmative reader. He operates in opposition to a patriarchal system, denying himself the

opportunity to rise through the ranks of the regime and create a comfortable, Republic-approved life for himself. Within every oppressive state, there are notes of dissent, and Nick is this note in Atwood's, and Rowland, Liggins, and Usalis' patriarchy.

Over the course of the 1990s there was a five to sevenfold increase in books and articles on masculinity studies (Nye 193). Unsurprisingly, many of these texts were written by men – but female theorists also lent their voices to this new field, creating a theoretical framework that both genders had provided insight into. There exists an issue that I could not avoid noticing when I began my research, many of the texts I could access were about men, and rightly so in a masculinity studies section, but they were men as presented – or written – by men. Alice Ferrebe's *Masculinity in Male Authored-Fiction 1950-2000* being but one example of this. Whilst these texts have served as an interesting opposition to my own avenue of enquiry, it highlights the deficit in the field of critical development of Atwood's works. There is little critical exploration of her masculine characters from a masculinity studies approach, if any at all when we narrow our focus to *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Criticism on Margaret Atwood has always been available in generous amounts, not least because of the sheer volume of work that she has published. Recent criticism has been focused upon her third and final instalment of the dystopian fiction trilogy: *MaddAddam* (2013), as well as her recent short fiction collection "Stone Mattress" (2014). Despite the volume of both critical work available on her, and her own published work, there is little to address the gap of study between the female and feminist aspects of her works and the male and masculine themes. This void is one that this thesis begins to bridge, uniting theories from both sides of criticism with one another to develop a new, and cohesive theoretical framework within which Atwood's characters can be studied.

The Handmaid's Tale develops the idea of the “emptiness” of the masculine. The male characters in Atwood’s novel are simultaneously everywhere and nowhere; they are intrinsic to Offred’s life, their power over her only really being portrayed and depicted in the domestic sphere when she comes into direct contact with them. The lack of interaction between the sexes – or at least between the narrator in her station as a Handmaid and men – is reason for this. The narrator is limited by her experiences; her disenfranchisement and incomplete world, and world access, create an obstacle to the reader, who can only formulate opinions of masculinity in the Republic of Gilead through the restricted report that she offers. It is important to note that throughout the novel the narrator’s presentation is a recalling of events; she constructs her story based on her memories, and she acknowledges this repeatedly throughout her tale and explicitly when she states: “This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction” (Atwood 144). The result of this is that the narrator constructs an unstable narrative, one that flits back and forth between past and present; it is within this collision between past and present in the text that a comparison of masculinity from pre and post-Gilead is created.

Chapter One of this thesis explores the heteronormative gender roles that Atwood depicts in the novel. By limiting the characters in the text to heteronormative gender roles which the Republic of Gilead religiously enforces, the novel provides a structured social hierarchy which this chapter analyses. Through establishing the status of each character in the household within the Republic, and exploring how this status has been attained, the chapter places the characters within the text – and the text itself – in the wider contexts of history, masculinity studies, and Atwood’s critical work. As well as analysing the social hierarchy present in the text, Chapter One considers how the novel portrays masculinity through the male characters, and how their masculinity is reinforced by heteronormative,

stereotypical indicators of success, such as fatherhood, and material possessions as examples of wealth, such as cars. In establishing the status of the masculine characters, the chapter develops a comparative method through which the female characters within the text are also explored. As some males enjoy an increase in power, so the chapter demonstrates that a majority of females have experienced a decrease in their power; not only political and social, but in the most extreme case – the breeding class of the Handmaids – bodily autonomy has also been denied by the Republic. By establishing an understanding of the location of each character within the Republic's social fabric, Chapter One sets the foundation for the second and third chapters to explore the gendered interactions that occur within the novel's pages.

Chapter Two develops the idea Nancy Henley sets forth in her ground-breaking text, *Body Politics: Power, Sex & Nonverbal Communication*, in which she states that “Nonverbal power gestures provide the micropolitical structure, the thousands of daily acts through which nonverbal influence takes place, which underlines and supports the macropolitical structure” (179). Her book is focused on the nonverbal characteristics of power relations. By applying Henley's vocabulary to *The Handmaid's Tale*, and taking the proposed micro and macro political structures as the foundation for this, this theory can be advanced to explore how they provide a framework for interpreting the gendered power interactions within the novel. Henley's theory of nonverbal interactions has been utilised by a number of critics, each with the aim of using it to understand specific gendered interactions within their area of study. The interpretation supplied by Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Michael A. Messner in their critical study “Gender Displays and Men's Power, The ‘New Man’ and the Mexican Immigrant Man” is one of the closest to the approach that I am proposing: “the micropolitics of men's and women's daily gender displays and interactions both reflect and

reconstruct the macropolitical relations between the sexes” (201). By defining the world in which Offred immediately lives, the house of the Commander and his Wife, as the micropolitical sphere, and the Republic of Gilead as the macropolitical sphere, Chapter Two explores the gendered interactions and divisions depicted within these spheres, and examines how the environments in which they occur affect the tone of these interactions. In defining the house as Offred’s micropolitical sphere, and dividing it room by room and dissecting the gendered interactions that are depicted within each, the chapter examines which characters are in control of each territory, and how this power is physically manifested within each territory. Once the chapter has established the micropolitical power relationships, it considers how they are indicative of power relations in the macropolitical sphere by expanding its analyses to examine two specific macropolitical territories; the Rachel and Leah Re-education Centre – where the Handmaids are ‘trained’ – and the government sanctioned brothel named Jezebel’s.

Chapter Three focuses upon how the power of the male is presented to the reader through descriptions of the physicality of the male body. By drawing upon specific examples within the text that portray male characters, the chapter juxtaposes the female body’s presence within the regime to its male counterparts. The strict social hierarchy examined in Chapter One is enforced through the wearing of uniforms, which are indicative of the power of each wearer, and Chapter Three explores how these coverings serve to stabilise and assert the power that each wearer possesses, and how their removal can result in a destabilisation of this clothed status. Using the narrator’s external senses as the access point into the body’s portrayal in the Republic, this chapter explores how the senses of touch and scent are used to both enhance male power and to deny it. The importance of the act of looking, and the proprietorial gaze is examined at length in this third chapter;

expanding upon the theories of ownership and property it explores how the removal of the right to stare has impacted masculine power and dominance in everyday life of the regime.

The study of masculinity within a female authored, and female narrated, text presents a unique problem. Identifying masculinity in the novel is reasonably simple, exploring its portrayal is more problematic. Any consideration of masculinity within *The Handmaid's Tale* must take into account the female, as it is through the female narrator that this masculinity is depicted. Likewise, any critical exploration into the notion of masculinity cannot be conducted without recognising its binary opposite of the female. This thesis takes this issue into account by discussing both the portrayal of the male and its architect, Offred. The creative mode of the story provides a stumbling block, for it is created by the disenfranchised female, and any views presented are coloured by her social standing and subjugation by the males she depicts. This female-dominated narration however, is contradicted in its authority by the final chapter of the novel. The "Historical Notes" are a transcript of the "Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies" held in the year 2195. The speakers at this theoretical symposium are all male, and it is they who have taken it upon themselves to arrange the unnumbered tapes of Offred's narrated story into some semblance of order. This occurrence, in itself a wider implication of an academic masculine authority and monopoly that persists today, provides another angle from which the narrated female story can be explored. Of course, the fact that Atwood is female cannot be dismissed, and whilst this thesis explores the masculine element of her novel, it is with the knowledge and awareness that this doubled female authorship of Atwood and Offred presents a unique portrayal of masculinity.

Chapter One: Gilead's Gendered Divide

This chapter explores the religiously conservative and heteronormative gender roles reinforced by the Republic of Gilead. Throughout *The Handmaid's Tale* the reader is presented with a traditional masculinity, one that is enforced by the roles that the male characters are defined by within the regime. By defining how masculinity is presented in the Republic, this chapter explores how masculinity operates within the Republic and the limitations of this presentation of masculinity. The heteronormative approach to both sexes within the novel is presented through the eyes of a disenfranchised member of the female breeding class, that of Handmaid Offred, whose rights do not even include a right to her own name. She offers the reader insight through her blinkered gaze into life in the Republic of Gilead and we experience the gendered separation of her world as she glimpses it from under lowered eyes. Within this supposed theocracy, women are viewed as a means to an end, they are not viewed as people, rather as possessions. They are denied ownership of property, material possessions, even their own children and their own bodies. The Handmaid's are owned by "society", passed from household to household like breed-stock. However, this disenfranchisement of the female individual extends also to the male, as he too is limited in his options. In his article entitled "Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity" Michael S. Kimmel states: "The hegemonic definition of manhood is a man *in* power, a man *with* power, and a man *of* power. We equate manhood with being strong, successful, capable, reliable, in control" (124). Whilst men are undeniably *in control* within the Republic, how much this control actually relates to the power by the individual is disputable. Males are expected to conform to the religious, heteronormative ideals of Gilead as much as women are, the only

difference is that males are granted greater 'power' by the Republic if they do so. To extend Nancy Henley's idea of power, presented in the Introduction, it will utilise the definition she presents in her chapter entitled "Body Politics Revisited: What Do We Know Today?" in the anthology *Gender, Power, and Communication in Human Relationships*. Henley states that power is the "capability of influencing or compelling others, based on the control of desired resources" (28). In defining power in these terms, it follows that a majority of the 'power', (making the assumption that because it is based on control of resources that it is finite in its amount), within *The Handmaid's Tale* is male-dominated.

Within Offred's immediate domestic environment of the household, Henley's 'micropolitical sphere', there are limited gender interactions; any inter-gender contact is strictly regulated by the Republic and the genders do little to no associating outside of set pieces of interaction. Offred's escort by the Guardians to the Commander's residence in the opening of the novel, the showing of passes to Guardians on the gate, Offred's visit to the doctor's surgery, the monthly impregnation Ceremony with the Commander, or a brief exchange of tokens for food whilst shopping, are the limited, and sanctioned interactions that Offred is allowed to have and documents in her narrative. These heteronormative roles are enforced by the rights the men experience and the limited responsibilities the women are given; men are appointed as "Commanders", as chauffeurs, as Guardians of the Faith, soldiers, and shopkeepers; whereas women's roles are defined by their domestic capabilities, Wives, cooks, maids, quasi-Nuns, and the Handmaids as breed-stock. By limiting the roles that men and women are allowed according to their sex, Atwood's novel adheres to a heterosexual reading; a man, a woman, and potentially a handmaid, form the only acceptable sexual and domestic combination. The dehumanisation of the handmaids is crucial in this context; were they to be treated as entitled human beings their role within

the marital relationship would amount to that of a mistress, and whilst this is a heterosexually “normal” role, it undermines the sanctity of marriage, and the heterosexual standard pairing, that the Republic reinforces so severely. Any deviation from this “norm” is punished by death, either execution or expulsion to the radioactive Colonies. As Offred informs the reader, the Handmaids “are for breeding purposes: we aren’t concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. On the contrary: everything possible has been done to remove us from that category. There is supposed to be nothing entertaining about us, no room is to be permitted for the flowering of secret lusts” (Atwood 146). In divorcing the Handmaids from their rights to behave as human beings, as women, the Republic has simultaneously attempted to make them as undesirable as possible whilst ensuring that they do not threaten the heterosexual, monogamous matrimonial pairing. To cast the Handmaids in the role of breed-stock, and to remove from them any human agency, is to also remove the role of mistress, concubine, or whore; they “are two-legged wombs, that’s all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices” (Atwood 146). Essentially cast as test tubes on legs, these ‘ambulatory vessels’ are granted no rights or freedoms and they become simply another household feature of the ruling class of Gilead.

The male characters are affected by this denial of human agency as well as the women; their relationships with women are limited to professional, pre-ordained interactions, and they are at risk of death or expulsion if they contravene the strict laws of the Republic. The difference between the two is that the women in the novel, and the Handmaids in particular, are only granted the freedom to live if they abide by the law, whereas the men have the possibility of a life with status if they follow the regime’s directives. The masculine characters are granted an immediate advantage because of their sex, whereas women are immediately disadvantaged because of theirs. It is apparent that this male possession of

power is dependent on their towing of the party line so to speak; the men are free to act as they wish, provided they act in a way that the Republic approves of. Privilege seems to be particularly evident through the control of female sexuality; the brothels are government-sanctioned and staffed by the women that are stationed in them, the Handmaid's are gifted only to those men whom the Republic deems worthy – not necessarily those who provide the best chance at repopulation. Maintenance of status and privilege is dependent on continued Republic approval of these privileged males. The Commander, embodies the Republic's ideal masculinity in Offred's narrative, he is considered a worthy man; he has a household, he has Guardians to tend his Wife's garden, he has obtained a rank and station that earns him a Handmaid. It is hinted in the ending of the novel that he was instrumental in the setting up of the Republic, and throughout the novel he maintains his status as a powerful male. We see this privilege and power reflected in material possession; the Commander's house, for example, is described by Offred as "Late Victorian ... built for a large rich family" (Atwood 18). This is the hope of the Republic, the large family, the wealth is there, it is the large family that is wanted and Offred is the stock provided to him to facilitate this. As well as the house, Offred notes the car the Commander possesses; "It's black of course, the colour of prestige or a hearse, and long and sleek" (Atwood 27). The car is a symbol of the Commander and men like him who possess such cars; prestige and death for these men are closely linked, they are two sides of the same coin. If you follow orders, obey the law, are an upstanding citizen of the Republic, then there is reward in prestige, power, and status; if you do not, the reward is death.

The text presents a traditional patriarchal society in which men are possessors of power, as a part of this traditional patriarchy, the regime exhibits a regressive stance on homosexuality. According to Rowland, Liggins and Uskalis' "Introduction" in *Signs of*

Masculinity: Men in Literature 1700 to the Present; “Writing the male body is frequently the occasion for fracturing received notions of masculinity and introducing alternative narratives of desire and gender identity, involving effeminacy, impotence and homoerotic/homosexual attraction” (10). Atwood does not explicitly fracture or deviate from the perceived and accepted notion of masculinity; indeed, Atwood’s Republic does everything in its power to preserve a conservative and antiquated masculine ideal. Male potency is enshrined in law, as is feminine lack. Despite the lack of explicit deviation from this traditional ideal of masculinity, Atwood’s novel possesses tiny notes of digression from the “norm”, introducing an alternative narrative of her own. The gender traitors on the Wall, citizens the Republic has executed for acts of homosexuality, indicate that there is still a subculture that is resistant to the dictated conservative masculinity of the regime. This creates a tension within the novel, not only between the Republic and a nonconformist underbelly, but also between the Republic’s portrayal of masculinity or accepted masculinity, and the many real facets of masculinity. These so called “gender traitors”, hung out as a public warning on the Wall, indicate the Republic’s attempt to maintain a socially regressive, conservative, and religiously reinforced morality that has been present in every culture at some point in time. The persecution of homosexuals, or as the Republic brand them “gender traitors”, has formed a part of each country’s history. In England and Wales, Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 sought to reaffirm a moral and social order and bolster a crisis in national identity that had resulted in the uproar over Home Rule for Ireland. From 1885 – 1967 all male homosexual acts and male homosexuality in England and Wales were completely illegal (Edwards 17). Although Atwood’s Republic is set in America, this historic occurrence is echoed in the text. As Nye states: “in crises, whether real or invented, societies tend to revert reflexively to what appear to be stable

gender norms centered [sic] squarely on bodies" (1955) . The Republic's regressive stance on sexuality is a knee-jerk reaction within a state that is attempting to win a war, to control its citizens, and maintain power. As Offred phrases it within the novel there has occurred a "return to traditional values" (Atwood 17).

Prominent Canadian literary critic Shannon Hengen quotes Marilyn French in her book *Margaret Atwood's Power* stating that by "adopting the role of feminist historian, French studies how the structures of women's power have been dismantled and devalued across cultures over time" (27). She continues by stating that French's central argument of her work in *Beyond Power* is as follows: "To become dominant men had to splinter women's power in three ways: they had to break the bond of mutual affection between men and women and substitute a bond of power; to break the bond of unity among women; and to break the bond of love between women and children, substituting a bond of power between men and children" (28). This triple attack upon women's power is present within Atwood's novel, operating to simultaneously disempower women and empower the male. Firstly, the Republic – whilst struggling to breed children – has successfully bred distrust and fear within each sector of society, at every level; one of the first casualties of this distrust has been the bond between women and men, which has been recast in the Republic. The primary bond between male and female the reader is presented with is the relationship that between Offred and the Commander; initially this bond is the proper and sanctioned one, their only interaction is during the monthly impregnation ceremony and they scarcely interact outside of this, however as the Commander breaks the rules and invites Offred into his study a bond is formed that is prohibited. In spite of this connection, the bond between the Commander and Offred is one that is dominated by the male, he is in complete control of their relationship, Offred draws the reader's attention to her precarious position, stating:

“For him, I must remember, I am only a whim” (Atwood 168). He summons Offred as and when he desires, as and when they will not be discovered, and she is treated as all the rest of the household staff otherwise, with no power to summon him. The imbalance of power in their relationship is only saved from being completely in his favour by the knowledge that if they get caught, he too will face the wrath of the Republic. The second male-female bond that the reader encounters is that between the Commander and his Wife, Serena Joy. Their bond is one that Offred presents as she experiences it herself; there is a coldness between them, their marriage is not a loving one. When Offred questions the Commander about his Wife during one of their secretive liaisons he states: “We don’t seem to have much in common, these days” (Atwood 166). Although Offred’s view of Serena Joy is coloured by her increasingly close bond with the Commander as their relationship develops, it is made clear that outside of mealtimes and the ceremony that there is little real interaction between the husband and wife pair, and there is no love exhibited between them. R. W Connell states in *The History of Masculinity* that “Gentry masculinity involved domestic authority over women, though the women were actively involved in making and maintaining the network of alliances that tied the gentry together” (249). The gentry masculinity within the Republic is the ruling class of the Commanders and their Wives, they associate with one another socially. Offred notes that this network of alliances is strengthened by the Wives, and their interactions with one another: “Sometimes ... Serena Joy is out, visiting another Commander’s Wife ... She takes food, a cake or pie or loaf of bread” (Atwood 162). The fostering of the bonds between the set social classes is not for friendship, it is for alliance, they are political relationships, designed to further the careers of the Commanders, their ever supportive Wives ensuring that socially they are beyond reproach. The bond between

Offred's Commander and his Wife then, is a bond that maintains their social status, a business partnership for want of a better name, because it is certainly not a bond of love.

With respect to French's second bond, that which exists between women, rather than fracturing it and replacing it with power, as she suggests must occur with the other two types, the bond between females must be broken completely. Just as there exists a chasm between the men and women in the text, so too there is a strong division that prevails between the women of the novel. The separated roles for females within the Republic limit their interactions as a gendered group, resulting in a fractured female identity that causes each group to associate within their own station and not to stray outside of it. The identity of woman has been subcategorized into differing domestic roles, each with prescribed duties and territories within the domestic space: the Marthas, who are responsible for cooking, cleaning and general household chores; the Handmaids, who are responsible for bearing children and the weekly shopping; and the Wives, whose responsibility it is to ensure the household runs smoothly. Aunt Lydia sells the regime's fracturing of the female to the Handmaid's in the Red Centre as a kindness: "Why expect one woman to carry out all the functions necessary to the serene running of a household? It isn't reasonable or humane" (Atwood 172). Women are taught to distrust and dislike one another, creating division and perpetuating their oppressive state. Handmaids are looked down on by all females, not because of the people they are but because of what they are. Offred highlights this to us early on when she states: "the frown isn't personal: it's the red dress she disapproves of, and what it stands for" (Atwood 19). The red dress is at once a symbol of hope for a fertile future and a reminder of the failure of the reproductive efforts of other women. The red dress reminds other women that in the eyes of the regime they are failing to fulfil their biological function, and so it exists as beacon of their failure, leading them to

dislike and openly despise those who wear it. This disapproval of Offred's status continues throughout the text; when Offred and her companion encounter a funeral procession for a child during their shopping trip Offred notes the women's reactions to them; "Beneath her veil the first one scowls at us. One of the others turns aside, spits on the sidewalk" (Atwood 54). The Aunts who train the Handmaids acknowledge their difficulty in fitting in but also remind them they are to remember the Wives are in an awkward position as well: "Try to think of it from their point of view ... It isn't easy for them" (24). In the Republic, women are untrustworthy, even to one another.

The power of the Republic has removed all rights from the Handmaid's and sold it to them as a favour, as something that is good for not only Gilead but for each of them personally. Males, by comparison, are law enforcers, rulers, "lads" in the brothel, and soldiers. They are seen mostly as single individuals in the novel but they exist as a fraction of a larger group, which wields power. Guardians of the Faith are an example of this fractional power. Although Offred states that they are comprised of those that are "either stupid or older or disabled or very young" (Atwood 30), they possess power. They guard the gates, demanding identity passes and they have the power to kill: "Last week they shot a woman" (Atwood 30). The fractured bonds between females in the Republic are contrasted by the friendly bonds from Offred's former life between her and her college friend Moira. The flashbacks to their relationship at college are ones that is familiar; settling onto a friend's bed before heading out for the evening: "Moira, sitting on the edge of my bed, legs crossed" (Atwood 47); or horse-playing: "Moira and I, with paper bags filled with water ... Leaning out my dorm window, dropping them on the heads of the boys below" (Atwood

67). This female pair-bonding has been destroyed within the Republic, it cannot survive with the categorising of women into single domestic roles, whilst the masculine bond has been reinforced, bolstered, and given greater power under the rule in Gilead.

Finally, the bond between women and children that is so sacred, is entirely removed within the Republic, and, as French states, replaced with power between man and child. The removal of children from their birth mothers, which gave the Republic its Handmaids, was the first step in this journey. The role of the Handmaid is to simply bear a child, no further mothering duty is allowed outside of initially nursing her offspring. Offred's experience in the house of a fellow Handmaid at the birth of such a child demonstrates this when she states: "She'll be allowed to nurse the baby, for a few months, they believe in mother's milk" (Atwood 137). This short period of time is all the relationship Handmaids have with their child; the regime may 'believe in mother's milk' but it does not believe that they should be allowed to raise the next generation of Gilead. The role of birth mother is to bear offspring, and to initially nurture it but then to give it up to be raised by strangers. The relationship between the adoptive mother – those Commander's Wives fortunate enough to have a fertile combination of husband and Handmaid – is one that cannot take the place of the bond between birth mother and child, primarily because this child is not of the Wife's genes. Each child born to a Handmaid is a reminder of the failure of the Wife, and although it gives her status among her peers, and provides her husband the same luxury, it is not of her blood, and the bond is one that is based upon the power and status a child provides rather than upon biologically programmed love. The conclusion of this is that the void created by the lack of a mother-child bond is filled by the bond of power between child and father; a man has proved himself virile and by extension worthy of power and status. As the novel's concluding chapter states: "What male of the Gilead period could resist the

possibility of fatherhood, so redolent of status, so highly prized?" (Atwood 323).

Fatherhood is not viewed as life-changing, or wonderful, or even as something to be embarked upon with caution; instead it is presented as an achievement, a status enhancer, a prize to be won. Offred notes in her recollection of the birth that the male of the household is, as his child takes its first gulps of breath, the Commander of the house is contemplating his promotion: "Probably he's figuring out when his promotion is likely to be announced. He's sure to get it now" (Atwood 126). That the supposed father of this precious commodity is considering how he will benefit from its appearance is a demonstration of the power bond between father and offspring, rather than one of love, a bond that the Republic has chosen to enforce and encourage by bestowing status on successful fathers. The Commander's maintenance of his status is linked to his virility, and his status as a powerful male, and thus his status as Commander and the trappings of his lifestyle are dependent upon his ability to perform. The role of the male within the domestic unit is that of head of house, the Commander is expected to keep the house in the manner to which his Wife has been accustomed but to be essentially absent within its walls. We are led to believe that Offred's Commander was instrumental in the emergence of the Republic; the "Historical Notes" explain the attempt in the post-Gilead world to work out who Offred's Commander is. There is the possibility that he could be one of two men, both of who played a large part in establishing the Republic: "We argued that such a highly placed individual had probably been a participant in the first of the top-secret Sons of Jacob Think Tanks, at which the philosophy and social structure of Gilead were hammered out" (Atwood 318). As a direct result of their role they were both rewarded with a high ranking status; this status, and the lifestyle they are allowed to lead, it is hoped, will give rise to a child, one that will consist of his genetics and will be raised by Commander and Wife as if it

were solely theirs. The Commander, however, will have little to do with raising the child. Much of the household is feminine, the child will be a part of this sphere, not a concern of the Commander and father-figure. It is a rigged system, the Republic has weighted the die in the favour of these men already by giving them Handmaids, women proven to be fruitful, so when these women are successful in proving their fertility, they are saved from death, allowed to live unashamed, and the masculine element reaps the reward of promotion. The power of the male is reinforced and praised seemingly at every turn within the Republic; males are given every chance to succeed under the regime, by fair means or foul, and when they do, their complicity is rewarded with further power and status.

The contrast between men of the Republic and men “before” is highlighted by Offred’s reminiscences on her life before the Republic. The masculine figure of this time “before” is Luke, Offred’s husband. She had a child with him, a child who was taken from her but also represented her salvation in the new order; her child was her passport into the Handmaid role as it proved she was fertile. Luke exists as an absent male figure, whose role as father was of the father-figures of before, he worried about things like if the plastic bags were within reach of their child and took steps to remove the hazard; “She could get one of those over her head, he’d say. You know how kids like to play” (Atwood 37). He exhibited nurturing, caring tendencies which are predominantly associated with, and dictated to be by the Republic, feminine in their discourse. The regression of the Republic to the gendered roles has resulted in a sperm-donor father who is present at the household’s bible readings but absent from the domestic sphere; “The function of the father seems threatened to degenerate into an empty symbolic one: ‘Daddy? Oh, he supplied the sperm’” (Forrester 115). This degeneration has not only occurred within Gilead, but it has been encouraged through the divisions of man and woman and their respective duties within the Republic. By

comparing Offred's past to her present we see that the threatened role of the father, the fear that he will disappear has been realised. She recalls giving birth to her daughter in the pre-Gilead society: "What I remember is Luke with me in the hospital, standing beside my head, holding my hand," (Atwood 136), and we see that this role has all but vanished under the regime when she describes the birthing scene of a fellow Handmaid: "The Commander, of course, is nowhere in sight. He's gone wherever men go on such occasions, some hideout" (Atwood 126).

Through Offred's depiction of them within the novel, powerful males do not appear to be unhappy with their role within the regime; none of the masculine Gileadean males, from the Commander, to Nick, to the Guardians on the gates, seem dissatisfied with their position. From Offred's perspective they present a united front of powerful satisfaction with the way the Republic is: "men, on the other hand, are mostly perceived as solid, fixed, linear, sterling, predictable. They are a still point, a calculable presence. Even their betrayal is predictable and forgivable, whereas female treachery is inexplicable. The women know enough about women not to trust them, and not enough about men to withdraw forgiveness. They choose, at least, to see men as reliable and secure" (Deery 474). The males within the novel adhere to this predictability; whilst the action of the Commander taking Offred as a mistress appears to contradict the unified masculine front by disobeying the law and thus going against the prescribed masculinity of the Republic, by defining this action as adulterous behaviour we understand that this is a type of predictable masculine betrayal: "Men at the top have always has mistresses, why should things be any different now?" (Atwood 172). This predictable masculine betrayal is juxtaposed with the female betrayal present in the novel; a betrayal that is depicted by Janine being asked to keep her ears open and to let the Aunts know if she hears anything (Atwood 142). Offred notes that

it does not matter that Janine then shared this with a fellow Handmaid in the Red Centre, Janine was protecting her own back, looking after herself: "It didn't mean she wouldn't testify against us, any of us, if she had the occasion" (Atwood 143). Janine's betrayal is worse than the Commander's, hers is a betrayal of the group for self-advancement, the Commander's is for self-gratification rather than advancement.

In Offred's former life, she was the other woman – she began a relationship with Luke before his marriage had ended: "when Luke was still in flight from his wife ... Before we were married" – and now that becomes her prescribed role in the Commander's household (Atwood 60). She becomes an accomplice, or if not an accomplice she is the means, to the Commander's predictably masculine betrayal; her role expands, from childbearing vessel to Scrabble playing mistress. Although her fertile womb is welcome in the household, Offred, the woman, is not. Serena Joy ensures the boundaries and expectations she expects Offred to adhere to are made perfectly clear in their first meeting: "I want to see as little of you as possible" (Atwood 25). Serena's status as a Wife gives her power within her household; Offred has observed her "pointing with her stick" in the garden to direct the Guardian where he is to dig (Atwood 22). She exercises her power over the women under her, making sure to express her superiority over Offred: "You can sit down. I don't make a practice of it, but just this time" (Atwood 25). She makes certain that her position of power is the foundation upon which their relationship is built: "As far as I'm concerned, this is like a business transaction. But if I get trouble, I'll give trouble back." (Atwood 25). Their relationship is mutually beneficial, Offred is allowed to reside in relative comfort whilst Serena Joy has the chance to have a child. Serena Joy, although female, has power, she has control over desired resources as far as Offred is concerned, her life is highest upon this list, and once again Marilyn French's fractured female identity is presented to the reader.

However, the power that the Wife holds alters when Offred's relationship with the Commander develops. Offred's female betrayal is that of taking another woman's husband, as the Commander's masculine betrayal is predictable and forgivable – because he is male, Offred's is not – because she is female, Serena Joy warns: "As for my husband ... he's just that. My husband. Till death do us part. It's final" (Atwood 26). The Wife knows that she is a risk, and stakes her claim upon the male, setting her and Offred in opposition from the very opening of the novel. Offred was initially hopeful of her new household: "I wanted, then, to turn her into an older sister, a motherly figure, someone who would understand and protect me" (Atwood 26). She is not given the chance by Serena Joy for either of these relationships, the regime has ensured that distrust between the female roles of the household is encouraged, causing their ability to identify with one another and recognise any form of sisterhood is negated. By embarking upon the dangerous path of concubine to the Commander, Offred becomes something more than a means to a child, the danger of her situation increases but she also gains a power from the secret relationship and what it enables her to do.

The power exchange between Offred and the Commander is much more subtle than that between Handmaid and Wife. Offred does not have an explicit power over him; she cannot hold their secretive affair over his head for it would do her more harm than him were they discovered. However, she has some power to request things, hand cream for instance: "I didn't want to sound begging, but I wanted what I could get" (Atwood 166). This small token hints at an exchange of power but also a material exchange – her time and company are worth something. The relationship Offred has with the Commander evolves almost into that of one with an abusive family member; she must do what he wants because she is unsure of how to tell him no and remain within the household, and alive. He controls

her life and her fate: "But watch out, Commander, I tell him in my head. I've got my eye on you. One false move and I'm dead" (Atwood 99). This fear is not fear of his power, but rather of his inability to keep their relationship secret. He nearly slips up in the monthly procreation ceremony involving Commander, Wife, and Handmaiden as the Wife's surrogate; "He reached his hand up as if to touch my face", and Offred has to explicitly tell him not to try and touch her in front of his Wife (Atwood 171). This collusion between dominant male and owned female has a power of its own within the frame of the Republic and the household, it is a different relationship exchange than the others. There is an affectionate air, but also an unease on Offred's part; she cannot exactly be sure of what the Commander wants. Offred's training in the Red Centre resulted in an un-Godly and unusual piece of advice from Aunt Lydia; "Men are sex machines ... and not much more. They only want one thing. You must learn to manipulate them, for your own good. Lead them around by the nose" (Atwood 153). Offred cannot lead the Commander by his nose, but she can beg small tokens, take the small victories of Scrabble wins and old magazines, and use her feminine power to gain small advantages that would otherwise be denied her.

Within the novel, Nick, the Commander's chauffeur is the second most important male character in Offred's micropolitical sphere. Nick's role as chauffeur dictates that he cares for the car and is near it often when Offred encounters him. Offred notes that at least the way men still enjoy cars has not changed; "The driver is going over it [the car] with a chamois, lovingly. This at least hasn't changed, the way men caress good cars" (Atwood 27). This caress of the car, the possessive relationship between a man and his car, is something universally familiar. Advertising and marketing of cars as sexy, utilising women to sell them to men and the female pronoun used in their address are all indicative that Offred is not only thinking of the car; she is identifying with the car as a possessed object. Men are

possessive of women now, but they are no longer appreciative and caressing. John Updike phrases this notion in his work *Venus and Others*, stating that the female body persistently haunts everyday merchandise “from the silky epidermal feel of a soft cigarette packet to the rumpy curves of a Porsche 911” (5). The car’s ‘rumpy curves’ are here caressed by a man who has not yet earned the right to caress a woman, the Republic has not yet deemed him worthy, if it ever does. Offred comments; “He [Nick] lives here, in the household, over the garage. Low status: he hasn’t been issued a woman, not even one. He doesn’t rate: some defect” (Atwood 27). The dismissive tone of Offred’s narration implies that she herself dismisses Nick, his cheeky demeanour and unselfconscious air make her nervous; his lack of concern for station and propriety are as evident as his loving stroking over the body of the car: “He’s too casual, he’s not servile enough” (Atwood 27). The shorter sentences here indicate a stress on Offred. In the final pages of the novel we learn that the written version was scribed from a voice recording of Offred’s story and when read aloud, in these few sentences one can hear the clipped, shortened phrases, and imagine Offred recalling this scene, narrating it with the echo of residual concern and fear of Nick’s refusal, or inability, to conform. This inability to conform to the prescribed servility and role has resulted in a limited status for him. The firm gender division that has been heavily developed in the Republic where women are feminine, carrying babies, working in the kitchen, shopping, cleaning, gardening – but not digging and heavy manual labour – of being housewives, has created an opposite side, a side where men are leaders, shop owners, soldiers, chauffeurs and powerful. This polarisation of the sexes and their relative power has resulted in a hierarchical structure, with those that are male and strongly conformist at the top, to those that are unable to conform and dead on the wall. Nick falls in the in between space, he is there and male, but he is not deemed worthy enough to bestow any great power or status

upon. Men are simultaneously everywhere, in every corner of the Republic, and yet nowhere at all through their lack of power over their own destinies.

The survival of the human race has, and always will, depend upon the reproductive capabilities of the species. These reproductive capabilities are enshrined in the Republic of Gilead's law; that is to say that men's reproductive capabilities are protected by law – a law that states that no male can be sterile, but a woman can be. The virile figure of man – the ability to sire the next generation – is enshrined in regime law, it is a protected status and to verbalise that men may be the problem and not women is treasonous. This masculine virility, the power of the male to plant his seed and give rise to the next generation, has been a benchmark by which males have been measured, and measuring themselves, for generations. The Republic has returned to this conservative, heteronormative benchmark of masculine virility by way of not only reinforcing its own power, but also emphasising women's lack thereof – whether that is lack of power, lack of choice, or lack of ability to child bear.

Masculine prowess and manly status are heavily linked to potency; the more powerful a man's seed, the more potent the man. He can fulfil his biological function, and fulfil it well, this ability gives him posturing rights over other males. At the most basic biological level, it ensures his genes live on through his progeny, not another's. As Robert Nye states: "In most times and places, societies have regarded the fathering of children as a necessary and sufficient feature of full masculinity" (1953). The value of male virility as a function of masculinity is recognised by the Republic, men of worth are not only given status symbols such as Wives, domestic staff, and big houses, but also Handmaids. These Handmaids represent recognition from the Republic that a man is deemed worthy enough that his

progeny should be forthcoming to repopulate the Republic and so a Handmaid is installed into his possession to better the chances of this occurring. Naomi Segalo states; “In the mythology of patriarchal tradition, the mother is just the seedbed, the link in a chain that gives sons to fathers” (41), and the mythology of Gilead reflects this, Handmaids are the seedbeds of the Republic. Our understanding of masculine virility in the novel is provided by Offred, who is used as breed-stock for the Commander, in whose house she resides, in order to assist in the repopulation of the Republic. Despite the protected status of male potency, there is an unspoken tension within the text: the understanding that men may be the problem as much as women. Offred experiences this undercurrent of dissent verbalised twice; once within the Doctor’s office and once when Serena Joy, the Commander’s Wife, offers her the freedom of sleeping with the Commander’s Chauffeur, Nick, to produce a child.

Offred’s encounter with the doctor reinforces the protected status of the masculine potency: “I almost gasp: he’s said a forbidden word. *Sterile*. There is no such thing as a sterile man any more, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that’s the law” (Atwood 70). The shock with which Offred reacts indicates how quickly male status has been inextricably retied to virility, and the seriousness with which this virility is protected. Offred is one of the “first wave” of Handmaids so to speak, they have experienced the revolution first hand and were among the first group of women retrained by the Republic to become Handmaids. The astonishment that Offred registers demonstrates how the reproductive capabilities status-holding males within the regime are inherently important to their status. The fear that she exhibits is borne not simply from the fear of the words the Doctor is uttering, but because it highlights her own plight within the novel. The successful Handmaid, one that bears a child, is a saved Handmaid. Offred

comments upon a fellow Handmaid who has successfully produced a healthy baby: “she’ll never be sent to the Colonies, she’ll never be declared Unwoman” (Atwood 137). The failure to produce offspring is solely the Handmaid’s, if repeated postings result in no child then she will be branded an Unwoman, one that is barren, and as such becomes useless in her role. Sherrill Grace summarises the plight of the females of Gilead in her work *Gender as Genre: Atwood’s Autobiographical ‘I’*, as follows: “Gilead denies Offred, indeed all women, any Subjecthood at all, thereby reducing her to the status of Object, natural resource, a pair of ‘viable ovaries’” (196). Under the regime, Offred has been reduced to her most basic biological function, walking a thin line between success and failure; all she needs to do is to conceive a child, fulfil her most basic biological function and she will be saved, failure will result in expulsion to the radioactive Colonies and certain death.

The concluding chapter of the novel, “Historical Notes”, portrays for us the context under which the Handmaid’s role came to pass within Gilead:

The regime created an instant pool of such women [as Offred] by the simple tactic of declaring all second marriages and non-marital liaisons adulterous, arresting the female partners, and, on the grounds they were morally unfit, confiscating the children they already had, who were adopted by childless couples of the upper echelons who were eager for progeny by any means. (Atwood 316)

We are made aware that in Offred’s former life she had a child with her husband Luke, who was a divorced man. His role in Offred’s downfall was unintentionally three-fold; firstly, he began to see her when he was still married, secondly, he chose to remarry her once divorced – both of these casting Offred in the role of adulteress, and thirdly, he was virile enough to provide her with a child – casting her in the role of functioning womb. This triple

sentence that Luke gifted Offred is the reason that her role moved from that of loving mother and wife to a viable womb under the regime. Offred's child was confiscated from her as prescribed and she entered the Rachel and Leah Re-education Centre; a repurposed old school within which potential Handmaids were re-educated in the way of the Republic, and their new function in it, by the quasi-Nun figures named Aunts.

By exploring the divided gender roles represented in Atwood's novel, this chapter has analysed how the heteronormative roles that Republic enforces serve to limit individual power. The regressive and conservative social divisions operate to markedly disenfranchise women, but they also ensure that the power made available to males is only granted in exchange for conforming to this conservatism. The characters of Nick and the Commander embody the two paths for males, and it is clear that if a male wishes to gain power and status within the regime, the Commander's version masculine conformity is the path that will enable him to do so. This chapter has defined the masculinity present within the Republic, and demonstrated that whilst it is far freer than the female, how it, too, is limited within the oppressive monotheocracy of Gilead.

Chapter Two: Territory as Power

The forthcoming chapter will expand the investigation of masculinity within *The Handmaid's Tale* by exploring how the gendered power divide of Chapter One is demonstrated by Offred's physical environment. By considering how the regime's masculinity manifests itself in the physical structure of the household, this chapter examines how this relates to the macropolitical climate of the Republic as a whole. There are two spheres of physical spaces that the characters in the novel occupy; the first is the Commander's residence, the property that the Commander, and his household, live in. This is Offred's immediate, micropolitical environment. The second is the macropolitical structure of the Republic itself, and how this is divided between the genders. The two areas of the macropolitical arena that this chapter will focus upon are the Rachel and Leah Re-Education Centre, where future Handmaids are trained, and the government-run brothel, Jezebel's. By narrowing the focus within the macropolitical sphere to these predominantly female populated environments, this chapter explores the power, and functioning of the male characters within environments where there is a numerical gender disadvantage. The relationship between the micropolitical sphere and the macropolitical sphere is one that Nancy Henley proposed in her ground-breaking text *Body Politics*, and this chapter will explore how her theory can be applied to Atwood's Republic.

In a sense, the gendered interactions that occur within the house both shape, and are shaped by, the physical structure of the property. The power exchanges between the characters are dictated by their location within the house; for example, Offred and the Commander's relationship alters dramatically between the setting of the bedroom during the Ceremony and his study during a game of Scrabble. This alteration in behaviours, as

well as the physical furnishings of the house, play a part in establishing and reinforcing the gendered divide in the household. The household is inhabited predominantly by females; as well as Offred, there are two maids, titled as Marthas in the regime, Rita and Cora, and Serena Joy, the Wife. The Commander exists as the household's figurehead, an omnipresent male that is theoretically the master of the household despite its feminine residents. In one of Atwood's earlier works, *Bluebeard's Egg*, first published two years prior to *The Handmaid's Tale*, we see a similar household structure depicted: "The structure of the house was hierarchical, with my grandfather at the top, but its secret life – the life of pie crusts, clean sheets, the box of rags in the linen closet, the loaves in the oven – was female" (Atwood 12). The gendered divide of the home sphere echoes throughout Atwood's works and we see it presented in Offred's story in the same structure as in *Bluebeard's Egg*. The female Marthas, are responsible for the daily running of the household, and Serena Joy is the alpha female for those within it, but the Commander maintains a symbolic presence as the master of his domain; when he is present at the Ceremony evening Bible readings he is in charge, and his Wife takes a lower status in his presence. Offred muses as she waits for the household to assemble for the monthly Ceremony: "*Household*: that is what we are. The Commander is the head of the household. The house is what he holds" (Atwood 91). However, this masculine dominance is not reflected by the house's physical appearance; the main body of the house is influenced by the female presence, each room reflecting the gender that inhabits it in the interactions that occur there and in its furnishings.

The sitting room is the main room of the house in which significant exchanges between the household and the character of Serena Joy are set. This parlour-come-sitting-room is the province of the Wife, Offred notes that it is, allegedly, her domain: "the sitting room is supposed to be Serena Joy's territory" (Atwood 97). The female influence of Serena

Joy in the room is reflected in its furnishings: “the dusk-rose velvet of the drawn drapes, the gloss of the matching chairs, eighteenth century, the cow’s-tongue hush of the tufted Chinese rug on the floor, with its peach-pink peonies, the suave leather of the Commander’s chair, the glint of brass on the box beside it” (Atwood 89). The furnishings are a physical manifestation of Serena Joy’s character, as well as her supposed power within that room. However, by specifically identifying the chair as the Commander’s, Offred draws attention to his presence in both the room and the household; this, the only piece of furniture in the room to be attributed to him, serves a dual purpose. Firstly it serves to illustrate that the sitting room is Serena Joy’s; the Commander’s chair is the only item of furniture Offred identifies as his, indicating that this is the only piece of him in the room, the rest, by implication, belonging to his Wife. Thus we deduce that the sitting room is predominantly Serena Joy’s. The second half of this identification of ownership of the chair is contradictory in nature to the first; the prominence of the chair within the room serves to place the Commander’s presence in it, there is a specific seat for him, one of ‘suave leather’. The conflicting analysis of this single statement leads us to the conclusion that, although the sitting room is ‘supposed’ to be Serena Joy’s, it is hers only because the Commander has allowed her to have it. Its tones may be subtle pink and the pictures chosen by her, but it contains his suave leather chair. He has a throne within her domain.

Offred assumes that the room is decorated to Serena Joy’s taste. She muses on the origins of the items within it, whilst referencing Serena Joy’s life pre-Gilead: “The paintings are possibly authentic. I suspect that when Serena Joy acquired them, after it became obvious to her that she’d have to redirect her energies into something convincingly domestic” (Atwood 90). Serena Joy’s past is supposedly that of a former singer and preacher on the religious programmes, Offred recalls her from her previous life before

Gilead when she watched her on television: “One of the women was called Serena Joy she was the lead soprano” (Atwood 26). Her disenfranchisement occurred with the rest of the female population’s, she was expected to turn her hand to something more befitting the Wife of a Commander, something more ‘convincingly domestic’ than her preaching about the domestic role of women: “Her speeches were about the sanctity of the home, and how women should stay at home” (Atwood 55). Now she has become what she told women they should become, she has realised her own self-fulfilling prophesy and has had to turn her hand to something ‘convincingly domestic’. She has become the second in command in the sanctity of her own household with its dusky pink shades and expensive rugs; “She stays in her home, but it doesn’t seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she’s been taken at her word” (Atwood 56). The power that Serena Joy possesses is depicted in a three specific examples from Offred’s recounting of the evening of the Ceremony. Firstly, Offred describes her taking her seat in the room as enthroning herself, using Offred as a prop to balance herself: “Possibly, she’ll put her hand on my shoulder, to steady herself, as if I’m a piece of furniture” (Atwood 89). She has the right to her seat, her chair, her place in her domain, and her Handmaid exists purely as a prop in order to ease her way – whether that be by providing a child for her household or providing a convenient shoulder to lean upon. Secondly, her power is demonstrated in her right to decorate the room as she wishes, her conflicting tastes are apparent in the furniture gathered about her, and by association, so is her character: “The tastes of Serena Joy are a strange blend: hard lust for quality, soft sentimental cravings” (Atwood 90). This hard lust vying with soft sentimental cravings, the hard and soft sides of Serena Joy’s character, depict a conflicted women, one who is struggling to stay at home and decorate her house with consistency. The final example of the Wife’s power within the room is the Commander’s entrance into it; this

interaction indicates that the power his Wife possesses, denoted by her chair and her Handmaid, is only hers because the Commander has bequeathed it to her, he can take it back at any time: “The Commander knocks at the door. The knock is prescribed ... he’s supposed to ask permission to enter it” (Atwood 97). The Commander’s knock is prescribed because the territory is supposedly his Wife’s, however, on this occasion the Commander dispenses with awaiting her answer; perhaps it is an oversight Offred speculates, maybe borne of tiredness, but this is indicative that Serena Joy’s territory, and by extension, her power, are only hers because he allows it, regardless of the reasoning behind his actions. “She likes to keep him waiting ... Tonight, however, she doesn’t even get that, because before Serena Joy can speak he steps forward into the room anyway. Maybe he’s just forgotten the protocol, but maybe it’s deliberate” (Atwood 97). If it is a deliberate action – and only Serena Joy knows if it is: “Who knows what she said to him, over the silver-encrusted dinner table? Or didn’t say?” (Atwood 97) – it serves as a forceful demonstration to his Wife that she is under his control. The two reasons for his action – purposeful or forgetful – result in the same outcome, to remind her house is ultimately his, her sitting room contains his chair and his household staff. It is a display of masculine power and ownership. If it were borne of forgetfulness, his actions are an even more overt display of his supremacy, it has simply slipped his mind that the sitting room is his Wife’s territory; his authority and masculine licence are so ingrained in his character that they are his default setting, if he does not think about his actions, he behaves as if Serena Joy’s status within the home is arbitrary and based entirely on his mandate.

The dominance of the female furnishings extends through the house from the sitting room, up the stairs and to the upper landing where Offred’s quarters are: “the polished hallway, which has a runner down the centre, dusty pink” (Atwood 18). The subdued flesh-

tones of the sitting-room extend across this path from door to door, linked by the “dusty-pink runner” (Atwood 59), a physical representation of the bond between Serena Joy and her Handmaid; their female identities tied with a dusty-pink pathway. The female power from the sitting room is amplified as it extends to the upstairs hallway; both Handmaid and hallway are Serena Joy’s, but we see a more powerful female presence in the pink upper hallway than in the sitting room. In the sitting room, masculine power is dominant, the Commander has a presence in his chair and his Bible, but up here, this is a female domain – he has no chair, no Bible, and no right of access – regardless of knocking for permission. This masculine power is not simply absent because the female is stronger; the Republic has control here, and it stipulates that this hallway is free of males because the hallway leads to the Handmaid’s quarters, and because males are not allowed to interact with them outside of specific times, the hallway is out of bounds for any male. Offred is shocked when she encounters the Commander up here: “I can see now, it’s the Commander, he isn’t supposed to be here” (Atwood 59). In contrast to Serena Joy’s manifestation of ownership in the house, Offred is reluctant to consider her room hers: “The door of the room – not my room, I refuse to say *my* – is not locked. In fact it doesn’t shut properly” (Atwood 18). However her unwillingness to claim it as hers is momentarily forgotten when she discovers the Commander upstairs, suddenly she declares ownership, her concern evident in her questions: “Was he invading? Was he in my room? I called it *mine*” (Atwood 59). The short, quick questions fired one after another indicate her anxiety, and her first question is that of territory, his invasion of her private quarters: “He is violating custom, what do I do now?” (Atwood 59). Regardless of this space being female, the pink carpet cannot remove the threat of the Commander. It is a combined threat, borne of fear of his power, but also his flagrant disregard for the rules; after all how female dominated can the hallway be if the

Commander disregards custom, and law, and enters? Masculine power takes precedence over the female domain, as it did in the sitting room, the linking pink carpet serving to carry this masculine power up the stairs and straight to Offred's door, masculinity commandeers the female highway between the rooms and exerts its power where it should not. There is a subtle difference in the portrayal of the Commander's expression of power here, rather than assuming an empowered right of entry, he has not entered Offred's domain, he is still in the hallway as she approaches: "he's looking into the room" (Atwood 59). Up until this moment, the room has been just that, 'the room' to Offred, as the Commander vacates the hallway, there is a power vacuum, the masculine dominance has dissipated and Offred stakes her claim upon the space: "MY room, then. There has to be some space, finally, that I claim as mine" (Atwood 60).

Offred's room is sparse, there is little furniture in it, all of it dedicated to a function; "A chair, a table, a lamp" (Atwood 17). Her surroundings are that of a guestroom, for that is her station within the household, she is a transient visitor, there to fulfil a function and afterward to move on – whether her purpose is met or not. Her description of the room reveals more about her situation because of what is not there, what she does not have, than what is. She notes that on the ceiling there is "a blank space, plastered over ... There must have been a chandelier once. They've removed anything you could tie a rope to" (Atwood 17). The idea that the 'they' – be they the ruling section of the regime or those in charge of her household – have removed her ability to commit the most final of decisions about her life is indicative of the extent to which her power has been removed: "I know why there is no glass, in front of the watercolour picture of blue irises, and why the window only opens partly and why the glass in it is shatterproof. It isn't running away they're afraid of. We wouldn't get that far. It's those other escapes, the ones you can open in yourself given a

cutting edge” (Atwood 17-18). She cannot even end her life should she so wish; the room serves to enforce the household’s power over her station, it is not her room despite her claiming, it is her prison. Her description of the room is unemotional, a detached categorising of the objects within it displaying her indifference towards it as anything other than a place to sleep: “A bed. Single, mattress medium-hard, covered with a flocked white spread. Nothing takes place in the bed but sleep; or no sleep” (Atwood 17). Her room embodies her functionality within the household, whilst it is not hers, it holds a small measure of privacy. Her status as a Handmaid, whilst making her a figure of dislike for some within Gilead, serves to protect her within her room. She is not to be left alone with men, she cannot interact on an intimate level – be it friendly or otherwise – with any other human being, and as such, her room is decidedly her own. This enforced aloneness creates a space within the house that simultaneously defines and allows her solitude, but it must be noted that the room is only Offred’s because no one else is allowed to claim it. As such, her power only exists within its walls because there is nothing else to take its place, she fills a power vacuum rather than taking active possession over the territory.

The sole territory of the Marthas, the only other females in the household, is that of the kitchen. They are the housekeepers who ensure that the food is cooked and the house, and Offred, are clean. By virtue of their kitchen enclave, they embody the domesticity of the household. Their characters are constantly presented carrying out domestic tasks; making bread, shelling peas, cutting up carrots or unpacking shopping. They are the representation of domesticity and homeliness within a segregated household; the kitchen is the nucleus of the home, and despite age old joke of a woman’s place being in the kitchen, within the Republic this joke has come to be realised, throughout the entire novel not once does a male character appear in the kitchen. Of the two Marthas, Rita, the eldest, displays

her authority within the kitchen most overtly; she does not approve of the Handmaids, or Offred, and she demonstrates this in her kitchen whenever Offred is present: “Rita sees me and nods whether in greeting or in a simple acknowledgement of my presence it’s hard to say” (Atwood 19). Rita fulfils her role in keeping the household running from her kitchen, she and Cora, the second Martha, interact with a closer and more equal relationship than any of the other female-female or male-female exchanges within the novel. They are of the same social station and they operate companionably to take care of the house and its occupants. They have the same master and mistress as Offred, but their domain is the kitchen, the hub from which they operate. Offred longs to share their female companionship, they are the closest thing to her equals in the household; “Today, despite Rita’s closed face and pressed lips, I would like to stay here in the kitchen. Cora might come in, from somewhere else in the house ... and Rita would make coffee” (Atwood 20). This female companionship that Offred longs for is something that Rita and Cora demonstrate within the kitchen between one another, they gossip and exchange views on an equal power basis, neither one superior to the other. Offred is an imposter to the kitchen, she must be there for a reason – either to gather the food tokens for shopping or to hand over the weekly shopping she has done – she cannot enter without reason as this is not her domain: “Rita would not allow it ... The Marthas are not supposed to fraternize with us” (Atwood 21). The fracturing of the female identity is acted out between the different roles within the Commander’s household, and, like children in a playground, they ostracise one individual.

Although the kitchen is the domain of the Marthas, Offred specifically notes that they have no more rights over the ownership of the household than she: “we would sit at Rita’s kitchen table, which is not Rita’s any more than my table is mine” (Atwood 20).

However, the classification of the kitchen table as Rita's is indicative of her power within the kitchen; Offred makes sure to define it as hers as opposed to Cora's. Of course the caveat that she adds, that the tables in the house belong to none of them, is true, but her identification of the table as Rita's highlights the status Rita possesses in the kitchen. We do not see Offred attribute any physical object to Cora's possession besides a bottle of lemon oil and a duster; this division of property, and the discrepancy between the objects, is a demonstration of which Martha is in the highest position of power (Atwood 20). Despite their equal status, Rita is the principle Martha, and as such, she has the power to dismiss Offred from her kitchen without even having to speak; "I've been dismissed" Offred comments when the Marthas begin discussing her as if she is not present (Atwood 58). Although they are similar in that they are all three servants of the household, Rita and Cora are separate from Offred, within the kitchen they are dominant and Offred is only there because they allow her to be. For the Marthas, Offred notes that she is simply "a household chore, one among many" (Atwood 58).

The kitchen exists as female dominion within the household, Serena Joy enters it, Offred too, but the Commander and Nick are conspicuously absent from its territory. The masculine is not only unrequired within the kitchen – due to the presence of the Marthas – but also has no role to play in this section of the house. There is a devolution in the role of the male in the domestic running of the house; domestic chores are simultaneously removed from the masculine concern as well as the right of the male to become involved in their execution is. This devolution is demonstrated in the two instances encountered in the preparing of carrots in the text. The first example is from Offred's pre-Gilead life, her mother, the feminist, comments upon Luke's domesticity as he chops carrots in their kitchen: "You don't know what we had to go through, just to get you where you are. Look at

him, slicing up the carrots" (Atwood 131). Her upbraiding of him continues as Luke retorts that he enjoys cooking and she states: "Once upon a time you wouldn't have been allowed such a hobby, they'd have called you queer" (Atwood 131). In the pre-Gilead world, the gender roles within the household merged to create a symbiosis in which men and women, masculine and feminine, were considered to be equal participants within the household; men were entitled to cook and clean, women were entitled to work and earn a living wage – both routes that are incompatible with the heteronormative and restrictive ideal of masculinity the Republic enforces. This restrictive masculine ideal is embodied by the Republic; it precludes males from the kitchen and instead of Luke chopping carrots and cooking as a hobby, the contrasting instance from Offred's Gilead existence of the female Martha cooking demonstrates the devolution of masculinity under the regime; "Rita is there, sitting at the table, peeling and slicing carrots" (Atwood 57). The restricted power of the masculine occurs solely in the kitchen; as already explored, the notion of female agency is dependent upon masculine assignment in every other female dominated room, but within the kitchen there is simply no role for the male, and no support from the Republic for the presence of the masculine in this particular domain. The heteronormative masculinity presented within the text dictates that this is the female territory, and men should have no part in it.

The polar opposite sphere to the kitchen, is that of the Commander's study. This is an area of the house where the female is not welcomed, and does not appear to even exist within its walls; only masculinity is reflected in the furnishings. Offred comments that this room is banned territory to all women: "this forbidden room where I have never been, where women do not go. Not even Serena Joy comes here, and the cleaning is done by Guardians" (Atwood 146). It is situated off the hallway, right next to the kitchen; these

neighbouring territories are entirely at odds with one another in both their functions and inhabitants. The Commander's study is entirely masculine, indeed, through Offred's story it becomes apparent that the Handmaid before her continued an illicit affair with the Commander and was present in his study, besides these two female presences there is no female appearance within its walls, and this lack of female influence is apparent in its physical description. Upon her first invitation from the Commander to come and see him in his study, Offred describes it. The room contains the usual office furniture, dependably male in its description: "a black leather chair ... an oriental rug, and a fireplace without a fire in it. There's a small sofa, covered in brown plush" (Atwood 147). The Commander's furniture is functional, there is a consistency to his possessions, linking his 'suave leather' chair from the sitting room to the black leather office chair and plush brown sofa. There is functionality here, but quality and luxury as well. His study reflects his power in both his household and the Republic; the Oriental rug and fireplace are comfortable and luxurious, indicating his ability to possess nice things. However, the key to his power within the room, is what startles Offred the most: "all around the walls are bookcases. They're filled with books. Books and books and books, right out in plain view, no locks, no boxes. No wonder we can't come in here. It's an oasis of the forbidden" (Atwood 147). The written word is banned, women are not allowed to read, but nor are men, the shop signs have had their lettering removed and written communication is limited to pictures. In the establishment of the Republic, books were burned, records destroyed, magazines and journals set alight and all forms of written contact outlawed. The only book that Offred knew of in the house prior to this was the Bible, kept locked and guarded in the sitting room with only the Commander allowed access: "The Bible is kept locked up, the way people once kept tea locked up, so the servants wouldn't steal it" (Atwood 98). The written word is too dangerous to allow just

anyone to use it within the Republic, the regime has removed the right of women and males of lesser status to read or have access to books. The right to read is possessed solely by those that Gilead deems fit, those males in positions of power are allowed but no others. The power of the male is reinforced throughout the novel with reference to education and knowledge of language. Offred recalls her husband Luke having some of this power when they discuss the origins of the word 'fraternize': "From the Latin. He liked knowing about such details. The derivations of words, curious usages" (Atwood 21). The idea that males have power through language was present in the pre-Gilead world of Atwood's novel; Luke questions Offred's knowledge of the word 'mayday' in a similar way, and enjoys telling her the origin of the word. The idea that masculine power is linked to the written word, and the ability to read, followed the same path as the re-establishment of enforced gender roles within the novel. Although Offred was an educated woman in her previous life, she and Moira met at college where Offred recalls having books spread about her dorm room: "On the floor of the room there were books, open face down, this way and that, extravagantly", Luke as the primary male in her life still possessed the knowledge and the power that brings over language (Atwood 47). The selection of the word 'fraternize' is not accidental, Luke goes on to state: "*Fraternize* means to *behave like a brother*. He said there was no corresponding word that meant to *behave like a sister*. *Sororize*, it would have to be, he said" (Atwood 21). The lack of a word for female unity and relationship is indicative of their absence within the novel; the women are divided, their gendered identity fractured, whereas the men are united, their power flowing through the fraternal links of authority and status. Within the Republic, the women do not experience a similar bond.

Within the confines of her Handmaid existence, Offred experiences this masculine mastery over language once again when she plays Scrabble with the Commander in his

study. This game too, is illegal, for it is made up of the written word: "Now it's forbidden, for us. Now it's dangerous. Now it's indecent. Now it's something he can't do with his Wife. Now it's desirable" (Atwood 149). Initially she does well, beating the Commander in this illicit game, but then she realises "The first time ... he'd let me win" (Atwood 164). Henley's notion of power being the control of limited resources is again manifested within the text; males have power over the written, and spoken, word, and females do not. The knowledge of the Commander, and his authority, are both reflected and amplified by his study. The possession of illegal books and board games, his ability to have his Chauffeur arrange an illegal meeting with his Handmaid, these things happen within his masculine domain, a domain that no woman enters, even to clean. He maintains the highest position in his household from within his study; located next to the domestic centre of the kitchen, its locked door serves as a reminder to the household that he is in charge here. In the concluding chapter of the novel, among the discussion of which man the Commander may have been, one of the two possibilities is credited with stating of women: "Our big mistake was teaching them to read. We won't do that again" (Atwood 320). This mistake has been rectified by the Republic, but the Commander takes the decision that he will allow Offred the luxury of reading in his study. The territory of the study serves to reinforce the Commander's dominance and power but also allows him to break the laws of the regime; it provides him a sanctuary within which to act out his desires and exercise his masculine power in a different, and illegal, scenario with his Handmaid. Offred is allowed to break the law, enjoying an illegal power within the Commander's private domain, however, this power is gifted to her by the Commander, and only in secret. He allows her to read books and magazines, but they come at a price. Offred comments: "when I left the room, it still wasn't clear to me what he wanted" (Atwood 163). This price is Offred's collusion in his illegal

behaviour, both his taking her as a mistress and his stash of banned books. The irony is not lost on a reader who is aware of the history of *The Handmaid's Tale*, which itself has managed to become a novel that has been rejected as inappropriate for teaching in certain schools. By including Offred in, and making her the vessel through which he enacts his illegal behaviours, the Commander refuses to adhere to the regime's strictures of masculinity. He shares his power with his Handmaid when they are together, by giving her texts to read, and in doing so the price is her keeping his secret.

In the same way that the Commander's study is a masculine domain mirrored by the feminine one of the kitchen, Offred's room upstairs is mirrored in Nick's apartment over the garage. Both spaces are alike in their lack of furnishings, Nick's apartment looks like "He's camping out" (Atwood 272). Offred describes the sparse furnishings in one sentence: "it's a single room, the bed's made up, stripped down, military. No pictures but the blanket says U.S." (Atwood 273). Nick possesses power within his room over the garage; he exists separately to the household, and his domain is a reflection of his status as a male. The functionality of his room is similar to that of the Commander's study, except that Nick's apartment does not have leather chairs, pot plants and oriental rugs. The old army blanket indicates his status as a subordinate male, as such he does not have the right to the luxurious trappings of the Commander's study. He is accorded his own space, but this is because to have him in the house would not be appropriate with Offred in such close proximity. Their situations are joined by their powerlessness over their own destinies, Offred comments when she describes her room that one of the Aunts from her Handmaid training days told them to think of their posts "as being in the army", and this is how we see Nick's apartment described; military, functional, and sparse, much like Offred's own (Atwood 17). Offred and Nick's quarters are power vacuums within the household, their

respective feminine and masculine control of these spaces is unavoidable because these rooms are empty of anything else. The only circumstances Nick's dwelling is described in the text is when Offred visits him, as such she is entering his territory and is immediately at a disadvantage; Nick is in control because she has entered his domain. Their power exchange is more equal than that between Offred and the Commander, but Offred is once again entering a forbidden masculine dominion, and once again masculine power exerts its supremacy over the female.

Perhaps the most dynamic indication of who is dominant over each household space within the novel is the ritual enacted when entering that space. Throughout Offred's story the reader is presented with the motif of crossing thresholds and entering claimed territories, and if the ceremony that occurs upon the crossing of these thresholds is examined it becomes unmistakably evident who is dominant in each. The first instance of crossing boundaries is Offred's entrance into the house when she arrives escorted by a Guardian: "On first days we are permitted front doors, but after that we're supposed to use the back ... everyone is unsure about our exact status. After a while it will be either all front doors or all back" (Atwood 23). This entrance into the house via the front door has been lobbied for by the Aunts of the regime, indicating that there is a desire for the Handmaid to be a visible member of the household, and that they should not be hidden away and kept like a dirty secret; their role is sanctioned by the Republic and their entrance into the house through the main door is prescribed upon their first arrival. Although their status is yet to be cemented, the entering of a property via the front door indicates a right of access, rather than entering through a back door or servant's entrance. Serena Joy's welcome is distanced and engineered to demonstrate her dominance over Offred despite the Handmaid's right to enter through the front: "She didn't step aside to let me in, she just stood there in the

doorway, blocking the entrance. She wanted me to feel that I could not come into the house unless she said so. There is push and shove, these days, over such toeholds" (Atwood 23). This push and shove is one which Serena Joy ensures she wins, she follows her frosty welcome by making Offred carry her bag into the house herself, rather than allowing the Guardian to do so. As he leaves, Offred states: "The threshold of a new house is a lonely place" (Atwood 24). This display of power that Serena Joy enacts marks the house as hers, she deigns to allow Offred to enter it and therefore ensuring Offred's status as her subordinate. Serena Joy's penchant for establishing her dominance by granting permission to enter is repeated in the evening of the Ceremony. The chapter has already explored the implications of the Commander's failure to wait for her signal to enter, but if we now juxtapose the two states of the Wife's power in these separate instances of entry it is obvious that the her superiority over Offred is authentic regardless of its setting, whereas her superiority over the sitting room and her husband is symbolic *because* of its setting.

There are two further examples of entry that are critical to the assertion of power in crossing territories; these are Offred's entry to the Commander's study and Nick's apartment. In both instances she knocks and waits to be granted entry. When she knocks on the study door she experiences the feeling of "a child who's been summoned, at school, to the principal's office" (Atwood 146). Her status is low, and her entrance into this masculine domain is likened to that of an errant child, her power is non-existent in this instance, and she must wait to be allowed entry; "I'm told to enter" (Atwood 147). The Commander is her superior, her master, and the most imposing masculine presence within the household. His invitation to enter is followed by Offred's anxiety, but also a feeling of surrealism; she is unsure of his intentions but her lowly status causes her to liken herself to a vulnerable baby animal: "as if I'm a kitten in a window" (Atwood 148). The image of the

feeble young creature symbolises her lack of power, she is completely at the Commander's mercy within the walls of his study: "The fact is I'm terrified" (Atwood 147). This feeling of terror is echoed, although not as acutely, when she requests entry to Nick's apartment during their affair: "I would knock softly, a beggar's knock" (Atwood 280). Her fear in this request for entry is not one of the possibility of what will happen on the other side of the door, but rather one of rejection: "I would expect him to say I could not come in" (Atwood 280). The fear of the rejection of entry, the idea that Nick will turn her away like a beggar is indicative of the power he possesses over his apartment. He may tell her to go away, that she may not come in, but this rejection – whilst a possibility of Nick's because he possesses the power over her right to enter – is not the same as the power that the Commander possesses over his study. The power of the Commander is much greater, more dangerous, and as such, Offred defers to him as her superior upon entering his territory; Nick's power lies in the fact that Offred has granted him the right to control her emotions, rejection from someone she is risking her life to see would occur at his threshold, she would be prevented from entering and sent away. Although both men have power over Offred's entry, the type of power they possess is different because the power interactions between them are of a different nature. Despite these differences, both examples of Offred's request to enter reinforce the masculine authority over the domestic space, in each situation Offred is in the submissive position, as such she is beholden to their masculine dominance.

Control over the territories within the Republic echo those presented in the domestic arena of the house. There are gates guarded by Guardians, and the right to enter unchallenged is dependent upon the possession of an identity pass and the guard's discretion. In its most extreme form, the control over territory is a matter of life and death within the Republic. Offred reports the conversation between Cora and Rita, discussing a

woman who was shot at such a gate: “Last week they shot a woman ... She was fumbling in her robe, for her pass, and they thought she was hunting for a bomb” (Atwood 30). When Offred and her companion seek entry, the Guardians salute them, showing respect; “Such tokens are accorded to us. They are supposed to show respect, because of the nature of our service” (Atwood 31). Should something go amiss, however, Offred’s life may be the price for not being allowed entry. Male power exerts its dominance within the Republic through the control of entry and exit of territories. The fact that the only way out of the country is “The Underground Femaleroad” indicates that this male power can only be subverted by illegal means (Atwood 313). Some women, and men, escape utilising a network of individuals sympathetic to their plights. The role of the railroad is mocked, however, in the closing chapter. The male professors dub it “The Underground Frailroad” (Atwood 313). This mockery of the only subversive female element within the Republic serves to highlight just how dominant the masculine is over the right to enter within the text, the final comment upon it is mockery, and from a male character no less.

In the Republic of Gilead there are two specific macropolitical spheres that exemplify the masculine dominance presented in the micropolitical climate of the house; the gendered relations enacted within the macropolitical realm in the greatest detail are those that occur in the Rachel and Leah Re-education Centre, and the regime run brothel Jezebel’s. The gendered divides that exist in the Commander’s household serve to reinforce the gendered relationships that occur within the macropolitical, but are in turn reinforced by interactions in these larger spheres. It is a cyclical pattern of action, a chicken-and-egg situation; the macropolitical reinforces gendered relations within the micropolitical, and thus when these gender relations occur within the macropolitical they operate as they do within the micropolitical, which in turn reinforces the gendered relations within the

macropolitical and so on and so forth. The setting of the Rachel and Leach Re-Education Centre, or 'Red Centre', is the opening chapter of the novel, it is where Offred and her story begin, and it sets up the gendered interactions that are repeated throughout the novel. The primary difference within the 'Red Centre', as Offred refers to it, and the Commander's household is that it is women who are in power within its walls as opposed to males. The figures of the Aunts are in control, and they enforce their training with cattle prods and beatings, their rule over the Handmaid's is one imposed by fear and violence. This violent enforcement of their power is what Nancy Henley referred to as "The ultimate underpinning of power" (28). She elaborates upon this by explaining that "force is the last-ditch, not the front-line defense [sic]" (28). The Aunts in the Red Centre are not defending, they are in an attacking position, there is no room for error by these Handmaid's in training and the Aunts' teachings invert Henley's idea that force is the last line of defence and instead, it becomes the first line of attack. Their ultimate power devolves from the regime, they have taken their position as Aunts in order to ensure their own protection.

The "Historical Notes" state that: "In Gilead, there were many women willing to serve as Aunts, either because of a genuine belief in what they called 'traditional values,' or for the benefits they might thereby acquire. When power is scarce, a little of it is tempting" (Atwood 320). This idea that the Aunts are enforcers for the Republic because of the power it enables them indicates that the power they hold within the domain of the Red Centre is granted to them by the regime. It was originally the male architects of Gilead who came up with the idea that "the best and most cost-effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes was through women themselves ... no empire imposed by force or otherwise has ever been without this feature: control of the indigenous by members of their own group" (Atwood 320). The control of the female element of Gilead by other females is

echoed in the micropolitical domestic setting of the house, where Serena Joy is free to exert her authority by violence if she wishes: "They can hit us ... But no with any implement. Only with their hands" (Atwood 26). In the Red Centre, the attacking force of the Aunts is designed to indoctrinate the Handmaids and create submissive vessels out of these women. Within the household, the force morphs into a physical threat of punishment if the Wife is displeased. Although the Aunts possess power within the Red Centre, and the domain is completely female, the masculine power that surrounds it in the form of the Guardians serves to contain this budding female power: "the Guards weren't allowed inside the building except when called, and we weren't allowed out, except for our walks ... two by two around the football field which was enclosed now by a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire" (Atwood 14). The Aunts have the right over who enters the Red Centre, males only being granted entry when called upon, however their power is much like that of Serena Joy's in the sitting room; they are allowed it because the masculine elite of the Republic has gifted it to them. Outside of its walls, their power means nothing, indeed the masculine dominance of the Angels and Guardians surrounding the centre serves to corral this female fraction of the Republic, maintaining a strong presence nearby.

The second macropolitical setting that we encounter in detail is that of Jezebel's. This regime run brothel is populated by women that did not adjust to the Handmaid lifestyle or were given an alternate option to the Colonies, as such its function is entirely at odds with the Red Centre. The Handmaids are divorced from any possible sexuality, their role is purely devoted to their biological capabilities; in Jezebel's the women are dressed up in outfits and makeup, they embody everything that the Republic has removed from the Handmaids and other socially prominent females like the Wives. The building is an old hotel, repurposed in the same way that the Red Centre was once a school. Although the

purpose may differ, the Aunts are in control of this macropolitical sphere too. Offred encounters one at the entrance to the toilet: "She's an older woman, wearing a purple caftan and gold eyeshadow, but I can tell she is nevertheless an Aunt. The cattle prod's on the table, its thong around her wrist. No nonsense here" (Atwood 253). The Aunts' no nonsense approach hinges upon their power within Jezebel's; although the women who reside in its walls are not Handmaids, their function is still to serve men, and they are governed by more superior females. The interactions that occur within Jezebel's echo those within the household, and again experience a subordinate female group exists who must obey a superior female.

As well as the Aunts power in Jezebel's, the masculine element is also powerful, however the roles which the males play in this theatre is vastly removed from the micropolitical setting. In Jezebel's the male characters are free to interact with females outside of the Republic's restrictive social code. The Commander states that: "A man will sometimes tell a women thing he wouldn't tell another man" (Atwood 249). Outside of the strictures of social conduct, the macropolitical sphere of Jezebel's creates a more balanced arena within which the genders interact; their interaction here is encouraged. The interactions in the macropolitical setting of Jezebel's appear, at first, to contradict Henley's theory; surely the role of the women in Jezebel's cannot be likened to that of a Handmaid. They are the wayward Handmaids of the Republic, their role is not to bear children but to amuse men, and stimulate trade (Atwood 249). Despite the appearance of a more even power balance, the fundamental reason for the brothel's existence is for the women within its walls to serve the men, and in turn, to provide them with another benefit of power: "As the architects of Gilead knew, to institute an effective totalitarian system or indeed any system at all you must offer some benefits and freedoms, at least to a privileged few, in

return for those you remove” (Atwood 320). The benefits and freedoms of the males come at a cost to the females, they are the benefits that the men enjoy, and as such, their power is once again proved to be an illusion within the walls of Jezebel’s.

This chapter has explored how the heteronormative gender roles within the micropolitical setting of the household has resulted in gender-controlled territories, and how this control is reflected in the physical furnishings of the house. Secondly, it has explored the ritual of entrance, and found that this exposes that masculine dominance is primarily enforced by granting the right to enter a territory, or to deny it. Finally, by relating these findings within the micropolitical sphere to two macropolitical environments, it has verified that the masculine dominance portrayed within them operates in a similar manner to that portrayed in the macropolitical locales. By applying Nancy Henley’s theory of the micro-macropolitical relationship to *The Handmaid’s Tale*, it is apparent that Atwood’s Republic is inherently reliant upon masculine dominance within all social settings, whether they are private or public.

Chapter Three: The Power of Sight and Scent

In this final chapter, the power of the physical body, and how it is presented within the Republic, is combined with the concept of the objectifying gaze, and how this has served to function within the Republic as another asset through which control is exerted upon the social classes. In our contemporary society – by which I mean both the 1980s when Atwood wrote *The Handmaid's Tale*, and also the twenty-first century – male bodies are still relatively inconspicuous, however female bodies are utilised in advertising to such an extent that we are almost immune to their presence, regardless of how covered – or uncovered – they may be. In his article “What Should Historians Do with Masculinity? Reflections on Nineteenth-Century Britain”, John Tosh argues that: “Women were 'carriers' of gender, because their reproductive role was held to define their place in society and their character. Masculinity remained largely out of sight since men as a sex were not confined in this or any other way” (180). Although Tosh is speaking of the historical role that masculinity has played within a specific timeframe and social landscape, his argument is applicable to both Atwood's women and male bodies in the fictional, futuristic Republic. His statement on the historical status of women as carriers of gender is displayed in the novel with women in Gilead being defined by their ability to child bear or not, and their stations within the regime reflecting this. A quotation from the prolific American writer John Updike, who captures a sense of American ‘reality’, echoes Tosh's sentiments on the female within society, stating: “The female body is, in its ability to conceive and carry a fetus [sic] and to nurse an infant, our life's vehicle – it is the engine and the tracks” (6). As well as this idea of the female body as defined by its ability to ‘carry’, Tosh's notion of masculinity as largely invisible is demonstrated with male characters that are simultaneously everywhere and nowhere in the

text. They comprise the ruling elite, the soldiers, the shopkeepers that keep the regime running, and yet their physical, masculine presence is limited to these roles. For Offred, they are defined by their roles, as she too is by them, and their bodies are as off limits and unseen as hers within the Republic.

Women's bodies are that much more conspicuous than men's in the novel because the Republic has taken such great pains to hide them. John Updike, in his work *Venus and Others* states that: "A naked woman is, for most men, the most beautiful thing they will ever see; on this planet, the female body is the prime aesthetic object" (5). In Atwood's Gilead, this prime aesthetic object is removed, hidden, controlled and closely guarded by a protective layer of cloth: "The skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat yoke over the breasts, the sleeves are full" (Atwood 18). The complete obliteration of any defining female feature by this covering serves to remove any sexuality from the wearer, whilst simultaneously imposing a constant and recognisable uniformed figure for other residents of the regime: "I glide with Ofglen along the sidewalk; the pair of us, and in front of us another pair, and across the street another. We must look good from a distance: picturesque" (Atwood 224). The distance from which they are looked upon defines how they are interpreted, the unspoken implication here is that from close up they do not look picturesque. Do they look unattractive? Or is it that from a distance there is an ability to overlook the imperfections, physical – differences in height, weight, eye colour – or otherwise – such as the social reasons for their dress or why they are parading two by two by two? This removed viewing of the figures of the Handmaids creates a clinical perspective from which to study them; we are removed from the immediate reality of their lives, as such they can be viewed simply as picturesque because the distance disguises the truth of their situation. This detached observation is something that Offred cannot participate in; she is

one of these figures, and even if she could view them from a distance, her opinion would be coloured by her status as their comrade, and this is shown in her use of the word 'must' in her status – she imagines they look good, they *must* look good, but she cannot state that they do.

The image of the paired Handmaids imitates that presented in the children's nursery rhyme of Noah's Ark; the animals entering the ark two by two. These animals represented the salvation of a world soon to be void of any other life forms; they were the chosen ones, to be saved from the devastating flood that would wipe the earth clean of every other living creature. The parallels between the Noah's Ark story in Genesis and the Handmaid's parading down the street in pairs can be developed further if the Handmaids are cast in the role of the animals; their function is to repopulate the earth after an unnamed catastrophe has reduced fertility, and create a new generation to ensure survival. Much like the picture of the animals loading onto the Ark, from a distance the Handmaids are picturesque, but when their lives are studied more closely the harsh reality of their situation becomes apparent. The Handmaids are disenfranchised, their survival is dependent on their reproductive abilities, much like the animals of the Ark. Genesis does not give a report of the conditions inside the Ark, there is no account of the days and nights spent being tossed and turned in the flood waters among thousands of other creatures, indeed, we can only imagine these conditions to be almost unbearable, cramped and unsafe. Offred's existence echoes this struggle; her survival is one of uncertainty, insecurity and danger, and like the animals on the Ark, her only salvation lies in the promise of her ability to bear offspring.

The complete covering of the Handmaid's body is maintained at all times, even during the impregnation ceremony the dress is modestly lifted, not removed entirely; "My

red skirt is hitched up to my waist" (Atwood 104). The aim of the ceremony is simple, to impregnate the handmaid, the removal of all sexuality from the situation is served by keeping the unrequired body parts hidden: "Below it [the red dress] the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing" (Atwood 104). This depiction of Offred's impregnation shows it to be a one-sided affair, without any affection: "Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved" (Atwood 104). Offred is simply a vessel, a means to an end and any relation between her body and sexuality must be fractured in order for the Republic to maintain its controlling influence over the position of the Handmaids and those they serve. The Commander seems as aware of this as she is. He is distracted; her physical presence and the intimate act that is occurring between them is neither affectionate nor emotionally engaging: "the Commander fucks with a regular two-four marching stroke, on and on like a tap dripping. He is preoccupied, like a man humming to himself in the shower ... like a man with other things on his mind" (Atwood 105). As offensive as this idea is, both parties are fulfilling their regime-dictated roles; Offred acts as the passive, partially clothed vessel, and the Commander as the man who will impregnate her without any display of concern for her enjoyment or pleasure. The dislocation of the Handmaids from their bodily autonomy extends to their right to have any feelings of pleasure or lust during their impregnations; it is more like a medical procedure than it is an act of affection. Offred and the Commander's illicit relationship alters the dynamic between them, during both their time alone together as well as their interaction during the ceremony. After this account of the monthly ceremony, Offred is unnerved by the idea of the Commander's naked body during their visit to Jezebel's: "Will this be worse, to have him denuded, of all his cloth power?" (Atwood 266). The Commander's status is directly linked

to his attire; without it, he becomes just a man, indication of his rank gone, forgotten, his power likewise: “Without his uniform he looks smaller, older, like something being dried” (Atwood 267). He is dried up, no longer potent; this direct correlation between power and dress that Offred makes is reinforced by the role of uniforms across the classes in the Republic.

In the conclusion of the novel, the notes from the “Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies”, it is revealed that the Handmaid’s uniform was developed by a man, who was also a Commander – he may have been Offred’s Commander – who was influenced by the uniforms of prisoners of war. He was “responsible for the design of the female costumes and for the suggestion that the Handmaids wear red, which he seems to have borrowed from the uniforms of German prisoners of war in Canadian “P.O.W” camps of the Second World War era” (Atwood 319). The female form has been forcibly divorced from any sexuality, and any sexual agency; their bodily autonomy has been completely removed and any relationship between the female body and sensuality has been abolished. Their dress is inspired by uniforms worn by prisoners of war and this is exactly what they are; imprisoned because of war by the Republic, imprisoned by their biological capabilities, and imprisoned in their red robes. The relationship between the female body and its covering is replicated in the male characters of the novel; Offred’s observation of the Commander, and her disparaging commentary on his physicality without it, indicates to us that just as the female Handmaid is kept to her station with her uniform, the male is as well. The Commander is recognised and empowered in his station because of his uniform, whereas Nick is limited by his. In contrast to her dismay at the thought of seeing the Commander out of his Commander’s uniform, Offred is eager to see Nick divested of his; she appears to lust after the idea of Nick’s body, whereas she is repulsed by the Commander’s “little belly” and

“Wisps of hair” (Atwood 266). As for Nick, Offred wants to “see what can be seen, of him, take him in, memorize him”, she wants to observe his individual physical being separated from his chauffeur’s uniform. His Guardian’s uniform limits him rather than enhances him: “the lines of his body, the texture of his flesh, the glisten of sweat on his pelt” are hidden by his clothing (Atwood 281). Offred’s language when describing Nick’s physicality is telling; her use of the word ‘pelt’ – a term commonly used to describe animal skin – captures the raw, animalistic, natural force of her desire in response to his masculinity. The sibilance of ‘his flesh’, ‘glisten’, and ‘his sweat’ echoes the soft ‘s’ in lust, further enforcing the masculine appeal of Nick’s body and self. Where the Commander’s power is reduced when he sheds his covering, Nick’s masculinity is enhanced by the discarding of his, in doing so, he bares his true male form. Martin Weinberg and Colin Williams state in their article “Bare Bodies: Nudity, Gender, and the Looking Glass Body” that “The bare body is a unique social mirror, stripped of the protective shroud of clothing, exposed and vulnerable” (48). In the Republic this social mirror is distorted by the clothing, issued according to rank, and when the body is exposed and vulnerable, the power statuses of the males are reversed, with the Commander becoming powerless, inspiring apathy from his partner, and Nick becoming powerful through his ability to inspire lust. Stripped of the trappings of political control, the males are reduced to their most basic form, the form in which their masculinity is at its most pure without clothing or societal restrictions, we – much like Offred – compare the two, and conclude that Nick is the more masculine, the more distinctly male in this bodily comparison.

The tension between what is hidden and what draws the gaze is highlighted by the absurdity of the cloaking of the fertile females in red, causing them to stand out boldly in their surroundings, drawing attention to their role and – crucially – their bodies. When

women observe other women there is constant physical comparison. Within Western culture, women are taught to gaze upon other women the way men do. But, rather than deriving a sense of ownership through the right to stare, women experience a reflex to compare themselves physically to the female form that they observe. Throughout the text this bodily comparison is shown to be common to all of the Handmaids. The comparison of women by women still exists within Gilead – despite attempts by the regime to conceal the female – , only now they study one another’s bodies to answer the question of with-or-without child: “Covertly we regard each other, sizing up each other’s bellies” (Atwood 69). When Offred encounters a pregnant Handmaid she was at the Red Centre with, Janine, she states: “She’s a magic presence to us, an object of envy and desire, we covet her. She’s a flag on a hilltop, showing us what can still be done” (Atwood 36). The likening of Janine to a flag not only casts her in the role of a target to be obtained, but crucially, as a territory; capturing the flag results in owning the territory it is on and thus winning the game. Janine, and all of the Handmaids, are territory to be taken and possessed, and they desire this position because it is their salvation. When Janine passes Offred and sees she is not with child, glancing at where her “belly lies flat” under her robes, Offred says: “Janine looks at me, then, and around the corners of her mouth there is the trace of a smirk” (Atwood 37). Despite their shared disempowerment, the women judge each other on their performance within the fractured dynamic dictated by the Republic – a dynamic based on the use of the female body as an object, a vessel. Offred’s body is both her freedom and her burden, it allows her the post of Handmaid, thus saving her from the Colonies, and death, but it also chains her to her biological destiny. As she explains, “I avoid looking down at my body; not so much because it’s shameful or immodest but because I don’t want to see it. I don’t want to look at something that determines me so completely” (Atwood 72-73). The Handmaid’s

body is her existence, and nothing more: “We are considered containers, it’s only the insides of our bodies that are important” (Atwood 107). Women, it seems, still experience an issue with body image as women from the pre-Gilead world (and our own secular, capitalist society), only they have been reprogrammed to hope above all else for a child, and this hope is simultaneously a hope for their own personal survival.

Handmaids are not permitted to shave, or cut their hair, or make themselves appealing in any way by the use of cosmetics; “Such things are considered vanities” (Atwood 107). This vanity is not allowed within the Republic; the Handmaids are for breeding purposes only, to make them attractive would be to endanger the bond of marriage that the regime endorses so strongly. Makeup in current society indicates hiding, the covering of the face by cosmetics implies a mask, something to hide behind; the Republic has removed this ability to mask the face whilst simultaneously covering the body. The naked face and the carefully masked body produces a tension within the text that is explored by Offred when she visits the regime sanctioned brothel, Jezebel’s. She states that the women in the brothel “All wear makeup, and I realize how unaccustomed I’ve become to seeing it, on women, because their eyes look too big to me, too dark and shimmering, their mouths too red, too wet, blood-dipped and glistening; or, on the other hand, too clownish” (Atwood 247). This impression of falsity presented by the makeup highlights to the reader the pretence of these women; there is a falsehood in their depiction of themselves. Offred’s perception of these “clownish” figures draws attention to the relationship between the body inside of Jezebel’s and outside in the Republic. Within the walls of Jezebel’s, women are required to paint themselves, wear revealing outfits: “cut high up the thighs, low over the breasts. Some are in olden days lingerie, shortie nightgowns, baby-doll pyjamas, the occasional see-through negligée” (Atwood 247). The overt display of flesh overwhelms

Offred for a moment; “There are a great many buttocks in this room. I am no longer used to them” (Atwood 247). The exposing of flesh and the wearing of makeup is specific to Jezebel’s; the reversion to the conservative, stabilised gender roles within the household has left no room for these images in the regime, and so they exist behind the guarded walls of the brothel. This is not for female benefit, the bodily autonomy that women in Jezebel’s seem to portray by wearing makeup and revealing their legs is an impression, it is not real, just as their depiction of themselves is inaccurate. The power over their physical beings still resides with the male. These women are provided for men, and it is they for whom these women dress and wear makeup, in the same way the Commander gives Offred lipstick and mascara to put on, because he wants her to dress up for him: “It’s a disguise ... You’ll need to paint your face too” (Atwood 243). Offred’s disguise dresses her as something other than his Handmaid. For the purpose of going out, this is essential, but there exists another reason for this game of dress up. The Commander has the power to obtain the outfit and makeup for Offred, and the power to make her wear them. Offred comments that “I want him to feel I’m doing him a favour”, and she attempts to maintain some power over their exchange by pausing before acquiescing to his request (Atwood 242). The power over the presentation of the body is dictated consistently within the Republic by those in power, the masculine governing body, and this is enforced by the lower ranking males and females upon those lower than they.

Tosh’s seemingly contradictory notion of masculinity being ‘everywhere but nowhere’, which was presented at the beginning of this chapter, is manifested in the presentation of masculinity in the novel. Throughout *The Handmaid’s Tale* we are presented with the tangible physicality of the male body, whether it is in the form of Nick or the Commander. However, male bodies within the Republic still exist ‘nowhere’. All of the

descriptions of the males are offered from Offred's perspective, she is the 'everywhere' of Tosh's theory, and the Republic is 'nowhere'. Offred is female, and not only that, she is a subjugated female. As such, her point of view is coloured by her circumstances. Her subjugation extends to her own name being removed from her and her Commander's being placed upon her: "a patronymic, composed of the possessive preposition and the first name of the gentleman in question" (Atwood 318). Offred is quite literally "Of Fred". Her womb, her body, her mind and her name are all possessions of someone else under the Republic, her subjugation is complete. In addition to this, we must bear in mind that Atwood is herself female, and although she writes from Offred's point of view, her own cultural, social and political ideas permeate the text. So the males presented in the novel are rendered initially from a female perspective: Atwood's. This is subsequently reinforced by a second female perspective – Offred's – and finally emphasised by the social position of that female. Offred's position in the Republic – or lack thereof – affects her view of the males she presents to the reader. This biased view is seen most clearly in the comparison between the representation of the men from the two parts of her life; Luke from her "normal" and pre-Republic existence, and the Commander and Nick from her Handmaid and post-Gilead existence. Whilst Nick and the Commander, and even the Guardian's at the gates, are immediate physical presences that are described using smell and female intuition, Luke's description is a memory. His domesticated tendencies and his essence are portrayed, rather than his physicality, are what she remembers, looking back to him as her ideal of masculinity through the distanced, romanticised view of her former life. Offred longs for his presence and longs for him physically, but he is not presented as a physical being like the other men. His body is not described at all, Offred cannot imagine his face, or even his body outside of the image of him "lying face down in a thicket", she knows exactly what he is wearing, but

“His face is beginning to fade” (Atwood 114). Offred acknowledges her inability to recall his physical form, stating that she should have made more effort to remember it: “I ought to have ... paid more attention, to the details, the moles and scars, the singular creases; I didn’t and he’s fading” (Atwood 281). The masculine of Offred’s former life was Luke, who embodied contemporary ideals of an enlightened masculinity which embraced aspects considered to be feminine; he cooked, shopped with her, and took care of their home and child. This version of contemporary masculinity is fading from Offred, as it has faded from the Republic. The construct of this contemporary masculinity in late twentieth and early twenty-first century Western culture creates its own issues; as Naomi Segal asks “Can our husband push a supermarket trolley in the morning and turn us on twelve hours later?” (42). Whilst this is not the most academic of queries, Segal does capture the fundamental concern of contemporary masculinity – can a man meet modern day domestic expectations and still be considered masculine? Gilead dispenses with this concern by forcing conformity with conservative class and gender divisions; men do not get the opportunity to explore or display their domestic abilities and individuality, their sexuality, masculinity and identity are enshrined in law. Luke’s physicality was not one of his defining factors for Offred, she is aware that his memory is slipping away and she blames it on her lack of awareness of his physicality, indicating that even in her pre-Gilead life the essence of masculinity was physical. For clarification, it is useful to revisit a quotation discussed above where, during her time with Nick, she resolves to memorise him: “I want to see what can be seen, of him, take him in memorize him, save him up so I can live on the image, later” (Atwood 281). Luke is her before – the embodiment of our late twentieth to twenty-first contemporary masculinity, and as such his physicality was not as important as his ability to help Offred domestically and to share the roles within the domestic sphere. In the Republic, the

defining characteristics of the males become physical because there is a social dislocation between the sexes that prevents vocal and visual, as well as almost all physical, interactions. As such, the impressions of males and their characteristics become purely physical for Offred; she can only describe them in terms of physical appearance, smell, and sound. She does not know how they chop carrots, or whether they would be any good helping to push a trolley around a supermarket; their domestic presence has been completely erased under the Republic's control.

The male characters throughout the novel are presented through two main senses, sight and smell. Offred describes the males she encounters with a combination of the two. Her limited view, framed by the wings around her face, causes her to turn to other senses to attempt to fully capture their presence. The smell of tobacco links two male characters that she encounters; the Doctor at the clinic and Nick. These characters are linked by this scent to the heterosexual norms the Republic has reverted to – those able to trade something on the black market or who have the means to get hold of contraband cigarettes – are also those who have power. The Doctor, who embodies the regime's control over the biological destiny of the women is described as having a stale smell of "old smoke, aftershave, tobacco dust on hair" (Atwood 70). His proximity to Offred during her physical examination enables her to smell, and see, more than she is usually able to. The sense of staleness presents a male figure who is past his prime, an attempt to cover this up made with aftershave that doesn't quite disguise it. Offred's interaction with him is brief. His attempt to disguise himself and make himself appealing with aftershave is indicative of his ulterior motive during their meeting: his offer to help her conceive. Offred makes mention of how smell can be treacherous, inciting longing for things that are better forgotten, specifically when she smells the bread cooking in the house: "It smells of me, in former

times, when I was a mother ... This is a treacherous smell, and I know I must shut it out” (Atwood 57). The smell of former times, the aftershave and the bread, create a tangible, sensory tension between life before and life after Gilead. Offred struggles throughout the novel to reconcile the two halves of her life, constantly making comparisons between them that are the result of memories evoked by sight and smell. Just as the bread reminded her of a previous identity as ‘a mother’, she similarly recalls her child when she bathes. This memory takes her by surprise: “she’s there with me, suddenly, without warning, it must be the smell of the soap” (Atwood 73). This momentary ambush by her mind plays out in her recall of the scents of “baby powder and child’s washed flesh and shampoo” (Atwood 73). The scent of her child awakens different feelings to those aroused by the men; there is a sense of loss, a soft melancholy that pervades her musings when she thinks of her child in terms of smell in the bath. The scent of her child – its pure, clean, washed flesh, and the feelings Offred experiences from the mnemonic associations are at odds with those evoked by both the Doctor and Nick. The Doctor’s identifying scents make Offred feel uncomfortable and dirty, where the child’s scents of baby powder and shampoo are soft, warm, familiar smells that generate an aura of safety and comfort.

Nick’s presentation is entirely different to that of the Doctor, Offred’s reaction to him is based on instinct, motivated by an attraction to not only his physical presence but the smell of a freshly burning cigarette: “tanned skin, moist in the sun, filmed with smoke. I sigh, inhaling” (Atwood 28). Offred’s reaction to tobacco – and to the male – in this instance are lust, she states: “Perhaps he saw the look on my face and mistook it for something else. Really I what I wanted was the cigarette” (Atwood 28). Nick did not make a mistake interpreting Offred’s expression, it is lust that he sees, however, on this occasion, before the flowering of their illicit affair, it is the cigarette that she wants – not him. As their

relationship develops in the novel, his presence inspires lust in her. For example, eighty pages after lusting after the cigarette Offred states: "I want to reach up, taste his skin, he makes me hungry" (Atwood 109). Coupled with Nick's glistening pelt and textured flesh, an impression of raw masculine power develops; Nick is male, he embodies masculinity and his male power is undeniable. Offred actively desires Nick's presentation of masculinity, he is fresh, alive, burning, and presents life and danger, in stark contrast to the Doctor's stale dust and false aftershave.

Rachel Adams and David Savaran state that: "Men and women in patriarchal society usually take up complimentary positions of desiring subject and desired object" (11). We see this theory turned inside out within Offred's tale, she is the observer, watching her desired object in the form of Nick whilst she becomes the desiring subject. The inversion of this theory is reversed again during her interaction with the Commander – she becomes something he wants, he desires her. Nick does not only appear and appeal to Offred in terms of masculinity personified; indeed, he is presented to Offred by Serena Joy as a virile male, his male ability to perform sexually is not questioned or undermined like the Commander's is of whom Serena Joy states: "Maybe he can't" (Atwood 215). Nick is the obvious solution to the Commander's failure as a biologically potent man. When Serena Joy notes the Commander's failure, she turns to the trusted chauffeur as the solution, adding: "I was thinking of Nick" (Atwood 216). Serena Joy responds to Nick's figure as a capable male, she states that his length of time in their service has made him loyal, and whilst this may be a compelling argument, neither woman would risk their life for that alone. There is a second, biologically motivated reason for their readiness to risk their lives – they both recognise him as the most potent masculine presence to whom they both have access and as such, he is the logical choice to aid in creating a child. Male scent, then, evokes unstable

emotions, active feelings rooted in the present that are difficult to control; uncertainty, fear, lust, and craving, whereas the smells related to children create a gentler emotion, with a pervading sense of loss linked to the inactive past, a much more stable and controllable emotion. Offred divides the scents she experiences into gendered roles by the way in which she reacts to them, the smell of the bread in the kitchen inciting home and motherhood, domesticity and the female, reminding her of her own mothering role. In contrast, the masculine scents of tobacco are found outside of the domestic sphere of the house, either in the Republic itself or on the driveway of the home. The division of smell exists as another indication of the fractured social interactions between the sexes as well as to reinforce the genders of those they are related to.

The idea of desired object / desiring subject is developed by Robert A. Nye states that “Men are no longer the invisible, unmarked gender... men are themselves the objects of the gaze of women, of other men, and of a new critical scholarship” (2005). Although Nye is speaking of the emergence of masculinity studies within the theatre of gender studies, we can apply the idea of the transference of the objectifying gaze from women to men to what is portrayed in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Offred is an observer. She is our eyes and it is through her seemingly passive gaze that the role of the masculine within Gilead is developed. This is the twist: the men that are presented to us become objects; they are studied and observed for us and it is upon this observation that the image of masculinity is created within the novel. The objectifying gaze is present within the novel is feminine. However, it exists as a distant cousin to the objectifying gaze that Nye speaks of. Gone are the open stares and wolf-whistles of the pre-Gilead world. This is a Republic where a single wrong move can have one taken away in “a black painted van” whose windows are “dark-tinted”, and the ensuing stares are borne of curiosity more than the preamble to an action

(Atwood 31). Offred recounts her own impotent terror when presented with this reality: “Something is happening: there’s a commotion, a flurry among the shoals of cars ... it’s a black van, with the white-winged eye on the side ... It cruises slowly along the street, as if looking for something: shark on the prowl” (178). When the van stops and the secret police, or ‘Eyes’ of Gilead appear Offred “can’t help seeing” (Atwood 178). Instead of averting her eyes, as custom and law dictate, and her companion requests, “Keep moving ... Pretend not to see” Offred finds herself staring, she cannot avert her gaze from the events unfolding before her (Atwood 178). She cannot help herself, but this stare does not evolve into any form of action, indeed, she exhibits no horror at the details of the incident itself, only thankful that she wasn’t the target of the dark van: “What I feel is relief. It wasn’t me” (Atwood 179). She sees, and then carries on: “It’s over, in seconds, and the traffic on the street resumes as if nothing happened.” (Atwood 179). The lack of any reaction, or action, resulting from visual stimulation indicates the power of the Republic over its citizens. Like Offred, they are frozen first with fear that they might be taken and then relief that they are not. Of course we are focused on Offred’s reaction, how her stare is related to action, however, Atwood develops the tension between the stare and ownership and action throughout the novel for characters of both sexes.

What was in the pre-Gilead Offred’s everyday life, and exists in ours – the right of man to stare at woman and to objectify her by doing so – has been removed within the Republic. A man may possess a woman, or women, but only if he is worthy, or at least, worthy as judged by the Republic. Although this objective, possessive male gaze has been considered a right that man has across social, political, and cultural divides, the Republic has denounced it; there has been an evaporation over the privileged, masculine monopoly of the objective gaze (Nye 1948). Not only has the public removed the right to stare, but the

powers that be have actively made it uninteresting to do so. The attire of the women operates to remove any desire that may arise in spite of the strict social mores. Men are not entitled to stare any longer, but if they happen to, their stare is met with heavy red drapes that move only against the body and do not compliment her: “a shape like mine, a nondescript woman in red carrying a basket” (Atwood 28).

The action of staring has been reclassified in the Republic as illegal: essentially, the male gaze has been emasculated, no longer a potent force or something that can be amplified by the presence of a woman, it exists purely in theory, an exercise in futility. In the pre-Gilead world, women were at risk from this male gaze, there existed a potential threat within the male stare. Offred recalls of the pre-Gilead society: “rules that were never spelled out but that every woman knew: don’t open your door to a stranger, even if he says he is the police...Don’t stop on the road to help a motorist...If anyone whistles, don’t turn to look” (Atwood 34). The society that taught *don’t get raped* instead of *don’t rape* is gone and we are left instead with a world where women are protected, or at least protected as defined by what is considered protection in Gilead. “There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from” (Atwood 34). The Republic gives women freedom from; freedom from the threat of the masculine gaze, freedom from the threat of this gaze taking on a vocal authority, or a physical one. It also gives them freedom from freedom: “Now we walk along the same street, in red pairs, and no one shouts obscenities at us, speaks to us, touches us. No one whistles” (Atwood 34). The regime has removed from males the perceived right to take what they can see, to issue ownership with their eyes, but it also removes the right for males to own anything without the approval of the Republic. The women too have lost the ability to elicit a reaction, although Offred finds herself compelled to tease the young Guardians on the gate as she passes through: “I move

my hips a little, feeling the full red skirt sway around me. It's like thumbing your nose from behind a fence or teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach" (Atwood 32). Interestingly, Offred identifies her body with the bone in this likeness; she is in control of a desirable thing – her body – and she holds it out of reach like a bone. The implication here is that the young guards are dogs, and she is a tease to them, Offred immediately assumes that the young men are motivated by their basest desires, similarly to a dog motivated by hunger. Their humanity does not feature for her, which is why she finds it so easy to tease them: "I'm not ashamed at all. I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there" (Atwood 32). The Handmaid's are revered to a certain extent: "They [the Guardians at the gate] are supposed to show respect, because of the nature of our service" (Atwood 31). Although the extent of this depends on status and gender, their role and status as fertile women is protected, they are protected whilst there is still hope that they will reproduce: "I am too important, too scarce ... I am a national resource" (75). In attaining this protected status of a national resource, women have lost their freedom, and much of their individual humanity.

Similarly, the emasculation of the male gaze, the denial of any right to act upon a gaze and even how to gaze, results in the agency of the male being removed; both his potency and his threat are neutralised. Their emasculation is completed by the idea that the strict societal and religious rules, the threat of floodlights and rifle shots, are the only thing keeping women safe in the streets. We see this played out when Offred passes two young Guardians at one of the gates: "As we walk away I know they're watching, these two men who aren't yet permitted to touch women. They touch with their eyes instead" (Atwood 32). This visual touch is not allowed, the nature of this gaze is not simply to gather information as to who or what is in their vicinity, this gaze is fuelled by curiosity, hope,

perhaps lust. Offred's teasing exists purely to give herself respite, and she is safe behind her fence of red, and the laws of the Republic. That the social conditioning of the Republic has made the encore to a kiss in the mind one of floodlights and rifle shots (32), and not of heavy breathing and searching fingertips, protects Offred in her teasing, as well as removing the threat of the male gaze that has been coupled with it, effectively paralysing the power of the masculine, limiting it to quick, furtive glances.

Offred's observation of the Commander during the household Bible reading presents the idea that "To be a man, watched by women ... must be entirely strange" (Atwood 98). During the reading of the Bible, he possesses the attention of the women, who watch him unchecked. The notion of the male being the object of a gaze is an odd concept for apparently both Offred and the Commander. The only bodies it is acceptable to look at for an unconfined amount of time are the dead ones that hang from the wall, "It doesn't matter if we look. We're supposed to look" (Atwood 42). The freedom to gaze and the freedom to possess what is being observed operates within the frame of the dead bodies that hang from the wall, citizens may gaze for an unrestricted amount of time at these bodies, because they can possess what they have, what they are, simply by breaking the law. Although the potent threat of the male gaze has been removed, effectively emasculating it, both the Commander and Nick violate this protective custom and breach protocol by entering into a relationship with Offred. As such, their gazes are as filled with ownership and threat as in the pre-Gilead world. Offred notices the difference between the Commander's gaze between the monthly ceremony before and after they begin their secret relationship: "I felt, for one thing, that he was actually looking at me, and I didn't like that" (Atwood 169). Suddenly, the Commander's power has been regained, his look is threatening because he and Offred possess a bond that was not previously there. By

claiming her as his mistress, he exerts more power over her, and as a result, the potential threat that his stare holds is realised; ultimately, by claiming her, he has placed her in grave danger. The danger that Offred is in is not only the very real threat to her life, but due to the Commander's appropriation of her, she is placed on display for other male members of the Republic within the walls of Jezebel's: "He is showing me off, to them ... they are decorous enough, they keep their hands to themselves, but they review my breasts, my legs, as if there's no reason why they shouldn't" (Atwood 248). In the action of showing her off, the Commander has empowered other males to ogle, and to 'review', his offering. Offred's protection under the regime evaporates as the masculine element reclaims its power over the right to openly stare. However, within the text, Nick's gaze functions inversely to that of the Commander and his compatriots. Whilst it still places Offred in danger, she actively seeks it out, wanting him to look at her. When she is on her way to Jezebel's with the Commander, she notes that Nick specifically avoids looking: "I tried to catch his eye, make him look at me, but he acted as if he didn't see me" (Atwood 244). The look that has been bestowed freely upon her by him up until now has disappeared, due to the Commander's requisitioning of her. Offred has become the property of another male, as such, Nick has no claim on her. As a subordinate will not risk challenging his Commander by staring; his lesser status ensures that despite the Commander's actions of dressing Offred up, making her wear makeup and placing her on display, Nick has not right to stare at her.

By analysing the role that the physical body plays within the Republic, this chapter has demonstrated that the masculinities illustrated through the two primary male characters of Nick and the Commander are significantly different. It has demonstrated that Offred's use of her senses serves to create an impression of the masculinity she encounters, and how the masculinity she portrays is in stark contrast to the masculinity of her pre-Gilead

world; that which, embodied by her husband Luke, possessed elements of the feminine. In summary, this chapter has found that in order to survive within the regime, masculinity must operate within the stable, heteronormative gender-roles discussed in Chapter One, as it is through these roles that power and status are given and maintained. However, it has also determined that the power of the male is frequently exercised outside of these boundaries. The attempts of each male character to deviate from this strict code has facilitated the exploration into the functioning of a hetero-normal masculinity within a society that threatens capital punishment for acting in contravention to its laws. The illegal relationships and illicit meetings that the males embark upon with the narrator lead to their masculine dominance being reasserted over her, bringing the power of the male to maturation. That is to say, that by stepping outside of the social mores that engender its power, masculinity reasserts its dominance over the female in every area of life within the Republic of Gilead; the regime grants the male power and status, which in turn protects him, thus enabling him to enact his illegal behaviour.

Conclusion

In summary, this thesis has embarked upon an analysis of masculinity in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Throughout three chapters it has brought the male characters to the foreground, and explored their role and power within the novel. During the course of the novel the reader is reminded that Offred is an imperfect narrator; her recollection of events frequently falters, her impressions are influenced by her social standing, and her final moments within the regime are equally terrifying and hopeful and lend no satisfying outcome to the events contained within the text. The construction of masculinity within the text echoes this unstable narrative plot, there are contradictions in its portrayal, but it is consistent in its inconsistency – like Offred's tale. In locating masculinity, and exploring the role it plays within a female dominated text, this thesis has opened the doorway to Margaret Atwood's lost masculinities.

Chapter One focused on establishing the status of the males and females within the Republic of Gilead, and creating an understanding of the social hierarchy and mores at work within the regime. It examined how masculinity is positioned in the text in opposition to the female, constantly competing and frequently conquering it, utilising the heteronormative gender roles to do so. Michael S. Kimmel's notion that males may be 'in power' but not individually powerful demonstrates that whilst the ruling elite, and the architects of the Republic of Gilead are male, their power is dependent upon their complicity with the rigid, conservative ideals of the regime. The fracturing of the female identity within the text serves to strengthen the power of the masculine, lending the male members of the country an immediately advantageous position because of their sex. However, this masculine power and identity is shown to be tightly regulated, and the opportunities that men enjoy are only

realised if they adhere to the strict social mores set forth in Gilead. The historical indicators of masculinity are shown to be regressive in their requirements, and this regression is as harmful to the males as it is to the females within the text.

Chapter Two expanded upon the findings of the first chapter by studying the power balance within the micropolitical setting of the house, and the macropolitical institutions of the Rachel and Leah Re-Education Centre and Jezebel's. In comparing the masculinity of the private and public spheres, the chapter engaged in locating masculinity in the arenas in which it is enacted by the male characters; it explores masculinity in the environments in which it operates in its rawest form. By establishing the role of masculinity within the household, Chapter Two created a map of those territories that are masculine dominated, (the study, the hallway, the living room), and which are female dominated, (the kitchen, Offred's room), creating a comparison between private masculinity, as enacted in the household, to that displayed in the public dominions of the Red Centre and Jezebel's. Masculinity in the public arena, Henley's macropolitical sphere, morphs into a different creature than encountered in the household's micropolitical sphere. There exists a gendered governance over the right to enter territory, and the gender that is in power is irrefutably the male. Despite apparent female possession of power as portrayed by the Aunts and Serena Joy, the relationship between the Commander and his Wife, and the Aunts status as implementers of the Regime's teachings, demonstrates that this power only exists if granted by the male.

Chapter Three narrowed the focus of Chapter Two to Offred's viewing of the males that are immediately available to her. By centring the chapter upon her senses, it developed a personal, emotional impression of the different masculine characters that she

is surrounded with. The chapter related this to the work available on masculinity, and how the female-as-viewed-by-the-male has been inverted by Atwood's text to give us males-as-viewed-by-females. Establishing that the approved masculinity of the Republic is embodied by the Commander, it is apparent through Offred's narrative that this masculinity is not necessarily the most appealing version; she finds herself drawn more to the chauffeur Nick's wayward, unsanctioned masculine power, even seeking his gaze despite the sense of ownership and the danger that it entails.

Despite the novel's presentation of masculinity as viewed from a female perspective, Atwood's inversion of this gaze is ultimately challenged, and destabilised, by the concluding chapter of her text. Throughout the novel, and this thesis, the development of the masculine has been ascertained under the impression that the gendered view of the female was the architect. The final chapter, "Historical Notes", undermines this; the male professors that present the conference notes have the final say upon Offred's story, and her narrative is found wanting. Professor Pieixoto goes so far as to refuse to call it a document, indicating that it has little historical worth: "The item – I hesitate to use the word *document*" (Atwood 313). Not only is Offred's narrative dismissed as a questionable source of data, it has been rearranged by these male professors: "the tapes were arranged in no particular order ... nor were they numbered, thus it was up to Professor Wade and myself to arrange the blocks of speech in the order in which they appeared to go" (Atwood 314). This arrangement of the tapes containing Offred's narrative is, perhaps, the most telling image of the novel. Despite the gendered power play that occurs within its pages, and despite the cat and mouse game that develops between its protagonists, ultimately, it is placed into an arbitrary order by two men who barely deign to grant it the title of 'document'. Offred is reduced to a brief footnote in the history of Gilead, the insight she grants into the gendered

interactions within the theological dystopia of the Republic are dismissed and male power asserts itself with finality in the conclusion of Atwood's text.

When approaching a novel of such standing as *The Handmaid's Tale* from a different critical perspective, one that is seemingly contradictory to the work that has gone before it, there is a fear that the approach is not worthy, for why has it not been considered from this perspective before? This thesis has altered dramatically from the moment of its inception, in the course of researching the novel I was presented with a multitude of rich critical work, predominantly that of the feminist literary field. As my research progressed, I could not help but notice that there was little to no work devoted to exploring the masculinity within the text other than to note its oppressive and misogynistic tendencies. This gave rise to the thesis topic as a reclaiming, and reinvestigation of her text from a new perspective, as only investigating one demographic in a state of oppression leaves questions as to the minute functioning of those doing the oppressing.

The volume of critical work available on Atwood made the topic of this thesis dually difficult; firstly because so much has been written in the feminist literary tradition, what more could possibly be said that would be of benefit to the field? And secondly, because there exists little upon the masculine in its own right within Atwood's works, so where to start? By focusing on the masculinity within *The Handmaid's Tale*, this thesis has sought to bridge the gap between the long standing critical field of feminist literary theory and the relatively young field of masculinity studies. By identifying the scarcity of masculine criticism on Atwood, it has utilised the critical theories available within the field of masculinity studies and applied them to the text to create a new avenue of analysis, furthering the current scholarship available on a popular, insightful novel.

So where does this leave us? Atwood's collection of work is enormous and varied, she has written prolifically upon a wide range of subjects with enthusiasm and skill. By using *The Handmaid's Tale* as the starting point to locating Atwood's masculinities, this thesis has created an opportunity to reconsider her works by moving the critical focus from being solely upon the female, towards the masculinity present. It should not be considered as contradictory in nature to the feminist literary tradition, indeed, investigation of the masculine cannot occur without the feminine. By uniting the two fields of study, we cease to focus upon each sex or gender as a standalone subject, and instead move towards an exploration of the sexes as they appear in both texts, and reality, simultaneously.

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