

The Trope of Doors in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood's new poems, *The Door* (2007) encourage a re-examination of her work for earlier instances of the door trope. Her breakthrough novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986) bears the most fruit in such a rereading. In the futuristic American theocracy "Gilead," Commander Fred and his wife Serena Joy attempt to force the handmaid Offred into becoming a surrogate mother. The door to Offred's room does not shut tightly, much less lock, troping her body from which she cannot bar intruders. The door trope is most prominent, however, in the open double doors of the black van into which she finally steps, promising a rescue or her imprisonment and death. In "Historical Notes to *The Handmaid's Tale*," less an appendix than a last chapter, the van doors open wide to mark the "open ending" of Offred's narrative. This open ending, represented by the open doors of the black van, has actually been constructed by Atwood's fictional editors, Professors Pieixoto and Wade, as an entry to their own concerns with history, at the expense of Offred's suffering as an oppressed woman.

Keywords

trope, doors, feminism, dystopian fiction, theocracy, handmaid, sterility

The appearance of a new book by a contemporary writer like Margaret Atwood usually creates a stir among her loyal readers—loyal because in some cases they have been reading her work for over four decades. When the new work is a novel, readers may be curious about how similar to or different from her last novel it will be. Often the latter is dramatically the case, as in *The Blind Assassin*

(2000), which subtly cues its readers that the individual responsible for Laura Chase's death, as it is reported in the opening sentence, will be revealed by the end. In direct contrast, the novel just before it, *Alias Grace* (1996), encouraged its readers to wait in vain for Grace to reveal her guilt as an accomplice to murder. Atwood's recent book of poems, *The Door* (2007), may not cause many Atwood readers to ponder its connection to its immediate predecessor, the earlier collection of poems, *Morning in the Burned House* (1995). However, the title of this more recent collection and the careful positioning of the poem of the same name at the end of the book force readers to pay attention to the trope of doors. One outcome of that attention may be that more than one reader will begin thinking about Atwood's concentration on doors in her earlier work, encouraging a rereading, perhaps even a fresh interpretation of novels such as *Alias Grace* and *The Blind Assassin* and also a much earlier novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986). This earlier novel deserves attention not only as the one with which many began their reading of Atwood's work but as the novel that continues to be her most popular.

Among these new poems in *The Door*, many of which focus on the poet returning to the writing of poetry in her later years, none is more provocative than the last poem, "The Door." Because titles are extremely important—most of us are dismayed by paintings and poems designated "Untitled"—readers are likely to be attentive to images of doors and, even more, to look forward to this final poem to understand why the poet chose to use its title for the collection. Additionally the dust jacket for this book contains a photograph of the poet as a young girl standing in front of the door to her house. More than this photograph, however, it is this last poem in the book, "The Door," that promises to be of help in understanding Atwood's attraction to the door as a literal part of our lives as well as a trope with multiple meanings in our everyday discourse.

In constructing this poem with the "door" trope, Atwood had to have been aware that she was taking some risks. Doors, of course, can be engineered to swing either way. When they swing outward, they can represent freedom, opportunity, promise, the unknown—the unknown not so much as something to be feared or dreaded but as the adventure of leaving behind the old and the familiar for the possible and the potential. Doors also swing

inward, and in the process they define the space that is a room. The power to close the door to one's room—moreover, to *lock* that door—makes the space a "room of one's own,"¹ and a powerful trope for security, privacy, and the individuality most of us find crucial to our spiritual well-being.

The Handmaid's Tale became Atwood's first best-seller in part because it draws upon what has been called second-wave feminism and in part because Atwood was relatively unusual as a woman drawn to the writing of dystopian fiction. The novel is set in the new nation of Gilead, part of the United States that has become a fundamentalist Christian theocracy, sometime between the writing of the book in the mid-1980s and 1995, when the story is set. The religious right has overthrown the U.S. government because of "permissiveness," i.e., the support of women's rights and the acceptance of same-sex orientation. Yet another factor is a sense of divine punishment in the somewhat mysterious sterility, resulting from radioactive waste. Women have been forced to return to second-class citizenship, within a hierarchy of women: Wives, many of whom may be sterile; "Aunts," who do the housework; and Handmaids who are fertile, young women. The Handmaid, who is telling this Tale, was separated from her husband, who she is fairly certain is dead, and from her young daughter, who may still be alive. The leaders of Gilead, or Commanders, are probably all sterile, but the pretense is maintained that it is their wives who are infertile in order for the Commanders to preserve their standing as powerful men of God. Each handmaid bears the brand of her Commander; accordingly, the Handmaid of Atwood's title is "Offred," as other handmaids are Ofglen, Ofwarren, etc. All wear

¹ Virginia Woolf could not have chosen the phrase for the title for a famous essay (*A Room of One's Own*) in which she argues for the rights of women—not only to be financially independent but to lay claim to a space that will be their inviolable sanctuary—without some awareness of the appropriateness of the trope to the situation of women. Given the very strong evidence that she could not protect the space of her body as a child from the violation of others, it is no coincidence that Woolf chose the trope of "a room of one's own" to embody the inner sanctum of the human spirit.

the crimson robe, marking them as handmaids, untouchable by anyone other than their commanders, who engage in sexual intercourse with the handmaid positioned between the knees of the commander's wife, who supports this charade of anticipating that her husband will prove his fertility. Hagar, the Old Testament handmaid delegated by the aged Sarah to bear Abraham a son— Ishmael, as it turned out—was at least spared the embarrassment and discomfort of this bizarre episode of group sex!

In the second chapter of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred describes the room she has been assigned in Commander Fred's house. Nowhere in Offred's comments on the room she sleeps in is there any mention of the door until she is about to leave the room, almost as if its associations are too painful to confront: "The door of the room—not *my* room, I refuse to say *my*—is not locked. In fact it doesn't shut properly" (8). Clearly the bedroom is not "a room of [her] own," because her privacy can be violated at any moment by someone pushing open the door without knocking or even by someone inadvertently leaning on it. Doors can turn rooms into sanctuaries when they have locks that work or when the doors at least shut tightly.

The room, not her room, becomes a trope for her body because she is powerless to keep Commander Fred from entering it. Handmaids, she notes, are "two-legged wombs" (136). Her vagina is the door through which viable semen may enter her womb, that room whose potential fertility defines her only worth to this culture. Offred has a room to sleep in, but it is essentially the place in which she waits to play her part in the charade of making believe Commander Fred has the capacity to impregnate her. In this way the room defined by its unreliable door becomes the counterpart of her position of "femininity," or powerlessness within patriarchy to prevent Fred from entering her body.

When Offred leaves the room in which she sleeps, her focus shifts to other doors: "I walk along the hallway, past the sitting room door and the door that leads into the dining room, and open the door at the end of the hall and go through into the kitchen" (9). It is as though she were mapping the floor plan of rooms by identifying their doors. She notes: "Sometimes I listen outside closed doors, a thing I never would have done in the time before" (10). Because the culture represented in the Commander's house is a structure of lies and subterfuge, curiosity about what is on the

other side of doors plays a greater part in Offred's experience, especially her "listen[ing] outside closed doors."

Once Offred is outside the house—"I go out by the back door" (12), she reports, and on another return, she tells us "I walk around to the back door" (47)—she becomes aware that the space outside is full of "Eyes." When she encounters an "interpreter" leading a group of Japanese tourists, who stare at her, Offred is made to recognize her radically "feminine" position of vulnerability as the object of the gaze. This "interpreter" is probably one of the "Eyes," or spies for the State, and thus she must carefully avert her eyes, lest his searching gaze penetrate the open doors of *her* eyes. Aunt Lydia has taught her that "Modesty is invisibility [. . .]. To be *seen* is to be penetrated" (28). Like the door to her room, Offred's eyes are unreliable, for they have the potential to betray her by revealing her interiority.

And when she goes to her room on that later return, she encounters the Commander, "standing in the hall, near the door to the room where I stay," and, as she well knows, he is "violating custom" (49). Although he offers no indication of why he is near the door of what she surprises herself by impulsively calling "my room," Offred has the sense of Fred's opening a door into a new and forbidden space, "an unknown country" (49). This space is of course eventually identified as literally his Office, but figuratively this space is the room in which she is empowered by association with *his* capability to ensure the inviolability of his sanctuary without even having to lock the door against the eyes of the outside world. Obviously no one would dare to enter his office without knocking. Also, as she notes when Nick informs her that the Commander wants to "see" her in his room, Offred has the immediate sense of the power she accrues through this disclosure of Fred's desire for her, transcending her function of potentially testifying to his fertility by becoming pregnant with his child.

The counterpart to Fred's room is the "sitting room" in which the masquerade of Fred's fertility will be performed sometime later, after the prayer session. Tellingly he "knocks at the door" as "prescribed": because "the sitting room is supposed to be Serena Joy's territory, he's supposed to ask permission to enter it" (86). Also his willingness to obey the rule of knocking on the door of *her* room obliges her to follow the custom of never entering her husband's room. Fred's wife enjoys keeping him waiting as a

modicum of power relegated to her by this patriarchy. In passing I would note how frequently there is knocking on doors in Offred's world, suggesting that some doors can remain closed, or even be locked, until entry is permitted by the possessor of the space the door defines. Curtains can offer a modicum of privacy from intrusive eyes, but no one knocks on a curtain.

With her ambivalent position in the hierarchy of women—a mere servant, but also valuable as a walking womb—any minimal power Offred may possess comes to her through the agency of men. The First Man in her life is Fred, who has immense power because he is one of an unspecified number of commanders in Gilead. Later, when he takes Offred to Jezebel's, a secret "gentleman's club," she sees a large room full of commanders. It is Fred who can invite her into his office where Offred has no idea what he wants from her, although she suspects it might be some "perverse" sexuality rather than the "marital" sex the two perform in the handmaid ritual. She is just as surprised as Atwood's reader is to discover he has brought her into his Inner Sanctum to play Scrabble.² It provides "a letdown of sorts" that she describes later:

What had I been expecting, behind that closed door, the first time? Something unspeakable, down on all fours perhaps, perversions, whips, mutilations? At the very least some minor sexual manipulation, some bygone peccadillo now denied him, prohibited by law and punishable by amputation. To be asked to play Scrabble, instead, as if we were an old married couple, or two children, seemed kinky in the extreme, a violation in its own way.

(155)

Tellingly it is the imagining of what could be "behind that closed door" that calls to mind perversions far beyond the actualities of

²Coral Ann Howells offers a fascinating reading of Offred's response to the Scrabble tiles: "The game provides her with the welcome opportunity to play with words, and her image of the Scrabble counters as candies, which she would like to put into her mouth, makes a beautifully literal equivalent for [Hélène] Cixous's metaphor of women's seizing language 'to make it hers, containing it, taking it into her mouth' (qtd. in Howells, *Atwood* 104).

Fred's desires. And like the shelves and shelves of banned books in his office, Scrabble is an index of his power as a commander to break the rules Gilead has made to keep the powerless in hand. As it becomes evident elsewhere in this novel, Atwood has learned well the lessons of Orwell in not only the grim *Nineteen Eighty-Four* but also the comic fable *Animal Farm*, where those in power enjoy the privileges of not having to obey the rules they have established to control the disempowered.

The other man in Offred's life is the mysterious chauffeur Nick. He seems "mysterious" because even after he has become her lover Offred cannot be certain that he is not one of "the Eyes," an agent for Gilead's Commanders. Initially Nick's function is merely as a variety of pander who brings Offred to the Commander through a system of signals that "tonight's the night." Presumably Nick has no idea what goes on in the Commander's office after the door closes. Because the activity, however, is furtive, there is no reason for the chauffeur not to conclude the activity is the highly forbidden sexual activity of a handmaid with her "Of," when the two are not engaged in the bizarre, if not comic, performance of their *menage à trois* with the Commander's wife but instead having sex for some purpose other than procreation.

It would appear that Serena Joy has been pushed toward desperation by the continuing absence of a baby to mother. In any case she is willing to risk social embarrassment, if not punishment as well, by exposing the shameful pretense of handmaids supposedly being impregnated by sterile Commanders. Offred has no way of knowing just how many handmaids preceded her and had to be sent off to the Unwomen's hell of the radioactive waste sites to bear the stigma of sterility, instead of their Commanders. She has no choice but to follow Serena Joy's directions to get herself pregnant by Nick the chauffeur. Perhaps even Fred himself is involved in this subversive activity of turning his servant into a stud to maintain the fantasy of his fertility.

Offred's first visit to Nick's room on the second floor of the garage is prefaced by her narrative of meeting Serena Joy in the dimly lit kitchen where the Commander's wife is whispering the directions for how to get to Nick's room. Commander's wives never lower their voices, Offred notes, because they are the domestic surrogates of their husband's power outside in the public

sphere. Serena Joy tells her: "You go out through the *door* and turn right. There's another *door*, it's open. Go up the stairs and knock [on the *door*], he's expecting you" (260; emphasis added). Tellingly Offred repeats these door references in her narrative of going to Nick's room: "I open the kitchen door, step out [. . .]. The door to the garage is only steps away [. . .]. I reach the top of the stairs, knock on the door there" (260). These frequent but essentially unjustified references to doors in her narrative of this dangerous journey—after all, it could lead to her death in a variety of manners—underscore the pervasiveness of doors and the spaces they contain in Offred's world.

What follows is first one and then another "reconstruction," to use Offred's term, of the sexual encounter. After the first—with some white space to mark a pause in her "storytelling"—she adds: "I made that up. It didn't happen that way. Here is what happened" (261). Then after the second version which the reader *might* believe "is what happened," with another blank space, she asserts: "It didn't happen that way either. I'm not sure how it happened; not exactly" (263). These "reconstructions" may point to the difficulty Offred has in remembering the experience of her first sexual encounter with Nick because after a number of visits she has fallen in love with this man who was at first merely an impregnator, just as Offred was a sexual outlet to Nick in a very sexually repressive culture in which even masturbation could be considered a crime against the state.³

Offred may not be sure how the first sexual encounter with

³Howells comments on how Offred "manages to twist the masculine genre of dystopia into a feminine romance plot by falling in love" (Howells, *Companion* 169), but ignores the parallel in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where Winston Smith falls in love with Julia. It is a relationship even more central to that dystopian narrative since Winston's resistance to Big Brother dissolves when he betrays his love by urging his tormentor to direct the ultimate horror in Room 101 on Julia, rather than himself. We hardly need to remind ourselves that one of the most formative texts for Atwood was George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in which Winston and Julia's love nest has been like those nests in which birds raise their young, unaware of the hidden camera that makes their inner sanctum always already violated.

Nick took place, but what she seems be quite sure of are the details of Nick's room, as it is enclosed by the door he opens to invite her into his space and into the risky business of joining her in fathering a child to pass off as Commander Fred's. Like Fred opening the door of his office to her, Nick is also opening a future, fraught with opportunities *and* dangers. Both of Offred's "reconstructions" agree about the military tone of the room's decor: the absence of pictures on the walls, the single bed with its blanket, which "says U.S." Other details are not repeated, suggesting that either the first "reconstruction" assumes a ghostly presence in the second or the detail is too painful to repeat, such as her noting in the first version that there is "another door that must lead to the bathroom" (260). Tellingly that door is *not* a second way out, emphasizing Offred's sense of entrapment, something else she may be sharing with Nick. On the other hand, Serena Joy and perhaps even her husband may seem to be at some risk in colluding in this violation of Gilead's rules, but one or both of them could easily deny any knowledge of or participation in this serious subversion of public "morality."

As important as these expressions of the door trope in *The Handmaid's Tale* may be, no instance of the trope is more central than its appearance in what is and is not the ending. The narrative clearly is moving into end game as readers become aware of the relatively few pages left in the book they hold. Additionally the sense of an imminent ending is enhanced after Serena Joy has confronted Offred with the evidence of lipstick on her cloak, presumably loaned to the handmaid by Commander Fred for the outing to Jezebel's. Offred recalls another handmaid Ofglen reporting how the Ofglen she replaced hung herself when she saw "the van coming for her." Suddenly Offred hears the black van coming for *her* and laments that she has not prepared for the possibility of needing to take her own life. Then she hears a "heavy muted tread" on the carpeted stairs. How like *Nineteen Eighty-Four* this seems in its sense of "the room" about to be penetrated by "them," through a door they need not even break down because it has no lock!

The remainder of this scene is right out of countless thrillers, complete with just such ambiguous elements. That ambiguity centers in the confusion for Offred and the reader when it is Nick, who pushes open the door and flicks on the light, producing a powerful sense of betrayal that the man she has come to love is

one of "them." The ambiguity of Nick's presence in her room is enhanced when he gets closer to her and whispers, "'It's all right. It's Mayday [the code word of the Underground]. Go with them.' He calls me by my real name" (293). Everything Nick says and does cuts both ways. He gives the password "Mayday" and addresses her by her "real name." Neither the password nor her "real name," however, guarantees that Nick is not one of "them," since the Eyes may not only see but *know* everything. His unexpected appearance in her room *seems* to be grounds for hope, but the ominous "they" might have sent Nick in to forestall another suicide that would rob them of the opportunity to make an example of Offred in the Salvaging to which she might be heading. The two Eyes Offred eventually notices in the shadows appear not to be part of the Underground since what Nick whispers to Offred is presumably not heard by them. If this is to be a rescue, we wonder, how will she get out of this apparent captivity by the Eyes? And Nick's equally sudden disappearance can only add to this thriller scene's ambiguity about who may be trusted: Is he one of the Eyes or as a member of the Underground?

In any case, this "Night" chapter ends with the powerful image of the double doors of the black van, opened wide to receive Offred. With all the ingenuity of being a storyteller herself, the Handmaid asserts, "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" (295).

This cliff-hanger ending to the chapter is guaranteed to encourage first-time readers to consider it the penultimate chapter and to turn the page to read the ending in the next, and last, chapter. After all, a dozen or so pages remain, surely enough to answer the reader's question: Did the van doors open into the darkness or the light?⁴ Almost immediately, however, the reader is

⁴As I have argued in a chapter on *The Handmaid's Tale* in my book *Waiting for the End*, Offred's narrative, or the part of Atwood's novel that ends with the van's open doors, is implicated in the duplicity readers have become accustomed to ever since novels have been published. Once they read "Historical Notes" and learn that the novel proper is based on Offred's audiotapes *after* she escaped Gilead, readers have at least a slight sense of being tricked by the simulated suspense of Offred stepping up

likely to discover that it is not only the van doors that have been left "open" at the end of the "Night," but in a highly significant way Offred's story as well. Indeed, turning the page, the reader finds not a "next chapter" but a new division of the novel titled "Historical Notes," and over the page, "Historical Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*." This self-reflexive gesture of including the name of the novel that readers are presently holding takes them out of the novel proper in which they have been engrossed and into a text that seems at first to have no connection with what has preceded it.

The problem is the indeterminacy of this last section. Atwood has indicated that her model for "Historical Notes" was the "Appendix" to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Like her model, Atwood's "Notes" are both inside the novel because they indicate what happened after Offred's narrative ended, and yet *outside* because "what happened" is restricted to something like, she was rescued. Atwood reads Orwell's "Appendix," "The Principles of Newspeak," as his assertion of hope for life to return to normal in the century after the year 1984. The basis of that hope, as Atwood reads Orwell's "Appendix," is the fact that it speaks of Newspeak in the past tense, suggesting that the nightmare is over (*Conversations*, 217). Because for women at least, Atwood's dystopia is as much a nightmare as Winston Smith's defeat by Big Brother, she wants to offer a similar hope. Not only do these "Notes" indicate that Offred escaped Gilead to "tell her story," but in a far-distant future Gilead is no more, and 20th-century aspirations to gender equity and ethnic diversity seem to have been achieved. However, like Orwell's "Appendix," these "Historical Notes" may offer a vision of the future that contains an abstract "hope," but the *person* Offred appears to have been is lost in translation by the historians responsible for these "Notes."

Accordingly, like Orwell's "Appendix," Atwood's "Historical Notes" launches readers into the future—2195—and into the context of an academic conference. After his introduction, James Darcy Picixoto, the conference keynoter, in one sense closes the doors left open as Offred stepped up into the black van. He closes the doors of the open ending by confirming that they opened out into a space of freedom, instead of closing her into a space of

into van because obviously by the time she tells her story she *knows* she was saved.

betrayal and death. And because the doors did lead to freedom and sanctuary, there is another mysterious space—never described, much less identified—in which she makes the audiotapes that serve as the basis of the narrative, thus making it a space in which the novel can in some sense continue to develop. By means of this brilliant stratagem that Atwood has devised to tell Offred's story, she has "commissioned" these two academics to produce this thriller, moving toward its cliff-hanger ending of whether Offred would be "saved in the final reel." Pieixoto has cleverly drawn his audience into an open ending with its "double doors"—an ending that not only opens out to Offred's future but also channels the audience into the "Historical Notes," which may be what these editors are really concerned with. We "know," of course, that these "Notes," like Offred's tale, have been constructed by Atwood; however, in the imaginative economy of the text, they are for better or worse the room the editors built.⁵

If the last lines of the "Night" chapter in which Offred describes herself stepping through the open doors of the van are themselves a "door" that the narrative is opening into a room in which Offred will make the audiotapes that Prof. Pieixoto and his co-editor have transformed into the novel we have been reading, then these "Historical Notes" raise questions that problematize this mysterious room. "Historical Notes" is after all the text of these academics, a "room" they have supposedly built from the raw materials they found as *bricoleurs*, or archaeologists of a sort.⁶ In the midst of all his pedantic fussing over minor details, Pieixoto has little or nothing to say about how the editors came upon the tapes some 200 years after Offred recorded them. Indeed, that story of transforming the tapes into a print text challenges the reader's credulity, since any audiotapes produced in about 1995 would probably have already deteriorated by our time and certainly would

⁵J. Brooks Bouson writes that "the 'Historical Notes' section appended to Offred's tale acts out the rescue fantasy generated by the narrative" (127). These "Notes," however, exist as a text *outside* Offred's narrative and incredibly beyond her "style" as a writer and as a thinker.

⁶The term *bricoleurs* gained some currency a half-century ago through *The Savage Mind* of Claude Lévi-Strauss, which appeared in 1962, its English translation in 1966. Literally "tinkerers," *bricoleurs* came to represent those who construct with the materials at hand.

be indecipherable two centuries into the future. And given the rapid obsolescence in our technology, the editors could not possibly have found a functioning cassette player two hundred years from the present. Thus, the claim that these fictional editors, Pieixoto and Wade, have transcribed, edited, and arranged the contents of the tapes in the order that they are putatively following in the story Offred is "telling" is extremely difficult to believe. As anyone who has transcribed audiotapes and edited them for publication well knows, the process is a variety of "translation," a shaping of the edited text toward something like an authored text.

And mentioning the possibility that the editors "shaped" Offred's narrative in the process of editing it might tempt us to speculate that Pieixoto and Wade have perpetrated a clever hoax that these academic conferees fail to recognize as such. Certainly the technology aspect of their story fails to hold water, as just noted. On the other hand, the legitimacy of their story of discovering and editing a print version of the transcribed tapes may be supported by the sense of a serious disconnect between the Professor and the Handmaid. In the context of the traditional claim by women that male authors continue to fail in creating female characters, is it conceivable that the pedant Pieixoto with his lame jokes about the "Underground Frailroad" by which Offred presumably escaped to Canada and his punning on the handmaid's tale, or tail, could have conceived the character of Offred? As numerous readers have noted, "the millennium" seems not to have been achieved in 2195, if the same adolescent humor at the expense of women can still be tolerated—even if the conference *is* being chaired by a "Professor Maryann Crescent Moon, Department of Caucasian Anthropology, University of Denay, Nunavit"! While readers might be leaning forward in anticipation of further news of Offred, Pieixoto is much more interested in attempting to identify who Fred was than offering something to satisfy his audience's interest in knowing what happened to Offred and the child with which she was pregnant when she climbed into the van.⁷

⁷Ginette Katz-Roy is much more assertive in her generalization that "the male centred point of view we find in the Historical Notes is a grotesque and negative counterpoint to the feminine perspective of the handmaid's tale, a denial of her enterprise which consists in making a

Instead, Pieixoto and his co-editor Knotly Wade may have cleverly constructed *The Handmaid's Tale* up to the point of Offred's entering the double doors of the van as a room from which they are leading their audience into what is more patently "their" work, the text titled "Historical Notes." The "double doors" of the van implicate the editors in the duplicity of their intentions in producing the "novel proper," for they seem most interested in the opportunity to lead their audience into these "Notes" than empathize with Offred's nightmare as a handmaid. After all, Pieixoto has been invited to deliver these "Notes" as a lecture for which he will undoubtedly be paid handsomely. Beneath this facade of pursuing the "truth," Pieixoto may be revealing that his real concern is the enhancement of his career as a historian.

And there is one final issue raised by this room the professors built after leaving the van doors open at the end of Offred's narrative. Many teachers who have assigned *The Handmaid's Tale* have been surprised, even appalled, to discover more than one student willing to admit not having read "Historical Notes," since this last chapter, of a sort, seemed an appendix, a body part the narrative could easily do without.⁸ In this way, the theme of doors and the spaces they define opens up a fascinating issue of endings: What is an ending? *When* is an ending? Did the 20th century make readers so accustomed to "open endings" that even when a novel opens the door to a space beyond in which readers might move along with Offred into the light some readers may be unwilling to go through the door in the way the novelist intended—if at all?

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woman's voice survive" (114).

⁸Kathryn VanSpanckeren calls *The Handmaid's Tale* a "trickster text" in its disruption of the reader's expectations.

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Further Reading

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