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“TOO GOOD TO KILL”: LITERARY GERONTOLOGY AND LATE STYLE IN MARGARET ATWOOD’S GILEAD NOVELS

A Thesis

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

in

English and Writing Studies

---

by

Serina Monique Item

May 2023

“TOO GOOD TO KILL”: LITERARY GERONTOLOGY AND LATE STYLE IN MARGARET ATWOOD’S GILEAD NOVELS

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Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and her 2019 sequel, *The Testaments*, illuminate the author's continued interest in the connection between a woman's age and the notion of her usefulness and complicity within a hegemonically masculine society. Focusing on literary gerontology and the author's late style, this essay highlights Atwood's persistent rejection of patriarchal representations of older women in literature. I analyze the ways in which Atwood's "ustopian" (Atwood's literary genre invention, combining "dystopia" and "utopia") novels develop older women characters beyond "old age as motif and metaphor" by removing age and gender as significant barriers to their primary purpose (Wallace 391). I explore Anne M. Wyatt-Brown's discussion of literary gerontology as an interdisciplinary development and expand upon Kathleen Woodward's notion of late style by observing Atwood's age as it impacts her creativity as a writer. Moreover, I examine Atwood's overlapping concerns about power and subjectivity in old age and how the sociocultural constructs of age often deter feminist writers away from engaging with the perspectives of older women in their creative processes. While this essay extends conversations interested in perceptions of societal ageism embedded in feminist literature and theory, my analysis is more invested in uncovering how literary gerontology and the author's late style contribute to our understanding of Margaret Atwood's portrayal of older women in her speculative works.

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Thank you to my mom, Margaret, for inspiring me to reach my goals no matter what comes my way. Thank you for trusting and believing in me. Thank you to my daughter, Samantha, for your patience and love. I could not have done this without you in my corner.

DEDICATION

This essay is dedicated to my daughter, Samantha. Remember, you are never too old or too late to (re)write your story.

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"TOO GOOD TO KILL": LITERARY GERONTOLOGY AND LATE STYLE IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S GILEAD NOVELS

Introduction

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is set in a near-future in what is recognizable as the former United States, specifically Cambridge, Massachusetts. In this near-future, a steep decline in birth rate has precipitated what the novel describes as "sect wars" that have resulted in the map of the U.S. being redrawn into a patriarchal theocratic state called Gilead where women have been reduced to their reproductive function (42). Atwood characterizes most older women of Gilead as either "Wives," "Aunts," "Marthas," or "Unwomen." The difference between these four categories is women's degree of usefulness and complicity in the Republic of Gilead, whose people are suffering from infertility due to environmental disasters. Gilead is run by an elite group of commanders called The Sons of Jacob, a think tank that orchestrated the overthrow of the U.S. government and designed Gilead's philosophy and social structure into a totalitarian patriarchal theocracy. The Gilead regime maintains power over its citizens through surveillance, violence, and threats towards any and all who resist its ideology. Gilead men have full control over the public sphere while Gilead women are ranked by strict gender laws mandated to preserve an ideal feminine image. The Wives are the highest-ranking Gilead women whose privileged position requires them to be obedient companions to their commander husbands; the Aunts are part of a strict "female control agency"

that trains and punishes Handmaids in accordance with Gilead law (308); the Handmaids are young fertile women assigned as property to high-ranking commanders with wives who cannot bear children. Handmaids are to be compliant in ceremonial sexual intercourse with their commanders and bear children for the married couple. They are forbidden to fall in love with their commanders, the children they give birth to, or anyone else for that matter, and if they fail to bear children, they are recategorized as Unwomen. The Marthas are expected to be meek domestic servants and nannies in the homes of commanders. The Unwomen are the lowest-ranking Gilead women; they are a group made up of old, sick, and non-conforming women who are forced to clean up radioactive waste in the colonies until they die from exposure. No women are allowed to read or write other than certain prominent Aunts entrusted with creating policy and arranging marriages in the women's sphere.

The Handmaid's Tale centers on the story of Offred, a Handmaid who secretly recorded thirty cassette tapes describing her account of being arrested, enslaved, and abused by her commander, Fred, and his wife, Serena Joy. During her assignment, Offred falls in love with Nick, Commander Fred's driver, and is later taken by Gilead officials without warning, leaving her fate undetermined. In the year 2195, Offred's tapes are discovered and heavily scrutinized by researchers of the International Historical Association led by Professor Pieixoto. Professor Pieixoto's "Historical Notes" at the end of the novel complicate our perceptions about the women's complicity in their own oppression by drawing on

the matriarchal position of Wives and Aunts with “traditional values” benefiting off the backs of Handmaids and other lower level women (308). However, Atwood clears up this assumption for Professor Pieixoto, and readers, by giving us the written voice of Aunt Lydia in *The Testaments*.

The Testaments (2019) continues the story of *The Handmaid’s Tale* without Offred, set fifteen years later, and primarily from the perspective of an elderly Aunt Lydia, the highest ranking and most respected woman in Gilead. Aunt Lydia’s former profession as a judge helped her earn The Sons of Jacob’s trust and responsibility of building and enforcing Gilead policy, law, and Handmaid training. Her rank comes with certain privileges such as access to the Hildegard Library, the Bloodlines Genealogical Archives, forbidden literature, and writing tools. Further, she signs off on all the assignments of women to become Handmaids, Wives, or Pearl Girls (Aunts in training). Throughout the years of regime corruption and the defilement of Gilead women, Aunt Lydia had been secretly writing “The Ardua Hall Holograph,” an anti-Gilead manuscript aimed at exposing all of Gilead’s criminal atrocities. She was also working inconspicuously with Canadian Mayday operatives as an anonymous informant, trading intelligence for the return of Nicole, a baby named after her father Nick and who was smuggled out of Gilead and into Canada by her Handmaid mother, Offred. Now, at the age of sixteen, Nicole (adopted as “Daisy”) leaves Canada and returns to Gilead to retrieve a document cache prepared by Aunt Lydia, containing damaging evidence against Gilead. When she arrives in Gilead,

Nicole discovers her older half-sister, Hannah, Offred's first-born daughter, working as "Aunt Victoria" with Aunt Lydia at the Red Center, a place where Aunts train girls and women to become Handmaids. Together, Nicole and Hannah cooperate with Aunt Lydia's plot to sneak back out of Gilead with a document cache and take down the Gileadean regime.

Literature Review

Historically, stock patriarchal representations of older women in literature are a lot like the ones depicted by Atwood in *The Handmaid's Tale* – women reduced to their biological usefulness or supposed lack thereof. Conversely, in *The Testaments*, Atwood rejects patriarchal archetypes of older women by writing older women characters who make a significant contribution to the fall of Gilead and thereby represent a powerful and underestimated bloc of antifascist political resistance. Thus, Atwood indicates the creative value of figures of older womanhood in contemporary feminist literature and utilizes literary gerontology (an examination of the influence of ageing on literature, both in creativity and in the lives of authors) to help break down social and cultural constructs of age, transforming the meaning of usefulness and redefining "feminine" heroines.

Some scholars have taken interest in Atwood's treatment of old age as a factor in her creative writing process. Teresa Gibert points out that Atwood's work "both reflects accepted views on the subject and may be influential inasmuch as it helps readers to revise the cultural images that inform contemporary attitudes towards ageing and, in particular, to deconstruct and challenge the negative

stereotypes of female ageing" (40). Helen Snaith argues that Atwood's "dystopian narrative provides a landscape in which Atwood deliberately subverts the standardized behaviours of old age" (116). Old age, and its presumed bodily limitations, is akin to a "personal dystopia," and Atwood utilizes the genre of speculative fiction to subvert patriarchal archetypes (Snaith 119). Snaith adds, "The role of speculative fiction is a pertinent factor in how Atwood manages to deliver a new mode of gerontological narrative discourse" (116). Atwood highlights the feminine 'age crisis' in *The Handmaid's Tale* where older women take on the typical "censorious matron figure…whose roles are defined in relation to their younger counterparts" (Snaith 116). Strong matriarchal power relations are especially seen from Offred's perspective in *The Handmaid's Tale.* For example, Serena Joy is described as tired, bitter, and limited in mobility, qualities that excite Offred, knowing that her relative youth and fertility give her power over Serena (113). Additionally, Aunt Lydia's old age, combined with her cruel yet gentle disposition, puts her in charge of leading the Aunts in breaking the spirits of the Handmaids in order to refine them for service, leaving Offred unsure of whether to obey or strangle her (89).

As quoted by Makenzi Krause, Emily Gordon notes that Atwood's speculative work provides a vehicle with which feminist studies can challenge the topics of gender and ageism when intimacy and power are involved: "'When our value is tied to the people who can impregnate us, we turn on each other'" (qtd. in Krause 10). Krause adds, "[T]ensions between generations of women appear

as the older women struggle to keep hold of their men while the younger women desperately seek someone who can help them survive in this society [Gilead]" (12). As the women of Gilead turn on each other, they undermine feminine solidarity, further perpetuating the same patriarchal beliefs that a woman's feminine identity begins and ends with motherhood.

The Handmaid's Tale illustrates several gerontological concepts that place Atwood's novels into dialogue with scholars of Critical Future Studies (CSF) and second-wave feminist arguments about the body's limitations and potential. Jayne Raisborough and Susan Watkins describe CSF as focusing on interrogating who futures are for, noting that Atwood's use of the term "ustopia" suggests various representational possibilities as "imagined futures in relation to ageing are often dystopian, frequently hinging on the apocalyptic visions of population change" (7). It is interesting to note the novel's foreshadowing of dystopian and utopian elements as they correlate between contemporary politics and second-wave feminist tensions around women's reproductive rights in the 2022 overturning of Roe v. Wade.

Noor Kamaluldeen, Oana Celia Gheorghiu, and Michaela Praisler argue that Atwood's "ustopian" ideas about a future that counters traditional representations of aging align with critiques of second-wave feminism. Kamaluldeen highlights how Offred's complicity obscures her mother's envisioned future for a women's culture: "*The Handmaid's Tale* is a critique of the second-wave feminism [in] that Offred's generation has given up the fight their

mothers started against women's oppression mainly because they enjoy the freedom gained from their mother[s'] agency" (4). Gheorghiu and Praisler add that the first novel develops an "implied critique of second-wave feminism – mainly in the relation between Offred and her militantly feminist mother" (89). They argue that the second novel is a call for a literary intervention from second-wave feminists to "destabilize the contemporary hierarchies through these *disruptive effects of women's writing*, and even to actively participate in the rebirth of a second-wave feminism, rebranded as the fourth wave" (91). From studies such as these, connections can be made between Atwood's use of literary gerontology and her time as a feminist writer which informs my interpretation of her Gilead novels.

Literary Gerontology and Late Style

Literary gerontology pays attention to the impact of aging on literature and focuses on the artist's late style: studying the artist's age, life, and creativity over the years. In *The Future of Literary Gerontology* (2000), Wyatt-Brown divides literary gerontology into five dominant categories: 1) literary attitudes toward aging, largely examined from a postmodern sociological perspective; 2) late style and creativity across the life course, using psychoanalytic and biographical perspectives; 3) cultural studies of aging, in particular those that analyze the politics of decline and progress discourses; 4) narrative studies of life review and guided autobiography; and 5) explorations of emotions (42). All these categories express the need for a critical feminist discourse involving gerontology and the

humanities in order to challenge the discriminatory effect of ageism in society.

Despite the now vast number of literary texts concerning issues of ageing, there remains continued resistance to grappling with age in literary feminist theory. Simone De Beauvoir's contribution to the study of age and gender in her early 1970s books, *The Coming of Age* and *Old Age*, was abandoned by many prominent second-wave feminist critics writing in the 1990s because it was viewed as "too pessimistic, ageist, and sexist" since it is only concerned with the author's personal anxieties (Maierhofer 67). Such criticisms which call for the removal of human experiences from theoretical practice are often what deter feminist writers from engaging with the perspectives of older women in their creative processes today. Literary gerontology intends to address some of these issues by analyzing how age is represented by the storyteller and uncovering how the writer's relationship to history, society, and loss influences their critical and imaginative faculties.

Researchers understand that to encourage more mainstream interest in literary gerontology, they must present age as complex, multi-dimensional narratives worthy of a literary-critical approach in the humanities. Sally Chivers and Hannah Zeilig suggest that stories about aging contribute to both our understanding of literary representations of the old and our gerontological knowledge, therefore transforming the meaning of old age and bolstering a writer's "desire to embrace rather than elide the complexities of later life" (Zeilig 8). The more we know about growing old, the better we can understand literature

and life rather than simply death. Chivers writes, “A humanities-based approach to aging can consistently maintain the crucial complexity of growing old because works of art, such as literature, can comfortably encompass contradictions and even gain their aesthetic strength from doing so” (x-xi). Chivers indicates that fictional narratives provide authors with a creative space to address the anxieties surrounding the stigma of old age. Zeilig adds, “narrative and literary approaches to age and ageing when allied to perspectives from critical gerontology can furnish scholars with important perspectives for interpreting and re-configuring ‘age’” (7). Engaging with narratives about aging affords authors and critics alike the possibility to liberate older women from patriarchal stereotypes as they question assumptions about the sociocultural constructs of age.

Unfortunately, many feminist authors realized too late that by not engaging with age in their earlier works, their work had become increasingly narrow over the years. For example, as a young woman, author Betty Freidan sought to articulate the “problem that had no name” for young housewives in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Friedan asked, “What happens when women grow up in an image that makes them deny the reality of the changing world” (66)? Ironically, Friedan never considered studying older women who have already endured living in what she called a “comfortable concentration camp” (282). By neglecting to include older women in her study of the post-war housewife experience, Friedan essentially stunted the conversation about women’s identity and oppression in America. As a result, many third-wave feminists later argued that *The Feminine*

Mystique further perpetuated the literary gap between first– and second–wave feminism and continues to restrict feminist literature and epistemologies (Holliday-Karre 2020; Ray 2006; Calasanti et al. 2006).

As an older woman, Freidan realized that by not engaging with older housewives in her previous work, her work had indeed become damaging for women over the years. To atone for her seemingly ageist research, in 1993, Friedan published *The Fountain of Age* to address the "woman problem" in new and more complete terms while divulging that her research on older women could not come at a time before she herself was old. Friedan writes:

> The image of age as inevitable decline and deterioration, I realized, was also a mystique of sorts, but one emanating not an aura of desirability but a miasma of dread. I asked myself how this dread of age fitted or distorted reality, making age so terrifying that we have to deny its very existence. And I wondered if that dread, and the denial it breeds, was actually helping to create the "problem" of age. I could already see, from the panic that kept dogging my own search, that the mystique of age was much more deadly than the feminine mystique, more terrifying to confront, harder to break through. Even as age came closer and closer to me personally, I kept asking myself if denial isn't better, healthier. (41-42)

Freidan's self-confessed late interaction with age illustrates how important it is for feminist studies to confront literary myths about age, including inquiry into the author's late style. The experience and perspective of growing old and being

faced with one's own mortality are concepts that fundamentally influence literary creativity, especially when writing about the future. Having written the two Gilead novels thirty-five years apart, Atwood juxtaposes them as she juxtaposes her young and old characters: from complicit to resistant, suggesting that Atwood's maturity as a feminist writer has creatively evolved with old age. Thus, Atwood's speculative works give feminist literary critics a corpus through which to look beyond the physical, spatial, and sexual boundaries of age to examine Atwood's late style.

Literary gerontologists like Constance Rooke (1992) and Kathleen Woodward (1993) have taken an interest in studying late style by looking at novels concerned with old age as a genre and theoretical framework sustained by the author's own experience with old age. Rooke refers to novels concerned with old age as part of the *Vollendungsroman* (German for "winding up," referring to the novel of completion) genre of literature, coined after the model of the *bildungsroman*, a literary term often referring to youth and young adult coming-of-age novels (245). Rooke suggests that writers of the *Vollendungsroman* genre typically engage with the identities and social relationships of the old to conceptualize a self-actualization marked by some kind of major loss that eventually triggers the beginning of a change or withdrawal rather than an absolute end. Rooke argues, "Although events such as retirement or the loss of a mate or removal to an institution provide sudden jolts and propel the plot of the *Vollendungsroman*, disengagement is typically regarded as a continuous process

– and not always or only as a progressive deterioration" (248). The *Vollendungsroman* challenges writers to move towards developing older characters beyond the notions of decline that dominate the alterity of old age, offering affirmation in the face of loss by constructing new meanings of life, even when the life of the character is deconstructed (Rooke 248). Atwood takes on this challenge with Aunt Lydia by re-presenting her in *The Testaments* as achieving a new sense of identity through narrative, reflecting Atwood's capacity to envision a future in which personal development is made possible via writing, reading, and telling one's own story, sustaining a creative process with no absolute end.

As women authors age, they tend to explore more meaningful stories about the connections between the ontology of being female and new stages, dimensions, identities, and creativity that emerge with old age. This observation is the basis for what Woodward calls "late style," a theoretical framework that focuses on the author's whole lifespan when asking questions such as: *Does old age give rise to new ways of thinking? If so, does old age positively or negatively affect writing style? How does literary creativity in old age alter stereotypes of older women writers?* Woodward's research on creativity and old age points to the revival of investigative creativity in Sigmund Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917) and Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* (1980), arguing that the reasons why ageist attitudes remain prevalent is actually because of anxieties around loss – the loss of family, friends, homes, jobs, utility, self-esteem, and purpose. Woodward notes that although these losses often

associate age with decline, the process of grieving these losses can also associate age with transformation:

> …the portrait of the psychodynamics of old age itself reinforces the prevalent and dark view of old age as a period of inevitable and crippling losses […] But loss can continue to be transformative throughout old age as well as in other times of our lives. Grief can continue to be a force of change. (82-83)

Woodward indicates how mourning loss can be deeply liberating in that it can bring about new ways of thinking, expressing, and responding to the world as it keeps moving forward. Loss occurs at many different times over the span of our lives; our experience with loss in our childhood isn't the same as loss in our middle age or in late life. In a 2022 interview with Jennifer Senior of *The Atlantic*, Atwood speaks on the notion of loss, suggesting our concepts of life and death are shaped and reshaped by loss as well as the challenges of inexperience:

> So that middle generation – somebody's got cancer and it's *We don't want to deal with this*. But later on, somebody's got cancer: This has happened to you before. You *know*. You've seen your parents die. You've seen people in your generation die. You're not afraid of it in the same way. And you order the flowers and send the notes. (qtd. in Senior)

Atwood's imagination is challenged by the prospect of Aunt Lydia's death, so she must question her own experience with loss and prospective death to bring about new ways to 'capture' Aunt Lydia's life before it vanishes. This form of interaction

between old age, gender, death, and literary creativity is manifested in Atwood's own autobiographical accounts and previous works. Over the years, Atwood's speculative works have become increasingly concerned with gender-specific issues of power and subjectivity in old age, marking ageism as a contributing factor in Atwood's creativity. She has published more than sixty works of fiction since 1961 including poetry, graphic novels, and children's books. Later publications such as *The Blind Assassin* (2000), *Oryx and Crake* (2003), "Torching the Dusties" from *Stone Mattress* (2016), *The Testaments* (2019), and *Old Babes in the Wood* (2023) all contain gerontological themes that confront literary representations of aging and gender, offering readers the "most sustained contemplation of ageing" explained with a "sense of disassociation – the affirmation that the body and its limitations is not the sum of a person's subjectivity" (Tolan 4). Important characteristics, themes, and stereotypes have emerged in Atwood's Gilead novels which can help draw conclusions about her understanding of literary representations of older women in an age-obsessed society.

The Crone

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Aunt Lydia is a bitter and villainized character, representing the archetype of the Crone or Hag. According to Cassidy Scanlon, "[T]he Crone or Hag is routinely portrayed as a hellish older woman whose hideousness and evil intentions are worthy of scorn and degradation. In British and North American folktales, a 'hag' is another word for a spirit who causes

nightmare[s]. They appear in stories meant to frighten children so they go to bed when told to." Atwood casts Aunt Lydia as an antagonist to remind women that the Crone is a patriarchal archetype all women are capable of embodying. Atwood presents Aunt Lydia's intimidating disposition as instrumental in perpetuating Gilead's dangerous patriarchal ideology, suggesting that women can also be complicit in the violent oppression of other women. Because she is closer to death, nature, and rebirth, the Crone lives silently, deep inside of younger women as she doubts her usefulness year after year, gathering wisdom until her youth and fertility are exhausted. Scanlon adds, "The Crone Goddess is a midwife and healer, aiding the birth and creation of new lives with her extensive knowledge. She is a guide through difficult transitions and turmoil, an expert navigator of the passage between life and death." As the new Handmaids experience a kind of death of their previous life and rebirth as surrogates, Aunt Lydia guides them in their transition while helping them cope with feelings of resistance to Gileadean law. She supplies the inner voice inside Offred's head – a moral conscience advising her against taking for granted the honor, prominence, and privileges given to Handmaids. Although Aunt Lydia is complicit in Gilead's regime, Offred trusts and looks up to her as an older female figure having survived in Gilead.

With Offred and Aunt Lydia, Atwood creates two first-generation Gileadean women from two different generations to demonstrate how women's power and subjectivity are always defined by their age in a male-dominated

hegemonic society. Barbara Comiskey explains, “[T]he voicing of differences of generation within gender can be seen as a strategy for figuring dialogic exchange between female subjects, as fully-fledged subjects” (141). The two women must reflect on their pasts in the present to find, understand, conform, and cope with their new roles and privileges in Gilead society. Offred regards Aunt Lydia’s voice with authority, reliability, and truth even though Offred feels as though her freedom has been stripped away. Offred recalls, “There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are given freedom from. Don’t underrate it” (24). Aunt Lydia’s voice guides and protects Offred in her everyday choices, reminding her of a time before the Gilead regime, when women had the freedom to make their own reproductive choices, which resulted in them being vulnerable, unsafe, and abused by men. Offred hangs on Aunt Lydia’s every word because she is afraid of what might happen to her if she again takes for granted the words of a matriarchal figure.

Atwood highlights the distrustful matriarchal relationship between Offred and her mother to indicate her concerns about the ways in which the stories of older women in literature are often represented through the perspectives of other characters, “mediated through younger locutors” (Comiskey 134). Because she is the sole narrator of the first novel, Offred is solely responsible for imposing the Crone image on Aunt Lydia and Offred’s mother; however, her perception is based on Gilead’s oppressive views of women. As quoted by Barbara

Macdonald, Jeannette King suggests that young people tend to "see older women through the lens of stereotypical images which are merely 'the projections of the oppressor'" (qtd. in King 65). Offred has internalized Gilead's anti-women ideology, causing her to cast the older women as Crones. Atwood alludes to the ways in which the suspicions of younger women, especially daughters, can oppress older generations of women. Offred admittedly ignores her mother's strong feminist views but pays full attention to her looks, describing her mother as a "wiry" and "spunky" old woman who dressed in overalls, "as if she were young." It isn't until Offred loses her mother and later sees her as a "pretty" and "earnest" young woman in an "Unwoman documentary," that her mother's views resonated with her 'unwomanly' choice to kiss Nick (121-122). Offred casts her mother as an antagonist or rival in her tales, because she is guarded against her mother wanting her to be the "model offspring" and the "reincarnation of her ideas" (120-121,180). The result of Offred's suspicions is an ageist attitude and an example of what Audre Lorde argues is another "distortion of relationship which interferes with our [second-wave feminists'] vision" (2). Lorde writes:

> By ignoring the past, we are encouraged to repeat its mistakes. The 'generation gap' is an important social tool for any repressive society. If the younger members of a community view the older members as contemptible or suspect or excess, they will never be able to join hands and examine the living memories of the community, nor ask the all

> important question: 'Why?' This gives rise to historical amnesia that keeps us working to reinvent the wheel every time we have to go to the store for bread. (2)

Lorde is speaking to the frustration many second-wave feminists experience when trying to build relationships with a younger generation of feminists. As such, Lorde speaks to Offred's mother's frustration with Offred for taking her feminist work for granted and for judging her for not acting or dressing her age. Atwood gives readers stereotypical images of Offred's mother, first, as a young and beautiful protester and later, as an old aggravating radical, to challenge our view of what feminist activists look like, prompting us to question how the age of women might invite or disinvite feminist discourse into our lives. As a woman from a significant feminist wave, writing about a second-wave feminist (Offred's mother), Atwood proves that the pioneers of the second wave reverberate after their passing. Atwood implies that active feminism has no "look," for even after her capture, it is Offred's mother's ideas about "a women's culture" that continued to influence Offred the same way the voices of second-wave feminists continue to influence younger generations of feminists, encouraging them to continue pursuing the politics of the body (127).

The Handmaid's Tale invites readers to question the patriarchal archetype of the Crone by illustrating how the female voices of past generations can both positively and negatively influence younger generations of women. Through Offred's relationship with Aunt Lydia and with her mother, Atwood infers that the

voices of past generations are indeed important for the survival of women in a hegemonically masculine society. Thus, the novel demonstrates how the age and age relations of female characters matter and ought to be an important category of literary analysis. Anne M. Wyatt-Brown states, “Aging is an important one of those ‘voices’ in which writers and characters speak, and critics and readers must learn to hear its messages. To ignore that aspect of a writer’s or character’s life experiences is to ignore a fundamental part of human nature” (1). To regularly omit the voices of older women in literary analysis is to miss the interaction of older female characters in conjunction with young female characters. For example, in *The Handmaid’s Tale* Atwood portrays Aunt Lydia through the ways Offred sees and understands her. By contrast, in *The Testaments*, Atwood prioritizes Aunt Lydia’s perspective alongside Nicole and Agnus, shifting her interest in telling the story from a young, competitive, and isolated female protagonist to a more collaborative joining of perspectives from multi-generational female heroines.

“Too Good To Kill”

As elements from *The Testaments* begin to make their way to the television screen in the Hulu streaming adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, readers and audiences alike want Aunt Lydia to live forever – just as Atwood intended. In our age-obsessed society, older women are often marginalized in popular culture. In television and movies, old women often play minor roles compared to their older male counterparts and tend to be left behind or are the

first to be ‘killed off.’ When asked about her creative influence over the made-for-tv adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood insisted that Aunt Lydia has been saving herself from being ‘killed off’ the Hulu series early. Atwood replied, “Well, he [producer Bruce Miller] didn’t kill her. But he wasn’t going to kill her anyway. She’s too good to kill” (qtd. in Alter). Although Atwood has scarcely any sway over the producer’s creative choices, she understands she’s created an older female character so powerful and fierce that fans are abandoning the prior caricature of Aunt Lydia in the first novel and of older women altogether.

Right from the start of *The Testaments*, Atwood challenges readers to rethink the ‘feminine’ heroine image by reintroducing Aunt Lydia as a statue of a savior, holding the hand of a little girl, resting her other hand on the head of a kneeling Handmaid, and leading the way for a Pearl Girl’s missionary work. Like Aunt Lydia’s statue, Atwood has remained quiet yet steadfast over the years with an “unflinching commitment to duty” to liberate the Handmaids in a second Gilead novel (1). Atwood engages audiences despite the thirty-five-year gap between publishing her two Gilead novels by pivoting the novels’ narration from Offred in the first novel to Aunt Lydia in the second novel, at times drawing the readers in and addressing them in the second person. Aunt Lydia begins *The Testaments* by examining a statue that has been erected in celebration of her accomplishments over the years. Aunt Lydia’s larger-than-life statue is a symbol for ‘time’ as well as ‘time for a change,’ yet it is still unclear at the beginning of the novel whether her dominant figure empowers or oppresses the other figures

around her. Aunt Lydia's statue is discovered by archeologists seventy years later after the fall of Gilead and is described by Professor Pieixoto as "clumsily executed," further suggesting the ambiguity of the sculpture's intention (409). By contrast, the novel ends with another mention of a statue – this time, Aunt Lydia's name is inscribed on Becka's statue, a young Pearl Girl under the name 'Aunt Immortelle' who drowned after giving up her spot to Nicole before the Canadian mission. Becka's statue clearly celebrates female empowerment, noting the sacrifices the young and old women made to bring about the fall of Gilead. Aunt Lydia's statue is symbolic of Atwood's intention to keep Aunt Lydia and Becka 'alive' long enough to see the fall of Gilead, signaling that Atwood herself is "too good to kill," for even after her passing, her stories will continue to 'live' for a women's culture, immortalized through her complex characters and stories.

Atwood is first ambiguous about Aunt Lydia's statue because she wants readers to be the judge of Aunt Lydia's character. As a former judge herself, Aunt Lydia understands that her story can be read as if she is on trial for her role in perpetuating Gilead's violent war on women's biological and intellectual freedom. She hides her manuscript in Cardinal Newman's *Apologia Por Vita Sua: A Defence of One's Life*, stating that she chose her title "advisedly, for what else am I doing here but defending my life? The life I have led. The life – I've told myself – I had no choice but to lead. Once, before the advent of the present regime, I gave no thought to a defence of my life. I didn't think it was necessary" (36). Before Gilead, Aunt Lydia didn't feel the need to defend her decisions. She

always felt like she was doing the right thing as a family court judge, fighting for mothers' rights. However, after The Eyes arrested her, she questioned the power she had over women's lives – even before Gilead – trying to understand what is fair and how to remove herself from her role. By putting Aunt Lydia in defense of her character, Atwood is placing herself in defense of her own creative choices, asking readers to decide whether they believe she has fairly represented the advantages and penalties of Aunt Lydia's disengagement from her patriarchal archetype.

Aunt Lydia's narrative can also be read like a life review, raising inquiries about the function of reminiscence in Atwood's late style writing. R.N. Butler claims life reviews are important for helping older people face death with grace (65). Aunt Lydia recognizes that although she is doing the right thing in writing about Gilead, she will be experiencing a fall from grace, because she will lose her prestigious place among Gilead when her secret operation ends with death. Thus, her manuscript confronts her own awful moments as she reconciles her fears about being judged by readers:

> My bottle of blue drawing ink, my fountain pen, my notebook pages with their margins trimmed to fit within their hiding place: through these I entrust my message to you, my reader. But what sort of message is it? Some days I see myself as the Recording Angel, collecting together all the sins of Gilead, including mine; on other days I shrug off this high moral tone. Am I not, au fond, merely a dealer in sordid gossip? I'll never know

your verdict on that, I fear. (277)

Aunt Lydia's anxieties about losing her purpose, dying, and being judged are reminiscent of my earlier mention of Rooke's notion of "disengagement" and Woodward's notion of "loss." Aunt Lydia's life review suggests Atwood has considered the possible damage from creating such a vicious older woman in her previous novel and has consolidated her authorial voice to rewrite Aunt Lydia's story based on the ways others have judged this decision over the years. Atwood knows how destructive Aunt Lydia's character has become for older women since the publishing of *The Handmaid's Tale* and even more so with the Hulu streaming series; therefore, Atwood is challenged with separating Aunt Lydia from her role as an imposingly cruel and domineering older woman and "shrink[ing] [her] back to normal size, the size of an ordinary woman" (32). *The Testaments* provides a second chance for Atwood to reject the previous patriarchal representation of Aunt Lydia and recast her as a heroine by explaining Aunt Lydia's motivations.

Through Aunt Lydia's fears about the reader's judgment, Atwood alludes to the ways in which young people typically judge or dismiss older women without hearing their side of the story. Aunt Lydia wavers over whether she even trusts her reader or if she will ever release the manuscript, because she feels it will never be enough to convince the younger generation that she is not the person everyone thinks she is and that Gilead gave her no choice but to subvert the Handmaids. Aunt Lydia shares her doubt, "Not that I can trust you either.

Who is more likely to betray me in the end? I will lie neglected in some spidery corner or under a bed while you go off to picnics and dances – yes, dancing will return, it's hard to suppress it forever – or to trysts with a warm body, so much more attractive than the wad of crumbling paper I will have become" (172). By contrast, when Aunt Lydia imagines the reader as someone she can trust, she describes her as follows:

> I picture you as a young woman, bright, ambitious. You'll be looking to make a niche for yourself in whatever dim, echoing caverns of academia may still exist by your time. I situate you at your desk, your hair tucked back behind your ears, your nail polish chipped – for nail polish will have returned, it always does. You're frowning slightly, a habit that will increase as you age. I hover behind you, peering over your shoulder: your muse, your unseen inspiration, urging you on. You'll labour over this manuscript of mine, reading and rereading, picking nits as you go, developing the fascinated but also bored hatred biographers so often come to feel for their subjects. How can I have behaved so badly, so cruelly, so stupidly? you will ask. You yourself would never have done such things! But you yourself will never have had to. (403)

Atwood's mention of Aunt Lydia's ideal reader conveys her desire for a continued audience made up of young and old readers, including scholars of feminist theory. She wants her reader to understand her creative choices and be inspired by them. Atwood acknowledges the fear of failing her readers with the major

shifting of narrative from a young perspective to an old one, suggesting an apprehension that her sequel might be boring to young readers – even more so when the writer is also old and the subject is old age, death, and decline. Ironically, it is a female graduate student, “Mia Smith,” who finds the witness testimonies of Nicole and Hannah while searching for thesis projects (412). Even more ironically, I am a graduate student laboring over Aunt Lydia’s manuscript, attempting to draw conclusions from it on Atwood’s understanding of aging. Thus, the novel challenges me to question my own work into how younger perspectives of the old, like Offred’s, can be damaging when not thoroughly investigated.

Atwood uses the theme of literacy and metaphor to both disengage Aunt Lydia from the mythology of Gilead and to reengage her with readers. Aunt Lydia leans on the skills she acquired in her previous profession as a judge to improvise justice for women where no justice exists. She returns to past behaviors to again get revenge on oppressive men like her father: a man who despised young Lydia’s ambition to get an education. Rooke states, “In [the *Vollendungsroman*], the elderly protagonist rebels against disengagement and (armed with a determination born of values asserted in the face of loss) reinserts herself or himself in the social realm. This reengagement may involve a return to past skills and past behaviors, or it may illustrate the capacity to actualize previously dormant aspects of the self (248). Aunt Lydia had to suppress her intellect to keep herself alive long enough to conspire with a plan to take down

Gilead. By doing this, she was able to move about the Hildegard Library, have access to the Bloodlines Genealogical Archives, and sit amongst the most provocative works in the Forbidden World Literature section of the library for years, plotting her revenge. Moreover, she was able to keep the holograph a secret because the regime underestimated old women; not even highly literate and educated old women were seen as a threat.

Atwood enlightens readers with a literary metaphor for Aunt Lydia's tenacity as an older woman in Gilead's youth-obsessed society, using the *Aesop's Fables* story about "The Fox and the Cat" to demonstrate how underestimated knowledge and creativity can be used to seek justice for unatoned offenses. Diana Wallace contends that literary criticism tends to offer representations of old age in the form of motif and metaphors such as love, time, creativity, memory, and mortality (391). In one way, Aunt Lydia is a "cat," representing time, waiting patiently up in a tree, watching over Gilead as it rots "beneath its outer show of virtue and purity" (307). In another way, Aunt Lydia is a "fox," using the power of literacy to try and undermine Gilead's ideology. Aunt Lydia explains:

> In the early days of Gilead, I used to ask myself whether I was Fox or Cat. Should I twist and turn, using the secrets in my possession to manipulate others, or should I zip my lip and rejoice as others outsmarted themselves? Obviously I was both, since—unlike many—here I still am. I still have a bag of tricks. And I'm still high in the tree. (254)

Aunt Lydia takes her time explaining the fox and cat story to showcase her own double agency, prompting readers to reconsider her complicity as more of a slow burning resistance to Gilead's sociopolitical structures. Aunt Lydia masks her loyalty for the Handmaids by performing loyal acts for The Sons of Jacob, waiting for the right time to use her knowledge to defeat Gilead. As such, Atwood develops Aunt Lydia beyond her typical "motif and metaphor," illustrating how older women can be represented in literature as complex and multi-dimensional characters with knowledge to share.

The Testaments gives readers insight into Atwood's hope for a more collaborative sharing of knowledge and responsibility between generations. Aunt Lydia primarily works with two groups of women: the older Aunts (Aunt Elizabeth, Aunt Helena, and Aunt Vidala) and the younger Aunts (Aunt Immortelle/Becka, Aunt Victoria/Agnus, and Nicole). Within the older group, there is insolence and backstabbing, while in the younger group, there is collaboration and sacrifice. Moreover, Aunt Vidala places the same kinds of destructive suspicions on the younger Aunts, calling them "malleable" and "susceptible to material temptations," proving that distrust between generations of females can travel in both directions (343). With these two groups, Aunt Lydia is looking for women she can trust to "carry the seeds of Gilead's collapse" (389). She never fully trusts the older Aunts, because, even with their knowledge and rank, they have done nothing to stop Gilead's tyranny. By contrast, Aunt Immortelle and Aunt Victoria have proven that they would rather die than become one of the Wives.

Thus, the two younger Aunts share more in common with Aunt Lydia's resolve than the older Aunts. Since she ultimately cannot control how the regime uses her, how Gileadean women see her, or how her reader will judge her, Aunt Lydia will control how she is 'killed off.'

Conclusion

Aging and death have always been linked to stories about the future. Authors of contemporary speculative fiction tend to enjoy sensationalizing cultural fears of aging by depicting the old as weak, feeble-minded, and burdensome. However, Atwood utilizes literary gerontology to disrupt longtime accepted views of powerless old women in society by addressing the terrifying consequences of continued subjugation, suggesting that "if we continue ignoring the problem of ageism, we will encounter a future in which younger generations actively oppress the elderly" (Krause 9). Atwood's novels demonstrate how ignoring critical distinctions of age in literature can be harmful to women because it entangles women into an age war commanded by the male gaze, youth, and the body's subjectivity. While *The Handmaid's Tale* addresses the ways in which dominant patriarchal archetypes of older women in literature often depict Crone-like figures that suppress younger women, the novel also reveals the ways in which younger women suppress their older female counterparts. *The Testaments* challenges these ageist attitudes, suggesting that women from different generations can work better against the patriarchy when they remove suspicions stemming from age gaps. By applying the theoretical framework of literary

gerontology to Atwood's Gilead novels, written three decades apart, we gain a better sense of the connections between age and creativity over her life as a writer.

Atwood's late style illustrates her understanding of the link between literacy and sociocultural and political power that puts older women authors at a disadvantage in terms of age and recognizing literary creativity. The novel weakens oppressive images of declining cognitive and biological productivity in older women by emphasizing Aunt Lydia's creative use of literacy skills as crucial for her revenge against Gilead's oppressive political authoritarian structure. Atwood resists conventional attitudes about aging and creativity, suggesting that writing provides an important source of self-discovery and self-creation, even in late age. Neal King notes that feminism centered only on the literary creativity of youth makes it hard for older female authors to advance an agenda for feminine socioeconomic and political issues occurring in old age. He argues that discounting the voices and literary productions of older women lengthens the list of oppressions for feminist study, and calls for feminist studies to include age in their political-economic analysis to help destigmatize the oppressive nature of ageism in labor, consumption, and dependence on institutional support (53). *The Testaments* illustrates that literary creativity is culture-bound, deciding whose voices are important, as Gilead tightly controlled women's intellectual capacities from contextualizing their experiences on a larger historical/political/economic scale.

Atwood confronts her own age, sense of usefulness, and complicities to tap into the literary creativity needed to address the critical neglect of older female protagonists, supporting literary gerontology and late style's prolonged concern for elderly female protagonists and their senior female authors. One question that kept coming to mind as I explored women's resistance to writing from the perspectives of the old is: *if growing old is what we all want so much, then why are we afraid to write about it?* Atwood's Gilead novels illustrate the potential for creative value when confronting such questions in literature and theory. Ruth E. Ray calls for a feminist gerontological approach to theorizing age in literature in which researchers are empowered to "engage in self-reflection and self-critique in regards to their own attitudes toward aging and to include personal criticism in their scholarly writings" (171). Ray suggests that more "personal investment" and "*passionate activism*" into age is required for feminist theory to fully understand the whole female experience. Unfortunately, it takes years to fully recognize the implications of De Beauvoir and Ray's gerontological discussion, which may explain why, until they themselves become old, younger female scholars rarely research older women.

Over the years, Atwood has been aware of her age within the context of younger and different generations. The years leading up to Aunt Lydia's decision to act correlate to Atwood's long-coming decision to write *The Testaments.* Many things had changed for Atwood since *The Handmaid's Tale* was published, including the age of her audience. In a 2013 interview at the University of Alberta,

Atwood stated, “How old you are in relationship to the people who are, for instance, reviewing you, and the people who are your audience – that’s a factor. The context of you within a generation, or another generation, or a different generation. For instance, I’m now of the granny generation.” Atwood’s lighthearted recollection is a powerful acknowledgment of the creative limitations of writing from the perspective of ‘old’ characters in youth, indicating the importance of critically recognizing age as it relates to what it means to be a woman and live like one. Atwood develops older women characters beyond their stereotypes and gives readers a chance to hear the voices of generations past as they relay “ustopian” stories of hope and collaboration. Atwood’s works have continuously demonstrated her concern with removing age as a significant barrier to a woman’s purpose and potential while honoring the ways in which older and younger generations of women continue to challenge the political discourse around feminism.

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