

*Special Delivery:*  
*Twenty-first Century Epistolarity*  
 in *The Handmaid's Tale*

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*A woman's life is all like the act of giving birth; a solitary, painful, furtive act.*

—The Three Marias: New Portuguese Letters



SET IN CAMBRIDGE before the year 2000, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986) depicts the aftermath of a paramilitary coup by right-wing fundamentalists who establish a theocracy in the United States, renamed the Republic of Gilead. Born about 1965, the heroine is old enough to remember her feminist mother's activism, but young enough to be recruited into surrogate motherhood in the new regime. Toxic wastes, nuclear accidents, and epidemics like AIDS have so decimated the population that reproduction is compulsory: the surrogates, called handmaids, dressed in red habits and veils, are assigned to aging childless couples among the regime's elite. The narrator is stripped of her previous identity and given the name "Offred," a patronymic composed of the possessive preposition and the first name (in her case, Fred) of the Commander whom she services.

The novel seems at first to have little in common with epistolary literature, since letter writing will presumably become extinct in the age of telecommunications and technological wizardry. But Atwood transports the dominant motifs of epistolarity into the twenty-first century,

transforming the heroine's "letter" into a tape recording from the 1990s, purposely recorded randomly from memory. The medium changes, but the mode remains the same. The novel's re-presentation of speech is a reconstruction several times removed, for Offred's discourse is muted, mediated, and modified by the interventions of time and technology, and by masculine writing appended to her own speech. Her tapes are unearthed and reconstructed in 2195 by a male archivist whose written transcript is the narrative we read. The representational status of writing and the voice of authority are thus decentered by Atwood's juxtaposition of two entirely different texts, one masculine and one feminine. Atwood apocalyptically foresees the failure of humanism, liberalism, individualism, feminism, and capitalism; disintegration and calamity follow. Postmodernism is therefore stamped on the text as indelibly as the postmark of epistolarity is. My aim in this essay is first to examine the novel's formal relations to epistolary traditions, particularly in terms of masculine writing versus feminine speech. I shall then explain how the novel functions as an anatomy of ideology, in order to show that apocalyptic politics are as vital as poetics in the special delivery of the postmodern epistolary mode.

*Masculine Writing/Feminine Speech:  
Atwood's Epistolary Predecessors*

*The Handmaid's Tale* has been compared thematically to *The Scarlet Letter* and to "fearsome future" novels like *1984*,<sup>1</sup> but its origins can be traced to the *locus classicus* of epistolarity, the *Heroides*, for, like Ovid's heroines, Offred narrates from exile, a ceaseless reiteration of her desire and her despair. She is multiply exiled: in obliterating the world she used to know, the Gileadean regime transforms her into "a refugee from the past."<sup>2</sup> When she flees Gilead, she is literally exiled; she makes her tapes while being hidden by the underground resistance movement. Thus, as with Ovid's Briseis, Dido, Penelope, and Medea, both Offred's psyche and the nation are in a state of siege among warring factions; in narrating, Offred situates herself in a landscape that is simultaneously psychic, physical, and political.<sup>3</sup> Whereas in earlier epochs the heroine addressed a reader (real or imagined), Offred addresses an imaginary listener. But like all earlier epistolary heroines, she reveals her pain and compulsively repeats it, as when she confesses:

It hurts me to tell it over, over again. Once was enough: wasn't once enough for me at the time? But I keep on going with this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story, because after all I want

you to hear it. . . . By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there, I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are. (268)

What Offred wills is nothing less than a future for the human race, since, at the moment when she actually speaks, its destruction seems imminent. By positing a listener, she affirms her faith in its survival. Far from being a solitary testament of individual feeling, a purely interior discourse of the heart, Offred's obsessions of necessity center on history, politics, and apocalypse. Apocalypse generally connotes catastrophe: terrorism, mass torture, nuclear accidents, deadly new strains of contamination. But apocalypse also signifies revelation of what was, is, and will be; in this sense, Offred is a "handmaid" metaphorically as well as literally: she is the handmaid of history, who prophetically reveals the monstrous shape of things to come for a listener she can only imagine, but whom she wills into being by telling.

The epistolary gesture always entails the invention of a confidant who is absent at the moment of narrating, and it is therefore an act of dissimulation as well as of confidence. Offred's narrative embodies both impulses: she dissimulates by disguising all the names and by scrambling the order of her tapes, and she confides by repaying tenacious listeners with her remarkable revelations. As Janet Altman points out, "The epistolary confidant is most fundamentally an archivist"; Offred's listener is literally an archivist.<sup>4</sup> Just as the heroine's narrative provides a glimpse into a past that the archivist barely comprehends, his own historical notes provide a glimpse into a future that neither the heroine nor the reader could have foreseen, for by 2195 the entire map of the world has been transformed in terms of territory, language, culture, religion, and politics.

The text thus articulates the problems of transmission and reception, an articulation for which epistolarity is justly renowned, and in which the female voice is particularly problematic. As Bernard Duyfhuizen explains, "If a novel in letters is to exist, the act of transmission must include its inverse: the act of retaining or collecting. . . . One part of the narrative of transmission . . . is the story of the collection—how the letters become available to an "Editor."<sup>5</sup> That is precisely the story that the historical notes tell. Only after the reader finishes Offred's discourse and turns to those notes do the novel's epistolary origins become apparent: the fiction of found tapes is the next century's equivalent to the fiction of found letters. Professor Pieixoto, Cambridge University's director of twentieth- and twenty-first-century archives, recounts his discovery of Offred's tapes to the 12th Symposium on Gileadean Studies in 2195. More than thirty tapes are found in what used to be Bangor,

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Maine; they were purposely recorded at random intervals on different musical cassettes to camouflage their chronology, coherence, and significance. Pieixoto determines that the tapes are authentic rather than forged, and draws deductions about the handmaid's culture. The very sequence of the sentences we read results from Pieixoto's guesswork; he arranges Offred's "blocks of speech" in a plausible order. He is aided by voice-print experts and technicians who reconstruct a machine long obsolete: the tape recorder. The narrative we read is thus a reconstruction, an approximation, subject to numerous interventions, all of which undermine the voice(s) of authority and the validity of interpretation.

Perhaps the most celebrated predecessor in the tradition of the fiction of found letters is *Lettres portugaises*, published in France in 1669 by Claude Barbin, who added an *avis au lecteur* asserting that the letters were written by a Portuguese nun, Mariane, after her seduction and abandonment by a French chevalier. Barbin recounts his difficulties in "translating" the letters and "verifies" their authenticity, but he may have perpetrated one of the greatest literary hoaxes of all time, for many now believe that Racine's friend Gabriel-Joseph de Lavergne de Guilleragues authored the letters.<sup>6</sup> Both editor and author, well aware of the public's distaste for fiction, accurately predicted the scandalous appeal the "history" of the nun's passion would have for the public. Like Barbin, Atwood's archivist insists on the authenticity of his discovery, and repudiates those forgeries "for which publishers have paid large sums, wishing to trade no doubt on the sensationalism of such stories." One of his moralistic editorial intrusions follows: "It appears that certain periods of history quickly become, both for other societies and for those that follow them, the stuff of not especially edifying legend and the occasion for a good deal of hypocritical self-congratulation" (302). But the archivist commits the very crimes he condemns, for he has little sensitivity to Offred's predicament or her pain. His tone is jocular; Offred's narrative comes to be entitled "The Handmaid's Tale" as a bawdy joke among his colleagues: "the word *tail* . . . being, to some extent, the bone, as it were, of contention, in that phase of Gileadean society" (301). In this pun, the issues of genre (tale) and gender (tail) are joined. Professor Pieixoto does not know how to describe the document as a genre; in terms of gender, he is condescending, ascribing the aleatory construction of the discourse, its lack of style, to the poor education of North American females in the 1980s, and apologizing for the quality of Offred's mind. He wishes her record contained more data about the Gileadean regime and yearns for some of the Commander's computer printouts. He ignores the fact that it is precisely because she is female that she is denied access to the kind of information he desires. Pieixoto and his cohorts are

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merely the most recent of a long series of epistolary editors who appropriate the female voice for their own purposes—fame, fortune, power, self-aggrandizement, and self-congratulation.

His obsession with literal facts is particularly chilling since Gilead, like Puritan America, is founded on a literal interpretation of the Bible, specifically Genesis 30:1-3, where Rachel tells Jacob, "Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her." These words result in a monthly "flesh triangle": Offred lies on her back between the knees of Serena Joy, the Commander's wife, while the Commander attempts to inseminate Offred. If and when she delivers a healthy baby, its appropriation and the handmaid's dismissal will follow—an ugly perversion of the spirit of the biblical dictum. How does one respond to such perversions? "One detaches oneself. One describes," says Offred (95).

As so often in epistolary narration, Offred gives us the sense not just of narrating to the moment, but of narrating under compulsion: "I don't want to be telling this story," she confesses (273). Just as traditional epistolary heroines draw attention to the blots on the paper, the tear-stains on the page, and the self-reflexivity of their acts of writing, Offred repeatedly reminds us that

this is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction. It's a reconstruction now, in my head. . . . When I get out of here, if I'm ever able to set this down, in any form, even in the form of one voice to another, it will be a reconstruction then too, at yet another remove. It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances; too many gestures, which could mean this or that, too many shapes which can never be fully described, too many flavors, in the air or on the tongue, half-colors, too many. (134)

She emphasizes synesthesia, the poetic mixture of sensory impressions, because it is the texture of life that language cannot capture; that texture is too ineffably rich and temporally fleeting. She is, moreover, suspicious of all attempts to label, to sum up, to encapsulate, to define: Gilead has shown her too well the repression that results from literally enforcing one way, one truth, one interpretation. The compulsion to describe what cannot be put into words is one of the hallmarks of epistolarity, as the Portuguese nun reflects, "It seems to me that I am doing the greatest possible wrong to the feelings of my heart in trying to make them clear in writing to you."<sup>7</sup> Offred is similarly overwhelmed by the incapacity of language to encompass experience or feeling; it is always approximate, as she says in describing her affair with Nick: "I'm not sure how it hap-

pened; not exactly. All I can hope for is a reconstruction: the way love feels is always only approximate" (263). What is lacking in the archivist's commentary about Offred's discourse is precisely any sensitivity to taste, texture, touch, sound, sight—to the particularity of material existence in a specific historical moment.

That particularity is one of the hallmarks of epistolary writing-to-the-moment, but it has frequently led epistolary theorists to identify the epistle exclusively with individual feeling, as if such feelings could be isolated from social issues or politics. That is one of the myths Atwood dismantles. Epistolary is in fact intrinsically political, whether one thinks of Ovid's exile, or Clarissa's rebellion against patriarchal bourgeois ideology, or the three Marias' prosecution for obscenity. Exiled, imprisoned, cloistered, or "shut up," epistolary heroines are deeply subversive because for them writing itself is an act of revolt. As the three Marias proclaim, "When woman rebels against man, nothing remains unchanged."<sup>8</sup> Transgression lies in the telling. *The Handmaid's Tale*, then, differs in degree rather than kind from its epistolary predecessors: what remains implicit in a text like *Lettres portugaises*, for example, is merely more explicit in Atwood's novel: sex and politics are indistinguishable as transfer points of power and oppression in a society under siege. The Portuguese nun's seduction is metonymic: she is enthralled by (and in thrall to) a Frenchman stationed in Portugal to expand the empire of the Sun King; once the conquest of woman and colony is accomplished, the chevalier sails home. In Gilead, similarly, woman's body becomes the territory to master; female sexuality is harnessed for the "higher good" of the body politic, and viable ovaries become a "national resource" (65).

The appropriation of the female body and voice is therefore closely allied with other political acts of appropriation and conquest. One begins the process of mastery by stealing the language, a theft that is a recurrent theme in Atwood's poetry as well as her fiction. In the "Circe/Mud" poems in *You Are Happy* (1974), for example, Circe is initially mistress of the island and namer of all things on it, but Odysseus vanquishes her by possessing her body and stealing her words: she spends her days "with my head pressed to the earth, to stones, / to shrubs, collecting the few muted syllables left over." She resists speaking in the "received language," as if aware that mythology always reproduces the same stories—of seduction, betrayal, conquest, power. She tries to subvert the glorious epic of omnipotent patriarchs by referring to Odysseus's "stupid boat, / your killer's hands." Yet she is helplessly doomed to silence, for she recognizes that he is the narrator of his odyssey, and she knows that "It's the story that counts." Despite her magical powers and prophetic

capacities, she beseeches him to answer her questions: "When you leave will you give me back the words? Don't evade, don't pretend you won't leave after all: you leave in the story and the story is ruthless."<sup>9</sup> She knows that since he is master of the myth, his story will depict her as evil, and that she cannot change its contours or course. Atwood thus draws on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as well as the *Heroides*; like Circe, Offred expresses the same powerlessness, the same awareness that she has no control over the outcome of what she narrates: "I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. . . . If it's a story . . . then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it" (39). The catastrophic events she witnesses are so unreal that Offred tries to believe they are fictional, but she cannot sustain that delusion for long. Her circumstances are too desperate and the regime is too ruthless.

The archivist fails to appreciate the profound implications of Offred's act, for he does not comprehend the effort of will and the leap of faith it requires for her to imagine a listener. Nor does he fully understand her objectives, for the particularity of her predicament is closely allied to the collective fate of women in her society, and one of her aims is to record their individual voices as well as her own. Traditionally, the epistle brings the absent beloved before the writing heroine; the motif of *je crois te parler* enables her to "hold him in her hands," to believe that she is speaking to him. That is a complex process for Offred, because she must first re-create herself, since the regime has turned her into a "missing person . . . disembodied . . . deserted . . . like a room where things once happened and now nothing does" (103-4). She first has to reclaim herself, retrieve her voice; once she does so, she turns to reinscribe the voices of other women. Poignantly, in this context, *je crois te parler* amounts to raising the dead, for Offred tries to bring into being a non-existent archive of women so as to memorialize, for history, the women she will never see again: her daughter, her mother, her friends, her co-conspirators. She re-presents the speech of Moira, for example, the gutsy college roommate who ends up as a prostitute in the Commander's private club. Offred consciously tries to mime Moira's iconoclastic, witty speech: "I've tried to make it sound as much like her as I can. It's a way of keeping her alive" (243-44). As a result, the entire narrative is a polyphony of distinctive female voices, but the archivist is deaf to these nuances. His scholarly, detached approach to the tapes reflects the assumptions of scientific research, technology, and objectivity; it assumes the status of truth. But his "truth" is not the same as women's. In Gilead, as in all previous periods of history, women's history is repressed; Gilead is merely the most recent regime to suppress their voices by prohibiting them from reading, writing, or speaking. The conditions of existence

\* Moira's story

under which Offred labors do not permit the luxury of the archivist's so-called objectivity. As Pierre Macherey observes,

The act of knowing is not like listening to a discourse already constituted, a mere fiction which we have simply to translate. It is rather the elaboration of a new discourse, the articulation of a silence. . . . What can be said of the work can never be confused with what the work itself is saying, because two distinct kinds of discourse which differ in both form and content are being superimposed.<sup>10</sup>

Arwood juxtaposes the handmaid's discourse with "what can be said" by the archivist, who errs in presuming that knowledge is an act of mere translation, once he assembles the proper technological equipment. The traditional definitions of "feminine" speech versus "masculine" writing are thus reaccentuated in Arwood's novel: the feminine is subjective, disordered, associative, illogical; the masculine is objective, orderly, controlled, logical. Such dichotomies have been reiterated by theorists of epistolarity through the ages, and have been used to decide whether the letter writer's sex can be determined solely by internal stylistic evidence; with such texts as *Lettres portugaises*, for example, the question continues to be intensely controversial.<sup>11</sup> Since on a tape recording it is easier to hear whether the speaker is male or female, the question will be less ambiguous in epistolary productions of the twenty-first century.

Ovid's heroines and the Portuguese nun are clearly Offred's ancestors, but her relationship with her missing husband, Luke, most closely resembles Héloïse's with Abelard. Years after Abelard's castration and her conventual incarceration, Héloïse still refuses to face the fact that their separation is permanent; instead she sustains her illusions and her passion in her letters. Offred is equally defiant and illogical; she cannot reconcile herself to the fact that she and Luke will never be free, never make love again, that he may not even be alive. She imagines three alternative fates for him: that he was killed when they were captured; that he is a political prisoner; that he escaped and is working in the resistance movement. She confesses, "The things I believe can't all be true, though one of them must be. But I believe in all of them, all three versions of Luke, at one and the same time. This contradictory way of believing seems to me, right now, the only way I can believe anything" (106). In contrast to Pieixoto's literalness, Offred strives to sustain a spiritual belief. "In reduced circumstances you have to believe all kinds of things. I believe in thought transference now . . . I never used to" (105). Thus, irrationality, which in former times would be seen as merely personal—and feminine—is here transformed into an explicitly political act, for Offred's survival is at stake in sustaining herself in order to

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witness to posterity about the fate of other political prisoners. Given the horror of her predicament, her danger, and its apocalyptic proportions, irrational faith is her only defense, for to be able to imagine one listener, she has to imagine the survival of thousands capable of vanquishing Gilead; these are the conditions of her survival and hence her narration. She explicitly relates her discourse to letters when she says:

A story is like a letter. Dear *You*, I'll say. Just *you*, without a name. Attaching a name attaches *you* to the world of fact, which is riskier, more hazardous; who knows what the chances are out there of survival, yours? . . . *You* can mean more than one. *You* can mean thousands. . . . I'm not in any immediate danger, I'll say to you. I'll pretend you can hear me. (40)

Letters have long functioned to defamiliarize the distance between fiction and reality by drawing attention to the fictiveness of the narrative act, as Offred does here. But here, *je crois te parler* is linked not solely to sustaining sexual passion, but to the survival of the human race.

The same transformation of the personal to the political through the act of forbidden discourse applies to forbidden reading, which has long been a feminine transgression in fiction, as with the forbidden letters Clarissa receives from Lovelace. But in Gilead, it is not just personal letters that are forbidden; all reading is forbidden to women. The Commander indulges Offred's craving by offering her a secret supply of banned books and magazines: Charles Dickens, Raymond Chandler, *Ms. magazine*, *Mademoiselle*, *Vogue*, *Esquire*, *Reader's Digest*. She reads voraciously, trying to absorb as much material as quickly as possible in stolen moments. These materials help her remember a time before Gilead redefined even the language, developing such terms as "unwomen," "unbaby," and "gender traitors" to reshape reality. That is why Offred's surreptitious Scrabble games with the Commander are so subversive: it is her method of stealing the language back again, a proleptic hint of the tape recordings she will eventually make. Language is what she steals, and through language, knowledge and power.

The epistolary novel is the site of numerous transgressions, the formal codes of which are all familiar: adultery in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*; prostitution in *Clarissa*; suicide in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, forbidden reading in all of these. Atwood transforms these familiar codes while leaving their traces legible: since the previous handmaid killed herself when her trysts with the Commander were discovered, suicide is never far from Offred's mind. She is, moreover, defined by the regime as an adulteress since she married a divorced man. Furthermore, she deceives Serena with the Commander and later deceives the Commander with

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Nick. Finally, when the Commander takes her to Jezebel's, the private men's club and brothel, she plays the prostitute. But the formal codes are here transformed into political crimes, for reading is not merely "an imaginary or metaphorical transgression."<sup>12</sup> Instead it is a literal crime, punishable by the amputation of a hand. The Gileadean regime punishes those who commit the "crime" of "unchastity" by amputating an arm and the crime of adultery by execution (275). In Gilead, these codes reflect an ideology devoted to the repression of human desire in general and female sexuality in particular.

What caused such sudden and severe societal repression? Offred learns from the Commander that the revolution came about because men felt irrelevant. "There was nothing for them to do with women . . . the sex was too easy. Anyone could just buy it. There was nothing to work for, nothing to fight for. . . . You know what they were complaining about the most? Inability to feel. Men were turning off on sex, even" (210). This revealing statement implies that male potency derives from and depends on the oppression of others. Only by wrapping women in veils and habits, by persecuting "deviants," by suspending civil liberties, do such men derive a sense of meaningful existence. As the three Marias observe, "The basic repression, the one which . . . lies at the very core of the history of the human species, creating the model and giving rise to the myths underlying other repressions, is that of the woman by the man."<sup>13</sup> At one point, Offred prophetically envisions a male listener to her tape and addresses him directly. After declaring that it is impossible to describe anything accurately, in all its fullness, she makes a crucial distinction between masculine and feminine responses to her discourse:

If you happen to be a man, sometime in the future, and you've made it this far, please remember: you will never be subject to the temptation or feeling you must forgive, a man, as a woman. It's difficult to resist, believe me. But remember that forgiveness too is a power. To beg for it is a power, and to withhold or bestow it is a power, perhaps the greatest. (133-34)

This puzzling statement is perhaps made clearer by relating it to Offred's attitude toward the Commander. She weighs individual responsibility, emotional involvement, and the power of forgiveness as she tries to find the words to describe his monthly violation of her.

He is fucking . . . the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. (94)

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Offred's comment about forgiveness thus arises in the context of whether it is possible to forgive the Commander, who puts her life in peril by breaking the rules of their intercourse. On the one hand, he becomes an individual person rather than a thing to her, and she to him, which slightly eases her otherwise unbearable existence. On the other hand, she is completely in his power, and he can turn on her, or turn her in, at any moment, as happened to the previous handmaid. It may seem as if Offred is advocating forgiveness, but she goes on to record her childhood memory of a television documentary about the wife of a Nazi SS-officer who was responsible for sending Jews to the ovens. Offred reflects that the wife "did not believe he was a monster. He was not a monster, to her. Probably he had some endearing trait: he whistled . . . he called his dog Liebchen. . . . How easy it is to invent a humanity, for anyone at all. What an available temptation" (145-46). The temptation of a woman to forgive a man is precisely what Offred abjures; forgiving would result in forgetting, and that is exactly what she records her narrative to prevent: her listeners must remember history and must not eradicate the memory of what has been done to the spirits and bodies of the regime's dissenters and its victims.

*Docile Bodies: An Anatomy of Ideology*

Offred neither forgives nor forgets; she rebels by keeping the past alive. What the regime would eradicate, she reinscribes. Her first words evoke the "afterimage" of a world long ago and far away: she remembers the basketball games and high school dances held through the decades in the gymnasium where she is imprisoned, which has been turned into a re-education center to indoctrinate handmaids in their new roles. "There was old sex in the room and loneliness, and expectation, of something without a shape or name. I remember that yearning, for something that was always about to happen . . . we yearned for the future" (3). The intensity with which teenagers yearned for the future is grimly ironic in retrospect, since that future has now arrived, emptied of hope, choice, possibility. The "something without shape or name" is desire, and Offred remembers her own "insatiability," a craving all the more poignant now, since desire is precisely what is banned in Gilead.

Her individual memories illuminate not just her intimate relations, but political and historical moments, ranging from her mother's feminist activism for abortion rights and against pornography, to her own combined roles as working woman, wife, lover, friend, mother, citizen. But

Gilead strips women of their individuality, categorizing them hierarchically according to class status and reproductive capacity. They are in fact, metonymically color-coded according to their function and their labor: the Commanders' wives wear blue (a remnant perhaps of aristocracy's blue bloods); the handmaids wear red, the color of blood; and "econowives," distributed to lesser functionaries in the regime, wear multi-colored dresses, to indicate that they have to perform multiple sexual and housewifely functions. The very term "econowives" makes explicit the hierarchical commodification of the female. Men without any status are not "issued a woman, not even one" (18). The traffic in women eliminates the individual female personality; she merely becomes an interchangeable unit in the body politic.

The novel thus gives a new and ominous meaning to the phrase "the body-politic" by laying bare the devices by which subjects of the state are ideologically constructed. Atwood implicitly inquires, "What is woman?" The answer: a person of the female sex. Only in certain relations of power and exchange does she become a servant, a womb, or a sexual partner, as Simone de Beauvoir observes in *The Second Sex*, which may have provided Atwood's donnée, for in trying to distinguish production in the Marxist sense from biological reproduction, de Beauvoir observes:

It is impossible simply to equate gestation with a service, such as military service . . . no state has ever ventured to establish obligatory copulation. . . . All that can be done is to put woman in a situation where maternity is for her the sole outcome—the law or the mores enjoin marriage, birth control and abortion are prohibited, divorce is forbidden.<sup>14</sup>

That is precisely the situation Atwood imagines: mass marriages are arranged; divorce is prohibited; free will and individual choice cease to exist. Like Héloïse, Mariane, and the many nuns in *The Three Marias*, Offred takes the veil not from internal religious conviction but because external pressures coerce her to harness her sexuality. The only difference between her existence and a nun's is that the latter is forced to be chaste, whereas for Offred and all handmaids copulation is obligatory; birth control and abortion are prohibited; woman is compelled to bring forth or face death.

Apocalypse depicts what has been, what is, and what will be. Atwood depicts what "woman" has been in the Judeo-Christian tradition, from biblical times through the 1980s to the end of the next century. From Medusa to the Virgin Mary, from the biblical handmaid Bilhah to Hester Prynne, from Mary Webster<sup>15</sup> to Maryann Crescent Moon in 2195, the novel assembles the constructions of "woman": monster, madonna,

witch, womb, whore, revolutionary, heretic, prostitute, servant, mother. Atwood's purpose is to show that revolutions come and go, but women's fates remain wholly unchanged. The three Marias share the same insight in *New Portuguese Letters*, as they similarly shift forward and backward through time, asking in a woman's diary entry from 1800:

What woman is not a nun, sacrificed, self-sacrificing, without a life of her own, sequestered from the world? What change has there been in the life of women through the centuries? . . . We are living in an age of civilization and enlightenment, men write scientific treatises, and encyclopedias, nations continually change and transform their political structure, the oppressed raise their voices, a king of France has been sent to the guillotine and his courtiers along with him, the United States of America has gained its independence. . . . What has changed in the life of women?<sup>16</sup>

Rather than being progressive, history, for women, is both regressive and repressive. Atwood is unflinching in depicting the oppression of women before the coup as well as after: before the coup, women were not safe on the streets; portable "Pornomarts" were on every corner; "snuff" films celebrated the murder and dissection of female bodies. The new regime promises an end to rape, pornography, and violence. As Atwood observes, "A new regime would never say, 'we're socialist; we're fascist.' They would say that they were serving God. . . . You can develop any set of beliefs by using the Bible. . . . Repressive regimes always have to offer up something in return."<sup>17</sup> Women believed the regime's promises and participated in book-burnings, inadvertently colluding in their own enslavement; it is precisely the cooperation of feminists with right-wingers that helps bring about the fundamentalist coup: pornography is banned, but so are all civil liberties. Martial law is imposed and all undesirables—prostitutes, lesbians, and feminists like the narrator's mother—are forced to clean toxic wastes until they die from contamination. All are labeled "unwomen." Language thus defines reality, which is one reason that Offred spends so much time meditating about words, comparing their meanings before the coup and after, their arbitrariness and construction. Of the word *chair*, for example, she reflects "It can mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first syllable in charity. It is the French word for flesh. None of these facts has any connection with the others" (110). But in fact there is an associative connection, for the leaders of the revolution enforce their power by torturing the flesh of dissenters. Resisters receive no charity, no mercy; instead, they are executed.

*The Handmaid's Tale* functions as an anatomy of ideology, exposing

the process by which one constructs, psychologically and politically, subjects of the state, and then enlists their cooperation in their own subjection. One begins at the level of the flesh. In the re-education centers, the handmaid is taught to have an entirely different relation to her own body, her "self." As Offred confesses:

Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfill the expectations of others, which have become my own. I used to think of my body as an instrument of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will. I could use it to run, push buttons of one sort or another, make things happen. There were limits, but my body was nevertheless lithe, single, solid, one with me.

Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed, around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping. Inside it is a space . . . huge. . . . I see despair coming towards me like famine. To feel that empty, again, again. (73-74)

Atwood's purpose, like Ovid's in the *Metamorphoses*, "is to tell of bodies which have been transformed into shapes of a different kind"; here Offred's body is reduced to the womb, a reproductive factory.

The novel demonstrates the paradox that the ideology of the biological family really comes into its own when the complexity of a class society forces the kinship system to recede.<sup>18</sup> Since children are distributed like commodities, the biological kinship system has ceased to exist. But at the same time the patriarchs justify their reign of terror by trumpeting the ideology of the family to the heavens, basing it on an extremist's interpretation of the Bible. The closest corollary to the Gileadean system is slavery in the American South, when black women were similarly prized and priced as breeders. As in slavery, despite the woman's labor, the white slaveholders, like the men in Gilead, retain legal property rights over the product of the woman's body; religiously and legally, it is the man who "produces" the child, just as it has always been.

Bodies are turned into machines in the army, the school, and the hospital; in Atwood's novel, the Red Centers combine all three functions. They are run by the "Aunts," menopausal women whose job is to create a sisterhood and a women's culture, a grim parody of one of the quaint feminist impulses of the 1970s and 1980s. The Aunts are licensed to torture recruits who resist re-education. (This emphasis on the collusion of women with their oppressors is significant; one of the regime's strokes of genius is their discovery that the least expensive way to enforce its policies is by using women against each other.) The Red Centers are also hospitals, for here the handmaids practice Lamaze exercises and

undergo drug and shock treatments. Their identities as women, wives, mothers, lovers are all erased through discipline, punishment, and torture. As Foucault asks, "Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?"<sup>19</sup> Offred is simultaneously a prisoner, a pupil to be re-educated, a patient who is forcibly subjected to monthly gynecological exams to optimize the chances of pregnancy. The novel thus condenses two of Foucault's major subjects: the birth of the prison and the birth of the clinic, the gaze of the panopticon and the gaze of the medical amphitheater.<sup>20</sup> In Gilead, all flesh is brought down to the level of the organism.

In revealing the inextricable connections between power and sexuality, Atwood demonstrates the validity of the observation that "Sexuality is not the most intractable element in power relations, but rather one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality."<sup>21</sup> Offred's reckless trysts with Nick seem to refute Foucault's thesis, but when she is discovered, she says,

I'll sacrifice. I'll repent. I'll abdicate. I'll renounce. . . . Everything they taught at the Red Center, everything I've resisted comes flooding in. I don't want pain. . . . I want to keep on living, in any form, I resign my body freely, to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me. I am a subject. I feel, for the first time, their true power. (286)

Her predecessor's suicide under similar circumstances attests to the powerful mechanisms in force to control sexuality. In Gilead, all citizens are classified in binary categories that control and contain everyone: licit versus illicit sex; reproductive versus nonreproductive ovaries; white versus black; religious believer versus heretic. Homosexuals are executed as "gender traitors"; abortionists are hanged for crimes against the species; Jews must emigrate or convert; blacks are "resettled"; feminists and other deviants—Quakers, Baptists, Catholics, atheists, liberals, leftists—are "disappeared."

To make visible the invisible work of ideology and subjection, Atwood's archeological investigations uncovered two theocracies as models: Puritan Boston of *The Scarlet Letter* and modern Iran under the Ayatollah Khomeini. Like Hester Prynne, the handmaid is defined by her sexuality, literally marked as a scarlet woman. Like Hester, she lives in a utopia gone awry, where the prison and the cemetery are omnipresent. Hawthorne's "Custom House" seems to have inspired Atwood's preoccupation with the ways in which we subject ourselves to the prison houses of custom: repression is first horrific, but soon comes to seem necessary, then customary, and finally "natural." At one point, Offred offhandedly remarks that at present "only" two bodies hang on the wall

in what used to be Harvard Yard. The present reality in all its horror is already coming to seem normal—even to her—and the next generation will have no memory, no means by which to measure the relative normality or abnormality of the regime. Indeed, time is carefully manipulated so that all remnants of the past, pre-Gilead reality are obliterated: there are no dates after the 1980s; all historical documents are destroyed, and the Gileadean regime periodically wipes out even its own computer records after various purges.

In a society under siege, when the brutal force of a coup prescribes the law of the land, subjects are defined solely by obedience: the subject who is constituted as subject is he who obeys. As Foucault observes:

The historical moment of the disciplines was the moment when an art of the human body was born, which was directed not only at . . . the intensification of its subjection, but at the formation of a relation that in the mechanism itself makes it more obedient as it becomes more useful, and conversely. What was then being formed was a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviour. The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A “political anatomy,” which was also a “mechanics of power,” was being born.<sup>22</sup>

Disciplined like soldiers, the handmaids learn to control their bodies, to respond mechanically, to act as a collective unit. As with a soldier or a nun, each handmaid’s body and gestures must reflect her status; she is commanded by signals, not by comprehension. Perhaps the closest model for the behavior desired of her is dressage—the leading of horses through their paces—which metaphorically signifies blind obedience.<sup>23</sup>

Obedience is also ensured through the careful regulation of time. As Offred notes, “the bell that measures time is ringing. Time here is measured by bells, as once in nunneries. As in a nunnery too, there are few mirrors” (8). Offred’s bodily movements are minutely monitored: so many minutes in the bathroom; so many chances (three) to conceive. Her entire existence as handmaid consists of waiting: waiting for the monthly “ceremony” during which the Commander tries to impregnate her; waiting for the results; and, if they are positive, waiting to deliver the baby. Another way to ensure obedience is to enforce silence; since spies are everywhere, the entire society ceases to speak freely, and the handmaids are only allowed to speak in prescribed pious clichés.

Atwood portrays a regime in the process of establishing the mechanisms of repression that will eventually be invisible. At the moment, they can still be seen: executions still abound; checkpoints stop citizens from fleeing the city; police vans suddenly materialize on the streets and whisk



unsuspecting citizens away. However, once Gilead works out the kinks in its repressive mechanisms, all citizens will, like the handmaids in their red habits, exist in a state of conscious and permanent "compulsory visibility" that will ensure the automatic functioning of power. The agents are called the Eyes, and eventually, as in Bentham's panopticon, surveillance will become permanent in its effects, even if discontinuous in its action, for the institutional gaze will be invisible but omniscient.<sup>24</sup>

Atwood's novel is thus an exemplary response to the challenge Michèle Barrett recently addressed to feminist literary critics:

I can find no sustained argument as to why feminists should be so interested in literature or what theoretical or political ends such analyses of literature serve. . . . Related to this is the inadequacy of feminist attempts to explore the ways in which material conditions have historically structured the mental aspects of oppression.<sup>25</sup>

Atwood's aim, however, is precisely to demonstrate how material conditions structure mental oppression, for despite all Offred's efforts to remember her prior existence, she has begun to take on the perception the regime wants her to have of herself. When she sees a pregnant woman, for example, she feels the emptiness of her own womb and experiences a sense of failure, futility, and worthlessness. Her breasts become swollen and ache. This is exactly how the material and mental aspects of oppression work in concert, for the Red Center trains her to reflect in her material body the mental impression it strives never to let her forget: that she is nothing but a passive receptacle.

Although Offred internalizes the oppression to which she is subjected, she also resists it. She repossesses her body by making love with Nick, an act for which she could be executed; she is compelled toward him, "expecting at any moment to feel the bullets rip through me" (268). By telling him her real name, she unburies the body, the voice, the self that the regime sought to annihilate, and she demonstrates how un-eradicable desire is. As de Beauvoir observes, "It is impossible to bring the sexual instinct under a code of regulations. . . . What is certain is that it does not permit of integration with the social, because there is in eroticism a revolt of the instant against time, of the individual against the universal."<sup>26</sup> In this way Offred defies the regime's definitions of her, for she and Nick "make love each time as if we know beyond the shadow of a doubt that there will never be any more, for either of us, with anyone, ever" (269).

Paradoxically, she also resists the regime by taking responsibility for her actions. Offred recognizes that she is guilty of numerous sins, albeit sins different from those defined by the regime. She castigates herself for

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not paying enough attention to the alarming signs of intolerance—religious, racial, and sexual—in her society before the takeover; and for colluding with the regime in order to survive. Her confession of these sins recalls one of the most remarkable characteristics of the female voice throughout epistolary literature, for from Héloïse to Mariane to Clarissa, heroines have used their letters to engage in merciless self-condemnation. Like Clarissa and the three Marias, Offred puts herself on trial.<sup>27</sup> She reveals her participation in the rite of “salvaging,” for instance, which means that when a woman is hanged, Offred touches the rope in unison with the other handmaids, then places her hand on her heart “to show my unity with the Salvagers and my consent, and my complicity in the death of this woman” (276). She also confesses to sharing the sensations the regime wants her to have when a political prisoner is brought before the handmaids on trumped-up charges of raping and murdering a pregnant handmaid. In a ritual called participation they rape and dismember him; only by an extraordinary effort of will does Offred restrain herself, but she nevertheless experiences the “bloodlust: I want to tear, gouge, rend” (279). And she memorializes both her complicity and that corpse in her text.

I wish this story were different. I wish it were more civilized. I wish it showed me in a better light, if not happier, then at least more active, less hesitant, less distracted by trivia. I wish it had more shape. . . . I'm sorry there is so much pain in this story. I'm sorry it's in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force. (267)

While apologizing for the pain in her story, Offred emphasizes that the fact that she is unhappy is less relevant than the fact that she should have been more engaged in collective action to save her society from fanatics. She compares the present with the ominous signs of growing repression in the past before the coup.

We lived as usual. Everyone does, most of the time. Whatever is going on is as usual. Even this is as usual, now. We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it. Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you knew it. (56)

She was an apathetic, self-absorbed member of the “post-feminist generation.”<sup>28</sup> The passage is thus an example of the ways in which one can locate in the same situation the forces of oppression and the seeds of resistance, for while Offred in some respects internalizes the oppression the regime enforces, she simultaneously resists it by confessing her individual responsibility and by making the tape recordings. From *Clarissa* to

*The Three Marias*, the heroine's discourse simultaneously reveals her oppression and resistance, collusion and rebellion. That duality, indeed, is yet another hallmark of the female voice in epistolary literature.

Quakers and Catholics also resist the regime; even Southern Baptists start a civil war, which to Atwood proves that there is considerable resistance, even among groups one would have thought would support a fundamentalist takeover. Her view of the Southern Baptists, however, seems overly optimistic in reality, for the 14.6-million-member denomination in 1987 elected a leader who endorses a literal interpretation of the Bible, insisting that "the narratives of Scripture are historically and factually accurate." A moderate minister who dissented from the majority vote noted that the election "seems to reflect the agenda of the fundamentalist takeover."<sup>29</sup>

Thus another reason for feminist literary analysis is that novels like Atwood's are less about the "fearsome future," than about the "fearsome present," for she dismantles received ideas and unquestioned assumptions about religion, sex, politics, women's cultures—and feminism itself. Atwood audaciously creates a heroine who is in a very real sense responsible for the Gileadean coup: she is apathetic politically, complacent about women's struggle for equal rights, absorbed solely in her individual existence. All around her she sees racial hatred, religious intolerance, and sexual repression intensifying daily. If *The Handmaid's Tale* were solely a tragic tale of one woman's suffering, it would merely reinforce the emphasis bourgeois ideology places on the individual, but by focusing equally on the decimation of a culture and a race, Atwood expands the parameters of the epistolary mode. Perhaps the most chilling statement in the novel is that of Professor Pieixoto, who observes, "There was little that was truly original with or indigenous to Gilead: its genius was synthesis" (307). The repressions Gilead devises are a synthesis of all previous cultures: it borrows from the Spanish inquisitors, the Puritans, Khomeini's Iranian followers, the KGB, the CIA. Gilead borrows Hitler's tactics of encircling urban centers, persecuting the Jews, eliminating undesirables, and using female bodies as laboratories for genetic reproduction. Pieixoto comments, "The sociobiological theory of natural polygamy was used as a scientific justification for some of the odder practices of the regime, just as Darwinism was used by earlier ideologies" (306).

Since such ghastly practices come to seem normal while Offred is witnessing them, one inevitably wonders what hope there is of sustaining any sense of outrage nearly two centuries later. Because readers in the 1980s are closer to the period Offred describes, our horror at what may become our imminent destiny is proportionally greater; Pieixoto and his

colleagues, however, look coolly back on a distant past. Whereas Offred sees nothing but pain in her narrative, two hundred years later, it is merely a source of quaint curiosity to the historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists who hear it. The immediacy of her danger and her descriptions of the evils she witnesses seem so remote in 2195 that her audience cannot even rouse itself to murmur against "the banality of evil"; nothing is condemned by Pieixoto, who warns: "We must be cautious about passing moral judgment upon the Gileadeans. Surely we have learned by now that such judgments are of necessity culture-specific. Our job is not to censure but to understand" (302).

This statement is a direct contrast to Offred's own defiant outrage, for like survivors of other holocausts, she insists that we pay attention to the material conditions of the suffering of specific individuals in a particular historical moment:

Maybe none of this is about control. Maybe it isn't really about who can own whom, who can do what to whom and get away with it, even as far as death. Maybe it isn't about who can sit and who has to kneel or stand or lie down, legs spread open. Maybe it's about who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it. Never tell me it amounts to the same thing. (134-35)

You can only forgive atrocities that you forget, and Offred reminds us never to forget, never to bury the horrors of history amid vague clichés in which there are no agents and no evils. Judgment is necessary, she insists, to prevent the past from repeating itself.

The archivist's myopia is ironically underscored by the last words of the text: "Are there any questions?" The novel leaves us haunted by myriad questions: What was Offred's eventual fate? What happened during the intervening century and a half to the United States and North America? The human race has survived, and the planet seems to have replenished itself—there are fish, oceans, forests—but what kind of society exists in 2195? Is it less sexist, racist, homophobic, fanatical? Is it more just? Or is it a telling comment that the archivist refuses to condemn Gilead as evil? Perhaps his society has merely perfected Gilead's "genius for synthesis," making the mechanisms of power and repression completely invisible—and thus all-pervasive. What, if anything, have we learned from history?

The novel resists closure, leaving us with disturbing questions rather than soothing answers. Atwood records the failure of humanism, liberalism, individualism, and feminism, but she offers no substitutes, no solutions, no comforting fictions of personal or political redemption—including feminist fictions. As Elaine Hansen observes, "This kind of

fiction and feminism alike insists that we uncover and examine the contradictions, the disequilibrium and insufficiency masked by the sense of an ending.<sup>30</sup> Thus in form and content, Atwood purposely dismantles received ideas about the present, as well as about the past and future, a strategy that evokes Fredric Jameson's reflection on future fiction: "The reader will there find an empty chair reserved for some as yet unrealized, collective, and decentered cultural production of the future, beyond realism and modernism alike."<sup>31</sup> Atwood invents just such a decentered cultural production, for the narrative we read is a collective endeavor, made possible by the resistance movement that presumably rescues Offred, by her courage and defiance in taping her discourse, and by archaeologists and technicians who reassemble her speech. The concentric construction of Atwood's apocalyptic novel encompasses past, present, and future. She makes us into detectives, trying to reconstruct the political history from which Offred's daily chronicle emerges. We discover the struggles and tensions that resulted in the establishment of Gilead's theocracy, and with the appended historical notes, we see history portrayed in its vastest sense, projected into the next century.<sup>32</sup> Through this triple framework, Atwood decenters both history and narrative. By dialogically superimposing the archivist's writing over the heroine's speech, she de-centers the representational status of writing while reaccentuating the epistolary postmark.<sup>33</sup>

Atwood's unique contribution to the long tradition of female voices in epistolary literature is to combine epistolary poetics with apocalyptic politics. Despite Gilead's attempts to ban desire, Offred's remains unvanquished. Despite the self-aggrandizement of masculine editors, the interventions of time, and the ideologues who sought to eradicate her, the distinctive female voice of Atwood's heroine remains. Her discourse is a defiant testimony of her innocence and culpability, her defiance and desire, her submission and rebellion to the history being rewritten before her eyes. Like Rennie, Atwood's heroine in *Bodily Harm*, her experiences of a brutal regime so radicalize her that she becomes "a subversive: She was not once but now she is. A reporter. She will pick her time; then she will report."<sup>34</sup> The novel is finally a testament to the urgency of the analytical project that lies at the interstices of feminism and literary theory, for the future Atwood describes is not distant. Instead, like 1984, it has already arrived. Atwood merely defamiliarizes the world around us in the 1980s: whether one thinks of the trials of surrogate motherhood, or the Vatican's recent doctrinal edict against anything but married "normal sexuality," or of the AIDS epidemic and its attendant repressions, or the resurgence of racial and religious intolerance—the seeds of hatred, violence, and repression are already prepared. Whatever

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"issue" is slouching toward Bethlehem may not yet be more than an embryo, but the seeds of disciplinary power and punishment of the body politic have already been sown. Like Foucault, Atwood is writing a history of the present.<sup>35</sup>

## NOTES

1. Mary McCarthy, *New York Times Book Review*, 9 Feb. 1986, pp. 1, 35.
2. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), 227. Subsequent references to this text are cited parenthetically.
3. For an analysis of the *Heroides* as the locus classicus of epistolarity, see Linda Kauffman, *Discourses of Desire: Gender, Genre, and Epistolary Fictions* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), ch. 1. See also Janet Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), 118-20.
4. Altman, *Epistolarity*, 53. Chapter 2 examines the oppositions of confidence and dissimulation in epistolary fiction. The dissimulation and duplicity of epistolary heroines (Ovid's, Héloïse, Mariane, Clarissa, and the three Marias) are discussed in Kauffman, 17, 23-27, 31, 32, 40-44, 56, 61, 70, 74, 110, 138, 142, 145, 148, 154-56, 179, 187, 201, 207, 288, 301-2, 305.
5. Bernard Duyfhuizen, "Epistolary Narratives of Transmission and Transgression," *Comparative Literature* 37 (Winter 1985): 1-26.
6. See Frédéric Deloffre and J. Rougeot, "L'Enigme des *Lettres portugaises*," in *Lettres portugaises, Valentins, et autres oeuvres de Guilleragues* (Paris: Garnier, 1962), v-xxiii. While in the editors' view the identification of Guilleragues as author is definitive, others argue that although no Portuguese original has ever been found, the work was at least inspired by authentic letters of a Portuguese woman. The controversy is far from being settled; Peter Dronke maintains in the *Times Literary Supplement* (5 Nov. 1976, p. 1397) that the entire issue "remains . . . wide open"; Yves Florenne, in "Introduction," *Lettres de la religieuse portugaise* (Paris: Librairie générale française, 1979), 77, argues for a female voice; Jean-Pierre and Thérèse LaSalle offer new evidence and additional letters by the same hand in *Un Manuscrit des lettres d'un religieuse portugaise: Leçons, interrogations, hypothèses*, *Papers on French Seventeenth-Century Literature* 6 (Paris: Biblio 17, 1982). See also Kauffman, ch. 3.
7. Frédéric Deloffre and J. Rougeot, eds., *Lettres portugaises, Valentins, et autres oeuvres de Guilleragues* (Paris: Garnier, 1962), 43, my translation.
8. Maria Isabel Barreño, Maria Teresa Horta, Maria Velho da Costa, *The Three Marias: New Portuguese Letters* (New York: Bantam, 1976), 158. The three Marias were prosecuted by the Caetano-Salazar dictatorship from 1972 to 1974. See Kauffman, ch. 8; on epistolary strategies of transgression, see Kauffman, 18, 27, 38-40, 49-50, 60, 64-68, 75, 78, 81-84, 89, 119, 132, 155, 229, 280-81, 289, 290-300, 310.
9. Margaret Atwood, "Circe/Mud Poems," in *You Are Happy* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1974; rpt. in *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, ed. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar [New York: Norton, 1985], 2296-98).

10. Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 6.

11. See, for example, Peggy Kamuf, "Writing like a Woman," in *Women and Language in Literature and Society*, ed. Sally McConnell-Ginet, Ruth Borker, and Nelly Furman (New York: Praeger, 1980), 284-99; Nancy K. Miller, "The Text's Heroine: A Feminist Critic and Her Fictions," *Diacritics* 12 (Summer 1982): 48-53; and Kauffman, ch. 3.

12. In "Flaubert's Presuppositions," *Diacritics* 11 (Winter 1981): 2-11, Michael Riffaterre traces a causal connection leading from forbidden reading to adultery, and from adultery to prostitution or suicide:

The first fatal step leads inevitably to the last fatal leap. These inseparable and complementary poles thus set the limits of the fictional space extending from an imaginary or metaphorical transgression (wicked thoughts nurtured by immoral and forbidden readings) to the most definitive of all actual or literal transgressions—the one that drags the heroine out of existence, and out of the text, simultaneously putting an end to what can be lived or to what can be told in words. The adulteress either commits suicide or sinks into prostitution.

13. *The Three Marias*, 219.

14. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1974), 65-66.

15. Atwood dedicates the book to Perry Miller, her professor of American literature at Harvard, and to Mary Webster, her Puritan forebear who was hanged as a witch but survived. "She had a tough neck," Atwood wryly observes.

16. *The Three Marias*, 154. Even after a junior officer's coup overthrew the Caetano-Salazar dictatorship in 1974, the women were still forced to stand trial, an injustice that further demonstrates the validity of their argument that revolutions do little to change women's oppression. See Kauffman, ch. 8.

17. Interview with Cathy N. Davidson, *Ms.* magazine, February 1986, pp. 24-26. Regarding the current feminist debate about pornography versus censorship, Atwood observes, "Women are in the position of being asked to choose between two things, neither of which is good for them. Why can't they have a third thing that is good for them . . . some kind of reasonable social milieu in which pornography would not be much of an issue because it would not be desired by men?"

18. Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism: Freud, Reich, Laing, and Women* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 378.

19. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979), 228.

20. See Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Vintage, 1975).

21. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 103.

22. *Ibid.*, 138.

23. *Ibid.*, 166.

24. *Ibid.*, 195-228.

25. Michèle Barrett, "Ideology and the Cultural Production of Gender," in *Criticism and Social Change: Sex, Class and Race in Literature and Culture*, ed. Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt (New York: Methuen, 1985), 65-85.

26. de Beauvoir, 65.

27. For an analysis of the trial motif in epistolary literature and the heroines' self-condemnation, see Kauffman, 44-45, 77-78, 133-36, 187-94.

28. See Susan Bolotin's "Voices from the Post-Feminist Generation," *New York Times Magazine*, 17 Oct. 1982, pp. 28-31, 103-7.

29. Atwood's comments appear in the *Ms.* interview; the Southern Baptists' Convention was reported by the *News and Observer*, Raleigh, N.C., 17 June 1987, pp. 1, 13A.

30. Elaine Tuttle Hansen, "Fiction and (Post)Feminism in Atwood's *Bodily Harm*," *Novel* 19 (Fall 1985): 5-21.

31. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 11.

32. The novel embodies Jameson's concept of "symbolization," (75), for its structure consists of:

three concentric frameworks [that] function to mark a widening out of the sense of the social ground of a text through . . . first, . . . political history, in the narrow sense of . . . a chroniclelike sequence of happenings in time; then of society, in the . . . sense of a constitutive tension and struggle between social classes; and ultimately, of history now conceived in its vastest sense of . . . various social formations, from prehistoric life to whatever far future history has in store for us.

33. Cf. Jameson, 285, 296. On Bakhtinian dialogism and epistolary reaccentuation, see Kauffman, 18, 23, 25, 33, 79, 82, 120, 282, 298.

34. Atwood, *Bodily Harm* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 265.

35. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 31. Mary McCarthy disagrees. She sees nothing "in our present mores that I ought to watch out for unless I want the United States . . . to become a slave state something like the Republic of Gilead." *New York Times Book Review*, 9 Feb. 1986, pp. 1, 35. Has McCarthy perhaps lived in Paris too long?



"Trying To Do Without God":  
*The Revision of Epistolary  
 Address in The Color Purple*

CAROLYN WILLIAMS



IN HER FIRST letter to God, Celie recounts her rape at the hands of her Pa. Celie is fourteen at the time, and she prays to God for "a sign letting [her] know what is happening to [her]."<sup>1</sup> But the sign for which she prays is not forthcoming. That first letter initiates the story of Celie's unrelenting victimization, until little by little she manages—through identification with other women—to find her strength and identity. The epistolary form of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* highlights this aspect of its content, since the letters themselves figure crucially in the plot. Toward the middle of the novel, Celie discovers that her husband, Mr. —, has been hiding the letters from her sister, Nettie, and allowing Celie to believe that her sister is dead. Through Nettie's restored letters, Celie eventually learns that the man who raped her—thus motivating her correspondence with God—was not her Pa after all, but her stepfather. Her last letter to God at this point reveals the amazed disgust she feels upon realizing that her chosen correspondent could hardly have been paying attention to her letters at all.

Dear God,

That's it, say Shug. Pack your stuff. You coming back to Tennessee with me.

But I feels daze.

My daddy lynch. My mama crazy. All my little half-brothers and sisters no kin to me. My children not my sister and brother. Pa not pa. You must be sleep. (163)

Surely the most striking feature of the novel's particular epistolary form involves the shift in address that occurs at this point, as Celie turns away from her first correspondent and begins instead to address her sister. In her second letter to Nettie, Celie offers an explanation of her turn away from God as addressee. True to the womanist philosophy of the novel,<sup>2</sup> Celie's explanation involves the race and class as well as the gender associated with a God who does not listen to "poor colored women."

Dear Nettie,

I don't write to God no more, I write to you.

What happen to God? ast Shug.

Who that? I say. . . .

Anyhow, I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man! And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown.

She say, Miss Celie, You better hush. God might hear you.

Let 'im hear me, I say. If he ever listened to poor colored women. the world would be a different place, I can tell you.

She talk and she talk, trying to budge me way from blasphemy. But I blaspheme much as I want to.

All my life I never care what people thought bout nothing I did, I say. But deep in my heart I care about God. What he going to think. And come to find out, he don't think. Just sit up there glorifying in being deaf, I reckon. But it ain't easy, trying to do without God. Even if you know he ain't there, trying to do without him is a strain. (175-76)

In the remainder of this crucial letter, Shug offers Celie a revised understanding of what "God" might be; and by the end of the novel, Celie has managed to put Shug's revised notion of God into practice. On the level of form as well as explicit content, this epistolary text performs the work of "trying to do without God," and by the end, that work is no longer such a "strain." The shift in Celie's address from God to Nettie, divinity to humanity, figurative to real family, "father" to sister, male to female, white to black, turns the novel in a new direction, toward the affirmative "Amen" of its closure.

Though Celie does not understand this until much later, the God whom she initially addresses is identified with men from the start. The choice of God as addressee, for example, is not made by Celie herself but

is urged by the man she calls Pa. His suggestion that God is the only "safe" confidant involves an explicit prohibition of the mother, as well as an implicit bond between the abusive human father and his God. This is clear in the italicized epigraph to the first letter, which suggests that Celie's text opens under the auspices of a voice other than her own: "*You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy*" (11). Celie follows this advice when she "protects" her mother from knowing the identity of her first child's father, and thereby, of course, she also protects the abusive father. "She ast me bout the first one Whose is it? I say God's. I don't know no other man or what else to say" (12). This refusal to identify the real father has the ironic effect of identifying that father with God; and this ironic association further serves Celie to explain to her mother when the child disappears. "Finally she ast Where is it? I say God took it" (12). Here "God" serves Celie as a mask for that other "he," who gives her children and then takes them away.

Recognizing the bitter irony of Pa's recommendation of God as correspondent depends on seeing Celie's simultaneous exclusion from and implication within the male network of power relations. She attempts to protect her mother from death by collaborating with the father's lies, but her mother dies anyway, and Celie then realizes that her death came as a result of the very lies she herself had helped to tell. "Trying to believe his story kilt her" (15). Celie's mother, weakened through repeated pregnancy, had never provided her daughter with a strong support against her Pa. But with her mother gone, Celie herself is left in the position of surrogate mother to her sister, Nettie, and Nettie becomes her primary female relation. She hopes to protect Nettie from her own fate. "I see him looking at my little sister. She scared. But I say I'll take care of you. With God help" (13). Her desire to protect her sister motivates Celie's marriage to Mr. —, insofar as her motives figure at all in what is basically an arrangement of convenience between father and husband. Mr. — turns out to be a fit successor to Pa, and Celie's plan to protect Nettie from Pa only puts her in danger from Mr. —, who, like Pa, has his eye on Nettie. When she refuses his sexual advances, he sends her away and revenges himself on the sisters by plotting to keep Celie from receiving Nettie's letters (26, 119). In other words, he takes Celie's sister away from her, completing the process that Pa began of isolating Celie from the other women in her family.

Her isolation is the precondition of Celie's continued correspondence with God. The novel's epistolary form, in other words, is the most fundamental representation of a concern with women isolated from one another within the patriarchal network, a concern that is also elaborately thematized within the novel. Because of Pa and Mr. —, there is no one

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