Article

The Gender Performances of Margaret Atwood's Aunt Lydia in *The Testaments*

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Abstract

This article examines the different gender performances that are demonstrated by the version of the character Aunt Lydia that Margaret Atwood focuses on in her latest novel, *The Testaments* (2019). The research is primarily informed by Judith Butler and her various works on the subject of gender performance. In *The Testaments*, Lydia performs two gender roles: publicly, that of the Aunt, and, in private, that of a woman who aims to restore Gileadean women's freedom. The gender of the Aunt is performed consciously, whereas the second gender is performed significantly more unconsciously.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood; gender performance; Aunt Lydia; *The Testaments*

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In September 2019, Margaret Atwood's sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *The Testaments*, was released. *The Handmaid's Tale* details the fall of the United States government at a time when birth rates are decreasing globally and the human population is in decline. In place of the United States of America, a new country, the Republic of Gilead, is founded. In Gilead, women are categorised according to their social function, and some, known as Handmaids, are forced to bear the children of high-ranking Gilead officials, called Commanders. Aunts, like Lydia, are tasked with overseeing the women of Gilead and ensuring that they fulfil their designated roles. In the sequel, Atwood details what happens in the years after the events of the 1985 novel, and continues to develop the Gileadean world and the characters living within it. Given the recent overturning of Roe vs Wade in the United States, the sequel's significance takes on an even more sinister quality than it had before, renewing the questions that Atwood had highlighted in her 1985 novel. Unlike in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Lydia is at the forefront of the sequel. In *The Testaments*, Lydia explains her motivations for working to enforce Gilead's laws among the female population, as well as how she hopes to catalyse the destruction of the Gileadean regime. She describes how she uses the power she has amassed during her time in Gilead to influence events and eliminate obstacles in her path to becoming the most powerful woman in the Republic. She also provides a little more insight to her past and background before Gilead rose to power, and before she became an Aunt.

The Testaments is constructed by alternating sections of three testimonies of women who all, at some point in time, lived in Gilead. These women include a young woman, Agnes, and a teenager, Daisy, who help Lydia deliver information to the anti-Gilead resistance movement in Canada and catalyse Gilead's demise. The third of these women is, of course, Aunt Lydia. Lydia's testament is recorded in the form of a manuscript titled *The Ardua Hall Holograph*, written during her final months in Gilead. She writes this document within her private study at Ardua Hall, where all the Aunts in Lydia's district live, train, and work. The study is located inside the Hildegard Library, which is presumably named after the famed medieval abbess, Hildegard of Bingen, at Ardua Hall. This library is one of the only such establishments left in Gilead, since most literature is banned and since a large portion of the population (that is, almost the entirety of the *female* population) is not allowed to read or write. The Aunts are given special access to this library so that they may learn to read, write, and learn how to harden their minds against the "sinful" ideas that literacy makes them vulnerable to. Lydia also indicates that she hides her manuscript inside a hollowed-out copy of Cardinal Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua: A Defense of One's Life* (Atwood 2019, 170–72).

Throughout *The Testaments*, Lydia performs differing genders, or kinds of femininity. Gender performance[1] is a concept made famous by Judith Butler. Butler's argument is,

[1] Butler's concepts of gender performance and gender performativity cannot be used interchangeably. This article assesses Lydia's gender performances only, and does not investigate her performativity.

essentially, that the commonly held assumption that femininity belongs to females and masculinity belongs to males is false. Instead, she argues that gender is nothing but a performance of socially approved acts and gendered traits and has nothing to do with sex. In her groundbreaking *Gender Trouble* (1999, 179; emphasis in the original), Butler explains that

> [g]ender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of gender as a constituted *social temporality*. Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the *appearance of substance* is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief.

What Butler argues is that gender is not a natural phenomenon, but a cultural one, and that its enactment is generally unconscious. Butler, however, does not mean to imply that gender is *only* performed unconsciously—it is consciously performed as well. In a society such as Gilead, the following statement of Butler's (2017, 957; emphasis in the original) seems highly applicable: "[gender] is a *compulsory* performance in the sense that acting out of line with […] norms brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence, not to mention the transgressive pleasures produced by those very prohibitions." Lydia does indeed face violence and punishment, should she stray from the path that the Gileadean power structure has laid out for her. Lydia's Aunt gender role, performed within Gilead and under the watchful eyes of the society around her, is indeed an identity "tenuously constituted in time." The gender of Aunt exists only because Gilead exists, and Lydia "stylises" her actions and movements in accordance with the social norms of Gileadean society. According to Butler (1988, 522), in any space, "the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all" (Butler 1988, 522). Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (2017, 899) accurately condense the concept of gender difference when they explain that "sexuality and gender are variable and indeterminate; they do not align with simple polarities and can take multiple, highly differentiated forms." These differentiated genders are then, in Judith Butler's understanding, performed, generally unconsciously. The genders that Lydia enacts in this novel are performed consciously *and* unconsciously, to some extent, in that some of these performances are undertaken with the intention to deceive, while others are ingrained in the character's mind and memory.

Performativity is, however, a worthy avenue of academic research that is useful in coming to understand Lydia's character and significance in the novel.

In other words, gender performances may be considered unconscious if the subject does not actively align their behaviour with a particular designation, gendered or otherwise.

While Butler is credited with naming the concept of gender performance, she is not the first person to have become aware of the role it plays in individuals becoming gendered. In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," Butler (1988, 519; emphasis in the original) recalls Simone de Beauvoir's famous statement that "one is not born, but rather, *becomes* a woman." This attestation alludes to the idea that the concept of femininity is constructed and subsequently adhered to, and not an instinctive path that all female human beings follow. De Beauvoir, in her book *The Second Sex* (1953, 13), says that "[i]t would appear, then, that every female human being is not necessarily a woman; to be so considered she must share in that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity." This femininity, the *performance* of femininity, is then what must be taken on in order to be accepted in society as a woman—an idea that is strongly linked to Butler's notion of gender as performance, and of gender as an act for which "there is no original" (Butler 2017, 956).

In *The Testaments*, Aunt Lydia performs two genders: that of the Gileadean Aunt, and that of a woman longing for the destruction of the regime. Outwardly (that is, in public spaces or in spaces where she is under scrutiny by her peers and superiors), Lydia performs the gender role indicated by her title: that of the Aunt. In Gilead, women are sorted into categories: Wives, Aunts, Marthas, Econowomen, Handmaids, and Unwomen. Aunts must be "unfeminine," and they are barred from "feminine" ways of living—they cannot marry or have children. An Aunt's roles might be perceived as a combination of the roles of schoolmistress, warden, and nun. While these roles are undeniably quintessentially reserved for those of the "feminine" designation, there is a degree of distance between those performing the role and other "traditional" aspects of womanhood, such as having children or becoming sexualised by men. Rather, the focus is placed on attributes of nuns, schoolmistresses, and wardens that benefit Gileadean social systems: control, adherence to procedure, and unwavering loyalty to the system which they enforce. Aunts are stern, devoted servants of Gilead whose role it is to see that the women of Gilead comply with the standards that are expected of them. This is Lydia's consciously and outwardly enacted gender in *The Testaments*. She is a ruthless, conniving Aunt who garners information about everyone around her and stores it until a time comes when she can use what she knows to her own advantage. There are, of course, a limited number of gender identities available to women in Gilead, but it is undeniable that Lydia performs her assigned gender with vigour and with notable results.

Aunt Lydia understands exactly what her role in Gilead is. She explains it to her reader in *The Ardua Hall Holograph*. She says, "the regime needs me. I control the women's side of their enterprise with an iron fist in a leather glove in a woollen mitten, and I keep things orderly" (Atwood 2019, 62). The comparison that Lydia uses to elucidate her

function as Aunt is telling. The “iron fist” indicates how ruthlessly she carries out her duties, and how unrelenting she is in enforcing Gilead’s laws. The “leather glove,” in concealing the bionic and terrifying “iron fist,” is indicative of the covert nature of some of Lydia’s activities as Head Aunt of Gilead. Finally, the “woollen mitten” confirms that Lydia’s job requires a degree of subtlety if she hopes to be an effective agent of Gilead. The woollen mitten, which appears warm, domesticated, and comforting, is used in order to disguise the more sinister ambitions of the Aunt that are hidden beneath it. For instance, Lydia’s unrelenting efforts in ensuring women’s compliance with Gileadean ideals is often disguised as genuine concern for the women’s well-being. In this way, she cushions the reality that her work is centrally concerned with keeping the women suppressed. This strategy is also intended to encourage the women to be confident that their given roles in Gilead are ordained by God and must be performed for the good of the human race. In addition, the nature of Aunt Lydia’s role is rooted in the fact that much of what she does is conducted in secret—she gathers information secretly and stores it away where no one will find it. She also pulls strings in order to ensure that events unfold favourably to her own goals.

This Aunt gender is consciously performed. It is also, arguably, a compulsory performance, “in the sense that acting out of line with […] norms brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence” (Butler 2017, 958). Here, Butler is describing 1990s America and the West more generally. However, this idea is all the more applicable to a place like Gilead, because it is an environment where gender is strictly regulated, and any deviations from the accepted behaviours and standards for any member of a certain gender designation results in physical harm or even death. In Gilead, more so than in any other space, “[b]ecoming a gender is an impulsive yet mindful process of interpreting a cultural reality laden with sanctions, taboos, and prescriptions. The choice to assume a certain kind of body, to live or wear one’s body a certain way, implies a world of already established corporeal styles” (Butler 1986, 40). These sanctions and taboos, in Gilead, are far more extreme than many of those outside of the fictional world because they are enforced as a matter of law, and not just as a cultural subtext that citizens are aware of and subscribe to in conscious and unconscious ways. Lydia has therefore consciously changed her behaviour in order to avoid being subjected to Gilead’s punishments after the United States government was overthrown.

Lydia tells her reader that she was aware of what the consequences would have been, had she not elected to become an Aunt. She explains that, when the United States government was overthrown, she was working at the courthouse. There, she and all of her female colleagues are arrested by the Sons of Jacob, Gilead’s armed forces, and taken to a stadium. The women then find that it seems as though the Sons of Jacob had been tasked with arresting any professional women they could find. The women are held hostage at the stadium for weeks, without sanitation and with only very minimal food and water. They also witness the public executions of some of the women at the stadium, though they do not, at the time, know why. Eventually, Lydia is pulled out from the crowd. She is sent to see Commander Judd, who, at this time, is a Son of Jacob.

Commander Judd is a prominent player in the plot of *The Testaments*, but this is Lydia's first meeting with him. They talk, and Commander Judd tells her that she is being given the opportunity to "cooperate with [Gilead]" (Atwood 2019, 147). Lydia provides him with an inconclusive response and is sent to a place known as the Thank Tank. Here, she is starved and left in a cold, lightless cell with no water. She is subjected to daily beatings. After some time, Lydia is transferred to a hotel, where she bathes often and is offered nutritious food to eat. Her old clothes are taken away, and she is given a garment that is "not quite a cowl and […] not quite made of brown sackcloth, but close" (Atwood 2019, 150). This is the preliminary garb of an Aunt—the signature brown dress that becomes emblematic of the role, as red dresses designate Handmaids. Lydia concludes this account by saying, "I put it on. What else should I have done?" (Atwood 2019, 150). In this moment, Lydia understands that, according to Oana Celia Gheorghiu and Michaela Praisler (2020, 92; emphasis in the original),

> [t]he choice given is simple: "eat or be eaten"; side with the male power to become powerful yourself. Cast away your femininity and punish others for keeping theirs. Lydia […] chooses life over femininity and accepts to join the masculine ranks of the tormentors. But this bisexualization, or […] bi-*gender*-isation, ricochets, as the acquired masculine traits completely, though ironically, take over the feminine ones.[2]

This notion of Lydia unfeminising herself is central to the mental shift that occurs within Lydia when she makes the decision to abandon her previous mode of enacting femininity and her pre-Gileadean moral codes in favour of pursuing power, and survival.

In this way, Lydia admits that she consciously and willingly *chose* to become an Aunt of Gilead. She made the decision to "put on" the Aunt gender and, to use Butler's (1986, 40) words, to "wear" her body in a way that aligns with the standards and values of the Republic of Gilead, and the gender that they have ascribed to Lydia. Lydia's sentiments that she has no other option but to comply with the new regime and its leaders is an exemplary instance of the notion that gender performance is "compulsory" (Butler 2017, 958), and that any non-compliance with its restrictions results in "punishment" by means of "violence" (Butler 2017, 958). Lydia has, at the point when she makes her decision, already witnessed the ruthlessness of the new regime—she has witnessed the executions of women who (as she now knows) refused to comply with the state as she did. She herself was starved, beaten, and psychologically tortured. She has, then, made this choice (so she claims) as a matter of survival. What I emphasise is the fact that she is *aware* of that choice—Lydia knew what her options were, and she decided to change her mindset and make a conscious alteration in her behaviour in order to avoid the risk of death. It could perhaps be argued that Lydia so fully embraces her new gender that

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[2] Gheorghiu and Praisler's choice to describe this phenomenon as a manifestation of a kind of "bisexual monster" is troubling, and not what I intend to convey here. Rather, I focus on the idea of favouring and embodying one gender over another because of one's perceived understanding of the power with which that gender provides the subject. In this case, I specifically regard "femininity" as the gender that Lydia discards, and "masculinity" as the gender that she favours as a result of the power, status, and security that it gives her.

she uses her unique position as a former judge to bargain with Commander Judd, since it is her own suggestion that a "separate female sphere" (Atwood 2019, 176) be established and managed by Aunts. Lydia constructs a site for her own empowerment which is directly oppressive to other women.

A second gender role, which existed in Lydia's previous life in the United States, emerges in Lydia's retelling of some of her experiences before the fall of the United States. This gender is the more unconsciously performed—*unconscious* because Lydia would have been assimilated into this gendered category from birth, and may not have realised this until much later, in adulthood—gender of a more emancipated woman who speaks her feelings with relative freedom and who is not monitored by a formal, governmental patriarchal power structure, but rather by more subliminal, insidious social codes. In a way, these descriptions of Lydia's previous life, before Gilead, function as a description of another of Lydia's gender performances, although she does not necessarily mean to communicate it as such. It must be stressed, however, that, even in a significantly freer space such as the former United States, society was still governed by gendered modes of being, and it was not utopic. It was simply far less overtly oppressive to women in the sense that gender was not legislatively forced upon individuals to the same extent or with the same punitive severity as in totalitarian Gilead. Women in pre-Gileadean societies would have been subjected to unconscious gender conditioning, which still would have had the potential to be hugely harmful. To illustrate this concept, John Berger (1972, 61–63) writes that

> [a] woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping. From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. And so she comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman. She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another. […] One might simplify this by saying: men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.

Essentially, Berger indicates that, in social spaces such as pre-Gileadean society, women were still faced with a reality in which they had to be hypervigilant about themselves and the ways in which they did or did not conform with social expectations. The difference is that, in Gilead, this vigilance exists on a systemic level, where, in pre-Gileadean life, it would have existed on a cultural level that was not enforced as a matter of law, and was so deeply entrenched in the societal psyche that some female subjects

may never have realised that they were behaving in this way. Alternatively, some would have been keenly aware of the implications of not "surveying" themselves and adhering to feminine norms. This is an apt example of the Lydia character's earlier assertion that, before Gilead existed, women enjoyed "freedom to" exercise personal agency, but that they are now given "freedom from" public sexual harassment, for instance (Atwood 2010, 34). Lydia makes no mention of the ritualised rape and other forms of oppression the women are subjected to in Gilead. Despite this, pre-Gileadean societies such as the United States of Atwood's fictional universe offered a much greater degree of freedom to women than Gilead does.

In *The Testaments*, Lydia's second gender performance evolves. It is no longer exactly what it was in the time before Gilead, but it does form the foundations for Lydia's secretly performed gender, within her manuscript. Lydia's gender performances can be summarised as follows: the first, the Aunt gender role, is performed externally and consciously; and the second, the gender of the free-thinking and rebellious woman longing for liberation, is performed internally and in a much more unconscious way. In other words, she performs the outward Aunt gender role for the purpose of realising the goals of her second, inward gender. That is, she convincingly and successfully plays her part as Aunt, advancing up the power structure and accumulating information about the innermost workings of Gilead. This gender performance propels Lydia through Gileadean life and towards her inward aspiration of destroying Gilead (an aspiration which also points to the highly conscious nature of the Aunt performance). In performing this gender, Lydia's aspiration of destroying Gilead is not only hypothetically possible, but also something that is ultimately actualised.

Lydia's second gender performance is enacted within Gilead itself, inside Lydia's private sanctum at Ardua Hall. It mirrors the gender performed by her previous self. However, it is still distinct from that previously performed gender. This gender performance is that of a woman longing for freedom for herself, and for all other women. It is also characterised by more than just wishful thinking—Lydia puts her thoughts into action. These actions are diverse, and perhaps morally questionable—Lydia behaves in apparent compliance with Gilead's standards in order to subvert them later. Additionally, Lydia's manuscript is hidden, we are told, in "a hollow rectangle cut inside of […] Cardinal Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua: A Defence of One's Life*" (Atwood 2019, 35). This is significant in and of itself. In the 19th century, Cardinal John Henry Newman was an English scholar, theologian, and poet. He, like Lydia, navigated opposing sets of beliefs—his ecclesiastical career began as an Anglican who condemned Catholic teachings and practice, but he later abandoned Anglicanism and converted to Catholicism. This echoes Lydia's own experiences in Gilead, where she must advocate for a world view and value system that appears to be directly oppositional to the one she subscribes to privately—in other words, she, like Cardinal Newman, becomes the thing she once fought against.

Lydia's unconscious, covertly enacted gender performance is defined by a deep resentment for the Gileadean state and its leaders. Although this performance is not visible to members of the public, it is the fact that Lydia writes her manuscript with the intention of having it read and distributed that qualifies it as an example of gender performance. Inside her sanctum and the pages of her manuscript, *The Ardua Hall Holograph*, Lydia openly admits how she desires the liberation of Gileadean women and the destruction of the regime. She says that she fears "that all [her] efforts will prove futile, and Gilead will last for a thousand years" (Atwood 2019, 277). Lydia not only desires the demise of the Republic, but also aspires to catalyse its destruction. It is clear that Lydia—as she is in private, away from the public eye—has not lost hope for women and the relative independence they once enjoyed. She indicates that, inside her study at Ardua Hall, she has decorated her personal shelves with books that have strong female protagonists at their centres: *Jane Eyre*, *Anna Karenina*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and *Paradise Lost* (Atwood 2019, 35). Additionally, many of these works (save *Paradise Lost*) are authored by women. It is possible that Lydia treasures this literature because it presents her with the only way in which to interact with the kind of femininity she once identified with and was free to embrace openly. Throughout this collection of works from Lydia's personal library, there is a common theme of ostracism and exile. It is also interesting to note that these female protagonists often find that they are being manipulated, taken advantage of, or being forced to submit to men and male rule. Jane Eyre finds herself "exiled" at Thornfield, where Mr Rochester tries to force her to submit to him in the traditionally "feminine" ways of the time. Anna Karenina is a passionate, educated woman who is determined to live on her own terms, but she is forced into exile after having an extramarital affair and facing societal scorn, which ultimately leads to her tragic suicide. Tess Durbeyfield is intelligent and sensitive, and she is thrown into a kind of exile when her two lovers reject her. She is then imprisoned (yet another form of the exile state) and executed. *Paradise Lost* is concerned with the literary figure Eve, who is adapted from the biblical character of the same name. She, along with her partner, Adam, is exiled from Paradise as a result of their disobedience to God in enjoying the fruit of a forbidden tree. Eve also bears the majority of the blame for this offence. Lydia, perhaps, finds that she can identify with these characters. She, too, is an independent, intelligent woman who is subjected to male domination and who must alter herself in order to avoid active persecution. Like the others, she is exiled in that she cannot express her thoughts candidly anywhere but in her study at Ardua Hall, where she surrounds herself with female characters who suffer similar circumstances. Her identification with these characters is also, however, a way for Lydia to excuse her misdeeds and to seek sympathy from her readers. In grouping herself with female characters from fictional works who have been moulded (and, in some cases, killed) by the social systems under which they live, she denies responsibility for her own actions and for the choices that she made herself. Although this attempted identification with other tragic female figures is a fair attempt at explaining her life and misdeeds to her reader, Lydia must still accept accountability for her role in upholding the Gileadean state.

Lydia's second, more covert gender performance is, like many other gender performances, informed by her background. She shares some of the details of her life before the inception of Gilead with her readers. Lydia explains that her family life and upbringing were unpleasant, and characterised by criminal activity. She recalls how her uncle was involved with illegal trade in what we can assume to be the Black Market (Atwood 2019, 112). The family lived in a "trailer park" (Atwood 2019, 112) and could be described, according to Lydia, as "sneerers at the police" (Atwood 2019, 112). She comments that her father was "proud of that" (Atwood 2019, 112). He was, however, not proud of his daughter, especially because she was a "smarty-pants girl" (Atwood 2019, 112). She remembers how she was beaten and abused by her father as a result of his distaste for her. Already, Lydia is mistreated by men for threatening them with her intellect and independence. This experience is mirrored on a structural (and literal) level in her adult life, particularly once Gilead comes into being.

Details of Lydia's adult life before Gilead's inception are also revealed. Readers of *The Ardua Hall Holograph* learn that Lydia once had an abortion, and that she was married for a time before getting a divorce. She never had any other children. Lydia indicates that she worked as a schoolteacher for a while (Atwood 2019, 171). She also describes her career as a judge, and it is revealed that Lydia worked as a volunteer at a rape crisis centre when she was a student. Lydia's legal career, we are told, was mainly focused on women, and included things like "[d]omestic cases[.] Sexual assault […]. Property rights in divorces […]. Removal of children from unfit mothers" (Atwood 2019, 171). Lydia's experiences before becoming an Aunt prove to be highly ironic, given the role she must now play. She punishes women with physical and psychological violence for committing any of the acts she once was "guilty" of herself—abortion, in Gilead, is punishable by death; divorce is no longer an option; the very notion of a woman having a career is laughable in Gilead. Further, Lydia's volunteer work assisting women who were raped is ironic since it is her job as an Aunt to ensure that Handmaids are being ritually raped on a monthly basis for the purpose of supposedly "repopulating the earth." It is also interesting to note some of the continuities between Lydia's old role as judge and her current role as Aunt in removing children from mothers who are deemed to be unfit. Those in power in Gilead have, essentially, chosen women from professions whose roles might be perverted in order to serve the Gileadean regime. This, then, is precisely what Lydia does during her time within the Republic. As someone whose role it once was to enforce women's rights, Lydia is therefore equipped with knowledge of how those rights could be taken away.

This "background information" is crucial to understanding Lydia's complicated gender performance. Suparna Banerjee, focusing on *The Handmaid's Tale*'s Offred specifically, highlights the importance of bringing the past into the present in Gilead. She notes that "[t]his weaving together of the past and the present allows Offred both to hold on to her history, and hence to her sense of self, and also to keep herself firmly grounded on her terrible present" (Banerjee 2014, 76). The same can be said for Lydia as she is presented in *The Testaments*. Lydia reminisces about her past so that her reader

might better understand her choices and actions. She may, in a similar vein, be doing this so as to remind *herself* what kind of woman she was, and what she once stood for. She is reminded how opposed the two worlds she has lived in are, and this allows her to focus more closely on reshaping the current world into something better, and freer. In writing about the life she once had and the life she has now, Lydia "keep[s] a distance from her [gender] performance, preventing the mask of [Aunt] from obliterating her other [self]" (Hansot 1994, 62).

In fact, it is the action of writing that reinforces and strengthens Lydia's secret performance of the gender that is so despised by the Gileadean regime. It is through her continual writing and recording of her testament that Lydia externalises her other, more covert gender. Without Lydia's writings and scheming, the Republic of Gilead would not have fallen when it did. If she had never recorded her testimony in the way that she has, those who came after her in history would never have known of its existence. Instead, they would have assumed that Lydia's dominant gender role, which, to them, would be the one that she believed in most, was that of the Aunt, which she performed with such dedication throughout her time in Gilead. Lydia's alternate gender performance is utterly subversive in its defiance of the accepted standards for feminine behaviour in Gilead, and this is reflected in Hélène Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa" (2017, 949), where she describes the influence of women's writing. She attests that a

> feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written, it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments; there's no other way. There's no room for her if she's not a he. If she's a her/she, it's in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the "truth" with laughter.

This is precisely the kind of gender, the kind of femininity, embodied by Lydia inside her private study at Ardua Hall. Although Cixous does not describe Gilead in the above quotation, her assertions remain relevant to it. Lydia's explosive performance of the revolutionary woman writer is nothing short of "volcanic" by Gilead's standards, and its sole desire is to witness the shattering of Gileadean frameworks and laws.

In many ways, Aunt Lydia functions as a version of Hélène Cixous's notion of the Medusa. This is largely rooted in how Lydia uses writing to emphasise her opposition to Gileadean laws and values. According to Cixous (2017, 940), "[w]oman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement." Cixous (2017, 943) continues by saying that woman "must write her self, because this is the invention of a new insurgent writing which, when the moment of her liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history." Women's stories are erased in Gilead—both stories of their lives and their suffering. In *The Testaments*, Lydia attempts to bring something of the female experience (even if it is only her own

experience) to the fore. Lydia reasserts feminine power by reclaiming her own narrative and alerting her hypothetical reader to the lived realities of women in Gilead at the time. She disobeys Gileadean law and utilises her literacy in order to change the course of history in Gileadean women's favour. As a result, *The Ardua Hall Holograph* "offers a moving testament to the power of language to transform reality in order to overcome [the] oppressive designs" (Campbell Reesman 1991, 6) that are imposed on women in Gilead. Lucy Freibert (1988) echoes this idea in her discussion of *The Handmaid's Tale*'s Offred's brand of feminine writing, which Freibert refers to as *écriture feminine*. Freibert (1988, 285) notes that Offred demonstrates that "women [are] able to take risks and tell stories, [and that they] may transcend their conditioning, establish their identity, joyfully reclaim their bodies, find their voices, and reconstruct the social order." This same idea can be applied to Lydia, for what else is she doing in this novel but risking her life to tell her story to women of the future, taking back her own narrative and changing the course of history?

This duplicitous performance of the Aunt gender and the gender that lies behind it is central to Lydia's success in finally destroying the Republic of Gilead. In this way, Lydia is an example of Simone de Beauvoir's (1953, 265) conviction that,

> like all the oppressed, woman deliberately dissembles her objective actuality; the slave, the servant, the indigent, all who depend upon the caprices of a master, have learned to turn towards him a changeless smile or an enigmatic impassivity; their real sentiments, their actual behaviour, are carefully hidden. And moreover woman is taught from adolescence to lie to men, to scheme, to be wily.

Throughout her time in Gilead, Lydia complies with Gileadean laws and lauds their effectiveness in improving society and bringing God back into the homes of the citizens of the state. All the while, though, she plots and bides her time until the moment comes for her to deliver the fatal strike to dissemble Gilead at last. Since her youth, growing up with her abusive father and other dangerous family members, Lydia has learnt how to abide by the standards that are expected of her while she quietly works towards achieving her goals—whether it be getting into law school, becoming an Aunt, or subverting the system she served in order to see it destroyed and erased. As far as gender performance is concerned, it is evident that Lydia is "an idol, a servant, the source of life, a power of darkness; she is the elemental silence of truth, she is artifice, gossip, and falsehood; she is healing presence and sorceress; she is man's prey, his downfall, she is everything that he is not and that he longs for, his negation and his *raison d'être*" (De Beauvoir 1953, 163). Lydia, though never a mother, has the power to decide who lives and dies in Gilead, if it serves her agenda. She instils doubt and fear in those around her who demonstrate weakness of mind so that they might be convinced to aid her in removing anyone who stands in her way. Lydia is also an icon in the Gileadean state, and she serves men in order to usurp them. Lydia shows men what they want to see so that she may later unveil herself, forcing them to realise their folly in believing that a woman could not be as capable of inciting chaos as they are.

If, in *The Handmaid's Tale* novel, it is "clear from the outset that Offred intends to be a survivor" (Hansot 1994, 57), the same can certainly be said of Lydia in *The Testaments*. Here, her gender performance is exceptionally complicated. Lydia begs for forgiveness from her anonymous reader and tries to convince them why she might be shown sympathy and mercy for the abominable actions she undertook during her time in service of the Republic. Through *The Ardua Hall Holograph*, Lydia shows that she is both oppressor and oppressed, perpetrator and victim. It is arguable that Lydia is potentially *more* perpetrator than victim, but victims, nonetheless, "testify, [and] their stories are elaborated in detail, photos of their wounds (figurative or literal) are published, all in an effort to arouse moral anger" (Bergstrand and Jasper 2018, 232). While Bergstrand and Jasper are not commenting on Gilead specifically, this idea is still applicable to the moral complexities of Gilead and the characters who try to make a life within it. Lydia's chapters in *The Testaments* are, as is clearly indicated by the title of the novel, her way of "elaborating her story in detail," to use Bergstrand and Jasper's (2018, 232) words. While Lydia has been a significant antagonist in Gileadean women's lives, it is important to remember that she was made to be so by another, far larger power—that of Gilead and its masculinist, misogynist ideology, which functions as the women's ultimate common enemy.

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