"Myth is more instructive than history": (Re)constructions of Biblical myths in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*

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Abstract
The paper deals with The Handmaid's Tale *by Margaret Atwood and* The Passion of New Eve *by Angela Carter. Both writers show dystopian regimes which reconstruct Biblical myths since, as it is suggested in their fiction, totalitarian states abuse myths to represent women as passive victims and objects of desire and rescue. And because demythologizing involves remythologizing, Atwood and Carter attempt not only to refuse the representations of the past literary and mythological tradition but also to declare subjectivity for their heroines; women are represented in Nancy Roberts' words "as rescuers rather than victims"*[1]*. Margaret Atwood uses the genre of speculative fiction to depict the nightmarish Gilead, a fundamentalist totalitarian regime reconstructed from patriarchal narratives of the Bible and American Puritanism. The leaders of Gilead value women for their reproductive function as 'two-legged wombs'. Atwood's protagonist, Offred, although she has no real power to rebel against patriarchal prescriptions, claims her body and her memory as her own territory. Through her narrative she undermines Gilead's myth of the silent passivity of women. Offred not only survives the oppression, she also re-writes the story of 'walking ovaries' into her own story of identity, denying the role of nameless Handmaid. In Angela Carter's speculative fiction* The Passion of New Eve*, the Biblical myth of the creation of Eve from Adam's body is remythologized by Mother, the leader of a group of militant feminists. A British man, Evelyn, is kidnapped and transformed through surgery into "the new Eve"*[2] *by Mother, who is a genius surgeon as well. I focus here on intertextuality, which offers Atwood and Carter a strategy for reconstructing the gaps inherent in Biblical myths related to reproduction, creation of woman and infertility.*

Keywords
Margaret Atwood, Angela Carter, Biblical myth, speculative fiction

Talking Back

Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter are both known for "talking back" to literary tradition.[3] In this paper I would like to present how the two dystopias they create find ways out of the labyrinth of the dangers and powers of ideological interpretations

1 Nancy Roberts, *The Schools of Sympathy: Gender and Identification through the Novel* (Montreal and Kingston, London, Buffalo: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 108.

2 Angela Carter, *The Passion of New Eve* (London: Virago, 1982), 70. All subsequent quotations from Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* are from this edition with page numbers indicated in the text.

3 Nancy Roberts, in *Schools of Sympathy*, uses the phrase "talking back" in a sense in which both Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter courageously question and probe the status of the heroine both in the novel as well as in society. Roberts explains that she has taken the phrase from Bell Hooks' book of the same name. Nancy Roberts, *The Schools of Sympathy: Gender and Identification through the Novel* (Montreal and Kingston, London, Buffalo: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 107.

of myths. In their rewritings of Biblical myths[4], Atwood and Carter not only refuse the prescribed roles and representations of women, they create types of women who challenge standards of patriarchal society. Both writers suggest a different view of female protagonists; they reject seeing women as passive "objects of speech and desire". Atwood's handmaids and as well as the Wives, Marthas and Econowives, are denied basic human rights such as freedom of speech and freedom of sexual behaviour. Nancy Roberts, in *Schools of Sympathy*, sees the work of Atwood and Carter as "representative of the attempt by women to claim subjectivity for themselves, to represent women as *subjects* of speech and of desire, as rescuers rather than victims"[5]. I analyze Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (HT) and Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (PNE) as two examples of speculative fiction[6] which hypothesize on the question What if Old Testament myths were literally reconstructed?

In the case of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Biblical narrative of Sarah's use of her handmaid, Hagar, as a surrogate womb for Abraham's heir becomes the basis for the legalization of handmaids' victimization. Atwood presents how the leaders of Gilead corrupted the original Biblical story to establish their vision. In a similar way, Angela Carter's dogmatic leader of military feminists, Mother, reconstructs the Biblical myth of Eve's creation from Adam's body. Moreover, in Mother's plan, the new Eve should also incorporate the new Virgin Mother.

"Give me children or else I die"

The Republic of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale* solves the problems of a decreasing birth rate by appropriating Biblical stories of the handmaid Bilhah, who is impregnated by her master, Jacob, married to Rachel. Leah, Rachel's sister and Jacob's first wife, had been fertile and blessed by God; but Rachel, the second wife, was thought to be infertile until much later. This is the myth the patriarchal regime of Gilead forces on its citizens:

> It's the usual story, the usual stories. God to Adam, God to Noah. *Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth.* Then comes the mouldy old Rachel and Leah stuff we had drummed into us at the Centre. *Give me children, or else I die. Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? Behold my maid Bilhah.*

4 The term "Biblical myth" is used in terms of Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (London: Penguin, 1999), where he discusses the relations of myths and literature. Frye sees the Bible as "the main source of undisplaced myth in our tradition" (140). In *The Double Vision of Language* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991) Northrop Frye distinguishes between Biblical myths and literary myths, suggesting that Biblical myths are "myths to live by" and Biblical metaphors "metaphors to live in" (16-17). Biblical myths are also analyzed in *Words with Power: Being a second study of "The Bible and Literature"* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), in which Frye studies "the relation of Biblical myth and metaphor to Western verbal culture, more particularly its literature" (98).

5 Nancy Roberts, *The Schools of Sympathy: Gender and Identification through the Novel* (Montreal and Kingston, London, Buffalo: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 108.

6 Both *The Passion of New Eve* and *The Handmaid's Tale* include elements from various genres, such as the picaresque novel, gothic fiction and romance. The term "speculative fiction" or SF can encompass other literary forms and sub-genres, such as dystopia, utopia, cyberpunk, space opera, etc. In my paper, speculative fiction is used to characterize Carter's and Atwood's novels because the "what if?" question typical of the genre is crucial to both novels. The two novels hyperbolize the extreme versions of "utopian" societies, Beulah in *The Passion of New Eve* and Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The disturbing versions of these alternative states are "analogic models", which Darko Suvin discusses in "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre". Suvin stresses the potential of speculative fiction to diagnose and warn about "possible alternatives". Darko Suvin, "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre." *College English* 34.3 (1972), 378.

She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her. And so on and so forth.[7]

The handmaid in Atwood's bleak dystopia must produce a child for the Commander and his Wife in a literal copy of the Old Testament: "*She shall bear upon my knees*" (Gen. 30: 3).[8] Atwood describes the ceremony of child birth. "[The Wife] scrambles onto the Birthing Stool, sits on the seat behind and above Janine, so that Janine is framed by her: her skinny legs come down on either side, like the arms of an eccentric chair" (HT 135). *The Handmaid's Tale* alludes to the motif of the Immaculate Conception: Commander's Wives, in their blue robes and veils, are imagined to have children without having sexual intercourse. In contrast to Rachel's active decision to raise her handmaid's child, the Wives and Handmaids are forced to do so.

If the Handmaid does not succeed in having children she is declared an Unwoman. In the novel Unwomen -- older women who cannot bear children, feminists and lesbians -- are sent to the Colonies to die. The Freudian axiom "anatomy is destiny" has been applied stringently in Gilead. Women have been reduced to their biological function: reproduction. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, women are valued only as "viable ovaries" (HT 153).

Klaus Peter Műller comments on how

> traditional myths are destructive for Atwood because they annihilate human freedom and the possibility of creating something new. The old, well-known myths include pre-determined roles and conclusions, they imply essential, unchangeable characteristics described by Atwood as reifying human beings and giving them the quality of "thinghood".[9]

On the other hand, Northrop Frye explains that myths are designed "not to describe a specific situation but to contain it in a way that does not restrict its significance to that one situation. Its truth is inside its structure not outside".[10] Gilead, however, is an example of restricting the significance of (Biblical) myths by adhering to the literal reconstruction of them. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood clearly shows the contrast between the rich text of the Bible, and the restrictive and reductionist reading of its narratives by the leaders of Gilead. In Atwood's novel the handmaids are seen as things,

7 Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (London: Vintage, 1996), 99. All subsequent quotations from Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* are from this edition with page numbers indicated in the text.

8 All the quotations from the Bible are from *The New American Bible*. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *The New American Bible.* http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/. Accessed 3 July 2009.

9 Klaus Peter Műller, "Re-constructions of Reality in Margaret Atwood's Literature: A Constructionist Approach". Reingard Nischik, ed., *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact* (New York: Camden House, 2000), 247.
Critics have discussed Atwood's use of mythic material. Estella Lauter in *Women as Mythmakers*, suggests that Atwood creates a new myth, "one which does not require the triumph of one person over another." Lauter, *Women as Mythmakers: Poetry and Visual Art by Twentieth-Century Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 215. Sharon Rose Wilson comments on Atwood's re-visioning of myths, suggesting that Atwood creates a new feminist mythology, but it is always one as unafraid to laugh at itself as at literary tradition, institutions, history and patriarchy" Sharon Rose Wilson, "Mythological Intertexts in Margaret Atwood's Works." Reingard Nischik, ed., *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact* (New York: Camden House, 2000), 226.

10 Northrop Frye, *The Great Code*: *The Bible and Literature* (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1983), 46.

as objects. Gilead denies Offred her identity and reduces her to an object, an instrument to increase the population, a bare fragment, "torso only", a "two-legged womb" (HT 146). The Handmaids, like all women, are left without civil rights: they cannot own property, read and write, or even walk and talk freely. Moreover, the Handmaids have no names, only patronyms that completely erase their past identities. Ironically, the planners of Gilead find themselves trapped within the ideology of myth as well. The regime indoctrinates people into so-called traditional Biblical values which had originally been propagated by the Commander's wife Serena Joy. Serena had been a television gospel singer and propagator of New Right ideology, but now in Gilead she is silenced and voiceless like all the women.

> She doesn't make speeches any more. 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 has been taken at her word (HT 56).

In the Gilead's reconstruction of the Biblical "*blessed be the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the silent*" (HT 100), the citizens are trapped in the prison of the old myth, which has been interpreted as prescribing silence, passivity and powerlessness to its female citizens. And because the Bible is kept locked up and "servants" (handmaids and Marthas -- another allusion to the New Testament heroines) are not allowed to read, the totalitarian regime is able to implement one single interpretation of the text. Atwood's speculative fiction re-evaluates the narratives of the Old Testament on which the theocratic regime of Gilead is based. The rulers of Gilead rewrite not only history but also the Bible, propagating only one discourse manifested in its own genealogy, history, theology and biography. I use Lyotard's concept of the loss of credibility of grand narratives to characterize Gilead's exclusion of other discourses. Lyotard uses term metanarrative to suggest that grand historical stories claim universal validity.[11] He asserts that metanarrative operates through inclusion and exclusion. The homogenizing forces exclude other discourses in the name of universal principles. In a similar way, the totalitarian regime of Gilead promulgates its authoritarian discourse over individual freedom. Jo Carruthers suggests that "in the light of the theories of Lyotard and others, however, it now becomes possible to think in terms of a 'postmodern bible': that is a set of heterogeneous, conflicting voices and stories rather than a monologic voice of unquestionable divine authority."[12] The idea of the Bible as a dialogic and polyphonic text was introduced even earlier by Harold Fisch in *New Stories for Old*. Fisch comments on the nature of the Biblical narratives which invite new meanings, "the result [being] somewhere between interpretation and a new invention."[13]

Gilead controls the Bible by keeping it locked away. The citizens are exposed only to the ideological interpretation, as Offred acknowledges: "We can be read from it, by him, but we cannot read" (HT 98). Aunt Lydia advises Offred to "cultivate poverty of spirit. Blessed are the meek. She didn't go on to say anything about inheriting the earth" (HT 74). Atwood seems to suggest that Gilead, as a monologic state, sees the dialogic

11 Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 37.

12 Jo Carruthers, "Literature". John F. A. Sawyer, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture* (Malden, Oxford, Victoria: Blackwell, 2006), 265.

13 Harold Fisch, *New Stories for Old: Biblical Patterns in the Novel* (Basingtoke: Macmillan, 1998), 18.

plurality of the Bible as a possible threat. The importance of monologic and authoritarian interpretation in Gilead is articulated by Aunt Lydia's proclamation that "[w]e were a society [...] dying of too much choice" (HT 35). The choice represents plurality, which endangers the control over the citizens of Gilead. Michael Holquist describes how totalitarian states use a single language, which he calls "official discourse". These single languages

> are masks for ideologies of many different kinds, but they all privilege oneness; the more powerful the ideology, the more totalitarian (monologic) will be claims of its language. Extreme versions of such language would be religious systems and certain visionary forms of government.[14]

Thus the leaders of Gilead insist on a single language and single interpretation of the Bible.

In *The Great Code* (1982) Northrop Frye suggests that "the Bible is more a small library that a real book."[15] And in *The Poetics of Biblical Narratives* Meir Sterneberg suggests that "Biblical narratives are notorious for their sparsity of detail [...]. And the resultant gaps have been left open precisely at key points [...]."[16] While Gilead presents the Bible as a homogeneous text, Atwood's Offred uses the gaps to "talk back" silently: "*Give me children or else I die.* There's more than one meaning to it" (HT 71). Thus, Offred uses the gaps to reconstruct her identity as a human being, recollects and relates her little narrative[17a], her history. She has to insist on her silent story in a state that has erased her family, her name and her voice. By recognizing the gaps between Gilead's simplistic and dogmatic reading of the Bible, Offred realizes the dialogic nature of the Bible itself.

Offred rejects her position as sexual slave and claims her own territory in her memory. She uses it to move "out and away into her private imaginative spaces."[18] Memories of the past and personal desires are to be erased and marginalized to form an absolutely uniform collective conditioned by the theocratic regime, with a pyramidal elite controlling past and present. The Republic of Gilead forces its people to submit to the power of one religion, one law, one myth, one discourse expressed in terms of universal

14 Michael Holquist, *Dialogism* (London: Routledge, 2002), 53.

15 Northrop Frye, *The Great Code*: *The Bible and Literature* (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1983), ix. Stephen Prickett and Robert Caroll similarly point out that it is "arguable that every grand narrative detected in the Bible breaks down under critical scrutiny, and that the Bible is, in fact, more a collection of open-ended stories and narratives […]" Caroll and Prickett, *The Bible: Authorized King James Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), xi. They continue to discuss the dialogism of the Bible by arguing that "any reader who really begins to engage with the Biblical text is, in spite of the occasional moments of familiarity, inevitably reminded of how essentially *alien* are the worlds of both Old Testament and New Testaments. Caroll and Prickett, *The Bible: Authorized King James Version,* xxx. In *Words and the Word,* Stephen Prickett defends the dialogism, polyphony and richness of the Bible: "the Bible is not just a monoglot recontextualization of words and ideas […] [i]t is a palimpsest of languages and contexts meeting and overlapping one another." Stephen Prickett, *Words and the Word* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 213.

16 Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 191.

17 The term "little narrative" is used to distinguish from the grand narratives (all-embracing explanatory theories) of Jean-Francois Lyotard, who recognizes their failings. The little narrative is the individual seeking "to resist the power of authoritarian grand narratives, such as the state […]."ed. Stuart Sim, *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge), 306.

18 Coral Ann Howells, *Margaret Atwood* (Houndsmills, Basingtoke, Hampshire and London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1996), 135.

truths and slogans: "All of us here will lick you into shape, says Aunt Lydia, with satisfied good cheer" (HT 124). Offred, however, refuses to believe in Gilead. As Lyotard notes, "the grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation."[19]

The very name of the Republic of Gilead comes from the Bible: "There was a chieftain, the Gileadite Jephthah, born to Gilead of a harlot." (Judg. 11, 1) The children of Atwood's Gilead are born to handmaids for the general prosperity of the state, to increase the birth rate. Contrary to the Biblical original, the children of the handmaids were not driven away, as with Biblical Jephthah, but grow up in their step-mother's households. Moreover, their biological mothers, who are not allowed to stay with their children, are promised social security by the state, i.e. not to be sent to Colonies. Paradoxically, the original Biblical narrative has a subversive potential, which is why Gilead controls the text of the Bible by allowing only the Commanders to read it out.

Atwood and Carter's totalitarian regimes of Gilead and Beulah (mis)use the Bible to propagate their ideology. However, their fictional political ideologies may be linked to historical and/or contemporary totalitarian regimes. *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture* points out that "Nazi-anti-Semitism, the apartheid regime in South Africa, or the Jewish extremist settlers on the West Bank [...] use the Bible to give authority and respectability to what most would consider to be an unjust case."[20] Similarly, the crimes against humanity in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Passion of New* Eve are not directed against the original meaning of the Bible, but "against humanity."[21] The danger of general happiness in the Republic of Gilead is countered by ignoring the individual.

In a similar way Angela Carter discusses the danger of reductionist readings of mythic schemes in her *Sadeian Woman:* "The nature of the individual is not resolved into but is ignored by these archetypes, since the function of the archetype is to diminish the unique 'I' in favour of a collective."[22] Carter emphasizes how the idealization of woman's reproductive abilities supports patriarchy, as it imprisons women in the domestic sphere. In *The Sadeian Woman* Carter suggests "the secularisation of women", a concept with an intention to "demystify" the womb, which she refers to as the "most potent matrix of all mysteries" (108-9).

> To deny the bankrupt enchantments of the womb is to pare a good deal of the fraudulent magic from the idea of women, to reveal us as we are, simple creatures of flesh and blood whose expectations deviate from biological necessity sufficiently to force us to abandon, perhaps regretfully, perhaps with relief the deluded priestesshood of a holy reproductive function. This demystification extends to the biological iconography of women (109-110).

19 Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 37.

20 John F. A. Sawyer, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture* (Malden, Oxford, Victoria: Blackwell, 2006), 3.

21 John F. A. Sawyer, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture* (Malden, Oxford, Victoria: Blackwell, 2006), 4.

22 Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Excercise in Cultural History* (London: Virago, 1979), 6. All subsequent quotations from Carter's *The Sadeian Woman* are from this edition with page numbers indicated in the text.

Handmaids in *The Handmaid's Tale* are seen as objects without any rights, as "sacred vessels" (HT 146) because of their mythical and "holy reproductive function." In *The Passion of New Eve,* Carter explores discourses of motherhood by presenting the self-created super-human matriarch, Mother. This creation of super-humans is typical for myths. As Anja Műller observes about Carter's relation to myths: "Myths create universal super-humans and restrict the play of meaning that characterises our language, they falsify facts, while blurring the edges of reality in a manner that points to their inherent danger rather than subversiveness."[23]

"You will be a new Eve … be glad"

In *The Passion of New Eve*, the Biblical myth of Eve's creation from Adam's body is taken literally. The male protagonist, with the ambiguous name Evelyn, regards women as mere sex objects; and after a short sexual relationship with Leilah, he leaves the violent urban space and becomes lost in the desert. Here he is kidnapped by militant feminist fighters who bring him to their leader, Mother. Mother is a satirical portrait of a matriarchal superwoman. She castrates Evelyn in order to create a perfect woman, Eve: "You will be a new Eve, not Evelyn! [...] And the Virgin Mary, too. Be glad!"(PNE 70) The castration is an indirect punishment for Evelyn's impregnating and abandoning Leilah. "Oh, the dreadful symbolism of that knife! To be castrated with a phallic symbol! (But what else, says Mother, could do the trick?)" (PNE 70) Mother's ambition is a feminization of the world through myth and knife, but her utopian project is doomed to failure. As Carter, in *The Sadeian Woman,* comments:

> All the mythic versions of women, from the myth of the redeeming purity of the virgin to that of the healing, reconciling mother, is consolatory nonsense; and consolatory nonsense seems to me a fair definition of myth anyway (5).

Carter employs an ironic strategy Roland Barthes suggests as an instrument against the dangerous effect of myth: she creates an anti-myth. According to Barthes' *Mythologies*,"...the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn, and to produce an *artificial myth*: and this reconstituted myth will in fact be a mythology."[24] In her explicitly "anti-mythic"[25] story T*he Passion of New Eve*, she explores feminist counter-myths created to empower women, finding these myths potentially dangerous as well.

In the subterranean city of Beulah, Mother is a self-created goddess: "She was her own mythological artefact; she had reconstructed her flesh painfully, with knives and with needles into a transcendental form" (PNE 60). Mother is the embodiment of the mythical cult of sacred and self-sacrificing motherhood. The genius surgeon and scientist transforms herself into a "paradigm of mothering" (PNE 60). Anna Kérchy suggests that "in her grotesque incarnation Mother unveils the illusory, universalizing,

23 Anja Műller, *Angela Carter: Identity Constructed/Deconstructed* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1992), 73.

24 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Vintage, 2000), 135.

25 Angela Carter refers to *The Passion of New Eve* as an explicitly "anti-mythic novel" in her "Notes from the Front Line". ed. Michelene Wandor, *On Gender and Writing* (London: Pandora Press, 1983), 71.

essentialist nature of the fiction of the mother, as well as the painful, tormenting consequences of this 'consolatory myth' for women."[26]

The mythical Immaculate Conception is a political rebellion by Mother, her scientific experiment. When Mother tells Eve that "Myth is more instructive than history" (PNE 68) she plans to deconstruct and rewrite history as a means of reconstructing the world according to her own mythology. Mother transforms Evelyn into Eve, deleting history by producing "a blank sheet of paper" (PNE 83). Barthes suggests that "the function of myth is to empty reality: it is, literally, a ceaseless flowing out, a haemorrhage, or perhaps an evaporation, in short, a perceptible absence."[27] After creating Eve from a male body, she planned to impregnate Eve with Evelyn's own sperm. The New Virgin Mother is paradoxically named New Eve, after the first woman, punished forever to bring children in pain.

> To the woman he said: "I will intensify the pangs of your childbearing; in pain shall you bring forth children. Yet your urge shall be for your husband, and he shall be your master (Gen 3, 16)

This punishment links the first woman with the Mater Dolorosa. The Biblical Eve is promised that she will give birth to the first promise of a Redeemer for fallen mankind. New Eve in *The Passion of New Eve* is supposed to give birth to the New Messiah: "Hail, Evelyn, most fortunate of men! You're going to bring forth the Messiah of the Antithesis!" (PNE 67)

The first Biblical woman, Eve, Hawah, meaning Life, is a pre-model of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of all living people, and thus can be understood as a model of Biblical motherhood. However, another mythical embodiment of motherhood in *The Passion of New Eve* is Mother, who is despotic, militant and cuts off all that does not conform to her myths --as in the warning of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale*: "we will lick you into shape". Similarly, Mother's matriarchal dogmatism depends on the conformity of her daughters. In *The Handmaid's Tale* Offred's painful reconstruction of her story signals the end of Gilead. In *The Passion of New Eve*, with declining belief in Mother comes the end of Beulah. When Mother acknowledges the impossibility of her mythology, her mythical super-motherhood is reduced to the dream of a "lone, mad old lady" (PNE 189).

The name of Mother's feminist state alludes to Biblical and also literary tradition. The word Beulah comes from Isaiah: "Your old name was *Forsaken* and the name of your land was *Desolate*. No more! I have determined to change your state and bless you. From now on, you shall be called *Hepzibah* ('My delight is in her') and your land shall be called *Beullah* (that is *Married*')." (Isa. 62, 4) The Biblical passage indicates both the marriage parallel and a close spiritual relationship with God resulting in delight. Mother's version of Beulah, however, becomes a satirical caricature of this ideal.

As a literal allusion, Beulah in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, is the pastoral earthly paradise, where Christian and the other pilgrims stop for a while before crossing the River of Death.[28] Blake presents a precise description of Beulah in the poem "Milton": "There is a place where Contraries are equally True / This place is called Beulah. It is

26 Anna Kérchy, "Fantastic Freakings: Decomposing Narrative and Deformed Femininity in Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*," 4, *Palimpszeszt*, Accessed 19 Apr. 2009. http://magyar-iradalom.elte.hu/palimpszest/24_szam/09. html.

27 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Vintage, 2000), 143.

28 John Bunyan, "Pilgrim's Progress", Christian Classicls Ethereal Library. Accessed 28 Nov. 2009. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/bunyan/pilgrim.toc.html>.

a pleasant lovely Shadow / Where no dispute can come."[29] Beulah is for Blake an idealized place without conflict. Mother's Beulah, in contrast, is intended as a utopian place of equality and peace; but because of Mother's dogmatism it becomes a place of distortion, pain and war between the sexes. Beulah may also be, as Linden Peach states in *Angela Carter*, "a poetic name for the state of Israel in its future restored condition"[30], the use of which adds another layer of irony.

Women-only Enclaves

On Mother's reconstruction of male myths and her creation of a counter-myth Anja Műller states: "Translating male mythology too naively into a feminine shorthand, women run the risk of repeating the faulty patterns of male history; the mythical fallacy can only end in tragedy."[31] Or, in Carter's words from *The Sadeian Woman*: "Mother Goddesses are just as silly as Father Gods" (5).

The counter-myths of radical feminists like Moira and Offred's mother are echoed in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Moira used to dream about the project of a female utopian counter-myth society: "a women-only enclave" (HT 181). Hilde Staels argues that radical feminists in *The Handmaid's Tale* "may very well reinforce the belief system of the New Christian Right" in maintaining the governing idea that differences in biological essence between masculinity and femininity result in an essentially different type of thinking and feeling."[32] Staels continues: "dogmatic discursive statements of radical feminists are shown to be as restrictive as the moral dogma of the Gileadean regime."[33] Offred can still remember her radical feminist mother, who understood the man who was the father of her daughter as merely an instrument to get pregnant: "Just do the job, then you can bugger off" (HT 131). The attitude of Offred's mother is paralleled by the impersonal insemination ritual between the Commander and the Handmaid. The destructive potential of feminist counter-myth is clearly shown in Atwood's text.

Demythologizing Biblical myths is only one side of both Atwood's and Carter's rewriting of mythology.[34] Their strategy of remythologizing reveals that all stories suggesting final solutions, universal happiness and general truths are negative readings of myths, as they deny plurality. Both of them show that creating counter-myths defined on the victory of absolute univocality is a destructive illusion. Carter in *The Sadeian Woman* suggests that the danger is in its rejection of unique individual experience: "Myth deals

29 William Blake, "Milton", eds. Morris Eaves, Robert Essick, and Joseph Viscomi, *The William Blake Archive.* Lib. Of Cong., Accessed 28 Sept. 2007. http://www.ccel.org/ccel/bunyan/pilgrim.toc.html.

30 Linden Peach, *Angela Carter* (Houndsmills, Basingtoke, Hampshire and London: Macmillan Press, 1998), 126.

31 Anja Műller, *Angela Carter: Identity Constructed/Deconstructed* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1992), 74.

32 Hilde Staels, *Margaret Atwood's Novels: A Study of Narrative Discourse* (Tűbingen and Basel: A Francke Verlag, 1995), 162.

33 Hilde Staels, *Margaret Atwood's Novels: A Study of Narrative Discourse* (Tűbingen and Basel: A Francke Verlag, 1995), 162.

34 Demythologizing the Bible in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Passion of New Eve* means that the ideological states of Gilead and Beulah offer a single "truth" against the plurality of meanings of myths. See Herbert N. Schneidau, *Sacred Discontent*: *The Bible and Western Tradition* (Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1976). Schneidau sees the Bible as a demythologizing force, rather than as a myth.

in false universals, to dull the pain of particular circumstances […]. Its savage denial of complexity of human relations is also a consolatory nonsense" (6).

The protagonists in both fictions suffer because of the violent denial of their human rights and freedoms. Atwood and Carter choose the speculative nature of dystopia[35] to push areas of representation to their extreme *what ifs.* They portray a "negative projection of existing social relations as they might play out in the near future."[36] According to Elisabeth Mahoney, a feminist dystopia is an extremely discomforting realm, as its depiction of sexual violence and desire tends to keep gender positions of "subject and object [...] master and victim."[37] Similarly to myths that, in the words of Klaus Peter Műller, "avoid duality and complexity of life"[38], feminist dystopias show the destructive and dangerous effects of feminist counter-myths. Barthes notes that

> myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions.[39]

In contrast, Atwood and Carter use their material critically; their myths consciously include contradictions, paradoxes, and opposites. In *New Stories for Old,* Harold Fisch discusses novelistic rewritings of the Bible and sees the Bible as an all-pervasive text, which "the Western imagination cannot escape."[40] He concludes that "biblical narratives by virtue of their polyphonic character as well as their pregnant silences, are particularly suited to beget other narratives."[41] In depicting the monologic worlds of Gilead and Beulah, Atwood and Carter leave gaps, blank spaces and doors open for the imagination and *what if* speculation.

Conclusion

Both books have open, speculative endings. *The Handmaid's Tale* ends when Nick (the driver with whom Offred has had a secret love affair) comes to Offred's room accompanied by Eyes (secret police) to take anxious Offred away in the Black Van reserved for rebels. The question is whether this is a rescue or a dreaded betrayal. Offred leaves the Commander's house either as a criminal or a rescued woman:

35 From the view of the respective societies (Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale* and Beulah in *The Passion of New Eve*), the narratives are intended as utopias (pleasant places with no sexual violence, no sexually transmitted diseases, increased birth rate, etc.). But because both societies violently ignore human rights, the utopian myths in fact mask dystopian societies. This is clearly meant to reflect political, technological and social tendencies of the present.

36 Elizabeth Mahoney, "'But Elswhere?': The Future of Fantasy in *Heroes and Villains*", ed. Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton, *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism* (Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman, 1997), 74.

37 Elizabeth Mahoney, "'But Elswhere?': The Future of Fantasy in *Heroes and Villains*", ed. Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton, *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism* (Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman, 1997), 73, 75.

38 Klaus Peter Műller, "Re-constructions of Reality in Margaret Atwood's Literature: A Constructionist Approach". Reingard Nischik, ed., *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact* (New York: Camden House, 2000), 248.

39 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Vintage, 2000), 143.

40 Harold Fisch, *New Stories for Old: Biblical Patterns in the Novel* (Basingtoke: Macmillan, 1998), vi.

41 Harold Fisch, *New Stories for Old: Biblical Patterns in the Novel* (Basingtoke: Macmillan, 1998), 18.

> Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can't be helped.
>
> And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light (HT 307).

Atwood's abrupt interruption leaves the reader to fill in the gaps to determine what happens with Offred next. Atwood's text offers a frame narrative (the Historical Notes) that may suggest an interpretative version of Offred's story. Two hundred years after Gilead has fallen, its history is being reconstructed from fragments, among which Offred's tale is found recorded on several tapes. These tapes are reconstructed and presented by a Professor Darcy Pieixoto at the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies held in 2195. Again, the reader is left with a very open story, as Pieixoto's transcript can be only one possible version of Offred's tale.

Similarly, Carter does not provide her readers of *The Passion of New Eve* with a definitive resolution. The novel concludes with Eve's magical experiences in the sea-cave, where she gets the impression that time itself is running in reverse. She sets out into a future where her and Tristessa's child will grow up with entirely new concepts of masculinity and femininity, since the old ones proved to be obsolete. "Ocean, ocean, mother of mysteries, bear me to the place of birth" (PNE 191). The future seems to be a wide, open and ambiguous space of uncertainty, awaiting the birth of the new.

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