

***Nolite te bastardes carborundorum:***  
**Schoolboy Latin in Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale***

*The Handmaid's Tale* is set in Gilead, a dystopic nation established in the former US and supposedly founded on Biblical precedents. The narrator of the tale is Offred, who is known solely by this moniker, her Gileadic designation as belonging to the household "of Fred," a commander in the regime. As a woman, Offred is no longer allowed to read or write. As a handmaid, she is installed in the commander's house in the hopes that she can conceive a child by him since his spouse cannot. The use of handmaids is common in Gilead, but the role is not without physical and emotional perils: many handmaids commit suicide rather than continue their service. As a safeguard against suicide, Offred's room in the commander's house is spare. What space is there for Classics in such a story?

While exploring her room, Offred discovers a "Latin" inscription carved into the woodwork by the previous handmaid occupant: *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*, a variant of *illegitimum non carborundum*, a nonsense-Latin phrase used in a Harvard fight song since the early 1900s. Offred does not know what the phrase means (indeed, she does not even know that it is pseudo-Latin), but she takes heart at its discovery: she repeats it as a mantra, and she considers it a bond between herself and the other handmaid--also called Offred--who served in the house before her. Offred conflates her idea of her predecessor with her memories of a friend, Moira, a spirited woman who had escaped from the Center in which handmaids are trained.

The inscription introduces the possibility that Latin provides a rare viable link between radically alienated women. The possibility turns on its head the common use of "schoolboy Latin" to consolidate bonds between men. David Skilton and Hugh Osborne have studied Latin's functions in Victorian society and suggest that the citation of Latin tags learned in school helped "gentlemen" to identify one another and strengthened their sense of privileged community. When the Offreds exchange this Latin tag, they seem to appropriate the language of patriarchal power for their own communal ends. "Schoolboy Latin" becomes "Handmaid Latin."

Although Atwood entices readers with this possibility, she ultimately suggests that Latin is a dead end. Offred discovers that her predecessor learned the phrase from the master of the house; the same master explains its meaning to Offred as "don't let the bastards grind you down," and he describes it as one of a number of Latin jokes passed down through generations of schoolboys. The communication between the handmaids is crucially mediated by the commander who exercises power over them and represents the larger Gileadic hierarchy. Nor is the spirit which Offred associates with the phrase borne out: Offred learns that her predecessor killed herself, and she finds that her friend Moira did not escape Gilead but instead serves as a sexual toy for the commanders. *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum* loses its magical power for Offred; it no longer connects her to women she had associated with community and resistance.

Atwood's depletion of the Latin tag seems to confirm the idea that Latin has no room for a community of women--such an idea was voiced by Offred's husband in the time before the Gileadic coup, when he explained to her that while Latin gives English *fraternize*, no equivalent such as *sororize* exists. Atwood replaces the empty promise of Latin with a new and ultimately efficacious phrase: May Day or *m'aidez*. Offred learns this catch-phrase from Ofglen (a handmaid member of the resistance), and Offred's lover, Nick, eventually uses it to signal that rescue is imminent. The spoken languages of French and English are thus associated with love and life, while Latin is used to underscore the hierarchy which makes the handmaids' existence a living death. Given this dichotomy, it is fitting that Offred eventually narrates her story orally, not writing it down but dictating it onto cassette tapes. And yet there may be hope for Latin: despite Atwood's deflation of *nolite te bastardes carborundorum*, some readers of the novel have adopted the phrase as a rallying cry of sorts, signalling their commitment to the project of making room for their voices within previously exclusive discourses and thereby resisting the dystopic society that Atwood's novel depicts.