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The Art of Retelling:
Text/ile in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*

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Abstract

This article proposes to examine the interplay between rewriting and the text/ile metaphor in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*. The author's predilection for intertextuality is inextricably linked to her conception of the text as a fabric and the writer as an embroiderer. Weaving, interweaving and reweaving are seamlessly tied to her acts of (re)writing. Drawing on André Lefevere's theorization of rewriting and Gérard Genette's conceptualization of metatextuality, the article examines the aesthetic and thematic relationship between rewriting and sartorial poetics. The novel is a textual patchwork of interlaced references gleaned from a large array of generic materials. The essay, which is divided into two parts, mainly argues that Atwood's (re)writing strategies, or what Adrienne Rich calls "re-vision," based on decoupage, collage, stitching, and sewing, are tools of resistance. The first section provides a theoretical framework for understanding the act of rewriting and the different ways in which it can be conceptualized. The second part applies this theoretical framework to Atwood's novel, examining how she uses the text/textile metaphor to explore the power of storytelling and the importance of resistance. Creating a tapestry-like novel with interwoven textual strands not only resists aesthetic and cultural closure, but also mobilizes attention against all forms of oppression.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood, *The Testaments*, rewriting, text and textile, intertextuality, metatextuality, sartorial poetics

Antoine Compagnon's *La seconde main ou le travail de la citation* (1979), a fascinating text on quotations, stands out among the cornucopia of

materials addressing the question of rewriting. Compagnon proposes citation as the dynamic force of both reading and writing, building on earlier debates about writing, repetition, and intertextuality led primarily by Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and Julia Kristeva. “Lire ou écrire,” he contends, “c’est faire acte de citation . . . c’est répéter le geste archaïque du découper-coller” (“Reading or writing are acts of quoting . . . they duplicate the archaic action of cutting and pasting”; my trans.; 41). He starts his investigation of the foundational quality of citation with memories of his childhood game of “decoupage and collage,” in which he was haunted by scissors and glue. He used to spend hours cutting pictures, selecting, combining, and rearranging them, creating “a world of paper” in the process (20). As he grew old, he realized that “l’homme au ciseaux est le seul vrai lecteur” (“The man with scissors is the only genuine reader”; my trans.; 31). The figure of the reader armed with scissors is similar, if not identical, to the figure of the writer armed with glue, while “le stylo réuni les propriétés des ciseaux et de la colle” (“the pen assembles the characteristics of both scissors and glue”; my trans.; 51). Writing, Compagnon argues, is based on rewriting: “le travail de l’écriture est une réécriture dès lors qu’il s’agit de convertir des éléments séparés et discontinus en un tout continu et cohérent, de les rassembler, de les comprendre (de les prendre ensemble), c’est-à-dire de les lire” (“The act of writing is a rewriting process insofar as it involves converting separate and discontinuous elements into a continuous and coherent whole, gathering them together, comprehending them (pulling them together), that is to say, reading them”; my trans.; 39). The idea of what Compagnon calls “l’entreglose” or “le déjà dit” sustains my reading of Margaret Atwood’s *The Testaments*, a textual patchwork of citations, newspaper clips, literary works, and feminist writings.

Atwood’s strategies of rewriting are deliberately based on acts of decoupage and collage. *The Handmaid’s Tale*, as well as its sequel, *The Testaments*, are based on hundreds of clippings the writer collected over several years of research on women and modalities of oppression. “I cut things out and put them in a box,” Atwood declares in a 2019 interview. Her primary concern was to provide evidence to what some skeptical readers may regard as far-fetched speculation: “I already knew what I was

writing about and this was backup. In case someone said, ‘How did you make this up?’ As I’ve said about a million times, I didn’t make it up. This is the proof – everything in these boxes” (“Margaret Atwood on the Real-life Events”). Although Atwood only explains the political reasons for decoupage and collage, the aesthetic aspect is no less significant. Indeed, *The Testaments* is an intriguing example of the art of retelling, combining politics and poetics.

The rationale behind this article is to examine the aesthetic and thematic rapport between acts of retelling and sartorial poetics. It seeks to expand on the concept of rewriting beyond its most obvious application, that of a straightforward adaptation of a well-known text. I would rather use the term “rewriting” in a broad sense, one that conceives of retelling or the already said as constitutive acts of writing. In the case of Atwood’s narrative, rewriting is essentially a process of interweaving textual threads in the novel’s tapestry. It is based on cutting and sewing. Her novel offers an intriguing case of sartorial poetics, wherein text and textile are thematically and aesthetically intertwined.

Atwood’s proclivity for intertextuality and rewriting is overtly affirmed in *The Penelopiad* (2005), a retelling of Homer’s *Odyssey* from Penelope’s perspective, as well as *Hag-Seed* (2016), a modern take on Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. A large part of the critical assessment of her novels focuses on the writer’s subtle drawing on various literary texts. Teresa Gilbert’s “The Monster in the Mirror,” for instance, examines Atwood’s “Speeches for Dr. Frankenstein” (1966), a poem revisiting Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Within the same line of interest, Sharon Rose Wilson argues that Atwood “reuses the old, great stories, modifying and usually subverting them, hiding their traces in order to reveal contemporary landscapes, characters, and problems” (xi). Her book *Margaret Atwood’s Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* offers a detailed study of the writer’s heavy drawing on fairy tales and folktales. I agree with Wilson that Atwood is a master of textual recycling, but I disagree with her assertion that Atwood conceals the sources of her material. I believe that Atwood openly and liberally incorporates traces, allusions, and echoes of the texts she draws upon in *The Testaments*. These intentional references invite readers to engage in a critical exploration of the text,

reassessing the stories Atwood references and perceiving them from a new perspective. Atwood's approach to textual recycling is not covert or elusive; rather, it is playful and interactive, like a stimulating game of hide-and-seek. Readers are encouraged to seek out and identify the intertextual references woven throughout the narrative. By doing so, Atwood invites readers to delve deeper into the tapestry of interconnected literary sources she employs, fostering a more profound engagement with the material.

Conceiving the text as a textile is also a prevalent metaphor in Atwood's narratives. In her article "An End to Audience?," she describes "the writer as a kind of spider, spinning out his entire work from within" (421). The spider-writer or spinner-storyteller trope in her works has gained a great deal of critical attention. Barbara Rigney, for instance, claims that "the image of woman as fabricator, seamstress, weaver, spider, becomes one with the image of the tale-teller, writer" (158). In the same vein, Fiona Tolan focuses on acts of stitching and storytelling in her reading of *Alias Grace* (1996). She analyzes Atwood's recurring use of "crafty tropes when contemplating the nature of storytelling" (111). Cynthia G. Kuhn, on the other hand, explores the text/ile trope as connected to woven, unwoven and rewoven material. She judiciously contends that the notion of "material," which is an assemblage of various texts, "achieves a double meaning as both text and textile" (8). The textile metaphor is a recurring motif in Atwood's work, and it has been explored by a number of critics who have noted the ways in which it can be used to represent the creative process, the nature of storytelling, and the relationship between text and reader.

The Testaments, which has received little critical attention thus far, corroborates the writer's predilection for textual craftsmanship and therefore deserves scrutiny from this perspective. I argue that Atwood's textual bricolage, decoupage, collage, as well as her penchant for intertextuality, are deliberate tools of resistance. The (re)writing strategies in the narrative are evocative of Adrienne Rich's term "re-vision," which she defines as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction." Such an act, Rich asserts, is "an act of survival" for women (18). To rewrite is also to resist

aesthetic and cultural closure. Rewriting, in this sense, becomes a textual mobilization, a war machine against insularity. My essay is divided into two major parts. The first, which serves as a theoretical anchor for my subsequent reading of the novel, engages in a debate about the various conceptualizations of rewriting. The second focuses on the significance of the text/textile metaphor in acts of retelling. It examines Atwood's strategies for portraying the writer as an embroiderer, the text as brocade, and retelling as acts of resistance. My ultimate objective is not to compile an exhaustive list of the texts Atwood weaves into the tapestry of her novel, but to try to explain Atwood's process of writing, which involves rewriting, as well as the reasons for doing so.

Rewriting

The art of rewriting is an essential facet of literary craftsmanship. It is a dynamic process through which texts undergo metamorphosis, emerging revitalized with renewed layers of meaning and resonance. This transformative endeavor transcends the boundaries of conventional textual manipulation, encompassing a realm where narratives and ideas find new life and relevance within the ever-evolving tapestry of literature. While the term rewriting has been extensively employed and subject to theoretical examination within the field of Narratology, the concept of retelling has garnered comparatively less scholarly attention, often being employed interchangeably with rewriting. This tendency is notable even in the work of Christian Moraru, who staunchly asserts that "rewriting and retelling are not synonymous," yet employs these terms interchangeably within specific contexts. Moraru elucidates this incongruity, stating, "Whenever I use the term retelling as equivalent to rewriting, I mean a precise, detailed, deliberate, and ideologically driven retelling of former written narratives" (17). He contends that the act of rewriting should be both deliberate and underpinned by ideological considerations. It involves "a 'flagrant' retelling of identifiable literary tales" (17), undertaken with the explicit aim of destabilizing established norms and convictions present within antecedent textual works. While my reading of Atwood's narrative does benefit from Moraru's conceptual framework, his precondition that

an unequivocally identified foundational text is requisite for the act of rewriting fails to encapsulate the protean nature of Atwood's multifaceted utilization of rewriting within her novel. *The Testaments* is firmly rooted in a diverse array of intertextual strata, ranging from the exceedingly subtle to the blatantly obvious, as I will elaborate upon in subsequent discussion.

While Moraru expresses reservations about using the terms "rewriting" and "retelling" interchangeably, Marina Lambrou conspicuously disregards any distinction between them. In her introduction to *Narrative Retellings: Stylistic Approaches*, she employs these terms synonymously. Her equivalence of rewriting and retelling is readily evident in the examples she uses to explain literary adaptations: "Pat Barker's (2019) *Silence of the Girls*, a retelling of *The Iliad*, Madeline Miller's (2019) *Circe*, a rewriting of *The Odyssey*, and Natalie Haynes's rewriting of the Trojan War, *A Thousand Ships*, are all rewritten from the perspectives of women protagonists to offer retellings of familiar narratives with a twist" (9). In this example, the two terms are clearly interchangeable, functioning as one and the same. Nevertheless, Lambrou's use of the term "retelling" encompasses a broad semantic spectrum, including various other literary practices. Indeed, she maintains that retelling "can be interpreted as: *adaptation, translation, recounting, reimagining, reconfiguring, recreating, restorying, revising, remembering, manipulating, rereading, rewriting, reframing, reinterpreting, editing, disnarrating, transferring, migrating, repeating, experimenting, transposing, and transforming*" (11). Lambrou's compilation of the facets inherent in the process of retelling is both exhaustive and intellectually stimulating. It serves as a reminder that retelling is more than mere replication or duplication; it is a realm of ingenuity and metamorphosis. This multifaceted endeavor encompasses a range of distinct methodologies, from adaptation and translation to disnarration and transposition. Additionally, the practice of retelling can be seen as a way to meticulously examine and reinterpret the source text, thereby generating new meanings and possibilities.

In contrast to Moraru, who distinguishes between rewriting and retelling, Lambrou adopts a more flexible approach to the term "retelling,"

which she sees as a capacious concept that can be applied to a variety of narrative contexts. My interpretation of Atwood's novel aligns with her conceptual understanding of retelling, which justifies my use of the terms "rewriting" and "retelling" interchangeably throughout this article. It is worth noting, however, that Lambrou's use of "retelling" does not differ significantly from André Lefevere's conceptual framework of rewriting. While both scholars associate these terms with a wide range of literary expressions, they each give prominence to a different term: retelling for Lambrou and rewriting for Lefevere.

Lefevere's theorization of rewriting offers a useful conceptual foundation for a comprehensive vision of the term, liberating it from the confines of simply reworking an old text into a new one. He defines rewriting as a broad term that encompasses translation, anthologization, historiography, criticism, and editing (*Translation* 9). His definition incorporates any type of intervention, which ineluctably leads to "manipulate works of literature to various ideological and poetical ends" (9). This provides us with a protean concept which makes of reading and writing inextricably enmeshed activities. Indeed, any act of reading is already an act of rewriting. Drawing on Lefevere, Marcel Corniş-Pope proposes "a critical practice that will turn re-reading into (re)writing, into self-conscious critical performances focused on the text's modes of signification, but also on their own interpretive and articulatory moves" (2). This creates an intriguing fractal pattern in which interpretation engages in rewriting a text which is itself based on reading and rewriting. Lefevere argues that "rewritings, rather than originals, keep the system of literature going as a system" ("Beyond Interpretation" 32). Accordingly, a non-rewritten text, that is a text which is not cited, critically assessed, implicitly or explicitly referred to, is doomed to death. His use of originals, on the other hand, is highly contested and invites reflection.

A pertinent question in the rewriting debate is: Is there anything truly original? Kristeva's answer is trenchant: "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (68). Her conceptualization of intertextuality subverts any claim of originality, novelty, and independence. Michael Riffaterre endorses this vision in his assertion: "the text always refers to something said otherwise

and elsewhere” (138). In a similar vein, Maurice Blanchot writes: “In the first place, no one dreams that works and songs could be created out of nothing. They are always given in advance, in memory’s immobile present. . . . What is important is not to tell, but to tell once again and, in this retelling, to tell again each time a first time” (30). Blanchot’s quote highlights the importance of intertextuality in all creative writing. Every text is inevitably influenced by the texts that have come before it, and it is through this process of retelling and transformation that new works of art are created.

Writing is an inherently intertextual act, as it always builds on and responds to previous texts. Indeed, Gérard Genette proposes “transtextuality” as the subject matter of poetics and defines it as “all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts” (17). While he acknowledges Kristeva’s pioneering work on intertextuality, which provides him with a “terminological paradigm,” he expands on this term and adds other types, including “metatextuality,” which is particularly relevant to my reading of Atwood’s text as a mode of rewriting. This type, Genette argues, “unites a given text to another, of which it speaks without necessarily citing it (without summoning it), in fact sometimes even without naming it” (4). Genette’s metatextuality is not to be confused with Barthes’ and Kristeva’s broad notion of intertextuality, that is “the citations which go to make up a text,” which “are anonymous, untraceable, and yet *already read*, they are quotations without inverted commas” (Barthes, *Image* 160). Although Genette’s notion of metatextuality also includes silent quotations without quotation marks, these excerpts can be traced and identified. (Re)writing in Atwood’s *The Testaments* is not only conscious, but also deliberate. It is a needlework-like process that operates within a text/ile trope.

Text/ile: The Writer as an Embroiderer

The textile metaphor presides over the creation of a text. The etymology of the word “text” attests to its cognate relationship to weaving acts. Indeed, its Latin origin, *textus*, literally refers to “thing woven,” and the verb *texere* means “to weave, to join, fit together, braid, interweave”

("Text"). Robert Bringhurst provides us with intriguing etymological continua and connections: "An ancient metaphor: thought is a thread, and the raconteur is a spinner of yarns – but the true storyteller, the poet, is a weaver. The scribes made this old and audible abstraction into a new and visible fact. After Long practice, their work took on such an even, flexible texture that they called the written page a *textus*, which means cloth" (25). Barthes' description of the text as being "plural" or his contention that "any text is a new tissue of past citations" ("Theory of the Text" 39), depends on the etymology of the word, for "the text is a tissue, a woven fabric," in his phrasing (*Image* 159). Atwood's novel recuperates the text-textile metaphor and provides a narrative intricately interwoven and deliberately plural.

The metatextual thrust in *The Testaments* is based on acts of rewriting, reinterpretation, and recycling of a wide array of intricately woven literary and cultural sources, most of which are not explicitly cited. Indeed, Atwood weaves several strands rather than relying on a definite or well-circumscribed Urtext. Her novel can be conceptualized as a tapestry or an embroidered canvas, with diverse threads, colors, and motifs interwoven throughout. The narrative's structure attests to this proclivity for weaving stories and voices together. Indeed, the polyphonic novel engages the voices of three characters: Aunt Lydia, Agnes Jemima, and Daisy. Aunt Lydia's holograph provides a privileged glimpse into the inner workings of the regime, while Agnes Jemima's spoken account offers a more personal and intimate perspective. Daisy's testimony, meanwhile, offers a glimpse of the outside world and the possibility of resistance. While the voices of these three characters are separate, the stories they tell are interlaced and work in unison. This creates a complex and nuanced portrait of Gilead, allowing the reader to see the regime from different angles and to appreciate the different ways in which it affects the lives of women.

As a sequel to the critically acclaimed *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), which narrates how fertile women are forced into reproductive slavery, *The Testaments* (2019) is, in a sense, predicated on rewriting. Not only does Atwood revisit events from the first novel to keep readers engaged and give the sequel a standalone quality, but she also rewrites the

character of Aunt Lydia. Indeed, the mighty Lydia, a notorious villain in *The Handmaid's Tale*, is given a large narrative space in an attempt to answer Atwood's own questions: "How do you get to be such a person? How do you act within that structure? What are your fears, what are your goals?" (qtd. in Feldman). The new version of the Aunt Lydia character is meant to confront the reader with his/her ethical responsibility, because judging is much easier than empathizing. This fundamental question is placed at the threshold of the novel in the guise of an epigraph extracted from Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate*: "When we look one another in the face, we're neither of us looking at a face we hate – no, we're gazing into a mirror. . . . Do you really not recognize yourselves in us . . .?" Hating or judging Aunt Lydia because she has participated in oppressing women and sustaining Gilead's patriarchal and repressive regime shows a moral superiority operating within an empathic deficit.

One of the most ethically challenging moments in the narrative occurs when Lydia finds "a fresh garment laid out for her," signifying that it is her turn to demonstrate her allegiance to the new regime in Gilead by executing rebellious women. Her rhetorical question after putting it on, "What else should I have done?" (150), is directly addressed to the reader, who may be horrified by her actions and accuse her of cruelty and apathy. The real question, however, is: what would you do if you were in her place? *The Testaments*, as a sequel, employs rewriting to dispel preconceived notions. It addresses what Atwood refers to as the "ideal reader," who is "intelligent, capable of feeling, possessed of a moral sense" ("An End to Audience" 424). Lydia's voice is an invitation to see things through her eyes, to understand, and to never judge. The Grossman excerpt, which the writer uses as an epigraph, not only serves as a cautionary prelude but also announces the intricate fabric of her narrative.

The garment episode, on the other hand, highlights Atwood's subtle use of the text/ile trope. While pleading for her innocence, Lydia also raises doubts concerning the veracity of her Holograph, a handwritten account evocative of handiwork. The association between textile and deception is evident in idiomatic phrases such as "fabricating evidence," "spinning a yarn," "tissue or fabric of lies," and "made out of whole cloth." This explains Aunt Lydia's sometimes implicit and sometimes

explicit appeals to the reader to believe her story. More importantly, it alludes to her proclivity for tampering with the reader's trust, building and destroying the truth of her text. In an entry in her holograph, she tells the reader:

through these I entrust my message to you, my reader. But what sort of message is it? Some days I see myself as the Recording Angel, collecting together all the sins of Gilead, including mine; on other days I shrug off this high moral tone. Am I not, au fond, merely a dealer in sordid gossip? I'll never know your verdict on that, I fear. (277)

The text as a fabric of lies is a prevalent idea in the narrative, especially when it has a historical attribute.

The degree of the fictional in a historical account resonates with the idiomatic use of text and textile cited above. Lydia speculates about her holograph's potential reader in the final chapter of the narrative: "Perhaps you'll be a student of history" (403). As she claims the veracity of her story, which she describes as "a definitive account of my life and times, suitably footnoted," she expects it to be treated as a historical document. And yet, in keeping with her playful demeanor, she adds: "though if you don't accuse me of bad faith I will be astonished" (403), thus complicating the dividing line between history and fiction (story). Professor Pieixoto, the historian tasked with presenting Lydia's manuscript together with the two girls' transcribed testimonies, declares that he has intervened in rearranging, interleaving, and numbering the sections in the materials "in an order that made approximate narrative sense" (414). His joke captures the tense relationship between history and narration: "You can take the historian out of the storyteller, but you can't take the storyteller out of the historian" (414). Ironically, Pieixoto's historical research focuses on "handcrafted textile items" (408), thus bringing the text-textile rapport full circle. In other words, the texts he has verified fall within the scope of his textile expertise. His montage of the three manuscripts, culminating in *The Testaments* itself, resembles any type of needlework.

Atwood reveals the embroidery quality of her narrative in the final page of the novel. Bidding farewell to her potential reader, Lydia cites Mary, Queen of Scots: "in my end is my beginning," a motto embroidered

on a wall hanging. She adds: "Such excellent embroiderers, women are" (404). In fact, Lydia's comment marks a metafictional moment wherein Atwood acknowledges her own citational strategy of stitching together quotations from a variety of other texts. *The Testaments*, like brocade, is "woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages (what language is not?), antecedent or contemporary, which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony," as Barthes puts it (*Image* 160). The narrative is indeed complex and multilayered, drawing on a wide range of sources. This intertextuality creates a rich and textured reading experience, as the reader is constantly reminded of the other texts that Atwood employs. She not only addresses a discerning reader who is expected to show empathy, but she also speaks to an alert one who is supposed to detect these references and use them as interpretive tools.

The Testaments offers a dense intertextual milieu that tests the reader's openness to literary, critical, and cultural vistas. Some references are easily detected, like the reprising of George Bush's notorious statement in his war on terror which we find in Commander Judd's "Let me just say that those who are not with us are against us" (172), or Benjamin Franklin's words, slightly changed, in Lydia's statement: "As someone once said, We must all hang together or we will all hang separately" (172). Other citations, on the other hand, are intricately woven into the fabric of the narrative and serve as extended hypotexts, such as the Scheherazade trope, which I will elucidate later. While some citations are faithfully reproduced, others are playfully twisted or rephrased, such as her use of Robert Frost's famous lines without quotation marks: "I made choices, and then, having made them, I had fewer choices. Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and I took the one most travelled by" (66); or "beneath its outer show of virtue and purity, Gilead was rotting" (308), which is an allusion to Shakespeare's "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (I.4. 41); "All things come to she who waits" (251), a slightly deformed line from Violet Fane's poem "Tout vient à qui sait attendre"; or else tampering with a quote, such as "Good, be thou my evil" (211) instead of John Milton's "Evil, be thou my good" (108).

The following examples, the majority of which I take from Aunt Lydia's holograph, elucidate further Atwood's intertextual or rewriting

strategies. Contrary to the two girls' spoken testimonies, the holograph shows Lydia's erudition as well as her deep and mature reflections on the politics of Gilead. The references can be classified into three major categories: literary, cultural, and critical or philosophical. Some of them, however, overlap, such as when Atwood provides a double entendre that combines a literary reference and a theoretical framework.

Towards the end of the opening section, Lydia mentions "the enthusiastic book burnings that have been going on across our land," which aim "to create a clean space for the morally pure generation that is surely about to arrive" (4). The allusion here is clearly to Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) which narrates a dystopian world wherein reading books is judged as a crime. The chilling fact of monitoring minds connects the two books. Atwood creates an aesthetic dialogue between the two texts by rewriting Bradbury's speculative world. Indeed, Captain Beatty's statement in *Fahrenheit 451*, "A book is a loaded gun in the house next door. . . . Who knows who might be the target of the well-read?" (58) finds an echo in Jemima Agnes's anxious queries in *The Testaments*: "'Are they wicked?' I asked. 'Those books?' I imagined all that explosive material packed inside a room" (290). In an essay that elucidates the genesis of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood discloses that she has harbored a pronounced proclivity for dystopian fiction since her formative years. She discovered an intriguing form in "Orwell's *1984*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*," which sparked "a secret yen to write an example of it" ("Margaret Atwood on How She Came to Write"). Atwood's reference to George Orwell's *1984* and its panoptic regime of surveillance is unmistakable. *The Handmaid's Tale*'s intertextual relation with Orwell's novel has already been the subject of several critical assessments (Feuer 1997; Ingersoll 1993). E. L. Doctorow goes so far as to call it "a companion volume to Orwell's *1984*" (qtd. in Ingersoll 64).

The metatextual impulse in *The Testaments*, however, goes beyond the generic or thematic to embrace the philosophical. Indeed, Atwood's drawing on Michel Foucault's theorization of the power/knowledge nexus is equally significant. Aunt Lydia's statement: "Knowledge is power . . . I am not the first person to have recognized this, or to have capitalized on it

when possible: every intelligence agency in the world has always known it” (35) opens up critical venues for a political and philosophical debate about the policing of bodies and minds. Her statement is in fact a rewriting or a reformulation of Foucault’s argument in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*: “power produces knowledge . . . ; power and knowledge directly imply one another; . . . there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations” (27). Foucault’s statement highlights the ways in which power and knowledge are inextricably linked, and how this relationship can be used to control and oppress individuals.

The government of Gilead controls its citizens through a variety of means, including the regulation of dress. Foucault’s concept of “docile bodies” (13) is useful for understanding the role of clothing in Gilead. A docile body is one that has been trained to obey authority. In Gilead, women’s bodies are disciplined through the imposition of a strict dress code. The clothes that women are forced to wear are designed to make them appear weak and submissive. The act of dressing in Gilead is thus a form of dressage. It is a process of training women to be docile and compliant. For example, women are required to wear long dresses and skirts that restrain their mobility. They are also required to wear white bonnets, which not only obscure their faces, but also limit their vision and consequently their knowledge. Women are reduced to objects of super/vision, never subjects who can see and know for themselves. Sartorial politics in Gilead is only one example of the ways in which the government controls its citizens. By regulating people’s dress, the government can regiment their thoughts and behavior. This is a powerful way to maintain social order and enforce the government’s ideology.

A similar example in which Atwood implicitly refers both to a literary text and a theoretical one is offered in Aunt Lydia’s following statement: “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: like a harem eunuch” (62). In this example, Atwood’s use of clothing elements (glove and mitten) interlaces with her penchant for textual embroidery. The phrase “harem eunuch” is a nod to Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters*

(1721), an epistolary novel in which Uzbek tries to control his harem from afar. In one of his letters to his Eunuch, he says: "Leave pity and tenderness behind . . . Make my seraglio what it was when I left it, but begin by expiation: exterminate the criminals, and strike dread into those who contemplated becoming so" (Letter 153). Like a harem eunuch, Lydia has the role to control female bodies and subdue any type of rebellion. Gilead is portrayed as a huge seraglio wherein women are bound to sexual servitude. The word "eunuch," however, is a further nod to Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970), a classic feminist text. Greer argues that society urges women to have the qualities of a eunuch: subservient and docile. Gilead's patriarchal project is based on forcing women to deny their libido and accept servility (52).

It may be difficult to compile an exhaustive list of all the literary, political, cultural, and philosophical references inserted into Atwood's text. The ultimate exercise, however, is to consider the writer's intertextual scheme as an intercultural project rather than a comprehensive catalogue of citations or references. At its core, the act of rewriting is a powerful form of resistance. This resistance is manifested through the deliberate inclusion of a variety of genres from different time periods and cultures. By embracing this multifaceted intertextual fabric, the narrative deliberately avoids settling into a singular aesthetic or cultural framework. Instead, it rebels against the limitations of closure, forging a narrative that remains open and adaptive. In this light, intertextuality serves as a tool of resistance, challenging established norms and inviting readers to engage with a narrative that defies easy categorization.

Atwood's exploration of authoritarian rule, autocracy, theocracy, and patriarchy in *The Testaments* initiates a stimulating cross-cultural exchange that attests to the universality of these practices. The novel paints a vivid image of a world in which these systems of governance and social control are not culture specific, but rather essential to the shared human story. Atwood challenges the assumption that these systems are localized by presenting dictatorship as a universal phenomenon. She alludes to autocratic rulers with varying backgrounds and histories to illustrate that the mechanisms of control and oppression can manifest regardless of the cultural backdrop. This serves as a reminder that the

struggle for freedom and agency is a shared human experience. Atwood also deconstructs theocracy to demonstrate its global applicability. Her narrative showcases the manipulation of religious beliefs for political gain across various cultures, highlighting how the blending of faith and power is not exclusive to any particular society. The novel further examines patriarchy, a social structure that is deeply embedded in many societies, as a pervasive force that transcends borders. By incorporating or alluding to the stories of oppressed women from different cultures, Atwood highlights that gender-based hierarchies persist across diverse cultural landscapes, emphasizing the universal nature of the struggle for gender equality. Her exploration of these themes in an interconnected global context is consistent with her aesthetic strategies of textual weaving and embroidery. Her vision of an interlaced global world is analogous to her vision of re/writing as a woven textile.

Atwood's strategies of rewriting go beyond simply incorporating implicit or explicit citations into her narrative. *The Testaments* is built on several layers of text, which attests to its palimpsestic nature. It is "haunted," in Matei Călinescu's phrasing, by other texts: "there are texts that haunt other texts, in the sense that they appear in them as expected or unexpected visitors, and even, some might say, as phantoms or specters" (*Rereading* xi). Atwood herself confirms this notion of textual spectrality in her article "How She Came to Write *The Handmaid's Tale*," wherein she declares: "Some books haunt the reader. Others haunt the writer. *The Handmaid's Tale* has done both." While Atwood's novel undoubtedly engages in intricate intertextual dialogues, I focus here on three layers, which I call extended hypotexts. Similar to an extended metaphor, an extended hypotext is developed at length and unfolds across the entire text. This hypotext acts as a ghost text, primarily interpolating the reader's remembrance of earlier texts or literary and feminist figures. The texts that Atwood subtly inserts in *The Testaments* are not mere textual ornaments; they serve Atwood's political agenda of women's resistance.

Although Atwood is extremely cautious in using the term "feminism," her writings are steeped in feminist thought. Her answer to the question, "Are you a feminist?" is rather elusive and ironic: "*Feminist* is now one of the all-purpose words. It really can mean anything from

people who think men should be pushed off cliffs to people who think it's Ok for women to read and write. . . . Thinking that it is Ok for women to read and write would be a radically feminist position in Afghanistan" ("Using What You're Given" 301). She defines her own feminism as "human equality and freedom of choice" (303). Whatever qualms she has about feminism, her focus on gender issues in *The Testaments*, as well as in her previous work, attests to genuine engagement with all forms of oppression and injustice experienced by women. Among the feminists who have marked her dissident thought, Simone de Beauvoir stands out as a "giant" figure. "How frighteningly tough she must be," Atwood admiringly says, "to be holding her own among the super intellectual steely brained Parisian Olympus!" ("Read It and Weep"). De Beauvoir's statement: "Il suffira d'une crise politique, économique et religieuse, pour que les droits des femmes, nos droits, soient remis en question. Votre vie durant, vous devrez demeurer vigilante" ("It will only take a political, economic, or religious crisis for women's rights, our rights, to be called into question. Throughout your life, you will need to remain vigilant"; my trans.; qtd. in Claudine Monteil) serves as a foundational layer of the whole narrative. Atwood's speculative novel, which explores latent possibilities that have not yet been enacted, is based on this cautionary appeal to vigilance. Although de Beauvoir is not mentioned in the narrative, her statement is not only pivotal, but it also resounds throughout the novel.

De Beauvoir's assertion that women's rights are fragile finds resonance in Atwood's *The Testaments*, where a political revolution triggers a precipitous decline in women's basic freedoms. The Wives, Marthas, and Handmaids of Gilead are all subject to strict control and violence, and their rights are routinely violated. *The Testaments* shows how easily women's rights can be taken away, even in a seemingly stable society. The Gilead regime came to power after a series of political and economic crises, and it used these crises to justify its oppressive policies towards women. The novel suggests that women must always be vigilant, lest their rights be eroded by those who would seek to control them.

The second textual layer which forms a metatextual relationship with Atwood's narrative is also a feminist piece. In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Hélène Cixous exhorts women to write:

woman 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. (875)

Cixous's strong tract urging women to write is at the heart not only of Aunt Lydia's holograph, which succeeds in toppling an oppressive regime, but also of Atwood's novel, which provides women with voice and agency.

Agnes's growing awareness of the significance of reading and writing is a compelling example of the power of literacy. "Being able to read and write," she states, "did not provide the answers to all questions. It led to other questions, and then to others" (299). The young girl's access to the power of the word, whether read or written, gives her the agency to interrogate her reality. Agnes and her female peers are prohibited from reading and writing in order to eradicate any inclination towards questioning. The pen, a phallic symbol, is only appropriated by men. Aunt Lydia's sly comment to Commander Judd, "Not for nothing do we at Ardua Hall say 'Pen is Envy'" (140), confirms this symbolic castration of women. However, her twist on Sigmund Freud's "penis envy" is more epistemological than psychoanalytic. If women envy anything, it is men's access to knowledge, which gives them power. Ironically, girls in Gilead are allowed to do needlework, which is deemed peaceful and womanly. Atwood's irony lies in the fact that the Commanders are blind to the power of textiles or the fact that embroidery is a type of writing. Agnes's anxieties over the difficulty of the task of writing are assuaged by Becka: "Becka said that writing was almost the same as that – each letter was like a picture or a row of stitching" (246). Becka's comparison of writing and embroidery is a powerful reminder of the ways in which women can use their creativity to challenge oppression.

The third ghost text, which serves as an extended epotext, is *One Thousand and One Nights*. In this text, Scheherazade's storytelling saves

the lives of thousands of women. The Scheherazade-like figure of Aunt Lydia also engages in liberating women from a Gilead-like zenana. Like Scheherazade, who opens her stories with “I heard, O happy King,” Lydia addresses her reader, calling him/her “my reader” (141), recreating thus the storytelling veneer of *One Thousand and One Nights* while capitalizing on the power of writing. Lydia ascribes to herself the mission of saving the lives of women in Gilead whose bodies are used and abused by Shahryar-like commanders. Narrating the ordeals she went through just after the Commanders took hold of Gilead and imposed a repressive regime, Lydia reports: “During the days new women would be added to our group of lawyers and judges. It stayed the same size, however, since every night some were removed. They left singly, between two guards. We did not know where they were being taken, or why. None came back” (145). The unmistakable reference to the frame story in *One Thousand and One Nights*, wherein the king marries a virgin girl every night and kills her in the morning, is echoed by Lydia, who, like Scheherazade, accepts to serve the regime in order to destroy it from within through writing/storytelling. Enchanted by Scheherazade’s power of weaving stories, the king spares her life and makes her his queen. Atwood, however, literally rewrites, in the sense of altering or improving, the ending of *One Thousand and One Nights*. Indeed, although Scheherazade saves the lives of other women, she ends up fully co-opted by the system. Shahryar is never punished and is even rewarded with a lovely and wise wife. Lydia’s secret report, however, which Agnes and Daisy manage to steal away to Canada, results in the demise of Gilead’s repressive regime. In contrast to Scheherazade, who is ultimately unable to overthrow the patriarchal system, Atwood’s Lydia succeeds in demolishing the regime and eliminating the commanders, thus providing a more hopeful and empowering ending for her female characters.

Conclusion

Rewriting in *The Testaments* is predicated on Atwood’s keen interest in the text as fabric. The textile nature of the narrative allows for acts of cutting, stitching, and sewing, which align with Compagnon’s vision of

re/writing. Retelling or weaving different textual threads in her novel is central to her speculative narrative. It answers the fundamental question: What happens when a political crisis ushers in a repressive regime that strips women of their previously acquired rights? *The Testaments* serves as a cautionary tale, employing retelling from various sources to validate the potential emergence of a Gilead-like world. In keeping with her belief that the novel “is a moral instrument” (“An End to Audience?” 429), rewriting emerges as an act of global mobilization, wherein various texts drawn from a broad generic gamut are rallied to resist oppressive and patriarchal regimes in times of extremes.

As Lefevere and Lambrou argue, rewriting or retelling and their derivatives, such as translation, interpretation, intertextuality, critical commentary, and adaptation, all attest to the movement of literature across cultures and time. Through this productive dialogue, literary works transcend time and space. Retelling in *The Testaments* serves as a mode of both aesthetic and political resistance. It calls for the need to create porous aesthetic spaces where readers and writers can freely explore diverse cultural landscapes. As a rewrite, Atwood’s text attests to an interconnected interdiscursive global world in which dictatorship, autocracy, theocracy, and patriarchy are not culture specific. It underscores the universal nature of the questions of power and resistance, which transcend cultural differences. This shared human experience bridges the gaps between diverse societies and highlights the importance of global empathy and understanding.

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