

FORUM: *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

## Torture Born: Babies, Bloodshed and The Feminist Gaze in Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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On the face of it, *The Handmaid's Tale* is about the autocracy of biological essentialism and female fecundity taken to its logical extreme. Since the book's publication, reading *The Handmaid's Tale* as a warning against reproductive tyranny is as feminist as refusing to bake an apple pie. And in an age of Mike Pence and "religious freedom" laws the new Hulu series is beyond prescient, demanding a reckoning with our current political landscape even more obviously than it might have done in 1985. It feels almost mean-spirited to take it to task as it so accurately dramatizes elements of America's evangelized collision course of reproductive repression.<sup>1</sup> However, I do want to pose a central question about how the series mobilizes its cultural outrage. That is, in order to most effectively "warn" us against repressive reproductive futurity, does *The Handmaid's Tale* marshal its own kind of neoliberal reproductive fantasies of the substance (if not the sanctity) of the nuclear family, with its roots in romantic love and melodramatic maternity? According the narrative's emotional logic, Gilead is the *most* horrifying of places not only for its cruel gender tyranny but for its distortion of the most "primary" of human relationships: heterosexual love that produces biological children.<sup>2</sup>

In season one, many scenes' emotional heft depends upon the destruction of familial love, marriage, and (your own) baby carriage. Our first scenes present us with a family being torn asunder. Like the forest they are captured in, they represent a kind of "natural order" cruelly disrupted. Further, June's decision to join the resistance is frequently referenced as being largely based in her decision to be reunited with her daughter. She challenges her best friend Moira's temporary complicity with a similar appeal, reminding her of her agreement to find Hannah when "this is all over," whisper-hissing "You promised. You f-king *pinky swore*." Before the episode ends, Moira smuggles the requested contraband.

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Later, when the Commander asks June rhetorically what could be more important than children (as a way to justify Gilead), June pauses for only a minute before answering “love.” While such an assertion might fly in the face of Gilead’s use of the Handmaids as baby machines, here “love” references the marriage bond, as we immediately flash back to June and Luke in a hygge-like tableau with their daughter in chunky warm woolens with something June has made on the stove (in sharp contrast to the kitchens of Gilead, staffed by Marthas—domestic workers).

Similarly, after Janine, another Handmaid, gives birth (itself a near parody of contemporary white middle-class rediscovery of midwifery—subdued lighting, no medication, surrounded by supportive women) June flashes back to own childbirth when she awakens in the hospital to find an infertile stranger desperately trying to steal Hannah. In staging these scenes so close together, we are meant to see the wild-eyed stranger attempting to abduct Hannah as akin to the more organized world of Gilead where babies are *still* taken from their mothers, wrenched out of their arms this time in butter-lit rooms where cookies are served. These are analogous examples of the same the fundamental horror—the disruption of heteronormative biological motherhood, the veritable *sina-qua-non* of moral depravity. We are right there with her when soon after giving birth to a daughter, Janine, another Handmaid lashes out and bites the hand of her Commander’s wife: Look Out Gilead, the scene seems to imply; Natural Motherhood is Feral and it is Not To Be Fucked With.

Make no mistake: in offering such a criticism I am neither making light of the emotional impact of these scenes or minimizing the horror and grief implicit in losing one’s husband and/or one’s child. As a human and a mother, I too held my breath when Janine hovered over the icy water about to throw herself and her baby into it. I too was entirely relieved when she sacrificed herself alone (or at least tried to), her red cape billowing out behind her like the most impotent parachute imaginable.

Herein lies the problem: I was relieved *when it was just her*. The emotional stakes of *The Handmaid’s Tale* are amped up to such an extreme degree that the attempted suicide of an innocent woman who has already had her eye gouged out for disobedience elicits relief from its (feminist) audience because *at least the baby didn’t die*. Sure, squirming cooing newborns elicit all kinds of protective emotions. But in siding ourselves against Gilead, we can also find ourselves, albeit unconsciously, emotionally complicit with it. “Saving families,” lest we forget, is the rallying cry of the right. It wasn’t so long ago that feminism insisted on a deconstruction of biological essentialism in the face of such calls via a rigorous analysis of the repression inherent in heterosexist assumptions of the meaning of mothers, fathers, romantic love, and family.

A Shulameth Firestone manifesto is not necessarily the answer here either, and I am, of course, adamantly on Margaret Atwood’s side. Yet I am also concerned that, particularly in its televised form, *The Handmaid Tale’s* dramatization of woman-as-womb might reinforce a neoliberal version of the very same claim. June will rebel not because she has been forced *into* maternity but because it has been *denied* her.

The show then reads as a rather disquieting take on modes of reproduction that bypass heterosexuality (queer parenting, sperm donation, adoption), the very hegemonic “love” that our hero is fighting for.

### Notes

- 1 However, for apt analyses of how the Hulu series fails in its representations of race, see Angelica Jade Bastien, *Vulture* (June 14, 2017), Ellen E. Jones, *The Guardian* (July 31, 2017), and Evan Narcisse in *Gizmodo* (June 21, 2017) to name just a few.
- 2 I put this word in quotation marks deliberately both because I want to challenge the term's too-easy linkage of human ownership of other humans (no matter what their age) and to genetic kin (like the rhetoric of “real” mothers and “real” fathers)