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Revenge of the Mutilated Wives: Bluebeards in Margaret Atwood's Novels

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Abstract
The article examines revenge strategies in Margaret Atwood's novels that draw inspiration from Bluebeard-type fairy tales. This fairy tale type is named after Charles Perrault's "Bluebeard", and includes related tales such as the Grimms' "The Robber Bridegroom" and "Fitcher's Bird". Variations on this family of plots appear throughout Atwood's oeuvre, most prominently in *The Robber Bride, The Blind Assassin,* and *The Testament*s. The key elements – curiosity, the bloody chamber, the blood-stained key, the tell-tale egg, and the chopped-up bodies in a bowl of blood – are invoked in new combinations with new associations to complicate the victim-oppressor hierarchy. This paper argues that in Atwood's revisions of Bluebeardian themes, she challenges traditional conceptions of the Bluebeardian predator. By rewriting fairy tales in a creative manner, Atwood explores not only the importance of surviving the violent attacks, but also the survivors' revenge strategies: from self-harm to bearing witness and making public accusations of the Bluebeardian oppressors. By sharing their stories, Atwood's protagonists can take control of their lives and resist aggressors' attempts to silence them or transfer guilt to them for their curiosity.

Key words
Margaret Atwood; novels; The Testaments; The Blind Assassin; The Handmaid's Tale; *Bluebeard*; revenge

Introduction

The eponymous antagonist of Charles Perrault's "Bluebeard" (AT312)[1] has lent his name to a group of fairy tales with similar elements, including two stories by the Brothers Grimm: "The Robber Bridegroom" (AT955)[2] and "Fitcher's Bird" (AT311).[3] The common elements of the stories are a naïve-seeming girl, often poor, who marries or becomes engaged to a wealthy or powerful man, the Bluebeard figure. The husband gives the girl a token – a key or an egg – that she must keep clean and a prohibition to visit one private place. Of course, the girl cannot resist peeping into the forbidden chamber and discovers the husband's dark secret – the mutilated bodies of his previous brides. The token becomes stained with their blood as evidence of the girl's transgression. The violent husband

threatens revenge but is thwarted by a last-minute twist. The girl may be rescued by her family or outwit him herself with disguise or deception. She often rights the original economic or psychological wrong that had put her at risk. Maria Tatar argues that the Bluebeard tale "begins with marriage (rather than ending with it), but also engages with the nexus of knowledge, sexuality, evil, and mortality" (2004: 3). The continued relevance of these themes explains why the elements of Bluebeard stories remain powerful narrative tools for postmodern writers even today.[4]

Beneath the apparently outmoded conflict of a mysterious nobleman and poor girl, there is another, more complex struggle for knowledge and power: he knows who he is (a sadist and murderer) and hides it from her. As soon as she learns this important piece of knowledge, the power struggle begins with more than survival at stake. Where, previously, he manipulated her, she learns to manipulate him to make possible her escape. She constructs a false identity conforming to his expectations and conceals her plans. Who is naïve and ignorant now?

Atwood's reconstructions of Bluebeard fairy tales emphasize that escape alone is not enough. The survivors cannot go back to their old lives: they are deeply transformed by their traumatic encounter with the Bluebeard figure and need to demonstrate control over their lives by getting payback. The currency of payback will be pain. Revenge can be defined as "a personal response to unjust treatment. Its goal is to achieve some sort of payback, to get even with the villain, to make the offender get what he or she deserves" (Gollwitzer 2009: 840). More importantly, the desire for revenge is also intended to re-balance power and allow the victim to regain a sense of mastery as a means of re-establishing control in their life (Lillie and Strelan 2016: 291). In Bluebeardian fairy tales, the poor girl frees herself from Bluebeard's thrall and seizes his gold as compensation. The parts of the narrative that Atwood's Bluebeardian novels highlight and challenge are less the chopped-up bodies and the threat of being punished for being curious and more the protagonist's survival and retaliation.

In *Payback*, Margaret Atwood confesses that "revenge is a fascinating topic – fascinating to all those who have ever kicked their sibling under the table and received a harder kick in return" (2008: 94). Experiences of injustice, hurt, and humiliation naturally trigger the desire for revenge, which might be universal. While some cultures encourage manifestation of it, others insist on forgiveness. Modern Western thought considers revenge taboo and instead encourages forgiveness (Grobbink 2015: 2) or recourse to the law, but the concept of personal revenge still bears a strong emotional appeal.

Gender roles and gender stereotypes are key elements in the normative definition and regulation of male and female behaviours. Fairy tales are often criticized for reinforcing such stereotypes.[5] Narrative stereotypes may even affect how women and men take revenge. According to Goldner et al. retaliation is gendered "with women adopting a submissive position and tending to avoid aggression and retaliation while men are encouraged to exhibit aggressive behaviours and revenge" (2019: 2). Researchers have also shown that women are more likely to direct their revenge against the self in the form of suicidal ideation, planning, or attempts (Goldner 2019: 2). It is possible to find many examples of women's

revenge through self-harm in Atwood's novels, especially those from early in her career. Examples include self-silencing[6], self-mutilation and suicidal thoughts/attempts.

I argue that when we track the chronological development of the Bluebeard theme and its motifs, patterns and characters in Atwood's novels, we find that characters become more likely to survive, and that there is a parallel development in the form that revenge takes. In Atwood's early fiction, vengeful reactions tend to involve self-harm. Her female protagonists tend to hurt themselves, not their (Bluebeardian) antagonists. However, her later fiction shows other-harming retaliation: instead of repressive/depressive self-destruction, women adopt more aggressive and vengeful tactics against Bluebeards. They learn not only to talk back to them; they run away, take their money, expose their crimes, kill them, and/or become them.

Atwood draws more on the heroines' capacity for self-rescue in the Grimms' stories, than on last-minute deliverance by others as in Perrault's Bluebeard: "The unexpurgated Grimm's Fairy Tales contain 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" (Atwood 1990: 115). In fact, it is not fairy tales, but secret chambers and abusive husbands that are bad for women.

Traditional stories usually keep women's voices muted. Atwood rewrites classical fairy tales from a woman's perspective, thus revealing the patriarchal secrets of power politics. As she argues in "Writing the Male Character", stories "force you to imagine what's it like to be someone else. Which, increasingly, is something we all need to know" (1984: 430). In her narratives that shift the focus from a male to a female perspective, Atwood shows that women need not be innocent victims when they open the doors of secret chambers full of hidden dangers. In *Fairy Tales and Feminism*, Donald Haase argues that "there has long been a tacit awareness of the fairy tale's role in the cultural discourse on gender, and many fairy-tale texts constitute implicit critical commentaries on that discourse." (2004: viii) This is the context in which Atwood examines the roles of oppressors and victims and the significance of acts of revenge. Such acts may indicate the avenger's liberation from the position and role of victim. As Atwood argues "to revenge yourself upon someone is to reliberate yourself, because before doing the revenge, you aren't free. What holds you in thrall? Your obsession with your own hatred of the other: your own vengefulness" (2008: 110). Atwood's protagonists thus heal their souls by revenge. They refuse victimhood and take back their power (and some gold, if possible).

Sister Brides: From Innocent Girls to True Bluebeards

In *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*, Sharon Rose Wilson suggests that the Bluebeard story functions as a subtext or intertext, representing the character's marriage to death as it "is not simply a male or even patriarchy per se but [a] kind of death or death worshipping culture" (1993: 199). Atwood's brides

start out as innocent victims in her early fiction but later works challenge this position of innocence. From victims they evolve into Bluebeards, with variants such as Bluebeard couples (in *Life before Man* and the Griffen siblings in *The Blind Assassin*) and female Bluebeards. Moreover, Atwood blurs the victim/predator boundary and creates ambiguous Bluebeard/victim hybrid characters, male victims and victim couples.

Even in Atwood's first novel, *The Edible Woman* (1969), Marian is haunted by a glimpse into the forbidden room and the sight of her fiancé holding a carving knife. This image makes her feel like prey or food and she stops eating. She cannot articulate her fears that her fiancé is destroying her. She becomes anorexic, consuming less and less food and turning her fear against herself and against her own body.

Surfacing (1972) recalls Bluebeard's butchery when the protagonist suggests the Canadian society of her time reduces women to their body parts – a "pair of boobs" (1998: 153) or "a cunt on four legs" (1998: 139) – and keeps them in kitchen spaces.

Joan Forster (*Lady Oracle*, 1976) cannot leave a forbidden door unopened: she doubles and multiplies the reflection of Bluebeard's naïve wives. Although the book is more comical than tragic, mocking the Gothic bodice-ripper genre rather than catering to a taste for misogynistic murder scenarios, Joan is haunted by phantasms of voracious Bluebeardian males, though they belong to the realm of illusion and not fact. As Sherill E. Grace points out, "[t]he results of this conflation, in so-called reality, are easy to summarize: believing that a Bluebeard-like figure is knocking on the door of her room, she pulls it open and knocks the villain out with a Cinzano bottle" (Grace 1984: 258). Joan, just like a fairy tale character, opens the door to be shocked: though not by the murdered wives but, ironically, by the fact that nobody wants to murder her.

In *Bodily Harm* (1981), the powerless female protagonists learn to make themselves heard and voice their condemnation of corrupt and tyrannical Bluebeardian politicians. Rennie has been ignorant of Bluebeards in her life. Her body is mutilated by breast cancer but also, metaphorically, by the exploitative and sadistic Jake and her doctor, Daniel. She leaves Canada to write a travel piece about twin Caribbean islands. Rennie becomes unintentionally caught up in a turbulent election and ends up in a prison cell together with another woman, Lora. Unlike Marian, Lesje, and Atwood's other victims, Rennie decides not to be a victim anymore. She intends to remake herself as an investigative journalist driven by the need to tell the story of Lora, beaten to death by cruel prison guards.

The Robber Bride (1993) deals with a woman's capacity to be a Bluebeard in her own right. In *The Robber Bride*, Atwood reworks a traditional fairy tale, the Grimms' "The Robber Bridegroom". In this tale, robbers lure young brides to their den to chop them up and eat them. When an old woman warns a clever girl, she manages to save herself: she catches the finger of one of the victims, tells on the robbers and ensures that justice is served. In *The Robber Bride*, three female friends, Tony, Charis and Roz, survive Zenia's brutal robberies and plan their retribution.

Sharon Rose Wilson argues that Atwood "reverses the gender of the Robber by making Zenia a female villain who victimizes her three friends" (2010: 28). On

the other hand, the three friends are not the innocent brides that they would like to see themselves as. They are as hungry as Zenia but they are trying hard to keep the secret chambers of their past and identity locked.

Another enigmatic character who presents aspects of both the Robber/Bluebeard character and the innocent victim/witness is Grace in *Alias Grace* (1996). Her survival depends on maintaining she was an unwilling accomplice of the murdering robber James McDermott, but the story includes moments when she thinks about killing her violent father, when she is jealous of Nancy Montgomery's fine clothes, and hates while keeping a calm face. Grace could be a killer. Atwood never answers the question of Grace's guilt or innocence, and her narrator Grace stages deft distractions whenever the narrative seems to be approaching the dark cellar with the secret of what really happened to Mr Kinnear and Nancy.

The Blind Assassin (2000) is presented as the memoir of eighty-five-year-old Iris Chase Griffen addressed to Sabrina, her granddaughter. She reveals many dark secrets that were locked away in her marriage. Iris's husband Richard was an abusive paedophile. He raped Iris's sister Laura, who committed suicide. However, Iris has no claim to innocent victimhood: she takes a lover and ignores the evidence of Laura's trauma. As Karen F. Stein points out, "both this twentieth-century Bluebeard and his wife have secrets: he has seduced her sister and Iris engages in an adulterous affair" (2011: 32). Iris leaves her sister behind.

In the two *Gilead* novels, citizens of Gilead, especially women and girls, are portrayed as helpless sister brides being consumed by their husbands and/or commanders. The image of a woman's body bleeding on the table evokes the basin full of blood and chopped up women in the fairy tale: the state of Gilead sacrifices the Handmaids to give life, and this is no secret. Unlike Bluebeard's wives in the original tale, brides in Gilead must produce children.

Bluebeards and Gangs of Robbers

Bluebeards keep coming back. They do not always have a blue beard and a castle as in the Perrault story that named the type, but we can still recognize some familiar qualities that emerge in story after story. The fairy tale addresses a complex of female fears about survival. As Shuli Barzilai argues:

> the story of Bluebeard simultaneously raises, and assuages, the specters of violence and murderous aggression against women. This tale type provides a palliative or temporary suspension of everyday anxieties—a woman is being beaten, a woman is being killed—by holding out the hope of a last-minute reprieve and reversal of fortune. (2005: 268)

Atwood breaks the stereotype of traditional male predators. She challenges the status of innocent victims and by empowering her female protagonists, she complicates the fairy tale gender dynamics. Her Bluebeards can be multiple (*Lady Oracle*), female (*The Robber Bride*), she creates murderous couples (*Life Before Man*, *The Blind Assassin*), or they can be a whole state (Gilead, the Corporations in

Maddaddam trilogy, and the Positron Project in *The Heart Goes Last*). By multiplying Bluebeards and switching their genders, she shows the great potential for complication in the power play between predators and victims.

In *Fairy Tale Sexual Politics*, Wilson points out that Surfacer meets her Bluebeard. It is her “art teacher, who talks her into an abortion and convinces her that women cannot be great artists” (1993: 116). This is amputating on the literal and metaphorical levels. *Surfacing* shows women cut to pieces in photography and objectified in various ways by pornography and by medical professionals.

There are several Bluebeard figures in *Lady Oracle,* (1976), including Lady Oracle, a.k.a Joan Forster, herself. Joan sees her husband Arthur as Bluebeard and later, she suspects all her lovers of having murderous appetites. She thinks that all of them share the traits of the infamous wife-killer.

In *Life Before Man,* (1979) Atwood reverses and doubles the fairy-tale plots and genders of characters in an unpredictable manner; for example, she recreates the Bluebeardian character in the form of the Bluebeardian couple of Elizabeth and Nate, who go through their lovers, leaving them helpless (at best, like Martha), or headless like Chris. Elizabeth is constantly fighting for power. Despite presenting a very passive, almost fragile and dormant image at the beginning of the novel, she usurps the role of a Bluebeard.

In *The Robber* Bride (1993), Atwood reverses the gender of the Robber and creates the vicious Zenia, a female villain who terrorises her three friends. At many times, Zenia is portrayed as a predator, Bluebeard, a wolf, “chicken murderer, drinker of innocent blood” (2002: 284) and compared to a blood-thirsty weasel that kills “for the pleasure of it” (2002: 243). Tony thinks Zenia might be satisfied by the offering of “a bowl of blood, a bowl of pain, some death” (2002: 13). Charis feels that Zenia has “taken a chunk of Charis’s own body and sucked it into herself” (2002: 68). Roz accuses Zenia of eating [Roz’s husband Mitch] “for breakfast” (2002: 435). All these images make Zenia a classical fairy tale Bluebeard. However, Zenia is not the only villain and cannibal in the story: all the characters, including the seemingly innocent female friends, are bloodthirsty. By switching the gender of the fairy-tale Bluebeard, Atwood enables us to see the hidden (darker) side of womanhood.

Discussing *Alias Grace* (1996), Sharon R. Wilson suggests that “Simon is a Fitcher/Robber [...] obsessed with flesh” (2008a: 108). In fact, the novel portrays all the men as “robber bridegrooms” who dismember and cannibalize women. Grace’s mother, Mary Whitney, Nancy and other characters are butchered in abortions, abused by prison guards, and treated as sex slaves by masters whose abuses society has no interest in bringing to light.

Like the voluntarily blind Iris in *The Blind Assassin*, Jimmy/Snowman’s role in the *Maddaddam* trilogy can be seen as that of a victim who chooses a path of ignorance and complicity with a Bluebeardian society. He chooses not to see the Corporations over-exploiting natural resources, people and animals. He refuses to recognise Crake as a robber bridegroom, intent on murdering humanity. Moreover, Jimmy/Snowman has some Bluebeardian traits of his own. Although he goes through a series of lovers whom he believes that he ruins, he also acts like a curious bride: he is only interested in the girls’ secrets, consuming them like fast

food. After a short time, he is fed up with them. The only enigma that he never tires of is Oryx, who becomes the bait for him to enter Crake's secret Paradice.

There is a notorious Bluebeardian character in the *Maddaddam* trilogy, Blanco, who abuses and rapes Toby. She is only saved from him by the intervention of the God's Gardeners. Their kindness helps her to overcome the trauma: "Freedom from Blanco was worth a lot: she was lucky she hadn't ended up fucked into a purée and battered to a pulp and poured out onto a vacant lot" (2009: 103). Later, Toby protects other women from the same dangerous predator.

The Testaments (2019) features the character most directly linked to Bluebeard. Commander Judd kills his young wives one by one, and he is still on the hunt: "Soon, I feared, he would again be a widower, and in the market for another child bride" (2019: 137). Atwood portrays Commander Judd as a fairy-tale villain: "Dislikeable though Shunammite may have been as a schoolgirl, I have no wish to have her join Judd's Bluebeard's chamber of defunct brides" (2019: 349). Atwood reconstructs the story in a surprising way: the girls are saved by Aunt Lydia. Paradoxically, Aunt Lydia acts as Bluebeard herself. She admits to passing cruel sentences leading to mutilating women: "Wives, daughters, Handmaids. Some have missing fingers, some have one foot, some have one eye" (Atwood 2019: 170). But most of all, the oppressive regime of Gilead treats women as food to be consumed or leftovers to be discarded and locks away the secrets of its corruption in its archives. Nobody is safe and nobody is innocent in Gilead.

Bloody Chambers, Dark Cellars and Basins Full of Blood

A key moment in a Bluebeardian plot is when the young woman is told she can go everywhere except the little room in the cellar. Of course, the bride is doomed to go precisely there by her curiosity. The sadistic penalty for breaking the taboo is death and mutilation: offenders' heads are cut off, they are chopped to pieces, and they are thrown in the bloody basin with all the chopped up body parts of the other interchangeable brides.

The secret chamber changes you. Lies, betrayal, broken promises, and secrets: these never disappear from our lives. This section examines the appearance of these secret places of butchery, horror and transformation in Atwood's Bluebeardian novels.

As was the case with her predators and victims, Atwood presents secret rooms and bloody chambers in a variety of forms. In Atwood's dystopias, including the *Maddaddam* trilogy and *Gilead* novels, the bloody chamber grows to the size of the whole state, which is littered with the dead and bloodless bodies of mutilated women, animals, and victims of torture. Atwood's dystopias offer inverted secret chambers, safe spaces or panic rooms in the world full of horrors. More traditional venues include a prison cell in *Bodily Harm* or a cellar in *Alias Grace*. However, Atwood complicates our expectations of such a space: in fact, she shows, we cannot be safe anywhere. Our own house (*The Blind Assassin*) or our own room (*Cat's Eye*) can become a scene of horror to rival a basin full of human blood.

There are labyrinths, forbidden chambers and secrets in *Lady Oracle*: "In a fairy tale I would be one of the two stupid sisters who open the forbidden door and are shocked by the murdered wives, not the third, clever one who keeps to the essentials" (1982: 152). Joan Forster seems to be thrilled to leave the bloody chambers at the very last minute, as if it were all a thrilling game that she enjoys a bit too much.

In *Bodily Harm,* the prison cell becomes a bloody chamber where Rennie is forced to witness a series of violent episodes. Rennie recognises that she has deliberately been shutting her eyes to the bloody chambers of pornography, cancer and sex violence, which are linked by the mutilation of female bodies. Only when Rennie sits by Lora's brutally injured body, does she understand that Lora is her double, her sister bride.

When Rennie holds Lora's beaten and faceless body, she identifies with her, encounters her own self, her own fate as Bluebeard's bride. She decides to expose the Bluebeards and call for justice: she dedicates herself to writing a report on what she has seen; however, this is not the same thing as escaping the bloody chamber because her future is still unclear.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, (1985), Commander Fred invites Offred to his office, paradoxically a safe space for Offred although it is deadly dangerous for her if anyone finds out she is there. Meanwhile, it is a place where she can play games, read illegal magazines and talk freely. She cannot feel this safe anywhere else in the totalitarian state: Gilead is one large bloody chamber where women's bodies and lives are chopped up and consumed by the state.

In *Cat's Eye* (1989), women are left mutilated by secretive and manipulative Bluebeards. A notable example is the scene where Elaine, the novel's protagonist, finds Josef's lover Susie after her abortion: "She's lying on the bed in her pink nylon shortie nightie, white as an uncooked chicken, eyes closed [...] Underneath her, across the sheet, is a great splotch of fresh blood" (2001: 320). Elaine peeps into Susie's room and seeing her in this state helps her recognize the fate that awaits her as the lover of a Bluebeard figure.

The space of the bloody chamber is not a specific place in *The Robber Bride.* There are no eggs, but murdered chickens, and there are no secret chambers because there are no secrets you can hide. During their dangerous encounters with Zenia, her victims are forced to confront the bloody chambers of their own traumas: abandonment and neglect (Tony), abuse and rape (Charis) and body and identity issues (Roz). Thus, Zenia triggers not only their curiosity, but, paradoxically, also their healing transformation. They realize they need to be more like Zenia, and not only because she is so attractive.

In *Alias Grace*, the imagery of blood, forbidden chambers, secret doors, butchered women and repressed curiosity suggests intertexts with "Fitcher's Bird" and its basin of blood. In the chapter "The Secret Door", Dr Simon Jordan dreams of a corridor of locked doors. He had always enjoyed investigating secrets and forbidden desires, and he becomes obsessed with Grace's (claimed) amnesia and her secret memories. Unlike the women in Atwood's previous novels, Grace refuses to open the doors to her memory and she resists revealing all the secrets. She resists becoming one of Bluebeard's wives and tries to save her life by playing

ignorant. At least, she never admits whether she is Bluebeard or the bride. She never confesses to the horrors in the bloody cellar. In the novel, Atwood assigns the role of the curious bride to the reader, who, together with Dr Simon Jordan, tries all the keys to get to the secret chamber of Grace's mind.

Although Grace will not share all her secrets, we learn that in a similar way to the third sister in "Fitcher's Bird", she discovered the mutilated body of her friend Mary Whitney in her own attic room. She also witnesses Nancy Montgomery's bloody butchering and understood what could happen to her. Grace dreads mutilation and she develops a fear of doctors, whom she sees as Bluebeards butchering women.

Even the title of *The Blind Assassin* (2000) hints that Iris is not only a victim but also an assassin. She behaves less like Bluebeard's bride and more like his accomplice. She does not look for Bluebeard's/Richard's (or anyone's) secrets, she does not inspect any secret chambers: "In theory I could go wherever I liked, in practice there were invisible barriers. I kept to the main streets, the more prosperous areas: even within those confines, there were not really very many places where I felt unconstrained" (2003: 392). Iris becomes a submissive wife and blinds herself to Richard's secrets. Her sister, Laura, is the more courageous and curious one: she urges her to leave Richard and his house, described as "angular and graceless, squinty-windowed, ponderous, a dense brown like stewed tea" (2003: 361), a colour that is also reminiscent of clotted blood. Iris refuses to leave because she fears not being able to support herself.

Sharon Rose Wilson claims that in *Oryx and Crake*, fairy-tale intertexts are "less recognizable than in most of Atwood's previous texts" (2008: 36). Nevertheless, Wilson points to numerous fairy-tale scenes. Several of them allude to "Fitcher's Bird", such as Jimmy opening the sealed door to find Crake killing Oryx. Moreover, the whole world may represent a metaphorical room full of monstrous and deadly (scientific) discoveries: a man-made pandemic, predatory hybrid animals, poisonous pills and lethal food. "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" (Atwood 2004: 216). Yet, the *Maddaddam* trilogy hides a secret place that is, paradoxically, safe: the Paradice where the Crakers are raised. Atwood has inverted the secret chamber, making it the only peaceful place in a world of monstrous hybrid animals and the victims of the pandemic melting into "pink sorbet" (2004: 253) and "raspberry mousse" (Atwood 2013: 306), reminding us of basins full of clotted blood in the fairy tale.

The Heart Goes Last (2015), a playful and farcical book, is an Atwoodian version of dystopia interwoven with other popular genres, including the fairy tale. Unsurprisingly, there are dirty secrets behind the locked doors of the Positron prison. In one of the chambers, a young and naïve Charmaine is employed to execute prisoners (including her curious husband Stan). Although she is inside the forbidden room where she performs executions, she remains blind to the truth of the Positron project. Stan, on the other hand, is the curious sibling who peeks into a secret hall full of body parts for humanoid sex robots: "Stan looks with curiosity at the special custom work that's underway. Brunettes at one table, redheads at another. Over here are the blondes. And here is Charmaine, gazing up at

him out of her blue eyes from a disembodied head" (2016: 240). Stan learns that Ed, the representative of the Positron Project, keeps a secret chamber of sexbot parts that remind Stan of desecrated bodies: "There are moving belts conveying thighs, hip joints, torsos; there are trays of hands, left and right. These body parts are man-made, they're not corpse portions, but nonetheless the effect is goulish [...] except there's no blood" (2016: 232).

The protagonists keep peeping into secret chambers and as Atwood suggests in her essay "Bloody-Spotted Villainesses", there is something different for each of us in the locked chamber: "What is in the forbidden room? Something different for everyone, but something you need to know and will never find out unless you step across the threshold" (2005: 138).

Tell-Tale Keys, Stained Eggs, and Chopped-off Fingers

While "Bluebeard" and "The Robber Bridegroom" have many similarities, they differ in the role blood-stained evidence plays in the plot. Bluebeard gives a little key to his little wife and inspects it later for specks of blood as evidence of her disobedience and unloyalty. In "The Robber Bridegroom", the intended victim-bride throws down the evidence – a woman's severed finger – at a public feast so that the titular predator gets his just desserts.

Life Before Man incorporates fairy-tale imagery such as the bloody chamber, the key, and mutilated bodies. Lesje's job of a palaeontologist gives her power to "go through those doors: secrets, wonders even, lay beyond. Now she has keys, she can go almost anywhere" (1980: 283). This Bluebeardian or "Fitcher's Bird" reference to keys and secret doors shows that Atwood's heroines draw on the model of resourceful and clever girls in the Grimms' fairy tales.

In *The Blind Assassin*, Laura leaves bloodstains all over her photographs (she colours photos in a family album and Richard's head and hands are red) but Iris ignores these tell-tale signs of her sister-bride's mistreatment. Laura is buried in yet another secret chamber full of mutilated women – an abortion clinic – under the pretence that she had a mental breakdown. Winifred and Richard destroy the metaphorical 'chopped-off fingers', Laura's letters to Iris, and thus prevent their secrets from becoming public, exposing their crimes and ruining them. Iris's own body is also presented as blood-stained evidence that can be read from the bruises left by Richard's abuse: "there were bruises, purple, then blue, then yellow. [...] I sometimes felt as if these marks on my body were a kind of code, which blossomed, then faded, like invisible ink held to a candle. But if they were a code, who held the key to it?" (2003: 454–5). Iris comes to realise that her body is the secret chamber and the key, so it is up to her to reveal what was hidden. In the end, it is hers and her sister's legendary chopped off hand that writes the story of the Griffen Bluebeards: "Laura was my left hand and I was hers. We wrote the book together" (2003: 627).

In "Fitcher's Bird", Bluebeard's tell-tale key is replaced by an egg, which is also a powerful symbol of female fertility. Furthermore, an egg, like the Bluebeardian fairy tale, is associated with doubling and concealment. The white hard shell hid-

ing a soft centre recalls Bluebeard's castle and its secret chamber. The egg symbol recurs in Atwood's *Gilead* novels, which is fitting for the depiction of a society obsessed with fertility.

Offred, who has looked into the secret brothels of Gilead, is given away by her lipstick-stained cloak, which spills the secret to Serena Joy and thus puts Offred's life at risk: "It's her cloak she's holding, the winter one. 'There was lipstick on it'" (1996: 299). Is self-silencing Offred saved by her sisters and brothers in the Mayday movement? We only find out thirty-four years later in Atwood's *The Testaments* (2019). The novel shows two innocent sisters smuggling a microdot out of Gilead. Since it is the evidence of Gilead's crimes, it can be a parallel to the severed finger in "The Robber Bridegroom". The secrets of Gilead's murderous tastes are revealed, two sisters are reunited with their mother Offred: they reclaim what Gileadean Bluebeards have deprived them of and more.

In *The Heart Goes Last*, it is Stan who keeps the evidence (a flash-drive with all the secrets of executions, neurosurgeries creating sex slaves, human rights abuse) in a safe place in his Elvis Presley buckle. He is the clever sibling in the story who uses disguise (as in "Fitcher's Bird") to trick the Bluebeards of the Positron project and smuggles 'the severed finger' that exposes its corporate crimes.

Manipulations, Disguises and Masks: Survive to Talk Back and Take Back

Bluebeard's brides adopt various strategies to survive. Some keep their secret but also keep falling for Blubeards and their castles over and over again, while others decide to expose the robbers' crimes and keep their murderous husbands' caskets of jewels, as in "The Robber Bridegroom", where the clever girl conceals herself to spy on the robbers and escape them. Most girl survivors adopt the same strategy as Bluebeard himself: manipulation and deceit. To escape the bloody chambers, they learn how to become Bluebeards themselves.

To save her life, Marian bakes a cake woman as her substitute, which she offers to Peter. Karen F. Stein points out that "the symbolic cake thus speaks for her, exorcising her demon lover and becoming a festive symbol of Marian's self-assertion as she enjoys consuming the confection she has constructed" (2003: 160). Her revenge is sweet: she eats most of the cake woman herself. She even gives a piece to Duncan, another Bluebeard in the story: "'Peter wasn't trying to destroy you [...] It was me. I was trying to destroy you'" (Atwood 2003a: 280–1). It is clear that Marianne's story ends where it began: with a man "licking his lips" (Atwood 2003a: 281) and biting into her. Marianne never actually escapes from Bluebeard's castle. Her self-harming revenge is not enough.

Surfacer, mutilated and self-muted, escapes the Bluebeards only by hiding herself in the wilderness. Although she was chopped up and consumed by the Robber Bridegrooms, she regenerates herself. She saves herself, but she leaves Anna in her own bloody chamber. Surfacer hopes to rescue her unborn child and bring it up differently. Like the clever fiancée in "The Robber Bridegroom", she finds her own voice, although the novel ends before we learn if she uses it to talk back to Bluebeards.

As mentioned earlier, *Lady Oracle* is a clever parody of the Bluebeard plot. Joan's obsessive fear of Bluebeardian villains has a comic effect. Joan, like a fairy-tale "clever girl", believes she is allaying the suspicions of her (supposed) Bluebeards and masks herself to escape them: "I was a sponge, I drank it all in but gave nothing out, despite the temptation to tell everything, all my hatred and jealousy, to reveal myself as the duplicitous monster I knew myself to be." (1982: 95) Just like the Fitcher's third wife, who mimics her wicked husband's tactics of manipulation and deceit, Joan constructs a new identity to fool those she believes seek to entrap her. Unfortunately, she keeps repeating the same mistakes.

Unlike the clever and resourceful fairy tale girls who save their sisters from Bluebeardian castles, Elizabeth is unable to save her paralyzed sister Caroline. Elizabeth transforms herself from a helpless bride to a powerful Bluebeardian manipulator:

> She let him see he was deficient and she promised, what? A transformation, a touch on the shoulder, knighthood. Then she'd stepped back, showing him that he was after all only a vacation, a beautiful picture on a brochure, a man in a loincloth whacking the head off some nondescript coconut [...] treated him the way men treat women. (1980: 145)

By going against the fairy tale expectations, Atwood displaces the truth of traditional narratives and sheds light on traditional characters, showing them not nearly so passive as we thought they were.

Atwood shows that her clever survivors need to see the dangers of the bloody chamber to transform themselves and become aware of their voice. Unlike Rennie in *Bodily Harm*, with her corrosive self-silencing and reluctance to write about political corruption and violence, Offred is ready to share her story in *The Handmaid's Tale.* Nevertheless, what readers are arguably invited to witness with Offred is the moment of revenge turning from self-harming silence to naming and publicising the wrongs of others. Atwood's Offred, like many of her other characters, does not merely wish for a happier ending or leaving the bloody chamber unharmed. As Shuli Barzilai argues, "instead, they devise strategies – sometimes brutally direct, sometimes highly artful – for striking back at their offenders." (2017: 323)

In *Cat's Eye*, we can also recognise this metamorphosis of a self-harming, self-silencing and self-mutilating girl overwhelmed by an army of Bluebeards into an artist who is able to channel her thirst for vengeance into the production of art that earns her money and recognition. She becomes a Bluebeardian character herself: chopping up images of women in her portraits.

After the Robber Bride Zenia leaves the three friends bloodless and mutilated, they rescue each other. Moreover, they jointly take the role of the clever girl in the Grimms' "The Robber Bridegroom" who brings the robbers justice. They also accept their fierce appetite for revenge and get deep satisfaction from Zenia's (second) mysterious death. By swapping the genders of the fairy tale characters, Atwood complicates the stereotypical victim-victimizer opposition. She also shows that a glimpse into the secret chamber transforms the characters. They

cure themselves by telling their stories. They learn how to take control over their narratives and their lives.

On the other hand, in *Alias Grace*, Grace's strategy is to keep silent: she will not reveal what she saw in the bloody cellar at Mr Kinnear's house. She manages to hang on to her secrets despite many people trying to prise them from her. In fact, she comes to enjoy such battles of will.

Unlike Grace, Iris in *The Blind Assassin*, grows tired of keeping secrets. After Laura's suicide, Iris uses fairy-tale-like tricks to save herself: like the clever sister in "Fitcher Bird" she disguises herself. She uses her sister's name and publishes a novel. Unlike the fairy tale character, she does not save her sister, nor her daughter Aimee; however, she manages to save her own life and now intends to save Sabrina, her granddaughter. Although Richard is dead when Iris decides to testify, she can still hurt his family. This is revenge served very cold. She intends to publish a story that will hurt, maybe even, ruin the Bluebeardian family of Griffens.

Jimmy cannot even save one of his human sisters, Oryx. Crake slits her throat and Jimmy watches him, realizing that his voyeurism (peeping at porn websites and engaging in dehumanizing sexual behaviour) makes him an accomplice in the Robber Bridegroom scenarios. Although he kills Crake, his revenge does not satisfy him. He inherits the Paradice but no bride.

Since *Oryx and Crake* (2003), Atwood's novels have tended to use Bluebeardian motifs in a slightly different way: many more overt fairy-tale elements, more farce, and more happy endings, especially in *The Heart Goes Last*. The reader can draw some revengeful satisfaction from the fact that Ed undergoes Positron neurosurgery and becomes a sex slave of Lucinda Quant, who breaks the story of "Prison abuses! Organ harvesting! Sex slaves created by neurosurgery! Plans to suck the blood of babies! Corruption and greed" in the media (Atwood 2016: 354). Atwood rewrites the fairy tale plot. She keeps recognizable motifs: the secret chamber, mutilated women, a wise old woman (Lucinda Quant), the cut-off little finger, but changes the gender of the protagonist. Instead of a clever sister, we have curious Stan who plays a key role in saving the day.

The Testaments, like "Fitcher's Bird" and "The Robber Bridegroom", shows how women help each other, forming alliances and protecting each other. Aunt Lydia is a double agent who, like the old servant woman in "The Robber Bridegroom", uses trickery and disguise to help her young protégées expose great crimes. While appearing to be dedicated to the Gilead regime, she orchestrates the most important act of women's solidarity when she plans to smuggle out the evidence of corruption and abuse of human rights in Gilead. She also protects young girls from Commander Judd, a paedophilic and murderous Bluebeardian figure, who has married a series of young girls in turn and then poisoned them to get a new, possibly younger bride. When Aunt Lydia finds out that he plans to use rat poison to get rid of his latest wife, she arranges for her to go on a retreat to the Calm and Balm Clinic.

In *Bluebeard: A Reader's Guide to the English Tradition*, Casie E. Hermansson argues that the disguised sister "relies on trickery and forms of storytelling, and even by using Bluebeard's own artistry against him" (2009: 171). The most

ambiguous of Atwood's characters, Aunt Lydia, uses decoy strategies to appear as Bluebeard, as the innocent victim and as the helpful old woman. She tortures the women like the infamous Robber, she suffers in the Gilead prison before she decides to cooperate, and later, she writes a memoir that reveals all the secrets of the murderous state.

Conclusion

Fairy tales are Atwood's main intertexts, although they are sometimes obscured by layers of other popular fiction texts. Atwood is playing with the fairy tale genre by exploring its ambiguities. With her ironic sense of humour, she updates the original material by placing it within a contemporary (and/or historical) context, in which a heroine searches for a fairy tale happy ending with or without a husband. Her Bluebeards' victims are saved or save themselves by transforming themselves into storytellers: they tell on Bluebeard like the fiancée who escapes in "The Robber Bridegroom", (Offred, Toni, Charis, Roz, Iris, Aunt Lydia, Jimmy, Toby) or they manipulate the story and shape the plot to be able to run away (Joan, Stan). Some of them become Bluebeards themselves to avoid being mutilated, abused, and killed (Zenia, Aunt Lydia). They can even become guards of a sealed bloody chamber (Grace).

Margaret Atwood has been in a rich constructive dialogue with fairy tales. This article highlights that the group with elements of "The Robber Bridegroom" / "Bluebeard" has been an especially productive source for Atwood. She critically reconstructs the fairy tale schemes and motifs to show that the secret chamber, tell-tale keys, escape strategies, and powerful sexual politics of this story offer not only dramatic narratives but also a possibility for revision of contemporary power relations. What is obvious in Atwood's text is that opening the secret chamber is a transformative act and the tell-tale key is an important means of finding a voice for Atwood's protagonists: many of them become skilful storytellers who present the case against the robbers, talk back to them, and thus achieve payback.

This paper shows how Atwood uses the traditional potent images and power plays, gender troubles and even class conflicts of this fairy tale to challenge stereotypical conventions. Atwood reconstructs the fairy tales by using satire, parody and black humour to emphasize the importance of revenge in the process of transformation from naïve pawn to powerful player. By inverting fairy-tale plots, opening the traditional happy endings, reversing the genders of the protagonists, she challenges the hidden ideologies of innocent brides, happy marriages and the straitjacket of essentialist and sexist stereotypes. The chronological development of the elements suggests a transformation from symbolic self-mutilation to reclaiming what was taken in the secret chamber, and revenge. The key elements of the fairy tale – curiosity, the bloody chamber, the blood-stained key, the tell-tale egg, and the chopped-up bodies in a bowl of blood – are invoked in surprising combinations with new associations to challenge the victim-oppressor hierarchy.

Atwood's postmodern revision of fairy tale intertexts enables her protagonists to become the subjects rather than the objects of the text, which is very obvious

when we look at their revenge mechanisms: from more passive self-harm (*Edible Woman*), through sharing the story of trauma (*Bodily Harm, The Handmaid's Tale),* to a very active and aggressive revenge that is directed not only at one Bluebeard figure in particular, but at a whole society that tolerates a Bluebeardian politics of gynophagy (*The Testaments*).

Notes

1 Published in the 1697 *Histoires ou contes du temps passé*, Charles Perrault's "La Barbe Bleue" is a story about a rich man with an ugly blue beard. Although there is no particular oral source for Perrault's version, there are several possible legendary figures known as serial husbands and predators. Hermansson argues for three possible historical precursors: Comôr the Accursed, Gilles de Rais and Henry Tudor (2009: 17). According to Jack Zipes, the French folklorist Paul Delarue examined the sources and their evolution of "Bluebeard", documenting "the liberties taken by Perrault in transforming an oral folk tale into a literary text" (2000: 56). Delarue emphasises that "folk tale versions do not fault the heroine for her curiosity" (2000: 56). Perrault's "La Barbe Bleue" repeats the tradition of over-curious women, including biblical Eve, mythical Pandora and Psyche, whose curiosity is punished by disastrous consequences.

2 "The Robber Bridegroom" is a tale known as "Mr. Fox" in the British context.

3 In the Grimms' "Fitcher's Bird", the heroine saves herself and her sisters. The tale appears in *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* 1812 edition. Here, the heroine is given an egg wherever she goes while he leaves her to wander around his place. The older sisters drop the egg into the bloody basin full of women chopped to pieces they find in the forbidden room. When the sorcerer returns and inspects the blood-stained egg, he kills the girls. The youngest sister remembers to leave the egg in a safe place so when the sorcerer examines it, he is tricked into believing she has passed his test. The clever girl tricks him into carrying her sisters and his gold back home. Atwood works with Perrault's and Grimms' versions of fairy tales, not with the oral or folk tales. In an interview with Joyce Carol Oates, Atwood claims that "'The Juniper Tree' was and remains [her] favorite, followed closely by a story called 'Fitcher's Bird'" (1992: 70–71).

4 Several other authors have used Bluebeardian fairy tales as source material to be reworked, including Angela Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, 1972 and "The Bloody Chamber", 1979; Jean Rhys's The Wide Sargasso Sea, 1966; Joyce Carol Oates's short story "Blue-Bearded Lover", 1987; Donald Barthelme's "Bluebeard", 1986; Helen Oyeyemi's novel Mr. Fox, 2011).

5 Feminist critics argue that representations of women in folktales and fairy tales have been based on extreme polarizations and served to preserve sexist stereotypes (Haase 2004: 12).

6 Self-silencing can be manifested in various types of self-harming behaviours. Self-silencing includes "the denial of expression of emotions or beliefs, presenting a submissive exterior to the public despite feeling hostility and anger, putting one's needs ahead of the self-needs are mostly characterized by women and women's strategies to cope with patriarchal systems that limit women's choices" (Goldner 2019: 2).

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