"Trust Me": Reading the Romance Plot in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale
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Midway through Margaret Atwood’s *Handmaid’s Tale*, the Commander sends a message to his wife’s handmaid, Offred, that she is to meet him that evening in his study. Imagining that the Commander may ask her to engage in some kind of forbidden sexual activity, Offred is surprised when he expresses his desire: “‘I’d like you to play a game of Scrabble with me’” (179). As the Commander takes the Scrabble box from his desk drawer and dumps out the counters, Offred realizes that this game is forbidden sexual activity. Under the Commander’s watchful eye, Offred, no longer allowed to read or write, takes up the wooden counters, delicious, “like candies, made of peppermint, cool like that,” and shapes them into luxurious words: “*Larynx*, I spell. *Valance. Quince. Zygote*” (180).

On subsequent evenings, Offred and the Commander repeat their game. Initially, she moves slowly: “My tongue felt thick with the effort of spelling. It was like using a language I’d once known but had nearly forgotten, a language having to do with customs that had long before passed out of the world” (199). During early meetings, Offred and the Commander obey the rules of the game, of the language. When Offred, for example, spells “Zilch” (“A convenient one-vowel word with an expensive Z” [238]) the Commander challenges her, and she suggests “‘We could look it up . . . . It’s archaic’” (238). But as time passes, these
two Scrabble players begin to alter the game. After a few drinks, the Commander “becomes silly, and cheats at Scrabble. He encourages me to do it too, and we take extra letters and make words with them that don’t exist, words like smurt and crup, giggling over them” (271).

I suggest that in this sequence, and various others throughout The Handmaid’s Tale, we readers receive instructions in the reading process, lessons in how to construct meaning out of disparate pieces. Like Offred, we obey a grammar, a set of rules, as we put together episodes, make chains (“words”) out of segments of The Handmaid’s Tale. First, Offred’s words must belong to that club of words adjudged legitimate by a dictionary; our readings are similarly legitimized by signs of their membership in acceptable schools/traditions of reading. Second, when composing words, Offred must restrict herself to letters she draws from those spread out on the desktop; similarly, we are to compose our readings of The Handmaid’s Tale relying upon what is “in” the text. But finally, just as Offred and the Commander “bend the rules” to allow for a more free-wheeling creativity, so too we may find that “taking up extra letters” and playing with seemingly bizarre connections actually may lead us to some new understandings of the text.

The Handmaid’s Tale worries over the plight of women in a society governed by religious fundamentalists committed to bolstering a seriously low birthrate (the result of toxic wastes, acid rain, and other environmental disasters which lead to sterility). In this “Republic of Gilead,” fertile women are trained to serve as handmaids to infertile ones; each month, upon ovulation, the handmaid copulates with her mistress’s husband (a Commander) and prays “let there be fruit.” If conception occurs, the handmaid receives assistance in her labor and delivery from other handmaids, and then surrenders the child to her mistress. Having given birth successfully, the handmaid can rest assured that she will not be sent to the Colonies, where “unwomen” clean up toxic dumps and radiation spills.

Most readings of The Handmaid’s Tale approach the text, quite rightly, as a dystopic novel, a cautionary vision of what might happen if certain attitudes are carried to extremes. Reactions to the Tale focus on its horrific presentation of “theocratic ambitions of the religious right,” on its understanding of the sinister implications of an exaggerated cultural feminism (Ehrenreich 156), and on its critique of our own gender arrangements (Gileadean “solutions” highlight the problematic nature of sexual/social interactions in the 1980s). Many of these reactions also posit love as a force subverting Gilead’s power. Coral Ann Howells, for example, argues that “heterosexual love is the excess term
which the system can neither accommodate nor suppress. Its stubborn survival continually subverts the regime’s claims to absolute authority, creating imaginative spaces within the system and finally the very means of Offred’s escape from Gilead” (69). In like fashion, Barbara Ehrenreich maintains that in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, “as in 1984, the only truly subversive force appears to be love” (34). And Amin Malak suggests that as the novel “upholds and cherishes a man-woman axis” (15), it enables its heroine to progress from “helpless victim” to “sly, subversive survivor.” These reactions to the text make sense; but I argue that if we pay attention to the *Tale’s* own statements about signifying systems and the construction of meaning, we may put together other readings, readings that further complicate the political signification of love in the novel. In pages that follow, I “play Scrabble” with three “counters” from *The Handmaid’s Tale*: Offred’s relationship with Luke, with the Commander, and with Nick. Moving these counters, occasionally superimposing them, I suggest that the novel expresses real ambivalence about its characters’ enactment of “the love story.” As much as we readers may want to posit love as a revolutionary force, we must attend to the novel’s statements about love’s tendency to follow decidedly conservative narrative forms.

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*’s first few sentences, Offred describes her situation at the Rachel and Leah Center:

>We slept in what had once been the gymnasium. The floor was of varnished wood, with stripes and circles painted on it, for the games that were formerly played there. . . . I thought I could smell, faintly like an afterimage, the pungent scent of sweat, shot through with the sweet taint of chewing gum and perfume from the watching girls. . . . Dances would have been held there; the music lingered, a palimpsest of unheard sound, style upon style. (3)

This suggestive mixing of past and present typifies speculative fiction, which most often generates other worlds as comment upon our own.1 Such fiction raises questions not only about what might happen, but also about what is happening. Certainly, *The Handmaid’s Tale* belongs to this genre; but to a greater extent than many other speculative novels, *The Handmaid’s Tale* also asks questions about how we put together future, present, and past, how we construct meaningful connections across time and place. Offred’s description above, for example, insinuates connections between past basketball games and the “games” to which Offred and her fellow handmaids are subjected, between past “dances”
(sexual interactions) and those performed by the handmaids. As the novel proceeds, however, it insists upon probing the nature of these connections. In what ways are they arbitrary, and if arbitrary, how meaningful can they be? If such connections resemble those between layers of writing on a palimpsest, can we claim significance for readings moving both forward and backward between layers? What about those readings that move across a layer, picking up resemblances between discrete units (in the above quote, for example, between the smells of sweat, chewing gum, and perfume)? Attempting to "compose" herself and her world, Offred cannot escape these questions. Nor can we, who attempt to "compose" some kind of reading of _The Handmaid's Tale._

Offred confronts such questions several times in the novel, but I want to look closely at just two such moments as introduction to my larger claims about how we might read the novel. The first moment occurs early on, as Offred describes a typical walk she takes with her "double," Ofglen. The two women do their shopping, then pause before "the wall" where bodies of traitors are hung on display, the heads covered with white bags. Blood stains one of these bags, blood that seeps from the dead man's mouth and takes the shape of "another mouth, a small red one, like the mouth painted with thick brushes by kindergarten children" (43). Offred finds herself drawn to the red mark, and she meditates on its connection with other red marks:

> I look at the one red smile. The red of the smile is the same as the red of the tulips in Serena Joy's garden, towards the base of the flowers where they are beginning to head. The red is the same but there is no connection. The tulips are not tulips of blood, the red smiles are not flowers, neither thing makes a comment on the other. The tulip is not a reason for disbelief in the hanged man, or vice versa. Each thing is valid and really there. It is through a field of such valid objects that I must pick my way, every day and in every way. I put a lot of effort into making such distinctions. I need to make them. I need to be very clear, in my own mind. (44–45)

Although we might accept Offred's assertion that "each thing is valid and really there," I think we must question her claim that "there is no connection" between the red of the blood and the red of Serena's tulips. Obviously, Offred herself sees a connection; she yokes the two together metaphorically: the red is the same. Thinking about the red of a smile and that of tulips, we might argue that at least superficially, both items suggest a type of sensual pleasure; both convey positive connotations. But we can sustain this positive reading only as long as we
repress the source of the red; the smile of the hanged man is a smile of blood. This fact must then push us to ask about the source of the tulips' redness; metaphorically, it is the blood of other women that allows Serena the time to cultivate her colors. In other words, for some women to enjoy the freedom of playing with red flowers, other women must wear the red of handmaids.

Although Offred herself enjoys the flowers, they, like the bloody smile of the hanged man, signify her own dismal state; as beautiful as they may be, they finally are only “fruiting bod[ies],” subject to the breeding policy of their gardener. Later in the novel when Offred comes upon Serena, shears in hand, snipping at the seedpods of the tulips, Offred wonders: “Was it . . . some blitzkrieg, some kamikaze, committed on the swelling genitalia of the flowers? The fruiting body” (195). This elaboration on the flowers as fruiting bodies points us once more to connections between the flowers and Offred.

Thus, once having suggested a connection between flowers and the bloody smile of a dead man, Offred cannot stop a flowering of associations unless, like Serena, she takes a kitchen shears and insists upon dissection—which is precisely what she does. Why does she retreat from relationships of similarity? As if anticipating such a question, Offred insists that she needs to make distinctions, needs to be very clear. But such insistence provides no real answer and so again we ask why, and ask what kind of clarity Offred achieves by cutting off these connections at the bud. If allowed to come to fruition, the connection cited above (between the red smile and the red tulips) pulls in Offred herself; in her red outfit, an outfit signifying both her fertility and her oppression, she is like a blood-red smile, like a flowering plant. She, and they, may provide a moment's pleasure, but at tremendous cost. Such metaphorical representations of her dismal situation can make Offred only more dismal. She represses them. Again, although I accept Offred's claim that distinctions are important, that objects exist separately, I read her denial of connection as reflecting a desire to protect herself from the hardest truths in her life.

A second moment of reflection on connection (and denial thereof) occurs somewhat later in the text, as Offred sits in a chair and prepares for breakfast: “I sit in the chair and think about the word chair. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first syllable in charity. It is the French word for flesh. None of these facts has any connection with the others” (140). Once more, as Offred allows her mind to play with the signifier chair, she spins out a series of signifieds, connected only in sound. But the fact of
this connection forces us to consider other connections: do these signs comment upon each other in some way? Does their juxtaposition force new meanings, new readings? Again, Offred says no. But her denial is suspect, especially in light of two subsequent narrative facts. First, in the sentence following those quoted above, Offred observes: “These are the kinds of litanies I use, to compose myself” (140). That is, to keep from falling into emotional disarray, Offred chants ritual sequences of words. But to keep herself from the other extreme—a kind of emotional overload, a composition that has no boundaries—Offred denies connections between the words. The second fact that should prompt our suspicions with regard to Offred’s denial is that in the “Historical Notes on The Handmaid’s Tale” pompous Professor Pieixoto opens his commentary on the Tale by referring to the same string of signifiers Offred has played upon in the Tale: “I am sure we all enjoyed our charming Arctic Char last night at dinner, and now we are enjoying an equally charming Arctic Chair. I use the word ‘enjoy’ in two distinct senses, precluding, of course, the obsolete third” (381). Here Pieixoto highlights the connection between “char” and “chair” which Offred does not want to acknowledge: in a sexist society, women and flesh are interchangeable. It is precisely this interchangeability that characterizes Gileadean culture, and that Offred would prefer to keep out of the “composition” which she calls herself.

These two moments—Offred contemplating a blood-red smile and tulips; Offred spinning out a chain of “chairs”—suggest that the signifying system cannot be arrested, cannot be contained. Containment attempts may tell us something about the desires and fears of a person who declares “there is no connection,” but should not constrain us to some limited reading; repeatedly, the novel declares that there is a connection, numerous connections (hence, I would argue, Pieixoto’s play on “chair” in “The Historical Note” is connected to Offred’s earlier play on this same word; the later reference forces us to make comparisons, to look for similarities and differences in the two chains of signifiers).

Having laid out these operating premises, I now turn to the novel’s representation of Offred’s relationships with three men: Luke, Commander Fred, and Nick. Not surprisingly, Offred wants to imagine these men as unique: Luke as her “real love,” husband, and father to her child; the Commander as her Gileadean “sugar-daddy”—powerful, distant, in control of her future; Nick as her illicit love, companion in crime. For example, before Offred begins her affair with Nick she gazes hungrily out at him from her window (just as she looks hungrily at the
Scrabble counters). She tells herself: “They [Luke and Nick] cannot be exchanged, one for the other. They cannot replace each other. Nick for Luke or Luke for Nick. Should does not apply” (248). And Offred most certainly would not imagine the Commander replacing either of them; as far as she is concerned, the Commander exists in a different realm altogether (a realm of duty, obligation; a realm in which love does not exist). But the text makes a very different argument. All three men merge, and this merging requires us to reassess supposed distinctions among husbands, lovers, and commanders. Other readers have noticed some of the similarities among these men; Mary McCarthy, for example, observes: “Characterization in general is weak in The Handmaid's Tale. . . . I cannot tell Luke, the husband, from Nick, the chauffeur-lover who may be an Eye (government spy) and/or belong to the ‘mayday’ underground. Nor is the Commander strongly drawn” (35). But no one has pursued implications of this blurring.

In looking first at Luke and the Commander, I attend to two categories of character definition: personal characteristics, and what we might call situational characteristics (relational dynamics). In the former category, I locate Luke’s familiarity with various languages, his interest in “old things,” and his insistence upon certain “old values.” The latter includes his position of relative power in a culture that requires women to depend on men, his enactment of this power relationship within marriages or affairs, and his history of past involvements with women.

Several times throughout The Handmaid's Tale, Offred comments upon her husband Luke’s knowledge of and interest in foreign languages. He frequently provides her with etymologies and translations. For example, when Ofglen remarks “It’s a beautiful May day” (58), Offred finds herself thinking about the word “Mayday,” a word whose derivation Luke explained to her in her pre-Gileadean life. “Mayday, mayday, for pilots whose planes had been hit, and ships—was it ships too—at sea” (58). He asks if she knows what the word comes from, and then tells her, “It’s French, he said. From m’aider” (58). He is the “word authority” in this marriage, as we see in yet another example. Wishing she might sit and talk with the servant Rita, gossip and exchange secrets, Offred muses upon the word “fraternize”:

*Fraternize* means to behave like a brother. Luke told me that. He said there was no corresponding word that meant to behave like a sister. *Sororize*, it would have to be, he said. From the Latin. He liked knowing about such details. The derivations of words, curious usages. I used to tease him about being pedantic. (15)

“From the Latin”: Luke, obviously, has had a somewhat different
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education than the narrator. Like so many men of privilege throughout history, he knows the language of the classical curriculum and he uses this knowledge in a subtle reaffirmation of classical gender roles and inequalities (men can be brothers, one to the other; women cannot).

Two other male characters employ their knowledge of Latin in similar fashion: the Commander and Professor Pieixoto. Pieixoto is beyond my consideration here; I limit myself to consideration of fraternal language bonds between Luke and the Commander. Like Luke, the Commander both knows Latin and likes to play with "curious usages." We get some insight into the Commander's learning on the evening that Offred asks him to translate "Nolite te bastardes carborundum" for her (she has found this phrase carved into the floor of her closet). Unable to pronounce the phrase so as to make it intelligible, Offred writes it out on a pad; as soon as the Commander reads it he begins to laugh: "That's not real Latin," he says. "That's just a joke" (241). Offred does not want to believe that the phrase that means so much to her might be a joke (presumably the previous "Offred," the handmaid who occupied the room before our Offred, carved out the phrase for those who were to come later); and she gratefully accepts a dog-eared textbook that the Commander pulls down from the shelf:

What I see first is a picture: The Venus de Milo, in a black-and-white photo, with a mustache and a black brassiere and armpit hair drawn clumsily on her. . . . 'It's sort of hard to explain why it's funny unless you know Latin,' he says. 'We used to write all kinds of things like that. I don't know where we got them, from older boys perhaps.' Forgetful of me and of himself, he's turning the pages. 'Look at this,' he says. The picture is called The Sabine Women, and in the margin is scrawled: pim pis pit, pimus pistis pants. 'There was another one,' he says. 'Cim, cis, cit . . .' he stops, returning to the present, embarrassed. (241–42)

The Commander stops, because the next word in the series is "cunt"; this little joke exemplifies typical schoolboy play, play that exploits the female body. Certainly, the Commander's Latin games are cruder and more childish than those of Luke, but both men wield their language prowess so as to keep women in the position of the unempowered.

Further reinforcing this positioning is the interest taken by both Luke and the Commander in "old things" and the ways of the past. When the Commander gives Offred a popular women's magazine from the 1970s and she asks why he has such forbidden material in his study, he responds, "Some of us . . . retain an appreciation for the old things" (202). Other "old things" appreciated by the Commander are on display
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at Jezebel's, a Felliniesque whorehouse with women dressed in an amazing mélange of costumes from the past:

Some of these have on outfits like mine, feathers and glister, cut high up the thighs, low over the breasts. Some are in olden-day lingerie, shortie nightgowns, baby-doll pajamas, the occasional see-through negligee. Some are in bathing suits, one piece or bikini; one, I see, is wearing a crocheted affair, with big scallop shells covering the tits. (305)

As the Commander escorts Offred through this display of flesh, he observes, “‘it’s like walking into the past’” (306), and Offred senses that “his voice sounds pleased, delighted even” (306). She tries to remember “if the past was exactly like this,” and concludes that although it contained these things, “the mix is different” (306). The “past” called up by the Commander, the past that brings delight into his voice, is one in which women are on display for men, and are dependent upon men.

Luke too enjoys “old things.” When married to him, the narrator works translating books onto computer disks; occasionally she takes books home, pleased with “the feel of them, and the look” (223). Luke tells her she has the “mind of an antiquarian.” She comments, “He liked that, he liked old things himself” (224). We might discuss the narrator’s antiquarian pleasures, but more important here, I think, is the association of Luke with items from the past; he likes old books, and, as we learn more about Luke we realize that he likes old ideas as well. Perhaps one of his favorite old ideas involves differences between the sexes. Twice in the novel we hear about Luke’s position with regard to difference. First, when the narrator and Luke are shopping, he attends to the meat purchases:

He liked to choose what kind of meat we were going to eat during the week. He said men needed more meat than women did, and that it wasn’t a superstition and he wasn’t being a jerk, studies had been done. There are some differences, he said. He was fond of saying that, as if I was trying to prove there weren’t. (83)

Although we might accept Luke’s comments as simple, good-humored teasing, there is more at stake here; Luke is the one who introduces the topic of difference, as if intent upon sustaining it (we have no evidence of the narrator denying difference).

Luke’s comments on this topic become more exaggerated when he is in the company of the narrator’s mother, who pushes on such questions much more seriously than does the narrator. Thus, we hear for a second time about Luke’s chauvinism when the narrator tells us
that in answer to her mother’s claims that there is something missing in men, Luke teases her, “pretending to be macho, he’d tell her women were incapable of abstract thought” (156). Again, we might dismiss Luke’s comment as teasing and good fun, were it not for the fact that the specific charge he levels against women is repeated, in slightly more specific form, by the Commander, when he tells Offred that women cannot add: “For [women] one and one and one and one don’t make four” (240). In both cases, the men hang on to their belief that abstract thought is beyond women, who seemingly cannot put concepts together.

The personal characteristics of Luke and the Commander examined above contribute to an overall pattern of relational dynamics between these two men and women in the text. If, for example, women are incapable of abstract thought, then women will have to accept such thought from men; once this dynamic is established, others follow as a matter of course: women depend on men intellectually, economically, physically, emotionally. We see the evolution of this dependence in scenes depicting the narrator and Luke immediately after she learns that all women have lost their jobs and that their credit accounts have been transferred to their nearest male relatives. Devastated, terrified, the narrator turns to Luke for consolation:

Did they say why? I said.
He didn’t answer that. We’ll get through it, he said, hugging me.
You don’t know what it’s like, I said. I feel as if somebody cut off my feet. I wasn’t crying. Also, I couldn’t put my arms around him.
It’s only a job, he said, trying to soothe me. (232)

Notice that although Luke is sympathetic during this exchange, he does not respond to the narrator’s question: “Did they say why?” Her question suggests that Luke may have access to an answer; his sidestepping implicates him in some way. But more damning is the text’s juxtaposition of the narrator’s thought, “I couldn’t put my arms around him,” with Luke’s “soothing” statement: “It’s only a job.” Reading these lines one after another, reading them in light of what we know about women’s jobs in Gilead, we cannot avoid the insinuation that even before Gilead, it was women’s job to put their arms around men. Although reluctant to address such an insinuation (look what it does to one’s belief in “love!”) the narrator does express certain doubts about what happens between her and Luke:
He doesn’t mind this, I thought. He doesn’t mind it at all. Maybe he even likes it.

We are not each other’s, anymore. Instead, I am his. (236)

Although she chastens herself for such thoughts (“unworthy, unjust, untrue” [236]) the narrator also notes that she never discusses her doubts with Luke: “I was afraid to. I couldn’t afford to lose [him]” (236). Newly subordinated, the narrator relies upon and so must retain the good will of her superior. Honesty in such a relationship becomes impossible.

Similarly impossible is any kind of equal interaction (and therefore, any kind of honesty) between Offred and the Commander. Like Luke, the Commander has control over Offred’s life; she knows as much, and knows she must remain in his good graces. When she receives the first call to his study, for example, she enters the room determined to engage in a good bargaining session; she envisions their interaction, quite rightly, as an exchange: “I’m not giving anything away: selling only” (178). She goes yet further on later reflection, thinking about the Commander’s desire as something that “could be important, it could be a passport” (186). She might say the same about the importance of maintaining Luke’s desire in the scene above; it may provide her with a way out.

And, as a matter of fact, an extremely significant moment in her relationship with Luke involves their use of passports. As the narrator tells the story of their attempt to cross the border into Canada, she suggests that Luke undertakes this journey out of love for her and their child, but the actual text of her account turns this suggestion on its head. She explains that the three of them drive the car to the border, where they hand their false passports to a border guard who takes the forms inside the immigration building:

Then Luke got back into the car, too fast, and turned the key and reversed. He was picking up the phone, he said. And then he began to drive very quickly, and after that there was the dirt road and the woods and we jumped out of the car and began to run. A cottage, to hide in, a boat, I don’t know what we thought. He said the passports were foolproof, and we had so little time to plan. Maybe he had a plan, a map of some kind in his head. As for me, I was only running: away, away. I don’t want to be telling this story. (291)

Failing to specify antecedents for the various “he’s” above, the narrator incriminates Luke. Who said the passports were foolproof? Who had a
plan? And what kind of plan? Encompassing whom? It may very well be that Luke’s “plan” is larger than the narrator realizes. We can read her final comment, “I don’t want to be telling this story” as suggesting that “the story” she does not want to tell (and does tell only through mistakes and gaps) is the story of Luke’s betrayal of her.

If the term “betrayal” sounds too harsh, perhaps we need to think about Luke’s treatment of his wife—that is, of his first wife. We do not meet this wife in the text; the narrator never has seen her, only has seen pictures and heard her “voice on the phone, late at night, when she was calling us, before the divorce” (96). The narrator also has heard Moira express disapproval of the narrator’s affair with a married man: “She said I was poaching, on another woman’s ground. I said Luke wasn’t a fish or a piece of dirt either, he was a human being and could make his own decisions” (221). But the decision he makes is to betray his wife. We do not know whether he is tired of her, bored with her, angry with her; whatever the reason, Luke begins an affair, spending afternoons in hotel rooms with the narrator.

Quite appropriately, when Offred begins her “affair” with the Commander (another man married to another woman), he takes her to the very hotel in which she has spent time with Luke: “I know where I am. I’ve been here before: with Luke, in the afternoons, a long time ago” (304). As if to underline the overlap between these two affairs, Offred comments on “sameness” when she enters the hotel room with the Commander:

Everything is the same, the very same as it was, once upon a time.
The drapes are the same, the heavy flowered ones that match the bedspread, orange poppies on royal blue, and the thin white ones to draw against the sun... All is the same. (326)
The setting is the same, because the interaction is the same: unmarried woman with married man.

Although the narrator protests against Moira’s disapproval of her affair with Luke, she is not immune to the force of Moira’s arguments. The narrator tells us, for example, about a dream in which she stands in the apartment she shares with Luke. The apartment is bare, empty, except for clothes hanging in the cupboard:

they’re my clothes, but they don’t look like mine, I’ve never seen them before. Maybe they’re clothes belonging to Luke’s wife... I pull out dresses, black, blue, purple, jackets, skirts; none of them will do, none of them even fits, they’re too big or too small.

Luke is behind me, I turn to see him. He won’t look at me, he looks down at the floor...
Luke, I say. He doesn’t answer. (96)

The narrator has this dream after she and Luke are married; but notice that in her account she refers to Luke’s ex-wife as his wife. Yet further suggestive of the narrator’s difficulties as “the second woman” is the fact that the clothes do not fit; although they are hers, they also are not hers. And finally, in the dream Luke will not look at her or answer her. One imagines that his response to his first wife is precisely the same; that is, he undoubtedly looks away from her, refusing to answer her questions. We can easily make the argument that this dream expresses the narrator’s otherwise unexpressed reservations about her relationship with Luke, and about Luke himself, a man who betrays women.

Offred’s understanding of male betrayal is sharper with regard to the Commander. Because her own feelings are not entangled with his, she recognizes the banality of his statement that he seeks Offred’s company because he and his wife “don’t seem to have much in common, these days” (203). Offred observes: “So there it was, out in the open: his wife didn’t understand him. That’s what I was there for, then. The same old thing” (203). In other words, in this instance, Offred has read the story, knows the plot line, and she is not impressed. As a matter of fact, she feels some guilt with regard to Serena Joy, and expresses this guilt in terms similar to those used by Moira earlier:

I felt I was an intruder, in a territory that ought to have been hers... I was taking something away from her, although she didn’t know it. I was filching. Never mind that it was something she apparently didn’t want or had no use for, had rejected even, still, it was hers, and if I took it away, this mysterious ‘it’ I couldn’t quite define... what would be left for her? (208)

While Offred may be awakening to the costs of extramarital affairs (costs borne most heavily by the wife who is betrayed), the men with whom she enacts these betrayals give no signs of a similar awakening. Luke expresses no repentance for his affair, and the Commander, rather than repent, multiplies his sins (Offred is not the first woman to spend time with him in his study and at Jezebel’s; the handmaid preceding Offred did so, and ended up hanging herself).

What am I arguing here? Looking at both personal characteristics and relational dynamics, we see that The Handmaid’s Tale provides us with two male characters who mirror one another; structurally, these two are twins. Offred does not draw attention to parallels between the two men, and might protest against such connections (“None of these facts has any connection with the other” [140]) but the text insists upon them. The Handmaid’s Tale encourages us to read the future in light of
the past, and the past in light of the future; doing so, we cannot exclude male figures from our consideration—no matter how disquieting the results of such consideration. Here, recognition of similarity between Luke and the Commander is disquieting; it casts doubt not only upon the narrator’s story of Luke’s love, but also upon love stories generally.

“But wait,” the romantic reader may object, “there’s a third male in this story, and he does credit to the love plot.” Lucy M. Freibert, for example, argues that “Offred’s real breakthrough to her courageous sexual self comes not with the Commander, who soon bores her, but with Nick. . . . Her joyous reaction to her desire embodies precisely the French *jouissance*” (288). Certainly, we may argue that it is through Nick’s intervention that Offred seemingly “comes to life,” escapes from Gilead, tapes her account, and thereby provides us with the story of her past. Nick, unlike Luke and the Commander, does not exhibit any penchant for “old ways,” any knowledge of patriarchal languages of power, or any inclination to implicate Offred in triangulated desire (there is apparently no wife in Nick’s life). Also unlike Luke and the Commander, Nick risks his own life to save that of Offred; he instructs her to go with the two Eyes who have come to take her away: “It’s all right. It’s Mayday. Go with them” (376). Although we may suspect Nick, just as Offred does ("My suspicion hovers in the air above him, a dark angel warning me away" [376]), the fact that we have a text at all suggests that Nick tells the truth, that he has arranged for Offred’s escape. In other words, he functions as a fairy-tale prince, setting the princess free with a kiss. Early in the novel, Offred expresses her faith that Luke will perform as her fairy-tale savior—“sooner or later he will get me out, we will find her [their daughter], wherever they’ve put her. She’ll remember us and we will be all three of us together” (135)—but Luke never makes a showing. So Offred makes do with what is available, and falls in love with Nick.

In paragraphs above, I suggested that parallels between the Commander and Luke should prompt us to read the narrator’s “love story” (that is, the story in which she and Luke are stars) with real skepticism. When the cast of this story changes, with Nick standing in for Luke, can we forgo the skepticism? Despite differences between the two men, the text pushes us to answer in the negative; it continues to represent the love plot as something potentially dangerous to women who entangle themselves therein. Let me pinpoint three narrative components that qualify the positive representation of Nick’s and Offred’s affair.

First is Offred’s seemingly casual reference to mushroom-colored
carpeting on the stairs to Nick’s room: “I feel my way up, stair by stair: carpet here, I think of it as mushroom-colored” (336). The only other mushroom-colored carpeting in this novel is that at Jezebel’s, the whorehouse to which the Commander takes Offred earlier on that same evening she climbs Nick’s stairs, the former-hotel whorehouse in which the narrator met Luke for afternoons of illicit sex. Although it is too dark for Offred actually to see the color of the staircase carpeting, she imagines it to be the same color as carpeting on which she trods in moving toward other bedrooms. Thus, Offred herself suggests connections between this affair and those, suggests similarities at work.

If the sole similarity between this affair and those were carpet dye, we might dismiss the suggestion of parallels, but two more features of the narrative militate against this dismissal: the effect on Offred of “being in love” and the grammar according to which she articulates being in love. When in love with Luke, the narrator tends to give in to him, to accept his direction of her toward passivity. For example, when a woman kidnaps Luke’s and the narrator’s child in a supermarket, Luke dismisses the incident as an individual woman’s craziness, encouraging the narrator to see such kidnappings as isolated events rather than as structural phenomena demanding a response. Later, when the narrator considers joining marches to protest women’s loss of their jobs, Luke again intervenes: “Luke said it would be futile and I had to think about them, my family, him and her” (233). And finally, when several weeks pass without a word from the narrator’s mother, the narrator searches her mother’s apartment, and determines to call the police:

Don’t, said Luke.
Why not? I said. I was glaring at him, I was angry now. He stood there in the wreck of the living room, just looking at me. He put his hands into his pockets, one of those aimless gestures people make when they don’t know what else to do.
Just don’t is what he said. (329)

And so the narrator doesn’t.

Similarly, after Offred begins her affair with Nick, she loses all interest in Mayday and in the possibility of escape. She comments, “The fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape the border to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him” (348). She barely listens to Ofglen, who “whispers less, talks more about the weather” (349). Whatever political commitment Offred might be capable of making vanishes in light of her commitment to romance. This evanescence is particularly frightening in light of Offred’s childhood
memory of a televised interview with the mistress of a man who supervised a death camp during World War II. This woman “said she didn’t notice much that she found unusual. She denied knowing about the oven. . . . He was not a monster, she said” (188). While the accommodation of this Nazi mistress may be extreme (“She was thinking about how not to think” [188]), it is not different in nature from Offred’s accommodation:

I said, I have made a life for myself, here, of a sort. That must have been what the settlers’ wives thought, and women who survived wars, if they had a man. Humanity is so adaptable, my mother would say. Truly amazing, what people can get used to, as long as there are a few compensations. (349)

So, Offred “makes a life for herself,” a life involving no community or political commitment, but only commitment to “having man.”

Perhaps equally worrisome is Offred’s reliance upon traditional grammars with which to structure her relationship with this man. For example, in Offred’s first account of her visit to Luke’s room, she relies heavily on the language of Harlequin romances. She and Luke do not talk:

Outside, like punctuation, there’s a flash of lightning; almost no pause and then the thunder. He’s undoing my dress, a man made of darkness, I can’t see his face, and I can hardly breathe, hardly stand, and I’m not standing. His mouth is on me, his hands, I can’t wait and he’s moving, already, love, it’s been so long, I’m alive in my skin, again, arms around him, falling and water softly everywhere, never-ending. (337–38)

“A man made of darkness”? “Falling and water softly, everywhere, never-ending”? Offred’s account comes right out of mass-market bodice rippers (a dangerous source of role models for women who want to maintain any sense of integrity). As if aware of the silliness of this version of her encounter with Nick, Offred revises: “I made that up. It didn’t happen that way. Here is what happened” (338). And then we get a second version, in which the new lovers have trouble talking to one another, until they fall into the language of old movies. They toss “lines” at one another, “quoting from late movies, from the time before” (339). This act of quotation is bizarre because, as Offred realizes, the movies themselves do not quote from “real life”: “Not even my mother talked liked that, not when I knew her. Possibly nobody ever talked like that in real life, it was all a fabrication from the beginning” (339). These two lovers enact the fabrication, hoping to conjure forth something real with these magic words. Offred cannot sustain the illusion for very long.
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She senses the talk is “faded music, faded paper flowers, worn satin, an echo of an echo” (339); that is, she senses that the words actually keep the two of them apart, referring, as they do, to “echoes of echoes.” After concluding this account, Offred again admits: “It didn't happen that way either. I'm not sure how it happened; not exactly. All I can hope for is a reconstruction” (340).6

Sadly, both of the reconstructions she offers us, as well as the fairly-tale construction she employs when she thinks about this affair, limit the range of activities and options available to male and female characters. Operating within this traditional grammar (men are princes or made of darkness; women are princesses or damsels in distress), Offred can individuate neither herself nor Nick; both fall into roles assigned to them by fairy tales and romances. Is the novel's reliance upon fairy tale/romance paradigms so destructive as to counteract its positive representation of Nick as “the prince”—the daring young man who saves the maiden? “Counteract” may be too strong a claim, but I argue that every representation of romance in The Handmaid's Tale, including that most positive representation, Nick with Offred, is highly qualified, highly ambivalent. The novel seems to want to believe in its own novelistic representations of love (and, by implication, in “real-life” love) at the same time it expresses extreme reservations about how we (authors, characters, readers, real-life lovers) typically realize this emotion. In one of the most perceptive reviews of Atwood's novel, Gayle Greene argues precisely this point. Greene observes that when Offred answers the Commander's question about Gilead's possible lacks—“What did we overlook?”—with the response, “Love, falling in love,” it is tempting to hear Atwood's voice in Offred's. But, according to Greene, we also must hear her voice in the Commander's: “oh yes . . . I've read the magazines, that's what they were pushing, wasn't it?” (Greene 14). That is, while there may be something importantly human about falling in love, narratives enact this emotion according to a limited number of scripts (those provided in magazines, romance novels, fairy tales) and we readers all too easily buy the line these scripts are pushing. Sadly, at the moment such scripts promise us individual love (“you, yes you, can love and be loved”) they undermine the very possibility of individuality (and love) as they restrict experience to a small number of decidedly limited plot lines.

Thus, I must take exception to Barbara Ehrenreich's claim that in The Handmaid's Tale, “the only truly subversive force appears to be love” (Ehrenreich 34) and to Victoria Glendinning's assertion that “what has been overlooked by the regime is the subversive force of love. On this
the plot turns, as in all romantic narratives since the world began” (Glendinning 147). I also must question Amin Malak’s optimistic assessment that while *The Handmaid’s Tale* condemns a “male misogynous mentality, [it] upholds and cherishes a man-woman axis” (Malak 15). Instead, I argue that the novel subverts the subversive force of love, and that it raises serious questions about a man-woman axis, when this axis models itself upon patterns that restrict rather than liberate. In its representation of such patterns in relationships between Offred and Luke, Offred and the Commander, Offred and Nick, the novel insists upon love’s limitations, rather than upon its latitudes.

I began this essay by suggesting that my way of reading *The Handmaid’s Tale* parallels the way Offred and the Commander play Scrabble: like them, I draw letters from the text, rearrange them, and thereby compose new words, new texts. I like that parallel, and enjoy the element of playfulness in both versions of Scrabble (Offred and the Commander take extra letters and make words that do not exist; I juxtapose characters and push on connections that, at least according to the narrator, do not exist). Here, at the end of this essay, I return to the Scrabble episode, again employing it as parallel—this time, not to the act of reading *The Handmaid’s Tale*, but to the act of “falling in love” as represented in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Unlike my first analogy, however, this one leaves me feeling uneasy, uncomfortable, as it points to the closed nature of the games in question. Playing Scrabble, the Commander and Offred generally operate within certain rules; the two of them occasionally bend these rules, coming up with words like *smurt* and *crup*. In my first parallel, I suggest that such breaches are examples of creative play; here, in contrast, I argue that they actually are part of the game. That is, they do not change underlying grammars, do not question essential rules (note, for example, that the “made-up” words follow conventions within English with regard to consonant blends and the presence of vowels). Similarly, the romances enacted in *The Handmaid’s Tale* operate within the rules, within the conventions of “falling in love.” In case we have forgotten our fairy-tale education in this process, Offred reminds us of its elements in a lengthy meditation thereon:

Falling in love. . . . Falling into it, we all did then, one way or another. . . . It was the central thing; it was the way you understood yourself. . . .

*Falling in love*, we said; *I fell for him*. We were falling women. We believed in it, this downward motion: so lovely, like flying, and yet at the same time so dire, so extreme, so unlikely. . . .
And sometimes it happened, for a time. That kind of love comes and goes and is hard to remember afterwards, like pain. (292)

The narrator “falls” for Luke; later she “falls” for Nick. In both instances she becomes a “fallen woman”—a woman who surrenders herself to a plot already written, a story already told. Following the rules, the narrator enjoys love’s loveliness and its pains—and never does she stop to ask if this game is the only way love can be played. Although some readers might see the narrator’s premarital affair with Luke as stepping outside the game, I have to read this affair, finally, as akin to made-up words like “smurt” and “crup”; the affair, like the words, may not be accepted in polite company, but it, like them, is an integral part of the game. Similarly, Offred’s affair with Nick (an apparent violation of her love-marriage to Luke) does nothing to challenge the general rules of romance; the affair simply provides readers with yet another example of “J.H. loves B.P. 1954. O.R. loves L.T.” (145), “short stories” carved into the wooden desktops at the Rachel and Leah Center. Rather than engaging in a radical revision of such stories (which remind Offred of “inscriptions I used to read about, carved on the stone walls of caves, or drawn with a mixture of soot and animal fat” [145]), Offred accepts these archaic plot lines as model for her own.

But is The Handmaid’s Tale structured according to “the story” or “the plot”? Although the novel does not provide an alternative vision of love’s enactment, its portrait of love’s typical realization is highly qualified. Yes, Offred’s love for Nick leads to her escape from Gilead, but as that love is associated with her love for Luke (a love that colludes in the very foundation of Gilead) it must be interrogated. Such interrogation does not lead to a rejection of the importance of love, but it must lead to a critical assessment of how we have shaped love’s plot, and how it has shaped us. The structural power of this plot is apparent in a seemingly casual description, from Offred, of the handmaids preparing for a Prayvaganza:

We line up to get processed through the checkpoint, standing in our twos and twos and twos, like a private girls’ school that went for a walk and stayed out too long. Years and years too long, so that everything has become overgrown, legs, bodies, dresses all together. As if enchanted. A fairy tale, I’d like to believe. (276)

If this is a fairy tale, a prince will arrive and make life better with a kiss. Because Offred so much wants to believe in the fairy tale, she closes off other plot options: what would happen if she were to work with Ofglen,
to spy on the Commander and communicate his secrets to Mayday? The novel does not give us these stories; but it does encourage us to break out of the old plots, to shape a future different from those offered us in the *Tale* and its *Historical Note*.

**NOTES**

1 Lacombe begins her article by quoting this passage and observing the ways in which it “multiplies layers of signification” (4). Later she makes reference to other passages that I too find to be important (the “smiling snowman” and “tulips” passages, for example, as well as the passage in which Offred meditates on the word “chair”). Despite our common interest in Atwood’s play with text as palimpsest, we pursue different effects of this play. She is particularly interested in Offred’s sexual relationship with the Commander and textual relationship with her readers; I am more intrigued by ways in which the palimpsest sheds light on heterosexual romance in general.

2 Howells quotes this passage as evidence of Offred’s humanism: “In entirely unpropitious circumstances, Offred insists on believing that individuals are significant” (66). Certainly, individuals are significant, but what Offred really wants to argue here is that they are significant and discrete. Atwood’s text deconstructs the latter claim.

3 Ehrenreich seemingly says no as well. Before quoting this passage on the word *chair*, Ehrenreich comments that “Offred spends a lot of time on aimless mental word games” (34). Obviously, in my reading of the text, these games are far from aimless; instead, they provide readers of the text with reading lessons.

4 Also “the same” is the fact that in neither situation do we know Offred’s/the narrator’s “real” name. Although we, along with McCarthy, may play detective and come up with the narrator’s name through a process of elimination (“my textual detective work says it is June” [35]), the text never supplies us with the name by which the narrator thinks of herself, that is, the name with which she identifies herself. This lack is significant as it affects not only our reading of Offred’s relationship with the Commander, but also, of her relationship with Luke.

5 Freibert wants to see Offred’s interaction with Nick as an example of positive risk-taking (risk-taking that allows women like Offred “to transcend their conditioning, establish their identity, joyfully reclaim their bodies, find their voices, and reconstruct the social order” [285]). In my reading, Offred’s affair with Nick represents precisely the conditioning that Freibert imagines the affair as overcoming; that is, Offred has been trained/socialized to follow a romance plot, and Nick happens to be around to play one of the necessary roles. Rather than reconstructing the social order, their affair repeats it.

6 Again, I have to disagree with Freibert, who reads Offred’s revisionist accounts as exemplifying Offred’s increasing perfectionism: “The risk-filled spirit of adventure permeates Offred’s actions and choices, turning her into a perfectionist. She creates and recreates accounts of her meetings with Nick, each time making them more intense, more precise” (288–89).

7 Freibert says, “when Offred listens to Nick’s ‘trust me’—the traditional patriarchal ploy for co-opting women—Offred hears with an experience and
knowledge that enable her to speak out, tell her tale, and perhaps precipitate
the action that will bring Gilead to an end" (289). But we have heard "trust me"
all too often out of the mouths of deceivers; and, what we see of post-Gileadean
culture (in the form of the Historical Note) does not suggest that this deception
has come to an end (see Davidson's essay).

If it did, we could read Aunt Lydia as its spokesperson: "Love, said Aunt
Lydia with distaste. Don't let me catch you at it. No mooning and June-ing
around here, girls. Wagging her finger at us. Love is not the point" (285).

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