

'Under His Eye': Feminine In/visibility in *The Handmaid's Tale*

I. Gilead's Governmentalised Gaze: Real Women and Phantasmatic 'Woman' in *The Handmaid's Tale*

'Under His Eye' – so goes the valediction of choice in the militantly sectarian Republic of Gilead of *The Handmaid's Tale* (both Atwood's germinal novel and Miller's televisual series), a discursive convention which condenses, in a simple phrase, a socio-Symbolic that is deeply embedded in a psychopathological power structure: namely, one informed by, and presided over by a deific *Grand Autre* or Big Other, ever watchful, always looking for... what? This paper will argue that what the Big Other, here, is looking for is nothing less than 'the feminine' itself – both actual, real-life women and the phantasmatic *Woman* – as the principal subject of its governmentalised gaze. Take the former: women – who are, by virtue of Gilead's revived sumptuary laws, hyper-visible in their distinctive costuming and colour coding, whether these actual 'fashion victims' be 'Marthas' in khaki green, 'Wives' in teal, 'Aunts in chocolate brown and/or, most notably, 'Handmaids' in their standout, pillar-box red habits, rendered even more conspicuous by their habits' boldly contrasting white wimples. Yet, equally, these women are as invisible as individuals, as they are hyper-visible as a group: an absence, as much as a presence – a faintly legible mark, as if under erasure. The doubleness of which – played out, further, in the narrative's characterological binarism of Handmaid/Wife, Martha/Jezebel, and, even for such a deeply 'protestantised' society, Madonna/Whore – issues from and is informed by a controlling fantasy: that of the latter example, above – of '*The Woman*' or *La Femme*, here deemed, contra Lacan, very much to exist.

II. A Woman is Being Beaten: Perversion, Guilt and the Split (Juridical) Subject of Gilead.

It is precisely because 'The Woman'-as-phantasy *exists*, as an imagined *beau idéal* from which it is impossible *not* to differ, that real women can be so thoroughly disciplined and punished, even disposed of in *The Handmaid's Tale*. For, here, women's many and manifold differences – such 'lived experiences' as single parenting, same-sex coupling, adultery,

divorce – are all proscribed in Gilead as unacceptable deviations, each attracting the most corporeal of penalties. This is because Gilead’s penological regime *literalises* a powerful Freudian fantasy, bringing it to life, replaying it over and over again, so that it comes to occupy centre-stage in the Divine Republic’s psychic and material existence. This phantasy-come-true is but a variation on that recurrent childhood phantasy of paternally administered ‘beating(s)’ so (in)famously documented by Freud as the source, amongst his (largely female) patients, of all subsequent adult perversions. For Freud, that phantasised beating always involved a child, *ein kind wird geschlagen*, ‘A child is being beaten’ – usually, a little girl – and following, scenically, a strict tripartite structure: that of the beater (‘A child – whom I hate – is being beaten by the father’); the beaten (‘I, a child, am being beaten by the father’); and voyeur (‘A child – usually a boy – is being beaten by the father/others, while I, a girl, watch’). In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, mature, fertile women replace children, and men – and women – in authority (Commanders, Angels, Eyes, Aunts, Wives) replace the father; however, the same tripartite structure prevails, so that the first scene becomes ‘A woman – whom I hate – is being beaten by the authorities’; the second, ‘I, a woman, am being beaten by the authorities’; and the third, ‘A man is being beaten by authorities/others, while I, a woman, watch’.

That change – from child to adult (girl to woman, boy to man), from father to authority figure – is not the only significant departure from Freud. Positionality – as subject or object – alters as well, shifting the respective scene’s players from love to hate, active to passive, masochist to sadist. Consider the third scene, ‘A man is being beaten by authorities/others, while I, a woman, watch’ which, as noted above, for Freud, took the form of ‘A child – usually a boy – is being beaten by the father/others, while I, a girl, watch’. Sadism looms large in both scenes, but with this difference: for Freud, the sadist is elsewhere – a father or, more likely, teacher, whose beatings the little girl-as-voyeur can ‘enjoy’ by proxy, always at a remove, safely watching, never engaged. While, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, that distancing proxy vanishes altogether, as woman-as-voyeur is always/already conscripted into Gilead’s on-going Sadean carnival of pleasure-in-pain. Consider, for example, just one ‘Participation’ carried out against a male offender – a putative rapist – who is, Maenad-like, torn apart by the Handmaids, Offred/June included, each emerging smeared, literally, in the bloodlust of their collective *jouissance*, arousing both ‘excitation’ and ‘repugnance’.

This 'Participation' scene, and its deeply sadistic register, recalls the narrative's first scenes of violence: consider the initial scenes set at the Red Centre where 'A woman – whom I hate – is being beaten by the authorities'. 'Hate' may seem, at first blush, misplaced here – and *is*, as fear is the principal affective response solicited in the scene. Yet, so is relief – a peculiar kind of *schadenfreude*: to wit, *that this beating is happening to someone else*, whether it be Janine, Moira, Alma, Brianna, Dolores and so on. The reason? Because that woman is, to put it mildly, *not loved* – and, indeed, *may* be hated. The flip side of which is that 'I' – the woman not beaten – *may* be loved and, thereby, exempted from hateful and hate-driven beating(s). Or so goes the twisted thinking here, its admixture of hate and love, fear and relief producing in the adult woman of *The Handmaid's Tale* precisely what it did for Freud's child phantasiist: specifically, it installs a pervasive, often paralysing sense of guilt. That guilt attracts punishment – and punishment of a very direct and immediate kind. Which is why the first scene's incipient sadism is superseded, indeed displaced by the 'just desserts' masochism of 'I, a (guilty) woman, 'am being beaten' (and rightly so).

Though, according to Freud, this punishment-provoking guilt concerns the 'beater', rather than another 'beaten'. Of course, when this phantasy is actually *enacted*, it is hard not to feel guilt over someone else's beating, however relief-filled, even *pleasurable* it might be. Think of the startled shock June (and the viewer) experiences when Serena, previously the Sons of Jacob's 'golden girl' – and, for a time, the narrative's most 'hated' child – is, herself, whipped with a belt by Commander Waterford, formerly her uxorious second fiddle, now her punitive 'father'. Yet, a guilty pleasure *is* embedded in this excruciating scene of divinely-sanctioned domestic violence which, following Freud, goes to the 'paternal' beater, not the beaten 'Wife' – and the incestuous longing the former arouses. This raises the truly perverse possibility that June may desire, however deeply denied, the Commander-as-Father, and, behind him, the 'ferocious' Father-God of Gilead. It is the placation of this doubled superegoic figure – Fred, the Almighty – that may also underpin and prompt, when shown by Aunt Lydia the consequences of her first attempted flight from Gilead (*i.e.*, the corpse of the hapless Omar, hanging on the Wall), June's guilty self-approach, masochistically and melancholically flagellating herself – at least metaphorically – with the (Catholic *mea culpa*?) refrain 'My fault, my fault, my fault'. Further, Aunt Lydia anchors this guilt, juridically; that is,

by splitting June/Offred into two discrete nomological halves, casting June as the transgressor, forever breaching the 'rules of the game' (from the sublime of God's Law to the ridiculous of the Commander's Scrabble board); and Offred, as the ever contrite and always compliant subject of law, who can and will adapt to the 'new dispensation' which is law-*full* Gilead.

III. Faith No More! The Triumph of Religion, 'The Law', and Gilead's Foreclosed Phallus

Where, though, one might well ask, is this much touted 'Law'? How can the Gileadian authorities of *The Handmaid's Tale* lay down, not just 'The Law', but *any* law – legal positivism's man-made *gesetz*, as much as natural law's elevated *Recht* – when its socio-legal record of one of rampant lawlessness: not only beatings (*e.g.*, June, Janine, Emily, Rita and so on), but amputations (*e.g.*, Serena's little finger), mutilations (*e.g.*, Emily's clitoris), and executions (*e.g.*, Beth and Sienna pushed off a roof)? Not to mention the slow death by radiation poisoning that awaits those unfortunates sent to that vast extermination camp, 'The Colonies' (*e.g.*, Holly, Janine, Rabbi Sally, and so on). In light of this deeply transgressive track record, where *is* 'The Law' in Gilead – aside from governmentality's repeated high-handed references to it: for instance, think of the overbearing Immigration officer at Boston's Logan Airport, refusing Emily an exit visa to Montréal on the grounds that her marriage to Canadian citizen, Sylvia, is invalid. Here, the so-called sacrality of the *lex divina's* doxa trumps the *lex humana's* secular tolerance, with Emily's much adverted to wedding certificate deemed in breach of the Scriptural ukase on same-sex relations.

It would be too easy to take a 'New Atheist' position here, à la Richard Dawkins, and, simply, blame religion: specifically, the *Christian* religion, of a peculiarly fundamentalist kind, ever quick with an anodyne Scriptural citation that 'just says No'. The problem, though, is that fundamentalism's central citational text – *The Bible* – is so partialised here, Gilead's highly selective reading of Scripture virtually excluding *The New Testament* and its *theos* of love, compassion, and forgiveness. For that, more expansive reading of *The Bible* – where the 'spirit' fulfils, but also prevails over the 'Law' – one must turn to the Canadian women's commune, Canaan: a pastoral refuge run by latter-day 'good Samaritans', and at which

Serena and Noah take shelter when on the run from Gilead and its Canadian-based agents, the Wheelers. In bold contrast to the *imitatio Christi* of Canaan, Gilead foregrounds *The Old Testament's* vengeful God – ‘Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord’ – with neither Christ nor, for that matter, the Holy Spirit getting a look-in. Not that the God Gilead constructs is anything more than a daemonic parody of its original *Old Testament* type, or, for that matter, the *lex talionis* often ascribed to that deity. After all, *Deuteronomy's* notorious ‘eye for an eye’ was intended to shut down further feuding, bringing a dispositive end to tribal bloodshed.

Which, in fact, is the reverse of Gilead where ‘eyes’ – such as Janine’s – are taken not to redress loss, but rather to instigate it, creating an imbalance antithetical to the ‘*quid-pro-quo*’ logic of retributive justice. Instead of balance, Gilead’s version of (in)justice embraces another logic, one marked by an unchallengeable certainty, an unquestionable sureness. Surely, here, we arrive at the very pathological heart of Gilead’s psychic life: that of *psychosis*, the hallucinations of which are, unshakeably, ‘(mis)recognised’ as reality. A diagnosis which, now, makes sense of how Gilead truly understands ‘Law’: for all its transcendental blather of a higher legislative power, Gileadian law turns out to be a crudely blunt means to horrifying ends, justifying all manner of displacements, dispossessions, and degradations. This lethal ‘weaponisation’ of law turns on what Freud-Lacanian psychoanalysis calls, in its catalogue of Unconscious operations, *verwerfung*: in other words, foreclosure. Foreclosing what? Simply: that of another ‘Law’ – the Law of the signifier, the ‘Father’s Name’, the Phallus. For, as Lacan teaches, when the Phallus is foreclosed from the Unconscious, it returns, according to the peculiar logic of psychosis, in the Real of delusion: here, in Gilead, as attested by its ever-proliferating ‘plague of (juridical) phantasies’ that, simultaneously, conceal but also reveal the ‘hole’ rending the collective Unconscious of its socio-Symbolic.

To reiterate: the hole in the narrative’s socio-Symbolic is occasioned by Gilead’s foreclosed phallus, now on walkabout, missing in action. Here, a reader of the novel(s), or viewer of the television series, might well object: drenched as it is in testosterone, surely Gilead is, to a ‘toxic’, indeed fatal extreme, *the* masculinist culture par excellence, where ‘having’ (rather than ‘being’) the phallus is celebrated above all else. Though, of course, as, in all such cases – that is, revelling in ‘having’ the phallus – an anxiety looms: that of castration. Even more

troubling than this castration anxiety is the traumatic realisation that the phallus is nothing but a *semblant*, never really here, likely nowhere, though possibly elsewhere. Where, according to the ideologues of Gilead, is this *elsewhere*? The answer, here, resides with no less a figure than that of the m(O)ther. Which is why is ‘the maternal’, monstrous or otherwise, is so actively sought by Gilead, even if its authorities *know* – but, perversely, disavow – that the mother is marked by penile privation. No wonder perversions abound in Gilead – think of the paraphilias on display at Jezebel’s (e.g, amputation fetishism, with one Commander licking a handmaid’s stump of severed arm, as he exits the lift), because, here, is a society where Freud’s *verleugnung*, perversion’s disavowal, vies with his *verwerfung*, psychosis’ foreclosure. For disavowal is capable of a perverse double-think; it can, at one and the same time, affirm the reality, but also acknowledge the inexistence of the maternal phallus. That (not so) ‘obscure object of desire’ – the maternal phallus – has a very specific phantasmatic location and, with it, an equally imaginary function. That is, the phallus is located, squarely, within the vagina. Unlike, however, the masticating *vagina dentata* of yore, gobbling up the penis hungrily, this invaginated phallus has a new, ‘improved’ purpose: not so much castrative as *creative*. Creative of what? Simply: that of parthenogenesis – or – auto-reproduction.

IV. ‘Firing Blanks’: The Supernumerary Penis vs the Maternal Phallus in *The Handmaid’s Tale*

Surely, that is *the* fantasy which most thoroughly grips Gilead – that women can procreate solely on their own – accounting for its psychic regression as much as social repression. Nowhere more so than in its *pulsion* to reduce all women to that status of a part-object, the hole of the vagina, around which the drives – anal, oral, and genital – turn, each attempting to plug it up (with *objet petit a* of faeces, the breast, the phallus?) and, thereby, suture the split that ensures the sexual relation’s fractured *non-rapport*, and ultimate failure. All of which makes sense of Gilead’s much touted ‘Ceremony’; that is, the ritualised rape that occurs, monthly, in the households of Gilead’s elite, graphically (and gruesomely) dramatised in the first episode of the television series, ‘Offred’ – though delayed, in the novel, until chapter 15. This painfully awkward process takes the following form: lying supine, with her arms pinned down by her mistress (Serena Waterford) and her legs spread wide, the

handmaid, June-as-Offred is penetrated and, most importantly, *inseminated* by her Commander (Fred Waterford). Though wrapped in Scriptural precedent and liturgical language, the Ceremony's thick cultural casing has the opposite effect: it reduces divinely-inspired *eros* to biology of the basest kind, outing this 'sacred' act as nothing more than nature's 'rutting'. Which is interesting precisely because this graphic representation of the Real of intercourse conceals (but also reveals) a deeper disquiet: an *angst* centred around *performance* rather than castration.

It is, after all, Offred's Gileadian examining doctor who, during a mandated clinical visit, 'helpfully' offers to inseminate her on the grounds that most Commanders (and their ilk) are 'sterile', effectively 'firing blanks'. An open secret to which even true believers such as Serena subscribe, enlisting, as she does, the much younger Nick – her husband's driver (and secret police watchdog, an 'Eye') – to impregnate June on the sly. All of which suggests that impotence might be the fate awaiting *all* men – not just Fred, but also Nick, even Luke – the penis, Gileadian or otherwise, having become not just impotent, not just flaccid, not just 'can't get it up' but truly, genuinely supernumerary. So, for all the phallogocentric brouhaha here, it is the male member's creeping irrelevance that constitutes the central fear powering the plot of *The Handmaid's Tale*: that men and, especially, their penises-as-phalli, have become otiose. Which is, of course, our era's own post-Oedipal story as well, where the precipitous decline of the 'Father's Name', indeed, patriarchy's outright collapse has been sealed by the reproductive autonomy – contraception, termination, sperm donorship, single/same sex parenting, IVF – that society's, *and* science's advances have secured for women. That said, a paradox looms; for this tremendous step forward has provoked, so the adage goes, two backwards, an obscurantist nostalgia challenging, increasingly, the gender equity's progress.

To which *The Handmaid's Tale* amply attests: be it Atwood's novel or Miller's TV series, each gives it audience(s) an *imago* – a mirror image – of our own 'interesting times', though seen through a speculative 'glass darkly'. New Testament gospel writer, Saint Paul, is quoted here because, at least in terms of hypermodernity's governing ideology, *The Handmaid's Tale* provides an interesting speculative twist on what Jacques Lacan, would call the 'triumph of religion'. To wit: in any showdown with science – so Lacan, confirmed atheist and ex-

Catholic, would claim – religion (and, especially, the Church of Rome’s *catholicos*) would always win. Why? Because it supplies symbolic meaning ‘by the bucketful’, as Lacan’s son-in-law, Jacques-Alain Miller further glossed, to the ‘unbearable Real’ of *physis*. *The Handmaid’s Tale* goes even further: more than just meaning, religion gives us answers – sound, practical, on point solutions to the pressing concerns, indeed emergencies of the day. Take the critical example of climate change: since the Gileadian *coup d’état* – and the institution of its post-industrial order – fossil fuel production has gone down by 78% in three years, enabling environmental recovery. Not to mention its rebounding birth rates. So, Serena informs a rapt Mexican delegation, hanging on her every word – and, themselves, interested in importing Gilead’s handmaid system south in order to address their own country’s urgent fertility crisis.

V. Gilead – The Way Forward? Biological Destiny, ‘Yummy Mummies’ and the Emergence of Feminine (Feminist?) Solidarity

Scenes such as these drive home something of a sore point – at least, for a secular, feminist and/or anti-faith reading of the text. That is, far from being the enemy of a certain kind of progress, faith in *The Handmaid’s Tale* actually guarantees, rather than blocks, the future. The principal vehicle, here, is nothing less than the much-longed-for figure of ‘the child’, the Gileadian conception of which – if we take contemporary political economy seriously – should sound strangely familiar. In fact, we already live in a world of ‘Handmaids’, only our ‘Bilhahs’ and ‘Leahs’ are *contractually*, rather than coercively, engaged, as figures of (neo-)liberal exchange rather than ‘holy’ use. Moira’s pre-Gileadian surrogacy arrangements with an adoptive British couple – seen in flashback in the TV series – writes this increasingly common natal marketisation into the narrative: the stark reality referent of a baby for money. Even where its ‘commercial’ variant is prohibited – as in, e.g., Australia – surrogacy, however ‘compassionate’, has altered the very nature of the (hyper)modern family and, indeed, parenthood – especially motherhood. Within the narrative world of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, that alteration in motherhood, at once, inflates (as ‘sacred vessels’, to be safeguarded at all costs), as well as deflates (as expendable carriers, to be jettisoned as soon as their function is fulfilled) its nurturing role, as well as introduces that world’s overarching theme of dramatic reversibility, its characters’ being forever fungible.

After all, Serena Waterford, and her high-caste clique of Bible-bashing '(Stepford) Wives', are not the only women, here, to valorise a woman's 'biological destiny'. June, and her posse – wayward Janine, fiery Alma, intellectual Emily – all find, themselves, reinvented as born-again 'yummy Mummies', each focused on, in fact fetishising Hannah/Agnes, Nichole/Holly, Charlotte/Angela, Joshua/Dylan, Oliver and so on. Such an astonishing *volte facie* – 'madonna-isation' embraced, here, by such diverse representatives of modern femininity – raises the distinct possibility that, perhaps, Gilead, however vicious, however violent, is not entirely wrong. Certainly, one of the most moving scenes in the TV series – Fred and Serena's overnight stay at an idyllic rural inn, close to the Canadian border – represents Gilead as a society, not only in organic harmony with nature, but, finally, at peace with itself, the nightly hymns of the inn-keeper's family, metaphorising a social order in which faith, family and fecundity cohere. That sense – of Gilead's rising expectations – is given an even brusquer formulation by Offred's new shopping companion, Ofglen 2, who says to June, in a moment of brutal 'I see you' honesty as follows: 'You had a first-floor walk-up down Back Bay, with a garden; you had yourself a Nordstrom's card...I used to get fucked behind a dumpster just so I could buy a sixth of Oxy and a happy meal. I'm clean now. I've got a safe place to sleep every night...and I want to keep it that way'.

So, clearly, for some, Gilead is working. Or, at least for a while. Of course, it is precisely this character – the opportunistic former sex worker, Ofglen 2 – whose tongue is cut out for speaking in support of Janine at her putative stoning, and who is, in retaliation, responsible for the suicide bombing of the Rachel and Leah Centre. Which drives home this undeniable truism: that, whatever 'greatest good' gains a society may make, whenever, in its midst, a woman is being beaten – or raped, or mutilated, or executed – rank injustice obtains. Yet, still, the thought persists that, perhaps, reform might come to Gilead, preserving its eco-sensitivities, but transforming its gender ethos. Already, that reformation is underway, however fragile it might prove, in Commander Lawrence's kinder, gentler version of Gilead: New Bethlehem. A jurisdiction, where handmaids are banned and women can, once again, read and work. That sense of a 'fresh start' is not confined solely to New Bethlehem, as something approaching feminist solidarity, between Gileadian and American women, is emergent in the civil war's contested territories. Think of that Magda Goebbels of the Divine Republic, Naomi Putnam, who, one imagines, would rather slaughter, Medea-like, her own

children, rather than surrender them to the enemy. The latter of which, of course, she does: under the *aegis* of Aunt Lydia and watchful eye, Naomi – rightly – returns Charlotte/Angela to her birth-mother, a grateful Janine.

VI. Beyond the Gilead/American Binary: A Feminine and Feminist Law – Under Her Eye?

That rapprochement might well continue, with women from both sides coming together to defeat the pervasive misogyny that underwrites Gilead's pitiless patriarchy or, for that matter, the American rebels' 'blowjobs for bullets' ethos. Neither speak to the concerns of either June or Serena who, together, might form a formidable alliance, assisted ably by the ex- Handmaids, former Marthas and simpatico Aunts: just to name the most prominent – Emily, Rita and, of course, Aunt Lydia. The fact that Lydia turns out to be – to flash-forward to Atwood's *The Testaments*, now in production as a televisual adaptation – a double agent, working on behalf of the Americans at the very core of Gilead Establishment, all but confirms a feminist coalition *à venir*. What form might that coalition take? Certainly, one that could move beyond America's crass materialism or Gilead's fundamentalist inflexibility, ignoring the worst of each (*e.g.*, women's objectification or commodification), but cherry-picking their best – sustainability, security, satiety – to create a woman-centric environment which privileges neither autonomy nor community, but fuses the two, taking us beyond the binary of Gilead/America – their fatal or toxic masculinity – into a third space.

A space where 'the feminine' is brought to the fore and where men know their place: as neither overlord nor drone, but a true partner in a polity committed to faith, family, fecundity and, above all, *freedom*. Central to this new order will be *the Law*, though such a reconceived legality will differ, radically, from both Gilead's ferociously punitive 'death drive' and America's coldly transactional utility calculus. Nor, for that matter, will the anaemic jurisprudence of public international law figure here, smugly content to see turncoat war criminals, such as Fred Waterford, at liberty. Instead, the law here would emerge from *une autre symbolique*, another Symbolic, one that goes through, but also *beyond* castration: an explicitly *feminist* legality which, in its knotting of faith and family, fecundity *and* freedom would point to, but also be informed by an 'eternal feminine', Goethe's *das Ewig-Weibliche* –

yet one that acknowledges her *inexistence*, barring her status as Big Other and managing her, hitherto, ungovernable *jouissance*. In so doing, this juris-*jouissance* of feminine *and* feminist legality restores an ethics of political and personal choice to the post-Gileadean polity, all the while releasing it from a threatened matriarchal inversion – and, with it, an attendant masculinist in/visibility – that might well say, by way of valediction to that culture *and* this paper, ‘Under Her Eye’.