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“Pen is Envy”: Education, Feminine Sexuality, and Fruitfulness in Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin
Market” and “An Apple Gathering” and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The
Testaments*

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Bridgewater State University

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Chapter 1: Education, Sexuality, and Forbidden Knowledge in the Victorian Era, and “An Apple Gathering” and “Goblin Market”

The Victorian era was a time in which people were very much interested in morality and sinning, especially when it came to women's sexuality. It was also time in which conversations about women and education often linked women to their bodies—even medical doctors during this era spoke of the dangerous consequences education might have on a woman's reproductive capabilities. While men's sexual transgressions were often viewed as a natural result of their being in the public sphere, women were expected to be the pure and domestic moral compass there to guide men that could not help but sin because of their nature and the environment they were exposed to. While redemption was plausible for men, many conservative Victorians did not see female premarital sexuality in a similarly hopeful light. Conservative Victorians often viewed women and sexuality in a very binary way, with many believing that women could belong to only one of two categories: chaste, domestic women like Coventry Patmore's "Angel in the House," or immoral, sexually curious fallen women that posed a threat of contamination to their pure opposites. Christina Rossetti challenges this dichotomy in the poems "An Apple Gathering" and "Goblin Market" through her use of fruit imagery and characterization, suggesting that women are complex humans—not completely unlike men—with wants and desires that do not fit into this unnatural box conservatives have made for them.

In the Victorian era much of the commonly held beliefs surrounding women revolved around their bodies and what their bodies were capable of, which Victorians believed to mainly be sex and producing children. In this way women were seen not as humans, but as natural resources (particularly for men). Looking into the social psychology of eating disorders in the Victorian era, Martin Bidney explains how women have often been equated with weakness and

the body. Because of this limiting view of women, “food deprivation may express an exertion of a will toward feminine power,” yet at the same time is counterproductive as a feminist protest because “it diverts attention from true self-development to an activity/passivity self defeating because destructive” (Bidney 317). This ironic assertion of the self emphasizes the strong history of women being linked to their physicality and bodies, which, by extension, resulted in their bodies being viewed as natural resources to be harvested and used by men. This chapter will examine the ways in which Rossetti’s poems reject Victorian ideologies that linked women’s sexuality and feminine knowledge with production or barrenness, particularly through the metaphor of fruitfulness. By situating readings of Rossetti’s poems within larger conversations about education and sexuality, this chapter will argue that Rossetti establishes a sort of counter-education for women. Reading her poems as counter-pedagogy, I argue that Rossetti imagines female sexuality as a renewable resource more closely allied with female pleasure than male consumption.

Education in The Victorian Era

The binary view of Victorian women as being either good, domestic women, or fallen prostitutes revolves around the idea that women were valued for what they could do, physically, for men: women could either fulfill men’s sexual desires, becoming fallen women, or make them a home and a family, becoming “Angels in the House.” We can see this ideology perpetuated in several texts on women’s behavior, and the value, and dangers, of their education. In a Victorian women’s conduct manual titled *The Ladies’ Book of Etiquette, and Manual of Politeness. A Complete Handbook for the Use of the Lady in Polite Society* (1860), Florence Hartley explains that a good Victorian woman should value education, a belief that at first glance seems to

progressively go against this idea that women were equated with the body, not the mind. But Hartley continues, writing that a woman's education was solely for the purpose of her being "capable of becoming to her husband a rational friend, a cheerful partner, an interesting companion, or, at least, an efficient listener, whose natural intelligence, even if originally inferior to his own, shall, by the help of education, have been raised to the same level!" (295). Again this exemplifies the idea that women were valued as a sort of natural resource to be used by men. While at first it seems that they are being valued for their minds, they are not themselves equated with intelligence, as men naturally are, and the feminine education described here is not one that is for the purpose of the student's own enjoyment. On the contrary, this education was actually for men's benefit. Women should be educated so that they can be better listeners and more interesting companions to men. The passive nature of this view of women as resources is very notable. Resources are stagnant—they lack agency, they are there to be used for the benefit of others. Like animals fed well for slaughter, women were educated not because it enriched their own selves, though it certainly did, but for the sake of the consumer—in this case, man.

The particulars of a Victorian woman's proper etiquette and education—which consisted mostly of what were called "accomplishments"—are examined further in Hartley's conduct manual. In this manual she explains proper Etiquette for women in various social settings. When a woman is walking in the street she should never raise her skirt higher than her ankle, even to avoid stepping in mud or a puddle: "Do not try to raise your skirts. It is better to soil them" (111). When walking in the street, women should also never look back, speak to men, or stop to look in shop windows (111). Hartley devotes an entire section of her manual to what were known as "accomplishments." This was a new form of education for women that went a little beyond teaching them domestic duties yet nonetheless was a way of preparing them to be

graceful “Angel[s] in the House” (Hughes). Explaining some of the “accomplishments” women were taught, Hartley writes:

A lady without her piano, or her pencil, her library of French, German, or Italian authors, her fancy work and tasteful embroideries, is now rarely met with, and it is right that such arts should be universal. No woman is fitted for society until she dances well; for home, unless she is perfect mistress of needlework; for her own enjoyment, unless she has at least one accomplishment to occupy thoughts and fingers in her hours of leisure. She may, for a few brief years, be the ornament of the drawing-room; but it must be, like many other ornaments there, in still life; she can never be the companion of the intellectual; and the time is gone by, when women, with all their energies excited, will be contented to be the mere plaything of brother, husband, or father. (179-181)

While this new form of educating women did promote that they learn more than simply how to cook or clean—quite a step for at least middle-class women—it is still notable that much of the discourse surrounding “accomplishments” is focused on the idea that women need to become learned so that they can be better “companion[s] of the intellectual” (181). In other words, these accomplishments, while for women, were really there to make them better wives for their husbands. While Hartley does point out that women should be learned so that they are not left a mere “plaything” when their beauty fades, they are not educated to be the “intellectual” themselves, but only “the companion of the intellectual” at best. This education that she speaks of still keeps her secondary and tied to domesticity (music and familiarity with continental authors for entertaining guests, and embroidering and needlework for occupying time at home). She is still aestheticized and made to be a sort of living, domestic art. Regardless of this, Hartley does touch on this important idea that women’s minds should be cultivated because their

ornamental value, or physical beauty, is temporary—a thought that I will further examine when it comes to Rossetti's fruitful poetry.

This connection of passivity and the body to feminine education is showcased by social and even medical discourse at the time, as Kathryn Hughes mentions:

it was important for a well-educated girl to soften her erudition with a graceful and feminine manner. No-one wanted to be called a 'blue-stocking', the name given to women who had devoted themselves too enthusiastically to intellectual pursuits. Blue-stockings were considered unfeminine and off-putting in the way that they attempted to usurp men's 'natural' intellectual superiority. Some doctors reported that too much study actually had a damaging effect on the ovaries, turning attractive young women into dried-up prunes. Later in the century, when Oxford and Cambridge opened their doors to women, many families refused to let their clever daughters attend for fear that they would make themselves unmarriageable.

So while women were expected to become educated, their intellect needed to be "softened" because being too intelligent was considered "unfeminine." It is particularly notable that this idea even made it into medical discourse, with doctors arguing the physical effects of too much education for women. Doctors went as far as to say too much studying "had a damaging effect on the ovaries" and made women into "dried up prunes." That is, education can lead to unfruitfulness. Education takes ripe and beautiful women and wastes them. Again here, women could not escape equation with the body. Examining the consequences of troping women's bodies as resources, Ashley Miller questions, "[i]s it wasteful, then, to blossom without bearing fruit?" (197). Miller points out the commonly held Victorian belief that women were valuable for what their bodies were capable of; notably what their bodies could produce—their fruitfulness.

Women are not valued for their minds or for their existence as individual human beings as men are, but instead as vessels for carrying life and making a home.

Sexuality in the Victorian Era

While women were expected to desire marriage, and were thoroughly educated for this task, they were not supposed to desire it to fulfill any sort of sexual or emotional desires; rather, marriage was a means to an end, with the end being motherhood. Again, this idea is found even in medical discourse:

A young girl was not expected to focus too obviously on finding a husband. Being 'forward' in the company of men suggested a worrying sexual appetite. Women were assumed to desire marriage because it allowed them to become mothers rather than to pursue sexual or emotional satisfaction. One doctor, William Acton, famously declared that 'The majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind.' (Hughes)

The taboo surrounding female sexuality was so strong it goes even further than just condemning women that were unchaste—in this case a doctor outright denies that most women even have any "sexual feeling" at all. On the contrary, men were assumed to have sexual desire, and evidence suggests that many men likely frequented brothels. A police magistrate estimated that there were 50,000 prostitutes in London in 1871, but this was just an estimate and not only sex workers were considered prostitutes, women who had illegitimate children, lived with men prior to marriage, or had relations with men for pleasure rather than money were all considered prostitutes (Flanders). William Acton, the same doctor that wrote that most women did not have any sexual feeling, wrote that he once counted 185 prostitutes on his walk home from work

(Flanders). Judith Flanders continues, “But short of accosting each one, it seems likely he based his judgements on appearance: women who dressed or behaved in ways men considered inappropriate were deemed to be whores.” It is clear: conservative Victorians believed women to be either good or bad, and the indicators of “goodness” or “badness” were based on, or relate back to, their physicality.

Women’s sexuality was a popular and controversial subject during the Victorian era, and while not all Victorians held conservative views on this topic, conservative views were certainly popular and important when it comes to thinking about women’s identity being strongly connected to their bodies. The Victorians saw female sexual transgression not only as irredeemable but also as contaminating to other women, an idea that is emphasized not only in literature and discourse from the Victorian era, but also artwork. Roxanne Eberle examines various artworks that depict contrasting “good” and “fallen” women. One striking ink drawing that she examines—notably done by the hand of Christina Rossetti’s brother, Dante Gabriel Rossetti—is titled “Gretchen and Mephistopheles in Church” (1848). In this drawing the artist depicts two women positioned beside each other and kneeling “but without any acknowledgement of each other. The ‘fallen’ Gretchen’s face is turned away; we only see her disheveled hair and a clenched fist. The Devil sits right behind her tormenting her by enumerating her sins. The pure woman ... kneels with hands joined in prayer, eyes closed” (Eberle 171). This drawing highlights this common Victorian dichotomy of a good and bad woman, and also illustrates how premarital sexuality was considered damning, and contaminating to other women. Even though the fallen woman is kneeling at a pew like the pure woman is, the Devil still lurks behind her reminding her of her sins—suggesting that sexual immorality was something irredeemable in this culture. Not only this, but the pure woman is

kneeling with her eyes closed, which seems to suggest that she is unable to look at this fallen woman, attesting to the idea that sexual immorality was almost like a disease that other women could catch from an impure woman. Even more telling is the placement of the baby in this drawing—the baby sits next to the pure woman while the fallen Gretchen is hunched over in agony with her body leaning toward the baby. Though seemingly counterintuitive, the message here seems clear: purity is rewarded with fruitfulness whereas sexual immorality is damned with unfruitfulness. Much like how education could turn women into “dried up prunes,” failing to remain chaste could make a woman barren.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti gives a similar depiction of feminine sexuality in his poem written in the same year he completed his drawing “Gretchen and Mephistopheles in Church” titled “Jenny” (1848). In “Jenny,” a male speaker describes his experience with a prostitute named Jenny and ponders her situation before leaving her with coins in her hair when morning comes. Rossetti writes of Jenny’s heart, stating that it is like a flower within a vile book, “To the vile text, are traced such things / As might make lady’s cheek indeed / More than a living rose to read” (259-261). Again this idea of female sexuality being unspeakable or as tainting to other women is brought up. Rossetti continues: “And so the life-blood of this rose / Puddled with shameful knowledge, flows / Through leaves no chaste hand may unclothe” (264-266). It is also notable that Rossetti is using a text here, and heavily mentions other things relating to education, including knowledge and books—he seems to be suggesting that female sexuality is like education in the sense that too much of it defiles women. Rossetti writes, “This room of yours, my Jenny, looks / A change from mine so full of books” (22-23). Even the space Jenny occupies is described as being the very opposite of the intellectual space this man inhabits. Jenny, who is equated with sexuality and the body, is situated as opposite to masculine knowledge, suggesting

that female sexuality is not compatible with education. Not only this, but Jenny is described as a “thoughtless queen” (7). Dante Gabriel Rossetti brings up the idea of “shameful knowledge” which has a biblical connotation relating to Genesis and The Garden of Eden. She cannot be “read” or “unclosed” because it would reveal a shameful and tainting knowledge. This is especially significant in this poem as it involves a male speaker hypocritically speaking of the immorality of a prostitute and the men that “thrust [her] aside / as when [he] dine[s]” while he is taking part in the same “immoral” acts as they are (86-87). While at first glance it might seem that Rossetti himself is subscribing to this popular idea of the “fallen woman” that his drawing “Gretchen and Mephistopheles in Church” appears to represent, instead it seems possible that Rossetti is challenging this commonly held belief that “fallen women” posed a threat of contamination to pure women. Rossetti appears to sympathize with this outcasted figure, putting pressure on societal norms regarding female knowledge and sexuality.

Another artwork by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, coming shortly after “Gretchen and Mephistopheles in Church” and “Jenny,” appears to challenge the idea that “fallen women” cannot be fruitful. “Bocca Baciata” (1859) illustrates this connection between fruitfulness and feminine sexual pleasure, but appears to go against this idea that only pure women can be rewarded with fruit. This painting depicts a sensuous female figure with flushed cheeks and lips. Her hair is loose and untamed as she looks off into the distance with flowers in her hair and hands and a piece of fruit next to her. “Bocca Baciata” translates from Italian to “lips that have been kissed,” and on the back of this painting is a poem by Giovanni Boccaccio, which states, “Bocca baciata non perda ventura, anzi rinnova come fa la luna” (The mouth that has been kissed loses not its freshness; still it renews itself even as does the moon) (MFA.org). This is a very different portrayal of women’s sexuality than the one we get in his previous drawing and poem.

The woman depicted here is able to be sensual without losing her “freshness.” She is surrounded by flowers and fruit—she is able to enjoy sexuality and still be fruitful. Like the cyclical moon, she will always be renewed regardless of the unchaste pleasures she enjoys. His sister’s work echoes this progressive tone concerning female sexuality and education.

Christina Rossetti

The topics of feminine knowledge, education and sexuality are prominent in the works of Christina Rossetti, particularly her poems “An Apple Gathering” (1857) and “Goblin Market” (1862). Notably these poems echo themes from much of the discourse, literature, and art I’ve previously examined—from the idea that women could either be “pure” or “fallen,” as seen in her brother’s “Gretchen and Mephistopheles in Church,” to the dangers of sexuality, education, and male-dominated spaces as warned against in conduct manuals and medical texts. The unifying trope between these ideas, and others I will go on to examine, is that women are seemingly inescapably tied to their physicality, illustrated particularly through the motif of fruit. Rossetti explores these themes in her fruitful and didactic poems in a very progressive way that highlights, and oftentimes goes against, the commonly held conservative beliefs Victorians held regarding women’s sexuality and education. In this way, Rossetti’s poetry serves as an important artifact in this history of Victorian ideals, giving us a better understanding of past roots of these topics that are as relevant today as they were then.

Fruit Untasted: Forbidden Knowledge

In “Goblin Market,” knowledge and education are represented as things forbidden and capable of making women unfruitful. Echoing the biblical forbidden fruit, this poem is about an

innocent woman that becomes unfruitful after acquiring new knowledge. First, it is notable that this poem is quite didactic in form, and it was said to be a poem for children. Though it is unclear who Rossetti's truly intended audience was, it is nonetheless important that the entirety of this poem is much like an object lesson for young girls. In this poem, two sisters, Laura and Lizzie, hear the sounds of goblin men that are trying to sell them fruits. Though these goblin calls are enticing, Lizzie warns Laura about the dangers of tasting such fruits—a young woman named Jeanie died after tasting these fruits and flowers won't even grow where she was buried. But the fruits are too tempting and Laura gives in and trades a piece of her golden hair for the fruit, but after tasting it she begins to fade away. Knowledge is a prevalent topic in this poem—early in the text, when speaking of Goblin fruits, Laura questions: “Who knows upon what soil they fed / Their hungry thirsty roots?” (44-45). Laura continues shortly after: “How fair the vine must grow / Whose grapes are so luscious; / How warm the wind must blow / Thro' those fruit bushes” (60-63). Laura and Lizzie are innocent and unaware of the origins of the goblin men's fruit. Laura wonders about where it might come from—the fruit or the men's intentions—and mistakenly assumes it must be from a beautiful, bountiful place, but when she finally tastes their fruit and becomes enlightened, she immediately questions the consequences of such knowledge: “She never tasted such before / How should it cloy with length of use?” (132-33). After tasting these previously mysterious and unknown fruits, Laura dwindles and loses her youthful liveliness like a rotting fruit. Eerily similar to some Victorian doctors' opinions regarding women and education, particularly that education has “a damaging effect on the ovaries” and makes women into “dried up prunes,” Laura fades and becomes unable to even make a kernel stone grow from her tears (Hughes). Though Laura nearly dies, she is redeemed by her sister and is able to have children and a family of her own. In light of the poem's didacticism, this suggests that Rossetti is

illustrating to young women and girls that knowledge is not always destructive, and that women can be both educated and fruitful.

Another theme prevalent in both “An Apple Gathering” and “Goblin Market” is the connection between women and knowledge and passivity. As illustrated in Hartley’s conduct manual, women are often associated with stagnancy while men are associated with agency. Even the education women were allowed to receive—training in “accomplishments”—kept women quite passive in the sense that they were limited to the domestic sphere and were educated to be secondary characters there only to support their husbands and families, not for the purpose of enjoying any sort of intellectual freedom such as through participating in politics as men could. After Laura loses her innocence through exposure to new knowledge—the goblin fruit—she “turn[s] cold as stone”; she sits down “listless in the chimney-nook / and would not eat” (253-298). In “An Apple Gathering,” the speaker “loitered, while the dews / Fell fast [she] loitered still” after indulging in blossoms unknown (27-28). This seems to echo conversations about women and education at the time, particularly the idea that knowledge, for women, is like a loss of innocence. It has the ability to “make women unmarriageable” and women are always tied to stagnancy even in the form of education they were allowed to receive—they are like still pieces of fruit (Hughes). After Laura tastes new knowledge, she is unable to perform her domestic duties and becomes still: “She no more swept the house, / Tended the fowls or cows, / Fetched honey, kneaded cakes of wheat, / Brought water from the brook” (293-96). Notably, though, Rossetti points out this flawed idea that knowledge is damaging for women, as Laura is able to recover and follow a traditional heteronormative path even after losing her innocence, interestingly as a direct result of her sister’s agency. Rossetti’s message is clear: feminine agency

and knowledge are powerful tools that can subvert patriarchal norms and beliefs that were so prevalent in this era.

Education and women as secondary characters belonging to the private sphere are other themes examined in Rossetti's poetry. As Hartley describes the strict rules women must abide by in the street—they should never look back, stop, or speak to men—Lizzie constantly warns her sister of danger when they are navigating public spaces: “you should not loiter so,” “come, Laura, not another maiden lags,” and “come with me home” (162, 223, 245). It seems Rossetti is highlighting the idea that public spaces are male-dominated, and that this idea is perpetuated through education. Taken together with the didactic nature of this poem, Lizzie is much like the educator here, teaching Laura of the dangers of this male-dominated space as Hartley does in her conduct manual. Similarly, while men can marry for love's sake or for sexual or emotional satisfaction, women are expected to marry so that they can bear fruit. Again, women are tied to the private sphere, much like how Hughes explains that women were expected to desire marriage, not for any sort of emotional satisfaction, but because it allowed them to be mothers. This is showcased in “An Apple Gathering” when the speaker states, “I counted rosiest apples on the earth / Of far less worth than love” (23-24). Rossetti is emphasizing the flawed societal beliefs surrounding marriage and feminine fruitfulness. Women should want to bear fruit above all else, and plucking blossoms—or enjoying love outside of a fertile marriage—is punished with unfruitfulness, Rossetti points out. Women are tied to the private sphere and the fruit-bearing capabilities of their bodies, and this is perpetuated in Victorian education systems.

Fallen and Unfruitful: Sexuality in “Goblin Market” and “An Apple Gathering”

Female sexuality was also a popular topic in the Victorian era, and is heavily touched upon in both “An Apple Gathering” and “Goblin Market.” Just as forbidden knowledge can make women unfruitful, female sexuality, ironically, also makes a woman unfruitful. “An Apple Gathering” begins with a warning of the dangers of engaging in premarital sex, shown when Rossetti writes, “I plucked pink blossoms from mine apple tree / And wore them all that evening in my hair: / Then in due season when I went to see / I found no apples there” (1-4). The speaker delights in these blossoms too early, leaving her empty handed later on when she goes to gather her apples. In equating female sexuality with fruit, Rossetti is showing how women cannot enjoy both premarital sex and marriage, like men can; rather, they are confined to having one or the other. Rossetti continues, “Ah Willie, Willie, was my love less worth / Than apples with their green leaves piled above?” (17-18). While the speaker is punished and left empty-handed for engaging in sexual behavior before marriage, her past lover Willie is able to enjoy sexual freedom and still get married later on. Laura is found in a similar situation in “Goblin Market” as she becomes unable to hear the goblin cry after she tastes their fruit one night. Lizzie, who has abstained from tasting their fruit, hears their cries, and Laura is left mortified: “Laura turned cold as stone / To find her sister heard that cry alone / That goblin cry ... Must she then buy no more such dainty fruit?” (253-257). The goblin men no longer target Laura after she has tasted their fruit once, and she begins to grow sicker and sicker as the days go on, while they continue to look for other women to buy their fruit that have not done so before. Rossetti again is highlighting the unfair differences between the consequences of engaging in premarital sex for men and women. It is especially notable that the fruit must come at a price for the women that want to taste it. While Laura has no money to buy their fruit, she instead pays for it in a much more personal way: “She clipped a precious golden lock / She dropped a tear more rare than

pearl” (126-127). According to scholar Elisabeth G. Gitter, Laura’s golden hair is a detail not to be overlooked, as there is “a long literary tradition of golden-haired ladies” particularly in the Victorian era (Gitter 936). Gitter continues, emphasizing the meaning golden hair often carries in literature: “golden hair, through which wealth and female sexuality are inevitably linked, was the obvious and ideal vehicle for expressing [Victorians’] notorious—and ambivalent—fascination both with money and with female sexual power” (936). It seems Rossetti is placing importance on the value and sexual connotations of this situation in which Laura must pay the goblin men with her hair and tears. Attesting to the price women must pay for enjoying the pleasures men can freely pursue, Rossetti emphasizes the flawed and harmful belief that female sexuality results in unfruitfulness.

Going back to the idea that, in Victorian culture, a dichotomy existed of good versus fallen women, as illustrated in Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s “Gretchen and Mephistopheles in Church,” Rossetti highlights this as she points out the faulty binary and isolating nature of this belief. In “An Apple Gathering,” the speaker is isolated after she is left unfruitful: “Lilian and Liliast smiled in trudging by, / Their heaped up basket teased me like a jeer ... Plump Gertrude passed me with her basket full” (9-13). This image is strikingly similar to the one depicted in “Gretchen and Mephistopheles in Church.” The pure woman kneels at a pew with a baby by her side—her fruit—her eyes closed out of fear of being contaminated by the barren, fallen Gretchen who is longing for fruit. This dichotomy of a pure versus fallen woman is highlighted even more explicitly in “Goblin Market.” Laura and Jeanie are posited as fallen women that are left unfruitful after enjoying their sexuality. Jeanie, whose story serves as a sort of object lesson in this poem, is left unfruitful in a way so permanent that it transcends death: she “fell with the first snow, / While to this day no grass will grow / Where she lies low: / I planted daises there a year

ago / That never blow” (157-61). Similarly, Laura fades like decaying fruit—she set her kernel-stone by a window “Dewed it with tears, hoped for a root ... But there came none”—and this is contrasted with her sister’s innocence and youthful ripeness: “Lizzie with an open heart, / Laura in an absent dream, / One content, one sick in part; / One warbling for the mere bright day’s delight / One longing for the night” (283-85, 210-14). The differences in the conditions of these sisters is remarkable and illustrates the difference between a pure woman, Lizzie, and fallen women such as Jeanie and Laura. This dichotomy is depicted in both “An Apple Gathering” and “Goblin Market,” and it seems Rossetti is pointing out the flawed nature of this Victorian belief; she argues that “fallen” women can actually be redeemed, as Laura is, and also points out how this dichotomy is perpetuated in female education practices.

Rossetti again points out this flawed dichotomy for female sexuality in emphasizing the power and redemptive qualities of sisterhood, particularly when it comes to ending the perpetuation of this harmful ideology in education practices. While at first Laura does suffer for tasting the goblin men’s fruit, she is not doomed to a stagnant and fruitless life like the speaker in “An Apple Gathering,” and it seems the main reason for this difference is that Laura is redeemed by her sister’s agency, whereas the speaker in “An Apple Gathering” is isolated by other women. Lizzie goes to buy fruit for her sister, and the goblin men try to force their fruit into her mouth in an overtly sexually abusive way, but Lizzie escapes and comes home to Laura triumphantly: “She cried ‘Laura,’ up the garden, / ‘Did you miss me? / Come and kiss me. / Never mind my bruises ... For your sake I have braved the glen / And had to do with goblin merchant men” (464-474). Laura is not left to sit alone and helpless, watching other men and women pass her by as the speaker in “An Apple Gathering” is; instead, her sister risks her own safety, and devises a clever plan to get fruit for her sister, and in doing so redeems Lizzie. Rossetti argues here that

instead of perpetuating the harmful belief that sexuality dooms women to a barren death, or isolating “fallen” women, women should lift each other up and end this dangerous cycle. The power of sisterhood is emphasized toward the conclusion of the poem. Both Laura and Lizzie have families of their own: “Days, weeks, months, years / Afterwards, when both were wives / With children of their own / Their mother-hearts beset with fears” (544-546). One final lesson is offered to their children, shown when Rossetti writes, “For there is no friend like a sister / In calm or stormy weather; / To cheer one on the tedious way” (563-565). Going against the common Victorian belief that fallen women were to be avoided by pure women like Lizzie, Rossetti suggests that instead fostering a strong female community can free “fallen” women from their otherwise dismal and lonely fates. It is especially notable that these beliefs are perpetuated in object lessons, as when Lizzie uses Jeanie’s story as a lesson against tasting Goblin fruit, but then there is a change as this didactic poem ends with the lesson that women should lift others up when they fall—rather than simply warning women of the dangers of sexuality beforehand. The contrasting outcomes of these two poems highlight the ills of women being forced into being either good or bad—and how this is perpetuated in education practices— and suggest that women should come together and support each other so that they do not have to exist as pure or fallen, ripe or decaying, but instead as complex human beings.

Women should not have to pay the price of their golden locks, or shed tears “more rare than pearl” in order to embrace the sexual or intellectual freedom that men do (127). A woman should not have to choose between plucking pink blossoms and having a fruitful harvest because women’s sexuality and knowledge cannot be limited to this metaphor, according to Rossetti. Education has the power to do good, or perpetuate harmful belief systems, especially regarding women. While we have come far from this limited view of female sexuality and knowledge,

there is still evidence of its existence in modern society. The Victorian dichotomy of “Angel in the House” or fallen woman is reflected in the Jackie Kennedy or Marilyn Monroe of the 1950s, and even today women are often viewed as being either/or, which I will go on to examine in Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments*, respectively. Reduced to belonging to one group or the other—pure or fallen, ripe or decaying—they are categorized and by extension objectified. It is when humans go from being regarded as people to being objectified as things or types that they are at risk of becoming victims of violence and abuse, as seen throughout history.

Chapter 2: *The Handmaid's Tale* and Sex Education in the 1970s/80s

A literary work perhaps even more interested in fruitfulness, as it pertains to the topics of women's sexuality and knowledge and education, is Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Though this is a Canadian novel written in the 1980s, there are striking similarities between its thematic preoccupations and those in Rossetti's poetry. Not only this, but this novel has gained recent attention, especially after the 2016 U.S. presidential election, as many believe this text is even more relevant today than it was when it was published. Atwood is known for stating that nothing in this book is "made up"; rather, atrocities from various points in history inspired and informed the making of this novel, which further supports a New Historicist reading of this text. But rather than focusing on these historical atrocities, I will examine the tools that allow Gilead to oppress women, in particular the intersection between sex and education.

To do so, I will be examining the cultural context in which *The Handmaid's Tale* was written—specifically education practices during this time—in conjunction with a close reading of the text itself. Education in the 1970s and 80s can be generally characterized as less than ideal when it comes to depictions of and beliefs regarding women. In this culture, the idea that women should be passively useful still existed, even if not stated as explicitly as in the Victorian era. General and sex education practices and tools from this era illustrate this belief through the way female figures are depicted and written about and how discourse about sexuality is often limited to the confines of marriage and family planning. Atwood stresses the ways in which education and women's knowledge continue to be seen as incompatible with fruitfulness or reproduction. When women are valued for their bodies, not minds, everything then revolves around their reproductive capabilities—knowledge becomes dangerous, decadent, illicit, and almost ironically sexual in nature because it is so unnecessary for reproductive purposes. Atwood actively resists

these notions, showing that female knowledge is capable of usurping the education systems that have been used to subdue it, and that perhaps women's knowledge is an even more powerful form of fruitfulness than reproduction.

General and Sex Education Practices in the 1970s/80s

Learning materials such as textbooks serve as tools for learning specific subjects, like reading, writing, or math, but at the same time carry indicators of a culture's customs and belief systems. This is especially true for students for which English is a second language (ESL) because learning a language is "a culture-learning process" according to Pat Hartman and Elliot Judd in their article "Sexism and TESOL Materials" (1978) (384). Exploring the portrayal of sexes in ESL textbooks that were currently used in classrooms in the 1970s, they found that women are often depicted in passive, weak roles, while men are depicted as having much more power and agency:

The only picture in which a girl appears without boys depicts a small child crying when her dog runs off with her ball. In contrast to this passive, weak image, boys without girls are shown juggling dishes, trying to catch the reflection of the moon, and clowning in a classroom. In the three pictures where both sexes appear, the boys are taking the active role—climbing a tree, rowing a boat, approaching the lions' cage at a zoo—while the girls just watch, in the last case one shrinking with fright behind her mother. (387)

In this way, education served as a means for perpetuating harmful beliefs, just as how Victorian women's training in "accomplishments" reasserted their roles as secondary but useful objects. An article that is equally relevant from this time period is "The Issue: Sex Equity and Sexuality in Education" (1987) by Susan Shurberg Klein. This source examines sex educator practices in

the 70s-80s and how they often reinforce “inaccurate stereotypes about females and males” by not explicitly teaching sex equitable sexual attitudes, knowledge, and behavior (1). She also examines culturally-derived inequities relating to sexuality that are perpetuated through education. This includes the idea that sex is equated with reproduction, and that women are valued for their reproductive abilities. Klein explains how many believe that sexual activity without the intention of leading to reproduction is considered illegal, immoral, and somehow “just not right.” This is related to the idea that women are seen as resources because they are able to produce children, and women are denied sexual knowledge and discouraged from controlling their reproductive abilities through birth control. Not only this, but many schools do not provide pregnant students with any support services; instead, these women are usually expelled (7). This practice seems to have been the norm in schools from the Victorian era to the 1980s: for women, knowledge, whether academic or sexual, is not compatible with fruitfulness, and sex, without the purpose of producing children under the canopy of marriage, is taboo, at least in education systems.

Yet, sex education in public schools in the 1970s/80s was not nonexistent. In fact, support for sex education was strong among the large majority of the American public and most state agencies and large school districts. According to a study done by Asta M. Kenney titled “Sex Education and AIDS Education in the Schools: What States and Large School Districts are Doing” (1989), from 1980 to 1988 the number of states that required sex education increased from three to 17 (these are still dismal numbers, but illustrate a large increase) (63). Though there was general support for sex education in the 80s, many school districts focused more on the prevention of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, because of the AIDS epidemic at the time, rather than teaching about the prevention of pregnancy. In fact, many schools reported STD

and AIDS prevention was discussed in classrooms not as a part of sex education or family life education, but in discussions about communicable diseases or other subjects instead (57).

Largely, curricula used by public schools included considerable emphasis on abstinence and the outcomes of sex in terms of disease, rather than pregnancy (63). As for training requirements for teachers, there were stricter requirements for certification among AIDS educators than general sex education teachers, and training these educators did receive was inadequate at best, consisting of short workshops that rarely focused on teaching materials or techniques (63). And though states were busy developing new and detailed AIDS education curricula, a great improvement for this one area of sex education, sex education generally about pregnancy prevention and sexual activity was left behind. Schools were using old curricula that “focused largely on the reproductive system, puberty, dating, marriage, pregnancy and the responsibilities of parenthood, rather than on more ‘relevant’ topics like sexual activity and pregnancy prevention” (64). And those schools that did teach about the use of contraception as a means of preventing pregnancy often portrayed it in a negative light and vaguely through focusing on things like the failure rate of condoms, simply mentioning condoms but providing no specifics, briefly mentioning contraception but not providing any information on sources of contraceptive care such as clinics or physicians, or addressing birth control in a negative context, such as in a New York curriculum that stated that “freedom from the bother and dangers of the pill, IUD and other contraceptives” is an advantage of abstinence (60). So while important advancements were made in public schools as a result of the AIDS epidemic, many schools lagged behind and continued to teach outdated and conservative curricula that focused on sex education in terms of marriage and family planning. As I discussed in the previous chapter, sex was still seen as acceptable only in the context of marriage and for the purpose of producing children—at least in

education systems. There was much more of a focus on contraception as a means of preventing disease than of preventing pregnancy.

Remembering Education before Gilead

The Handmaid's Tale begins: “We slept in what had once been the gymnasium” (Atwood 3). Throughout this novel Atwood provides glimpses of past education, whether formal or informal, in Offred’s daydreams and flashbacks to her life before Gilead. When it comes to informal women’s education, she reflects on unsaid rules for women at this time:

I remember the rules, rules that were never spelled out but that every woman knew: Don’t open your door to a stranger, even if he says he is the police. Make him slide his ID under the door. Don’t stop on the road to help a motorist pretending to be in trouble. Keep the locks on and keep going. If anyone whistles, don’t turn to look. Don’t go into a laundromat, by yourself, at night. (24)

Calling back to Victorian conduct manuals, these unsaid rules all revolve around the way women navigate public spaces and interact with men. As Laura often warned Lizzie of the dangers of loitering in the glen for fear of Goblin men’s unknown fruits, especially at dusk, Offred reflects on this similar women’s culture that revolved around protecting themselves from dangerous men.

Offred also often thinks about her sometimes turbulent relationship with her mother, an outspoken feminist who was disappointed in her daughter’s lack of participation in this women’s culture. Offred reflects on a memory she has of watching an educational program about the Holocaust on television when she was a child. The documentary involved an interview of one of the concentration camp supervisor’s mistresses—her mother explains to her what the word mistress means. She writes, “my mother explained *mistress*, she did not believe in mystification,

I had a pop-up book of sexual organs by the time I was four” (145). At the young age of four she already has a sex education book teaching her about genitals—a stark contrast to the type of education she gets at the Red Center, which I will examine shortly. She continues, saying how she always thought of these kinds of documentaries as just being a story, even though they were real: “If it’s only a story, it becomes less frightening” (144). In the documentary itself, the mistress does just the same thing—she denies knowing about gas chambers or any of his other evil deeds: “He was not a monster, she said. People say he was a monster, but he was not one” (145). Offred remembers this woman on the television was older, but still took pride in her appearance, as she was wearing make-up and pearls on her neck. Offred thinks that this woman must have convinced herself that her lover was not all bad:

A big child, she would have said to herself. Her heart would have melted, she’d have smoothed the hair back from his forehead...The instinct to soothe, to make it better...Things are so hard for you. All this she would have believed, because otherwise how could she have kept on living...Several days after this interview with her was filmed, she killed herself. It said that, right on the television...What I remember now, most of all, is the make-up. (146)

Offred imagines this mistress catering to her evil lover, much like an “Angel in the House,” being a domestic escape from the harsh outside world for him. Offred recalls her make-up: just as the mistress is making-up for this man, she is also making up a new story, one that allows her to live with herself, but in the end, she succumbs to this knowledge. Atwood seems to be getting at the idea that knowledge can be dangerous for women when they are taught that their role is that of care-taker, domestic soother—knowledge is not compatible with this sort of role. This idea comes alongside her mother’s opposite intent to demystify everything and not shelter her

daughter at all. Offred is caught between the demystification of her mother's blunt educational practices, and the mystification of covering up knowledge for the sake of one's own happiness and well-being, as the mistress in the historical television program tries, and fails at.

In Offred's memories, education, for women, is also an exercising of one's own will, or reclaiming power as a woman. Offred recalls a memory from college. She and Moira are sitting in her room, books "extravagantly" strewn everywhere. Moira asks her: "What's your paper on? I just did one on date rape. Date Rape, I said. You're so trendy. It sounds like some kind of dessert. *Date rape*" (38). For Offred, education is something she once took for granted, and it is also notable that education often included discussion of subjects like rape or assault. Here it seems education is a tool that has the potential to liberate women from the objectification or misuse of their bodies. In another memory, Offred recalls being disappointed when on a Saturday afternoon that was supposed to be a special time for her to spend with her mother, the two of them ran into a book burning of pornographic magazines. Her mother lets her throw one into the fire: "It riffled open in the wind of its burning; big flakes of paper came loose, sailed into the air, still on fire, parts of women's bodies, turning to black ash" (39). Offred's feminist education, both from her mother and in her schooling, seems again to be an attempt to move women away from the misuse of their bodies, to liberate themselves and become more equated with the mind—Offred watches as these pornographic magazines, images of sexualized women, are turned to ash.

Offred ends these flashbacks with this: "I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance" (39). Stories, or tools of knowledge like books and magazines, offer

immortality to women; they are a means of escaping the present and becoming untied from the body. She once took this for granted:

I'd taken [...] magazines lightly enough once [...] I'd bought them to take to hotel rooms, a device to fill in empty time while I was waiting for Luke. After I'd leafed through them I would throw them away, for they were infinitely discardable [...] they suggested an endless series of possibilities [and] one improvement after another [...] The real promise in them was immortality. (156-57)

She realizes this not before, when she was not limited to her body, but after, when she is stripped of all identity aside from that of her fruitfulness, or reproductive capacity. Seohyong Jung explains how Handmaids are “only alive as [they] continue to be a potential mother who has an empty womb that is ready to reproduce,” and for this reason, Motherhood (or, more accurately, surrogacy) becomes the boundaries of life for Handmaids (5). Knowledge offers immortality because it removes one from their body. Knowledge can live on beyond a person's life; even if they are not fruitful, they can have a sort of living legacy in knowledge. As Offred mentions when the Commander gives her his pen: though Aunt Lydia often preached that “Pen is Envy”—a twist on Freud's “penis envy”—it is not the manhood that Offred envies, it is the power of knowledge, of writing and producing knowledge that can live on, something I will examine in further detail in the next chapter when it comes to Atwood's recent sequel *The Testaments* (186).

Red Center Re-education

Offred's flashbacks to her past education often come when she is being re-educated at the Red Center, ironically located in what once was a school. While education in the past, for women, involved being liberated from the body, or the sexualization/abuse of it, this re-

education at the Red Center teaches the Handmaids to completely identify only with their bodies. Essentially education at the Red Center is an internalization of one's roles, almost literally as they cannibalistically consume their roles as "two-legged wombs," as Maria Christou describes in her article "A Politics of Auto-Cannibalism: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*." Aunt Lydia tells the Handmaids "Gilead is within you" (23). Education is a thing to be consumed, for women in this society. The Handmaids get Bible lessons with their food: "we had it read to us every breakfast, as we sat in the high school cafeteria...for lunch it was the Beatitudes" (88-89). They often consume eggs, chicken, and pears, all foods that connote fertility; as they consume symbols of fertility, they are educated to value and strive toward fertility—they are eating themselves, as Christou describes it. This education is a push away from the pre-Gilead female education that let women be their minds; it is a move toward the physical. Aunt Lydia often tells them to identify with their bodies. Everything the Handmaids are taught revolves around their bodies, the way they use them (or more clearly: how their bodies are used for others), and the way they appear. Offred gives an account of the strict ways in which Aunt Lydia wants the Handmaids to be arranged: "She wanted our heads bowed just right, our toes together and pointed, our elbows at the proper angle. Part of her interest in this was aesthetic: she liked the look of the thing. She wanted us to look like something Anglo-Saxon, carved on a tomb; or Christmas card angels, regimented in our robes of purity" (Atwood 194). The Handmaids are educated to become like art objects; they become like still-life paintings of fruit, objects valued for their reproductive abilities.

Looking is a powerful force in *The Handmaid's Tale*. According to "Sexual Surveillance and Medical Authority in *The Handmaid's Tale*" by Pamela Cooper, "To look is to rape, and to rape is to look" (6). Though Aunt Lydia is always preaching about the dangers of being seen—

she tells the Handmaids that to be seen is to be penetrated almost like a sexual violation—she still wants them to look a certain way. To some extent, they exist to be viewed (28). This is especially true in public spaces; as Laura constantly reminds Lizzie of the dangers of loitering in the glen in “Goblin Market,” Handmaids consistently worry about the possibility of being seen by a patriarchal “Eye.” The message is clear: women have a secondary claim to public spaces; they exist to be seen to a certain extent, but not to see. The aestheticization of women can be seen again as the speaker describes her walk to a Prayvaganza. Atwood writes, “We must look good from a distance: picturesque, like Dutch milkmaids on a wallpaper frieze, like a shelf full of period-costume ceramic salt and pepper shakers, like a flotilla of swans or anything that repeats itself with at least minimum grace and without variation. Soothing to the eye, the eyes, the Eyes, for that’s who this is for” (212). The Handmaids become like pieces of Victorian domestic artwork. As in the Victorian era, women are encouraged to create, to be fruitful both through reproduction and domestic creative endeavors like embroidery and painting. Here they become like what they can create. Women are encouraged to make art or to themselves look like art because art revolves around creation, or fruitfulness.

Subversive and Illicit Education

So far, I’ve focused on past education and the re-education of the Red Center, but there is also another sort of education that is presented in this novel, and that is the education of everyday life that Offred takes advantage of. While the Handmaids are taught to pray often, and their ritualized language revolves around religion or their fruitfulness (“Praise be,” “Blessed be the fruit”), the Handmaids often use the way they have been educated to speak and act against those that educated them. As Francoise Couturier-Storey asserts in “Law, the Word of God and

Subversion in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," in a society "where the word is God, everyday language is going to be used as Law or as a subversion of this Law" (135). Because language has a palimpsest of meaning, it can be used to either defy or follow the Law: "there is a balm in Gilead" sounds a lot like "there is a bomb in Gilead" (138). Handmaids take back the tool that was used against them, instilled in them through education—language—and use it as a tool of agency, as Ofglen does when she says to Offred, "It's a beautiful May Day"; the weather is an allowed topic of conversation for the Handmaids but at the same time this phrase has a rebellious double meaning with the word "May Day" (43). And as the Handmaids have been taught to pray for their fruitfulness, Offred prays instead to the words of hope she finds in the back of her closet, even before she finds out their meaning from the Commander: "nolite te bastardes de carborandorum" (which she later finds out translates to "don't let the bastards grind you down") (185). Though re-education, the covering up of the old with the new, is a prominent theme in Gileadean society, the Handmaids are able to use the educator's tools to take back their identities and subvert this fundamentalist, patriarchal system. This book in itself is a sort of taking back of the patriarchal narrative, as Tom Henthorne explores in "Naming Names: Identity and Identification in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*." As Offred engages the reader in figuring out her name (through process of elimination as June is one of the names whispered at night in the Red Center, and the only name that is not later attached to a character), she is taking back her personal identity that has been replaced with a new identity that is only that of a fruit-bearing vessel. The interactive nature of this text makes the reader participate in Offred's subversive activities, including figuring out that her name is June, even though she never explicitly states it. To take back one's name is to take back one's identity and refuse to be just a being with worth only in one's connection to a man, as she has been taught.

As Atwood posits female education as something that can connect or disconnect oneself with the body, or as something that can be subverted and used against the educator, she also depicts education as something illicit and almost sexual in nature. The Commander calls Offred into his office at night to play Scrabble with him, something Offred describes as being oddly “kinky” (155). After the Commander presents Offred with the gift of an old *Vogue* magazine, something now illegal, Atwood writes, “I felt the Commander watching me as I turned the pages. I knew I was doing something I shouldn’t have been doing, and that he found pleasure in seeing me do it [...] I felt...*naughty*” (157). Reading has become something naughty, something that gives her pleasure, and in turn gives the Commander pleasure: he enjoys this voyeuristic act of seeing her pleasure herself with knowledge. “This watching is a curiously sexual act, and I feel undressed while he does it,” says Offred (184). As Aunt Lydia has instilled in them: to be seen is to be penetrated (28). Offred imagines what Nick must think of her and the Commander’s late night visits with each other: “he has no idea what really goes on in there, among the books. Acts of perversion, for all he knows. The Commander and me, covering each other with ink, licking it off, or making love on stacks of forbidden newsprint. Well, he wouldn’t be far off at that” (181). Offred also thinks of herself as the other woman: she does with him what he can’t do with his wife. In this society where love is essentially taken out of marriage, and sex has become a means to an end, forbidden knowledge becomes something that is the subject of an illicit affair.

Offred also uses the illicit nature of their literary intimacy to gain knowledge. She finally asks the Commander what the words inscribed in her closet mean. She writes it down for him: “The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains. Pen is Envy, Aunt Lydia would say, quoting another Center motto, warning us away from such objects. And they were right, it is envy. Just holding it is envy. I envy the

Commander his pen. It's one more thing I would like to steal" (186). Freud argued that women envied what they did not have—a penis. Atwood's play on words emphasizes the implications of this sort of jealousy; she shows that what Offred actually envies is not simply his manhood, but his ability to write, this phallic and sexual tool that can immortalize a person through recording their thoughts, much like a form of procreation, especially in this society that values fruitfulness so much. I'd also argue that Atwood is pointing to the Victorian and seemingly redundant idea that female knowledge is sexual because it does not contribute to their baby-making fruitfulness, thus making them fallen women, or "Unwomen." And to be fallen is to be an object of sexual desire, rather than a mother figure, if we are thinking of this idea of women being capable of only being one or the other.

Text and Sex

As female education becomes something illicit because it is unnecessary for their reproductive capabilities, sexuality in *The Handmaid's Tale* often becomes simply a means to an end, and, for this reason, sexuality that does not lead to fruitfulness becomes wasteful. Ashley Miller asks the question: "Is it wasteful, then, to blossom without bearing fruit? Does the metaphoric affiliation between women and flowers always suggest a reproductive teleology?" (197). Because sex is merely a means to an end for women in *The Handmaid's Tale*, "to blossom without bearing fruit" becomes something wasteful (197). Posited as natural sources in an even more explicit way than in Rossetti's poetry, the Handmaids are taught to think of themselves as "containers" (Atwood 96). Because of this, the Handmaids' identity is fully in their reproductive abilities—time is of the essence. As Unwomen wasted their time pursuing knowledge that was not fruitful for others—which Aunt Lydia points out when she shows the Handmaids videos of

feminist protests—they also wasted their time having sex without producing children. Sex is only allowed when it is in the confines of this fundamentalist regime—sex education revolves around preparing the Handmaids to reproduce and be fruitful, eerily similar to the conservative curricula of the 80s that taught sex ed in the confines of marriage and family planning.

We can see the strong importance of time and ripeness and waste in Offred's thoughts throughout the novel. When she arrives home after a walk to get groceries, she sees Nick, an object of sexual and romantic desire for her, and observes blossoming flowers in the garden:

The tulips along the border are redder than ever, opening, no longer wine cups, but chalices; thrusting themselves up, to what end? They are, after all, empty. When they are old they turn themselves inside out, then explode slowly, the petals thrown out like shards. Nick looks up and begins to whistle. Then he says, 'Nice walk?' I nod, but do not answer with my voice. He isn't supposed to speak to me. (45)

Here Atwood explicitly highlights the flawed nature of seeing women's sexuality as only acceptable if for the purpose of being fruitful. The Handmaids are fruit in this society, and fruit or flowers are only valuable when they are productive. After they have blossomed, they fade and die. Like the Handmaids, when they are no longer fruitful or ripe, they are no longer valued. To blossom sexually without bearing fruit is to be wasteful. It is especially notable as Offred is pointing this out after she notes an object of her sexual desire. As in Rossetti's poetry, the idea that women must choose between being fruitful and enjoying sexual pleasure is brought up in *The Handmaid's Tale*. In one of Offred's flashbacks to her past life, she reflects on how she would escape her domestic life when she would meet Luke and carry out their affair at a hotel. Atwood writes, "I had plants, too; though they always got spider mites or died from being under watered. I would go off with Luke and neglect them" (172). Here, Atwood is again highlighting

this dichotomy of being a pure or fallen woman, having to choose between fruitfulness and sexual pleasure, a dichotomy much like the polarities that Aunt Lydia is so fond of. Offred leaves her domestic duties to carry out an affair with a married man, and her plants, her fruit, die as a result.

As Atwood points out how fruitfulness is depicted as being something that is ironically incompatible with female sexual pleasure, she also points out that it is something that, if wasted, can completely ruin a woman; again, women's well-being is contingent upon their fruitfulness. After Janine has a "shredder," a baby that is unhealthy, Offred describes Janine's appearance: "Her body under the red dress looks very thin, skinny almost, and she's lost that pregnant glow. Her face is white and peaked, as if the juice is being sucked out of her" (214). This image of Janine depicts her as a dried up fruit—calling back to images of the women in "Goblin Market" that are dried up by goblin men; flowers don't grow where Jeanie is buried, and Laura cannot even make a seedling sprout with the drops of her tears. Janine's ripeness, her ability to bear fruit, is essentially wasted because she failed to be fruitful. She is like a piece of fruit that has had the juice sucked out of it. All of this comes together to illustrate how Atwood, much like Rossetti, is pointing out the flawed nature of this temporal identity in fruitfulness, and female sexuality only being acceptable when it comes to reproduction. As Victorian conduct manuals and sex education in the 80s often limited female sexuality, if even spoken about, to a means of fruitful production, both Atwood and Rossetti argue that female sexual pleasure does not have to be limited to the confines of producing fruit.

Frivolous Fruitfulness

As Aunt Lydia educated the Handmaids to be like passive pieces of art for the patriarchal Eyes to observe, this possibility of being used by a male consumer comes up throughout the novel when it comes to the topic of sexuality. In a passage where Offred notes how much time she has to spare, she reflects on how she used to visit museums and look at paintings of harems done by men. Atwood writes, “These pictures were supposed to be erotic, and I thought they were, at the time; but I see now what they were really about. They were paintings about suspended animation; about waiting, about objects not in use. They were paintings about boredom. But maybe boredom is erotic, when women do it, for men” (69). Atwood points out how men eroticize women into still-life art objects, like pieces of fruit. This also builds on the idea that a woman can either be fruitful or enjoy sexuality. To be an object not in use, like the women in these paintings, is to be like something blossoming without bearing fruit. And to be frivolously fruitful in this way is erotic, for men, if we are thinking of women being capable of being either one or the other. Fallen women are not being used for their reproductive capabilities; they are being consumed by men for the sake of pleasure—which it seems is what makes them erotic: their uselessness.

Anything that does not contribute to women’s baby-making abilities is unnecessary in Gilead. Offred mentions how Handmaids sometimes use butter as a moisturizer for their faces, as they are not given any sort of cosmetic products—since the only thing necessary for their fruitfulness is their wombs—something the Commander finds amusing: “Buttered, I lie on my single bed, flat, like a piece of toast...in the semi dark I stare up at the blind plaster eye in the middle of the ceiling, which stares back down at me” (97). Again, she is something to be consumed by an eye. But when all one is allowed to be is an object to be consumed, power can be found in using the body. When Offred passes Guardians, she feels their eyes on her: “they

touch with their eyes...I move my hips a little, feeling the full red skirt sway around me...like...teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach...I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there" (22). There is also an abundance of fruit basket images that are strikingly similar to images found in Rossetti's poetry. When certain fruits are in season, Gilead makes sure nothing goes to waste. Offred points this out: "In each of our baskets are strawberries — the strawberries are in season now, so we'll eat them and eat them until we are sick of them" (164). This is a moment that points out the idea of taking advantage of fruit when it is ripe; it is not to be wasted. At the same time, this is a moment of consumption for Offred: she is taking advantage of this fruit's ripeness, and of her own ripeness when she uses her body as a passive dog bone, as her ripeness is simultaneously being exploited.

Serena is perhaps the most striking character that exemplifies the importance of female creativity as a means of fruitful reproduction. Though Serena is barren—she can no longer bear fruit, it is Offred's job to do that for her—she still takes part in a variety of creative/productive activities, desperate to be fruitful in some way. Atwood writes,

One day I came upon Serena Joy, kneeling on a cushion in the garden, her cane beside her on the grass...I watched her sideways as I went past, with my basket of oranges and lamb chops. She was aiming, positioning the blades of the shears, then cutting with a convulsive jerk of the hands. Was it the arthritis, creeping up? Or some blitzkrieg, some kamikaze, committed on the swelling genitalia of the flowers? The fruiting body. To cut off the seed pods is supposed to make the bulb store energy. (153)

Atwood emphasizes Serena's aging: she roughly chops away at her garden with her possibly arthritic hands, her cane lying beside her. But the last sentence is an interesting statement: in cutting out reproduction the plant is made stronger. Again, Atwood suggests that perhaps sexual

reproduction is not the only form of powerful procreation women are capable of, and it seems she's arguing that when women aren't limited to their reproductive capabilities they are made stronger. But, when women are limited to their bodies, they might find it is their only source of power, as Offred consistently uses Serena's barrenness against her, in her angry thoughts, as fruitfulness is the one thing she has that Serena does not. Earlier in the novel, Atwood writes: "[Serena's] in one of her best dresses, sky blue with embroidery in white along the edges of the veil: flowers and fretwork. Even at her age she feels the urge to wreath herself in flowers. No use for you, I think at her, my face unmoving, you can't use them anymore, you're withered. They're the genital organs of plants. I read that somewhere once" (82). In a society that places so much importance on procreation, or fruitfulness, Serena must create in any possible way she can. She is found in her sitting room "knitting away at her endless Angel scarves, turning out more and more yards of intricate and useless wool people: her form of procreation, it must be" (154). This image is one that Atwood presents again and again. Serena asks Offred to hold her wool for her as she knits. Offred describes this repetitive scene: "I sit, putting down my basket, strawberries again...She fits the skein of wool over my two outstretched hands, starts winding. I am leashed, it looks like, manacled; cobwebbed, that's closer. The wool is gray and has absorbed moisture from the air, it's like a wetted baby blanket" (203). Serena takes part in these very Victorian, feminine creative activities as a way to be fruitful somehow. While she once was fruitful in the knowledge she produced—she gave speeches, wrote books, and was featured on television—that very knowledge came back to bite her; she was finally taken at her word, and those tools of education she once used are taken away from her. She knits with damp wool that is like a "wetted baby blanket," a blanket for a child she will never be able to herself produce.

Social and cultural forces continue to reduce women's identities to their bodies and to a compulsory fruitfulness. Female pleasure is depicted as being unnecessary—whether it be in knowledge for the learner's sake, or sexual pleasure that does not result in fruitfulness. When women are confined to their bodies, they see the body as their only source of power. But female authorship or storytelling allows women to escape their bodies—their fruitfulness. To share one's story, to put pen to paper, is to transform oneself into something else, something that cannot wither and die. They escape their physical selves and become powerful and lasting, something to be heard rather than seen, as Offred immortalizes herself as the author of her own story. In my next and final chapter I will explore the power of female authorship as an alternative to fruitfulness and examine general and sex education practices today through a close reading of Atwood's sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Testaments*.

Chapter 3: *The Testaments*: Understanding Sex Education in the 21st Century

“Only dead people are allowed to have statues, but I have been given one while still alive. Already I am petrified,” Aunt Lydia records in her manuscript, reflecting on the unveiling of her statue (Atwood 3). She continues,

I write these words in my sanctum within the library of Ardua Hall—one of the few libraries remaining after the enthusiastic book-burnings that have been going on across our land [...] If you are reading, this manuscript at least will have survived. Though perhaps I’m fantasizing: perhaps I will never have a reader. Perhaps I’ll only be talking to the wall, in more ways than one. (4-5)

In Atwood’s *The Testaments*, female authorship is a prevalent theme that comes up throughout the novel in conjunction with the topics of education and female sexuality. As I’ve explored in previous chapters, women are often reduced to their biology, or their fruitfulness, whether in conduct manuals from the Victorian era, or in sex education in the 80s—and even today, which I will explore shortly—and knowledge is often seen as being incompatible with fruitfulness. Lizzie almost succumbs to the forbidden knowledge she tastes in goblin men’s fruit, and Offred is taught that “Pen is Envy” at the Red Center. The little education that women are allowed revolves around feminine creativity and reproduction—from learning how to paint and become an “accomplished” prospective wife and mother in the Victorian era, to Serena’s desperate attempts to simulate procreation through gardening and knitting. In this chapter, I will maintain that Atwood is arguing that female fruitfulness is not limited to the body or reproduction; rather, female knowledge is posited as a sort of alternative fruitfulness that is powerful and capable of making patriarchal fundamentalism “rot from within” much like how it has limited women to their reproductive capabilities and, by extension, forced them to rot when they were no longer

fruitful. Female knowledge castrates patrilinealism in a society that is obsessed with reproduction—Aunt Lydia’s manuscript is what lives on, and her leaked secrets take down the regime and make it “rot from within.”

Sexuality, Cultural Norms, and Education Practices in the 21st Century

In *Rage Becomes Her*, (2018) Soraya Chemaly points out how female knowledge and fruitfulness are often seen as clashing or incompatible, and how women cannot escape being linked to motherhood and their fertility, even today. She writes:

Pregnant women are, studies show, associated with mindlessness, meaning lacking in thought or consciousness, or, at least, a different kind of mind, one with less agency.

Either way, when women themselves perceive that they are being objectified, which happens every day to a visibly pregnant woman, they act more like objects, moving less and speaking less. How we act when we have ultrasound exams, for example. (96)

Here, knowledge or intelligence is posited as something that is somehow completely incompatible with fruitfulness. Not only this, but the consequences of such stereotypes cause women to actually absorb and then replicate these ways of being, as Offred and Agnes both find themselves doing. Chemaly continues: “At work, pregnancy generates biases about women’s abilities, competence, and commitment, and sheds light on deep prejudices. Some women continue to hide pregnancies from employers as long as they can in the knowledge that, despite the law, pregnancy discrimination remains a potential reality” (100). As accommodations aren’t made for pregnant high school students, pregnant women—or even women that are in a child-bearing age range—are discriminated against in the workplace.

Chemaly sees the root of this in the gendering of emotion. She touches on the idea that female behavior and emotion, anger in this case, are only acceptable when they involve women acting in their roles as mothers or feminine caretakers:

Women's anger is usually disparaged in virtually all arenas, except those in which anger confirms gender-role stereotypes about women as nurturers and reproductive agents. This means we are allowed to be angry but not on our own behalves. If a woman is angry in her "place," as a mother or a teacher, for example, she is respected, and her anger is generally understood and acceptable. If, however, she transgresses and is angry in what is thought of as a men's area—such as traditional politics or the workplace—she is almost always penalized. (xvii)

Everything a woman does revolves around their biology. As women were educated only for the purpose of becoming better companions to their husbands in the 1860s, female anger today is something that is only acceptable if it is related to women's stereotypical roles. In the Victorian era, any education beyond preparing a woman for marriage was seen as something that could make a woman's ovaries shrivel up—knowledge was literally thought to be something that could make a woman unfruitful. Neither women's emotions nor women's knowledge is acceptable unless they revolve around their place in the home as mothers, daughters, and wives. If a woman oversteps this allowed sort of patriarchal-centered education, she is punished—like the fallen Gretchen, Laura and Jeanie, and the women of Gilead. Education for one's own personal advancement or enjoyment is something only men are privileged to enjoy.

As women are penalized for emotions or knowledge that oversteps the boundaries of the stereotypical women's sphere, education systems similarly punish women and girls by favoring and supporting boys academically and withholding support for girls. Victor Lacy Edith Sand

studied how teachers' gender biases contribute to the gender gap in academic fields like engineering and computer science through looking at a three cohorts of 6th grade students from 2002-2004 in "On The Origins of Gender Human Capital Gaps: Short and Long Term Consequences of Teachers' Stereotypical Biases" (2015). In middle and high school, teachers' encouragement is a large predictor for whether or not students will enroll in higher level math courses. Sand explains how teachers' stereotypical biases encourage boys to enroll in advanced math courses, and do the opposite for girls, and "since these courses are prerequisites for admission to higher education in these subjects, such teachers' stereotypical biases contribute to the gender gap in academic degrees in fields like engineering and computer science, and by implication they also contribute to the gender gap in related occupations" (5-6). Our stereotypical biases limit women by making them think that they are not capable of going into these fields, confining them to fields that are more stereotypically feminine. The gap in STEM fields is not due to a lack of ability or aptitude generally on women's parts; rather it is the result of institutionalized bias in our education systems.

Not only are women limited to their biologies in the workforce, healthcare systems, and general education systems, but also in sex education today. Numerous studies have shown that abstinence-only education is not effective, yet schools around the country continue to teach this in their sex education curricula. A report that was done by the Guttmacher Institute titled "Youth Have Healthier Sexual Outcomes if their Sex Education Classes Discuss Contraception" (2012) shows that young adults that attend sex education classes that discuss both abstinence and contraception have better sexual health outcomes than students that do not receive instruction on these topics. According to this study, "respondents aged 15-24 who had received information on both topics were less likely than nonrecipients to have had sex before age 20 [...] and to have

had a first partner who was much younger or older than them” and were “more likely than nonrecipients to have used a condom or any effective form of contraception at first sex” (Doskoch 1). While facts say that abstinence-only sex education, or no sex education at all, is actually harmful to the sexual health of adolescents and young adults, school curricula continue to be informed, or rather misinformed, by religious fundamentalism. Religiously informed curricula are intended to prevent sex before marriage, yet they do just the opposite.

Depressingly, not much has changed since the 1980s, or even the 1860s when it comes to discourse and education on these topics. A report done in 2016 shows that while 37 states mandate that abstinence information be provided in sex education curricula—and 25 that it be stressed, only 33 require HIV information, and just 18 require contraceptive information. Even more shockingly, only 13 states mandate that instruction be medically accurate, 26 that it be age appropriate, eight that it not be race-, ethnicity-, or gender-biased and inclusive of sexual orientation, and two that it not promote religion (Hall). Not only this, but 87% of high schools allow parents/guardians to exclude their children from such instruction. Kelli Stidham Hall explains that deeply rooted religious beliefs about adolescent sexuality have shaped and informed state policies and “continued public and political debates on the morality of sex outside marriage perpetuate barriers at multiple levels—by misguiding state funding decisions, molding parents’ (mis)understanding of programs, facilitating adolescents’ uptake of biased and inaccurate information in the classroom, and/or preventing their participation in sex education altogether” (621). The problem with religious fundamentalism in education systems is that it simply does not produce outcomes that are aligned with its intentions. Students that do not receive any sort of sex education, or receive abstinence-only education, are more likely to partake in sexual behaviors

that these exact teaching practices think they are preventing. This refusal to teach adolescents about sexuality is a major thematic preoccupation in Atwood's *The Testaments*.

Education and Religious Fundamentalism in *The Testaments*

The Testaments is set 15 years after the events of *The Handmaid's Tale*, and is narrated by Aunt Lydia, Agnes—the biological daughter of *The Handmaid's Tale*'s protagonist Offred who was taken away from her at the onset of the regime and has grown up in Gilead—and Nicole—Offred's younger daughter that escaped Gilead as an infant and who has been raised by foster parents in Canada. Nicole's foster parents are killed by spies from Gilead and she learns that she is actually the famous Baby Nicole that was “kidnapped” from Gilead years ago. She falls into the care of MayDay organization members who work with an unidentifiable inside source—who we later discover is Aunt Lydia—and send Nicole back to Gilead as part of a plan to take down the regime. Agnes discovers that Nicole is her half sister and together, with Becka's sacrifice and Aunt Lydia's inside intelligence, release information detailing corruption within Gilead which cause the regime to begin to “rot from within”. When it comes to education, Agnes's is of particular interest when it comes to the topic of fruitfulness because she grows up in Gilead, a society obsessed with reproduction. Throughout *The Testaments* Atwood depicts female education as being a sort of consumption of one's role—particularly that of a fruitful vessel. Rather than existing for the sake of intellectual growth, education serves as a fundamentalist tool that forces women to consume their identities. Just as the young women cannibalistically consume foods relating to fertility in *The Handmaid's Tale* (as Maria Christou argues), at Rubies Premarital Preparatory school girls are taught how to make dishes relating to fertility in *The Testaments*. In school, Agnes and Becka are taught how to properly poach an egg

and the temperature at which a quiche should be served (164). Reminiscent of Victorian women's training in "accomplishments," the girls are also taught flower arrangement in the Japanese and French style and how to make petit point embroideries of bowls of fruit for their future husbands (156). Everything revolves around creating a comfortable home for their husbands to occupy—any sort of knowledge beyond this is not only unnecessary, but even potentially dangerous. Aunt Vidala remarks, "if they stay in school too long, they become disruptive" (154). Agnes realizes this—and even says, "I was not anybody in my own right—although of the privileged class, I was just a young girl about to be confined to wedlock" (158). Education exists as a way to reassert women's roles as fruitful beings whose identities are in motherhood, or the possibility of motherhood.

With fundamentalism also comes the danger of misinterpretation, according to Atwood. While *The Handmaid's Tale* has appeared on lists of banned high school reading books for its negative portrayal of Christianity, Atwood is not arguing that religion is inherently bad; rather, institutionalized fundamentalism, such as fundamentalism in education systems, is dangerous and subject to misinterpretation or misuse by those in power. As Becka tells Agnes, "You can either believe in God, or Gilead. Not both" (*The Testaments* 304). Gilead is full of contradictions, misinterpretations, and downright falsehoods. Much like the sex education of the Victorian era, 1980s, and today, in school, girls are taught about sex only in the context of their marital duties and it is extremely vague and mystified. Agnes refers to a certain body part as "the shameful part of many elusive names" (*The Testaments* 82). Aunt Vidala presents lectures that "were supposed to inform [them] about a woman's role and duty in regard to her body—a married woman's role—but they had not been very informative or reassuring" (82). As they are taught about their duties as wives, they are simultaneously taught that their bodies are dangerous.

And as they create flower art, an act of feminine creation, the Aunts simultaneously teach them about the dangers of their bodies and sexuality. Offred remarks in *The Handmaid's Tale* that she read somewhere once that flowers are “the genital organs of plants,” so as they create flower art, they are also taught to be afraid of the sexual connotation of fruitfulness (*The Testaments* 82). In a society that is so concerned with not wasting anything, Commander Judd frequently “wastes” the fruitfulness of his young wives by murdering them once he has used them sexually.

Education here is full of contradictions. Gilead is rotting from within, and in the end it is taken down by those that truly abide by biblical principles and use the Bible to undermine this patriarchal, fundamentalist regime (308). As I will examine further later in this chapter, Becka ironically serves as a sort of shining Christ figure; her sacrifice allows for the information to escape in Nicole's arm, and an image of her statue is what ends this novel. On it are written verses taken from the Bible that essentially mean that there is power in storytelling, in this case, in female knowledge. Those who defy Gilead are actually more “godly” than those who led it.

Atwood again represents a world in which knowledge and fruitfulness are not compatible for women—women may have either one or the other, like the dichotomy of the pure versus the fallen woman in the Victorian era. In Gilead, the only women that have access to knowledge outside of the sort of fruitful knowledge women are generally allowed are the Aunts—but they are not fruitful reproductively. While other women have the ability to live on in the form of their fruit, or lineage, Aunts do not have this ability—they are barren. Recalling the Victorian image of Gretchen and Mephistopheles in church, Aunt Lydia writes to her hoped-for future reader, stating that she will one day have become just a wad of crumbling paper. She continues, “it's not yet the midnight of my life; the bell has not yet tolled, and Mephistopheles has not yet turned up to collect the price I must pay for our bargain” (173). Mephistopheles, a demon who Faust traded

his soul to in exchange for knowledge and power, has not yet come back to haunt her, as he haunts Gretchen in the Victorian image, leaving her barren and fallen. Aunt Lydia continues, remarking on how educated women were targeted when Gilead first started executing people. She writes, “All that was necessary was a law degree and a uterus: a lethal combination” (144). Being an educated woman was a death sentence, unless a woman was lucky enough or could stomach becoming an Aunt.

Because they have been taught that education and womanhood are essentially incompatible, young girls in Gilead are amazed at the knowledge the Aunts are allowed to have. The Aunts’ ability to read and write is a spectacle for women and girls in this society. Agnes questions how the Aunts were able to get the power that they have: “How had they received their strength? Did they have special brains, neither female nor male?” (156). The thought that women can be educated and have power in the form of knowledge is almost incomprehensible for Agnes. The incompatibility of knowledge and fruitfulness is underscored again when Commander Judd kisses Agnes, his prospective wife and she thinks, “I pictured a tiny morsel of my brain being sucked through the skin of my forehead into his mouth. A thousand such kisses later and my skull would be emptied of brain” (226). She feels herself wasting away just from his kiss, and knows she will wither and die after being married to him. She points out that his teeth smell like decay, and has a terrifying vision of their wedding night in which she imagines him as a faceless blob with only an orifice that looks like the mouth of a leech, coming toward her (226). When men use female sexuality and fruitfulness—here, in the form of marriage—they literally sucks out a woman’s brains, making her waste away. This is especially notable as Commander Judd does this to women much younger than he over and over again: he uses them for sex and then murders—or wastes—them.

Sexuality in *The Testaments*

Women are taught that their only value is in their bodies, which in turn leads them to believe their bodies are their only source of power. Early in this novel, Agnes explains codes of dress for women in this society: “arms covered, hair covered, skirts down to the knee before you were five and no more than two inches above the ankle after that, because the urges of men were terrible things and those urges needed to be curbed” (9). Much like the education in “Goblin Market” that involved wariness about how one will be seen by men in public settings, girls in this society are taught to fear the urges and intents of men that are lurking around every corner. Agnes feels frustrated that she is destined to be limited to her body—she doesn’t want this life that is already laid out for her. She describes how the Marthas would let her play with dough when they were making bread. Atwood writes, “I always made dough men, I never made dough women, because after they were baked I would eat them, and that made me feel I had a secret power over men. It was becoming clear to me that, despite the urges Aunt Vidala said I aroused in them, I had no power over them otherwise” (20). Feeling helpless, Agnes finds power in this act of consumption—she is able to have power over the men she has been taught she is powerless over. She even tries starving herself, a small act of resistance; Martin Bidney claims that since women have often been equated with weakness and the body, “food deprivation may express an exertion of a will toward feminine power” (317). Agnes has been taught that her body, while capable of being fruitful and promoting God’s will, is also something very dangerous. She remarks, “There were so many things that could be done to it or go wrong with it, this adult female body, that I was left feeling I would be better off without it. I considered shrinking myself by not eating, and I did try that for a day, but I got so hungry that I couldn’t stick to my resolution” (83). Women

are taught that their only power is in their bodies, but it is a power that is dangerous and that can actually lead to their own personal harm. Though Agnes tries to empower herself through eating dough men, and then starving herself, she is destined to fail because she is still acting according to the way she has been taught—she is limited to her body.

Also aligned with Victorian beliefs about female sexuality is the idea that sexuality and knowledge are dirtying and contagious—again, like in the image of Gretchen and Mephistopheles in church. In this image, a pure woman with a child at her side is depicted with her eyes closed, unable to look at the fallen woman beside her that is desperate for the child. Aunt Vidala teaches her students about the dangers of knowledge: “forbidden things are open to the imagination. That was why Eve ate the Apple of Knowledge, said Aunt Vidala: too much imagination. So it was better to not know some things. Otherwise your petals would get scattered” (15). Made out to be like flowers, knowledge carries with it the power to demolish and destroy a woman. And as knowledge has the power to scatter a woman’s petals, a woman that has already been demolished—a fallen woman—can contaminate pure women. The Wives and Shunnamite often call the Handmaids “sluts.” After Agnes finds out that her mother was a Handmaid, she becomes fascinated with Ofkyle. Atwood writes: “It was common knowledge that all the Handmaids had been sluts, once upon a time. And they still were, although in a very different way [...]. Nobody bothered them or spoke to them or touched them, because they were—in a sense—untouchable” (90-91). Agnes is intrigued by Ofkyle but sees her as a distant figure that is untouchable. When Agnes remembers how upset Becka was when the Aunts told them a story about the Concubine Cut into Twelve Pieces, she wonders if something disgraceful happened to Becka to make her so affected by the story. She writes, “But I didn’t want to ask her: another girl’s disgrace could rub off on you if you got too close to it” (162). Agnes is afraid

to even ask her friend about her traumatic past out of fear of her dirtiness rubbing off on her. Knowledge is similarly depicted as something tainting and almost sexually dirty. Agnes's Marthas are glad they aren't Aunts because Aunts "dirty up their minds" with "filthiness and muck" (238). But while female knowledge is seen as something illicit and unclean, Atwood argues just the opposite. As Lizzie is redeemed by Laura and the power of sisterhood, Agnes and Nicole are saved by Becka and Aunt Lydia's sacrifice in the end. Female knowledge is what takes down Gilead and makes it rot from within as it once made its female inhabitants rot.

In the 19th century, female writers were often condemned and seen as lesser by their male counterparts, and though female creative endeavors were promoted, it was in the form of petit point embroidery, learning the Romance languages, and Motherhood, while men learned the Classics and participated in politics. Aunt Lydia's manuscript survives as a sort of continuation of her self (like a child), while Gilead, a society so obsessed with fruitfulness and survival, is destroyed. Commander Judd thinks Aunt Lydia is at his disposal; she thinks he views her as a sort of "embodiment of his will" (137). When Commander Judd tells Aunt Lydia about the microdots concealed in a pen, Aunt Lydia responds: "Not for nothing do we at Ardua Hall say 'Pen is Envy.'" Manhood is not something to be envied—knowledge, the pen, is. He laughs at this because he thinks she really is just an extension of himself, the embodiment of his will, yet her knowledge is what destroys the patrilineage of Gilead. She doesn't need to be fruitful in the way Gilead has forced women to be; her knowledge becomes a tool that is actually more powerful than procreation.

And while *The Testaments* opens with Aunt Lydia recalling the memory of the unveiling of her statue, an art object created by Gilead as a means of remembering her, it ends with this male-authored statue broken in pieces, while her manuscript, a hand-written testament of her life

and truth, is what remains. While Gilead rots, along with the physical masculine construct of Aunt Lydia's life, her words replace it. She won't be remembered in the confines of what Gilead made her out to be; she is remembered for her words and their power. Her words live on—her form of procreation—while Gilead is castrated and cut off by her pen. Women can be fruitful and have knowledge, and perhaps female knowledge is even more powerful than any other form of fruitfulness. Aunt Lydia ends her manuscript with this: "In my end is my beginning, as someone once said. Who was that? Mary, Queen of Scots, if history does not lie. Her motto, with a phoenix rising from its ashes, embroidered on a wall hanging. Such excellent embroiderers, women are" (404).

The novel ends by emphasizing that it is not religion but the institutionalization of religion in education systems that is corrupt. *The Testaments* ends with an image of a statue constructed in memory of Becka, who sacrifices herself so that Nicole and Agnes could escape with the information used to take down Gilead. On this statue is written: "In loving memory of Becka, Aunt Immortelle. This memorial was erected by her sisters Agnes and Nicole and their mother, their two fathers, their children and their grandchildren. And in recognition of the invaluable services provided by A.L. *A bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter. Love is as strong as death*" (415). Gilead is destroyed, but feminine knowledge lives on. "Immortelle" is the name given to long-lasting flowers that are placed on grave sites—Becka and Aunt Lydia's power is felt beyond their graves and it is what survives and is remembered. As "Goblin Market" ends with a testament to the power and redemptive qualities of sisterhood, *The Testaments* ends quite similarly, and Atwood points out the power of female authorship: "a bird which hath wings shall tell the matter." Quills were made from bird feathers and birds are often associated with poetry and authorship, making the connection to

female authorship even more explicit. Though women may suffer under the hand of patriarchal fundamentalism, particularly in education systems, their words will bite back and reveal truth. The full verse of the second half of the quote reads: “set a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is as strong as death” (KJV Bible). The seal that is set upon Nicole’s arm is what takes down a corrupt fundamentalist regime that was supposed to be based in the Bible, and what is left are the words of these women. When education curricula limit women and girls to their bodies, we suffer as a society by missing out on the fruitfulness of their minds. Female authorship is not limited to reproduction or domestic creativity; women have the power to make lasting change that does not die with the body. As Commander Judd wasted his young wives by murdering them and replacing them after he used them, Gilead is now wasting away while feminine knowledge prevails.

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