

Document A

The bell that measures time is ringing. Time here is measured by bells, as once in nunneries. As in a nunnery too, there are few mirrors.

I get up out of the chair, advance my feet into the sunlight,
 5 in their red shoes, flat-heeled to save the spine and not for dancing. The red gloves are lying on the bed. I pick them up, pull them onto my hands, finger by finger. Everything except the wings around my face is red: the colour of blood, which defines us. The skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat yoke
 10 that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full. The white wings too are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen. I never looked good in red, it's not my colour. I pick up the shopping basket, put it over my arm.

The door of the room - not my room, I refuse to say *my* - is
 15 not locked. In fact it doesn't shut properly. I go out into the polished hallway, which has a runner down the centre, dusty pink. Like a path through the forest, like a carpet for royalty, it shows me the way.

The carpet bends and goes down the front staircase and I go
 20 with it, one hand on the banister, once a tree, turned in another century, rubbed to a warm gloss. Late Victorian, the house is, a family house, built for a large rich family. There's a grandfather clock in the hallway, which doles out time, and then the door to the motherly front sitting room, with its
 25 fleshtones and hints. A sitting room in which I never sit, but stand or kneel only. At the end of the hallway, above the front door, is a fanlight of coloured glass: flowers, red and blue.

There remains a mirror, on the hall wall. If I turn my head so that the white wings framing my face direct my vision
 30 towards it, I can see it as I go down the stairs, round, convex, a pier-glass, like the eye of a fish, and myself in it like a distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairytale figure in a red cloak, descending towards a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger. A Sister, dipped in blood.

At the bottom of the stairs there's a hat-and-umbrella stand,
 35 the bentwood kind, long rounded rungs of wood curving gently up into hooks shaped like the opening fronds of a fern. There are several umbrellas in it: black, for the Commander, blue, for the Commander's Wife, and the one assigned to me,
 40 which is red. I leave the red-umbrella where it is, because I know from the window that the day is sunny. I wonder whether or not the Commander's Wife is in the sitting room. She doesn't always sit. Sometimes I can hear her pacing back and forth, a heavy step and then a light one, and the soft tap of
 45 her cane on the dusty-rose carpet.

Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 1986, London : Vintage, 1996, pp. 18-19

NB: The narrator is a "handmaid" in a theocratic and totalitarian state that has replaced the United States of America. Handmaids are assigned to bear children for infertile elite couples.

Document B

In Chester, for example, the authorities
 * deplored the habit of wives, widows and many maids in the city wearing
 white caps, kerchiefs and great broad black hats 'whereby a single woman
 cannot be distinguished from a married, which disordering and abusing
 5 of apparel is not only contrary to the good use and honest fashion used
 in other good cities and places of the realm, whereby great obloquy
 among strangers has and does run abroad, but also is very costly more
 than necessary'. In response, they imposed monetary fines on all unmar-
 10 ried women who had the temerity to wear caps and on all women wear-
 ing black hats unless they were riding or going to the country.⁶ In terms
 of dress, at least, women of all ranks including the wives of burghesses, felt
 able to disregard measures designed to safeguard their respectability.

And yet the vulnerability of female chastity was a commonplace, which
 15 was constantly reiterated in literature and in the claims and counter-
 claims thrown around in slander and defamation suits. It was present
 even in tales lauded by historians as rare examples of narratives in which
 the wife is assumed to be chaste, such as Adam de Cobsam's poem dis-
 20 cussed by Hanawalt. In this poem, written in 1462, a married carpenter is
 given a contract to build a hall and turns down the opportunity of taking
 his wife with him, claiming that he has no need to fear for his wife's
 chastity during his absence. However, as the narrative unfolds, it becomes
 clear that the story hinges less on the wife's natural chastity, than on the
 incentive and assistance she has in maintaining it. A woman of poor fam-
 25 ily, her only dowry is a magical rose garland that will not fade so long as
 she is true to her husband. Moreover, as if the inability of the wife to con-
 ceal her unfaithfulness was not a sufficient deterrent, the carpenter felt
 the need to improve his wife's ability to defend her chastity by construc-
 30 ing a tower and a dungeon. In sequence the lord, the steward, the pro-
 curator of the parish church and the priest all try to test the wife's chastity in
 her husband's absence, but when they offer her money, she leads them to
 the tower where they fall through the trap door to the dungeon below.
 Here, suffering from hunger, they experience the final degradation of

being reduced to begging to be allowed to do women's work (preparing
 35 flax and spinning) in exchange for some food until the husband returns
 from his building contract.⁷ When this was one of the most positive liter-
 ary assertions of the married woman's capacity for chastity, it is hardly
 surprising that women's reputation was to a large extent defined by
 their sexual honesty, and that women seeking to defend themselves
 40 against slanderous comment most commonly sought a retraction of the
 label 'whore'.

This was largely due to the prevailing assumption in this period that
 women were by nature more lustful than men, and that women, their sex-
 45 ual passions having been aroused by the experience of marriage, were
 insatiable as widows. By the later seventeenth and early eighteenth cen-
 turies, partly as a result of the development of new medical theories, such
 views were undergoing a revision. In the new scheme the naturally chaste
 woman could be mastered and controlled by the sexually dominant man.
 Before this development, the greater lustfulness of women, together with
 50 the uncertainty of paternity, supported the idea of woman as temptress
 and deceiver and seemed to justify the double standard. But this view-
 point was not unchallenged. Those with pastoral concerns could reach
 different conclusions about culpability and responsibility. On the one
 hand, the catholic classification of mortal and venial sins suggested that
 gravity depended on the nature of the offence rather than the sex of the
 55 offender. More interesting, since it fostered diametrically opposed con-
 clusions about gender and sin, was the idea that sin represented a loss of
 control. Following contemporary assumptions about the nature of the
 sexes this meant that naturally weak-willed women should be deemed less
 culpable than men who were thought to be more rational and to be more
 60 able to control their sexual desires. These ideas were already present in
 the late middle ages, but were given a sharper edge with the development
 of protestantism especially when zeal for godly reformation coincided
 with the opportunity of social control.

Christine Peters, *Women in Early Modern Britain, 1450-1640*, Chap. 3, "Disorderly Women"
 Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, pp. 70-71



Audrey Flack, *Marilyn (Vanitas)*, 1977. Oil over acrylic on canvas, 96 x 96 in. Artist's collection.