

The Interrelated Defense of Abortion and Pornography in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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THE CULTURE OF DEATH, being a parody of the culture of life, is also a seamless garment. For over a century now there has been an interrelated defense of abortion and pornography. The Comstock Act of 1873 made the link explicit between obscenity and abortion when it banned the mailing not only of every obscene writing or picture but also of anything meant for "preventing conception or producing abortion."ⁱ It is no accident that Planned Parenthood, now the biggest provider of abortion in the U.S., boasts of having played a major role in overturning both the Comstock Act of 1873 and the Communications Decency Act of 1996, thus opening the floodgates to pornography in the U. S. mails and on the Internet.ⁱⁱ

A good example of an interrelated defense of abortion and pornography in literature can be found in the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* by Canadian author Margaret Atwood. This book was on *The New York Times* best-seller list for 23 weeks in 1987 and was nominated for a prestigious international prize. It was then turned into a movie in 1990, thanks to the script of playwright Harold Pinter, and into an opera that premiered in Europe in 2000 and in the U.S. in 2003.ⁱⁱⁱ Not only that, it has a cult following among feminists in academe today and can be found in college libraries and bookstores across the nation. Yet here is a work in which a spokesman for the culture of death weaves a seamless garment in defense of both abortion and pornography.

To begin with, Margaret Atwood writes about a Christian theocracy operating in the U.S. in the late twentieth century. She creates an anti-

utopia where women are enslaved for breeding purposes to reverse the population decline among whites. Her book is a warning against Christian conservatism, for she stacks the cards throughout so that Christians who oppose abortion and pornography always appear as tyrannical and perverted. They are bible-thumping Nazis who use women for their fertility and then destroy them. In a publicity release, Atwood stated that just as Orwell's *1984* was "an extrapolation of life in 1948," so her *Tale* was "a slight twist on the society we have now."^{iv} In an interview for *Ms.* magazine, she said that some of it "is happening now,"^v and in other publicity appearances she spoke of keeping a scrapbook on the "religious right wing" since 1983^{vi} and she pointed out that Evangelical ministers Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson were proof that she was writing not fantasy but history based on the American Christian Right, for Falwell had persuaded 7-Eleven stores not to sell *Playboy* and *Penthouse* and Robertson had decided to run for president in 1988. Clearly her novel was a "logical extension of where we are now."^{vii}

Many reviewers agreed that Atwood's anti-utopia was comparable to Orwell's *1984*. This is strange, because Orwell, who was strongly pro-life, was holding up a mirror in *1984* to an atheistic totalitarian regime then actually in existence in the USSR. Atwood, on the other hand, was writing about a Christian theocracy that existed only in her mind, one that used the Bible to persecute women and exploit them for their fertility. In the original interviews promoting her book, Atwood warned that the Reagan years verged on such a woman-hating theocracy, and many reviewers agreed that this persecution of women was just about to happen here. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* called Atwood's *Tale* a "plausible cautionary tale" about zealous, hypocritical Christian fundamentalists,^{viii} and *Ms.* said that Atwood had provided a deep, complex "critique of contemporary society."^{ix} Other journals typically said that her story was "not nearly as futuristic nor fantasmatic as we might wish" and that "in a very real sense, the future presaged by *The Handmaid's Tale* is already our history."^x Already! One looks around in vain to see what is left of the concentration camps of the 1980s. Even in England a reviewer called Atwood's theocracy an extension of the Bible-belt.^{xi} At least Mary McCarthy quipped that this novel "strained credibility" by exaggerating

the power of the Christian Right.^{xiii} Only one reviewer had the courage to say that her novel was based on a “lie”—the lie that a fundamentalist coup here could create a Christian nation without “hope or charity.”^{xiii} A second critic noted that Atwood revealed nothing about the historical present, but a lot about the psychology of the Left: “What does this book tell us about the present except that Atwood (and apparently the award givers) have a great anxiety about conservatism, Christianity, and traditional female roles?”^{xiv} Indeed, it is an anxiety bordering on paranoia.

Let us see what Atwood says explicitly about abortion in her novel. In the last part of her book, she imagines a professor of the late twenty-second century giving a paper about the causes of the white population’s decline and extinction in the U.S. He declares that only “some of the failure to reproduce” could be attributed to “birth control of various kinds, including abortion.”^{xv} Atwood here makes her learned speaker define abortion as a form of *birth control*. With a flourish, she makes twenty million babies aborted in the U. S. from 1973 to 1986 disappear into thin air, their absence equated with their never having existed. Atwood’s professor then spells out the reason for the population decline: environmental poisons from “nuclear-plant accidents,” “leakages from chemical and biological warfare stockpiles,” “toxic waste,” insecticides and herbicides (304). Atwood wants to displace the blame for the absence of children from the sex and abortion industries to the Pentagon and big business. Since Atwood calls abortion “birth control,” it is noteworthy that Moira, the heroine of her novel, worked in the publishing division of a women’s collective before the revolution, putting out “books on birth control” (178). In other words, she was a propagandist for abortion.

Atwood depicts pro-life Christians as becoming violent once they establish their theocracy: they proclaim all doctors who ever committed abortions “war criminals” retroactively guilty of “atrocities” against humanity. They sift through the few hospital records that survive or use informants to ferret out the former abortionists and to execute them publicly. When the narrator first approaches the Wall of Harvard yard in Cambridge, Mass., there are six dead doctors and scientists in white coats

hanging on hooks for their crimes of abortion: "Each has a placard hung around his neck to show why he has been executed, a drawing of a human fetus" (32-33).

Atwood leaves it vague just who these tyrannical Christians are, for she shows them persecuting only some Catholics, Jews, Baptists, and Presbyterians, but all Quakers, blacks, and homosexuals. In her *Ms.* interview, Atwood calls attention to the "civil war" that in her *Tale* is "led" by Southern Baptists. One reviewer finds it odd that Southern Baptists should lead a counter-revolution against a fundamentalist theocracy, and he calls this only one of her "ignorant" misrepresentations of the American Christian Right.^{xvi} In fact, it is not ignorance, but an attempt to lull the expected opposition.

To make sure that the reader does not attribute any humane motive to Christians for their opposition to abortion, Atwood depicts them as quietly committing infanticide on a vast scale. The narrator explains that while abortion is outlawed in the theocracy, defective newborns disappear without a trace: "You can't have them taken out; whatever it is must be carried to term." But if they have "a pinhead or a snout like a dog's, or two bodies, or a hole in its heart or no arms, or webbed hands and feet," they are "declared Unbabies" and "put somewhere, quickly, away" (112-13). Also, fetuses are valued only if they are not defective. The narrator describes a procession of lower-class women in black mourning a miscarriage, the mother carrying a small jar with a fetus only two or three months old, "too young to tell whether or not it was an Unbaby" (44). The point is that if the fetus were imperfect, it would be thrown away, not given a funeral. In this way, Atwood projects the culture of death's utilitarian view of babies, born and unborn, onto the culture of life, showing Christians as hypocrites who use the Bible to persecute women and exploit them for purposes of eugenics.

To underline the inhumanity of right-to-lifers, the narrator also recalls that they had the name "*bleeders*" before the revolution because they used to carry signs saying, "*Let them bleed*" (180). In short, she imputes such a hatred of women to Christian conservatives that she imagines them carrying signs that tell women to go bleed to death in illegal abortions. This is just one example of how she uses a wide brush

to tar the entire Christian Right in this story.

Let's now examine how the defense of pornography is closely interrelated with that of abortion in Atwood's *Tale*. The narrator remembers that her mother joined in many marches before the revolution: "[I]t was during the time of the porn riots, or was it the abortion riots, they were close together. There were a lot of bombings then: clinics, video stores; it was hard to keep track" (180). The implication here is that great numbers of Christians were bombing both abortion clinics and porn shops at once—a malicious fantasy, since violence has always been very rare on the Christian side. At the time, the narrator's mother was a feminist who actively defended abortion, yet she marched with Christians against pornography. One reviewer noted that there had indeed been an alliance of feminists and fundamentalists to fight porn in the early 1980s,^{xvii} and another explained that Atwood herself had been against porn earlier on.^{xviii}

When the narrator is undergoing training as a "handmaid," she watches a documentary in which her mother marches with a group bearing such banners as: "Freedom to choose. Every baby a wanted baby. Recapture our bodies" (119-20). Also, as she grew up, the narrator would often hear her mother say, "You were a wanted child, all right" (120, 181), the phrase "wanted child" being a mantra of the abortion-rights party. Clearly, her mother was a militant defender of abortion. Yet Atwood portrays this older feminist as very misguided for joining an "ecstatic" group of women who burned porn in a public space. The narrator was only a child then, but she recalls her mother giving her a magazine to throw on the flames. She looked at the cover and saw that it had "a pretty woman on it, with no clothes on, hanging from the ceiling by a chain wound around her hand." She adds, the picture "didn't frighten me. I thought she was swinging, like Tarzan from a vine." But when she threw the magazine on the fire, something sinister happened: "flakes of paper came loose...parts of women's bodies turning to black ash, in the air, before my eyes" (38-39). This imagery suggests that looking at porn is harmless, even for a child, but burning it is murderous: it sends out "parts of women's bodies" into the air as "black ash." Thus, Atwood links the burning of porn to the burning of women in gas ovens,

one of her many allusions to the Third Reich. Several reviewers noted these allusions, one of them calling the narrator of the *Tale* “a latter-day Anne Frank,”^{xxix} and another drawing the specious connection between Christian opposition to porn and Hitler’s burning of books.^{xx} *Time* magazine said the narrator’s mother had helped bring in the Christian theocracy by burning porn.^{xxi}

At the time of the Christian revolution in the *Tale*, the “pornomarts” were shut down (174) and “[t]here were bonfires in Times Square, crowds chanting around them, women throwing their arms up thankfully into the air when they felt the cameras on them.” Atwood shows the women as only pretending to be thankful, but the young Christians as really sinister—“clean-cut stony-faced young men tossing things onto the flames” and forcing “the manufacturers and importers and salesmen” of porn to get “down on their knees” and repent in public (230). Thus, Atwood depicts the Christian Right as bombing lots of abortion clinics and porn shops before the revolution and then as arbitrarily and retrospectively punishing both abortionists and pornographers after the revolution. Here is an interrelated defense of abortion and pornography. Atwood warns that these two industries must stand or fall together.

Moira is the character in whom the two strands of the novel converge. She is the post-modern feminist, much more sophisticated than the narrator’s mother, yet just as militant. She does not march, but rather creates propaganda. As mentioned earlier, Moira’s job at the revolution was publishing books on birth control, which, for Atwood, includes abortion. Moira is not just the best and oldest friend of the narrator but also the heroine of the novel, for from the time of her escape from the Red Center, she looms larger than life: Moira was “our fantasy,” the “lava beneath the crust of daily life” (129). The narrator admits that she herself is willing to grovel in order to survive, but she rejoices that Moira is brave, independent, and resourceful: “I want gallantry from her, swashbuckling, heroism, single handed combat. Something I lack” (249). Atwood is careful not to reveal that Moira is a lesbian until the middle of the novel, by which time she hopes the reader’s liking for her is firmly established.

When we first meet Moira, she is selling porn-style lingerie at

“underwhore parties” for suburban housewives trying to compete with the “Pornomarts” (56). Atwood presents this as a clever way to earn one’s way through college. Later we see Moira at the Red Center where young women are turned into handmaids—that is, made willing to serve as surrogate mothers for barren Christian women—by being shown old porn movies and told that such cruelty towards women was the result of too much “choice.” Moira laughs at these movies and says the torture “wasn’t real” (118-19), reacting just as the narrator did, when as a child she saw the cover of the porn magazine and compared it to a Tarzan movie. Atwood wants us to believe that porn is harmless because what happens to women in porn is only entertainment. It follows from this that feminists are wrong to join the Christian Right in their anti-porn rallies. The freedom to depict perversion is intimately connected here with the freedom to have an abortion. Lose one of these freedoms and you end up, Atwood warns, in a woman-hating Christian theocracy.

In order to emphasize the harmlessness of porn and its attendant perversions, Atwood depicts her narrator as disappointed when the Commander invites her to come to his private study and she finds it is only to play Scrabble and read old magazines. At this point we are in the middle of the book, where Atwood begins to unveil her values boldly: “there had been a letdown of sorts. What had I been expecting, behind that closed door.... Something unspeakable, down on all fours perhaps, perversions, whips, mutilations? At the very least, some minor sexual manipulation...prohibited by law” (155). Note her word *letdown*. Atwood herself once stated that her narrator in the *Tale* is “an ordinary, more-or-less cowardly woman (rather than a heroine).”^{xxii} Yet she would have us believe that this average, cowardly woman goes willingly and fearlessly to a place where she expects to be asked to join in sexual perversions. She would have us believe that she feels *let down* when no perversion is in sight. Surely this is why *New York Times* reviewer Lehmann-Haupt called the novel a cerebral sado-masochistic fantasy—not disapprovingly—and the *Socialist Review* called it a solipsistic pornographic fantasy with echoes of de Sade.^{xxiii} For in fact, Atwood not only defends pornography in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, she is covertly writing it. The link with the Marquis de Sade is worth emphasizing, for a number of feminists regard

the works of de Sade in a positive light, and this pornographer may well have been the first to attack “restrictions on abortion as the result of religious superstition” and exult in the “delight of destroying an embryo.”^{xxiv}

A little later, the narrator speaks of Scrabble as “kinky in the extreme,” again blurring the line between porn and entertainment. While she plays with the Commander, words related to abortion such as *zygote* are used, the implication being that a conceived child is nothing but a clever combination of letters in a game. After Scrabble, she reads a woman’s magazine “supposed to have been burned” in the “house-to-house searches” (157). Atwood’s point is that after Christian conservatives have destroyed hard porn, their next target will be soft porn in women’s magazines. With relish she describes the predatory-looking females featured in *Vogue* in the 1980s: they looked like “princes” and “pirates,” with “boots that came to the knee,” cat’s eyes “fixed for the pounce” and “horsy acquisitive teeth.” Above all, “No quailing, no clinging” (157). Thus she blurs the line between the dominatrix of porn and the magazine model.

Atwood wants us to believe that Christians pose a far greater threat to women than pornographers and abortionists. In her *Tale*, the Christian rulers regard women as “two-legged wombs, that’s all” (136). They see a woman beyond childbearing age or a sterile woman as having so little value that they declare her an “Unwoman” and ship her out to clean up toxic waste. And they don’t provide “protective clothing” in such places because, Moira explains, these are people “they want to get rid of,” especially “old women” and “Handmaids who’ve screwed up their three chances” (248). The narrator’s mother has been sent to sweep up toxins (252-53), and the narrator herself fears to end up there if she does not succeed in bearing a child to her third Commander. This accusation against men of the Christian Right, that they value women only for their fertility and have no other use for them, is another example of projection in this book, for who has less use for an old woman than a playboy or pornographer? But the utilitarian view of women typical of the culture of death is consistently projected here onto the culture of life.

The brutal treatment of women in the Christian theocracy is

supposedly based on a literal reading of certain passages in Genesis and St. Paul. Although Atwood misrepresents the Bible, she disguises this by saying that the Commanders kept the Bible locked up so that women could not find out what was in it. The problem with this is that Atwood is writing about the *first* decade after the revolution, when women would presumably remember what was in the Bible.

Among the perversions practiced by Christian rulers in Atwood's theocracy, the most important one is the "Ceremony." Indeed, this perversion is at the very heart of her novel, and it is described in ample and repellent detail in Chapter 16. One critic correctly calls this chapter "pornographic and voyeuristic," part of the overall "sodomasochistic fantasy."^{xxv} In the Ceremony, the Commander tries once a month to impregnate his handmaid as she lies in bed literally upon his wife's knees,^{xxvi} performing his "duty" fully clothed under glaring light to avoid any hint of lust or love. This brutal Ceremony is supposedly "a literal enactment of Genesis 30:1-3," where barren Rachel gives her maid to Jacob, so that her maid may "bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her." Indeed, the first epigraph of the *Tale* is this very passage from Genesis 30. This is strange, since no Jew or Christian in 3,000 years ever interpreted this passage as allowing three people to have intercourse at once. During the Ceremony, Atwood's narrator reflects that it is "everyone's wet dream, two women at once" (94). Well, this is the point: the author herself tells us with a wink that the Ceremony is perversion with a biblical excuse. One critic notes shrewdly that Atwood tries to show here that sex confined to procreation is far more obscene and twisted than the perversions depicted in pornography.^{xxvii}

We see another parody of the Bible when the wife holds the handmaid's hands in the Ceremony and it is said to signify that the two women "are one flesh." The phrase *one flesh* refers to St. Paul (1 Cor. 6:16), where it applies to a husband and wife, not to two women. Atwood, of course, has little sympathy for the Bible, which she often mocks in this book. In an interview given in 1996 she mentions that her father was a "Darwinist by training" and that no religion was practiced in her family.^{xxviii} Incidentally, in some interviews she points out that the *Handmaid's Tale* is dedicated to her ancestor, who survived hanging as a

witch because of her “very tough neck.”^{xxix} In a sense, what we have in this book is the correlative of the notorious crucifix dipped in a jar of urine: this is the Bible dipped in a jar of porn.

At the end of the novel, we learn that the Commanders have a secret brothel called Jezebel’s. When the narrator discovers Moira there wearing a Playboy bunny outfit, she learns that Moira was captured and given a choice—to live the remainder of her life there or to go clean up toxic waste. The brothel is not so bad, Moira says, because it is full of women lawyers and executives who “prefer it here” to the “alternatives” (237), so it is “Butch paradise” for her with “lots of women around.” When the narrator asks if they are allowed to be lesbians, Moira emphasizes how perverted the Christian Commanders are by saying: “women on women sort of turns them on” (249). She also declares that these Commanders enjoy bringing Handmaids to the brothel because “It’s like screwing on the altar...your gang are supposed to be such chaste vessels” (243). Again, Atwood is saying that Christian conservatives are the ultimate perverts.

The narrator never sees her friend again, but she hopes that Moira “blew up Jezebel’s, with fifty Commanders inside it. I’d like her to end with something daring and spectacular, some outrage, something that would befit her” (250). In these lines Atwood makes it clear that Moira is the heroine of the story—a female Samson, enslaved but indomitable, mentally unbowed, and able to bring down singlehandedly the Philistine temple of Dagon. This is her fantasy of a lesbian-feminist’s revenge against the Christian Right.

Now, a tale like Orwell’s *1984* bears an analogy to reality. It holds the mirror up to an evil empire that once actually existed, so it works as satire. *The Handmaid’s Tale* bear no such analogy to reality, not only because Christian conservatives were never on the verge of establishing a totalitarian regime in the U.S., as Atwood and her admiring reviewers have claimed, but because she gives a complete misrepresentation of the Christian Right and of the biblical view of women. For, in fact, Christian men would be the first to loathe such monsters who would exploit women for their fertility and then discard them in their old age. The projection here is very obvious. The reason why Christians oppose

pornography and abortion is precisely that these industries, viewed rightly, amount to such an exploitation of women. Thus, Atwood's *Tale* does not work as satire. It is a paranoid fantasy, indeed a serious defamation of Christian men dressed up in literary style.^{xxx} Little wonder that *The American Atheist* gloated that Atwood had skewered American religion in this novel.^{xxxi}

And yet, Atwood had good reason for writing this book, because the best defense is a good offense. Abortion and pornography are morally indefensible, so the best way for the supporters of these lucrative industries to claim the high moral ground is to depict their opponents as tyrannical and perverted. Such a ludicrous image of Christian conservatives, however, arises out of their own unacknowledged and unrepented guilt, which fills them with a natural fear that punishment is deserved and on the way. But that punishment is coming from the Erinyes, not from Christians. Now, in an early poem called *The revenant* Atwood did something very similar in defense of abortion. There her speaker is haunted by a child whose "twisted" face keeps appearing at a window and whose name materializes in the snow. She sees it walking barefoot, bleeding in the winter, a "frozen martyr," yet she feels no pity for the child, asking instead: "How can I get rid of you"? (Never mind that she already has.) She defends herself by using razor-sharp words, attacking the child as sullen, trite, vindictive, boring, tyrannical, and in the end, declaring angrily, "You don't exist."^{xxxii} Psychologically speaking, her reaction is understandable. Breaking the natural law and justifying the killing of an unborn child mean that one has to deal with the sting of conscience. This sting can become intolerable. So the next step is to project that unrepented guilt onto the victim, or whoever is a reminder of the victim, such as Christians who oppose abortion.

In *The revenant* Atwood defends abortion by imagining the child as tyrannical and then as non-existent. Likewise in the *Tale*, she defends abortion by imagining Christians first as tyrannical and then, by means of the archaeologist in the epilogue, as non-existent. To depict the aborted child or the pro-life Christian as tyrannical is pure projection, because who is more tyrannical than the one who aborts a child? Besides, after all the candidates for public office who have been "borked" since 1973

for their right-to-life convictions, anyone can see who the tyrants are: those who construct a new *implicit* right to privacy and deconstruct the *explicit* right of American Christians under the Constitution to follow their conscience and serve in public office without taking the new religious test, the sacrament of abortion.

In the end, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a piece of strident ideology that assaults not just the Christian Right but the Christian idea of woman. The word *handmaid* in the title alludes to the one who called herself "handmaid" when she consented to conceive and be the Mother of Christ: "I am the Handmaid of the Lord. Be it done unto me according to thy word" (Luke 1:38). For the interrelation of motherhood and chastity in the Virgin Mary and the Christian woman is at the core of the culture of life, while the interrelation of abortion and pornography has been and will continue to be at the core of the culture of death.

NOTES

i. Information from Jim Sedlak, president of Stopp International. The Comstock Act was overturned in 1936. See <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/96oct/brthctrl/brthctrl.htm>.

ii. On March 20, 2001, Planned Parenthood went to federal court to stop the Children's Internet Protection Act. Jim Sedlak informs me of a news article STOPP has on this point.

iii. The opera, with music by Poul Ruders, had its world premiere in Copenhagen in 2000 and its U.S. Premiere at the Minnesota Opera on 10 May 2003. See Anthony Tommasini's comments in *The New York Times*, 19 January 2003.

iv. Margaret Atwood, interview, Houghton Mifflin publicity release, Feb. 1986, Box 149:4, Margaret Atwood Papers, University of Toronto. Cited in Nathalie Cooke, *Margaret Atwood: a Biography* (ECW Press, 1998), p. 277.

v. Cathy N. Davidson, "A Feminist 1984: Margaret Atwood Talks about Her

Exciting New Novel” *Ms.14* (Feb. 1986) 24.

vi. Margaret Atwood, “A Writer’s Road from Wilderness to Wealth,” *Independent*, 6 (Feb. 1987) 12. Cited in Cooke, p. 277.

vii. Cited in J. Brooks Bouson, *Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Novels of Margaret Atwood* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts, 1993), p. 136. For her references to Pat Robertson, see her interviews with Maria Battiata in *Washington Post*, 6 April 1986, pp. G1, 6, and with John Nichols in the *Blade* (Toledo), 4 May 1986, p. E3. These interviews are summarized in *Margaret Atwood: A Reference Guide*, ed. Judith McCombs and Carole L. Palmer (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1991), pp. 494, 545. This work will be cited hereafter as *Reference Guide*.

viii. Jerome Rosenberg, “In a Future World, New Puritans Rule and Women Suffer,” in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 9 February 1986, pp. 1, 8. *Reference Guide*, p. 553.

ix. Davidson, p. 24.

x. Frances Bartowski and Arnold E. Davidson, cited in Bouson, *Brutal Choreographies*, p. 136.

xi. Harriet Waugh, “Love and Death at Sea,” *Illustrated London News*, No. 274 (May 1986) 90-91; summarized in *Reference Guide*, p. 573.

xii. “Breeders, Wives and Unwomen,” *New York Times Book Review* (9 Feb. 1986) 1, 35. See *Reference Guide*, p. 535.

xiii. D. J. Dooley, a review in *Canadian Churchman*, No. 112.2 (Feb. 1986) 25. See *Reference Guide*, p. 508.

xiv. David Halliday, “On Atwood,” *Waves*, 15 (Spring 1986) 51-54. See *Reference Guide*, p. 593.

xv. *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), p. 304.

xvi. James J. Thompson, Jr. “Bashing the Bible-Thumpers,” in *The World and I* (May 1986) 438-42, summarized and excerpted in *Reference Guide*, p. 568. Thompson says that Atwood’s best seller gives the Left a weapon by which to pummel “the Religious Right.”

xvii. Robert Fulford makes this point in a review in the *Toronto Star* (28

December 1985), p. H5. See *Reference Guide*, p. 460.

xviii. Lisa Dicaprio, "Bleak Future Envisioned for Women," *Guardian* (New York) 39 (11 March 1986) 17. See *Reference Guide*, p. 587. Pornography was much on Atwood's mind in 1986, for she mentions in an interview having written a parody subtitled, "Across Canada by Pornograph," for the Writer's Union pornographic project; Geoffrey Hancock, "An Interview with Margaret Atwood," *Canadian Fiction Magazine* 58 (1986) 113-44. The interview took place on 12-13 December in her home. See *Reference Guide*, p. 520.

xix. Cathy N. Davidson, "A Feminist 1984," p. 24.

xx. Gayle Greene, "Choice of Evils," in *Women's Review of Books* 3 (July 1986) 14-15. See *Reference Guide*, p. 519.

xxi. Paul Gray, "Repressions of a New Day," *Time* 127 (10 February 1986) 84. *Reference Guide*, p. 518.

xxii. Margaret Atwood, "If You Can't Say Something Nice, Don't Say Anything at All," *Language in Her Eye*, ed. Libby Scheier et al. (Toronto: Coach House, 1990), pp. 18-19.

xxiii. Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, *The New York Times*, 27 January 1986, p. C24; Pam Rosenthal, *Socialist Review* 87-88 (May-August 1986) 151-56. See *Reference Guide*, 533-34 and 553-54.

xxiv. John Noonan, "An Almost Absolute Value in History," *The Morality of Abortion: Legal and Historical Perspectives*, ed. John T. Noonan (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1970), p. 37. This information was given me by Dr. Keith Cassidy of the University of Guelph.

xxv. Bouson, *Brutal Choreographies*, pp. 145, 137.

xxvi. *The New Republic* and other magazines noted that the Commander's wife was modeled on the well-known conservative woman Phyllis Schafly. See Barbara Ehrenreich, "Feminism's Phantoms," *New Republic* 194 (17 March 1986) 33-35. Ehrenreich thinks Atwood is attacking Schafly's book, *The Power of the Positive Woman*. Laura Fraser also says that Atwood's theocracy shows what would happen if Phyllis Schafly and Pat Robertson got their way "completely." See *San Francisco Bay Guardian* 21 (19-26 November, 1986), pp. 23-24; and Gina Allen says that Atwood shows what the U.S. would be like

if Pat Robertson were president, Jerry Falwell secretary of state, and Phyllis Schafly secretary of education, in *Humanist in Canada* 20 (Summer 1986) 3, 37. See *Reference Guide*, pp. 509, 511, 576. Schafly is also mentioned in other reviews in the *Reference Guide*, pp. 499, 514, 540, 559.

xxvii. Barbara Hill Rigney, "Dystopia," *Canadian Literature* 111 (Winter 1986) 143-44. See *Reference Guide*, p. 551.

xxviii. Cited in Cooke, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 31.

xxix. Cooke, p. 314. See her interview with Caryn James, "The Lady Was Not for Hanging," in *The New York Times Book Review* (9 February 1986) 35, where she speaks of this ancestor named Mary Webster, in *Reference Guide*, p. 526. Also Davidson, *Ms.*, p. 26.

xxx. In the comments on my paper at the 2003 UFL Conference, one person compared Atwood's *Tale* in its defamation of Christians to the anti-Semitic *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. And this is how some feminists in academe have used it: to tar Christians as dangerous.

xxxi. James Brodhead, *American Atheist* 28 (July 1986) 45-48.

xxxii. *The Animals in That Country* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1968), p. 52. Her poems in *Power Politics* show that "abortion is preferable to birth," according to the editors of *Reference Guide*, p. 291.

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* has been both controversial and influential in the decades since its publication. The novel reached best-seller status in the mid-1980s and has continued to sell well in North America and abroad and has been translated into more than thirty-five languages, including Chinese and Serbo-Croatian ("Poised"). The *Handmaid's Tale* has been made into a feature-length film, an opera, a full-cast radio adaptation, and a stage play. Perhaps most important, it has been introduced to many young readers in secondary and postsecondary English and language-arts classrooms. *The Handmaid's Tale* itself an example of dystopian fiction focusing on physical and spiritual oppression, media manipulation, and the control of human thought as necessary governing mechanisms of society, has often been compared to Orwell's *1984*. In many ways, Atwood's text owes much to Orwell's *1984*. Just as Orwell's text is itself in debt to its own utopian and dystopian predecessors, "*The Handmaid's Tale*" contains several such touches of deft sardonic humor - for example, the television news program showing clouds of smoke over what was formerly the city of Detroit: we hear the anchorman explain that resettlement of the children of Ham in National Homeland One (the wilds of North Dakota) is continuing on schedule - 3,000 have arrived. Despite the novel's projections from current events, Margaret Atwood resists calling her book a warning. "I do not have a political agenda of that kind. The book won't tell you who to vote for," she said. The Interrelated Defense Of Abortion And Pornography In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. [online] Uffl.org. Available at: [Accessed 10 December 2020]. Website. Jones, S. *The Handmaid's Tale* Is a Warning to Conservative Women. 2017. In-text: (Jones, 2017). Your Bibliography: Jones, S., 2017. *The Handmaid's Tale* Is A Warning To Conservative Women. [online] The New Republic. Available at: [Accessed 11 December 2020]. Website. Newman, S. What is Margaret Atwood'