

Anonym

Nolite te Bastardes Carborundorum.
Reading Margaret Atwood's "The
Handmaid's Tale" and Christina Dalcher's
"Vox" in Dialogue

Master's Thesis

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Nolite te Bastardes Carborundorum -

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and Christina Dalcher's *Vox* in Dialogue

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1. Introduction

Recently, and especially in 2017, when Donald Trump was inaugurated as President of the United States, Women's Marches occurred all over the United States. In many of these marches, women used symbols from Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, such as red cloaks and white bonnets (Hauser). 'Nolite te bastardes carborundorum' perhaps the most quoted phrase of *The Handmaid's Tale* meaning 'Don't let the bastards grind you down' became a feminist rallying cry during those women's marches. *The Handmaid's Tale*, which was written in 1985, regained popularity and relevance due to a rising political power of Christian fundamentalists, which led to attacks on women's rights, particularly women's reproductive rights (Armstrong).

The Handmaid's Tale made way for similar feminist novels exploring dystopian futures, such as Christina Dalcher's *Vox* (LaMonica). *Vox* and *The Handmaid's Tale* are both set in a dystopian future in which the U.S. has become a theocratic state. The women in *Vox* suffer by being limited to speak only one hundred words a day, while women in *The Handmaid's Tale* are forced into circumscribed roles, for example the role of the Handmaid. These women are subject to ritualized rape. The society in *The Handmaid's Tale* is reminiscent of societies in former human history, notably the Puritan society (Atwood *Age of Trump*) whereas the society in *Vox* is more futuristic and influenced by modern technologies, as this work will show.

In this thesis, the patriarchal power structures of the dystopian societies in *Vox* and *The Handmaid's Tale* will be analyzed by examining the sexual politics of patriarchal societies and state power as well as the use of language and punishment. I argue that both novels explore overt and subtle patriarchal structures, which have different impacts on the protagonists' identities. The protagonists differ in their strategies of resistance and process their struggles differently. While Jean in *Vox* angrily holds on to her dominant and bold personality and is actively involved in the resistance against the Pure state, Offred is in pain and even numb and passively retreats to her memories and thoughts. Offred's resistance is less politically motivated but rather anchored in her feelings on a personal level.

The novels will be analyzed in dialogue with each other to point out similarities and differences between them. In the second chapter the patriarchal social structure of the Pure state in *Vox* and the state of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale* will be compared in depth according to Kate Millet's categories of class, religious, biological and sociological ideologies as well as education and economy. This chapter aims to answer the question how governmental power is exercised through children's socialization according to patriarchal principles and examines the accompanying destructive psychological effects on the psyche of the states' citizens, especially

of the protagonists in the text. Kate Millet's theory of sexual politics provides a good and structured overview of factors that help maintain a patriarchy, such as class, the principles on which patriarchal societies rely, ideologies, myths and biology. As she also names effects of the patriarchy on the psyche and behavior of women, her theory provides a useful theoretical background to analyze the characters' identities. Since Millet is a literary theorist her work is intended for the use in literary contexts.

The third chapter is concerned with the way torture, punishment and discipline according to Foucault's work *Discipline and Punish* are incorporated in the lives of the protagonists and used by the dystopian states to exercise power and control over their citizens. This chapter further looks at the significance of surveillance and technology in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Vox*.

The fourth chapter explores the relation of knowledge and power as stated in Foucault's *Power/Knowledge* and its impact on the way of resistance of the protagonists of *Vox* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. Foucault's texts suit the analysis of the two selected dystopian societies as he challenges the idea that power relies only on coercion and violence but also highlights the significance of compliance and domination of the discourse. To him, power is constantly negotiated and pervades every aspect of society. In addition, Foucault shows the inevitability of resistance and the many forms in which it occurs, which is useful to approach the protagonists' way of resistance. In the last chapter the results will be summarized and compared, and a conclusion will be drawn.

2. The sexual politics of patriarchal societies

2.1. *Sexual politics* by Millet

In her theory of sexual politics published in 1969 Kate Millet examines the political relationship between the sexes. Here, *politics* refers to "the power structured relationships [and] arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another" (Millet 23). While *sex* can be defined as "the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women" (WHO), gender "refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women" (ibid.).

With her work Millet wants to prove that "sex is a status category with political implications" (24) by examining how the patriarchy operates and perpetuates its power on an ideological, biological, sociological, class, economic and educational, anthropological, and psychological

level. She claims that the relationship between the sexes was and still is of dominance and subordination, a *herrschaft*, with males ruling over females by birthright (24 ff.).

According to Millet, every society, though with varying degree (26), is a patriarchy, meaning that men are in power of all institutions that make up its structure (25). As a consequence, this *herrschaft* of men over women appears to be “the most pervasive ideology of our culture [providing] its most fundamental concept of power” (ibid.). “While patriarchy as an institution is a social constant” (ibid.), there are instances of women holding power in certain areas of life depending on the nation. As stated in Hannah Arendt’s *Speculations on Violence*, power upholding the government is supported either through violence or consent (qtd. in Millet 26).

On an ideological level, consent of sexual politics is obtained through *socialization* (ibid.). Socialization is “the process whereby an individual learns to adjust to a group (or society) and behave in a manner approved by the group (or society)” (Encyclopaedia Britannica).

Millet claims that men and women are conditioned to follow “patriarchal politics with regard to temperament, role, and status” (26). *Temperament* as a psychological category “involves the formation of human personality along stereotyped lines of sex category” (ibid.). Since men are the dominant group, they get to dictate what qualities they favor in themselves, like “aggression, intelligence, force and efficacy” (ibid.) and in the subordinate group, women, like “passivity, ignorance, docility, ‘virtue,’ and ineffectuality” (ibid.). *Sex role*, a sociological category, dictates a certain “code of conduct, gesture and attitude for each sex” (ibid.). Millet emphasizes that women are more limited in their roles because their assigned activities are in the area of biological experiences, like domestic work and child care and therefore excluding them from human achievement, interest and ambition, which are all reserved to men and lead to a higher *status* (Millet 26.). Millet views *status* as a political category and assumes that there exists a “prejudice of male superiority” (26) securing men’s superior *status*.

She argues that these differences between the sexes regarding *temperament*, *sex role* and *status* are not biologically but culturally shaped (28). Millet criticizes the assumption that behavior is shaped by biology and the focus on physical strength of men when reconstruction the origin of the patriarchy and male supremacy (27). Since superior physical strength does not factor in political relations, Millet concludes that male supremacy must in fact be based on “the acceptance of a value system” (ibid.).

Relying on Robert J. Stoller’s differentiation of sex as biological and gender as cultural and psychological (qtd. in Millet 29) as well as his research, Millet comes to the conclusion that