

***The Testaments:* An Intertextual Dialogue between Witnessing and Storytelling**

Carla Scarano D'Antonio

History doesn't repeat itself, but it rhymes.

Mark Twain (qtd. in O'Toole)

Abstract: My work explores the intertextual references and connections in *The Testaments*, which are linked to storytelling and witnessing. In my article, I argue that Margaret Atwood's use of intertexts in *The Testaments* aims to give a more positive and hopeful vision of a possible different world after the fall of Gilead. The dialogue between texts is less parodic than in the previous novels and the ending is less open; it has a closure of sorts. This gives a more direct and less ambiguous view compared to *The Handmaid's Tale* and previous novels. The intertexts expose the manipulation of traditional texts, such as nursery rhymes and some passages from the Bible, by the regime to impose its rules. Furthermore, the significance of some intertexts, such as Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Frost's "The Road Not Taken," is reinterpreted and/or reversed. This gives space to possible social and political changes. In the novel, Margaret Atwood makes explicit reference to Cardinal John Henry Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, and in interviews and talks she refers to Hilary Mantel's trilogy on the rise and fall of Thomas Cromwell.

All of these elements engage the readers in a process of critical thinking about the world that surrounds them, that is, a world of language, but the story also refers to a 'real' world where things have happened and might happen again. Atwood's technique of both referring to a physical world and revisiting myths, fairy tales and literary classics allows space for a re-thinking of the rules and roles in the dominant society and questions the readers' position in this world as well as power relations in society. The emphasis is on transformation but also on saving human culture in a wider perspective, which implies a tenacious survival and a constant metamorphosis. This results in multiple versions of the same events that are described by the three narrators in *The*

Testaments. They fight for survival, deconstructing and reconstructing different versions of the story in a dynamic way and reshaping the incongruous narratives of the oppressive world they live in. Through intertextual references and allusions, Atwood emphasises the corruption and perverted use of power in Gilead and highlights possible alternatives and transformations in a renewed sisterhood that might bring redemption and hope but also sacrifice.

The Testaments, published in September 2019, is unanimously considered to be the follow-up of *The Handmaid's Tale*. The book was published thirty-four years after the previous novel, marking the shifting of time both in the use of intertextual references and in the choice of the narrators' voices. The sequel occurs about fifteen years after Offred's escape from Gilead and means to give an answer to the readers' questions about her destiny and about Gilead's collapse. The novel won the 2019 Booker Prize jointly with Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (de León).

I argue that Margaret Atwood's use of intertexts in *The Testaments* aims to give a more positive and hopeful vision of a possible different world after the fall of Gilead (Sabo and Graybill 418-19). The view is still ambiguous and threatened by backlashes but certainly shows a trust in human love and its capability for sacrifice and good causes. This is expressed in the intertextual dialogue between witnessing and storytelling. The dialogue between the main text and the intertexts is less parodic than in the previous novels, and the ending is less open; it has a closure of sorts. This gives a more direct and less ambiguous view compared to *The Handmaid's Tale* and to other previous novels (Sabo and Graybill 419-20). The intertexts expose the manipulation of traditional texts, such as nursery rhymes and some passages from the Bible, by the regime to impose its rules. Furthermore, the significance of some intertexts, such as Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Frost's "The Road Not Taken," is reinterpreted and/or reversed. This gives space to possible social and political changes. This practice is used by Aunt Lydia to justify behaving in a way that is complicit with the regime but also inspires the Pearl girls, Becka, Agnes, and Nicole, in their journey towards freedom, for example, in their reading of biblical texts. The complex interweaving of intertexts reveals the importance of witnessing and storytelling, where witnessing is implied in the etymology of the word "testament," and storytelling entails the intertextual reading.

In the “Acknowledgments,” Atwood claims the novel “was written partly in the minds of the readers of its predecessor, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, who kept asking what happened at the end of that novel” (Atwood, *The Testaments* 417). Thus, *The Testaments* is meant to answer the question “How did Gilead fall?” Reviews of the novel and interviews with the author repeat this concept of the novel being written to answer the readers’ question, which was also prompted by the popularity and effectiveness of the Hulu TV series (Dillon 215). In an interview with Ash Sarkar, Atwood claims that “the name of June was given by the readers” and that “there is a lot of participation of the readers in this book” (“Margaret Atwood and Ash Sarkar”). Many readers considered the ending of *The Handmaid’s Tale* to be too open and ambiguous; they needed closure and a more hopeful and certain destiny for Offred. In response to these expectations, the role of the reader becomes paramount in *The Testaments*; they join in with the creation of the story, dictating certain expectations and interpreting the “score” (“Margaret Atwood at MIT”). The reader is the Other with whom the main narrator, Aunt Lydia, is in constant dialogue in an interweaving of storytelling and witnessing that, as occurs in previous novels, constructs a fictional world and, at the same time, refers to what has already occurred in human history (Atwood, *The Testaments* 418). Therefore, unlike *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *The Testaments* has closure. The loose strings are tied up at the end: people live or die, some of them move to a freer country, the oppressive regime of Gilead collapses, guilty and corrupt people are punished, and innocence is finally rewarded or sacrificed for the cause. Significantly, the last words of Professor Pieixoto in “The Thirteen Symposium” are “I will close” (Atwood, *The Testaments* 415), an ending that sounds final and is sealed by the inscription at the end of the novel that summarizes what has occurred as well as the main characters’ destinies, as will be seen in this article (Scarano D’Antonio).

The Intertextual Dialogue

In my intertextual reading, Kristeva’s development of the concept of intertextuality is crucial. She echoes and develops Bakhtin’s concepts in “The Bounded Text” and “Word, Dialogue, and Novel” (Kristeva, *Desire in Language* 4). Bakhtin refers to the carnivalesque discourse, which positions the text in history and society, in which the writer participates by transgressing the abstraction of history “through a process of reading-writing” (Kristeva, *Desire in Language* 65). Poetic language is “polyvalent and

multi-determined, [and] adheres to a logic exceeding that of codified discourse” (Kristeva, *Desire in Language* 65). It is “a social and political protest” that challenges official codes and laws. Hence, poetic language is transgressive and multivalent in its constant dialogue with past texts, which are contradicted and reaffirmed without being completely erased (Kristeva, *Desire in Language* 48). According to Kristeva, this concept is also linked to the maternal *chora* that mediates and transgresses the symbolic law of the father (Kristeva, *La Révolution du Langage Poétique* 27).

In this dialogue between texts, the novel is a “mediator” and a “regulator” (Kristeva, *Desire in Language* 66) because it interrogates social patterns and “ways of seeing,” which are “never settled” (Berger 7). It is subversive, at least double, and is characterized by its semiotic practice, which is different and ambivalent, expresses a “nondisjunctive function,” and allows simultaneous contradictory interpretations (Kristeva, *Desire in Language* 51, 66). In this intersection of words (texts) and utterances, there is a continuous dialogue between writer, reader, and texts within the main text, and this dialogue creates polyphony and produces transformation (Kristeva, *Desire in Language* 71). In this way, past writings are challenged and a new logic of change is proposed.

For this reason, contrary to the static monologism of the epic, the novel is polyphonic, multi-level, and multivocal. It constantly develops and generates meaning in a dynamic, dialectic way in which the self is defined in dialogue with the Other, as Bakhtin claims (Vološinov 76; Allen 23). The force of the novel is active, oppositional, and heteroglossic and allows fragmented, multiple views.

Margaret Atwood’s work reflects Bakhtin’s and Kristeva’s theories of the novel as free, open, and subversive in a world of language that is a mosaic of texts that are interconnected to each other – a structure in progress, a continuous becoming. It involves a metafictional postmodern practice of storytelling in which the novel has parodic intent to “unmask dead conventions” and expose obsolete interpretations (Hutcheon 18). From an intertextual perspective, this does not merely mean the destruction of the past; instead, it is an exploration in progress that looks for a new synthesis where the reader has an active role of participating in the creation of the text’s world of language (Hutcheon 20, 25-26; Howells 6). The reader is active and responsible and is invited to take a stand (Hutcheon 27, 30). The awareness of the intertextual

relations depends on the social and cultural context. This means that on the one hand there is a constant reworking of the text, which reading might change in time and which varies with the perspective of different readers; on the other hand, the author gives precise clues in the text itself that guide the reader to adopt certain interpretations (Hutcheon 152).

Furthermore, according to Plett, the intertextual reading always leads to multiple interpretations “that need to be interrelated by the recipient” (Plett 10). It leads to fresh analyses that may trigger transformation (Allen 2). In *The Testaments*, the intertextual reading opens up a reinterpretation of traditional texts that might lead to a different and more hopeful vision and therefore change society so that it eventually has a more equal and fairer perspective.

Significant Intertexts

The intertexts I am going to analyze in *The Testaments* are some passages from the Bible and references to nursery rhymes, where words have been changed to fit with the views of the regime. There are also references to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, which, together with references to Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy, and *Lives of Girls and Women* by Alice Munro, form a canon of sorts that relates to women’s writing, novels in which women are the protagonists in a patriarchal world, and to the biblical context that is so crucial in Gilead. Furthermore, in *The Testaments*, Aunt Lydia hides her manuscript in Cardinal Newman’s *Apologia pro vita sua*, and in interviews Atwood refers to the recent biography of Thomas Cromwell, who is considered to be “swollen with power” (Atwood, *The Testaments* 32), like Aunt Lydia, written by Diarmaid MacCulloch (Newman; Wagner). The cardinal and the statesman are two controversial figures who shed light on Aunt Lydia’s contradictory personality and contribute to the analysis and understanding of her role in the novel.

Atwood also refers to President Trump’s election and the backtracking regarding women’s rights during his presidency. In a similar way to what happened during Reagan’s presidency, with the rise of conservative Christians in the 1980s, Trump’s presidency was supported by the right, which has consequences for immigration regulations and abortion laws. As Professor Crescent Moon quotes in “The Thirteen Symposium” at the end of the novel, “History doesn’t repeat itself, but it rhymes”

(Atwood, *The Testaments* 407). Though times have changed since the 1980s and the two situations are not exactly the same—Trump is not Reagan—their discourses rhyme, they refer to each other, and they echo in the mind of the readers. In an interview of Atwood at Birmingham Royal Symphony Hall (Okojie and Atwood), Atwood claimed, “Trump was voted by the conservative Christians not because he is a believer but because he would do their agenda.” Furthermore, according to Atwood, the coincidence that the Hulu series of *The Handmaid’s Tale* was broadcast when Trump was elected drew parallels in the minds of readers between fiction and reality (BBC News). As Atwood has said, “Instead of going away from Gilead ... we started going back towards Gilead ... Not that the show changed, it didn’t, but the frame around the show changed ... So instead of ‘fantasy, ah, ah, this will never happen’, it got a lot closer to reality” (qtd. in BBC News). The novel’s sales increased exponentially, and women dressed in red cloaks and white bonnets marched silently all over the US to protest against the restrictive abortion laws. Similar remarks of Atwood are reported in Deborah Friedell’s review in the *London Review of Books*: “I have never believed it can’t happen here. I’ve never believed that. And more and more people are joining me in that lack of belief” (qtd. in Friedell 11). Significantly, Atwood claimed that *The Handmaid’s Tale* is not a dystopian novel but speculative fiction, as what is narrated has already happened and still happens in some countries (Bouson 136; Atwood, *Writing with Intent* 92-93). This concept is reflected in *The Testaments* as well, as Atwood’s remarks in talks and interviews confirm.

The other important reference is to Arachne’s myth at the end of Aunt Lydia’s narration when she speaks of women as “excellent embroiderers” (Atwood, *The Testaments* 404), which is linked to storytelling and therefore to intertextuality.

Testament: The Legacy of Witnessing and Sacrifice

The title of the novel points to different meanings of the word “testament” as well as to the multiple “testaments” in the narration. Testaments refers to the Bible, the Old and New Testament, and to the biblical quotations in the novel. The term also refers to the different connotations that the etymology of the word implies. According to Willis Barnstone, the inappropriate Latin translation *Testamentum* of the Hebrew *Berith* (to cut or divide) by “later Latinizing Christians,” did not consider the concept of “covenant” present both in Hebrew and in the Greek translation of *Berith*, that is, *Diatheke*, in the Septuagint (154). The mistranslation was adopted in vernacular languages as well; for

example in the authorized King James version, in which *Diatheke* is often translated as “testament” instead of the proper word, “covenant.” This occurs in the description of the Last Supper, for example in Luke 22.20, as well as in Hebrews 9.20 (*Holy Bible*), in which Saint Paul speaks about Moses’s covenant with God. Nevertheless, in modern English translations, *Berith* and *Diatheke* are often translated as “covenant” to fit with the context. This has led to the development of different connotations of the word *Testamentum*/testament, that is, a will, which is linked to death and sacrifice, a witnessing of the covenant with God, and a piece of evidence, a *testimonium*/testimony. The link to *Berith* underlines the sacrificial root of the term as it refers to the ancient Jewish custom of ratifying the covenant between God and his people by cutting sacrificed animals into two halves and walking between the pieces to seal the pact, as described in Jeremiah 34.18–19 (*Holy Bible*). Thus, blood and sacrifice are involved as well as testimony and witnessing; these are signs that seal an agreement and create a bond between two parties. Furthermore, most of the time, the covenant is unconditional and unilateral in the Bible. It is God’s promise to his people, who can accept or refuse it but cannot change its rules, as occurs with Noah and Abraham. The promise implies material and spiritual benefits if the requirements of the covenant are fulfilled. Unfortunately, Israel often rebels against the Lord and breaks the covenant, which then needs to be re-established. Later on, animal sacrifice was substituted with bread and wine, for example in Bar or Bat Mitzvah or in Kiddush celebrations, and in the Eucharistic meal. Therefore, the New Testament, or new covenant, encompasses the concepts of the will and sacrifice, in this case self-sacrifice. True love implies a commitment that might put people’s lives at risk, as occurs in the novel with Nicole and Agnes, in the death of Aunt Adrianna, and at the end of the story with the deaths of Becka and Aunt Lydia. So the word “testament” is connected to a promise and witnessing that refer to life, and to a will and sacrifice that refer to death. Hence, love and faith in some superior ideal are double edged and survival is not always granted. In addition, similarly to Israel’s breach of God’s promise, the initial ideal of the “purity” and “perfection” of the Gileadean regime has been betrayed in all possible ways, resulting in the horrors of the dictatorship (Okojie and Atwood). This interpretation of the word “testament” implies that besides witnessing and storytelling, the promise of a more equal society entails commitment and sacrifice as well, and maybe death.

The Mayday organization and the sisterhood expressed in the bond of love and faith between the young protagonists of the story who are supported by Aunt Lydia are the counterattacks to the oppressive and dismembering narratives of Gilead; they convey the feeling of having hope in a better future where things can be changed if we act differently (Okojie and Atwood). Furthermore, as we have seen, the word “testament” implies a pact, an agreement, in this case with the reader. Aunt Lydia’s “unknown reader” (Atwood, *The Testaments* 5) or “my reader” (Atwood, *The Testaments* 32, 61, 141, 172, 209, 277, 279, 313, 317) is the Other with whom she engages in dialogue, wondering if the reader will make her manuscript come alive, make her message endure over time, and give it space. At the same time, there is the temptation to obliterate the story, to destroy the evidence that might cause the author-witness’s death because she has been found guilty of betrayal (Atwood, *The Testaments* 317–18). The fight is between life and death, between enduring by storytelling or giving up. Therefore, the covenant with the reader indicates that there is a promise to create a hopeful and better future, although there will be risks and sacrifices along the way, and it is sealed by a symbolic sign of sisterhood expressed in love and faith in the relationship between the Pearl girls.

Atwood believes that young people are more hopeful and idealistic than adults and refers to the #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, and Extinction Rebellion movements as the places where changes can happen. In an interview with Jessica Townsend, she called Greta Thunberg the “Joan of Arc of the environment” (Atwood qtd. in Townsend), showing her support for the Extinction Rebellion movement. Furthermore, in an interview with Lisa Allardice, she spoke of “the casket moment,” referring to *The Merchant of Venice*: as citizens, we need to make a choice and decide which door we are going to open (Atwood qtd. in Allardice).

Trump’s “fake news” is therefore denied in the acknowledged authenticity of the narratives of *The Testaments* that are endorsed by Professor Pieixoto in “The Thirteenth Symposium”; he validates women’s words and gives them power, a power that is in part denied by the same professor in the “Historical Notes” of *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Ratcliffe). The evidence and witnessing allow the corruption of the apparently pure state of Gilead to be exposed and cause its collapse from within. In previous novels, the intertextual network of myths and fairy tales is reversed or rewritten in a parodic way to

change the patriarchal narratives from within, as Hutcheon claims. In *The Testaments*, the attempt to change the narratives occurs through witnessing and evidence, that is, through Aunt Lydia's will, where the multiple meanings of the word "testament" play a significant role. As Sabo and Graybill remark, in "*The Testaments*, writing has become truth, and as in John 8: 32, 'the truth will make you free' – a passage not quoted in the text, but rather embodied in it" (417). The manuscripts are therefore considered reliable; they are a true witnessing even if they remain partial and incomplete (Sabo and Graybill 418). Similarly to what has occurred in the real world, where women have accused Harvey Weinstein and Jeffrey Epstein of abuses and harassment, women's voices are heard and their evidence is validated, bringing down patriarchal totalitarianism, as Keira Williams claims (Williams). Furthermore, to be effective, witnessing and evidence imply the acknowledgment of the listener or reader. As Atwood claimed in a podcast with *The Irish Times*, "[T]here is not just one future, there are multiple futures, it depends on our choices now" (*Women's Podcast*). She also claimed that we are not doomed because she does not believe in predestination but in choices. She said she was hopeful that although we cannot reverse what has already happened, we can make the right choices for a more equal world and an environmentally friendly attitude. This is also what she claimed during the interview that I attended in Birmingham (Okojie and Atwood). Deborah Friedell writes from a different perspective, concluding her review in the *London Review of Books* by remarking: "If *The Testaments* were truly a novel for our times, after Aunt Lydia and her allies had succeeded in getting the documents out, ... journalists would write about them; and nothing would happen" (12).

An Analysis of the Intertextual References

The epitaphs at the beginning of the novel underline some of Atwood's recurring themes in *The Testaments*, such as the theme of the double, women's identity and role in a patriarchal society, and survival. The double is clearly shown in the double personality of Aunt Lydia. The Pearl girls always work in couples, similarly to the Handmaids, and the half-sisters Agnes and Nicole are opposite and complementary personalities. Becca is the ideal sister for Agnes, and Aunt Lydia is Offred's double as a narrator. Both play out their plot in secret, though Lydia has more power and this allows her to change the narratives from within. In this perspective, *The Testaments* is not only the sequel but also the double of *The Handmaid's Tale*; it gives a different view

according to the different time but also refers to the previous novel (Williams). The third epitaph highlights the implication of freedom in the concept of survival where choice and sacrifice play important roles. Contrary to the previous novel and to other novels by Atwood, where survival, at least temporary survival, is attained at all costs and is considered a topical theme of Canadian literature and mentality, in this novel, there can be no survival, at least no physical survival. People's works and sacrifices might endure in the remembrance and memories of those who survive, but the narratives imply death and sacrifice for a good cause, that is, for freedom. Therefore, freedom is a choice, as Atwood has remarked in her interviews, that needs to be achieved through commitment and sacrifice, and it leaves casualties on the road. It is linked to death, which is agreed to in a pact sealed with blood and carried out by constant witnessing.

The intertextual references highlight great complexity and a nuanced approach. The novel is a skillful embroidery that is expressed via the art of storytelling. In the first place, names matter in this novel, as in *The Handmaid's Tale*; nevertheless, they do not have ambiguous implications but refer directly to the signification they mean to convey. For example, the names of the Pearl girls have biblical or religious connections that communicate innocence and purity. Jemima is an Arabic name that means "little dove" and is the name of one of Job's three daughters. Agnes derives from the ancient Greek Hagnē that means "pure" or "holy" and is linked to St. Agnes of Rome, a martyr often depicted in Catholic iconography with a lamb, a symbol of innocence. Crystal, the real name of Ofkyle, who dies in childbirth, is clearly connected to purity and innocence, as is the name Daisy. However, the name Crystal is also seen as trashy in some parts of the world, which reflects the double role attributed to the handmaids and the way they are judged by other women in Gilead. The other two names attributed to the young girl Daisy are Jade, a precious stone, and Nicole, which means "people of victory." Becca, or Rebecca, refers to the wife of Isaac, sister of Laban, and mother of Jacob and Esau. It has multiple biblical resonances; her story is linked to kindness and generosity but also to women's power when she decides to follow God's prophecy that "the elder shall serve the younger" (*Holy Bible*, Genesis 25.23). Therefore, Becca's determination is only comparable to Aunt Lydia's, and significantly, both sacrifice their lives at the end of the novel, killing themselves for the cause. As a Pearl girl, Becca acquires the name of

Immortelle, which clearly alludes to her destiny of self-sacrifice and the impact that her legacy will have on future generations. She has been made immortal by her selfless and generous act. The names Nicole and Victoria convey the characters' destiny as well, that is, their victorious ending. Victoria is from Latin and means "victory"; Nicole is from the ancient Greek words *nike* (victory) and *laos* (people), meaning "victory of the people" or "people of victory." Besides confirming the Latin proverb *nomen est omen* (true to its name), the names guide the reader to specific conclusions and in part anticipate the development of the story. The references are direct and unequivocal and seem to be guidelines for the reader regarding interpretation.

Furthermore, the reference to Blake's poem "The Lamb" magnifies the innocence of the girls by questioning the reader about the origin of innocence. "The Lamb" echoes the twin poem in *Songs of Experience*, "The Tyger," in the line "Did he who made the lamb made thee?" The question lingers in Gilead: how is it possible that Gilead produced such innocence and, at the same time, such utter cruelty and depravity? The question remains unanswered, as in Blake's poem.

The world of fairy tales is evoked in Tabitha's discourse when she tells Agnes the story of the girl's rescue. The reference is not connected to any specific fairy tale, contrary to what usually happens in Atwood's work, and the story is not developed in a critical way. It refers to what happened to Agnes as it is narrated in *The Handmaid's Tale* and is described in the first episode of the TV adaptation. Agnes ran through the forest with Offred/June and hid behind a tree. In this way, *The Testaments* refers both to the previous novel and to the TV series. Atwood confirms that the narratives of the sequel were crafted to meet the reader's expectations, as she states in the "Acknowledgements."

In Gilead, where childhood is strictly protected and, at the same time, threatened and abused, the lyrics of traditional nursery rhymes are rewritten according to the aims and narratives of the regime. The sexual undertones of "I've been working on the railroad" that refer to oral sex and adultery, which are considered crimes in Gilead and punished with death by stoning, are rewritten in the creepy horror story of the hanged handmaid. She is guilty as the protagonist of the folk song and therefore executed for her crime:

Who's that hanging on the Wall? Fee Fie Fiddle-Oh!

It's a Handmaid, what's she called? Fee Fie Fiddle-
Oh!

She was (here we would put in the name of one of
us), now she's
not. Fee Fie Fiddle-Oh!

She had a baby in the pot (here we would slap our
little flat stomachs). Fee Fie Fiddle-Oh!

(Atwood, *The Testaments* 106)

It is a warning addressed to the girls; the handmaid is the scapegoat, but all women in Gilead are under the same threat. Sex, especially illicit sex, is severely punished and no woman can escape this punishment. In the same chapter, narrated by Agnes, Section VI titled "Six for Dead," there is also the reference to the nursery rhyme "One for Sorrow," which is rewritten in the Gileadean perspective:

One for murder, Two for kissing, Three for a baby,
Four gone missing, Five for alive and Six for dead,
And Seven we caught you, Red, Red, Red!

(Atwood, *The Testaments* 106-107)

The apparently innocuous nursery rhyme summarizes the horrors of Gilead, where murder, death, and missing people are everyday events, as is often the case in totalitarian regimes. The Handmaids are the main victims, but women in general are the targets. As Agnes cleverly notices, the song and the game are both a warning and a threat, and the fact that murdering comes before kissing and these are followed by having a baby reveals the state of women in Gilead. The "precious flower" that is so protected and cherished is symbolically, but also literally, murdered and is doomed in a marriage where kisses of love would empty her brain (Atwood, *The Testaments* 226). Her only task is having babies for the regime, and it does not matter if she ends up dead. This is relevant for the Handmaids in the first place, because it happens to Ofkyle, but it encompasses all women in Gilead at different levels. They are not just commodities but are also regularly abused, raped, and murdered—"defiled," as Agnes says after her encounter with Dr. Grove (98). The Commander-in-Chief, Commander Judd, prefers child brides and disposes of them after a few years, when he then chooses another young girl. This is not just corruption or bribery; this is torture and perversion, and they are

evoked in one of the crucial intertexts of the novel, the Levite's Concubine's story, as will be seen in this article. Furthermore, while the nursery rhyme speaks of "a secret, never to be told," the Gileadean version is explicit and direct in spelling out the secret and setting the punishment. In a similar way, *Ten Tales for Young Girls*, by Aunt Vidala, is "about things girls shouldn't do and the horrifying things that would happen to them if they did" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 294). Once again, the inappropriate behavior and the punishment that is threatened to follow are unambiguously described. This builds in the young girls' imagination, as revealed in Agnes's reaction to the bedtime prayer when she pictures the angels at her bedside looking like the Eye police in black uniforms and with guns, a threatening vision that haunts her.

The other nursery rhyme evoked is "Monday's Child" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 259, 332), which outlines Nicole's destiny. She is a Thursday's Child and has "far to go," which is the case in the story. But she also has her woe days and "works hard for a living" ("Monday's Child Poem"). The literal reference to the nursery rhyme shows Nicole's commitment to and her hope for a better world that is connected to the new movement of Extinction Rebellion, which Atwood supports, as mentioned previously (Atwood, "When Writers Rebel"). Therefore, the references connect the story with what is occurring in the real world. The references to nursery rhymes thus confirm their power; they show the protagonists' destinies and guide the reader. At the same time, they question the authenticity of the female characters' roles proposed by Gilead and suggest commitment and action.

A crucial intertext is the Levite's Concubine's story in Judges 19–21 (*Holy Bible*). The story reveals the connection with the Handmaids, as the concubine has no name and is a sexual partner or a wife with a secondary status, and shows, in a general perspective, the women's status in Gilead and in modern society (Judges 19.22–29). The story of the concubine, who was raped to death and cut into pieces, evokes the fairy tale of *The Robber Bride* and highlights the different sexual treatment reserved for women compared with men (Stone). Women are totally subordinated and traded like animals. Their sexual violation is considered unavoidable in certain situations, though it will be avenged afterwards, which in the concubine's story is a pretext for a war against the Benjaminites, who committed the crime. In the following chapters (Judges 20–21), a

similar treatment is reserved for the women of Jabesh-Gilead and the young women of Shiloh, who are abducted by the Benjaminites. The intertext is a horror story that meant to expose the prevailing social chaos in Israel before the institution of the kingship, to justify it. The story is referred to twice in the novel. The first time in the regime's official version in which the concubine's disobedience is highlighted (Atwood, *The Testaments* 78–79), but once Becka and Agnes are able to read, they discover that what the Bible says is different from what the Aunts taught them at school (Atwood, *The Testaments* 303). The passage from the Bible is therefore manipulated similarly to the nursery rhymes to fit with the Gileadean vision.

The horrible biblical story is therefore contradictory, and Gileadean narratives are deceitful. The two young women need to acknowledge this change of perspective to take action. Their shared view reinforces their commitment and their bond of sisterhood that clarifies their position as women in an oppressive society where they might be used as scapegoats or cattle, traded, or raped to death and cut into pieces and where “[m]en must make sacrifices in war, and women must make sacrifices in other ways” (Atwood, *The Testaments* 80). This also refers to the real world, where these things occur in conflicts and their aftermaths and in everyday life, such as the Marocchinate that occurred after the liberation of Monte Cassino in Italy (Cionci), during the Bosnian war (Turton; Fisk), the treatment of Indigenous women in Canada (Maie Mailhot; Moss), and the killing and raping of women in Mexico (Maloney; Staudt). This is also revealed through Agnes's and Nicole's comments on the male gaze. For Agnes, men's eyes are like “the eyes of tigers ... searchlight eyes” (Atwood, *The Testaments* 9). When Nicole arrives in Gilead, she senses “eyes, eyes, eyes all over me like hands” (Atwood, *The Testaments* 272). Therefore, through the intertext of the Levite's Concubine, the novel exposes the depravity and utter cruelty of Gilead, especially towards young women, in an unequivocal way by highlighting the contradiction between the claimed purity of the regime and its rotten reality. Thus, the novel is dystopian, speculative fiction that warns the readers and refers to real-life modern society in a fictionalized, exaggerated way but is not completely invented. In the intertextual dialogue within the text, Riffaterre's concept of “fictional truth” is produced when the reader is guided in decoding the text and is simultaneously engaged in creating new interpretations. According to Riffaterre, “[w]ords may lie yet still tell a truth if the rules are followed” (xii-xiii). Therefore,

“fictional truth” warns and questions the readers and, specifically in *The Testaments*, invites them to commit to being against oppression and backlashes against certain rights to change the situation. This points to more hopeful perspectives for women and marginalized groups that should lead towards a more equal and just world.

Another important intertextual reference is the “Fox and the Cat” fable to which Aunt Lydia refers; it explains her duplicitous personality well. She is experienced, strong, and adaptable; she has the capacity to understand good and evil and consequently to increase her knowledge and power. She is well read, she can quote, and she can read and write, like all the Aunts, though her memoir is written in secret, as writing is considered dangerous in Gilead. She acts as her own leader and dictates her own rules to herself. Her discourse sometimes has the quality of a witty joke or slogans and alludes to proverbs she applies or does not apply according to the situation. She is clever and manipulative, but her survival is not ferocious to the point of undermining her plan for revenge. The intertextual use of the fable underlines her creativity and flexibility. She is both the cat and the fox; she can play both roles separately and simultaneously according to the circumstances. She can transform herself, shape shift, and therefore adapt to and manipulate situations to her advantage or to suit her plans. The fable is in part rewritten or developed when the fox attempts to eat the cat, who flees into a tree and is already safe when the dogs arrive (Atwood, *The Testaments* 254). The fox is caught and killed, as occurs in Aesop’s fable, but his “bag of tricks” (Atwood, *The Testaments* 254) though useless on that occasion, can still be a good resource in different circumstances and especially in Aunt Lydia’s hands. Aunt Lydia, as she claims, is both the cat and the fox; she still has her “bag of tricks,” as she demonstrates when she convinces Aunt Elizabeth to bear false witness and is already “high in the tree” (Atwood, *The Testaments* 254). She twists the morality of the fable, saying, “better one safe way than a hundred on which you cannot reckon,” indicating she believes that narratives can be rewritten and that nothing is absolute.

In a similar perspective, Aunt Lydia reverses Milton’s *Paradise Lost*’s line, “Evil be thou my Good” (Bk. 4, line 110), to “Good, be thou my evil” (Atwood, *The Testaments* 211). The context of Milton’s work implies the presence of both good and evil in humankind, where Satan becomes the king of the dark side. He has to abandon hope in the sense of personal improvement but, at the same time, he relinquishes fear, which

gives him the courage to face God's absolute power. In a similar way, Aunt Lydia is fearless, but good, not evil, is her final target, though it is pursued through wicked tricks to attain some justice as well as her revenge. In Gilead, a "slippery place" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 62) with a "slippery motto" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 33), her tactic for survival, which she needs to do to attain her goals, is winning, though this is not flawless. The motto *Per Arduam cum Estrus* shows this ambiguity. It is officially translated as "Through childbirth labour with the female reproductive cycle" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 289), but this is a mistranslation, a twisted interpretation dictated by the regime. The motto certainly emphasizes women's power, that is, a mixture of sex (estrus is the period when female mammals are on heat) and reproduction. When female mammals are experiencing their reproductive cycle, they are also sexually receptive. Therefore, the motto reveals Gilead's repression of sexual desire and the forced purification of female power that is intended only to be used for reproduction and shows the regime's fear of women. Lydia's ironic comment "Pen is Envy" when Commander Judd speaks about the microdots that can be hidden in a pen (Atwood, *The Testaments* 140) is rewritten, highlighting young girls' fear of the penis (Atwood, *The Testaments* 214). Hence, the purification pursued by the regime causes young girls to refuse to participate in sex, which is a reflection of a fear of the penis that paralyzes women and might cause annihilation.

Newman vs Cromwell

Cardinal Newman's *Apologia pro vita sua*, in which Aunt Lydia hides the manuscript, is a religious autobiography the Catholic priest wrote in 1864 to vindicate his career in response to Charles Kingsley's review of J. A. Froude's *History of England*. Kingsley claims:

Truth, for its own sake, had never been a virtue with the Roman clergy. Father Newman informs us that it need not, and on the whole ought not to be; that cunning is the weapon which Heaven has to give to the saints wherewith to withstand the brute male force of the wicked world which marries and is given in marriage. (Newman xi)

Newman felt that the passage was offensive and did not correspond to his words or intentions. He asked for an amendment of the passage, which Kingsley never did completely, so he decided to reply to the accusation in his own writing, publishing the

Apologia in instalments. The cardinal wanted to prove his honesty and the search for truth he had pursued throughout his life despite, or because of, his change of direction. He had a meandering career that eventually developed into a conversion from the Church of England to the Roman Catholic Church. Subsequently, he was appointed cardinal in 1879, beatified by Pope Benedict XIV in 2010 and canonized by Pope Francis in 2019. He lived when Roman Catholicism was seen as a tyranny, an out-of-date superstitious religion, “next door to voodoo,” as Aunt Lydia remarks (Atwood, *The Testaments* 36). His first conversion occurred when he was very young and was deeply influenced by Calvinism. Afterwards, he moved to Anglicanism and became an Anglican vicar in 1824. After a period of crisis when he lived in a semi-monastic retreat at Littlemore, he became a Catholic priest in 1847.

Newman’s views were moderate and liberal, combining the conservative and innovative elements of the Catholic Church in a relentless search for truth and personal freedom. How is his personality linked to Aunt Lydia, and why is the most important testimony of the novel hidden in Newman’s book? The tone of Newman’s apology is colloquial; he establishes a conversation with his audience in an intimate way, similar to Aunt Lydia. He gives his opinions and reports facts about his own life by using excerpts from his own letters and previous articles. He explains his “religious opinions” and why he moved from Calvinism to Anglicanism and finally to Roman Catholicism, though he was never completely comfortable in any of these churches. Along his winding path, Newman always pursued his search for freedom of thought and the truth, which he believed were rooted in Jesus Christ’s message. Therefore, the connection with Aunt Lydia is both in this capacity of transformation that was motivated by a search for freedom, justice, and truth and in the peculiar characteristic of Newman’s work: it is an *apologia*, that is, a vindication or justification of his life and career, of his choices, expressed and justified by his opinions. This is presented at a personal level but has a wider perspective; he sets an example and his legacy is confirmed by his canonization, as happens to Aunt Lydia in the final inscription.

Nevertheless, Aunt Lydia is a more ambiguous and duplicitous figure than Newman; she is “swollen with power” and also “nebulous ... formless, shape-shifting” (Atwood, *The Testaments* 32). This aspect connects her to the other historical figure evoked in *The Testaments* and in Atwood’s interviews, that is, Thomas Cromwell. He is

a controversial figure who has recently been rehabilitated by Hilary Mantel's historical trilogy and Diarmaid MacCulloch's biography. Cromwell is depicted as a self-made modern man who was flexible and ruthless, rapacious and shrewd, but who also has "a degree of idealism and reforming enthusiasm" (548). He was not "a man for all seasons" like Thomas More; Cromwell was well aware of the transformations happening in England and in Europe, not only religious changes but above all the shifting of power and economic changes. He had a vision of a politically, financially, and religiously independent England, which did not occur during the rule of Henry VIII but eventually moved in the right direction during the reign of Elizabeth I. Under Henry VIII's reign, considered by Atwood an absolutist regime, Evangelicals were executed for heresy and Catholics for treason. Cromwell was on the Protestant side; he was involved with the Evangelicals and the Lollards, whom the king hated, and promoted the vernacular Bible translated by William Tyndale (MacCulloch 71). His ideas are often linked to Machiavelli and to Girolamo Savonarola, a Dominican friar who intended to reform the Church in the late 15th century in Florence and was burned at the stake (MacCulloch 72). MacCulloch considers Cromwell a Nicodemite, that is, a person who hides their religious views and conforms to the official creed (27, 542). At the apex of his career, Cromwell had several enemies, especially among the aristocracy whose estates and titles he had harvested for himself and his family. He was loyal to the king, supporting his divorce from Catherine of Aragon and the break with Rome, but did not survive the religious instability of his time, which was connected with the different powerful courtly factions that eventually ended him. Henry VIII married Catherine Howard on the day of Cromwell's execution, 28 July 1540, though he seemed to regret the loss of his adviser afterwards. According to MacCulloch, his legacy should be measured in the long term, as England transformed its marginalized European position into a "seaborne world empire that rose and fell from the seventeenth century to the twentieth ... [and in] the formation of another world power whose time may similarly pass, the United States of America" (551-52).

Interestingly, Atwood refers to two very different historical figures who lived in different times and were, for different reasons, both considered heretics. Aunt Lydia shares with Cromwell the mix of an idealistic, realistic, and ruthless vision that will eventually make her plans successful. The allusion to Cardinal Newman is linked to the

quality of his oeuvre, an apology and a testimony of his life and career, which involved changes of route where he, differently from Aunt Lydia, “took the one less travelled by” (Frost). Lydia reverses Frost’s line in her discourse, as she does with the line from Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (66). She chooses compromise at first, the life she “had no choice but to lead” (36), and is complicit with the regime to the point of abuse, as narrated in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and murder. Her corpse is not on the path, as she claims, but eventually will be once she decides to be a Nicodemite, like Cromwell, and to support the Mayday organization.

Embroidering the Story

At the end of the novel, Aunt Lydia refers to Mary Queen of Scots’s motto (In my end is my beginning) and to the queen’s needlework representing “a phoenix rising from its ashes” (Atwood, *The Testaments* 404), which is linked to Lydia’s hope that her story will be revived by her readers. For Queen Mary, her embroidery was not only a way to spend her time, as she was kept in custody for more than eighteen years by her cousin Elizabeth and spent most of her time indoors, but she also expressed her feelings through the patterns. For example, she used symbols that subverted traditional iconography, as in the phoenix, symbol of immortality, and in the representation of a ginger cat (Elizabeth) playing with a gray mouse (Mary) (V&A Museum). For this reason, Aunt Lydia speaks of women as “excellent embroiderers,” capable of using the apparently innocuous visual elements of the needlework to criticize and expose (Atwood, *The Testaments* 404). This is an intertextual reference to the most famous weaver of ancient times, Arachne; the most complete version of the myth of Arachne is in *Metamorphoses* by Ovid at the beginning of Book Six. Like Arachne, Lydia is the weaver of the plot, a narrative that exposes the flaws of the gods of Gilead, their rapes and abuses disguised by manipulated biblical quotations, marriage arrangements, and supposed purity. The “City upon the Hill” (Atwood, *The Testaments* 174) is rotten to the roots, and though Lydia has been complicit with it and is in a position of relative power, she intends to fight for justice and attain it, as shown via the execution of Dr. Grove.

Lydia defies the absolute power of the establishment through her narrative, like Arachne. She describes realistically and ruthlessly the crimes of Gilead, whose narratives are reflected in the myth of Arachne in Pallas Athena’s embroidery that glorifies the Olympian gods and punishes the arrogant humans (Colby College).

Therefore, weaving is a writing of sorts and is particularly related to women in mythological and literary worlds (Colby College). Arachne is an ordinary girl, self-taught and proud of her mastery. She is not respectful of the gods and challenges Athena to compete with her. In her tapestry, she describes in vivid detail Jupiter's seductions and his rapes of young girls when he is disguised as a bull, a swan, and a shower of gold. She also depicts Proserpina's abduction and the different animal shapes and camouflages that Neptune, Bacchus, and Phoebus adopt to seduce nymphs and maidens. It is a long list of detailed images so well crafted that Pallas is tremendously jealous of Arachne's skills and is outraged by her daring narratives and her arrogance in exposing the wrongs of the gods. She destroys Arachne's tapestry and hits her repeatedly on the head with her shuttle. The poor, desperate girl cannot endure such sufferance and commits suicide. At this point, the goddess transforms her into a spider, which saves her life but dooms her to eternal spinning, a never-ending silent writing, as narrated in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

After the metamorphosis, Arachne cannot communicate with an audience as she did at the beginning of the story when women from all over the region came to admire her work. Her story has parallels that of Aunt Lydia and of women writing in general. Athena plays the part of the dominant society that constrains women to their eternal spinning that comes from the inside of their belly, as is described in the myth, but does not allow external contact, that is, the spreading of their subversive voices. Aunt Lydia, like Arachne, exposes the flaws of Gilead and, in doing so, she risks her life. The gods of Gilead are ruthless like Athena and will punish her with an excruciating death if they find her out what she is doing.

Therefore, the parallel with the myth underlines women's storytelling and their skills and power as well as the danger they might face and the possibility they have of not being heard or being silenced. The embroidery metaphor is also reinforced by the practice of petit point the girls learn at school. Petit point must be executed with a degree of patience and allows for the creation of detailed patterns. For this reason, it is stitched on double-threaded canvas, also called Penelope canvas (Fall; DeBrule). It is challenging, rewarding work that connects with the characters and the narratives of the novel. The girls do their patient work in silence, paying attention to detail and being alert and creative in their artwork. The narrative refers to Penelope too, to her patient

weaving, her silent storytelling that defies and deceives the suitors. In a similar way, Agnes and Becka resolve to escape their horrible destiny of becoming child brides, and eventually Agnes/Aunt Victoria succeeds in her final escape. Their petit point, that is, their small narratives, has a patient, flawless, and creative force that makes these characters triumph at the end of the novel.

Both Agnes and Becka endure abuse and threats. They are especially creative in escaping their destiny as wives. Agnes is particularly attentive and receptive to what is happening around her both at school after Tabitha's death and in the family after her stepfather's second marriage with the hateful Paula. In chapter XIV section 35, Agnes connects Becka's attempted suicide to her own body that she describes "as stone cold" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 223) and to Ofkyle-Crystal's death, when the handmaid was "lying still, wrapped in a sheet, staring at me with her silent eyes." She also points out that "[t]here was a certain power in it, silence and stillness," which emphasizes the resistance of the body that silently opposes the rules imposed on women by the regime. In this way, both Becka and Agnes recreate their destinies once they enter Ardua Hall and become Supplicants. They acquire knowledge and therefore power by studying the Bible and perusing the documents in the Archives, as Aunt Lydia notes in her comments regarding the opportunity for women to have access to the library at Ardua Hall (Atwood, *The Testaments* 35). Becka is especially skilled in the study of the Bible and in reading (Atwood, *The Testaments* 297). She teaches Agnes reading and writing and points out the story of the Levite's Concubine. Her remarks about the regime show her insightfulness:

"I know," she said. "That happened to me. Everyone at the top of Gilead has lied to us."

"How do you mean?"

"God isn't what they say," she said. She said you could believe in Gilead or you could believe in God, but not both. (Atwood, *The Testaments*, 303-304)

Daisy reinvents her life after the death of her stepparents with the help of the Mayday organization. She accepts her mission in Gilead, which implies a change in her look and in her attitude to attract the attention of the Pearl Girls, who are looking for Baby Nicole. She is wary, attentive, and creative in her new role, stepping "into a blank"

(Atwood, *The Testaments*, 271), as her mother did, getting into the van at the end of *The Handmaid's Tale*. However, the positive side of her personality and of her mission is highlighted at the end of chapter XVI section 44, when she says, "I would be in a dark place, carrying a tiny spark of light, trying to find my way" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 271). She is therefore open to new responsibilities but also to reshaping her own life.

As we have seen in the reading of the Levite's Concubine story, other biblical quotations are particularly significant in *The Testaments*. They highlight two different visions of the Bible, the manipulative propagandistic use and abuse of the biblical text by the Gileadean regime, also present in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and the way the girls read and interpret the Bible, which denotes their belief in a possibly more faithful and sensible interpretation of the text and a hope in restoring a more just society. As Hannah Strømme remarks, "[t]he word is not singular but plural; it is not transparent but 'seen through a glass darkly' (I Corinthians 13: 2) and is therefore open to multiple incarnations in the world" (49-50). For example, Commander Judd's quotation of Luke 9.50 (*Holy Bible*; similar in Mark 9.0), "for he that is not against us is for us," is reversed in Gilead: "Let me just say that those who are not with us are against us" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 172).

This highlights the ruthlessness of the regime compared with the open perspective of Jesus Christ's words. The manipulation of the Gospel as a source also underlines the constant threatening warnings of the regime that never miss an opportunity to point out the punishment that will inevitably follow the breaking of the rules and the defiant behavior of its subjects. Commander Judd also adopts a general religious language of sorts when he warns Lydia to convince her to collaborate with the regime. For example, when he sends her to the Thank Tank, an isolation cell where she is starved and beaten, he says, "Let us hope you will learn to be more thankful" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 147). Afterwards, when he meets her again after she has recovered from the experience of the Thank Tank, he investigates her feelings using a similar mystical language: "Did you see the light? The Divine Light?" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 170). Consequently, the narratives of the regime manipulate the biblical text, as we have seen previously in the Levite's Concubine's story, in a more extensive way. They revert to and use the religious discourse to cover their crimes and justify their abuses, while the Pearl

girls look for a more valid and meaningful significance of the biblical text that inspires their quest for a more equal society.

In Agnes's discourse, the biblical quotations are therefore used to reveal a different perspective. She opposes Gileadean narratives in a repossession of a possibly more authentic interpretation. She practices her reading of and writing about the Bible and rediscovers the meaning of the text (297–299). The passages quoted are Psalm 90.4–6, 1 Cor. 13.13, Song of Sol. 8.6, and Eccles. 10.20 (*Holy Bible*):

For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night. Thou carriest them away as with a flood; they are as a sleep: in the morning they are like grass which groweth up. In the morning it flourisheth, and groweth up; in the evening it is cut down, and withereth.

And now abideth Faith, Hope, Charity, these three; but the greatest of these is Charity.

Love is strong as death.

A bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter. (Atwood, *The Testaments* 297–299)

They are pivotal religious passages that seem to be embedded in Agnes's (and Becka's) heart. Reading them and writing them down is an opportunity to meditate on them, as happened to amanuenses who copied ancient texts. Agnes questions the texts and her beliefs where the emphasis is on love and the vanity of human life, which is linked to death. The three girls, Becka, Agnes, and Nicole, like the three Marys, seem to believe in and fulfill these "mottoes" in different ways. Becka does so via silence and sacrifice, while Nicole is active and committed, and Agnes seems more meditative and determined. Their final experience of sisterhood is the fulfillment and direct experience of love, which is literally as strong as death, putting their lives at risk or leading them to self-sacrifice, as in Becka's case.

Two of the biblical quotations just mentioned are repeated at the end of the novel in the inscription quoted in "The Thirteen Symposium" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 415).

This section emphasizes the quotations from Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon and sets the perspective the reader is invited to meditate on. While “the bird of the air shall carry the voice” seems to refer to surveillance when it is first quoted, at the end of the novel it can be read as a message of hope. As Atwood says, the message needs to be spread, communicated, as we have seen in this article. The line from the Song of Solomon that closes the novel acquires a particularly strong quality that is caused by the innocent deaths and sacrifices that have occurred in the narration and refers to the epitaph at the beginning of the novel about the Tombs of Atuan. Therefore, freedom is a choice and “Love is as strong as death”; the two concepts are connected in a more hopeful and open perspective that might lead to a fairer society.

Concluding Remarks

In the Thirteenth Symposium, hosted in First Nation territory, Crescent Moon has more space to speak. Professor Pieixoto “will attempt not to reoffend,” though he seems worried “that women are usurping leadership positions to such a terrifying extent” (Atwood, *The Testaments* 408). Thus, women’s voices are heard and studied. Their testimonies, recordings, and manuscripts are acknowledged as authentic. The intriguing graffiti found on the windowsill of the shelter the fugitive characters end up in after the escape to Canada are considered another aspect of the proof of their witnessing. Nevertheless, Pieixoto’s remark that “you can take the historian out of the storyteller, but you can’t take the storyteller out of the historian” (Atwood, *The Testaments* 414) adds an ambiguous layer to the speculative fiction element of the novel. The reader is invited to become aware that *The Testaments* is fiction even though it might seem very near to the “real” world. It is fiction and truth at the same time, and in a few decades, it may be not as true as we think it is today. This also depends on the positions of the readers, who are citizens too and make choices.

Furthermore, the inscription on the statue that commemorates Becka at the end of the novel and celebrates female empowerment, is considered “a convincing testament,” a testimony, a will, and evidence of the authenticity of the story (Atwood, *The Testaments* 415). The description of the statue is moving in its simplicity. It refers to Becka, who sacrificed her life for the cause; she has two doves on her shoulder representing Agnes and Nicole. The bond of sisterhood is also reiterated in the inscription and is sealed by the final line of the novel: “Love is as strong as death.” All

the major agents of the story are present in the positive ending that points to hope in a more just future world if the readers commit to it by making the right choices. Through storytelling, the intertextual references expose the wrongs and suggest a transformation that might lead to a different, fairer vision.

In this article, I have discussed the complex network of intertexts that suggest a more hopeful vision in a perspective of possible change. The dialogue between witnessing and storytelling refers to the speculative fiction quality of the text and inscribes the story in a world of language that could become more or less “real” according to different situations in different parts of the world. Thus, in *The Testaments* the polyvalent characteristic of the novel is confirmed. As Kristeva remarks in *Desire in Language*, the novel is “a polylogical ‘discourse’ of a multiplied, stratified, and heteronomous subject of enunciation” (173) that in *The Testaments* is substantiated by the use of the intertexts in the different narratives. The reader is guided to acknowledge the “testament” of the narratives as witnessing, evidence, and will and consequently to take a stance if this is not the world they would like to live in.

Works Cited

- Allardice, Lisa. “Margaret Atwood: ‘For a Long Time We Were Moving Away from Gilead. Then We Started Going Back Towards It.’” *The Guardian*, 20 Sept. 2019, www.theguardian.com/books/2019/sep/20/margaret-atwood-moving-away-from-gilead-testaments?utm_term=RWRpdG9yaWFsXod1YXJkaWFuVG9kYXlVS19XZWVrZW5kLTE5MDkyMQ%3D%3D&utm_source=esp&utm_medium=Email&utm_campaign=GuardianTodayUK&CMP=GTUK_email.
- Allen, Graham. *Intertextuality*. Routledge, 2000.
- Atwood, Margaret. “On What *The Handmaid’s Tale* Means in the Age of Trump.” *The New York Times*, 10 Mar. 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/03/10/books/review/margaret-atwood-handmaids-tale-age-of-trump.html.
- . *The Testaments*. Chatto and Windus, 2019.
- . *Writing with Intent: Essays, Reviews, Personal Prose 1983–2005*. Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2005.
- Barnstone, Willis. *The Poetics of Translation: History, Theory, Practice*. Yale UP, 1993.

- BBC Culture via BBC Radio 4. "Third Ear: Margaret Atwood." 1989, www.facebook.com/BBCCulture/videos/10159704036215459/?v=10159704036215459.
- BBC News. "Margaret Atwood: *Handmaid's Tale* Has Got 'a Lot Closer to Reality.'" 9 Sept. 2019, www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/entertainment-arts-49635586/margaret-atwood-handmaid-s-tale-has-got-a-lot-closer-to-reality.
- Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. Penguin Books, 2008.
- Bouson, Brooks. *Brutal Choreographies*. The University of Massachusetts Press, 1993.
- Channel 4 News. "Margaret Atwood on Her Sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*, Politics of Fear and the Climate Crisis." 11 Sept. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=PH2ltR-xvFI.
- Cionci, Andrea. "La Verità Nascosta delle 'Marocchinate', Saccheggi e Stupri delle Truppe Francesi in Mezza Italia." *La Stampa*, 16 Mar. 2017, www.lastampa.it/cultura/2017/03/16/news/la-verita-nascosta-delle-marocchinate-saccheggi-e-stupri-delle-truppe-francesi-in-mezza-italia-1.34636405.
- Colby College. "Weaving and Writing: Censorship in Arachne: Ovid and the Censored Voice." 2022, web.colby.edu/ovid-censorship/censorship-in-ovids-myths/weaving-and-writing-censorship-in-arachne/.
- DeBrule, Althea. "Alles über Penelope Needlepoint Canvas 2021." *Lybadvice.com*, <https://lybadvice.com/all-about-penelope-needlepoint-canvas>.
- de León, Concepción. "Bernardine Evaristo: 'No Single Book Is the Best Book in the World.'" *The Independent*, 7 Nov. 2019, www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/bernardine-evaristo-booker-prize-2019-girl-woman-other-the-testaments-a9187461.html.
- Dillon, Jade. "'Blessed Are the Meek': Atwood's Desire for Female Autonomy in *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Fantastika Journal*, vol. 1, no. 2, Dec. 2017, pp. 213–16, fantastikajournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Global-Fantastika-Vol-1-Issue-2-Dec-2017.pdf.
- Fall, Cheryl. "Important Facts about Needlepoint and Petit Point." *The Spruce Crafts*, 17 Nov. 2019, www.thesprucecrafts.com/difference-between-needlepoint-or-petit-point-2479581.

- Fisk, Robert. "Bosnia War Crimes: 'The Rapes Went on Day and Night': Robert Fisk, in Mostar, Gathers Detailed Evidence of the Systematic Sexual Assaults on Muslim Women by Serbian 'White Eagle' Gunmen." *The Independent*, 8 Feb. 1993, www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/bosnia-war-crimes-the-rapes-went-on-day-and-night-robert-fisk-in-mostar-gathers-detailed-evidence-of-1471656.html.
- Friedell, Deborah. "I Love Her to Bits: *The Testaments* by Margaret Atwood." *London Review of Books*, vol. 41, no. 21, 17 Nov. 2019, pp. 11–2.
- Frost, Robert. "The Road Not Taken." *Poetry Foundation*, 1916, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44272/the-road-not-taken.
- The Holy Bible: Authorized King James Version*. New American Library, 1974.
- Howells, Coral Ann. *Margaret Atwood*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*. Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2013.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. Edited by Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia UP, 1980.
- . *La révolution du langage poétique*. Éditions du Seuil, 1974.
- MacCulloch, Diarmaid. *Thomas Cromwell: A Life*. Penguin Random House, 2018.
- Maie Mailhot, Terese. "When Will North America Reckon with the Ongoing Genocide of Indigenous Women?" *Pacific Standard*, 6 June 2019, <https://psmag.com/ideas/will-canada-reckon-with-the-ongoing-genocide-of-indigenous-women>.
- Maloney, Alison. "City of Silence: The Dark Mystery of Ciudad Juárez in Mexico where 1500 Women and Girls Have Been Brutally Murdered and Dumped in the Desert since 1993." *The Sun*, 25 Sept. 2017, www.thesun.co.uk/fabulous/4542094/the-dark-mystery-of-ciudad-juarez-in-mexico-where-1500-women-and-girls-have-been-brutally-murdered-and-dumped-in-the-desert-since-1993/.
- "Margaret Atwood and Ash Sarkar on Activism and the Legacy of *The Handmaid's Tale*." *YouTube*, uploaded by Penguin Books UK, 9 Nov. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=DfhExA5_-3g.
- "Margaret Atwood: Handmaid's Relevance After Election." *YouTube*, uploaded by q on cbc, 22 May 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=BvIpWyWVTdE.

- “Margaret Atwood at MIT – *Oryx and Crake* Revisited – 2004 Abramowitz Lecture.” *YouTube*, uploaded by MIT Video Productions, 5 Sept. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=kB_bhdEX8OE.
- “Margaret Atwood, *The Testaments*.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Politics and Prose, 21 Sept. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=DZNvo-jU5RU.
- “Monday’s Child Poem: Your Child’s Personality by Day of the Week.” *Famili*. www.famlii.com/mondays-child-day-of-the-week-nursery-rhyme-predicting-childs-personality/.
- Moss, Margaret. “Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls: An Epidemic on Both Sides of the Medicine Line.” *The Conversation*, 5 June 2019, theconversation.com/missing-and-murdered-indigenous-women-and-girls-an-epidemic-on-both-sides-of-the-medicine-line-118261.
- Newman, John Henry. *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*. Edited by Ian Ker, Penguin Books, 2004.
- Okojie, Irenosen and Margaret Atwood. “Margaret Atwood: Birmingham Symphony Hall.” 28 Oct. 2019. Birmingham Symphony Hall.
- O’Toole, Garson. “History Does Not Repeat Itself, But It Rhymes.” *Quote Investigator*, <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2014/01/12/history-rhymes/>
- Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, Book 3, johnstoniatexts.x10host.com/ovid/ovid6html.html.
- Plett, Heinrich. “Intertextualities.” *Intertextuality*, edited by Heinrich Plett, Walter de Gruyter, 1991, pp. 3-29.
- Ratcliffe, Sophie. “With *The Testaments*, Margaret Atwood Heads for That Hollywood: Review.” *The Telegraph*, 16 Sept. 2019, www.telegraph.co.uk/books/what-to-read/testaments-margaret-atwood-heads-hollywood-review/.
- Riffaterre, Michael. *Fictional Truth*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1990.
- Sabo, Peter J. and Graybill, Rhiannon. ‘Arcane Energy: An Afterword on the Bible and *The Testaments*.’ “Who Knows What We’d Make of It, If We Ever Got Our Hands on It?”: *The Bible and Margaret Atwood*. Edited by Rhiannon Graybill and Peter J. Sabo. Gorgias Press, 2020, pp. 409-21.
- Scarano D’Antonio, Carla. “Notes on ‘The Testaments’ by Margaret Atwood.” *The Blue Nib Literary Magazine*, Apr. 2020, thebluenib.com/notes-on-the-testaments-by-margaret-atwood/?fbclid=IwAR35RNNKNfyiG9bg1uvY3_y3XoMmVKPfiCOTd5PrADygQ2zWQVoJjpm_s.

- Staudt, Kathleen, and Howard Campbell. "The Other Side of the Ciudad Juárez Femicide Story." *ReVista: Harvard Review of Latin America*, Winter 2008, archive.revista.drclas.harvard.edu/book/other-side-ciudad-ju%C3%A1rez-femicide-story.
- Stone, Ken. "Concubine of a Levite: Bible." *Jewish Women's Archive*. jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/concubine-of-levite-bible.
- Strømmen, Hannah. "Always a Potent Object?: The Shifting Role of the Bible in Margaret Atwood's Novels." *Who Knows What We'd Make of It, If We Ever Got Our Hands on It?: The Bible and Margaret Atwood*, edited by Rhiannon Graybill and Peter J. Sabo. Gorgias Press, 2020, pp. 27-53.
- Townsend, Jessica. "When Writers Rebel: Jessica Townsend Meets Booker Prize Winner Margaret Atwood." *Hourglass*, vol. 4, no. 6, 4 Jan. 2020, hourglass.news/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/The-Hourglass-Issue-4-Digital-Edition.pdf.
- Turton, Sue. "Bosnian War Rape Survivors Speak of Their Suffering 25 Years on." *The Independent*, 21 July 2017, www.independent.co.uk/news/long_reads/bosnia-war-rape-survivors-speak-serbian-soldiers-balkans-women-justice-suffering-a7846546.html.
- V&A Museum. "The Prison Embroideries of Mary, Queen of Scots." V&A, 2022, www.vam.ac.uk/articles/prison-embroideries-mary-queen-of-scots.
- Vološinov, V.N. "Marxism and the Philosophy of Language." *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev and Voloshinov*. Edited by Pam Morris, Arnold Publishers, 1994, pp. 62-73.
- Wagner, Erica. "'Writing Is Always an Act of Hope': Margaret Atwood on *The Testaments*." *New Statesman*, 18 Sept. 2019, www.newstatesman.com/margaret-atwood-interview-the-testaments-handmaids-tale-sequel.
- Williams, Keira. "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum: On the Literature of Witness in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*." *Pop Matters*, 4 Oct. 2019, www.popmatters.com/margaret-atwood-the-testaments-2640840462.html.
- Women's Podcast*. "Episode 347: Margaret Atwood." *The Irish Times*, Nov. 2019, soundcloud.com/irishtimes-women/ep-247-margaret-atwood?fbclid=IwARomLmRwQkCdsHxLn-ADoPHFOCoVFeOb9axSSzouAJtIZCz8fnI7AHifPjk.