

THE
UNIVERSITY
OF RHODE ISLAND

University of Rhode Island
DigitalCommons@URI

English Faculty Publications

English

1996

Margaret Atwood's Modest Proposal: *The Handmaid's Tale*

Karen F. Stein

University of Rhode Island, kstein@uri.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/eng_facpubs

Terms of Use

All rights reserved under copyright.

Citation/Publisher Attribution

Stein, Karen F. "Margaret Atwood's Modest Proposal: *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Canadian Literature*, vol. 148, 1994, pp. 57-73.

Available at: <https://canlit.ca/article/margaret-atwoods-modest-proposal/>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at DigitalCommons@URI. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@etal.uri.edu.

Margaret Atwood's Modest Proposal *The Handmaid's Tale*¹

Margaret Atwood begins her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* with two dedications and three epigraphs: a passage from *Genesis*, a passage from Jonathan Swift's "Modest Proposal," and a Sufi proverb. This abundance of preliminary matter establishes a frame through which we read the novel, just as a frame around a painting tells us to read the enclosed space in a certain way, as an art object, an object re-presented in a way that calls attention to its special relationship to surrounding objects. We look through—not at—the frame, but its presence has already categorized the object within and structured the way we will view it. Similarly, Atwood's interpolated texts set up a frame that asks us to read the rest of the book in a particular way.

To frame means, among other things, to utter or articulate, to fit or adjust to something, to enclose, to shape or fashion, to invent or imagine, to plan or contrive, to devise falsely (to frame up); all of these meanings resonate in *Tale*. In Gilead, women have been framed. Framed by their red robes and wide wimples, the handmaids are clearly visible, marked and delimited by their social status. For the wearer within the frame, the wimples serve as blinders; to look *through* them is to see only straight ahead, a narrowed view of the world. For us as readers, to look *at* the wimples is to read the authoritarian practice of Gilead which attempts to control women, and to permit only one view of reality. By decoding Atwood's framing texts, we can read the frame itself as well as reading through it. Such a reading may in fact expand our view, for it adds layers of inference and possibility. Many critics

have discussed one of the framing texts, the Historical Notes section at the end. Indeed, this topic is the focal point of articles by Arnold E. Davidson and Patrick D. Murphy. Davidson considers the political implications of the Notes, while Murphy examines this section of the novel as a structural device. For other analyses of the Historical Notes, see, for example, Deer, Lacombe, LeBihan, Rubenstein, Stein, Tomc. Thus, while this section has received substantial attention, few critics have spoken about the prefatory material. Lucy M. Freibert addresses the dedication and all of the epigraphs, although she speaks in detail only about the material from *Genesis*. She remarks that the epigraph from Swift prepares us for political satire. Nancy V. Workman analyzes the Sufi proverb and its meanings for the novel. She mentions the Swift epigraph in passing, notes that it is “readily understood” and relates Swift’s exaggerated satire to Atwood’s exaggerated satire of American Puritanism and the Moral Majority (11). Linda Wagner-Martin discusses the novel’s dedications briefly. Sandra Tomc explores in greater depth some of the ironic implications of the dedications. I will consider all of the prefatory framing matter here, and focus in particular on the Swift epigraph. I shall argue that this epigraph serves larger thematic and stylistic purposes in Atwood’s novel. By examining these initial framing devices, I hope to ask useful questions about the narrative voice and to extend our readings of the novel.

Before considering the preliminary framing matter which will be our central concern here, it will be useful to sketch out the workings of the book’s “Historical Notes,” the concluding frame. This chapter, a report of an academic conference about Gilead held at the University of Denay, Nunavit (“deny none of it”), serves many functions. For one, the academic discourse satirizes academic pretension. More seriously, through its sexism and moral relativism it establishes ideological parallels between the dystopias of Gilead and the post-Gileadean society. Rhetorically, the speaker at the conference, Professor James Darcy Pieixoto, continues the process of ironic layering of texts which the multiple epigraphs have initiated. Pieixoto has in fact assembled Offred’s story, rearranging and transferring her audiotaped oral narrative into the written text that is the eponymous story. Thus, through his editorial acts, and now, in the novel’s narrative present, through his conference presentation, Pieixoto provides another narrative voice, another layer of interpretation to frame the handmaid’s narrative. His narrative includes information about Offred’s escape

from Gilead and her recording of the story which, puzzlingly, she does not provide. Moreover, in bracketing her tale, his text reiterates the tension between Offred's words and patriarchal control of her story which forms the crux of her tale. We shall have more to say later about the ways in which Pieixoto misreads Offred's tale.

Additionally, the "Historical Notes" section furthers the satirical purpose of the novel. In describing the function of this frame, Patrick Murphy explains it as a device to solve a problem facing writers of dystopian speculative fiction: if the dystopian world is too far removed from ours, our reading may lead to "cathartic reduction of anxiety" (26) with no impulse to act in our world. The reader who is too comfortable may read for escape or to "reinforce smug assumptions" (26). To reduce this distance, and induce a "discomforting" reading, the author employs a framing device "intended to reduce the distance between tenor [relations in the empirical universe] and vehicle [relations in the fictional universe] and thereby further the fundamental purpose of this SF subgenre: to prompt readers to change the world" (Murphy 40, bracketed text from Suvin 70). Murphy notes that while it has "historical precedents in the 'discovered manuscript' device used by Swift . . . and others, pseudo-documentary framing" is a more appropriate strategy for contemporary readers because it is closely related to "journalistic and academic writing conventions. . . [influenced by] 'new journalism' and the popularity of the 'non-fiction novel'" (27). To Murphy's categorization of *Tale* as dystopian science fiction, I would append, as others have suggested, the label of satire (and also, the labels of journal, epistolary novel, romance, palimpsest).² Satire, like dystopian science fiction, is a genre which addresses its exaggerated version of present evils to readers who have some power to act and, by this means, hopes to bring about social and political change. Offred's original text, recorded on audiotape, is presumably intended to inform a larger audience about Gilead and thus to serve the same purpose of bringing about action to extirpate the horrors of the dystopia.

This dystopian-science fiction-satirical-journal-epistolary-romance-palimpsest text, then, this *Tale*, is the story of a rather ordinary, educated, middle-class woman who is framed by, but (presumably) escapes from, a dystopian misogynist society. How appropriate to frame (bracket) her story with a dedication to Atwood's ancestor, Mary Webster, who escaped hanging as a witch at the hands of the dystopian misogynistic

Puritan Massachusetts. Because the rope broke and the law of double jeopardy saved her from being tried again, Webster escaped from death and subsequently moved to Nova Scotia, a more liberal society. Counterpoised to Webster, the novel's other dedicatee is Perry Miller, an American scholar of Puritanism (a teacher of Atwood's when she was at Harvard). Sandra Tomc demonstrates that the juxtaposed dedications posit the ironic relations between scholars and the texts they (mis)read, between the events of history and the historians who (mis)interpret them. In explicating and valorizing the texts they interpret, both Pieixoto and Miller ignore the deeply misogynist strain of Gileadean and Puritan cultures. Pieixoto urges the conference audience to suspend moral judgment in studying Gilead; Miller was in the vanguard of American scholarship that celebrated the Puritan vision as quintessentially American (Tomc 80). Observing that the ironic pairing of Webster and Miller at the start parallels the pairing of the handmaid Offred and Professor Pieixoto at the end, Tomc notes "the issue in both cases is the failure of the female object of study to fit the patterns of inquiry set out by her male scrutinizer" (81). Moreover, because they do not fit these "patterns of inquiry," Offred and Mary Webster are able to escape from the traditional plots scripted for (or rather against) women, and thereby to elude not only the scholars who study them, but also the rigidly punitive societies that seek to destroy them.

Like the dedications, the epigraphs chosen as framing texts are drawn from the domains of history, literary history and religion, thus pointing to a wide scope of issues, to a seriousness of purpose and, also, to the persistence over time of the problems the novel will raise. These preliminary interpolated texts signal the reader that several discourses will be juxtaposed; several layers of meaning and language will be superimposed upon each other, and played against each other to produce ironic effects.

Because irony is a chief feature of the novel, and one of the components of satire, a brief discussion of its purposes is in order. A useful place to begin our understanding of irony is Linda Hutcheon's discussion. Describing the complex, multifaceted uses of irony, Hutcheon notes that its tone extends along a range that begins with the mildly emphatic and continues through the playful, ambiguous, provisional, self-protective to the insulting, the subversive or the transgressive (221). She offers a definition of "irony as the interaction not only between ironist and interpreter but between different meanings, where both the said and the unsaid must play

off against each other (and with some critical edge)” (220). Moreover, irony may be a device which creates a community of knowing readers who are complicit in their exclusion of the targeted groups, those other readers who do not comprehend the point of the irony. With this in mind, let us resume our readings of the prefatory matter of *The Handmaid’s Tale* to discover how the ironizing frame of the novel is constructed.

Just as the double dedication suggests ironic possibilities, the biblical, Swift and Sufi epigraphs open up spaces for further ironic readings. Because others have addressed the biblical and Sufi material, we shall consider them only briefly here, and then focus our attention on the Swift text which needs further critical explication. In her analysis of the Sufi proverb, Nancy V. Workman explains that punning, multiple meanings and paradox (discursive strategies central to *The Handmaid’s Tale*) are central components of Sufi writings. She finds that the “inwardness and language play” important to the Sufi mystical tradition structure the novel and provide the narrator with “the power to shape reality” (18). However, we must be aware that the reality Offred shapes is a private one; her world is a narrow cell-like room within which she is free to imagine and meditate as she chooses.

In contrast to Offred’s constrained shaping of reality, the totalitarian government of Gilead appropriates biblical texts to institute and enforce harsh political control, to shape a political reality for its citizens. Lucy M. Freibert discusses the religious hypocrisy of Gilead and explores the comic implications of the biblical allusions and parallels, noting “humorous correspondence between the biblical account and Atwood’s tale” (283) and outright “high burlesque” (284) in the prayer scene preceding the impregnation ritual. The epigraph biblical text *Genesis* 30: 1-3 suggests the importance of children to women and raises the issue of male control over women. Recontextualizing this passage, Gilead turns Rachel’s anguished plea for children into the pretext for instituting a new domesticity based on the sexual triangle of a man and two women. In the guise of a re-population program, Gilead reads the biblical text literally and makes it the basis for the state-sanctioned rape, the impregnation ceremony the handmaids must undergo each month. In this recasting of the biblical passage, Gilead obliterates the emotional meaning of the story and, instead, turns a woman’s desire into an instrument of male control.

Moreover, on a more figurative level, the choice of a biblical text for the epigraph suggests that spiritual as well as political significance is at issue in

the novel. The state-controlled religion of Gilead, like the patriarchal Israelite society and the Puritan theocracy of Massachusetts, offers its adherents little spiritual sustenance. Its belief system is a harsh theology based on a judgmental father god rather than on a nurturing divinity. The state cynically selects the texts which it privileges to authorize its political control, and promulgates religious rituals (such as the Salvagings, Particutions and Prayvaganzas) as “steam valve[s] for the female elements” (390). Its written texts are subject to state control. Bibles are kept locked up, and only the men are legally allowed to read them. Computer-banks of prayer machinery print out prayer scrolls and intone them in metallic monotones, but no one reads or listens to the prayers: “you can’t hear the voices from outside; only a murmur, a hum” (216). Even worse, neither Offred nor her partner (and possibly no one else in Gilead) believes that the intended audience—God —“listens to these machines” (217). Consequently, the computer prayers are voices which fall upon deaf ears, just as Offred’s voice falls upon deaf ears, unheard or misheard. Since Pieixoto finds her audiotapes so many years later, hidden in a trunk in what was once the city of Bangor, Maine, we must assume they did not succeed in their purpose of conveying the story of Gilead to her contemporaries.

Another voice whose urgent, impassioned call to action was not heard by his contemporaries is the voice of Swift’s Modest Proposer. Atwood’s choice of an epigraph from “A Modest Proposal” invites us to explore thematic and stylistic parallels between her text and Swift’s, and leads us to posit ironic readings of the narrative voices. The satire in each case depends upon an ironic narration, the “proposal” or “tale” of a supposedly artless observer who reports an appalling situation in a relatively flat style. The targets of satire are repressive governmental policies which produce worse harm than the problems they set out to solve. Swift, the brilliant Irish political satirist and clergyman, published his “Modest Proposal” in 1729 to expose the damaging consequences of British economic policy toward Ireland. Atwood, the brilliant Canadian novelist, published her *Handmaid’s Tale* in 1985 to expose the damaging consequences of patriarchal misogyny in an imagined state, which Atwood alleges is not entirely fictional.

The passage which Atwood appends in her epigraph reads: “but as to myself, having been wearied out for many years with offering vain, idle, visionary thoughts, and at length utterly despairing of success, I fortunately

fell upon this proposal.” Whose is this voice? Is it the voice of Swift, the outraged public man who seeks to ameliorate the problems of a debt-ridden, colonized Ireland? The Proposer, who frames— in a data-filled, matter-of-fact report— a most heinous solution to the problems of Ireland’s poverty and overpopulation? Critics are still asking: How are we to read the connections between the voices of Swift and his Proposer? Swift chose the “Modest Proposal,” a genre popular in his time,³ as his frame “to reduce the distance between tenor [relations in the empirical universe] and vehicle [relations in the fictional universe] and thereby further the fundamental purpose of this . . . subgenre: to prompt readers to change the world” (Murphy 40, bracketed text from Suvin 70). His satire is powerful in part because it is directed at its readers, both the educated business class of England and the oppressed Irish. English and Irish Protestant mercantile interests might speak in exasperated, voices about the Irish poor, as does the Proposer. Or they might suggest policies as detrimental to Ireland as those of the Proposer, without realizing the tragic consequences of such legislation. On the other hand, many of the remedies the Proposer discounts as being ineffective or impossible to realize, such as the refusal to purchase foreign manufactured goods, are options available to the Irish themselves.

Whose voice(s) does the author of *Tale* mean to imply by the epigraph? Who are we to suppose is the equivalent of the Proposer? There are layers of authors: the imputed author, the handmaid Offred who narrates the tale, the archaeologist Pieixoto who pieces together the fragments of audiotaped oral narration to assemble the manuscript. Whose voices emerge from this layering, and with what degree(s) of innocence? And what are the targets of the novel’s satire? What are we to make of the novel’s use of romance story conventions? Should we conclude that because it uses the romance plot— the rescue of the helpless female victim by the mysteriously dark, silent lover— the tale is therefore retreating from politics and public life into romantic fantasy? Or is the tale satirizing the woman who would choose this plot for herself? Or is the tale satirizing those readers who do not see that the romance conventions are also a level of irony (Tomc 82)? Or is the tale satirizing all of the academics who attempt to pin down its voice and propound our own interpretations?

Swift’s “Modest Proposal” and Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* share many stylistic and thematic features. Stylistically, both play with the range of possible irony. Both create characters (the Proposer, the Commander and

the Professor) whose smug certainties are punctured by ironic narration. Thematically, both texts establish metaphorical links between women/animals/ procreation/ food. Both paint graphic pictures of the horrific consequences of misguided political policy. Swift's text demonstrates the tragic effects of English colonial policy which reduced Ireland to poverty & famine. Atwood's novel depicts the ravages of a fictional totalitarian regime (although Atwood insists, in an interview in *Quill & Quire*, that "there's nothing in the book that hasn't already happened"). In both cases, one social dilemma addressed is that of population. The "Modest Proposal" seeks to solve the problem of Irish overpopulation; the rulers of Gilead are obsessed with resolving their crisis of underpopulation, for industrial pollution and experiments in biological warfare have produced the sterility that led to underpopulation. In each case, the measures taken to rectify the population are draconian. Gilead resorts to the desperate remedy of enforced sexual servitude; the Proposer suggests another desperate remedy, cannibalism. The voice of the Proposer, like that of Gilead, is definitely hostile to women (note that the possibility that Swift was also a misogynist is a matter of some critical debate).⁴ Both the Proposer and the government of Gilead seek to control and appropriate women's sexuality and to commodify their children.

In both texts, there are deprecating references to women as animals, especially breeding animals. Ofglen is a "trained pig" (26), the handmaids are like "caged rats" (90). Offred sees herself as a "prize pig" (90), and "an attentive pet" (238). She refers to the handmaids as two-legged wombs. She thinks of a Commander as a "rutting salmon" (p. 282). In "Modest Proposal," a similarly reductive perspective prevails. Women are compared to brood mares, calving cows or sows in farrow. Charles Beaumont finds that in its thirty-three paragraphs of text "Proposal" uses the terms "breed" or "breeders" six times, and "dam" (in the sense of female progenitor) twice (105-107).

Body parts of men as well as women (often exaggerated or grotesquely depicted) figure prominently in each text. In *Tale*, Offred sees worms as "flexible and pink, like lips" (p. 23); she describes the Commander's penis as a "tentacle," "blind," like a slug (113). The sexual politics of Gilead foregrounds sexuality as reproduction, and leads the narrator to view the world in terms of reproductive functions. Offred perceives flowers as "the genital organs of plants." As a result of this distorted vision, as Roberta Rubenstein notes, "distinctions between human and non-human are grotesquely inverted or reduced" (107). The hanged bodies of Gilead's victims are suspended from

the walls of the former Harvard Yard like slabs of meat on meathooks. With bags over their heads, they are anonymous, featureless. Offred contemplates this process of dehumanization: “This is what you have to do before you kill. . . You have to create an it, where none was before. You do that first, in your head, and then you make it real” (249). The “Modest Proposal” employs a similar strategy of dehumanization; the Proposer describes infants as “useless mouths” (17); Beaumont counts five uses of the word “carcass,” and four appearances of “flesh” (105-107).

Just as women in Gilead have become property of the state as child-bearing machines, the children they produce are commodified. In *Tale*, bearing a child insures the handmaid’s survival, while handmaids who fail to produce progeny after three postings are exiled to the toxic waste colonies. Because of their enhanced value, pregnant handmaids flaunt their status. But they lose all rights to the infants after parturition: the babies become the property of the Commanders’ wives. However, as a result of environmental pollution, many babies are born deformed and thus fail to actualize their commodity value: they are “Shredders” rather than “Keepers.”

In “Modest Proposal,” of course, the sole value of children is as marketable commodity. But market value here depends on weight and flavour. Children are described as “plump,” “fat,” or “fattest.” Infants are reckoned up in terms of how many portions they will make: “a well-grown fat yearling child . . . roasted whole, will make a considerable figure at a Lord Mayor’s feast, or any other public entertainment” (16); “a child will make two dishes at an entertainment for friends; and when the family dines alone, the fore or hind quarter will make a reasonable dish” (13). Additionally, children are compared to venison or suckling pig, and recipes are offered.

The “Modest Proposal” continues to shock with its vitriolic satirical suggestion of cannibalism. But there are dark echoes of cannibalism in *Tale* as well, which it will be worth considering. Indeed, Atwood’s first novel was *Edible Woman*, in which the narrator Marian MacAlpin perceives herself as a commodity that her fiance Peter plans to consume. She thinks of herself as analogous to the rabbit he hunts and eviscerates; she runs away from the camera he seeks to “shoot” her with. In the conclusion, she bakes a cake in the shape of a woman and asks him to consume it instead of her. (For an exploration of the food imagery in *Edible Woman*, see MacLulich, who reads the novel as a version of the “Gingerbread Man” folktale.)

Atwood has clearly been fascinated with the idea of cannibalism. She has treated this subject playfully in at least one other context. In 1987 *The CanLit Foodbook: From Pen to Palate—a Collection of Tasty Literary Fare*, edited and illustrated by Margaret Atwood, was published.⁵ Written as a fund-raiser for Canada's Anglophone P.E.N., the book is a compilation of authors' favorite recipes, and selections from Canadian authors containing descriptions of food or meals. Atwood cautions her readers that this is not exactly a cookbook. Indeed, chapter nine is titled: "Eating People is Wrong: Cannibalism Canadian Style." In her foreword, Atwood tells us:

Chapter nine is devoted to cannibalism, metaphorical and actual, of which there's a surprising amount in Canadian literature. It appears to be one of those thrill-of-the-forbidden literary motifs, like the murders in murder mysteries, that we delight to contemplate, though we would probably not do it for fun, except in children's literature, where devouring and being devoured appears to be a matter of course (4).

In her selections for this chapter, Atwood includes the passage in which Marian MacAlpin bakes and decorates her woman-shaped cake. Atwood comments in the foreword that collecting recipes and "pestering writers" took a long time: possibly she had begun thinking about the *Foodbook* at the time she was writing *Tale*. Of course, the tone of the foodbook is much lighter than that of *Tale*. Alluding to cannibalism in connection with Hitler's policy of extermination establishes a much more serious context in *Tale* than in the tongue-in-cheek cookbook. Yet, this conflation of serious and comic is a recurring feature in Atwood's work. In fact, her playful *Foodbook* is a fund-raiser for the serious purpose of raising money on behalf of writers who are political prisoners.

Cannibalism, to the extent that it may ever have been actually practiced (apart from the desperate cases of stranded disaster survivors in extreme conditions), is an act of aggression against an other, a powerless, but somehow potentially dangerous and fearsome victim. We would apply the cannibal label only to alien others, whom we perceive to be savages beyond the pale of civilized humanity, for cannibalism is a powerful taboo, which has, as Atwood notes, the power to horrify and titillate readers. The cannibal theme is carried out in several ways in *Tale*. On some level, the foods the handmaids eat, symbolic representations of wombs and fertility (pears, eggs, chickens, bread described as baking in the oven), are analogues for their bodies. Additionally, one of Offred's flashback memories recounts her childhood fear of cannibalism. When her mother described the deaths of

victims in Nazi concentration camps, she talked about people being killed in ovens. As a young child, not comprehending, Offred believed that these people had been baked and eaten. "There is something especially terrifying to a child in that idea. Ovens mean cooking, and cooking comes before eating. I thought these people had been eaten. Which in a way I suppose they had been" (187-88). By means of this digression, Offred makes explicit the analogies between Gilead and Nazi Germany, and between her tale and "A Modest Proposal." In all cases, we have dystopian societies that are devouring their children.

Having explored some of the thematic parallels, let us now turn to the stylistic parallels between Atwood's and Swift's texts. These stylistic strategies hold the key to our readings of the texts, for through their styles the narrators establish their relationships to their texts and present themselves as subjects of the reader's interpretations.

Discussing the style of "A Modest Proposal," Charles Pullen writes that the Proposer "is quite capable of irony and anger: what he is incapable of seeing is how monstrous his marvelous solution is" (77). Further, "The Proposer is . . . highly skilled, knowledgeable, imaginative . . . He is also a captive of his style which simply has no need or room for emotion, for morals, for human implication. Solving the problem is all: he possesses the rhetorical structure, the proper language and the necessary knowledge" (79). This characterization of the Proposer's style applies equally to the first of the two male voices in *Tale*, the voice of the Commander (the state). The Commander, "highly skilled, knowledgeable, imaginative," is smugly certain that he has solved "the woman problem." But he is more sophisticated than the Proposer. Aware of the human implications, he is nevertheless pleased with his solution. In conversation with Offred, he lapses into cliché, thus signaling that his response is superficial, trivializing both the issue and the person he is answering. His response again relies on dehumanizing and cannibalizing the victims: "You can't make an omelet without breaking eggs" (273). He also acknowledges that "better never means better for everyone. It always means worse, for some" (274). Thus women become for him the eggs which are broken and consumed to create a better life for the patriarchal ruling class.

The Commander is evasive and trivializing about the human implications of his political revolution. On the other hand, we note that Professor James

Darcy Pieixoto (the voice of the academy) who speaks in the Historical Notes section, is willing to remain oblivious to the “human implication” of Offred’s tale, the story he has pieced together from fragments. His distanced, objective reading is at cross purposes with Offred’s subversive political intent in recording her tale. Accordingly, his neutral stance highlights his links to the Commander, and serves to accentuate the satirical purpose of the novel. As Pullen notes in continuing his discussion of the Proposer’s style: “Only a style of antiseptic distance could ignore the potential for horror in this” (80). The last of the narrators of *Tale*, Professor Pieixoto prides himself on his “antiseptic distance,” his fitting, proper, moral relativity. Ignoring the horror of Gilead, he warns his audience “we must be cautious about passing moral judgments upon the Gileadeans. Surely we have learned by now that such judgments are of necessity culture-specific. . . . Our job is not to censure but to understand” (383). Thus, Pieixoto adheres to a reading practice that remains distanced from dystopian or satirical narratives, reading for escape or for comfort rather than as an impetus for action toward social change. It is this kind of distanced reading which perpetuates the dystopia of Gilead in its current avatar in Nunavit.

We now turn to the central narrative voice in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. What are we to make of the voice of Offred, the handmaid whose oral narration has been transcribed by Pieixoto? Glenn Deer has analyzed the voice of the narrator, and finds her to be not as innocent as we might first suppose. Deer notes that Offred is a gifted storyteller; she does not remain an artless narrator. To some extent she is complicit in the story she tells, a story which foregrounds violence. “In *The Handmaid’s Tale* we are guided by a cunning implied author, a voice that feigns weakness in the guise of Offred, her narrative mask; but this voice cannot help but advertise the control and strength of its origins: Margaret Atwood. . . [T]hough the reader has participated in the construction of this story, responsibility for its pain and power lies in the rhetorical will of the author” (230). Deer argues that Atwood must create a skilled storyteller in order to achieve her rhetorical goals. I would like to push Deer’s point somewhat further, to argue that the power of the novel comes precisely from the tension produced by just this layering of narrative voices. By reading the slippage between the voices of Offred and Pieixoto and the “rhetorical will of the author” we become aware of the layers of irony, “the interaction. . . between different meanings. . . with some critical edge” (Hutcheon 220). Similarly, it is in the slippage between the

skillful speech of the Proposer and the “rhetorical will” of Swift that the irony of “A Modest Proposal” resides.

A key stylistic feature of *Tale* is its use of layers of textual material to establish frames that set up ironic oscillations of meaning. The epigraphs, historical notes and dedications are part of this process, but even within Offred’s narrative the novel employs this ironic layering device. First, we note that Offred’s text, the main portion of the novel, is Pieixoto’s piecing together of recorded fragments. Second, within the tale puns, digressions, flashbacks, asides, rewordings, abound. Offred sometimes retells the same event in different ways, reminding us that this is a “reconstruction” or an “approximation.” Thus, Offred’s words continue the pattern of layered texts, overlapping voices within the novel. Jill LeBihan notes that this textual layering functions to problematize the Gileadean notion that there exists one truth, one officially sanctioned version of reality: “the novel constantly reiterates its uncertain, problematic relationship with the concept of a single reality, one identity, a truthful history” (96-97). Further,

the dystopian genre and temporal shifts are ways of drawing attention to the frame, the arrangers, and the white space and flat surfaces which make perception . . . possible (104). . . *The Handmaid’s Tale* is dystopian fiction, but also historiographic metafiction with a confessional journal-style first person narrator. The single identifiable generic frame is stretched to include as many different writing strategies as possible within its construction. But the story once in print . . . is not under the subject’s control (106).

Thus, several narrative conventions exist in tension with each other, challenging the notion of a seamless reality and a unified narrative voice. Similar stylistic strategies are at work in “A Modest Proposal.”

Returning to interrogate Swift’s style, we find that its power stems from this very tension of layered voices. I quote at some length from Clive T. Probyn’s discussion:

[Swift] characteristically works from the margin inwards, leaving us with a false frame, or even several overlapping frames of discourse. . . . The background noise[s] (allusions, . . . genres, styles, . . . asides, . . . disconnections) are endless. There is no one voice for us to interrogate, and . . . [the] text . . . refuses to give us a definitive truth. . . [Swift situates] the crisis of interpretation within the narrative personality, *before* the text reaches the reader of print, when he or she recognizes that . . . to agree with Gulliver we must become horses, or that humanitarianism in Ireland depends on cannibalism. . . There is no solace or privilege for the critic in all of this. Swift’s narrators are always their own first critics, analytically adept,

logical to a fault, keen students of the literary text. . . Swift's solution to warfare between overlapping texts is to rewrite, recycle, and permanently distort one text by [another]. . . version of it. . . . The subversion of a given text by an incursion from the margin which rewrites either in part or whole . . . [adds] a further and implosive level (25-30).

The overlapping frames of discourse, the background noises (puns, allusions, digressions, memories, retellings, multiplicity of genres, disconnections); these are among the devices which construct *The Handmaid's Tale*. There are many voices, starting with the dedication, moving through the epigraphs and the journal-entry novel to the Historical Notes. The "crisis of interpretation" is situated within Offred and Pieixoto. To agree with Offred, we must become complicit in the voyeurism of Gilead and its sexual and political violence; we must reify the romance plot which engineers Offred's escape from Gilead. To agree with Pieixoto, we must acquiesce to moral relativism and patriarchal sexism. "There is no solace or privilege for the critic in all of this": we must interrogate our own readings; in the person of Pieixoto ("analytically adept, logical to a fault, [a] keen student of the literary text") we have already been subsumed into the text. Layers of overlapping texts "rewrite, recycle, and permanently distort one text by [another]. . . version of it." The incursions from the margins, the dedications and epigraphs which press in upon the text, the Historical Notes which rewrite the tale from a future time add "further and implosive level[s]." Atwood's scintillating satire appropriates and puts to powerful use the very strategies which built Swift's satire.

Let us now turn to the epigraph: "having been wearied out for many years with offering vain, idle, visionary thoughts; and at length utterly despairing of success, I fortunately fell upon this proposal." If we read this as the voice of the Modest Proposer, we see the man who considers himself a practical, decent person, exasperated by the folly and suffering of humanity, delighted to be able to offer a solution to the ills of Ireland.

Who is the equivalent of the Modest Proposer in *Tale*? Let us consider the options. Is it the Commanders of Gilead, who at last have fortunately come upon the solution to the political ills they addressed, and to the problem of women. In this context, we remember that the Commander tells Offred that men from the time before Gilead had lost the ability to feel, and believed "there was nothing for them to do with women" (272). Or, is Atwood's Modest Proposer the voice of the somewhat obtuse, chauvinist historian

Pieixoto who at this point in his professorial career (after what previous encounters with ideas, what manner of “thoughts”?) “fortunately fell upon” Offred’s narrative, which may lead to conference papers and publications, and thus insure his professional “success”? Perhaps it is Offred, who was “wearied out for many years” thinking her “vain, idle, visionary thoughts” in her cell-like room in Gilead, and has now “fortunately [fallen] upon this proposal” to dictate her memoirs as a way to communicate the horrors of Gilead to a larger audience which possibly has the power to intervene in Gilead, or at least to commemorate its history. Or perhaps we have here the gently self-mocking, ironic voice of the imputed author (or of Atwood?). This author has “been wearied out for many years” speaking publicly, writing novels and essays “offering vain, idle, visionary thoughts” and has despaired because the political changes her texts propose have not yet come to pass. However, she has now “fortunately [fallen] upon this proposal” as the cautionary tale which will at last bring others to see the light and to mend their ways. Or perhaps, dear readers, it is we, the scholars who, like Professor Pieixoto, “fall upon” our texts and read into them our own obsessions. Perhaps, it is we who commodify the texts we read and evaluate according to our standards; we who offer up recipes for consuming the texts.

- 1 This article was prepared during a sabbatical leave from the University of Rhode Island. The research was conducted at the University of British Columbia through the generous hospitality of the Centre for Research on Women’s Studies and Gender Relations, Department of English, Library, and the Arts Computing Centre.
- 2 For satire see Hammer; for romance see Miner; for palimpsest see Lacombe; for epistolary narrative see Kauffman.
- 3 The complete title of the work is “A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People from Being a Burthen to their Parents, or the Country, and for Making them Beneficial to the Publick.” Claude Rawson notes that “The form of title is that of many ‘modest proposals’ and ‘humble petitions’ which appeared in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. . . . It captures accurately the conventional postures: concern for the public good, profitability, the air of planned or scientific management of human material. . . . The title would be taken quite straight and give no hint of shocks to follow” (187-88).
- 4 See, for example: Katherine M. Rogers, *The Troublesome Helpmate: A History of Misogyny in Literature* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966), 166-74; Rogers, *Feminism in Eighteenth-Century England* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 58-62; Margaret

Anne Doody, "Swift among the Women," *Yearbook of English Studies* 18 (1988), 91; Laura Brown, "Reading Race and Gender: Jonathan Swift," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 23 (1990), 442.

5 Richard Cavell directed me to this book.

WORKS CITED

- Atwood, Margaret. *The Edible Woman*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969.
- . Interview. "Margaret Atwood: 'There's nothing in the book that hasn't already happened.'" *Quill & Quire* 51:9 (Sept. 1985): 66-67.
- . *The Handmaid's Tale*. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1986.
- . *The CanLit Foodbook: From Pen to Palate—a Collection of Tasty Literary Fare*. Toronto: Totem Books, 1987.
- Beaumont, Charles. "The Classical Rhetoric of 'A Modest Proposal.'" *Jonathan Swift, "A Modest Proposal,"* Ed. Charles Beaumont. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1969. 94-120.
- Davidson, Arnold E. "Future Tense: Making History in *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms*. Ed. Kathryn VanSpanckeren and Jan Garden Castro. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1988. 113-21.
- Deer, Glenn. "Rhetorical Strategies in *The Handmaid's Tale*: Dystopia and the Paradoxes of Power." *English Studies in Canada* 18.2 (June 1992): 215-33.
- Freibert, Lucy M. "Control and Creativity: The Politics of Risk in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood*. Ed. Judith McCombs. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1988. 280-91.
- Hammer, Stephanie Barbe. "The World as it Will Be? Female Satire and the Technology of Power in *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Modern Language Studies* 20.2 (Spring 1990): 39-49.
- Hutcheon, Linda. "The Complex Functions of Irony." *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos*, 16.2 (Winter 1992): 219-34.
- Kauffman, Linda. "Special Delivery: Twenty-first Century Epistolarity in *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Writing the Female Voice: Essays on Epistolary Literature*. Ed. Elizabeth Goldsmith. Boston: Northeastern UP, 1989. 221-44.
- Lacombe, Michele. "The Writing on the Wall: Amputated Speech in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Wascana Review* 21.2 (Fall 1986): 3-12.
- LeBihan, Jill. "*The Handmaid's Tale*, *Cat's Eye* and *Interlunar*: Margaret Atwood's Feminist (?) Futures (?)" *Narrative Strategies in Canadian Literature*. Ed. Coral Ann Howells and Lynette Hunter. Buckingham: Open UP, 1991. 93-107.
- MacLulich, T. D. "Atwood's Adult Fairy Tale: Levi-Strauss, Bettelheim, and *The Edible Woman*." *Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood*. Ed. Judith McCombs. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1988. 179-97.
- Miner, Madonne. "'Trust me': Reading the Romance Plot in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Twentieth Century Literature* 37.2 (Summer 1991): 148-68.

- Murphy, Patrick D. "Reducing the Dystopian Distance: Pseudo-Documentary Framing in Near-Future Fiction." *Science Fiction Studies*, 17 (March 1990): 25-40.
- Probyn, Clive T. "Starting from the Margins: Teaching Swift in the Light of Poststructuralist Theories of Reading and Writing." *Critical Approaches to Teaching Swift*. Ed. Peter J. Schakel. N.Y.: AMS Press, 1992. 19-35.
- Pullen, Charles. "The Greatest Art is to Hide Art': Satire and Style in Jonathan Swift." *Satire in the Eighteenth Century*. Ed. John D. Browning. NY: Garland, 1983. 70-82.
- Rawson, Claude. "A Modest Proposal." *Critical Approaches to Teaching Swift*. Ed. Peter J. Schakel. N.Y.: AMS Press, 1992. 187-202
- Rubenstein, Roberta. "Nature and Nurture in Dystopia: *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms*. Ed. Kathryn Van Spanckeren and Jan Garden Castro. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1988. 101-12.
- Stein, Karen F. "Scheherazade in Dystopia: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 61.2 (Winter 1991/2): 269-79.
- Suvín, Darko. *Positions and Presuppositions in Science Fiction*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 1988.
- Swift, Jonathan. "A Modest Proposal" 1729. Rpt. Ed. Charles Beaumont. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1969.
- Tomc, Sandra. "'The Missionary Position': Feminism and Nationalism in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Canadian Literature* 138/39 (Fall/ Winter 1993): 73-87.
- Wagner- Martin, Linda. "Epigraphs to Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Notes on Contemporary Literature*, 17.2 (1987): 4.
- Workman, Nancy V. "Sufi Mysticism in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 14.2 (1989): 10-26.

