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# RELIGION, GENDER INEQUALITY, AND SURROGATE MOTHERHOOD

*A New Family Arrangement in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale*

**ABSTRACT:** Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), is the account of an imaginary future State, the Republic of Gilead, based on strict biblical values where men take back their place as head of the family (and the State), and women go back to their original ancillary position, both in society and at home. Gilead was indeed created to solve problems such as the extinction of the human race, due to a diffused infertility, using fertile women, the Handmaids, as surrogate mothers for the families of the Commanders, those who rule it. This creates, in fact, a new model of family, where the Commander and his wife host another woman in their house, hoping that, through the monthly "Ceremonies" (the intercourse between the Commander and the Handmaid), theirs can become a traditional family with children. Yet, the novel shows how a true balance, even between the sexes, is impossible to reach. The aim of this analysis is to show how the author has fractioned all the elements that form a family, as a small version of society itself, to foretell a possible outcome of many matters of debate, especially the role of women.

**KEYWORDS:** Atwood, Surrogacy, Religion, Gender, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Donald Trump, America

The year 2017 saw the revival of Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) through the award-winning Hulu TV series starring Elizabeth Moss and Joseph Fiennes. The novel had been already made into a movie by Volker Schlöndorff in 1990, but the impact of this new filmic version of Atwood's novel has been wider and more political, due perhaps to the similarities between the fictional society of Gilead and today's social realities. Elizabeth Moss, who plays the Handmaid Offred in the show, has noticed "things happening with women's reproductive rights in our country [America] that make me feel like this book is bleeding over into reality" (Lowry 2017).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the

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<sup>1</sup> Moss refers to the decision of the Republicans to defund "Planned Parenthood," the largest abortion provider in the United States, and to suspend Obamacare's contraception mandate.

show has been aired after the election of Donald Trump, a time when “America needed to take a hard look at itself, and consider the hypocritical, misogynist prurience that seems to drive many of its political figures” (Cain 2017). Women have started attending marches and protests wearing the red robe and the white bonnet, the Handmaids’ uniform, and others have marched with banners saying, “Make Atwood Fiction Again” (Polychronis 2017), showing how wide has been the influence of the show, and the novel, on women all over the world.

*The Handmaid’s Tale* explores a fictional society where women have lost all their rights and where they do not have the faculty to choose what to do with their lives and their bodies. They are also forced to live according to very strict rules that prescribe fixed gender roles for their existence. This society, the Republic of Gilead, is the successor of the United States of America and it is guided by a fundamentalist reading of the Bible’s principles. In Gilead, patriarchy is what defines both the personal and the public life, and the most oppressive issue, that of infertility and the possible extinction of humanity, is solved by using the last fertile women as “productive wombs.” These women, named “Handmaids,” must live with the Commanders of the State of Gilead and their Wives “in a parody of a family unit” (Kužnicki 2017, 68), and attend a monthly “ceremony” where they have sex with the Commander, in the presence of the Wife. If the intercourse results in a pregnancy, the baby will be relinquished to the couple as soon as he/she is born.

This arrangement creates a new kind of family that seems to make obsolete the previous one, producing “that dangerous, creeping normalization, the utterly unordinary becoming ordinary” (Wollaston 2017). It creates a new “balance,” new bonds, and it deals with current issues such as surrogacy and the role of women both in the family and in society.

*The Handmaid’s Tale*, which is narrated by Offred, might be read as a cautionary tale. Being a dystopian novel, it warns about the perils of an excessive control over people’s lives and customs, about the risks of abiding to religious fundamentalism, and of course about the inequality of the sexes, here brought to its extreme consequences. Moreover, the novel presents a new, although inspired by an old, familiar pattern, which shapes society and is seen as a return to “Nature’s norm” (Atwood 1985, 232). This pattern stems directly, also in the real world, from the governments’ and media’s concern about family decline which “calls to return to the apparently superior values of a past golden age of family life” (Chambers 2012, 2). Such a golden age is connected to the nuclear family model, which represents an “icon of tradition and stability, often still perceived as an antidote to today’s social problems” (2). Furthermore, family values are directly tied to the intention of governments, Gilead included, to “identify and defend the moral standards of the nation” (Chambers 2012, 12) and are central “to how nations view themselves and their prospects for the future” (Markens 2007, 3).

Is there anything about this model that is mirrored by real life society? Are women bound to return to the roles assigned them by men? Would such a solution fix some of the issues of our time? Do we risk going back to an entirely patriarchal society, where women have no rights? The analysis of the elements constituting Gilead's familiar model tries to answer these questions.

Gilead, defined by Sławomir Kuźnicki as “the perverse marriage of religion and sexuality” (68), relies for its structure and rules on the Sacred Scriptures. Nonetheless, it is not only based on Christian values, rather it is “a conglomeration of Western religious ideals, uniting Old Testament patriarchy with Protestant Puritanism and New Right traditional values” (Rine 2013, 55). The function of these values is to reinforce gender roles, and to grant “male hegemony state control over women's bodies, biological reductivism, strict (hetero)sexual mores and the equation of natural and normal” (55). The epigraph that opens the novel is taken from Genesis, 30:1-3, and it constitutes the Biblical origin of surrogate motherhood:

And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children or else I die.  
And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb?  
And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her. (Atwood 1985, 9)

This piece from the Bible is taken literally “to disempower and sexually exploit fertile women” (Banerjee 2015, 55), in a historical moment that sees an alarming rate of infertile men and women. Infertility deprives the institution of marriage of what is considered, in the Bible, the proper end of it: reproduction, since, “at the heart of this primary form of human relationality is fecundity” (Atkinson 2014, 50). So, “the only antidote to this is the retrieval of the biblical vision of marriage and family, which requires the recovery of an authentic theology of creation” (51) since “without procreation and the creation of new families, there can be no history” (66). In Gilead, in order to grant the survival of humans, and to give the Commander's families children or heirs, the few remaining fertile women are enslaved and used as “mere procreators shorn of personal integrity” (57). This loss of identity is symbolized by the very act of losing their baptismal name to take on the name of the man to whose household they are assigned. Offred is indeed a patronymic for “of Fred,” which corresponds, according to Abigail Rine, with the name Adam gives Eve: “wo-man” (“of man”), “denoting man as origin and woman as different from, yet belonging to man” (59). The use of patronymics for the Handmaids “exemplifies the model of sexual difference established in the biblical creation myth” (59).

The sexual act that allows the insemination of the Handmaid is the monthly “ceremony,” which is introduced by the Commander reading the Bible in “a kind of

religious service” (Filipczak 1993, 176). As the already quoted piece prescribes, the intercourse follows a precise ritual that is “sanctioned by the state” (*Ibidem*). Rituals, as in this case, shape and express the social roles of the people enacting them, and bring them “beyond conscious levels of awareness” simultaneously commanding “attention and loyalty” and deflecting any questioning (Braverman 1988, 159). The Handmaid is fully clothed, lying on her back, with the head between the Wife’s knees; the two women hold hands, which is “supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really means is that she is in control, of the process and thus of the product. If any” (Atwood 1985, 104). In this way, “the most private and intimate interaction between two individuals is made grotesque and coercive” in an act performed “passionlessly once every month” (Banerjee 2015, 58). The TV series shows the grotesque element of the ceremony from the very first episode (“Offred”),<sup>2</sup> where every move of the ritual is accompanied by the words of the epigraph, functioning as an explanation for the position of the bodies.

The triad that produces such an act might be also interpreted in religious terms, and “the Commander plays the role of God the Father, because he is the oldest and he embodies the biblical concept of patriarchy in its fullest way” (Kuźnicki 2017, 68). Patriarchy, justified by religion, allows the objectification of women, “mainly in the sexual and biological sphere of life” (72) and hence is used as “a political tool of repression, which is always connected with the process of victimizing one particular group of people at the cost of another” (73). Nevertheless, Dorota Filipczak has argued that the patriarchal interpretation of the Biblical texts is not within the texts, but only “the sexist assumptions of the interpreter” (Filipczak 1993, 182), denoting an instrumental use of religion.

Of course, in such an arrangement, romantic love and genuine bonds between people are not allowed. The concept that a family is a product of the love between two people is outdated, since, as the Commander claims, “All we’ve done is return things to Nature’s norm” (Atwood 1985, 232). Norms are “the basic structural building blocks for all groups, including the family group” and they may “prohibit, permit, prefer or prescribe a specific behavior or set of behaviors for incumbents of a social position” (Boss *et al.* 2009, 232). In Gilead, the norm, presumably set by Nature, is used to justify, among others, the practice of arranged marriages, because “Arranged marriages have always worked out just as well, if not better” (Atwood 1985, 232) since “this way they all get a man, nobody’s left out” (Atwood 1985, 231). But the patriarchal nuclear family is only “a historically and culturally specific” social institution, and not something “natural,” that is why it is used, in Gilead and in real societies, “in the organization of social and cultural life” and in “the acquisition of male and female gender identities, and the moral order” (Wright and

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<sup>2</sup> “Offred.” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Directed by Reed Morano, season 1, episode 1, Hulu, 26 April 2017.

Jagger 1999, 4). It is not surprising then, that in Gilead “intimacy and emotional commitment, the cornerstones of contemporary families, no longer exist” (Newman and Grauerholz 2002, 523). Moreover, “love is not allowed, and pleasure is denied any part in sexual contact” (Trahair 1999, 167). The act performed in the ceremony, as Offred recounts, “has nothing to do with passion or love or romance or any of those other notions we used to titillate ourselves with. It has nothing to do with sexual desire [...] Arousal and orgasm are no longer thought necessary” (Atwood 1985, 105). Pleasure cannot be part of the equation because the sexual act only has a procreative *telos*, and the “pleasure-centered ethos” that involves sex without procreative ends, in a Christian view, “is destructive of the family, the individual and society” (Atkinson 2014, 51). That is why, “the family is weak, despite the government’s pro-family rhetoric” (Sheckels 2012, 89).

The standardization of family is not only a fictional element, rather the result of some governments’ attempts to do it through measures such as “housing policies, tax breaks for married couples, divorce and post-divorce parenting laws, family planning, types of access to new reproductive technologies and so on” (Chambers 2012, 1). As Julie Hanlon Rubio claims, many Americans believe that giving equal importance to all types of family (for instance same-sex families, mononuclear families and so on) is destructive to “the family” and that “it is not beneficial, in their eyes, to focus on the diversity of family life in the United States” (Hanlon Rubio 2003, 4). It is probably from this conviction that Atwood took inspiration to depict the previous family that Offred had: she was married to Luke and they had a baby girl. Although they were an apparently traditional nuclear family, Luke had been married before to another woman, and Offred was his mistress. The show adds another element of “discomfort” to the couple, since Luke, played by the actor O-T Fagbenle, is also a black man. Hence, theirs is an interracial union, which makes it even less “holy” than the new reality Offred is forced to live in.

In Gilead, women are relegated to an ancillary position with respect to men’s, who wield power in a totalitarian way. Once again, religion is the foundation of this arrangement, because “being the first created and being the source, the man embodies an ordering principle” in the relationship he has with the woman (Atkinson 2014, 60). Power, in this society, can only be interpreted in Foucauldian terms, therefore in negative ones, because it takes on the meaning of “refusal, limitation, obstruction, censorship” (Foucault 1980, 139). “Power is what says no,” writes Foucault, and it implies “either a renunciation of natural rights, a Social contract, or a love of the master” (*Ibidem*). This is what happens in Gilead, where women are not allowed to write, to read, and to hold property anymore (Atwood 1985, 187). Such a society might have been inspired by the claims of the New Right in the 1980’s, which hoped for “every man’s right to rule supreme at home” and to exercise the husband’s “God-given responsibility to lead his family” (Bouson 1993, 135). What these activists wanted was “the restoration of women’s traditional roles” and “the return of women to the home” (135). The probable

outcome of such claims, had they been applied, was “the virtual enslavement of women, their reduction to mere functions, to mute replaceable objects” (135). The New Right ideology on family was, of course, oppressive towards women, since it prevented them from achieving an economic independence and “vocational fulfillment” outside the home (Hanlon Rubio 2003, 12). It also showed how “family values” have nothing to do with “women’s desires, women’s rights, or women’s health” (Oliver 1997, xv). Not too implicitly, the claim of the New Right was that family values “would be safeguarded only when men are once again fully in power in both the public and domestic spheres” (xvi), which is exactly what happens in Gilead. Nonetheless, Atwood claimed that *The Handmaid’s Tale* is not “strictly speaking a feminist dystopia” because “all the men would have to be advantaged, and this is far from being the case” (Lacroix et al. 1999, 14). Rather, Atwood defines this society as a hierarchy, where “some people at the top have power” but “the general run of men live in a very arranged way” (14). Of course, there is a hierarchy also among women, “so that their clothing, movements and language are all delimited by the roles they play” (Banerjee 2015, 60). For this reason, women must wear the colour related to their social status: blue for the Wives, red for the Handmaids, green for the Marthas, who are the servants in Gilead (Atwood 1985, 19). This difference implies a clear assignment in their roles, which are bound to stay the same forever. The colors are also a symbol borrowed from the Christian iconography of the late-medieval, early Renaissance period, explained by Atwood regarding the TV series as follows: “the Virgin Mary would inevitably wear blue or blue-green, and Mary Magdalene would inevitably wear red” (Vineyard 2017).

The Wives, too, have limited possibilities. As any other woman in Gilead, they are not allowed to read or to make decisions, and they are confined to their spaces, which are the house and the garden, where they can take care of the plants or knit. All these activities are designed to “keep the Wives busy, to give them a sense of purpose” (Atwood 1985, 23) since they are “defeated women. They have been unable [...]” (56). So, they must accept the practice of surrogate motherhood, which is the core of the novel.

Due to the high rates of infertility, which has become an “epidemic”<sup>3</sup> also in the late twentieth century reality (Markens 2007, 9), conceiving a child has become a difficult task, and “where motherhood and fatherhood were once inevitable and given, they now require definition by law” (Chambers 2012, 12) and cannot rely anymore on biological procreation, or at least, on that between husband and wife only. Yet, infertility is only a female guilt in Gilead, because “There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore [...] there are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that’s the law”

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<sup>3</sup> According to Susan Markens, infertility might be the result of the trend which sees women as a part of the labor force, hence delaying motherhood until they have established their careers. Since fecundity decreases with age, men and women are more often infertile (15).

(Atwood 1985, 70-71). Anyway, Serena Joy, the Commander's Wife, informs Offred, during a private conversation, that she believes her husband is sterile, and suggests to her to try an illegal solution: having sex with the house guardian Nick (Atwood 1985, 216). The act, which takes place in absolute secrecy, is carried out as an act of love, or at least of desire, and it is repeated several times, no more for procreational aims but for something Offred dares not call love, because "it would be tempting fate; it would be romance, bad luck" (Atwood 1985, 282).

Through traditional surrogacy, a practice which is never named in the novel, the "dyadic private world of biogenetic sexual reproduction" is now transformed into something that allows "the divisibility of maternity, including the transfer of newborns from one mother to another," and which "separate, divide and distribute what may be called the formerly unified essentialist dimension of maternity" (Farquar 1996, 15). Besides, the surrogate mother acts, in a certain way, as a "surrogate wife" to the husband of the infertile woman (Field 1988, 5). As Lisa Sowle Cahill claims, indeed, "the 'surrogate' is 'substituting' not for the mother [...] but for the wife of her child's biological father, making a biological contribution" (153). What results is a "bizarre situation in which the woman has limited information, and experiences physical and psychological evaluations and stresses beyond those normally associated with pregnancy, and all to carry a baby whom she will surrender to someone else forever" (Schwartz 2003, 163). This anxiety, in the novel, is expressed through the constant and obsessive control over Offred's menstrual cycle and health, with mandatory monthly visits to the doctor and healthy food to be "a worthy vessel" (Atwood 1985, 75). The arrival of the menstruation is viewed as the failure of her "productive enterprise" (Martin 1997, 85). Consequently, it is not surprising that surrogacy challenges the very notions of "family and relatedness" (Markens 2007, 2), because "introducing third parties into the process of human reproduction may weaken certain marital and familial relationships" bringing the intended father to establish "an inappropriate psychological bond with the surrogate mother" (Tong 2003, 370). The ceremony, indeed, might be considered as "a form of fornication or adultery" even if "in the Old Testament surrogacy is not seen as a form either of fornication or adultery" (Charlesworth 1993, 76). In the novel, an inappropriate psychological bond develops when the Commander asks Offred to see him in his office, after Serena Joy has gone to bed, to play *Scrabble* with him. The game would in normal times have been innocuous; "now it's forbidden [...] dangerous. Now it's indecent. Now it's something he can't do with his Wife. Now it's desirable" (Atwood 1985, 149). The game is forbidden, of course, because it implies playing with letters and words, something that women, bound to be illiterate, cannot do without breaking Gilead's law. Yet, the essence of the inappropriate bond between the Commander and the Handmaid comes out when he asks her to kiss him "as if you meant it" (Atwood 1985, 150) at the end of their forbidden encounter. They keep meeting regularly, and initially, he grants her small presents, such as an old magazine to read, and

a hand balm, another forbidden item for the Handmaids. Eventually, the Commander takes her out to Jezebel's, a club out of town where the Commanders can enjoy the company of prostitutes. The excuse for the existence of such a club is, as the Commander explains, that "you can't cheat Nature. Nature demands variety, for men. It stands to reason, it's part of the procreational strategy. It's Nature's plan" (Atwood 1985, 249). At Jezebel's, the relationship between Offred and the Commander becomes even more inappropriate because he has sex with her outside of the procreational ceremony (Atwood 1985, 267).

Since the choice of becoming a Handmaid is not up to the women who are going to grant this service to the Commanders and their Wives, theirs is an exploitation that makes them "nothing but a two-legged womb used for breeding" (Trahair 1999, 167). Both women and children become, in this society, a commodity. The Handmaids, or surrogate mothers, are "treated as a thing, an instrument, and not as a person" (Charlesworth 1993, 77), their bodies are "containers, it's only the insides [...] that are important" (Atwood 1985, 107). Their condition is precisely that of slaves, because slavery is "the situation where a person is made to serve another by force or coercion and where no kind of free and informed consent has been possible" (Charlesworth 1993, 78). However, the Handmaids are "too important, too scarce [...] a national resource" (Atwood 1985, 75).

What the Handmaids are asked and instructed to do by Aunt Lydia at the Red Centre, beginning their journey to become Handmaids, is, once again, connected to religion and to the concept of "sacrificial Christian love ethic" (Sullivan-Dunbar 2017, 78). This concept, which assumes that Christian love must only be obeyed and that "its very essence must be to contradict our inclinations, which are warped through sin" (80), results in the fact that in Gilead, there is no space for anything that is the unique feature of a Handmaid, or her inclination towards any aspect of everyday life. They all must wear a uniform and speak only through set phrases (such as "Blessed be the fruit," "May the Lord open," "Praise be" etc.), and of course they must obey the Commander and his Wife. All these rules automatically erase their identity as persons. Additionally, "our 'natural' self-love is deeply suspect in this tradition, and must be radically contained" (Sullivan-Dunbar 2017, 80). That is why the Handmaids cannot wear the least sign of vanity, which translates into the prohibition to wear make-up or to have a mirror or a razor in their rooms and "hair must be long but covered" (Atwood 1985, 72). "Modesty is invisibility" is Aunt Lydia's warning, "to be *seen*- is to be [...] penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable" (Atwood 1985, 38-39). Handmaids are also denied the basic body-care, such as a moisturizer. Finally, this ethic considers natural instincts as "a dangerous guide for moral decisions making" (Sullivan-Dunbar 2017, 81), which is exactly what Aunt Lydia teaches the Handmaids.



Another aim of this family arrangement is, according to Aunt Lydia, to create a society where “women will live in harmony together, all in one family.” In such a society “there can be bonds of real affection” because women will be “united for a common end!,” “Helping one another in their daily chores as they walk the path of life together, each performing her appointed task” (Atwood 1985, 171). That is what surrogacy, in certain cases, might do, bringing women “closer together” and having positive “transformative effects” on them (Tong 2003, 573). That does not happen between Offred and Serena Joy, since the latter sees the first as “a reproach to her; and a necessity” (Atwood 1985, 23). The cold treatment that Serena gives Offred disappoints her expectation, and the Aunts’, to create an artificial yet harmonic relationship between the Wife and the Handmaid. Offred’s hope was to “turn her into an older sister, a motherly figure, someone who would understand and protect me” (Atwood 1985, 26).

In most cases, surrogacy complicates the relationship between the women involved in the practice, because it disrupts the very idea of maternal wholeness, since motherhood is distributed “among at least three potential mothers: genetic, gestational, and social” (Temam 2010, 7). The first two “mothers” are those who directly offer their body within the pregnancy, while the third does not have any direct physical involvement in the gestation, but only raises and nurtures the child. The social recognition of motherhood seems to be an essential feature in Gilead, probably more than anything else, and the show stresses this fact in the second episode (chapter 5 in the book), “Birth Day”.<sup>4</sup> Here, the Handmaids attend the birth of Ofwarren’s child at her Commander’s house, which is crowded with upper class women assisting the Wife, who wears a nightgown and behaves as if she were in labor. When Ofwarren is ready to deliver, they put her in the same position as prescribed for the monthly intercourse ritual ceremony, with the head between the Wife’s legs. After the baby, a girl, is born, she is taken away from Ofwarren and showed off to the women enjoying the party at the house.

This episode, which is slightly different from the book, shows exactly how the fear of losing the social recognition as a mother brings the Wives to pretend a natural birth they are not involved in. What they experience is a “pseudopregnancy” where their role as nurturers is highlighted, and the biological role of the “real” mother is devalued. “In this way, motherhood is reinterpreted as primarily an important social role in order to sidestep problematic aspects of the surrogate’s biogenetic relationship to the child and the adoptive mother’s lack of a biogenetic link” (Ragoné 1997, 120-21). The baby is seen as something the Wife has won, “a tribute” (Atwood 1985, 136). The Handmaid will be “allowed to nurse the baby, for a few months” and after that she will be transferred “to see if she can do it again, with someone else who needs a turn” (Atwood 1985, 137). From that moment on, the biological mother will be erased from the life of the child, as

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<sup>4</sup>“Birth Day.” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Directed by Reed Morano, season 1, episode 2, Hulu, 26 April 2017.

Offred notices when Serena Joy brings her an album with pictures of her daughter, whom she has lost when she was captured. In the family album Serena shows her there are no Handmaids, and Offred is nothing to her daughter. “I have been obliterated for her. I am only a shadow now, far back behind the glib shiny surface of this photograph. A shadow of a shadow, as dead mothers become” (Atwood 1985, 240). This is the new family standard in Gilead, and this will likely be forever.

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The year 2018 has opened – among others – with the publication of Michael Wolff’s book *Fire and Fury, Inside the Trump White House* (Henry Holt and Company), which immediately became a best seller. It features prominently the role of Steve Bannon as former White House Chief Strategist. Bannon was also the executive chairman at Breitbart News, a far-right American news website founded in 2007 by the conservative commentator Andrew Breitbart. Scrolling through the pages of Breitbart, it is possible to understand better why protesters all over the world have marched with their banners saying, “Make Atwood Fiction Again.”

The website, which supported Trump’s presidential campaign in 2016, contains a fair number of articles, mostly written by Milo Yiannopoulos, dealing with the issues contained both in *The Handmaid’s Tale* novel and TV show. What follows is only a glimpse at the website.

Regarding birth control and contraception, it is possible to find an article titled “Birth Control Makes Women Unattractive and Crazy” where Yiannopoulos lists a series of side effects caused by the Pill, such as “Birth control makes you fat,” “makes your voice unsexy,” “makes you choose the wrong mates,” “makes you a slut,” “makes men unmanly,” “gives you cottage cheese thighs.” In his opinion, “the Pill may have destroyed the institution of marriage,” because the lack of children leads to “fewer reasons for couples to stay together” (Yiannopoulos 2015a). He concludes that “we need the kids if we’re to breed enough to keep the Muslim invaders at bay. Tossing out birth control isn’t just kinder to women, it may be the only way to save civilization [...] It’s what God wants, too.”

The issue of birth control involves the organization “Planned Parenthood,” which is accused, in an article by Susan Berry, of performing nothing but abortions and devoting a minimal part of its funds to mammograms (Berry 2018). Berry also maintains, in another article, that the decision to defund what she calls “the abortion industry” is stirring up “war on women” rhetoric (Berry 2017a). Finally, she complains that the Cinema chain Alamo Drafthouse, based in Texas, has organized a women-only screening

of the film *Wonder Woman* to collect money for Planned Parenthood, among the protests of men (Berry 2017b).

Regarding the role of women in society, there are several articles by Yiannopoulos that hope for a return of women to the kitchen. His remarks are alarmingly reminiscent of Atwood's novel when he writes that "for now, women are the only gender capable of bringing another life into existence. That is a genuinely beautiful thing that should be respected and celebrated" (Yiannopoulos 2016a). The journalist goes even further when he suggests the creation of a "female" internet, to avoid online harassment, because "men built the internet, along with the rest of modern civilization." In this way, women "could go back to bridge tournaments, or wellness workshops, or swapping apple crumble recipes [ ... ] I, Donald Trump and the rest of the alpha male will continue to dominate the internet without feminist whining" (Yiannopoulos 2016b). Lastly, Yiannopoulos writes about Nature, another issue brought on by Atwood, maintaining that it "experiments more widely with men: the male IQ range is wider, and there is more variation in male behavior and biology than in women. Men are where experimentation happens, because a wider variety of male aptitudes and preferences will keep women happier and result in a more well-rounded society" (Yiannopoulos 2015b). Regarding the inequality of the sexes, he believes that "the fight for women's 'equality' has always been absurd: why would a woman want to step down to the lower status of being equal with men? Why should women be badgered into choosing to work over having babies and being happy? (Yiannopoulos 2015b)." His idea about marriage corresponds to that of Gilead's Commanders when he writes that "marriage will benefit from a reduced focus on sex. With desire taken out of the marital equation, it's conceivable that the number of 'partnership marriages' between people who get on well and respect each other enough to share the loads of raising children will grow. Without the power imbalance built in to traditional heterosexual marriage – i.e., women holding all the cards – marriage could become stronger than ever" (Yiannopoulos 2015b).

For those being positive that our society is far from becoming that of Gilead, the cultural climate that these articles and the current American administration reflect is quite alarming. As Abigail Rine wrote just a few years ago, "the ideal of virile male leadership and the passive, reproductive femininity prevails, though no longer merely clothed in the guise of Adam and Eve" (73). So, those believing that our next model of family might be that described in *The Handmaid's Tale* could be right, given the government's attitude to "pick and choose among American cultural values about family, parenthood, and reproduction, now choosing biological relatedness, now nurturing, according to their needs" (Ragoné 1997, 123). To describe the current cultural atmosphere and its perils, some words from *The Handmaid's Tale* might be useful. "Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you knew it" (Atwood 1985, 66) and an even stronger warning: "ordinary

[...]is what you are used to. This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary” (43).

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