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The Handmaid's Tale as Palimpsest

Biblical (Re)Imaginings in Margaret Atwood's Novel

Abstract

The Handmaid's Tale inhabits an imaginary space defined by biblical narratives and set in the near future, when low fertility has reached a critical point. The solution provided by the Bible-based totalitarian regime in Gilead is to offer "handmaids" as surrogate mothers to members of the ruling elite. The biblical basis is chillingly re-enacted through the set reading of Genesis 30:1–3 that precedes and legitimises the ritual rape of the household-dedicated handmaiden. While this text from Genesis clearly provides the rationale for addressing issues of fertility in Gilead, I focus here more specifically on how the book of Judges (specifically Judges 19–21) is marshalled to provide an implicit framework for *The Handmaid 's Tale*. This article analyses the complex ways in which the Bible is used and abused in both the novel and the fourth season of the TV series, using literary and feminist lenses. It will be argued that both narratives, the book of Judges and Atwood's tale, contain elements of subversion and deconstruction.

Keywords

The Handmaid's Tale, Biblical Reception, Palimpsest, Feminist Reading, Book of Judges

Biography

Ann Jeffers is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy in the United Kingdom. She lectured for nearly thirty years at Heythrop College, University of London, where she was Senior Lecturer in Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Judaism and also Director of Research. Her research interests are varied but focus on Bible reception, gender and ecology.

Margaret Atwood's sixth novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), has had a substantial impact, especially since reaching our television screens with the Hulu series of the same name. The sheer prescience of the book, tackling issues of totalitarianism, religious fundamentalism, environmental disaster, loss of fertility and subsequent control over women's bodies, has contributed to its cultural visibility and generated a surge of studies. Using literary and feminist lenses, my investigation will focus on one of these areas: the

DOI: 10.25364/05.10:2024.1.3

complex ways in which the Bible is used and abused in the fundamentalist state of Gilead. Furthermore, I posit that the manuscript is in effect a palimpsest, for when we read the characterisation of the handmaid as a victim of gender-based violence, Judges 19–21 can be discerned beneath the words of the modern narrative.[1]

Reading Texts as Palimpsest

According to the Collins Online Dictionary, a palimpsest is "a parchment, tablet, etc. that has been written upon or inscribed two or three times, the previous text or texts having been imperfectly erased and remaining, therefore, still partly visible".[2] In his analysis of the multidimensionality of texts in his book *Palimpsests*, Gerard Genette writes of hypertexuality as "any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the *hypertext*) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the *hypotext*), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of a commentary".[3] *The Handmaid's Tale* is the hypertext of an underlying biblical hypotext. While Atwood uses *palimpsest* with reference to the society on which Gilead has superimposed itself, the term can be understood to refer to a complex network of literary traditions, a patchwork of multiple references to works ancient and modern, ranging from the Bible to Ancient Greek literature, Ovid, Geoffrey Chaucer, Puritan literature, fairy tales and modern dystopias, as the multiple references to George Orwell's *1984* demonstrate.[4] The novel also refers to totalitarian rule from the past, in particular Nazi and Stalinist regimes.[5] But while we can glimpse many literary references, the central plot of the novel makes explicit references to the Bible, and closer examination of the text itself unveils a number of biblical quotes, misquotes and echoes.

The idea of the palimpsest is useful in other ways: studies of biblical narratives about women have uncovered a patriarchal bias in the way the stories were recorded, with women's voices and agency severely curtailed. Although Atwood has expressed reservations about feminism, she nonethe-

1 Atwood 1996, 9 uses the word. On the idea of *The Handmaid's Tale* as palimpsest, see Ketcham 2019, 147.

2 Collins Online Dictionary 2023, http://tinyurl.com/3jrpsmvc [accessed 10 August 2023].

3 Genette 1997, 5.

4 Scarano D'Antonio 2021, 593–594; Nordström 2008, 1.

5 Lawson 1987, 496.

less situates herself within a feminist tradition[6] and has described her novel as "a study of power".[7]

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the women have lost their rights to work and to have a bank account, and they have also lost the right to choose whether to become pregnant, with fertile female bodies coerced into the national task of child-bearing. With Simone de Beauvoir's affirmation in mind that women's bodies need to be viewed as "autonomous subject",[8] *The Handmaid's Tale* is a clear illustration of the erasure of women's whole selves by reducing them to "bodies" whose sole purpose is in the service of the state: "I am a national resource",[9] says the protagonist, Offred, in one of her internal discourses. That function is achieved through state-sponsored ritualised rape and the eradication of sexuality (an echo of George Orwell's *1984*), with a handmaid redefined as a "two-legged womb".[10] According to Hélène Cixous, *The Handmaid's Tale* can be read as a feminist dystopia: "It is men who have driven away women from writing and it is men who have confiscated their bodies, their voices, and thus their writing in order to defend patriarchal order."[11] Carla Scarano D'Antonio suggests that the palimpsest presupposes "dissent"[12] from the text it is grafted onto. If we take that point seriously and analyse Atwood's novel (and the Hulu series) as a palimpsest of the Bible, we can expect to uncover a number of strategies like "subversion", "sedition", "blasphemy" and "heresy".[13] The narrative also exposes and attempts to rewrite the autonomy of Offred as a subject.

Trapped by the Bible

Much has been written on the prominence of the Bible in *The Handmaid's Tale*: the patchwork of biblically inspired hymns, religious traditions and

6 Although Margaret Atwood has been reluctant to call herself a feminist, she agreed with the broad definition of feminism as "a belief in the rights of women". See Munro Prescott 2019, 206.

7 Somacarrera 2006, 37.

8 de Beauvoir 1952, 39.

9 Atwood 1996, 71.

10 Atwood 1996, 142.

11 Cixous 1976, 339. See also Landis 2018, 18; Filipczak 1993, 171; Sugg 2019, 169.

12 Scarano D'Antonio 2021, 594.

13 Bertrand 2020, 177.

biblical references is extensive.[14] As has already been discussed by a variety of scholars, prophetic literature (Isaiah in particular) as well as Deuteronomy, Leviticus, Luke's gospel and Pauline writings – to name just a few – have all been cited as evidence of the importance of the Bible in the novel. Here I shall give only examples specifically concerned with women's relation to procreation to show the diverse ways in which the Bible is used as the hypotext and deliberately misconstrued. A greeting frequently uttered to and by the handmaids is "Blessed be the fruit", a shortening of a verse from Luke 1:42, which reads, "Blessed is the fruit of your womb", in the context of Mary's encounter with Elizabeth which each woman is pregnant with her first child.[15] The veils which are part of the women's outfits are a reference to 1 Corinthians 11:6–7, with the addition of 1 Timothy 2:9 to reinforce the modesty of their attire. The decontextualised use of "she shall be saved in childbearing", from 1 Timothy 2:8–15, with its emphasis on the "submission" of women to men[16] and on the role of women as procreators, reinforces much of Gilead's characterisation of handmaids as silent and powerless.[17]

The "aura"[18] of the sacred text as hypotext is used effectively in developing these ideas. Thus another example of the misuse of the Bible by Gilead occurs in the context of a handmaid giving birth: Offred remembers being told at the Red Centre, "From each according to her ability; to each according to his needs",[19] a quote attributed by the Aunts to the book of Acts. In its original context, the last part of this verse comes from Acts 4:35 ("they distributed to each as anyone had need") and is about food distribution among those who need it. In the context of the novel, the first part of the verse is a

14 Scarano D'Antonio 2021 and Dvorák 2006 have discussed a wide range of aspects of biblical references. Filipczak 1993 exposes the multiple references to Gilead as "beacon city on the hill" but also as corrupt and stained by blood. See also Tan 2009 on Isaiah and McCrossin 2019 on the book of Job.

15 Atwood 1996, 25. Here the greeting recurs when Offred encounters her shopping partner, Offglen. All quotations from the Bible in this article are from the New King James Version (NKJV).

16 Atwood 1996, 229.

17 This passage has been frequently deployed to suppress women's voices within the Christian tradition. See Neufeld Redekop 1990 for its localised contextualisation within second-generation Christians. The message about suppressing women's speech is reinforced by Aunt Lydia: "Do your duty in silence" (Atwood 1996, 229).

18 Swindell 2010, 5 speaks of the "aura" of the original text.

19 Atwood 1996, 123.

new addition that legitimises the role of the handmaids.[20] Other texts relating to the procreation and bearing of children are alluded to, for instance Amos 1:13, where the prophet warns that the Ammonites will be punished for they have "ripped open the women with child in Gilead, that they might enlarge their territory". In the novel, the handmaids' own children have been forcibly taken from them so that these "two-legged wombs" could become the property of a state mobilised to invade all private spaces. Echoes of the grief and loss suffered by Rachel in Jeremiah 31:15 are sounded by Offred and every other handmaid whose children have been taken away from them; as Rachel is a symbol of the nation, she represents everywoman. A last example of how *The Handmaid's Tale* reworks the biblical text is the reference to the 'Jezebels'[21], a generic designation which refers to prostitutes working in Gilead's brothels and which reinforces the dichotomy between the roles of women.

The Ceremony: Amplification and Intensification

I now turn to the section of the book dedicated to the Ceremony.[22] I look at the main characters and offer an analysis of how Offred inhabits an imaginary space broadly defined by Genesis 30:1–3 but interwoven with other biblical narratives too.

At a time in the near future when low fertility has reached a critical point, the Bible-based totalitarian regime in Gilead offers handmaids as surrogate mothers to members of the ruling elite.[23] The biblical basis for this act is chillingly re-enacted through the set reading of Genesis 30:1–3 that precedes and legitimises the ritual rape of the household handmaids. According to that text, while Leah, Jacob's first wife, is fertile and gives birth to sons, Rachel, Leah's sister and Jacob's second wife, is barren and despairs of ever giving her husband a son. Rachel gives Jacob her handmaid Bilhah to sleep with and Bilhah gets pregnant and gives birth to Dan and, later on, Napthali.

20 The verse can also be read as a quote from Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*: "From each according to his capacity, to each according to his need." See Marx 1933, 31 and Larson 1989, 48.

21 Queen Jezebel's story is told in 1 Kings 16–2 Kings 9:37. The sexual associations belong to the history of interpretation (see Brenner 1999).

22 This can be found in Section VI, "Household", chapters 14 to 17. Atwood 1996, 85–106.

23 In the Bible as in *The Handmaid's Tale*, children from polycoity have the same status as children from the patriarch's wives.

The process is repeated in the competition between the two sisters, with Leah's maid Zilpah also being given to Jacob and impregnated with two sons, Gad and Asher (Gen. 30:1–13). The biblical handmaids from Genesis are voiceless, as are the handmaids of Atwood's novel. There is no attempt to contextualise the Genesis story aside from the mandate to use a handmaid for reproduction. The most direct and explicit reference is the story read on the night of the Ceremony,[24] with the Commander taking the Bible from a locked box[25] before reading out the account of Rachel and Bilhah. A woman's God-given role, the state holds, is to bear children: "she shall be saved by childbearing", one of the Commanders says, quoting 1 Timothy 2:15.[26] The second direct allusion to Genesis 30:1–3 is found in the name "Rachel and Leah Re-education Centre" (also known as The Red Centre), the place where the handmaids are trained.[27]

The broad patriarchal history that starts with the Adam and Eve story and includes the injunction to "be fruitful and multiply" is invoked to reinforce the role and function of women as child-bearers.[28] The context of the latter text is the renewal of creation and sealing of the Noahic covenant, which articulates the promise that the earth will not be destroyed again by God.[29] There is irony in quoting a text which in the context of Atwood's novel refers to ecological destruction brought about by humankind.

Present at the ceremony is the Commander's wife, Serena Joy. Although in the re-enactment of Genesis 30:1–3 she stands for Rachel, the infertile wife,[30] her name also recalls Sarah, who was given "joy" when she became pregnant in old age with Isaac. The Commander stands for Jacob,[31] a reference to Ra-

24 The quote from Gen. 30:1–3 also appears at the beginning of the book, before the table of contents.

25 Atwood 1996, 94.

26 Atwood 1996, 229.

27 Offred's internal voice offers here an irreverent, satirical and possibly rebellious counter stance to Gen. 30:1–3, by calling it "the mouldy old Rachel and Leah stuff" (Atwood 1996, 95).

28 Atwood 1996, 95.

29 In Genesis the command appears in 1:28 and in 8:17, where it is given to animals. Note the selective "God to Adam", "God to Noah", which emphasise the patriarchal framework: there is no mention of God speaking to women despite, for instance, speaking to Hagar, Sarah's handmaid in Gen. 16:11–12.

30 Christou 2016.

31 The characters in the Ceremony re-enact Gen. 31. The historical notes following Offred's tale provide some information about the Sons of Jacob as the instigator of Gilead's regime; see Atwood 1996, 314.

chel's husband, and the "Marthas" are a clear reference to the Martha who is one of Lazarus's sisters from John 11 and is traditionally associated with domestic tasks. The generic "handmaid" presents a more complex set of references, standing not just for Bilhah but also for all women whose voices have been silenced by the biblical tradition: Hagar, Zilpah, Sarah, Rachel, Leah, Rebecca, Jephthah's daughter, Ruth, Jezebel, Mary and many others, both named and unnamed, "missing persons without textual authority".[32] Another echo comes from prophetic literature, specifically Joel 2:28, where handmaids prophesise against corrupt governments, a theme that Offred's testimony and the Hulu series develop. The handmaid's name Offred proclaims her as a possession "of Fred" and is written over her own name. Her patronymic can also be read as "offered",[33] thus presenting her as a sacrificial victim.

While the book of Genesis occupies a central place in the Ceremony, a closer examination of the chapters relating to the cruel ritual unearths more biblical references. Offred's memory of another reading illustrates the manipulation of the biblical text for propagandistic purposes: "For lunch it was the Beatitudes",[34] with the additional non-biblical "Blessed are the silent". This much-shortened version is taken out of context (as is the Commander's prayer) and is used to reinforce the power of the patriarchal theocracy over women, overwriting the original vision of a new world order. Offred's prayer "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum"[35] is a subversive, irreverent and satiric digression that interrupts the patriarchal narrative led by the Commander's call to prayer before the ritualised rape. In another of her memories,[36] Offred reminisces about Moira's attempt to escape the Red Centre and her punishment: the torture which turned her feet into "pulp",[37] destroying a part of her body Aunt Lydia deems unnecessary. It is a brutal inversion of 1 Corinthians 12, where Paul affirms that all body parts work in unison as Christ's body.

32 Lawson 1987, 496.

33 Christou 2016 reads Offred as a sacrificial victim, an echo of the sacrificial lamb of Exodus 12:1–14. See especially Atwood 1996, 123: "We know the sacrifices you are expected to make", which also echoes Aunt Lydia's admonitions: "Think of yourselves as seed" (page 24) and "you are the shock troops. Take a risk" (page 118).

34 Atwood 1996, 96. Bertrand 2020, 175: "The selection of Beatitudes and the addition of new Beatitude about silence serves the ideology of passive acceptance of one's fate promoted by Gilead."

35 "Don't let the bastards grind you down", in Atwood 1996, 97, 98, 193.

36 Atwood 1996, 97 and 98.

37 Atwood 1996, 98.

Finally, the Commander's own prayer, "For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to know himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect towards him",[38] is a direct but truncated quote from 2 Chronicles 16:9, leaving out "In this you have done foolishly; therefore from now on you shall have wars." In fact, the Commander's quote is also the chorus of one of the scripture-inspired songs popular in the 1980s,[39] perhaps as a satiric nod to Serena Joy's previous career as a singer of evangelical songs.[40]

Song of Songs as a Hypotext to the Ceremony

When the Commander, his wife and Offred enter the bed chamber, "Serena Joy's territory",[41] for the last part of the Ceremony, there is a distorted echo of Song of Songs, which holds the "house of my mother"[42] and its inner chamber as a place of safety and nurture for the woman. In that space, Offred detects the scent of lily-of-the-valley, a direct allusion to Song of Songs 2:1–2.[43] When the entire ritualised rape is read side by side with Song of Songs 2:1–13, it becomes an inversion and devastating parody of the lovers' tenderness and affection. A couple of examples will suffice: "It has nothing to do with sexual desire"[44] can be contrasted with Song of Songs 2:3, "I delight to sit in his shade, and his fruit is sweet to my taste"; "He is humming to himself, […] like a man who has other things on his mind"[45] overwrites Song of Songs 2:4, "Let his banner over me be love" or Song of Songs 2:6, "His left arm is under my head, and his right hand embraces me." The dark and violent note in the Song of Songs (5:6–7) is reflected in the performance of the Ceremony.[46]

38 Atwood 1996, 99.

39 As examples see https://tinyurl.com/yz4cb3zz and https://tinyurl.com/ysmaf5jc [both accessed 31 August 2023].

40 Atwood 1996, 22.

41 Atwood 1996, 93.

42 Song of Songs 3:4; 8:2.

43 Atwood 1996, 86; 100. Although Landis (2018, 114) does not refer to Song of Songs, she has noted the role flowers play in the novel and their relation to sexuality: "Even at her age she still feels the urge to wreathe herself in flowers. No use for you, I think at her, my face unmoving, you can't use them anymore, you're withered. They're the genital organs of plants. I read that somewhere, once" (Atwood 1996, 87).

44 Atwood 1996, 101.

45 Atwood 1996, 101.

46 According to Landis (2018, 114), "this story of imprisonment, coercion, and dehumanization is leavened by flowers".

These digressions from Offred's inner voice illustrate the use of "double-consciousness"[47] and fight the monologic discourse of the state: Scarano D'Antonio suggests that the complex intertextuality brings forth "a different way of being human",[48] one which is not solely defined by one's procreative ability.

Women "~~Under Erasure~~"

In this section I read *The Handmaid's Tale* as a palimpsest of the book of Judges, more specifically of Judges 19–21.[49] By highlighting the many parallels between the book of Judges and *The Handmaid's Tale*, I can examine strategies of re-writing, imaginative filling of gaps, and ironic reversals, which both expose and denounce the erasure of women. While the book of Judges is the edited product of an ancient patriarchal culture, *The Handmaid's Tale* offers a fictive insight into a patriarchal future. Both books are framed by stories about the swift and brutal erasing of culture,[50] in the case of *The Handmaid's Tale* through the replacement of democracy with a mock-theocracy headed by the Sons of Jacob.[51] Ironically, the men are not called by God as in the book of Judges, but like some of the characters from the book of Judges, they use scripture to establish a patriarchal state for their own purposes: indeed, like the men in Judges, "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judg. 21:25). They inscribe their own regime onto the old political structure which has been wiped out/erased overnight.

Another echo between the two narratives is that both societies have brought disaster upon themselves: having made catastrophic decisions in the past, they suffer from a lack of fertile women. Another parallel between the book of Judges and Gilead's society is the localised focus on family.[52] In

47 Ketcham 2019, 148. Offred lives in two worlds and two chronological times, with two languages, her internal, private voice and the patriarchal, public voice of the state. She is a counter voice to Aunt Lydia's either/or perspective.

48 Scarano D'Antonio 2021, 596–597.

49 The complexity of any analysis of Judges 19 is brought into relief by the fact that there are other biblical texts which have been read as "intertext", most notably Genesis 19: Lot and his daughters at Sodom and Gomorrah.

50 Erasure of culture is a prevalent theme in Judges. See Ketcham 2019, 154.

51 Atwood 1996, 128–129.

52 Clifton (2022) has argued for the primary importance of the family in Judges.

The Handmaid's Tale, the household of the Commander (and the households of all the other commanders) does not recognise as "legitimate" households like that of Offred's marriage to the divorced Luke and the child issuing from that relationship.

The overall framework of Judges highlights the behaviour of some of its characters as signs of social disintegration,[53] culminating in the gang rape of one woman and the kidnapping and collective rape of 600 young women to remedy the near erasure of the tribe of Benjamin and to provide the surviving men with a chance for reproduction and thus the survival of their tribe. The parallel with the story of Offred and its subsequent development in the Hulu series is striking. Furthermore, in Judges 19–21, Atwood's novel and the Hulu series, the focus is on internal political struggles.[54] The solution callously decided upon by the men of the various Israelite tribes is worked out in the name of restoring unity among them. The erasure of culture inherent in both narratives is explicit in both stories: the initial erasure of Canaanite culture is continued in Judges 19–21, with the erasure of the female characters, of their names,[55] voice,[56] body,[57] freedom and agency. Atwood's novel is a palimpsest from which the women's erased identity, agency and voice can, perhaps, be recovered.

Judges 19–21: Amplification and Intensification

The first parallel between the woman of Judges 19 and Offred is that, initially at least, both are active agents: they take the initiative to depart from the place they inhabit, one to leave her husband[58] and go back to her father's place and the other to leave behind a dangerous political situation, taking

53 Fewell 1992, 68.

54 While the book of Judges tells initially of a lack of unity between the tribes, which often act independently of each other, in the *Historical Notes* following the transcript of Offred's story, Professor Pieixoto tells of internal purges among the Sons of Jacob (Atwood 1996, 302).

55 Both the Levite's wife/concubine and Offred are nameless. The Levite's wife/concubine and Offred have been given names: "Bat-Shever", which means Daughter of Breaking (see Exum 2012, 123), and "June" in the Hulu series.

56 In Judges 19–21 none of the female characters speak. Bertrand (2020, 263–304) exposes the many deafening silences in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

57 Ketcham 2019, 151 and 155.

58 The motive of the woman of Judg. 19 is unclear. The Masoretic text reads "she played the harlot against him" which differs from the translation in Greek in the LXX: "she was angry with him", see Schneider 2000, 249.

her husband and daughter with her. This is their one and last act of agency. A further parallel is given by the designation of the woman of Judges 19:1 as a *pîlegeš*, who was "taken" by a "certain Levite". The text says nothing of their back story or whether the Levite was previously married. Although the use of the Hebrew term *pîlegeš* is relatively unclear, we know that it referred to a low-status wife or even a slave, and it is possible that if she was a secondary wife, the Levite had a main wife.[59] This is an attractive suggestion, as it reinforces the parallel between both stories. In Atwood's novel, the main character is also considered a secondary wife: she lost her status prior to Gilead because she was in an "adulterous" relationship with a divorced man[60] and as such she is now part of an anonymous "pool"[61] of women, as were the young women of Jabesh-Gilead[62] and Shiloh in Judges 21.

The woman's silence is overwhelming throughout Judges 19: she is not consulted at any point, her words are never recorded and when it becomes clear that she is to be sacrificed by her husband and bodily thrown to the men of Gibeah, she never utters a cry or expresses despair or protest.[63] Throughout the story we have only the perspective of a male narrator, who never tells us what had happened between her and her husband to make her leave. After four months of unexplained delay, her husband sets off "to speak kindly to her" at her father's house, but nothing is said about how she felt about her husband coming for her and whether she wanted to go back with him. The Commander in Atwood's tale, by contrast, offers Offred nuggets of comfort during their secret nightly meetings in his study, playing Scrabble with her, giving her forbidden women's magazines and hand cream[64] and taking her out (albeit to a brothel).

59 However, the woman is not consistently referred to as *pîlegeš*; she is *'iššâ* in relation to her husband (e. g. Judg. 19:1). See Clifton 2022.

60 The *Historical Notes* explain that second marriages from the previous society were declared illegal in Gilead. Atwood 1996, 312.

61 Atwood 1996, 312.

62 The name of the city which failed to respond to the call to arms against the Benjaminites offers a striking parallel with Atwood's novel. Both the women of Jabesh-Gilead in Judges and the women of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale* constitute a "pool", with members of which the men can have children .

63 She has lost both voice and agency. Likewise, Offred has not only lost her voice, but she has also lost all agency: "I am leashed […] manacled" (Atwood 1996, 209), "handmaids are corralled" (page 222).

64 Atwood 1996, 144; the Commander wants to bestow on Offred "tenderness" (Atwood 1996, 217).

The woman from Judges 19 continues to be portrayed as silent and passive when the Levite decides to bring her back home: she is not asked whether she wants to stay with her father or where she wants to pass the night when they finally set out on their journey to the Levite's home. She continues to be silent in the scene of the encounter with the man from Ephraim at Gibeah and when her host and her husband attempt to negotiate with the perverted men's sexual demands (19:22). After a night of being subjected to sexual violence, she comes back to the house of her host and collapses on the threshold, where she is addressed directly for the first time by the Levite (19:28: "Get up and let us be going"). She does not answer. The horror of the situation is brought out by the ambiguity of the Hebrew text, which does not say whether she is dead or still alive. Her husband cuts her up into twelve pieces, with each piece sent to a tribe in Israel (19:29).

While reflecting the rape and erasure of the woman of Judges 19:25, Offred's tale elaborates on both its physicality and its metaphorical quality. Memories of rape pepper the novel, from Offred remembering writing a paper on date rape,[65] to her recalling Janine publicly testifying to her own experience at the Rachel and Leah Re-education Centre,[66] to the intersecting with the re-enactment of Bilhah's story in the rape of the Ceremony in the home of the Commander and in all the other homes of Gilead's high officials. The Hulu series develops the extensive state-sanctioned rape of the handmaids, thus filling in gaps in the story of the young kidnapped fertile women of Jibesh-Gilead and Shiloh.

Dis-memberment and Re-membering as Means of Reinforcing Tragedy

Dismemberment as fragmentation is imaginatively reflected in the treatment of the handmaids in Atwood's novel. Its horrific depictions of tortured and cut-up women in the compulsory viewing of old pornographic films[67]

65 Atwood 1996, 43.

66 "It was my own fault. I led them on. I deserved the pain" (Atwood 1996, 78). Atwood offers a critique of the history of interpretation of the story by stating that "she got what she deserved" (Gunn 2005, 254). It is only with the advent of feminist criticism that the story was looked at from the woman's point of view (Exum 2012, Fewell 1992). Deut. 22:25 spells out the punishment for the rape of a woman in the open countryside, which is enacted in the "Particicution" of a man accused of rape (Atwood 1996, 286).

67 Atwood 1996, 124.

by the trainee handmaids echoes the body of the Levite's wife literally fragmented into twelve pieces. Dismemberment is expressed in the novel in various ways. Thus, for example, Offred experiences dissociation from her body and fragmentation after ritualised intercourse with the Commander.[68]

By rewriting the story of the woman of Judges 19, Atwood's novel makes the abused woman visible. She overwrites her story by giving Offred a position of subject. The protagonist's internal voice and memories are interrupting, such that the abuse perpetrated during the Ceremony and later on in the parallel sexual encounter with the Commander can be contrasted with two reimagined scenes, the memory of a better time with her husband Luke[69] and her experience as subject in her relationship with Nick.[70] Also, Offred's narrative shows an awareness of the fragmentation of her own story: "I am sorry there is so much pain in this story. I'm sorry it's in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force."[71]

At a metaphorical level, the fragmented body of the woman of Judges 19 and the fragmented consciousness of the handmaid are mirrored by the amputated, disjointed and manipulated use of biblical quotations. This brings to the fore the literal, symbolic and metaphorical tragedy of women without voice and agency.[72] The metaphorical fragmentation of the women's bodies and experiences is explicitly connected with "approximately thirty tape cassettes" found in no specific order[73] and edited by Professors Pieixoto and Wade,[74] two male historians, two hundred years later.

A final note about the narrative editors of *The Handmaid's Tale* is warranted here, as they form a significant point of contact with Judges: in both books, the editors' framework is patriarchal, and they speak about the degeneration of society and how this moral decline is mirrored in its treatment of women. The ultimate irony of *The Handmaid's Tale* is that it is revealed at the end that what we thought was a genuine female voice is in fact a reconstructed narrative originally made up of fragments. Doubts

68 "One detaches oneself. One describes" (Atwood 1996, 102).

69 Atwood 1996, 104.

70 "I am alive in my skin" (Atwood 1996, 269) contrasting with "I lie there like a dead bird" (page 263). See Scarano D'Antonio 2021, 592.

71 Atwood 1996, 275.

72 Scarano D'Antonio 2021, 595.

73 Atwood 1996, 309.

74 They are "instrumental in transcription, annotations, and publication" (Atwood 1996, 300).

as to the authenticity of her voice in light of what the reader now knows to be an edited text are compounded by the word play in the name of the university hosting the conference in the *Historical Notes*, "Denay, Nunavit",[75] or "Deny none of it". In the fiction frame, we have been reading a story authored by men,[76] relegating the experience of the anonymous women's voice to a historical footnote.[77]

Finally, where is God in both the hypotext and the hypertext? This question stands in sharp relief in the two narratives. God is not consulted in either the book of Judges or *The Handmaid's Tale*. The authority of the Judges and of the Commanders is nowhere bestowed or indeed ratified by God. In Judges 20–21 the men tie themselves into knots over ill-judged vows and curses. They go into battle against their own, only consulting the deity after they have marched against the Benjaminites and lost the battle, illustrating that the men had done what was right in their eyes, not the deity's (20:23).[78] "Do you think God listens to these machines?",[79] Ofglen asks her companion as they pass by the Soul Scrolls, a chain of stores that prints out five types of prayers, introducing an ironic critique of a fundamentalist regime that manipulates scripture to its own end and does not consult God. Violence against women is what happens when God is not consulted. Reading *The Handmaid's Tale* as a palimpsest of Judges 19–21 exposes the horrors faced by the women and gives voice to the experience of the handmaids. It also underlines the violence perpetrated against women in our own time.

Writing, Erasing, Rewriting and Uncovering

By reading *The Handmaid's Tale* as a palimpsest of the Bible, a range of hermeneutical strategies have been uncovered: while the Bible is decontextualised, it is not completely erased, retaining many echoes, truncated verses, misreadings, and revisionist, subversive and satirical re-readings. As an imaginary (and not so imaginary) exercise in what happens when the Bible is used as legitimation for reinforcing oppressive power structures, the hy-

75 Atwood 1996, 307.

76 This contributes to Offred's ultimate voicelessness. See Landis 2018, 93.

77 Historico-criticism has similarly offered a critique of the times of the Judges but without engaging with the brutal treatment of women (Gunn 2005, 272).

78 Schneider 2000, 278.

79 Atwood 1996, 173.

pertext subverts scriptures and functions as a warning against monologic interpretation. As such it is also a call to political awareness. As a protest, it is a warning against uncritical acceptance of both biblical texts and their reception in history. In its questioning of scriptural and political authority, *The Handmaid's Tale* reimagines the experience of silenced and oppressed women in a way that offers hope and life.

Above all, reading Atwood's novel as palimpsest also causes us to pay attention to the present erasure of culture as expressed in a variety of human experiences. The monologic constructed biblical discourse ironically leaves out the life-giving message of the Torah and the ideal of social justice embedded in the covenant. Instead, it offers a ruthless and satiric narrative constructed solely to support a patriarchal, monolithic and monologic culture determined to keep strict and hierarchical boundaries between genders. Indeed "hope" and "love" have been left out, leaving only a faint "faith" in the process of erasure.[80] In weaving biblical hypotexts through a richly reimagined narrative, Offred's story calls us to "listen to whatever has been silenced and is clamouring to be heard".[81] It invites us to question, re-evaluate and reappropriate creatively the biblical stories for our times, a process that is open and never-ending. It is fitting to end with Margaret Atwood's own words: "The dead may guard the treasure, but it's useless treasure unless it can be brought back into the land of the living and allowed to enter time once more – which means to enter the realm of the audience, the realm of the readers, the realm of change."[82] And so we too "step up, into the darkness within; or else the light".[83] The choice is ours.

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80 See 1 Cor. 13:13 "And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these *is* love."

81 Tan 2009, 105.

82 Atwood 2002, 178.

83 Atwood 1996, 303.

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