THE HANDMAID'S TALE OF ANTI-FEMINISM:

A LITERARY RESPONSE TO 1970S ANTI-FEMINIST RHETORIC AND THE EMERGING CHRISTIAN RIGHT

by

Emily Gray

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of The College of Arts and Sciences

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of

Bachelor of Arts with Distinction

University of Delaware
Newark, DE

May 2022

THE HANDMAID'S TALE OF ANTI-FEMINISM:

A LITERARY RESPONSE TO 1970S ANTI-FEMINIST RHETORIC AND THE EMERGING CHRISTIAN RIGHT

Introduction: Emily …… 1

Chapter 1: Betty …… 9

Chapter 2: Phyllis …… 21

Chapter 3: Margaret…… 35

Chapter 4: Octavia …… 47

Chapter 5: Modern Adaptations …… 60

Conclusion: Emily …… X

INTRODUCTION: EMILY

I was inspired to write this thesis after learning about a current social media trend centered around women's endorsement of traditional gender roles. #Tradwife has become a niche but nevertheless prevalent hashtag on Instagram, garnering 38.6k posts on the app and several accounts dedicated to promoting the trend. Women who embrace the trend use the hashtag #tradwife on Instagram to share their positive experiences as housewives and stay-at-home mothers, often while promoting Christian values and anti-feminist rhetoric in the process. "Tradwife" refers, of course, to "traditional wife," and women in the subculture idealize the image of the 1950s housewife whose role in society was erased by feminist movements throughout the 1960 and 70s. I wanted to explore these women's mindset because it was so perplexing to me: it is one thing to hear men disparage feminism, but a very different thing to hear women express similar disdain for gender equality. *Why* do these women hate feminism? Is it internalized oppression? The desire for male validation? A stringent belief in Christianity?

Although I was interested in all of these questions and possibilities, I soon learned the limitations of analyzing #tradwives directly. The movement is too new and too niche to evaluate fully, and I was limited in my ability to interview women who subscribe to such a mentality. Instead, I chose to explore anti-feminism through a literary and historical lens. In doing so, I hope to articulate the mentality that turns women against feminism, and to demonstrate how literature can combat and indict this dangerous way of thinking about gender in the United

States. I was especially interested in researching the role that religion plays in cultivating this perspective, since the bulk of #tradwife posts I've seen on Instagram have Christian overtones. Therefore, the fiction novels I will be analyzing all deal with themes of religious oppression and Christian hegemony. While the history of Second Wave Feminism as a whole is more secular, my research into the STOP ERA Movement and–obviously–the Christian right, share this religious focus.

I decided to structure my thesis into five chapters: two on the history of Second Wave Feminism and women's opposition to it, two on the literary works inspired by this history, and one on the modern adaptations of these novels. Because this is an English thesis, I have centered each of my history-focused chapters on particular books and writers who exemplify the thinking and rhetoric of the time. I have also decided to name each of my chapters after the woman I've chosen to focus on. This is an homage to the 2020 television series *Mrs. America,* a modern re-telling of the Second Wave Feminist Movement that names each episode after a different woman involved in the politics surrounding gender equality at the time.

Second Wave Feminism is founded on the belief that women should exist beyond the domestic sphere. These early feminists were intent on rejecting the very lifestyle that modern #tradwives idealize. The first chapter of my thesis, titled "Betty," describes the circumstances of post-WWII America that inspired Betty Friedan to write her 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*. I hope that this chapter enlightens readers on the truth of 1950s family bliss. While the idea of a loving, nuclear family can be appealing in the 21st century, its reality is a testament to the constraining and demoralizing influence that such a structure had on women before the Second Wave. People tend to romanticize the past, viewing it as something to emulate and revive. It is

important to evaluate history as it really was, in order to understand and contradict arguments that revolve around its glorification. In the same vein, I do not wish to idealize Betty Friedan and the Second Wave Feminist Movement in this chapter. While revolutionary in her thinking, Friedan has several blindspots and focuses her argument primarily on the plight of wealthy, white women. It is important to recognize this deficiency and its effect on queer women and women of color whose problems went unaddressed by the larger movement.

My second chapter, titled "Phyllis," details Phyllis Schlafly's rise in prominence as an opponent to Second Wave Feminism. In particular, I focus on the STOP ERA Movement that Schlafly started to oppose the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment. I was excited to write this chapter because Schlafly represents the very thinking that many #tradwives still profess. She was a woman who, despite her intelligence and political literacy, decided to uphold women's limiting status in society. I began writing this paper because I wanted to understand how women can be anti-feminist. Schlafly provides an essential answer to that question. STOP ERA became popular with white housewives primarily because it appealed to the privileges women have in society on the basis of their gender. Of course, in my opinion, these privileges are eclipsed by the many obstacles women face: A woman has the privilege of her husband's care for her, or the obstacle of her complete dependence on him. A woman has the privilege of not having to work, or the obstacle of wanting to and being overlooked or underpaid for her efforts. Despite the questionable validity of such privileges, many women remained terrified of losing them. Schlafly intensified these fears with hypotheticals about women who lost their children in divorce or were drafted in the military. Her thinking provides an essential framework for understanding modern feminism's opposition.

The bulk of my rhetorical analysis in this chapter comes from Schlafly's 1981 book *The Power of the Christian Woman*. This book advises readers on how to be good "Christian Women" by acknowledging their place in society and catering to their husbands and children. It also, and most importantly, delineates the potential dangers of ratifying the Equal Rights Amendment. I did not realize until after reading this work that Schlafly had written another book on the same topic in 1977. This book, titled *The Power of the Positive Woman,* is almost identical to *Christian Woman* except that it is not overtly Christian. Schlafly most likely re-published her thoughts against the ERA because its ratification deadline was pushed back two years, from 1979 to 1981. While the writing in both texts is the same, Schlafly refers to her intended readers as "Positive Women" throughout, stripping them of the religious identifier. *The Power of the Christian Woman* also has one additional chapter in the beginning of the book, titled, "Knowing the Beginnings," which explains how God created men and women to be complementary to one another. While Schlafly gives other, more practical reasons to reject the ERA, by starting the book this way she demonstrates how her thinking is founded on Christian ideals. Finally, the books differ in that every chapter from *The Power of the Christian Woman* begins with a Bible verse. These subtle changes are fascinating because they reflect the growth of the Christian right in the United States, and Schlafly's savvy adaptation to it. Although she, herself, was Catholic, STOP ERA as a whole bridged the divide between Catholics and Protestants to elevate the Christian right and promote evangelicalism in the United States.

The rest of my project discusses how writers and other creatives responded to Second Wave Feminism and Schlafly's STOP ERA Movement. For my third chapter, titled "Margaret," I chose to analyze Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale.* Many academics have

described *The Handmaid's Tale* as a reaction to and commentary on the Reagan Administration. For example, Sally Barr Ebest begins the fourth chapter of her book *The Banshees: A Literary History of Irish American Women Writers* with the line, "Anyone who has ever read the Irish Canadian Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, will recognize its genesis in Ronald Reagan's war on women" (117). Barr goes on to detail the myriad of ways that Ronald Reagan and the New Right demonized feminism and reduced government funding for programs that aided women such as the Women, Infants, and Children Program (WIC). While I agree with and appreciate this point, I wanted to focus on the novel's response to anti-feminists like Phyllis Schlafly rather than Ronald Reagan. Barr's chapter draws a comparison between Schlafly and the character of Serena Joy to discuss the "insidious[…] use of women against their own sex" (130). However, she does not go into specifics on the two women's striking and intentional similarities. I was interested in proving the deliberate nature of this parallel and how it pertains to a larger theme in both *The Handmaid's Tale* and its 2019 sequel *The Testaments* of women maintaining and promoting patriarchal ideals for their own survival.

Both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* are overtly political, coming out during the Reagan and Trump administrations, respectively. I knew going into this project that I wanted to argue the similarities between modern conservatism and the right-wing politics that emerged in the late 1970s and 80s. Therefore, I was interested in exploring Atwood's decision to publish a sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*, titled *The Testaments*, in 2019. Although Atwood had been thinking about writing a sequel for years, she did not decide to act on her impulse until after Donald Trump's presidency and the women's protests that his election inspired. I hope that this

chapter illuminates the extent to which Atwood's literature condemns misogyny in conservative politics.

While I was already familiar with Atwood's work, primarily due to its Hulu adaptation, I was less familiar with the work of Octavia Butler. For my fourth chapter, titled "Octavia," I decided to focus on her 1993 novel *Parable of the Sower* and its 1998 sequel *Parable of the Talents*. The series tells the story of a young Black girl, Lauren Olamina, who begins a new religion in the wake of an apocalypse. I focus the bulk of my literary analysis on *Parable of the Talents* because it introduces the "Christian America" party to serve as a counterpoint to Olamina's new "Earthseed" religion. I argue that Butler provides these contrasting examples of religion to propose an alternative to the Christian right in America.

One could argue that since these novels were written in the 1990s, it would be incorrect to categorize them as a response to the anti-feminism of the late 1970s and 80s. However, I hope that my chapter makes clear how influential the emerging Christian right was in inspiring Butler's writing. *The Parable of the Talents* in particular addresses how Evangelical Christians used the chaos and presumed moral depravity of the 1970s to justify intensifying religiosity in the United States. I argue that the bulk of this novel defies what audiences have come to expect from religion: while the Christian right relied heavily on tradition and "family values," Olamina's religion "Earth Seed" shows that change and progress are equally valid principles for faith and can provide a different source of comfort and security in times of political upheaval. To emphasize this point, Butler ventriloquates Pastor Jerry Falwell Sr. and the Christian right through the character of President Andrew Steele Jarret and his Christian America party.

Although I maintain that Butler's work responds to the some political climate that inspired Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, she was also heavily influenced by Black feminists' emphasis on intersectional identities and the compounding influence of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation throughout the 1980s. In 1989, four years before Butler published *Parable of the Sower*, the legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" in her essay, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." Crenshaw describes the worrying tendency of white feminists to frame their efforts as beneficial to all women, when really they only mean white women: "The value of feminist theory to Black women is diminished because it evolves from a white racial context that is seldom acknowledged. Not only are women of color in fact overlooked, but their exclusion is reinforced when *white* women speak for and as *women* (Crenshaw, 154). Crenshaw was arguing against the racism embedded in Second Wave Feminism as a consequence of Betty Friedan's myopic perspective in *The Feminine Mystique* and the activism it inspired. Butler emphasizes her characters' races and sexual orientations to deconstruct this one-dimensional definition of women and raise awareness of the dangers of having an intersectional identity in a white, heteronormative Christian context. It is important to discuss Butler's work in relation to Margaret Atwood's, since *The Handmaid's Tale* centers almost exclusively on white women and avoids a discussion of race by omitting people of color from Gilead.

My fifth chapter is titled "Modern Adaptations," and focuses on how these works have been reintroduced to American audiences in a 21st century context. I wanted to discuss these adaptations to demonstrate the reemergence of 1980s conservatism and the Christian right today.

I was also interested in exploring how modern creators have adapted their source material to suit a modern audience. How has our thinking about race and gender evolved in the last several decades, and how has that changed our expectations for media? For this chapter, I focus primarily on the 2017 Hulu adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* and the 2020 mini-series about Phyllis Schlafly titled *Mrs. America*. While I began this project focused on tradwives– the next generation of Schlafly's– I am now interested in this next generation of Atwoods and Butlers whose work in television has revitalized discussions of anti-feminism and the urgent need to oppose it.

CHAPTER 1: BETTY

"The feminine mystique says that the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity" –Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 37

How can you solve a problem with no name? And how does an issue so dangerous escape definition? In 1963, Betty Friedan (1921-2006) wrote *The Feminine Mystique* to answer these questions and expose the ubiquity of sexism in post-World War II American society. Her work is largely credited for catalyzing the Second Wave of the Feminist Movement and raising women's consciousness of gender inequality within social, political, and economic spheres of life. Friedan coined the term Feminine Mystique to identify the undefined–but widely felt–belief that women are inherently different from men. This mentality was often used to justify strict distinctions in

gender roles and expectations under the guise of making women's lives easier. After all, the Feminine Mystique says that women are naturally more nurturing and *maternal,* fulfilled by lives as mothers and homemakers while men need stimulation from outside domestic and family life.

Of course, this was not a new idea: the same understanding pervaded American and European society during the Victorian Era before "First Wave" feminists secured Women's Suffrage and fought for gender equality in employment and education. While the 1920s and 30s saw improvements in the way women were viewed, the horrors of the Second World War and the growing popularity of Freudian psychology pushed women back into positions of subservience. Even worse, these external pressures discouraged women from vocalizing–or even acknowledging–their discontent. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* rectified this problem by giving a name to it–a name that expressed how men's definition of femininity constrained women while demanding that they enjoy such restriction. Unfortunately, her definition and its subsequent application worked almost exclusively to elevate the rights of white, upper-middle class housewives. This focus from the onset of the Second Wave persisted throughout the 1960s and 70s, characterizing the movement as myopic and exclusionary despite its relative success in raising women's consciousness and their desire to speak out.

To understand the Feminine Mystique fully, it is important to first dissect the term itself. The word "mystique" is defined as, "a fascinating aura of mystery, awe, and power surrounding someone or something" (Cite this lol). It was important that men found women mysterious in the 1950s and early 60s because it freed them from attempting to understand or empathize with women. For example, while a man may recognize his own unwillingness to give up his job and

become a full-time parent, he expects that from his wife because women are more naturally inclined to domesticity. Friedan explains,

> Women were taken to task for making their husbands do housework, instead of letting them pioneer in the nation and the world. Why, it was asked, should men with the capacities of statesmen, anthropologists, physicists, poets, have to wash dishes and diaper babies on weekday evenings or Saturday mornings when they might use those extra hours to fulfill larger commitments to their society? (Friedan, 42)

Men were outraged at the notion of occupying the “women’s world” of the domestic sphere because they believed themselves superior to it. They did not entertain the possibility that women could also be dissatisfied with merely washing dishes and diapering babies. Nor did they acknowledge that women could be successful physicists and statesmen in their own right. While this passage clearly implies that men viewed women as inferior, American society still regarded the outcomes of housewifery with esteem. It was important for men to return to well-kept homes and nuclear families after fulfilling their “larger commitments.” This ambivalence towards women’s role in society further explains Friedan’s choice of the word “mystique,” which has a generally positive connotation. Though women lacked the capacities of men, they had the power to produce and raise children. *This* was their value to society, and it was respected and described as equally valuable. In a 1942 sociology textbook called *Marriage for Moderns*, Henry A. Bowman explains that, “The sexes are complementary. It is the works of my watch that move the hands and enable me to tell time. Are the works, therefore, more important than the case? ... Neither is superior, neither inferior…So it is with men and women-together they form a functioning unit” (Bowman, 21). The Feminine Mystique relies on a tactic of exploiting gender differences while maintaining a sort of reverence for women who fulfill their femininity through

marriage and children. This is a more insidious form of misogyny than outright claiming that women are inferior to men. Women felt that they had to assume the roles society dictated because they were biologically and socially required to.

Friedan offers two major reasons for the Feminine Mystique's ubiquity in 1950s America: Freudian psychology and World War II. Sigmund Freud was a leading psychoanalyst during the Victorian Era, and his scholarship gained massive popularity with American psychologists, educators, and marriage experts in the 1940s. In particular, Freud's followers relied on his theories about human sexuality and femininity to explain housewives' growing dissatisfaction with domestic life. Freud believed that unhappy women often suffered from a phenomenon called "penis envy," a form of neurosis that comes when young girls realize that they do not have the same genitalia as men. In order to overcome that neurosis, he argued that women must relinquish their desire to engage in "phallic activity" and instead focus on fulfilling their femininity. And how does one fulfill her femininity? According to Freud, "The feminine situation is, however, only established when the wish for the penis is replaced with the wish for a child– the child taking the place of the penis" (Friedan, 107). His diagnosis of "penis envy" and its invariable cure parallels the Feminine Mystique's insistence that women must perform their duties as mothers and homemakers to complement male breadwinners' role in society. Pseudo-Freudians of the 1940s and 50s used his reputation as an acclaimed psychoanalyst to justify restrictive gender roles, deeming any desire for gender equality as a consequence of "penis envy." Women who sought societal change were accused of neurosis, forced into the burden of recovery while the social issue causing their distress grew stronger. Housewives felt that they

could not express their discontent without being blamed for it, and thus, the "problem that has no name" went on undefined.

While Freudian psychology gave the Feminine Mystique academic validity, the Second World War played a central role in encouraging men and women to embrace the phenomenon fully. After experiencing the trauma of war, Americans were eager to cultivate strong homelives and return to idyllic domesticity. Though that desire is understandable, it may surprise some readers that American society accepted the idea of rigid gender differences so readily. Women had already proven themselves capable in the "male world" of the workforce as factory workers assisting the war effort domestically. In fact, the US Census Bureau identified married women without children under the age of ten as a prime demographic for temporary employment in 1942 and women with no prior work experience comprised 49.1% of Group One Manufacturing jobs in 1944 (Honey, 26).[1] Nevertheless, politicians and industrial leaders made it clear that this rise in employment was merely temporary–the fulfillment of a patriotic duty and not indicative of a concrete shift in labor demographics. According to a 1942 report from the War Production Board's Labor Division, "'There is little doubt that women will be required to leave their jobs at the end of the war to permit the return of men to their jobs as they are released from the armed forces" (Honey, 26). This promise manifested in the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as the G.I. Bill. The act provided WWII veterans with low-cost mortgages, tuition to attend universities and vocational schools, and the ability to seek low-interest loans to start independent businesses and farms. It also resulted in significant layoffs as women were

---

[1] https://www.jstor.org/stable/2123119?seq=3#metadata_info_tab_contents

expected to relinquish their high paying manufacturing jobs for lower-paid "pink collar" positions as teachers and secretaries, or else leave the workforce altogether.[2]

While it is clear that women were not expected to stay in their wartime positions, Friedan argues that many of them did not even want to, and that the GI Bill facilitated a welcome return to traditional gender norms: "After the loneliness of war and the unspeakableness of the bomb, against the frightening uncertainty, the cold immensity of the changing world, women as well as men sought the comforting reality of home and children" (Friedan, 212). World War II necessitated a change in gender dynamics, but that change was never meant to last. It was the symptom of a troubled time, and men and women alike were eager to re-assume clearly defined gender roles to distance themselves from the horrors of war. The eighth chapter of *The Feminine Mystiqu*e, titled "The Mistaken Choice," explains this impulse as the desire to recreate an idealized past. Upon returning home, soldiers immediately found wives and started families to satisfy their need for the motherly love and affection they longed for on the front. Similarly, single women felt an increased urgency to take on domestic roles and make up for time lost during the war. The birth rate rose four-percent in the five years after the war (from 20.1% in 1945 to 24.1% in 195) and stayed in the mid-twenties until 1960.[3] All the while, the myth of the Feminine Mystique continued to grow as women became more entrenched in the responsibilities of motherhood and the societal pressure to maintain their domestic roles.

Although Friedan does not discuss the war at great length, her book inspired more women academics to interrogate the nature of gender dynamics during wartime and analyze the

---

[2]https://www.historylink.org/Content/education/downloads/C21curriculum_Unit5/C21curriculum_Unit5%20resources/Unit5_READINGS_WomenandWorkAfterWWII.pdf

[3] https://www.infoplease.com/us/population/live-births-and-birth-rates-year

factors contributing to the Feminine Mystique throughout the early 1940s. Maureen Honey, a professor of English and Women's Studies at the University of Nebraska, discusses how advertising campaigns reiterated the temporary nature of women workers and idealized the return to traditional gender roles in her 1984 book *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda during World War II.* She explains that while advertisements from early in the war emphasized women's ability to maintain dual roles as mothers and industrial workers, by 1943 campaigns had shifted to addressing women's return to domesticity. A 1943 Monsanto Chemical advertisement provides a bridge between these two intentions. The ad shows Rosie the Riveter, an iconic symbol of the working woman, performing her wartime duties alongside the headline, "What has Rosie the Riveter to do with Fresh Strawberries for Thanksgiving?" At first glance, the message is clear–Rosie's professional responsibilities come before frivolous concerns about produce refrigeration. However, the ad goes on to explain,

> Razzberries for Tojo. Right now, that's more important than anything else for Rosie the Riveter. But there will come a day (after a certain boy with MacArthur comes flying triumphantly home to a big church wedding) when a lot of good new things of peacetime will become important to Rosie the Housewife [4]

The graphic itself pays more credence to Rosie's job as a riveter, but the text accompanying it clearly shows the finite nature of her employment. Furthermore, the advertisement equates peacetime with becoming a housewife, alluding to the idyllic fantasy Friedan discusses in *The Feminine Mystique.* Rosie will be rewarded for her hard work with a "big church wedding" and all her troubles from the war will disappear. Some advertisements were even more critical of women working outside the home. A 1944 ad for Adel Manufacturing Company shows a woman

[4] https://digital.sciencehistory.org/works/bk128b060

dressed in a factory uniform speaking to her young daughter, with the text, “Mother, when will you stay home again?”[5] This implies that working mothers are less effective parents, and functions under the assumption that the woman’s job is temporary. It is important to understand how this mentality endured and took root in American consciousness, making it harder for women to re-enter the workforce of their own volition after the war.

While this reflection on wartime attitudes may seem like a departure, recognizing their ubiquity is essential for understanding the world Friedan was commenting on in *The Feminine Mystique*. Even though women proved themselves as fully capable workers during World War II, their work was understood as a service to America in its hour of need. It was necessary but not ideal and, according to Adel Manufacturing Company, it was hurting children the most. With soldiers’ return home and the passage of the GI Bill, women were able to go back to fulfilling their consummate role as mothers and wives. This was viewed as a reward and men and women alike were expected to rejoice in their newfound peace. Of course, the reality was that women–and housewives in particular–were unhappy. They wanted domestic bliss and feared the accusation of “penis envy,” but they could not adjust to the fixed role that society demanded of them.

Having established *how* the Feminine Mystique took hold, we can now analyze its manifestation in women’s daily lives. Friedan’s book speaks mainly to the experience of suburban housewives, plagued by boredom, and inundated with meaningless chores and tasks. Her decision to write *The Feminine Mystique* was inspired by her career as a writer for women’s magazines. She would often interview housewives, who would express similar feelings of

[5] https://librarypartnerspress.pressbooks.pub/gendersexuality1e/chapter/analysis-of-women-in-wartime-advertisements/#footnote-36-5

dissatisfaction and emptiness. One family doctor she spoke to from Pennsylvania remarked, "I call it the housewife's blight. I see it so often in these young women with four, five, and six children who bury themselves in their dishpans. But it isn't caused by detergent and it isn't cured by cortisone" (Friedan, 8). While these women often reported the same intense unhappiness, they were nevertheless convinced that there was something wrong with *them* specifically. In a country defined by post-war bliss, under a medical system that encouraged individual blame, these women could not and would not admit to the problem they faced.

In addition to these aforementioned factors, women's magazines played a prominent role in maintaining the Feminine Mystique. In chapter 2 of *The Feminine Mystique*, titled "Happy Housewife Heroine," Friedan includes a table of contents from a July, 1960 issue of *McCall's,* a popular women's magazine throughout the 1950s and 60s. The issue primarily featured fictional stories about women finding and maintaining love, including one exceptionally disturbing short story about a young woman who learns to lose at tennis in order to find a husband: "You're nineteen, and by normal American standards, I am now entitled to have you taken off my hands, legally and financially, by some beardless youth who will spirit you away to a one-and-a-half room apartment in the Village while he learns the chicanery of selling bonds. And no beardless youth is going to do that as long as you volley to his backhand" (Friedan, 26). The message of this story is obviously horrific. The presumed father infantilizes his daughter, portraying her reliance on him as a burden that can only be rectified when she is "spirited away" by her husband. Even worse, this narrative promotes the idea that men do not want to marry women who will challenge them in any way. A woman cannot beat her husband in anything, even something as meaningless as tennis, because doing so will delegitimize the power and superiority

he feels over her. Other women's magazines such as *Ladies' Home Journal* express similar themes. One issue from January of 1960, in a section titled "Making Marriage Work," features a quiz testing how companionable a couple is. The quiz features several questions relating to how the wife should behave for her husband, asking the reader if she: "Respect[s] your husband as a man;" "Usually follow[s] his suggestions;" and "Really [does her] best to please him?" (30).[6] None of the questions refer to the wife's own happiness in the marriage. The onus is entirely on the woman to maintain her relationship with her husband by submitting to his will and catering to his needs. For women whose lives are defined by domesticity, the impulse to maintain such a happy marriage can become paramount, especially when magazines are telling them that it is their duty to preserve that happiness. These examples demonstrate the expectation that women remain acquiescence in order to find fulfillment and happiness.

On top of these fictional stories, magazines such as *McCall's* and *Ladies' Home Journal* were also filled with cooking recipes and sewing patterns to maintain women's place in the home, giving them endless, time-consuming tasks to fill their days. These activities gave women the feeling of being simultaneously intensely busy and completely purposeless: "I was so busy, running from morning till night, and yet I never had any real feeling of satisfaction. You raise your kids, sure, but how can that justify your life? You have to have some ultimate objective, some long-term goal to keep you going" (Friedan, 334). In chapter ten of *The Feminine Mystique*, titled "Housewifery Expands to Fill the Time Available," Friedan reports that the majority of housewives were consumed by these domestic activities and the ever-present pressure to do more around the house, but were nevertheless distressingly unhappy. Their

---

[6] https://archive.org/details/ladieshomejourna77janwyet/page/n29/mode/2up?view=theater

identities were entirely linked to their children, so that when those children grew up they had nothing left to cling to about themselves. She interviewed 28 women in an upper-class development, and over half of them were in analytical therapy or were prescribed tranquilizers. Additionally, several of them had attempted suicide or were hospitalized for mental illness (279). Although these women led seemingly fulfilling lives, the reality was that none of them felt their lives had genuine purpose because they were so intrinsically linked to the finite youth of their children or the meaninglessness of their domestic hobbies.

The plight of upper-middle class housewives is not to be dismissed–clearly, these women were suffering greatly in their roles. However, it is essential to address the many women who did not have the privilege of being stay-at-home mothers and wives. *The Feminine Mystique* was primarily concerned with pushing women out of the home and into the workplace, but what about the myriad of women already *in* the workforce? Second Wave Feminism neglected poor women of every race, but was particularly and notoriously bad at addressing Black women's experience with gender inequality. An article written by Nina Banks for the Economic Policy Institute elucidates the differences between Black and white women's employment throughout the 1950s and 60s. She explains that while married white women were more likely to have husband's in high-paying positions, married Black women often occupied "two-parent households due to Black men's precarious position in the labor market." [7] Black men faced their own employment discrimination, necessitating Black women's participation in the workforce while simultaneously raising their families and running their homes. Cecilia A. Conrad describes the nature of this employment in her chapter, "Racial Trends in Labor Market Access and Wages:

[7] https://www.epi.org/blog/black-womens-labor-market-history-reveals-deep-seated-race-and-gender-discrimination/

Women." She explains that over a third of Black American women worked as domestic servants in 1960, compared to only 3.2% of white women (Conrad, 127).[8] This disparity is important because it highlights the exclusionary nature of Friedan's rhetoric and argument. The final chapter of *The Feminine Mystique*, titled "A New Life Plan for Women," explores how women can escape the "housewife's trap" and find their own identities outside the domestic sphere. She does not quantify these statements with the reality that only white women had the luxury of such entrapment.[9]

Friedan also avoids discussions of homosexuality and the rights of lesbian women throughout *The Feminine Mystique,* though this omission is relatively innocuous compared to the blatant homophobia she displayed later on as the Second Wave Movement progressed. Friedan does not explicitly condemn lesbian women in her book, but she uses the coded phrase "man-hating" to denounce queer women and distance them from other feminist activists. She only uses the phrase once in the original 1963 publication of her work, while explaining misconceptions about feminism: "It is a strangely unquestioned perversion of history that the passion and fire of the [First Wave] feminist movement came from man-hating, embittered, sex-starved spinsters, from castrating, unsexed non-women" (Friedan, 74). Friedan rejects the commonly held assumption that all feminists operate under a distinct hatred of men, and argues instead that women simply want equality with the men they love. It makes sense that she wished to counter this misconception, considering her intended audience of doting wives and mothers. A woman

---

[8] https://nap.nationalacademies.org/read/9719/chapter/7#127

[9] Conrad goes on to explain that the discrepancy between Black and white female employment began to equalize throughout the 1970s, but stagnated in the 1980s (Conrad, 125). In 2021, 25% of Black women worked in service occupations compared to 18.6% of white women https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat10.htm

who can hardly admit her unhappiness would never participate in a movement that espoused hatred and vitriol towards her husband. However, Friedan's anxiety about "man-hating" feminist stereotypes quickly gave way to anti-lesbian rhetoric when she and the movement she inspired gained popularity. The second edition of The Feminine Mystique, published in 1974, includes an epilogue with several more references to "man-haters" and their attempts to fragment and tarnish the Second Wave Feminist Movement. One striking example of this is her criticism of the "man-hating faction" who "broke up the second Congress to Unite Women with hate talk, and even violence" (469). This is a reference to when members of the Radicalesbians group protested homophobia within the Second Wave by wearing "Lavender Menace"[10] t-shirts and proudly proclaiming their sexuality. Friedan vilified lesbians for distracting from the interests of straight women and, in her mind, confirming misogynistic stereotypes about feminists. Her bigotry towards queer women, in addition to her shallow conception of race and gender relations, has marred the Second Wave Feminist Movement with a legacy of racism and and homophobia.

Friedan begins *The Feminine Mystique* with a dedication "for all the new women, and the new men." Evidently, all these new women were straight, white, and wealthy. Nevertheless, her work was incredibly successful in inspiring its intended audience of white mothers and housewives to admit their dissatisfaction and demand a change in treatment. Friedan's book was contextualized by the popularity of pseudo-Freudian psychology and the traumatic memory of World War II, making it salient with women who felt confined by social pressure to maintain a facade of happiness despite their depression, fatigue, and boredom. These housewives needed the validation that their problem was not the consequence of individual failure, but rather the result

[10] In 1969, Friedan referred to lesbians as the "Lavender Menace" while President of the National Organization for Women (NOW)

of societal discrimination and the unhealthy expectations placed on women. No amount of children can provide an adequate sense of self, yet American culture glorified women's sole capacity of producing and raising children throughout the 1940s and 50s. Betty Friedan reminded these women that their identities were not inextricably tied to their maternity, encouraging them to return to the male-dominated workforce and advocate for their own self-interests rather than the interests of their husbands and children. She gave a name to a problem that lacked one, and defined an era of feminist activism that irrevocably changed the latter half of the twentieth century.

CHAPTER 2: PHYLLIS

"Are you looking for security–emotional, social, financial? Nothing in this world is sure except death and taxes, but marriage and motherhood are the most reliable security the world can offer."

Phyllis Schlafly, *The Power of the Christian Woman*, 54.

The Feminine Mystique gave women the vocabulary necessary to discuss gender oppression and the confidence to ask for equality instead. Consequently, more and more women throughout the 1960s and 70s sought political and social reform in an era known colloquially as the time of "Second Wave" feminism. Betty Friedan worked alongside other feminist activists such as Gloria Steinem (1934) and Bella Abzug (1920-1998) in demanding equal rights for American women, most notably by lobbying and raising support for the passage of an Equal Rights Amendment (ERA).

Ironically, the movement's greatest opposition came from Friedan's target demographic–white, upper middle-class housewives. Started and led by Phyllis Schlafly (1924-2016), the STOP ERA Movement galvanized women's political reaction against the proposed amendment

by reiterating the Feminine Mystique's greatest myths about inherent gender differences and the complementary roles of men and women. Schlafly's 1981 book *The Power of the Chrisitian Woman* responds directly to the ERA's central goals and perpetuates the Feminine Mystique by appealing to its religious foundation. Her rhetoric and the movement she inspired foreshadow the looming rise of Conservatism throughout the 1980s.

To understand how Phyllis Schlafly gained such widespread support, it is first important to understand *what exactly* she was opposing. The Equal Rights Amendment has a long and disappointing history; in almost one hundred years, it has yet to be ratified. Alice Paul (1885-1977), the suffrage organizer and founder of the National Women's Party, originally drafted the amendment in 1923, three short years after women in the U.S. gained the right to vote through the passage of the 19th Amendment (Francis). Paul feared that suffrage alone was not enough to ensure gender equality and wanted women's rights to be protected and preserved in the Constitution. In 1943, Paul re-wrote the amendment to reflect the legal thinking and discourse of the time, and the foundational statement of the ERA remains in this form today: "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex" (Francis).[11]

While this sentiment is simple enough in theory, in practice it was notoriously difficult to pass. Despite being introduced in every session of Congress from 1923 to 1970, the amendment rarely made it out of committee. Whether due to politicians' misogyny or the vagueness of what constitutes equality, no one could agree on the ERA. Despite this difficulty, feminist organizations and politicians worked tirelessly to revive support for the amendment in Congress

[11] https://www.equalrightsamendment.org/faq

and force its reconsideration. In particular, the National Organization for Women (NOW) was very successful in its efforts to raise support for the ERA both in Congress and during the amendment's eventual ratification process. Betty Friedan founded NOW alongside 28 other feminists during the Third National Conference of Commissions in June of 1966, with the express purpose of "[taking] action to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now, exercising all the privileges and responsibilities thereof in truly equal partnership with men" (Friedan, NOW SoP).[12] In February of 1970, twenty NOW members disrupted the US Senate Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments to demand that the amendment leave committee and receive a full hearing from Congress. Their protests were successful and the ERA was given a hearing in the Senate in May of that year. (EQUAL RIGHTS AMENDMENT SUMMARY OF NOW ACTIONS IN SUPPORT OF THE ERA, 1966 – 2018 and ERA FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS). Simultaneously, Martha Griffiths, a Democratic Congresswoman from Michigan, filed a discharge petition to force the amendment out of the House Judiciary Committee and into the House of Representatives (EQUAL RIGHTS AMENDMENT SUMMARY OF NOW ACTIONS IN SUPPORT OF THE ERA, 1966 – 2018 and ERA FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS).[13] The ERA passed the House of Representatives in 1970, but ultimately failed in the Senate because senators could not agree on how the amendment would impact mandatory conscription in the US armed forces–a disagreement that would continue to plague the ERA throughout the 1970s. In 1971, Griffiths re-introduced a revised version of the ERA and it successfully passed through both the House and

---

[12] https://now.org/about/history/statement-of-purpose/

[13] https://now.org/historical-summary-of-now-era-actions/

Senate by March 22, 1972 (National Archives, *Martha Griffiths and the Equal Rights Amendment*).[14] After almost 50 years of trying to pass the ERA through Congress, feminist activists felt confident that their hardest victory was finally won. They had already achieved the improbable, all that was left to do was ensure its support in the states.

Unfortunately, this task was easier said than done. The process of amending the Constitution is long and arduous to ensure that any changes made reflect the rights, values, and beliefs of United States citizens. Thus, upon passing Congress with a two-thirds majority in both the House and Senate, Article V of the Constitution dictates that an amendment must be ratified by "three-fourths of the states" or 38 states (Erikson).[15] Congress allotted the ERA a seven-year deadline to achieve this, ending on March 22, 1979.[16] By the end of 1972, thirty states had ratified the ERA, making its proponents optimistic that the amendment would succeed. However, their optimism would soon prove unwarranted. David Kyvig, a Professor of History at the University of Akron, explains in his article titled "Historical Misunderstandings and the Defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment" that state support for the ERA stagnated after 1973, and only five more states ratified the amendment by 1978. In that same time, five other states[17] sought to

---

[14] https://www.archives.gov/legislative/features/griffiths

[15] https://www.ncsl.org/research/about-state-legislatures/amending-the-u-s-constitution.aspx

[16] Some legal historians disagree with the imposition of a deadline, however the inclusion of one is defensible under the 1921 Supreme Court decision Dillon v. Gloss. Members of NOW affirm the belief that the ERA's time limit can still be lifted and eventually entered into the Constitution: "Therefore, under the principles of *Dillon* and *Coleman*, and based on the fact that Congress voted to extend the ERA time limit and to accept the 203-year-long ratification period of the Madison Amendment as sufficiently "contemporaneous," it is likely that Congress has the power to legislatively adjust or remove the time limit constraint on the ERA if it chooses, to determine whether or not state ratifications which occur after the expiration of a time limit in a proposing clause are valid, and to promulgate the ERA after the 38th state ratifies" (https://www.equalrightsamendment.org/pathstoratification)

[17] Nebraska, Tennessee Idaho, Kentucky, and South Dakota (https://www.equalrightsamendment.org/pathstoratification)

rescind their endorsement of the ERA, though whether or not Article V of the Constitution allows for this is heavily debated (Kyvig, 45; Erikson).

Feminist organizations did not accept this changing tide lying down: throughout the 1970s, NOW worked alongside the newly formed National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC) to advocate for the ERA's ratification. Notable feminists including Congresswomen Bella Abzug and Shirley Chisholm (1924-2005), Ms. Magazine founder Gloria Steinem, and Betty Friedan formed the NWPC in 1971 because they believed that the success of the Feminist Movement depended on women's growing representation in the US Government (NWPC Mission Statement). While the NWPC focused on getting more women interested in politics and increasing female delegates' representation in the Republican and Democratic National Conventions, NOW assisted the ratification process by organizing marches in support of the ERA and boycotts against unratified states. Additionally, both organizations also advocated for an extension to the ERA's seven-year deadline, and in 1978 the ratification process was granted an extension that expired on June 30th, 1982 (Kyvig, 46). Despite the best efforts of these women activists, politicians, and organizers, the ERA ultimately failed to be ratified in 38 states. The source of this defeat is commonly attributed to Phyllis Schlafly, a stringent Catholic and self-described housewife who founded the STOP ERA Movement in 1972 to argue against the Equal Rights Amendment.

Shockingly, despite her vehement and aggressive opposition to it, Schlafly was virtually unaware of the Equal Rights Amendment until 1972. She began STOP ERA after the Republican Senator Sam Ervin brought the amendment to her attention and requested that she start a counter-movement against it (Kyvig, 51). Ervin reached out to Schlafly primarily because of her ability

to disseminate information among Conservatives and build a strong support base. She had already proven herself in this arena with her incredibly popular newsletter *The Phyllis Schlafly Report,* and Ervin sought to use her mailing list to raise awareness of the ERA and its deficiencies. In addition to Schlafly's talent in organizing, Ervin also targeted her to lead the movement because she and her audience were women. This was essential in a time when the ERA enjoyed bipartisan support from male politicians. No one wanted to appear misogynistic by opposing gender equality, so it was crucial that women themselves spearhead the fight against it.

Schlafly relied heavily on myths perpetuated by the Feminine Mystique to appeal to her audience of mothers and wives. Namely, she argued that men and women are inherently different, and that distinctions between male "breadwinners" and female "homemakers" are both natural and advantageous. Of course, she, herself, did not subscribe to these delineations. As a writer, activist, and lawyer, Schlafly consistently worked outside the home and clearly possessed the sense of purpose and fulfillment that alluded so many of the housewives Friedan interviewed for *The Feminine Mystique*. Nevertheless, Schlafly maintained that being a housewife was every woman's greatest calling. In her 1981 book *The Power of the Christian Woman,* she explains that, "A woman helps man to "subdue" and take care of the earth by being a supportive, loving wife and a nurturing mother. Being a homemaker is a most honorable and valuable career–not the demeaning, confining, valueless role which the feminists call it" (Schlafly, 14). Schlafly convinced her followers that Second Wave Feminism–a movement criticized for being *too focused* on housewives–was actually antagonistic towards them. She painted feminists as condescending bullies, intent on denigrating other women and de-valuing their role in society. In

doing so, she threatened one of Second Wave Feminism's core demographics and opened the door to a larger discussion about what kind of social framework would truly benefit women.

Schlafly's central argument against the ERA was that women's unequal role in society granted them certain privileges and protections that men were not afforded. This claim was so important to the STOP ERA Movement that its name even reflects it: STOP is an acronym for Stop Taking Our Privileges. Essentially, Schlafly believed that society's glorification of femininity and motherhood actually benefited women, and that enforcing gender equality would take away those benefits. In a 1972 issue of the *Phyllis Schlafly Report*, she argues, "Our respect for the family as a basic unit of society, which is ingrained in the laws and customs of our Judeo-Christian civilization, is the greatest single achievement in the entire history of women's rights" (Schlafly, 1, PSR, volume 5, issue 7). This is an absurd statement, disregarding the women who worked tirelessly for women's suffrage and equal education and employment. Unfortunately, it was also incredibly effective. Many of Schlafly's supporters opposed the ERA because of her insistence that total equality of the sexes would rob women of important benefits such as child support, spousal alimony, and draft exemption.

Of these fears, the last was by far the most compelling. Schlafly played upon men and women's residual fears from the Vietnam War to promote anxiety about another draft–one in which women would also be in danger. In a debate between Schlafly and Friedan that aired on "Good Morning America" on January 28th, 1976, Schlafly asked her opponent if she could, in good conscience, advocate for her daughter to go to war.[18] Friedan countered this point with the assertion that she did not want her son to fight in a war either. This response seems obvious: no

[18] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WncN6PWEMGo

parent wants to see their child risk their life, regardless of gender. However, it is extremely important when understanding the psyche of American society at the time. Schlafly and her followers argued the moral horror of drafting women because conscription proved an objectionable and incredibly unpopular expectation throughout the 1960s. It was easy, then, to fear monger a reality wherein women were subject to the same unjust mandates. Feminists countered this argument by explaining that the draft had already more or less been eradicated after Congress heavily reformed the law in 1973 (Selective Service System, Changes).[19] However, feminists were also in the awkward position of arguing the validity of drafting women in the next hypothetical war, regardless of how unlikely it was that another draft would occur. Schlafly describes this situation in *The Power of the Christian Woman*, recounting:

> At the Virginia hearings, I listened as one of the legislators asked a pro-ERA witness: "If we did draft women, don't you think we could assign the women to the safe, noncombat jobs, and leave the actual fighting up to the men?" She replied: "Oh no, because that would discriminate against women and deprive us of our equal opportunity to win a Congressional Medal of Honor!" Unfortunately, most Medal of Honor winners are dead and the overwhelming majority of American women do not think they were mistreated because they did not have equal obligation to fight jungle warfare in Vietnam and become POWs or MIAs (Schlafly, 105).

The question of military conscription was difficult because conceding a different expectation for men and women would delegitimize the Second Wave's thesis that both genders are equal in capability. Feminists were thus arguing against societal pressures to *protect* women from the dangers of combat and in favor of subjecting women to a fate most men would not deem enviable. Though denouncing the draft may seem valid today, during the 1970s this approach to the problem of draft impartiality came off as evasive and insufficient. With the Vietnam draft still

---

[19] https://www.sss.gov/history-and-records/changes-from-vietnam-to-now/

in their periphery, society demanded a response to how the ERA would handle military conscription. While feminists upheld their desire for equal treatment, their request for complete equality left men and women alike concerned about the amendmanet's implications on women's safety and stability in the event of another war.

Schlafly used the same fear-mongering tactics when discussing divorce and a wife's right to alimony and child-support. She argued that the ERA would take away divorced women's privileges because women would no longer be favored in custody agreements and divorce settlements. In *The Power of the Christian Woman*, Schlafly explains that, "a rule based on equality or a sex-neautral rule based on which spouse makes more money (which some courts are tending to adopt) would be most harmful to women and a big take-away of present rights" (Schlafly, 90). It would be unfair to dismiss this fear outright, considering the undoubtable economic consequences that housewives faced in the event of divorce. However, it is incorrect to place blame on the ERA and the feminists who supported it, especially when these feminists were often heavily involved in advocating for the rights of divorced housewives. In her 2013 article, "An Incomplete Revolution: Feminists and the Legacy of Marital-Property Reform," Mary Zeigler argues against the commonly held belief that feminists' interest in the ERA distracted them from pursuing divorce reform for women. On the contrary, Zeigler explains that STOP ERA's discussion of divorce inspired NOW and other feminist organizations to concentrate their efforts *even more* around the plight of mothers and housewives: "Advocates within NOW verbalized the threat posed by STOP ERA and its appeal to homemakers. In order to succeed in the ERA struggle, as prominent NOW member Toni Carabillo stated in a confidential strategy memorandum, NOW had to show that STOP ERA "deserved neither

credibility nor trust" when its members claimed to be "homemakers' champion[s] and defender[s]" (Ziegler, 277). Essentially, Ziegler claims that feminists who supported the ERA were becoming increasingly interested in addressing housewife privileges throughout the early to mid-1970s, primarily in retaliation to Schlafly's movement. This response demonstrates how powerful Schlafly's rhetoric was, even if it was demonstrably untrue and maligned the feminists who did, in fact, want to protect housewife privileges.

Beyond the strength of Schlafly's "privilege" argument, the STOP ERA Movement was also successful because of the way it was organized. Schlafly began her conservative interest group "Eagle Forum" in 1972, and used the organization as the base of STOP ERA operations and communications throughout the 1970s. In her 1986 book *Why We Lost the ERA,* political scientist and sociologist Jane J. Mansbridge explains that the Eagle Forum was successful at training new recruits and disseminating information because it was organized hierarchically, unlike the more democratized Feminist Movement. This proved beneficial because all members of the movement knew to make the same consistent points when debating the flaws and implications of the ERA: "STOP ERA was able to overcome some of the problems of participatory decentralization by accepting, at least in theory, a relatively hierarchical chain of command centering on one person–Phyllis Schlafly–without whom the opposition would probably not have been able to prevent ratification" (Mansbridge, 133). There was no discussion or contradiction about the movement's key talking points, resulting in a more consistent and unified message. Conversely, the Feminist Movement gave all women the chance to speak out, resulting in disagreements about how the ERA would impact everyday life for American women. Some feminists argued that this form of hierarchical organization promoted ignorance since

Schlafly's followers only reiterated her opinions rather than forming their own. A local NOW leader told Mansbridge, "Phyllis doesn't care if the people who follow her ever learn anything. She's content to have them ignorant; we're not. And there's a price you pay for that in media recognition" (134). However, Mansbridge argues that the Eagle Forum's structure actually facilitated learning since Phyllis was able to instruct women more effectively. Regardless of whether or not her followers understood the extent of her messaging, she enjoyed their intense loyalty, admiration, and trust. Her skills in communication and prevalence in the media made Schlafly a staple of the Republican Party throughout STOP ERA's tenure and came to be a symbol of the emerging Christian right in America.

Christianity experienced a resurgence in popularity throughout the late 1970s and early 80s, coinciding with Schlafly's growing prominence and amplifying her "pro-Family" message. This increase was most likely a consequence of the political and social upheaval that defined the 1960s and early 70s. People were desperate for a return to normalcy, and Schlafly was very successful at linking anti-feminist sentiments to wholesome Christian and family values. Grant Wacker, a Professor of the History of Religion in America at Duke University Divinity School explains,

> What differentiated [Jerry] Falwell, [Pat] Robertson, and Schlafly from other Christian spokesmen was their linking of traditional Christian values with images of a simpler small-town America of the past. Indeed, the Christian Right proved so successful in translating its concerns to a wider audience that national pollster George Gallup pronounced 1976 "the year of the evangelical" (Wacker, para. 4).[20]

---

[20] http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/twenty/tkeyinfo/chr_rght.htm

Schlafly relied heavily upon her Catholic faith to justify her attitudes on gender and family values, defining her opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment as evidence of her moral conscience. Pastors Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson made the same tactical move by founding the Moral Majority in 1979 to fight for "family values" and protect America from an apparent moral decline by opposing the ERA and its perceived promotion of abortion and homosexuality (Dowland, 614)[21] STOP ERA and other anti-ERA organizations could argue their moral superiority because the Feminist Movement was largely secular and supported many symbols of depravity as defined by the Christian right. In particular, Second Wave feminists were often vocally pro-choice and supported women's right to safe abortions and reproductive freedom. Betty Friedan was also very conscious about avoiding the question of religion in *The Feminine Mystique* and instead focused on the sociological factors that contributed to gender inequality.

For these reasons, Schlafly was able to paint feminism as immoral and herself as a symbol of righteousness. Schlafly's religious beliefs are especially evident in *The Power of the Christian Woman*, which both delineates the ERA's flaws and advises women on how to appropriately honor God and their families while maintaining their femininity. Schlafly originally published the same work in 1977 under the title *The Power of the Christian Woman.* Her decision to reframe her thoughts in an expressly Christian context reflects a growing association of STOP ERA with Christianity, which was always present but now even more explicit. Several of the ideas she expresses in this book are based in the concept of "Biblical Womanhood," a complementary perspective on theology that demands a wife's total submission to her husband. Schlafly writes, "Women and men were made to complement each other. To

---

[21] https://www.jstor.org/stable/20618754?seq=9#metadata_info_tab_contents

“complement” means to complete or make perfect. That is what man and woman do for each other–spiritually, psychologically, physically, and sexually” (Schlafly, 9, PoCW). This viewpoint was similarly expressed by pseudo-Freudians in the 1940s and 50s, but Schlafly’s additional emphasis on religion and God’s will legitimized her claim and capitalized off the rise of Christianity. It also paid greater attention to how families would be affected by the ERA’s ratification. In 1977, Phyllis Schlafly spoke at a counter-convention protesting the National Women’s Conference in Houston, Texas. The protest was called the “Pro-Family Rally” and Schlafly delivered a speech defining the ERA as an “attack on the family.” She argues this same point throughout *The Power of the Christian Woman,* decrying the immorality of raising children in a world without clearly defined gender roles to keep families stable and happy. By aligning herself and her movement with Christian values, Schlafly demonized feminism and was more adequately able to incite fear against the ERA.

Schlafly’s appeal to religion gave the STOP ERA Movement a “moral” edge, but the concept of gender equality was not outwardly antagonistic enough to Christian ideals. For that reason, Schlafly had to consistently remind her followers that the ERA would facilitate two of the Church’s biggest fears: gay marriage and abortion. Schlafly argues that Christian Women have a responsibility to protect their children from the social depravity that both homosexuality and legalized abortion embodied:

> Abortion, the killing of unborn babies, is our third most popular operation, ranking right behind tonsillectomies and appendectomies. Militant homosexuals and lesbians are popular lecturers on college campuses and guests on television and radio programs…The task of the Christian Woman is to resist these trends and mend the rips in the fabric of civilization as far as her influence and energy can reach (Schlafly, 149, PoCW).

This argument, again, creates a moral distinction between the evils of feminism and its righteous opponents. Additionally, her efforts to incite fear gave the STOP ERA Movement a greater sense of urgency, which was important given the time constraints of the ratification process. However, the actual link between homosexuality, abortion, and the ERA was relatively tenuous and did not transcend shallow fear-mongering. Most obviously, the landmark court decision Roe v. Wade had already legalized abortion in 1973–a decision which Schlafly calls "even worse" than the "Dred Scott case, that legalized slavery" (Schlafly, 171, PoCW). Women had access to abortion well before the ERA's ratification deadline, yet Schlafly still dedicates a large section of her book to its vilification in order to malign Second Wave Feminism as "anti-family." This argument, despite its obsolescence, could resonate with Christian and Catholic audiences who feared that feminists' role in promoting policy would lead the country away from God.

Schlafly claimed that the ERA would promote the legalization of gay marriage by mandating non-gendered language. She argued that this change in language would define marriage as a unity between two spouses rather than between a man and a woman. The Feminist Movement struggled to articulate a unified response to this assertion, exemplifying the pitfalls of a decentralized political movement. On the one hand, many lesbians supported and advocated for the ERA, and Bella Abzug even introduced gay rights legislation to Congress in 1974 as a New York representative. However, as I discussed in the first chapter of this paper, Betty Friedan was significantly less willing to align herself with queer women and their needs. She was wary of associating feminism with the LGBTQ community because she wished to avoid the potential damage of arguing in favor of queer individuals: it was easier to advocate for straight, white women who already enjoyed significant overlap with STOP ERA's core demographic. While

feminists did, eventually, include sexual preference as a resolution in the 1977 National Women's Conference, lesbians and other queer women were continuously maligned and ignored both by anti-feminists and the women who wished to escape their ire.

Schlafly's opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment relied on fear mongering, Christian ideals, and the insistence of female privilege to turn women against the prospect of women's equality. White housewives were encouraged to reject Second Wave Feminism despite the movement's focus on helping them, specifically. Consequently, 1970s feminism became even more focused on catering to white, upper middle class women, at the detriment of queer women and women of color. Four years after Phyllis Schlafly published *The Power of the Christian Woman* to turn female readers against the ERA, Margaret Atwood published *The Handmaid's Tale* to tell the story of a totalitarian Christian regime and the men and–especially–women who supported it. Understanding Schlafly's influence on 1970s and 80 politics is essential to recognizing the salience of Atwood's work and her intentions behind it.

CHAPTER 3: MARGARET

"There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it."

–Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale,* 39

On February 9th, 1986, Mary McCarthy of the New York Times denounced Margaret Atwood's (1939) 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale* as "powerless to scare," a death sentence for any work of dystopian fiction.[22] Despite this criticism, *The Handmaid's Tal*e did–in fact–scare readers, and continues to evoke fear and paranoia to this day. It tells the story of Offred, a young woman forced into sexual slavery as a Handmaid after The Republic of Gilead overthrows the U.S. Government and forces women into positions of subservience. Offred is one of several white, fertile women who is made to have procreative sex with a member of Gilead's ruling class

[22] https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/00/03/26/specials/mccarthy-atwood.html?TB_iframe=true&height=921.6&width=921.6

after disease and environmental toxins cause mass infertility throughout the country. Atwood explains her desire to write *The Handmaid's Tale* in a 2018 essay for *Literary Hub* by posing the question, "If you wanted to seize power in the United States, abolish liberal democracy, and set up a dictatorship, how would you go about it? What would be your cover story?" (Atwood, "Origin Story," para. 8)[23]. The Republic of Gilead uses Christianity and the threat of infertility as its "cover story" and succeeds in suspending women's rights while elevating white, Christian men to positions of power.

Although *The Handmaid's Tale* is classified as dystopian fiction, its description of Christianity as a tool to subjugate and oppress women provides a scathing commentary on the conflation of religion and politics throughout the 1970s and 80s. In particular, Gilead's classification of women as Wives, Handmaids, and Marthas (servants) reflects the way that Christian organizations such as Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority and Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum defined femininity as a woman's devotion to her husband and commitment to childbearing and homemaking. Atwood's 2019 sequel to the novel, titled *The Testaments,* takes place 15 years after the events of *The Handmaid's Tale* and provides a deeper analysis of how women and children were indoctrinated into Gilead's Christian dogma. Atwood's decision to publish the novel in 2019 highlights the pervasive nature of misogyny and its persistence in the 21st century.

Margaret Atwood began writing *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1984, shortly after Phyllis Schlafly's STOP ERA Movement defeated the Equal Rights Amendment in 1982 and Jerry Falwell co-founded The Moral Majority in 1979. Falwell and Schlafly were key leaders in the

---

[23] https://lithub.com/margaret-atwood-on-how-she-came-to-write-the-handmaids-tale/

growing Christian right faction of the Republican Party and used their platforms and notoriety to espouse family values and urge the United States' return to a God-centered government. In a 1983 speech given at the University of California on November 29th, Falwell promised his audience, "This nation is in the middle of a moral and spiritual renaissance…I believe historians will look back on the 1980s as a period–a decade–of moral and spiritual rebirth for our nation which in my estimate will bring about politically, socially, morally, economically, a greater health to our society than we have known in the past" (11:03 UCLA Speech)[24]. Falwell and the Christian right looked optimistically on the 1980s as a decade that would be defined by Christian values. While the events of *The Handmaid's Tale* are not set in Falwell's "period of spiritual rebirth,"[25] Atwood implies that the Republic of Gilead emerged out of similar circumstances to the Christian right. These textual allusions link the horrors of Atwood's dystopia to the Christian America Falwell sought to cultivate.

Scholars began associating Gilead and 1980s America almost immediately after the novel's publication. For example, in his 1989 article "*The Handmaid's Tale*: A Contextual Dystopia," David Ketterer uses Offred's memory of her past life to argue that Atwood is intentionally harkening back to the 1970s and 80s:

> Her recollections, usually narrated in the seven spaced sections (out of a total of 15) called Night (a time of relative freedom), are of an earlier era recognizably that of the 1970s and '80s. She recalls her feminist mother (now, we subsequently learn, an

[24] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mvjudpg-cMo

[25] At one point Offred references "an old Esquire from the eighties"

> Unwoman) and the failed attempt she had made with her now "disappeared" husband to flee to Canada during the early stages of Gilead's totalitarian regime (Ketterer, 210).[26]

There are several examples in the text of her mother's explicit activism during the Second Wave. She has one particular memory of going to the park with her mother as a child and burning a magazine with "a pretty woman on it, with no clothes on, hanging from the ceiling by a chain wound around her hands" (Atwood, *Handmaid*, 59). This is most likely a reference to feminists throughout the 1960s and 70s burning "instruments of female torture" including Playboy magazines after the infamous Miss America Protest of 1969 catalyzed the myth that all feminists were bra-burners (Dove).[27] While Offred recalls this memory through a child's eyes, her description of the bound, nude woman implies that her mother and her mother's friends were burning books and magazines that objectify women. Offred also describes seeing a copy of *Ms. Magazine*, a feminist magazine co-founded in 1972 by Gloria Steinem and Dorothy Pitman Hughes, in her mother's "various apartments while I was growing up" (Atwood, *Handmaid*, 387). The latter example provides indisputable proof that Gilead overthrew the US Government sometime after Second Wave Feminists brought awareness of women's inequality and were eventually dismissed.

Evidence of this dismissal comes primarily from scenes depicting Luke's interactions with Offred and her mother. Offred frequently describes her husband's attempts to provoke her mother by asserting the difference between men and women: "There are some differences, he

[26] https://www-jstor-org.udel.idm.oclc.org/stable/4239936?searchText=puritan+the+handmaid%27s+tale&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Dpuritan%2Bthe%2Bhandmaid%2527s%2Btale%2B%26so%3Drel&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3A486d00307f2d08ff87cfb8c8b1083609&seq=2

[27] https://history.howstuffworks.com/history-vs-myth/women-burn-bras-in-70s.htm

said. He was fond of saying that, as if I was trying to prove there weren't. But mostly he said it when my mother was there. He liked to tease her" (Atwood, *Handmaid*, 129). Although Ketterer does not mention these scenes when discussing "recognizably '80s" references, Luke's rhetoric *does* coincide with right-wing thinking at the time. For instance, in *The Power of the Christian Woman*, Phyllis Schlafly explains, "[The Christian Woman] understands that men and women are different, and that those very differences provide the key to her success as a person and fulfillment as a woman" (Schlafly, PoCW, 17). Offred's use of the phrase "as if" shows that she, also, has internalized the difference between men and women and does not wish to challenge the notion in the same way that her mother does. Luke reitterates Schlafly and Falwell's worldview again when he tells Offred's mother that, "women were incapable of abstract thought" (Atwood, *Handmaid*, 189). He makes this comment facetiously, but the repetition of these ideas even in jest reflects men's growing acceptance of women's assumed inferiority. Commanders in Gilead took the same thinking in earnest to justify eradicating women's rights to read and work. While Luke does not share the same radical views against women as other men in Gilead, his joking acceptance of misogyny before the war highlights its normalization after women like Offred's mother ceased protesting. Atwood's novel provides a cautionary tale against men and women's complacency following the ERA's failure and the Christian Right's growing prominence.

Atwood also draws comparisons between *The Handmaid's Tale's* dystopian future and America's Conservative present through the way the Republic of Gilead is organized. Deprived of their ability to work, read, and handle money, the majority of women in Gilead are forced to live with and depend upon a designated Commander, or Government leader. These women are placed into three distinct categories based on the manner in which they serve their patriarch:

Wives must run their husband's household and devote themselves to him, Marthas must cook and clean for him, and Handmaids must provide him with children if his wife is unable to. The explicit roles of Handmaids. Wives, and Marthas, exemplify the Christian right's simplification of women into mothers, wives, and homemakers. By compartmentalizing these duties, Atwood demonstrates how absurd and reductive that mentality truly is. Ironically, women in Gilead who are forced to carry out all three duties–a common expectation for housewives in the 1970s and 80s–are viewed as even worse off than the Handmaids: "There are other women with baskets [...] some in the striped dresses, red and blue and green and cheap and skimpy, that mark the women of the poorer men. Econowives, they're called. These women are not divided into functions. They have to do everything; if they can" (Atwood, 48). Her use of the words "have to" implies that the Econowives' job is an even greater burden, which is reflected in the inferior treatment that these women receive in Gilead society. While this understanding of Econowives is understandable in Gilead's hierarchical structure, it is simultaneously striking as a reader who is significantly more used to women who perform the role of "Econowives." We are unfamiliar, and therefore rightfully appalled, by the split of women's household duties into clearly defined positions. It is reprehensible to devalue a woman's life into her sexuality, her devotion, or her servitude. However, when those roles coalesced, people like Phyllis Schlafly viewed them as a great and indisputable benefit to society. Atwood intentionally includes these classifications to raise readers' awareness of this, and describes the even less favorable position of the Econowife to demonstrate the burden of being a housewife without support or recognition.

Similarly, Atwood uses names in *The Handmaid's Tale* to raise awareness of how patriarchal traditions devalue women's identities. Significantly, Handmaids are the only women

in Gilead forced to change their names to reflect their Commander's ownership of them. Offred gets her name because her Commander's name is Fred: she is literally "Of Fred," stripped of any identity devoid of male influence. In her 1989 essay, "A Sister, Dipped in Blood," Anne Kaler points out that this dehumanizing use of names is an extreme example of a practice that is already quite common in Christian societies:

> At baptism, while the first name is that of a saint who becomes the child's patron, the last name given the child is that of the father, not the mother. At marriage, the woman receives the name of her husband[...] Whenever the names of female saints were depleted in a religious community, the nuns were given the names of male saints, usually preceded by the name of Mary in honor of the Mother of Christ, e.g. Sister Mary Benedict (Kaler, 47).

For most of human history, women have been defined by their husband or father's ownership of them. Atwood only makes that reality more explicit by changing Handmaids' first names instead of their surnames. Of course, this practice is more psychologically damaging because it more adequately erases their identities. Nevertheless, Kaler's examples remind readers that the practice of reducing women to their husbands and fathers is already normalized in patriarchal Christian societies. In some ways, the Handmaids' anonymity is also reminiscent of the housewives in *The Feminine Mystique* who described not knowing who they were without their children and husbands. This lack of identity also reflects an extreme and disturbing consequence of valuing women solely for their reproductive power, as many Christian right thinkers did in the 1980s.

Several characters rely on Schlafly and Falwell's arguments about female privilege to justify Gilead's oppressive and misogynistic social structure. *The Handmaid's Tale*'s protagonist Offred undergoes training at the Rachel and Leah Center before taking on her role as a Handmaid for the Commander, Fred, and his wife, Serena Joy. While at the Center, Offred is

instructed by older, infertile women called Aunts who teach her the Biblical basis for her sexual slavery. These Aunts remind Offred that her position in the Commander's household is, "not a prison but a privilege," and that women were at greater risk of sexual assault during "the days of anarchy" before Gilead came to power (39). This rhetorical technique borrows inspiration from Schlafly's STOP ERA Movement, which emphasized housewives' privileges and the roles men play as women's protectors and providers. Offred reminisces about the precautions she once took against predatory men, delineating the rules she used to set for herself: "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" (39). Her memory conveys the genuine fear that women feel around men, but the alternative Gilead offers does not actually protect women from rape. On the contrary, life as a Handmaid condemns one to monthly sexual assault under the guise of ritual Ceremony. Though women have less concerns about external threats, their livelihoods within their system of government are already extremely traumatic. Women are completely confined to their role in the household with no outside freedoms or control. Aunt Lydia, the leading Aunt at the Rachel and Leah Center, denies the severity of this situation by explaining to her handmaids-in-training that, "There is more than one kind of freedom. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it" (39). When opposing the Equal Rights Amendment, Schlafly would regularly argue about the activities women had "freedom from." For example, she claimed that women benefited from a lack of gender legislation since they had "freedom from" mandatory conscription in the US armed forces. Housewives were also considered free from financial anxiety and labor pressures

because they could depend on their husbands for economic security and stability. Both in the United States and in Gilead, "freedoms from" come at the expense of women's agency and necessitate their reliance on men. Schlafly and Falwell attempted to use women's fears to justify that loss, and the Aunts and Commanders of Gilead succeeded.

This notion that women are better off in Gilead applies to Wives as well as Handmaids. When attending a Prayvaganza to celebrate young women's marriage to older men, Offred hears a Commander's sermon about the problems that plagued women before the Republic of Gilead supplanted the United States. He explains:

> If [women] did marry, they could be left with a kid, two kids, the husband might just get fed up and take off, disappear, they'd have to go on welfare. Or else he'd stay around and beat them up. Or if they had a job, the children in daycare are left with some brutal ignorant woman, and they'd have to pay for that themselves, out of their wretched little paychecks. Money was the only measure of worth, for everyone, they got no respect as mothers. No wonder they were giving up on the whole business. This way they're protected, they can fulfill their biological destinies in peace. With full support and encouragement (Atwood, *Handmaid*, 462).

The Commander argues that Gilead's practice of arranged marriage is important because it protects women from fickle, selfish, and brutal men by mandating certain expectations for husband and wife. Men are responsible for supporting their wives financially so that women can "fulfill their biological destinies" of having children. Falwell argues the same point in an interview with political commentator and former White House Press Secretary Bill Moyers in 1980. When asked about the Equal Rights Amendment, Falwell responds with the Commander's same alarmist description of men: "I feel that if the Equal Rights Amendment is ratified there will be a lot of sorry men off the hook who have deserted their wives and because it would be discrimination on account of sex to have to take care of that woman financially therefore they

would not have to do it" (Bill Moyers Journal)[28]. It is important that Atwood highlights the protective element of Gilead's political system because this was a fundamental aspect of the Christian right's view of women. By shrouding misogyny in veiled concern and religious doctrine, Falwell and Schlafly both encouraged women to adopt subservient attitudes towards their husbands for the good of their families and their own moral betterment. The same is true of Commanders and Aunts in Gilead, who perpetuate women's subservience in the name of providing protection and stability.

Although all women in Gilead suffer as a result of the Republic's harmful social structures, the system itself does not facilitate empathy or camaraderie between women of different statuses. In fact, it relies upon Aunts and Wives to maintain other women's oppression. Atwood demonstrates this when Aunt Lydia tells Offred and the other Handmaids at the Rachel and Leah Center that Wives will pose a greater threat to them than their husbands: "It's not the husbands you have to watch out for, said Aunt Lydia, it's the Wives. You should always try to imagine what they must be feeling. Of course they will resent you. It is only natural" (72). Wives resent the fact that they cannot have sex with their husbands, and instead must be involved in procreation vicariously through their passive role in the Ceremony. Rather than argue against their husbands or the system itself, these women abuse their status within the household to hurt Handmaids and maintain superiority over Marthas. They cling to the power they are afforded without using it to aid other women. Likewise, Aunts represent a minority of women who are able to maintain their power and authority by existing almost entirely independent from men. Even Wives must answer to their husbands, but Aunts are able to educate young women on their

[28] https://vimeo.com/48621151

duties as Wives and Handmaids with little to no interference and without the threat of unwanted sexual advances and expectations. Atwood's 2019 sequel *The Testaments* showcases Aunts' hypocrisy and compliance by highlighting the myriad of reasons young women become Aunts. When Gilead is first established, Aunt Lydia is taken to a stadium with other powerful female lawyers and judges. These women's intelligence and education makes them a threat to the regime, but they are given the option to die at the hands of Gilead soldiers or comply with the new government and shoot the other women in the stadium. Aunt Lydia chooses the latter, turning against other women with her same credentials and intellectual capacities to survive in the new world order. Almost two decades later, Offred's displaced daughter Agnes becomes an Aunt to avoid having sex with men. While this decision is less destructive than Aunt Lydia's acts of murder, both choices exemplify how patriarchal systems can turn women against each other. Aunts and Wives uphold immoral systems to avoid becoming victims of them.

Atwood's decision to emphasize women's role in perpetuating misogyny has clear parallels in Schlafly's STOP ERA Movement. Though the ERA sought to bring about gender equality, women fought against the amendment to maintain the privileges they had as white, upper-middle class housewives. There is even strong evidence that Atwood based the character of Serena Joy off of Phyllis Schlafly. This is evident in both her physical features and her lifestyle before Gilead. Atwood describes Serena Joy as "ash blond, petite, with a snub nose and huge blue eyes, " matching Schlafly's coloring and complexion. She also supported the Republic of Gilead before the war and took political action to advocate its establishment:

> She wasn't singing anymore by then, she was making speeches. She was good at it. Her speeches were about the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home. Serena Joy didn't do this herself, she made speeches instead, but she presented this

> failure of hers as a sacrifice she was making for the good of all…
>
> Luke and I would watch her sometimes on the late-night news. Bathrobes, nightcaps. We'd watch her sprayed hair and her hysteria, and the tears she could still produce at will, and the mascara blackening her cheeks. By that time she was wearing more makeup. We thought she was funny. Or Luke thought she was funny. I only pretended to think so. Really she was a little frightening. She was in earnest.
>
> She doesn't make speeches anymore. She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word. (Atwood, Handmaid, 71).

This description of Serena Joy's work as an orator is eerily similar to Schlafly's political career throughout the 1970s. Feminists frequently called Schlafly out for her hypocrisy, noting that she, herself was not a housewife at all, but an acclaimed and highly educated activist. Nevertheless, Schlafly continued to use her platform to assert the benefits of housewifery and the problems that arise when women think themselves similar to men. This passage is particularly interesting because it highlights the sincerity of Serena Joy's beliefs, at least in the beginning. She is not like Aunt Lydia, who becomes a willing participant in Gilead's government despite not sharing their fundamental ideas. Serena Joy believes in what she is saying until she is forced to live in and face the reality that women do not have more privileges through depending on their husbands. This cognitive dissonance can be similarly applied to Phyllis Schlafly, whose writings and beliefs seem sincere but contradictory to the life she led as an activist, lawyer, and politician. While this description of Serena Joy is already damning enough, Atwood even names Serena Joy's husband Fred—the same name as Phyllis Schlafly's husband who she thanked before every speech (Cori).[29] As much as I would like to believe that this is another intentional dig at Schlafly,

[29] https://eagleforum.org/publications/cori-commentary/quoting-phyllis-schlafly.html

Atwood could have also picked the name simply because she wanted to call her protagonist Offred. Many scholars, including David Ketterer and Ann Keler, provide several reasons for this, citing its similarity with the word “offered,” and its association with the color of her Handmaid wardrobe (Ketterer, 210). Nevertheless, these obvious parallels between Schlafly and Serena Joy demonstrate Atwood’s interest in exploring women’s complicity in anti-feminism and their role in promoting self-defeating ideals.

CHAPTER 4: OCTAVIA

"All that you touch
You Change.
All that you Change
Changes you.
The only lasting truth
is Change.
God
is Change."

–Octavia Butler, *The Parable of the Sower*, pg. 9

Like Margaret Atwood, Octavia Butler (1947-2006) is another woman science fiction author who emerged from and combatted the growing Conservatism of the 1980s. However, unlike Atwood, Butler was writing from the perspective of Black queer woman living in the United States. As such, she was more privy to the realities of Evangelicalism's rising popularity, and the racist, homophobic, and misogynistic rhetoric that accompanied this growing prominence. Butler's 1993 novel *Parable of the Sower* and its 1998 sequel *Parable of the Talents* emphasize this bigotry by depicting queer characters and people of color who experience, firsthand, what it means to be othered by a hegemonic Christian majority.

Surprisingly, these novels do not present organized religion as exclusively oppressive. Instead, Butler's series describes religion as a powerful and stabilizing force, capable of doing both harm and good. The series describes a young Black woman's attempt to create a new religion after gang violence, wealth inequality, and climate disaster threaten the American way of

life. Lauren Olamina, the novels' protagonist, is 12 years old when she first develops the concept of "Earthseed." Earthseed is a faith that revolves around the notion that life is forever in flux: "God is Change," and we must accept this "lasting truth" as its own source of hope in the wake of the apocalypse. After rioters raid her enclosed community, Olamina must travel to Los Angeles as a refugee, where she spreads the message of Earthseed to other travelers and grows a community around her faith. By centering her series around a fictional religion, Butler exposes the hypocrisy of the Christian right while proposing the possibility that faith can elevate–rather than denigrate–women, people of color, and members of the queer community. Butler's series also answers important questions about how religious fervor takes root in society. While *Parable of the Sower* focuses on Olamina's attempts to raise support and awareness of Earthseed, *Parable of the Talents* describes the simultaneous emergence of Evangelical Christianity and far-right politics in America post-apocalypse. President Jarret and his "Christian America" party borrow rhetoric from the Christian right to encourage a return to "family values" and more antiquated notions of race, gender, and sexuality. Butler presents Earthseed as a foil to this thinking and its 1980s parallel, demonstrating religion's capacity for good while highlighting the importance of embracing change and adapting to progressive views on family and identity.

It is not a coincidence that Christian America and Earthseed developed concurrently in the wake of the apocalypse: while antithetical to one another, both belief systems appeal to individuals living in chaotic times. Earthseed's doctrine resonates with those who embrace change, as evidenced by Olamina's diary entries describing the religion and its conception of God. She writes:

> God can't be resisted or stopped, but can be shaped and focused. This means God is not

> to be prayed to. Prayers only help the person doing the praying, and then, only if they strengthen and focus that person's resolve. If they're used that way, they can help us in our only real relationship with God. They help us to shape God and to accept and work with the shapes that God imposes on us. God is power, and in the end, God prevails. (Butler, Sower, 31)

This perspective is appealing because it helps Earthseed followers accept disorder and unpredictability while still maintaining their sense of control. Even as a young woman, Olamina witnesses the atrocities committed all around her and recognizes that she cannot completely stop God's will. Rather than attempt to fight against the "shapes that God imposes" on her, she instead accepts God's ultimate power and adapts to it. However, this does not mean that Olamina completely sacrifices her own autonomy since Earthseed functions on the belief that its followers can "shape" and "focus" God. At first, these ideas seem counterintuitive–how can one person shape the epitome of power? It is important to note that Earthseed's definition of God does not conform to the Judeo-Christian image of a personified entity. Olamina defines God as Change. Thus, Earthseed followers can "shape" the changes in their lives by adjusting to them. Prayer cannot influence the universe, but it can help followers accept the chaos surrounding them. It can be comforting to acknowledge that life is ever-changing, and Olamina even admits that Earthseed's emphasis on change helps to curb her fear of it: "We say "God is Change," but the truth is, we fear change as much as anyone does. We talk about changes at Gathering to ease our fears, to desensitize ourselves and to consider consequences" (Talents, 150). Earthseed is a pragmatic religion that assists in urging its followers forward despite their anxieties about what lies ahead. In this way it is inherently progressive, forever moving forward. However, Butler's

work acknowledges how unpopular progress can be, and how dangerous it is for those who promote it.

While Earthseed encourages its followers to embrace change, Christian America appeals to those who crave the stability and comfort of an idealized past. In *Parable of the Talents*, the Baptist Minister and Texas Senator Andrew Steele Jarret capitalizes off Americans' fear of change by associating the country's former greatness with its Christian foundation. He explains, "There was a time, Christian Americans, when our country ruled the world. America was God's country and we were God's people and God took care of his own. Now look at us. Who are we? What are we? What foul, seething, corrupt heathen concoction have we become?" (Talents, 194). By correlating "God's country" with a country that "ruled the world," Jarret attributes America's success to God and his influence on the universe. This further implies that the country's fall from grace was a consequence of his wrath: Americans lost their faith in God, so God ceased to protect and take care of them. The idea that God's love is reciprocal gives Christians a greater sense of control, since they can change their fate simply through prayer and devotion to God. However, this idea is also harmful since it justified animosity towards non-Christians. The "heathen purveyors of fake and unchristian doctrines" caused the apocalypse, and Christian Americans had the duty of inflicting justice upon them. Earthseed followers were considered the greatest offenders because their acceptance of change directly defied the Christian Americans' love of stability. Butler presents Christian America as a foil to Earthseed to highlight the conflicting ideals that emerge from political upheaval. While some people only look forward, others only look back and cling to the comfort that tradition provides. This latter impulse was

particularly evident in the United States throughout the late 1970s and 80s, after the 60s and early 70s saw extensive social changes in American society.

Butler's description of Christian America bears a striking resemblance to the Christian right and its endorsement of the Reagan Administration. In fact, Jarret even uses the same campaign slogan that Reagan used in his 1980 presidential campaign: "make America great again." Jarret's rhetoric while on the campaign trail also takes clear inspiration from speeches that the Pastor Jerry Falwell Sr. gave while promoting Ronald Reagan and the Moral Majority. In chapter one of *Parable of the Talents*, Olamina bemoans Jarret's misleading depiction of American history, saying, "He wants to take us all back to some magical time when everyone believed in the same God, worshiped him in the same way, and understood that their safety in the universe depended on completing the same religious rituals and stomping anyone who was different" (Talents, 9). Similarly, in a 1979 speech titled "America Back to God," Falwell delineates America's history as a purely Christian nation to highlight the country's lapse in faith throughout the 1960s and 70s: "What has gone wrong? What has happened to this great Republic? Why are we under the wrath of God? What has happened to this country? We have forsaken the God of our fathers. In the prosperity and the plenty and the blessedness of post-Second World War living, our country has left God" (Falwell)[30]. Like Jarret, Falwell argues that the United States is at the mercy of God's wrath because Americans lost touch with their Christian faith. Both preachers also use the word "we" throughout their sermons, implying that Christians are also responsible for becoming permissive with their faith. It is not enough to

---

[30] https://liberty.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p17184coll4/id/4835

simply practice Christianity, good Christians cannot even tolerate those who practice different faiths or else live an “un-Christian” lifestyle.

Both Christian America and the Christian right agree that women’s defiance of gender roles played a key part in promoting the United States’s moral decay. By appointing a Black woman as the head of Earthseed, Butler challenges Christianity’s outdated perception of women and demonstrates women’s equal ability in abstract thinking and leadership. In chapter six of *Parable of the Talents*, Olamina describes how radical members of Christian America, called Crusaders, participate in the disturbing practice of cutting out women’s tongues to silence them. She explains,

> We still don't know whose work this tongue cutting is, but we know that some Christian America types would be happy to silence all women. Jarret preached that woman was to be treasured, honored, and protected, but that for her own sake, she must be silent and obey the will of her husband, father, brother, or adult son since they understood the world as she did not. Was that it? The woman could be silent or she could be silenced? (Talents, 221)

Like in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, this section of Butler’s novel exposes Christianity’s misogynistic pretense of protecting women by suppressing their rights and ability to express themselves. Olamina’s brother Marcus reiterates this point when he urges his sister to join Christian America alongside him. He writes in his final letter to her, “The movement won't let you preach. They agree with Saint Paul in that: 'Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach nor to usurp authority over the man but to be in silence.' But don't worry. There's plenty of other more suitable work for women to do to serve the movement” (Talents, 731). Despite this, Olamina consistently establishes herself as a capable communicator both verbally and in writing. While Christian America attempts to silence all

women, Olamina writes her own religious text that questions the faith her Father and Brother told her to accept.

Butler also uses Lauren Olamina's character to raise questions about gender expectations and presentation. Other characters throughout the series note her more masculine features, describing her as "tall and strong" with "a man's chest and hips" (Talents, 218). This allows her to pass as a man when she is traveling, since it is dangerous to travel alone as a woman. Butler's inclusion of these physical attributes highlights the inherent difficulties women face in a sexist society, to the extent that Olamina must pretend to be a man just to stay safe. Micah Moreno discusses Butler's employment of the "passing" phenomenon in his 2017 thesis titled "Survival By Any Means: Race and Gender, Passing and Performance in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*." Moreno argues that Olamina's performance of gender mimics historic instances of racial passing in America, drawing comparisons between racial and gender discrimination in the country:

> Butler shows how history's habit of repeating itself has led to America's apocalyptic future. The primary way in which Butler examines and magnifies history is through gender passing, which is highly evocative of the racial passing common during Jim Crow America, in which individuals were able to pass into a society that privileged whites over blacks because of their ambiguous and easily masked physical features (Moreno, 10).[31]

This interpretation of gender in the *Parable* series is significant because it links the dystopian Christian America to the very real and relatively recent Jim Crow America that preceded the Civil Rights Movement. Considering the undeniable similarities between the Christian right and the Christian America party, these scenes could imply that American society in the 1980s and 90s

[31] http://fau.digital.flvc.org/islandora/object/fau%3A39776

was regressing from the social progress made throughout the 60s and 70s, at the detriment of both women and people of color.

In addition to emphasizing Olamina's masculine qualities and her ability to "pass" in society, Butler also gives Olamina some stereotypically feminine features to showcase the fluidity of gender and contradict one-dimensional expectations about male and female traits. Most notably, Olamina carries the curse of having "hyperempathy," meaning that she can feel others' pain more acutely than those without the affliction. This is significant because empathy is often associated with femininity amongst Christians who subscribe to traditional perceptions of gender. Butler also includes male hyperempaths, or "sharers," to demonstrate the vulnerability men face by having traditionally female characteristics. Olamina remarks in *Parable of the Talents* that, "male sharers were touchy–resenting their extra vulnerability more than females seemed to" (765). In *Parable of the Sower*, Olamina admits to having not even considered the possibility that her brothers could be sharers, and acknowledging that it "would be harder on a man." Society places so much emphasis on men's stoicism and strength, that the very notion that a man could have hyperempathy is virtually unheard of. Butler uses Olamina's physical appearance and the concept of hyperempathy to subvert gender expectations and highlight Christianity's inaccurate definitions of femininity and masculinity.

Butler's play on gender is especially salient given the growing attention to Biblical Manhood and traditional expressions of masculinity throughout the 1980s and 90s. Hailed as the father of this Christian Men's Movement in his LA Times Obituary, Edwin Louis Cole is known for raising awareness of the importance of defining masculinity by founding the Christian Men's Network in 1979 and writing the best-selling book *Maximized Manhood: A Guide to Family*

Survival in 1982 (LA Times Archive)[32]. Cole's book corroborates many of the views that Christian American Crusaders espouse in *Parable of the Talents*, particularly regarding men's leadership and women's silence and submission. He explains, "Women desire their men to make decisions. Not as a dictator, but as a leader…Nations, families, women, children all need decision makers" (Cole, 95). It is significant that Cole says "men" instead of husband here, granting all adult men intrinsic power over women just as President Jarret suggests when he advises women to obey their "husband, father, brother, or adult son" (Talents, 221). In his article "Godly Masculinities: Gender Discourse among the Promise Keepers," John P. Bartkowski credits Cole's book as a seminal text of the Promise Keepers, an Evangelical men's organization that was founded by Bill McCartney in 1990 and most likely Butler's inspiration for the radical Crusaders group of Christian Americas in *Parable of the Talents.* In a 1997 Washington Post article, Sylvia Moreno reports on a Promise Keepers gathering held at the Washington DC National Mall and a concurrent counter-protest led by members of the National organization for Women. Moreno's article quotes several wives of Promise Keepers, including one woman who states, "There are times, out of protection for me, that he makes the final decision. But I have an equal voice" and another who agrees and says, "A true husband is one who wants to protect and support" (Moreno).[33] While these wives maintain that they have a voice in their marriages, both reiterate the same stance on the husband's role as their protector, consistent with both President Jarret and Edwin Louis Cole's beliefs. Given these similarities and the Promise Keepers'

[32] https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2002-aug-31-me-cole31-story.html

[33] https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/local/longterm/library/PK/rally/women.htm#:~:text=NOW%20and%20other%20women's%20groups,dominance%20in%20families%20and%20society.

prominence at the time *Parable of the Talents* was written, it is very possible that Butler includes the Crusaders to warn against the danger of male-only Evangelical groups.

The Promise Keepers' interest in traditional masculinity and the Christian right's general emphasis on Conservative family values worked in tandem to denounce and demonize homosexuality–something Butler criticizes strongly throughout both *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*. Butler does this primarily by creating homosexual characters that demonstrate genuine love and affection for their partners. The best example of this is the Earthseed follower Allie's relationship with a woman named Mary Sullivan. While at a concentration camp run by Jarret's Crusaders, Allie begins a sexual relationship with Mary in secret. After confirming that Mary truly loves her friend, Olamina accepts their relationship easily and offers them protection and advice: "Then be good to one another," I said. "And if there's any trouble, you and your sisters stand with us, with Earthseed." This open display of tolerance demonstrates that religion does not have to be a source of antagonism to the queer community. Earthseed's tendency towards progressive social politics sets it apart from the Conservative Christian America that criminalizes Mary and Allie's love based on bigotry and an obsession with traditional family dynamics. One day, when a Christian American Reverend calls prisoners of the camp to testify, two women from Earthseed betray Allie and out her and Mary's relationship. They parrot the Christian right's homophobic aspersions, saying that Mary is "strong like a man, and she's mean" and calling their love "dirty and filthy and perverted" (566). In his 1981 speech on the "Homosexual Revolution," Jerry Falwell made similar remarks, describing gay people as dangerous and warning his listeners that "many of them are out after my children and your children" (Falwell, Homosexual Revolution). After the couple is exposed,

Crusaders torture them until Mary dies and Allie loses the ability to speak. Butler includes this graphic depiction of senseless violence to highlight the true horror of homophobia and its perpetuation in the United States during the 1980s and 90s.

Butler writes about queer characters to criticize the rampant homophobia imbedded in Christianity. The inherent "queerness" of her work also combats commonly held assumptions of what constitutes a family. In her thesis "Queer Families in Octavia Butler's Science Fiction," Jess S. Bennet cites Judith Butler's definition of heteronormativity to explain how people's strict definition of the family unit promotes homophobia and and the concept of gender differences:

> We can apply Judith Butler's terms to the family, which functions as a site of cultural perpetuation and reproduces heterosexualization and the norms of cultural intelligibility. Once I apply this definition of heteronormativity to family construction, we are left with families made of one father, one mother, and children, all of whom operate in the gender binary of male and female (Bennet, 4)[34]

Butler challenges this understanding of the family by highlighting relationships that escape this narrow definition. One very striking example of this is the relationship between Allie and her adopted son Justin. Allie is described as a completely capable and loving mother, despite being a lesbian with no biological relationship to her son. Their mother-son dynamic provides a counterpoint to the common argument that Christians must protect their children from homosexuality.

The members of Earthseed have a more fluid understanding of family overall, since the constant threat of torture and death brought people of all different races, ages, and sexualities

[34] https://jewlscholar.mtsu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/f00ff2a1-8539-4c7e-9660-768191afd8c1/content

together to form intense familial bonds. Olamina's daughter Larkin describes this impulse towards family-blending in Chapter 2 of *Parable of the Talents*, saying:

> Next came Allison Gilchrist and her sister Jillian—Allie and Jill. But Jill was killed later along the highway… Justin Rohr became Justin Gilchrist when the group found him cry-ing alongside the body of his dead mother. He was about three at the time, and he and Allie wound up coming to-gether in another small family. Last came the two families of ex-slaves that joined together to become one growing family of sharers. These were Grayson Mora and his daughter Doe and Emery Solis and her daughter Tori (Butler, Talents, 48).

Families grew and blended to help the people inside them survive, finding comfort in one another despite the tremendous trauma of religious oppression and abuse. Butler's inclusion of varying family dynamics implies that a family can be defined as any group of people who love and care for one another. Grayson and Emery are single parents who merge their families to form one interracial household. Allie raises Justin as a single mother for most of the novel, but expands her family at one point to encompass a mute woman named May and the recently orphaned Paula and Nina Noyer. While the fictional Christian America and actual Christian right used the notion of "family values" to harm people in queer and interracial relationships, Butler explains the development of family bonds as a source of salvation for people with these identities. She is reminding her readers that people in these relationships are not anti-family simply because their families look different from what is defined as socially valid.

In addition including queer representation in the *Parable* series, Butler also emphasizes the racial identities of her characters to highlight the latent white supremacy embedded in patriarchal Christian societies. One simple way that Butler does this is by describing the racial make-up of Earthseed: "Except for a larger town called Prata, the nearest towns are almost all

White. Prata is White and Latino with a sprinkling of Asians. We're you name it: Black, White, Latino, Asian, and any mixture at all—the kind of thing you'd expect to find in a city" (Butler, Talents, 73). This minor detail makes race an inextricable element of the series, even when it is not explicitly important to the plot. It is also a striking departure from Atwood's work, since Atwood mostly omits race from *The Handmaid's Tale* by implying that Gilead is an all-white society. While this omission also comments on the Christian right's prejudicial basis, Butler's deliberate inclusion of race gives her more room to discuss and condemn white supremacy outright.

Butler also emphasizes race by presenting Christian America as the latest iteration of American systemic racism. As previously stated, Micah Moreno's thesis on gender and racial passing links Olamina's performance of gender with America's Jim Crow Era. Butler also includes allusions to the Antebellum South, particularly when Olamina and the other members of Earthseed are imprisoned at a concentration camp called Camp Christian. Every prisoner at the camp is forced to wear a collar that shocks the wearer for misbehavior. Butler calls these shocks "lashes" to harken back to the time in American history when slavers would whip enslaved Black people in the same manner. At one point in the novel, Butler clarifies this association by describing people who *were* physically whipped: "Bankole says they look as though they've been lashed with whips. "I suppose," he said with great bitterness, "that people who don't have access to convict collars might have to exert themselves—resort to older methods of torture"" (Butler, Talents, 296). Notably, many of the non-Earthseed prisoners of Camp Christian are Black due to the country's racist law enforcement practices. Olamina describes meeting a Black man named

Day Turner[35] who was wrongfully accused of robbing a Christian America Church and sent to Camp Christian as punishment: “But the thieves were said to be Black, and Day and his friends were Black, so Day and his friends were presumed guilty [...] He and 18 or 20 other men were caught, and all the Black ones went to jail” (Butler, Talents, 408). While Christian America’s employment of concentration camps is horrific and dystopian, the presumed guilt of Black men was a very real and pressing problem in the 1980s and 90s, when Black men were being disproportionately imprisoned in America at an alarming rate. This section of the novels combines the horrors of America’s past and Butler’s present to demonstrate the urgent need for change in American society when she was writing in 1998.

[35] The last name Turner is a deliberate reference to Nat Turner, a Black preacher who notoriously led a rebellion of enslaved people in Virginia in 1831. Later on in Parable of the Talents, Day Turner also leads a rebellion against Camp Christian but fails.

CHAPTER 5: MODERN ADAPTATIONS

"This was a modern tragedy, and the women's movement lost in the end. And I didn't want to shy away from that just because maybe we want a different ending that would make us feel better. I think there are really important takeaways for where we are today, and the seeds of what we're dealing with 40, 50 years later were absolutely planted during this time. We wanted to connect some of those dots for audiences."

–Dahvi Waller, creator of the original Hulu series Mrs. America, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/mrs-america-finale-interview-creator-dahvi-waller-1296070/

Fifty-nine years have passed since Betty Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique,* catalyzing the Second Wave of the Feminist Movement and revitalizing women's interest in the Equal Rights Amendment. It is easy to view her efforts–and the efforts of other feminist activists such as Gloria Steinem and Bella Abzug–in vain. The ERA was not ratified by 1981, after all. Phyllis Schlafly and her Eagle Forum won. America's increasing conservatism throughout the 1980s only clarifies that failure. Nevertheless, 1970s feminism and the literature it inspired continues to captivate audiences and historians today. In 2017, Bruce Miller adapted Margaret Atwood's novel 1985 *The Handmaid's Tale* for the streaming service Hulu, and the series now enjoys critical and popular acclaim. Similarly, Octavia Butler's 1993 novel *Parable of the Sower*

entered the New York Times' bestseller list for the first time in 2020, thirty-three years after its original publication and fourteen years after Butler's death. This success most likely spurred the independent entertainment company A24's decision to purchase the rights for a film version of the novel, to be produced at a later date. While readers in 2022 clearly have an appetite for dystopian fiction, there is also a growing interest in the history of the Second Wave Feminist Movement and the rise in Conservative politics that followed. Most notably, in 2020 Dahvi Waller created the television series *Mrs. America* to document the ERA's ratification process. Each episode in the miniseries focuses on a particular woman involved in the Feminist Movement or STOP ERA, including Phyllis Schlafly, Gloria Steinem, Shirley Chisholm, Betty Friedan, Bella Abzug, and Jill Ruckelshaus. Although not every real-life counterpart viewed the series favorably[36], the show enjoyed massive success and its popularity demonstrates a demand for fresh perspectives on the Feminist Movement. All of these examples serve to demonstrate the Second Wave's continued relevance in 2022 as a source of entertainment, inspiration, and political insight.

But *why* are audiences so interested in these narratives? To understand this increased interest, it is necessary to evaluate the current political climate contextualizing these adaptations as well as the way that creators, directors, and writers have adapted their source material to fit a modern audience. It will be beneficial to first look at *The Handmaid's Tale*, since this series arguably catalyzed creators' renewed fascination with feminist dystopias. In 2017, Bruce Miller adapted Margaret Atwood's famous 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale* for television, and the series now has four seasons all available on the streaming platform Hulu. Since coming to the

---

[36] Insert Gloria Steinem critique

silver screen, feminists around the world have co-opted the iconic handmaid uniform of a red cloak and white bonnet to symbolize their resistance to gender inequality. In 2018, women in Northern Ireland wore the costume while protesting the country's ban on abortion pills despite the Republic of Ireland's referendum to overturn its abortion ban.[37] Similarly, women in both the United States and the United Kingdom have used this symbol from *The Handmaid's Tale* to protest the Trump Administration. For example, in July of 2018 women in Philadelphia donned the costume to protest former Vice President Mike Pence's arrival in the city.[38] A devout Christian, Pence is resolutely pro-life and supports overtunring Roe v. Wade, the landmark 1973 Supreme Court case that legalized abortion in the United States. In a 2018 interview with *The Guardian*, Margaret Atwood explained, "In countries that prohibit birth control and reproductive health information, the state claims ownership of women's bodies through enforced childbearing. What the costume is really asking viewers is: do we want to live in a slave state?"[39] Of course, Miller did not know the extent of the show's relevance when he began working on it in 2016. When asked by TIME Magazine about the show's haunting prescience, he responded, "I know. We unintentionally made the most relevant show on television."[40] While Miller did not set out to respond to the Trump Administration, the former president's election endowed the series with a sense of urgency that has maintained its momentum five years later. Although the first season of *The Handmaid's Tale* follows the same plot as Atwood's original novel, Miller's series

---

[37]https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/may/28/pro-choice-group-plans-to-offer-abortion-pills-in-northern-ireland-tour ; https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44256152

[38] https://www.phillymag.com/news/2018/07/24/mike-pence-protest-handmaids-tale/

[39]https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/03/how-the-handmaids-tale-dressed-protests-across-the-world

[40] TIME Interview

incorporates some notable changes to better fit the medium and appeal to 21st century audiences. Among these changes, Miller modernizes the series' setting, makes Offred a more agentic character, and diversifies Gilead with the inclusion of Black and queer characters. All of these changes work in tandem to give Atwood's story an even greater sense of urgency and applicability in our current society, contributing to its mass popularity and resonance with modern protest movements.

One of the main differences between the novel and the television series is its setting. While Atwood's novel does not explicitly state the time it takes place in, only implying a distant, dystopian future, Miller deliberately sets his series in the present day United States and emphasizes this through flashbacks to Offred's old life. In the series' pilot episode, we see Offred's first introduction to her new role as a Handmaid at the Rachel and Leah Center, where Aunt Lydia explains the necessity of an abrupt regime change: "As birth rates fell, they made things worse…Birth control pills, morning after pills, murdering babies...just so they could have their orgies, their Tinder" (Offred, 16:35). As an audience member, it is incredibly jarring to hear such a militantly religious and extremist character reference an app that was created and popularized in the last decade. This line is especially effective because it references a common criticisms of 21st century attitudes towards sex and relationships within the Christian Church. Miller explains that he wanted to include banal references to modern technology like Tinder, Uber, and Criagslist because the show's creators "wanted to make sure that it felt like "now" because it's scarier." This is definitely true: the blase way that characters interact with the world in flashbacks gives the impression that something like Gilead could happen in a slightly darker timeline.

In addition to modernizing the series' setting, *The Handmaid's Tale* series is also concerned with appealing to 21st century audiences' expectations and perspectives. This is especially evident in the show's characterization of Offred. In the novel, Offred is generally more passive and her rebellion is almost entirely internal: her thinking is rebellious but her actions largely are not. This works in the novel because readers are still privy to all those thoughts. However, for the more visual medium of television, audiences expect more direct action and agency from a show's protagonist. One example of this newfound agency comes in how Offred responds to Gilead's rise in power. In the novel, Offred is distraught when she is laid off from work, but never attempts to defy the regime's early demonstrations of sexism. Instead, she expresses her fears about the future to her husband Luke, who dismisses her with the promise that, "You know I'll always take care of you" (Atwood, 376). The same conversation plays out in episode three of the series, titled "Late." However, while Offred and Luke are alone in the novel, in the series Moira is also there to bear witness to Luke's casual misogyny. She scoffs at his declaration, prompting Offred to defend her husband's choice of words while also acknowledging their unintended meaning:

> LUKE: You know I'll take care of you
> MOIRA: Christ
> OFFRED: Oh, well that's not what he's saying
> LUKE: What, what's wrong?
> OFFRED: Nothing, it just sounds a little patronizing
> MOIRA: It is so fucking patronizing!
>
> "Late," 24:10

While Offred's tone of voice is still relatively light throughout this interaction, and she clearly does not want to hurt or offend Luke, she also verbally acknowledges how his words could be misconstrued as patronizing and misogynistic. Offred makes the same acknowledgment in the

novel, but only internally: “I thought, Already he's starting to patronize me. Then I thought, Already you're starting to get paranoid. I know, I said. I love you” (376). The reader can understand Offred’s thoughts because she tells them to us. However, the viewer can only gain that information through character interaction or voiceover. This creates more opportunities for Offred to be verbally expressive, immediately making her a more confrontational and expressive individual. In the same episode, Offred and Moira attend a protest against the declining rights of women under Gilead rule. This event was entirely invented by Bruce Miller and the episode’s director Reed Morano, and has no basis in the novel. Nevertheless, it is essential to understanding Offred and Moira’s characters as well as the regime’s willingness to violently suppress its opposition.

Another way that the series acknowledges Offred’s agency is by giving her a real name. In the novel, Offred’s name is derived from the Commander she is assigned to. She is literally “Of Fred,” marking her enslavement to him and evoking the image of Eve being born of Adam. This is a powerful statement about how women are viewed in patriarchal societies, and is effective in showcasing Offred’s subjugation as a handmaid. However, television demands that viewers maintain their interest in a character for *years*. It is understandable that the series’ showrunners wanted to strengthen Offred’s identity outside of her association with Fred, so they gave her the name “June.” This decision makes sense for a variety of reasons. On a practical level, it affords writers with the freedom to evolve Offred’s story beyond her Commander Fred’s household. While season one of the series follows the events of Atwood’s novel, this is not true for the succeeding seasons. It would be nonsensical to follow a protagonist with consistently changing names, and audiences would most likely feel less allegiance to her. The decision to

name Offred "June" can also be understood as an act of fan service. Atwood ends chapter one of *The Handmaid's Tale* by describing how the women at the Rachel and Leah Center introduced themselves: "In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed: Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June" (Atwood, Handmaid, 6). Many readers assumed that Offred's real name was June because of this, a fact the showrunners were clearly aware of. Regardless of *why* the series' creators decided to give Offred the name June, the very fact that they name her at all changes the nature of Offred's identity from page to screen.

Another major change between the book and the television series is the latter's treatment of race. In Atwood's novel, Gilead's penchant for white supremacy is evident primarily through its omission of racial minorities: there are no characters of color in the novel. Atwood implies that all people of color have been sent to the colonies to work and later die. Conversely, there are several Black characters in the television adaptation of the series, including both Offred's husband and her best friend. This change is significant because it affects how viewers are meant to understand Gilead society. Of course, *The Handmaid's Tale* presents an immoral and abhorrent world, but the television series' creator and producers feared the implication of extending that cruelty to casting choices. In an 2017 interview with Time Magazine, Miller explained his decision to implement racially blind casting for his Hulu adaptation:

> In the book, it's an all-white world. That was a very big discussion with Margaret about what the difference was between reading the words, "There are no people of color in this world" and seeing an all-white world on your television, which has a very different impact. What's the difference between making a TV show about racists and making a racist TV show where you don't hire any actors of color? So that was part of it.[41]

[41] https://time.com/4754200/the-handmaids-tale-showrunner-changes-from-book/

This is certainly a valid point. As twenty-first century viewers, we have come to expect more diverse casts in film and television. Moreover, to discriminate casting on the basis of race would rob Black actors of roles and deprive audiences of stand-out performances like Samira Wiley's portrayal of Moira. Nevertheless, this decision comes with distinctly negative ramifications by erasing the link between Evangelical theocracy and white supremacy. Atwood's novel already fails to fully engage with this discussion by eliminating all people of color from Gilead. But by portraying Gilead as a fully integrated society, Miller proposes a narrative where race is no longer an issue. Wealthy white men have no problem procreating with Black Handmaids so long as they are able to produce children, and it does not matter to them that these children are biracial. In his interview, Miller brings up the distinction between "a TV show about racists" and "a racist TV show." However, his casting choice makes it difficult to even define characters in *The Handmaid's Tale* as racist.

Miller's understanding of race in Gilead transcends his desire for fair and racially blind casting–it also indicates his view about America's race problem in the real world. In a 2017 interview with INSIDER, Miller argues that setting *The Handmaid's Tale* in 2017 alleviates the burden of discussing white supremacy with the Evangelical Christian right:

> I'm not going to the Census Bureau and finding out whether all these things were true, but my sense was that the Evangelical movement had gotten a little more diverse in terms of race. So that there would be more diversity within a group like the Sons of Jacob, which is the group of very religious people who take over…It seemed like if [...] the way people think about races had changed and diminished over time, and you were in a world where fertility rates have fallen so low, that fertility would trump everything. That that would be the one important thing.

This thesis that Evangelical Christians are less racist than they were in 1985 is optimistic, but invalidates the very real racial prejudice that still exists in the United States, and in Christian America in particular. Robert P. Jones, the author of *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in Christian America,* conducted a thought experiment in 2020 to test current Christians' attitudes towards race and racial discrimination. Jones created a "Racism Index" by conducting a survey with 15 questions pertaining to the existence of structural racism, police brutality, and other forms of discrimination within the criminal justice system. He found that white Evangelical protestants had the greatest median score of 0.78 on the Racism Index, while religiously unaffiliated white Americans scored 0.42 and Black Protestants scored 0.24. In his article discussing the survey, Jones explains that, "While most white Christians think of themselves as people who hold warm feelings toward African Americans, holding racist views is nonetheless positively and independently associated with white Christian identity."[42] By neglecting the issue of race in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Miller negates the relationship between Christianity and white supremacy. Critics of the television series often criticize the show for its treatment of race. In fact, in 2021, organizers of the Women's March in Washington DC updated their guidelines to discourage women from wearing Handmaid costumes to the march:

> The use of 'Handmaid's Tale' imagery to characterize the controlling of women's reproduction has proliferated, primarily by white women across the country, since the show has gained popularity. This message continues to create more fragmentation, often around race and class, it erases the fact that Black women, undocumented women, incarcerated women, poor women, and disabled women have always had their reproduction freedom controlled. [43]

---

[42] https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/racism-among-white-christians-higher-among-nonreligious-s-no-coincidence-ncna1235045

[43] https://news.yahoo.com/handmaid-tale-outfits-banned-saturday-210321009.html?guccounter=1

Ironically, in attempting to diversify *The Handmaid's Tale*, Miller exposed the narrative's deficient ability to tackle the intersectionality of gender and race. This criticism also highlights how, despite attempts to modernize and ground the series in realism, its dystopian genre can still be viewed as a detriment to inciting action against gender discrimination.

While showrunners of *The Handmaid's Tale* did not set out to defy Trump's America, the same cannot be said of Dahvi Waller, creator of the 2020 Hulu miniseries *Mrs. America*. *Mrs. America* is a nine episode historical drama detailing the Equal Rights Amendment ratification process throughout the 1970s. As evidenced by its name, the show focuses primarily on Phyllis Schlafly and her successful attempt to thwart the ERA with the development of her STOP ERA Movement. Although accurate to real historical events, Waller clearly intends to portray Schlafly as a harbinger of modern conservative politics. This is especially evident in the ninth and final episode of the series, titled "Reagan." Notably, this is one of only two episodes in the series not named after a woman involved in either the Feminist Movement or STOP ERA.[44] The other aberrant episode is titled "Houston," in reference to the 1977 National Women's Conference held in Houston, Texas and the "Pro Family Rally" Schlafly ran outside the convention center. Waller's decision to name the final episode of the series after Ronald Reagan is telling because it indicates to the viewer that the series focus has transcended the conflict between feminists and anti-feminists. Early into the episode, two of Phyllis Schlafly's initial supporters discuss the evolution of STOP ERA throughout the 1970s:

---

[44] The other aberration is episode nine, eight "Houston." This is a reference to the 1977 National Women's Conference held in Houston, Texas and the "Pro Family Rally" Schlafly ran outside the convention center on the same day.

> ALICE: I've always supported Phyllis when things were simple and clear, when it was about protecting our place in the home. But somewhere along the way, it has become about something else.
> ROSEMARY: We are in the midst of a conservative revolution. After years of being ostracized and discounted, religious voices are being heard in the political arena. Did you really think there'd be no casualties? It's bigger than the ERA now.
> "Reagan," 7:05

The women in this scene have no real life counterparts, and their conversation has no factual basis. Waller constructed this interaction to promote her thesis that Schlafly paved the way for the Christian right's emergence in American politics–ushering in an era where religious voices were heard at the detriment of American women. Alice's character throughout the entire series, and especially in this episode, represents the myriad of housewives who believed Schlafly's "housewife privilege" argument and promoted a new wave of right wing politics that hurt, rather than helped, women. The rest of the episode depicts Schlafly's endorsement of Ronald Reagan in the 1980 presidential election, painting her involvement as invaluable to his success over Carter. Despite the importance of her work, she does not receive the cabinet position she expected for her efforts. The episode ends with a phone call between Schlafly and the president-elect, wherein Reagan acknowledges her value before ultimately rejecting her: "Your coalition carried me across the finish line. Your [conservative mailing] list was invaluable. But Jim tells me that I didn't do too well with the ladies. Seems I have a woman problem. It isn't that you don't deserve it, it's just that I can't afford to upset the pro-ERA groups" (*Mrs. America*, 45:45). After this disappointing conversation, Schlafly goes into her kitchen and begins making dinner for her husband. The series ends with the exceptional activist once again back in the domestic sphere, clad in her apron as a voice overhead sings, "the year is going by, and the season's getting on.

Don't you think it's time to build yourself a home?" (Molly Drake, Little Weaver Bird). Both this scene and the scene between Alice and Rosemary construct an image of Schlafly and STOP ERA as sacrificial victims to the Reagan Revolution. They were necessary for revitalizing the Christian right faction of the Republican party. However, neither succeeded in helping women– Schlafly could not even help herself.

In a 2020 Washington Post review of the series, Max Boot claims, "In searching for the origins of our current madness, you can start by watching the historically accurate drama "Mrs. America." He continues,

> Schlafly pioneered the kind of incendiary, irrational rhetoric that galvanized much of the conservative movement during its early years–and, sadly continues to excite it today. There was always a big difference, however, between what activists like her said and how Republican officeholders acted [...] Now the wing nuts at last have the presidency they have always wanted (Boot).

While one could dismiss this review as one man's opinion, the way that the series is structured draws clear parallels between Donald Trump and Phyllis Schlafly. One similarity the series highlights is their common tendency towards deceit and embellishment. The best example of this comes in the ninth and tenth episodes of the series, titled

One prominent example of this comes from the tenth and final episode of the series, titled "Reagan."

The series depicts Schlafly's political strategy as both deceptive and aggressive, two words often employed when criticizing Trump's own messaging. One prominent example of this comes from episode four of the series, titled "Betty." This episode depicts Schlafly's introduction to political debate, and shows her infamous debate with Betty Friedan

The series draws clear parallels between Schlafly's tactical organization of STOP ERA and the current Republican Party's political strategies. This is most notable in a scene

Episode 4, Betty: "Deny and deflect. Better yet go on the offensive, accuse her of something worse

Although the series stays relatively true to real-life events, Waller does not attempt to mask the similarities she finds between past and present Conservatism. She also emphasizes the continued efforts of feminists to galvanize support for the ERA today.

In 2017, Nevada became the first state to ratify the amendment since 1977, and in 2020, Virginia was the 38th state to ratify the ERA. This historic decision afforded the amendment its necessary ¾ majority, and should have been enough to grant its placement in the United States Constitution. Unfortunately, the time limit placed on the ERA's ratification barred this from happening: In 2020, the

Butler's description of President Jarret's political strategy and run for office mirrors

election and the rhetoric he used when appealing to voters parallels Jerry Falwell's

Throughout the late 1970s and 80s, Conservative politicians and Christian preachers defined

While Atwood's 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale* alludes to the social upheaval pre-dating Gilead, many of the issues described are false or highly exaggerated to justify a religious uprising. Conversely, the social and political dysfunction contextualizing *Parable of the Sower* is

very real. The story begins in 2024, in a United States marred by gang violence, wealth inequality, and climate disaster. Lauren Olamina devises Earthseed in the hopes that she can help herself and those among her find peace amidst the fear, desperation, and anger that plagues America.