

# Language, Power, and Responsibility in *The Handmaid's Tale*: Toward a Discourse of Literary Gossip

The sheer ubiquity of gossip in literature, from Chaucer's *Wife of Bath* to Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* to Atwood's *Handmaids*, suggests the importance of developing a theory of gossip that would account for the variety of ways in which gossip functions in literary texts. Although gossip as a socio-cultural phenomenon has received serious attention from both sociologists and anthropologists since the mid 1960s and new books on the subject continue to be published (Brison 1992; Bergmann 1993), the attention paid to gossip in literature has been less substantial. Patricia Meyer Spacks' *Gossip* (1985) is probably the best recent effort to bring the implications of theoretical models of gossip drawn from other areas of cultural study to bear on literary gossip and on literary forms themselves. In many ways, however, Spacks' thesis that gossip engenders and sustains a potentially subversive female community might be seen as a feminist re-vision of the well-established position within social anthropology that gossip and scandal "have important positive values" since they "maintain the unity, morals and values of social groups" (Gluckman 308). Anthropologist Max Gluckman's "Gossip and Scandal" (1963), which has dominated discussions of the subject since its publication with its focus on the stabilizing function of gossip based on its reinforcement of moral norms, has made Gluckman himself into gossip's central apologist. Tacitly rejecting the traditional notion that gossip is simply empty chatter, Gluckman argues that gossip is a principal factor in defining and sustaining distinct social groups within larger communities precisely because of its

nature as an exclusivist discourse. Like Mikhail Bakhtin's sociolinguistics, Gluckman's notion of discourse is informed by the shared assumptions that "generate a community of value judgments" ("Discourse" 397). Rather than reinforcing universal norms, or more accurately, those of the dominant ideology, gossip always orients itself around the codes of a specific social group, binding it together in the process. Although Gluckman's interests lie elsewhere, the implications of his argument for a feminist treatment of gossip are not hard to see.

Building on Gluckman's conclusions about gossip as a mechanism of group preservation, Spacks extrapolates a theory of gossip that is explicitly motivated toward a consideration of women's discourse. Through her study of gossip in the Anglo-American novelistic tradition, Spacks identifies a continuum of intent on which different kinds of gossip are provisionally defined. At one end, gossip appears motivated by pure malice, generating in the gossipier "an immediately satisfying sense of power" (4); poised at the center, "idle talk" operates "[w]ithout purposeful intent" except to protect the gossipers from serious engagement with one another (5). At the other pole lies what Spacks calls "serious gossip," "which exists only as a function of intimacy" (5). As Spacks explains, this type of gossip is not concerned with informational content, but rather is solely focussed on "the relationship such gossip expresses and sustains" through its very form as intimate, dialogic conversation. In an attempt to resuscitate gossip's originary etymological sense, from the Old English *godsibb*, and the positive associations of bonding, community and shared experience that it implies, Spacks concentrates her study on this "serious" pole of her "crude taxonomy" (6) while she simultaneously insists that "even malicious gossip may possess a positive value" (34). For Spacks, that value originates in the personal since gossip "releas[es] people from the prison of their own thoughts" (43), but inevitably moves outward to embrace the concerns of a larger social community: "Gossip, of course, demands a process of relatedness among its participants; its *I*'s inevitably turn into a *we*" (261). Aligning her argument that gossip often works to empower subordinate groups with Deborah Jones' notion of a "speech community" that is "a key to the female subculture" (Jones 248), Spacks exposes the moral attack on gossip as the dominant (male) discourse's attempt to foreclose upon the circulation of potentially subversive ideologies. For Spacks, as for many other feminist writers, gossip "embodies an alternative discourse to that of public life and

a discourse potentially challenging to public assumptions; it provides language for an alternative culture. . . .A rhetoric of inquiry, gossip questions the established” (46).

By locating herself within the province of communal rhetoric, however, Spacks leaves her argument open to the same kinds of criticism that have plagued Gluckman himself. As Robert Paine argues in his rebuttal to Gluckman’s theory, “What Is Gossip About? An Alternative Hypothesis” (1967), “[i]t is the individual and not the community that gossips” (281). By shifting his emphasis away from the community that Gluckman prizes, Paine suggests importance of surveying the motives of gossip production from the ground floor, recognizing that an individual’s discourse is always directed towards his or her own self-interests before those of the group. In fact, the chief criticism of Gluckman’s position has been his refusal to do just that: “[His] argument commits a category mistake that is typical of functionalist explanations because it implicitly foists its determination of the latent function of gossip on the gossipers as a goal” (Bergmann 145). Consequently, Gluckman must completely ignore gossip’s social disrepute, treating it only as “an erroneous opinion...that needs to be disproved” (Bergmann 144), lest the essential contradiction between gossip’s simultaneously destructive and preservative powers undermine the premise of his argument. In much the same way, Spacks attempts to salvage the “positive” aspects of gossip by circumscribing her subject: concentrating her discussion on the socially productive mode of “serious gossip” even as she acknowledges that “to take a positive view involves suspending consciousness of gossip’s destructive force and considering what besides animus against others it may involve” (34). Like Gluckman, Spacks excuses gossip’s often malicious content by insisting that “[r]educed to means rather than ends, aggression serves alliance” (57). Although this may be functionally true, one is still left with an unsatisfying argument that fails to adequately account for the ways in which individuals use gossip to further their own interests.

**A** different approach might examine how individuals use gossip to empower themselves through the imaginative appropriation of other people’s lives as story. As Rachel M. Brownstein notes, “Gossip, like novels, is a way of turning life into story. Good gossip approximates art” (cited in Spacks 13). To regard literary gossip as a metafiction is in large part

to relocate the significance of gossip in the novel from community to individual. Following from Paine's thesis that gossip is a personal discourse motivated by the self-interests of the gossiper, my argument suggests that although gossip often does function as a mechanism for preserving social groups, there are also ways in which literary gossip is intimately linked to a process of metafictional self-construction. By examining the ways in which Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* not only articulates gossip's positive potential, but also tests the limits of its power and suggests the possible dangers of its method, my argument will not simply catalogue gossip's effects, but attempt to discover *how* gossip functions in a literary text. Specifically, by locating *The Handmaid's Tale* in relation to the competing linguistic assumptions of theorists like Jacques Derrida and Mikhail Bakhtin, I will attempt to show ways in which such theories provide suggestive models for structuring the workings of gossip and in turn, how Atwood's treatment of gossip itself might furnish a valuable model for interrogating their assumptions.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, gossip seems to function along precisely the same lines as those laid out by Spacks in her thesis. Representing the Handmaids' gossip as the discourse of a women's subculture, Atwood shows how gossip "provides a resource for the subordinated. . . a crucial means of self expression, a crucial form of solidarity" (Spacks 5) by locating it within the context of the paradigmatically oppressive Gileadean state. The images of confinement that Roberta Rubenstein describes as characterizing the Handmaids' experience, such as "the physically confining rooms, walls and other actual boundaries of the Republic of Gilead [which] corroborate the condition of reproductive 'confinement' to which the Handmaids are subject" (103), might also be expanded to include their confining silence. In which case, gossip itself is transformed into a crucial balm for isolation. As Lucy M. Freibert observes, "[t]he formulaic speech patterns imposed on the Handmaids, 'Blessed be the fruit', 'May the Lord open', 'Praise be' [9] . . . , serve to perpetuate the religious nature of their role and *to prevent practical conversation*" (284; my emphasis). In fact, the suppression of practical conversation in Gilead, like the dominant ideology's suppression of gossip in Spacks' study, seems to reflect "the justifiable anxiety of the dominant about the aggressive impulses of the submissive" (Spacks 30). More importantly, however, for the rigidly monitored Handmaids, whose prescribed and ritualized actions and speech constantly serve to isolate them from

their own social group, gossip represents the almost unimaginable possibility of social contact. Offred's yearning for precisely this kind of community is apparent in her desire to gossip with the Marthas, Rita and Cora:

. . .and we would sit at Rita's kitchen table, which is not Rita's any more than my table is mine, and we would talk, about aches and pains, illnesses, our feet, our backs, all the different kinds of mischief that our bodies, like unruly children, can get up to. We would nod our heads as punctuation to each other's voices, signalling that yes, we know all about it. We would exchange remedies and try to outdo each other in the recital of our physical miseries; gently we would complain, our voices soft and minor-key and mournful as pigeons in eaves troughs. *I know what you mean*, we'd say. Or, a quaint expression you sometimes hear, still, from older people: *I hear where you're coming from*, as if the voice itself were a traveller, arriving from a distant place. Which it would be, which it is.

How I used to despise such talk. Now I long for it. At least it was talk. An exchange of sorts. (10-11)

Offred's emphasis on mutual exchange, on the quality of voice itself, "soft and minor-key and mournful as pigeons in eaves troughs" and on the choral support, "*I know what you mean*," "*I hear where you're coming from*," betray her desire for human contact as a goal of the utterance itself that will validate her personal experience and locate her within a social group that is distinctly her own. As the focus of this passage suggests, the domestic gossip that she longs for, what Deborah Jones calls "chatting," is prized not for its content, but for the intimate relationship it expresses, for the "continuous chorus and commentary on the incidents of women's daily lives" it provides "in an evaluative process that also provides emotional support" (Jones 248). Significantly, Offred positions her current longings for mutual disclosure against her own former derision of "such talk" and the entire tradition of moral censure that it implies. Offred's nostalgia for this kind of gossip about the old quotidian (ours) in which women's bodies might be seen as something other than "walking wombs" emphatically suggests that Atwood, like Jones and Spacks, is taking a revisionist stance by proposing to focus on the 'positive' value of gossip as a social bonding agent.

Gossip's functional value as a mechanism for sustaining social groups attains its ultimate form in the Mayday underground's institutionalization of gossip in the nefarious "grapevine." Transformed by the radicalization of late twentieth-century contexts in Gileadean society, the grapevine, once a transparent euphemism for the movement of gossip itself, takes on a central role in the Mayday underground as a network of information acquisition and dissemination. Although functionally similar to "chatting," Mayday's

grapevine literalizes gossip's latent ability to define a coherent social group in the form of a password that confirms or denies individual membership:

"Who told you?" I say. There's no one near, we can speak more freely, but out of habit we keep our voices low.

"The grapevine," she says. She pauses, looks sideways at me, I sense the blur of white as her wings move. "There's a password," she says.

"A password?" I ask. "What for?"

"So you can tell," she says. "Who is and who isn't." (190)

Significantly, even the password itself, "Mayday," points to a community of mutual assistance and support. For Offred, the password takes on the value of its acoustic equivalent, "M'aidez" (42), the polite French second-person plural which literally means, "*you* (plural), help *me*." By speaking the password, a member creates with language an entire community of support. However, the value of gossip for the Mayday resistance is not simply the solidarity it provides. In fact, Offred's realization—"There is an *us* then, there's a *we*. I knew it" (158)—prompted by her introduction to the Mayday organization, is largely a side-effect—a function—of this gossip's explicitly political agenda. As the language of the (un)official political resistance, the grapevine is emblematic of gossip's subversive potential.

In a similar way, Offred imagines the subversive possibilities for the language of an alternative ideology even in everyday gossip, since it too can be a conduit of forbidden knowledge:

The Marthas know things, they talk amongst themselves, passing the unofficial news from house to house. Like me, they listen at doors, no doubt, and see things even with their eyes averted. I've heard them at it sometimes, caught whiffs of their private conversations. *Stillborn, it was. Or, stabbed with a knitting needle, right in the belly. Jealousy, it must have been, eating her up. Or, tantalizingly, it was toilet cleaner she used. Worked like a charm, though you'd think he'd of tasted it. Must've been that drunk; but they found her out all right.* (11)

Like chatting, gossip about the private lives of social superiors does promote alliance among the gossipers in that it identifies them as belonging to the same social sub-group. This unofficial news, "passed from house to house," serves the same function as the women's lip-read names exchanged "from bed to bed" (4); the sugar packets stolen to comfort Moira, "hand[ed] from bed to bed" (87); or the story of Moira's escape "passed among us that night, in the semi-darkness, under our breath, from bed to bed" (125) at the Rachel and Leah Center. Gossip traveling from house to house or bed to bed is an image of alliance, solidarity, and resistance that defines and sustains a distinct social 'we'.

Like the Mayday grapevine, however, the Marthas' gossip is valuable not simply for the purpose of alliance it serves, but for the way in which it undercuts the representative figures of the dominant ideology. Gossip about a Wife overcome by jealousy and a Commander slain by toilet bowl cleaner works subversively to deflate the power of those in charge, even as it ostensibly reinscribes the dominant morality: "*but they found her out all right.*" As Offred later notices, the story of Moira's escape from the Center, that whittles away at the power of the establishment, works in precisely the same way: "In the light of Moira, the Aunts were less fearsome and more absurd. Their power had a flaw to it. They could be shanghaied in toilets. The audacity was what we liked" (125). In keeping with the subversive nature of gossip, the Marthas' retreat to established values might be seen in the context of Paine's suggestion that "gossipers always pursue the goal of exploiting the values and moral ideas to which they implicitly or explicitly refer in their information in order to promote their own interests" (Bergmann 147). In this way, the Marthas can reap the benefits of empowerment inherent in subversive gossip without placing themselves at risk in a landscape populated by ears and Eyes.

In more complex ways, the gossip between Moira and Offred at the Rachel and Leah Center reveals its value as a parodic tool for the suppressed:

What we're aiming for, says Aunt Lydia, is a spirit of camaraderie among women. We must all pull together.

Camaraderie, shit, says Moira through the hole in the toilet cubicle. Right fucking on, Aunt Lydia, as they used to say. How much do you want to bet she's got Janine down on her knees? What do you think they get up to in that office of hers? I bet she's got her working away on that dried-up, hairy old withered—

Moira! I say.

Moira what? she whispers. You know you've thought it.

It doesn't do any good to talk like that, I say, feeling nevertheless the impulse to giggle. (208)

Returning to Brownstein's remark that gossip is a form of the artistic, Moira's parodic reinterpretation of Aunt Lydia's rhetoric of "camaraderie" ("we must all pull together") as a grotesque forbidden sexual encounter highlights the performative possibilities of gossip when used subversively. As Mikhail Bakhtin suggests, "parodic travesty 'mimicry'. . .rips the word away from its object, disunifies the two, shows that a given straightforward generic word," in this case Aunt Lydia's patriotic and implicitly suppressive rhetoric, "is one-sided, bounded, incapable of exhausting the object; the

process of parodying forces us to experience those sides of the object that are not otherwise included in a given genre or style. Parodic-travesty literature introduces the permanent corrective of laughter, of a critique on the one-sidedness of the lofty direct word, the corrective of reality that is always richer, more fundamental and most importantly *too contradictory and heteroglot* to be fit into a high and straightforward genre” (*Dialogic* 55). In her travesty of Aunt Lydia’s Word, manifested in gossip, Moira rejects the one-sidedness of Gilead’s communal rhetoric for the ludicrous propaganda it is, asserting the primacy of her own experience. At the same time, she suggests something of gossip’s power to perpetuate “the permanent corrective of laughter,” much like Spacks’ “rhetoric of inquiry” that “questions the established.”

Even Offred herself, the reluctant auditor of Moira’s parodic verbal performance who stifles a giggle, eventually embraces the power gossip represents as she admits, “It does so do good. It does”; “There is something powerful in the whispering of obscenities, about those in power. There’s something delightful about it, something naughty, secretive, forbidden, thrilling. It’s like a spell, of sorts. It deflates them, reduces them to the common denominator where they can be dealt with” (208).

In fact, the magic Offred recognizes is gossip’s power to cripple utterly the authority of the elite by objectifying and appropriating their life as story. The spell to which she refers recalls Spacks’ suggestion that gossip’s appeal is based in “the ancient belief in the magic of language,” and the notion that “telling stories takes possession of others’ experience” (11). As Roland Barthes suggests in his scathing moral indictment, “Gossip reduces the other to *he/she*, and this reduction is intolerable to me. . . . The third-person pronoun is a wicked pronoun: it is the pronoun of the non-person, it absents, it annuls” (cited in Spacks 34). For Offred, however, gossip that deflates authority by objectifying it in language, reducing it to a manageable fiction, is an essential coping device and a testament to gossip’s almost supernatural power.

**N**ancy M. Freibert would likewise attribute enormous power to the story-teller in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. “Although forced into complicity by fear during her three postings,” says Freibert, “Offred, once freed, threatens the system by telling her tale.” And again, “Atwood demonstrates through Offred that women, able to take risks and tell stories, may



transcend their conditioning, establish their identity, joyfully reclaim their bodies, find their voices and reconstruct the social order” (285). These claims for the power of language sound suspiciously like those made by Spacks herself when she calls gossip “a weapon for outsiders” that “incorporates the possibility that people utterly lacking in social power may affect the views of figures who make things happen in the public sphere” (Spacks 45, 7). Although Freibert is reluctant to be explicit, her own argument bears heavily on the function of story as gossip. Not only is it the epitome of Spacks’ discourse for an alternative culture, but on the most fundamental level, Offred’s story approximates gossip in its oral mode since “Offred literally tells her story, recording it on tape instead of writing it down” (Freibert 286). Moreover, like the Mayday password, Offred’s telling creates its own auditor: “By telling you anything at all I’m at least believing in you, I believe you’re there, I believe you into being. Because I’m telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are” (251). Offred’s story-telling thus produces the same kind of social community that has otherwise only been imagined through gossip in the novel, in such a way as to locate gossip and story functionally within the same discursive set.

Spacks identifies a similar dynamic in the novel form itself when she suggests that gossip “supplies a form of analogizing the exchange between narrator and reader: the novel’s basic economy” (21). Citing Bakhtin’s account of dialogue, Spacks shows how “the implicit presence of a listener—or by extension a reader—would affect the dynamics of language even in the process of composition” (21). As Bakhtin himself argues, “the listener as an immanent participant in the artistic event...has [a] determinative effect on the form of the work from within” (“Discourse” 408). According to this model of discourse, founded on the recognition that “every conscious act is already a social act, an act of communication” (“Discourse” 408), writing and speech can not be totally divorced from that New Critical bogie—authorial intent. Like gossip, story too is intimately linked to notions of purposeful communication. For Bakhtin, the regulative role of the listener in artistic creation, who, as “the bearer of the value judgements of the social group to which the ‘conscious’ person belongs” (“Discourse” 408), ensures the inherently dialogic nature of the text since his “constant coparticipa[tion] in all our conscious acts determines not only the content of consciousness but also. . .the very *selection* of the content, the selection of what precisely we become conscious of, and thus determines also those eval-

uations which permeate consciousness" ("Discourse" 409). Thus for Spacks, as for Offred, the story itself could be said to function as a kind of gossip.

If Offred's story represents the ultimate form of productive gossip in the novel, then Freibert's incredible claims would make its teller—and gossip itself—nearly omnipotent. However, while the subversive qualities of gossip as it is presented in the Handmaid's discourse might be seen as a form of power, the conclusions of Atwood's novel are less optimistic. Although the Handmaids' gossip can be emotionally empowering as it is for Offred who finds herself "so excited [she] can hardly breathe" (158), its actual power often proves to be illusory. Consider Offred's emotional defeat just prior to her miraculous rescue: "I resign my body freely to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me. I am abject. I feel for the first time, their true power" (268); or Moira's resignation to a life at Jezebel's (234); or the increasing pressure of the Mayday organization whose demands for information prove to be as oppressive for Offred as those of the state itself (255). All of these examples suggest ways in which Atwood's novel is self-consciously concerned with establishing the limits of gossip's power as well as its strengths.

Despite Freibert's speculation that Offred's tale "precipitate[s] the action that will bring Gilead to an end" (289), the "Historical Notes" that follow the tale emphatically suggest that while the political Republic of Gilead may have fallen, the seeds that produced it are comfortably gestating in the hearts of the scholars in attendance at the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies. As David Cowart notices, the latent misogyny present in the jokes of Pieixoto and the scholarly community about the Underground Frailroad and "enjoying" the chair, "[c]oming as they do after such a horrendous story...set the teeth on edge" (108). Considering the scholars' academic awareness that "no new system can impose itself on a previous one without incorporating many of the elements found in the latter" (287), their running sexist commentary on Offred's story of a political system rooted in misogyny and its effects on her own life reveals in the historians an appalling lack of self-consciousness. In effect, Atwood's scathing satire of the academics in this section presents the conference as a Gilead in microcosm, even as it projects readers back to their own time, warning that "American society at the end of the twentieth century may be at a terrible historical turning point" (Cowart 108). If the Gileadean ethos persists in this way even after Offred's supposedly cataclysmic telling, an argument like Freibert's would seem to miss the point.

Although *The Handmaid's Tale* seems ultimately sceptical of gossip's power to alter the social order as Spacks implies it might, Pieixoto's "little chat" at the IHAC presents yet another way of viewing gossip in Atwood's novel. Even more than Offred's own telling, Pieixoto's iteration of her tale might be considered in terms of its functional relation to gossip communication. As a meta-text, Pieixoto's "Historical Notes" comprise the academic complement to gossip that is itself "a kind of meta-communication. . . a communication about communication" (Rosnow and Fine 84). Furthermore, the casual atmosphere of the Conference, punctuated by further jokes about missing lunch; the relaxed nature of Pieixoto's talk—"Problems of Authentication in Reference to *The Handmaid's Tale*"—which he describes as "my little chat" (282); the frequent laughter, applause or indulgent groans in response to Pieixoto's presentation that act as affirmations of community values; as well as the speculative nature of his comments—"This is our guesswork" (292)—all contribute to the sense that the Conference may present itself as the locus of a kind of academic gossip—a place for speculation on the lives of those radically, as well as grammatologically, absent. However, Pieixoto's academic gossip appears to be altogether different from that of the Handmaids presented earlier. Aside from its incidental function of sustaining academia, that is to say the critic's social group, Pieixoto's appropriation of Offred's story is ultimately self-reflexive and self-constituting.

The extent to which Pieixoto usurps Offred's tale for his own purposes is evidenced by the fact that Offred herself is barely present in the historian's comments which focus almost entirely on discovering the identity of her Commander. The disturbing misogyny that David Cowart sees in the final section clearly extends beyond the "sexist jokes" (Cowart 108) of Pieixoto's introductory remarks to inform the proceedings of the entire Conference. In similar fashion, Pieixoto's naming of the text itself suggests how fully he has made the text his own:

Strictly speaking, it was not a manuscript at all when first discovered, and bore no title. The superscription "The Handmaid's Tale" was appended to it by Professor Wade, partly in homage to the great Geoffrey Chaucer; but those of you who understand when I say that I am sure all puns were intentional, particularly that having to do with the archaic vulgar signification of the word tail; that being, to some extent, the bone, as it were, of contention, in that phase of Gileadean society of which our saga treats. (Laughter, applause.)  
(282-83)

While the inappropriateness of locating a story of female oppression and resistance under the banner of “the great Geoffrey Chaucer,” the *Father* of English Literature, goes unnoticed by the participants of the Conference, its irony is emblematic of the extent to which Offred’s story has been ripped from its original context and relocated to furnish a new meaning. More importantly, in the act of naming her story, “The Handmaid’s *Tale*” (283; my emphasis), literally as a story, Pieixoto himself reduces her life to a manageable fiction, that is to say, to a “text.” Clearly, in Pieixoto’s recontextualization of her story in terms of his own academic project, the integrity of Offred’s “tail” (both of them) is on the line.

To posit a correlation between gossip and Pieixoto’s historical meta-text, as I have done, is ultimately to suggest that both function in similar ways for similar reasons. As a purely textual trace, whether oral or written, of one who is grammatologically absent, Offred’s tale is cut off from its original meaning and “can,” as Jacques Derrida argues, “be cited, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable.” As Derrida goes on to explain, “This does not imply that the mark is valid outside of a context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center or absolute anchoring” (*Limited* 12). With no authorial center, Offred’s text ceases to be “hers” the moment it is uttered. In a similar fashion, gossip, by reducing others lives (or one’s own) to story, breaks with life contexts and assures its own iterability. Available for appropriation, such stories can evoke endless significations and even become, paradoxically, the basis for another’s identity:

Did our narrator reach the outside world safely and build a new life for herself? Or was she discovered in her attic hiding place, arrested, sent to the Colonies or to Jezebel’s, or even executed? Our document, though in its own way eloquent, is on these subjects mute. We may call forth Eurydice from the world of the dead, but we cannot make her answer; and when we turn to look at her we glimpse her only for a moment, before she slips from our grasp and flees. 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. (293)

Pieixoto’s final word on Offred’s text thus shows ways in which gossip can be both self-referential and self-constituting. If Offred is his Eurydice, then Pieixoto has scripted for himself the role of Orpheus whose irresistible

power of song can raise the dead and wring tears from trees. For Pieixoto then, whose methods seem to be underwritten by Derridean notions of absence and free-play, gossip affords an expedient means of self-construction through the textualization of other people's life stories. Ironically, however, Ovid's version of the Orpheus story ends with the singer's painful realization of the impotence of song and the dangers of gossip. Ovid's Orpheus, who rejects the female body after his second loss of Eurydice by singing scatological songs, could be seen as Pieixoto's ironic counterpart since he too is a gossip spreading scandalous stories—about Venus and Adonis and even about his own father—to revenge himself on love. Orpheus' empowerment through his rejection of female sexuality (in his extravagant grief he turns to pederasty as well as malicious gossip) is ultimately parodied by Ovid since the singer is ripped to pieces by the frenzied Maenads when he discovers that his tune—based on the appropriation of his father's story—can't hold off his own destruction. As W. S. Anderson suggests, Ovid rejects Orpheus' "violent misogyny," exposing him as "a performer, egotistic, calculating, self-dramatizing" (44, 47). Like Orpheus, Pieixoto too is implicated in the dangers of privileging the linguistic/masculine at the expense of the physical/feminine in true Derridean fashion, only to be ripped apart, more subtly, by Atwood's cutting satiric portrayal. Although Pieixoto is blind to the ironic implications of Orphic gossip as a paradigm for self-construction, Orpheus himself, as he is torn to bits, embodies the ultimate reminder of the consequences for the academic's Derridean free-play with Offred's story.

■ If the principles of Derridean logic are ultimately parodied in this text, though, where does this leave Atwood's view of gossip that would seem to operate on those very principles? Offred's insistence on the value of context—"Context is all" (136)—seems to produce a rupture in Atwood's thematization of gossip. While it might be taken to suggest Derrida's multiplication of contexts and the ways in which meaning is never determinable, and thus to open its own door to Pieixoto's appropriative "reading," the Handmaids' gossip itself tells a very different story. As Bruce Stovel suggests, gossip is indeed an art; adapting Bakhtin, we might call it an art that is "immanently social; the extra-artistic social milieu, affecting art from outside, finds direct, intrinsic response within it" ("Discourse" 393). Thus, as in the case of Moira's parody of Aunt Lydia, in gossip "the

[extraverbal] situation enters into the utterance as an essentially constitutive part of the structure of its import” (“Discourse” 397). In gossip of the kind Moira practices, the extraverbal situation is not restricted to the physical person or event to which it refers, but also includes “the implicit reference to common knowledge, common values” (Jones 246) whose silent citation determines the individual’s inclusion in a social group. Gossip, at this level, is a social communication *par excellence* since, as Bahktin recognizes, “[t]he meaning and import of an utterance in life (of whatever particular kind that utterance may be) do not coincide with the purely verbal composition of the utterance. Articulated words are *impregnated* with assumed and unarticulated qualities” (“Discourse” 401). In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Gilead’s socio-political structures that largely determine the extraverbal contexts of gossip are so extreme that every covert utterance is steeped in the ideological assumptions of a particular group’s relation to the social order. Just as the Handmaids and Marthas gossip about the Wives and Commanders, so too, Offred speculates, the Wives must gossip about their social counterparts: “*Agreed to it right away, really she didn’t care, anything with two legs and a good you-know-what was fine with her. They aren’t squeamish, they don’t have the same feelings we do. And the rest of them leaning forward in their chairs, My dear, all horror and purience. How could she? Where? When?*” (202). Not only is this gossip loaded with an assumed knowledge of Gilead’s social structure and social practices, it also incorporates into its very form, as moral censure, the unarticulated values of the dominant discourse.

Significantly, however, gossip as a verbal performance is not simply rooted in the immediacy of the experiential. Nor is it, like Bahktin’s notion of a literary text, “a special form of interrelationship between creator and contemplator *fixed* in a work of art” (“Discourse” 294; my emphasis). In no way can gossip be a “fixed” utterance since, “[i]nasmuch as aggressive wishes control the discourse, the narrative that initiates the gossip interchange may alter form or content to serve the reporter’s need. Gossip thus often partakes of fiction (some people would say lies), less because of the inevitable distortions of its passage from mouth to mouth than because of the purposes it serves for the retailer, who forms the story to fill unconscious needs” (Spacks 50). Because by its very nature gossip is repeated—from mouth to mouth or from bed to bed—and in that repetition new contexts are introduced and content is altered, its meaning can never be

“anchored.” As Derrida insists, “Iteration alters, something new takes place” (*Limited* 40). With each repetition, gossip retreats further away from the real object of the utterance itself whose intrinsic value is simplified or emptied and filled with a new meaning as determined by the performer. Reducing the world to a linguistic artifact, Derridean free-play does much the same thing.

Although Pieixoto’s performance is not gossip *per se*, its similarities with the post-structuralist’s practice of “iterability” make gossip a suggestive model for interrogating Derridean assumptions. Since the endless circulation of the Handmaids’ gossip is often prized for its form rather than its content, Atwood’s treatment of their gossip neatly skirts the ethical questions raised by Derrida’s decentering of the “matrix.” Furthermore, because their gossip is consistently aimed at “the façade of reputation people construct around themselves” (Spacks 45), the Handmaids are exempt from Atwood’s critique of Pieixoto’s Derridean methods which focuses on his total disrespect for the text’s function as a “social communication” (“Discourse” 395). However, the textual privilege given to their highly socialized gossip suggests the extent to which *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a humanist text. Conversely, Pieixoto’s academic gossip that reduces the viscosity of Offred’s life “to an academic question” (Freibert 280) to accommodate his own megalomania demonstrates the dangers of Derrida’s comparable exile of the body from language: “What writing itself, in the nonphonetic moment, betrays, is life. It menaces at once the breath, the spirit, and history as the spirit’s relationship with itself. In the end, their finitude, their paralysis. Cutting breath short, sterilizing or immobilizing spiritual creation in the repetition of the letter, in the commentary or the *exegesis*, confined in a narrow space, reserved for a minority, it is the principle of death and of difference in the becoming of being” (*Of* 25).

In the wake of the academic’s erasure of Offred’s body, her own utterance, “Context is all,” surfaces as a humanist life-preserver on a sea of Derridean supplementarity. As Offred says of Moira’s story, “I’ve tried to make it sound as much like her as I can. It’s a way of keeping her alive” (228). Although Atwood’s presentation of gossip ultimately accepts the emotional and intellectual empowerment that gossip functionally represents, it remains deeply suspicious of any technique that would turn an ex-Handmaid of the system into a Handmaid of Orpheus. While Atwood’s novel presents a valuable starting point for developing a discourse of gossip

proper by suggesting its multifarious functions for both individual and community as well as the ethical problems it raises, it also speaks to the relevance of a study of gossip as a model for responsible criticism. Exposing the dangers of viewing gossip finally as “a game which, like all absorbing games, expresses impulse and satisfies needs” (Spacks 47), *The Handmaid’s Tale* offers its own deconstructive critique of Derridean free-play. Finally, Atwood’s stance on gossip is cautionary in its suggestion that Derridean play may itself be based on a highly questionable ethos of gossip that views the world as a playground and the person as a word.

WORKS CITED

- Anderson, W. S. “The Orpheus of Virgil and Ovid: *fleBILE nescio quid*.” In John Warden, ed., *Orpheus: The Metamorphoses Of A Myth*. Toronto, Buffalo, London: U Toronto P, 1982. 25-50.
- Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid’s Tale*. 1985. Toronto: Seal, 1986.
- Bahktin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: U Texas P, 1981.
- . “Discourse in Life and Discourse in Art (Concerning Sociological Poetics).” Trans. I. R. Titunik. In Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer, eds., *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Literary and Cultural Studies*, 2nd. ed. New York, London: Longman, 1989. 392-410.
- Bergmann, Jorg R. *Discreet Indiscretions: The Social Organization of Gossip*. 1987. Trans. John Bednarz Jr. New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1993.
- Brison, Karen J. *Just Talk: Gossip, Meetings and Power in a Papua New Guinea Village*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: U California P, 1992.
- Cowart, David. *History and the Contemporary Novel*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois U P, 1989.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Limited Inc*. Evanston: Northwestern U P, 1988.
- . *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore, London: The Johns Hopkins U P, 1976.
- Freibert, Lucy M. “Control and Creativity: The Politics of Risk in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*.” In Judith McCombs, ed., *Critical Essays on Atwood*. Boston, Mass.: G. K. Hall, 1988. 280-92.
- Gluckman, Max. “Gossip and Scandal.” *Current Anthropology* 4 (1963): 307-16.
- Jones, Deborah. “Gossip: notes on women’s oral culture.” In Deborah Cameron, ed., *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader*. London, New York: Routledge, 1991. 242-50.



Paine, Robert. "What Is Gossip About? An Alternative Hypothesis." *Man* 2 (1967): 278-85.

Rosnow, Ralph L. and Fine, Gary Alan. *Rumor and Gossip: The Social Psychology of Hearsay*. New York, Oxford, Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1976.

Rubenstein, Roberta. "Nature and Nurture in Dystopia: *The Handmaid's Tale*." In K. Van Spanckeren and Jan Garden Castro, eds., *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Form*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois U P, 1988. 101-12.

Spacks, Patricia Meyers. *Gossip*. 1985. Chicago, London: U Chicago P, 1986.

Stovel, Bruce. "Tristram Shandy and the Art of Gossip." In Valerie Grosvenor Myer, ed., *Laurence Sterne: Riddles and Mysteries*. London, New Jersey: Vision and Barnes & Noble, 1984. 115-25.

