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Under His Eye: Gendered Power/Body Relationships in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Senior Paper

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The body is a powerful force in Margaret Atwood's 1985 classic feminist novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. The novel is a work of dystopian fiction focusing on a theocratic regime that has taken control of the United States in response to an ongoing fertility crisis and environmental tensions. In this new nation, called Gilead, fertile women are forced into a life of sexual servitude in order to produce children. This role is inspired by the Biblical story of Rachel and Bilhah, in which Bilhah, a handmaid, carries children for Jacob, Rachel's husband, when she herself cannot. The novel is narrated by one of these enslaved women, whom the audience only knows by the name of Offred. In the novel, bodies are impacted by a multitude of social and legal constructs within the nation of Gilead.

Scholars have applied several theoretical approaches to the body, but one of the most applicable theories to use in contextualizing and interpreting the role of the body in Atwood's work comes from the scholar Michel Foucault. Foucault introduced the idea of the docile body in his 1975 work *Discipline and Punish*, which examines the history of the modern penal system, the sociocultural context of punishment, and the effects of changing power relations. Foucault posits that a "body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved" (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 136). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the body functions as a dystopic symbol of power, authority, and control. The body is divided by social class, gender, and other identities. Gilead's control over the body is patriarchal and conservative ideologically, but it is also representative of restrictions on religion and class divides. Bodies, and in particular fertile women's bodies, become a reproductive machine, a threat against rebellion, and a marker of social status.

Feminists have long recognized women's biological differences, reproductive functions, and social roles as contributing factors in the oppression of their lived experiences. Scholar

Susan Bordo's early work on the female body emphasizes the problematic nature of contemporary standards of beauty, calling attention to the impact of patriarchal power structures and social constructs on the perception of the self. She quotes theorist Andrea Dworkin, who argues that these standards "define precisely the dimensions of [woman's] physical freedom ... No feature or extremity is spared the art, of pain, of improvement ... From head to toe, every feature of a woman's face, every section of her body, is subject to modification [and] alteration" (Bordo 183-184). Scholar Lois McNay posits that "female bodies are worked upon in socially and historically specific ways rather than in terms of an eternal, undifferentiated difference between the sexes" (133). Scholar Sandra Lee Bartky writes that "we women cannot begin a revision of our own bodies until we learn to read the cultural messages we inscribe upon them daily and until we come to see that even when the mastery of the disciplines of femininity produce a triumphant result, we are still only women" (151). For feminist scholars, gender and power are inextricably linked, impacting female bodies most prominently.

Foucault's writing on docile bodies and his theories on power and subjectivity have been particularly influential for feminist theorists. Many works of feminist scholarship engage with his work and apply a Foucauldian perspective to their analysis of power and the female experience. In her article "The Prisoner of Gender: Foucault and the Disciplining of the Female Body," Angela King argues that "there are in fact many convergences between the feminist account of power and the body and Foucault's." Feminist scholars have paid close attention to power relations, particularly between the sexes. Foucault "held particular disdain for totalizing theories that claimed to offer the truth through scientific explanations," and feminist scholars were similarly critical of science's claims of objectivity and truth (King 32).

Gender plays a crucial role in the relationship between power and the body in Gilead. Through her narrative lens, which so heavily depends on the perspective of women, Atwood entangles the relationship between power and the body discussed by Foucault with the complex nature of gender. Atwood's gendered approach to the ideas echoed in Foucault's theories is an approach that goes ignored by Foucault himself. A prominent gender-blindness permeates his work. From *Discipline and Punish* to *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, and beyond, Foucault adopts an approach to power/body relationships that does not define the body in terms of gender. In Foucault's work, the body is simply a sexless body, neither oppressed or empowered by gender. Gender identity and the social complexities attributed to it in the contemporary world are seemingly invisible through the Foucauldian lens.

Foucault's gender neutrality is problematic because society itself is not gender neutral. To consider contemporary power dynamics without the underpinnings of gender relations is to ignore the impact of established gendered social constructs on the formation of female subjectivity. According to King, Foucault's analysis "sidesteps how woman has been discursively identified with the body and downplays the objectification that feminists argue this results in in order to argue for the subjectifying power of discourse" (33). Foucault's theories on power demand a gender-specific analysis that he himself does not provide. By adopting a feminist lens many scholars have been able to "correct" Foucault's gender-blindness and androcentrism. In this thesis, I will examine the ways in which *The Handmaid's Tale* reflects the relationship between power and the body articulated by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*. I will also argue that *The Handmaid's Tale* functions as a corrective for Foucault's gender-neutrality, illuminating the ways in which female subjectivity is impacted by gender as a "discipline."

The Foucauldian lens draws from a rich philosophical tradition, and much of Foucault's writings on power and the body usefully inform interpretations of *The Handmaid's Tale*. *The Handmaid's Tale's* focus on reproductive control and Gilead's class divisions call attention to what Foucault calls a new scale of bodily control, in which the body is not treated as a whole, but instead as a collection of individual pieces. The body was discovered to be both an object and a target of power during the early modern age. Physicians and philosophers, such as Descartes, believed that "there was a useful body and an intelligible body. And yet there are points of overlap from one to the other" (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 136). The industrial age brought with it a wealth of projects concerning the docility and utility of the body. In this new era of industrialization, the image of the body as a machine was celebrated and pursued. Movements, gestures, and attitudes are just some of the "mechanisms" in the body taken as a sum of its parts.

The mechanization of the body as described by Foucault is portrayed in *The Handmaid's Tale* through various structures, laws, and decorum that emphasize the body's utility and contribute to the body's docility, emphasizing what Foucault calls the individual body's "economy, the efficiency of movements, [and] their internal organization." The new form of control exercised on the body presents a new modality: there is an "uninterrupted, constant coercion," in which the *processes* are supervised more closely than the *results*. Time, space, and movement were partitioned as finely as possible in order to generate maximum productivity (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 137).

In Gilead the transfer of the Handmaids from one home to another reflects bodily utility and docility by economizing the body and regulating its movements through time and space. By placing them with a new Commander, the state hopes that Handmaids that have had no luck with getting pregnant will be able to fulfill their "duty" of conceiving a child. These exchanges

maximize productivity in the sense that increased or better fertility and access to fertile women leads to the “production” of children for Gilead. For Foucault this approach to bodies has roots in industrialization, which “made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces” and created a relationship between utility and docility, which Foucault calls disciplines. Even when a child is born, the Handmaid’s service continues, with a new façade of “privilege”: Janine is “allowed to nurse the baby, for a few months, they believe in mother’s milk. After that she’ll be transferred, to see if she can do it again, with someone else who needs a turn. But she’ll never be sent to the Colonies, she’ll never be declared Unwoman. That is her reward” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 126). As a Handmaid, Janine gains very little agency for being a surrogate, and her servitude continues with maximum production in mind. Scholar Angela King reads the female body as “a particular target of disciplinary power in order to argue that gender, specifically femininity, is a discipline that produces bodies and identities and operates as an effective form of social control” (30). Women are defined by their association with their reproductive physiology as well as their association with nature, whereas men are defined by their mind and their association with rationality. Such is the way of Gilead, where there exists an economy of scarcity in which the lack of babies is endangering the human race. The female reproductive system is, thus, central to the state’s survival and continued development.

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the Handmaids’ fertility puts them in a “position of honor;” however, power dynamics within the home seem to subvert the honor instilled by the state. The narrator, Offred, describes the transfer of the Handmaid into a household as a “business transaction” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 15). In the same way that goods and services are exchanged, the Handmaid is transferred from house to house in a cycle of sexual servitude. The

body is economized and made efficient and disciplined; in other words, docile. And while it could be argued that it is better that the Handmaids are at least praised for their fertility, the life of the Handmaid becomes centered around reproduction, ultimately leading to Handmaids being dehumanized for their fertility in the same way that infertile women are. When Handmaids are objectified in this way, the reproductive system functions as a commodity. In Gilead, the value placed on the Handmaid's fertility in its commodification triggers a national obsession, or fetishization, with the Handmaid. However, this obsession with the Handmaid is not based on her personal identity, which is now heavily rooted in her own oppression, but it is instead based on her mechanized, disempowered body.

For the Handmaids, their bodies become a source of anxiety rather than agency. As Offred remarks, "Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure ... Now the flesh arranges itself different. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object ... Every month there is a moon, gigantic, round, heavy, an omen. It transits, pauses, continues on and passes out of sight, and I see despair coming towards me like famine. To feel that empty, again, again ... marking time" (Atwood 73). Once a central marker of her identity, Offred's body in Gilead is no longer her body, but a docile, politicized anatomical structure subjected and abused by her government. In this passage, she compares her uterus to the universe. She yearns for the moon – the egg, the bringer of life – to become a fetus, but every month menstruation comes with its own despair, for menstruation indicates failure. Offred's anxiety over menstruation reflects what Pamela Cooper calls "the gendered ambivalence of the flesh" by illuminating the double meanings of blood in the novel. Blood symbolizes both life and death. She has not fulfilled her duty and, before long, she will pay for it with her life. For Atwood, Offred's menstruation "genders [her] by designating a bodily openness both to fertility and – in an

especially intense, biologically specific way – to injury. Menstrual blood marks the renewal of life through procreation and its potential destruction through a sexualized violence of invasion and occupation” (Cooper, “A Body Story...” 93). Blood presents an interesting paradox which Atwood develops further in her portrayal of the relationship between the Handmaids and the state. Blood represents both sides of the Handmaid’s duty, from the trauma of rape and violence endorsed by the state to the menstruation and childbirth enabled by her fertility.

The utilization and fetishization of the Handmaid’s bodies, in particular their fertility and menstruation, reflects the relationship between the state and the body, in which the state of Gilead values Handmaids solely because of their ability to produce children. Foucault describes disciplines as focused on the body, not only at its skills or its subjection, but “at the formation of a relation that in the mechanism itself makes it more obedient as it becomes more useful.” Foucault calls this a “political anatomy.” This “machinery of power” illuminates power relationships between bodies, as well as between the state and the body. It defines how one may control others’ bodies, not only so that they will conform to one’s wishes, but also so that they may operate, like a machine, “with the techniques, the speed, and the efficiency that one determines.” Political anatomy was not a sudden discovery; rather, it was a product of multiple minor processes which “gradually produce[d] the blueprint of a general method” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 138).

Historically the disciplines that formed the political anatomy of the body were adopted in response to needs varying from the rise of industry to the outbreak of epidemic diseases similar to the fertility epidemic that triggered the rise of the Gileadean regime. The disciplinary institutions that formed this new power helped create what Foucault called a “new micro-physics of power... because, since the seventeenth century, they had constantly reached out to ever

broader domains, as if they tended to cover the entire social body” (139). Foucault coined the term “biopower” to describe such disciplinary responses to natural needs. In the presence of biopower, the natural body and the political body merge into one.

One can see the significance of biopower via the background of the Gileadean regime. The nation of Gilead was conceptualized as a response to several national crises, specifically a widespread epidemic of infertility. Because of this biological crisis, the newly-formed theocratic government is centered around reproduction. This goal is arguably a survival instinct, reinforced and solidified by religious values and upheld by the hierarchy of the totalitarian state. Gilead defends their complete control over women through this biological justification. In using biopower Gilead is able to dehumanize women by stripping them of their right to hold money, read, or write in order to more easily take control of their bodies, specifically their reproductive system. And while the rhetoric behind Gilead’s use of biopower is commonly accepted as “pro-women” by the larger society, the elimination of these rights for women creates an environment in which women are subhuman.

This ostracization of women is further reinforced by the intricacies of Gileadean society that point to the notion of biopower. For example, the Handmaids are forced to wear uniforms that cover up their bodies and obscure their faces as a way of preserving their outward innocence and sexual purity. The narrator, Offred, remarks that “everything except the wings around my face is red: the color of blood, which defines us” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 8). Because the government is so heavily involved in reproduction the control of the state has inadvertently created a nation in which women are defined in terms of their fertility. Although they hold some semblance of power due to their relationships with the Commanders, the Wives are exemplified by their widespread infertility, as are the “Unwomen,” who are sent to the Colonies and declared

useless. This distinction between Unwomen and Wives shows the intersection between infertility and class, but what is more important is the distinction between these two sects of women and the Handmaid. Regarding the Wives, Aunt Lydia comments that “you must realize that they are defeated women,” because they have been unable to produce children in accordance with the biopower-based regulations instituted by the state (46). Their infertility is not viewed as a biological coincidence but as a failure attributable to no one else but the women themselves.

One way in which disciplines, and consequently biopower, succeed is through the distribution of individuals within a particular space. Disciplines occasionally require the enclosure of the body or of bodies in a closed space. Enclosure is not always a form of punishment. While enclosure in the prison sought to punish and prevent crimes such as vagrancy and looting, other enclosures such as universities were more discrete in their disciplining. The model pupil was the product of monastic discipline. Enclosure was also practiced in the military to stop desertion and to hold army soldiers in place. At the same time, industrialization brought with it manufacturing spaces that represented a new form of enclosure and a new type of control. The aim was to “derive the maximum advantages and to neutralize the inconveniences (thefts, interruptions of work, disturbances and ‘cabals’), as the forces of production become more concentrated; to protect materials and tools and to master the labor force” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 142). With these factories, enclosure became not just about idyllic behaviors or reinforcement, but also about efficiency and productivity. In *The Handmaid’s Tale* the Handmaids are sent to the Rachel and Leah Center, where their training to be a Handmaid occurs. The Handmaids are set to a strict schedule of training and seminars regarding topics like the Ceremony, Gileadean decorum, and the Bible. As described by Offred, they “tried to sleep, in the army cots that had been set up in rows, with spaces between so we could not talk. We had

flannelette sheets, like children's, and army-issue blankets ... Aunt Sara and Aunt Elizabeth patrolled; they had electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their leather belts ... we weren't allowed out, except for our walks, twice daily, two by two around the football field, which was enclosed now by a chain link fence topped with barbed wire" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 4). By enclosing the Handmaids and concentrating them into a small space, the Gileadean government practices enclosure in order to meet their goals.

Disciplines also thrive through the control of activities. In *The Handmaid's Tale* Offred's everyday life in Gilead is strictly monitored in ways that recall a monastic existence. According to Foucault, the time-table originated in the monastery and soon spread to schools and hospitals. Seventeenth century regulations divided up the work day and often "retained a religious air" similar to Gilead's theocratic realm: "before beginning their work, all persons shall wash their hands, offer up their work to God and make the sign of the cross." Foucault explains that the time table succeeded because of its "three great methods -- establish rhythms, impose particularly occupations, [and] regulate the cycles of repetition" (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 149). There are echoes of the time-table method in *The Handmaid's Tale* through regulations that further embolden bodily docility and utility.

For example, bells and other sounds measure time. Offred remarks that "the bell that measures time is ringing. Time here is measured by bells, as once in nunneries" (Atwood 8). Here, too, the bell establishes a rhythm. It signals a change in time or a change in activity. The bells are so commonplace that many have grown accustomed to the sound. And there are other alerts, as well, that establish a change in routine. There is a siren which prompts Offred to rush to a nearby window, where she sees a red Birthmobile make its way down the street. The bell also signals the start of the ceremony, the ritual of nonconsensual sex between the Commanders and

their Handmaids. Offred remarks that “when the bell has finished I descend the stairs, a brief waif in the eye of glass that hangs on the downstairs wall. The clock ticks with its pendulum, keeping time; my feet in their neat red shoes count the way down” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 79). In this moment Offred knows what the bell is for and what is expected of her. When she counts her steps on the way down the stairs, she follows a ritualistic rhythm, not imposed by the guidelines for the Ceremony but arguably self-imposed by her subconscious desire for distraction. When she counts her steps in the same way that soldiers in the seventeenth century monitored their marching, she separates herself from her reality, attempting to form her own subjectivity in the face of oppression.

Rituals in Gilead such as the ceremony illuminate what Foucault calls the “temporal elaboration of the act” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 151). Specific gestures and movements are controlled or set to a rhythm rather than a specific partition of time. In Gilead, at events such as the Prayvaganza, certain socioeconomic classes are cordoned off and controlled. Offred remarks that “this rope segregates us, marks us off, keeps the others from contamination by us, makes for us a corral or pen, so into it we go, arranging ourselves in rows, which we know very well how to do, kneeling them on the cement floor” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 214). Many other behaviors, even everyday routines, follow a certain rhythm or set of guidelines. When Offred goes to meet her partner for their daily walk, they greet one another with “the accepted greetings:” “Blessed be the fruit” and “may the Lord open” (19). They walk together in a pair throughout Gilead, not only for “protection” but to serve as the other’s spy.

The Handmaids’ walks are thus a form of surveillance, one of many in Gilead. Surveillance is one of the most prominent tactics used by the Gileadean regime to deprive women of their power and their experiences. Surveillance takes on many different forms and

illuminates both power in a general, omnipresent sense as well as the gendered nature of power in Gilead. The Gileadean police force, known as the Guardians, represent a more personal form of surveillance, for they interact with the Handmaids on a day-to-day basis. Surveillance gives them power over the Handmaids because they can enable or disable the Handmaids' physical access. In other words, they are able to enforce the boundaries of enclosure described by Foucault and enabled by the Gileadean regime.

However, the Guardians are also subject to many of the same constraints and restrictions that they impose on the women in Gilead. Offred remarks that "I hope they get hard at the sight of us and have to rub themselves against the painted barriers, surreptitiously. They will suffer, later, at night, in their regimented beds. They have no outlets now except themselves, and that's a sacrilege" (22). The Guardians are enclosed by barriers -- both physical and sociocultural -- that other, more powerful members of the regime are allowed to pass through. They are not given the same free-will as the Eyes or the Commanders because they are effectively treated as a militarized force, controlled and resourced like the soldiers described by Foucault. They are assigned to beds and housing built specifically for those of their status, but are not given the same lavish lifestyles afforded to the Commanders and other powerful Gileadean men. They are deprived of their sexuality as "men who aren't yet permitted to touch women" (22). It is a different type of deprivation from that of the Handmaids', which takes the form of nonconsensual, reproductive servitude, but it is a deprivation nonetheless. Their position on the Gileadean hierarchy of power is a complicated one. They are privileged in some ways, and subjected in other ways. For these surveillant men, discipline is simultaneously a giver and a taker of power.

Surveillance also takes the form of what scholar Pamela Cooper refers to as “the gaze of the doctor” in her article “Sexual Surveillance and Medical Authority in Two Versions of *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” in which she examines the use of doctors as a form of surveillance in Gilead (Cooper, “Sexual Surveillance...” 1). The unequal power dynamic between Offred and the doctor, who she only goes to once, reflects the larger patriarchal power structures in Gilead. The screen that Offred shields her body with is “red cloth stretched on a frame, a gold Eye painted on it, with a snake-twined sword upright beneath it, like a sort of handle. The snakes and the sword are bits of broken symbolism left over from the time before” (Atwood *The Handmaid’s Tale* 59). What Offred sees in place of the doctor when he is examining her is adorned with symbols of surveillance (the eye) and the phallus (the snake and the sword), creating an “emblem of Hippocratic integrity” that, according to Cooper, “accomplishes the gendering of medical authority as masculine, and designates the link between that authority and the phallic eye” (Cooper, “Sexual Surveillance...” 3). The three separate symbols are entangled together in a visual allegory for the power and control of the patriarchal Gileadean regime.

Just like she is in the eyes of the state, in the doctor’s office Offred is vulnerable, even though “the doctor will never see [her] face. He deals with a torso only” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 59). Even at times when she cannot be seen, her body is still subject to the male gaze that dominates Gilead and informs power dynamics. Offred is desirable, her body fetishized by the state and medically valuable because of her fertility. When the barrier is broken between her and the doctor, it is done so for the doctor to propose impregnating Offred. And even though she refuses, “this is not the last word as far as he’s concerned. He could fake the tests, report me for cancer, for infertility, have me shipped off to the Colonies, with the Unwomen” (61).

Medical examinations as a form of surveillance embolden the Foucauldian idea of the body as a “spectacle” that reinforces the power structures established within. The Aunts use cattle prods and deploy other methods of physical punishment to force the Handmaids to assimilate and behave to Gileadean standards, although their female identity makes it so that “even they could not be trusted with guns” (4). The Gileadeans are subject to punishment or execution if they disobey the laws. Reminders of this intended to instill paranoia are present in markers of trauma on bodies, such as scars, amputated extremities, and gouged eyes. There are mounds of dead rebel or criminal bodies left in the street for days at a time, intended to serve as a reminder of what happens to those who disobey. Most importantly, there is the Wall. Once a “plain but handsome” architectural feature of a university, it has been converted into a physical barrier (reminiscent, again of Foucault’s idea of enclosure) as well as a display of authority (31). When Offred visits the Wall early in the novel, she and Ofglen “stop, together, as if on signal, and stand and look at the bodies. It doesn’t matter if we look. We’re supposed to look: this is what they are for, hanging on the Wall. Sometimes they’ll be there for days, until there’s a new batch, so as many people as possible will have the chance to see them” (32). The bodies on the Wall function in much the same way as statues at an art museum: they’re meant to be seen.

Surveillance in Gilead calls to mind Foucault’s ideas on selfhood and subjectivity as described in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, in which Foucault writes that there “is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself” (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 155). To Foucault, the individual internalizes the authoritarian curtain to

such an extent that they become self-surveillant, adopting behaviors and identities that conform to social norms and societal standards.

While Foucault posits that physical punishment and restraint are not relevant to the development of selfhood and subjectivity, I argue that *The Handmaid's Tale* confirms that acts of violence and harm against the body impacts subjectivity just as well. When female bodies are determined to be infertile, they are often declared “Unwomen” and sent to the Colonies. Male workers who have committed crimes may also be sent to the Colonies, along with heretics, homosexuals, and other historically marginalized groups that the nation of Gilead has persecuted and criminalized. In the Colonies, men and women perform physical labor, compromising the integrity of their bodies. When Offred reunites with Moira, Moira explains that “the other Colonies are worse, though, the toxic dumps and the radiation spills. They figure you’ve got three years maximum, at those, before your nose falls off and your skin pulls away like rubber gloves. They don’t bother to feed you much, or give you protective clothing or anything, it’s cheaper not to. Anyway, they’re mostly people they want to get rid of” (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 248). Bodies are left to decay and rot in order for the government to achieve its goals. Gilead is ultimately committing genocide through the Colonies disguising their mass-murder of marginalized workers as a service to clean up lands destroyed by toxic waste and war.

In Gilead, these grotesque bodies – both the dead and the alive – are symbolic of the relationship between power and prejudice in the social world. By examining the damaged body, one can see the vulnerability of the body to coercion, vital threats, and political power. Prejudice gives power by bringing people together through the disenfranchisement of a specific group to which they attribute their failures. In Gilead, conservative Christians aim to disenfranchise many different groups of people to create a heteronormative society where reproduction is no longer a

problem but is instead celebrated and upheld by the state. The power imposed on the Gileadean body leaves it subjected and stripped of individual identity and expression. The regime's power over the body enables prejudice and ostracization, genocide and mistreatment rooted in the toxic ideologies that have taken over in times of disarray. This power allows the regime to take control of the populace.

This is just one of the many areas in which *The Handmaid's Tale* strays from the Foucauldian perspective by showing the ways in which gender interacts with power and the body. Through its portrayal of reproductive control, a theocratic government, and Handmaidenry, *The Handmaid's Tale* shows how gender functions as a discipline that leads to the creation of docile bodies that serve a higher utility for the government. In showing the validity of gender in understanding and contextualizing the docile bodies process, *The Handmaid's Tale* rejects the absence of the effects of gender in *Discipline and Punish*. The gendered power structures, hierarchies, and institutions established and maintained by Gileadean Commanders, Guardians, and Eyes directly subvert Foucault's gender-neutral perspective on power and the body articulated in texts like *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, and *Discipline and Punish*.

Gendered forces of power operate on the micro-level in Gilead, impacting almost every aspect of daily life. Stores, streets, and structures are tightly bound to the authoritative ideology that permeates the fabric of the nation. These forces of power as they operate in Gilead also call attention to Foucault's idea that power forces dominate "not from magisterial decree or design 'from above' but through multiple 'processes, of different origin and scattered location,' regulating the most intimate and innate elements of the construction of space, time, desire, [and] embodiment'" (Bordo 191). In her article "Feminism, Foucault and the Politics of the Body"

scholar Susan Bordo points to Foucault's suggestion that one should reimagine power as a possession and instead a "network of non-centralised forces" as one of several conceptualizations of modern power that have proved useful not just to her studies, but to the field of feminist theory at large.

Foucault's level of attention to gender as a discipline present an interesting discourse that has been the subject of discussion and scholarship for many scholars of feminist theory. King explains that "although feminists have engaged at length with his theories, Foucault himself never showed much interest in feminism or gender issues. For someone whose project was to elaborate on how power produces subjectivity by focusing on the ways it invests the body, his accounts are curiously gender-neutral" (29). Foucault has been criticized for failing to recognize and address the role of gender in power relations. It's notable that Foucault dedicated much of his work to analyzing power relations, sexuality, and the body without *any* discussion of gender. Scholar Sandra Lee Bartky argues that Foucault treats the body in such a way that he fails to explain the reasons why men and women experience power structures and institutions differently. In her examination of the ways in which female bodies are subjected to practices and institutions specifically targeting them, Bartky shows how female bodies and subjectivity are informed by a "disciplinary regime of femininity" (Bartky 102). Atwood takes on a similar approach to Bartky in her portrayal of women in Gilead. The patriarchal nature of Gilead's power structures consequently brings the idea of gender as a discipline to the forefront while Foucault's theory fails to do the same.

Gender as a discipline can also be seen in *The Handmaid's Tale* through the way criminality is treated through both Gilead and the Colonies, particularly female criminality. For women, acts such as reading and adultery are prosecutable by death or dismemberment. For

example, during a Salvaging of a Handmaid and a Wife, Offred ponders, “Reading? No, that’s only a hand cut off, on the third conviction ... As for the Wife, there’s mostly just one thing they get salvaged for. They can do almost anything to us, but they aren’t allowed to kill us ... especially not when we are pregnant” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 275). Men are not always held to the same standard, especially the Commanders. Men are afforded the additional agency that comes with being allowed to read and write, and are not subjected to Salvagings, or executions to the same frequency as women of all classes are. Some men are even afforded access to Jezebel’s, a brothel providing women an alternative to Handmaidenry in the form of prostitution. The Commander explains that it is “only for officers, from all branches; and senior officials. And trade delegations, of course. It stimulates trade. It’s a good place to meet people. You can hardly do business without it” (237). Here, the objectification of women holds global economic power, strengthening bureaucratic connections through the fetishization and sexualization of female bodies. And yet, even in an extremist state like Gilead, these inklings of sexual immorality are afforded a pass when these acts are performed by powerful people, and more importantly, powerful men.

In showing the differences in crime between genders, Atwood echoes the argument of scholars like Patricia O’Brien who argue that Foucault “fails to differentiate sufficiently between the treatment of female and male prisoners” (McNay 132). While male criminality has been perceived as a social deviance, female criminality for many has roots in natural physiology. Scholar Lois McNay explains that female criminality “was perceived predominantly through the grid of what was regarded as the inferior biological makeup of women. It was explicitly linked to what were understood as fundamental traits of the feminine physiology – delicacy, nervousness, [and] susceptibility.” These attitudes were further reinforced by the popular

interpretation that female sexuality was “pathological and regressive” (132). In criminalizing actions such as reading and writing, Gilead emboldens what Foucault calls “the correlation of the body and the gesture,” in which gestures are confined to a routine or what Foucault calls a “gymnastics;” in the case of handwriting, for example, “invests the body in its entirety, from the points of the feet to the tip of the index finger” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 152). The disciplined, docile body operates with efficient gestures in which context is present throughout. Atwood departs from Foucault when she applies the discipline of gender to this movement as well by constricting the gestures of reading and writing in the lives of Gileadean women. Men are able to engage in literacy, to follow through with the movements associated with the command of language. The act of using a writing utensil or possessing a printed text also implicates Foucault’s idea of the “body-object articulation,” in which “discipline defines each of the relations that the body must have with the object that it manipulates” (153). Again, Gilead shows the implications of gender by prohibiting women from reading or writing texts.

While feminist scholars are quick to critique Foucault, I think it’s notable that Michel Foucault was a product of his time, and the gender-blind nature of his theories on docile bodies and power dynamics reflect a larger ignorance of gender politics in the larger world. Misogynistic ideas about women are regularly used to justify wage gaps and other inequities, some more heinous than others, in the larger world. Femininity is still seen as synonymous with weakness and submission even in industrialized, modern nations like the United States and the United Kingdom. These ideas show that Foucault’s theories on power are not merely theoretical, and Atwood’s portrayal of such sexist power is not merely fictive.

Such is the nature of Atwood’s work, which is based on what is already there. Regarding *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood wrote, “If I was to create an imaginary garden, I wanted the toads

in it to be real. One of my rules was that I would not put any events into the book that had not already happened in what James Joyce called the “nightmare” of history ... No imaginary gizmos, no imaginary laws, no imaginary atrocities. God is in the details, they say. So is the Devil” (Atwood, “Margaret Atwood on What *The Handmaid’s Tale* Means”). She pulled inspiration from a Chinese fertility crisis, historical totalitarianism, and Biblical precedents to craft her dystopian world of Gilead. When an audience claims that Gilead could never happen, Atwood raises a valuable point about gender and power echoed by Foucault’s deep analysis of history: it has.

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