

**Segregating Antiquity from Fantasy:  
An Inspection on Tracy L. Higley's *The Queen's Handmaid***

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**ABSTRACT**

*Historic fiction, in general is a blend of both historic figures and non-historic fictional characters, re-telling a story from either a narrator's point-of-view or a character's perspective. In this re-telling, in order to spice things up and display more realistically, the author tends present a probable alternative reality that oscillates between actual history and the past according to the writer, presenting a credible account of what must have really happened. In such a case, it is necessary to dissect the text, isolating history from speculations and fantasy and trace it to its roots, enabling the reader to be aware of the influence and background of a particular history and possible historic allusions in the text. This paper entitled "Segregating Antiquity from Fantasy: An Inspection on Tracy L. Higley's *The Queen's Handmaid*" traverses through the novel and displays the perception in which history is portrayed, delineating historic facts from that of the author's fictional narration.*

**Keywords:** *history, fiction, facts, literature, scrolls.*

History is a subject that deals with facts recorded by men from the past who were entrusted by emperors and royalties to write about their achievements and conquests. Recording of events has been done at the behest of the victors and hence it could not be neutral or unbiased at times. However, no matter the slant or bias, history is always treated as facts and information from the past. From ancient times, there has been a tradition to record all events of a place. This tradition to record events has been in practice much before the arrival of printing press as there have been rare manuscripts written on paper, leaves and dried skins of animals. It shows the propensity of the people of earlier times to record information in written form for future generations.

The main connection between literature and history is that literature is used to report and represent history. The two are, therefore, intertwined with one another. The biggest difference between literature and history is the latter posits itself as fact, while the former is taken to be an artistic form. The twin ideas of fact and entertainment intertwine often within literature and history to produce historical fiction and narrative non-fiction.

Historical fiction is a popular form of literature. It shows the deep connections between history and literature by having the writer study a particular era from the past in order to write

a story. These stories may be wholly fictional or they might be fictionalized accounts of real people and real events. Popular authors of historical fiction include Bernard Cornwell who wrote books on Napoleonic Europe, the Dark Ages and the Battle of Agincourt, and Hilary Mantel, who wrote “Wolf Hall,” a book about Thomas Cromwell.

Tracy Higley’s *The Queen’s Handmaid* belongs to the genre of historic fiction that explores the lives of Herod and his family as well as the changing times of Israel, Rome, and Egypt. Higley has not only presented facts but has also infused fictional narrations that give an antique appeal to the readers, taking them back to the worlds of kings and queens. So it is necessary to discern and isolate facts from fiction and deliberate upon how the author has inculcated historic incidents to form a work that belongs to the genre of literature. New historicism theory can be of great assistance to do this analysis.

New Historicism is a literary theory based on the idea that literature should be studied and interpreted within the context of both the history of the author and the history of the critic. Based on the literary criticism of Stephen Greenblatt and influenced by the philosophy of Michel Foucault, New Historicism acknowledges not only that a work of literature is influenced by its author's times and circumstances, but that the critic's response to that work is also influenced by his environment, beliefs, and prejudices.

New historicism basically takes into account that literary work or rather any literature work has time, place and thus a historical event as its key components and that these key elements can actually be deciphered from the literary text following keen analysis of the text even if these elements are not clearly depicted by a writer in his or her work. With this as base, this paper entitled “Segregating Antiquity from Fantasy: An Inspection Tracy L. Higley’s *The Queen’s Handmaid*” traverses through the novel and displays the perception in which history is portrayed.

Before exploring the historic facts, it is necessary to be aware of the circumstances and the background of the story. In Egypt, Cleopatra ruled and had successfully seduced Mark Antony, who then married Octavius Caesar’s biological sister named Octavia. Both Egypt and Judea were under the control of Rome, which was ruled by the triumvirates Mark Antony, Lepidus and Octavius Caesar. Marc Antony’s growing allegiance to Cleopatra alienated him from Octavius Caesar and from Rome. By the summer of 30 BC, he and Cleopatra were both dead at their own hands.

In Jerusalem, the Maccabean revolt that placed the Hasmonean family on the throne occurred 120 years before the start of *The Queen’s Handmaid*, and eventually that feuding family invited Rome into the conflict in hopes of settling it. Instead, in 63 BC, the Roman

general Pompey nearly destroyed Jerusalem and made Israel a client kingdom of the Roman Republic. Pompey restored the Hasmonean Hyrcanus (Alexandra's father) as High Priest, but placed the Idumean Antipater (Herod's father) on the throne as king.

Antipater was a shrewd politician, a friend to Julius Caesar, and he paved the way for his son Herod to eventually become king. Factions within Jerusalem were still supporting the dethroned Hasmoneans, in the person of Hyrcanus's nephew Antigonus. Antipater was later assassinated in a political rival and Antigonus took charge, imprisoning Antipater's family. But Herod managed to escape.

The very opening of the story begins with the meeting of two great incredibly powerful leaders: Cleopatra and Herod the Great. In original history, Herod fled from Judea to Alexandria and he was well received by Cleopatra, who offered to appoint him as commander of her army. Anxious to reach Rome, Herod declined. In the novel, the meeting between Herod and Cleopatra is narrated briefly focusing more on their possible conversations and how she tried to seduce and win Herod. When all her efforts go futile, she tries to force a kiss on him, which Herod delightfully returns with coldness. Then she proceeds to talk business about providing him ship to travel back to Rome. There is no of mentioning of army or political alliance. Unable to hold it any longer, Herod blurts out that he may inform Antony about her advances. She then sends him away and plans what to do next. However fictionalized, Higley never fails to display the calculative mind of Cleopatra: "Inside her own chamber, she slammed the door on his guards and collapsed against it. It would be a delicate business to destroy one of Antony's closest friends without incurring her lover's wrath. But she had not ruled Egypt alone for nearly twelve years without learning how to make convenient deaths appear as accidents" (ch. 4).

After Herod became king of Judea, enmity developed between them, for his accession had frustrated Cleopatra's plans to annex Judea. Cleopatra incited Antony against Herod. She also lent a ready ear to the complaints of Alexandra, Mariamne's mother had quarrelled with Herod for refusing to appoint her son Aristobulus as high priest. In the novel, Alexandra sends a portrait of her son and daughter along with a letter to Cleopatra asking her to show it to Marc Antony, thus, urging her to persuade Antony to favor Aristobulus. Antony requested Aristobulus to come to Egypt and Herod panicked, and he refused to Antony's request, with the reason that Aristobulus was too popular that his departure could cause riots. To keep Aristobulus in Judea and away from Antony, Herod makes him High Priest, deposing Ananel, who had been appointed for life. But unfortunately, by chapter 19, Aristobulus and Alexandra

were caught red handed while trying to sneak out by one of Herod's eunuch and their plan gets foiled.

Cleopatra openly supported Alexandra and it was as a result of her intervention that Herod was required to account Antony for the death of Aristobulus. Though Herod succeeded in saving his throne, he was compelled to cede Cleopatra Jericho and its environs together with certain areas of Arabia. These he subsequently leased from her; but this did not improve their personal relationship. In the novel, the conversations exchanged between Mariamme and Aristobulus delineates Cleopatra's attempt to pressurize Herod and show him who the boss is: "All I have seen of Cleopatra's actions since Herod took the throne tells me she wants only to restore her Ptolemaic kingdom of old—including Syria and every bit of Judea. Look at all she has convinced Antony to grant her already—the rights to collect bitumen tar from the Salt Sea, the date-palms and balsam of Jericho—" (ch. 18)

The next historic incident that Higley has used is, the Battle of Masada. The siege of Masada was one of several historical events recorded by Roman-Jewish historian Flavius Josephus during the First Jewish-Roman War. The site of the siege is the ancient Masada fortress. The siege occurred between 73 and 74 CE, after the fall of Jerusalem. The siege of Masada was a pivotal event in the First Jewish-Roman War as it brought an end to the first revolt by the Jewish people against the Roman Empire in Roman-controlled Judea. Flavius Silva led fifteen thousand men and women to the area surrounding Masada. This group included about eight thousand fighting men. The Roman legion surrounded the plateau and built many camps and a large circumvallation wall. The novel too presents all these incidents through the eyes of the protagonist Lydia, but it presents something more: the reason for Herod to fight zealously in this siege: because Herod's mother Cypros, his sister Salome, his mother-in-law Alexandra and his betrothed wife Mariamme were trapped in the Masada fortress. The novel also states that the more Herod neared Judea, he became more of a forsaken husband who yearns for his wife's company. Initially the rebels seemed to be gaining an upper hand in the war, but finally Herod and his troop managed to win the siege and rescue his precious women of importance. Higley has thus managed to paint the picture of Herod as a lovey-dovey husband rather than a ruthless aristocrat as per mentioned in actual history.

*The Queen's Handmaid* deftly presents the shrewd way in which Herod decided to take Jerusalem, before he entered the city. He declares to his family that he will take the city with "force of his magnanimous personality alone" (ch. 15). He first sends emissaries at the gates of the city proclaiming that Herod has come in peace. But ironically the people were well aware of the existence of Roman legions on the outskirts of the city.

By origin, Herod was an Idumean. The people of Jerusalem were too conscious about his Idumean bloodline and they refused to accept him. But Herod moves one step further and marries the Hasmonean princess named Mariamme and announces it gleefully, thereby making claims to his kingship legitimate. His campaign was successful enough that he managed to stir the hearts of many Jews. Herod takes this as his cue and with his Roman legion led by Macherus, he takes Jerusalem by force which now has much less resistance. The novel vividly presents a scene of bloodshed and chaos during this siege:

Everywhere, people ran and people screamed. Some bloody already, lurching and clutching at walls, searching for home and safety. A woman ran past, about Lydia's age, one cheek slashed from lip to eye. Her gaze tumbled over Lydia without comprehension, without reason. Lydia gasped with pity. The siege fires were everywhere now. Smoke snaked upward from the city in a hundred columns of death, lives and homes reduced to ash. It burned her eyes and clogged her throat . . . The fighting grew fiercer the nearer she came to the Temple area. Its enclosure walls hid an enormous courtyard. The Temple itself soared above the walls, its face set toward the east. Sunlight glanced off gold and Lydia blinked against the glare, raised a hand to her brow. Bodies were everywhere. Romans, Jews, and Herod's men alike littered the paving around the Temple walls. Blood pooled in cracks, ran like liquid mortar in tracks around the flat-hewn stones. Bashed heads, gored chests, lopped limbs. (ch. 17)

Before being taken as prisoner, in the novel, Antigonus rushes to the feet of the Roman general, trying to gain his favour, only to be mocked by the general who calls him with a female version of his name, 'Antigone.' Historically there is no such claim to this incident. But the way Higley incorporated this fictional scene makes the reader contemplate on how miserable Antigonus would have been treated in the hands of Romans. History narrated with spice and heart-touching scenes is one of the specialities of historic fictions, which is aptly found in Higley's novel.

In the end, Antigonus was taken as a prisoner. He was taken to Antioch and executed, ending Hasmonean rule. Josephus states that Mark Antony beheaded Antigonus (*Antiquities*, XV 1:2 (8–9)). Roman historian Cassius Dio says that he was crucified and recorded in his *Roman History*: "These people [the Jews] Antony entrusted to a certain Herod to govern; but Antigonus he bound to a cross and scourged, a punishment no other king had suffered at the hands of the Romans, and so slew him". In his *Life of Antony*, Plutarch claims that Antony had beheaded Antigonus, which serves as the first example of that of a punishment being inflicted on a king.

While Herod used the Hasmoneans to legitimize his own rule he was, at the same time, fearful of them and regarded them as threats. For instance, Aristobulus III, a grandson of Hyrcanus, and the brother of Mariamne, was made high priest in 36 BC. In the following year, however, fearful that the people of Jerusalem might make the Hasmonean Aristobulus their king as well, Herod murdered him.

Hyrcanus was a victim of Herod's jealousy as well. Although Herod honoured the former monarch, with every mark of respect, he was waiting for a chance to get rid of him. This opportunity came in 30 BC, when Hyrcanus was accused of plotting with the King of Arabia, condemned, and executed. Even his beloved wife, Mariamne, was not spared, being charged with adultery (Herod in fact was suspicious that his wife and her family were plotting to dethrone him), found guilty, and executed.

In the novel, death of both Mariamme and Aristobulus are scripted as doings of Herod's sister Salome, who worked behind the scenes. Aristobulus was murdered submerging him forcefully in Herod's pool under the guise of playing in the pool. Mariamme, on the other hand, was proved guilty through a false trial where she was blamed for two things: for not visiting the king's chamber for a year and for being close with Herod's trusted friend Sohemus, although their relationship was nothing more than an innocent friendship. Higley's version of story tells us that Herod went into madness after Mariamme's death. This information is passed on from David, one of Lydia's friends who warn her about Herod, as she decides to leave the palace after Mariamme's death: "Be careful," David said. "Herod is beside himself with grief and rage. He staggers from room to room, crying out for Mariamme as if she lives." (ch. 37)

In actuality, after Mariamme died, Herod did go mad for a while, but soon he managed to find another girl with same appearance and same bearings of that of his beloved Mariamme and history labels her as Mariamme II. If Higley has attempted to make Herod seem like a ruthless yet ardent lover, like in Chinese webcomics, then she has done a really great job in moving the hearts of readers, making them think almost for a second that Herod's love for her was genuine and not an obsession.

Higley has not only displayed actual history through her fictional writing, but has also made allusions to the birth of Jesus Christ in her novel. When the death of Herod was imminent in the battle against Syria, Herod gave his brother Joseph an order to kill Mariamme and her child, if the news of his death would reach them, lest she remarries another man after his demise. Simon and Lydia somehow learns of this plan of Herod and decide to take away nine months pregnant Mariamme away from the palace to some safer place. This incident is more

relatable with that of Joseph and Mary (who is pregnant with baby Jesus Christ) flee from Nazareth, when Herod had ordered the death of all children below age two.

Just as how the pregnant Mary ends up in Bethlehem, Mariamme arrives at Bethlehem during night time to take rest. The only difference is Mariamme managed to get an inn to stay, whereas Mary never got one. Both of them go into labour at midnight. Here comes the interesting fact: when Mariamme was asked for her name during her labour pain, she introduced herself as 'Mary' and gave birth to a healthy baby boy. This incident of Mariamme giving birth to her son is illustrative of Mary giving birth to baby Jesus Christ. Again, Mariamme had extra assistance of a midwife during the childbirth, and there is no solid evidence of Mary from Bible giving birth all by herself. So it is normal to perceive that she might have had the assistance of a midwife, which has been left unrecorded by the historians, owing to its insignificance.

With all the major historic incidents of eminence narrated, now it is requisite to explore how Higley brought these all together and cooked it into a story that would become a best-seller. In the novel, Lydia is found out to be a lost- Judean princess with the help of the pendant she received from Samuel in Alexandria and through the words of Banafrit who discloses the fact that Lydia is the daughter of a Hasmonean princess Shira and the king of Cyprus who happens to be the twelfth brother of Ptolemy. The circumstances of the death of Ptolemy's brother, king of Cyprus, is factual, but details of his wife's identity are unknown. It is here that Higley fictionalized her connection with Judea, by creating an imaginary character named Shira making her a sibling of Alexandra.

With all the characters put into place, the story will be as follows: King of Cyprus and Hasmonean princess Shira must have come in contact with one another, after Rome took over Judea. In Egypt when Cleopatra's sister tried to take over the throne, she eliminated all the possible heirs to the throne in which King of Cyprus and Shira should have been murdered. But unfortunately Cleopatra killed Benerice and took over the throne. Apart from being the Egyptian Pharaoh, Cleopatra herself has Greek bearings, that would make Lydia half Greek, half Egyptian (as she was raised in Alexandria) and half Hasmonean, making her a potential heir to all the three kingdoms. With this information at hand, Higley has also included a fictional scene where Cleopatra, on her yearly visits to Judea meets up with Lydia once again. Cleopatra being aware of Lydia's new found identity is threatened and she tries to intimidate her, to which Lydia gives a sharp reply:

“Cleopatra shouted in Lydia’s face. “You think I fear you? You worthless little worm-servant! You are nothing but a half-breed, raised in the sewers. You are no more to me than an insect.”

“And yet here you are.” Lydia kept her voice low. “Seeking me out. Attempting to intimidate me.”

It felt like freedom, to speak thus to Cleopatra.” (ch. 31)

Higley could have turned the plot the other way around, and made Lydia the queen of Egypt through Herod who has better relations with Octavius Caesar, when Cleopatra and Mark Antony died at once. This could have altered the historicity of the novel, making it more absurd and unrealistic. But she does not do that; she has rather created a strong character who stays unwavering by wealth, power or aristocratic life. Lydia decides to embrace the identity of a normal Jewish woman and lead a peaceful life with new beginning at the end of the novel.

Higley has created her character in such a way that she moves throughout the novel seamlessly without any block. Whether be it Egypt, Rome or Judea, there is inaccuracy, with no complete facts about the names or identities of the slaves of these great messed up aristocratic families. This enables Higley to fit Lydia beautifully into the position of a slave who could have had the possibility to rewrite the history, thus without altering the actual history.

In all the three kingdoms, as far as Higley is concerned, Lydia has served as a maid. And this addition of character in no way alters the historic happenings of the novel or the course of the plot. It is just that the whole history is reviewed from the eyes of a nobody, on whom Higley has bestowed a character and a purpose to keep the pace of the plot in motion.

The driving force behind all this that holds down Lydia from making any clear decisions is the ancient scrolls and the task to hand it over to Chakkiym. Chakkiym means ‘wise men’ in general. Apart from the three wise men who travelled around the globe to meet baby Jesus Christ, the other place in Bible where wise men are mentioned more is in the Book of Daniel.

According to the biblical and archaeological history, Daniel was made the ruler over Babylonian provinces by Nebuchadnezzar. And being a ruler gives him the privilege and possibility of raising a retinue of people on his own. In the last chapter of book of Daniel, Daniel gets a vision from heaven, where an angel instructs him to seal up some words revealed to him, which should not be opened until the time of Messiah. In New Testament, in one of the biblical stories that has been recorded, Jesus Christ is seen reading from the scrolls of Isaiah the Prophet in the synagogue. Connecting these two incidents, Higley has drawn the plot of the



existence of wise men apart from the Pharisees and Sadducees, who protect the fictional scrolls of Daniel which has been passed down from generation to generation.

Humans are prone to make mistake in one way or the other. To epitomize this characteristic, Higley makes one of the descendants of these wise men to lose this scrolls and makes it to be found by another Jew in exile named Samuel. Here too, Higley has drawn this name from the biblical character named Samuel, who anoints the Israeli kings Saul and David respectively. This can be interpreted in novel in a similar manner: by presenting her mother's necklace and the divine scrolls, Samuel the prophet anoints Lydia to undertake the journey of her life. At the end of the novel, Simon and Lydia travel to Persia to hand over the scrolls to the wise men. The recent excavation of Dead Sea Scrolls from Nag Hamadi Wadi provides the possibility of existence of Daniel's fictional scrolls. This paper has shed light on the fine line that separates fantasy from antiquity with numerous possibilities for reality.

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