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## Katarzyna Machała: The Handmaid's Tales in Gileadverse: Dynamics of a Transmedia Storyworld 2025

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## Book Review

### Katarzyna Machała: *The Handmaid's Tales* in Gileadverse: Dynamics of a Transmedia Storyworld

#### KEYWORDS

The Handmaid's Tale, Margaret Atwood, adaptation, dystopia, transmediality, transmedia storytelling, fan studies, fan fiction

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## Book Review

### Katarzyna Machała: *The Handmaid's Tales in Gileadverse: Dynamics of a Transmedia Storyworld*

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Margaret Atwood's dystopian feminist novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, published in 1985, has become an integral part of the canon of fantastic literature. Highly acclaimed by readers and critics alike, *The Handmaid's Tale* feels more relevant and current than ever (forty years after its initial publication). Against the backdrop of abortion bans in the USA, the #metoo movement, and the rise of right-wing conservative politics, the themes of the novel mirror our current Zeitgeist in an utterly painful way. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the adaptation as a TV series (2017-2025), which recently concluded after six seasons, has been widely received and interpreted as a commentary on current social conditions.

Katarzyna Machała's monograph *The Handmaid's Tales in Gileadverse* focuses not only on the process of adaptation from one medium into the other but is concerned with the larger transmedia universe, its dynamics and mechanisms, which, according to Machała, began with the success of the Hulu production (cf. pp.50f.). The author has therefore decided not to include more conventional adaptations of the material in her book—namely those that appeared between the release of the novel and the TV series, such as Volker Schlöndorff's film version (1990), the radio plays by John Dryden (2002) and Michael O'Brien (2002), and Poul Ruders' adaptation for the opera (1998). Although these different works are mentioned, they have, according to Machała, no relevance for the Gilead universe as it manifests itself today due to their less extensive reception and the lack of expansion of the narrative world. With the TV series, *The Handmaid's Tale* has grown into a "complex and manifold narrative in which the relations of the texts are not adequately explained by the traditional logics of adaptation" (p.VII). Therefore, Machała assumes that *The Handmaid's Tale* is not a rigid, finished product, but "the narrative is participatory and ever expanding across different media, overwritten by many authors" (p.VIII). Terms such as 'palimpsest' or 'archive' come to mind, but Machała does not take them into account.

Conceptually, Machała develops her study with *The Handmaid's Tale* as a textbook example of transmedia storytelling based on preliminary considerations by Henry Jenkins, Marie-Laure Ryan, and Matt Hills as well as Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca, among others. The author demonstrates compellingly the transmedia quality of the material by putting together the various pieces of the puzzle that make up the fictional world of Gilead into a coherent whole. The book's different chapters are dedicated to these individual elements and the exploration of central aspects such as world-building, character development, narrative strategies, and media convergence. In addition to Atwood's novel and the Hulu series, chapters of the book are dedicated to Renée Nault's graphic novel (2019), the follow-up communication of fans online (in particular fan fiction, memes, and the Gileadpedia), and Atwood's sequel *The Testaments* (2019). Although *The Testaments* brings the plot of the first novel to an end, Machała argues that the second book may not be perceived by readers and fans as a final point set by the author. On the contrary, Machała argues that the publication of *The Testaments* does not indicate the author's desire

to maintain the interpretative sovereignty over her work or to control the interpretive community (as with Joanne K. Rowling, for example). In contrast, *The Testaments* marks a new beginning (cf. p.164). However, the question of how this could actually take shape in the future remains open. Conversely, it is all the more revealing that the structure of *The Handmaid's Tales in Gileadverse* indicates precisely the opposite: The structure of the volume suggests a distinct chronological logic and hierarchy that the various building blocks follow—instead of a confusing transmedia network with different entries that equally enrich the transmedia experience of the audience. Atwood's novels seem like the bookends of a closed universe.

A major criticism of *The Handmaid's Tales in Gileadverse* concerns, above all, its treatment of fan fiction. If we take TV fan culture as a pivotal factor of the transmedia narrative world—the flourishing of fictional texts written by fans that are set in the same storyworld as the fan object marks the moment in which a transmedia narrative begins to grow like a rhizome—then it weighs heavily that Machała only refers to fan fictions published on the online multifandom archive fanfiction.net. The author sees this platform as the “most structured collection” (p.102) of fan texts on *The Handmaid's Tale* but finds only 84 entries, of which the appendix informs us that some authors wrote several of the stories. On the one hand, it is surprising that Machała nevertheless claims that the fandom is “moderate in size” (p.103)—considering that 684 fandoms are currently listed on fanfiction.net in the “TV Shows” section along with a number of stories at least in the three-digit range. On the other hand, it is of course surprising that Machała seems to be unaware of Archive of Our Own, which has become much more relevant in fan fiction communities over the last ten years. After all, a search for the tag ‘The Handmaid's Tale’ brings up 710 results (Apr. 23, 2025).

The biggest faux pas, however, seems to be that Machała overlooked two of the most influential and popular *Harry Potter* fan fictions of recent years that borrow *The Handmaid's Tale's* dystopian premise: senlinyu's *Manacled* (2018) and *The Auction* (2019) by Lovesbitca8. Being explicitly inspired by *The Handmaid's Tale*, although *Manacled* had not been tagged on AO3 as such, this dark romance story about Draco Malfoy and Hermione Granger used to be one of the most popular fan fictions on AO3 across all (!) fandoms. In the summer of 2024, *Manacled* had a total of nine million page views, 95,000 kudos, and was bookmarked more than 27,000 times. Together with *The Auction*, it had been pulled-to-publish from AO3 by the end of last year and will presumably be published in the near future as an original work (similar to the fan fiction *Master of the Universe* that became widely known as *Fifty Shades of Grey*). Interestingly, *Manacled* operates less in the sense of a crossover between the two worlds (Hogwarts and Gilead) and more in the sense that *The Handmaid's Tale* is spread out as a dark tapestry for the plot, whereby the political, social, and political radiance of Gilead becomes a mass phenomenon in a remarkably self-evident way. The story—including its German, French, Spanish, and Chinese translations—could have been found on fanfiction.net as well. With almost 9,000 likes (favs) on fanfiction.net, *Manacled* had been significantly more popular than all the texts Machała deals with put together. For comparison: According to the appendix, the most popular *The Handmaid's Tale* fan fiction in the study has 23 favs [cf. p.182]]. Moreover, not only *Harry Potter* fan fiction is relevant in this context but tropes, premises, and settings borrowed from *The Handmaid's Tale* found their way into other fandoms as well—from *Bridgerton* (2020-) to *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* (2020), from *Hannibal* (2013-2015) to BTS.

Despite its weaknesses, Machała's book is an entertaining companion, especially for fans of the TV series, when navigating through the fictional Gilead universe. The fact that *The Handmaid's Tale* as a



transmedia narrative world is much more limited—“more manageable” (p.165) than *Harry Potter*, *Marvel*, or *Star Wars*—certainly adds to the appeal of the study. At the same time, however, overlooking fan fictions like *Manacled* and *The Auction* is crucial, because its analysis may have actually put the future of the transmedia Gilead into perspective and would have highlighted the much larger cultural impact of Atwood’s book.