

## 4 Margaret Atwood and the Fairy Tale

### Postmodern Revisioning in Recent Texts

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Margaret Atwood is not only one of today's best-known writers but also one who demonstrates the power and beauty of fairy tales. Fairy-tale intertexts function in nearly all of her work, including novels, short story collections, flash fictions and prose poems, poetry, children's books, and essays; and some of these works are themselves meta-fairy tales. As I have previously shown, in addition to literary, film, biblical, mythic, and other popular intertexts, Atwood's novels into the late 1980s—*The Edible Woman*, *Surfacing*, *Lady Oracle*, *Life Before Man*, *Bodily Harm*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *Cat's Eye*—all embed fairy tales. Although seldom recognized, Atwood's short story, poetry, flash fiction, and essay collections, most evidently *Bluebeard's Egg*, *The Circle Game*, *You Are Happy*, *Power Politics*, and *Survival*, and some of her visual art (*Fitcher's Bird*), also demonstrate fairy-tale intertexts (Wilson, "Fiction Flashes"). By revisioning fairy-tale intertexts in a postmodern manner, Atwood explores power and sexual politics in patriarchal society and implies movement from symbolic dismem-

berment and cannibalism to metamorphosis, usually through the transformative and creative act of telling a story.

To varying degrees, *The Robber Bride* (1993), *Morning in the Burned House* (1995), *Alias Grace* (1996), *The Blind Assassin* (2000), and *Oryx and Crake* (2003), my focus here, continue to use fairy-tale images, motifs, themes, structure, and characterization, always deconstructed and interlaced with tales from related folklore, other popular culture, history, literature, and opera. Atwood admits that the Grimms' fairy tales, along with closely related biblical and mythic stories, are her major influences (Sandler 14) and that "Fitcher's Bird," embedded in all of my focus texts, is one of the tales she uses most frequently. In addition, "The Robber Bridegroom," "The Juniper Tree," "The Girl without Hands," "Little Red-Cap," and "The White Snake," from the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, appear often. Hans Christian Andersen's literary tales, including "The Littlest Mermaid," "The Red Shoes," and "The Snow Queen"; French-Canadian tales; Native American tales; nursery rhymes; comic books; and children's literature frequently recur. Rather than clearly distinguishing between myth and fairy tale as Angela Carter does, or using the fairy tale for its historical status as a genre, Atwood employs all intertexts in a similar postmodern way, simultaneously seriously, ironically, and parodically. Often, as illustrated nicely in the "Fitcher's Bird" intertext in *Bluebeard's Egg*, they are both comic and tragic.

Surprisingly, in view of excellent studies by Jack Zipes and other folklorists, the numerous postmodern and postcolonial fiction writers who use fairy-tale intertexts, and the serious scholarship that investigates these intertexts, some readers still view fairy tales stereotypically as "poison apples" for female readers, as didactic tales enculturating societal expectations and rigid gender roles (Daly 44, 90–91; Dworkin 41). When used by writers such as Louise Erdrich and Toni Morrison, some readers mistakenly criticize a supposed "appropriation" of "European" stories, particularly as part of an "experimental" and self-referential postmodernism, as a selling out of their own cultural traditions (see, for example, Silko 179). Postmodern novelists who embed fairy-tale intertexts generally "revise" or deconstruct them, using irony, parody, and sometimes satire of these intertexts alongside the tales' original character types, themes, motifs, and images. Often turning fairy-tale plots upside down, reversing outcomes, and using unreliable narrators, anti-heroes/heroines, and magical realism, the texts generally exist in a romance mode and may still depict transformation and metamorphosis.<sup>1</sup>

Very frequently, Atwood retains the oral quality of fairy tales in her texts: especially in her fiction flashes or prose pieces, there is a voice and a listener. Although she often uses trickster narrators and characteristically “writes beyond the ending” rather than resolving narratives (DuPlessis 6), her fairy-tale intertexts generally imply movement from symbolic dismemberment and cannibalism to healing.

In embedding fairy-tale intertexts, Atwood uses characteristic tactics. First, she often builds a scene on a fairy-tale image, such as the mother apparently turning into a jay in *Surfacing*. Second, by frequently reversing the gender of fairy-tale characters, as when *Life Before Man*'s Nate becomes a comic “Cinderella,” she moves the woman from object to subject and doubles characters. Third, as in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood displaces the “truth” of privileged, reliable traditional narratives to unreliable ones with self-conscious and developing narrators. Fourth, she uses tropes and symbols to deepen the meaning of the ordinary, such as the “dismemberment” most of her characters experience in patriarchal or colonial culture. Fifth, as in *Life Before Man*'s “Wizard of Oz” intertext, she displaces the fairy-tale plot line to make the marginalized subtext, in this case the wicked witch, central. Sixth, rather than using an intertext's resolution, such as marriage or living happily ever after, Atwood usually explodes and opens it to varied interpretations. In *Bodily Harm*, rather than allowing Rennie's plane to land in Toronto, she revises her manuscript to keep the plane in the air (Margaret Atwood Papers). Seventh, Atwood bends and blends tone and genres, as in *Bluebeard's Egg* when the comic Bluebeard is a heart surgeon specializing in seduction. Eighth, like other postmodern writers, Atwood uses irony as a subversive discourse. Ninth, while retaining fairy-tale costumes (red gowns and baskets in *The Handmaid's Tale*), settings, and motifs, Atwood uses language to defamiliarize (Shklovsky 13–22), transgress, and parody these elements. Tenth, moving toward a postcolonial or harmonious society, she revises or reverses the norms or ideology of an intertext, so that the danger of going off the path in “Red Cap” becomes the necessity of leaving it in *The Handmaid's Tale* (Wilson, *Margaret* 32–33). Most important, fairy-tale intertexts are much more than allusions in Atwood's texts: “frame narratives echo inner narratives' images, motifs, themes, characterization, structures, and even plots, self-consciously reflecting, and reflecting upon, intertexts” (Wilson, *Margaret* 3–4). In addition, they use or parody intertexts' scenes, point of view, symbols, and costumes to shape ironic postmodern and postcolonial texts that undermine essentialist, colonial, and sexist assumptions.

*The Robber Bride and Morning in the Burned House*

Published within two years of one another, *Morning in the Burned House* and *The Robber Bride* both feature explicit use of fairy tales: referring to two Grimms' tales by title, directly addressing an audience, building on fairy-tale images and symbols such as dismemberment, avoiding resolution, blending tones and genres, using irony and parody, shifting ideological norms of the intertexts, and, in the case of *The Robber Bride*, reversing the gender of the villain. Both embed the Grimms' “Fitcher's Bird” (Perrault's “Bluebeard,” AT 311),<sup>2</sup> one of my focuses here. Fairy-tale intertexts in *The Robber Bride*, most importantly the Grimms' “The Robber Bridegroom” (AT 955) about a groom literally consuming fiancées, are numerous,<sup>3</sup> and in addition to underlining the novel as a meta-fairy tale about fairy tales in western culture, they function to support Atwood's postcolonial and feminist themes. Myth, biblical allusions, nursery rhymes and stories, literary references, mummy and vampire lore, historical legend, and popular culture intertexts are interwoven with fairy-tale ones. The novels' epigraphs suggest intertexts, and, although critics have said little about “The Robber Bridegroom” in this regard, they have recognized the importance of intertexts in this novel (Jacobsen; Potts “The White” 230, “The Old” 283). Like other postmodern writers, in this and other novels Atwood creates magical realism, a fusion of magic with realism, through her intertexts by inserting trickster figures, shape-changers, demonic revenants, witches, devils, vampires, a potent underworld, real or inverted quests, and actual colonialist history into believable situations.

In addition to its role in the novel *The Robber Bride*, “The Robber Bridegroom” is used by Atwood in *The Edible Woman*, *Bodily Harm* (originally titled “The Robber Bridegroom”), “The Robber Bridegroom” poem in *Interlunar*, a watercolor of that title in a private collection (Wilson, *Margaret* 36, 200), and as an epigraph in *Negotiating with the Dead* (2002), a recent book of essays from the Empson lectures she gave at Cambridge. Where she refers to the Grimms' “Fitcher's Bird,” about a groom's dismemberment of successive brides who are stained when they enter the forbidden room (see sections on *Alias Grace*, *The Blind Assassin*, and *Oryx and Crake* below), “The Robber Bride” and its motifs are generally implied as well. “The Robber Bridegroom” tells of a robber groom and the prospective brides he lures to his isolated house in the dark forest, where he and his band of robbers dismember and then eat the women. The maiden featured in the tale is warned

both by a caged bird, "Turn back, turn back, young maiden dear, / 'Tis a murderer's house you enter here," and an old woman in the basement whose head bobs constantly, "You think you are a bride soon to be married, but you will keep your wedding with death." Unlike earlier maidens, this one hides behind a barrel and sees another maiden being prepared for dinner. The victim's chopped-off finger (sometimes hand), falls into her lap (in some versions, bosom), but the old woman calls the robbers to dinner and drugs their wine. Both women escape, following the path of sprouted peas and lentils home, where the maiden tells her father, the miller, everything. At the wedding celebration, where each person is expected to tell a story, she says nothing until the groom urges her to speak. She then relates a "dream" and presents the victim's chopped-off finger (H57.2.2.). Because the bride speaks, the Robber Bridegroom is executed. It is the groom, not the bride, who marries death (Hunt and Stern 200-04; Magoun and Krappe 151-54; Zipes *Complete Fairy Tales* 153-57).

In *The Robber Bride*, Atwood reverses the gender of the Robber, but, as in many of her texts, most of the characters play both Robber and Bride roles in their games of sexual politics. As in other genres, character roles in fairy tales are both doubled and foiled and may be seen as archetypal. The novel deconstructs any easy line we might draw between victors and victims or winners and losers. While the tale has some gender-specific implications about male and female behavior, Atwood's revised meta-fairy tale, dramatizing survival problems in a cannibalistic, colonialistic world, is about post-colonial survival as well. Initially obsessed with holding onto the men in their lives, the three main narrators, Tony, Charis, and Roz, choose to see both these men and themselves as innocent and passive victims of a female monster, cannibalistic as in "The Robber Bridegroom" and some versions of the Bluebeard cycle. Ironically, what mainly makes Zenia monstrous is an ability to appropriate and hold onto men who "belong" to someone else. In short, she is a sexual colonizer. Like the Wizard of "Fitcher's Bird," who is able to get maidens to jump into his basket when he appears, Zenia seems irresistible.

Although Canada thinks of itself as colonized but historically neutral (the "sweet Canadians" of *Bodily Harm*), this novel dramatizes a Canadian's invention of the Supergun and Canada's participation in colonizing wars in the Middle East. Involved in personal as well as political intrigue, the trickster Zenia creates different personal "pasts" for each listener and, even after her

apparent death, manages to enthrall both women and men. A vampire returned from the dead, a well-preserved mummy, and a tiny-waisted snake goddess, Zenia plays the death-giving Robber of life and literally robs the women of both men and illusions. Tony is afraid that Zenia will leave her as useless as an amputated hand and thinks she might be appeased with Fitcher's bowl of blood (199, 15), and Charis feels as if Zenia has "taken a chunk of Charis' own body and sucked it into herself" (78). When Zenia tells Roz that she didn't own Mitch, that "He wasn't your God-given property," Roz replies: "But that doesn't alter the fact that you ate him for breakfast" (510). Ironically, however, virtually every other character, including Roz, who becomes thirsty for Mitch's blood (436), is described as a Dracula or Robber cannibal. Perhaps the most painful episode of symbolic dismemberment and cannibalism occurs when Uncle Vern rapes Charis, who at this point is named Karen: "Then he falls on top of Karen and puts his slabby hand over her mouth, and splits her in two. . . . On top of her is a dark mass, worrying at her, like an animal eating another animal" (300-01).

Only when we recognize that Zenia is dying of cancer, may actually have been an abused child, and is probably murdered do we recognize that she is a victim as well as a robber. While the unreliable narrators Charis and Roz do grow in awareness by the end of the novel, it is Tony, the historian, who especially reaches feminist and postcolonial consciousness. Finally, she speaks out as the Robber Bride, telling the story we read. Aware that Zenia "will only be history if Tony chooses to shape her into history" and that, like folklore, Zenia is "insubstantial, ownerless . . . drifting from mouth to mouth and changing as it goes," Tony creates meaning: "these histories may be ragged and threadbare, patched together from worthless leftovers, but to her they are also flags, hoisted with a certain jaunty insolence, waving bravely though inconsequently, glimpsed here and there through the trees, on the mountain roads, among the ruins, on the long march into chaos" (536-37). Constructing her own story of Zenia, Tony "stares up at Zenia, cornered on the balcony with her failing magic, balancing on the sharp edge, her bag of tricks finally empty." Invoking and deconstructing the Great Goddess of matriarchy, Tony finally realizes that "whatever her secrets are she's not telling. She's like an ancient statuette dug up from a Minoan palace: there are the large breasts, the tiny waist, the dark eyes, the snaky hair. Tony picks her up and turns her over, probes and questions, but the woman with her glazed pottery face does nothing but smile" (545-46).

When, at the end of the novel, Tony questions whether “we are in any way” like Zenia (546), she has already detailed comparisons of Zenia to Marius, Gengis Khan, Saddam Hussein, and other colonizers. Recognizing from the novel’s beginning that the basin of blood in “Fitcher’s Bird” would have been appropriate for Zenia (15), she knows that Zenia represents history. Although history can repeat itself, it can, like a novel, be written and spoken differently. As Tony writes Zenia’s ending—the novel’s unresolved ending—Atwood challenges all of us to write and exist differently. Ready for another story, Tony rejoins the female friends that have, like herself, been Zenia: both the Grimms’ Robber Bride and Robber.

Although many of the poems in *Morning in the Burned House* deal with Atwood’s childhood and her father’s later illness and eventual death, section II “is clamorous with the voices of women” (Howells 137), eager to revision women of calendars, paintings, mythology, films, and history by allowing them to tell their own stories. Like *The Robber Bride*, “Manet’s Olympia” critiques the famous Manet painting and even allows Olympia, a Robber or Bluebeard victim, to speak. This poem illustrates well the way Atwood interweaves art, historical, and fairy-tale intertexts to critique essentialist and sexist societal values. According to Atwood’s first persona,

This is indoor sin.  
Above the head of the (clothed) maid  
is an invisible voice balloon: *Slut*. (24)

It is the black ribbon around the woman’s neck, resembling the blood-red necklace of Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber,” that identifies her as a consort of the Robber or Bluebeard:

. . . What’s under it?  
A fine red threadline, where the head  
was taken off and glued back on.  
The body’s an offer, but the neck’s as far as it goes. (24)

Like Atwood’s early watercolors of women with chopped-off heads (*Mary Queen of Scots* I and II), she is one of Atwood’s many symbolically dismembered female protagonists, but she refuses to remain a sex object or to be forced into any category. Here the male viewer, “Monsieur Voyeur,” addressed as “You,” is jerked into both poem and painting ironically to become

a comic object of voyeurism: “As for that object of yours / she’s seen those before, and better” (25). When the point of view shifts to the formerly objectified woman, “I, the head,” becomes “the only subject / of this picture.” She advises the man that he is furniture and should “Get stuffed” (25).

In addition to its allusions to “Fitcher’s Bird,” “Hansel and Gretel,” “Rapunzel,” “Sleeping Beauty,” and numerous myths, *Morning in the Burned House* includes Atwood’s poem “The Girl without Hands,” named after the fairy tale and long available only in the Fisher Rare Book Library’s manuscripts. A tale Atwood also embeds in *You Are Happy, Life Before Man, Bodily Harm*, and *The Blind Assassin*, “The Girl without Hands” (“The Handless Maiden,” AT 706) informs handless figures in her watercolors as well as her many characters whose hands are gloved or dangle, unable to act, or who, like Crake of *Oryx and Crake*, suffer from the Rapunzel Syndrome discussed in *Survival*: enclosing themselves in towers they become, they are too distant to establish anything but destructive touch. The most striking feature of the Grimms’ “The Girl without Hands” is the regrowth of the girl’s chopped-off hands; and while several of the final poems of Atwood’s poetry volumes, including *Interlunar*, *Two-Headed Poems*, and *Morning in the Burned House*, suggest this kind of transformation, some of her characters (Serena Joy, the Commander, Zenia) remain robbers of life, unable to touch except destructively.

In “The Girl without Hands” fairy tale, the father resembles Bluebeard figures by cutting off the hands of the faultless girl, possibly a victim of incest, because he has inadvertently sold her to the devil. As in Joyce Carol Oates’s novel alluding to this tale, the girl says, “Do with me what you will.” The Devil cannot claim her since she is clean and inside a magic circle, so she goes away in her snow-white garment. After she eats one of the pears in his garden, a King marries her and gives her silver hands, only to cast her out later with her child because of false letters. After the King’s mother substitutes a hind’s cut-out tongue and eyes for hers, the Queen is led by an angel to a house where she and her son Sorrowful stay for seven years. “Because of her piety, her hands which had been cut off, grew once more” (Hunt and Stern 164). After fasting for seven years, the King discovers the woman and child and all live happily. Atwood’s “The Girl without Hands” also shows fairy-tale transformation. The poem presents two doubled handless characters, the first a contemporary, urban “you” who turns a magnificent seen world into ruins because she pushes distance “like a metal cart on wheels” surrounding herself: “you can’t hold it / you can’t hold any of it.” Like the

Girl Without Hands of the fairy tale, the "you" is surrounded by a clean circle, in this case of dead space. The Girl's white dress means either purity or "the failure / to be any colour," and her scream "surrounds her now like an aureole / of hot sand, of no sound." Still, since only she can understand what has happened to the "you," if there she would touch with absent hands "and you would feel nothing, but you would be / touched all the same" (112-13). As in many of Atwood's poems using fairy-tale intertexts, the magic outweighs the irony. Although "Everything has bled out of her," like other shape-changers in this volume, the girl still bridges the distance, partly of past and present, to heal both herself and the other. Just as this volume's central persona can breakfast in a burned house no longer there, she, too, recognizes "The power of what is not there" and becomes a Proteus aware of the primacy of touch: "the trick is to hold on / through all appearances" ("Shapechangers in Winter," "Morning in the Burned House" 120, 125-26). As Howells suggests, "The volume represents painful processes of disruption and relocation, where loss is finally transfigured through the creative act of writing" (135).

#### *Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin*

Few readers would think much about "The Fitcher's Bird" (Perrault's "Bluebeard," AT 311) intertext in *Alias Grace*. Like "The Robber Bridegroom," "Fitcher's Bird" is about marriage to death, this time with three sisters. The disguised wizard's touch forces each sister in succession to jump into his basket, after which he takes them to his house in the dark forest, where each is given keys and whatever she desires but told to stay away from one forbidden room. He also gives each one an egg and orders that they carry it with them. Both the first and second sister are curious, enter the forbidden room filled with dismembered bodies of previous prospective brides, drop the egg in the basin of blood, and are unable to wash off the stain. The first is beheaded and both are cut into pieces. The third sister, however, passes the test by leaving the egg in a safe place. When she sees her dismembered sisters, like Isis she puts the pieces together and they live again. The wizard is now in her power and she makes him carry a basketful of gold, hiding her sisters, to her parents. She leaves a substitute bride, a flower-wreathed skull, in the window and disguises herself as a wondrous bird. When all of Fitcher's wedding guests are in his house, the brothers and kinsmen of

Fitcher's Bird set fire to it so that he and his crew cannot escape (Hunt and Stern 216-20).

The "Fitcher's Bird" fairy tale appears in virtually every Atwood text, often alongside "The Robber Bride." Her watercolor, *Fitcher's Bird*, shows the skull-faced substitute bride (Wilson, *Margaret* Plate 3). In *The Edible Woman* (1969), Marian imagines that she will open the forbidden door in her Bluebeard's apartment to see her fiancé holding a carving knife. She increasingly feels like food and stops eating, especially when she sees her new hairstyle as a decorated cake. In addition to the men in her life, Fitcher / the Robber represents her consumer society. Similarly, in *Bodily Harm* (1981), Rennie, eaten by cancer (and symbolically by her physician and live-in lover), meets other Fitcher / Robbers in the middle of a Caribbean revolution and, whether she ever leaves the prison or not, recognizes that bodily harm is global. *Bluebeard's Egg* (1983), which actually quotes the Hunt and Stern translation of the Grimms' "Fitcher's Bird," is a comic treatment of the fairy tale in which the "bird" thinks her husband plays the egg rather than Bluebeard. Sexual politics is dominant as Bluebeard, a heart doctor, symbolically dismembers the many women, including the deluded wife, whom he betrays.

"Fitcher's Bird," "The Robber Bridegroom," and "The Girl without Hands" intertexts again underline the dismemberment, cannibalism, and male / female conditioning in *Alias Grace*, including blood, the forbidden door and chamber, the casket of secrets, a missing hand, Pandora's box, punishment, disguise, trickery, and escape motifs. In this novel about repressed sexuality, class privilege, and gender stereotypes, Grace, like Lady Macbeth, continuously imagines (or says she does) spots of red in her prison that suggest Fitcher's basin of blood. Even a book (*Godey's Ladies Book*, with fashions from the states) is found in bed, covered in blood, "murdered" along with its reader. Neither of the book's unreliable narrators has much self-insight, and both Simon and Grace resist opening doors to forbidden chambers of the self, although they are eager to open those concealing the other. In "The Secret Door" chapter, Simon dreams of a corridor of locked doors, similar to the attic where the maids lived in his childhood home. He had enjoyed examining forbidden things in this "secret world" (139). In his dream, the door at the end opens, and sea water closes over his head while maids first caress and then abandon him. Objects of his father rise from the depths and reform into a dead hand representing his father and his sense of having transgressed. Simon rationalizes that this is really Grace's story and that amnesia, which he later experiences, is a "drowning of recollection," the "buried

treasure" of lost memories. But he appears to have little faith in his own competence and allows himself to be manipulated by women, especially his mother, who not only picks his bride but tries to run his entire life.

On the other hand, Simon is a Fitcher/Robber. Atwood characteristically blends tones and genres and parodies in her comic characters at the same time as we recognize their ominous Gothic elements. Simon is obsessed with flesh, including that of Dora (probably named after Freud's famous patient), Mrs. Humphrey, Lydia, and especially Grace. Like the Robber Bridegroom, he wants to cannibalize women symbolically: he thinks of Dora as ham; Miss Lydia, who places him on a "tongue-coloured settee," as pastry; and Grace as "a hard nut to crack." Lydia smells like ferns, mushrooms, and fermenting fruit. He wants to watch Grace eat the apple she associates with the Tree of Knowledge and imagines Grace "washing herself with her tongue, like a cat" (85, 54, 90-91).

Again Atwood builds her story on fairy-tale images, symbols, and themes, moves a woman from object to subject, displaces "truth," and uses subversive irony. She even manages to open a closed, historical story. Grace sees most of the men in the book as cannibals who dismember, and as an Irish immigrant in a sexist and classist world, she often sees women, such as her mother and Mary Whitney, being victimized. Her father thinks his new baby "would look very nice on a platter with roast potatoes and an apple in his mouth" (110). Hearing flute music associated with Jamie Walsh, Grace dreams of a peddler with a starved look, "someone I had once known," who watches her scrubbing the floor at Mr. Kinnear's and holds her cut off hand: "white and shrivelled up, he was dangling it by its wrist like a glove" (100-01). She feels her heart, too, is missing, and, ironically as she quilts while speaking, does not want to be in pieces, a patchwork. The prison guards think of her as a morsel, "ripe enough to be picked": "Come, you're making my mouth water for you already, you're enough to turn an honest man into a cannibal" (240). In a dream where she feels both horror and longing, she associates McDermott, Jeremiah, Kinnear, and another man she had been familiar with in childhood with Death himself, suggesting marriage to death. Headless angels in robes washed with blood crouch in judgment near Kinnear's house (280-81). Grace also thinks of children as cannibals of their mother, the new child as "an enormous mouth, on a head like the flying angel heads on the gravestones, but with teeth and all, eating away at my mother from the inside" (107).

Grace, too, plays the Robber/Fitcher. She thinks of her "Red hair of an ogre. A wild beast. . . . A monster" (33). Wishing to be a gloved lady and possibly murdering to acquire Nancy Montgomery's clothing, she considers killing her siblings and abusive father, disguises feelings, tells conflicting stories, manipulates and entralls men, and, depending upon interpretation, may hide a Mary Whitney part of herself behind a door to a forbidden chamber. Certainly James McDermott considers her responsible for his execution. Atwood does not, however, resolve the extent of Grace's involvement in the murders. As Atwood tells one of her editors, butter wouldn't melt in Grace's mouth (Margaret Atwood Papers). Just as Grace recognizes that her role as an object of pity "calls for a different arrangement of the face" than when she was an object of horror and fear (443), she wants to put a disguised and subversive border of snakes on her Tree of Paradise quilt after marriage to Jamie Walsh. Other characters also seem to be both Fitcher and the Robber. According to the Susanna Moodie *Life in the Clearings* chapter epigraph, McDermott cut Nancy in four pieces and after beheading, was himself cut into pieces at the university, something Grace fears as well.

Unlike *The Robber Bride* and most of Atwood's work embedding fairy-tale intertexts, *Alias Grace* offers no regrown hands; the only fairy-tale transformation is that of Grace into an accomplished creator. In league with her friend Jeremiah the peddler, a charlatan posing as Dr. Dupont, Grace plays the role of a person with a split personality disorder and manages to trick people into releasing her from punishment. While readers may still think that Grace has psychological problems, she has become a consummate storyteller. Her entire narrative is so filled with antilanguage designed to con listeners ("This is what I told Dr. Jordan, when we came to that part of the story" and "It might have happened," 6, 296) that it becomes difficult to make any definitive statement about her except that she is both a "wizard" and an abused girl who learns to survive in a dismembering society. She is attracted to Jeremiah, a Pied Piper peddler, and gives every indication of continuing her performance in marriage to Jamie Walsh, who performs as Pan.

*The Blind Assassin* also uses "Fitcher's Bird" and "The Girl without Hands" intertexts. It is a novel within a novel within a novel, a "maze" seemingly designed to trap readers into confusing characters and plots. The three narratives are interspersed with newspaper clippings, a letter, and society announcements. The first narrative, the frame one, is a self-reflexive memoir

of Iris Chase's life in Port Ticonderoga and Toronto, Canada, in the 1930s and 1940s. The second, also called "The Blind Assassin," is a novel published under Laura Chase's name but written by Iris. The protagonists are identified only as "he" and "she," and readers are led to believe that the novel records the love affair of Alex Thomas and Laura Chase, Iris's sister. The third is an unfinished science fiction pulp "magazine" or novel, including a "Blind Assassin" story that the "he" and "she" appear to compose together within this novel. It is set on the planets Zycron, Xenor, and Aa'A with tongueless sacrificial maidens and blind assassins, lizard men wearing flammable shorts, and luscious peach women who ripen on trees. Again Atwood creates an oral situation, builds scenes on a fairy-tale image (here, particularly, cut-off hands), blends tones and genres, uses unreliable, developing narration and fairy-tale symbols, defamiliarizes with profound irony and parody, and, despite the main character's death near the end of the novel, denies resolution. As Atwood says, the male lover uses Zycron "as many science fiction writers used the genre before him—as an oblique critique of his own society, in which there is child labour, exploitation and different classes" (Sylge). In addition to "Fitcher's Bird" and "The Girl without Hands," the novel as a whole interlaces allusions to fairy-tale texts including "Sleeping Beauty," "The Robber Bridegroom," and "Rapunzel" with other traditional stories to explore the ways that we all blindly "assassinate" in personal and political wars.<sup>4</sup> As in *The Robber Bridegroom* and *Oryx and Crake*, the novel uses the sold child folk motif in reference to both Iris and Laura Chase, the former Richard's "child" bride and later the sister whom Richard abuses, also presumed author of the inner book titled "The Blind Assassin." The honeymoon trunk, holding the unhappiness of Iris and Richard's marriage and the notebooks revealing Richard's abuse of Laura, is also the casket of secrets.

In the "Fitcher's Bird" intertext, the Fitcher figure represents the "blind assassins," the men with "burning heads," including Richard, Iris and Laura's father, and all the men who precipitate war and do "bodily harm." In the science fiction stories, as in *The Robber Bride*, however, the roles double, so that Fitcher is also women, such as Iris, who symbolically dismember and cannibalize others. *The Blind Assassin* uses disguise, bad touch, marriage to death, the forbidden room, the casket of secrets, keys, dismemberment and remembering, trickery, and punishment motifs.

Iris is blind, helpless, heartless, and asleep throughout the book. As a combination Sleeping Beauty/wicked godmother in "Sleeping Beauty" (AT

410), Iris prefers not to be aware of her, her sister's, her parents', and Alex's sacrifices to war, capitalism, and greed. Not only Iris but also Laura, Aimee, Winifred, and Sabrina are connected to the "Sleeping Beauty" fairy tale. Winifred, usually the witch, is, like Iris, also a parody fairy godmother (318). Iris has a daydream about Winifred and her friends wearing wreaths of money on their heads and gathered around Sabrina's bed bestowing their godmother gifts. "I appear in a flash of sulphurous light and a puff of smoke and a flapping of sooty leather wings, the uninvited black-sheep godmother." Her gift is the truth (439). Laura, more questioning than Iris, is still blind or asleep. Angry at Laura's ability to "subtract herself," Mr. Erskine yells, "You're not the Sleeping Beauty" and throws her against the wall. . . . Iris realizes that she should not have interrupted "a sleepwalker" with the news that Alex was dead. She "pushed [Laura] off [the bridge]" (164, 488). On the other hand, Laura would also be an uninvited fairy at Aimee's christening if she said that Aimee wasn't Richard's child (432).

As the third sister, Fitcher's bride, discovers the dismembered pieces of her sisters, the previous brides, behind the locked door, Iris finally understands what has happened to her sister. Rather than a prince, it is Laura's notebooks and Iris's own regained feelings that awaken Iris. Laura Chase's notebooks, first used when Laura and Iris study with their tutor, Mr. Erskine, reveal to Iris her blindness and her complicity in her sister's death. Although Iris withholds knowledge about the contents of the notebooks from readers until "The Golden Lock" chapter near the end of her memoir, she discovers them in her stocking drawer the day Laura dies, too late to keep her from uttering the words that send Laura over the bridge. Finally, Iris is not the tongueless victim of her characters' science fiction story but the bride who speaks out in "The Robber Bridegroom" fairy tale. The person who appears to be "Laura's odd, extra hand, attached to no body . . . [this] prim-lipped keeper of the keys, guarding the dungeon in which the starved Laura is chained to the wall" (286), leaves a secret casket, a steamer trunk of words that is the novel we read. She and her protagonist, "Iris," are no longer mute, sacrificial virgins, Blind Assassins, or handless, helpless females. As in "The Girl without Hands" fairy tale, Iris's symbolically cut-off hand grows back; as in the "Fitcher's Bird" fairy tale, Iris is able to reassemble the dismembered pieces of herself.

*Oryx and Crake*

Fairy-tale intertexts in *Oryx and Crake* are less recognizable than those in most of Atwood's previous texts. By studying her earlier use of the Grimms' "Fitcher's Bird" (AT 311), however, we see again some of this tale's primary motifs, especially the door to the forbidden chamber (C611.1), behind which literal or figural rooms hold horrifying discoveries, in this case suggesting apocalypse. The door becomes this novel's central symbol. Tales other than "Fitcher's Bird" also present doors, typically two doors hiding menace, such as tigers or death, and the third one treasures, and characters must choose which to open. In folklore, tales about forbidden places, including caskets, chambers, and doors, have a wide geographic distribution, including French Canada; doors may also be entrances to the lower world or the fairy world, they may be guarded by monsters, sometimes magic is necessary for opening, and ghosts may be able to enter closed doors (AT 526, 222; Thompson VI 224–25). *Oryx and Crake* also uses other motifs from "Fitcher's Bird"—such as dismemberment, cannibalism, unwitting marriage to death, death for breaking a taboo, resuscitation by arrangement of members, disguise, tricked ogre, and punishment of the murderer<sup>5</sup>—and interweaves literary and popular culture allusions with its fairy-tale intertexts.<sup>6</sup> In addition to "The Girl without Hands" and the Rapunzel Syndrome, folklore motifs appearing in many fairy tales, such as "Once upon a time," menacing or helpful animals, the golem, unnatural food, the trickster, the robber of life, the casket full of secrets, the abandoned or sold child, the quest, escape, rescue, and the fountain of youth, occur in an apparently realistic context that is actually dystopian and Gothic. As Atwood says, speculative fiction is usually in the romance mode, and *Oryx and Crake* is an adventure romance "coupled with a Minippan satire."<sup>7</sup> As in fairy tales and *The Handmaid's Tale*, the narrator addresses an audience even though he cannot know that anyone will hear. Still, the novel deconstructs its fairy-tale intertexts by moving a female from object to subject, displacing the truth of traditional narratives, using symbols, parody, and irony, refusing closure, and bending/blending genres and tones, characteristically mixing tragic and comic modes of response. *Oryx and Crake*'s extravagant and comic word play and puns reveal Atwood as a master of defamiliarization.

In this novel, there is no escape by use of a substituted object or rescue by a sister: like Snowman/Jimmy, readers of *Oryx and Crake* are on their own. Jimmy is the character/unreliable and self-conscious narrator who must prove his worth and pass the fairy-tale test. While he hopes he will win Oryx—Eve, one of this novel's tricksters and the sold child—like many of

Atwood's narrators he initially marries death: he chooses blindness and accepts a cannibalistic culture. He becomes distracted by games and superficialities and chooses the door to treasure and then the one to attacking animals rather than to authentic humanity. He does not begin to gain knowledge until he is expelled from an infected Paradise (here Paradise) to become a prophet for the Crakers, the created beings who are supposed to replace human beings. Crake, the novel's Adam, Dr. Frankenstein, and Fitcher or the trickster robber of life, amuses himself with Extinctathon and substitutes a killing microbe for the magic Fountain of Youth (Water of Life) sought by the pleeblanders. Oryx, also this novel's eaten Robber Bride or a dismembered sister of Fitcher's Bride, is the sold child, Eve/snake, Scheherazade, and reversed Cinderella. She is what Eve Sedgwick calls an object of exchange between the two men (524). As one of Atwood's many tricksters, including Circe of *You Are Happy*, harpies, and sirens, she holds Jimmy in bondage to Crake by telling him contradictory stories.

Unlike the many fairy tales, such as "Cinderella," in which friendly animals help the hero or heroine on a quest, sometimes leading them to treasure, here the abused animals, chimeras who have been subjected to genetic hybridization, get revenge on human beings who lack reverence for other beings or the natural world. Like the pigs in *Animal Farm*, the pigeons in this cautionary tale show intelligence and teamwork: on Snowman's quest to the destroyed compound, they maliciously watch and attack. Unlike "The Three Pigs" (AT 124A), where the pigs live in houses built of straw, twigs, and iron or bricks, the human wolves in Crake's society don't need to blow houses down: the affluent intellectual elite has already broken into the houses of lower beings, including not only pigs but low-status humans, rabbits, chickens, skunks, raccoons, and even wolves, all now subjects for Dr. Frankenstein's experimentation. They barricade themselves in gated communities called Compounds. As in the Grimms' "The Wolf and the Kids" and "Red Riding Hood" (Redcap: The Glutton, AT 123, 333), the elite "wolves" use disguise and deception, including false advertising and products, in order to open the doors of their victim's defenses so that they may be eaten, in this case by microbes that produce this novel's apocalypse. Ironically, beautiful Oryx, still an abused Cinderella, delivers the libido-enhancing product that kills, only to be killed by her "prince."

In *Oryx and Crake*, the "Fitcher's Bird" intertext is again paralleled by "The Robber Bridegroom." The theme of sexual politics may seem absent since it is in the background of this violent, dehumanizing, classist society: "its main products being corpses and rubble. It never learned it made the



same cretinous mistakes over and over, trading short-term gain for long-term pain. It was like a giant slug eating its way relentlessly through all the other bioforms on the planet, grinding up life on earth and shitting it out the backside in the form of pieces of manufactured and soon-to-be-obsolete plastic junk" (243).

The forbidden door motif begins early in the novel, in the "Once upon a time" when Snowman was Jimmy. For much of Jimmy's life, all women are "doors" to be unlocked with the words "I love you." Jimmy believes in answers, codes, and passwords and continuously remembers and constructs stories about colonialism, societal rules, products, his mother, Oryx, and Crake, but he prefers to watch voyeuristically rather than to see and know. He can parody self-help books but not help himself or others when he gets a glimpse of the forbidden. Even though the compound people are "sealed up tight as a drum" away from the pleebland cities and are themselves forbidden places to the poor, what appears to be mad cow disease gets in. Before his microbiologist mother decides to stay home and later to protest work of OrganInc and other Compounds, she explains that, because "the bad microbes and viruses want to get in through the cell doors and eat up the pigeons from the inside," her job is to make "'locks' for cell 'doors'" (18–19, 29). Looking back on his life before cell doors are unlocked, Snowman imagines hearing "the door of a great vault shutting" while he is watching Oryx float. He feels trapped and "knows they are both in great danger" (43). When Jimmy wonders whether Crake has told her to make love with him, Oryx implies that she will close the door on Crake. She is "a casketful of secrets. Any moment now she would open herself up, reveal to him the essential thing, the hidden thing at the core of life, or of her life, or of his life—the thing he was longing to know. The thing he had always wanted. What would it be?" (314). Even the Internet picture of Oryx (or someone who looks like her) on Hott Totts and Oryx's past is a forbidden door. Crake uses the picture as his gateway to the subversive Grandmasters' section of the Extinction playroom that aims to shut down the whole perverse society through terrorism. As head of an outlaw group called MaddAddam, Crake resembles the robbers of life in the Grimms' "The Robber Bridegroom" as well as in "Fitcher's Bird," representing not just one mad scientist but an entire mad segment of an already ruined society. "Jimmy had a cold feeling, a feeling that reminded him of the time his mother left home: the same sense of the forbidden, of a door swinging open that ought to be kept locked, of a stream of secret lives, running underground, in the darkness just beneath his feet"

(216–17). After Crake has gotten Oryx to spread the JUVE virus all over the world, she ends up on the same side of the door as Crake. Jimmy finally closes the door against Crake, only to open it when he can't see Oryx, who has lied to him. Crake slits Oryx's throat, and Jimmy then shoots Crake and seals the door until he leaves with the Crakers. Jimmy's and his society's blindness and fear of forbidden knowledge are evident in Jimmy's cultivated fish-eyed stare, the RejoovenEssence Compound's "blind eyeball" (297), and the ruptured and empty eye sockets of people exposed to the virus.

Some Internet sites, especially "At Home with Anna K," are doorways to Jimmy's love of words and, like those of other Atwood creator-narrators, his decision to collect and shape them into the story we read. Snowman's acceptance of responsibility for the Crakers, his efforts to speak and to create meaningful myths for them, and his one-eyed, then two-eyed, then no sunglasses in his disguise as Tiresias suggest that he attains some wisdom. His myths about the creation of words and of the children of Oryx from eggs and those of Crake from coral and mango are etiological: rather than leaving Crakers with chaos, the myths explain basic questions about the origin of life and such matters as why animals cannot talk. His quest back to the compound and his decision to face the human beings who make Robinson Crusoe footprints on the beach are also "doors" to a possible future. When he returns to the compound, he expects that "someone—someone like him—is lying in wait, around some corner, behind some half-opened door" (229), and thus he recognizes his own complicity in Fitcher games. Still, neither Snowman nor the Crakers suggest the kind of fairy-tale transformation implied in earlier Atwood texts. None of Atwood's novels is resolved, but in *Oryx and Crake* any transformation of this fallen world resembling our own must, in postmodern and postcolonial fashion, be constructed by the reader. Since Jimmy, like Iris, Grace, and Toni, transforms himself into the creator who shapes the tale we read, as a reader I construct the possibility of societal as well as personal transformation.

As a postmodern writer, Atwood revises her works' fairy-tale intertexts by using techniques such as building scenes on fairy-tale images, moving females from object to subject, displacing the truth of traditional narratives, making marginalized subtexts central, and reversing intertexts' norms or ideologies. Atwood uses symbols, irony, parody, gender reversal, self-conscious and developing narrators, bent and blended tone and genres, lack of resolution, and defamiliarization to depict characters and personas who experience greater awareness, usually fairy-tale transformation.

Fairy tales continue to be Atwood's main intertexts, and, as her most recent works indicate, they and the stories in which they may be embedded depend upon a reader or listener for their existence: "Because a story—any story, but especially one that exists in such a vernacular domain—is a negotiation between teller and audience, the listeners are accomplices (*Targets* 187). As in her 2004 poem "Bottle II," if the writer or tale-teller is a voice in a bottle, the voice depends upon the reader or audience to uncork the bottle and listen.

### Notes

1. Despite considerable evidence to the contrary, Greene surprisingly calls the mode of feminist writers, including Atwood, "realism" (4) and finds "no feminist metafiction by black women writers that relates the rewriting of old plots specifically to women's search for freedom" (24).

2. AT numbers identifying fairy tale cycles are from Aarne and Thompson, and motif numbers are from Thompson.

3. Some fairy-tale intertexts Atwood has frequently used in other works also recur in *The Robber Bride*: Andersen's "The Red Shoes" and the Grimms' "Cinderella," "The Girl without Hands," "Little Briar-Rose" (Perrault's "Sleeping Beauty"), "Little Snow White," "Little Red-Cap," "Rapunzel," "Hansel and Gretel," "The Water of Life" (Youth), and "The Wolf and the Seven Little Kids." The Robber Girl of Andersen's "The Snow Queen," who sets her reindeer free so that they can carry Gerda to Lapland to rescue Kay (67–69), is probably also an inspiration for the gender reversal in Atwood's book.

4. Other fairy-tale references in *The Blind Assassin* include "Red Cap," "Hansel and Gretel," and "Cinderella."

5. Other fairy-tale and folk allusions in *Oryx and Crake* include "The Robber Bridegroom," "The Wolf and the Kids," "Red Cap," "The Water of Life," "Hansel and Gretel," "Cinderella," "Beauty and the Beast," "The Three Pigs," the *Arabian Nights*, and "Jack Jump over the Candlestick."

6. Although Atwood does not see *Oryx and Crake* as a classic dystopia, such as *The Handmaid's Tale*, because readers do not get an overview of the structure of society and what they do know is suspect because edited, her definition of dystopia applies just as well to the more recent novel (*The Handmaid's Tale* 517).

7. This idea was suggested to me by Shuli Barzilai, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, during "Margaret Atwood: The Open Eye" symposium in Ottawa, April 2004.

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