

“The Missionary Position”

Feminism and Nationalism in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*

When Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* was published in 1985 it was to an almost unanimous adulation. The novel won Atwood her second Canadian Governor-General’s Award, and won her equally distinguished, and laudatory, reviews by some of North America’s foremost feminist scholars.¹ Published at a moment when the American Religious Right had become a particular focus for American feminists, Atwood’s prophecy of gender fascism was accepted pretty much unconditionally as an admirable banner of liberal feminist insurgency. Since the mid-1980s, however, presumably as a result of certain gains in historical perspective, many readers of Atwood’s novel have, I think justly, questioned its character as a feminist critique. Why, for instance, does Atwood choose to resolve her drama of women’s oppression by implementing a paradigm of female romance, such that the telos of the heroine’s journey becomes her introduction to Mr Right? How are we to read the heroine’s barely ironized longings for hand lotion and old copies of *Vogue* when the novel provides these as symbols of women’s former freedom? More important, and more troubling, what are we to make of Atwood’s seeming refusal of a politics of emancipation? How do we interpret her apparently uncritical endorsement of the self-protective passivity of her heroine? For the critics who ask these questions *The Handmaid’s Tale* is less a critique of androcentric political structures than a consolatory instruction on ways of “making do.”

I want to begin my own reading of *The Handmaid’s Tale* by stating that, in essence, I agree with this position. For a novel so overtly offered as a piece

of feminist doctrine, *The Handmaid's Tale* delivers a curiously, and, for Atwood, an unwontedly, conservative interpretation of women's exemplary social actions, advocating what looks more like traditional femininity than an insurgent feminism. But I also want to propose that this conservatism is, in fact, politically motivated, not by Atwood's feminism in this case but by her nationalism. Although *The Handmaid's Tale* is not generally regarded as part of Atwood's nationalist canon, its understanding of female independence is nevertheless determined by Atwood's sexually coded understanding of the relation between Canada and America. In this, Atwood's only full-scale parody of American society, what concerns her is not a feminist politics of emancipation, but the nationalist politics of self-protective autonomy, an autonomy which, as I will argue, eventually translates into an advocacy of traditional femininity.

In Atwood's career-long promotion of Canada's cultural autonomy from the United States, national and gender issues have had for her a commensurate and almost interchangeable status. Her 1972 novel *Surfacing* overtly identified the "rape" of the Canadian wilderness by American investors and tourists with the abuse of the female narrator's body by men. *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, published in the same year, indirectly elaborated this identification of Canada and victimized womanhood into an explication of the essential Canadian identity as that of "the exploited victim" (35, 36). Although *Survival* did not venture expressly to characterize Canada's victimhood as feminine, Atwood's commentary since suggests the extent to which this notion of victimhood was for her a feminine construct. In a 1987 essay that strongly opposed the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement, an agreement regarded by many Canadians as the beginning of the end of Canada's cultural autonomy, Atwood told her readers: "Canada as a separate but dominated country has done about as well under the U.S. as women, worldwide, have done under men; about the only position they've ever adopted toward us, country to country, has been the missionary position, and we were not on top" ("...only position" 20).²

While *The Handmaid's Tale* was a departure for Atwood in that it took up feminist issues to the exclusion of themes focusing on Canadian culture, her collapse of national and gender categories would, under any circumstances, make a consideration of her nationalism relevant to her feminist readings of contemporary culture. However, more than this, *The Handmaid's Tale* is not simply a non-Canadian novel, it is, as Catherine Stimpson emphasizes

(764), Atwood's first foray into an extended representation of America.³ Its story of gender oppression is situated within the object of Atwood's nationalist antipathy and the roles given both to America and to the novel's heroine are familiar: America is posed here, once again, as the male aggressor, its masculinist qualities literalized in the Gileadean patriarchy (which has, incidentally, mandated the missionary position); the heroine, to borrow a term from *Survival*, is the "exploited victim." If the geographical partition in *Surfacing*, the dotted membrane separating Canada from America, is not a central issue in *The Handmaid's Tale*, it nevertheless survives as a psychic and bodily construct, a membrane preserving the "victim" from total capitulation to the "victor." And accordingly, what Atwood defines as the optimum political response of her subjugated heroine is not a politics of liberation, if we understand such a politics to entail an active resistance to oppressive power, but a form of border patrol, a strategy of protectionism not unlike what she advocates for the survival of Canada's cultural autonomy: "good fences," as she puts it, "make good neighbours" ("Canadian-American" 392).

When Atwood's heroine Offred contemplates the power of the Patriarchal Republic of Gilead she understands it as a form of domination that wants to abolish borders, that has no limits:

"This is the heart of Gilead, where the war cannot intrude except on television. Where the edges are we aren't sure, they vary, according to the attacks and counterattacks; but this is the centre, where nothing moves. The Republic of Gilead, said Aunt Lydia, knows no bounds. Gilead is within you" (33).

Moving borders from continental to internal spaces and replacing colonization with indoctrination, Atwood goes on to define her heroine's response as a necessary preoccupation with the protection of her personal integrity—what Atwood in *Survival* terms "spiritual survival, . . . life as anything more than a minimally human being" (33). Stating at the start of the novel that she "intends to last" (17), Offred proposes to live outside of Gilead's amorphous discursive borders in a space of the self which its doctrines have yet to chart. She looks back to the days when "We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom. / We lived in the gaps between the stories" (66-7). Throughout the novel these empty, unwritten spaces are posed as sites of escape. There is first of all the blank space, surrounded by a plaster wreath, "a frozen halo, a zero," in the ceiling of Offred's

bedroom where the chandelier has been removed, which offers the ultimate escape of self-annihilation: "Draw a circle, step into it, it will protect you" (223).⁴ There is the hole in the washroom wall at the Centre where Offred touches Moira's fingers and hears of her plans to escape the Aunts (100). "The Canadian experience," Atwood once said, is "a circumference with no centre, the American one a centre which [is] mistaken for the whole thing" ("Canadian-American" 379). What counts as survival in the face of this appropriating wholeness is the integrity of the unscripted voids, one of which is Offred's real name:

My name isn't Offred. I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. 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 (94).

Unmentioned and surrounded by its aura, another border, Offred's identity is protected from appropriation. That the evasion of naming is paradoxically a form of self-affirmation is made clear in what Offred says about rhetorical strategies of evasion generally: their purpose is "to keep the core of yourself out of reach, enclosed, protected" (274).

The degree of Atwood's investment in such strategies of self-protection is suggested by the fact that moments of crisis and horror in this novel are organized around threats to the internal and bodily membranes surrounding the uncharted space of the self. Of course, within Gilead's gendered economy of power, sexual penetration is the most obvious manifestation of threat, and appropriately, the Commander's penis, to which Offred must open herself once a month, is described not only as an invasive instrument but as a "delicate stalked slug's eye," "avid for vision," attempting to read a "darkness" (98)—that blank of personal plenitude. When Offred and her husband Luke drive north in a desperate last-minute attempt to get over the borders of Gilead, Atwood describes Offred's fear of discovery as a fear of being penetrated, and of being read: "I feel transparent," she says. "Surely they will be able to see through me" (95). It is appropriate, given Atwood's investment in blankness as a site of identity, that when Offred finally does move into a territory potentially free of Gileadean penetration, her narrative stops, thus literalizing the association of emptiness, of what might in other Atwood works be called wilderness, with spiritual survival.⁵

Atwood's representation of her heroine as a special space or territory to be protected is perfectly consonant with her long-standing identification of the missionary position with America's missionary tradition of cultural and economic infiltration. Yet whether this use of nationalist models is entirely commensurate with the liberal feminist assumptions she calls upon to provoke her reader's outrage is another question. The problems critics have with *The Handmaid's Tale* focus precisely on the discrepancy between its overt invocation of feminist outrage and the heroine's self-protective avoidance of any form of political interaction with her circumstances. Glenn Deer, for example, remarks that Atwood "seems to privilege the female existential will, the realm of private consciousness, as an adequate recompense for... enslavement" (229). And Barbara Ehrenreich points out: "Offred cries a lot and lives in fear of finding her erstwhile husband hanging from a hook on the wall, but when she is finally contacted by the resistance, she is curiously uninterested. She has sunk too far into the incestuous little household she serves—just as the reader, not without intermittent spasms of resistance, sinks into the deepening masochism of her tale" (34). Ehrenreich, in fact, pinpoints a crucial problem. Atwood's internalization of a nationalist political paradigm produces a heroine whose sole resistance goes on inside her head, a resistance at once indistinguishable from passivity and masochism and uncomfortably synonymous with traditional stereotypes of feminine behaviour. It would be fairly easy to conclude that this incongruousness is simply an accident produced in the collapse of incompatible paradigms—that feminism, which historically has been based on a politics of liberation, is simply not synonymous with Atwood's notions of cultural autonomy and that, in assuming their interchangeability, she comes up with what her readers regard as a dubious response to "enslavement." Yet Atwood's politics of autonomy are more complicated than this suggests. If Offred's self-protectiveness is produced by Atwood's nationalist idea of the relationship between victim and victor, it also duplicates and fortifies this novel's generic idiosyncracies, anchoring Atwood's formal choices in the heroine's efforts to maintain her integrity and suggesting that Atwood places herself as a colonial writer in the same victim category that she places her heroine. And here we have the second big problem critics have with this novel. What Atwood chooses as a colonial writer, what she lights upon to signify her own integrity, is not the political and anthropological density of feminist dystopian fiction but the highly formulaic fluff of

popular female romance, the genre whose paradigms finally ground Atwood's formulation of colonial autonomy.

It is important to underline, first of all, Atwood's sheer reliance on the contrivances of women's junk fiction to structure the plot of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Like her prototypes in bodice-rippers and costume gothics, Offred is the innocent heroine who finds herself imprisoned in a menacing world over which she has no power, and indeed seeks to gain none for fear of compromising her womanly integrity. She falls in love with a man—in this case Nick the chauffeur—who is an attractive, ambiguous figure, stereotypically characterized by his roguish cynicism, his silence and his ability to melt the heroine with his ways in bed. Although like all of his strong and silent brethren, Nick initially seems to be part of the atmosphere of evil—he may, for instance, be a spy for Gilead—the heroine nonetheless trusts to feminine instinct and surrenders herself to him completely. For this leap of faith she is, of course, amply rewarded. The ambiguous lover turns out to be her saviour, the knight who rescues her from the menace—who, in this case, smuggles her out of the heart of Gilead into a space of relative freedom where she is at least able to articulate her story.⁶

The Handmaid's Tale recapitulates the plot of a romance; but more than this, Atwood thematizes romance conventions themselves as agents of women's resistance and autonomy. Given that the "blank" space of the victim's autonomous self is framed as an essentially discursive territory, one whose scrawl the imperial order is incapable of deciphering, Atwood's particular thematization of romance conventions suggests that these form the cryptic writing on the victim's unreadable void. For Offred romance conventions provide the scripture that allows her to counter Gilead with a defense of hope. It is her belief in the fairytale narrative of the damsel rescued by her prince that both encourages Offred's self-protectiveness and saves her from capitulation. She says of her husband Luke: "I must have patience: sooner or later he will get me out... Meanwhile I must endure, keep myself safe for later" (116). Likewise, what Offred wants from the renegade Moira, another source of hope, is "gallantry... swashbuckling, heroism, singlehanded combat" (261). The very trappings of costume gothic, namely its costumes, its feminine trinkets and adornments, are posed as subversive alternatives to Gilead's institution of plainness and uniformity, so that Offred, catching sight of a group of Japanese tourists, notes the women's clothes, their short skirts and thin stockings and high heels, and

says to herself: "I used to dress like that. That was freedom" (38). In some of Atwood's other novels, in *Lady Oracle*, for instance, in which the narrator is actually writing a costume gothic, romance conventions function as the objects of parody and critique. They are things to be escaped, both by the heroine and by Atwood herself as a writer. But in *The Handmaid's Tale* romance conventions are presented as the *instruments* of escape, as much for Atwood as for the heroine. Indeed, the degree of Atwood's investment in romance paradigms as emancipatory structures is underlined by the fact that she does not—whether for her characters, her reader or herself—offer a way out of Gilead except through them. Moira, who engages in a tangible campaign of subversion and struggle, ends her days still imprisoned. Offred, who sits in her ersatz tower at the top of the Commander's house looking constantly out her window, is rescued by her hero.

Not unexpectedly, Atwood's critics view her reliance on popular female romance as an abysmal political lapse, one that is at least as glaring as the heroine's passive acceptance of enslavement. Chinmoy Banerjee argues that Atwood's invocation of costume gothic is there to dissolve feminist critique and to facilitate for the reader a soft commercialist consumption and enjoyment (90). Similarly, reading through what he regards as Atwood's obfuscations of history, Jamie Dopp concludes: "The Handmaid's desire for a man seems a part of the unchanging order of things, another emblem for the determination of political relations by sexual instincts and for the hopelessness of women's struggle" (263).⁷ But if, as my own argument suggests, Atwood's endorsement of the romance is motivated by the same strategies of "survival" that determine her heroine's passivity—if Atwood, in other words, is cloaking a critique of Canada's victimization within the folds of the apparently complicitous costume romance, perhaps we should take a closer look at precisely what costume that romance is sporting.

Although the Republic of Gilead is generally accepted as an incarnation of the burgeoning American fundamentalism of the early 1980s, Atwood herself made a point of stressing that Gilead was in fact inspired by her studies in American literature and history. When asked by one interviewer whether *The Handmaid's Tale* takes place in "some amorphous Boston," Atwood responded:

Not amorphous. It's enormously concrete. The Wall is the wall around Harvard yard. All those little shops and stores mentioned are probably there at this very

minute. I lived in Boston for four years. It's also the land of my ancestors. They were people who left New England in 1775-1783, during the revolution and went to Nova Scotia. They were Puritans of the 1630-1635 immigration. They are all still in the Salem genealogical library. They are those people in the dour, black, strait-laced pictures that appear in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The book is dedicated to Perry Miller who was one of my teachers at Harvard who wrote *American Puritans* [sic].... And the other dedication is to Mary Webster, who is one of my ancestors who was hanged as a witch. She's the witch who didn't die. They hadn't invented the drop then, so your neck didn't get broken.... She must have had a very sinewy neck and didn't die. Under the law of double jeopardy they couldn't execute her again. So there she was living away ("There's nothing," 67).

Several readers of this novel, including Cathy Davidson (26) and Alden Turner, have commented on Atwood's invocation of the American Puritan tradition in her representation of Gilead. But what Atwood is invoking more specifically—in her reference to Miller, in her reference to Harvard, in her emphasis on a Puritan fear of women's sexuality, and even in Gilead's branding of the Handmaids in *scarlet*, though the actual letter is missing—is not just the persistence of a puritan strain in modern American culture but a tradition of American studies that celebrates Puritan intransigence as quintessentially representative of the American spirit. When Atwood was Miller's pupil at Harvard in the early 1960s, Americanists such as Richard Chase, Harry Levin, and Leslie Fiedler were busy transforming Miller's studies of the Puritans into *the* measure of authenticity in American writing. If Atwood was not herself a student of American literature, the efforts of these critics to define a national literary character were influential enough to inspire her to undertake a similar project for Canada and write *Survival* ("Canadian-American" 382-84).

Atwood's exposure to 1950s and 1960s Puritan Studies provides her with the means to parody American culture. Aiming her attack at Americanist academics, Atwood holds up for condemnation their own most cherished national ideals: their approving construction of an uncompromising American spirit with its "tragic vision," its deep affection for allegory, for Manichean conflict and moral absolutism, and, above all perhaps, its iconoclastic reinventions of the social order. At the same time, Atwood's exposure to Puritan Studies arms her with a very neat, very precise definition of what constitutes the un-American mind. For the coterie of all-male critics writing during the 1950s and concerned to invest their national culture with a certain "toughness" and manly rigour, the one unequivocal un-American territory, the swamp which none of them could bring themselves to claim

or settle under the national flag, was the morass of women's popular fiction—what Ann Douglas, another student of Perry Miller, would eventually term “the sentimental heresy” (11). As later feminist critics were quick to point out, Puritan Studies scholars, having defined the American spirit as one distinguished by “an absolute refusal to give the feminine principle its due” (Fiedler 29), went on to erase women's fiction from the “genuinely” American literary history which they themselves were engaged in constructing.⁸ And this, I would suggest, accounts for Atwood's commitment to the trashy feminine world of love and romance. Identifying autonomy as a discursive space, an illegible void within the victim's self, Atwood locates the site of resistance and the means of struggle—for her heroine, for herself and for her country—in a language America had not equipped itself to read.⁹

It is thus no surprise to find in the concluding “Historical Notes” to *The Handmaid's Tale* that at centre stage is a male academic, a historian like Miller, who finds himself unable to read the essential content of Offred's story. Professor Pieixoto's appearance at the end of the novel as an expert on the now long-extinct Republic of Gilead fixes Gilead itself as an academically-inspired construct, flanked by Miller at the beginning of the book and Professor Pieixoto's at the end. As Arnold Davidson notes, Atwood's epilogue “loops back through the text that precedes it to suggest that the ways in which scholars (present as well as future) assemble the text of the past confirms the present and thereby helps to predict the future” (115). And presumably, just as the text of the Puritan past read by Perry Miller foreshadows and inspires an American Gilead, so Pieixoto's reading of the text of the Gileadean past predicts the possibility of another gender tyranny, a future actualization of the forms of chauvinism he exhibits during his talk.

However, if part of Atwood's aim in the “Historical Notes” is to expose the complicity of academia in the formation of authoritarian institutions, another part is to offer strategies for slipping through what W.F. Garrett-Petts calls “the official discourse of History” (82). The pairing of Professor Pieixoto and Offred at the end of *The Handmaid's Tale* mirrors the pairing of Perry Miller and Atwood's ancestor, the Puritan Mary Webster, at the beginning; and the issue in both cases is the failure of the female object of study to fit the patterns of inquiry set out by her male scrutinizer. Confronted with the Handmaid's refusal of politics for romantic introspection and history for passive self-absorption, Pieixoto cries, “What would we not give, now, for even twenty pages or so of printout from Waterford's [the

Commander's] private computer!" (322). Hailing from yet another Cambridge (England instead of New England), Pieixoto is implicitly as ill-equipped as his Puritan studies prototypes to read the hieroglyphs of feminine culture. Atwood's critics have, as I've said, condemned her endorsement of popular romance both for its gender conservatism and for its commercialism. And yet the "Historical Notes" indicate that a tribute to the "low brow," to forms of culture inadmissible to scholarly exchange, is part of her project. It is no accident that Offred's tapes are discovered among other tokens of popular passion and bad taste—Elvis Presley tunes, folk songs, Mantovani instrumentals, and the screams of Twisted Sister—nor that all of these are laughed at and dismissed by Professor Pieixoto. If the projected end of Pieixoto's academic efforts is only another tyranny, these tacky unreadable texts, like the romance itself, slip through his "official discourse" to signify the potential of resistance and hope.

Offred's failure to write the history that Pieixoto would be able to read is presumably mirrored by Mary Webster's failure to live the life that Puritan studies scholars could utilize in their constructions of the American spirit. Mary Webster's comic salvation by a weak rope contradicts the academically sanctioned "tragic vision" of a novel like *The Scarlet Letter*, which refutes the possibility of miracles precisely by redelivering its heroine to the scene of her tribulations. That Atwood duplicates Webster's miraculous escape in her own text, allowing Offred to escape Gilead through the implausible circumstance of falling in love, suggests this novel's challenge to the brutal teleology that produces a Hester Prynne, that celebrates and determines the female victim's capitulation to a "tragic" place in the history of persecution. The same might be said of Atwood's own choices for her novel. As her presentation of Pieixoto implies, imperial domination is for her as much an act of interpretation, a projection of cultural consciousness onto an uncharted self, as it is an economic or geographical domination. Finally, and much like her heroine, Atwood escapes interpretation along an "Underground Female Road," the illicit textual trail that leads over the border dividing American Tragedy from Harlequin Romance.

What fate does Atwood finally envision for Canada itself? In the nightmare future she imagines, women have succumbed to a totalizing patriarchy. Appropriately, given Atwood's conflation of feminism and nationalism, Canada, in some analogous gesture, has succumbed to its

totalizing southern neighbour. Among the historical facts revealed in the “Historical Notes” is Canada’s complicity in the Gileadean enterprise, its refusal to harbour female refugees escaping north for fear of “antagonizing its powerful neighbour” (323), and, even more insidiously, its contribution of the design of the handmaid’s costumes, which are modeled on the uniforms of German prisoners of war in Canadian P.O.W. camps of the Second World War. The logic behind such dour predictions seems to have its basis in 1980s history. Written at a moment when Canadians had just elected an unabashedly American-friendly Prime Minister, *The Handmaid’s Tale* predicts a future in which the iconic move of crossing the border into Canada will no longer represent the escape from American persecution which it had, variously, in the eighteenth century to the United Empire Loyalists, in the nineteenth century to Southern American slaves, and in the twentieth century to refugees of the draft. In order to escape Gilead, Pieixoto tells us, Offred would not just have had to go north, as Atwood’s ancestors did; she would have had to leave the North American continent altogether.

And yet if the epilogue predicts and, indeed, comments upon Canada’s complicity in American aims, it also preserves the terms of Atwood’s nationalist project, presenting in Professor Pieixoto the emissary of yet another of Canada’s imperial rulers, this time Great Britain. In accord with the geographical trajectory of Atwood’s nationalism, which equates northern wilderness with a final refuge, the scene of embattled autonomy has been pushed up almost into the Arctic itself. This scene is perhaps no longer identifiably Canadian. By Professor Pieixoto’s era, Canada has disappeared as a geo-political entity. The academic conference at which Pieixoto speaks takes place at the “University of Danay, Nunavit,” “Danay” apparently being a version of “Dene,” one of the First Nations tribes, “Nunavit” being that portion of land in the Northwest Territories which the Canadian government has designated for the Inuit peoples and which, in Atwood’s version of the future, has achieved its promised sovereign status. But if Canada itself has disappeared, the position of the feminized “exploited victim” has not. Maryann Crescent Moon, as the representative of native culture, itself an object of Caucasian imperialism, is also the object of Pieixoto’s sexist remarks. The “Historical Notes” section, in other words, recapitulates the relations between female/colony and male/empire that Atwood’s nationalism inscribes throughout this novel. In some sense, indeed, the prediction of Canada’s dissolution, as well as Atwood’s reference to Canada’s unsavory

participation in Gileadean fascism, only reinforce her call for national autonomy, precisely by painting so bleak a picture of the price of Canada's compliance.

There is no question that Atwood's attempt to warn against the dissolution of borders, whether national or personal, prompts her to propose models of autonomy for women that many feminists would consider too dangerously androcentric and heterosexist to be of much value. But by reading this novel outside the liberal/left feminist framework which its critics invariably bring to it, we can perhaps better understand its feminism not as part of a prescribed or consistent itinerary, but as a protest contingent upon the idiosyncracies of its contexts. Both the position of Canada with respect to Reagan's America in the mid-1980s and the self-designations of the Americanist scholars with whom Atwood was familiar determine her combined advocacy of self-protective autonomy and the unsanctioned texts of women's popular culture. But I would also suggest that such a reading might go further to question whether our standards for legitimacy in feminism don't sidestep the possible alterations required of it when gender is fused with seemingly unrelated political issues. Atwood draws on a conceptually skewed conflation of feminism and nationalism, but the very fact that she does so suggests the extent to which national selfhood is already a libidinally invested construct, one which enmeshes the discourses of citizenry and sexuality and which therefore potentially confuses the traditional coordinates of feminist response. The fantasies of drugstore romance may not seem like adequate weapons in the struggle for women's equality and recognition. But then, maybe lying in the missionary position under Uncle Sam, you need a little fantasy.

NOTES

- ¹ Namely, Cathy Davidson, Barbara Ehrenreich and Catharine Stimpson.
- ² In a talk delivered in 1981 Atwood said almost exactly the same thing: "Are we talking about a proposal of marriage, in which case the States would proclaim, 'with all my worldly goods I endow thee' in exchange for Canada's adopting the missionary position?" Atwood went on, "Canada has always been a cheap lay" ("Canadian-American" 389).
- ³ Actually, fewer critics and reviewers than one might expect have taken account of this novel's American setting, especially considering that Atwood herself mentions the point again and again in interviews. Among those that have, apart from Stimpson, are Davidson (24), Turner, and Ketterer. Ketterer gestures towards the connections among

Canadian nationalism, feminism and the American setting about to be explored in this paper: "SF is only worthy of serious attention when it is about something real; and in this case, underlying the muted feminist polemic, the central theme, equally real and earlier identified by Atwood as particularly Canadian, is that of human survival" (209).

- ⁴ Dorothy Jones has a different reading of these plaster halos: "The white circle represents a stifling denial of growth and fertility" and "the dubious safety of observing the boundaries society imposes on women" (34, 35).
- ⁵ Whether Offred actually crosses the borders of Gilead is never revealed. But that she does escape to some space of relative freedom and safety beyond the constantly watchful eye of Gilead is made evident by the existence of her tapes.
- ⁶ Dorothy Jones indicates an additional way in which this novel resembles a female romance when she describes the Handmaids as occupying the "socially ambiguous position of a Victorian governess" (32). It is precisely this social ambiguity, a stock characteristic of the misplaced and orphaned heroines in women's historicals, that Atwood parodies in the costume gothic Joan Foster is writing in *Lady Oracle*. Charlotte, like Offred, is a third wheel at Redmond Grange, a love object for the lord of the manor and a considerable irritation for his jealous wife; like Offred, she feels there is "menace lurking somewhere in the vast house," a menace intensified by the fact that, although she must remain at Redmond, she lacks access to the knowledge granted to either guests or servants (30).
- ⁷ In taking Atwood to task for her obfuscations of history, Dopp is among several critics and reviewers who have remarked on what Barbara Ehrenreich calls the "anthropological" thinness of *The Handmaid's Tale* (34), its cursory explication of those things that would make Gilead seem more historically "real" and would, the implication is, de-eroticize the heroine's passivity (see also McCarthy 35, and Banerjee 78-80). Interestingly, it was precisely this attention to "realness" that Atwood objected to in her 1976 review of Marge Piercy's feminist utopia, *Woman on the Edge of Time*: "To turn from Piercy's utopia to her poetry is to turn from an imagined world to an imagination, from a sense to a sensibility....I find the poetry more convincing" ("Marge Piercy" 277).
- ⁸ The best discussion of this process remains Nina Baym's.
- ⁹ I should mention that Barbara Ehrenreich identifies Atwood's approval of conventionally feminine paraphernalia, including, by implication, her approval of romance, with the backlash against the early 1980s radical feminism of those like Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon. But while a critique of radical feminism is certainly at work in Atwood's presentation of Offred's mother, whose condemnation of make-up and penchant for book-burning only end up facilitating the rise of Gilead, this critique does not quite account for the absence of what Dopp calls a "critical perspective" from which to assess the heroine's passivity on the one hand and the text's debt to romance on the other (272-81). To read *The Handmaid's Tale* purely as a condemnation of radical feminism, in other words, is to be unable to account for Atwood's unqualified endorsement in this novel of the gender norms and genres which in her other novels she invariably represents, if not critically, then at least ambiguously.