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Sororophobia and Sisterhood in an Intertextual Analysis of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and its television and movie adaptations

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Table of Contents

Introduction

In 1984, the semiologist Thomas Sebeok was consulted by the U.S. government about the best method of signaling, across generations, radioactively contaminated sites. His answer was unequivocal: the only solution to create a message that would remain intelligible despite linguistic, socio-historical, or anatomical changes was to establish a *myth*. Myths have the potential to be eternal because their vitality lies "in their capacity for change, their adaptability and openness to new combinations of meaning," as Chris Baldick stated when dealing with *Frankenstein*, published in 1818. As such, "adaptations, allusions, accretions, analogues, parodies and plain misreadings" allowed Mary Shelley's creature to survive in Popular Culture to this day, which leads us to believe that notions such as those of "faithfulness" or "unfaithfulness" may tell us very little about the potential of adapting. On the contrary, it is the author's mastery in adjusting the message to a specific context, receiver, and medium that should be considered when reflecting on the impact of a television or cinema adaptation of a literary text.

In 2017, the TV adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* was released. Shortly after, feminist protests broke out using the Handmaid's outfit, first in the U.S. and then around the world. Another film adaptation had already been made in the nineties, but its reception was unenthusiastic. The question that arises from this observation motivates this dissertation: in which ways did these two adaptations update Atwood's original work? To which degree do they amplify or diminish the importance of certain topics? In short, what do they have to contribute to the original text?

I argue that the strategies and changes carried out by the TV series by Hulu, released in 2017, have made Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* more relevant than ever. The 1990 movie adaptation, on the other hand, failed to understand some of the key issues of the novel, which resulted in a resounding fiasco. In both cases, the adaptors' motivations and attitude towards the original text or hypotext, as well as the context of production, will be considered given the nature of these adaptations as collective processes.

As theoretical and analytical tools, Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation will be crucial, as well as Julia Kristeva's and Gérard Genette's notions of intertextuality. Later, the notion of "sisterhood" will

be briefly explored with regards to how it has been tackled differently throughout the history of feminism. Additionally, Margaret Atwood's status as a woman Canadian writer and her relationship with feminism over the years will be considered.

Finally, Helena Michie's "sororophobia" will be employed in order to describe the "negotiation of similarity and difference, identity and separation, among women of the same generation, and intended to encompass both the desire and the refusal to identify with other women" (9). In this respect, sororophobia is not considered as a homogeneous phenomenon that can be fully outlined, but rather a constantly evolving "matrix against and through which women work out - or fail to work out - their differences" (10).

I argue that sororophobia plays a major role in Margaret Atwood's fiction, especially in *The Cat's Eye* (1988) and *The Robber Bride* (1993), the two novels after *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Thus, I will explore how this topic has been tackled in these two novels in order to give a broader view of its significance regarding *The Handmaid's Tale* and its two subsequent audiovisual renditions.

The ambivalence in female relationships between the extremes (similarity-difference, desire-rejection, sister-enemy) based on these two concepts (sisterhood, sororophobia) is the key topic that will be explored throughout the intertextual analysis and discussion of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and its two adaptations, 2017's TV adaptation and 1990's film.

Lastly, a brief paratextual analysis of posters and promotional photos of both adaptations has been included as an annex at the end of this dissertation.

1. Theoretical Framework

1.1 Adaptation Studies

The main argument of this dissertation is that Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* has become more relevant than ever thanks to the adaptations recently made based on it, especially the TV show created by Hulu in 2017. Atwood's is not the only case of this happening, though, far from it. Adaptations are a day-to-day issue, with recent examples of great success like the TV adaptation of the videogame *The Last of Us* (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2013) created by Craig Mazin and Neil Druckmann for HBO and released in 2023. In the words of Linda Hutcheon, a fundamental scholar in Adaptation Studies and Postmodernism, adaptations are "omnipresent in our culture" (4), appreciated by both audience and critics, with two thirds of all Oscar-winning Best Pictures being adaptations in 2017 (Jackson). As a result, there is an undeniable commercial interest, and profitableness expectations are enormous (Hutcheon 5), as will be explained in further detail later.

It is important to first establish a definition of what the term adaptation implies. For that purpose, *Theory of Adaptation* (Routledge, 2006) by Linda Hutcheon has turned out to be a key reference for this dissertation. Throughout her work, the scholar argues that an adaptation is not only the product of adapting, that is, the specific work resulting from adaptation, but also the process of creation while adapting, as well as the process of reception. In this sense, Linda Hutcheon deals with adaptation as a fascinating multilayered cultural phenomenon whose study is closely linked to the study of the lifetime of artworks and their reception and influence on society. It is the purpose of this dissertation to take up Hutcheon's vision and analyze *The Handmaid's Tale* and its subsequent adaptations, not as clear-cut, isolated products, but in a connective vein, a rhizome, as Deleuze and Guattari would say (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980).

As such, Linda Hutcheon describes three ways to handle adaptations: first, as "an acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works;" second, as "a creative and interpretive act of appropriation;" and finally, as an "extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work" (8).

Myths are one of the few ways a message can remain intelligible despite linguistic, socio-historical, or anatomical changes. Similarly, part of the reason why Shakespeare's characters and Mary

Shelley's Creature have survived to the present day involves the endless adaptations, allusions, parodies, and even misreadings built up around them. To survive, stories must adapt, as Hutcheon states (32), and the mastery, or lack thereof, of the author(s) in adjusting a story, or message, to a specific context, receiver, and medium will tremendously affect its evolution and survival. In *Theory of Adaptation*, Hutcheon tries to get rid of the traditional perspective of the "morally loaded discourse of fidelity" (7) arguing that adaptation is repetition but not replication, and therefore changes are inherent to the process itself: who could possibly adapt, to reproduce, only for the sake of adapting (7)? On the contrary, it is a wide range of intentions, from being inspired or paying tribute, to calling the original work into question, what drives adapters to undertake this work. On the one hand, the economic lures, as Hutcheon calls it, are a strong motivation when adapting, since collaboration art forms like operas or films are expensive and generally look for safe bets (87). Potential legal constraints inherent to adaptations, such as a possible copyright fraud, result in contracts made to protect publishers and studios while leaving screenwriters powerless and mostly anonymous, according to the scholar (88). Producers and editors can do whatever they want with the material: "Once your work is sold, it's like a house you've designed and sold" (as screenwriter Noel Baker puts it as qtd. in Hutcheon 89). This will be a crucial idea when analyzing the resulting movie adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Regarding TV shows, Sarah Cardwell argues that television still pays substantially more attention to writing than movies, to the point that the TV screenwriter can retain a similar status to the director in cinema (193).

Adaptations are often considered to be a "contested homage" (Greenberg as qtd. in Hutcheon 7), or at other times a simultaneously "oedipally envious and worshipful" act (Horton and McDougal as qtd. in 7). In both cases, the rhetoric of fidelity seems at all events inadequate to discuss the multiple layers involved in adaptation, this double process of both interpreting and then creating something new (Hutcheon 20). Indeed, the reasons to adapt and the adapter's attitude towards the original text will be a key issue when analyzing the two ways in which *The Handmaid's Tale* has been adapted, since they are deeply intertwined with the process of creation in both cases. Regarding these two renditions, it is worth recalling Hutcheon's view of unsuccessful adaptations, not in terms of infidelity to a prior text, but as a lack of the creativity and skill to make the text one's own and thus autonomous. (Hutcheon 20-21)

According to the scholar Sarah Cardwell, adaptations have been becoming increasingly bolder and more inventive, while viewers seem to more easily accept changes to plot and dialogue if they perceive some attempt to stay faithful to the original style, tone, or spirit (Cardwell 193). *Faithful*, in this vein, could be seen as a less appropriate term than *respectful*. If "content" is less important than "spirit" or "tone," revisiting an artwork in order to voice perspectives somehow silenced or marginalized in it could become a good opportunity to offer commentary on a source text. This is one of the major goals of adapting, according to Julia Sanders (18). A second goal would be the attempt to make the source text more relevant or more comprehensible to contemporary audiences, especially in the case of adaptations of the classics (18-19). Ultimately, when a film becomes a financial or critical success, Hutcheon argues, quoting George Bluestone, that little or no attention is paid to the question of faithfulness (Hutcheon 7).

Exploring motives eventually leads to establishing authorship, which becomes a significant pitfall of the analysis of cinematographic adaptations due to their nature as collective processes. We might wonder who bears the burden, as Hutcheon puts it (80). Screenwriters, as it has been previously stated, are often undervalued and helpless to a certain extent. Actors, although obviously following a script, are the ones who ultimately embody the stories and give material existence to the adaptation. To prepare for roles, they usually delve into the original story, which turns them into reader-interpreter-creators. Understandably, much of the focus and emphasis present in the original script mutates during shooting and editing to the extent that the final result can differ greatly from the screenwriter's initial material (83). The collective work of all those involved, of all potential adapters, determines the definitive outcome, which is influenced by the temperament and talent of all, as well as the universe of intertexts in which each of them lives, and through which the materials to be adapted are filtered.

Figure 1. On the left, picture of the 2003 opera *The Handmaid's Tale*. On the right, the 2019 opera. Poul Ruders, the composer, and Paul Bentley, the librettist, are involved in both productions.

Between the two *The Handmaid's Tale* operas, one performed in 2003 and the other in 2019, there is a fundamental difference in costumes, especially of the Handmaids (in red) and the absence of the iconic "wings" or white bonnets that highlight the redness of their robes. This difference most likely relates to a text, in its broad sense: that of the TV series released by Hulu in 2017, which may have irreversibly changed the way we picture the Handmaids and Aunts from Gilead. To understand this phenomenon of communicating vessels between different works, it is worth referring to the third type of adaptation proposed by Linda Hutcheon. The author adopts the term *intertextuality*, which, although coined by Julia Kristeva in 1966, has been widely used and differently interpreted since then. Hutcheon's goal using this notion is to account for the far-reaching possibilities of engagement between the original and the adapted work.

First used in her seminal essay, "Word, Dialogue and Novel", and published as part of the book *Desire in Language* (1980), Julia Kristeva uses *intertextuality* to account for the relationship between texts as a sort of dialogue in which they are mutually influenced: "each word (text) in an intersection of words (texts) where at least one word (text) can be read" (66). So, any text is "constructed of a mosaic of quotations, any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (66). In that vein, texts are not self-sufficient, since there is no text autonomy as such – texts do not work as closed systems. Taken to the extreme, Roland Barthes would say it is impossible to live outside of the infinite text, "l'impossibilité de vivre hors du text infini", and "c'est bien cela l'intertexte," that's exactly what intertext is about (*Le plaisir du texte,* 1973). The one who writes is also the one who reads, and as Julia Kristeva puts it, the writer's interlocutor is the writer himself as a reader of other texts: he himself is no more than a text rereading itself (86-87). When describing the "literary word," she would say that it is "an intersection of textual surfaces" that offers dialogue between "the writer, the addressee (or the character), and the contemporary or earlier cultural context" (65).

The French literary theorist Gérard Genette, on the other hand, takes up the notion of Julia Kristeva's intertextuality and delves deeper into categorizing different textual relationships. First of all, the scholar uses the term "intertextuality" to describe the explicit references to the source text or hypotext ("an earlier text A", Genette 5). The most evident example of this occurs when two texts are linked by

quoting, plagiarism, or overt (or slightly covert) allusion (2), whereas "transtextuality" is employed to describe the "textual transcendence of the text," in other words, to "all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts" (Genette 1). Everything surrounding the work – its title, subtitle, prefaces, forewords, book covers, illustrations, etc. – is called the "paratext." According to Genette, these elements endow "the text B" or "hypertext" with a variable setting that more or less unconsciously impacts readers in their perception of the text (3). Genette's most interesting contribution regarding this dissertation might be this latter term and the other two derived from it, "hypotext," an earlier text A, and "hypertext," a later text B, a text in the second degree, derived from another preexistent text (5). Despite a first impression of hierarchy, Genette's perspective actually provides us with a more horizontal relationship between both texts. In this vein, the French author considers that a hypertext (text in second degree, e.g., a TV adaptation) can simultaneously transform a hypotext and imitate another hypertext or text B (30), and be turned into a hypotext for another hypertext. As such, these categories should not be regarded as separate and absolute, as Gérard Genette states. On the contrary, reciprocal contact and overlapping is a common scenario (7).

To account for the importance of context in adapting, Hutcheon explores literary adaptation in evolutionary terms taking up Richard Dawkins' 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*. Hutcheon argues that stories' cultural adaptation, similarly to what happens to species, involves migration to advantageous conditions – favorable cultures and periods of time, and convenient media: "stories adapt just as they are adapted" (31). Some of those will more effectively qualify for survival (persistence in a culture) and others for reproduction (number of adaptations) (32). Dawkins argues that "cultural transmission is analogous to genetic transmission in that, although basically conservative, it can give rise to a form of evolution" (as qtd. in Hutcheon 31), and, like genes, some stories will adapt to new environments as long as they are able to mutate, survive, and eventually flourish through their adaptations (32). To insist on keeping a work as it "is," focusing on fidelity and overlooking the context, can result in its extinction in popular culture.

In terms of experiencing a story, reading it or watching it as a movie or a TV show fundamentally conditions the way we "feel" it. Hutcheon calls this a "different mode of engagement," involving a distinctive "mental act" depending on the channel that will critically affect the act of transcoding, more focused on either telling or showing. In telling, we imagine and visualize from black marks on white pages; in showing, our minds try to give meaning to a wider range of images, sounds, music, and words both seen and heard (130).

> I can describe in a book what a heroine looks like, but that's something that the reader fills in according to what the reader thinks and the reader feels. So the reader is actually participating in the creation of the book. Every time someone reads a book, a new book is being created in the reader's head. Reading is a creative activity. (Atwood as qtd. in Mendez-Egle 169)

While we gradually and sequentially collect information in reading, "a direct aural and visual performance [is] experienced in real time" when multiple objects and significant signs simultaneously appear in front of our eyes (Hutcheon 130). In the telling mode, the story takes place in the "realms of our imagination," which, although controlled by the author's directing words, can also be slowed down, paused, re-read, or skipped ahead. In that sense, the reader performs a more active role, "a creative activity" in Atwood's words. When watching a movie or a TV show, we assist to an "unrelenting, forward driving story." As a result, in a book-to-screen adaptation, we move from the realm of imagination, in which our engagement with the story is not restricted by the limits of the aural/visual, to the realm of direct perception, in which the wide variety of elements involved (image, sound, music, words seen and heard) opens up a long list of potential strategies for transcoding.

Taking up Genette's framework of hypertext-hypotext, Thomas Leitch, author of numerous authoritative books on film studies, theorizes a list of hypertextual relations when adaptors try to render a literary text more suitable for cinema (98). This list includes compression, expansion, correction, updating, and superimposition. Compression and expansion relate to the elision and extension of the story, which are also affected by correction, in which potential hypotext weaknesses are revised. Update is especially relevant when adjusting classics, since it assures their relevance to contemporary viewers. Finally, superimposition accounts for the impact of the producer's home style, industry censors,

budgetary constraints, the vision of the filmmaker or the actors, or the generic conventions on the resulting adaptation (101-102).

Adjusting a 311-page story like *The Handmaid's Tale* to achieve the 109-minute movie adaptation by Volker Schlöndorff definitely requires a strategy of compression. In cases like this, there is generally not enough time to delve into psychological elaboration and secondary plotlines as deeply as in the novel/hypotext, usually impacting complexity and ambiguities, which tend to be contracted. Additionally, a showing mode, mainly based on images, has itself "little tolerance for complexity or irony or tergiversations" (John North as qtd. in Hutcheon 2), and so everything has to be filtered and clarified, reduced in length and complexity.

Although films have a much more limited duration than television series and therefore the work of compression is significantly more difficult, both film adaptations and series feature cases of expansion as well. TV series, for their part, have the potential for numerous seasons, with more time at their disposal, but their time unit, 45-55 minutes per episode, entails other temporal constraints (Hutcheon 66). The story needs to be divided into a fixed number of episodes of a similar length. Additionally, this feature could play a key role in the fact that series generally have a faster pace than films (Cardwell 122). Still, the multiple-season potential of the series is frequently better suited, according to Cardwell, to adapting long classic novels (182). In the case of the adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* into a television series, the plot of Atwood's hypotext is almost entirely told in the first season, and therefore, the other four (and the allegedly final season, season six, which has not been released yet) are a clear example of expansion.

As mentioned above, ambiguity is a tricky aspect of film adaptations. Verbal and narrative ambiguities are sometimes difficult to reconcile with the immediacy of visual and aural experience, since they have to be somehow acted out in the showing mode, which often leads to explicitness. If in the hypotext a double reading or meaning could exist and this equivocality plays an essential role, the adaptor generally has to prioritize one interpretation and perform it through images (Hutcheon 29). The characters' physical appearance, for example, is something that can be obscured in the telling mode, but by no means (or in almost no case) in the showing mode.

The New York film critic Pauline Kael or the playwright Bertolt Brecht are mentioned by Linda Hutcheon as authors who considered introspective, psychological, or conceptual development to be very problematic in the showing mode, a mode in which it was necessary to prioritize action above all (as qtd. In Hutcheon 57-58). In a novel, the interior of the characters' minds can be explicitly communicated, if desired, through streams of consciousness. In the film adaptation, it is the actors' task to physically embody the emotions and thoughts of characters, who can at most talk to other characters about their reactions (Hutcheon 25). In turn, the film adaptation can increase a sense of physical empathy with the characters that the telling mode can hardly achieve (Morrisette as qtd. in Hutcheon 131). Another strategy to delve into the character's mind, the voice-over, has been reviled by authors such as Robert McKee or Linda Seger (Hutcheon 53-55) for considering it a literary resource, specific of the telling mode, not the showing mode. This, however, will be a distinctive feature of the *Handmaid's Tale* TV series, as will be described later on, whereas for the movie adaptation voice-over was considered a marginal practice best avoided.

Being a sort of third-person storyteller, the camera can hardly achieve the intimacy of a first-person narrative, although it can rely on the close-up to build a deeper closeness with the characters: "The power of that close-up ... to create psychological intimacy is so obvious ... that directors can use it for powerful and revealing interior ironies" (58). External appearances in cinema can be used to "mirror inner truths" (58-59) with the right shot. The camera can also zoom out, leaving the character alone and/or isolated in contrast to the rest of the scene, or use a wide shot featuring other characters and elements, to give us a broad perspective of what is happening and, perhaps, an idea of unity. Thus, the tools of the camera and edition provide adaptors with a myriad of strategies to penetrate character's minds.

Music is another extremely powerful tool for expressing emotions that is neither showing nor action. With music, we can emotionally accompany the character, for the soundtrack clearly triggers an emotional response in the audience (24). Nevertheless, music does not only enhance or reinforce the aspects of the story we know; it can also act as a contrast and even contradict the visual and verbal aspects (24). Indeed, music will play a fundamental role in emotionally and temporally placing June's character

in the Hulu adaptation. In the movie adaptation, Schlöndorff primarily opted for diegetic sound. Either "a collector and a channeler of previously created emotion" or a way of connecting "inner and outer states in a less explicit way than do camera associations" (Ondaatje as qtd. in Hutcheon 41), the soundtrack becomes another tool, along with emotionally significant shots, to communicate the character's state of mind to the audience, sometimes while keeping the rest of the characters in the scene unaware of it (Hutcheon 59).

Throughout this section, it has been argued that adaptations constitute a fundamental phenomenon in our culture. Following Linda Hutcheon's guidelines in *A Theory of Adaptation*, adaptation has been approached from three different angles: as a final product, as a process, and as a cultural phenomenon. It has been argued that each medium has its own specificity, which, while not making any of them inherently better, does matter since a certain mode of engagement may be able to convey certain aspects of a story better than others (24). Recalling W.J.T. Mitchell's words as quoted in Hutcheon, "The medium does not lie between sender and receiver; it includes and constitutes them" (34). As such, while the telling mode (novels, short stories) plunges us into a fictional universe through means of our imagination, the showing mode (movies, plays, TV shows, etc.) does it through the perception of aural and visual elements (Hutcheon 23). Finally, the study of adaptations has been considered important since a particular version of a director's imagination will likely affect our own when rereading the novel after watching the adaptation, especially when the latter has had a great success and it has led to a broad phenomenon of intertextuality (Kristeva) or transtextuality (Genette). As Linda Hutcheon confesses, she will likely never be able to recapture her first imagined versions of a quidditch game or orcs from *The Lord of The Rings* because "palimpsests make for permanent change" (Hutcheon 29).

1.2 Feminism, Sisterhood, and Sororophobia

After briefly addressing the main tenets of adaptation studies, I will now move on to the section about feminism, which has been conceived with two purposes: firstly, aiming to give an overview of the different trends to which Margaret Atwood was likely exposed to throughout her literary career and

which may have influenced her novel *Handmaid's Tale* and its subsequent adaptations; secondly, to analyze the concepts of "sisterhood" and "sororophobia" regarding the different waves of feminism. I will attempt to prove that these two concepts are conveyed differently in Atwood's work than they are in its television and film adaptations.

Given the length of this paper, unfortunately, it would be too complex to delve into the intricate history of feminism and feminist theory in all its diversity. Therefore, the four waves identified so far by scholars will be briefly mentioned, especially focusing on two key moments: on the one hand, the radical feminism of the seventies, and its notion of sisterhood; on the other hand, the emergence of difference in the eighties, along with the concept of sororophobia, coined by Helena Michie in her work *Sororophobia: Differences Among Women in Literature and Culture* (1992). The fourth wave will be key to understand the reception of Hulu's TV series *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Olympe de Gouges, the author of the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen* (1791), was accused of sedition and treason and beheaded by the guillotine for demanding a plebiscite about what type of government to have after the revolution, including the option of a constitutional monarchy, what was considered a capital offense in Robespierre's times. To Atwood, de Gouges was also used as a warning to other women, since liberty, equality, and fraternity could not, and did not, include sorority in the overthrow of the old order (*Burning Questions* 24).

Sorority. Sisterhood. The term *sisterhood* is constantly found on the internet through forums, social media, and mass media, to the point of becoming a sort of must for feminism 4.0 or fourth-wave feminism: we see it appearing in political speeches and demonstrations, as well as on mugs and T-shirts. During the first wave of feminism, sisterhood is seen as "union is strength," since the main goal was to achieve women's suffrage and become equal before the law. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Mary Wollstonecraft advocates for treating women as "rational creatures," since obtaining "a character as a human being" must be the first human ambition, "regardless of the distinction of sex" (as qtd. in Freedman 27). Wollstonecraft calls women to "awaken" from the lethargy in which they are plunged because of the adoration of men, as shown in the following excerpt:

> My own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their *fascinating* graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to

> stand alone. I earnestly wish to point out in what true dignity and human happiness consists - I wish to persuade women to endeavor to acquire strength, both mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, "susceptibility of heart", "delicacy of sentiment", and "refinement of taste" are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness, and that *those beings who are only objects of pity and that kind of love, which has been termed its sister, will soon become objects of contempt.*[1] (27)

Through this fragment, Wollstonecraft seems to unite the destinies of two women: the woman worshipped by men because of her refinement and elegance, and the victim of contempt in whom the former must see herself reflected, for she will become her sooner or later. Therefore, all women are supposed to share a similar experience of inequality and, accordingly, they would have a common interest in fighting against this unfair situation. A sense of sororophobia is also present in this excerpt, from the "worshipped women" towards "the victims of contempt," although it is presumably to be overcome eventually.

This request for equality between men and women eventually led to women's suffrage in England after the Great War and in most developed nations after the Second World War. During the latter, women had to work in factories and make weapons, all of them encouraged by Rosie the Riveter and her world famous "We Can Do It!" After the Second World War, men came back to work, and so women had to go back home. A sort of fairy tale awaited them there: three or more children to raise, in a beautiful house full of appliances located in a nice suburban neighborhood. In the critically-acclaimed TV drama *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-2015) that is the situation Betty Draper's character starts from. However, she strangely begins to suffer from nervous breakdowns. Although being the wife of the highly successful, charismatic, and very handsome Don Draper, as well as the mother of two well-behaved children whom she raises in a beautiful house, her hands start to tremble, to the point of losing control of her car occasionally.

> The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years In the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night -she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question-""Is this all?" (Friedan 270)

[1] Emphas s added.

Betty Friedan would argue that Betty Draper's condition can be explained as "the problem that has no name" (274). According to Friedan, multiple psychological pathologies (anxiety, alcoholism, neurosis, excessive sexual desire, suicide) should not be seen as disorders inherent to the feminine nature but as the byproduct of boredom and frustration at trying to fit into the model of the feminine mystique. Throughout an intense study through interviews and sociological and psychological studies, Betty Friedan points in her *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) to women who are defined and portrayed only as housewives, wives, and mothers: "[Millions of women] gloried in their role as women, and wrote proudly on the census blank: 'Occupation: housewife'" (Friedan 273). To Friedan, this turned out to be an endless source of discontent and unhappiness.

This perspective, which although it contributed to the revival of feminism and struck a chord in a lot of women, especially in middle-class, educated, white women of the sixties, also received (and continues to receive) a lot of criticism. First of all, Friedan has been criticized for linking the "feminine mystique" to the suburban housewife's setting, lacking consideration for other realities that women of other races and from a much worse socioeconomic situation had to deal with. This will be later called "white feminism," "liberal feminism," "equality feminism," etc., and turned out be the starting point of another feminism, which will assume a more social, intersectional, and of-color perspective in the following years, eventually posing the problem of difference.

Secondly, Friedan's work was accused of being too insistent on individual effort as a form of resistance. Throughout the first chapter of *The Feminine Mystique,* Betty Friedan mentions the need for every woman to shake off the "chains in her own mind and spirit" (277) in order to start believing in "that voice inside her" (278). No matter how good a psychoanalyst is, all he or she could do for a woman was to "give her the courage to listen to her own voice" (278). As such, to be a whole human being, "every woman has to listen to her own inner voice to find her identity in this changing world" (278). The search of women for themselves had just began, she argued, and the "voices of the feminine mystique can no longer drown out the inner voice that is driving women on to become complete" (282).

Friedan's perspective sees women as individuals who make free and autonomous decisions rather than as a collective than can yearn for emancipation as a whole. Her critique is social, but the determination to confront injustice, individual. As for Margaret Atwood, her position on *The Feminine Mystique* is ambivalent. On the one hand, she states that Canadian women were not as much a victim of that "'master of the house' style of brainwashing" as American women were (*Burning Questions* 250). In her words, Canadians were "still doing the Amelia Earhart flying tomboy thing" (250). On the other hand, Friedan's book made Simone de Beauvoir and her *Le Deuxième Sexe* relevant for her generation, although both of them as descriptions of their mothers' and grandmothers' situation, not theirs (250). As we will see later in this paper, a similar intergenerational feminist conflict will occur between Offred and her mother in the novel *The Handmaid's Tale.*

The Feminine Mystique was published in 1963. Margaret Atwood started working on *Edible Woman*, her first novel, in 1964, although she ended up publishing it in 1969. On several occasions, Atwood has refused to label her work as feminist and rejects Friedan's work as an inspiration. However, a sort of echo might be noticed between the two works, as both had been able to reflect a similar conflict of their time, but from very distant places. While Friedan criticizes the housewife role as a source of dissatisfaction for being the fundamental source of identity for women, the protagonist of *The Edible Woman* progressively discovers herself as a commodity and ends up identifying herself with food, "seeing herself as the consumed rather than the consumer" (Ingersoll 28), which causes her to completely lose her appetite and eventually stop eating.

A few years after that, at the end of the decade, a younger generation of women built up a new form of feminism influenced by the New Left and antiwar politics: radical feminism (Freedman 288). They started to consider women as an "oppressed group" that could be freed thanks to consciousness-raising that started to grow around the country. These activists coined the motto "the personal is political," since the analysis of interpersonal relationships, along with health and sexuality, was put in the forefront of their discourse. For example, although they had a full-time job, many women still had to perform many more hours of work than men, as Pat Mainardi satirizes in 1970: "The New Commodity, the Liberated Woman, has sex a lot and has a Career, preferably something that can be fitted

in with the household chores –like dancing, pottery, or painting" (Mainardi 289). In the same year, Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* set patriarchy as the fundamental system of domination upon which all other systems are built (i.e., race and class), which meant that a real revolution could only be achieved by destroying patriarchy first (311). Millett claimed the existence of an "interior colonization" whereby the male dominates the female, and the adult male dominates the young. According to her, inequality is not imposed by force (or coercion), but rather accepted as natural in a process of internalizing patriarchal values. This leads to a lack of self-esteem, which causes women to undervalue themselves and underestimate other women (311), a major source of sororophobia.

Although published in 1980, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" might be a good example of the general spirit of sisterhood that permeated the 1960s and 1970s, in which Adrienne Rich stated that heterosexuality had to be recognized as a political, man-made institution which has been imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force (26-27). As an alternative to this system, she proposed the notion of a "lesbian continuum," a sort of "women-identified experience" beyond "consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman" (27). According to Rich, eroticism between women had been explored under a patriarchal definition and as a limitation, setting apart "female friendship and comradeship" (28). She aimed to open up the term "lesbianism" in order to include different types of bonding and support between women, and argued that lesbian existence was not something exceptional but intrinsic to women's experience (26). This type of women's bonding, potentially available to every woman, was the only way to overthrow patriarchy according to her. Besides, the term "lesbian continuum" encompassed all sort of relationships based on being "one another's allies, mentors, and comforters in the female struggle for survival," encouraging women to accept and enjoy "each other's company and attraction to each other's minds and character, which attend a recognition of each other's strengths" (36). Thus, her proposal allowed the union of all women under the same umbrella and let them move in and out of this continuum, "whether [they] identify [them]selves as lesbian or not" (29). From this perspective, women could be together under the same notion of oppression, and lesbianism would be an alternative to patriarchy in which solidarity and mutual support, that is, sisterhood, prevails.

As for the feminist movement in Canada, it was strongly intertwined with anti-war activism, campaigns for equality in education and employment, and advocacy of birth control and an end to violence against women. *The Canadian Encyclopedia* places the rise of second-wave feminism in Canada in the foundation of the Canadian Voice of Women for Peace (VOW) in 1960. Its members initially advocated for nuclear disarmament, peace, and social justice, and even partnered in 1969 with American anti-war women to give voice to anti-colonialist narratives by Southern Asian women. Groups from the Canadian New Left, such as the Vancouver Women's Caucus and the Front de libération des femmes du Québec (FLF), adopted the slogan "Sisterhood is Powerful," while the Student Union for Peace Action (SUPA) published the manifesto "Sisters, Brothers, Lovers... Listen" (1969) in order to point out the sexism of the male left.

Birth Control was removed from the Criminal Code in 1969, but rights to abortion were harder to obtain. In 1970, an Abortion Caravan departed from Vancouver up to the Parliament Hill in Ottawa and doctors like Henry Morgentaler established illegal clinics across Canada. The Canadian Association for the Repeal of the Abortion Laws was founded in 1974, but it was not until 1988 that abortion was decriminalized in Canada by the Supreme Court.

On the other hand, violence against women was condemned by radical feminist groups such as Women Against Violence Against Women. Several marches, like "Take Back the Night," rose across Canada in the 1970s to fight sexual assault, and transition houses, health clinics, and rape crisis centers began to appear. In 1982, Margaret Mitchell claimed in the House of Commons that "1 in 10 husbands beat their wives regularly" each year, a statement that, according to the *Canadian Encyclopedia*, was met by laughter. One year after that, in 1983, it became illegal for a man to rape his wife. Québécoise feminists achieved equal rights for married women and mothers (compared to fathers) to child custody in the 1970s. Canada also decriminalized homosexuality in 1969. In 1976, Toronto hosted the first National Lesbian Conference and, a year later, Quebec became the first place in Canada to consider sexual orientation as illegal grounds for discrimination. Finally, the progressive mobilization of minorities and women of color should be noted, with the foundation of the India Mahila (Women's) Association and the National Congress of Black Women in 1973. The same year, 13 Indigenous women's groups were

assembled to preserve culture, gain equal opportunity, and influence policy by the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC). Ten years later, in 1983, Inuit women gathered to form Pauktuutit, whose main tenets were empowering women, advocating children's rights, promoting sexual health, and preserving Inuit Culture.

Based on the information provided by the *Canadian Encyclopedia*, it can be observed that major points of the feminist movement in the 20th century had a similar trajectory in the United States and Canada. However, some advances arrived slightly later in Canada and the ethnic context was also different. For example, decriminalization of abortion came to the United States in 1973, while it was not until 1988 that it occurred in Canada. As for the pill, it came on the market in both countries in 1960, but by 1965 its use was decriminalized in most (but not all) U.S. states, while Canadian women had to wait until 1969.

> Advocating the mere tolerance of difference between women is the grossest reformism. It is a total denial of the creative function of difference in our lives. For difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways to actively "be" in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters (as qtd. in Freedman 333).

First delivered in 1979 by Audre Lorde at an academic conference at New York University, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" accounts for the frustrations of being the sole lesbian or black speaker invited to participate among mostly middle-class and upper-middle-class white women. During the 1970s, women of color and lesbians in the United States had started to demand that feminist scholars acknowledge their own discriminatory practice and consider racial and sexual differences. Audre Lorde, as well as bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, and many others, could be considered bridge thinkers between the second wave of feminism and the third, as they are inheritors of the thinkers of the sixties and seventies, but their legacy consists of negotiating the agenda of feminism and introducing the consideration of difference, especially through race.

> Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged ... Without community, there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression (as qtd. in Freedman 333).

In this excerpt, Audre Lorde takes up the second wave's idea of sisterhood and mutual support while emphasizing the need to make room for a version of Friedan's "inner voice" – to Lorde, the source of our personal power. It would be the main goal of feminism "to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures, in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish" (333). Throughout another well-known publication, *Sister Outsider* (1984), she harshly criticized second-wave feminism for disseminating a homogenizing image of the female experience through sisterhood, which, "does not in fact exist" (166). Audre Lorde also pointed out four types of blindness: racism, sexism, heterosexism, and homophobia, and, according to her, all have their origin in the inability to recognize the concept of difference (45).

> We are taught that women are "natural" enemies, that solidarity will never exist between us because we cannot, should not, and do not bond with one another. We have learned these lessons well. We must unlearn them if we are to build a sustained feminist movement. We must learn to live and work in solidarity. We must learn the true meaning and value of Sisterhood. (hooks 43)

In the time between the two texts by Audre Lorde, bell hooks published another key text for black feminism: *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981), in which she delves into an analysis of the experience of black womanhood throughout history, as well as exploring her encounter with racial bias in feminism during her college days. In her critique of an earlier feminism ("both liberal and radical"), she argued that their universalist approach ended up erasing the black experience and history. Later on, in 1986, she stated that the idea of a "common oppression" was actually disguising the very complex social reality of women, in which issues of racism, class privilege, and other sexist attitudes came into play (*Feminist Theory* 16). According to her, in the second-wave white version of sisterhood, "sisters were to 'unconditionally' love one another ... they were to avoid conflict and minimize disagreement ... they were not to criticize one another, especially in public" (46). That resulted in members of different groups (WASPs, working class white women, white academy faculty women, anarchist feminists, etc.) promoting a culture of support and protection among themselves while showing hostility to those women outside their sphere (46-47). This occurred in consciousness-raising

groups, where the feminist thinkers and activists could "recruit new converts" (*Feminism is for Everybody* 8). To hooks, the idea of common oppression was "wishful thinking," a "romantic reverie" (44) that helped "conservative and liberal women of a radical political vocabulary" to shape the movement that would promote their class interests (*Feminist Theory* 6). bell hooks also criticizes feminist movement's focus on male violence, omitting the violence inflicted by women. To her, this adds credibility to sexist stereotypes suggesting that "men are violent, women are not; men are abusers, women are victims" (*Feminist Theory* 45-46). Sixteen years later, in 2000, she upheld this criticism to feminist thinkers that "still choose often to portray females as always and only victims" (*Feminism is for Everybody* 62). According to her, violent attacks on children are inflicted by women but not equally underlined as an expression of patriarchal violence.

Margaret Atwood, from her side, also criticized this approach calling it the "usual female one," and made a comparison with Canada's perception towards the world, that she named the "Canadian victim complex." During her interview with Graeme Gibson in 1972, she declared that victimhood can be dangerous as a means of defining yourself. As a victim, you will think that "it will always be somebody else's fault, and you will always be the object of that rather than somebody who has any choice or takes responsibility for their life." According to Atwood, this would always be true until one stops defining oneself as a victim (13).

One of the times Margaret Atwood was asked if she would designate herself as a "feminist writer," in 1979, she answered that she did not consider the term inclusive, adding that women that usually understood her point of view were "from Scotland or black women in America who say, 'Feminist, as it is used in America, usually means white middle-class American women saying *they* are *all* women" (Fitz Gerald and Crabbe 139). Atwood declared to feel closer to people from a "peripheral culture" (139), and also referred to Alice Walker, from whom she read a piece that spoke a "great deal" to her (139). Alice Walker coined the term "womanism" to refer to feminists of color, more specifically Black feminists, and their focus on the experiences of black women. They would probably agree with Atwood when she says that "what the term 'feminist writer' means to certain American feminists cannot

mean the same thing it means to me. They are on the inside looking at each other, while I am on the outside" (139).

In another interview in 1985, Margaret Atwood denied the homogeneity of the women's experience (Meese 184), a similar critique to that made by black women writers early in the movement. Then, she added, "If I have anything to say to the American feminists, it's that they've been too parochial. America is very big, you can get lost in it, but they haven't looked enough inside" (184).

In my analysis of *Handmaid's Tale*, I will seek to establish that Atwood is critical of a homogenizing view of the female experience by citing her essays, her comments in interviews, and, most importantly, her novels. Of all feminist approaches to which she may have been exposed, I will suggest that she has been most attuned to the feminism of difference. Nonetheless, a significant divergence can be found between Margaret Atwood and authors such as Audre Lorde and bell hooks, the latter who, in addition to being writers, could be considered activists of black feminism. While Lorde and hooks reject the (white) second wave version of sisterhood but believe in a world in which patriarchal alienation can be overcome thanks to a new "female consciousness" (*Feminist Theory* 49), resulting in a sisterhood that reflects differences of class and race, I will argue that in Atwood´s work the tension between collective fight and individual experience is always present and hardly resolvable, for rivalry and competition between women is inherent to their existence as complex human beings.

In an attempt to unravel the very complex relationships between the female characters in *Handmaid's Tale*, in which sisterhood and rivalry converge, often in contradictory ways, I propose revisiting the concept of "sororophobia" established by Helena Michie in 1992. By this term, the author sought to describe the "negotiation of similarity and difference, identity and separation, among women of the same generation, and intended to encompass both the desire and the refusal to identify with other women" (9). As opposed to a conception of sisterhood as something attainable once certain types of barriers have been overcome, the scholar introduced "sororophobia" as a constantly evolving "matrix against and through which women work out - or fail to work out - their differences" (10). Throughout her work, Michie is concerned with family as a baseline, in which dynamics of competition and cooperation become a particularly tense give-and-take situation when it occurs between mothers and

daughters, sisters, or cousins. The family will be turned into a place of negotiation, a simulation, where one can practice before confronting the outside world (Michie 20).

> Between women, male supremacist values are expressed through suspicious, defensive, competitive behaviour. It is sexism that leads women to feel threatened by one another without cause. (bell hooks, *Feminist Theory* 47)

Helena Michie seems hesitant about some books that had recently been considering the differences between women as a "by-product of internalized patriarchal norm" (6). She wonders whether all competition between women would be demolished once the forms of hegemonic power were dismantled, and argues that, on the contrary, the very origin of the processes of difference lie, not in patriarchal structures, but in the fact that no one "competes with anyone who, for whatever reason, seems entirely different from oneself." Competition, in her view, would be to some extent "a mark of sameness, if only of shared goals" (7). This is why Helena Michie is primarily interested in the relationships between mothers and daughters, and between sisters, which will be very useful when analyzing the relationships between female characters in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Michie's perspective takes up Julia Kristeva's insights on poetic language in order to account for the dynamics of difference between sisters, and between mothers and daughters, in the framework of French psychoanalytic feminism. Michie's notions of "sororophobia" and "matrophobia," which are based on Kristeva's theory, ultimately relate to the work of Jacques Lacan. As such, Kristeva's proposal of the Semiotic, the Symbolic, and the Abject of the cognitive dimension are to some extent translations of Jacques Lacan's triad, the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real[2]. While the Real is what cannot be named nor systematized (sex, death, madness, for instance), the realms of the Imaginary and the Symbolic are related to the Mirror Stage, that is, the experience by which a child (aged 6 to 13 months) realizes that he or she can recover from the fragmentation felt when being separated from his or her Mother. "I am something that is not my mother" is the first limit set between the self and the other. After this shocking event, it is in front of the mirror where they can see themselves again as a one-piece, unified body, with this *imago* or specular image of self-identity being only a projection. From then on, the

[2] The follow ng br ef summary of Lacan's basic tenets is based on the lecture given by Professor Paul Fry in Spring, 2009.

separation from the Mother creates in the child a desire to become their Mother's object, which turns out to be an utter impossibility due to the appearance of the Father, a representative of the social law, the Symbolic. According to Lacan, the child starts at this point to learn how to deal with unsatisfied longing while enjoying a little satisfaction by respecting the symbolic rules. However, the unfulfilled desire will remain as a dimension of permanent lack in the child, and later as an adult. According to Lacan, metaphor would be the ultimate manifestation of this utter impossibility, the expression of an unreachable and forever unsatisfied longing articulated by means of approximation in an always displaced manner.

Going back to Helena Michie's proposal, psychoanalytic feminism, and Kristeva's work in particular, explores the period in which the Daughter struggles with her likeness and unlikeness to her Mother as a source of identity before her entrance into and her inscription within the Law of the Father, the Symbolic and social realm (8). It is the maternal body from which the "female I" and the "female speaking subject" is "produced and reproduced" (8). As such, Michie proposes "matrophobia" as an approach to dynamics of difference that "encompasses fascination and repulsion, identity and separation, competition and cooperation, on the part of both mother and daughter" (8).

Difference as a compelling connection providing us with personal power – in this particular statement, a connection can be seen between Audre Lorde and Julia Kristeva's notion that "meaning does not inhere in concepts, but is always a function of the relation among concepts" (as qtd. in Penas 98). Julia Kristeva argued that the linguistic division between femininity and masculinity was not itself marginalizing, sexist, or authoritarian (Penas 99), but what we do with these categories - the problem lies in discourse, not in language itself. Femininity and masculinity, like many other categories, are not self-sufficient entities, but mostly provisional categories filled with meaning only with respect to one another. To Kristeva, poetic language is, indeed, the place where language opens up from the Symbolic (the Father's law) to the Semiotic (the Mother's realm), an attitude towards the Other comprising an ongoing negation and an constant challenge of any fixed meaning or identity (Penas 100). For Michie, sororophobia and matrophobia become the place for negotiating oneself by constantly being challenged by the Other, who is similar but different, for whom one feels at times fascination and at times rejection,

challenging any fixed meaning about who one is. In Kristeva, the downside of this unlimited potential of poetic language will be that the ever-evolving semiotized body is also a "place of permanent scission" (Kristeva as qtd. in Weil 164), a permanent place of pain and distress.

To sum up, several strands of feminism throughout the 20th century have been tackled as they may have influenced Atwood in the elaboration of her work *The Handmaid's Tale*. First of all, so-called liberal feminism, whose main focus was on the individual female experience. Then, radical feminism has been explored, which sought the emancipation of women as a collectivity by exploring the causes of oppression based on the idea of gender and how it is internalized. Later, the emergence of the feminism of difference aimed for a feminism that could encompass the various, and sometimes divergent, realities of the female experience in a way that these differences become a source of strength, not of division. Special emphasis has been placed on the evolution of the concept of sisterhood, especially throughout the second wave of feminism, to which Margaret Atwood has been most exposed. Then, Helena Michie's concept of sororophobia (and matrophobia) has been explored as a sort of response to the idea of sisterhood in feminism. Julia Kristeva's conception of difference, the basis for Michie's sororophobia, will be considered as a place from which Margaret Atwood elaborates her female characters, both in the constitution of their identities as well as in building the complex relationships between them. The following section will provide some background on Margaret Atwood's life and work and how the concept of sororophobia has been present throughout both.

2. Margaret Atwood

> I came from a very isolated background. This is probably the key to some of my writing. I grew up isolated from society in a kind of non-violent family of scientists. When I hit society I was shocked. I'm probably still in a state of cultural shock (Atwood as qtd. in Ingersoll 121).

Margaret Eleanor Atwood, affectionately called "Peggy" by her family and friends, is an award-winning Canadian author, poet, literary critic, and travel writer whose work spans several decades and includes novels, poetry, short stories, academic writing, screen plays, TV screen plays, and non-fiction (Ingersoll 171). She is a widely recognized writer worldwide, but especially in her country, where she was a founding member of the Writer's Union of Canada. There is even an association committed to analyzing

her literary production, the Margaret Atwood Society, which formed the *Margaret Atwood Studies Journal* in 2007.

Double Persephone (1961) was her first publication, a poetry book, which immediately succeeded and won the E. J. Pratt Medal, an award given by the University of Toronto. While working as a professor, she published her first novel, the aforementioned *The Edible Woman,* in 1969. With her second novel, *Surfacing* (1972) and *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature,* published the same year, she started to being portrayed, in Sandler's words in 1976, as an "inspired national prophet" (40). In Atwood's words, Canada might have been hungry for a few visible stars "having been without any for so long" and she became one of them (Oates 81). In a 1976 article in the magazine *Maclean's*, Helen Slinger called her "the goddess, the bitch, the nationalist, the feminist, the Venus, the madwoman" and then, "the earthmother." From the very beginning of her career, Margaret Atwood has been familiar with being the subject of criticism and labels, as well as expectations about what she writes and what she does not. Her career has undoubtedly been affected by what it means to be a woman and a Canadian in the literary world.

> Politics, for me, is everything that involves who gets to do what to whom ... Politics really has to do with how people order their societies, to whom power is ascribed, who is considered to have power. A lot of power is ascription. People have power because we think they have power, and that's all politics is. And politics also has to do with what kind of conversations you have with people, and what you feel free to say to someone, what you don't feel free to say. (Brans 149)

"Power" might be one of the key words when dealing with Atwood's themes. As a writer, she is concerned about power on all levels, from the micro-level politics in relationships within a family, a couple, or a group of friends, to the macro-level politics in totalitarian systems. This exploration of power eventually leads her to wonder how gender might shape women's experiences in their lives, relationships, and identity, as exemplified by the following statement: "Men are afraid that women will laugh at them. Women are afraid that men will kill them." This is one of the Atwood's most famous and repeated quotes. It constantly appears on social media, sometimes accompanied by frames from Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* because, although it does not appear in the novel, it was used by the screenwriters of the TV series in the second season. It has appeared in banners related to International Woman's Day or

to tributes to domestic violence victims, as well as in countless artwork portraying Margaret Atwood or the Handmaids. It is, indeed, a rewording of the following extract, an excerpt of the lecture she gave at the University of Waterloo in 1982:

> "Why do men feel threatened by women?" I asked a male friend of mine ... "I mean," I said, "men are bigger, most of the time, they can run faster, strangle better, and they have on the average a lot more money and power." "They're afraid women will laugh at them," he said. "Undercut their world view." Then I asked some women students in a quickie poetry seminar I was giving, "Why do women feel threatened by men?" "They're afraid of being killed," they said. (*Second Words* 358)

The male power referred to by Atwood can be understood from two points of view: first, from micro-level politics, in which women might be afraid of sexual assault or other violence committed by men; second, from macro-level politics, in which it is the state who decides whether women can have an abortion and within how many weeks. As a result, women may have to assume the risk of undergoing abortion in unsanitary conditions and the potential consequences for their bodies. All human societies, but especially absolutist governments, have always shown "an inordinate interest in the reproductive capabilities of women," explains Margaret Atwood in *Burning Questions* (256-257). In 2018, when Argentinian women demonstrated using the Handmaids' attire while the legalization of abortion was being discussed in Congress and it eventually failed, the writer criticized the government's eagerness to protect babies without even considering supporting mothers in prenatal, birth, and postnatal care so as to help them out of poverty. She claimed that, instead, the state "just wants to reinforce the usual cheap trick: force women to have babies, and then make them pay. And pay. And pay. As I said, slavery" (361-362).

Figure 2. Demonstrators disguised as Handmaids support a bill to legalize abortion in the first 14 weeks of pregnancy in Argentina. On the left, Buenos Aires, 25 July, 2018. Center picture, 1 August, 2018. On the right, 5 August, 2018. *AP News.*

For days, these photographs were seen all over the world, linking Margaret Atwood's worlds with feminism and the Women's Movement – but not for the first time. Margaret Atwood had been

associated with the Women's Movement from the very beginning of her career, due to the success of first novel, *The Edible Woman*.

> Gibson: What about the response of other women; do they try to categorize you or...
> Atwood: Well, of course, now that Women's Lib has come along, it's very curious. Back in the days when you were supposed to pay attention to diapers and the washing dishes, I was a threat to other women's life positions. Now I get made into a kind of hero, which is just as unreal. It makes me just uncomfortable. It's turning me from what I am as a writer into something I'm not. (Interview conducted in 1972, Gibson 11)

Throughout her career, Atwood would be constantly asked about her affiliation with the liberation movement, the feminist movement, and her status as a woman or female writer. When asked, in 1975, whether she considered *The Edible Woman* to be a feminist novel, she answered that it was not possible since there was no feminist movement when she wrote it in 1965. The interviewer added that, beyond terminology, there were themes in the book that reminded her of "feminist themes," but Atwood bluntly rejected this idea: "I don't consider it feminism. I just consider it social realism. That part of it is simply social reporting" (Kaminski 27). She later added, "I have to keep saying I'm a fiction writer, you know, I'm not a propagandist" (27). For years she would explain that the feminist movement "adopted" writers like herself because it was eager for role models (1976 interview, Sandler 54), although she never saw herself as a writer trying to promote certain ideas (1987 interview, Lyons 221), nor a feminist message, through her stories. In 1982, after the subject was raised several times by the interviewer, she finally admitted agreeing with feminism if defined as "human equality and freedom of choice" (Brans 142). Throughout the years, it would become harder and harder for interviewers to "make" her call herself a feminist.

Some of her reluctance to be identified with the feminist movement appears to be related to her relentless questioning of "monolithically ideological" thought, to the point of saying that if "practical, hardline, anti-male feminists took over and became the government," she would resist them because "they could start castrating men, throwing them into the ocean, doing things" she does not approve of (Meese 183). Atwood is very concerned with any extreme group or type of fanaticism, which she considers dangerous (183). Belief in women's rights, she states, is another thing. She goes on explaining

how she supports, endorses, even contributes with money to the cause, but that she runs away once other people start to tell her, "'Thou shalt write about this', and 'Thou shalt not write about that,' 'Thou shalt not say, The Empress has no clothes.' 'Thou shalt not say, 'This was a stupid, pigheaded way to behave'" (183).

However, her refusal to be identified with feminism does not make her an apolitical writer. In fact, she declared, "I *am* a political writer" in 1979 (Fitz Gerald and Crabbe 137) and explained that "it's impossible for a Canadian not to be involved in politics, because the place is saturated with it ... In Canada you're involved because the climate is political" (a 1978 interview, Ingersoll 118-119). Although political, the writer should not be an activist, she argues on numerous occasions during her interviews:

> I think if you are going to save souls or save the world, you should be a preacher or a politician, so I don't see my role in any one-to-one relationship with society. I think anybody who does is deluding himself. Books don't save the world. (In 1972, Gibson 5)
>
> If I wanted to propagate my vision of Canada, I'd be a philosopher. And if I wanted to impose it on everyone, I'd be a politician or a minister. (In 1976, Sandler 41)
>
> I'm not a politician, and it's wrong to suppose that the artist is a vanguard revolutionary. (Sandler 54)
>
> Canada is a very political country where people frequently indicate what they feel writers ought to be doing. You always have to say first that a writer is a writer. A writer isn't a preacher, a politician, or a lawyer. (In 1978, Ingersoll 119)

Margaret Atwood wrote *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1984 and it was published in 1985. Concerned, as previously stated, that she would be considered an activist writer, she declared to be worried that this novel would be thought "feminist propaganda of the most outrageous kind," which was not what she intended (Hancock 216). Nowadays, her novel is included among a list of feminist works that "challenged misogyny and inspired activism" by *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Its context of publication was the so-called "right-wing pushback" of the eighties. According to Atwood, the Reagan years brought the rise of a religious right that wanted to reverse the second-wave woman's movement's achievements, especially regarding women's bodies (*Burning Questions* 443). At that time, the daughters from this women's movement were coming of age, similarly to Offred in the novel, and they were noticing that in the 1990s they could pursue higher education and delay marriage and children when their mothers could not, enjoy a participation in the workforce that endowed them with more independence, etc. There was

a certain feeling that gender equality had been achieved, to the point that a 1995 report by the National Center for Education Statistics declared that gaps between men and women in education "have essentially disappeared for the younger generation" (as qtd. in Yarrow). It was the end of an era. 1989 had seen the opening of the Iron Curtain and the fall of the Berlin Wall. In 1992, Francis Fukuyama would publish the very well-known *The End of History and the Last Man* (Free Press) in which he argued that the universalization of Western liberal democracy was the endpoint of humankind's ideological evolution. 1992 was also called "the Year of the Woman" because, among other facts, the numbers of women senators tripled, showing that women were winning more political power than ever. Atwood's book was being read at a time, the second half of the 1980s and the 1990s, in which fighting the system was seen as no longer necessary for a significant part of Western societies. Five years after its publication, the first cinematographic adaptation of the novel was made, a time in which *The Handmaid's Tale*'s potential political message may have seemed less relevant to viewers than ever.

Allison Yarrow describes a certain hostility towards women in the 1990s as well as a commercialization of their sexuality, a phenomenon she has called "bitchification." According to her, in those years there was an important production of portrayals of women as "sluts, whores, trash, prudes, 'erotomaniacs,' sycophants, idiots, frauds, emasculators, nutcrackers and succubi." In line with this, Glenn Close later suggested that her rendition of Alex Forrest in *Fatal Attraction* could have contributed to media stigmas regarding mental illness and the "bunny-boiler" trope. What Close thought of Alex in 2013, that she was a troubled woman desperately needing help, would probably be immediately obvious to a modern audience (Desta). This type of female portrayal will be essential when dealing with Offred's transformation into Kate in the 1990 movie adaptation.

27 years after Schlöndorff's adaptation, Donald Trump took office on January 20, 2017, blowing up the political and cultural life in North America and leaving the rest of the world speechless. The next day, around 4.2 million people attended mass protests across the country known as the Women's March, making it probably the largest demonstration in U.S. history up to that point, according to Erica Chenoweth and Jeremy Pressman (as qtd. in Frostenson). Although the first season of Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* was entirely written by the time the November 2016 election gave the presidency to

Donald Trump (Robinson 155), it included a key scene in episode 4 in which June and Moira run from a violent protest against the establishment of Gilead. Comparisons were inevitable. In addition, Margaret Atwood mentioned "an outpouring of misogyny not witnessed since the witchcraft trials of the seventeenth century" during the campaign, citing the fact that the hashtag #repealthe19th went viral after October 2016 polls suggested that Donald Trump would win election if only men could vote (*BBC*). "You have to pinch yourself to make sure you're awake," added Atwood (*Burning Questions* 313). The Women's March was the first step toward what would later become the #MeToo movement.

Although the term was originally coined by Tarana Burke on Myspace in 2006, it was not until October 2017 that "#MeToo" spread virally as a hashtag on social media following numerous sexual-abuse allegations against the film producer Harvey Weinstein – more than 80 women ended up accusing him of rape, sexual assault, and sexual abuse. The actress Alyssa Milano published a tweet asking women to share their experiences with sexual assault and harassment. As a result, #MeToo was used more than 500,000 times by October 16 on Twitter, and 12 million posts included the hashtag during the first 24 hours on Facebook (Smartt). In the following months, a large number of sexual assault testimonies arose accusing public figures. *Time Magazine* ended up naming "Silence Breakers" the faces of the #MeToo movement, as "Person of the Year." The writers of Hulu/MGM were not isolated from their time, but quite the contrary, it seems. Their rendition of Atwood's story is profoundly related to the topics and anxieties of the political background of the time, but most evidently, the audience was affected by it when the series was released, in March 2017, which "helped rocket the show to early success," Robinson argues (155). Reviewers immediately linked the show with what was going on in the country, "and *The Handmaid's Tale* writers, cast, and crew suddenly found themselves at the middle of a swirling debate" (155).

The Women's March as a response to Trump's election and the later #MeToo movement were the breeding ground for the explosion of what is now called the fourth wave of feminism. Although already referred as such back in 2012 (Rivers 8), the ensuing Weinstein effect, the Westminster sexual scandals and La Manada gang rape case in Spain between 2017 and 2018 put it on the map for the general public. Among its main characteristics, online activism is a key feature: "Blogs are our consciousness-

raising groups ... I think one of the main contours of the Fourth Wave is that our activism is inseparable from technology" (as qtd. in Baumgardner 95). As such, protesters who use "online activism" but look for "offline effects" (Rivers 108) are quintessential prosumers, political actors who do not just consume media text but also produce and circulate them (Van Dam and Polak 184). Fourth-wave protesters have serious regard for the "political impact of clicking, liking, and retweeting particular content," which leads to backing a type of iconography that is "political evocative" whereas also become "commodified as cool and easy to adopt" (184). The success of this online activism has to do with the amount of attention a post generates, and most of them are heavily based on "arresting visual images" (186).

Although the election of "the pussy-grabber-in-chief", in Atwood's words (*Burning Questions* 435) left her presumably distraught, during his inauguration the author published an article in *The Nation* warning once again about those who would ask art to perform a "moral duty," demanding artists to "lend their voices to the cause" (325) as a response to the White House's new tenant. To Atwood, that could only lead us to produce two-dimensional propaganda and allegories: "the art galleries of the mediocre are wallpapered with good intentions" (325). Regarding the #MeToo movement, Atwood's opinion was that its overall effect had been positive (xviii-xix), although she also warned that the advantages and disadvantages of social media denunciation were still under debate. Indeed, over these years she has been involved in two fairly well-known events related to the #MeToo movement and cancel culture. First of all, she signed an open letter called UBC Accountable, which accused the University of British Columbia of being responsible for the unfair treatment of one of its former professors, Steven Galloway, accused of sexual misconduct. The backlash that her involvement in the open letter unleashed led her to write an op-ed called "Am I a Bad Feminist?", published in the *Globe and Mail* on Jan. 13, 2018. In this text, the author recalls that she had been accused by left and right-wing media since 1972 of being a decapitator of men, a dominatrix, and a witch. In 2018, she was presumably waging a war against women, "like the misogynist, rape-enabling Bad Feminist" she was (335). Throughout her op-ed she criticized several issues. First, the fact that a certain part of feminism, "the Good Feminists," have taken a positive position against Galloway despite not having access to the report or even the evidence (the professor had been found not guilty and fired from the university anyway). Atwood claimed that

this position fed into the narrative of women either as angels, "incapable of wrongdoing," or as girls, "incapable of agency or of making moral decisions" (335-337). Secondly, she mentioned "guilty because accused" examples throughout history, such as those of the French Revolution, Stalin's purges, or the Generals in Argentina, situations of "temporary vigilante justice" to usher in a better world, and warned that there is a risk of culturally solidifying a "lynch-mob habit" to justify new forms of oppression (337). To Atwood, "The #MeToo moment is a symptom of a broken legal system" in which women who could not get a "fair hearing" started using the Internet. The author argues that it is dangerous for the legal system to be bypassed, and claims that other organizations, such as Canadian Civil Liberties, should have been in charge of dealing with this issue. In the meantime, she summons both Good Feminists and Bad Feminists to hold the University of British Columbia accountable. In the final line, she wonders why "have accountability and transparency been framed as antithetical to women's rights" (339).

Electric Literature, an independent publisher literary journal founded in 2009, published a few days later an article called "Margaret Atwood's Books Taught Me to Listen to Women—Now She Needs to Learn the Same Thing," a good example of the backlash that Atwood's op-ed triggered on social media. In this article, although Erika Thorkelson starts by praising Atwood's ability to write compelling stories about women, mentioning *Cat's Eye, The Handmaid's Tale* and the Maddaddam trilogy, she expresses deep disappointment with the author for failing to listen to the complainants against Galloway or to younger generations of women. To Erika, Atwood posed herself as a "rational being" against a "backlash of orthodox feminist zealots." She also criticized Atwood's call for unifying women since it was "under her version of the narrative in support of her reputation as a feminist," mentioning later Atwood's "background of far more privilege" than the author's. Her critique was not regarding Atwood's right to express her opinion, she claims, but about "the moral responsibility we all have to choose when to speak and when to listen." *Are you a feminist? Thou shalt not write about that.*

In *The Guardian*, Ashifa Kassam gathered many tweets together in an article called "Margaret Atwood Faces Feminist Backlash on Social Media over #MeToo." Defined as "The 78-year-old author of *The Handmaid's Tale*," Kassam refers to tweets in which Atwood is described as "one of the most important feminist voices of our time" while she is accused of being responsible for "declaring war

against younger, less powerful women." According to one tweet, she should stop that war and, again, "start listening." Atwood "shits on less powerful women to uphold the power of her powerful male friend," says another tweet. In short, they largely criticized Atwood's use of her position of power.

Finally, "When Your Fave is Problematic: The Issue with Margaret Atwood" was published in a student newspaper of Wellesley College, Massachusetts. Throughout this article, the author agreed that Atwood was a "bad feminist," whom she adored and idealized as an author until the Galloway case. She considered *The Handmaid's Tale* "one of the greatest feminist texts of the modern age," which made her consider Atwood a "badass feminist prognosticator." In the article, its author perceives in *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood's intention to awe us with those capable of fighting the system, such as Moira and Ofglen. For that very reason she criticizes Atwood for perpetuating in real life the same systems that silence the trauma of her characters.

In a few words, these three articles build their criticism upon Atwood's image as a prominent feminist figure, specifically as the author of *The Handmaid's Tale*, to condemn her public opinion on the Galloway case. As Grady put it, "Atwood abruptly fell from her status as one of the feminist heroes of 2017 to the realm of 'problematic fave'" due to UBC Accountable and her subsequent "Am I a Bad Feminist?" op-ed.

The other controversy she was involved in during the last few years is the open letter she signed, along with more than 150 public figures, including J.K. Rowling and Salman Rushdie, through which they denounced a growing tendency towards "illiberalism" and "ideological conformity" through so-called cancel culture: "restriction of debate, whether by a repressive government or an intolerant society, invariably hurts those who lack power and makes everyone less capable of democratic participation ... The way to defeat bad ideas is by exposure, argument, and persuasion, not by trying to silence or wish them away." This open letter, as expected, unleashed a backlash criticizing that letter as the whining of "assorted rich fools" (Bradley), resulting in the publication of another response letter referring to "the intellectual freedom of cis white intellectuals" who have "never been under threat en masse" (*The Objective*).

With all that being said, it should be also mentioned that Margaret Atwood is a lively user of Twitter, where she regularly shares news about environmental issues or the war in Ukraine, as well as crowdfunding campaigns on social issues, which in that regard connects her to the practices of the fourth wave. Although completely against propaganda and activism through fiction, she has been personally involved in numerous marches, e.g., against Vietnam, the raids on gay bathhouses in Toronto, or Trump's election (according to the documentary *A Word After a Word...*).

> My fundamental position is that women are human beings, with the full range of saintly and demonic behaviours this entails, including criminal ones. They're not angels, incapable of wrongdoing. If they were, we wouldn't need a legal system. (*Burning Questions* 335)

In "Am I a Bad Feminist?", Margaret Atwood depicts fiction writers as "particularly suspect" since they deal with human beings and human beings are "morally ambiguous" (337-338). In her case, her novel *Surfacing* (1972) has been read by some as an antiabortion novel[3] while *Cat's Eye* has been considered by many as an "anti-feminist book about the awfulness of girls" (Ingersoll ix). A difficult aspect of Atwood's fiction is that the majority of her characters, mainly women, can hardly become role models, since they are generally conflicted, and at times mean, cowardly, or ambivalent. In one of her best-known speeches, "Spotty-Handed Villainesses" an allusion to "the invisible but indelible [spot] on the hand of wicked Lady MacBeth," she addresses the portrayal of "female bad behaviour" in literature and calls into question those who find "unfeminist" the depiction of woman behaving badly, as if bad behavior should be a "monopoly of men." By rejecting female bad behavior, we are falling into the same trap of the angel/whore dichotomy, Atwood argues. And despite the positive impact to literature that the Women's Movement has had (the expansion of themes and areas of experience, a sharp-eyed examination of power and gender, for instance), it has also brought a "tendency to cookie-cut"– first, by associating morality and gender (women are good, men are bad); second, by judging by "tribal markings" (heels and make-up versus overalls); third, by making hopeful excuses according to which "defects in women were ascribable to the patriarchal system and would cure themselves once that system was abolished" (21). She argues that being both a novelist and a second-wave feminist could thus make you feel your choices restricted

[3] The *Pro-life Activist's Encyclopedia* quotes *Surfacing* to introduce the section "Post-Abortion Syndrome: Abortion's Lasting Hold on Women".

(21). For example, she wonders how to address women's will to power if it is stated that women are, by nature, communal egalitarians; or how to portray despicable behavior practiced by women against each other, or by little girls against other little girls – all of this was "abetting the enemy, namely the male power-structure" (21). This female bad behavior is explained by some saying it was Big Daddy's fault, or Big Mom's, "that agent of the patriarchy." To Atwood, the account for female bad behavior as "the patriarchy made her do it" eventually leads to the idea of women being homogenized and deprived of free will (21).

Kiley Kapuscinski, an English professor at Queen's University in Kingston, Canada, wrote her PhD on the violent woman in Atwood's fiction, from which several thought-provoking ideas have been taken. First of all, the idea that Atwood's violent women "are not predeterminately bound to act in harmful ways" since many women are actually able to resist their impulses towards hurt (10). Atwood's fiction is based on free will, according to her. Similarly, Atwood explains in "Spotty-Handed Villainesses" that female characters can be "explorations of moral freedom" as long as they can "pose the question of responsibility": "if you have power you have to accept responsibility, and actions produce consequences" (22).

Secondly, Kapuscinski argues that Atwood's attempt to imagine women differently turns her violent women into a tool to give comment on the society within they are placed. According to the scholar, Atwood places the violent woman as a "paradoxical insider/outsider figure" (41) who leads readers to question social narratives and make room for their revision. In this vein, the violent woman, filled with "eccentricity and centricity" (41), could lead us to the ongoing negation and the constant challenge of any fixed meaning or identity proposed by Kristeva. The violent woman, a "privileged space" in Atwood's stories to "unsettle ideological frames in powerful ways" (41) could be the "place of permanent scission" in Kristeva's view of the poetic language.

Moreover, Kapuscinski reproaches feminism for its inability to include "empathetic discussions of violent women," arguing that abusive women undermine some traditional tenets of feminism which assume women as "multiply inscribed victims" (20). Discussing female violence could be seen as politically disadvantageous for women, a tool for "further oppress[ion]," resulting in some feminists

broadly ignoring abusing women or recasting them as victims (20). Saying that abusive women are an "appropriation of male aggression," that they are borrowing an "essentially masculine behaviour" (22), implies denaturalizing women's use of violence as human beings. Feminism's negligence in dealing with abusive women show that this figure challenges some ideological tenets of feminism, specifically those that "construct women as victims and global 'sisters.'" (25). To Kapuscinski, violent women are a way to explore notions of victimhood and "the limits of sisterhood as a political metaphor" (31), especially in the case of Atwood's violent women and their "inescapable familiarity" (12).

Thus, to Kapuscinski it is important for feminism to stay "flexible and adaptive" if it aims to answer to the "endless differences existent within the category of 'woman'" (20), since "those relegated to the margins" are key to understanding much about any collectivity and "the various biases and gaps it conceals" (31). Violence and aggression are not essentially inhuman acts, Kapuscinski argues, but rather the opposite. In Atwood's words, "life contains awful things" ("Margaret Atwood's Address" as qtd. in Kapuscinski 9).

2.1 Margaret Atwood's Work regarding Sisterhood and Sororophobia

We have chosen each other
and the edge of each others battles
the war is the same
if we lose
someday women's blood will congeal
upon a dead planet
if we win
there is no telling
we seek beyond history
for a new and more possible meeting.
- Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

The approach provided in the previous section to Atwood's stance on politics, gender, and feminism will be now linked to the provided notions of sisterhood, especially during the second wave, and Helena Michie's sororophobia, through some of Atwood's fiction. The term "sororophobia" seems especially pertinent since it involves a woman's both refusal and desire to identify with other women, resulting in

an ongoing "negotiation of similarity and difference, identity and separation" (9). It is argued that this is not only a key topic in *The Handmaid's Tale* and its subsequent adaptations, but also plays a major role within a broader framework of Atwood's work, especially in *The Cat's Eye* (1988) and *The Robber Bride* (1993), the two novels she published after *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985).

> I think I'm more interested in mirror-images ... You counterpart is someone who is the mirror reflection of yourself, and your complement is someone who supplies those elements that are lacking in you ... I'm interested in complements, image structures in which other people are perceived not as necessarily you, you inside, or hidden you, but as something quite other. (Margaret Atwood as qtd. in Kaminski 32)

Looking at our complement could feel like contemplating our negative, as if we were photos. The other upon whom we reflect is telling us what we are lacking, namely, what we are not, and so, what we are. Twenty years after this 1975 remark, Atwood was delivering "Spotty-Handed Villainesses," in which she would state that female characters can work as "keys to doors we need to open" (22). As she further explains, "if you're a woman, the bad female character is your shadow; and ... she who loses her shadow also loses her soul" (24). Similarly, in 1978 the author explained that she seemed to be less concerned about the relationship between men and women than she was about those among women. She added that she had two novels in her head, and that she hoped to start one that summer (Oates 70). Although we will never know for sure the two stories she was referring to, the next novel she published, *Bodily Harm* (1981), primarily dealt with a toxic heterosexual relationship. After that, it was *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *Cat's Eye* (1988).

> Sisterhood is a difficult concept for me, I tell myself, because I never had a sister. Brotherhood is not (*Cat's Eye* 404).

Several points should be made about *Cat's Eye.* As it has been previously stated, the story was considered by many as an anti-feminist book about the awfulness of girls at that time, according to Philip Howard (Ingersoll ix). Secondly, the story of its protagonist, Elaine, is closely related to Margaret Atwood's own childhood. Atwood has repeatedly described her early life as a solitary child growing up with her parents and brother in the woods, who did not start formal schooling until she was eight. Thirdly, the interview given as an adult artist remarkably recalls some of Atwood's aforementioned statements. Accordingly, this novel contains two fundamental sources of sororophobic dynamics: first and foremost, Elaine's

relationship with other girls, especially with Cordelia, and her process of socialization as a woman and becoming an adult; also, but as a minor issue, the relationship with other women in feminist circles and Elaine's stance on the matter.

> I want some friends, friends who will be girls. Girl friends. I know that these exist, having read about them in books, but I've never had any girl friends because I've never been in one place long enough. (*Cat's Eye* 31)

Like Margaret Atwood, Elaine had little to no relationship at all with any girls until they moved from the forest to town, and she started attending school. Until then, her older brother had been her only companion and sole playmate, as happened to Atwood. Already in town, and at the age of eight, Elaine makes two girlfriends for the first time, Carol and Grace, through whom she is initiated into the ways and behaviors, the expected desires of a little girl, leaving aside the physical activity and adventure that she lived with her brother.

Being socialized as a girl means new longings ("I begin to want things I've never wanted before: braids, a dressing-gown, a purse of my own" 63), but also the learning of a new type of communicative act in which what is said and what is intended may conflict. When playing with the scrapbook game, she hears her companions say, "Oh, yours is so good. Mine's no good. Mine's *awful*," although she can tell they do not mean it - each one actually thinks that her lady is better: "But it's the thing you have to say, so I begin to say it too" (62). Later on, a new girl joins the group, Cordelia, to whom Elaine feels initially drawn. In William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Cordelia is the youngest of King Lear's three daughters, the one who refuses to profess him love in return for land, being punished for this decision throughout the play. Atwood's Cordelia, on the other hand, is the quintessence of dominance and cruelty towards other girls, especially towards Elaine. Among them, Cordelia will progressively develop a climate of vigilance and mistrust with a carrot-and-stick form of control, from which Elaine cannot escape:

> Once I'm outside the house there is no getting away from them. They are on the school bus, where Cordelia stands close beside me and whispers into my ear: 'Stand up straight! People are looking!' Carol is in my classroom, and it's her job to report to Cordelia what I do and say all day ... They comment on the kind of lunch I have, how I hold my sandwich, how I chew. On the way home from school I have to walk in front of them, or behind ... 'Don't hunch over,' says Cordelia. 'Don't move your arms like that.' (141).

Surveillance and psychological punishment hurts, but more terrifying to Elaine is being left alone ("I have never had any before and I'm terrified of losing them. I want to please" 142). Cordelia has a compelling feeling to offer - a sense of belonging: "This time her voice is confiding, as if she's talking about something intimate that only she and I know and agree on. She creates a circle of two, takes me in." (83). And so, Elaine feels at a crossroads of emotions that she can hardly handle. Increasingly depressed, she refuses to consider Cordelia and the rest of the girls as enemies, since they are her only friends: "Hatred would be easier. With hatred, I would have known what to do. Hatred is clear, metallic, one-handed, unwavering; unlike love" (142). Complex enough, when Elaine is not the focus of Cordelia's poisonous attention, but another girl, she does not sympathize either but rather feels a sort of pleasure: "On some days Cordelia decides that it's Carol's turn to be improved ... At these times I don't pity Carol. She deserves what's happening to her, because of all the time she's done the same things to me. *I rejoice that it's her turn instead of mine*[4]*"* (143).

Elaine starts to feel sick, vomit, and daydream of drinking bleach. Shortly thereafter, it will be revealed that Mrs. Smeath, the mother of the other two girls, was perfectly aware and thought that Elaine somehow deserved it:

> A heavy, thick hatred ... What I hate is not Grace or even Cordelia. I can't go as far as that. I hate Mrs Smeath, because what I thought was a secret, something going on among girls, among children, is not one. It has been discussed before, and tolerated. Mrs Smeath has known and approved. She has done nothing to stop it. She thinks it serves me right. (213)

Many years later, as an art student, a classmate who used to have sex with the same teacher as her will try to commit suicide. She will think word by word what Mrs. Smeath, one of the mothers, said about her: "a small, mean voice, ancient and smug, that comes from somewhere deep inside my head: *It serves her right*" (376). As well as it will happen in *The Handmaid's Tale*, traumatic episodes, especially with other women, will be transformed into voices that affect, consciously or unconsciously, the main character's thoughts and attitudes. For example, the abuse suffered during these years becomes a nine-year-old girl's voice for adult Elaine, that is made explicit when she tries to hurt herself with a knife, following the dictates of this voice: "I wasn't a frightening voice, in itself. Not menacing but excited, as if proposing

[4] Emphas s added.

an escapade, a prank, a treat. Something treasured, and secret. The voice of a nine-year-old child" (440). This voice is deeply intertwined with the love-hate relationship with Cordelia, as the following passage suggests: "Get me out of this, Cordelia. I'm locked in. I don't want to be nine years old for ever" (471).

A terrible prank that almost costs her life awakens Elaine, who is finally able to distance herself from the girls and stop considering them her friends (228-229). Years after, Cordelia returns to Elaine's life and their relationship evolves into a calmer one based on listening to records or reading comics together.

Although described here in chronological order, Margaret Atwood constantly oscillates between the present-tense narrative, in which Elaine is a recognized artist who returns to her hometown for a retrospective of her work, and the past point of view, which she narrates chronologically. From this point on, in which Elaine and Cordelia's new relationship is growing, the two narratives begin to intertwine more closely, as Atwood attempts to transform our view of Elaine through the episodes of her childhood made known to us, re-signifying adult Elaine's language and relationship with art and with other women. Thus, we learn how her relationship with Cordelia evolves during adolescence while the adult Elaine ponders a painting of Cordelia.

> I wanted her about thirteen, looking out with that defiant, almost belligerent state of hers. *So?* But her eyes sabotaged me. They aren't strong eyes; the look they give the face is tentative, hesitant, reproachful. Frightened. Cordelia is afraid of me, in this picture. I am afraid of Cordelia. I'm not afraid of seeing Cordelia. I'm afraid of being Cordelia. Because in some way we changed places, and I've forgotten when. (267)

Elaine's fear of seeing herself reflected in Cordelia's face is related to the adolescent phase she is revisiting through memory by being back in her hometown, the one in which she stopped feeling "powerless" and other women began to be afraid of her. Interestingly enough, Atwood is well known (and often criticized) for her scathing comments, and in interviews she has expressed puzzlement for having been considered a threat to other women's life positions at first ("you were supposed to pay attention to diapers and the washing dishes", Gibson 11, "or collect china" Davidson 96) and then becoming a 'feminist model' (Gibson 11), "often, inadvertently, by the same people who where forming the [consciousness-raising] groups" (Davidson 96).

> Girls at school learn to look out for my mean mouth and avoid it. I walk the halls surrounded by an aura of potential verbal danger, and am treated with caution, which suits me fine. Strangely enough, my mean behaviour doesn't result in fewer friends, but, on the surface, more. The girls are afraid of me but they know where it's safest: beside me, half a step behind. 'Elaine is a riot,' they say, without conviction. Some of them are already *collecting china*[5] and housewares, and have Hope Chests. For this kind of thing I feel amused disdain. And yet it disturbs me to learn I have hurt someone unintentionally. I want all my hurts to be intentional. (277)

In this scenario, Cordelia becomes the object of most of her verbal attacks, a sort of "target practice" (277). Elaine wonders how she can be that mean to her "best friend," "for this is what she is" (291). Cordelia starts failing exams, eventually quits school, and asks Elaine for company, although the meeting is more bitter than expected: "I know she has expected something from me, some connection to her old life, or to herself. I know I have failed to provide it. I am dismayed by myself, by my cruelty and indifference, my lack of kindness. But also I feel relief" (306). A few years later, Elaine visits Cordelia in a sort of a rest-home where she is obliged to take tranquillizers since she had tried to commit suicide before. When Cordelia asks her for help to get out from the rest home, and Elaine refuses, Cordelia responds: "I guess you've always hated me." Elaine is not able to understand Cordelia's statement. She cannot remember "ever hating Cordelia" (421), nor realize consciously that victim-victimizer, powerless-powerful roles have changed sides.

A year after its publication, Margaret Atwood told Ingersoll that there is a tendency to think that the most important relationships to women are those with either men or babies (Ingersoll 236). Atwood noticed a lack of narratives about what "young girls do with and to one another", and she created a complex character, Cordelia, who had a deep influence on "how the little girls who got run over by her were able to respond to other women when they grew up" (236). As such, *Cat's Eye* is essentially the story of a woman who is trying to unravel what happened in her past, especially in her childhood, and why the figure of an old friend-enemy haunts her to this day. Atwood depicts Cordelia as a sort of absent presence, which adult Elaine both fears and awaits during the preparation and subsequent opening of her retrospective; a kind of nightmare-daydream that lasts for days: "Really it's Cordelia I expect, Cordelia I want to see. There are things I need to ask to her. Not what happened, back then in the time

[5] Emphasis added. A quite evident intertextual reference to Atwood's previous interview regard ng ch na.

I lost, because now I know that. I need to ask her why. If she remembers. Perhaps she's forgotten the bad things, what she said to me, what she did. Or she does remember them, but in a minor way, as if remembering a game, or a single prank, a single trivial secret of the kind girls tell and then forget" (485). More than the eagerness to see someone in particular, this absent presence becomes a space to ask questions, about herself, about her history, of a figure who, in the negative, configured what she is today.

> She will have her own version. I am not the center of her story, because she herself is that. But I could give her something you can never have, except from another person: what you look like from outside. A reflection. This is the part of herself I could give back to her. We are like twins in old fables, each of whom has been given half a key" (485).

Cordelia, of course, never shows up. Elaine as a child, her house, her hometown, Cordelia herself... All of them are absences and echoes that will follow her wherever she goes, turning her into an echo chamber: "I peer out through the glass of the train window ... This looks like emptiness and silence, but to me it is not empty, not silent. Instead it's filled with echoes. *Home*, I think. But it's nowhere I can go back on" (443).

The final scene of the novel shows the protagonist returning to her current home by plane. During the flight, she notices two ladies playing cards and drinking tea. Some critics have seen in this scene a note of hope and gaiety, something that Atwood has wryly rejected (Ingersoll 238). "The jolly old women is something she doesn't have," Atwood comments, and, as such, in Elaine this scene points to the everlasting wound of what is missed and will never happen. Again, Kristeva's image of language as the "permanent scission."

> They're innocent and dirty, they don't give a hoot. Responsibilities have fallen away from them, obligations, old hates and grievances; now for a short while they can play again like children, but this time without the pain. This is what I miss, Cordelia: not something that's gone, but something that will never happen. Two old women giggling over their tea (498).

The second focus of sororophobia arises from her comments on feminism, especially from the interview with a journalist on the occasion of the retrospective, as well as the protagonist's experiences with "consciousness-raising groups." In these two motifs, a clear link to Atwood can be observed: on numerous occasions she has had to answer questions about feminism, as explained above, to which she also gave a very strong opinion about her experiences with "consciousness-raising groups." Moreover, in an interview in 1986 (two years before the publication of *Cat's Eye*), she explained that becoming a

painter is a sort of parallel life for her, one of the many parallel lives that every writer, and every person, lives with (Ingersoll 250).

Regarding the meeting with the journalist, the interview is tense from the beginning. To start with, Elaine is wearing a powder-blue jogging suit, an "early-sixties holdover", while the journalist, Andrea, an "upsettingly young" bright red hair woman, wears black, "approved, glossy black" (103), which, of course, accentuates Elaine's aging and lack of style. Andrea's first questions concern Elaine's generation and her status as a woman artist, and the exchange is so awkward and uncomfortable that Elaine ends up saying, "I'm beginning to sweat. I feel as I'm at the dentist, mouth gracelessly open while some stranger with a light and mirror gazes down my throat at something I can't see" (104). She moves from other subjects, "and back towards women, which was where she wanted to be in the first place. Is it harder for a woman, was I discriminated against, undervalued? What about having children?" Her answers do not convince the interviewer: "all painters feel undervalued." In addition to that, her husband had been wonderful, giving her moral and financial support, but that is not what the interviewer wants to hear: "She'd prefer stories of outrage" (105). Elaine then explains that people of her age are expected to tell that sort of story: "Male art teachers pinching your bum, calling you *baby*, asking you why there are no great female painters, that sort of thing. She would like me to be furious, and quaint" (105). The interviewer gives it another try and asks her what she thinks about feminism, since many people consider her to be a feminist painter. The link to Atwood's interview experience can be more clearly identified here, as their answers are almost identical:

> 'Well, what about, you know, feminism?' she says. 'A lot of people call you a feminist painter.'
> 'What indeed?' I say. 'I hate party lines, I hate ghettos' ...
> 'So it's not a meaningful classification for you?' she says.
> 'I like it that women like my work. Why shouldn't I?'...
> She frowns, diddles with the tape-recorder. 'Why do you paint all those women then?'
> 'What should I paint, men?' I say. 'I'm a painter. Painters paint women ... Everyone paints women. Is there something wrong with painting women?'
> 'But not like that,' she says.
> 'Like what?' I say. 'Anyway, why should my women be the same as everyone else's women?'. (105)

Women's consciousness-raising sessions, on the other hand, constituted one of the foundations for the second-wave feminism, in which women pondered, discussed, and "enhance[d] consciousness" about

what it meant to be a woman by sharing experiences with other women (Blakemore, *JSTOR Daily*). In a few interviews, Atwood explains that she went to a very early one for people in arts, and to her, there was only one woman worth listening to (Meese 189). She describes being "pissed off" because they were discussing "whether it was or was not liberated to wear false eyelashes". According to her, a lot of people were still discussing eyelashes in 1985 (189). Similarly, Elaine listens to the other women talking about shaving their legs o wearing lipstick. One of the women at the gathering shows her "real leg underneath, which is defiantly, resplendently hairy," and Elaine feels cowardly and brainwashed with her naked legs (402). Women talk about being raped, beaten up, discriminated against at their workplace, or their work been dismissed as too feminine (403). Elaine's attitude is ambivalent. On one hand, the rage that holds up these meetings makes her feel sort of powerful, and also makes her reconsider women she thought were stupid as having "simply been hiding things", as she was (403). On the other hand, they also build in her a sense of nervousness, awkwardness, and uncertainty, since anything she says "might be the wrong thing" (404). She feels out of place, underserving the other women's attention. The last sentence, "I want to please," directly refers to the monologue about Cordelia as a child and her fear of not fitting in: "I have not suffered enough, I haven't paid my dues, I have no right to speak. I feel as if I'm standing outside a closed door while decisions are being made, disapproving judgements are being pronounced, inside, about me. At the same time I want to please" (404). Seven years before the interview with Meese, in 1975, Atwood had already mentioned consciousness-raising groups. She stated that she had not been part of any because she had already gone through her own consciousness-raising process, by, as mentioned before, the same women who had questioned the fact that Atwood was not collecting china (Davidson 96). Atwood seems to hold some bitterness towards a part of the community that at first criticized her and later sought her out looking for feminist models: "Where were you when I really needed you? You know, I'm very tough now, but I wasn't always then, and I would have appreciated some of that support, at that time," (96) Atwood declared.

If *Cat's Eye* dealt with a haunting ghost of, not only trauma, but the hope for what cannot happen, Atwood opens *The Robber Bride* with a Günter Grass' quote: "Only what is entirely lost demands to be

endlessly named: there is a mania to call the lost thing until it returns." Naming and language are key to processing the unfillable void of the past. Another opening quote, "A rattlesnake that doesn't bite teaches you nothing," seems to suggest a need for a little poison in everyone's life in order for them to evolve.

In this novel, the rattlesnake has a name: Zenia. By constantly biting the three main characters, Tony, Charis, and Roz, she forces the three women face their demons, constantly trying and failing. Eventually, they are able to confront Zenia and, for once, not fall into her trap and move away from her, as Elaine did in *The Cat's Eye*. The story starts when the three of them are having lunch at The Toxique and they see Zenia, who they thought was dead – this is the starting point of a five-hundred-and-sixty-page exploration of their lives, aiming to understand why the vision of Zenia at The Toxique turned their minds and lives upside down.

The title *The Robber Bride* refers to the fact that, over the years, Zenia steals each one of their partners. However, the lethal aspect of her poison is not only in taking them away, but also in having done so while they were friends, making them believe that she was an ally, not an enemy, and using trust and intimacy as weapons to achieve her goals. First of all, Atwood introduces us to the relationship between the three: a certain sense of competitiveness, possessiveness, and jealousy that also includes mutual support and a certain sisterhood. Roz is the one who wants to make them go shopping and wear nicer clothes (18); Charis wants to improve their front lawns, turning out to be a little invasive in that field (21); Tony, on her side, makes sharp remarks that embarrass Charis, making her feel dumb and insecure (36). As for the robber bride, Zenia, she uses sisterhood to builds her relationships with other women in three stages: 1) identification - Zenia finds a feature that makes them identify with her and exploits it to gain their trust; 2) sisterhood - she makes them feel special, even though they may have doubts about certain behaviors of hers, which forces them to be sympathetic and supportive; 3) betrayal - Zenia makes use of the information acquired through intimacy and trust to deliver a final blow and disappear without giving any explanations.

Regarding identification, each one is made to believe a different story about her childhood, adjusted to their specific circumstances so that they feel identified. To Tony, Zenia was a Russian refugee whose mother forced her to start working as a prostitute when she was five or six years old and died young

of Tuberculosis: “So far Tony has seen Zenia as very different from herself, but now she sees her as similar too, for aren’t they both orphans? Both motherless, both war babies, making their way in the world by themselves” (197). Tony looks at her and thinks that she “admires Zenia tremendously,” seeing in her “her own reflection: herself, as she would like to be. *Tnomerf Ynot* [Tony Fremont]. Herself turned inside out” (194). To Charis, Zenia’s father was killed in the war, as well as Charis’, who is “glad that they have a bond in common” (324). Finally, her version for Roz is that her father saved her life during the war, and Roz didn't know much about her father. According to this version, Zenia was a little Jewish girl who was living in Berlin with her parents and later became a prostitute, a stripper, and eventually a heroine and coke addict.

Connecting with Tony is easy since they both belong to the same academic sphere, and, in fact, Zenia is dating West, Tony's friend and secret love. With Charis, she will have to work much harder. Coming to her yoga class with a blackened eye, Zenia explains to her that she had run away because she had cancer, after which she went to the mountains and cut out meat and alcohol, which “sounds exactly right to Charis” (261). At that point she had cancer again and needed someone to take care of her. Zenia tells Charis that she tried to go back to West, Tony’s husband now, but he presumably made her eat meat and drink alcohol, and sometimes hit her: “She can’t picture [West] hitting anyone, much less Zenia; but people can have deceptive exteriors. Men especially … West, no doubt, is one of these. Indignation rises in her, the beginning of anger” (261-263). Zenia was not aware of how deeply she was pulling at Charis’ heartstrings, since Charis had been repeatedly abused by her uncle when she was eight years old and her aunt did not believe her (310). This event probably made her very sensitized to the testimony of women in cases of abuse and sympathetic to the complex cause of #believewomen, which advocates for accepting women's allegations of sexual harassment or sexual assault at face value. Later on, when Zenia was already living with Charis and her boyfriend, she would say that he didn’t love her but “her ass”: “I’ve watched him, he’s a greedy shit, they’re all just rapists at heart. You’re an innocent, Karen. Believe me, there’s only one thing any man wants from a woman, and that’s sex” (272).

Roz, on the other hand, has become a successful businesswoman and runs a magazine called *Wise Woman World*, which allows her to deepen her awareness of the feminine condition from an

empowering and sisterly stance, and to make up for some of the sisterhood she had not experienced when she was younger: "*Wise Woman World* was all the sleepover parties Roz had once felt were going on behind her back, and of course she had to save it" (421). Previously, she had tried to participate in consciousness-raising groups: "It was like catching up on all the sisters she'd never had, it was like having a great big family in which the members, for once, had something in common; it was like being allowed, finally, into all the groups and cliques she'd never quite been able to crash before" (420). However, something did not seem to be working. When it was Roz's turn to speak, "a sort of disbelieving gaze" would appear in the eyes of the other women, who would quickly change the subject. In her opinion, it was probably related to her money. This experience helps to illustrate how important the magazine was to Roz in filling that lack of affection, and the impact of Zenia's appearance as a journalist with gender concerns ("I got myself commissioned to do a piece on sexual harassment in the workplace", 378) with her own impressive story of disgrace and empowerment, exactly the sort of story they like to publish: "inspirational, a success story. A story about overcoming fears and obstacles, about facing up to yourself and becoming a whole person ... *Wise Woman World* appreciates real-life heroines, ordinary women who have been more than ordinarily courageous" (439). And so she promises to help her. Although skeptical at first, Roz "...is touched. She, Roz –she alone– has been chosen, to understand. And she does, she does" (437).

Once the seed of likeness and mutual support is putting down roots, that "I understand/believe you while the others do not," Zenia feels comfortable and gets the ball rolling. It is then when her actions, which in another situation could have been considered inappropriate behavior, are condoned by her three friends because they understand that she is coming off a bad streak and want to support her. Yet, the emotions of doubt and envy at some point slowly begin to emerge. In the case of Tony, Zenia starts to drain her time and money, like a vampire. Regarding Charis, Zenia stays at her place for a long time, but she does not seem to improve nor contribute financially or help with household chores. At the same time, she saps Charis' self-confidence and trust in her boyfriends in an Iago's style. As for Roz, Zenia begins to distance herself from her and progressively gains more power at the magazine, no longer consulting with Roz before making decisions.

The next and last stage is betrayal. In the case of Tony, Zenia asks her to write a paper for her and then blackmails her not to reveal it, which could jeopardize her future as a college professor. She then breaks up with West, drops out of college and escapes with Tony's money without leaving any trace. Regarding Charis, Zenia brainwashes her for months about her boyfriend Billy, gathering information from her about Billy's status as a draft dodger. The morning after Charis tells them that she is pregnant both have disappeared, although it is never revealed whether they actually left together or Zenia reported him to the police. Regarding Roz, Zenia eventually manages to change the name of the magazine to *Woman World*, dropping "wise," after which there would be no more stories about delaying motherhood or about how to deal with sexism, but only about diets, hair treatments, wrinkle creams, relationships with men, etc. Zenia justifies this by saying that: "'Most women don't want to read about other women who achieve... It makes them feel unsuccessful.'" Roz then starts considering forcing Zenia out since she is still the majority shareholder. However, "she can't do that without looking like a vindictive shrew" (445). Finally, Mitch, Roz's husband, falls in love with Zenia, and once she has used him, she abandons him, and Mitch commits suicide, leaving his children fatherless.

As Atwood's mastery partly lies in exploring past relationships to re-signify present issues, in *Robber Bride*, it is intricate relationships with the protagonists' mothers what explains the characters' longing for love and belonging. Matrophobia is here the primal source for a later sororophobia, as explained by Michie in line with Kristeva. Regarding Tony, she remembers being left alone in the snow when she was five (162), and later describes being abandoned by her mother as a teenager, for which Tony blames herself: "All of this is her own fault, somehow. She hasn't made enough cups of tea, she's misread the signals, she has let go of the string or the rope or the chain or whatever it is that's been attaching her mother to this house" (178). When Tony tells all this to Zenia, the latter daydreams about her mother, identifying with her, that is, Tony's worst enemy and worst betrayal up to this point (191). Charis' relationship with her mother was also quite complex. Her mother used to insult her ("little bitch!") and hit her, then fall to her knees and hug her and say, "I'm sorry, I love you, I don't know what got into me, I'm sorry'" (277). Charis learned a type of love closely linked with pain and violence, with insult and blows followed by forgiveness and a show of affection: she "would try to stop crying then, she

would try to smile, because her mother loved her. If someone loved you that made it all right" (277). Charis' mother had a hard relationship with her own mother too, since Charis' grandmother was a countryside woman, rough and sometimes rude or vulgar, and Charis' mother, on the contrary, was sensitive and delicate, even refined. As for Roz, her relationship with her mother was not particularly bad, but she resented her mother for being so strict with her while so indulgent with her father, whom she rarely saw and who had been unfaithful to her, as well as her husband, Mitch, will be later to Roz. Her mother, who "is so unbending, bends. She abdicates ... She looks at Roz's father mutely, the same kind of mushy cow-eyed look the Virgin Mary gives the Baby Jesus or the Holy Spirit in the picture" (398).

> How well she did it, thinks Tony. How completely she took us in. In the war of sexes, which is nothing like a real war but is instead a kind of confused scrimmage in which people change allegiances at a moment's notice, Zenia was a double agent. Or not even that, because Zenia wasn't working for one side or the other. She was on no side but her own. (218)

Throughout this novel, the story of these four characters provides us with an opportunity to reflect on the delicate thread that weaves relationships between women, delving into the possibility of an unscrupulous character, a sort of Iago, who is able to see the thread and sew as she pleases. Zenia thus employs sisterhood and victimhood against men as tools to connect with Tony, Charis, and Roz, referred to by the narrator of *The Robber Bride* as a "war of the sexes," with Zenia being a "double agent."

In this war of the sexes, Tony is also accused of "letting women down" (25) by her colleague Rose, a social historian professor, who rebukes her for being Eurocentric in her course of the Merovingian wars, and suggests her to account for the perspective of victims instead of marginalizing them (24). "Which victims? ... They were all victims! They took turns! Actually, they took turns trying to avoid being the victims. That's the whole point about war!" Tony replies. From a biographical reading, Tony's discussion with Rose could be interpreted in two senses: first, as Atwood's rejection of dealing with gender from a victimized point of view in her fiction, in line with hooks (*Feminism is for Everybody* 62); and second, as a scathing remark recalling her *Thou shalt not write about* in her interview with Elizabeth Meese (183). As a woman historian, Tony feels she is expected to be writing social history, "such as who ate what when, or Life in the Feudal Family. Female historians, of whom there are not

many, think the same thing but for different reasons. They think she ought to be studying birth; not death, and certainly not battle plans" (24). Similarly, Atwood would be expected to deal with women as oppressed by patriarchy, and not delve into those who are mean and violent, especially against each other. Back to Tony, Rose ends up asking her why she likes wars so much, to which she replies: "War is *there*. It's not going away soon. It's not that I like it. I want to see why so many other people like it. I want to see how it works" (24). Similarly, Atwood states that, although she did not like politics, problems were there, and she could not ignore them (Sandler 54).

The last pages of the novel certainly echo the nostalgia and ambivalence of the final scene of *Cat's Eye*. Roz, for example, explains that, funnily, "she actually feels sad" (561). Although Zenia "was a tumour", she was a "major part of Roz's life and her life is past the midpoint ... She feels something else she never thought she would feel, towards Zenia. Oddly enough, it's gratitude. What for? Who knows? But that's what she feels" (561). Is she echoing the opening quote, "a rattlesnake that doesn't bite teaches you nothing"? As for Tony, she ponders on what ceremonial activities could honor the figure of Zenia ("A ritual cannon shot, the flag lowering to halfmast"). She finally considers her an enemy "of equal rank," since no one "competes with any one who, for whatever reason, seems entirely different from oneself", as Michie puts it (7). Quite the opposite, Margaret Atwood frequently depicts female characters as opposing forces who define themselves by struggling against each other. According to Toni McNaron, sisters often assume opposing roles within the family, either one sister encouraging the other to play out some complimentary self that she does not or cannot become (as qtd. in Michie 19-20). Similarly, friends and friends-enemies negotiate themselves in relation with each other, depending on "as much on likeness as unlikeness" (20). "*I am the enemy you killed, my friend*," Tony thinks (562).

Finally, the last lines of this novel have to do with laughter and storytelling, language, nostalgia, absent presence; the ongoing forward and backward dynamic of women who recognize and reject each other, like the three characters and Zenia, and like the three among themselves:

> From the kitchen [Tony] hears laughter, and the clatter of dishes. Charis is setting out the food, Roz is telling a story. That's what they will do, increasingly in their lives: tell stories. Tonight their stories will be about Zenia.
> Was she in any way like us? thinks Tony. Or, to put it the other way around: Are we in any way like her? Then she opens the door, and goes in to join the others. (564)

3. *The Handmaid's Tale* and its Adaptations

Although Margaret Atwood had been associated with feminism due to her condition as a well-known female Canadian writer, as well as her "proto-feminist" novel *The Edible Woman* and her later *Surfacing*, it is especially *The Handmaid's Tale* that makes her reputation outside the Canadian literary world. Published in 1985, *The Handmaid's Tale* received critical acclaim from the very beginning, winning the 1985 Governor General's Award and her first Arthur C. Clarke Award in 1987, and also being nominated for the 1986 Booker Prize, the 1986 Nebula Award, and the 1987 Prometheus Award. The enormous reception of this novel made her a household name in the 20th century English-speaking literary world, and since its publication it has not ceased to be reprinted. And yet, we might wonder what happened to make her publish its sequel 34 years and 10 novels later. Why is it that, 38 years after its publication, women in Israel imitate the attire of its protagonist in mass demonstrations?

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood builds a dystopian society in which the United States had suffered a coup by a fundamentalist religious group called the Sons of Jacob. The result is an extremely hierarchized dictatorial system, called the Republic of Gilead, which tries to give a solution to a problem that could be the end of the human race: a massive, and worldwide, problem of infertility. The Sons of Jacob then come up with the idea of gathering fertile women (to them, there is not such a thing as an infertile man) in order to give babies to high-ranking officials' households. These women are the Handmaids, who are unmistakably recognizable by being dressed entirely in red. The use of color to distinguish and control them will be extended to the women of the Commanders, the Wives, who will wear blue; to the women who will control the Handmaids, the Aunts, who will wear military brown; to the Marthas, the servants, who will wear utilitarian green; and to the Econowives, the lower class women, in gray. Through the first-person point of view of a Handmaid, Offred, we will learn how this world works, especially concerning women, the strict rules they have to follow, and the intricate relationships that are forged between them.

The theme of power will be essential for the analysis of the book and its subsequent adaptations, since the countless constraints on women make the battle for some power the key for survival. A sororophobic approach will then account for this battle between women, filled with suspicion, jealousy,

and envy, as well as temporary or long-lasting alliances, as has been depicted more prominently in Atwood's book when compared to the movie and the TV series. Margaret Atwood has explained on several occasions that it is a mistake to think that Gilead men have all the power, and all women do not. As a totalitarian state, Gilead has a strict hierarchy, in which women at the top have different types of power from the elite men, "but they have power nonetheless, and some of the power they have is power over other women" (Howells 53).

Apart from *The Canterbury Tales*, after which *The Handmaid's Tale* is named, and the Bible, from which she takes up the idea of dealing with a text that contains "mixed messages" of protection and destruction, of friends that can turn into foes, George Orwell's *1984* is the most significant literary influence on *The Handmaid's Tale*. Atwood herself claims Orwell to have become a "direct influence" for her in the "real" 1984, when she started writing *The Handmaid's Tale* (10). As obvious as the intertextuality of *Handmaids Tale's* final symposium with the Newspeak section may be, I consider that there are other issues in *1984* that Atwood also draws on in crafting her novel. In both *1984* and *The Handmaid's Tale* there is an oppressive atmosphere of hostility and distrust, which grows until it reaches its climax at the end of each novel. The alliances that are formed with some people are ultimately revealed to be useless or false, which leads us to reach the end of the novel in a deep despair. However, this fall into the abyss is counterbalanced by the epilogue of an academic symposium, which conveys that the regime has fallen, and that individuality and freedom of expression have been restored. Apart from Orwell's novel, the atmosphere of suspicion that Atwood experienced in West Berlin and Czechoslovakia in 1984 was another important source of inspiration, where "to say anything real [they] had to go out into the middles of parks" since their friends could have been "bugged" (*Burning Questions* 100). According to Atwood, Czechs were afraid to discuss any criticism inside any building or car. In hotels, "well-dressed, attractive single women" posing as call girls were actually there to "pry secrets out of visiting businessmen" (263).

What a "too far-fetched" (*Burning Questions* xv), "whacko" (Hancock 216) idea *The Handmaid's Tale* seemed to Margaret Atwood at first: an extremely religious society where fertile women were seen as goods and raped once a month to provide elites with children. As previously stated,

she worried that it would be taken as "feminist propaganda of the most outrageous kind." The novel has indeed been categorized as a feminist work since then, specifically a feminist dystopia (Leclaire, Malak) or a "feminist *1984*" (Feuer). Similarly, Philip Howard, the prologue writer of the book of interviews called *Conversations*, defined *The Handmaid's Tale* as "science fiction about feminism carried to the extremes" (ix). As has been explored before, Margaret Atwood has been encouraged to talk about her work in feminist terms, which she has repeatedly refused to do. Her last collection of essays published, *Burning Questions* (2022), is opened by a lecture called "Scientific Romancing," in which Atwood explains that her motives were to write a dystopia from a female point of view, a sort of "world according to Julia," the main female character of *1984*. This point of view, she claims, does not make her novel a "feminist dystopia," and adds that considering "feminist" the act of "giving a woman a voice and an inner life" can only be carried out by "those who think women ought not to have these things" (10). Feminist or not, with the publication of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Atwood critical industry "shifted into a higher gear" (Howells 8), soon becoming a staple of high-school curricula and English literature reading lists (Gilbert, Schwartz). Since then, the book has sold millions of copies.

When dealing with adaptation from a Darwinian point of view, two main features were highlighted as the capacity of stories to be adapted (Hutcheon 31-32): survival, the persistence of these stories in a culture, and reproduction, the number of adaptations made out of these stories. One may say that *The Handmaid's Tale* had a good "survival rate", probably thanks to remaining a staple of reading lists across several generations. Reproduction, on the other hand, was not working so well. After Schlöndorff's movie in 1990, an opera was made in the 2000s by the composer Poul Ruders with a libretto by Paul Bentley, whose result was "dramatically convoluted" according to the *New York Times*, although "so musically inventive that you get pulled in anyway" (as qtd. in Tommasini). As for the radio dramatization made by BBC Radio 4 in 2000, the issue with "the science-fictional future is that it so often sounds like the past," observed Ann Karpf in *The Guardian.* Atwood's story, which added "little to Orwell, Huxley and Kafka," was inspired by "the alarmist, backlash mid-80s," with speeches that "could have been lifted from Thatcher." As such, the 21st century Gilead was not that different from "50s Moscow." *The Globe and Mail* criticized the ballet presented in 2013 by Lila York and James

MacMillan as "short of conflict, drama, passion and tension" (Citron). A 2015 stage adaptation, on the other hand, was seen as too close to Atwood's original text by some critics, like David Lyman at *The Enquirer*, who wrote that there was "so much narrative text that at times, they might as well be doing a dramatic reading," adding, "this isn't a book. It's a live performance." Without delving too much into these works, critics seems to notice three types of problems with their adaptations: 1) they were too close to the literary specifics of the story; 2) the plot was too complex or too simple; 3) the context seemed old-fashioned.

Of all the adaptations of *The Handmaid's Tale*, two have been chosen for this dissertation: Schlöndorff's movie, premiered in 1990, and the first season of MGM/Hulu's TV series, released in 2017. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, because both belong to the audiovisual industry, which facilitates analysis and comparison. Secondly, because the respective success of the two projects has been diametrically opposed, as were the filmmaking circumstances. While in the film the authorial sense was diluted due to the numerous changes in the direction and problems with the script, in the series the producers had a very clear idea of what they wanted and the collective work of several directors and screenwriters added up instead of tangling and hindering, as happened in the film. With the movie, its screenwriter ended up asking for his name to disappear from the credits. With the series, the leading actress and the crew won several Emmys.

In other to analyze these two adaptations, Hutcheon's concepts discussed above will be taken up: the intention of the adapters, the sense of authorship, the channels used, the strategies implemented (compression, expansion, correction/update, superimposition), and the use of different shots, music, and other tools like voice-over.

3.1 Context of Production of the Adaptations

In 2015, two years before the release of Hulu's production, Sophie Gilbert reflected in *The Atlantic* on the massive failure of *The Handmaid's Tale* movie adaptation and wondered if the book could still be too radical for cinema. Nonetheless, she pointed out a few questions regarding the aforementioned issues that could be crucial to understanding what happened.

In an interview with Geoff Hancock in 1986, Margaret Atwood commented that it was reassuring to know that the person in charge of writing the screenplay of *The Handmaid's Tale* was Harold Pinter, playwright, screenwriter, and Nobel Prize winner in Literature in 2005: "If anyone can do it, he can." According to Atwood, his expertise was scenes in which "people don't say very much, but convey meaning anyway" (Hancock 217). In a novel like Atwood's, with a first-person perspective and long monologues, that would be essential in order to avoid critics like Lyman's "this isn't a book." "It could have been a total disaster," Atwood stated in 1987, an "S & M exploitation, a sensationalist movie of the worst kind" (217). According to Sophie Gilbert, Atwood had sold the rights in 1986 due to the decision of having Pinter and the director Karel Reisz on board. Both of them, Pinter and Reisz, had already worked together on *The French Lieutenant's Woman,* a movie adaptation of John Fowles's novel starring Meryl Streep and nominated for five Academy Awards. However, that did not help the producer, Daniel Wilson, find a studio in Hollywood. For two and a half years, the project was ignored: "a film for and about women ... would be lucky if it made it to video," movie executives said, according to Gilbert. During that time, they lost Sigourney Weaver as leading actress and Karel Reisz as the director, and the movie was eventually financed and distributed by Cinecom, an independent company. According to Stephen H. Gale, the film company would not allow Karel to shoot big public scenes, so he withdrew in the end (318). As a result, Volker Schlöndorff committed to the project instead, a leader of that New German Cinema movement, Gilbert explains, who was seeking to break into Hollywood. Finding a new leading actress was a daunting challenge as well, since many actresses in Hollywood were afraid of being associated with a "feminist work," Gilbert claims. Finally, Natasha Richardson agreed to play Offred's role, but even she was allegedly wary about it. The Nobel Prize winner Harold Pinter was still on board, although with several difficulties. First of all, he had been working on the script since 1987 at Reisz's instigation (Gale 316). An extensive clipping file of articles relating to the issues tackled by Atwood (surrogate motherhood, forced pregnancy policies, hanging) prove the screenwriter's commitment to the story, to the point that he abandoned the writing from exhaustion (Gale 318). One of the possible reasons for that is the fact that Schlöndorff continuously called him asking for changes in the script while the film was being shot (318). Pinter was supposedly so exhausted that he agreed to accept any changes

previously accepted by Atwood, a sort of "carte blanche" with one condition (319). However, not only did Atwood make changes, but so did many other people participating in the shoot, including actors (319): "It became ... a hotchpotch," Pinter declared to his biographer Michael Billington. It was such a bad experience for him (321) that he tried to have his name removed from the credits (319): "It's not mine," he stated (Billington as qtd. in Gale 319). He nonetheless remains as the screenwriter of the movie to this day.

Regarding the screenwriting's style, Gilbert explains that it is "typically Pinterian." Dialogues are short, even for Kate, Offred's real name in the movie, who barely has a few more lines than other characters. Harold Pinter, in line with Robert McKee or Linda Seger (Hutcheon 53-55), had a strong aversion to voiceover, so the option was not even contemplated. The ending, one of the most obvious cases of expansion of the novel, entirely original, does feature voiceover, a decision possibly made at the last minute. The storyline is chronologically linear, with no flashbacks at all.

Hulu's production, on the other hand, was brought to life under very different circumstances. In *The Art and Making of The Handmaid's Tale*, Andrea Robinson explains that the novel had a profound impact on Bruce Miller, the showrunner, when he was studying as an English major, and became haunted by the ambiguous ending of the main character throughout the years: "Miller would return to Atwood's novel again and again over the years as he found a career writing for television" (12). When Hulu was "actively expanding its line-up of original programming", they obtained the rights and gave the green light to Bruce Miller to write the script of the first three episodes (12).

> There were two things I really wanted to find out. One, what was Offred's voice? You know, her internal voice. And also, how had the book captured that tone ... I wanted to internalize the voice of Atwood, and internalize Offred's, so that I could update it and fit the person that we were going to need her to be (12).

When dealing with the screenwriting, Bruce Miller was very aware that portraying Offred's voice was one of the most important challenges to face. Capturing the book's tone had to be done through Offred's perspective, although he was concerned that adjusting the text to the actress would require some changes and some updating would be necessary. Being "faithful" to the book's spirit was crucial, so he checked with Atwood regarding any changes, for example, including non-white actors in the casting (12).

Warren Littlefield, president of NBC entertainment and executive producer of the TV series, claims in the foreword that both Bruce Miller and Elisabeth Moss strove to create a space in which "women can make their voices heard." The writing room, directors, the department heads... were largely dominated by women" (7). When Atwood was asked about this, she said that screenwriters could understand "the nuances of day-to-day intra-female power struggles, and the importance of who speaks or does not speak to whom, and who smiles or does not smile at whom, and who helps or hinders whom, and why." As seen in other Atwood novels, this is a key issue when dealing with relationships between women. "An all-male writing room would probably not have grasped those things," she adds, explaining that a lot of men wrote her after reading *Cat's Eye* saying that they finally "understood what was going on in grade 4" (11).

Elisabeth Moss, the leading actress, was also involved as a producer – her first producing role. Having read the book and admired it, playing Offred seemed a big responsibility to her (16), and as a result, she could not settle for just being the leading actress, since she also had a vision of the project, which she felt she was "meant to be a part of" (16). To her, the production was "creatively fulfilling" and "personally meaningful" on a "deep human level" (16). In order to guide her in her performance, an in-depth knowledge of the book was crucial: "It's been a book I've gone back to so many times it's become a part of who I am now. I probably know this novel better than any single work of fiction or nonfiction I've ever come into contact with" (16). However, she did not feel like getting involved in another TV series so soon after *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007–2015), in which she spent nine years of her acting career. In that show, she plays Peggy Olson, initially a secretary at the advertising agency Sterling Cooper who is later promoted to copywriter, an unusual job for a woman at the time, and ends up becoming Copy Chief. Compared to other characters, Peggy Olson is considered by her fellow workers as less attractive, but it is her intelligence and witty remarks that make her stand out. Elisabeth Moss became the "stealth heroine" of the TV series, for which she received six Emmy nominations (Michael Schulman). This character, for which she has been widely recognized and to which she will always be linked, is part of her public persona and has many similarities with that of Offred/June in the Hulu production. This fact will probably affect viewers when they see June on screen, especially when compared to Natasha

Richardson, who right before the adaptation had embodied a young and beautiful English woman in the erotic thriller *The Comfort of Strangers*. As for Moss, Michael Schulman calls her an "approachably cool pop-culture feminist icon." This is not insignificant, since the fact that some characters are incarnated in specific stars, according to Hutcheon, definitely conditions "the work's meaning and impact" (143).

When the script of the first three episodes came to Reed Morano's hands, she had been working as a director of photography for years, having just directed her first film, *Meadowland* (Bron Studios, 2015). She was willing to join projects in which she could "create a directorial vision of her own" (Robinson 20). As such, the lookbook she wrote for those first three episodes became a guide for the subsequent directors of the show. The early script of *The Handmaid's Tale* already "bucked television convention with their tight focus on Offred's internal world" and she felt impelled to find its own particular "rhythm of storytelling," starting by working with "long spaces in between what people say." Reed Morano explains that every scene had to answer the following questions: "Whose scene is it? Who does it affect and how? What's going on there?" (92). The "unspoken word," the "unsaid" is one of the key elements of her directing style. Her camera's main focus was on "where Offred or June's head is at the entire time," as well as other characters' thoughts and feelings (92). She adds: "As a viewer you're living Offred's emotion by staying with her for a one-minute take" (92).

Although Pinter was completely against the use of voiceovers, Bruce Miller had no doubt about the appropriateness of employing them. Although tricky from an editing perspective, Morano explains that the voiceover text "fits like a glove" thanks to Elisabeth Moss's acting method. Moss used to memorize the text and, while acting the scene, "silently she will be going through that voiceover in her head." This is how the camera can capture her facial expressions as they change along with her thoughts and her lines (92).

In addition to this, the director talks about being supported and trusted, which gave her "full creative rein": "it was their openness and willingness to take risks that is why we ended up with the show we did" (92). Although she only directed the first three episodes, she established a very firm editorial philosophy "that has persisted for the run of the series" (20).

To conclude, while the continuous changes during the production, screenwriting, and shooting of the movie adaptation showed a lack of a supportive environment and a common vision, in the TV series the main figures were united by a common deep respect for the original source, and shared a vision about the story and how to adapt it that helped to create a supportive environment for creation. As a result, I argue that the lack of a common vision of Atwood's work in the movie adaptation led to a mixed-up, inconsistent vision of the sororophobic dynamics involved in the story, leaving some scenes incomprehensible. The TV show, on the other hand, offered its own sororophobic reading, which although remaining mostly faithful to the spirit and tone of the original work, also developed the relationships between women into something completely different.

3.2 Analysis and Discussion

Following Linda Hutcheon's exploration in her *Theory of Adaptation*, "adaptation" has been considered as a three-sided concept: first, as a recognizable transposition of a source text, hypotext or text A, that is, where Atwood's text is transcoded in these two adaptations; second, as the creative and interpretative act of adaptation, for which it has been considered essential to briefly deal with production, screenwriting, and shooting conditions as explained before; third, as an intertextual network between adaptations and other cultural images or products, of which Elisabeth Moss's previous role as Peggy Olsen could be an example, as well as the historical background of both adaptations.

A substantial body of literature on *The Handmaid's Tale* as a book and as a TV series adaptation already existed before this dissertation. However, what this dissertation has to offer is the integration of those adaptation studies with the notion of sororophobia established by Helena Michie. This idea has been contextualized in a larger framework of how sisterhood and difference has been tackled throughout the years by several writers and thinkers considered to be feminists, for which Atwood's stance on feminism has also been considered as relevant information. To better understand *sororophobia*, a term that delves into the "negotiation of similarity and difference, identity and separation, among women of the same generation, and intended to encompass both the desire and the refusal to identify with other women" (Michie 9), two works written by Margaret Atwood a short time after *The Handmaid's Tale* have been briefly explored, since they were mainly focused on sororophobic dynamics, and thus

intimately related to Offred in various ways. Along with sororophobia, Michie also proposes "matrophobia," whose dynamics of fascination and repulsion, identity and separation (8) are certainly parallel to "sororophobia," but are rooted in a deeper and darker place. Taking up Lacan's notion of the Mirror Stage and Julia Kristeva's interpretation of it, the separation from the mother creates in the child a longing to become their mother's object, a desire that will never be satisfied and thus will create a dimension of permanent lack in the adult. When that child is a girl, that longing coexists with a "female I" in construction, which is "produced and reproduced" (8) alongside her mother's shadow. As the "female I" grows older, her different relationships with other women become a place for negotiating her identity and femaleness through an on-going dialogue of identification and separation. The way these dynamics are portrayed in both adaptations and the extent to which the original text is transformed or not will be the focus of this analysis.

As demonstrated by Atwood's previous works, the past generally leads to the resignification of the characters' behaviors and decisions in the present thanks to a structure in which scenes from the present and the past are almost endlessly interspersed, setting them in dialogue. Since this would make the reading of the dissertation difficult, I have preferred to firstly discuss Offred's past, and its literary and audiovisual handling, and deal in a second section with her present in Gilead and all the female figures that populate it. In this sense, the film is totally excluded from the first part, since it has completely suppressed the past of its characters, except for a reference to the past of Serena Joy, the Wife of Fred Waterford, the household to which Offred "belongs." As a result, the sororophobic dynamics will be more clear-cut and explicit as portrayed by the movie adaptation, without the echoes and shadows present in Atwood. The show, on the other hand, will make use of one of its great advantages, having plenty of time and footage, to delve into the past of characters we do not know much about in the novel.

Offred is the Gileadean patronymic name of a woman in her thirties who used to work in an office (job underdetermined), and was the daughter of a second-wave feminist, married to a man and mother of one child. This vague depiction, that could fit a lot of women, relates to the sense of anonymity created in the first chapter of the book. In fact, *The Handmaid's Tale* starts with "we slept in what had once been

the gymnasium" (3) and that "we" will continue throughout the whole first chapter. At the end of it, a narrator whose name or aspect we know nothing about yet, explains: "We learned to whisper almost without sound. In the semi-darkness we could stretch out our arms, when the Aunts weren't looking, and touch each other's hands across space. We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's mouths. In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed: Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June." While the introduction of the protagonist goes from the "We" to the "I" in the novel, in the movie, Offred's personal drama, her failed attempt to escape from Gilead with her husband and daughter, is the first information we learn about her. Both the movie and series' plot go in this other direction, from the "I" to the "We". After that first sequence in the movie, Schlöndorff opts for wide shots in which Offred is seen as a sheep in the middle of the flock. From now on, she will be referred to as "Kate" in the film a choice whose reasons remain unknown. "June", a name that fans had adopted, was eventually accepted by Atwood as a name that could actually fit, and was the name chosen for Offred by the show.

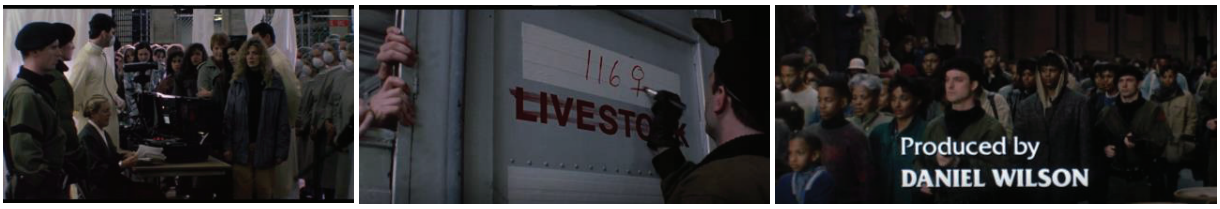

Figure 3. Kate is forcedly recruited by Gilead as a Handmaid in the movie adaptation.

The first minutes of the movie are filled with wide shots and many walk-on actors over any steps towards Kate's subjectivity, to the point that Stephen H. Gale sees a clear comparison with Nazi Germany through the sound of drums, military transport trucks, crowds of men, women, and children, etc. (317). The next time Kate is the focus of the scene is when talking to Moira on the bus, but nothing new is revealed about her character or background. Rather than her inner world, the movie adaptors seem to be focused on explaining how Gilead works.

As for Hulu's production, they also decided to set June's personal drama, losing her husband and especially her child, as the starting point of the series, which could be echoing the film's decision. Called Hannah in the show and Jill in the movie, Offred's daughter's real name is never revealed in the novel, where she is mentioned for the first time in chapter 3, section 7, page 39, when the exposition

phase of the plot is mostly done. In the book, she is rather a ghost of the past haunting Offred ("She's too young, it's too late, we come apart, my arms are held ... I can see her, going away from me, through the trees ... Of all the dreams this is the worst", 75). In the TV series adaptation, the terrifying Gilead theme appears for the first time when Hannah is taken from June's hands. Thus, in the series, losing Hannah shows Gilead at its most terrifying.

The show's second sequence corresponds to Atwood's second chapter, and the famous lines, "A chair, a table, a lamp" (7). Offred/June is seen rear lit and the voice over starts, repeating the opening of chapter two verbatim: "A chair, a table, a lamp." Elisabeth Moss herself declared that she thought it was not a good idea to adapt Atwood's work ("It's such a personal, singular point of view"), until she read the script and said to herself "Oh, *that's* how you do it." Voiceover then becomes a distinguishing element of Hulu's adaptation to retain Offred's perspective "while letting the audience into the world and letting them experience it through her eyes" (Robinson 16). Moreover, the camera keeps zooming in during the rest of her monologue in voiceover as a means to approach her subjectivity.

Figure 4. First depiction of Offred as a Handmaid in the TV series adaptation.

At the end of the first episode, learning that her best friend, Moira, is dead seems to be a turning point for her – something deep inside her has changed. In her voice-over monologue, she goes on as follows: "Everything must look the same. Because I intend to survive for her. Her name is Hannah. My husband was Luke. My name is June." Thus, the previous scene [see figure 4] is resignified with a sense of purpose: she is determined to rescue her daughter. The episode ends with the revelation of her name and a close up that we had not seen in the previous sequence [see figure 5]. The credits of the pilot are accompanied by the song *You don't own me* (Leslie Gore, 1963), emphasizing June's determination.

Figure 5. Offred reveals her real name, June, at the end of episode 1.

This decision is highly significant, since Atwood decided not to reveal her name, and leave it as something dark and forbidden. Her true name becomes a source of power, as with "Karen" for Charis in *The Robber Bride*. Whoever uses it, like Zenia did, can jeopardize the character's situation:

> I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day. I think of this name as buried. This name has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that's survived from an unimaginably distant past. I lie in my single bed at night, with my eyes closed, and the name floats there behind my eyes, not quite within reach, shining in the dark. (84)

Throughout the novel, Offred will try to forget her name in order to cope with her situation (143), or think of her husband calling her by her real name, longing to be acknowledged (96). Also she will reveal it to Nick, the Commander's driver, a possible spy of Gilead, and eventually her lover (270). This is a more than significant step toward him, since not even us readers know her real name. Not revealing it to the readers could make the echo of the real Offred and her past even bigger – what is not shown and lays in silence can have a deeper presence than what is overt. Hulu's screenwriters generally showcase a purposeful use of silence and of what is implied, but revealing her name was paramount for them. The showrunner Bruce Miller explained that, although she has to look "silent and meek" from the outside, June is in reality "strong and stubborn," and keeping her name meant retaining her identity and eventually being able to fight back (Renfro). The portrayal of Offred is worth considering since both adaptations showcase diametrically opposed approaches. While the movie is not so interested in Kate's inner world and retains the shadowy, low profile of the novel, June holds on to her name as a means for resistance, declaring her determination to survive as a statement of intent. From the very first episode, her subjectivity begins to take shape, leading her towards the role of leader among other Handmaids that she will take on by the end of the first season.

In *Cat's Eye*, but especially in *The Robber Bride*, mothers project a shadow with which daughters are constantly negotiating their femaleness, and their feelings of belonging and rejection by their mothers

and then by other women. Thus, their endless desire to become perfect daughters would determine their relationships with other women as adults. Matrophobia is seen by Michie as the first step towards sororophobia. As such, pondering memories of mothers generally leads Atwood to reflect on identity and sisterhood and this is the case for Offred and her mother as well. Their conflict emanates from the struggle between an old-school second-wave feminist, represented by her mother, and her white-collar daughter, not involved in the women's movement and happily married to a man. One night, when Luke is cooking, Offred's mother rebukes her for not acknowledging what feminism had achieved: "You young people don't appreciate things ... You don't know what we [feminists] had to go through, just to get you where you are. Look at him, slicing up the carrots. 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?" (121). As for her being happily married to a man, Offred's mother thinks that men are useless except "for ten seconds' worth of half babies. A man is just a woman's strategy of making other women" (121). In the novel, Offred sometimes felt as if she were the mother of the relationship (252), doing the laundry at her place or borrowing things from her, even being called "a prude" by her mother: "She liked being more outrageous than I was, more rebellious" (180). Ultimately, Offred resented her mother for expecting her to vindicate her life and the choices she had made: "I didn't want to live my life on her terms. I didn't want to be the model offspring, the incarnation of her ideas" (122). The movie does not account for this character, and the show dispenses with her completely in the first season, although it dedicates all the flashbacks of episode 3, season 2, to here, making her the focus of a secondary subplot. Throughout the episode, Holly, June's mother's name in the show, tells her daughter that she does not think she should marry Luke: "June, you're so young. You really want to take all that energy and passion and give it to a man?" She argues that the country is collapsing, so it was time "to get out in the street and fight, not just play house." As such, the main source of matrophobic tension in the show relates to Holly's frustration about her daughter not getting involved in the women's movement. Not happy about her daughter's job as an editor at a publishing company, in the show she praises Moira's job designing the website for a queer women's collective. Holly's comment on Moira probably was a transposition of Moira's feeling of closeness to Offred's mother in the novel, about which Offred seemed slightly annoyed: "She's not cute, I would say.

She's my mother" (HT 253). This sort of connection in some way echoes the connection that Zenia felt towards Tony's mother in *The Robber Bride*, resulting in the same emotional response for the daughter: feeling like an outsider, rejected.

The portrayal of Offred's mother also serves to show sororophobia among second-wave activists when she got pregnant: "My oldest buddy accused me of being pronatalist, the bitch. Jealousy, I put that down to ... a lot of them started sending me these articles about how the birth defect rate went zooming up after thirty-five" (120). Offred also makes contact with these second-wave activists when, one day, her mother tells her they were going to the park to feed the ducks. However, the real reason for going was to join a group of women burning magazines, what upsets Offred: "She'd lied to me, Saturdays were supposed to be my day. I turned away from her, sulking, towards the ducks, but the fire drew me back," a feeling of abandonment that could remind us of Tony left alone in the snow in *The Robber Bride*. In the show, on the contrary, little June seemed happy and comfortable: "It didn't matter. I loved seeing my mother like that," says the voice-over.

Figure 6. A happy, excited little June goes with her mum to a "Take Back the Night" march in episode 3, season 2

Offred describes the women gathered there as chanting, happy, "ecstatic almost" (38). A woman handed Offred one of the magazines to throw it to the fire, and she looked at it with interest: "It had a pretty woman on it, with no clothes on, hanging from the ceiling by a chain wound around her hands ... It didn't frighten me. I thought she was swinging, like Tarzan from a vine, on the TV" (38), but her mother did not want her to see the magazine: "Don't let her see it, said my mother. Here, she said to me, toss it in, quick." (39). Later on, Commander Waterford would hand Offred a fashion magazine during one of their intimate evenings in his study. Although all these kinds of magazines were supposedly destroyed in flames by Gilead, he possesses one, and looks at the woman on the front page, "a model on glossy paper, hair blown, neck scarfed, mouth lipsticked," with that look

"you'd give to an almost extinct animal, at the zoo." Suddenly, Offred longed so deeply to get the magazine that she felt the end of her fingers ache (156). In them there was a promise: "One adventure after another, one wardrobe after another, one improvement after another, one man after another. They suggested rejuvenation, pain overcome and transcended, endless love. The real promise in them was immortality" (157). In the series, the magazines are changed for pieces of paper with the names of rapists, thus recalling marches like "Take Back the Night" that emerged, as mentioned in a previous section, in Canada during the 70s.

Thus, the exclusion of the mother's subplot from season 1 rejects the potential parallel between the flames burning pornographic magazines and those of Gilead destroying any type of magazine aiming at women's sexual freedom. Later in the novel, when she is handed a glittering dress before going to Jezebel's, a sort of sex club in Gilead for Commanders, Offred feels enticed by the dress ("so sinful, so free"), and will claim that "Freedom, like everything else, is relative" (230-231). The exploitation of the woman's body was supposedly over in Gilead. Bitterly, Offred remarks: "Mother, I think. Wherever you may be. Can you hear me? You wanted a women's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies" (127). The compression of this matrophobic subplot, especially regarding June's indifference towards the women's movement, could help to reduce the potential cognitive dissonance for viewers. On the one hand, June's mother criticized her for not joining the feminist movement, but, on the other hand, the series showed June participating in violent marches in favor of women's rights, among other things. Thus, even though these scenes become a place for exploring matrophobia in Atwood's spirit, the decision to include the subplot in the second season of the series confuses the viewer that saw June quite engaged in women's rights protests the first season.

In short, Offred's and her mother's divergent stances on feminism and regarding men and heterosexual love are a source of matrophobia, and their differences would eventually connect with the tension between Moira and Offred, a place for sororophobia in the novel. As a result of the adaptors' decision, matrophobia is almost completely neutralized in both movie and series adaptations.

> ... I hadn't turned out entirely as she'd expected. No mother is ever, completely, a child's idea of what a mother should be, and I suppose it works the other way around as well. But despite everything, we didn't

> do badly by one another, we did as well as most. I wish she were here, so I could tell her I finally know this." (180-181)

Dorothy Fortenberry, supervising producer, explained that this quote was their guide for the entire episode: "Whatever I was doing on the episode, I felt, 'Okay, if I can get us to this final moment, this quote from the book that feels incredibly powerful, and if the whole episode feels like it can end in that place, then we've gone in the right direction" (129). As such, at the end of the episode we see June driving and with make-up, earrings, and professional attire; her mother, on the other hand, has mostly comfortable clothing, putting her naked feet on the dashboard. Holly serves as a reverse reflection in which June is mirrored but only addressed in a single episode. The show decides, despite all their differences, to show them singing together, having a good time. In the novel, however, there remains the ever-open wound of the unfinished conversation, of the missed encounter, just as at the end of *Cat's Eye*.

Figure 7. June and Holly sing together at the end of episode 3, season 2

Moira, Offred's best friend, is a more complex character, highly significant for Offred/Kate/June and her relationship with other women both in the past and in the present time. Moira is often the counterpart of Offred and her domestic lifestyle, and so throughout the novel they will show different stances towards men, lifestyle, politics, feminism, etc. In the novel, Moira is an activist, but Offred does not go to any of the marches against the new regime, in part because Luke says that "it would be futile" and she had "to think about them, [her] family, him and her," so she starts doing more housework, more baking (180).

In the series, Luke shows the same protective attitude when responding to June's concerns, but where Offred thinks it is patronizing but also a little paranoid, both June and Moira adamantly criticize in the series his statement as ("so fucking") patronizing, and then condemn his use of the possessive pronoun "my": "*My wife?* She doesn't belong to you ... She isn't your property." Moira goes on claiming that his sort of mindset is where all the problems they are suffering come from. He feels attacked: "Should

I just go in the kitchen and cut my dick off?" The show thus updates gender battles in a conversation in the kitchen right before Gilead was set, probably because Luke's statement sounded more ridiculous when writing the show in 2017 than it was for Atwood in 1985. The next flashback in episode 3 shows Moira and June in a march than ends up with the army shooting at the protesters, with a slowed-down version of Blondie*'s Heart of Glass*. A few of Moira's qualities that serve as a contrast to Offred, especially her engagement with feminism and her strengthened bonding with other women, are depicted by the movie and especially by the series as features of Offred as well. June's decision to go to the marches is a clear example of how a greater engagement with the social realm, and an enhanced interest in sisterhood, is present in Hulu's portrayal of Offred.

In the novel, Offred criticizes Moira for thinking that she "could create Utopia by shutting herself up in a women-only enclave." Moira's position appears to align with Adrienne Rich's idea of sisterhood as a "lesbian continuum," in which men are completely ignored, as well as with Offred's mother's perspective. For them, sisterhood is not only a tool for fighting, but it is truly everything. For example, when Offred falls in love with Luke when he is still married, Offred turns into "the other," being accused by Moira of "poaching on another woman's ground" (171). Moira calls on her responsibility towards other women, a sort of sisterhood, a reprimand that Offred clearly disregards by saying: "I [am] in love" (171). In the show, in episode 4, her position as "the other woman" is recalled by Aunt Lydia when she calls her "an adulterer, a worthless slut" who has been given an opportunity to be useful. In the novel, Moira, as well as her mother, were mirrors with which Offred could negotiate her identity, opinions, and concerns, but they lose relevance as places to challenge the ever-evolving semiotized body of the protagonist in the two adaptations.

Identity, opinion, and concerns can only be expressed in thoughts, Offred's sole shelter, in Atwood's dictatorial, hyper-controlled society of Gilead, which does not allow freedom of speech. The mind is the main place for fighting in the book by means of rethinking certain concepts, making certain jokes, or performing small acts of rebellion that almost no one else notices but Offred. For example, when Offred agrees to have intercourse with Nick, the Commander's driver, because The Ceremony with the

Commander is not working, Serena gives her a cigarette as a token of gratitude. Although she feels like smoking it, she prefers to save both the match and the cigarette. That makes her think she could burn the house down: "Such a fine thought, it makes me shiver. An escape, quick and narrow" (209). She also imagines she could shred up the cigarette and flush it down the toilet. In other words, not using that cigarette gives her some kind of power. In Schlöndorff's adaptation, the cigarette will be the reason for Kate's first contact with another handmaid, Moira, who in the movie is not her best friend but some girl she just met. In the show, the cigarette scene will be adapted almost word-for-word from the novel, but also lead to an even more powerful scene. During the Birth Day, the day of delivery, Serena offers Offred a macaron. Although she craves it, the conversation is so humiliating, that she goes to the toilet and throws it out in the sink, leaving a little of the macaron on the side of the sink. This slightly disgusting scene leads to a closeup of June looking at herself defiantly, proud, in the mirror. After the final closeup of episode 1 in which June reveals her name, this is the most powerful moment for June, an important step towards agency, and it is provoked by a rejection to Serena's position of power. It is no coincidence that this takes place in a spotlessly white room, which highlights the opposition of June to Serena with a red-blue contrast, and their different power positions according to their body postures, as well as the macarons' colorfulness as a source of conflict.

Figure 8. On the left, Serena Joy offers June a cookie. On the right, she looks at herself at the mirror after throwing out the macaron.

A crucial moment for Offred's inner realm is a monologue in section 45, the next-to-last of the novel. Through it, she seems to finally give up on Gilead's control, and it occurs after learning that Ofglen has committed suicide (the novel) or been taken by Eyes (the series). June, on the other hand, thinks some of these words when she is about to be interrogated by Eyes. While it is certainly a tense scene, the series' scene is not as dramatic as in the novel: first, because it happens in episode 3, whereas it represents one of Offred's final monologues in the novel, before going into the black van. Secondly, June defiantly uses the forbidden word "gay," causing Aunt Lydia to tase her, and then boldly quotes a

Scripture passage to retort to her, which makes Aunt Lydia tase her repeatedly until Serena Joy appears to stop her. As a result, a key final monologue showing Offred's desperation, in which she renounces any sort of fight and accepts Gilead's demands, is transformed by the series into a moment when June almost gives up but eventually stands up, showing bravery and boldness by defending another handmaid, a "friend" of hers. This is a meaningful example of the divergent paths that the character of Offred and her relationships with other women will take in the novel, the movie, and the series, resulting in different depictions of sororophobia.

In the novel, Offred is a woman who will choose love, or the hope for love, over a potential friendship with other women, eventually conceding to Gilead's demands. In the movie, Kate shows resistance against Gilead in key moments, although her day-to-day behavior hardly justifies this transformation. In the show, June's transformation is more gradual, manifesting itself through small steps, as the aforementioned scene in episode 2, with the macarons on the Birth Day, which showcases the progressive recovery of June's agency. In the book, although Offred seems to have a certain level of power over others, especially regarding her body as a place for desire, it is much more limited than June's and barely increases throughout the story. Kate does not seem to regain power over others, except for the intimacy gained during the evenings with the Commander, which gives her the chance to kill him and help May Day. June, on the other hand, clearly becomes much more manipulative than in the other two renditions, conferring her a power over men and women that will turn her into a unifying figure for the Handmaids, then for the resistance, especially women's resistance, and finally, a heroine.

Handmaids's bodies are a battlefield, since in their wombs lies Gilead's most important resource: the hope for the reproduction of the species. Therefore, the dictates on their bodies are strictly regulated: their diet, their medical check-ups, their level of hygiene, and of course, the degree of their bodies' exposure. One night, Offred comes to the window looking for fresh air: "there's no one out there, no need for modesty, in my nightgown, long-sleeved even in summer, to keep us from the temptations of our own flesh, to keep us from hugging ourselves, bare-armed" (191). She did not expect to cross glances at that moment with Nick, the Commander's driver and potential Eye: "We look at each other. I have

no rose to toss, he has no lute. But it's the same kind of hunger. Which I can't indulge. I pull the left-hand curtain so that it falls between us, across my face, and after a moment he walks on, into the invisibility around the corner" (191-192). In both adaptations, this moment is portrayed in order to build up the sexual tension between Offred and Nick, although with very contrasting results. On the one hand, June dares to go out of the house, which could better explain the mixed feelings of sensuality and fear-mistrust between June and Nick when glances are exchanged, since she was wearing a camisole with no sleeves and no bra, only permitted in the solitude of her room. On the other hand, Kate takes off all her clothes and comes to the window bare-chested and wet. June is wrapped in darkness (the frame has been slightly lightened to better appreciate it), whereas Kate just happens to have an exterior light (a streetlight? The moon?) in front of her room that makes her body fully noticeable and exposed, to Nick in this case.

Figure 9[6]. Above, June dares to go out due to anxiety after the Ceremony with Commander Waterford and his Wife Serena Joy. Below, a distraught Kate opens the window to get some fresh air and notices that Nick, the Commander's driver, has seen her.

The highly sexualized exposure of Kate's body amplifies the sensuality of the original scene to such an extent that it is not credible and seems to be intended for male eyes, which could even betray the spirit of the novel considering that this occurs after one of the most heinous events in Gilead, the institutionalized rape of the Handmaids, the Ceremony. The depiction of June is intended to inspire

[6] The first two pictures have been lightened slightly for better viewing.

physical empathy through naturalness, not only during this scene, but throughout the series. For example, June and Moira are shown running in episode 3, and their clothes, hairstyle, and the habit of jogging itself make us viewers easily identify with their setting. A close up of June's breasts is shown, not aestheticized but displayed sweating, contrasted with a following shot of a pedestrian frowning at her with disgust. Moreover, Elisabeth Moss does not wear any make-up as a maid despite the frequent and intense close-ups. Sometimes her face, especially her forehead, can even look a little greasy. Some shots of her back make it look wide and strong, even slightly masculine, even when she is wearing ultra-feminine clothes in her first visit to Jezebel's. Natasha Richardson, on the other hand, seems to wear some make-up, although subtle and natural, and make use of hairstyling throughout filming.

Figure 10. On the left, Kate shares a Scrabble evening with the Commander at his office. In the center, the Commander brings June to Jezebel's for a second time. On the right, June's appearance is deteriorated after 13 days confined [second and third pictures have been lightened slightly for better viewing].

Broadening the perspective, Natasha Richardson makes Offred better meet the 90-60-90 expectations for a conventional female protagonist, especially at the end of the eighties and early nineties, when the dangerous blonde woman type was in vogue in erotic thrillers, like Glenn Close in *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, 1987), Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992) or Madonna in *Body of Evidence* (Uli Edel, 1993). Elisabeth Moss, on the other hand, is not as skinny as Natasha Richardson and has broader shoulders, and a wider body shape in general. In *Mad Men*, her character, Peggy Olson, received a handful of dismissive comments regarding her physical appearance. Compared to other secretaries at the office, she goes almost unnoticed by most men. This version of Offred has a less spectacular physique, more similar to that of an average woman, but is also provided with much more dialogue than the movie's Offred. As such, I argue that Natasha Richarson's physique and her rendition of Kate's body results in an aestheticized image of the Handmaid, whereas Elisabeth Moss's

interpretation of June's body aims for her humanization and physical empathy with the viewers, some of them probably influenced by the character of Peggy Olson.

Regarding the depiction of sex with Nick, the series shows a determined June who, the second time, goes to see Nick on her own, makes him take his clothes off, and asks to be on top during the sexual intercourse. This scene is in dialogue with another one from her past with Luke, her husband, in which she also demanded to be on top during the intercourse, a clear-cut depiction of power relations through sex. The series adaptation thus uses the sexual encounter to show that June is regaining power by rejecting the traditional "missionary position" and raising women-on-top as a symbol of women's power over men, contrasting with her passive position during the first encounter, with Serena watching in the background. I argue that June's attitude towards her body and sex is another example of updating the story to connect with contemporary viewers, especially women.

On the other hand, both Kate and Nick seem comfortable and playful from their first encounter: "Have you come to do your duty for the fatherland?" asks Nick. "Yep!" responds Kate. The scene becomes another opportunity to aestheticize Kate's body through shadow play, mirroring conventional scenes of 90s romantic dramas. At the end of it, she will reveal herself: "My name is Kate," she says, echoing Offred's abandoning herself to Nick in the novel.

Figure 11. On the left, Kate and Nick's sole sexual encounter in the movie. In the middle, June and Nick's first encounter, with Serena watching from the back. On the right[7], June and Nick's second encounter, when June's regaining power is shown by placing her on top.

Whereas Kate's killing the Commander in the last scene seems hard to believe, since we have not seen any steps towards a development of agency in her inner or outer realm, June's progressively more active role is built up throughout the first season, and two reasons for this can be suggested: first, giving June increasingly more agency in the outer realm could open up new conflicts and plots for the following

[7] The third frame has been slightly lightened for better viewing.

seasons, as indeed happens; second, a stronger and more determined female protagonist better fits the woman's portrayal the adaptors were looking for, as well as viewers' expectations in the 2010s.

Apart from her relationship with Nick, June's progression towards becoming a stronger character in the series is showcased in several key moments. First, it is revealed that June and Moira joined marches against Gilead in episode 3, which ended with the military opening fire on the crowd (unlike Offred, from the novel, who stays at home). June's influence over others starts to simmer in her encounters alone with the Commander, whom she gradually begins to learn to manipulate with a mixture of vulnerability and naughtiness that works like a charm with Fred Waterford. This idea is also present in the novel and the movie, but Elisabeth Moss's subtle acting work endows this process with many nuances that engage the viewers in the understanding of their give-and-take dynamic of power. In episode 6, June meets the Mexican Ambassador, a woman. When asked in front of the Waterfords, June is obliged to lie about her real situation in Gilead, what makes her feel ashamed and frustrated. The next day, in the morning, she takes advantage of a moment when the Mexican Ambassador came to bring some presents and, seemingly alone in the dining room, she tells them what she would have preferred to say the first time: "They rape me." Nonetheless, it seems hard to believe that, living in a dictatorial country, in the house of one of the elite men, in the middle of the day, no one could have been listening to them. Later on, June will ask another Handmaid, Alma, about May Day, the resistance movement, without being completely sure of her engagement with the resistance, which is extremely dangerous. This is something Offred would probably never have done, but June eventually decides to collaborate with them. Finally, the last episode of the season will make her a heroine for the Handmaids when she is able to stop Janine's Particicution.

Meanwhile, the only moment before killing Commander Waterford in which Kate seems less passive and constrained is when she helps Moira to escape from the Red Center, an act not considered by Atwood in the novel. This incident is also taken up by the series, although its rendition seems much more believable. In the novel, although apparently curious, Offred never joins the resistance because of her fear for her own life and her daughter's, and eventually feels closer and more attached to Nick.

Once the portrayal of Offred in both movie and series has been explored, we can turn to the cameo appearance made by Margaret Atwood in the Hulu/MGM adaptation. In it, the author becomes an aunt, an enforcer, acting out a character to whom, according to her, she would have been strongly opposed in real life: "Or I think I would have been strongly opposed" (*Burning Questions* 419). Along with Wives, Aunts are the highest-ranking women in Gilead, in charge of the training and indoctrinating of Handmaids as well as overseeing births and most executions. They can also read, a forbidden activity for the rest of Gileadean women. As such, Aunts are extremely powerful, but their power quota always depends on who they are with: a part of Aunts' role is to read "where her own power lies in the hierarchy of Gilead" (Robinson 68). When acting out Aunt Lydia, the actress who plays her, Ann Dowd, indicates that actors had to take many precautions "in the dealings with another." For example, regarding Serena Joy, Ann Dowd would wonder: "What's the balance of power here? How am I going to get my point across without entirely alienating her?" (68). As for her relationship with Offred, Aunt Lydia, probably one of the most important Aunts of Gilead, plays a different role in the three stories. For Offred, she appears mainly as an echo in the form of flashback from her days at the Red Center. Thus, Aunt Lydia becomes a representative of Gilead's ideology through the instructions and slogans that Offred recalls. Aunt Lydia also advocates for sisterhood, but sisterhood as understood by Gilead: according to her, someday all women "will live in harmony together, all in one family; you will be like daughters to them ... There can be bonds of real affection ... Women united for a common end! Helping one another in their daily chores as they walk the path of life together, each performing her appointed task" (HT 163) Later, she will promote again a sort of "spirit of camaraderie among women. We must all pull together" (222). In the show, on the other hand, Aunt Lydia certainly plays a more prominent role beyond June's days at the Red Center. As mentioned before, she accompanies the Eye that goes to interrogate June about Ofglen, which leads to a confrontation between her and June. Aunt Lydia also directs the Particicution in which Janine is to be executed, where June's opposition leads her to unwittingly become a clear leader of the Handmaids.

Aunt Lydia's relationship with Janine, another Handmaid, as depicted by the series endows the character with increased depth and tenderness. While in the book this relationship is mocked by the

Handmaids, who secretly joke about a possible homosexual relationship (222), resulting in an increased level of sororophobia towards the two of them, in the series their relationship becomes a factor of humanization of the character. The first encounter between the two, not present in the book but offered by the series, depicts Janine, still unaware of her situation, blurting out "Fuck you" to Aunt Lydia. Aunt Lydia then tases her, and Janine is taken away to have her eye gouged out as a punishment. When Aunt Lydia takes her to bed at night, despite the brutality of what happened, she tucks her in before leaving. Also in episode 6, when Serena Joy asks the Aunts to "remove the damaged ones," Janine among them, Aunt Lydia advocates for their presence: they deserve to be honored. Unable to convince Serena, she promises Janine to bring her a tray full of desserts as compensation in a very tender scene. This connects with Atwood's Aunt Lydia lobbying for the front entrance for the Handmaids: "Yours is a position of honour, she said" (13). The movie, on the contrary, shows a younger Aunt Lydia dressed in a white shirt and white pearls, who sticks to the authoritarian portrait of Aunt Lydia, without endowing her with any humanity. Making her a younger aunt could have been an opportunity to delve into more complex sororophobic dynamics, as Hulu's adaptors explored with the portrayal of Serena Joy. Hulu's Aunt Lydia, as an older woman, is more distanced from June in age but also closer to a motherly figure, at times cruel, at times loving, connecting with Charis' grandmother in *The Robber Bride*. In the movie, aside from her indoctrinating talks at the Red Center, the only thing we know about her is that she is tied up and humiliated by Moira when she tries to escape. Neither Offred nor Kate ever have a direct conversation with her.

Figure 12. Comparison of Aunt Lydia as in the movie, on the left, and as in the series, center and right.

In this sense, Hulu's portrayal of Aunt Lydia fills the character with a sense of tenderness that humanizes her, simultaneously positioning her as one of the great antagonists of the story. This expansion of the plot connects in a fundamental way with the spirit of the novel - the addition proposed by the adaptation completes the silences, but does not contradict the story; on the contrary, it fits perfectly. A good example

of this is Atwood's decision to write a sequel, *The Testaments*, in which we get to know Aunt Lydia's point of view in greater depth, which in turn connects with the portrayal made by the series.

It has been previously stated that, in contrast to Offred's domestic lifestyle, Moira is shown as a symbol of sexual freedom, who did not hesitate to reveal herself as a feminist and lesbian. She has a strong character, as demonstrated by her straightforwardness and audacity. Moira is brought to the Red Center accused of "gender treachery," that is, homosexuality, and Offred is happy so find her there. In a place where "friendships were suspicious," having Moira at her side made her "feel safer" (70) and "ridiculously happy" (73). If they both share the longing for a cigarette in the novel, sharing a match is how Moira and Kate meet for the first time in the movie, a sign of sisterhood and friendship.

In the novel, Moira dares to be meaner than Offred at the Red Center, and seems to be stronger as well. For example, in the bathroom she is bold enough to joke about Aunt Lydia and Janine having sex. "You were always such a wimp," Moira says to Offred when she complains about the joke (222). When Janine has a breakdown at night, it is Moira who slaps her across her face several times until she pulls herself together: "She does that again and I'm not here, Moira said to me, you just have to slap her like that. You can't let her go slipping over the edge. That stuff is catching" (216-217). Over time, Moira becomes an inner voice in Offred's head who accuses her of being stupid or cowardly: "Idiot, says Moira" (234) or "Moira is right, I am a wimp" (294).

The main change between the source story and the two adaptations regarding Moira has to do with her escape from the Red Center. In the novel, it is Moira who tries to escape once, gets caught, and then tries a second time, succeeding this time. When Moira tells Offred about her plans, Offred freaks out: "I feel panic. No, no, Moira, I say, don't try it. Not on your own ... They'll find you out ... Moira, don't" (89). Offred feels worried, but also, she is afraid of losing her only companion: "I couldn't stand the thought of her not being here, with me. For me" (89). In the movie, Kate helps Moira to tie Aunt Lydia's hands but stays at the Red Center, which is difficult to justify. First, because the total lack of information about Kate's inner realm shows her as a generally passive character, making it hard to believe that she would dare to tie the hands of one of the probably most powerful aunts of Gilead, and still stay

at the Red Center with no further consequences. Second, it is also difficult to believe that in such a militarized and restrictive society no one asked Moira her name or controlled her credentials, especially given her hesitant way of walking. What should be an extremely tense scene ends up being an almost comic one – not to mention the Guardians' staring at her mischeviously.

Figure 13. Moira escapes from the Red Center with ease.

In the series, June not only helps Moira, but also tries to escape with her. In that sense, the series seems to take up the movie's reading of the scene, even expanding it. As such, while in the book she would probably be too scared to do any of this, June gives orders to the Aunt and even uses her cattle prod. Moira is able to escape, but not June, whose punishment for the escape attempt is the same as Atwood's Moira when she tries to escape the first time. June sacrifices herself to let Moira go, and the rest of Handmaids show their support by bringing little pieces of food to her bed while she is recovering. In the novel, the same thing happened to Moira after her first attempt to escape (91), a case of transference that becomes another key scene to portraying June as a heroine supported by the rest of Handmaids.

Figure 14. Handmaids sneak little pieces of food and leave them by June's pillow as a sign of support and sisterhood.

Moira succeeds in escaping from the Red Center, but not from Gilead. She ends up joining Jezebel's, a club set up by Gilead for the Commanders to entertain themselves with "loose women." When Offred/Kate/June gets there and sees Moira, the latter seems to be resigned to her new life. Gilead has finally killed her rebellious spirit:

> "Moira," I say. "You don't mean that." ... But how can I expect her to go on, with my idea of her courage, live it through, act it out, when I myself do not? I don't want her to be like me. Give in, go along, save her

> skin. That is what it comes down to. I want gallantry from her, swashbuckling, heroism, single-handed combat. *Something I lack*[8]. (249)

This is the end of the story for Moira in both the novel and the movie. In the show, however, June reacts to this resignation by giving her a pep-talk to convince her to keep fighting. Although Moira first says they are alone ("Just take care of yourself"), she eventually finds the courage to help June in her May Day mission and later manage to cross the border and get to Canada. Offred, who would have liked to tell us of a different outcome for Moira ("I'd like to tell a story about how Moira escaped, for good this time ... something daring and spectacular" 250), only gets the opportunity to do so in the series as June In the novel, Moira's alleged success in escaping turned her into "an elevator with open sides" that made the rest of Handmaids " feel dizzy," since they were "losing the taste for freedom" and starting to find the Red Center's walls "secure." To them, Moira becomes their fantasy of freedom, "lava beneath the crust of daily life." As Offred explains, "[i]n the light of Moira, the Aunts were less fearsome and more absurd." In the show, it is June's speech based on friends bonding and fighting the system what wakes up Moira, who declares, "I was doing all right until I saw you again" in episode 9.

After Offred and Moira, Janine is the most fleshed-out Handmaid. For the sake of analysis, two sides of her portrayal are considered: first, as a sort of stupid/innocent Handmaid, potentially dangerous for the rest, at the Red Center; second, as a pregnant Handmaid, with the advantages that this entails, in Gilead. Indeed, it is the contrast between Janine's status as the "mouthy girl" at the Red Center and "the pregnant Handmaid who is basking in her favored status despite the grim circumstances" (Robinson 76) that the creators of the show wanted to depict in the pilot.

In the novel, the first thing known about her is that she is pregnant and that she brags about it. We quickly learn that Offred is not especially fond of her: "She was at the Red Centre with me, one of Aunt Lydia's pets. I never liked her. Her name, in the time before, was Janine" (HT 26). On the Birth Day, however, Offred feels closer, partly due to her suffering: "Her eyes are squeezed closed, and this way I can almost like her. After all, she's one of us; what did she ever want but to lead her life as agreeably as

[8] Emphas s added.

possible? What else did any of us want? It's the *possible* that's the catch. She's not doing badly, under the circumstances." (117) As will be discussed in the following section, Janine is mostly seen by Offred as a threat, since her sometimes erratic behavior or her close relationship with Aunt Lydia can get her into trouble, although some jealousy might be involved as well. At the final scene, during the Particicution, Janine's mental health appears to be damaged (281) and nothing else is known about her afterwards.

Figure 15. June and Janine's different attitudes according to their body postures in their first day at the Red Center.

In the show, Janine is introduced when both she and June come to the Red Center. During the scene, Janine serves as a counterexample of why June cannot be brave or defiant, demonstrating that it would be probably stupid at that point in time. From that moment on, it will be more common to establish a correspondence between June and Janine than in the novel. For instance, the second time Janine appears in the show is when June is waiting in the living room for the pre-Ceremony ritual to start and thinks, "I want to know what I did to deserve this." The shot of June is juxtaposed with an extreme closeup of Janine's left eye, then a zoom-out to show her removed right eye while she starts telling the story of when she was gang-raped. The visual and aural experience of the show allow this kind of connection between Offred and other women's experiences to be shown through closeups of parts of their bodies or costumes, which all look similar in Gilead.

One of main differences between the novel and movie compared to the show lies in the portrayal of the scene in which Janine tells the rest of the Handmaids how she was raped. In the novel, a sort of enjoyment or eager cooperation on the part of the Handmaids can be observed:

> But whose fault was it? Aunt Helena says, holding up one plump finger. Her fault, her fault, her fault, we chant in unison. Who led them on? Aunt Helena beams, pleased with us. She did. She did. She did. (HT 71)

Despite the brutal situation, Atwood portrays a group of Handmaids not being able to sympathize with her: Janine "looked disgusting: weak, squirmy, blotchy, pink, like a newborn mouse." None of them

"wanted to look like that, ever." They "despised her" despite the fact that they "knew what was being done to her": "Crybaby. Crybaby. Crybaby. We meant it, which is the bad part. I used to think well of myself. I didn't then" (HT 72). This probably echoes *Cat's Eye* and those days when Elaine enjoyed seeing another girl being criticized by Cordelia. That meant it was not Elaine's turn to be bullied and could relax, but also Elaine is portrayed feeling some enjoyment at having, at least that day, some of that power of derision. In great contrast, June seems strongly against this situation, and she does not enjoy Janine's public shame by any means. By slightly frowning, the closeup of June offers a response to Aunt Lydia's question: "Whose fault was it?" Although she looks at Moira, she is not "brave" enough to react. Offred is the only one not doing it, and that is when Margaret Atwood slaps her in her famous cameo.

Figure 16. On the left frame, June's frowing offers commentary to Lydia's question who fault was the fact that Janine was gang raped. At the center, Moira avoids June's gaze, probably ashamed. On the right, a circle of Handmaids blame Janine in the movie, seemingly indifferent most of the time.

In the movie, on the other hand, most Handmaids are portrayed as bored and indifferent at first, then somehow as enthusiastic and eager to cooperate as in the novel. Nonetheless, the use of wider shots and their resulting depersonalization make it harder to notice the level of subtlety shown by Elisabeth Moss and Samira Wiley in their closeups.

Another key scene has to do with a cookie that was given to Janine in the novel, transcoded into the macaron handed to June in episode 2 of the series. In the novel, Offred imagines that Ofwarren, "formerly that whiny bitch Janine" (115), was in front of Serena Joy and the other Wives so they could see her belly, touch it, and congratulate the Wife: "A strong girl, good muscles." Then, some "kind" Wife would say, "Would you like a cookie, dear?" "Oh no, you'll spoil her, too much sugar is bad for them," another one would have said. Janine, in turn, would have asked: "Oh yes, can I Ma'am, please?" And then, another Wife says: "Such a, so well behaved, not surly like some of them, do their job and that's that. More like a daughter to you, as you might say." Once Janine would be gone, Offred pictures the Wives saying, "Little whores, all of them, but still, you can't be choosy. You take what they hand out,

right, girls?" (115). In the show, it is Serena who gives a macaron to June, to which she replies, with a cracked voice: "Yes, please." When June has left the room, Serena will repeat almost the exact same words: "Little whores, all of them, but still, you can't be choosy. You take what they hand out." Having heard this, June then goes to the bathroom, spits the macaron in the sink, and observes herself in the mirror with a look of what could be defiance or self-satisfaction [see figure 8]. There is a case of transference between Janine and June that accounts for their similar situation with respect to the Wives. While Offred seems to push her away, aiming to show that they are different kinds of women, June's portrayal shows understanding and empathy, to the point of assimilating a humiliating situation originally experienced by Janine.

This empathy and closeness is also shown in the series when Janine suffers a mental breakdown at bedtime. While Offred keeps her distance from the situation and lets Moira take care of it, June gets closer to her, and gently touches her face, talking to her. Moira eventually slaps Janine, exactly as in the book and the movie, but then June comes back to help her get dressed: "I want to go home," says Janine. "I know, come here," replies June.

Figure 17. June is compassionate with Janine, whom she treats with tenderness.

To Offred, Janine's relationship with Aunt Lydia seems to be a dangerous thing for the rest of them. Offred imagines Aunt Lydia saying to her, "I feel I can rely on you," "Help me ... we are all in this together. You are a reliable girl ... not like some of the others" (128). Although Offred is aware that Janine's cooperation is due to her being a "puppy that's been kicked too often" (132), she is equally mean to the rest of girls: "We were treating her the way people used to treat those with no legs who sold pencils on street corners" (133). They feared that Janine would testify against them if she had the chance: "She was a danger to us, we knew that" (133). To Offred, at the end, everything comes down to having a better position than the rest of Handmaids: "Now it would be someone else for a while. She was, temporarily,

off the hook" (133). Such a rejection of Janine for being a potential collaborator is totally excluded from the series, as are the jokes about her possible relationship with Aunt Lydia, which probably would not fit the sense of humor of the series' audience in the 2010s. Hulu/MGM production does depict her as innocent and dumb or clumsy at times, like the scene in which she was cleaning the blood from the Wall and dumbly excited, says, "It's like painting!", but the level of rejection and mistrust from the other Handmaids is highly reduced.

Becoming a pregnant woman is the other side of Janine's character. This arouses envy on the part of Wives and Handmaids, especially among the latter. First, for achieving what they aspire to: getting pregnant ("Covertly we regard each other, sizing up each other's bellies: is anyone lucky?" 59). Second, for holding a better position, of slightly greater power, than they do. However, this is sorted out in the film without any envy or jealousy. Janine is not even the pregnant Handmaid that everyone applauds, nor do we know her name or who she is. As a viewer, it is perceived as another filler scene that barely adds to the action or the psychology of the characters.

Figure 18. An anonymous Handmaid is is applauded by Handmaids and Wives alike, gently accompanied by the Wife of her household, thus completely neutralizing potential sororophobia. On the right, Janine breastfeeds baby Angela/Charlotte.

As in the novel, the cinematic Janine is distraught, probably because of the loss of the baby, as well as ecstatic from the violence she has been a part of in the Particicution. In the series, on the other hand, Janine's subplot when she has had the baby is an occasion to talk about her vulnerability and the inevitable attachment that is established between mother and baby. It is also an opportunity to deal with an ambiguous love relationship between a Handmaid and her Commander. Scenes of great beauty and tenderness are offered between Janine and the baby, humanizing her much more than in the novel or the film.

Apart from the many shadows affecting Offred through memories (her mother, Moira, her daughter, Aunt Lydia, etc.), Offred will find another ghost in her own room: the previous handmaid, Offred #1, that hung herself.

> I want to tell him about the woman in my room, the one who was there before me, but I don't. I'm jealous of her. If she's been here before me too, in this bed, I don't want to hear about it. (270)

This Offred #1 begins to take shape upon the discovery of her message in a corner of the room (in the novel) or in the closet (in the series): *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*. In a world where almost all women are banned from reading or writing, the finding of an encrypted message left by the woman who lived in your cell before you is of incalculable value, of an incredible audacity. Nothing is known about her, but Offred #2, the protagonist, imagines someone about her age or slightly younger, starting to give her the look of Moira when she was in college: "quirky, jaunty, athletic, with a bicycle once, and a knapsack for hiking. Freckles, I think; irreverent, resourceful" (52-53).

"I pray silently: *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*" (90). This statement, regardless of its unknown meaning, becomes a mantra for Offred, which connects her with the vitality and courage with which Moira managed to escape from The Red Center: "the scratched writing on my cupboard wall floats before me, left by an unknown woman, with the face of Moira" (90). In the show, this connection is emphasized by relating this message to a scene showing Moira carving "Aunt Lydia sux" in the bathroom door.

Soon after, this former Handmaid becomes the other dark side of Offred; the one who also had a relationship with the Commander, but decided to commit suicide and now tells Offred to follow her steps. The one who dared to leave her a message. A sort of ghost or shadow, an inner voice that echoes the ghostly double of Charis/Karen in *The Robber Bride* or the other voice of the little girl in Elaine, in *Cat's Eye.*

> Behind me I feel her presence, *my ancestress, my double*[9]... How could I have believed I was alone in here? There were always two of us. Get it over, she says. I'm tired of this melodrama, I'm tired of keeping silent. There's no one you can protect, your life has value to no one. I want it finished. (293)

[9] Emphas s added.

The Commander reveals its meaning later on, "Don't let the bastards grind you down," a Latin inside joke with his fellow students when he was younger. Offred then realizes that "it conveys nothing. You might as well say, Don't let there be air; or, Don't be" (291). It did not help the former Handmaid ("*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum.* Fat lot of good it did her. Why fight? That will never do", HT 225) and it will not help her either. Bitterly, she conveys that words cannot change reality, especially relevant if we have in mind that Offred thinks this after Ofglen had asked her for help. Margaret Atwood had said something similar in the seventies, admitting that, while there are political elements in almost everything she has ever written it would be "naïve" to believe that fiction can change lives (Sandler 47).

Offred's disappointment and despair in the novel is transcoded into episode 4, in the first half of season 1, which has *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum* as the title. In this episode, Serena has harshly imposed her power over June, confining her for 13 days; then her aforementioned attempt to escape from the Red Center is portrayed, as well as every Handmaid being kind to her, bringing her little pieces of food; and the protests before Gilead that June and Moira joined are also shown. As such, the adaptors construct a portrait of Offred that becomes the kindling for the fire that this statement, *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*, ignites. This time, the revelation of its meaning triggers a sense of union, of sisterhood, between her and the former maid, resulting in June being able to manipulate Commander Waterford, probably for the first time, saying that she might kill herself as well as the former Handmaid did: "There was an Offred before me. She helped me find my way out. She's dead. She's alive. She's me. We're Handmaids." This scene is followed by a wide shot in which more and more Handmaids come out [see figure 19], with uplifting music in the background, which will be recalled in the last episode of the season, though more emphatically. In addition, the translation of "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum" is used by June when she tries to convince Moira of escaping: "Moira, do not, do not let them grind you down," and the episode ends with June's voiceover, "*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum,* bitches." In short, the revelation of the meaning turns the phrase into a cause for desperation in the novel whereas it becomes a sort of catalyzing mantra for sisterhood in the show.

Figure 19. June is first seen as part of an army of Handmaids with "*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum,* bitches" in voiceover.

In Atwood's novel, Ofglen is Offred's shopping partner. Initially, Offred is very suspicious of Ofglen, whom she sees as acting artificially, hesitantly: "I think of her as a woman for whom every act is done for show, is acting rather than a real act. She does such things to look good, I think. She's out to make the best of it" (31). However, she becomes another mirror in which Offred reflects herself: "She hesitates, as if to say something more, but then she turns away and walks down the street. I watch her. She's like my own reflection, in a mirror from which I am moving away" (45). Not much is known about her in the book; the only thing we are told is that she plays a role in the resistance, May Day, and that she will commit suicide after seeing the black van coming after her. When the truth of her role in the resistance is revealed, they both share the thought of having taken the other for a "true believer," a "stinking pious." From then on, Offred feels that hope is rising in her, "like sap in a tree" (185). She looks forward to talking to her, since it has been the first time she has had a real conversation with someone: "I know it, I can feel speech backing up inside me" (185).

A similar story is provided in the series (instead of "stinking pious", Offred thinks of her as a "pious little shit with a broomstick up her ass", updating the language but with the same spirit), although Ofglen shares much more information with June than with Offred. In the show, she reveals her real name, Emily, and that she has a Wife and a son who escaped to Canada. "There are no friends here," June thinks, but in Hulu's Gilead, there are indeed. In episode 3, when Offred is interrogated, she explains that she did not report Ofglen because she was her friend. The revelation moment with Ofglen happened at an ice cream place, while they were reflected in the mirror. "They do that really well," says Emily, "making us distrust each other." "It was nice to finally meet you" are Emily's last words before leaving. As for Kate and Ofglen in the movie, they share no intimacy at all, apart from silly remarks, until Ofglen reveals her participation in May Day out of nowhere after the Birth Day. Kate does not even react

and there is no further consecuences. While scenes at the Commander Waterford's office are long and filled with dialogues, the script generally deals with Kate's relationships with other women in haste, resulting in clumsy or awkward situations like the previous one.

In the show, it is Ofglen's disappeareance that drives June and Emily apart. In the novel, it is Offred feeling more in love with Nick that leads her to feel progresively detached from Ofglen: "I hardly listen to her, I no longer credit her. The things she whispers seem to me unreal. What use are they, for me, now?" Right after saying this, Offred's mind-wandering leads her to Nick: "I put his hand on my belly. It's happened, I say. I feel it has. A couple of weeks and I'll be certain ... it's yours, I say. It will be yours, really. I want it to be" (270-271). When asked for help, she tells Ofglen that she cannot, she is too afraid: "Anyway I'd be no good at that, I'd get caught. I scarcely take the trouble to sound regretful, so lazy have I become." Ofglen offers to get her out if she is in immediate danger, but she is no longer interested in escaping: "The fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him", which makes her feel ashamed of herself. Eventually, Offred notices that Ofglen gives up on her: "She whispers less, talks more about the weather. I do not feel regret about this. I feel relief" (271). This is one of the show's main changes in adapting the novel, significantly increasing the sense of sisterhood. Although hesitant at first ("I don't know, I'm not that kind of person"), June eventually helps May Day in a dangerous mission that involves returning to Jezebel's the next day.

Another addition, fully original, in the series is when Emily, after telling Offred to join May Day during a market day, steals a car and drives around the plaza to let everyone see, especially other maids. It feels like a sort of revenge for the life she is obliged to live. She looks for June; June smiles back and nods, reinforcing her decision to run over the guardians in front of her. Another rebellious act carried out by a Handmaid is closely linked to June.

Figure 20. On the left, Ofglen steals a car and looks for June's validation. On the right, June smiles back and nods.

In Atwood's fiction, Wives are among the most powerful people in the nation of Gilead, although still subject to their husbands. The household, the spatial framework for Handmaids, are Wives' major control area. Since Handmaids are constantly changing their households, it almost impossible for them to establish support networks, which endows Wives with a crucial power. Among them, Serena Joy seems to be a very influential one, along with her husband Commander Waterford, since both were involved in the establishment of Gileadean values and system. In the novel, Serena Joy's real name is Pam and she used to be, first, the lead soprano of a Sunday morning religious program, and then a spokesperson for the return of women to their homes. In the movie, Serena is only depicted in her singing role on TV, while the series' adaptation opts for expanding her role in the design of Gilead. Episode 6 of the first season is actually called "A Woman's Place," the title of the book Hulu's Serena wrote that theorized fertility as a national resource. During this episode, Serena Joy will be shown to be constantly shut out of Gilead's decision-making despite her intelligence. For example, she seems frustrated when her opinion on Gileadean issues is not even taken into consideration by her husband during breakfast. Besides, a Mexican Ambassador, another woman, holds a high-level conversation with Serena Joy, quoting her book several times. In this sense, the Mexican Ambassador seems to account for the sort of role Serena would have if women were allowed to have power positions. In short, Hulu's adaptation largely focus on Serena's intelligence and strong will, which sometimes appealed to Offred in the book: "Evidence of her stubbornness, and not altogether despicable" (203).

Regarding their first encounter in the novel, it takes place in the garden, since "the garden is the domain of the Commander's Wife" (12). Offred does not even have a name at first ("So, you're the new one, she said", 13) and she is threatened by Serena right away ("if I get trouble, I'll give trouble back", 15). Nonetheless, Serena tones it down a little: "Don't call me ma'am, she said irritably. You're not a Martha" (15). The movie's portrayal of this conversation turns out to be a bright setting, marked by big windows. It is a laid-back scene in which they look into each other's eyes, both of them smiling, especially Serena. Although she similarly threatens her with trouble, Serena immediately asks her to not call her Ma'am and sits by her side, on the same couch, at the same height, adding in a medium close-up: "We could help each other".

Figure 21. On the left, Serena Joy and Kate talk for the first time. On the right, Serena Joy gently treats Kate when handling her the picture of her daughter. Both her eyes and hands show compassion towards Kate.

In the novel, Offred would like to turn Serena "into an older sister, a motherly figure, someone who would understand and protect me" (15-16), and compares her with her mother, who "did not knit or anything like that" (204). Serena's age is also mentioned in several occasions: regarding her perfume, "It makes me feel slightly ill, as if I'm in a closed car on a hot muggy day with an older woman wearing too much face powder" (80); she says that Serene has arthritis (13, 153), uses a cane (46, 79, 81, 203, 287) and wonders if her skin has gone numb (203). MGM/Hulu's writers' decision to cast the young and beautiful Yvonne Strahovski as Serena Joy significantly impacts the tension between her and June, resulting in a more complex competition due to their increased likeness, and a continuous play of mirrors between the two. They are both young and attractive, intelligent, and one of them, June, assumes the roles of intimacy and sexuality that should be a Wife's due. When June and Serena Joy meet for the first time, it is a much darker scene, in the living room (the public "Wife's domain", where the pre-Ceremony ritual takes place). June does not look at her directly, keeps her eyes down instead, and sits down from the beginning. Serena, in turn, remains standing all the time, whose upright position endows her with power. The adaptors also switch the order of the dialogue: Serena starts with, "Don't call me ma'am," and only after the Commander, the main source of envy and competition, appears to share a few words with them, Serena Joy adds, "I want to see you as little as possible; do you understand?" as well as, "He is my husband until death do us part" and, "If I get trouble, believe me, I will give you trouble back." While the movie repeats the same lines in the same order as in the novel, but does not convey the message with visual experience, the show changes them slightly in order to make the sororophobic effect even stronger.

Jealousy or envy is then the basic feeling intermediating between them. "Try to imagine what they must be feeling," says Aunt Lydia. "Of course they will resent you. It is only natural" (46). Offred

repeatedly mentions this: “I envy the Commander’s Wife her knitting (...) What does she envy me? She doesn’t speak to me, unless she can’t avoid it. I am a reproach to her; and a necessity” (13), or, “Once I’d merely hated her ... and because she hated me too and resented my presence” (161). However, she adds that “the hatred was no longer pure and simple,” a sort of comment that has been repeatedly observed in the relationship between Elaine and Cordelia, Zenia, and the others. Offred, in turn, feels jealousy and guilt, seeing herself as longing for something someone else has and should be hers, but as an “intruder, in a territory that ought to have been hers” (161). “You could have left me with something,” says Serena in episode 9 of the series, when she finds out that June used her dress. After that, Serena tries to play Scrabble with his husband, but he seems too busy for that. Serena then adds: “She’s a smart girl. I guess she’s pretty good at this.” By spending time with the Commander, merely playing games and listening to him talk, their “functions were no longer as separate as they should have been in theory” (161), says Offred in the novel. In a world where your role as a woman defines you, this is a major threat.

I argue that while Hulu’s writers have seen this, considered it important, and expanded it through the aural/visual experience of a show, the movie, on the contrary, deals with this relationship as a minor element of the script, which reduces its potential sororophobia enormously. Considering her role in society to be threatened, Serena Joy continuously and evidently exerts her power over Offred/June to remind her who is in charge. This is barely noticeable in the movie. For example, in the book “she'll put a hand on my shoulder, to steady herself, as if I'm a piece of furniture. She's done it before” (79), or gives her a cigarette (in the book, 279) or a macaron (in the series). Offred and, at first, June, do not have the right to complain, but through their inner monologue or voice over, as well as the position of June’s hands, we can have access to their emotions, which is not what happens with Kate.

On one hand, the sororophobia between June and Serena emphasizes June’s figure as one who resists For example, in episode 4, “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum,” the restriction and torture used by Serena is a catalyst for the feeling of sisterhood derived from the *Nolite*... catalyzing mantra and starts making a heroine out of June. In episode 10, right before Serena welcomes June with a big slap, causing her to hit a piece of furniture when falling, June had been portrayed in a medium shot, looking defiantly and thinking, “It’s their fault. They shouldn’t have given us uniforms...”

Nonetheless, June empathizes and identifies with Serena despite all that, as they are both ignored by Gilead. Whereas Offred ponders this, it is explicitly shown in the show, as the POV shot in the next figure. In episode 6, "A Woman's Place," a key episode in the portrayal and humanization of Serena, June and her share a moment of intimacy when preparing for the reception. A shot of Serena Joy is shown turning to June while she is reflected, somehow distorted, in the mirror next to her. This device had already appeared in episode 2, at the moment of the revelation with Ofglen.

Figure 22. On the left, POV shot of June when Serena is left out in a business meeting. On the right, another mirror play between them.

One day, Offred is told to go to see Serena in her garden. Serena tells her then that the Commander might be the reason for her not getting pregnant, which surprises Offred. In this world, talking about men's infertility is not even contemplated, almost a sin, and this confidence draws them closer: "I look up at her. She looks down. It's the first time we've looked into each other's eyes in a long time. Since we met. The moment stretches out between us, bleak and level" (205). Offred imagines that they "are cronies," as if they were "at a kitchen table," and it would be a "date" they were "discussing," "some girlish stratagem of ploys and flirtation" (205). This scene is portrayed by the series with higher tension, since June suspects the conversation is only a trick to entertain her while the black van arrives, and daydreams of killing Serena with her shears, an object that had been present several times in the novel as a symbol of simmering violence (HT 118, 153, 293).

Nonetheless, the TV series shows how Serena tenderly approaches June in episode 3 and says, presuming she is pregnant: "What you do, what *we* do together, is so terrible. It's terribly hard, and *we* must remain strong. Which is why I feel so blessed to have you."[10] Hulu's Serena had also turned Atwood's original "you" into "we" in the encounter in the garden, in episode 5: "I was thinking maybe we could try another way." During episode 3, Serena approaches June a few times, touches her hand,

[10] Emphas s added.

and June seems to be touched by this in turn. At the end, she will also tell her: "You're my miracle. My beautiful miracle," affectionately touching her face. Right after this is when June reveals to her that she is not pregnant and Serena violently drags her to her room, confining her for days. Like Offred and June, Serena shows ambivalent feelings towards her, ranging from tenderness and identification to the most extreme hatred, rejection, and violence.

When June finally gets a positive pregnancy test, Serena shows her vulnerability, not only by crying, but also by lowering herself to June's level, bringing herself down to her. June, although bloodied, feels endowed with a new power and looks at her defiantly.

Figure 23. "He answered our prayers", says Serena. "You think I prayed for this?", boldly replies June.

Serena Joy, in order to restore the balance of power, finds it imperative to take her to see her daughter Hannah and says, "As long as my baby is safe so is yours," while the Gilead theme is playing in the background. June then explodes: "You're deranged. You're fucking evil. You're a goddamn motherfucking monster. Fucking heartless, sadistic, motherfucking evil cunt. Fuck you, Serena. You're gonna burn in goddamn motherfucking hell, you crazy, evil bitch!" Elisabeth Moss skillfully delivers an extremely emotionally charged scene, to which Yvonne Stravinski only replies: "Don't get upset. It's not good for the baby." This scene was entirely original – Offred never comes to actually see her daughter in the book, but only a picture Serena provides her with. In that case, Offred is able to think but not to say, "The bitch, not to tell me, bring me news, any news at all ... She's made of wood, or iron, she can't imagine. But I can't say this, I can't lose sight, even of so small a thing. I can't let go of this hope. I can't speak" (206). As such, June's transformation during the season endows her with the power of speaking, a key element for the major event of the last episode, the Particicution.

In the continuous game of similarity and difference between the two women, Offred agrees to have intercourse with Nick in order to provide her with a baby. At the house, before heading to Nick's

place, Offred thinks, “I see the two of us, a blue shape, a red shape, in the brief glass eye of the mirror as we descend. Myself, my obverse” (259). This on-going mirror play finds another expression in a scene in the series that is completely original. When coming back from visiting her parents, Serena brings a present to June: a little music box with a ballerina that she used to have when she was a little girl. The camera first focuses on the ballerina, then shows June's gaze reflected in the mirror.

Figure 24. Serena's gift serves as an example of June's refusal to be assimilated by Gilead.

If the metaphor was not clear enough, June’s voice over explains it as follows: “A perfect gift. A girl trapped in a box. She only dances when someone else opens the lid, when someone else winds her up.” The camera progressively zooms out, leading us to June’s real occupation: carving “you are not alone” next to *Nolites...* while she says, in voice over, “If I’m telling this story, there must be someone. There’s always someone even when there is no one.” Thus, June takes over the narrative from the former Handmaid and continues it, creating the possibility of another one coming after her. One wonders, however, whether another Handmaid is the main receptor of this message, or whether a spectator, especially a woman, might also feel interpellated. It also worth noting that she was laying on the floor, desperate because of her confinement, when she found the inscription *Nolites...* This time, she is in a vertical position and there is no backlighting hiding her face anymore, at eye level, almost looking at the camera and saying, “I will not be that girl in the box” [see figure 37, right frame]. In the background, the music from the box can be heard distorted right after she ends the last statement. This shot is contrasted with the first shot of the series showing June as a Handmaid” [see figure 37, left frame]. In the two frames there is a similar structure: Offred in the center or slightly to the right, in a vertical position, a light source at her back. A few moments like these are seen in the show with June talking to the next Handmaid or the audience, which convey the evolution of her character through the strength of the outer light in the earlier shot versus how clearly her face is seen in the later shot.

Figure 25. Intertextual play between different shots of June in order to show her evolution.

All in all, the sororophobia between Serena and Kate has been practically neutralized in the film. In the series, on the contrary, it has been strongly emphasized, encouraging the mirror games proposed by Margaret Atwood in the original work, although prioritizing the competitive element between Serena and June, in contrast to what happened with other Handmaids.

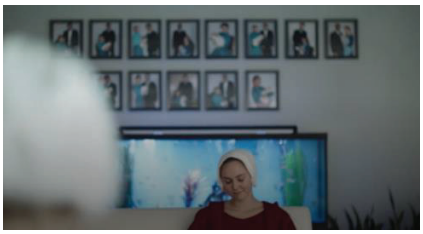

Figure 26. June waits for her medical check-up before the Ceremony

There is no Handmaid without a Wife or Wife without Handmaid, as this frame illustrates, when June is waiting for a medical check-up the day of the Ceremony. One cannot exist without the other. Indeed, one of Gilead's main sources of metaphor is trying to conceptualize Handmaids and Wives as one being. In episode 4, when Handmaids are explained how to proceed during the Ceremony, Aunt Lydia explains: "The two of you will become one flesh, one flower, waiting to be seeded." In this scene, terror does not only emanate from the intercourse itself but especially from the fact of it taking place in between the Wife's legs, as Moira's face shows. In addition to that, no matter if Wives are among the most powerful people in Gilead, the most urgent desire for a good number of them, to be mothers, proves beyond their reach. They are dependent, and will always be indebted, to the body of their enemies. And so, one of the most important rituals in Gilead is the Ceremony. Not only is it designed to achieve Gilead's main objective, increasing the number of children, but also to endow the Wife with an aura of control, since her consent and support is crucial to everything working out well.

> The Commander knocks at the door. The knock is prescribed: the sitting room is supposed to be Serena Joy's territory, he's supposed to ask permission to enter it. She likes to keep him waiting. It's a little thing, but in this household little things mean a lot. (86)

To this end, the ritual before the Ceremony takes place in the living room, the Wife's quintessential "public" place. In the book, Serena's crying during Ceremony is ridiculed by Offred, which could seem even cruel, echoing the sororophobia of little Elaine's pleasure when another girl was being criticized.

> Serena has begun to cry. I can hear her, behind my back. It isn't the first time. She always does this, the night of the Ceremony. She's trying not to make a noise. She's trying to preserve her dignity, in front of us. The upholstery and the rugs muffle her but we can hear her clearly despite that. The tension between her lack of control and her attempt to suppress it is horrible. It's like a fart in church. I feel, as always, the urge to laugh, but not because I think it's funny. The smell of her crying spreads over us and we pretend to ignore it (90).

In the series, Serena is depicted smoking cigarettes out of nervousness, with glazed eyes, lightly showing her pain and helplessness. In the movie, she follows the ritual serene, serious, slightly stiff. As such, it is easier to empathize with Serena as depicted in the series.

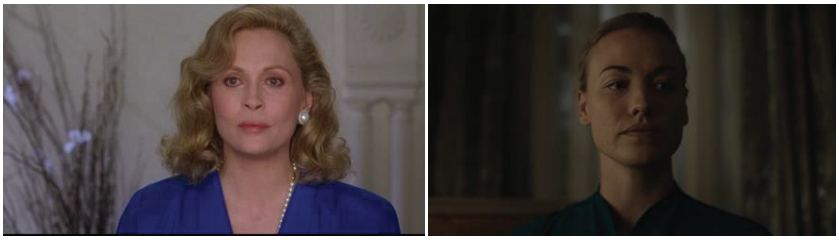

Figure 27. Two different portrayals of Serena during the pre-Ceremony ritual.

"The Ceremony goes as usual," Offred explains, and tries to think of anything to distract from the act itself: "Therefore I lie still and picture the unseen canopy over my head. I remember Queen Victoria's advice to her daughter: Close your eyes and think of England. But this is not England. I wish he would hurry up" (94). In the show, religious music on the background connects the pre-Ceremony ritual and the Bible reading with the act itself. An extreme close up of Offred is first displayed, with a hieratic expression, emotionally distant, and her head jumping due to the Commander's "impacts." Then extreme closeups of different objects are seen: the Commander's watch, his vest, and Serena grabbing her wrists. We also see the same cadence of "impacts" in the body of Serena, with a few shots on her and her face. The three of them, their attitudes and emotions, are extensively considered during the scene.

Then, a wide shot of the whole scene is displayed, conveying the strange situation and position involved in the three of them when trying to become “one being”:

Figure 28. Histrionism and awkwardness are key to the portrayal of the Ceremony in the series.

The closeups in objects and Serena’s hands account for the symbolic violence involved in this scene as explained by Atwood: “My arms are raised; she holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers. This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really means is that she is in control of the process and thus of the product. If any. The rings of her left hand cut into my fingers. It may or may not be revenge” (94). When Commander Waterford is done, an extreme closeup shows us how hard Serena was grasping June’s wrists by the mark left on them, as a visual rendition of their sororophobic tension. Right after the Commander is out, Serena lights a cigarette and says, “Get out.” In this adaptation, Serena only starts to cry when she is already alone.

> The lights were on, as usual, since Serena Joy always avoided anything that would have created an aura of romance or eroticism, however slight: overhead lights, harsh despite the canopy. It was like being on an operating table, in the full glare; like being on a stage (161).

In the film, the scene of the first Ceremony has candles and darkness, endowing it with a sinister and sensual element, with both women's legs exposed [see figure 29]. Their suffering faces are veiled, and the faint cries could be mistaken for moans, as they are accompanied by the Commander's faces of pleasure and the creaks of the bed. Indeed, the Commander is mainly the focus of this scene, not the women. In addition, the depth of the name The Ceremony is lost, as the term appears much later in the film.

While in the series close-ups are preferred, in the film we find medium or general shots. In the series, June's face is shown in a close-up, her body at a sharp angle, with Waterford, her watch, and her ring in close-ups as well. The aural experience of celestial music sharply counterbalances the violence of the visual experience. In addition, Mrs. Waterford's rejection is much more emphasized in the case of the

series. It should be remembered, moreover, that the anxiety following the Ceremony will show us a Kate who presses her breasts against the window, which, surprisingly enough, are fully illuminated by the outside light. In conclusion, the Ceremony as portrayed in the book and in the series serves to convey an extreme sense of sororophobia, highlighting the Wife and the Handmaid's competition by trying to bond them together. In the movie, none of this is taken into consideration, using the scene as a means for sensuality and an aestheticized portrayal of rape.

Figure 29. Schlöndorff's rendition of the Ceremony.

In the novel, while the Ceremony showed the strict hierarchy between the Wife and the Handmaid in the intimacy of the household, the Birth Day was be its equivalent on a social level:

> As I'm going up the steps, wide steps with a stone turn on either side, Ofwarren's Commander must be higher status than ours, I hear another siren. It's the blue Birthmobile, for Wives. That will be Serena Joy, arriving in state. No benches for them, they get real seats, upholstery. They face front and are not curtained off. They know where they're going. (115)

Every detail is intended to show the difference between the two types of women, despite the fact that they both participate, and are fundamental elements, in one of the most important events in Gilead. Wives enjoy a large "buffet: ham, cheese, oranges – they have oranges! – and fresh-baked breads and cakes," drinking from the "coffee urn, and bottles of wine" while Handmaids will get "milk and sandwiches, on a try, later" (116).

Figure 30. In the first picture, Wives, Handmaids, and Aunts share the same space and food. In the second, two spaces are highly differentiated: the Wives, performing the labor, and the Handmaids, who are intended to be with the Handmaid actually in labor. The last picture showcases the Wives' reception room, filled with treats forbidden for Handmaids, especially the desired macarons.

In the movie, however, they are all mixed up, Wives, Handmaids, and Aunts. This does not make any sense considering that it is a highly ritualized event in which every detail must show status. In the series,

on the contrary, Handmaids and Wives have separate rooms. Right at the entrance of the household, Alma jealously points out the smell of coffee emanating from the Wives' room. It is in that room that June is offered the forbidden macaron. In the movie, during labor, jazz music keeps playing in the background, which suggests a laid-back atmosphere. Everything seems a little chaotic, not having a specific place or time. Another curious decision is depicting the Wife helping Janine during labor, while Handmaids are kept at the back, as spectators. They also let her lie down for a moment with the baby, being comforted by the Wife, which, according to the book, would be hard to believe. Serena is not present in this sequence. Thus, the changes made by the movie do not expand, correct, or update the scene, but only reduce the sororophobic tension between Wife and Handmaid in labor, also decreasing potential sisterhood on the most important day for a Handmaid: "One of the women kneels and rubs her back. We are all good at this, we've had lessons" (123), explains Offred in the novel.

Figure 31. The Wife helps Janine during labor instead of other Handmaids.

In the novel, Handmaids are the ones helping the woman in labor, not the Wife, who wears a "ridiculous white cotton nightgown" and sits in the Birthing Stool, which frames Janine (125). As for the show, Janine is introduced in a long sequence showing the entire room in which all the Handmaids are seen chanting together. The walk ends with June approaching Janine and saying, "Hi. You're doing great." From then on, June is by her side throughout her labor, squeezing her right hand, supporting her. Serena is doing the same, at the opposite corner, with the Wife "in labor," thus establishing another reverse mirror.

Figure 32. Janine's labor as depicted in the series. On the left, June approaches Janine to show her support. On the right, June squeezes her hand as well as Serena squeezes the Wife's, placing another reverse mirror.

"We are jubilant, it's a victory, for all of us. We've done it," says Offred when the labor is over (127). The use of "we" indicates the communion they experience, feeling part of something bigger by sticking together, as in, "We stand between Janine and the bed, so she won't have to see this" (127). In the show, that "we" is concretized and embodied in June, who is the first to comfort Janine. This provokes all Handmaids to do the same after her, another example of June progressively becoming a unifying figure for Handmaids. In the movie, it is also Kate who comforts Janine after labor, but it is only the two of them with no one else around. In this sense, the series may have taken up the intimacy proposed by the film's rendition, but accentuates the sisterly aspect.

Figure 33. June comforts Janine, hugs her, and then every maid does the same. This is shown by zooming out from a close-up that shows bonding between two women, to a wider shot, in which a couple of dozen joins them, offering a sense of community.

Regarding sisterhood and sororophobia between Handmaids, it is important to carry out an analysis of the audiovisual treatment of two events of extreme violence in the novel that involve Handmaids exercising violence on other people. The first one is Salvaging, which is the term for public executions in Gilead, and the other, Particicution, in which male criminals are beaten to death by the Handmaids, usually for crimes such as rape. Such acts, especially the Particicution, can be explained as a form of catharsis provided by the state to vent the violence Handmaids suffer in their everyday lives. A "steam valve for the female elements in Gilead" as Professor Pieixoto explains in the Historical Notes (307), through which Gilead gets rid of subversive elements by endowing the oppressed class with a role within

its system of justice and punishment. Two Handmaids and a Wife are hung, and Offred is shown to have mixed feelings about it: on one hand, she begins to "shiver... Hatred fills my mouth like spit" (274); on the other, a dandelion in front of her reminds her of the egg yolk, which makes her feel hungry (274), "This is monstrous, but nevertheless it's true. Death makes me hungry" (277). This scene is filled with bitterness, comparing the women about to be hung with "graduating students who are about to be given prizes" (273), hate (shiver, spit), and indifference (the feeling of hunger), which tells us about Offred's emotional exhaustion at the end of the book. In addition, the Particicution is the punishment to the worst crime a Handmaid can suffer: being raped by a Guardian, who is supposed to protect you, and killing the baby you are carrying as a result (278-279). Offred feels an energy building up, "a murmur, a tremor of readiness and anger. The bodies tense, the eyes are brighter, as if aiming" (278). "There is a bloodlust. I want to tear, gouge, rend. We jostle forward, our heads turn from side to side, our nostrils flare, sniffing death, we look at one another, seeing the hatred. Shooting was too good." (279) For a few moments, they are completely unleashed, free. "Now there are sounds, gasps, a low noise like growling, yells, and the red bodies tumble forward and I can no longer see, he's obscured by arms, fists, feet. A high scream comes from somewhere, like a horse in terror" (279). A cathartic scene follows: "The two Guardians move in, pulling them off, from what's left. Some lie on the grass where they've been hit or kicked by accident. Some have fainted. They straggle away, in twos and threes or by themselves. They seem dazed" (280).

When an agitated Offred asks Ofglen why she was the first to run forward and hit the criminal, she explains to her that the criminal was actually part of the resistance movement: "Don't be stupid. He wasn't a rapist at all, he was a political. He was one of ours. I knocked him out. Put him out of his misery. Don't you know what they're doing to him?" (280). The ecstasy is now counteracted by the fact that this was all a performance, like *1984*'s Two Minutes Hate for Handmaids.

The movie transcodes this scene very literally, able to convey the mass hysteria and the spectacle side of the Salvaging/Particicution. When Aunt Lydia says the last words, "The baby... died!" all of them start running towards the alleged criminal. The enthusiastic applause of the Wives, the chaos, and the

creepy portrayal of Janine at the end, covered in blood and carrying a tuft of hair, show us the darkest side of the Gileadean women, especially the Handmaids.

Figure 34. On the left, Janine is shown in the movie as ecstatic and presumably mentally disturbed. On the right, an enraged June is displayed, next to an ecstatic Handmaid. Janine is pregnant at this point, so she cannot participate.

In the series adaptation, this sequence is divided into two different moments, located in the pilot and in the finale. The Particicution is the first ceremonial execution displayed, with a Guardian convicted of rape. The Gilead theme builds up along with a emotional orchestral theme with strings while Aunt Lydia is making the announcement. Closeups of different Handmaids showing anger and sadness can be seen, as well as June eagerly striking first. Right before Aunt Lydia blew her whistle, June had been told that Moira was caught and sent to the Colonies, dead by then, which disturbed her profoundly and might explain her anger. In this occasion, no counterexplaination is offered about the real origin of the criminal. This could be analysed from two points of view: first, the salvaging is included in the pilot in order to make a more powerful episode that would convince producers, although it was too early in the relationship with Ofglen to make her reveal her involvement in May Day, the source of that information. Second, the portrayal of a common feeling of distress in Handmaids might have been prioritized over a darker depiction of them as profoundly disturbed and eventually alienated, aligned with Gilead. In turn, adaptors might have wanted to start building up a sense of community between them through this type of situation from episode 1. Wives were not present, contrary to Atwood's and the movie's depiction, resulting in an emphazised Handmaid issue instead of a spectacle for the Gileadean society.

The next ceremonial execution takes place at the end of season 1. The first salvaging was on a sunny day, whereas this one takes place when it is snowing hard. When Aunt Lydia announces that Janine is to be stoned to death, the Handmaids start looking at each other, astounded. Ofglen#2, although depicted as completely aligned with Gilead's system up to that moment, is the first one to say something: "Aunt Lydia, come on. We can't do this ... Seriously? Guys, this is insane." She is then struck

hard with a riffle butt and taken away. Shortly after, June overcomes the fear that what happened to Ofglen#2 would likely inspire and moves a few steps forward, saying nothing but looking forward defiantly. Aunt Lydia is in now in front of her, looking at her eyes, waiting for the next move. June's red robe is wrapped by the red patch of the rest of the Handmaids, a color that is emphasized by the white of the snow that surrounds them. Aunt Lydia, on the other hand, is completely alone.

June then extends her arm and drops the stone, fixing her gaze on Aunt Lydia, to whom she says, "I'm sorry, Aunt Lydia." June is quickly mimicked by Alma, a former Red Center friend and her contact with May Day, and then by the rest of the Handmaids. June looks around, with a discreet smile. Evidently, if no other Handmaid had joined her, she would have probably ended up being taken away like Ofglen #2 was.

Figure 35. On the left, wide shot of the Handmaids in a circle and Aunt Lydia alone, facing June. In the center, June looks defiantly at Aunt Lydia, about to throw the stone. On the right, June slightly smiles, proud and satisfied that she has stopped the Particicution, backed by the Handmaids.

The failed Particicution or Salvaging of Janine serves as the first act in which all Handmaids agree to resist a Gilead order. Protecting another Handmaid becomes their first performance of resistance as a group. The next scene shows them marching as an army, with June at the front as a leader and Nina Simone's *Feeling Good* (1965) in the background. A new sense of hope secretly overwhelms them.

Figure 36. The Handmaids return home after the failed Particicution, after which the feeling of sisterhood has been emphasized.

Once at home, and although a black van came for her, June claims to be serene due to how they behaved with Janine: "I tried to make things better, for Hannah. Change the world a little bit." This echoes Atwood's words in the book, although from a completely different perspective: "I feel serene, at peace,

pervaded with indifference. Don't let the bastards grind you down. I repeat this to myself but it conveys nothing. You might as well say, Don't let there be air; or, Don't be" (291). While in Atwood these words show an exhausted, indifferent, hopeless Offred, the writers of the Hulu/MGM production take them up, along with the Salvaging scene, to transform Offred into the black swan who would lead the fight against Gilead based on Handmaids' mutual support.

Finally, and while the May Day resistance movement exists and plays a significant role in Atwood's plot, I argue that the series turns May Day into a resource for amplifying sisterhood, especially regarding the protagonist, June, and her progressive involvement with this movement. In the novel, when Ofglen uses the word "network" to refer to May Day, it makes Offred think of her mother in the sixties, "*Networking* ... musty slang of yesteryear," that essentially meant having lunch with other women (202). Offred is called to join that network, only asked to gather some information about her Commander, which she declines to even try. June, on the other hand, seems slightly reticent the first time, with Ofglen, but then dangerously goes to ask Alma about May Day, claiming that she wants to help. In episode 9, when Alma asks her to go back to Jezebel and collect a secret package, June asks a few questions. She seems a little hesitant to do it, but Alma insists, "Look, you came to me. And this is what they need now. Can they count on you or not?" June takes a short time to answer: "Ok. I'll try," in a low voice. At Jezebel's, she fails to collect the package, but convinces Moira to do it instead: "Risking your life because Alma said so? Fuckin' Alma?" asks Moira, who tells her to go home and behave instead. June goes on and says that, even believing her to be dead, she "didn't give up like a coward." June then continues: "Moira, do not, do not let them grind you down [translation of *Nolite...*]. You keep your fucking shit together [Moira's words in the past]. You fight." Visibly affected, Moira replies, "I was doing all right until I saw you again" and leaves. As a potential leader, June is proven able to ignite other people's spirits, since Moira finally changes her mind, helps her with the mission, and has success in crossing the border.

Alma, the aforementioned collegue at the Red Center and later contact with May Day, is used to explain the sororophobic dynamics between Handmaids. In episode 10, in a flashback back in June's first days at the Red Center, a voice over says:

> There was a way we looked at each other at the Red Center. For a long time I couldn't figure out what was it exactly. That expression in their eyes. In my eyes. Because before, in real life, you didn't ever see it. Not more than a glimpse. It was never something that could last for days. It could never last for years (June's voiceover, episode 10).

Although Alma is actually shown to be her friend at the Red Center (they are happy to see each other when they meet in the Salvaging in episode 1), she gives the impression of being her enemy in these frames, which seems a little exaggerated. I argue that the decision of choosing the character of Alma for this scene allows an analogy between the ideas that "those who are enemies in Gilead will be allies in May Day" and "those who are competitors in a patriarcal system will be allies in sisterhood," stating that sororophobia is something circumstantial that can be overcome, which ultimately seems to contradict Atwood's depictions of highly complex long-term sororophobia in *Cat's Eye* and *The Robber Bride*.

Figure 37. A shot reverse shot displaying the sororophobic tension, especially distrust, between a newcomer June and Alma.

Shown once again in the marching scene, June says in voice over, "We don't look at each other that way anymore. It's their own fault. They should have never given us uniforms if they didn't want us to be an army." She then turn her head towards Alma in a look of mutual, although secret, understanding. June discreetly smiles. In figure 19, related to episode 4, *Nolite...*, they marched for the first time "as an army." Now, besides that, June and Alma look at each other, which means communication and a sign of trust. I argue that this type of scene, with Handmaids walking and filled with a sense of sisterhood, is the one that has been mimicked in Women's Marches using Handmaid's robes.

Figure 38. The sororophobia shown in figure 39 has been overcome.

Finally, the Eyes come to get Offred. Not having clarified why, it can only be assumed that Offred made a huge mistake using the term "May Day" when asking Ofglen#2 about Ofglen#1. It could also be a way out planned by Nick, although he did not seem very worried about her in their last encounters. Either

way, Atwood preferred to give us an open ending in which we had to choose: "Your choice, reader's choice. I like the reader to participate writing the book," stated Atwood in an interview (Lyons 227). Thus, adaptations must decide to either keep the ending open or pick between one of the possible readings. In both the series and the movie, the adaptors, as readers, preferred to give the protagonist a happy ending. In the case of the movie, Kate's help during Moira's escape helps to justify her murder of the Commander and later rescue by the rebels, although, to Linda Hutcheon, the happy ending of Schlöndorff's production to Atwood's dark and dystopic is as a way to mute tragedy or horror (40). This decision could be analysed as a structural superimposition on a broader "familiarly patterned plot of rising and falling action, with a clear beginning, middle, and end" (40). Oddly enough, Kate's voiceover appears in the last scene, acompanied by light symphonic music, portrayed pregnant and safe in the mountains, waiting for Nick. In the different scripts for the movie included in the Pinter Archives, Gile explains, the conclusions are largely the same: the Commander is killed by Kate, Nick helps Kate to escape, and Kate makes her way up to Canada (319).

Figure 39. On the left, a pregnant Kate looks at the mountains, waiting for Nick. At the center, June hugs Rita and confides her with the May Day package, the Handmaids' letters. On the right, Serena confronts June a last time (in season 1).

The show, on the other hand, presents an ambiguous ending in the finale of season 1, but the story goes on with June as its protagonist in the following seasons, so her fate must be revealed. As such, season 2 will show us that Aunt Lydia ordered the black van in order to pretend the Handmaids were to be hanged; it was retailation for refusing to engage in Janine's Particicution. Later in the episode, Nick finds a way to get her out, and her attempt to escape lasts two episodes. In some way, the adaptors manage to explore both endings.

In the book, Rita stays in the kitchen when Offred is taken by the Eyes. In the show, June hugs Rita and entrusts the May Day package hidden behind the tub to her. As for Serena, she tries to find out why they are taking June, like in the book, but maybe more insistently. Serena's "Bitch ... After all he did

for you" in the book became "What did you do? After all we've done for you," followed by June setting herself free from Serena grasping her arm. Right before entering the black van, she looks one last time at them, and defiantly looks at the van, ready to face whatever fate is waiting for her. Compared to the series, the movie seems a TV drama, fast, full of action but lacking tension and dialogue. The series, in turn, offers a deep psychological depiction of a good amount of its characters, and closes the first season by leaving an uplifting feeling in the viewers, which somehow neutralizes Atwood's gloomy ending but also connects the series' ending with the hope of Gilead eventually ceasing to exist one day, as depicted in the book by the symposium/Orwell's Newspeak sections.

Conclusions

> As all historians know, the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes. Voices may reach us from it; but what they say to us is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come; and, try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day (HT 311).

When adapting a novel, the story reveals itself as filled with silences and echoes. In some way, it is adaptors' task to try to decipher these silences and echoes and propose a coherent reading, generally trying to make the story clearer and more relevant for their target audience.

In the case of the movie adaptation, the larger need for synthesis led Schlöndorff's production to keep the most striking events of the story, portraying them with vibrant colors and generally wide shots. Those subplots or scenes of the book that delve more subtly into other issues, sorophobic dynamics in particular, have been simplified, removed (any kind of flashback, for example), or ended up being superficial and irrelevant.

The specifics of series adaptations, which, compared to a film adaptation, enjoy the advantage of having a longer running time, allowed Hulu's production to provide deeper psychological portrayals by delving into the character's pasts in a clear strategy of expansion. A better understanding of the characters' attitudes and decisions in the present is fundamental to Atwood's fiction, and was totally ignored in the film.

As spectators, we connect extraordinarily with the series' protagonist, June, thanks to voiceover. Only the audience has access to this voice, creating a significant intimacy also supported by continuous close-ups of June, which results in a sort of physical empathy with the audience almost impossible to achieve in the telling mode, in line with June's relationship with her body. Moreover, there is a feeling in the series that everything is connected in order to convey a specific message related to June and her evolution, for which having a tight-knit production and writing team was essential. In the movie, on the other hand, Kate's behavior at times seems hard to understand (killing the Commander, for instance), and some scenes present a lack of meaning or coherence. The ongoing issues during the writing and shooting as previously described may account for this.

Regarding the sororophobic dynamics, the main focus of this dissertation, it is argued that they become almost irrelevant in the portrayal proposed by the movie, setting aside a crucial issue from the novel and in Atwood's fiction in general. Matrophobia is nonexistent, and while Janine only operates as a trigger to move the story forward, Ofglen is rendered absolutely irrelevant with the exception of her revelation during the Particicution. The lack of greater ties in the past between Kate and Moira make it difficult to build their relationship, although a case of transference from Moira's subplot to Kate's has been noted, which may have been taken up by the series adaptors. If Atwood's Moira was a complement for Offred, since Moira embodied the boldness that she lacked, including June/Kate in some situations that were specific to Moira leads to a highly decreased sororophobia in both adaptations.

Hulu's production interprets the sororophobic dynamics as a key topic, but deals with them differently. First, excluding the mother's subplot in season 1 impedes a potential parallel between the second wave feminists burning pornographic magazines and Gilead destroying any type of magazine aiming at women's sexual freedom. But most importantly, the relationship between mother and daughter as a place to negotiate difference is almost equally ignored, only conveyed in a single episode in season 2. On the other hand, the sororophobia between Wives and Handmaids is highly empathized, even amplified, in the case of the series. Serena Joy, echoing the novel, becomes an inverse mirror for June that helps her to configure herself by means of contrast, highlighting June's alliance with other Handmaids. Losing some complexity is inevitable in this type of transcoding, and so the series has

managed to express the sororophobic dynamics as a more visual experience, especially through the use of mirrors and shot-reverse shots. As for the movie, I argue that the lack of a common interpretation of the novel among the film crew (screenwriter, director, actors) has led to a reading of the story's sororophobia that is meaningless and chaotic. This can be seen especially in the case of Wives and Handmaids, as they share spaces and cooperate in situations that should be clearly delimited and hierarchized, as during the Ceremony or the Birth Day. As for the Aunts, Hulu's portrayal of Aunt Lydia expands the character by endowing her with a sense of tenderness that humanizes her, simultaneously positioning her as one of the great antagonists of the story. Meanwhile, the movie remains "faithful" to the original Lydia, keeping her as a distant figure that never addresses Offred/Kate directly.

Throughout the series, June gradually gains more influence and starts being portrayed as a potential leader, opening up new conflicts for future seasons. This aligns with the decision of casting Elisabeth Moss, known for her role in *Mad Men*, in which she portrays the transformation of an intelligent woman from secretary to copy director at an advertising agency. As Atwood explains in an interview for *Vulture*, "*Handmaid's Tale* is ordinary people in extraordinary times. The book is. The television series is turning that ordinary person into an extraordinary person" (Young). From that point of view, Atwood's women, and Offred in particular, are more flawed than Hulu's June and other women, but also more realistic. Atwood's female characters are far from perfect, as it has been explored through her lecture "Spotty-Handed Villainesses" and Kapuscinski's analysis.

Along with this transformation of June, her relationships with other Handmaids are based more on cooperation and mutual support than in the book, where there is always a shadow of mistrust. The case of Janine is highly significant, since June assimilates a humiliating situation originally experienced by Janine in the book, while Janine remains a dangerous element until the end in Atwood's novel. Sisterhood thus becomes a main element in the portrayal of the most oppressed women in the show, Marthas and Handmaids, especially among the latter, turning June into a unifying figure for them. In the movie, Kate is as isolated as in the book, this adaptation being more "faithful" to the source story.

Casting Natasha Richardson, on the other hand, reflects the film's turn towards erotic thriller, with a strong focus on the protagonist's sexual relationships with the Commander and Nick, giving the

story a happy and romantic ending. A more romantic subplot is a rereading of Nick that both adaptations have in common. The visual transcoding of the sororophobic dynamics in the film have been proven confusing and reflect a mixed message. As such, although the movie adaptation is more "faithful" to the novel in terms of lines of dialogue and the order of events, it fails in what the aural/visual experience can contribute. The need to adjust the narrative to Hollywood style and the influence of some tropes of the nineties, like the dangerous blonde in erotic thrillers, might have been a case of superimposition. The series adaptation, in turn, presents more transformations regarding June's evolution and her relationships with other women while remaining faithful to an important part of the original spirit. Expansion, especially regarding other characters' past, and the undertaking of a correction or update, not only including LGTB issues and color-blind casting (Robinson 17), but also June's perspective on sex and gender, have been proven to be the main strategies throughout this adaptation when dealing with sororophobic dynamics. While in the novel Offred is overpowered by fear and mistrust and refuses to join the resistance, in the series the boundaries (the difference) with other Handmaids and Marthas are progressively diluted, the tension shown to be easier to overcome in the series, which renders less problematic the idea of mutual support and sisterhood, specifically regarding May Day and June's involvement. Regarding Aunts and Wives, the boundaries in turn are accentuated and complexified. I argue that this depiction of Offred as progressively braver and more determined, moving from the inner realm (Offred) towards the outer realm (Kate, June) and accompanied by less problematized sororophobic dynamics among Handmaids and between Handmaids and Marthas, eventually leading to mutual support, is fully in line with the series' positive reception in the #MeToo era.

As a result, the reception of the film was terrible, to say the least, while the series was a great success. Charlie Kauffmann called *The Handmaid's Tale* screenplay "by far [Pinter's] worst" (as qtd. in Gile 319), and, to Sophie Gilbert, Schlöndorff's use of striking shades of blue and green, and a synthesized soundtrack more suitable for a "1980s horror film," made the movie enter "the realm of melodrama," in line with Roger Ebert's review, which also criticized "Richardson's passivity." To Peter Travers, the Ceremony was "as erotic as a gynecological exam" and Richardson's "transitions from

widow to handmaid to secret lover of the Commander's chauffeur ... to underground rebel to assassin happen so fast that her emotions barely have time to register," leading him to call the script a "binge." To him, Hollywood had once again transformed a "challenging book into negligible cinema." Rita Kempley claimed that the director seemed "as uncomfortable in this feminist nightmare as a man in a lingerie department." After the film's production cost $13 million, it grossed less than $5 million, which led Gilbert to conclude her article for *The Atlantic* in 2015 by saying that it was possible that neither audiences nor the film industry were ready for a new *Handmaid's Tale*. How wrong she was.

The series' reviews were overwhelmingly positive. On *Rotten Tomatoes*, the series has a score of 94% from critics and 90% from the public. The reviews largely praise its "emotional and intellectual impact" (Brian T. Carney), its understanding of "the tone and message of the original novel, perfectly replacing pure reflection for emotion" (John Tones), or its rendition of the "personal perspective of June" (Annalee Netwitz). Among the bad reviews, it was criticized for their decision of not dealing with racial issues (Cate Young). Angelica Jade Bastién claimed that "the conversation around *The Handmaid's Tale*" had become a "feminist war cry," also supported by Arielle Bernstein when she says that "the image of red robed and white bonneted women from the classic feminist text has become as celebrated as Rosie the Riveter," to the point that the series had "become the quintessential feminist text of 2018." According to her, there was a "pressing feeling among many feminists that watching The Handmaid's Tale is *important*." Sarah Jones added that "Texas is Gilead and Indiana is Gilead and now that Mike Pence is our vice president, the entire country will look more like Gilead, too" (Sarah Jones). Although not all of them agree in how feminist this show is in reality, they all seem to argue that it has become a crucial text for feminism as a movement.

To understand its success it is important to consider how the adaptation, being released in the late 2010s, could have ultimately connected with the social activism of the fourth wave, helping to increase the story's level of reproduction through a clear-cut visual language turned into symbols, memes, art works, costumes, fan fiction, etc. Indeed, one of the strengths of Hulu's adaptation is the creation of its own visual language, in which the tremendous care put into the costume design (colors, fabrics, hidden symbols), whose process is recounted in detail in the book *The Art and Making of The*

Handmaid's Tale (Titan Books, 2019), might have contributed substantially to the success of the adaptation. Van Dam and Polak explain that Hulu's striking visual and verbal language has become a "widely recognized shorthand for activism against oppressive, often explicitly 'pro-life', tendencies in government on all levels in and outside of the US" (184).

Thus, a steady trickle of protests, first in the US, and then all over the world, started to take place shortly after Hulu's release on April 26, 2017, even before the show's official release. Imitating a Hulu promotional event during the South by Southwest festival in Austin (Elderkin), a group of women dressed as Handmaids marched towards the State Capitol protesting against several anti-abortion measures (Canfield). Six weeks later, the same thing happened in Missouri (Liptak). In April, a website called The Handmaid's Coalition appeared in New Hampshire to call for a protest where participants would wear the Handmaids' attire. This website used to host a manual called *The Handmaid's Guide*, which offered tips on preparing the costumes. Regional groups later appeared in Illinois, Massachusetts, Ohio, Michigan, Washington DC, Alabama... Internationally, the Handmaid's costumes reached Poland, when Trump visited Warsaw in July 2017 (O'Neil), Ireland in September 2017 and North Ireland in May 2018 during protests against strict abortion laws. They reached London, also during Trump's visit to UK in July 2017; Croatia, in early 2018, to protest violence against women; and finally Argentina, as previously explored. In 2023, the abortion debate persists after the overturn of Roe vs. Wade, which has paved the way for individual states to curtail abortion rights. Suspicion of *The Handmaid's Tale* being banned in high schools is almost permanent, as was the case in February 2023 in Madison County, Virginia (Atwood, "Go ahead..."). In 2019, in Georgia, some students had proposed to discuss the novel in class, thanks perhaps to the popularity of the Hulu's production. Two complaints were made to the district's board due to its "vulgarity and sexual overtones" (Tatar). The last demonstration using the Handmaid's outfit dates from March 2023, in which Israeli women's rights activists saw the rise of Netanyahu's conservative, religious government as a threat for women: "Women are going to be the first to be harmed," declared a protester to *AP* (Goldenberg and Scharf).

When asked about the story becoming the "launching pad for so many global protests and movements," Margaret Atwood answered that Hulu's production was "an example of a work escaping

from its frame -its box- and coming alive through the imagination of its readers [or adaptors]," and that she could no longer say that it was "her" *Handmaid's Tale*: "It seems to have taken on a life of its own that is not under the control of its first creator (me) and its other creators (the makers of the show)" (Robinson 11). As such, some might see these protests as the result of an exciting transformation of the story that, thanks to adaptation, now connects to the concerns of our time. Others may see it as a major transformation whose outcome has been the simplification of the characters and their relationships, a betrayal of Atwood's original spirit of complex sororophobia and her alignment with the feminism of difference. In both cases, Atwood's Handmaids have become, through adaptation, "immediately recognizable," even for someone who has not read the novels or seen the series (Van Dam and Polak 185). Frankenstein's transformation by movies, although it turned him into a dumb and clumsy monster, also makes us seek an encounter with the brilliant and deeply human Creature two hundred years after the novel's publication. The power in stories lies in their potential for new meanings and new ways of telling them.

Perhaps the omnipresence of protesters costumed as Handmaids and their transformation into a feminist symbol will stir more readers' interest in Atwood's fiction. There, they will not only discover the complexity of Offred's character and her ongoing "negotiation of similarity and difference, identity and separation" (Michie 8) with other women, but, intrigued, they will eventually get to know Elaine and her complicated long-term relationship with Cordelia, or the strange and tense balance between Roz, Charis, and Tony, and why was Zenia so significant for them. By doing so, they might discover a little piece of themselves, as has happened to me.

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Annex: Paratextual Analysis

Figure 40. Posters and promotional pictures of both adaptations.

According to Gérard Genette, any text surrounding the publication of a work, that is, its title, subtitle, prefaces, forewords, book covers, illustrations, and so on, significantly impacts the manner we receive it. Regarding movies and TV series, posters and promotional photos are the main paratext that should be considered, since they set expectations on a very emotional or subconscious level, compared to reading reviews, for example. On the left, the theatrical release poster for the 1990's Schlöndorff's adaptation displays a beautiful and blonde Natasha Richardson, eyes down, bare shoulders, holding a dress or fabric that may fall at any moment. Her hair and nails look perfect, as if she had just come out of a beauty salon. The next poster, the German version, delves into the exposure of a Handmaid's body – since there is no face, it remains unknown whether it is Richardson's body or not. The characterization as an erotic thriller, with someone naked whose hands are tied behind their back, is then highlighted and reminds us of Atwood's words in 1987: "It could have been a total disaster ... a S & M exploitation, a sensationalist movie of the worst kind" (Hancock 217). In other posters, the title "A psychosexual movie shocker" will be added at the top of the composition.

As for the series, the Handmaid's body is this time more contextualized: first, as regards to a soldier and the Wall, second, as part of a Gilead's symbol. If the motto in the first poster referred to Kate from a passive perspective ("every woman's fear"), the Hulu's motto calls for action, establishing a *We*, a sort of community: "We will bear no more". Although mainly covered by a thick cloak and ample wings, her eyes can be noticed trying to make eye contact with the viewers, as if trying to tell a secret, while keeping the Handmaid's required posture. She is shown full body, occupying approximately two thirds

of the length of the poster, compared to the soldier, standing up, but cut in half. The far-right poster focuses on the visual language, red and white as the Handmaids' distinctive colors, and sets Margaret Atwood as the sole reference to authorship. Margaret Atwood also appears in the German poster, but slightly camouflaged between the screenwriter Harold Pinter and the director Volker Schlöndorff, the latter in larger font.