Balogné Bérces, Katalin – Kaščáková, Janka – Kačer, Tomáš (eds.), Crossing borders between countries, scholars, and genres: Commemorating the late Kathleen E. Dubs. Ružomberok: Verbum. ISBN 978–80–561–1171–0 (print), ISBN 978–80–561–1172–7 (online)

6.

From Chaucer to Atwood: Robes, Roles, and Repression in Gilead

Katarína Labudová

Introduction

Fashion, often overlooked in literary analysis, can offer a powerful optic that deepens our understanding of characters and their words. While Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* reflects a time when fashion provided a channel for self-representation and self-construction, *The Handmaid's Tale* shows how clothes can be used to erase identity and individual expression. This paper explores how fashion can be manipulated by repressive regimes and can be employed to enforce conformity and control. The role of fashion in literature is frequently neglected in traditional literary analysis. However, depictions of clothing, styled bodies, material culture, and changing fashions are integral to the evolution of fiction. With the development of fashion studies, literary critics have been able to "argue for the consideration of clothing and its implications as a generative critical lens, inviting new and exciting venues of investigation" (Kuhn and Carlson 2007, 2). And because style and fashion can apply equally to linguistic expression and text, studying fashion, garments and accessories can enrich and deepen the literary analysis of characters' psychological state, gender identification, race and ethnicity markers, social and political status, and occupation.

Clothes, dresses, and costumes have undeniable symbolic value in fiction. In fairy tales, the destinies of fairy tale heroes and heroines depend on glass slippers, golden hair, invisible cloaks, and wedding dresses that spring out of a nutshell. In medieval poetry, items such as the magic girdle in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* have vital significance. Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* "takes a great deal of care in describing the pilgrims' garments enabling readers to understand and visualize these items, as opposed to the spiritual world in which these characters operate" (Mahawatte 2022, 293).[1] Furthermore, as seen in "The General Prologue" to *The Canterbury Tales*, where the Wife of Bath is described as wearing "coverchiefs ful fyne of ground" that

[1] For more studies on the intersection of fashion and literature and culture, see Benstock and Ferriss (1994); Bruzzi (1997); Flügel (1930). For more recent studies, see Seys (2018). Paulicelli et al. (2022) offers a section on fashion and literature.

"weyeden ten pound" (Chaucer 2011, 15), it is not merely the literal weight of the head coverings that matters. Rather, Chaucer's use of exaggeration, meticulous attention to luxurious detail, and references to rich fabrics such as silk, velvet, and muslin serve to construct vivid character portraits. These descriptions reveal not only personal vanity or wealth but also embed the characters in a broader cultural and social context, as seen throughout "The General Prologue" as well, where apparel and ornamentation signify authority, sexuality, and personal narrative.

With these frames, the article traces the dialogic tensions between outer appearance and inner identity, performance, conformity, and resistance in Chaucer's and Atwood's narratives. Clothes do more than just protect the body from cold or unwanted attention. In *The Face of Fashion*, Jennifer Craik argues that "codes of dress are technical devices which articulate the relationship between a particular body and its lived milieu, the space occupied by bodies and constituted by bodily actions. In other words, clothes construct a personal habitus" (1993, 4). Moreover, the intertextuality of Atwood's and Chaucer's writing draws our attention to the fabricated and interwoven nature of their texts, using changes in fabrics, clothes, and fashion to connect to both social change and the lineage of writing. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, clothes and style support the idea of the text as a palimpsest,[2] drawing on the previous texts and styles: "I could smell […] the pungent scent of sweat, shot through with the sweet taint of chewing gum and perfume from the watching girls, felt-skirted as I knew from pictures, later in mini-skirts, then pants, then in one earing, spiky green-streaked hair. Dances would have been held there; the music lingered, a palimpsest of unheard sound, style upon style" (Atwood 1996, 13).

The pairing of Chaucer with Atwood is both deliberate and generative. Kathleen E. Dubs has argued persuasively for the continuing relevance of Chaucer's narrative strategies and ethical frameworks in literary contexts. She underscores Chaucer's engagement with power and narrative performativity – concerns that resonate strongly with Atwood's strategies of writing. By aligning a medieval text with a contemporary novel, this article follows Dubs's insistence of Chaucer's and his narrators' afterlife and invites an intertextual dialogue on the politics of dress and identity.

Through the examples of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, I explore how fashion can serve both as a medium of individuality and identity in one text, and as a tool of uniformity and control in the other. While

[2] In its original meaning palimpsest is "a writing surface, whether of vellum, papyrus, or other material, that has been used twice or more for manuscript purposes. […] The vellum surfaces were often scraped or rubbed or the papyrus surfaces washed. With a material so used a second time it frequently happened that the earlier script either was not completely erased or that, with age, it showed through the new" (Holman and Harmon 1986, 354–55).

The Handmaid's Tale portrays clothing as a mechanism of ideological repression, *The Canterbury Tales* presents a more varied picture. Although not every pilgrim's attire is overtly individual – such as the Knight's plain tunic or the Monk's fur-lined cloak – Chaucer often seeks out distinctive details that hint at character, values, or status. Whether through exaggeration, symbolic colour, fabric, or accessories, these sartorial details offer narrative cues that enliven the characters beyond mere costume. I suggest that the study of fashion in literature can deepen literary analysis by revealing psychological, social, political, and cultural insights about the roles and the status of characters. I argue that clothing and fashion are symbolic, contributing to the understanding of a character's identity and situation and the narrative's context.

Red Habits

The title of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* echoes *The Canterbury Tales*, as we learn from its in-story editor, Prof. Pieixoto, who has given this title, "partly in homage to the great Geoffrey Chaucer" (Atwood 1996, 313), to the anonymous tape he has found. However, it is not only this note that relates Atwood's dystopia to Chaucer's work. In "Margaret Atwood and Chaucer: Truth and Lies," Pamela Clements discusses medieval elements in Atwood's work, textual links and similar textual history of *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Handmaid's Tale*: "Offred's story has been found recorded on several ancient rock-and-roll cassette tapes that have been ordered in much the same way as the 'fragments' of *The Canterbury Tales*" (2011, 56). Clements emphasises that each book is as much "about storytelling as about its own subject matter" (2011, 56). Moreover, even if the story is fragmentary and full of silences when it becomes too painful, Atwood's tale follows the rules of the dystopian genre, that the story is meant to be a warning to readers who might end up in a dystopian setting. The storytellers in *The Canterbury Tales* include a moral lesson in their narratives too, which is typical for medieval narratives. As Marta Dvorak suggests, *The Handmaid's Tale* is "a cautionary tale, it has a central question and a central message, a sententia, sense or moral expected by listeners/readers of Chaucer's time, and inscribed into the novel, as signalled by the intertextual title and ribald references to the author of *The Canterbury Tales* in the Historical notes" (2018, par. 27).

However, I argue that there is at least one more important link that connects Atwood's and Chaucer's texts, and that is the importance of clothes and fashion in both works.[3] The texts' fragmentation and intertextuality call attention to the "fabricated,

[3] For a detailed discussion of clothes and fashion in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, see Hodges (2005) and Ramsey (1977). For fashion in Margaret Atwood's texts, see York (1990); Kuhn (2001); Kuhn (2005).

fictional nature of the texts" (Dvorak 2018, par. 4).[4] The word "fabrics," again, underlines the link between clothes and textuality. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* (2019), which is a sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*, are rich, interwoven narratives that draw from a complex textual palimpsest of citations, newspaper clippings, literary works, and historical events. This textual patchwork is not just a stylistic choice but Atwood's effort to challenge conventional modes of storytelling, creating what Roland Barthes describes as a woven text – an open fabric of meaning, where the "text means Tissue; but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as a product, a ready-made veil, behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth), we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving […]" (1975, 64). Through intricate narrative design of interweaving, Atwood reflects the ways in which oppressed identities and dystopian societies are constructed, offering a commentary on both the literal and metaphorical significance of clothing.

Red Stockings

From *The Canterbury Tales*, Offred's tale has links with "The Wife of Bath's Tale," Griselda in "The Clerk's Tale," and "The Second Nun's Tale". The female characters represent models of femininity that Atwood creatively reconstructs and parodies following Chaucer's own example, as his texts are intertextually linked to older sources.[5] Chaucer's detailed descriptions of the pilgrims' clothing and accessories function as signifiers of their "condition" and guide the reader in understanding and imagining the pilgrims (2011, 2). It becomes obvious that the pilgrims' clothes, although they most certainly reflect their social and economic status, also reflect their personal character. In *The Canterbury Tales*, Offred's story in *The Handmaid's Tale* resonates particularly with the Wife of Bath and Griselda. While Offred's narrative engages with these tales thematically, Chaucer's "General Prologue" offers further insight into gender and identity through the visual and material portrayal of his pilgrims. His detailed descriptions of clothing and accessories function as signifiers of the characters' "condition" (Chaucer 2011, 2), they guide the reader's imagination and interpretation. Although these garments often reflect social and economic status, they also reveal personal traits. For instance, the Prioress, though not directly linked to Offred's tale, is described with particular attention to elegance and refinement: "That no droppe ne fell upon her brest"

[4] Apart from Chaucer, *The Handmaid's Tale* refers to fairy tales (Little Red Riding Hood), myths (Eurydice), the Bible, and a number of utopias (More and Campanella) and dystopias (Zamyatin, Orwell, Bradbury).

[5] According to Scarano D'Antonio (2021), Chaucer draws on *Roman de la Rose* by Guillaume de Lorris and by Jean de Meun. "The Clerk's Tale" can be traced back to Petrarch's story and to Boccaccio's version.

and "ful fetis was hir cloke" (Chaucer 2011, 5) suggest meticulous self-presentation. The brooch she wears – "a brooch of gold ful sheene" – inscribed with "Amor vincit omnia" (2011, 6), which translates to 'Love conqueres all,' and carries also a secular connotation, potentially suggesting romantic or courtly love. This dual meaning highlights that her delicacy and refined manners may extend beyond the simplicity and humility typically associated with a nun's lifestyle.

Another important female character is from Bath and is linked to Offred by her red stockings. She goes on many pilgrimages, and we learn that she has had five husbands. Chaucer describes her "hosen" that are "of fine scarlet red" and her "shoes full moist" (2011, 15).[6] What is more important, we learn that her "coverchiefs" are "full fine" and Chaucer swears they "weighede ten pound" (2011, 15). Her clothes thus communicate to readers not only her economic situation – namely that she could buy expensive red stockings and new shoes – but also that she did not mind attention, since she wore a hat "as broad as is a buckler" (Chaucer 2011, 15) and the colour of her stockings can be associated with frivolity and erotic experience. Moreover, her expensive and elaborate clothes, far from ideals of modesty and chastity, suggest that she is more interested in travelling and adventures than in religious devotion. It is obvious that even though the Prioress's fine clothes and Alison's clothes indicate their gender and their economic and social situation, we cannot overlook that they still have a way to exert their personal choices in self-fashioning. With their bold outfits and accessories, the Prioress and Alison challenge religious edicts and gender expectations, showing their ability to shape their own identities. Unlike Offred's red robe, which is imposed on her, the Wife of Bath's costume and the accessories worn by the Prioress are chosen by them to reflect their personal style, even within the restrictions of the patriarchal society. In *The Culture of Fashion*, Breward argues that personal appearance is not just a passive reflection of status, it is a means of self-fashioning: "[i]n a society arranged around rigid strata, duties and expectations, dictated by such considerations as gender, wealth, age, land and ancestry, personal appearance carried immense importance as an indicator of social position and role" (1995, 23). In *The Canterbury Tales*, the Prioress and the Wife of Bath can exercise some agency in how they fashion themselves unlike Offred who cannot accessorise, who cannot pick her clothes, not even buy them or wash them herself.[7]

[6] In "The Two Alisouns: The Miller's Use of Costume and His Seduction of the Wife of Bath," John Slefinger comments on the Wife of Bath's expensive clothes: "the Wife's hosen are specifically marked as expensive in that they are made of scarlet, an expensive fabric often used by royalty, and are dyed red, a particularly costly colour" (2014, 156).

[7] Offred mentions the store, Lilies of the Field, where Handmaids order their robes. As many names of products, places, and events in Gilead, this name refers to the Bible. Colette Tennant argues that Gilead uses this allusion

In "*The Handmaid's Tale*: An Intertextual Transformation through Storytelling," Carla Scarano D'Antonio argues that "the female character that mainly interweaves with Offred is Griselda, the faithful, meek wife and the poor peasant girl who marries the rich and powerful Walter, or Gualtieri, marquis of Saluzzo" (2021, 605). Just like Griselda, who did not even bring her own clothes into her husband's house, Offred is given her red robe. Griselda is given "broches and ringes" (Chaucer 2011, 252) to match her husband's status: "Walter has had clothing made, secretly, to Griselda's measure" (Kuhn and Carlson 2007, 37). Griselda does not own her clothes and, likewise, Offred wears the uniform provided by the state. Interestingly, even though clothing plays a significant role in *The Canterbury Tales*, the readers do not get a full detailed description of Griselda's attire. As Ramsey (1977) observes, in this tale, changes in her clothing symbolise shifts in her social status: "when Griselda is wedded to Walter […], she is clothed in finery; when she is sent away, the fine clothes are stripped from her; after her restoration, she is again clothed in regal garments" (106–7).

Griselda's old smock, "olde gear," (Chaucer 2011, 256) or "rude array" (Chaucer 2011, 281) is in such condition that the ladies did not want to "handle before dressing her in the new and noble garments and jewels that Walter provides. Chaucer's depiction of these ladies' attitudes illustrates the disdain felt for old garments" (Hodges 2014, 101). She is not appreciated for who she is, until her new clothes make her visible. Walter's act of dressing Griselda in fine clothes and jewels follows the tradition of "marital gifts: that function as public displays of possession and status" (Hodges 2014, 102). This gesture not only reinforces his patriarchal authority over her but also, ironically, obscures his initial attraction to her – Griselda's innate virtues, or "her bounte" (Chaucer 2011, 252).

When Walter sees Griselda's sartorial metamorphosis, he comments on it, "For though that eve virtuous was she, / She was increased in such excellence" (Chaucer 2011, 257). The way the red robe transforms the women in Gilead is equally remarkable. However, while Griselda's new clothes and status are admired and approved by others, her crown and clothes enhancing her individuality, Offred's identity is erased by her robe and its red colour provokes feelings of hatred and disapproval, especially from other women. In *The Testaments*, Agnes feels shame when she is told that her biological mother is a Handmaid: "They get passed around until they have a baby. They're all sluts anyway, they don't need real names" (Atwood 2019, 81). Gileadean propaganda says that handmaids are precious but only as well-disciplined bodies, a sort

manipulatively: "By calling the store that sells the prescribed Handmaids' uniform 'Lilies of the Field', the orchestrators of Gilead's society suggest that the Handmaids are 'arrayed' or dressed in a glorious or fitting and appropriate way for their role, and that their role is a providential one instead of a prison" (2019, 22).

of reproductive army. Griselda's removal of her old smock in "The Clerk's Tale" is echoed at the beginning of *The Handmaid's Tale*, where Offred recalls how the Handmaids in training "neatly folded their clother" and wrapped themselves in "army-issue blankets" (Atwood 1996, 13). While the contexts differ, both scenes function as rituals of erasure: acts in which women are stripped of their former identities and prepared for submission to a new social class. In this sense, Griselda becomes an antetype not through direct narrative resemblance but as a symbolic embodiment of female disrobement within patriarchal systems. The scene is a symptom of a society that has stripped these women of their individual rights, names, and personality. Moreover, to connect Offred and Griselda more tightly, Offred's daughter is forcibly removed from her and her (future) babies will be taken from her too by the state; Griselda too must give up her own children: "This child I am commanded for to take" (Chaucer 2011, 261). Both women are forced to surrender their children which demonstrates the central theme of control over women's lives and their roles, even their roles of mothers, in an oppressive environment.

Self-fashioning and Storytelling

The silencing of their roles as mothers mirrors another silencing: the control over their voices and stories. Griselda and Offred are created by male narrators: Griselda by the clerk in "The Clerk's Tale" and Offred by Professor Pieixoto, a male academic in the future. He reconstructs Offred's narrative, analyses it and comments on it in an ironic way, further reducing her to an object for scholarly dissection, much in the same way that Griselda was fashioned and exposed to the male gaze. Pieixoto's irony reveals that he approaches Offred's account with academic detachment, objectifies her, and talks over her, thus silencing her voice. He academically criticises the gaps in her story because he ignores her trauma and emotional urgency. Similarly, Griselda's story is shaped by the Clerk, who fashions her as an ideal and retells her obedience as a moral and didactic exercise. In both tales, the act of narration becomes a form of silencing.

We do not hear their tales directly from them, but rather styled and edited by the male narrator. Chaucer's narrators similarly disrupt the pilgrims' tales. As Kathleen Dubs notes: "The Clerk's Tale" – the story of patient Griselda – triggers the first of Harry's overtly personal reactions. "[…] Harry completely misinterprets the story's message about reason, compassion, and mercy. Instead, he fixates on the theme of unruly wives, and specifically on his own" (Dubs 2011, 43). In doing so, Harry reveals his anxiety over women defying male-imposed norms, which enhances the connection between Griselda's symbolic derobement and oppressive regime of Gilead. Clements argues that "Gilead's patriarchal social system echoes medieval ideas about

women, ideas that make up much of the debate embedded in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*," (2011, 56) suggesting that Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* deliberately evokes these medieval notions to critique contemporary gender dynamics. The sequel, *The Testaments*, goes further by not only continuing this medieval echo but also drawing on additional medieval texts, especially the Middle English poem *Pearl*. Through these intertextual references, Atwood deepens her exploration of the power structures of patriarchal ideologies. As Mary Dockray-Miller suggests, *Pearl*, is "constructed as a dream-vision dialogue between a grieving man and the character commonly referred to as the 'Pearl Maiden,' who instructs him about Heaven, the afterlife, and Christian doctrine" (2024, 12). She compares the Pearl Girls to the medieval Pearl Maiden, who wears a crown of pearls, not only a pearl necklace, and whose dress is shiny. Visually alike, the Pearl Girls recall the Pearl Maiden. Although they may appear similar at first glance, the Pearl Girls – unlike the Pearl Maiden – pervert the authenticity of Christian moral values and spiritual insight: "the Pearl Girls offer only a false, socially sanctioned version of purity and moral rectitude; the converts agree to enter not an immaculate feminine paradise but a false, misogynistic Hell" (Dockray-Miller 2024, 13). Atwood layers many historical, religious, and literary sources to stitch together a postmodern tapestry. Her text resonates with patriarchal voices from the past and mirrors past wardrobes. Madelaine C. Seys argues that "sartorial description also functions as a self-conscious literary technique. Authors use their heroines' sartorial refashioning as a metaphor for their own negotiation of contemporary politics and fashions of literature, representation, and genre" (2018, 14).

Madelaine C. Seys's argument suggests that the deliberate choice of clothing in literature can symbolise a deeper negotiation of identity. What is more, it supports the idea that the novel is a "patchwork of texts" (Edwards 2005, 100), stitched together from various pieces, reflecting how *The Handmaid's Tale* is a tapestry of interwoven literary and historical references. This "patchwork" structure is emblematic of the postmodern novel, where the imagery of textiles symbolises how different texts are sewn together to form a new yet perverted design, which shows Gilead's control over the lives of its citizens.

In this context, the concept of palimpsest not only serves as a literary device but also functions as a metaphor for Offred's experiences and her evolving resistance. Just as Gilead recycles old clothes, Offred's identity is layered and constantly restyled – reflecting the layering of multiple influences. Atwood challenges the notion of pure genres and the existence of a single, fixed identity by using palimpsest to illustrate how Gilead's power structures erase and overwrite the past and the Bible. Her reimagining of historical events unfolds like a palimpsest – rewritten texts, where references and

quotations are transformed, reinterpreted and restyled to reflect the fragmented nature of identity and narrative in Gilead.

Clothing becomes a powerful instrument of control in the dystopian regime of Gilead. The government exerts control over every aspect of life, including how people dress. The protagonist, Offred, describes how theocracy forces rigid dress codes on women and uses uniforms to erase individuality and reinforce the power hierarchy. The theocratic regime dictates what citizens wear, leaving them with no agency or freedom of expression. This loss of control over clothing reflects broader themes of submission and restriction in theocratic Gilead, where personal autonomy is denied, and even fashion becomes politicised. This control over dress is not unique to theocratic Gilead but reflects real-world patterns of societal regulation in the past and present. As Susan B. Kaiser argues, religious groups like Gábor Adventists or orthodox Mennonites exert "control over their members' bodies" (2012, 91).[8] In these religious groups, women's clothes and head coverings are supposed to show submission and modesty. There are numerous examples from history and fiction where clothes are used to erase or suppress individuality: the plain habits of monastic orders signify submission to the order over personal identity; Victorian workhouses imposed standardised dress to instill discipline and suppress rebellion among the poor. Military uniforms, Nazi concentration camp uniforms, and Socialist school outfits alike emphasise conformity and loyalty to collective ideals, often at the expense of personal expression. Even in fictional constructs like Thomas More's *Utopia*, uniformity in dress reflects a deeper ideological commitment to social harmony achieved through the erasure of self. Thus, Atwood's narrative strategies – her interweaving of historical, religious and genre discourses, along with metaphorical use of clothing – create a powerful critique of theocratic authoritarian regimes that aim to control both the mind and the body.

The sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale, The Testaments* (2019), was published 34 years after the popular dystopia. The events of *The Testaments* take place approximately fifteen or sixteen years after the events of *The Handmaid's Tale*. It focuses on the lives of two young women: Daisy, raised in Canada, and Agnes, a privileged Gileadean daughter. The narrative shifts to their experiences as they navigate Gilead's oppressive

[8] The Gábor are a subgroup of Roma people, primarily found in Romania. Traditionally, the Gábor are known for their strict internal rules, distinctive clothing, and patriarchal social structure. According to Péter Berta, "women [are] wearing ankle-length skirts and headscarves, choosing a spouse from their own Roma ethnic population" (2019, 48). Orthodox Mennonites are part of the Anabaptist Christi. They are committed to pacifism and plain dress (often including head coverings for women and beads for men), live separated from modern society, and avoid using electricity, cars, and modern technology. Jana Hawley analyses the significance of their dress code that has changed very little over the years: "Dress for Old Order women consists of a white prayer cap made of organza, a black bonnet, a shawl, cape, apron, black stocking, and a dress. The long dress, apron, and shawl are intended to conceal the body, and the bonnet to follow the biblical notion of 'shamefacedness'" (2008, 93).

society. Through their perspectives, we learn about the private lives of citizens, where clothing, much like food, is dictated by the regime.

In Gilead, the prescribed dress codes, uniforms, and the symbolism embedded in clothing are central to the regime's control and structure. These uniforms, which clearly define an individual's role in the theocratic state, play a crucial part in maintaining social order. The Handmaids, Aunts, and other members of the hierarchy are not just identified by their positions and roles within the regime, but by the uniforms they wear. Except for the Handmaids, high-status women (Wives and Aunts), women in Gilead are classified either as Econowives or Marthas and personify the ideal of the housekeeping and domesticity. Econowives, wearing red, blue, and green striped uniforms that "mark the women of the poorer men" must perform all roles (Atwood 1996, 34), while Marthas are domestic servants and cooks in the Commanders' households. Offred describes their uniforms as dull green, "like a surgeon's gown of the time before" (Atwood 1996, 19).[9]

Wearing uniforms according to a rank or role reinforces the idea that Gilead is a military state at war with enemies. This is supported by propaganda broadcast on TV, which is the only source of information for the citizens. The idea of being surrounded by enemies creates a false sense of belonging to Gilead. As Roveri argues, "[u]niforms enforce social discipline, strengthen a sense of belonging and amplify national sentiments. They also provide a 'costume' where to hide and adopt a socially acceptable appearance, which emphasizes the utility of bodies (over the value of individuals)" (Roveri 2022, 195). Uniforms emphasise a sense of hierarchy: from the cheap, colourless robes of Unwomen to the better fitting and flattering uniforms of wives in blue, or very precious brides in tailored white wedding dresses.

Likewise, in the time of Chaucer and his pilgrims, the clothes and their colours reflected not only practical functions but also social and economic status:

> [i]n the Middle Ages in Europe, society was organized in a very hierarchical manner – again, in a pyramid-like feudal structure. The elite's wealth and power at the top resulted from their ownership of land. Below the elite was a class

[9] The women who resist any classification in Gilead are declared "Unwomen" and are sent to the Colonies where they remove toxic waste or are executed. Unwomen are assigned the colour grey. The women at Jezebels, who escape being assigned a colour, are nevertheless required to wear garish costumes that declare their role as sex objects – "government issue," as Moira describes a Playboy bunny outfit (Atwood 1996, 315). The colour symbolism of uniforms in *The Handmaid's Tale* has been analysed by a number of critics. In *Brutal Choreographies*, J. Brooks Bouson comments on the colour of Offred's uniform: "The sexual object for male consumption and the marginalized woman who is shunned and despised by other women, the Handmaid is the good/bad woman, the saintly prostitute. Her red, nun-like uniform symbolizes her imprisonment in the Handmaid's role" (1993, 140).

> of merchants, clerics, and artisans. […] Because lower class individuals had to perform manual labor, it was difficult to keep their clothing clean. The color of clothing – dark colors to hide dirt versus lighter colors for those who did not need to worry about manual labor – also became a key indicator of social status.
>
> (Kaiser 2012, 110)

The strict dress code in Gilead is a reminder of medieval and Renaissance efforts to prevent people transgressing class boundaries. However, while medieval rules regulated appearance based on class, they still allowed for some personal variation – unlike Gilead, where clothing functions as a totalising system of control that erases any individuality.

The uniforms, particularly the Handmaids' red robes, are designed as a visual expression of Gilead's oppressive theocratic ideology. The robes are not only practically but also symbolically restrictive, echoing Puritan ideals of femininity and submission. Offred reminiscences about her past and the clothes she used to wear. "I think about laundromats. What I wore to them: shorts, jeans, jogging pants. What I put into them: *my own* clothes, *my own* soap, *my own* money, money I had earned *myself*. I think about having such *control*" (Atwood 1996, 34). Gilead strips her of her own clothes, her name and identity. This process of stripping away autonomy and individuality is further emphasised by Aunt Lydia's reflection on the creation of a new societal order: "Week by week we invented: laws, uniforms, slogans, hymns, names" (Atwood 2019, 177). This invention of dress codes is not merely administrative but a tool for indoctrination, teaching women their assigned roles.[10] The uniforms serve as constant visual reminders: a woman's dress is a direct reflection of her value to the regime and a memento of their specific function.[11] As Laflen argues: "In fact, each of the roles available to women in Gilead reinforces this belief. Although each role carries with it different privileges and burdens, each is signalled visibly by an assigned costume and colour" (2007, 92). The powerful costume imagery of Gilead is as a tool for both identification and isolation of citizens. At its core, the regime enforces a radical division of traditionally gendered functions (shopping, cooking, childbirth, intimacy) by assigning each to a separate class of women. This fragmentation not only condines women to reductive roles, but also prevents them from empathising with one another. By defining, delimiting, and separating women's roles, Gilead creates rigid boundaries and frictions

[10] Mary Dockray-Miller describes the process as follows: "[S]omewhat analogous to kapos in the Nazi concentration camps, Lydia and the other founders thus become complicit in the oppression of women in Gilead: training the Handmaids as sex slaves for breeding; 'educating' the young, elite women to be submissive Wives; designing the codes and rituals that will enforce the categories of female exploitation under the regime" (2024, 10).

[11] Even the second-hand, shabby old costumes at the Jezebel's are a satirical comment on the costume imagery of Gilead.

between the classes of women, leaving women with little empathy and no trust in each other, as they are denied shared experiences.

In Gilead, the prescribed dress is part of the larger project of controlling the bodies of women. Colour-coded uniforms, fear, and brain-washing propaganda make it easier to (visually) screen and control the groups of citizens. Women willingly take part in self-surveillance, not to gain any kind of advantage, but out of fear of being taken to the Colonies: the Handmaids keep each other in line, Marthas and Wives spy on the Handmaids too and vice-versa. Apart from representing oppression and the power hierarchy, Atwood's obsessive description of clothes, shoes, and headpieces in *The Handmaid's Tale* also serves to ironise and ultimately subvert the twisted ideology of the dystopian state. On the other hand, clothes can be an occasion for communicating empathy and care. Calling to mind Gilead's stipulation that Marthas not befriend Handmaids, the reader still witnesses how Rita offers Offred an ice cube, after seeing her in a warm red habit on a hot day. An act of sympathy is a gesture of rebellion, and not only against the strict dress-code. Similarly, in *The Testaments*, the wedding dress becomes a symbol of women's empathy, collaboration, and resistance. The fitting of wedding dress is not only an act of participation in the regime's rituals but also a moment to save Agnes from her traumatic union with the well-known but untouchable abuser, Commander Judd.

The red robes remind Offred of habits, a term that evokes monasteries, order, discipline, and strict habits that "are hard to break" (Atwood 1996, 34). The association of Handmaids' red robes with nuns' habits is manipulative: "The red gloves are lying on the bed. I pick them up, pull them onto my hands, finger by finger. Everything except the wings around my face is red: the colour of blood, which defines us. The skirt is ankle-length full, gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full. The white wings too are prescribed issue. They are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen" (Atwood 1996, 18). In contrast, Chaucer's Wife of Bath is also marked by excessive redness – her bold red stockings and flushed complexion – yet this signals not repression but her unapologetic embrace of sensuality. She challenges the norms of female modesty. In Gilead, the Handmaids in red look like nuns, walk in twos like nuns, and pose their hands and heads like nuns. However, this similarity is entirely superficial. As Colette Tennant suggests, "instead of being married to Christ, as celibate orthodox nuns are expected to be, these Handmaids are flesh-and-blood examples of religion gone awry. Instead of the voluntary celibacy practiced by nuns, they are raped every time they endure a Ceremony" (2019, 62). Gilead abuses fashion and aesthetics to serve their political goal of increasing the population in the state. In *The Testaments*, the colour of their dresses reflects the girls' fertility and marriageability: pink

for a pre-pubescent girl (purple in winter), bright spring green for post-pubescent but still not married: "The pink, the white, and the plum dresses were the rule for special girls like us. Ordinary girls from Econofamilies wore the same thing all the time – those ugly multicoloured stripes and grey cloaks" (Atwood 2019, 11). Gilead forces girls into marriage as soon as they get their first period: Agnes is only thirteen when they start arranging her wedding. But first, they bring in a wardrobe team led by Aunt Gabbana.[12]

Indoctrination

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's perception of the women around her is heavily shaped by Gilead's indoctrination. She becomes accustomed to her robe and to what it means. First, out of fear of severe punishment, but later out of habit: "the handmaids' habits are deep full-yoked gowns, white slips and petticoats, stockings, and low shoes, veils, cloaks and headpieces. The complexity of the habits preserves the excessive modesty demanded by patriarchal societies" (Kaler 1989, 52). The extent to which Offred has absorbed the viewpoint symbolised by her robes is surprisingly revealed when she sees a group of Japanese tourists dressed in short skirts, high heels, and wearing lipstick. Although Offred recalls a time when she wore revealing clothes, she thinks, "[t]hey seem undressed. It has taken so little time to change our minds, about things like this" (Atwood 1996, 38). She remembers how she used to dress in feminine and stylish clothes and shoes, but she has become used to new (red) habits.

The regime's pervasive control extends to the manipulation of how bodies are viewed: "The regime encourages people to look at the bodies on the Wall" (Laflen 2007, 107). This reflects the wider use of visual culture to instil fear and obedience. The mass production of statues, paintings, and other representations of Gilead's authority reinforces an environment of surveillance. Lydia herself becomes part of this: Aunts wear a khaki brown uniform which include a cattle prod, and they are not shy about using it. The constant presence of these images fosters an atmosphere where resistance seems not just dangerous but futile. Yet small acts of rebellion – whether a gesture of kindness or a covert mission like the wedding dress fitting – suggest that even in a society where the regime controls every aspect of visual appearance, acts of resistance and women's sympathy can still emerge.

[12] Aunt Gabbana's name echoes the name of a famous Italian luxury fashion house, Dolce&Gabbana. She is a matchmaker and wedding planner, who consults on wedding dresses and the premarital wardrobe. The outfits are "themed in green: spring green with white accents – pocket trims, collars – for spring and summer, and spring green with dark green accents for fall and winter. […] spring green was for fresh leaves, so the girl was ready for marriage. Econofamilies were not allowed such extravagances, however" (Atwood 2019, 159–60). Nobody can pick the colour of their outfit; Gilead picks it for you.

The aesthetic of Gilead's uniforms is a weapon of political control. The Aunts, as the enforcers of the regime's ideology, discipline clothing to suppress individuality and enforce uniformity. Clothes are designed to mark the wearer's place in a rigid system, where personal expression and resistance are forbidden. The aesthetic serves to make Gilead's ideology visible and palpable. As Sartwell writes, "aesthetics represents the 'ideological' aspect of political systems," and in Gilead, this aesthetic, including fashion, is employed to maintain the oppressive power structure (2010, 50). However, the carefully selected and designed uniforms function as misleading disguises as well. Offred compares the Commander to a series of harmless "male figures: to a museum guard, a midwestern bank president, a man in a vodka ad, and the shoemaker character in a fairy tale" (Bouson 1993, 145), thus diminishing his identity as an important figure in Gilead. In a mirror passage, the Commander talks to Offred about women in the past buying new clothes to become some other woman; in Gilead, by contrast, many women look the same because they wear the same clothes, the identical red robe, which hypocritically covers the true nature of Gileadean sexual polygamy.

The Aunts' manipulation of aesthetics, clothing, and appearance extends beyond uniforms. They also shape the ideological narratives of Gilead through fairy tales and stories designed to instil fear and obedience. These tales, often filled with cautionary imagery of innocent girls abused or killed by men, reinforce Gilead's message about women's roles. "One for murder, Two for kissing […] And Seven we caught you, Red Red Red!" (Atwood 2019, 107). These songs, nursery rhymes, and games transform even childhood into an indoctrination tool, where everything, from play to clothing, is politicised. Young girls like Agnes understand how women in Gilead should dress: "arms covered, hair covered, skirts down to the knee" (Atwood 2019, 9).

Despite Gilead's powerful use of clothing and aesthetics to maintain control, the uniformity is not an entirely unbreakable system. Foucault argues that "where there is power, there is resistance," and in Gilead, resistance manifests in subtle, almost invisible ways (Foucault 1978, 95–6). The uniform, though a powerful symbol of repression, also provides the means for covert resistance. In this way, the uniforms and the political aesthetics of Gilead can be potential tools for rebellion. Moira's escape from the Red Centre is emblematic of this strategy: she can get through the guard posts because she is wearing an Aunt's uniform and is presumed to be unquestionable. By creating a society that works like a machine, Gilead becomes vulnerable in situations where more critical thinking is needed. For example, to leave Gilead and smuggle the important piece of evidence against the regime, the two sisters (Daisy and Agnes), disguise themselves as Pearl Girls, missionaries proselytising and recruiting for Gilead in neighbouring countries. They are "young women in long silvery dresses and white hats who called

themselves Pearl Girls and said they were missionaries doing God's work for Gilead" (Atwood 2019, 44). They "had white pearl necklaces and smiled a lot, but not real smiling" (Atwood 2019, 45). However, Gileadean Pearl Girls have no understanding of the Bible and Christianity, their mission is to go to Canada and recruit young fertile women to Gilead. Their mission is fake, their "pearls" are fake, "[f]ake…everything about them is fake" (Atwood 2019, 46).[13] Many of the Pearl Girls are opportunistic, serving this mission only to escape their (future) roles as Wives. Daisy, when infiltrating Gilead, is also wearing the uniform of Pearl Girls as it hides her true Canadian identity. On the other hand, when Daisy leaves Gilead and changes back to jeans and T-shirt, she feels like her true self again.[14] Daisy's shift back to casual clothing symbolises a reclaiming of her personal autonomy and true self. In Gilead, the prescribed dress codes and uniforms serve as a pervasive tool of ideological control. They strip individuals of their personal identity, reinforcing a strict social order, yet they also present opportunities for resistance, as characters like Daisy and Agnes demonstrate. Ultimately, the aesthetics of Gilead are a reflection of the regime's power, and the uniformity this imposes is both a means of suppressing resistance and, paradoxically, a means of facilitating it.

Conclusion

Clothing in *The Handmaid's Tale* and in *The Canterbury Tales* serves not only as a symbol of the strict social, economic, and gender roles within patriarchal system, whether in dystopian Gilead or medieval society. In Gilead, the uniforms imposed on women enforce conformity and erase individuality, mirroring a hierarchical and militarised society, where any attempt at personal expression is suppressed and severely punished. On the other hand, the same uniforms can trigger subtle gestures of empathy and subvert the system.

By intertextually linking *The Handmaid's Tale* to *The Canterbury Tales*, Atwood highlights the complex relationship between clothing, power, and textuality. In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer uses detailed descriptions of the pilgrims' clothing to reflect their social status as well as personal identities. Clothes and personal style illustrate how fashion functions as a form of self-expression and social signalling. In contrast to the uniforms enforced in Gilead, including rigid colour schemes, the female characters in *The Canterbury Tales* such as the Prioress, the Wife of Bath and Griselda use their

[13] Daisy's fake-pearl necklace breaks in her fight with hypocritical Aunt Vidala (Atwood 2019, 358).

[14] "The clothes were jeans and long T-shirts and wool socks and hiking boots. Plaid jackets, fleece pull-on hats, waterproof jackets. I had a little trouble with the left T-shirt sleeve – something caught on the O. I said, 'Fucking shit' and then, 'Sorry.' 'I don't think I've ever changed clothes so fast in my life, but once I got the silver dress off and those clothes on I began to feel more like myself'" (Atwood 2019, 364).

clothing to communicate their personal style and oppose expectations. While the Wife of Bath's red stockings and lavish garments and the Prioress's refined, accessorised attire suggest a degree of independence and self-stylisation tied to social and economic standing, Griselda's outward grace and composure must be read differently. Rather than signalling autonomy, her appearance reflects the ideals of obedience and virtue projected onto her by patriarchal authority, which both invests her with and strips her of symbolic value.

This contrasts sharply with prescribed robes in Gilead, where uniforms strip away rights and identity, and force people into conformity and docility. While medieval society also prescribed clothing based on class, women in that era still retained more personal freedom for self-expression that the women of Gilead, whose uniforms leave no space for resistance or self-definition.

Moreover, the comparison between Offred and Griselda is striking. Both women endure torture, are defined by the patriarchal control over their bodies, and are robbed of their children. Griselda's humble old smock and Offred's red robe signify their subordination. Atwood uses intertextual references to critique how clothing functions to control women's autonomy.

Through the intricate layers of robes, veils, and stockings, Atwood shows that clothes can be a tool of oppression, but also a means for resistance and rebellion. Just as the characters in *The Canterbury Tales* express their roles and identities through fashion and personal style, Gileadean women find ways to empathy and resistance through subversive uses of clothes and uniforms. Human desire for freedom cannot be suffocated by heavy veils.

References

Atwood, Margaret. 1996. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Vintage.

Atwood, Margaret. 2019. *The Testaments*. Chatto & Windus.

Barthes, Roland. 1975. *The Pleasure of the Text*. Translated by Richard Miller. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Benstock, Shari, and Suzanne Ferriss, eds. 1994. *On Fashion*. Rutgers University Press.

Berta, Péter. 2019. *Materializing Difference, Consumer Culture, Politics, and Ethnicity Among Romanina Roma*. University of Toronto.

Bouson, Brooks J. 1993. *Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Novels of Margaret Atwood*. University of Massachusetts Press.

Breward, Christopher. 1995. *The Culture of Fashion: A New History of Fashionable Dress*. Manchester University Press.

Bruzzi, Stella. 1997. *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies*. Routledge.

Chaucer, Geoffrey. 2011. *The Canterbury Tales*. Harper Press.

Clements, Pamela. 2011. "Margaret Atwood and Chaucer: Truth and Lies." In *Makers of the Middle Ages: Essays in Honor of William Calin*, edited by Richard Utz and Elizabeth Emery. Western Michigan University.

Craik, Jennifer. 1993. *The Face of Fashion: Cultural Studies in Fashion*. Routledge.

Dockray-Miller, Mary. 2024. "Margaret Atwood's Medieval Testaments." *Margaret Atwood Studies* 17: 8–24.

Dubs, Kathleen. 2011. "Harry Bailly: Chaucer's Critic?" In *Does It Really Mean That? Interpreting the Literary Ambiguous*, edited by Kathleen Dubs and Janka Kaščáková. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Dvorak, Marta. 2018. "'What's in a Name?' Readers as Both Pawns and Partners, or Margaret Atwood's Strategy of Control in *The Handmaid's Tale*." In *Margaret Atwood. The Handmaid's Tale/Le Conte de la servante. The Power Game*, edited by Jacques Leclaire and Jean-Michel. Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle.

Edwards, Justin D. 2005. *Gothic Canada: Reading the Spectre of a National Literature*. University of Alberta Press.

Flügel, J. C. 1930. *The Psychology of Clothes*. Hogarth.

Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality, Vol.1: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. Pantheon Books.

Hawley, Jana. 2008. "The Amish Veil: Symbol of Separation and Community." In *The Veil: Women Writers on Its History, Lore, and Politics*, edited by Jennifer Heath.

Hodges, Laura F. 2005. *Chaucer and clothing: Clerical and academic costume in the general prologue to The Canterbury Tales*. D. S. Brewer.

Hodges, Laura F. 2014. "Reading Griselda's Smocks in the *Clerk's Tale*." Chapter 3 in Hodges, Laura F. 2014. *Chaucer and Array: Patterns of Costume and Fabric Rhetoric in* The Canterbury Tales, Troilus and Criseyde *and Other Works*. *Chaucer Studies XLII*. D. S. Brewer.

Holman, Hugh C., and William Harmon. 1986. *A Handbook to Literature*. 5th edn. Macmillan.

Kaiser, Susan B. 2012. *Fashion and Cultural Studies*. Bloomsbury.

Kaler, Anne K. 1989. "'A Sister, Dipped in Blood': Satiric Inversion of the Formation Techniques of Women Religious in Margaret Atwood's Novel *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Christianity and Literature* 38 (2): 43–62. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44311750.

Kuhn, Cynthia G. 2001. "Style and Textile: The Performance of Dress in Margaret Atwood's Fiction." PhD diss., University of Denver.

Kuhn, Cynthia G. 2005. *Self-fashioning in Margaret Atwood's Fiction: Dress, Culture, and Identity*. Peter Lang.

Kuhn, Cynthia G., and Cindy L. Carlson. 2007. *Styling Texts: Dress and Fashion in Literature*. Cambria Press.

Laflen, Angela. 2007. "'From a Distance it Looks Like Peace': Reading Beneath the Fascist Style of Gilead in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 32 (1): 82–105. https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl32_1art05.

Mahawatte, Royce. 2022. "Fashion and the English Novel." In Paulicelli et al. (2022).

Paulicelli, Eugenia, Veronica Manlow, and Elizabeth Wissinger, eds. 2022. *The Routledge Companion to Fashion Studies*. Routledge.

Ramsey, Roger. 1977. "Clothing Makes a Queen in 'The Clerk's Tale'." *Journal of Narrative Technique* 7: 104–15.

Roveri, Matia. 2022. "Fashion in the Trenches: How the Military Shapes Fashion." In Paulicelli et al. (2022).

Sartwell, Crispin. 2010. *Political Aesthetics*. Cornell University Press.

Scarano D'Antonio, Carla. 2021. "*The Handmaid's Tale*: An Intertextual Transformation through Storytelling." *American Review of Canadian Studies* 51 (4): 592–610. https://doi.org/10.1080/02722011.2021.1997484.

Seys, Madelaine C. 2018. *Fashion and Narrative in Victorian Popular Literature: Double Threads*. Routledge.

Slefinger, John. 2014. "The Two Alisouns: The Miller's Use of Costume and His Seduction of the Wife of Bath." *Essays in Medieval Studies* 30: 155–164.

Tennant, Colette. 2019. *Religion in The Handmaid's Tale*. Fortress Press.

Utz, Richard, and Elizabeth N. Emery, eds. 2012. *Makers of the Middle Ages: Essays in Honor of William Calin*. Available at: http://works.bepress.com/elizabeth-emery/34/.

York, Lorraine M. 1990. "The Habits of Language, Uniform(ity), Transgression and Margaret Atwood". *Canadian Literature* 126: 8–19.