"The Words Boil Out of Me, Coil after Coil of Sinuous Possibility": Fairy Tales in Margaret Atwood's Work

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Abstract

This paper discusses the role of fairy tales as intertexts in Margaret Atwood's work through a selection of texts from her novels, short stories and poetry. The incorporation and intermingling of different genres in Atwood's novels brings about a strong focus on intertexuality. The texts echo and recall earlier writing, in a constant process of displacement and revision. The importance attributed to genres here demonstrates that a genre does not consist simply of a set of rules that have to be observed. A genre can provide a useful frame of reference for the writer and for the reader. The creation of a generic framework within the text allows the writer to point out the generic norms and at the same time to subvert them in a recognisable way.

Key-words: Fairy Tale; Brothers Grimm; Intertextuality.

1. Gender and genre

Margaret Atwood's 2006 short story cycle *Moral Disorder* uses a violent and macabre Celtic folk tale, that of the Headless Horseman, to explore the protagonist's darker self. Halloween provides the perfect occasion. In "The Headless Horseman" the narrator creates a monstrous puppet "out of papier mâché" with a "ghastly glare" (28) and a "neck stub" (Atwood 2006: 29) painted in red. It was supposed to have a terrifying effect; in actual fact it scared only her little sister to the extent that years later the narrator thinks it may have affected her emotional life. For the young protagonist, however, Halloween acts as a Carnival, with all its liberating possibilities that a disguise can offer – or rather it belongs to the Carnivalesque, as Mikhail Bakhtin has theorised. His notions of the "carnivalistic sense of the world" include eccentric behaviour: behaviour that was

otherwise unacceptable is legitimate in carnival, and human nature's hidden sides are revealed (Bakhtin 1984).

For Halloween that year […] I dressed up as the Headless Horseman […] Halloween was my best holiday. Why did I like it so much? Perhaps because I could take time off from being myself, or from the impersonation of myself I was finding it increasingly expedient, but also increasingly burdensome, to perform in public (Atwood 2006: 27).

For Bakthin carnivalesque imagery is always dualistic and ambivalent. In Atwood's story it allows the protagonist's monster self to surface.

I loved the sensation of prowling abroad in the darkness – of being unseen, unknown, potentially terrifying, though all the time retaining, underneath, my own harmless, mundane, and dutiful self (Atwood 2006: 31).

"The headless horseman" makes a brief appearance in an earlier novel, *Life Before Man,* in all its terrifying and violent connotations. In this case, there is literally a body without a head, due to suicide by gunfire (Atwood 1979: 16).

Doubles and doppelganger figures, shadow selves and evil twins, recur throughout Atwood's oeuvre, since her first novel, *The Edible Woman* (1969). In *The Robber Bride*, a novel I shall discuss later on, the three women protagonists, all victims of the wicked but gorgeous Zenia, experience a deep desire to identify with villainess. In her critical writing, starting from her first acclaimed study of Canadian literature, *Survival* (1972), to *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (2002), based on the prestigious Empson Lectures Atwood offered in Cambridge, she discusses the importance of doubles in literature. Atwood is a very prolific essayist, with ten books of reviews, essays and lectures. In order to discuss the use of fairy tales in her texts, or rather of their darker, more violent facets, I want to turn briefly to Atwood's first critical book where the author explores the issue of literary genres and of generic conventions or norms.

In *Survival*, Margaret Atwood observes that the Rapunzel syndrome, patterned on Grimms' fairy tale, is a recurring motif in realistic fiction. Grimms' tale offers the basic story line: the witch who wants the heroine locked away; the tower in which

she is imprisoned and the rescuer, a "handsome prince of little substantiality who provides momentary escape" (1972: 52). In a 1976 interview, Atwood talks about her fascination with the genre: "I would say that *Grimms' Fairy Tales* was the most influential book I ever read" (Ingersoll 2006: 24). Maybe one of the reasons for this fascination can be found "in the Brothers' profound philosophical, philological, and artistic approach to storytelling and all kinds of folk genres", to quote Jack Zipes, one of the most authoritative American scholars of fairy tales and of the Brothers Grimm in particular (Zipes 2015: 155). Atwood operates within the Grimms' tradition of storytelling and writing and at the same time renders it more feasible and pertinent to the present. In addition, her interest in fairy tales is linked to questions of boundaries, to reach beyond generic norms, can be far more rewarding than confining oneself within rigidly demarcated generic rules. As she remarks:

Every-one of these art forms has a certain set of brackets around it. You can say, *this is what happens with this form*, and, *these are some of the things that don't happen within it*. Some of the most interesting things happen when you expand the brackets. Then you change the rules (Hancock 1987: 260).

Atwood's fiction shows a striking tendency to revisit conventional fictional forms inherited from traditions of both "high" and "low" forms of writing, as for example, the Gothic, the sentimental novel, the picaresque, ancient myth and the fairy tale. The way in which different genres and traditions function in the texts reveal the author's skill in working within a set of generic conventions in order to subvert them. Atwood's interest lies in shaping the material from which she borrows, in order to "transform it, rearrange it and shift the values" (Atwood in Peterson 1987: 138). The interaction between different generic modes of writing has further implications, in that it calls into question the difference between so called "high" and "low" forms of art, challenging conventional hierarchies existing among genres (see Rao: 1993). The use of popular art, for example, as Stuart Hall reminds us, does not merely reproduce ways and means of belonging to the dominant discourse. On the contrary, it acts as the locus of conflict, where a double movement between acceptance and dissent can be continually discerned (Hall 1965).

The challenge to generic classification, however, does not imply that the reader has to abandon generic thinking altogether. Instead it calls for an investigation of genre itself and of the relationship between genres. It is essential to understand how generic rules work before making any alteration to the norms:

You have to understand what the form is doing, how it works, before you say "Now, we are going to make it different […] we are going to turn it upside down, we are going to move it so it includes something which isn't supposed to be there, we're going to surprise the reader" (Hancock 1987: 260).

Atwood's defiance of readers' expectation is deeply linked to a questioning of gender roles. Cristina Bacchilega in her study *Postmodern Fairly Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies* summarises the privileged role fairy tales play in the production of gender:

In its multiple retellings, the fairy tale is that variable and "in-between" image where folklore and literature, community and individual, consensus and enterprise, children and adults, woman and women, face and reflect (on) each other […] the tale of magic's controlling metaphor is the *magic mirror*, because it conflates mimesis (reflection), refraction (varying desires), and framing (artifice) […] Postmodern fiction, then, holds mirrors to the magic mirror of the fairy tale, playing with its framed images out of a desire to multiply its refractions and to expose its artifices. Frames and images may vary, but gender is almost inevitably the privileged place for articulating these de-naturalizing strategies. And while this play of reflection, refraction, and framing might produce ideologically 'destructive', 'constructive' and 'subversive' effects, the self-reflexive mirrors are themselves questioned and transformed (Bacchilega 1997: 10; 23-4).

Perhaps the fairy tale holds its power over the imagination because of the simplicity of its rules, easy to use and extremely adaptable, rendering translatable experience into narrative. This could be the main reason for their role as intertexts, which also emphasise the need for stories. As Marina Warner puts it in her study *From the Beast to the Blonde*:

the enlightenment distinction between logic and fantasy has given way in the growing realization that the structures of the imagination, often

highly ordered and internally consistent, themselves form understanding. Pleas for a return to reason, for simply stripping away illusion, ignore the necessity and the vitality of mythic material in consciousness as well as unconsciousness. (Warner 1994: 14)

In Warner's analysis fairy tales are read not as universal archetypes. Instead they are interpreted within their social context which, of course, changes over time; the reader's attitudes are also bound to change. As Warner writes: "What is applauded and who sets the terms of the recognition and acceptance are always in question". Atwood's review of Warner's *From the Beast to the Blonde* closes with a celebration of the power of creative retelling, of the mischievous reversal, of the rightly-chosen wish. For a writer like Atwood, so fascinated by the narrative world of fairy tales – this is also a "challenge". As she concludes in her review, "The uses of enchantment, it seems, are in our hands" (*Curious Pursuits*, 2005: 201).

Atwood creatively adjusts the fairy tale plot to suit her purposes. This process is often metafictionally referred to here and there in her fiction. For example, at the end of *Alias Grace* (1996) the protagonist has left the Penitentiary and is in her own house sitting on the veranda, making yet another quilt. Grace has sewn many, but this particular quilt she thinks, "is the first one I have ever done for myself". This time she takes the liberty to alter the design: "It is a Tree of Paradise; but I am changing the pattern a little to suit my own ideas" (459). In the prose poem, "Plots for the Exotics" in *The Tent,* the narrator, who is also a writer, reflects on her own art: "I could make up some new plots, or give a twist or two to the old ones" (2006: 58). The author's compulsion to tell stories, old and new, emerges here and there throughout her work. In "The Tent" it is specifically referred to as "graphomania" (146); at other times it is the lyric I of the poems that reflects on the urge to narrate, as in the poetry collection, *Morning in the Burned House,* which I quoted in my title: "The words boil out of me, / coil after coil of sinuous possibility. /The cosmos unravels from my mouth, all fullness, all vacancy"(1995: 69). As the years go by, an element of fatigue informs the poetry, as in the 2007 collection, *The Door*; here in the poem "Another Visit to the Oracle" the compulsion to narrate persists: "I'll tell your story –/ your story that was once so graceful/ but now

is dark. / That's what I do:/ I tell dark stories / before and after they come true (see Rao 2011: 180).

Sharon Rose Wilson highlights the metafictional aspect of fairy tale intertextuality in the work of Margaret Atwood. Wilson's argument is summarised in the following quotation:

Atwood's intertexts serve at least five connected purposes in her work: 1) to indicate the quality and nature of her characters' cultural contexts […] 2) to signify her characters' – and readers' – entrapment in pre-existing patterns; 3) to comment self-consciously on these patterns – including the embedded fairy tales, myths, and related popular tradition stories – often by deconstructing constricting literary, folkloric, and cultural plots with 'transgressive' language […] and filling in the gaps of female narrative; 4) to comment self-consciously on the frame story and other intertexts; and 5) to structure the characters' imaginative or 'magical' release from externally imposed patterns, offering the possibility of transformation for the novel's characters, for the country they partly represent and for all human beings. (Wilson 1993: 34).

According to Kevin Paul Smith "the fairy tale chronotope acts as a supplement in the way described by Derrida" in *Of Grammatology* (Smith 2007: 85). A supplement is something that, allegedly secondarily, comes to serve as an aid to something 'original' or 'natural'. What is notable in Derrida's argument is the ambiguity that ensures that what is supplementary can always be interpreted in two ways. It is ambiguous, or more accurately, 'undecidable', whether the supplement adds itself and "is a plentitude enriching another plentitude" or whether "the supplement supplements […] adds only to replace […] represents and makes an image [...] its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness" (Derrida 1976: 144). Ultimately, Derrida suggests that the supplement is both these things, accretion and substitution.

Opening up generic boundaries is also important since it reacts against woman's "conventional confinement within the divisions and paradigms of patriarchal thinking" (Anderson 1990: 24). A similar function, connected with the role of female characters, is performed by the plethora of intertextual references present in Atwood's work. In her re-writing of fiction from earlier periods, the past is inscribed in the present. Her use of plots belonging to popular genres, makes these modifications more clearly recognisable. This intertexual

dialogue between present and past, old and new, implies a belief in the value of change. Contemporary re-writing of fairy tales by sophisticated and talented authors such as Angela Carter, Salman Rushdie, A. S. Byatt, Marina Warner, just to mention a few in the United Kingdom, and, of course, Atwood in Canada, have had great appeal to audiences. According to Zipes this happens because these authors share the reader's "hope for changing the world in a meaningful way" (Zipes 2015: 76). Atwood stresses innovation more than conservation since she does not believe that tradition is the keeper of venerable or absolute truths. As Zipes puts it, albeit with reference to other contemporary women writers, the process at work in these fictions is "dialectical" in the Hegelian's sense: "the thesis negated by the antithesis forms a new thesis. That is, what is old is not totally negated. The resilient and relevant qualities of the old are carried on in the new thesis" (Zipes 2015: 160).

The female figures whom Atwood takes as models for her own characters are often 'heroines on the run' or tragic figures doomed to be victims. Atwood, however, shapes her narrative material in such a way as to contrast her own characters' survival qualities, their fake deaths and/or rebirths, with these conventionally tragic fates. Moreover, in her revised version of fairy tales and myth the female characters not only survive but also write about their survival.

Atwood's first published novel, *The Edible Woman* (1969), treats many of the themes mentioned above. These are elaborated in the texts she published subsequently. In *The Edible Woman,* one finds the re-visitation of the standard eighteenth-century comedy plot from a feminist perspective; the use of intertextuality, especially in relation to fairy tales and of Lewis Carroll's *Alice* novels; the rejection of narrative closure, which sees in the ending an indication of a new beginning. *The Edible Woman* with its "shift" of emphasis escapes the confines of the heterosexual romance plot. Here the convention of "the two suitors", derived especially from Jane Austen, is simultaneously echoed and refuted (Greene in Mendez-Eagle 1987: 97).

This novel is also concerned with consumption and consumer culture. The protagonist shifts "from being a consumer to feeling consumed" (Palumbo in Bloom 2009: 22). The discourse of consumption affects every character in the novel, including Duncan, the graduate student in English whom Marian becomes involved

with. As Alice Palumbo suggests, "Graduate studies in English is merely the act of devouring one text and regurgitating it in another form. The narrative enacts this itself, by devouring a number of intertexts (fairy tales, gothic romance, children's fiction) to produce the text itself" (Palumbo: 22)

A Deleuzian interpretation of *The Edible Woman* sees Marian's psychological uneasiness which borders on psychosis and schizophrenia as a positive component in her development: "Marian's refusal to speak in the first person and her body's refusal to consume living things carve out a place that is productive and creative in its ability to critique the structures that it slips beyond" (Hobgood 2002: 3). In order to survive, Marian has to learn how to navigate this space, between, above and behind it, in a manner that is reminiscent of the poem, "Evening Trainstation, Before Departure": "I move / and live on the edges […] I live / on all the edges there are" (*The Circle Game* 1966: 10).

Edges, often dangerous ones, are recurrently crossed by the protagonist of *Lady Oracle* (1976) who has been in fact considered a skilled trapeze artist, for her capacity to move in and out between different identities (literally with two sets of names) and consequently two different lives. These two identities soon multiply through the different identities assumed simultaneously by Joan Foster and / or Louisa K. Delacourt as well as through the spectrum of her projected personae ranging from film stars to heroines of fairy tales. The plethora of intertextual references here, with the heroine's projections and identifications, has produced a great deal of critical attention (see Barzilai 2005; Howells 1996, 2005; Rao 1994). If Joan reveals a quixotic and capricious aspect, her inclination to live partly in a fantasy romance world acquires the positive significance of a strategic defensive and survival device. Open, direct confrontation with reality though necessary, can be very dangerous: witness the fate of Tennyson's Lady of Shallot, one among the many intertextual references in this novel. Confined in her tower where she weaves and sings, the Lady can look at reality only through a mirror, and she copies in her web the reflections of the outside world. Metaphors of the perceiving mind and the creative consciousness, the mirror and the web signify the problematic relationship between art and life, testing and challenging the solipsistic tendencies of the individual imagination. The Lady's bower represents safety, and the mirror

acts also as a protection from life. But it cracks when she looks down to Camelot and leaves her place in the tower to reach out for the knight, only to drown in the river. "The Lady of Shalott" thus effectively creates a tension between conflicting desires to face reality and to shun it. But it does so without providing an answer to the questions it poses, and similar contradictions are found in Joan. "You could stay in the tower for years, – weaving away, looking in the mirror, but one glance out the window at real life and that was that. The course, the doom" (Atwood 1976: 313).

Joan in *Lady Oracle* writes gothic romance novels where the heroines get lost in labyrinths, and she herself runs the risk of getting lost in the maze of her fabricated identities. Similarly in *Life Before Man*, as Carol Beran notes, Elizabeth, one of the female protagonists, "is lost in the underground maze of her own psyche" (Beran 1993: 47). More importantly to the present discussion, Elizabeth, but also the other two protagonists of this extremely unconventional love triangle, use images and patterns of behaviour from *The Wizard of Oz* to interpret their lives. As a survival strategy, however, they are not successful, and more often than not, those images precipitate anxieties and fears: "She is falling in on herself, she's melting, like the witch in *The Wizard of Oz*, and seeing it Elizabeth remembers: Dorothy was not jubilant when the witch turned into a puddle of brown sugar. She was terrified" (Atwood 1979: 279).

In the prose poem "The Female Body", included in the collection *Good Bones* (1992), there is a profusion of intertexual references to folk and fairy tales. This piece was commissioned by the *Michigan Quarterly Review*, and the same collection contains the parallel story devoted to the male body ("Alien Territory"). "The Female Body" starts in a humorous, entertaining mode:

I agree, it's a hot topic […] Take my own for instance. / I get up in the morning. My topic feels like hell. I sprinkle it with water, brush parts of it, rub it with towels, powder it, add lubricant. I dump in the fuel and way goes my topic, my topical topic, my controversial topic, my capacious topic, my limping topic, my nearsighted topic, my topic with back problems, my bad behaved topic (1992: 39-40).

The list continues. The witty mode, however, changes rather suddenly: soon the topic / the female body metamorphoses into

something treacherous or alternatively into something that can drift away; therefore it has to be constrained and controlled. The solution suggested here is inspired by the nursery rhyme "Peter, Peter, Pumpkin Eater" referred to in Atwood's text, whose origin travels back to America and to Scotland in the nineteenth century. This seemingly innocent nursery rhyme has powerful and painful sexual undertones directed at controlling woman's sexuality. What the rhyme is really about is the dilemma of a poor man who has an unfaithful wife. The complete text reads as follows:

Peter, Peter, Pumpkin Eater,
Had a wife and couldn't keep her,
He put her in a pumpkin shell
And there he kept her, very well.

The pumpkin here is the woman's intimate part which Peter imprisons in a chastity belt (the "pumpkin shell") in order to prevent adulterous relationships. Towards the end of Atwood's "The Female Body", a similar problem arises: "[…] he's lost the Female Body!". The resolution here echoes not only the nursery rhyme but other variations on the "Rapunzel" theme so familiar in Atwood's fiction. "Catch it. Put it in a pumpkin, in a high tower, in a compound, in a chamber, in a house, in a room. Quick, stick a leash on it, a lock, a chain, some pain, settle it down, so it can never get away from you again" (1992: 46).

2. A nightmarish future

In the celebrated novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), the intertextual reference to *Little Red Riding Hood* is self-evident in the long hooded red garment the handmaids have to wear. Atwood was very appreciative of the book cover, since it immediately transmitted the intense symbolic nature of that garment. As she commented on it: "What do you think of when you see someone in red carrying a basket?" (Wilson 1993: 271). In this respect Kevin Paul Smith in his study *The Postmodern Fairy Tale: Folkloric Intertexts in Contemporary Fiction* remarks*:* the "allusion on the level of character description is highly relevant because that particular fairy tale has transformed over the years from a cautionary tale about the danger of wolves into

an invective against female sexuality […] and [is] of course highly relevant to the narrative" (Smith 2007: 107).

In the Republic of Gilead women's clothes are colour-coded: the Commanders' wives wear blue; the paramilitary organisation propagandist of the regime, known as "the aunts", wear khaki uniform and carry cattle prods; the handmaids can only wear red: it is the colour that defines them, as they are the only fertile women left in Gilead (due to excessive pollution) and are therefore a "national resource" (75), as Offred muses. This does not mean they lead a life of privilege. On the contrary, their life is spared because of their reproductive qualities, but it is not under their control: "We are for breeding purposes […] There is supposed to be nothing entertaining about us […] We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (146), with "two viable ovaries" (135). Elsewhere in the text they are defined as sisters "dipped in blood" (19).

In *The Handmaid's Tale* the protagonist's husband, Luke, functions as a fairy tale prince who will set her free: "sooner or later he will get me out, we will find her [their daughter] wherever they've put her. She'll remember us and we will be all three of us together" (135). Luke, however, never shows up, and Offred shifts the fantasy to Nick, the Commander's chauffeur. She falls in love with him – and indeed he is possibly behind her successful escape from the totalitarian state of Gilead.

Portrayed as a parodic version of "Little Red Riding Hood", Offred is forbidden to stray from the prescribed path during her daily walk. However, as in the fairy tale story, she takes the risk of disobeying when she tiptoes towards Nick's room at night – for her clandestine sexual encounters with the chauffeur could be punished with death. "If I turn my head […] I can see […] myself in it like a distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairy tale figure in a red cloak, descending towards a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger" (19). Unlike the doomed character of the fairy tale in question, Atwood's protagonist survives her ordeal (Rao 2010).

In her powerless situation Offred also identifies on occasion with Cinderella. As she muses: "I must be back at the house before midnight; otherwise I'll turn into a pumpkin, or was that the coach?" (266). Prisoner in the role of handmaid in the oligarchic state of

Gilead, living a life of "reduced circumstances", as she words it, witness of violent events she could not, of course, comprehend – like the public executions or the Prayvaganza – she makes recourse to a narrative pattern that she is familiar with. Indeed, Linda Hutcheon suggests that "the process of narrativisation has come to be seen as a central form of human comprehension, of imposition of meaning and formal coherence on the chaos of events" (Hutcheon 1988a: 121). This is how Offred narrates the ritual of the Prayvaganza, Gileadian mass-religious ceremonies: women's Prayvaganza are for group weddings, while men's celebrate military victories (Chapter 34).

We line up to get processed through the checkpoint, standing in our twos and twos and twos, like a private girls' school that went for a walk and stayed out too long. Years and years too long, so that everything has become overgrown, legs, bodies, dresses all together. As if enchanted. A fairy tale, I'd like to believe (276).

Storytelling and narrativisation become a central form of human understanding. As Smith further explains: "It is easy to see the value of the fairy tale as a schemata around which to organize experience, it offers well-defined roles and structures, and for this reason we often see characters attempt to explain their situation in this way" (Smith 2007: 120). The act of storytelling reveals how narrators make sense of what is happening around them by means of fitting the events into pre-established schemas so that their lives will become part of an understandable narrative. In *Rewriting the Self* Mark Freeman claims that "the very act of making sense of ourselves and others, is only possible in and through the fabric of narrative itself" (Freeman 1995: 21).

In Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* the association between the individual and history is a primary concern. Offred's supposedly autobiographical narrative is also a historical account. Her tale is a recollection of historic events, framed within fairy tale patterns. As it is by now well-known, Hayden White in *Metahistory* aligns history with fiction: "I believe the historian performs an essentially *poetic* act, in which he *pre*figures the historical field and constitutes it as a domain upon which to bring to bear the specific theories he will use to explain 'what was *really* happening' in it" (White 1993:

x). This problematisation of history becomes evident in the novel's Epilogue, when a historian from the future discusses the value of Offred's tale as a document.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* the central character's fictive reality proliferates in a multitude of other stories which have no possibility of authentification. The different versions of a given event which Offred provides do not validate any of them. It rather undercuts them all with the result of undermining any firm guarantee of meaning. In addition, Offred's way of thinking and/or believing is contradictory in that she refuses to accept a single version of reality.

The things I believe can't all be true, though one of them must be. But I believe in all of them, all the three versions of Luke, at one and the same time. This contradictory way of believing seems to me, right now, the only way I can believe anything. Whatever the truth is, I will be ready for it. This is also a belief of mine. This also may be untrue (Atwood 1985: 116).

On the aesthetic level the coexistence of mutually exclusive alternatives undermine the structure of the plot. On the psychological level it suggests a notion of the self as a locus of contradictions. However, in the fictive reality of the text, this "tale" is presented as a "Historical document". The novel's Epilogue brings this status to the fore. The device shows that there is always a conflict between biography, autobiography and the writing of history. Offred's fabrications have the effect of taking the reader "into a world of imagination only to be confronted with the world of history, and thus asked to re-think the categories by which we normally would distinguish fiction from 'reality'" (Hutcheon 1988a: 17).

The academic paper, "Problems of Authentification in Reference to *The Handmaid's Tale*" delivered by Professor Pieixoto, and probably the most pessimistic part of the book, has the effect of emphasizing the novel's status as a "reconstruction"(Davidson in Van Spanckeren and Castro 1988). The narrative is a "reconstruction" for Offred, as she tells her story after she has escaped from Gilead (Atwood 1985: 114), and a "reconstructed" historical document, since it originally consisted in a non-ordered sequence of cassette recordings. The epilogue addresses the problem of how knowledge of the past is acquired. It illustrates, in fact, that "how we *choose*

to construct history partly determines the history we are likely to get" (Davidson 1988:115); a perception that escapes the pedantic and sexist Professor Pieixoto.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* a supposedly true story is being told, but its status as a "reconstruction" indicates that "a teller constructs that truth and chooses those facts (Foley 1986: 67). The novel highlights how access to the world of history is always mediated by the limits and the power of the available representations of history itself. Documents, the testimony of witnesses and of archival material provide the only access to the past, which "exists *for us* only as traces and in the present", and which cannot be separated from discursive representations of it" (Foley 1986: 73). The movement the novel presents from the historic event, that is Offred's experience as a handmaid in the Gilead Republic, to its becoming fact, underscores the constructed, discursive nature of historiography.

3. A nightmarish past

Throughout her career Atwood has shown a strong fascination with the Bluebeard story in its different versions (Grimms' fairy tales "Bluebeard", "Flitcher's Bird" and "The Robber Bridegroom") which emerge from the numerous retelling of the plot(s) that can be found in her narrative fiction and in her poetry (see also Wilson 2008: 13-33). Quite a few of Atwood's watercolours are inspired by the various Bluebeard versions, and are reproduced and discussed by Sharon Wilson in her essay "Sexual Politics in Atwood's Visual Art" (Van Spanckeren and Casto 1988: 205-14). Furthermore, in an unpublished prose poem titled "Three Jokes" Atwood drastically amends the plot: in this version the clever sister is "too good or too clever to live" says Bluebeard as he is about to chop off her head. The two sisters who disobeyed are spared. In his mind, it is proof of being perfect wives: "They passed the test, they are stupid and dishonest: I know that with them I am safe" (Atwood papers, Box 12, with *Power Politics* manuscripts).

An early collection of poems *Power Politics* contains a version of the fairy tale in a contemporary setting. Here, however, there are no corpses. In the poem "Hesitation Outside the Door" (1971: 48-51) the images of earlier partners – the "thin women" are symbolically kept in the male partner's (who is never given a voice) "pockets" where

they "hang on hooks", and are perhaps just memories, while the lyric I wears "the head of the beloved" around her neck (Atwood 1971: 50), likewise possibly a memory too. The forbidden room hovers over them, and appropriately the "door is closed" (Atwood 1971: 48). Yet, no severed body parts are to be found in it. The room can be read as a symbol of their relationship; if they go in, they "will find nothing" or alternatively they "will find each other" (Atwood 1971: 51).

Much more violent are the images in a later poem "The Robber Bridegroom" in *Interlunar* (1984: 62). In the eponymous version of the Grimms' fairy tale, the groom actually eats prospective brides; here though there seems to be some regret, some form of resistance or remorse for the urge to kill; in fact he wishes for his women to be different, to be the way he wants them to be: "he would like not to kill. He would like / what he imagines other men have, / instead of this red compulsion. Why do the women / fail him and die badly?" (Atwood 1984: 62). But they do fail him and he can't even manage to "kill them gently, / finger by finger and with great tenderness". Instead he "goes for the soul, rummaging / in their flesh for it […] hunting among the nerves and the shards / of their faces" (Atwood 1984: 62).

In the short story "Bluebeard's Egg" (1987) the protagonist encounters the Grimms' tale in one of her night courses, "*Forms of Narrative Fiction*" (Atwood 1987: 150). After discussing "The Epic" and then "The Ballad", they approach "Folk Tales and the Oral Tradition" and here Sally, the protagonist, "is having trouble" (Atwood 1987: 153). The assignment for this part of the course is a re-writing of a story told by the instructor, but using a single point of view and a contemporary setting. In other words, Sally is about to write the story we are reading. The theme of power achieved by means of storytelling is paramount in Atwood's texts from the '80s onward. In *True Stories* the poem "Spelling" articulates this awareness: "A word after a word / after a word is power"(Atwood 1982: 64).

The first and the last stories in the collection *Bluebeard's Egg* portray a "consummate storyteller" (Stein in Wilson 2003: 165) where the narrator's childhood is represented as an apprenticeship to become a writer. Stein, however, regards the title story as lacking an "assertive storyteller" (165). Nonetheless, the story's open

ending, in both content and form, its absence of closure (stressed by a question mark at the very end), is suggestive of a different interpretation that gives space to creativity and imagination (see also Merli 2007).

In the chapter subtitled "Interrogating Serial Killer, the Role of Women, and the Bluebeard Discourse", Zipes explains how a vast body of texts played a part in the formation of the literary fairy tale genre and of a Bluebeard discourse in particular. "Bluebeard" is a tale that revolves around power, who is in control of it, and "why power should always be in the hands of men" (Zipes 2012: 53-4). As Shuli Barziali observes: "If fear of women's unruly sexuality is factored into this sociopolitical context [...] it is indeed issues of power and control that generate the successive stories of texts designed to represent the humiliation of women and vindicate the hegemony of men" (Barzilai 2009: 8).

In "Bluebeard's Egg" what the instructor reads is "a variant of the Bluebeard motif, much earlier than Perrault's sentimental rewriting of it. In Perrault, said Bertha, the girl has to be rescued by her brothers; but in the earlier version things were quite otherwise" (154). In this version the first two sisters are killed by the wizard, as they go in the forbidden room and stain the egg with blood. The third sister is smarter and leaves the egg outside before going in the room where she finds her sister's severed body parts. She puts them together and the sisters come to life. When the wizard returns and finds the egg spotless he decides he can marry her. But he has lost his power over the girl and has to do whatever she asks.

In Atwood's short story, Sally then has to decide how she is going to re-write that plot, and from which perspective. "At first she thought the most important thing in the story was the forbidden room. What would she put in the forbidden room, in her present-day realistic version? Certainly not chopped up women" (Atwood 1987: 156). She procrastinates about this decision for two weeks. Then she comes up with "the brilliant idea of writing the story from the point of view of the egg [...] How does it feel, to be the innocent and passive cause of so much misfortune?" (Atwood 1987: 157). Suddenly she realises her husband Ed, who "certainly isn't the wizard", is instead the egg: "Ed isn't the Bluebeard: Ed is the egg. Ed egg, blank and pristine and lovely. Stupid, too. Boiled, probably. Sally smiles fondly" (Atwood 1987: 157).

The very evening she finds this solution, she is having a party at her house. So she has to resume the preparations and leaves her story aside. Earlier on, however, the narrative is focused on Sally and Ed, and on Sally's discomfort and fear. Everything seems to go smoothly in her life but deep down she is afraid and insecure, with no sense of stability; their wonderful house seems to be held in place just by Sally's will. At one point in her perceptions, Ed "looms larger and larger, the outlines around him darkening. He's constantly developing, like a Polaroid print, new colours emerging, but the result remains the same: Ed is a surface, one she has trouble getting beneath" (Atwood 1987: 150). At the end of the story and of the party, Sally is lying in bed and she is seized with fear again. She is terrified by the egg, which earlier on she had identified with Ed. So Ed is, after all, a contemporary version of the wizard.

In the novel *The Robber Bride* (1993) Atwood summarises the plot of this lesser known version of the fairy tale. It is a bed time story; one of the protagonists, Tony, tells her friend Roz's twins:

Tony liked to contribute – those authentic fairy tales in the gnarly-tree edition, not a word changed, all the pecked-out eyes and cooked bodies and hanged corpses and red-hot nails intact. Tony said they were more true to life that way (Atwood 1993: 292).

But when Tony reads from *The Robber Bridegroom* the little girls demand a change: they want a woman protagonist in all the roles, both persecutor and victim. In this way the parallel with the other female character in the novel, Zenia, the devious seductress, the beautiful and evil rival, comes easily. As Roz muses: "*The Robber Bride* […] Well, why not? Let the grooms take it in the neck for once. The Robber Bride, lurking in her mansion in the dark forest, preying upon the innocent, enticing youths to their doom in her evil cauldron. Like Zenia" (Atwood 1993: 292).

The question, however, is complicated here as the three protagonists who are all victims of Zenia's tricks and mischievous lies, deep down desire to be like her. The three main characters merge at various moments with "not – I", namely Zenia. Despite their hatred for her, they reflect themselves in Zenia, at times they desire to be her, in a play of splitting and doubling. "Tony looks

at her [Zenia], looks into the blue-black eyes, and sees her own reflection: herself, as she would like to be. *Tnormerf Ynot*. Herself turned inside out" (Atwood 1993: 166). Likewise Roz reflects: "she would like to be someone else. But not just anyone. Sometimes – for a day at least, or even for an hour [...] sometimes she would like to be Zenia" (Atwood 1993: 389). At the end of the novel, after Zenia's death, Tony ponders: "Was she [Zenia] in any way like us? Thinks Tony. Or, to put it the other way around: Are we in any way like her?" (Atwood 1993: 466). It is wicked Zenia who disrupts the other three women's illusory stability, who makes their divided, multiple condition surface. (For a sophisticated linguistic analysis of this novel, among others, based on Julia Kristeva's psycholinguistic theory see also Staels 1994; 2010).

Arthur Frank in his study *Letting Stories Breathe* stresses that "stories work with people, for people, and always stories work *on* people, affecting what people are able to see as real as possible [...] Stories breathe life not only into individuals, but also into groups that assemble around telling and believing certain stories" (Frank 2010: 53). *The Robber Bride* emphasises the non-static, non-fixed quality of borders, including the boundaries of self: "There is a continuous ebb and flow, a blending, a shift of territories" (Atwood 1993: 112; see Rao 2006). Hence, the desire to transgress, to trespass beyond the bounds of the self. Above all, however, there is the desire to tell stories: "From the kitchen she hears laughter, and the clatter of dishes. Charis is setting out the food, Roz is telling a story. That's what they will do, increasingly in their lives: tell stories. Tonight their stories will be about Zenia" (Atwood 1993: 466).

Through the use of irony, parody, pastiche, comedy on occasion, and intertextuality Margaret Atwood in her narrative creates spellbinding and compelling atmospheres that captivate her audience with the aim to build a new understanding of gender roles. Her use of intertextual strategies which combines high and low forms of art, past and present, imaginative and historical perspectives conveys possibilities of change. Furthermore, Atwood creates ambiguous identities that act as site of contradictions thus undermining any absolute notion of truth. Ultimately, her innovative characters metafictionally play the role of narrators and in so doing acquire a new form of power. As she remarks in a 1979 interview, referring once again to her interest in folklore and in the Brothers Grimm:

The unexpurgated *Grimm's Fairy Tales* contains a number of fairy tales in which women are not only the central characters but win by using their own intelligence. Some people feel fairy tales are bad for women. This is true if the only ones they're referring to are those tarted-up French versions of "Cinderella" and "Bluebeard", in which the female protagonist gets rescued by her brothers. But in many of them, women rather than men have the magic powers. (Ingersoll 2006: 73)

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