“The iron fist, the leather glove, and the woollen mitten”: Gender performance(s), complicity, and complacency in written and screen versions of Aunt Lydia from Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments*.

By

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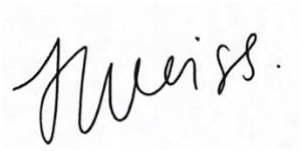

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the different gender performances, complicities, and complacencies demonstrated by three versions of the character Aunt Lydia: first, the Aunt Lydia of the novel version of *The Handmaid's Tale*; second, the television version of the same character for the Hulu series, *The Handmaid's Tale*; and third, the Aunt Lydia that Margaret Atwood focuses on in her latest novel, *The Testaments*. The research is primarily informed by Judith Butler and her various works on the subject of gender performativity, as well as Simone de Beauvoir's conception of women's complicity in and complacency about their own oppression. *The Handmaid's Tale* novel's Aunt Lydia performs the gender role of Gileadean Aunt, and she is thoroughly complicit in and complacent about women's subjugation in Gilead. In the television adaptation of the novel, Lydia continues her performance of the Aunt gender role, but her complacency about women's situation in Gilead begins to shift. However, she remains complicit in enforcing the women's oppression. Finally, in *The Testaments*, Lydia performs multiple gender roles: that of the Aunt, as the other versions of her character do, and, in private, that of a woman who aims to restore Gileadean women's freedom. Though she is ever complicit in suppressing the women around her, this version of Aunt Lydia cannot be said to be complacent about that suppression.

Key Terms

Margaret Atwood

gender performance

complicity

complacency

adaptation

The Handmaid's Tale

The Testaments

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Fictional dystopias render visible the extreme moral depths to which characters may sink for the sake of survival. They also exemplify how characters selfishly abandon their compassion for others and alter their behaviour in order to fit in and find safety in dangerous and extremely regulated societies. Aunt Lydia[1] functions as a paradigm of that phenomenon. In this dissertation, I focus on *The Handmaid's Tale* novel (1985), *The Handmaid's Tale* television series, and *The Testaments* (2019): I refer to this collection of texts as the Gilead sequence. I investigate Lydia's performances of various genders, or types of femininity. This is an idea that has been conceptualised and researched extensively by Judith Butler. It must be noted early on that I, for the purposes of this research, will regard the iterations of Lydia that audiences are exposed to in the two novels and the television series as mostly separate entities, and not as one strictly coherent character appearing at various points in the narrative as a whole. I understand the iterations as *mostly* separate because there are certain continuities between them that cannot be ignored or assumed to be unrelated, as I explain later in this dissertation. In other words, I analyse three differing (although not wholly *different*) Lydias. In order to explain my separation of the characters, I make use of adaptation theory, with particular focus on research done by Julie Sanders and Linda Hutcheon. Although Atwood wrote both novels and was involved in the production of the television series (Alter, 2019), she did not write the series and was not solely responsible for determining the trajectory of the narrative after the end of the first season of the series. (The first season depicts the events of the1985 novel). There are discrepancies between the events of

[1] In this dissertation, I do not use the terms "Lydia" and "Aunt Lydia" interchangeably. In instances where I discuss the character in her capacity as an Aunt specifically, I refer to her as Aunt Lydia. In instances where I discuss her in relation to her past, or in instances where I view her in the full complexity of her character (such as, for example, in Chapter 4, where I discuss Lydia as both an Aunt *and* as a revolutionary), I refer to her as Lydia.

Atwood's written work and the events that are portrayed in the television series, making it difficult to argue convincingly the possibility that Lydia's characterisation might be consistent throughout the Gilead sequence. These inconsistencies render adaptation theory pertinent to the study I conduct here—that adaptation is "inevitably interested in how art creates art, or how literature is made by literature" (Sanders, 2006:1), and how the details of these so-called "original" texts and their adaptations can be regarded and appreciated in relation to each other, *and* as stand-alone works.

Before this dissertation can be carried any further, the novels and television series that form the sites of this investigation must be contextualised. Margaret Atwood is the author of an array of texts, ranging from novels to poetry to essays, and she has been the recipient of multiple literary awards, including the Booker Prize for *The Testaments* in 2019 and for *The Blind Assassin* in 2000. She has also, in recent years, become involved in television production, specifically for the Hulu adaptation of her novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). This dissertation is centred on the Gileadean universe that Margaret Atwood first introduced to readers in *The Handmaid's Tale*. This universe is focused on the country that was once known as the United States of America, which is overthrown by a militant religious group known as the Sons of Jacob. This group then establishes the Republic of Gilead. This choice of name is misleading, given that Gileadean society is not democratic but autocratic. Gileadean society is also extremely patriarchal, since women in this setting are reduced to their biological capacities to reproduce, and are severely regulated in areas such as dress, speech, and occupation, to name only a very few. So far, the events taking place in this universe are recounted in the 1985 novel, the Hulu television adaptation of that novel, and Atwood's latest novel (and the sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*), *The Testaments* (2019). The events of the 1985 novel are depicted in the television series' first season, but the following

four seasons are the product of series writer Bruce Miller's interpretation of Atwood's characters and dystopia, though Miller did consult with Atwood extensively while writing the series. Atwood attests to this in an interview with Alexandra Alter for *The New York Times* (2019). Alter (2019) indicates that "Atwood and [Bruce] Miller had to calibrate plot and character developments in the series, so that the series didn't contradict [Atwood's] sequel, or vice versa". She then quotes Miller: "Margaret offered me more restrictions, and I gave her more information […]. She rules the [fictional Gileadean] world" (Alter, 2019). In the interview, Atwood clarifies her role in the production process, explaining that "[she] [has] influence but no power […]. [She is] not the person who can ultimately sign off on anything. So, [she is] in communication with Bruce" (Alter, 2019). In this way, Atwood and Miller attempt to maintain a degree of consistency in the story's plotline. This is an important consideration in the context of this study, since my discussion focuses on the three versions of Lydia that are presented across the three sections of the Gilead sequence—which are authored by two different people. This has implications for the way in which the character is portrayed, and for whether or not it is possible to view Lydia's character as consistent throughout the sections of the sequence. In the series, audiences view Gilead as it is experienced by many characters, both in and outside of Gilead. In contrast to the novel version of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the television series allows audiences to see not only how characters experience Gilead, but how they experience *each other*. This means that we see how Offred, the other Handmaids, and even the Wives experience Aunt Lydia. *The Testaments* also permits audiences to see how the characters experience each other, since the novel is narrated from three different perspectives. In contrast to *The Handmaid's Tale* novel and television series, *The Testaments* depicts events that happen long after those of the original novel and the series, in a future where Gilead is a steadfast establishment and in which Aunt Lydia has reached the pinnacle of her power and influence. While the two novels are undoubtedly vital to studying Lydia's gender performances, complicity, and complacency, the multiplicity of

perceptions of Lydia that are afforded by the television series, as well as the insight it provides to Lydia's background, thoughts, and feelings, render the series a valuable addition to the range of texts I analyse here.

The concepts that form the core of this study are gender performativity, complicity, and complacency. According to Judith Butler, all gender is culturally constructed and reproduced (Butler, 1999). Butler also indicates that gender, which is often understood to be a natural phenomenon, is really entirely *unnatural*. In her book, *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1999:9) asserts that "gender is neither the causal result of sex" nor "as seemingly fixed as sex". When it comes to defining gender, Butler (1999:10) indicates her belief that

> [i]t would make no sense […] to define gender as the cultural interpretation of sex, if sex itself is a gendered category. Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pregiven sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which "sexed nature" or "a natural sex" is produced and established as "prediscursive," prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts.

In another text, "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex", Butler (1986:35) explains that we cannot "refer meaningfully to natural or unnatural gendered behaviour: all gender is, by definition, unnatural. Moreover, if the distinction [between sex and gender] is consistently applied, it becomes unclear whether being a given sex has any necessary consequence for becoming a given gender". In other words, the concept of "masculinity" and the traits or behaviours that are typically associated with it do not necessarily belong exclusively or inherently to males, and the concept of "femininity" and the traits or behaviours that are typically associated with it do not belong exclusively or inherently to females. In addition to the concept of gender performance, and in the context of the texts I analyse in this dissertation, complicity and complacency are fundamental concepts to consider when

exploring Lydia's three characters and their respective gender performances. In her book, *The Second Sex* (1953), Simone de Beauvoir indicates that women are often complicit in and complacent about their own subjugation—they conform to patriarchal society's expectations of them and impose those expectations on their daughters and the women around them more generally. This notion is foundational to the way in which Gileadean society works. To elaborate, complicity involves being a participant in the oppression suffered by the women in Gilead. Complacency, as I employ the term in this dissertation, refers to demonstrable satisfaction with Gilead's misogynist laws and customs. This satisfaction may be demonstrated by a character's inaction in response to these customs, or by a blatant approval of Gilead's teachings.

Each of the texts I study for this dissertation is located in the same fictional universe, but is distinct from the other texts in content and form. *The Handmaid's Tale* (2010) is presented as a transcript of the orally recorded testimony of a Handmaid named Offred. (Offred's transcript is followed by a section entitled "Historical Notes" (Atwood, 2010:311), a coda that offers a glimpse of a post-Gilead future, in which the transcript is presented for perusal and discussion at a university conference). In the transcript, Offred describes her life in Gilead and the people she encounters there. The novel is focused less on action, and more on reflection and description. Offred recalls her husband, Luke, whose fate is unknown to her—they attempted to flee the country once the government was overthrown, but they were apprehended and she was forced to take their daughter, Hannah, and run, leaving him behind. She thinks about Hannah often, and she recounts the story of how she and her daughter were caught during their flight, and how Hannah was pulled out of her grasp and taken away by Gileadean soldiers, known as Guardians. After this, Offred was taken away to be trained as a Handmaid.

In Gilead, women are categorised according to their moral standing (which correlates with the values of the hyper-religious and misogynist regime) and class. Aunts are servants of the state who are concerned with the women's side of Gilead's enterprise, and who never marry or have children. They teach the women to behave in accordance with Gilead's gendered standards, and punish any disobedience. Wives are women of high rank, married to Gileadean officials who are known as Commanders. Econowomen are working-class women who are confined to traditionally "feminine" work (such as laundry and housekeeping), married to working-class men. Marthas work in Commanders' homes as cooks and cleaners. Handmaids are women that are fertile, but considered "immoral" as a result of particular behaviours during the time before Gilead, such as being involved in extramarital relationships, being lesbians, or being single mothers, for example. It is a Handmaid's duty to repopulate Gilead in light of the fertility crisis the world faces in the Gileadean universe. Finally, there are Unwomen. These are women who are infertile, Handmaids who have been unable to give birth to a healthy child within a three-year period, or who are being punished by the state for not abiding by Gileadean laws. They are sent to the radioactive wasteland known as the Colonies to be worked to death. The very first chapter in *The Handmaid's Tale* describes the Rachel and Leah Re-Education Centre (otherwise known as the Red Centre) that Offred was sent to after her failed attempt at escape: the centre is one of many such institutions that are scattered all over the country for the purpose of teaching fertile, "sinful" women (such as adulteresses, lesbians, or single mothers) how to conduct themselves properly as Handmaids of Gilead. At Gilead's inception, all fertile women were sent to a Rachel and Leah Re-Education Centre, but, as time goes on, only Handmaids attend these institutions. It is here, in the Red Centre, that Offred encounters Aunt Lydia for the first time. Offred recounts Aunt Lydia's teachings, punishments, and other brief encounters that she

has with her throughout the narrative. Offred only reminisces about her experiences of Aunt Lydia from her time in the Red Centre—she hardly sees Aunt Lydia in the flesh throughout the course of the novel's plot. She states, at the end of the novel, that it has been several years since she last saw Aunt Lydia. Offred finally sees Aunt Lydia again in person at the Salvaging (or public execution) of two Handmaids and a Wife. *The Handmaid's Tale* does not provide much insight into Aunt Lydia's character other than what Offred experiences at face value, but it is still valuable in that it displays how Aunt Lydia is perceived (that is, how her gender performance of Gileadean Aunt is perceived) by the women around her, and particularly by those over whom she has control, such as Offred and the other Handmaids.

The television series version of the 1985 novel delves deeper into Lydia's character. While the first season of the series depicts the events of the novel itself, the following seasons take audiences deeper into the lives of those characters living in Gilead, as well as those who have found refuge in Canada. This means that audiences are exposed to the experiences of not only Offred, whose actual name is June, but of several other characters as well. The second season of the series sheds light on June's fate, which is left unclear at the end of the novel. The novel (and the first season of the television series) ends with Offred being escorted out of Commander Waterford's house by two Guardians, and climbing into the back of a black van. The second season begins with June climbing *out* of that black van to find that all the other Handmaids in her district have been removed from their houses in this way to be punished by Aunt Lydia for their insubordination in refusing to stone Janine, a fellow Handmaid, to death. June encounters Aunt Lydia on numerous occasions in the series. Those encounters are sometimes hostile, or violent, and at other times they are unexpectedly tender, or, at the very least, allude to the softer side of Aunt Lydia's character. In Season 3, June's story remains the main narrative focus, but Lydia still features prominently in the

events of the plot. Later on in the season, audiences are given the opportunity to learn more about Lydia's background for the first time. Episode 8 is dedicated almost entirely to providing a glimpse into Lydia's former life. Lydia, we learn, worked as a 4th grade schoolteacher, and audiences observe her interactions with a particular boy in her class, Ryan, and his mother. Ryan's mother is single, scatterbrained, and, according to Lydia, negligent when it comes to Ryan's needs. For instance, she is very late to picking him up from school, and does not pack him what Lydia would regard as nutritious and balanced lunches. Lydia is deeply involved with this family, even inviting them to spend Christmas with her. The episode also elaborates on Lydia's exploration of romance. She develops a connection with the school's principal, who rejects her advances after a New Year's Eve party, saying he wants to take things more slowly. Lydia, interpreting this request as an outright rejection of her affections and the end of their relationship, shuts herself off emotionally from those around her, and reports Ryan's mother to the authorities for being negligent with her child. Ryan is taken by social services, and her relationship with the principal remains awkward and stunted. This vision of Lydia in her old life is totally at odds with Aunt Lydia as she appears within Gilead. Here, audiences see most plainly the changes that Lydia underwent in her transition from "womanhood", so to speak, to Aunthood. The gender of her old life is juxtaposed with the Aunt gender role she performs throughout the series. The pre-Gileadean gender is significantly more unconscious than the Aunt gender, which Lydia must perform consciously. This episode will be central to my discussion of Lydia's more unconsciously performed gender. However, I will refer to other episodes in the season to elaborate upon Lydia's consciously gendered performance of Gileadean Aunt. Episode 8 is also central to my discussion of Lydia's complicity in and complacency about the oppression endured by Gileadean women. This is because Lydia is seen *choosing* to turn on Ryan's mother, just as she ultimately chooses to turn on the women who become Handmaids. Although Aunt Lydia does sometimes indicate that she is unhappy with some of Gilead's rules and customs, her disapproval is not substantial and does not

result in Aunt Lydia mobilising against Gileadean forces, meaning that she, in this iteration of her character, remains mostly complacent about the subjugation of women in Gilead.

The Testaments, which is also expected to be televised as a Hulu series (Feldman, 2019), sees Lydia's character become even more rounded, and the conflicted nature of her subjectivity becomes clear. In this novel, Lydia's testimony is recorded in a manuscript which she writes in her private study at Ardua Hall, the home of all the Aunts in her district. The manuscript is entitled *The Ardua Hall Holograph*. Sections of this manuscript are alternated with sections of the testimonies of two female Gilead escapees, Agnes and Daisy. Agnes, who is revealed to be June's stolen daughter, Hannah, grows up in Gilead in the home of a Commander and his Wife. She, however, dreads becoming a Wife herself, and commits herself to serving Gilead as an Aunt instead. She goes to Ardua Hall to begin her training, where she finally meets Aunt Lydia in person, having only seen her in pictures or from afar while she was growing up. Meanwhile, in Canada, Daisy lives with her guardians, Melanie and Neill. Later in the novel, Daisy is revealed to be Baby Nicole, who is first introduced in the television series as June's second child, and who, at June's request, is smuggled into Canada as an infant by her friend and fellow Handmaid, Emily. This event is central to the plot of the television series, but the details relating to which Handmaid brought Nicole to Canada are left obscure in *The Testaments*. When their second-hand clothing shop is bombed and her guardians are killed, Daisy learns that her guardians were Mayday agents working for the underground Gilead resistance movement. She joins the group, and enters Gilead under the guise of a new recruit and convert in order to bring back information from a secret source high up in Gilead's power structure. In this way, Daisy finds herself at Ardua Hall as well. Agnes and Daisy meet and are eventually told that they are sisters, and, shockingly, that Aunt Lydia is the secret source from which Daisy must collect information to

take back to Canada. Lydia helps both girls to escape with the cache of documents, and ultimately ends her own life by ingesting morphine before the Guardians have the chance to apprehend her. Lydia's sections in the novel are used to explain how she has come to possess the power she enjoys and what she uses it for. She also provides brief descriptions of her childhood and life before Gilead rose to power, describing how she was a family court judge, and came from an abusive and sexist family. Here, Lydia clearly explains how she outwardly adheres to Gilead's social rules and performs (very convincingly) the role of Aunt. She indicates exactly how and why she has disposed of her enemies, and how she pulls strings in order to satisfy her own political agenda. Her secret, inward gender performance (that is, one which cannot be performed publicly as a result of Gilead's brutal punishments and law enforcement, which I will elaborate upon later in this dissertation) is also made abundantly clear, as she states that she wishes for women to be given their freedom back and for a better world to replace the broken one she has helped to construct.

As mentioned earlier on in this introduction, in my consideration of the three iterations of the Lydia character, I make use of Julie Sanders' and Linda Hutcheon's respective conceptions of adaptation and appropriation in various art forms and expression media. This is because of the fact that the iterations of the character have been authored by different people (Bruce Miller, in the television series, and Margaret Atwood herself, in her two novels). Analysing the character becomes complicated because each iteration must be considered as a separate entity from the others since the difference in authorship presents various questions relating to continuity of character in the onscreen environment versus what is read in the pages of the novels; at the same time, the character must also be considered and contrasted with those alternate iterations in order to effectively demonstrate the differences in their respective gender performances, complicities, and complacencies. Adaptations are often, as Julie

Sanders (2006:19) notes, inter-generic—novels can be adapted for the screen, dramas may be adapted into musicals, and so on. It is for this reason that I view the two latest versions of Aunt Lydia as *adaptations* of Atwood's original character from *The Handmaid's Tale* novel of 1985. According to Sanders in *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2006:18),

> adaptation studies mobilize a wide variety of active terms: version, variation, interpretation, continuation, transformation, imitation, pastiche, parody, forgery, travesty, transposition, revaluation, revision, rewriting, echo. As this list of terms suggests, adaptations and appropriations can possess starkly different, even opposing, aims and intentions [to those of the "original" texts] […] [Adaptations] are invested not in proving a text's closure to alternatives, but in celebrating its ongoing interaction with other texts and artistic productions. To this end, sequels, prequels, compression, and amplification all have a role to play at different times in the adaptive mode.

Here, Sanders indicates that adaptations of so-called "original" texts are not intended to simply mimic the originals, but to expand on them. She furthers her definition of adaptation by highlighting that adapting a text is a process which "[indulges] in the exercise of trimming and pruning; yet it can also be an amplificatory procedure engaged in addition, expansion, accretion, and interpolation" (Sanders, 2006:18) and that adaptation is "frequently involved in offering commentary on a sourcetext […] [which is] achieved most often by offering a revised point of view from the 'original', adding hypothetical motivation, or voicing the silenced" (Sanders, 2006:19).

In this way, adaptations may be appreciated (and therefore, analysed) *as adaptations*, but they may also, in certain cases, be appreciated and analysed as stand-alone works. *The Handmaid's Tale* television series is an example of this. *The Handmaid's Tale* television series can be appreciated and consumed by audiences who are familiar with Atwood's work, *and* those who have never read Atwood's novel, because Bruce Miller presents them with a fully developed universe that encompasses many of the elements and plotlines of Atwood's initial novel. Miller also extends and expands upon what Atwood presented in the 1985 novel.

The Testaments, however, would likely not be fully understood and appreciated by readers if they were not familiar with either *The Handmaid's Tale* novel or television series, because they contain too many contextualising details that are not made explicit in *The Testaments*. Because I view the three versions of Lydia in terms of adaptation theory, it becomes possible to consider them predominantly as individual characters, and, secondarily, in relation to each other, where appropriate.

Central to my discussion of the three Lydias is the notion of gender performance, a concept made famous by Judith Butler. Throughout her work, Butler's argument is, 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), 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. [Butler's emphasis.]

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 (1991:957) 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" [Butler's emphasis]. Lydia does indeed face violence and punishment, should she stray from the path that the Gileadean power structure has laid out for her. This is, undeniably, applicable to all three versions of Lydia and the way in which they enact their various genders inside Gilead. Lydia's Aunt gender role in all three iterations of the character, performed within Gilead and under the watchful eyes of the society around her, is indeed an identity "tenuously constituted in time"—she would not be performing this gender in some other temporal locality, or in some other place. The gender of Aunt exists only because Gilead exists, and Lydia "stylizes" her actions and movements in accordance with the social norms of Gileadean society. "[B]ecause gender is not a fact", not in Gilead, or, for that matter, 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.

I will argue that each of the three versions of Lydia performs various genders both consciously and unconsciously, and that these performances embroil Lydia in complicity, insofar as her work as an Aunt perpetuates the oppression of her fellow women in Gilead. In addition to this complicity, which is intrinsic to the role of Aunt that is played by all three versions of Lydia, I also investigate the extent to which each Lydia is complacent about the oppression that Gileadean women endure. As mentioned earlier on in this chapter, for the purposes of this study, I take complacency to mean demonstrable satisfaction with Gilead's misogynist laws and customs, which may be indicated by a character's inaction in response to these customs,

or by a blatant laudation of Gilead's teachings. I argue that the very first version of Aunt Lydia, who appears in Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, consciously performs the gender role of Gileadean Aunt. This is because she originates from the time before Gilead rose to power, and therefore had to consciously adapt to the standards of the new society in which she had to make a life. She is undeniably complicit in the oppression of the women around her, playing an active part in ensuring that they adhere to Gilead's laws and gendered standards of behaviour. She is also complacent about that oppression, as she shows no dissatisfaction with the social mores of the society of which she is now an active part. Since this version of the character is the first of the three that we are introduced to within the Gileadean universe, she will be regarded as the so-called "original" iteration of the character, in line with Sanders and Hutcheon's theories on adaptation. The second Lydia appears onscreen in Bruce Miller's adaptation of Atwood's original novel. She once again consciously performs the gender of Aunt, and does this in much the same way as the Aunt Lydia of the first novel. However, in the third season of the series, audiences are given their first glimpse into Lydia's background, before Gilead rose to power. At that time, she unconsciously performed the gender of a more emancipated woman living and working in the United States of America. This Aunt Lydia, the onscreen version of the character, remains complicit in women's oppression. She is also largely complacent, although she does display some disapproval of the powers that be in Gilead through the body language, facial expressions, and nuanced speech of Ann Dowd, who portrays the character. Since the television series' version of Aunt Lydia is Bruce Miller's interpretation and subsequent continuation of the character that Atwood first created in 1985, the televisual Lydia is an adaptation of the original novel's Aunt Lydia. This means that she can be regarded both independently of *and* in conjunction with the first version of the character. The final Lydia, whom we encounter in Atwood's latest novel, *The Testaments* (2019), seems to perform both of the forementioned gender roles simultaneously. She outwardly and consciously performs the gender of Aunt,

while her inward and more unconscious gender performance (which is mostly externalised in her private study as she writes her manuscript, *The Ardua Hall Holograph*) is reminiscent of the gender of the emancipated woman from what is known as the "time before" (Atwood, 2010:20). The "time before" refers to the years before the US government was overthrown and before Gilead rose to power. Here, Lydia is complicit in but decidedly *not* complacent about the oppression that she and the women around her must endure during their time in Gilead. This most recent version of Lydia, like the version watched by audiences of *The Handmaid's Tale*, is an adaptation of Atwood's original character, even though Atwood herself is responsible for the authoring of the character (although some of her insight into Lydia's life is informed by the television series).

As I have already suggested, the three versions of Lydia perform three main versions of femininity—three main gender performances that form the focus of my discussion. *The Handmaid's Tale*'s Aunt Lydia performs the gender role indicated by her title: that of the Aunt. Aunts must be "unfeminine", and they are barred from "feminine" ways of living—they cannot marry or have children. The roles of an Aunt 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 sexualized 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. The kinds of roles that I have indicated above are also, notably, often performed in service of patriarchal social and political bodies. In other words, they are often centrally concerned with enforcing patriarchal ideals on those over whom they have control: a schoolmistress might be in a position to

govern girls' behaviours in a school environment, and ensuring that their uniforms, which often incorporate skirts and other forms of traditionally gendered clothing, for example, are appropriately worn; wardens, too, are entrusted with the work of subduing and surveying their (female, in this case) prisoners, and enforcing strict regulations for conduct, dress, and daily activities upon them; finally, nuns, with their apparent closeness to a divine being are in a uniquely powerful position to regulate women's beliefs and behaviour, because they are implicitly supported by God—nuns, then, under the guise of devoutness and virtue, are in a position to impose patriarchal standards upon women with relatively less fear of resistance, especially when those women are devoted believers in the faith. 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. Regarding the Handmaids, in forcing the women to comply with Gileadean standards, Aunts are inherently complicit in the events of the women's lives after they leave the Aunts' care—including the monthly, ritualized rape known as the Ceremony, where a Commander attempts to impregnate his Handmaid while his Wife restrains her. This is the case for Aunt Lydia in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and she carries out her duties consciously.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* television series, Aunt Lydia continues with her performance of this Aunt gender, specifically throughout the first and second seasons. This is the main gender role that audiences observe in Lydia in the third season as well, but a second gender role, which existed in Lydia's previous life in the United States of America, emerges in Episode 8, which is titled "Unfit" (2019). This gender, which I will focus on, is the more unconsciously performed—*unconscious* because Lydia would have been assimilated into this gendered category from birth, and may not have realized 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. It must be stressed that, even in a significantly freer space such as the former United States of America, society was still governed by gendered modes of being. Pre-Gileadean society was not utopic, nor was it free from patriarchal values. 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 realized 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. Despite this, pre-Gileadean societies in Atwood’s fictional universe, such as the United States of America, offered a much greater degree of freedom to women than Gilead does.

Finally, in *The Testaments*, Lydia performs two genders simultaneously. The first, the Aunt gender role, is performed externally and consciously; the second, the gender of the free-thinking woman longing for liberation, is performed internally and in a much more unconscious way. This hybrid gender forms the third main version of femininity that Lydia performs: she performs the outward Aunt gender role for the purpose of realising the goals of her inward gender. That is, she convincingly and successfully plays her part as Aunt, advancing higher and higher 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.

While Judith Butler is credited with naming the concept of gender performativity, 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) recalls Simone de Beauvoir's famous statement that "one is not born, but rather, *becomes* a woman" [Butler's emphasis]. 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, 1991:956).

In performing the Aunt gender role, the three Lydias are complicit in the subjugation of women living in Gilead. This notion—of women being complicit in upholding the patriarchal practices and principles which oppress them—is central to Simone de Beauvoir's theories on what it means to be a woman. In *The Second Sex* (1953:583), De Beauvoir says that

> [m]an wants woman to be object: she *makes* herself object; at the very moment when she does that, she is exercising a free activity. Therein is her original treason; the most docile, the most passive, is still a conscious being; and sometimes the fact that in giving herself to him she looks at him and judges him is enough to make him feel duped; she is supposed to be only something offered, no more than prey. [De Beauvoir's emphasis.]

Lydia neatly fits this definition of complicity in all three iterations of her character. All three versions of Lydia "make themselves object" by satisfactorily performing the government-sanctioned gender of Aunt, and, because that performance is, as De Beauvoir points out, a freely undertaken activity (although the consequences for the Lydias' survival would have been dire had they *not* complied), all three characters can be classified as being undoubtedly complicit in the oppression of Gileadean women—including their own.

Where the three Lydias differ, however, is in the extent to which they make themselves "prey" to the patriarchal powers that control their bodies and movements. *The Handmaid's Tale* novel's Aunt Lydia is indeed "something offered". She offers herself up to serve Gilead as Aunt, a role that is centrally concerned with suppressing the women in her charge and ensuring that they accept their role as Handmaids as being for the greater good of the world

at large. In performing this role, Aunt Lydia falls prey to the prospect of securing a life for herself in Gilead, even though that prospect requires her to harm—both mentally and physically—hundreds of other women. She not only makes *herself* prey to the regime, but, by enacting the role of Aunt, she also forces the Handmaids to make themselves prey to *her*.

The television series' Lydia offers herself to Gilead in much the same way as the novel's Aunt Lydia does. She performs her role and carries out her duties of indoctrinating and punishing the Handmaids with relentless vigour. In the third season of the series, this trend remains largely the same. Contrary to the novel, however, the Lydia of the television series begins to become aware of the negative implications of her actions, and she starts to indicate, even if only through small gestures or expressions, that she is unhappy with her role and what it requires her to do. She remains the prey of Gilead, except, this time, she appears dissatisfied with her standing in Gileadean society.

The version of Lydia that readers are presented with in *The Testaments* subverts the notion of "making oneself prey" entirely. In this novel, Lydia *feigns* absolute dedication to the regime and its goals. She makes herself prey to the system on the surface, continuing to act as though she is a dedicated servant of Gilead, while simultaneously working towards tearing down the Republic. Instead of offering herself up to Gilead, Lydia offers herself to the resistance movement and to the liberation of the women living in Gilead. But even though this Lydia only pretends to be a steadfast follower of Gilead, she is still deeply complicit in the oppression of the women she eventually hopes to free.

Expanding on her discussion of women's complicity in their own subjugation, De Beauvoir (1953:591) says that

> [i]t is evident that woman's "character"—her conviction, her values, her wisdom, her morality, her tastes, her behaviour—are to be explained by her situation. The fact that transcendence is denied her keeps her as a rule from attaining the loftiest human attitudes: heroism, revolt, disinterestedness, imagination, creation.

By this, De Beauvoir means that women's circumstances are crucial to understanding the actions they take in their day-to-day lives. In Lydia's case, this means that she takes on the role of Aunt—in other words, performs the gender of Aunt—because of the situation she finds herself in. All three versions of the character would not exist without Gilead. Gilead's rise to power forces all three Lydias to adapt, and all three chose to take on the role of Aunt. The moral rightness of that choice may be questionable, but it is undeniable that Gilead makes monsters, and that it has moulded the three versions of Lydia into the merciless, intimidating characters they are in the two novels and the television series.

Closely connected to the notion of women's complicity is, as De Beauvoir points out, the *complacency* that women display about their own subjugation. Being complacent (in other words, "*making* oneself object") is key to the perpetuation of patriarchal institutions and ways of life. Complacency is defined as self-satisfaction, especially when accompanied by unawareness of actual dangers or deficiencies. In this dissertation, I take this definition a step further by understanding complacency to mean satisfaction with the dominant social norms of the society in which the character is immersed—in other words, a demonstrable satisfaction with Gilead's social roles and customs. This definition allows me to investigate the possible complacency (or lack of complacency) of the three versions of Lydia's character. The Aunt Lydia of *The Handmaid's Tale*'s novel is thoroughly complacent about the

subjugation of women in Gilead. She shows no dissatisfaction with the social norms of Gileadean society. The television series' Lydia, despite showing a small degree of dissatisfaction and unhappiness with Gilead's status quo, can still be classified as being complacent because she suppresses her feelings of indignation at the suffering of the women around her so that she may continue to do Gilead's work. The Lydia of *The Testaments*, however, is not complacent at all. This is because she, in the critiques she offers in *The Ardua Hall Holograph*, displays scorn for and dissatisfaction with Gilead and the restrictions it imposes over women's minds and bodies. Various instances of these attitudes can be located throughout the individual narratives, and I will identify them for discussion in the fourth chapter of this dissertation.

These concepts—gender performativity, complicity, and complacency—will form the theoretical backbone of the research I conduct here, and will be applied to the three versions of Lydia. I will indicate which gender Lydia performs in each instalment of the narrative, as well as which actions or speeches of Lydia's indicate those performances. I will also show where and how Lydia is complicit in and complacent about the oppression she helps to enforce over the women of Gilead. Chapter 2 will focus on the first version of Aunt Lydia, who is introduced in the novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*. I will use Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity as the lens through which I study the character, showing that she consciously performs the Aunt gender role during her time in Gilead and throughout the interactions that she has with the speaker, Offred. She is complicit in the oppression of women in Gilead, a stance which will be justified with evidence from Offred's narrative. She is also shown to be complacent about the oppression she herself endures and which she imposes upon other women. This is because she displays no dissatisfaction with Gilead's social order and the roles it imposes on women throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*.

In Chapter 3, I focus on the next instalment of the sequence, *The Handmaid's Tale* television series. Here, Lydia continues her conscious performance of the Aunt gender role. Audiences are also given a glimpse into Lydia's life before Gilead, where she subscribed to a different gender, which she performed unconsciously. This gender performance is enacted when Lydia displays "feminine" traits of the time; for instance, audiences see Lydia wearing makeup, and attempting to pursue a romantic relationship. This performance, as opposed to the Gileadean gender that Lydia later adopts, is not government regulated, making it significantly more unconscious. She is, however, still complicit in the oppression of other women. She remains mostly complacent about that oppression, even if glimmers of Lydia's previous gender come through in her Aunt performance.

Chapter 4 will deal with the final instalment of the sequence, *The Testaments*, where Lydia simultaneously performs both of the genders that the previous two versions of the character have displayed. She consciously performs the Aunt gender when under public scrutiny, and, to a more unconscious extent (although not wholly unconsciously), she performs a gender that is reminiscent of the gender exhibited by Lydia in Episode 8 of Season 3 of the television series. That gender is showcased through Lydia's longing for the women of Gilead to be free, and to be instrumental in the liberation process—that is, this more "liberated" gender performance is what allows Lydia to even conceive of these rebellious notions, let alone enact them. As is the case with the previous two Lydias, this Lydia is complicit in the oppression of Gileadean women. Importantly, though, this version of Lydia cannot be said to be complacent about the status of women within the Republic. She displays a deep dissatisfaction with and

repudiation of Gilead's social norms in her writings for *The Ardua Hall Holograph*, where she details the lengths to which she goes in order to dismantle the regime.

Once I have undertaken detailed analyses of the versions of Lydia and their gender performances, complicity, and complacency in chapters dedicated to each individual text, I will draw and state my conclusions. I will have indicated the conscious and/or unconscious nature of the gender performances that the Lydias carry out, as well as what those genders are. More specifically, I will have shown that the Aunt Lydia of *The Handmaid's Tale* novel consciously performs the gender of Gileadean Aunt; that the Lydia of *The Handmaid's Tale* television series consciously performs the gender of Gileadean Aunt and, previously, before Gilead's inception, a more unconsciously performed gender which, although still decidedly "feminine" and performed with less fear of extreme persecution and punishment, eventually gives rise to the Aunt that Lydia becomes; and that the Lydia of *The Testaments* consciously performs the Aunt gender role in spaces where she knows she is being observed by others, and that she performs a far more revolutionary gender within her study and within her manuscript, *The Ardua Hall Holograph*, to a more (but not wholly) unconscious extent. Each version of the Lydia character's complicity and complacency will have been indicated and substantiated. In *The Handmaid's Tale* novel, I will have shown that Aunt Lydia is decidedly complicit in and complacent about the oppression that Gileadean women endure. In the television series adaptation of the novel, Lydia remains complicit in but is *less* complacent about the treatment of women in Gilead. In *The Testaments*, however, Lydia, though still complicit, can no longer be called complacent when it comes to women's oppression in Gilead. Finally, in the conclusion, I will very briefly consider possible areas of future research in relation to the texts I discuss here. The priority of this work, however, is to explore gender performance, complicity, and complacency, a project that will commence in the next chapter.

Chapter 2: *The Handmaid's Tale* Novel

The very first time that readers are presented with Atwood's fictional world is in her 1985 novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*. The Republic of Gilead is at the heart of this world, functioning as a quintessentially unjust society. A fundamentally unjust social structure, according to what Amy Baehr (2017:4) calls "liberal feminist doctrines", is one in which "the internal workings of all social arrangements [involve] […] coercively enforced gender hierarchy [and] gender roles" (Baehr, 2017:5). The injustice of this kind of social arrangement lies in the fact that "choosing against it [is] either physically impossible or issues a credible threat to take away something to which one is entitled" (Baehr, 2017:5), such as, in this context, bodily autonomy and freedom of expression, to name only two. The novel is presented in the form of the testimony of a woman, known only as Offred, living in Gilead and serving the Republic as a Handmaid. It is structured as a series of sections. Sections that deal with Offred's daily activities (which have various names such as "Shopping", "Birth Day", and "Soul Scrolls") are alternated with multiple sections called "Night". In these sections, Offred lies awake and reflects on the life she lived before Gilead rose to power. She also reflects on the life she must live within the confines of Gilead, in her new role as Handmaid. These musings take place in a bedroom (Offred refuses to call it *her* room (Atwood, 2010:18)) at the home of Fred and Serena-Joy Waterford. The Waterfords are the Commander family with whom she is stationed (it is a "Commander family" because Fred is a high-ranking Gilead official). Following the narrative sections is a section called "Historical Notes" (Atwood, 2010:311-324). This section is the transcript of a lecture given at an academic conference held in the year 2195, long after Gilead has fallen. The conference deals with "Gileadean studies" (Atwood, 2010:311) and centres on the recent discovery (in the timeline of Atwood's fictional

universe) of a document entitled *The Handmaid's Tale*, the very tale which makes up the main narrative of Atwood's novel.

In Offred's time (that is, before Gilead's official inception), the United States of America's government is overthrown in a coup by a militant group known as the Sons of Jacob (Atwood, 2010:318). This group founds the Republic of Gilead, which replaces the country formerly known as the United States of America. The Sons of Jacob are composed of political and religious extremists—all male—who are supposedly dedicated to ameliorating the steadily declining birth rate that the world faces. In the "Historical Notes" section of the novel (Atwood, 2010:311-324), the declining birth rate is explained. Professor Pieixoto, a speaker at the conference, indicates that the declining birth rate in the period before Gilead rose to power was due to "the widespread availability of birth control of various kinds" (Atwood, 2010:316), as well as AIDS, syphilis, nuclear-plant accidents, and the mismanagement of toxic waste, which resulted in infant genetic deformities, miscarriages, and stillbirths (Atwood, 2010:316-317). The Sons of Jacob, in their new Republic of Gilead, aim to combat these issues and repopulate the earth by means of what they call "a return to traditional values" (Atwood, 2010:17): a renunciation of wastefulness, vanity, and excess, and an embracement of "biological destiny" (Atwood, 2010:231). In order to facilitate the fulfilment of these "destinies", women are sorted into categories based on their social functions—Aunts, Wives, Econowomen, Marthas, Handmaids, and Unwomen. As a Handmaid, Offred's duty is to bear children for the Commanders of Gilead, who are the highest-ranking men in Gileadean society. Because Offred and the other women in her situation have been forced to adopt these roles and are thus likely to rebel, they have to be subdued and conditioned into accepting this new way of life by the Aunts, those women who serve Gilead by instilling its dogmas into the female population. Aunt Lydia is the most prominent woman in this category,

and Offred refers to her frequently as she recounts her story. In fact, Aunt Lydia is mentioned 105 times in Offred's narrative, which is 306 pages long.[2] Offred's frequent references to Aunt Lydia indicate how central Aunt Lydia has been to the attempted reformulation of Offred's mind, and furthermore speak to Aunt Lydia's centrality in building up the Republic of Gilead.

In order to play such a pivotal role in Gileadean society, Aunt Lydia has to ensure that she adheres to the regime's standards of behaviour. In *Science, Gender, and History: The Fantastic in Mary Shelley and Margaret Atwood* (2014:60), Suparna Banerjee explains that,

> [in Gilead,] the containment of women's personhood in the relational-familial is replicated at the level of state organization, making the personal patently political. Gender roles—those of wife, daughter, child-bearer, widow, maid, and warden ('Aunt')—define and regulate women's lives in the patriarchal totalitarian state, so that their clothing, movements and language are all delimited by the roles they play.

Lydia must play the part of Aunt, and, if she is to have any hope of making a life for herself in the new society of which she is now a part, she must play it very convincingly. The Aunt role is by nature a gendered role, just as any of the other categories—Wife, Martha, Handmaid—are. By performing this role, Lydia performs her designated Gileadean gender—that of the Aunt. The first and most obvious signification of the gender that is embodied by any one woman in Gilead is her clothing. Wives, we are told, wear blue, while Marthas wear green, Econowomen wear stripes, and Handmaids wear red (Atwood, 2010:31). Aunts are distinguished by their "khaki dress[es]" (Atwood, 2010:123) and "brown wimple[s]" (Atwood, 2010:142). Colour and symbolism go hand-in-hand, especially in a context as hyper-religious as the one we find in *The Handmaid's Tale*: the Sons of Jacob assigned these colours with very specific intentions. The Wives' blue is indicative of a holy role, a role which has been

[2] The edition of the novel I use here is 306 pages long, although other editions of the novel may not be this exact length.

touched by God's blessing. According to Benno Zuiddam in "Biblical colour symbolism and interpretation of Christian art" (2018:74), the colour blue represents "heaven as the seat of God's authority". He goes on to explain that "blue often comes in a context of worship and service to God" (Zuiddam, 2018:75). The over-valuation of marriage for women is highlighted through the use of this colour to signify the Wives' social standing. The same strategy is employed regarding the other categories of women in Gilead. The signature red of the Handmaids is a colour that is heavily charged with both secular and Christian meaning. PJ Heather (1948:178) indicates the figurative uses of the colour red in English poetry, saying that "Shakespeare wrote of 'the virgin crimson of modesty'; Milton of […] 'enemies grown red with shame'; and Shelley of 'wrath's red fire'". These significations are relevant to the situation of the Handmaids and the shameful label they must bear, in that Handmaids, too, must be "modest", for they lived "shameful" lives before the rise of Gilead, and ought to redeem themselves by sacrificing their bodies to the holy enterprise of childbearing. The colour is also religiously charged. In his discussion of so-called "holy" colours in "Biblical colour symbolism and interpretation of Christian art", Zuiddam (2018:74) indicates that

> […] red also functions as a cleaning agent that leads to white: "And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they? And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said unto me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb (Rev 7:13-14)".

The link here is clear, since the Handmaids have been assigned to this category firstly, because they are fertile, and secondly, in order to atone for their ungodly living in the time before Gilead rose to power.

Brown, the colour that signifies the Aunt gender role, bears significantly less (or at the very least, significantly less *obvious*) symbolism. It is not traditionally gendered, as other colours

are (such as pink pertaining to girlhood, for example). It is also not a morally charged colour, as red, black, or white are (Zuiddam, 2018). In their investigation into the emotive responses to certain colours held by people of various backgrounds, Clarke and Costall (2008) found that brown typically incited responses that were “neutral or negative” (Clarke, 2008:408). Participants in the study did not find brown to be a particularly emotive colour, but they did feel that brown is an “earthy” colour that reminded them of “mud” and “nature” (Clarke, 2008:408). Some participants in the study went so far as to say that they “[had] no real feeling towards brown” and that they had “nothing to say” about brown (Clarke, 2008:408). Brown could be said to be a colour that is genderless, and which exists in a somewhat neutral space, since it does not carry explicitly emotionally, politically, or socially charged symbolism—at any rate, it carries far less symbolism of these kinds than other colours do. PJ Heather (1948:174) also lists brown as one of the “neutral” colours, along with grey. This attests to the “defeminized” existence of an Aunt in Gilead, as they are denied the opportunity or choice to partake in traditionally feminine enterprises, such as marrying or bearing children. This removal of what is perceived to be “feminine” is crucial to the oppressive work that Aunts must carry out—in removing the feminine aspect of their identities, it becomes easier for the Aunts to commit atrocities against other women. If they no longer feel as though they belong to that group, it is far easier to carry out the duties with which they are charged. This will be discussed in greater depth later on in this chapter. Brown is also a colour that is closely related to the natural and to the unembellished—it is an earthy tone denoting modesty and humility (Jones, 2013:150). This is significant, because Aunts must appear to be sincere in their endeavours to improve the lives of the women in their charge, even while their work actively oppresses them. These significations, which encompass the essence of what it means to be a Gileadean Aunt, are communicated solely by the garments worn by the women of that station. Their gender is thus performed on multiple levels—through the clothing they wear, through the colour of that clothing, and through the ways in which they are expected to

conduct themselves. Above all, though, it is the ways in which Aunts must behave that is most central to the performance of the Aunt gender.

In "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*" (1986), Judith Butler explains why gender cannot be perceived as a reflection of one's sex. She explains that

> [t]he distinction between sex and gender has been crucial to the long-standing feminist effort to debunk the claim that anatomy is destiny; sex is understood to be the invariant, anatomically distinct, and factic aspects of the female body, whereas gender is the cultural meaning and form that that body acquires, the variable modes of that body's acculturation. (Butler, 1986:35)

Butler's assertion highlights the extent to which gender presentation is entrenched in culture. In another paper, Butler (1988:527) states that "[g]ender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed". This idea is central to life in Gilead, and to the identities of those living within the Republic. Aunt Lydia is defined by the state and the men who control it, but her gender is also characterised by the unique ability of Aunts to define *other women*, and to enforce gender roles on them. In this way, she is an agent of patriarchy—she is given a degree of power by men, but she may only use it to further Gilead's misogynistic cause. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred recounts an experience she had in the Red Centre, where Aunt Lydia explains the fertility crisis and women's roles in that crisis to the Handmaids-in-training. Aunt Lydia tells the women, "[a] thing is valued […] only if it is rare and hard to get. We want you to be valued, girls. […] Think of yourselves as pearls" (Atwood, 2010:124). Offred comments on this sardonically, saying, "We are hers to define, we must suffer her adjectives" (Atwood, 2010:124). Aunt Lydia indicates with these words how the women should see themselves, as well as how they should carry themselves as Handmaids. Aunt Lydia's life is consumed by the role that she must play, according to Gilead's laws. Aunt Lydia, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, is pious, and apparently deeply earnest

in her sincerity to look out for the Handmaids' best interests. Offred, however, also notes that "Aunt Lydia might look abstracted but she [is] aware of every twitch" (Atwood, 2010:56). This is the gist of what it means to be an Aunt in Gilead: it is to be devoted to the women left in one's charge, and to be simultaneously devoted to the regime that has placed those women in that subordinated position. Indeed, they must be significantly more devoted to the regime than to the women in their care, since the work of an Aunt is to deny women the opportunity to cultivate their minds and to take ownership of their bodies, because that is essential to achieving *Gilead's* aims. Furthermore, to be an Aunt is not only to impose "adjectives" on other women, but also to "suffer [the] adjectives" (Atwood, 2010:124) of the men in control—what is the designation of Aunt if not a descriptor?

In the novel, Offred and her walking partner, Ofglen, encounter a group of Japanese tourists and their Gileadean tour guide. The tourists ask if they may take a photograph of the two Handmaids. Offred declines. This incident reminds Offred of something that Aunt Lydia once said during her time at the Red Centre: "Modesty is invisibility […]. Never forget it. To be seen—to be *seen*—is to be […] penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable" [Atwood's emphasis] (Atwood, 2010:39). This is significant for multiple reasons. First, the sexual connotations of Aunt Lydia's words are clear. In telling the Handmaids (who have no way of escaping physical sexual penetration) that their modesty (which encompasses their docility, passivity, and compliance with Gilead's rules) is their strength and the only way in which they may hope to transcend the difficult reality of their day-to-day lives, she reinforces Gilead's values in them, as well as the common belief, pointed out by Simone de Beauvoir (1953:571), that it is women's situation to suffer and to bear their suffering with dignity and patience. Aunt Lydia projects this modesty as an admirable strength. It is, however, also an important element of the way in which she presents her own gender of Aunt to the world

around her. To Aunt Lydia, being invisible, and therefore incomprehensible, to whomsoever it is that wishes to "see" her, equals being impenetrable, unbreakable, and safe. It is easy to see why this idea of never being truly known to other members of her society is of such importance to Aunt Lydia. What she is doing, effectively, is asking the Handmaids to remember the importance of their gender performance within the confines of Gilead. Her words translate to this: do what is expected of you, and you will be safe. She asserts herself as a skilled actress who consciously performs the gender that is expected of her, and the performance is all the more effective for its applicability to life governed by the totalitarian strictures of the Gileadean state.

Apart from Aunt Lydia's belief that "impenetrability" ensures safety in the Republic of Gilead, there are other ideas that she passes on to the Handmaids. These messages, in contrast to those pertaining to modesty and invisibility, are not directly communicated; rather, they are implied. This, however, does not detract from their meaning, or their influence on the Handmaid subjects. Offred tells her readers,

> Men are sex machines, said Aunt Lydia, and not much more. They only want one thing. You must learn to manipulate them, for your own good. Lead them around by the nose; that is a metaphor. It's nature's way. It's God's device. It's the way things are. Aunt Lydia did not actually say this, but it was implicit in everything she did say. It hovered over her head, like the golden mottoes over the saints. (Atwood, 2010:153-154)

These lines speak volumes about Aunt Lydia's views on gender and about the way in which she presents her own gender to the world around her. This implicit message from Aunt Lydia suggests that she herself could well be manipulating those she serves. It is interesting to note how clichés that are usually applied to women are here subverted and applied to men instead—that they are mindless, inherently sexual beings who must be coaxed in whichever direction one wishes them to go, and that this aspect of their collective nature is an

unchangeable fact of their existence. Although the stereotypes that Aunt Lydia draws on are not new, this subtle inversion of the power structures that govern life in patriarchal society is significant in relation to Aunt Lydia and the role she must play. At the very least, in implying this message to the Handmaids, Aunt Lydia offers them the *illusion* of having some power over the men the Handmaids must interact with. Lydia does, however, know full well that this conception of the women's sexuality cannot rightfully be called power. Nevertheless, Lydia, in performing the Aunt gender role, shows the men who are in control what they would like to see: a woman serving their Republic by instilling Gilead's values into the female population and ensuring that they do not behave in ways that are not approved by the regime. This aspect of Aunt Lydia's performance, then, is central to the outward, perceived gender of Aunt—it indicates that she too may be doing what is expected of her purely at a surface level, manipulating those who are blinded by loyalty to the Republic in order to accumulate power and in order to survive. It may also, however, show that she simply offers the illusion of her solidarity to the Handmaids, when, in reality, she is almost as involved in oppressing them as Gilead's male power structure is. In other words, she attempts to make it *appear* as though she wants to help the Handmaids by teaching them how to conduct themselves around Gileadean men, when these actions really only aid the patriarchal regime and no one else. It might also be said that the "feminine power" that Lydia hints at is only subjugation disguised as power, in that the women's sexual "power" over the men is still determined by those men to begin with. Nevertheless, the above quotation is an important piece of evidence that contributes to the idea of the conscious nature of Lydia's performance of Aunt, even though it is indeed only Offred's *interpretation* of things that Aunt Lydia has said.

It is important to differentiate (as I have mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation) between consciously and more unconsciously performed gender. Offred herself is aware that

she cannot be sure of the true natures of the women around her. Of Ofglen she says, “I think of her as a woman for whom every act is done for show, is acting rather than a real act. She does such things to look good, I think. She’s out to make the best of it. But that is what I must look like to her, as well. How can it be otherwise?” (Atwood, 2010:41). Simone de Beauvoir (1953:264) expresses a similar sentiment in *The Second Sex* when she attests that “to say that woman is mystery is to say, not that she is silent, but that her language is not understood; she is there, but hidden behind veils; she exists beyond these uncertain appearances. What is she? Angel, demon, one inspired, an actress?”. This idea is applicable to Aunt Lydia and the gender she performs—any given entity producing opinions about others cannot have access to an unquestionable truth. Nevertheless, it is impossible to assert without question that Aunt Lydia’s gender performance, as it is presented in this novel and via this iteration of her character, is wholly continuous with her personal belief system. This, in conjunction with the fact that Aunt Lydia was raised and lived in the society that preceded Gilead, provides reasonable grounds for readers and researchers to be confident that her role of Aunt is consciously performed.

According to Offred, the adult population in Gilead have all lived in what she calls “the time before” (Atwood, 2010:20), a time before the Sons of Jacob overthrew the United States of America’s government and established the Republic of Gilead in its place. This we know because Offred imagines how her daughter must have grown since she last saw her—she recalls how the little girl was five years old when the family was apprehended by the Gileadean authorities and mother, daughter, and father were separated from each other. Offred then estimates that her child must be about eight years old at the time when the narrative takes place (Atwood, 2010:74). Aunt Lydia is a part of this formerly American group of adults. This means that she had a totally different life before she assumed the role of Aunt,

and that she was immersed in a significantly less (overtly) sexually oppressive culture. Within this culture, an implicit social understanding likely existed which asserted that "women and men are not innately endowed with feminine and masculine qualities through their biological sex" because "gender is culturally constructed" (Bigwood, 1991:58). Bigwood is not necessarily describing the fictional universe in which Gilead (and by implication, the version of the United States of America that existed before the fictional regime came into power) exists, but since the version of the United States of America that exists in the novel is modelled around the real and contemporary United States of America, we may assume that Bigwood's assertion has some relevance to the argument I make here. This idea would certainly have been held by *some* people, although it cannot be said that this idea was widely held. Nonetheless, the society that Offred (and, by implication, Aunt Lydia) lived in before Gilead placed a much greater deal of emphasis on freedom of expression than Gilead does, allowing more diverse ideas relating to gender and gendered life to prosper in some social circles. Aunt Lydia's adaptation to her new position would then have had to have been conscious. Judith Butler (1986:40) notes that "[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". Here, Butler is talking about the unconsciously performed genders that saturate everyday living in the non-fictional world, but the idea that she expresses is particularly relevant to Aunt Lydia and life in Gilead more generally. In Gilead, "becoming" a gender, while mindful, is not an impulsive process—it is a carefully calculated, meticulously monitored process which has great bearing on the performer's likelihood to survive. The sanctions, taboos, and prescriptions of which Butler speaks are central to Gileadean culture and social roles. Should Aunt Lydia not adhere to the rules laid out for Aunts, she risks being sent to the toxic wasteland known as the Colonies, or being killed. She, when presented with the new regime, discarded the "corporeal styles" that were

prevalent in American culture at the time and took on the style of Gileadean Aunt instead. Although it cannot be concluded that Aunt Lydia approves or disapproves of the gender performance into which she has been coerced, it *can* be concluded that she is indeed aware of the fact that her gender performance *is* a performance. In other words, she knows that she is consciously enacting an established set of behaviours for someone of her class in Gilead. This is because she originates from a time in which the Aunt gender role (as it is enacted in Gilead) did not exist as such, which means that she had to learn what it means to be an Aunt, and how to correctly communicate that gender role to others.

Since Aunt Lydia's gender performance can be deemed an act that is undertaken consciously, it follows that she is complicit in the oppression suffered by the other women in Gilead. Charlotte Knowles indicates that, generally, women who are complicit in their own oppression are *willingly* complicit. Knowles (2019:246) notes that,

> [i]t is not simply that women accept their position as the Other because they have no other option. Indeed, if they did this would not, strictly speaking, be a case of complicity. Complicity implies the ability to do otherwise. […] Complicity is thus distinctive in being a form of unfreedom that is reinforced and perpetuated by unfree agents *themselves*, even if they are not the initial cause of this unfreedom. [Knowles' emphasis]

Because it is evident that Aunt Lydia has had to actively choose to alter her gender and all the significations that go with it—including her previous (that is, pre-Gileadean) views on gender roles, bodily autonomy, and other serious moral concepts—in order to conform to Gilead's standards, she is undoubtedly complicit in women's subjugation within the Republic, despite being part of the subjugated group herself. More specifically, Lydia has had to adapt to the role of Aunt, which is inherently oppressive to women of all classes in Gilead. One of Aunt Lydia's most well-known lines in *The Handmaid's Tale* is this: "There is more than one kind of freedom. […] Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom

to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it." (Atwood, 2010:34). The "days of anarchy" that she refers to is the same period that Offred refers to as the "time before". By this she means, for example, that women enjoyed certain freedoms to a much more significant extent—for instance, they generally had more freedom to dress how they wanted, have sex with whom they wanted, and to be individuals living independently of others, financially or otherwise. Offred alludes to these past freedoms when she and Ofglen pass by what used to be a laundromat. To the laundromat, she recalls, she would take "[her] own clothes, […] [her] own money, money [she] had earned [her]self" (Atwood, 2010:34). As for the trespasses of the past from which women are now "free", Offred states, "no man shouts obscenities at us, speaks to us, touches us. No one whistles" (Atwood, 2010:34). In other words, the women do not have the freedom to live as autonomous individuals, but they are granted an existence in which they are not catcalled and harassed on the streets, as they once were, in the "time before" Gilead.

Indeed, the women *have* been granted an existence in which they are not harassed on the street, and they have also been given a place in a society in which rape (a crime that, conveniently, does not include the ritual monthly Ceremony, in which a Commander effectively rapes his Handmaid while his Wife restrains her) is an offence that is punishable to the highest degree. Even rape is defined by the masculinist government in order to suit its own agendas—not just the women and their roles themselves. Nevertheless, this, according to the Gileadean government, is what the women are now free *from*. They are, however, free *to* do almost nothing. All of their actions are regulated. Even the greetings they exchange amongst themselves are government issue—"Blessed be the fruit", to which the standard reply is "May the Lord open" (Atwood, 2010:29). In her testament, Offred notes that, in the "time before", "[they] were a society dying, said Lydia, of too much choice" (Atwood, 2010:35).

This means, according to Aunt Lydia, that women's choices regarding sex and pregnancy (such as choosing to have abortions, or pursuing homosexual relationships and deciding not to have children) were the cause of the falling birth-rate and the steady decline of the human population. Aunt Lydia encourages the new Handmaids about their futures in the new world in which they must live, painting a picture for them which says that, in fact, this life might not be so bad at all. She says:

> For the generations that come after, […] it will be so much better. The women will live in harmony together, all in one family […]. There can be bonds of real affection […]. Women united for a common end! Helping one another in their daily chores as they walk the path of life together, each performing her appointed task. (Atwood, 2010:171)

This, of course, is a far rosier imagining of life in Gilead than the real experiences of those living in it, especially the Handmaids. This is also a particularly harrowing example of Aunt Lydia's complicity in the oppression of other women. She actively lies to them about their role in Gilead and the impact that it will have on their futures. Alanna A. Callaway (2008:42) elaborates on this, and notes that, "according to the Aunts, the new social stratum is liberating. But this attitude, couched in pseudo-feminist sentiment, is the most insidious tool of the patriarchy, a tool designed to convince women that their subservience provides personal fulfilment and serves the common good". This strategy is a form of deeply rooted complicity on the part of the women performing the Aunt gender role. It is also, as is mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, a way in which the Aunts not only make *themselves* "prey" (as Simone de Beauvoir puts it when she discusses women's complicity in their own subjugation in *The Second Sex* (1953)) to the regime, but also how they force the Handmaids to make themselves "prey" to the Aunts. Callaway (2008:9) makes the same observation: she says "the real threat in Gilead comes not from male but from female control. The ultimate result of the micro-stratification in Gilead is the evolution of a new form of misogyny, not as we usually think of it, as men's hatred of women, but as *women's* hatred of

women" [Callaway's emphasis]. This concept is at the core of Gilead's political success—Gilead cannot exist if women are unwilling to betray the rights of other women.

Aunt Lydia's complicity in the oppression of Gileadean women is multifaceted. She punishes them physically for any disobedience or insubordination. She might not always be the person carrying out the punishment, but she is able to order the punishment of a given Handmaid. A substantial part of her oppression of the other women also exists as a mental enterprise. She not only indoctrinates the women by teaching them Gilead's values and the implications of their new roles in Gileadean society, she also instils in them the belief that any harm that befalls them as a result of non-compliance with Gileadean ideals is their own fault. The following passage from *The Handmaid's Tale* can be cited, where Offred recounts a speech made by Aunt Lydia to the Handmaids at the Red Centre, which elucidates the tactic:

> The spectacles women used to make of themselves. Oiling themselves like roast meat on a spit, and bare backs and shoulders, on the street, in public, and legs, not even stockings on them, no wonder those things used to happen. *Things*, the word [Aunt Lydia] used when whatever it stood for was too distasteful or filthy or horrible to pass her lips. A successful life for her was one that avoided *things*, excluded *things*. Such *things* do not happen to nice women. (Atwood, 2010:65) [Atwood's emphasis]

Aunt Lydia makes use of victim-blaming in order to beat the women into submission. She teaches them that they, the Handmaids, are in control of how they are treated by others. If they do not behave "respectably", according to Gileadean standards for women, they cannot expect to be treated with respect. Once again, Lydia operates as an agent of patriarchy by enforcing patriarchal ideas (such as those related to victim-blaming above, for example) on the women as a way to not only ensure that those ideas become ingrained in the women, but they assess their peers and ensure that they are compliant with the ideas as well. Lydia lifts her own position in the eyes of her male supervisors by suppressing the women over whom she has control.

The psychological aspect of Aunt Lydia's methods for training the Handmaids is by far the most impactful one, and the one which solidifies her complicity most undeniably. The Handmaids, during their time at the Red Centre, take part in an activity called Testifying, in which they confess their sins. One Handmaid, Janine, shares with the others that she was gang-raped when she was fourteen years old, and that she then had an abortion. The Aunts—including Lydia—lead the women in a chant: "But whose fault was it? Aunt Helena says […] *Her* fault, *her* fault, *her* fault, we chant in unison. *Who* led them on? Aunt Helena beams […] *She* did. *She* did. *She* did. Why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen? Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*" [Atwood's emphasis] (Atwood, 2010:81). When Janine finally claims the fault for what happened to her, Aunt Lydia praises her, saying, "Very good, Janine […] You are an example" (Atwood, 2010:82). The Aunts teach the women that they have deserved the horrifying experiences they have suffered in their lives as a result of their ungodly behaviour—religion forms the backbone of their reasoning for these kinds of events. Put simply, "patriarchal interpretations of the Bible have been utilized to develop doctrines and theology that marginalize, oppress, and perpetuate violence against females" (Moder, 2019:97). By masquerading misogynist ideas as issues pertaining to religious morality, the Aunts are able to brainwash the Handmaids into believing that their own actions have caused them to become Handmaids—they lived immorally in the "time before" as adulteresses, lesbians, or single mothers, and it is now their responsibility to atone for their sins by serving society through giving birth to children. It is also a useful strategy for solidifying in the Handmaids the belief that everything happens for a reason, and that God willed their suffering for the greater good of mankind. This causes them to accept their situation. Indeed, in a fanatically religious society such as Gilead, to question God's motives and His deeds is the most serious form of blasphemy. Simone de Beauvoir (1953:570) says that "faith gets its

fanatical power from the fact that it is not knowledge: it is blind, impassioned, obstinate, stupid; what it declares, it declares unconditionally, against reason, against history, against all denial". Religion, and Christianity more specifically, as a concept that generally holds morality at its core, is a useful tool for those who wish to manipulate religious ideas in service of a political agenda—if you do not behave in the correct way, you disappoint God; if you disappoint God, you are unworthy of respect; if you disappoint God, you must be punished. The Aunts may even come to believe their own brainwashing—it is impossible to say which of them had these kinds of beliefs even before the United States of America's government fell, and which of them have chosen to harm other women as long as their own safety is ensured, regardless of what their opinions on matters such as these are. Nonethless, this reinforces the notion of the extremely performative nature of the Aunt gender in general, especially as it is manifested in Lydia. Aunt Lydia may or may not have had beliefs steeped in religious ideology before she began serving Gilead, but the fact that she steps into the Aunt role and delivers teachings like these (which are necessarily highly regulated and government approved) are proof of her complicity in the suffering of Gileadean women. She, too, had to learn what Gilead would like her to say, and she then had to go into the world and say it, regardless of her personal beliefs and regardless of who would be harmed in the process. In addition, the ritualistic way in which these values are instilled in the Handmaids (that is, the use of chanting and repetition during activities such as Testifying) is yet another piece of evidence pointing towards the extremely conscious enactment of gender in Gilead. Behaviour and gendered traits are drilled into the women as a mechanism by which to remind them what their place in Gileadean society is and how they ought to align their conduct with it.

Aunthood requires women to abandon other women, to discard any concern for the moral and ethical concerns they may have for those women's wellbeing and rights, in favour of

pursuing power and self-preservation in a ruthlessly sexist and violent society. Lydia and the other Aunts have been instrumental in removing the Handmaids' freedom to do things and to make decisions. They (and particularly senior Aunts of Lydia's rank) have chosen power over subservience, and since power is, essentially, a relation (Allen, 2016), the Aunts cannot circumvent the complicity that is inherent to the work they do in Gilead. The "relation" that I am most concerned with is not the one between themselves and the men running the country, but the one between themselves and other women. This is the essence of Aunt Lydia's complicity in the oppression of the women living in Gilead: she is a critical part of the patriarchal mechanism. It is, essentially, her job to dull the women's minds, to snub out any independent spirit or free will they may possess, in order to mould them into meek and malleable reproductive machines.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Aunt Lydia is not only complicit in the oppression of Handmaids and other women in Gilead—she is also complacent about that oppression. In this dissertation, I have taken complacency to mean demonstrable satisfaction with Gilead's misogynist laws and customs. Complicity and complacency are concepts that are inherently related—in certain situations in both fictional worlds and the real world, complacency *is* complicity. The late Archbishop Desmond Tutu famously described this concept when he said, "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor" (Oxford Reference, 2022). In this sense, this neutrality, which amounts to complacency, is crucial to Gilead's success as a political system. Simone de Beauvoir has written extensively about women's cooperation with the patriarchal systems which oppress them in *The Second Sex* (1953). De Beauvoir (1953:583) argues that, "[m]an wants woman to be object: she *makes* herself object; at the very moment when she does that, she is exercising a free activity. Therein is her original treason; the most docile, the most passive, is still a conscious being"

[De Beauvoir's emphasis]. These words highlight De Beauvoir's belief that complacency is in and of itself a form of complicity in the subjugation that women suffer—a woman might be passive (in other words, complacent), but she is still imbued with free will, and when she submits to patriarchal standards, "[making] herself object", she is then complicit in not only the repression of other women, but in her own as well.

Aunt Lydia, as she appears in *The Handmaid's Tale*, displays her complacent attitude towards the oppression of the women around her in various ways. Near the beginning of the novel's narrative, Offred and her walking partner, Ofglen, are on their way back to their houses with the groceries and provisions they have been sent to purchase. The route that they take leads them to the Wall (Atwood, 2010:41). On this Wall, bodies are hung for display as a warning to all who pass by of what disobedience and disloyalty to Gilead will earn them. Offred and Ofglen stop to look at the corpses, as they are expected to (Atwood, 2010:42), and Offred remembers something that Aunt Lydia said at the Red Centre. Offred remarks that, "Ordinary, said Aunt Lydia, is what you are used to. This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary" (Atwood, 2010:43). In saying this to the women, Aunt Lydia is asking them to accept the situation that they find themselves in, to be objective about what it is that they must do in their new lives. She wants them to be uncritical and emotionally uninvolved in the implications of their role as Handmaids. She insists that they resign themselves to their fate, and to "make themselves object", as Simone de Beauvoir puts it. She wants them to use their free will (or at least the illusion of it, in a Gileadean context) to their own disadvantage. This is an instance in which Aunt Lydia's complacency about the oppression suffered by Gileadean women is clear. In addition, it cements Aunt Lydia in her position of complicity, for she *asks* the Handmaids to get used to the horrific circumstances under which they are being forced to live.

This is only one instance of Aunt Lydia's complacency. Offred provides multiple examples of it as she tells her tale. Only thirteen pages after the incident that has just been described, Offred reveals another of Aunt Lydia's speeches that indicates her passivity and objectivity about the terror faced by the Handmaids as they carry out their duties in the Commanders' homes. Aunt Lydia tells the women, "It's not the husbands you have to watch out for, […] it's the Wives. You should always try to imagine what they must be feeling. Of course they will resent you. It is only natural. Try to feel for them. […] Try to pity them. Forgive them, for they know not what they do. […] You must realise that they are defeated women" (Atwood, 2010:56). With these words, Aunt Lydia asks for a Christ-like magnanimity on the part of the Handmaids—it is not a coincidence that she chooses to echo Christ's words on the cross when she speaks to the Handmaids about the sacrifices they must make. What the Handmaids must do, essentially, is to set aside their own feelings and their own horrific experiences, and to have compassion for those who restrain them while they are raped. This they must do, according to Aunt Lydia, because it is understandably difficult for the Wives to live with the women with whom their husbands have sex and try to conceive children. This self-abnegation disguised as compassion and pity is hugely destructive to the Handmaids' psyches. It is also interesting to note how Aunt Lydia vilifies the Wives for resenting the Handmaids without mentioning the Commanders' roles in building the society that facilitated that resentment in the first place. In the Red Centre, the Handmaids are taught, "*Blessed be the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the silent.* […] *Blessed be those that mourn, for they shall be comforted*" [Atwood's italics] (Atwood, 2010:100). The essence of being a Handmaid is to accept one's role without question or complaint, and it is the essence of Aunthood to embody these qualities and to preach them to the women in their care. The Aunts also ensure the

Handmaids' compliance by means of violence. Aunt Lydia routinely reminds the Handmaids, "Blessed are the meek" (Atwood, 2010:74), but she does not mean to imply that she and the other Aunts ought to be meek. In fact, they are the opposite. It is the Handmaids, rather, who should aspire towards meekness, and by assuming this apparent position of non-confrontational, contented embracement of the strictures imposed on women in Gilead, Aunt Lydia cements herself, in this iteration of her character, as thoroughly complacent about the gender-based violence that its central to Gileadean life.

Complicity and complacency may not always be one and the same thing, but the two concepts are always closely linked, sometimes even blended. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, when Aunt Lydia explains to the Handmaids how it is their own fault if they are attacked as a result of "oiling themselves like roast meat on a spit" (Atwood, 2010:65), Aunt Lydia ends her speech with these words, as recounted by Offred: "I'm doing my best […] I'm trying to give you the best chance you can have. […] Don't think it's easy for me either" (Atwood, 2010:65). This is a decidedly ambiguous choice of words. Does Aunt Lydia mean to say that she is looking out for the Handmaids' best interests in teaching them how to survive in Gilead, and that it pains her to have to alter the Handmaids' minds in order to accommodate Gilead's dogmas? Because it is not possible for the readers of this novel to access Aunt Lydia's psyche, there is no way of knowing if the apparent ambiguity of the words holds any truth. The words must then be taken at face value. In that case, this utterance from Aunt Lydia is perhaps the most indicative of her complacency about the suffering women endure in Gilead. It is also especially relevant to her conscious performance of the Aunt gender role.

When Aunt Lydia tells the Handmaids that she is trying to give them the best chance they can have, she is effectively telling them that any non-compliance with the laws of Gilead will have dire consequences—it is implied that their lives will be at risk, should they resist their transition into Handmaids. Her best, she implies, is to go to extreme lengths—including violence that results in women being injured, maimed, or even killed—to indoctrinate the women and to force them to succumb to the psychological and political pressures of Gileadean society. She encourages them to accept that being a Handmaid is the best role that they will have in their new life, and that they ought to embrace it for what it is. She wants them to resign themselves to their fate, and this resignation, according to Simone de Beauvoir (1953:328), is the key component to the complacent woman's situation. She says, "the fact is that her resignation comes not from any predetermined inferiority: on the contrary, it is that which gives rise to all her insufficiencies; that resignation has its source in the [woman's] past, in the society around her, and particularly in the future assigned to her". Women in Gilead must resign themselves to their situation, and in so doing, lose their grip on any freedom they may have possessed and any hope they may have had for resisting the misogynist laws that bind them.

Importantly, Aunt Lydia tells the Handmaids that her work and her own adjustment to Gileadean life have not been easy. This simple phrase cements Aunt Lydia's complicity in and complacency about women's oppression in Gilead because, though the work she has done (which includes training both the Handmaids and herself to adapt to a Gileadean way of life) has been difficult, she has done it anyway. In saying this to the Handmaids, she admits that she consciously *chose* to be an agent of Gilead, and that she is aware of the implications of that choice. In other words, she understands that her job is to strip women of their ability to think and act freely and to harm them both physically and psychologically if they do not

cooperate. This willingness to collaborate with the Gileadean government by working as an Aunt, as well as Aunt Lydia's confession that, while her work is not easy, she carries it out anyway, speak to the conscious nature of Aunt Lydia's gender performance. She lived in the United States of America before Gilead rose to power, and therefore had to consciously alter her mindset when the takeover took place in order to leave behind those aspects of society that Gilead deemed unsavoury and to embrace the values that the regime lauds. She chose, very consciously, to become an Aunt and to beat the women in her society into submission.

Aunt Lydia admits more than once that she is aware of the terrifying circumstances under which women, and the Handmaids in particular, live in Gilead. These admissions are central to the complacency that Aunt Lydia displays. One such admission appears in Chapter Twenty of *The Handmaid's Tale*:

> You are a transitional generation, said Aunt Lydia. It is the hardest for you. We know the sacrifices you are being expected to make. It is hard when men revile you. For the ones who come after you, it will be easier. They will accept their duties with willing hearts. She did not say: Because they will have no memories, of any other way. She said: Because they won't want what they can't have. (Atwood, 2010:127)

Once again, Aunt Lydia shows that she knows how Gilead and those who serve it impact the lives of the women they oppress. She and the other Aunts "*know the sacrifices they are being expected to make*"—sacrifices that include bodily autonomy, the possibility of forming genuine relationships with other women, and not being forced to be dependent on a man to survive. They know this, but they carry out their work with vigour anyway. They ask the women to take comfort in the thought that the women who come after them will not have such a hard time as they are having, because they will not have known any other way of life. They will be more malleable, more docile, and more accepting of their role. The Aunts' complacency lies in the fact that they know the Handmaids are being forced to sacrifice the essence of their freedom and that they, the Aunts, applaud the Handmaids' submission to

this fate; it also lies in the way in which they attempt to comfort the Handmaids with the knowledge that future Gileadean women will not question their roles. The implications of this attempt at consoling the women are this: there is no hope for women to regain the freedoms they enjoyed in the past. The Aunts expect the women to accept their roles because they have no reason to hope that things will ever be any different. Future women will be fully moulded by Gilead, with no interference from external influences. These women will never attempt to transcend their circumstances because they will never be given the opportunity to learn critical thinking. Simone de Beauvoir, although not writing about fictional worlds such as Gilead, claims that the phenomenon of what she calls "women's situation" (De Beauvoir, 1953:591) is relevant and central to women's lives in the real world. According to her, "[i]t is evident that woman's character—her convictions, her values, her wisdom, her morality, her tastes, her behaviour—are to be explained by her situation. The fact that transcendence is denied her keeps her as a rule from attaining the loftiest human attitudes: heroism, revolt, disinterestedness, imagination, creation" (De Beauvoir, 1953:591). The fact that Aunts are instrumental to creating this specific "situation" for the Handmaids-in-training, while simultaneously acknowledging the effects that that situation has on the women's minds and bodies, solidifies their complacency about the subjugation suffered by Gileadean women. In line with the definition of complacency that I provided earlier in this dissertation—that complacency will be taken to mean a demonstrable satisfaction with Gilead's laws—it is clear that Aunt Lydia is undoubtedly complacent in *The Handmaid's Tale* novel. She shows no dissatisfaction with Gileadean laws. Indeed, she approves of those laws, and, worse still, endorses them to the very people they intend to oppress. Aunt Lydia is, in this novel, unambiguously complacent about the oppression suffered by Gileadean women, because, as Suparna Banerjee (2014:79) notes, "[e]ven if someone lacks the power to resist or avenge oppression [they] still [have] the power not to condone it". And Aunt Lydia condones this oppression publicly and unapologetically.

Aunt Lydia, as she is portrayed by Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale*, plays a central role in reshaping the minds of the women being inducted into Gilead's social strata as Handmaids. She performs consciously the gender of Gileadean Aunt. Aunt Lydia originates from a time before Gilead which was characterized by a completely different culture and different ways in which to "embody" life, which means that she would have had to consciously shift into a different mode of performing gender when Gilead overthrew the former government. During her time in the Republic, Lydia has not "become [her] [Aunt gender] from a place prior to culture and to embodied life", but she has done so "essentially within their terms" (Butler, 1986:39). Because Gilead exists, Lydia's Aunt gender exists. In adopting this gender, Aunt Lydia becomes complicit in the oppression of women in Gilead: she is actively involved in it by perpetuating Gilead's harmful ideologies in her teachings to the Handmaids. It follows that Aunt Lydia is complacent about the oppression suffered by the women in her society. She encourages them to do their work with meekness and diligence and to think of the greater good before they lament the trajectory of their own lives. She shows no dissatisfaction with Gilead and its laws, cementing her position as a character who is complacent about and complicit in the subjugation of Gileadean women. In this instalment of the Gilead story, Aunt Lydia, though somewhat of a two-dimensional character, is nonetheless one who is hugely damaging to those over whom she has control. To members of her own sex, she appears as a character who has chosen a life of violence and treachery, and who encourages other women to accept their suppressed situation with meekness and docility. However, because of the limited access that readers have to Aunt Lydia's mind and personal experiences in this iteration of her character, it is not possible to argue for mitigating circumstances that might otherwise damn her unquestionably for the role she plays within the Gileadean social system,

or, at the very least, to explain why she has worked as an Aunt, and what she feels about the actions that that role required of her.

Chapter 3: *The Handmaid's Tale* Television Series

After the conclusion of Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Aunt Lydia reappears in a televisual format. *The Handmaid's Tale* television series, created by Bruce Miller, aired for the first time on 26 April 2017. As in the novel, Aunt Lydia (played by Ann Dowd in the series) is a central figure in the unfolding of the plot and in the lives of the Handmaids in Gilead. In the introduction to this dissertation, I indicated that the Aunt Lydia of *The Handmaid's Tale* television series is an adaptation of the character initially created by Margaret Atwood in her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1985. According to Linda Hutcheon (2006:6), "[t]o deal with adaptations as adaptations is to think of them as […] haunted at all times by their adapted texts". In this instance, that which Hutcheon refers to as the "adapted" text is the same as what Julie Sanders (2006) refers to as the "original" text. Hutcheon (2006:6) continues with her discussion of adaptations, explaining that,

> [w]hen we call a work an adaptation, we openly announce its overt relationship to another work or works. […] This is why adaptation studies are so often comparative studies. […] This is not to say that adaptations are not also autonomous works that can be interpreted and valued as such. […] Although adaptations are also aesthetic objects in their own right, it is only as inherently double or multilaminated works that they can be theorised as adaptations. An adaptation's double nature does not mean, however, that proximity or fidelity to the adapted text should be the criterion of judgement or the focus of analysis.

The Handmaid's Tale television series is, in line with Hutcheon's theorising, an adaptation of Atwood's novel in that it not only draws on what Atwood wrote in that novel, but that it also expands upon it, and, in some ways, deviates from it. Because the television series' Lydia is an adaptation of the initial character from 1985, she may be interpreted both as an adaptation and as an autonomous, independent character.

Season 1 of the series functions as a visual version of Atwood's 1985 novel—the series' plot does not deviate significantly from that of the novel. From Season 2 onward, however, the series depicts the Gilead story as Bruce Miller has imagined it. Miller, in consultation with Atwood (Alter, 2019), continues the narrative beyond the end of Atwood's novel. Season 2 deals with a more rebellious Offred (who is frequently referred to as June in the television series) and the lives of those immediately around her. Season 3, which forms the focus of the research I conduct for this dissertation, is centred on June's efforts to smuggle children out of Gilead and into Canada, where she believes they will be safer and better taken care of. Season 4 of the series, which lies beyond the scope of this dissertation, focuses on June's eventual escape from Gilead and the struggles she faces in adapting to life outside of Gilead. Significantly, where *The Handmaid's Tale* novel presents the narrative through Offred's eyes—her own retellings of her experiences—*The Handmaid's Tale* television series is not presented from the perspective of any one character. This is, of course, as a result of the televisual medium, which limits the possibility of first-person perspectives significantly. In contrast to *The Handmaid's Tale* novel, the series focuses on the experiences of various characters (including Lydia) throughout the series. This allows audiences to gain a more thorough understanding of each of the characters, in that the characters are viewed at different stages in their lives (that is, before Gilead and within it). This is, interestingly, similar to the fragmentation of the novel version of *The Handmaid's Tale*, which, in turn, points to the television series' role as an adaptation of the novel. In the series, audiences also witness how characters are viewed by each other at various points in the narrative, meaning that we are given an opportunity to get to know the characters from their own subjectivities *and* from the perspectives of others. This is pivotal to beginning to understand the character of Aunt Lydia.

Season 3 of *The Handmaid's Tale* begins in the aftermath of June's friend and former walking partner Emily's escape from Gilead. Just before her escape, Emily stabs Aunt Lydia in the back with a knife. June gives Emily her second baby, Nicole, and asks Emily to bring her safely across the border into Canada. June is transferred from the Waterford household to the home of a new Commander and his Wife. The new Commander, Commander Lawrence, is an enigma to June—he seems to straddle the line between supporting Gilead's dogmas and working against them. This is because, although he is a very powerful Commander in Gilead's ranks, he is also the person who arranged for Emily (and June, though she declined the opportunity) to escape. Commander Lawrence also does not perform the Ceremony. He spares June the experience of monthly ritualised rape that she would be subjected to in any other Commander's household in Gilead. In Lawrence's household, June finds that she is able to express her thoughts and opinions much more freely than she was able to in the Waterford household. The women in the Lawrence household, including the Marthas, are far less regulated than those elsewhere in Gilead. Throughout the season, June tests the freedoms that she has in the home of her new, unknowable Commander, and she becomes involved in various covert operations. These include smuggling Marthas with knowledge of bomb-making and chemistry out of their houses and into the Mayday resistance movement. She also eventually dedicates herself to getting children out of Gilead. Aunt Lydia visits June at her new posting at various points in the series, and becomes increasingly suspicious of the goings-on at the Lawrence home. Where previous seasons saw Aunt Lydia maintain her composure in spite of any insubordination from Handmaids, she is more prone to outbursts in this season, and is frequently very brutal towards the Handmaids over whom she presides. Aunt Lydia's feelings about women's situation in Gilead become more complicated when she accompanies June and the Waterfords, June's previous family, to Washington D.C on a diplomatic trip that is intended to help the Waterfords advocate for the return of June's "stolen" baby, Nicole. In Washington, the Handmaids have their mouths clamped shut and their faces

largely covered, and Aunt Lydia expresses her perturbation at this to June. At the end of the season, June, with the help of Commander Lawrence, succeeds in smuggling children and Marthas out of Gilead. June then goes into hiding.

While these events are important for contextualising this segment of the dissertation, they will not be the focus of my discussion. In this chapter, I focus on Episode 8 of Season 3, directed by Mike Barker and titled “Unfit” (2019). The episode begins in the Red Centre, before June goes into hiding. The Handmaids, including June, shun another Handmaid called Ofmatthew. They do this because Ofmatthew reported a Martha named Frances for helping June reconnect with her stolen child, Hannah (who is known as Agnes in Gilead). Aunt Lydia tells June to get her friends to “cool it” (“Unfit”, 2019, 09:27) with their tactics of bullying Ofmatthew. The episode then zooms in on something that has yet not been explored up to that point in the story—Aunt Lydia’s background. Audiences learn via flashbacks that Aunt Lydia, whose true name is revealed to be Lydia Clements, was a fourth-grade teacher in the “time before” (Atwood, 2010:20). She appears as a starkly different character to the Aunt audiences have come to know in the rest of the series: she wears her hair loose, wears jewellery, and wears makeup. In the episode, Lydia is concerned about a boy in her class, Ryan. Ryan’s mother Noelle is single and working various jobs in order to take care of him. She is often late to picking him up from school and, as far as Lydia is concerned, does not provide him with nutritious lunches. Lydia gets to know the family and even spends Christmas with them. She also begins to navigate a potentially romantic relationship with the principal of her school, Jim Thorne (played by John Ortiz). Lydia attends a New Year’s Eve party with Jim and they both return to her house afterwards. Once there, Lydia tells Jim that teaching is her second career, and that she used to practice family law. They begin kissing, but Jim, who recently lost his wife, says that he wants to take things more slowly. Lydia interprets this boundary as an

outright rejection of her advances and Jim leaves. The next day at school, Lydia (who has now altered her appearance and resembles more closely the Aunt she becomes in Gilead) calls Child Protective Services and reports Ryan's mother for being negligent with her child. Ryan is taken away from his mother, and Lydia and Jim do not speak again. In this episode, audiences are given the opportunity to view Lydia in terms of her own experience *and* how she is viewed by other characters. This allows for the possibility of gaining a deeper understanding (and perhaps even a degree of sympathy) for Aunt Lydia.

The way in which Lydia is viewed by other characters in the series is predominantly determined by her gender performance. More specifically, Lydia's Aunt gender performance qualifies the way in which she is perceived by others within Gilead. Outside of the Republic, in the time before Gilead was established, Lydia performs a gender that is starkly different to that which she performs after the fall of the United States of America's government. That gender, along with the Gileadean gender role of Aunt, is displayed to audiences of *The Handmaid's Tale* in Episode 8 of the series. The episode jumps between past and present—that is, a pre-Gileadean past in which Lydia is more "feminine", and a Gileadean present where she is more "masculine", allowing for the juxtaposition of the two genders. It also allows us to see what similarities there are between the "old" Lydia and the "new".

In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory", Judith Butler (1988:519) explains that

> gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures,

> movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self [Butler's emphasis].

Butler (1988:526) goes on to explain that these "stylized" and "repeated" acts are

> rarely, if ever, radically original. The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualised and reproduced as reality once again.

The "new" Lydia, who lives and works in Gilead, performs the Aunt gender role. This is the gender that audiences see Lydia performing from the first season of the series. It is, for the most part, the same gender that is performed by *The Handmaid's Tale* novel's Aunt Lydia. Significantly, though, the television series' version of the character presents a gender performance that is more nuanced. This is because in this format, audiences have the opportunity to witness Lydia from a more omniscient perspective than in the novel, where Offred's eyes are the lens through which readers perceive Gilead and those living in it. In the series, Lydia's gender performance is even, at times, ambiguous. The ambiguity of her gender performance in this iteration of her character, specifically as it relates to her complicity and complacency, will be discussed later in this chapter. Lydia's Aunt gender is characterized by a set of actions that are "stylized" by the Gileadean government. The repetition of those acts is also enforced by the regime. In Lydia's case, the "illusion of an abiding gendered self" that is presented to audiences throughout *The Handmaid's Tale* series (and in Season 3 specifically) is that of the Aunt. In the television series, much like in the novel, Aunts are characterized as a kind of amalgamation of a schoolmistress, warden, and nun: they are condescending to the women they are charged with overseeing; they are strict and ruthless in meting out punishment for disobedience and insubordination; and they are apparently ardently religious. Their religious fervour is applied to their work in order to justify the violent atrocities that are committed against the women, and particularly the Handmaids. Aunts are

known for their brown dresses, and for the fact that they are not allowed to marry or have children. They are also known for their privileges—they are the only women in Gileadean society who are allowed to read and write. This access to literacy leads to the last and most significant aspect of Aunthood: Aunts are known for their power.

Aunt Lydia is seen throughout the season wearing her brown dress and wielding the electric cattle prod she uses to discipline the Handmaids—the idea is that the Handmaids are made to *feel* like animals since they are *treated* like animals. She is often seen quoting from the Bible. In this way, Lydia embodies the qualities of an Aunt and carries out the duties entrusted to someone of her rank. This role that Aunt Lydia performs is indeed, as Butler notes, not original. It exists only because Gilead exists, and those who engineered the Gileadean social system constructed this set of behaviours by observing women in the time before Gilead and deciding which of those traits would serve Gilead's political agenda best. They have chosen traits like modesty, sternness, strength, religious commitment, and an inclination towards violence for their Aunts because these traits allow for the maintenance of Gilead's power structure among the women of Gileadean society. In this way, those who structured Gilead and its way of life constructed the accepted genders for women by picking out the aspects of the genders that existed in pre-Gileadean society that would serve them and their budding socio-political order most. This gender, that of the conscious performance of Aunt of Gilead, is what Lydia performs throughout *The Handmaid's Tale* series.

The "old" Lydia, the character who had not yet been exposed to the world of Gilead, performed a starkly different gender. In Episode 8, "Unfit", this gender is showcased. The difference between the Aunt gender role and the pre-Gileadean gender that Lydia displays is

made most apparent by Lydia's appearance—her hair and clothing are completely different to what Lydia looks like in Gilead. In the episode ("Unfit", 2019, 10:26), Lydia is shown in her fourth-grade classroom with Ryan. She wears an outfit that would never be seen in Gilead, which is shown in Figure 1 ("Unfit", 2019, 10:41): she wears straight leg pants, kitten-heeled pumps, and a loose white blouse. In Figure 2 ("Unfit", 2019, 12:19), audiences see that her hair is worn loose and styled, with the front section of hair twisted behind Lydia's head. She has visible highlights in her hair. Lydia's ears are pierced and she wears jewellery, including a necklace. In addition, Lydia is clearly wearing some makeup in this scene, most noticeably on her lips and cheeks.

Figure 1: "Lydia and Ryan in her classroom", directed by Mike Barker, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 2019.

Figure 2: "Lydia embraces traditionally 'feminine' beauty standards before Gilead's official inception", directed by Mike Barker, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 2019.

In Gilead, women are forbidden to wear pants of any kind—even the female children must wear skirts that fall well past their knees. Heeled shoes are reserved for Wives in Gilead, and most Gileadean women are only permitted to wear dresses (women do not wear blouses in Gilead). Most obviously, the Lydia from a pre-Gileadean past is not restricted in what colours she can or cannot wear. Women's hair is never worn down in Gilead, and the only jewellery that is permitted are wedding rings. Makeup is also prohibited. In this time in Lydia's life, before Gilead took over the United States of America, women are significantly freer in terms of choosing how to dress and how they choose to perform their genders outwardly. In this world, women have more choice regarding the clothes they want to wear, how they want to style their hair, and how much or how little makeup they prefer to use. These freedoms indicate that in the pre-Gileadean world, Lydia performs the gender of a woman who is free to make her own choices and to enjoy her individuality. While Lydia's attire in this scene is still, in a way, "delimited by the role [she] play[s]" (Banerjee, 2014:60) in society, it is regulated to a much lesser extent than when she is in Gilead. In other words, Lydia's gender performance in the United States of America is still governed by social and cultural expectations for someone who is designated as a "woman", but her adherence to these expectations is not monitored by formal governmental structures. In the same vein, it follows that, should she deviate from the codes of behaviour that are associated with her perceived gender, she would not be punished and/or prosecuted on a governmental or legal level in the United States of America as she would be in Gilead.

In the episode, Lydia is playing 20 Questions with Ryan while she waits for his mother, Noelle, to collect him from school. Before Noelle arrives, Principal Thorne comes past Lydia's classroom and is surprised to see that she is still there. Lydia explains that Noelle has not

been answering her phone calls, and she also tells Principal Thorne that Noelle packed only a packet of potato chips for Ryan's lunch. When Noelle finally arrives around 7pm, Ryan complains that he is hungry. Noelle tells him that they will stop at a drive-through and get something to eat on their way home. Ryan is still unhappy with this, stating that they had ordered McDonald's the night before. Lydia jumps into the conversation at this point, and invites the family for dinner at her house, where she has prepared chili. She tries to convince Noelle to agree, saying that "growing boys need more than burgers" ("Unfit", 2019, 12:29). This remark demonstrates that Lydia's personality is already ripe for receiving and perpetuating Gilead's ideals—she is already critical of what she deems to be "unfit mothers" who do not provide the best care for their children. Ann Dowd, who portrays the character of Lydia across all the seasons of the series, passes this remark with a hint of sarcasm in her voice and with a pinched smile directed at the character Noelle. Lydia's facial expressions can be seen in Figure 3 ("Unfit", 2019, 12:31). Noelle evidently picks up the criticism in Lydia's voice, but she accepts

Figure 3: "Lydia criticises Noelle for not feeding Ryan wholesome meals", directed by Mike Barker, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 2019.

the offer. Although the scene in Lydia's classroom has only taken place for about two minutes up until the point when Noelle arrives, Lydia, with her remarks, has made it clear that she is

critical of Noelle's parenting. These subtle criticisms pave the way for the character that comes to exist in Gilead as an Aunt, and who passes similar (although much more severe) judgement on women and their capacity and/or right to raise children. In this instance, Lydia's pre-Gileadean gender is similar to the Aunt gender that she comes to perform once the United States of America's government has fallen.

As the episode progresses, Lydia's relationship with Noelle and Ryan becomes more intimate and more familiar. She often sees the family outside of working hours, and she also invites them to spend Christmas with her at her house. During the festivities, Noelle presents Lydia with a gift, a makeup palette, which she gently applies to Lydia's face, saying that she wants Lydia to find "someone special" with whom she can share her life, because she has "so much love to give" ("Unfit", 2019, 26:12). Interestingly, when Lydia presents Ryan with a Christmas present, he replies, "Thank you, Aunt Lydia" ("Unfit", 2019, 24:51). Ryan's inclination to call Lydia "aunt" is significant in this context due to the retrospective nature of the episode—it foreshadows what Lydia will become, and it also highlights the differences between the two genders (that of the past, and that of the present, in Gilead) that Lydia performs in this episode. To clarify, "aunt", as Ryan calls Lydia, is indicative of a loving, caring, quasi-maternal relationship. There is a great deal of familiarity between Lydia and the boy, and a great deal of affection, too. Lydia beams at this, and it seems as though she loves Ryan very much. Aunt Lydia, however, although still deeply concerned with the welfare of children, is quite a different character. She is no longer nurturing and caring, especially not towards the women who have become Handmaids. She is much harder and much less sympathetic. It should be noted that, because Gilead's establishment is not distant in memory for those living in this world, it is very possible (and even likely) that Ryan's mother Noelle would have been forced to become a Handmaid. She is, after all, fertile, single, apparently "negligent" by Gilead's

standards, and she is an adulteress—she reveals to Lydia ("Unfit", 2019, 26:50) that she is in a relationship with a man who is married with two children. Lydia (both the Aunt version and the version that appears before Gilead) disapproves of this type of behaviour.

As has already been alluded to, Lydia's gender performance before the institution of Gilead was not free of behaviour that Gilead repudiates. Lydia tells Noelle that she was once married, but that it was a mistake ("Unfit", 2019, 13:52), implying that the marriage ended in divorce. This is an impossible outcome for marriages in Gilead—they are only ended if one party in the couple dies. Earlier in the series, in Season 2, Episode 5 (titled "Seeds"), Aunt Lydia admits to Serena-Joy, the Wife of Commander Waterford (whom June is stationed with for the first two seasons of the series) that she used to smoke in the "time before" (Atwood, 2010:20). Aunt Lydia catches Serena smoking on the balcony of her house, and encourages her to quit for the sake of her baby's health (of course, the baby is not biologically Serena's, but June's). She then tells Serena that she "knows quitting is very hard" ("Seeds", 2018, 15:34). Smoking, in Gilead, is ungodly behaviour—Serena has only acquired her cigarettes via illegal trade. Then again, most behaviour from pre-Gileadean life is considered ungodly: simply wearing makeup and considering the romantic prospects of a relationship with a man to whom she is not married makes the "old" Lydia a sinner. This does not stop her from passing judgement on others, though, as she does once in Gilead's service. In Gilead, however, Aunt Lydia's disapproval is externalised through brutal physical punishment and psychological abuse. Once again, this previous version of Lydia performs a gender that is not the same as, but which paves the way for, the gender she comes to perform as Aunt.

As Episode 8 progresses and Lydia becomes more and more involved with Ryan and Noelle, Lydia also furthers her relationship with Jim Thorne. Lydia and Jim go out together to celebrate New Year's Eve. They go to a crowded bar where loud music is playing. Again, Lydia's appearance signals just how different her pre-Gileadean gender is from her Aunt gender performance. Figure 4 ("Unfit", 2019, 28:24) below depicts the moment that Lydia walks into the bar, where she is shown wearing a low cut, knee-length black dress with a sparkly black jacket. She wears a silver necklace, and her hair is styled, this time with a curling iron. There is, as before, evidence that she is wearing makeup. This outfit, which is much less modest than the outfit

Figure 4: "Lydia nervously checks her appearance before meeting Jim", directed by Mike Barker, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 2019.

Lydia is first seen wearing in her classroom, is, accordingly, even less likely to be approved by someone living in Gilead. She is also noticeably self-conscious, and she checks her appearance in a mirror before going to greet Jim ("Unfit", 2019, 28:28). Apart from indicating her nervousness about being emotionally vulnerable with another person, her discomfort may also be interpreted as a sign that she is possibly uncomfortable with some of the aspects of the gender she performs here. The couple sit together, laughing and talking and drinking

champagne. In Gilead, drinking alcohol, like smoking, is strictly prohibited for women. Lydia opens up to Jim about her past, and she tells him that teaching is her second career; she once worked in family law ("Unfit", 2019, 29:24). She left that profession, however, because "[she] couldn't help as many children as [she] wanted to" ("Unfit", 2019, 29:30). Lydia says that the "system", as it was commonly known at the time when she practiced law, was very unreliable. The fact that Lydia worked in family law and that she reiterates her interest in the welfare of children reminds audiences of the extremes to which these passions are taken in a Gileadean future. Aunt Lydia very literally passes judgement and carries out punishment on those who are considered a threat to children (and to Gileadean ways of life more generally). Her work as an Aunt is as centrally concerned with children as it is with women—she must see to it that the women perform their roles and do not hinder the children they produce from having "good" lives with their Commander and Wife parents. At this point in their conversation, Jim compliments Lydia, saying, "I've never seen anyone so devoted. I've always admired you" ("Unfit", 2019, 29:41). This, as is the case with much of the action and dialogue dealing with Lydia's past in this episode, is deeply ironic, given the insight audiences have into Lydia's present life in Gilead. Her devotion remains, but it is far more aggressive and far more destructive in Gilead. She commits her life to serving Gilead's purposes, and she carries out her role with fervour. Additionally, it is strange for audiences to hear admiration being directed at Lydia. Jim's words take on a sinister quality in this scene. He praises her good qualities at the time, but he has no way of knowing how those initial qualities become warped and perverted in the Gileadean future. Lydia then exposes her more tender side, and she tells Jim, "I'm fond of you too" ("Unfit", 2019, 29:45). While there is undeniably a greater degree of emotional distance in Lydia's words than Jim's, it remains significant that Lydia appears to begin embracing the possibility of vulnerability and openness with another person, and with someone who she is potentially interested in as a romantic partner.

After singing karaoke together and embracing after the New Year countdown, Lydia and Jim go to Lydia's house. They begin kissing, and as the embrace becomes more passionate, Jim pulls away from Lydia. He tells her that the relationship is progressing too quickly for him, but that he would like to spend time with her again in the future ("Unfit", 2019, 46:10). Lydia is visibly embarrassed and shuts off from him entirely. The warmth with which she treated Jim becomes much cooler and, when he tells her that he would like to see her again, she replies with, "Yes, I'll see you at school" ("Unfit",2019, 46:30). Her implication is that she will only interact with Jim again on a professional basis, and he leaves without another look from Lydia. Once Jim is gone, Lydia unleashes the extent of her devastation—she cries and removes her makeup. She then smashes the mirror in her bathroom with her fists. The symbolic meaning of this action is significant. In this moment, after what Lydia has perceived to be irrevocable rejection, she withdraws into herself and rejects vanity. By smashing the mirror in which she sees her own reflection, she indicates, on a symbolic level, a great degree of self-hatred. Lydia refuses her self as something to be made vulnerable and to be made subject to desire; she renounces the material. Her insecurities cause her to shut off her emotions, and she does not venture into a mental space where she might consider that Jim's rejection is not absolute and eternal. It may be argued that this event, which is emphasised in the episode as a turning point for Lydia, is where her devolution truly begins, and where she—ashamed, angry, full of self-loathing—is best positioned to adopt the cruel, cold role of Gileadean Aunt.

At the end of the episode, when Lydia has apparently been rejected by Jim Thorne, Lydia's pre-Gileadean gender begins to undergo a dramatic change. The next time Lydia sees Jim, which happens to be at school, as Lydia stated, her appearance is markedly different. Overall, she appears far more severe, and far more like the Aunt Lydia she becomes once Gilead

takes over. In this scene, Lydia has changed her hairstyle—it is twisted back into a bun of sorts, much like what she is seen wearing in her role of Aunt. She wears much less makeup, so that it is hardly noticeable, and no jewellery, and her clothes are decidedly more modest. Instead of a blouse, she wears a long, dull green cardigan with pants. Figure 5 (“Unfit”, 2019, 38:51) illustrates this drastic alteration. This change in appearance signals a change in personality—since New

Figure 5: “Lydia’s appearance reflects a turning point in her character and history”, directed by Mike Barker, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 2019.

Year’s Eve, Lydia has evidently abandoned the way in which she once embraced and portrayed her femininity. Now, she chooses a more reserved look that is indicative of a more reserved, emotionally uninvolved character. By renouncing her once “feminine” appearance, Lydia is, in a way, beginning to unsex and unfeminise herself. By removing herself from her previous form of femininity, she distances herself from other women and their experiences. This is especially true in relation to Noelle (as will be discussed in the next paragraph). By retreating from her previous form of femininity, Lydia’s “masculinity” increases with the increase in her allegiance to masculinity and its inherent privileges, resulting in an increase in power—patriarchal power. In other words, in the wake of the emotional blow Lydia has suffered from Jim’s rejection, she is in a position that allows her to fully adopt an identity that

has been more subtly present up until this point in her history—cold, sexless spinster, and blatant agent of patriarchy. From this point in her history onwards, she wields her newly embraced "masculine" power in such a way that aligns with her own moral ideals. The change of appearance is not only indicative of a change in personality: it is also indicative of a change in gender performance. The gender that Lydia performs in this scene is not a *new* gender, however. Rather, it is a transitional gender. It is still rooted in the gender of a well-educated, opinionated woman who embraces norms for femininity at the time, but it paves the way for the much more aggressive gender of Aunt. In order for Lydia to someday become the Aunt that audiences encounter in *The Handmaid's Tale*, she needs to become a character who selfishly detaches from the needs and desires of others in order to protect her own ego. In the same way that Butler (1986:36) notes that "to be a woman is to become a woman; it is not a matter of acquiescing to a fixed ontological status, […] but rather an active process of appropriating, interpreting, and reinterpreting received cultural possibilities", Lydia's gender in this scene after New Year's Eve indicates a process of becoming for Lydia—of *becoming* an Aunt, an agent of patriarchy. The fact that this happens to Lydia can be read as an example of Butler's conviction that gender changes perpetually. Lydia reinterprets her cultural possibilities, and adapts to one which suits her frame of mind best. Because Lydia's love is repeatedly rejected (first, we can assume, by her husband, and then by Jim), she detaches emotionally from others. They cannot hurt her if she does not feel for them. This is the beginning of the way in which Aunt Lydia dissociates herself from the Handmaids in her treatment of them, once she begins serving the Republic of Gilead.

Lydia's actions on New Year's Eve further cement the change that has taken place in her characterization and in the trajectory of her gender performance. Lydia is being interviewed by an agent from Child Protective Services—she has reported Noelle, citing that Ryan "is

vulnerable to a corrupting influence" ("Unfit", 2019, 36:31). Jim, who is present for the interview, is evidently unhappy with this course of action, and he asks Lydia if she is certain it is necessary. She defends her actions by saying that she "is required by law to report moral weakness". During the interview, Lydia tells the agent that Ryan often comes to school in dirty clothes or without lunch. She also mentions that Noelle has been involved with multiple men during the time in which she has been involved with the family on a personal level. She takes care to note that one of the men is married with children of his own. Additionally, when the agent asks if Noelle goes to church, Lydia responds with "I've tried" ("Unfit", 2019, 36:42), implying that she has tried to encourage Noelle to embrace religion, but to no avail. Lydia expresses sentiments that are distinctly Gileadean in nature, although the regime does not yet, at that point, exist out in the open. When Noelle comes to the school to confront Lydia, she calls Lydia "a cold-hearted bitch" ("Unfit", 2019, 46:08), to which Lydia replies, "This is your fault, Noelle […]. I forgive you" ("Unfit", 2019, 46:11). Lydia has torn apart Ryan and Noelle's family, and this has been facilitated by the change in her gender: she has mentally removed herself from femininity and traits that she perceives to be "feminine"—sympathy, compassion, sensitivity—and is thus able to hurt other women (in this case, Noelle) without suffering too much from a troubled conscience. This response is also very reminiscent of what Aunt Lydia does in Gilead—she indicates that any hardships that befall a person come as a result of their own "moral weakness". She does not provide any indication that she recognises that she may have played a role in those hardships, and her response is imbued with an air of Christian self-righteousness. She further insists that the blame is to be placed purely on Noelle by offering Noelle her forgiveness—why would she offer it if nothing had been done to warrant it in the first place? Additionally, Lydia's offer of forgiveness, which functions as a cruel twist on the Christian imperative to forgive, seems to be a way for her to advocate for her own moral purity in contrast to that of those around her. Lydia also claims to be centrally concerned with the welfare of the child when she decides to report Noelle to

Child Protective Services. This, too, is what she is apparently centrally concerned with when she becomes an Aunt. Her desire to pass moral judgement on others is masked behind an apparent desire to do what is best for the children, and this excuse seems best suited for carrying out her agenda both within and before Gilead. Lydia's attitude in this scene is undeniably Gileadean, and is indicative of the shift in gender performance that ultimately allows Lydia to develop into the Aunt that pervades *The Handmaid's Tale* series. Put simply, this transitional gender exists as an almost tragic way in which to "dramatize monstrous creation" (Banerjee, 2014:57), where the totalitarian regime takes advantage of women's fears and insecurities in order to convince them to become involved in the very process which "treats fertile women solely as baby makers" (Banerjee, 2014:57).

We may assume that this pre-Gileadean gender performance (which encompasses the gender that Lydia performs before the events of New Year's Eve *and* the gender that begins to emerge after them) is significantly more unconscious than the Aunt gender performance. That is, Lydia may not consciously *realise* that she is making a gendered choice. Unlike in Gilead, women in the United States of America at the time enjoy much more agency and bodily autonomy than the women of Gilead do. Because women's lives are regulated and strictly monitored in Gilead, it follows that their gender performances are conscious. If they do not behave in accordance with Gilead's laws for women's behaviour, they face the possibility of being punished with violence and even death. In order to avoid this, the women are hypervigilant about the behaviour of other women and how their own behaviour compares to them. As Judith Butler (1988:522) notes, "as a strategy of survival, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences", and this could not be truer when gender is performed in a society such as Gilead. It is easy to see, then, why the Aunt gender role (which is largely the same in this iteration of Lydia's character as that of *The Handmaid's Tale* novel's Aunt

Lydia, and which was discussed extensively in the previous chapter) is consciously performed. The gender that Lydia performs in her past and which is showcased in Episode 8 of Season 3, however, is unconscious. This is because society is far less regulated and legislatively oppressive to women in the United States of America. This does not mean that American society is without its gender roles and traditional modes for embodying gender. In her book, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (1990), Sandra Bartky indicates that women are aware of what behaviours are acceptable for women in their culture and that they monitor their gender performances even in societies that claim to treat people of various genders more equally. She observes that

> it is women themselves who practice this discipline on and against their own bodies […]. The woman who checks her make-up half a dozen times a day to see if her foundation has caked or her mascara run, who worries that the wind or rain may spoil her hairdo, who looks frequently to see if her stockings have bagged at the ankle, or who, feeling fat, monitors everything she eats, has become, just as surely as the inmate of [Foucault's] Panopticon, a self-policing subject, a self committed to a relentless self-surveillance. This self-surveillance is a form of obedience to patriarchy. (Bartky, 1990:80)

This is the case for pre-Gileadean Lydia as well. Lydia (and every other Aunt) takes on a Foucauldian policing role (Foucault, 1982) in Gilead, in that they turn the panoptical vision onto women—they punish and scrutinise each other, and in so doing, they perpetuate their own punishment and scrutinisation. Lydia does indeed adhere to certain norms of femininity at the time, such as wearing heeled shoes, makeup, and jewellery, which implies, according to Bartky, that she is unconsciously indoctrinated to follow patriarchal standards of feminine behaviour. While she might not be actively restricted by laws that dictate her behaviour as a woman, her society is still governed by gendered codes of behaviour. In contrast to her time in Gilead, Lydia performs her gender of nurturing schoolteacher and emancipated American woman without making a concentrated effort to convey that idea to others. She performs the gender unconsciously by portraying her femininity in ways that are traditional in her specific socio-temporal locale.

Even after Lydia repudiates the softer, more vulnerable side of her nature and begins to transform into the Aunt version of her character that audiences come to know later on, her gender is still performed unconsciously. The transitional gender, as I have called it, is likely still not being performed with the intention of actively deceiving or of advocating for a particular political system. It is, rather, more of a defence mechanism which is later manipulated so as to conform with the expectations of the oppressive patriarchal regime known as the Republic of Gilead. To clarify, the Lydia of the past comes to the subconscious understanding that with less vulnerability (which she equates to femininity) comes more power (which she equates with masculinity). After Jim's request that they take the development of their romantic relationship more slowly, Lydia unconsciously slips into a state of mind that removes her from empathising with others. Instead, she hurts others before they have the chance to hurt her. The performance of this similar yet different gender is, as is the case with the gender that preceded it, not performed because of the presence of the "punitive consequences" of which Judith Butler speaks in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" (1988:522). This is because these kinds of consequences are significantly less likely to influence Lydia's physical safety and wellbeing, even if there are moral, ethical, or cultural consequences (such as Jim's evident displeasure with Lydia's decision to report Noelle to Child Protective Services, for example). Regardless, Lydia's performance of the initial pre-Gileadean gender that is displayed in Episode 8 and the transitional gender that comes after it are unconsciously performed—at the very least, they are performed far less consciously than the Aunt gender. Both versions of Lydia's pre-Gileadean gender are, as Butler notes, "tenuously constituted in time" (1999:179), and they act as unconsciously formed stepping-stones towards the gender that Lydia ultimately performs consciously as Aunt of Gilead.

Even in Lydia's pre-Gileadean life, she demonstrates a degree of complicity in the structures that oppress women. In her book, *Science, Gender, and History: The Fantastic in Mary Shelley and Margaret Atwood* (2014:56), Suparna Banerjee touches on the idea of women's complicity in their own oppression in the Gileadean context specifically. She notes that

> [t]he dystopian society that Atwood projects in *The Handmaid's Tale* [novel] […] shows women's complicity in their own victimhood and links it to their complacent non-involvement in sexual politics. The micro-politics of interpersonal relational dynamics between the genders are here mapped onto the macro-political level as the theocratic state confers absolute power over women to men of the upper classes. And through the devices of 'flashback' and epilogue, Atwood shows how the seeds of Gilead are being sown in contemporary patriarchal societies.

While Banerjee makes specific reference to the 1985 novel version of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the ideas she expresses here are just as relevant to the television version of the narrative. Her mention of flashbacks is especially relevant in the context of Episode 8 of Season 3 of the series. In the television series, Aunt Lydia displays the same kind of complicity in the subjugation of women as the version of the character that appears in the novel. Her complicity becomes more complicated in this episode, however, because audiences are given the opportunity to view Lydia's complicity in harming women on a structural level in her life *before* Gilead rose to power. The gross complicity that is demonstrated once she has earned the title of Aunt has its roots in Lydia's life as a woman living in the United States of America, at a time when women are perceived to be significantly freer than when they come under Gileadean control.

Lydia displays her complicity in the subjugation of women in various ways throughout Episode 8. At the beginning of the episode, in Gilead itself, Aunt Lydia leads a group of Handmaids in

a gathering known as Testifying. In it, the Handmaids sit in a circle. During this gathering, Ofmatthew, the Handmaid who is being bullied by the other Handmaids for reporting the Martha looking after June's daughter, is called to the centre of the circle, where she must confess to her sins. June brings it to Aunt Lydia's attention that Ofmatthew, who is pregnant, is unhappy to be with child again, stating specifically that "Ofmatthew doesn't want her baby" ("Unfit", 2019, 07:24). This is a grievous sin in Gilead. When Ofmatthew starts to cry during the Testifying, Aunt Lydia tells her "Ofmatthew, don't be a crybaby". The Handmaids then point at Ofmatthew in unison and chant "crybaby, crybaby, crybaby" ("Unfit", 2019, 09:27). In leading the women in this belittling ritual, Aunt Lydia proves her complicity in perpetuating the oppression suffered by Gileadean women. There are many examples of this kind of behaviour on Aunt Lydia's part throughout the seasons of the series, and her complicity at this stage in the narrative, much like her gender performance, remains the same as the complicity demonstrated by the character of Aunt Lydia that emerges in the novel version of *The Handmaid's Tale*. This begins to change in Episode 8, "Unfit". Here, we are given the opportunity to view Lydia as she is before Gilead's existence, and the way in which she is complicit in harming and subjugating women in her society at that time.

In Episode 8, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, audiences learn that Aunt Lydia's former name was Lydia Clements. It is interesting to note that, unlike many of the women living in Gilead in the time after this retrospective scene takes place, Lydia has kept her name. In the television series, Offred's name is revealed to be June, but in the novel version of the narrative, Offred's true name is never revealed. She explains that she "keep[s] the knowledge of [that] name like something hidden, some treasure [she will] come back to dig up, one day. [She] think[s] of [that] name as buried. [The] name has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that's survived from an unimaginably distant past" (Atwood, 2010:94). Theo

Finnigan (2011:448) notes that Offred obscures her name in order to "remind herself that she was once a 'valued' individual, not just a 'valuable' biological commodity". Some women in Gilead are so disempowered that they are stripped of their names, which often encompass one's identity. This does not happen to Lydia—she may be called *Aunt* Lydia in Gilead, but her name is still Lydia. This retention of name and of identity indicates the extreme power that Aunt Lydia enjoys. It is also representative of a certain continuity between the "old" Lydia (Lydia Clements) and the "new" Lydia (Aunt Lydia). By this I mean that the character is given a history, which deepens the treachery that Lydia commits against women in Gilead—she was once a relatively "normal" woman, who dressed and behaved in many of the same conventionally "feminine" ways that women of her time did, and she chooses to discard that seeming embracement of femininity in favour of reducing women's individuality to their biological potential for producing children. It may also be assumed that Lydia already had a complicated relationship with femininity and with discourses surrounding femininity in her life before Gilead, and that this likely laid the foundations for the Aunt role that Lydia later comes to embody. Aunt Lydia has power because she has kept her name, but her characterisation as villain is also solidified because of the retention of aspects of her former identity which have ultimately paved the way for her new identity to take shape.

In her classroom, when Lydia is waiting for Ryan's mother Noelle to collect him at school, she demonstrates her complicity in upholding patriarchal structures that harm women, as well as ideals about motherhood and what it means to be a "good" parent. When Noelle arrives and suggests that she and Ryan get a takeaway for dinner, Lydia's underhanded response is "Growing boys need more than burgers, don't you think?" ("Unfit", 2019, 12:29). I return to this quotation because, in saying this to Noelle, Lydia indicates her beliefs about parenthood, which are imbued with traditional patriarchal ideas—the mother ought to cook for her child,

and she ought to ensure that the child is receiving all the nutrients they need. In other words, all of the responsibility of raising a child is the mother's, and not the father's (whether he is present or absent, as in Ryan's father's case). Lydia's tactics of criticising Noelle's parenting without explicitly insulting her are a useful tool for reinforcing patriarchal ideals in Noelle and for making her feel guilty about not meeting those standards. It is also interesting that Lydia is concerned about the sustenance of Ryan, in his capacity as a male child. In other words, Lydia's concerns about what Ryan has to eat points to patriarchal ideas relating to boys and "proper" ways of feeding and raising them. The question that Lydia asks implies that Noelle is neglectful and that she does not look out for the wellbeing of her growing child. In addition, the fact that Lydia ends her criticism with the question, "don't you think?", forces Noelle to consider Lydia's point of view, and causes her to potentially doubt the way in which she is raising her son. In fact, this comment from Lydia likely deepens the guilt that Noelle possibly *already* feels for not being a "good enough" mother to her son. The continuation of this attitude is central to the role that Lydia plays later on in Gilead, where it is her duty to see that the welfare of Gileadean children is being upheld, and to punish anyone who, according to Gilead's understanding, is guilty of endangering a child—a crime which is, notably, what Agnes' Martha was charged with and executed for.

Although Noelle seems to be visibly bothered by Lydia's comments about the way she tends to Ryan's needs, she nonetheless embraces Lydia and gets to know her on a more personal basis. Later that evening, at Lydia's home, the two women sit together talking while Ryan eats the chili Lydia promised him. Conversation turns to Ryan and how Noelle thinks that she cannot give him the life she would like to. She says, "He deserves more. Better. […] But all he has is me" ("Unfit", 2019, 14:14). Lydia's response to this is, "You could be better" ("Unfit", 2019, 14:22). Noelle acknowledges Lydia's comment, but she does not react in an especially

warm way. The criticism in Lydia's words does not go unnoticed by Noelle, nor is it intended to go over the audience's head. Lydia repeatedly demonstrates her criticism for people who are "blessed" enough to have children (which is what Lydia tells Noelle—that Ryan is "so special" and that she is "so blessed" ("Unfit", 2019, 14:10)) who do not care for them in a way that Lydia approves of. She is especially critical of those she deems to be unfit mothers. Lydia is unsatisfied with Noelle's parenting, and she openly communicates that to Noelle instead of comforting her by insisting that she is doing the best she can with what she has to offer Ryan, and that that is enough. Lydia insists on judging Noelle and emphasizing traditional family values in her advice to Noelle. This is also evident when Noelle confides in Lydia and tells her that she has begun a relationship with a married man, who has children of his own. Lydia disapproves of this as well. While she does not say it out loud, the implication is that it is morally unacceptable to Lydia that Noelle and her partner violate the sanctity of marriage, and that she has, prior to the start of this particular relationship, exposed Ryan to the many other men that she has dated in the past. Lydia's disapproval stems from the fact that she is evidently still a religious woman, although less extreme than when she is in Gilead—she quotes Bible verses at the start of the episode when she is talking to Jim in her classroom. To Lydia, who holds traditional Christian values, this is a potentially damaging environment for a child. She views Noelle as someone who is morally "loose" and who is unfit to have the privilege of caring for a child as "special" as Ryan. This episode, as is implied in the title "Unfit", is concerned with inadequacy in a variety of forms: Lydia's failure to grow a meaningful romantic relationship with Jim in the time before Gilead, Ofmatthew's unwanted pregnancy in the Gileadean present, and Noelle's "bad" parenting.

The traditional Christian values that dominate Lydia's worldview are inherently patriarchal. By emphasizing these values to other women, Lydia effectively imposes the patriarchy on

them and shames them for behaving in ways that do not line up with these ideals. Alanna A. Callaway notes that the complicity shown by women in patriarchal societies is what allows patriarchal structures to flourish. According to Callaway (2008:68), "the success of the patriarchy depends on female self-regulation, which is masked as female collaboration, and the women of Gilead are trained to place their allegiance to men before their allegiance to women". Although Callaway is describing the conditions within Gilead specifically, her ideas are still relevant to the society that preceded the autocratic theocracy that forms the main setting of *The Handmaid's Tale*. This "female self-regulation", in the context of Episode 8, takes the form of Lydia frowning upon Noelle's way of life and the way in which she chooses to raise her son. Lydia regulates her own behaviour in multiple ways. At the beginning of the episode, she does this by closing her mind to the possibility that ways of life different to what she believes is morally correct are potentially valid paths to follow. She disagrees with Noelle's way of life and her parenting methods, and her response is to remain steadfast in her own opinions—she cannot force Noelle to change her ways, but she can demonstrate the "right" way to live to her. In doing this, Lydia resigns herself to patriarchal, gendered codes of behaviour that are embedded in religion. Even though Lydia does not forcefully regulate Noelle and her behaviour, she does attempt to regulate her psychologically. Her comments, suggestive questions, and body language (such as frowning, pursing her lips, or smiling wryly) are intended to embarrass and shame Noelle for her parenting. The aim of this is to coax Noelle to alter her methods so that they reflect more "traditional" values and images of motherhood. Lydia's "advice", which is indeed "masked" as a form of "collaboration", is not given from a place of genuine care for the wellbeing of Noelle and Ryan, nor is it given with the intent of helping them. Rather, Lydia's advice is given as a way in which to point out to Noelle what her faults are, and how she can improve her own gender performance so that she may be thought of as a good mother to her son.

Not long after the exchange at Lydia's house, the narrative redirects to the Gileadean present once again. Here, Aunt Lydia is shown sitting around a round table with two other Aunts, and they are assigning Handmaids to Commander families. The women discuss how the personalities of the given Handmaids may or may not suit the personalities of their possible host families, and they make their decisions about whom to place where. They also discuss how unfortunate it is that some women (like June, or as she is known in this episode, Ofjoseph, specifically) are blessed with the opportunity of having had multiple children, even though they are not "deserving" ("Unfit", 2019, 23:10-24:32). In this scene, the depths of Aunt Lydia's complicity in the subjugation of women are on display. She is actively involved in choosing Handmaids for specific families—it is her job to decide which man will rape a Handmaid, and which woman will hold her down while he does so. The decision made by the production team of the television series to include this scene is significant. Not only does it reinforce the obvious complicity that audiences have witnessed in Lydia right from the first season of the series (especially for those who had first read *The Handmaid's Tale* novel), it also shows audiences the roots of that complicity, which is continually masked as coming from a place of caring. The scene is situated in the middle of the episode—this means that audiences have caught a glimpse of Lydia's past life from the beginning of the episode, in which signs of her complicity have already begun to emerge. They are then taken back into the Gileadean present, where they can see how Lydia's complicity has evolved from a simple expression of disapproval and suggestion of other ways for women to live their lives into active involvement in orchestrating the structures that violently oppress them. Audiences are then thrust back into the past again, so that they might see how Lydia started to become the character they have grown so familiar with long before Gilead comes into the foreground of US politics. Aunt Lydia's attitude towards the Handmaids is very similar to the attitude she displays towards Noelle. She always encourages improvement (it is significant that she notes

how she has “tried with that one” (“Unfit”, 2019, 24:19) when she talks about June and the trouble she has made for Gileadean authorities throughout the preceding seasons of the series), as she is seen to encourage Noelle to “be better” in the glimpses that are offered into her past. Her emphasis on the idea that some people are more deserving than others of motherhood is also significant. In the previous scenes, Lydia has indicated in a much more subtle manner her belief that motherhood is a blessing, and she has also hinted at what she believes is the “right way” to care for a child. As has been stated elsewhere in this chapter, it is interesting to note that, because of her “immoral” lifestyle and “negligent” parenting style, Noelle might very well have become a Handmaid when Gilead took over. While Noelle’s life in the “time before” is already aligned with the future designation of Handmaid, Lydia’s is already aligned with that of the Aunt, a figure who oversees and manages the functions of women’s bodies, who has the rights to those bodies, as well as who is deserving of the blessed condition of parenthood.

In the final part of the episode, where audiences approach the end of their glimpse into Lydia’s past, her complicity in oppressing Noelle reaches its climax. The breaking point for Lydia comes after Jim’s apparent rejection of her sexual and romantic advances, once she smashes the bathroom mirror in her house with her fists (“Unfit”, 2019, 36:00). This action is symbolic in itself—as has been suggested, it indicates how Lydia renounces her self, how she closes herself off to others emotionally, and how she recedes into a place of power masked as altruism. This place of altruism is a place that is centrally concerned with the welfare of children and the repudiation of anyone who threatens Lydia’s sense of emotional security. Noelle, who has encouraged Lydia to embrace her womanliness and to open herself to the possibility of romance (which has ultimately failed), and who has also shown Lydia her deficiencies (as Lydia perceives them) in looking after her child, is Lydia’s first point of attack.

In fact, these actions could be understood as revenge against Noelle for pushing Lydia to embrace another form of femininity or feminine gender expression. Lydia tells an agent from Child Protective Services that Noelle is a danger to her child, citing that "the child is vulnerable to a corrupting influence" ("Unfit", 2019, 36:31). Both before and within Gilead, Lydia takes it upon herself to pass judgement on others and to decide who is or is not worthy of the blessing of having a child to care for. She catalyses the devastating separation between mother and child without thinking that she is in the wrong or that she has behaved irrationally. When Noelle confronts Lydia about what has happened, Lydia indicates her belief that Noelle should rightfully take the blame for her son being taken from her ("Unfit", 2019, 38:14). Once again, Lydia totally dismisses the notion that she could have had a part to play in the unfortunate events that unfold, or that she might be to blame for the unhappiness that is caused by it. She feels justified in her actions because Noelle's belief system does not align with her own, and must therefore be wrong. In this instance, Lydia has intentionally caused emotional harm to Ryan and Noelle simply because she knows that she has the power to do so—she knows that she holds some influence as a teacher and caretaker of children, and she uses this power to her own ends.

Lydia's complicity in the oppression of women *before* Gilead rises to power is here characterised by Simone de Beauvoir's notion of making oneself "object" (De Beauvoir, 1953:583). De Beauvoir notes that, when a woman makes herself object, "she is exercising a free activity. Therein is her original treason; the most docile, the most passive, is still a conscious being" (De Beauvoir, 1953:583). Lydia, too, makes a conscious decision to betray her fellow woman in favour of upholding inherently patriarchal modes of belief. Lydia is not coerced into reporting Noelle—she does this out of her own free will, and she does not appear to regret it either. This is an undeniable example of the way in which Lydia oppresses the

women in her society, even before Gilead rises to power. Once this happens, Lydia's complicity arguably becomes much more severe: her decisions harm the women not just on an emotional or psychological basis, but also on a physical one. In aiding and abetting the patriarchal structures of modern society (like government organisations such as Child Protective Services at the time in which the scene is set), Lydia demonstrates a loyalty to the male and the masculine. Further than that, she "act[s] more male and start[s] to usurp [men's] […] power" (Millsap-Spears, 2013:119). In other words, she oppresses Noelle in a "masculine" way, since Lydia equates having power with masculinity. About the kind of internalised misogyny that Lydia displays, Hélène Cixous asserts that "[m]en have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilise their immense strength against themselves" (Cixous, 1976:942). This is what happens to Lydia—she abandons the bond between women in favour of supporting and enforcing the structures that seek to disempower them. She has become a servant of the patriarchy, and she expresses her hatred for women through the power that she wields in both of her societies—Gilead, and the contemporary United States of America.

Earlier in this dissertation, it was asserted that complicity and complacency are concepts that are inextricable from one another when it comes to women's situation of subordination. Simone de Beauvoir (1953:583) implies her agreement with this idea when she says that "[m]an wants woman to be object" and that she "*makes* herself object" [De Beauvoir's emphasis], which amounts to a course of action that is chosen and conducted freely, since the woman is still a "conscious being". In other words, in agreeing to assist in the enforcement of gender roles and structures which oppress women, a woman confirms her attitude of complacency towards that oppression. In some ways, and under certain circumstances, complicity and complacency are ideas that cannot exist without each other. For instance,

complicity often implies complacency, and complacency generally becomes a form of complicity because of a subject's acceptance of their subjugated state. The two concepts, can, however, be viewed independently, too. A subject might be involved in (and therefore complicit) in enforcing a way of life that they disagree with internally, or they might be complacent about their own subordinated position because they do not know any other way, and can therefore not be labelled as complicit. Regardless, it is undeniable that, in the context of *The Handmaid's Tale* television series, complicity and complacency on the part of women are essential to upholding the structures of the Republic of Gilead. While the above understanding of complacency on the part of women is fundamental to the arguments I make in this dissertation, I have also included my own definition of what constitutes complacency. I take complacency to mean that a character is demonstrably satisfied with those Gileadean laws and customs which are centrally concerned with oppressing women and regulating their bodies. In order to identify whether or not a character is indeed complacent, their response to such laws and customs may be evaluated—in other words, if they demonstrate a blatant approval or enforcement of these values, or if they do or say nothing to oppose these values, the character may be considered to be complacent about the oppression of Gileadean women. This additional definition, used in conjunction with De Beauvoir's definition, serves to indicate the nuances and specificities of Lydia's complacency more clearly, as De Beauvoir's definition alone allows for an overly simplistic view of Lydia's complacency about the suffering of Gileadean women.[3] Using these definitions, it becomes possible to prove how

[3] Using De Beauvoir's definition alone, in this context, censors the centrality of the fact that Aunt Lydia lives in a dystopian universe under a regime that threatens her safety if she does not comply with its standards and laws. This means that, while she does exercise the free-will that De Beauvoir describes, Lydia's context is an important contributor to our understanding of *why* she conforms with Gileadean expectations. De Beauvoir's definition does not explicitly consider context in relation to women's complacency about their own suppression. By combining De Beauvoir's definition with my own, which I provided in the introduction to this dissertation, I take Lydia's context into account when I evaluate her complacency about the oppression that Gileadean women endure, while still acknowledging that Lydia uses her agency (a luxury that the majority of Gileadean women do not possess) to harm and suppress other women.

Lydia, in her life before Gilead *and* her life after Gilead's inception, is complacent about the oppression that Gileadean women suffer.

In Episode 8, "Unfit", Lydia demonstrates her complacency about the subjugation that women suffer in the time before Gilead and in the Gileadean present. At the start of the episode, when the Handmaids are being led in Testifying, Aunt Lydia's complacency is demonstrated. In carrying out her duties as Aunt, which entails leading the women in the chastising chants which characterise the act of Testifying, Aunt Lydia illustrates how she has made herself "object" to the Gileadean regime and the patriarchal ideals which underpin it. She chooses to act in accordance with the laws of Gilead even though it is evident that those laws (which, here, are embodied in the enforcement of the practice of Testifying) are intended to psychologically damage the Handmaids and force them to submit to Gileadean behavioural norms. Aunt Lydia facilitates the group shaming of Handmaids for their behaviour: in this case specifically, she leads the women in chastising June for being involved with the Martha that was executed for "endangering" June's biological child, and she also leads the women in denouncing Ofmatthew's sinful sentiments of displeasure about being pregnant for the fourth time. Earlier on in this chapter, an incident was described where Aunt Lydia tells Ofmatthew to stop being a "crybaby" ("Unfit", 2019, 09:27) during Testifying. Aunt Lydia shows no remorse or sympathy in this setting, and she carries out the Testifying session without seeming to consider how this may impact the women's minds. Since Aunt Lydia enforces the practice of Testifying and does not seem to be in disagreement with it and its implications, one can conclude that she is complacent about Gilead's various practices of oppressing women.

When the episode shifts its focus from the Gileadean present to Lydia's past in the United States of America, her complacency is demonstrated again. This time, however, her complacency is more subtle and subdued, and the consequences of her complacency, while still extremely damaging, are not as overtly related to subjugating women—instead, her complacency is masked behind the guise of doing what is best for someone who *relies* on the woman in question (Noelle), such as a child. Her complacency in this case, then, is more indirect. Nonetheless, the complacency that she displays in her life before becoming an Aunt of Gilead is what allows her to eventually display the complacency that audiences witness throughout the seasons of *The Handmaid's Tale* television series. Here, I return to a scene that was discussed earlier on in this chapter, where Lydia takes her complacency about the subjugation of women to new heights when she reports Noelle to Child Protective Services for her "negligent" parenting of her son Ryan. The structures that govern these kinds of actions against parents (and mothers more specifically) are inherently founded on patriarchal practices and ideals. In their paper, "Patriarchal Struggles and State Practices: A Feminist, Political-Economic View", Anna Zajicek and Toni Calasanti explain how, in a liberal feminist understanding, the state may be viewed as a structure which "represent[s] the interests of a dominant group" and that, "[s]ince men happen to be the powerful group, the state acts as the agent for their interests" (1998:506). In a radical feminist view, the state is depicted as "the oppressor itself" in that it is a "patriarchal power structure" (Zajicek, 1998:507). They go on to say that the state, as a social structure and institution, "not only serves men's interests but is itself inherently gendered" (Zajicek, 1998:507). Feminist thought points out that government institutions are formed as patriarchal structures and therefore act in the interests of men. So, in acting in conformity with government structures that are put in place in order to regulate the ways in which children are cared for in the United States of America, Lydia demonstrates that her allegiance is with patriarchal structures and the ideas that inform them. This means that she uses her influence as someone who can make judgements about the

parenting methods of others (and whose judgements will in all likelihood be taken seriously, given that she is a teacher whose primary concern ought to be the child's welfare) and enforces those social rules. Lydia goes out of her way to enforce the rules laid out by patriarchal structures because her own belief system aligns with the values which inform those rules, without considering the long-term effects that her decision may have on the family concerned.

Lydia's complacency about the way in which she represses Noelle in the time before Gilead is not only due to the fact that the government's standards of "acceptable" maternal behaviour align with her own. There are also, as Simone de Beauvoir notes, certain benefits for women who comply with patriarchal structures. De Beauvoir indicates that "[r]efusing to be the Other, refusing complicity with man, would mean renouncing all the advantages an alliance with the superior caste confers on [women]. Lord-man will materially protect liege-woman and will be in charge of justifying her existence" (De Beauvoir, 1953:10). Lydia, when she reports Noelle and brings about the separation of Noelle and Ryan's family, acts in compliance with patriarchal structures because there are benefits to be had: the government agent who has come to interview her applauds her for reporting the mishandling of the child, stating that he finds Lydia's case to be "accurate" and that "the correct steps [were] taken" ("Unfit", 2019, 46:11). He, too, serves the religious patriarchal structures that are central to American life in this fictional world. Lydia receives affirmation that she is indeed doing the "right thing" (which is here equal to doing the legal thing), and is therefore confident in her decision and the accompanying implications. Lydia is comforted to know that, in the eyes of the law, she has done the right thing, and this is, in this circumstance, what De Beauvoir means when she talks about "lord-man" (which, here, is represented by the patriarchal state) justifying the existence of "liege-woman". Lydia's complacency is strengthened by the fact that the state's

views align with her own, so she feels justified in acting with accordance with the law, regardless of the damaging effects such accordance may potentially have on those concerned.

In addition, Lydia's insistence that the decision of Child Protective Services to remove Ryan from his mother is Noelle's own fault indicates her complacency about her role in oppressing Noelle. She knows that this action will not only be damaging to Noelle, but also that Ryan may not in fact be better off in the foster care system. Earlier in the episode, when Lydia and Jim are celebrating New Year's Eve together, she implies that the system does not always serve the children in the end: she says that, as a judge, and being very involved in the system, she always lamented the fact that she "could not help as many children as [she] wanted to" ("Unfit", 2019, 46:11). She does note that the system (as it functions in the present, during that glimpse in her past) functions better since that sector has become privatised, but she cannot claim that this newer system ultimately preserves the wellbeing of the children in a way that is dramatically more effective than it did at the time when she was still working in law. Lydia does not consider the role that she may have played in bringing about these events—it appears as though she cannot fathom that she may have acted emotionally, or rashly. According to the evidence that is available to audiences onscreen, she does not consider that she is trying to punish Noelle for encouraging her to pursue more meaningful relationships, or that she might be punishing Noelle for not living in a way that Lydia deems to be morally correct. Lydia also does not consider that institutions such as Child Protective Services (and especially the iteration of the institution that appears in the television series, where blatantly religious, patriarchal ideals inform the criteria by which mothers are judged) might be fundamentally oppressive to women in Noelle's situation—women who are single mothers and working in jobs that demand a great deal of their time for disproportionate pay,

which means that their children might not always have new clothes, or very nutritionally diverse lunches to take with them to school. Lydia does nothing to understand this, and blindly conforms to what is expected of her "by law", as she explains in the episode ("Unfit", 2019, 36:33). She is therefore undeniably complacent about the subjugation suffered by women in the time before the rise of Gilead, which is indicative of the degree to which her complacency expands in the days that come after the Republic's institution.

These indications of Lydia's complacency are undeniable. However, Lydia's complacency is more complicated in the televisual iteration of her character than the written version audiences first meet in *The Handmaid's Tale* novel. This more complicated complacency is not made apparent in Episode 8 of Season 3, but there are other instances where the attitude is displayed. Only a few episodes before the episode that has been the focus of my discussion in this chapter, Aunt Lydia shows not only the audience, but also June, that she is in disagreement with the evolving misogyny of the Gileadean state. In Episode 6, "About" (2019), June accompanies her former Commander and his Wife to Washington D.C. in an effort to convince the Canadian government to return June's child, Nicole, who was smuggled over the border at June's request. Aunt Lydia goes with June in order to supervise her and in order to ensure that she does not stir up any trouble. Once in Washington, June and Aunt Lydia notice that the Handmaids wear scarves over their mouths. They wonder at this, but it is not until they arrive at the home of Commander Winslow, who is their host, that they discover why the Handmaids are dressed differently to those that come from June's district. These Handmaids have had their mouths clamped shut with what appear to be giant staples, and the scarves are worn to cover the gruesome markings. June is not the only one who is horrified to see this—Aunt Lydia is evidently shocked as well. Because June is in Washington, she is forced to wear the scarf for the sake of uniformity, even though she has not been

silenced in the way that the other Handmaids are. Aunt Lydia comes into her room to help her get ready to appear on television, and June asks Aunt Lydia, tearfully, “Do you want us all to be silenced?” (“About”, 2019, 42:25). Aunt Lydia is equally emotional when she responds, “No. No I don’t. […] [I]t has been a tiring trip. When I get tired, I try to think of all the good I could do in God’s world. If I can help just one person, one soul, that’s enough. I think of you, dear” (“About”, 2019, 42:32). The women hug each other, having shared this rare moment of tenderness together, and then Aunt Lydia helps June to fasten the scarf around her mouth. In this instance, it is significant that Aunt Lydia silences June (even if only because she has no choice but to do so), but she herself has no obligation to cover her face and remain silent. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that, here, Aunt Lydia’s complacency becomes more complex and nuanced than that of the Aunt Lydia of *The Handmaid’s Tale* novel.

This moment is one of various instances throughout the seasons of *The Handmaid’s Tale* television series in which Lydia demonstrates that she is not in total agreement with Gilead’s ways. These instances could be discussed as the analytical focus of a dissertation or similar document in its own right. For the sake of brevity (and because this chapter has paid special attention to Episode 8 of Season 3), I discuss this instance, which appears in Episode 6, of Aunt Lydia’s complex complacency only. In Episode 6, Aunt Lydia is evidently dissatisfied with the Gileadean rule (which is expected to be spread to all of the districts in Gilead) that physically silences women like Handmaids and Marthas. She cries when she and June talk about the possibility of all Gileadean women being silenced, and she openly states that this is not something she would like to see happen. She therefore demonstrates the criteria for determining if a character may be classified as *not* complacent about the subjugation suffered by women in Gilead: she openly disapproves of the practice of silencing women. Simone de

Beauvoir discusses this kind of behaviour in *The Second Sex* (1953), explaining that the woman "does not accept the destiny assigned to her […] by society; and yet she does not repudiate it completely" (De Beauvoir, 1953:349). In the context of this scene, Aunt Lydia does not accept the idea that all Gileadean women may someday be silenced—she does not even seem to want the Handmaids, whom she is tasked with training and subduing, to have their mouths sewn shut and silenced forever. Aunt Lydia does not accept this destiny, but she also makes no move to do something about it. She vaguely expresses that she does indeed feel a desire to help the women in June's situation as well as she can under the circumstances, but to Aunt Lydia, this might well mean compelling the women to accept Gileadean standards of behaviour, since it is better for their safety and wellbeing to accept these standards than rebel against them. It may be argued, then, that she is already too deeply involved in structuring the women's side of Gilead's enterprise to now change sides and rise against what is expected of her. However, I do not intend to explore this idea in this dissertation—I point it out for the purposes of indicating that, in the television version of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Aunt Lydia's complacency is not as simple as it appears to be to readers of the novel that inspired the series. Aunt Lydia demonstrates that she is not as complacent as the initial iteration of her character is, although she is still complicit in the oppression that women suffer in Gilead. She is not always happy with the ways in which Gileadean life work, but she does not do anything to change them.

The television version of Aunt Lydia demonstrates a much more nuanced and complex complacency regarding the subjugation of Gileadean women. In addition, it is likely that this complexity will continue to grow and develop, because the series writers show no signs of ending the story any time soon—Season 4 has already aired in South Africa, and Season 5 was released on the 14th of September 2022. There is thus room for Aunt Lydia's character

to evolve even further, and for her attitude towards her role in Gilead to change. Aunt Lydia's moral complexity can be infuriating and unsettling for audiences, but "not all writers of literature have […] clear moral aims. It may be for example that a writer has purposefully not determined precisely what we should make of or draw from the people and events they portray. It may be that something, a character perhaps, remains unresolved in a work of literary fiction" (Taylor, 2011:78). It appears that this is precisely what Atwood and Miller have set out to achieve. It might be argued that Lydia's complexity is what makes her a compelling, terrifying character—her apparent, flawed normalcy in the glimpse we are offered into her past makes the realisation of her transformation into a ruthless, cruel Aunt that much more interesting. Michel Martín del Campo (2017:64) is correct in noting that "[a] villain has goals, a history, and a past. The villains of today [that appear in popular television series and films] have their own paths which could easily have led them on the path of the hero, and audiences […] are just as enamoured by the fallen angels and the devils of fiction as they are the shining knights once standing front and centre in storytelling". Despised by audiences as she may be, Lydia is undeniably capable of capturing their attention. In any narrative, "[e]stablishing the initial innocence of [a character] […] marks a crucial, early phase in their character development, without which their subsequent devolution into equivocation, hypocrisy, guilt, and finally, despair, would remain incomprehensible" (Gimelli Martin, 2016:165). This is perhaps the most fundamental reason why characters like Aunt Lydia are so fascinating not only to audiences, but to academics as well. In spite of her moral complexities, the glimpse that we are allowed into her pain in the time before Gilead allows us to sympathise with the character, to an extent, and the slight shift in her complacency allows us to wonder how the Aunt Lydia character will develop and change in future seasons of the series.

Chapter 4: *The Testaments*

Aunt Lydia's future extends beyond the gaze of the television version of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Her story continues to unfold about sixteen years beyond the series' end (although we do not yet know exactly when that may be, given that the series is an ongoing enterprise at the time of writing this dissertation), in the sequel to the original Atwood novel—*The Testaments*. *The Testaments*, released in 2019, details what happens in the years after June's story has come to an end. In this novel, Atwood continues to develop the Gileadean world and some of the characters she first introduced to her readership in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Lydia is one of them. Arguably, Lydia is one of the most hated characters on the series,[4] but she does not meet her end in the televisual representation of the narrative. After all, as Atwood herself has noted, "[Lydia] is too good to kill" (Alter, 2019). By this, of course, Atwood means that Lydia's story and character are compelling. Characters like Lydia are not *simply* evil—they have origins, pre-existing characteristics that pave the way for them to devolve into the haunting, terrifying characters we come to know later on. This is what Atwood explores through Lydia in *The Testaments*, so a third of her latest novel is dedicated to exploring the workings of Lydia's mind and motivations more deeply.

Atwood has attested to the fact that there was an effort made on her part to avoid any "glaring inconsistencies" (Alter, 2019) between her sequel and the television series. She explains her role in the production of the television series further, saying, "I have influence but no power.

[4] In an interview with the New York Post, Ann Dowd, who has played Aunt Lydia in all five seasons of the televised version of *The Handmaid's Tale*, acknowledged what it was like for her to play "one of the most loathed TV characters in recent memory" (Starr, 2018). When asked if it was strange for her to play such a "hated" character, Dowd admitted that her character is "feared" and "disliked deeply" (Starr, 2018), both within the fictional Gileadean universe and in the real world.

There's a big difference. I'm not the person who can ultimately sign off on anything. So, I'm in communication with Bruce [Miller], and I say things like, 'You can't kill that person'" (Alter, 2019). Although there is clearly some degree of continuity between the three instalments of the Gilead story, there are also narrative discrepancies that should be noted. It must be clarified, however, that I do not attempt to produce an exhaustive list of such discrepancies. Rather, I will describe only a few such differences between the television version of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*. For one thing, Agnes (who is known as Hannah in the television series) is adopted by Commander Kyle and his Wife in *The Testaments*, but in *The Handmaid's Tale* television series, Hannah lives with the MacKenzies, another Commander family. Similarly, in the series, Baby Nicole is left in the care of June's husband Luke, who is in Canada. In *The Testaments*, Daisy (who is really the "stolen" Baby Nicole) explains that she was brought up by Neill and Melanie. As for Lydia herself, it is foregrounded in the television series that Lydia worked as a teacher in the time before the rise of Gilead, but in *The Testaments*, Lydia only briefly mentions that she served "two terms" (Atwood, 2019:171) as a schoolteacher. Further than that, she focuses on her career as a judge and as a legal representative. This is of course not necessarily a narrative inconsistency, but it is nonetheless interesting to take note of what is and is not explicitly indicated and emphasised in the television series and in Atwood's recent sequel. Atwood has, however, asserted that she has "left [the writers of the television series] a lot of blank wallpaper to draw on behind the scenes" (Alter, 2019), and she adds that it is "up to them how they get people across the border [to Canada] in their part of the plot" (Alter, 2019). This most recent version of Aunt Lydia, like the version audiences view onscreen, is an adaptation of Atwood's original character from her 1985 novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*. Although the Lydia of *The Testaments* is starkly different to the character that those who are familiar with the Gileadean universe have come to know and loathe, "it is usually at the very point of infidelity [to the "original" text's version of the character] that the most creative aspects of adaptation […] take place"

(Sanders, 2006:20). In citing this, I foreground the importance of *The Testaments*' ability to travel inside Lydia's mind, giving readers an intimate view into the character's decision making, history, and motivations. In *The Handmaid's Tale* novel and television series, Lydia is, rather unambiguously, a primary antagonist and enemy of women; the Lydia of Atwood's sequel, however, claims that she is the opposite, at least in spirit if not in practice.

In *The Testaments*, the narrative is constructed by alternating sections of three testimonies of women who all, at some point in time, lived in Gilead. These women include Agnes, who is revealed to be June's stolen daughter, Hannah, to whom audiences are first introduced in *The Handmaid's Tale* novel; Daisy, who audiences learn is the Baby Nicole introduced in the television series; and Aunt Lydia, who features in all three instalments of the Gilead sequence. Agnes and Daisy's testimonies are recorded as transcripts from what we assume to be court proceedings in the days after Gilead's fall. Lydia's testament, however, is recorded in the form of a manuscript that she wrote during her final months in Gilead. She has titled this manuscript *The Ardua Hall Holograph*, and she writes this document in 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 at Ardua Hall—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 and write, and to 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, 2019:170-172).

Lydia's motivations for working to enforce Gilead's laws among the female population is not explored in any significant depth in any of the other instalments of the Gilead story. Here, however, Lydia explains to her reader why she has done what she has done, and what she hopes to do in the future. She explains exactly 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 into her past and background before Gilead rose to power, and before she became an Aunt. Lydia reveals that, for many years, it has been her ambition to see Gilead destroyed. This dream is realised in *The Testaments*, and Agnes and Daisy play a fundamental role in seeing this reality actualised.

Agnes, who has been living with a Commander family for as long as she can remember, is terrified of the fate that awaits her: marriage and reproduction. In order to avoid this future, she decides to become an Aunt instead, since Aunts never marry or have children. In this way, she meets Aunt Lydia in person for the first time and begins her training at Ardua Hall. Once there, and once Agnes has begun to learn to read and write, Aunt Lydia begins secretly feeding information to Agnes about people in the high places of Gilead's power structure. At the same time, in Canada, Daisy's guardians, Neill and Melanie, are killed in a bombing incident outside their second-hand clothing shop, called The Clothes Hound. Daisy then learns that her guardians worked for the covert anti-Gilead resistance movement known as Mayday (which is mentioned in both the novel and television versions of *The Handmaid's Tale*). She then joins forces with Mayday and prepares to enter Gilead undercover so that she can retrieve a cache of documents from an unknown source within the Republic that has been feeding information to the resistance movement in Canada. Once inside Gilead, Daisy also finds herself at Ardua Hall, and it is no coincidence that she is placed with Agnes, who

is meant to help her adjust to Gileadean life. Eventually, the two young women learn the truth of their backgrounds, and discover not only that they are half-sisters, but that Daisy is the famed Baby Nicole that was smuggled out of Gilead by June's friend Emily so many years ago. The revelations, however, do not stop there. They also learn that Lydia is in fact the secret source who has been working with Mayday, and from whom Daisy must collect documents to carry over the border. Lydia ensured that the two young women were placed together so that they could carry out her plan as a team. Lydia constructs an escape plan for the two girls so that they can deliver her cache of documents to the Mayday operatives waiting for the information on the other side of the border, which ultimately results in the fall of Gilead and the emancipation of those living under its constraints.

In this iteration of her character, as in all the others, Lydia, (like fictional characters and real people), performs gender. Sometimes, it is not only one gender that she performs, but multiple genders. This is the case in *The Testaments*. To the world, Lydia performs the gender role of Gileadean Aunt. This gender performance is visible to readers of *The Handmaid's Tale* and audiences of *The Handmaid's Tale* series. Lydia also describes the kind of woman that she was before the inception of the Republic of Gilead. In a way, this functions as a description of another of Lydia's gender performances, although she does not necessarily mean to communicate it as such. Finally, within Gilead itself, and more specifically, within her private sanctum at Ardua Hall, Lydia performs another gender, one which mirrors the gender of her previous self but which is still distinct from it. This is the gender of a woman who longs for freedom—not only for herself, but for all other women as well. This gender is characterised by more than just wishful thinking. It is also characterised by action. These actions are diverse, and perhaps morally questionable—she behaves in compliance with Gilead's standards in order to subvert them later. This array of genders is

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. In other words, gender performances are unconscious if the subject does not actively align their behaviour with a particular designation, gendered or otherwise. Judith Butler (1999) posits that gender is generally performed unconsciously, but that it would be incorrect to assume that gender cannot be consciously performed.

In this chapter, I focus on two of the three genders that are performed by Lydia in *The Testaments*. These are the outwardly and consciously performed Aunt gender, and the inwardly, more unconsciously performed gender of a revolutionary woman who longs to see the end of the Republic of Gilead. I do not focus heavily on the gender that was performed before the rise of Gilead, because that gender is extremely similar to the gender performance that formed the focus of my discussion in the previous chapter. The two genders I do discuss, however, when considered simultaneously, shed light on the inner workings of Lydia's mind and her motivations for serving Gilead in order to destroy it when the time is right.

In *The Testaments*, Lydia continues to perform the Aunt gender that audiences have come to be so familiar with. They have watched this performance in the 1985 novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, as well as, more recently, the television adaptation of that novel. As in the other instalments of the story (and in the correlating iterations of the character Aunt Lydia), this novel's Lydia 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. This role is known to all Gileadean citizens; Agnes notes in her testament that "[t]his was what the Aunts did […]. They recorded. They waited. They used their information

to achieve goals known only to themselves. Their weapons were powerful but contaminating secrets […]. Secrets, lies, cunning, deceit—but the secrets, the lies, the cunning, and the deceit of others as well as their own" (Atwood, 2019:309). 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.

This iteration of Lydia makes clear that she is under no delusions as to 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). As I have mentioned elsewhere,[5] 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. This is something that readers and audiences have witnessed in *The Handmaid's Tale*—not only the novel, but the television series as well. Lydia often expresses sentiments that communicate that she is trying to give the Handmaids "the best chance they can have"—this is something

[5] Some of my discussion here builds on the mini-dissertation that was submitted as part of my Honours degree in 2020, titled "'The Iron Fist in a Woollen Mitten': Shifting Patterns of Women's Complicity and Complacency in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*".

she tells them directly in the original novel (Atwood, 2010:65) and in the second season of the television series ("Other Women", 2018, 38:20). 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 role is ordained by God and that it must be performed for the good of the human race. 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 in a way that is favourable to her own goals. In spite of her efforts in carrying out her work as secretively as possible, most members of Gileadean society are, however, not so naïve as to believe that there are not more sinister things happening behind the closed office doors of those in power—including Lydia. They might know vaguely what Lydia's work is, but they do not know precisely how she gets the job done.

This Aunt gender, which is essentially identical to the Aunt gender role that is performed by *The Handmaid's Tale* novel and television series' Aunt Lydia, 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, 1991:958). Here, Butler is describing The United States of America in the 1990s 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 result 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 tells her reader that she was aware of what the consequences would have been, had she elected not to become an Aunt. She explains that, when the US government was overthrown, she was at her place of work, 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 they are not alone—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 are also subjected to witnessing 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 an unspecified amount of time, Lydia is transferred to a hotel, where she bathes many times 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, of course, the preliminary garb of an Aunt—the signature brown dress that becomes emblematic of the role, as the 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),

> [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.[6] [Gheorghiu and Praisler's emphasis]

This notion of Lydia unfeminizing herself, which was discussed previously in this dissertation, in Chapter 3, is central to the mental shift that occurs within Lydia when she makes the decision to abandon her femininity and her pre-Gileadean moral codes in favour of pursuing power, and survival.

In this way, Lydia admits to her reader 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, 1991:958), and that any non-compliance with its restrictions results in "punishment" by means of "violence" (Butler, 1991:958). Lydia has, at the point when she makes her decision, already witnessed the ruthlessness and coldness of the regime that has overthrown the one she grew up with—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,

[6] 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 that that gender provides the subject with. 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.

then, made this choice (so she claims) as a matter of survival. What I emphasise, though, 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.

As has been mentioned, the consciously performed Aunt gender role is not the only gender that Lydia displays. Within her study, she performs another gender role. This gender role is an adaptation of the gender role she performed before Gilead took control of the United States of America. It is revolutionary, and it is informed by her deep resentment and hatred for the Gileadean state and those who run it. Inside her sanctum and the pages of her manuscript, *The Ardua Hall Holograph*, Lydia openly admits how much she desires the liberation of Gileadean women and the destruction of the system that oppresses them. She says that she fears "that all [her] efforts will prove futile, and Gilead will last for a thousand years" (Atwood, 2019:277). This gender is also focused on the goal of eventually catalysing the demise of the Republic she so despises. It is clear that Lydia—as she is when performing her hidden gender—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, are 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 that 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 privately and unconsciously performed, revolutionary gender is 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 that her close

family members often experienced run-ins with the law. 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 her, 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.

She reveals more of the details of her life before Gilead to Commander Judd once she has decided to serve the Republic as an Aunt (Atwood, 2019:171). Readers of *The Ardua Hall Holograph* learn that Lydia once had an abortion, and that she was married for a time, but that the relationship ended in divorce. She never had any other children. Here, she confirms that she did indeed work as a schoolteacher, as audiences saw in *The Handmaid's Tale* television series. Her career as a judge is also mentioned, 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. This is made visible in Episode 8 of Season 3 of the television series, which was discussed extensively in the previous chapter. 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 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 how she has come to be where she is, and why she has made certain choices. 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 into something 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). More specifically, she "keeps a distance" from her consciously performed Aunt gender using her more unconsciously performed gender of the revolutionary woman.

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. In "Speaking the Truth with Folk and Fairy Tales: The Power of the Powerless", Jack Zipes (2019:257) remarks that "art can be the power of the powerless only if its fire is continually stoked". 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, which, to them, would be the one that she believed in most, was that of the Aunt, which she performed so assiduously and 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" (1976:949), 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 within the walls of her private study at Ardua Hall, and by her own feminine text, *The Ardua Hall Holograph*. 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.

This duplicitous performance of the Aunt gender and the gender that lies behind it is central to Lydia’s success in destroying the Republic of Gilead for once and all. 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 regulations 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 plans 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 who 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. She does this through blackmail and espionage. 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.

The question of Aunt Lydia's complicity in the oppression of Gileadean women is fairly straightforward in the previous two iterations of her character—those of *The Handmaid's Tale* novel and television series. However, in *The Testaments*, this question becomes significantly more complicated. Lydia, during her time in Gilead, has played a major role in enforcing Gileadean laws and customs, predominantly at the expense of the women in her society. She has no delusions about this role—she knows that she has been complicit in their suffering, and she knows exactly how she has demonstrated that complicity. She acknowledges this at the very beginning of her testament. She indicates that, according to Gileadean ideology, "[t]he corrupt and blood-smeared fingerprints of the past must be wiped away to create a clean space for the morally pure generation that is […] about to arrive" (Atwood, 2019:4). She muses on this idea, recognising that "among these bloody fingerprints are those made by ourselves, and these can't be wiped away so easily" (Atwood, 2019:4). She then makes the following confession: "Over the years I've buried a lot of bones; now I'm inclined to dig them up again—if only for your edification, my unknown reader" (Atwood, 2019:4). At this stage in the timeline, Lydia's involvement with the Handmaids and their training is far less direct and far less personal than what is observed in the original novel and television series. Rather, she is mainly involved in their oppression on a structural level. Nonetheless, she is involved, and she is aware of the implications of that fact. Lydia, in her musings to her unknown reader, admits that she has sabotaged and harmed many people in her quest for power and survival. She knows to what extent she has been complicit and actively involved in the suffering and

subjugation of others. For Lydia, "[s]elf-preservation takes precedence over love" (Callaway, 2008:44), and further, it takes precedence over any emotion that stems from love as well—including compassion and sympathy.

It is as a result of Lydia's cooperation with the Republic of Gilead that she is arguably the most powerful woman in Gilead: she is allowed to read and write, she is privy to sensitive government information, and she also possesses a significant cache of knowledge relating to the private lives of those in power that has been acquired in underhanded ways, including (but not limited to) blackmail and extortion. Atwood herself discussed this aspect of Lydia's complicity in an interview with Alexandra Alter (2019), explaining that, in order to climb in rank in a totalitarian state, one must either be "a true believer from the beginning […] or […] an opportunist". Atwood continues this idea, saying that it can also occur as a result of "fear, or it can be a combination of all of [these things]" (Alter, 2019). Atwood notes that "Aunt Lydia's always been a climber, so she climbed up. She's not easily disturbed, but she's not a true believer […]. [S]he realises the power of having dirt on people that [is not revealed] publicly" (Alter, 2019). She also has access to technology like cameras and microdots, as readers learn that Lydia has installed various cameras around Ardua Hall in order to spy on her enemies (Atwood, 2019:5). The microdots are used to communicate with Mayday operatives in Canada (Atwood, 2019:140). In *The Testaments*, Lydia's pre-Gilead trait of being a "climber" (Alter, 2019) remains central to her character (and gender performance) once Gilead comes into power. It must be noted that Lydia's opportunism casts doubt on the sincerity with which she claims to pursue her goal of destroying Gilead and restoring women's rights. In spite of this, it is clear that, once she is established in her position of Head Aunt, she enjoys a level of power that she does not possess in either of the other two iterations of

her character. Here, Lydia is a "legend" (Atwood, 2019:32), and she explains the reach of her power to her reader. She says,

> I am […] alive, but more than alive, dead but more than dead. I'm a framed head that hangs at the back of classrooms, of the girls exalted enough to have classrooms: grimly smiling, silently admonishing. I'm a bugaboo used to frighten small children […]. I'm also a model of moral perfection to be emulated […] and a judge and arbiter in the misty inquisition of the imagination […]. I've become swollen with power, true, but also nebulous with it—formless, shape-shifting. I am everywhere and nowhere: even in the minds of the Commanders I cast an unsettling shadow (Atwood, 2019:32).

Lydia would not enjoy the privileges of her power without having been complicit in the oppression of other women in Gilead. Her influence is not only felt by the women of her society, but by some of the men, too, as she notes here. Lydia exemplifies the idea that women's use of power can be just as destructive as men's. In this way, she becomes an embodiment of Amy Allen's (1998:31) assertion that "[w]omen's use of power is not necessarily benevolent; [they] are not unable or unwilling to use [their] power to hurt others simply because [they] are women". Allen goes on to say that some women "play an integral role […] in the subordination of others" and that women find themselves in "complex and multifarious power relations […] wherein they can be both dominated and empowered at the same time and in the context of the same norm, institution, or practice" (Allen, 1998:31). This is, of course, the way in which Lydia lives—she uses her power (outwardly, at least) to the detriment of other women. She also uses her power in order to bolster the Gileadean state. This further empowers her, in that she is rewarded with the privilege of utilising her literacy and that she is furnished with an impressive amount of influence. However, Lydia's power simultaneously dominates her by limiting what she can and cannot do, and how she can openly exercise her agency. Lydia uses the fact that the regime "needs [her]" (Atwood, 2019:62) in order to "control the women's side of their enterprise" (Atwood, 2019:62), thus

maximising her potential benefits from a system that would otherwise denigrate and destroy her.

While Lydia does undoubtedly use the power that she has obtained through her complicity for the purpose of suppressing the Handmaids and other women in Gileadean society, she also foregrounds the idea that she has only been complicit in this way in order to secure her own safety. This is, according to Graciela Hierro (1994:176), an aspect of patriarchal power that cannot be ignored because "the biggest obstacle for understanding it is the intensity of the desire to possess it. In the majority of people this desire stems not so much from a positive love of power but from fear that without it they will not be safe or they will be impotent". This is relevant to Lydia's situation, especially seeing as she is a woman living under a misogynist regime. Lydia mentions that she "put on" (Atwood, 2019:150) the brown garb of an Aunt after her time in the Thank Tank. This is an indication of the conscious performance of the Aunt gender role that she displays, but it is also an indication of the motivation for Lydia's choice: she realises that, if she does not agree to support Gilead in its ambitions of suppressing women, her own welfare could be in jeopardy. She follows her statement that she "put on" the brown dress with the rhetorical question, "What else should I have done?" (Atwood, 2019:150). The implication, then, is that she adopted the role of Aunt as a mechanism of self-defence. In Lydia's case, more so than those of other women living in Gilead,

> [i]t is not simply that [she] [accepts] [her] position […] because [she] [has] no other option. Indeed, if [she] did this would not, strictly speaking, be a case of complicity. Complicity implies the ability to do otherwise […]. Complicity is […] distinctive in being a form of unfreedom that is reinforced and perpetuated by unfree agents *themselves*, even if they are not the initial cause of this unfreedom [Knowles' emphasis] (Knowles, 2019:246).

Lydia embraces the complicity that is inherent to the role of Aunt as a means of escaping oppression, and yet, in so doing, she reinforces the fact that she is still oppressed, even

though her situation is significantly less violent and restrictive than that of Handmaids, Wives, and other Gileadean women.

Lydia also emphasises that her complicity functions as a means to the end of seeing the Republic of Gilead destroyed. In the novel, Daisy expresses that, when she was younger, she often wondered "[w]hat sort of people could be on the side of Gilead and not be some kind of monsters[.] Especially female people" (Atwood, 2019:46). Lydia herself expresses very similar sentiments, when she recalls her conversations with her fellow female prisoners at the stadium where the women were taken shortly after the United States of America's government was overthrown. When they witness a group of women dressed in brown robes participating in the executions of some of the women who had declined to participate in Gilead's new society, Lydia proclaims that they are "monsters" (Atwood, 2019:144). This is, of course, deeply ironic, given the fact that Lydia not only becomes one such "monster", but also because she is so effective in her role that she eventually comes to be the most influential woman within the social designation of Aunt. Clearly, then, Lydia consciously alters her mindset to fit the image of Aunt, and in order to ensure her own safety—not because she has faith in the correctness of Gilead's values and ideals. This does not, however, detract from the monstrous state of Aunthood and what its social and moral implications are. Additionally, Lydia claims that her transition to Aunt is focused on retributive justice. When she is in the Thank Tank, after a particularly brutal beating by the Sons of Jacob, she addresses the men in her mind and promises herself, "I will get you back for this. I don't care how long it takes or how much shit I have to eat in the meantime, but I will do it" (Atwood, 2019:149). This sentiment could be considered a possible seed that eventually grows into Lydia's goal of dismantling the Republic. Lydia is dedicated, from the beginning, it seems, to reclaiming her power from the regime that has stolen it from her. This begins as a selfish

enterprise, in that it serves only her own interests, but, over the years, Lydia's goal evolves into what she expresses in *The Testaments*—to see Gilead's disappearance from the earth. For Lydia, who is the paradigm of women's complicity in their own oppression, "passivity serves an enterprise, and she makes her weakness the instrumentality of her power; since she is not allowed to attack openly, she has to depend on stratagem and calculation; and it is to her advantage to seem to be freely given [to the men who dominate her]" (De Beauvoir, 1953:354).

While it is true that Lydia is complicit in the suffering of other women in Gilead because she fears for her own life and because she wishes to bring about the destruction of the regime, it should also be noted that this complicity is arguably more serious than those complicities exhibited by the Lydias of *The Handmaid's Tale* television series and novel. This is because the complicity of *The Testaments*' Lydia exists in spite of her resentment for and hatred towards the Gileadean state. She does not believe in the values that form the foundations of Gileadean ideology, yet she performs her function as an Aunt anyway. She knowingly and willingly harms other women in her society in the name of Gilead and Gileadean values, values which she does not find any merit in herself. It is true that Lydia may not have many other options, and that she acts this way in order to secure her own safety, but the fact remains that Lydia puts her own needs before those of thousands of other women. Her complicity in this novel is, in this respect, different to those that are illustrated in the television series and in the original novel, but it is the very presence of the complicity that must be emphasised. That is, however good Lydia claims her intentions are for serving Gilead in order to destroy it, her complicity remains problematic and morally questionable. Lydia knows this. She asks her reader if having good intentions is "ever a convincing excuse when there's blood on the carpet" (Atwood, 2019:111). She confesses, "I meant well too […]. I meant it for

the best, or for the best available, which is not the same thing. Still, think how much worse it could have been if not for me" (Atwood, 2019:11). Lydia also admits that she toys with this idea in private, and sometimes finds that it is "bullshit" (Atwood, 2019:111). Alternatively, she sometimes "pat[s] [her]self on the back" (Atwood, 2019:111) for what she is working towards, regardless of her methods. Lydia vacillates between self-blame and self-justification, highlighting just how conflicted she is about the role she plays in Gileadean society.

In *The Testaments*, Aunt Lydia continues to offer herself up as "prey" to the men that control her, and she also keeps up the act that she is "making herself object" (De Beauvoir, 1953:583) to them. Here, however, Lydia is, in the mode of Simone de Beauvoir's (1953:646) understanding, an "intellectual", in that she "knows that she is offering herself" and that "she knows that she is a conscious being, a subject" (De Beauvoir, 1953:646). Lydia knows that she must harm women in order to uphold Gileadean standards and codes of behaviour. She dons a mask of devoutness and ardent belief in the regime, making sure that her performance is believable and effective in securing the power she desires and the physical safety she needs. Lydia may be understood as an example of De Beauvoir's (1953:576) conviction that it is a woman's objective "to decide between an evil and a lesser evil, between a present good and a greater good to come, to have to define for herself what is defeat and what is victory—all [of which] [involve] terrible risks". Lydia evidently decides that becoming an Aunt and working to amass enough power, influence, and secrets in order to eventually destroy the Gileadean regime later on is a far lesser evil than the role that she must play in order for these events to be brought about. She chooses to work for what she believes is the greater good, even though numerous people are harmed and killed along the way.

Although Lydia's complicity remains constant in each of the three iterations of her character, the same cannot be said of her complacency about the oppression suffered by Gileadean women. For the purposes of this dissertation, I have taken complacency to mean demonstrable satisfaction with Gilead's misogynist laws and customs, which may be indicated by a character's inaction in response to these customs, or by a blatant approval and laudation of Gilead's teachings. In *The Testaments*, Aunt Lydia is decidedly *not* complacent about the injustices suffered by the women around her. Further, she is not complacent about her role in that suffering, either. Lydia knows that she has done many morally dubious and treacherous things since the United States of America's government was overthrown by the Sons of Jacob. In fact, one of the first things that Lydia does in her testament is to admit that she is writing this manuscript, *The Ardua Hall Holograph*, in order to explain herself, so that those who live after the fall of the Republic might understand her choices and actions. 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.[7] 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.

Once Lydia confides the hiding place of her manuscript to her reader, she proclaims,

[7] This is an idea that I have briefly touched on elsewhere, in the mini-dissertation (Weiss, 2020) completed in partial fulfillment of my Honours degree.

> I have chosen my title advisedly, for what else am I doing here but defending my life? The life I have led. The life—I've told myself—I had no choice but to lead. Once, before the advent of the present regime, I gave no thought to a defence of my life. […] I'd assumed I was living virtuously; I'd assumed my virtue would be moderately applauded (Atwood, 2019:36).

This, of course, indicates Lydia's feelings of shame regarding her actions in choosing to become an Aunt and in perpetuating Gileadean ways of life. This feeling could not rightfully be called regret, as Lydia's general attitude is that she chose to serve women at large by oppressing a group of them in her line of duty. Thus, she seeks to plead with her reader to have compassion for her situation and to try to understand her position. The fact that Lydia does not blindly defend her actions without indicating that she is aware of their moral implications is enough to conclude that she is not complacent about her role in subjugating women in Gilead. Lydia admits that she has told herself that her choices could not have been avoided, and she implies that this is merely something she tells herself in order to help mitigate her feelings of guilt. Nonetheless, she is evidently aware of the moral severity of her choices during her time in Gilead.

One of the most significant factors contributing to Lydia's non-complacency in this part of the Gilead story is the fact that she does not believe in Gilead's cause. She recalls how she took stock of the other women selected by Commander Judd to become the Founding Aunts of Gilead—Vidala, Elizabeth, and Helena—at the regime's inception. Early on, Lydia says that she knew that she needed to establish herself as the "alpha hen" (Atwood, 2019:177), and that she "had an advantage" (Atwood, 2019:177) over the others. This advantage was the fact that she "was not blinded by ideology", which "would give [her] a flexibility [the others] lacked" (Atwood, 2019:177). Lydia admits that her participation in the regime is purely practical, and not based on faith or loyalty to a cause. In other words, Lydia stands to benefit

from working as an Aunt because she serves herself (and later, in an indirect way, the female population of Gilead at large) and not the ideas that inform the regime that employ her. In this way, Lydia has the opportunity to amass advantages over the other Aunts and over the men in power because she "rejects the deceptions [they] [offer]" (De Beauvoir, 1953:594). Lydia exemplifies De Beauvoir's notion that, "[i]n the upper classes[,] women are eager accomplices of their masters because they stand to profit from the benefits provided" (De Beauvoir, 1953:594). Indeed, Lydia does participate in the masculine enterprise of legislatively and systematically oppressing women because she knows that her own well-being will be protected, but, at the same time, she is aware of the implications of that choice and she is not deluded by the visions of moral purity that Gilead imposes on her and expects her to perpetuate. She rejects (privately, at least) the façade that Gilead turns to the world, and instead focuses her energy on plotting the regime's demise when she deems the time to be right.

It must be noted, however, that Lydia did at one time *almost* believe the Gileadean ideologies that enveloped her new life. Towards the end of the novel, Lydia tells Agnes, Agnes's friend Becka, and Daisy that "[t]he aims of Gilead at the outset were pure and noble […] [b]ut they have been subverted and sullied by the selfish and the power-mad" (Atwood, 2019:337). Lydia expands on this same idea earlier on in the novel with the following confession:

> Did I hate the structure we were concocting? On some level, yes: it was a betrayal of everything we'd been taught in our former lives, and all that we'd achieved. Was I proud of what we managed to accomplish, despite the limitations? Also, on some level, yes. Things are never simple. For a time I almost believed what I understood I was supposed to believe. I numbered myself among the faithful for the same reason that many in Gilead did: because it was less dangerous. What good is it to throw yourself in front of a steamroller out of moral principles and then be crushed flat like a sock emptied of its foot? Better to fade into the crowd, the piously praising, unctuous, hate-mongering crowd. Better to hurl rocks than to have them hurled at you. Or better for your chances of staying alive. They knew that so well, the architects of Gilead. Their kind has always known that. (Atwood, 2019:178)

In this way, Lydia echoes Simone de Beauvoir's sentiment that "it is more comfortable to submit to blind enslavement [by men] than to work for liberation" (De Beauvoir, 1953:269). Lydia chooses to be complicit in women's oppression in the name of Gilead because this option ensures her own safety. However, she does not genuinely laud Gilead's activities and teachings in any way in this novel, and particularly in *The Ardua Hall Holograph*. While it is unclear which part of Gilead's original dogma seemed "noble" to Lydia at the regime's outset, she does, in fact, confide to her reader that her "larger fear" is "that all [her] efforts will prove futile, and Gilead will last a thousand years" (Atwood, 2019:277). It is because of this fear that Lydia writes her manuscript and records her activities in her final months as Head Aunt. It is because of this fear that she secretly works towards dismantling Gilead. Simone de Beauvoir (1953:595) asserts that women "must reject the limitations of their situation and seek to open the road of the future. Resignedness is only abdication and flight, there is no other way out for woman than to work for her liberation". Lydia appears to have adopted this strategy as well. The Lydia of *The Testaments*, though obedient and devout on the surface, spends years of her Gileadean life working towards that liberation, cementing her position as an iteration of the character that is decidedly not complacent about women's oppression within the Republic.

Lydia's complacency is not only determined by her negative attitude towards the state. Her actions play a key role in this as well. Lydia does indeed collect information and communicate it to Mayday across the border in aid of her long-term plans, but there are ways in which she attempts to help women in Gilead in real time. One such example is relevant to a friend of Agnes's, called Becka. Becka, we are told, has been friends with Agnes since their days at school. Additionally, Becka is deathly afraid of marriage and of men more generally, even

going so far as to slash her wrists with a pair of secateurs in order to avoid having to be married. Dr Grove, Becka's father (that is, the man who performs so-called fatherly duties, since he is not biologically Becka's father) is a respected dentist in their specific district. He is also a paedophile. Agnes recounts how the dentist molested her as she sat in his chair during a dentist appointment one day (Atwood, 2019:96). Dr Grove subjected many of his patients to this treatment, a fact that Lydia admits that she was aware of for a long time. Lydia has planted cameras and microphones all over Gilead, including the dentist's office and the residences of the Aunts. Despite having collected secretly taken photographs of Dr Grove committing these acts for years, she explains that she could not bring the dentist to justice, since the testimonies of women and girls would not be believed in Gilead—according to Lydia, even the testimonies of four grown women are not enough to stand against the testimony of one man (Atwood, 2019:252). However, once Lydia learns that Becka was sexually abused by Dr Grove for years during her childhood, resulting in her pathological aversion to marriage and to men, she decides that his actions "demanded retribution" (Atwood, 2019:252). Lydia declares, "once a judge, always a judge" (Atwood, 2019:253), and she begins devising a plan for Dr Grove to pay for what he has done. Ultimately, Lydia convinces one of the founding Aunts, Aunt Elizabeth, to accuse Dr Grove of attempting to rape her while in the dentist's chair. The encounter is secretly recorded on tape by Lydia, and Dr Grove meets his end at a Particicution. This is a Gileadean ceremony of execution in which all of the Handmaids in the district beat the offender to death.

Lydia, here, takes action against a man who deprives girls of the little dignity they have to enjoy in Gilead, and this is key in affirming Lydia's non-complacency surrounding the oppression of Gileadean women. It is, however, somewhat unclear whether Lydia punishes Dr Grove because his molestation has caused Becka to resent marriage and men—

cornerstones of a Gileadean way of life—or if Lydia simply wants retribution for Becka as a person and as someone who was abused in her childhood, regardless of the effect that this abuse had on her views on marriage in adulthood. Lydia, in her manuscript, does not imply that her intervention had anything to do with Becka's aversion to marriage and men, but that she felt that Dr Grove ought to be brought to justice after years of witnessing his crimes. In her interactions with other Aunts or Supplicants (Aunts-in-training), Lydia often cites the idea that it is an Aunt's responsibility to "help women and girls" (Atwood, 2019:337). This is what Lydia aims to do when she sets Dr Grove on the path of his downfall. This idea is, of course, interpreted to mean something different to the Aunts at face value—in other words, Aunts should "help women and girls" by enforcing Gileadean customs and values on them and ensuring that they behave acceptably for women of their various stations. To Lydia, however, it seems to mean something different, in certain circumstances, at any rate. Lydia has here aimed to help Becka and Dr Grove's other victims by punishing him for his crimes and eliminating him from their society. The morality of this course of action is perhaps questionable, but then the question of morality is something that is infinitely hazy in Gilead. In Lydia's case, we might refer to Andrea Nicki's (2001:98) comment that

> [s]everal feminists […] have referred to the inevitability of 'dirty hands' in moral endeavour, where one is not purely an oppressed but also an oppressor. Sometimes the best one can do is to choose the least harmful option and, after acting, to leave the situation with slimy feelings of regret for having to cause harm at all.

The moral implications of this statement in relation to Lydia's actions are severe—it is therefore necessary that I clarify my intention to engage with Nicki's statement more figuratively than literally. In *The Testaments*, Lydia is simultaneously oppressor and oppressed. She is oppressed because she is a woman who is appointed to certain duties and allocated certain roles because of her sex and perceived gender. She is an oppressor because she uses the power she has obtained in this role in order to harm

other women and anyone else who offends her or gets in her way. It is possible that Lydia "oppresses" Dr Grove by causing his death based on a false accusation. It is also possible that Lydia "dirties her hands" by oppressing women as part of her job as an Aunt for the state. Here, it appears, Lydia has used her own discretion in deciding to choose the "lesser evil" if it serves the "greater good". To employ Nicki's terms, it is the harmful action that indicates complicity, and it is the "slimy" feeling that indicates non-complacency. While Lydia feels no remorse for the murder of Dr Grove, she does express some regret for the things she has had to do in order to amass enough power and intelligence to bring about the fall of the Republic. She notes, however, that "Hell [is] paved with good intentions" (Atwood, 2019:139). This demonstrates that Lydia agrees that one's actions cannot necessarily be excused if they were meant for the benefit of others. It is this that roots Lydia in her position as a woman that is not at all complacent about the oppression that Gileadean women endure, sometimes by her own hand. Agnes, in her testament, mentions that Lydia goes to her private study at Ardua Hall to do "important research that would make Gilead a better place" (Atwood, 2019:300) and it seems that this is indeed what Lydia is trying to do, although in different ways than Gileadeans might expect, and using dubious methods.

It is, once again, the act of writing itself that solidifies Lydia's non-complacency about the oppression suffered by Gileadean women. Women are banned from literacy under Gileadean rule. Although it is true that Lydia is given the privilege of being permitted to read and write, she is expected to use this privilege for the purpose of furthering Gilead's cause. Outwardly, this is precisely what Lydia does, but inwardly, she does something else. Internally, and within her private study at Ardua Hall, Lydia expresses her contempt for the structures she has helped to build and her plans for dismantling them at last. In this way, Lydia is quite similar

to the protagonist of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred. Suparna Banerjee (2014:69) explains that "[a] significant part of Offred's resistance against Gilead's oppression also consists in the very act of her narration, even if that is done as a running stream of thoughts in her head which was recorded later". This is true of Lydia as well—the very fact that Lydia expresses her discontentment with the circumstances under which she lives in a written manuscript is indicative of how she has, in this iteration of her character, evolved into someone who is not complacent about the atrocities taking place around her. Regardless of whether one views Lydia as an example of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's (1979) "passive angel" or "active monster", it remains true that "the woman writer feels herself to be literally or figuratively crippled by the debilitating alternatives her culture offers her, and the crippling effects of her conditioning sometimes seems to 'breed' like sentences of death in the bloody shoes she inherits from her literary foremothers" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979:57). Lydia, who might be understood to be both "passive angel" in the eyes of Gilead *and* "active monster" by the end of the novel, must carve a path for her narrative as female writers have always historically had to. This is not an easy task, but it is something that Lydia commits to so that she may finally be able to complete her ultimate act of rebellion—bringing down the Republic of Gilead using language, and communication.

In many ways, Aunt Lydia functions as a version of Hélène Cixous's notion of the Medusa. This, too, is largely rooted in how Lydia uses writing to emphasise her opposition to Gileadean laws and values. According to Cixous (1976:940),

> [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 (1976:943) 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 of their suffering. In *The Testaments*, Lydia takes on the task of bringing 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 by 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 as well, 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?

Significantly, Lydia explicitly states her hope that women will be restored to their former freedom in the future. Towards the end of Lydia's testament, she imagines what her reader might look like, and who they might be. She imagines her reader as "a young woman, bright, ambitious" (Atwood, 2019:403), studying Lydia as a historical figure. Though Lydia is sure that this reader will accuse her of "bad faith" (Atwood, 2019:403) in how honestly she has told her story, Lydia's general attitude towards this imagined scholar is positive, even

encouraging. She pre-empts the questions that her reader might have, and she also answers them: “How can I have behaved so badly, so cruelly, so stupidly? you will ask. You yourself would never have done such things! But you yourself would never have had to” (Atwood, 2019:403). Lydia then concludes her manuscript with a plea to her reader to “[t]ry not to think too badly of [her], or no more badly than [she] think[s] of [her]self” (Atwood, 2019:404). Lydia’s admission of the guilt and shame she feels for her actions is evidence enough that she is entirely different to the first two versions of the character that I have discussed and analysed in this dissertation. That is, she is entirely and indubitably *not* complacent about the injustices happening around her, even while she is complicit in them. Here, we see a character that emphasises that her actions were done in pursuit of survival and in order to liberate those that are so oppressed by Gileadean law. She implies that her shocking behaviour was nothing but a means to an end, and that this course of action cannot be thoroughly understood by someone who has never been in a position where these actions are necessary. She implies that what she has done, she has done for the greater good—she has harmed women so that she could free them, and so that they would eventually be in a position that is empowered enough to criticise and analyse her in later years. Lydia, like Alanna Callaway (2008:31), has found that “[s]ocial harmony [cannot] be effected by reforming […] severely flawed extant social structures, nor, indeed, through any political avenue. Instead, these structures [have] to be destroyed. Equality is achieved by force, not by choice”. In Gilead, with its limitations on choice, Lydia opted for force—not because she desired it, but because she was presented with no other options. Lydia, eternally opportunistic, appreciates the sense in pragmatism, appalling though that pragmatism may be to her readers.

In *The Testaments*, Aunt Lydia becomes distinct from the versions of her character that are presented in *The Handmaid’s Tale* novel and television series. 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 significantly more complicated, resulting, in turn, in a far more complex complicity in and complacency about the oppression of Gileadean women. This 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 her testament, *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. Ewelina Feldman-Kolodziejuk (2020:80) correctly notes that, in a society as devoid of genuine relationships and compassion as Gilead is, it is “[t]hrough the rehabilitation of [Aunt Lydia]—which raises a multitude of ethical questions inherent in a narrative of involuntary collaboration—[that] Atwood underscores the need for women’s solidarity”. While Lydia has been a significant antagonist in the lives of Gileadean women, 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.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In the fictional Gileadean universe, Aunt Lydia functions as *the* paradigm of the phenomenon of women being complicit in their own oppression. This is true, to varying degrees, across all three iterations (that is, adaptations) of her character. She is also an example of how gender may be consciously or unconsciously performed in specific social settings, and, more interestingly, in order to reach goals and amass power. Throughout each of the three instalments in the Gilead story—*The Handmaid's Tale* novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* television series, and *The Testaments*—Lydia performs various genders and exhibits varying levels of complicity in and complacency about the oppression that is suffered by women living inside the Republic of Gilead. Each instalment of the Gilead sequence establishes a version of the character Aunt Lydia that is distinct from the others. The Lydia that we meet in the 1985 novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, consciously performs the gender of a dedicated, ruthless Aunt who serves Gilead by being complicit in the oppression of the women around her. The Lydia that audiences come to know in the television version of *The Handmaid's Tale* also performs that Aunt gender, although in a more nuanced, complex way; her complacency about the role she plays in the Republic begins to become less absolute. Finally, in *The Testaments*, Aunt Lydia becomes a character who performs gender for the purpose of destroying the oppressive totalitarian regime she has served, removing her from the category of women who are complacent about the subjugation suffered by their sisters.

Across all three instalments of the Gilead sequence, Lydia is one of the greatest enemies of Gileadean women. She throws them into turmoil for the sake of self-preservation and in order to amass power for herself, and for her own benefit. The Lydia we are presented with in *The*

Handmaid's Tale novel does this wholeheartedly and with no display of remorse. Readers, then, acting as the jury, cannot imagine granting this character amnesty for her crimes. The television version of the character, who perpetuates and, significantly, complicates her activities within the Gileadean social and power structures may divide the jury that denounced the novel's Lydia. Regardless of the rare instances of goodwill shown for the Handmaids and distress displayed at the actions of the Republic, Lydia, in this instalment, is likely to find that exoneration evades her again.

However, in the final section of the sequence thus far, Lydia stands as a character who has the potential to thoroughly baffle her audience. Many questions inform the debates surrounding the character's motivations: is Lydia's monstrosity in working with Gilead redeemed because she plays an instrumental role in catalysing its demise? Are her exploitative and violent actions forgivable because they were necessary for securing the power that allowed her to unlock a freer future for the women of Gilead? These questions, as Lydia herself notes (Atwood, 2019:178), are never simple. Further, these questions may form the basis for future studies on this selection of texts, or on Lydia specifically, given the complexity of subjects like morality and redemption. In texts such as *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*, which are particularly dense with moral ambiguity, these topics ought to be given the concentrated focus they deserve, in their own devoted study, since Lydia's (and other characters') questionable and dubious morality are part of what intrigue and infuriate readers and academics alike, causing us to return to the texts time and again. However hazy Lydia's perceived villainy may be, it is certain that she remains a character who is infinitely perplexing and frustrating. She is an enigma, who is, at her core, meant to "[appeal] to the heartless survivor in all of us—at least this is what she seems to say, that when the chips are down, we will revert to our most primitive state" (Enright, 2019). The Lydia

of *The Testaments*, though a significant enemy of the women around her, finds common ground with them in loathing the regime which oppresses them.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred discovers a Latin phrase scratched into the wood near the floor on the inside of her cupboard. She knows that this engraving was made by her predecessor. This phrase, forbidden and hopeful simply because it has been written down, is, Offred says, "intended for whoever [comes] next" (Atwood, 2010:62). It might be said that Lydia—the Lydia of *The Testaments*, at least—is that someone. She embodies the spirit and envisioned actions of that carving, which reads, "*nolite te bastardes carborundorum*" (Atwood, 2010:62): "Don't let the bastards grind you down" (Atwood, 2010:197). Although only mock-Latin, a Latin learner's joke, as June learns (Atwood, 2010:196), the phrase lends itself to more serious interpretations in the Gileadean universe. Lydia, despite the questionable morality of her actions, and although she is perhaps ignorant of the phrase, appears to function as an embodiment of it. Continuing her work as Aunt in order to liberate the women suffering under Gileadean rule, she demonstrates her commitment to never letting anyone—man, woman, or regime—grind her down. That being said, Lydia also stands as an example of productive and instructive complexity and moral ambiguity. Terrifying in her ruthlessness towards those over whom she has power, and fascinating to those who study and watch her, Lydia is best understood not as a picture of unadulterated evil, but as a study of how characters may abandon morality, ethics, and compassion in pursuit of their goals—whether noble, or terrible.

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