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*Article*

# "An Act of Hope": Women's Resilience Through Literacy and Storytelling in Margaret Atwood's The Testaments

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## Abstract

The present essay is an examination of the connections among women's storytelling, access to literacy, and ability for coordinated political action in Margaret Atwood's The Testaments. The author draws from Mario Klarer's 1995 article "Orality and literacy as gender-supporting structures in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale", accepting the position that disallowance of literacy helps to solidify and maintain oppressive authoritarian political structures. The author demonstrates the ways in which literacy relates to political agency for women in Atwood's fictional Gilead. The central thematic elements of the text – literacy and storytelling as inherently political and hopeful acts – are further represented through the systemic devaluing of female cognitive capacities, thereby placing the entirety of women's societal value on their corporeality. In this way, the question of women acquiring literacy is left completely unconsidered, as the people of Gilead have been duped into believing that, by their very biology, women are incapable of such. The author discusses the ways in which the tyrannical leadership of Gilead simultaneously fear and recognize the need for women's biology, as represented through a series of blood references. Atwood's female characters remain resilient throughout the text, and when denied the tools to orchestrate their own liberation, they use other methods of storytelling until literacy can be obtained, even going so far as to use their own abused bodies as tools in that endeavor, one in which they are ultimately successful. They leave behind their written testaments, an act that is inherently hopeful because it assumes a future reader of said stories.

***Keywords:*** *gender analysis, women's literacy, women's political agency, storytelling, speculative fiction.*

*Reading was not for girls: only men were strong enough to deal with the force of it.*
- Atwood, *The Testaments*

In a recent interview Margaret Atwood commented that "writing is always an act of hope" (Hedges, 2019). Far from milquetoast poeticism, the comment cuts to the bloody quick of her 2019 novel: it is, quite literally, a series of written testaments to women's resilience and ingenuity in the face of unimaginable systemic oppression. The Testaments, the long-anticipated sequel to The Handmaid's Tale, presents a masterfully interwoven triptych of women's first-person accounts of the fall of an oppressive and violent regime.

The Testaments takes place fifteen years after the conclusion of The Handmaid's Tale. The Republic of Gilead, a tyrannical and virulently anti-woman regime, remains in place. The novel's narrative is non-linear and is composed of three interwoven stories of women who have suffered under Gilead's totalitarian political system. The initial narrator, Aunt Lydia, returns from The Handmaid's Tale. Her story is presented as her written account detailing her role in orchestrating the downfall of Gilead. The Aunts are a group of women charged with holding forbidden knowledge so that they may enforce the methods employed to control and suppress women. As an Aunt, Lydia holds a special place of privilege with the Sons of Jacob, the group that staged a coup d'état that overthrew the United States government and established the Republic of Gilead. In her life before the coup Lydia was a judge. She is highly literate, educated, and post-menopausal. For these reasons, she is selected to play a key role among the Aunts, designing the methods by which Gileadean women are dominated. She has access to sensitive material and is entrusted with historical texts that, if revealed, would lay bare the cruelty of Gilead toward women. Lydia uses her special access to literacy and to libraries of these forbidden texts to funnel classified government information across broad networks of resistance fighters. Collectively called Mayday, these resistance networks work to reveal to the world the horrors to which women are subjected in Gilead under the Sons of Jacob.

The second storyteller is Agnes, a little girl adopted into a Gileadean household, the head of which is a socio-politically powerful man named Commander Kyle. Agnes' ailing adoptive mother Tabitha regales her with fantastic stories of her adoption, functioning as her only tether to her previous life. After Tabitha dies, Kyle remarries Paula, a woman who views Agnes as both a nuisance and a threat. The Commander and his handmaiden, OfKyle, conceive a child through the bizarre Gileadean ritual in which a woman, called a handmaiden, is assigned a man with which to procreate in the presence of his wife, among other women. The handmaidens take their Commander's name and once they have borne the requisite number of children are dismissed. Moreover, they are to take no part in the children's rearing. That task is left to the Commander's wife and her servants. Commander Kyle wishes to marry Agnes off to another powerful man, Commander Judd, a fate which Agnes escapes by pledging to become an Aunt, for "the Aunts were not married; they were not allowed to be. That is why they could have writing and books" (Atwood, 2019, p.10). Once at the training facility for Aunts-to-be, the aptly named Ardua Hall, Agnes is given access to documents that detail the corrupt and bloody history of Gilead. Further, she learns that her biological mother was a handmaiden who smuggled her sister, famously known as Baby Nicole, into Canada to escape the regime, an event that created considerable political tension between Gilead and Canada.

The third girl to tell her story in The Testaments is Daisy. Daisy was raised by her own adoptive parents in Canada, who unbeknownst to her are secret resistance fighters with Mayday, working to liberate women from Gilead in a sort of underground railroad. After her parents are murdered by Gileadean terrorists seeking to destroy Mayday, Daisy is recruited by the group to serve as an undercover operative. She poses as a Gileadean missionary called a Pearl Girl to pass undetected into Gilead so that she may obtain documents damning of the Sons of Jacob. Once in Gilead, she is presented to Aunt Lydia, who places a microchip containing the crucial documents into a tattoo on her arm. Further, Daisy is revealed to be Baby Nicole and Agnes her sister. The two youths are tasked with smuggling the documents cache back out of Gilead so that they may reveal to the world the horrible truth of conditions of life in Gilead. The mission is a success and Gilead topples after the documents are revealed. Daisy/Nicole and Agnes are returned to their mother and Lydia commits suicide to avoid being captured and tortured.

The final portion of the novel is, importantly, an epilogue in the form of a lecture in which an academic reads portions of a found manuscript entitled The Ardua Hall Holograph. The manuscript is presumably the text of the novel or, more pointedly, the women's testaments.

Women's ability - or lack thereof - to tell their own stories is a central thematic element in The Testaments. Lacking literacy, the women of Gilead are unable to contextualize their own experiences on a larger historical and/or political scale, and this connection between literacy and political agency rounds out the central salient points of the text. In The Testaments' Gilead, language and, more specifically, literacy are tightly controlled. The ability to read and write are skills fastidiously guarded by the ominously named theocratic government The Sons of Jacob. Literacy is permitted only for specifically selected women, either because they must possess the skill in order to maintain the stiff and sometimes tenuous political status quo or because it was a skill they acquired before the coup. The ruling class in Gilead is, of course, entirely made up of men. It is men who hold the power to decide which women may learn to read or write, the ways in which they are permitted to do so, and the literary materials they may consume or create. In his 1995 paper entitled "Orality and Literacy as Gender-Supporting Structures in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale," Mario Klarer posits that "literate cultures have a stabilizing and innovative potential" and that "by controlling the very structures of language and thinking, the leading class is able to consolidate the basis of its monolithic state and keep all others in their assigned positions" (p. 2). Denial of literacy is denial of political agency. The Sons of Jacob know, however, that women are resilient, and in order to completely quash any germinating rebellion among women, they force them to believe that they are inherently incapable of literacy by placing all women's social value in their bodies, insisting that they are intellectually incapable of the skill. Atwood nevertheless crafts her female characters with grace, presenting readers with a gritty, blood covered tale of women's ability to be akin to a "phoenix rising from its ashes (Atwood, 2019, p.404).

The link between literacy and sociopolitical power reveals itself in the very formation of the western canon. Considering that access to literacy directly correlates to the ability to disseminate accounts of experiences of oppression, the ways in which literacy relates to the political come into sharper relief. John Guillory, in his 2006 essay "Canon", points out that the

literary body of works was shaped by sociohistorical forces, and that although minority groups' exclusion was unlikely part of a targeted or deliberate campaign, women's voices are notably silent until the early part of the 18th century. Guillory argues that “great works could hardly be produced by women, if by and large only men were taught to write, or only men were in social positions which made possible a life of literary production” (p. 238). As women became increasingly literate, they began to tell their own stories to wider audiences. Their stories could then begin to compete with the dominant social narratives, heretofore constructed for and about them by men. Moreover, with the tools to communicate widely one's own experience comes the ability to compare and contrast it to that of others. Continuing this train of thought, the logical conclusion follows that literacy allows for recognition of inequality. It also allows for the ability to communicate this inequality to others and, ultimately, revolutionary political change. That is, literacy allows for a broader understanding of one's own place in the world, and contextualized knowledge of this allows for synchronized efforts for systemic change. In short: literacy is political power. Just as Eve's understanding of her own place in the world upset the proverbial apple cart, so too does literacy. A literate woman is indeed a dangerous one.

“The ban on reading and writing in The Handmaid's Tale is a measure to prevent the “privilege” of objectivity from getting into the hands of women” (Klarer, 1995, p. 5). This observation holds true in The Testaments, as well. It is only once the girl characters learn to read that they are able to reveal truths about their own situations. Literacy allows the girls and women of Gilead to take a wide-angle view of their own position. The ability to read and to tell their own stories sharpens their peripheral vision. “Only in a tradition based on literacy, in which the past is archived, is it possible to place the present in relation to the past. Because of the spatial and temporal fixation on the immediate in orality, historical thinking can hardly develop” (Klarer, 1995, p. 4). Due to their ability to read, the women of the rebellion can understand the true history of their government, their position within the larger political system, and that system's place within global politics. Additionally, they can create records that bear witness to their experiences. Atwood (2019) succinctly sums up this sentiment in the epilogue to The Testaments, writing: “first-hand narratives from Gilead are vanishingly rare – especially concerning the lives of girls and women. It is hard for those deprived of literacy to leave such records” (p. 412). If we accept Klarer's

position that disallowing literacy will help maintain oppressive political structures, then the act of writing – that is, engaging in the prohibited realm of the cerebral – is inherently an act of hope, as it contains the seeds of resistance.

Given the above, it is not enough to simply burn books or to restrict access to existing ephemera. In order to maintain order in the regime, Gileadean women must not only be blocked from consuming and creating literature, they must be made to believe that they are fundamentally incapable of doing so. If a pilot light is left on, so to speak, there will always remain a risk that women could nurture the flame and find ways of acquiring forbidden literacy skills. In order to engineer a situation of total and abject hopelessness for women, the Sons of Jacob violently emphasize the female bodily and de-emphasize the female intellectual. If women can be made to genuinely believe that their only value lies in the use of their bodies, then they can be completely erased as a potential political threat. This task proves very delicate, however, because the Sons of Jacob recognize the very real simultaneous need and fear of both women's abilities and their biology. With this in mind, they build a society that is literally obsessed with keeping the so-called lid on women and their intellectual capacities. To this end, Gileadean women's bodies are used, sacrificed, and then discarded. It is no coincidence that Commander Judd behaves as a kind of Henry VIII toward his multiple child brides, discarding them after they have served their purposes for him; they are disposable. Atwood illustrates this in the text with a series of blood references. In The Testaments (2019), Atwood references blood as both sacred sacrificial giver-of-life and as a repugnant, debasing feature of bodily womanhood. That value of the female body is considered the same in Gilead, and blood is the touchstone representation of this in the novel. These blood references weave through the narrative like a single crimson thread, touching and connecting the female characters into a constellation of dangerous womanhood. We can follow this thread and it will be worthwhile to examine closely two of the more startling examples of these references. The Sons of Jacob began an organized campaign of reducing women to husks of their former intellectual selves early in the coup that toppled the United States government. Atwood presents us with a harrowing and detail-rich account of the first wave of incarceration and execution of female intellectuals, lawyers, judges, professors, and professionals. In other words: highly literate women. The future Aunt Lydia was a practicing judge at the time of her kidnapping and

incarceration. Her re-telling of this event contains important references to bodily debasement as well as what is perhaps one of the most important blood references in the novel. As Lydia sits in the stadium into which the "middle-aged professional women" have been sequestered, she ruminates on the coup, telling the reader that "any forced change of leadership is always followed by a move to crush the opposition. The opposition is led by the educated, so the educated are the first to be eliminated. You are a judge, so you are educated, like it or not. They don't want you around" (p. 116). The women in the camp are stripped of their autonomy. They are disallowed even the smallest luxuries, and they are kept in a constant state of physical discomfort and fear. Describing the conditions at the encampment Lydia writes, "Some of us were past menopause, but others were not, so the smell of clotting blood was added to the sweat and tears and shit and puke. To breathe was to be nauseated" (p. 143). The treatment of the women in the camp was systematic and carefully designed to reduce each captured to a transparent shadow of herself and to quash any capacity for rebellion. Each woman is stripped of her humanity and made animal in ways that recall Primo Levi's 1986 The Drowned and the Saved. This similarity is unlikely to be accidental, as Atwood follows a personal rule that each event in her speculative fiction necessarily has happened in human history (Atwood, p. 418). So, while the connection is highly uncomfortable, it is nevertheless warranted. Levi, describing the treatment of newly arrived Nazi prisoners, tell us of "kicks and punches right away, often in the face; an orgy of orders screamed with true or simulated rage; complete nakedness after being stripped; the shaving off of all one's hair; the outfitting in rags" (Levi, 1986, p. 28). Moreover, Levi describes the goal of the Nazi camps was to create the "immediate collapse of one's capacity to resist" (p. 27). Lydia similarly states that the purpose of the abuse at the Gilead camp was "to humiliate us, break down our resistance" (Atwood, 2019, p. 117) and to make the women "consider ourselves subhuman" (p. 143). These tactics, tried and true, are both brutal and efficient; they allow for the destruction of rebellious will, cognitive capacity, and for humiliation. The blood reference here is powerful and serves to highlight the ways in which the women are being reduced to their biology. That is, they are told that even their sole valuable resource – fertility – is disgusting despite its usefulness. If they have passed menopause then their value is less, and they are liable to be executed in a grotesque spectacle. If, however, they are still having periods that blood is at once both disgusting and necessary for the

new regime. Fertile women cannot be allowed to understand this value, and so they are denied the proper hygiene products with which to maintain a modicum of bodily control or dignity. In this way, women are trapped in a deeply shameful relationship to their biology, which is held as their only value. The cognitive capacity to seek out literature and, ultimately, political emancipation is completely removed from the equation. It becomes wholly unthinkable.

A second important blood reference occurs when Ofkyle dies during the bizarre Gileadean childbirth ritual. Firstly, it is worth mentioning that many of the objects associated with the handmaids and with birth in general are red. Most notably, the handmaids' uniforms are red, the birth mobile is red, as are the wings on the medical bags carried by the medics who attend births. Interestingly, the medics are all female, and Agnes makes mention that women are unable to become “real” physicians despite their doing the actual work of doctors. Women are consistently forced to view themselves as they are connected to blood and to body. They are constantly surrounded by reminders of their bodies and that of which these bodies are and are not capable. Agnes herself is also ensnared in the red thread in this chapter, as on the day of Ofkyle's delivery she got her first period. Agnes tells us that young girls and women who are eligible for marriage are disallowed from seeing birth until they experience it themselves. This is a poignant way of reminding the reader that although women's bodies and their functions are necessary, women themselves cannot be allowed autonomy over them. By denying them the “thick red knowledge” of their own bodies – the ones to which they have been reduced – women are left unaware of their earthy power (Atwood, 2019, p. 102). Ofkyle's death is treated as secondary to the fact that a healthy baby boy was delivered. When a household servant expresses sadness that Ofkyle's ordeal appears to have been for naught, she is reminded that “it was one or the other ... they had to cut her open” (p. 103). OfKyle was, quite literally, a blood sacrifice for the life of a boy. She was cut open and laid out on the bed for all to see, as though an animal eviscerated on an altar to the glory of some vengeful ancient god. Agnes notes that after death OfKyle's face was white, and that she “must have had no blood left in her” (p. 103). The regime needs her blood sacrifice, and yet her loss is treated as a non-issue. Women are but paltry vessels out of which blood is to be poured so that they may be filled with babies to preserve the life and comfort of their captors. Cognitive capacity is not regarded as a part of their being.

I have elaborated the ways in which Gileadean women are reduced to the value of their physicality in order to quash any chance that they will seek out literacy, and it will now be appropriate to examine the ways in which women in The Testaments nevertheless achieve their emancipatory political goals through literacy and storytelling.

One of the first instances in the novel of a girl character attempting to tell her own story comes in the form of Agnes' dollhouse. Agnes is illiterate, having been reared in a Gileadean household rather than an American one. Interestingly, Atwood (2019) explicitly connects the dollhouse to literacy at the very outset when Agnes notes about her dollhouse that "all the little pretend books on the shelf were blank. I asked why there was nothing inside them – I had a dim feeling that there were supposed to be marks on those pages" (p. 14). Agnes' dollhouse speaks to the innate human desire to tell one's own story. For Atwood, the desire to depict experiences is encoded in our very humanity, and when that desire is frustrated it will inevitably seep out in some way or another, even unconsciously as happens with young Agnes. She does not recognize the reasons why she feels the desire to arrange her dollhouse and its inhabitants the way that she does, but nevertheless feels compelled to play out a tiny pantomime of her life. This is the seepage of the basic human desire to tell our stories. The child uses her dollhouse as a form of storytelling, even just for herself. She uses the tools at her disposal to depict not only a representation of her life, but a representation of her emotions about that life. In the miniature version of her life, Agnes can exert some form control over her surroundings. By arranging the dolls inside her miniature world, she can craft some form of autonomy - autonomy that she is not afforded in her flesh and blood existence. She can even see what her father doll is doing in his office, reading his "stack of papers" (p. 15). Agnes has some agency inside of her dollhouse, and this betrays the power of storytelling for Gileadean women: they can have that wide-angle view of their own situation just as Klarer described. Just as Agnes can view her own position from a bird's eye view in her dollhouse, literacy affords the same ability. In this way, the dollhouse serves as a microcosm for the power of storytelling and of literacy.

A second instance in which Gileadean women use literacy to emancipate themselves is in the tattoo with which Daisy is branded before she enters Gilead as a neophyte Pearl Girl. The tattoo is placed on the inside of her forearm by her Mayday handlers, in the following formation:

L

G O D

V

E

The meaning of the tattoo is not revealed in the text immediately, but the reader knows that it was specifically requested by Mayday's contact inside Gilead, known only as "the source". The tattoo can be taken to indicate both literacy and resiliency. Daisy mentions that the tattoo itself is not really a tattoo, but rather "scarification: raised lettering" (p. 204). After she arrives in Gilead, Aunt Lydia (revealed then to be the source) uses tools to insert a chip into the scarred letter "O" on Daisy's arm. The chip contains a documents cache to be delivered to resistance workers in Canada. The cache holds accounts of Gilead's cruel treatment of its citizens – that is, the writing that will emancipate the women and girls of Gilead. It is not coincidental that the documents cache so necessary for her freedom is inserted into another letter carved into her skin by a highly literate woman. Daisy's body is, in this way, also a sort of blood sacrifice, because she had to shed blood in order to carry important words. This words-within-words theme occurs elsewhere in the novel as well, and the tattoo is not unlike the bloodline documents hidden inside of other hollowed out books in the Ardua Hall library. The tattoo can also be taken as a sign of Gileadean women's resiliency. The scarification becomes badly infected during the journey back to Canada, nearly killing Daisy. Nevertheless, she manages to survive with the help of her sister. Upon arriving on the shores of their destination, Daisy notes, "My left arm felt as if it wasn't mine – as if it was detached from me" (p. 397). As she leaves Gilead, Daisy's physical body rejects the poison of her past. She is free, and the women of Gilead are all to follow her into that freedom.

In The Testaments, Gileadean girl children are reminded often that females have "smaller brains" and are "incapable of thinking large thoughts" (Atwood, 2019, p. 15). Agnes even goes so

far as to describes her own brain as “warmed-up mud” (p. 88). Gileadean women have been carefully reduced to their most basic physiology and are made to believe that their only value lies in their ability to reproduce. They are but pieces of their whole selves. Having been deconstructed, each of their parts is scattered to those men who deem them of greatest use. The women have been battered such that their lack of access to literacy remains largely unquestioned because they have been made to sincerely believe that they are cognitively incapable of comprehending the written word. It was not enough to deny them literacy, the Sons of Jacob had to attempt to stamp out any small hopeful flames. However, the desire to communicate one's experience is, for Atwood, hardwired. The women of Gilead nurtured the flame of literacy and thus of hope. There is immense power in possessing the ability to describe one's own oppression and to subsequently communicate that experience with others of the oppressed group. It is clear that the Sons of Jacob recognize and fear this threat. The escape of key political activists and, ultimately, the fall of the Gileadean regime is orchestrated and mobilized by intricate networks of literate women. It is not immaterial to this point that, in her secret writings, Aunt Lydia styles her potential future reader (should such a reader exist) a female academic. It is also not immaterial that Agnes uncovered the heinous truth about her oppressors only after learning to read. Mayday's activities are coordinated and executed by literate women smuggling to one another written accounts of atrocities and secret messages hidden inside tattooed letters. In the end, not only did the women of Gilead free themselves, but they ended the cruel empire of Gilead and left behind their testaments, bearing witness to their ordeal. As Lydia writes in her own testament: “topple me and I'll pull down the temple” (Atwood, 2019, p. 111).

Margaret Atwood’s *The Testaments* takes the torch from 1985’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* with bravery and grace. The central thematic elements in the text – literacy and storytelling as inherently hopefully and rebellious acts – do more than describe a world in which women have been denied basic human rights. The women and girls of Gilead are denied access to literacy and, ultimately, to the ability to effectively communicate their own life experiences, both geographically and temporally. For Atwood, the ability to communicate and contextualize experiences of oppression allows for coordinated political action that threatens established power structures. To secure the denial of these abilities from women, the Sons of Jacob systematically reduce females’ societal

value to their ability (or lack thereof) to reproduce, forcing Gileadean women to genuinely believe that their biology precludes them from literacy. They are prohibited from engaging in the cerebral through being made to believe that they are fundamentally incapable. Atwood represents this with a series of powerful and grotesque blood references, showing the reader that Gileadean women are prisoners to their physiology. In The Testaments, these abilities are couched as tantamount to political agency. Greater understanding of their situation allows Gileadean women to mobilize intricate networks of political resistance that bring about the fall of the dictatorial regime. The women accomplish their goal through covert teaching of literacy and creative methods of depicting their reality when literacy cannot be obtained. In the end, it is the ability to tell their own stories that allows the women of Gilead to orchestrate their own liberation and leave physical accounts of their suffering. Leaving their testaments is an act of hope because it assumes a future reader.

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