

Dancing in Red-Hot Iron Shoes: The Fairy Tale Intertext in Margaret Atwood's Novels



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Introduction

As a keynote speaker at a conference celebrating the ten-year anniversary of “The Women’s Review of Books” Margaret Atwood remarked that bad reviews are “the crystallization of those moments when you wake up in the middle of the night, sweating large drops and knowing with a deep inner conviction that you have just made a complete and total fool of yourself” (7). However, as a world-renowned author of best-sellers and the most researched Canadian author, Atwood has little to fear from possibly vicious reviewers. Academic critics praise her work for being well written and multi-layered: Nischik commends her for “combining intellectually challenging writing with a high readability” and Eleonora Rao states that her appreciation of Atwood’s novels stems from the fact that they “partake of a logic of ‘both/and’ rather than ‘either/or’” (xviii).

Part of Atwood’s attraction is her seemingly effortless imitation and parody of genre. Atwood has successfully written in genres such as dystopian science fiction (*The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*), modern Victorian novel (*Alias Grace*), bildungsroman (*Cat’s Eye*) romance (*The Edible Woman*). Apart from writing entire novels in different genres, Atwood’s fiction is also interwoven with short references to other genres such as the comic book, the pulp novel and classical myth. One of the many critics who wrote on Atwood’s habit of merging generic treats, Eleanora Rao, states in *The Question of Genre: Creative Reappropriations* that “Atwood’s interest lies [...] in shaping the material from which she borrows in order to ‘transform it, rearrange it and shift the values’” (2). This results in an imitation of genre which does not merely amuse but adds meaning and depth to the novel as well.

Among the many genres Atwood has imitated and parodied is the fairy tale genre. Two of Atwood’s own titles directly refer to a fairy tale: “Bluebeard’s Egg” and *The Robber Bride*. Throughout her novels she makes many references to fairy tales by mentioning fairy tale titles, by imitating a fairy tale’s storyline or by using famous fairy tale symbols, such as Snow White’s poisoned apple or the Little Mermaid’s bleeding feet. The purpose of this dissertation is to improve the understanding of Atwood’s novels by researching how the fairy tale intertext operates within the narrative and what meaning it adds.

While almost all critics agree that the fairy tale genre and the brothers Grimm’s fairy tales in particular have influenced Atwood, they often interpret the fairy tale literally, not taking into account the possibility of an ironic or post-modern fairy tale reference. For example, critics such as Margery Fee in *The Fat Lady Dances* and Eleanor Rao in *Strategies for Identity* comment on the direct reference to “The Little Mermaid” and “The Red

Shoes" in *Lady Oracle*, but they do not investigate the role of the fairy tale intertext further than the literal level. Sharon Rose Wilson, the only critic who has written an extensive work on the fairy tale intertext in Atwood's complete oeuvre, does the same thing. She poses that the purpose of the fairy tale intertext is to indicate the characters' cultural context, to "signify characters' entrapment in pre-existing patterns" and to comment on these patterns. However, after meticulously identifying all possible fairy tale influences, references and patterns, Wilson only sparingly explains if and how Atwood's narratives comment on the fairy tale patterns. Indeed, Wilson has been criticized by Alice Palumbo to refrain from "[examining] the possibility of ironic reworkings of the fairy tales, while Atwood's use of genre conventions in narrative structure is generally seen as merely ironic" (768). On the whole, critics tend to take the fairy tale intertext too literally. If Atwood refers to a fairy tale, they reason, (part of) the narrative must be a modern-day copy of the fairy tale narrative. In this dissertation, I will show that the fairy tale intertexts are altered in such a way that Atwood's characters are empowered rather than victimized; either the fairy tale plot and symbols are inverted to change their meaning or Atwood implements the fairy tales with a different interpretation to make the empowerment possible.

In her discussion of the fairy tale intertext in Margaret Atwood's work, Wilson mainly focuses on fairy tales with such plots that their unaltered version already supports the plot of Atwood's novel. Most tales Wilson discusses, such as "The Robber Bridegroom", "The Girl Without Hands", "Fitcher's Bird", "The Red Shoes", "Little Red Cap" and "The Snow Queen", feature self-sufficient heroines. Even though their actions are not always rewarded, these protagonists display a high level of autonomous action, not just reacting but acting out of their own accord. Other tales discussed by Wilson are "The Juniper Tree" and "The White Snake", which both feature equally independent but male protagonists. Wilson argues that Atwood's literary fairy tales have the characteristic pattern of "a movement from fairy tale dismemberment or cannibalism to metamorphosis and healing" (xii). However, since she focuses on the fairy tales which have exactly this theme, her conclusion is hardly surprising. The only predominantly passive fairy tale heroine discussed by Wilson is Rapunzel. Yet in her discussion of this fairy tale she does not mention the possibility of Rapunzel's metamorphosis. Wilson's interpretation of Atwood's fairy tale intertexts is that they merely serve to illustrate the characters' development. Wilson does not discuss or even consider a Cinderella who takes charge or a miffed Little Red Cap who turns into a wolf herself.

In order to get a very different look at the fairy tale motif than Wilson's, my focus will be on fairy tales with protagonists who are hardly pro-active or emancipated. Not only will this provide a different look at Atwood's fairy tale intertexts than Wilson's, it also makes a literal interpretation nearly impossible since Atwood's characters rarely remain passive throughout the novel. Another reason to focus on heroines who have traditionally been regarded as

especially passive or eager to please, such as Snow White, Sleeping Beauty and the Little Mermaid, is because they are so often referred to by Atwood. Their function in the narrative is often inverted or reversed in order to fit into Atwood's novels, or Atwood focuses on aspects of the fairy tale which are not immediately concerned with the often especially male-oriented love-story.

This dissertation makes use of the structuralist concept of intertextuality. The term was coined by Julia Kristeva and is based on Bakhtin's and Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralist ideas. Intertextuality is essentially the way texts are shaped by other texts. Any one literary text contains allusions, citations or adapted aspects of other, earlier texts. This means intertextuality is not only the overt reference to a biblical story, for example, but intertextuality is also the use of a conventional literary convention such as the way dialogue is presented in a novel. Also, an intertext can be consciously imparted by the author, but is just as valid when it is only perceived by the reader. The result of this is that no text is devoid of intertextuality and Atwood is of course no exception.

A special mention needs to be made of Maria Tatar's annotated versions of the Grimm's fairy tales and the tales by Hans Christian Andersen. Both works contain the careful translations of the tales with an abundance of notes by Tatar explaining and indicating not only related cultural phenomena but also theories from other fairy tale critics on particular passages. Both works provide an excellent theoretical background for every fairy tale, comparing and contrasting different interpretations of the fairy tale in the introductions and notes. These two volumes have been of indescribable value to me throughout my research.

In the following chapter I will provide some background information on Margaret Atwood and give a brief overview of fairy tale criticism. Following that, I will start to discuss "The Little Mermaid" as an intertext in *The Edible Woman*, *Lady Oracle* and *Oryx & Crake*. Chapter 3 will be about "Sleeping Beauty" in Atwood's *Life Before Man*, *The Robber Bride* and *The Blind Assassin*. The next chapter defines how "Snow White" features in *Alias Grace*, *Cat's Eye* and *Lady Oracle*. In my conclusion I will specify the result of Atwood's reversal and inversion of fairy tale aspects.

Chapter 1 – Background

For the understanding of the fairy tale theme in Atwood, it is of interest to know something of the evolution of the fairy tale and more especially of the origin of the multiple versions of many fairy tales. The exact origin of the fairy tale is unclear since it stems from an oral tradition; it probably dates back to prehistoric times (Jones 1). However, during the last three hundred years or so, more and more fairy tales have been recorded and published. The most famous collections in the Western world are those of the brothers Grimm, the Andersen volume, the Mother Goose tales and a few tales from *Thousand and One Night*. Many fairy tale collections contain similar fairy tales, which suggests that those tales were widespread even before publication. The collected fairy tales are by no means a reliable account of the original fairy tales since the collectors had absolutely no qualms about modifying and adapting fairy tales. Some collectors even added tales they wrote themselves, such as Andersen's famous "The Little Mermaid". Because there are so many versions of each fairy tale, it is sometimes difficult to determine to which version Atwood is referring. In cases in which the multiple fairy tale versions are so significantly different (such as "The Sleeping Beauty", which has a whole extra story-line involving a malicious ogre in the Grimm edition), I will try to define which tale is the most likely to be referred to.

Many contemporary authors incorporate the fairy tale genre in their novels, for which there are several methods. The mix of variously edited and altered fairy tales has inspired many authors over the last few centuries to produce fairy tales which are, as Jones calls it, "original, single author fairytales" (34), or simply known as literary fairy tales. Sometimes these are attempts at 'new' or 'literary' fairy tales like Baum's "The Wizard of Oz", Tolkien's *The Hobbit* or Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*, or reworked versions of existing fairy tales like Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* or Tanith Lee's *White as Snow*. Atwood's novels are neither 'new' tales, nor does she focus on a single fairy tale per novel. Instead, she alludes to several fairy tales in her novels, supplying a contrast to the unfolding plot.

A special mention needs to be made of Angela Carter's fiction and her use of the fairy tale. Her use of the fairy tale is often more overt than Atwood's, but her method is similar. In an essay by Atwood about Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, she analyzes how Carter adapts existing fairy tales to give them a new moral. Marina Warner even attributes Atwood's use of the fairy tale as being the direct influence of Angela Carter's fiction.

Angela Carter was in turn influenced by fairy tale scholar Jack Zipes, whose theories are also in tune with Atwood's use of the fairy tale. In *Why Fairy Tales Stick* Zipes poses that "oral and literary fairy tales enunciated, articulated, and communicated feelings in efficient metaphorical terms that enabled listeners and readers to envision possible solutions to their problems so that they could survive and adapt to their environments" (xii). These metaphors are not static but change along with the problems of the intended audience. Zipes states that the fairy tale is especially popular because they are "survival stories of hope" (27), in part because of "the possibility of transformation [which] gives hope to the teller and listener of a tale" (49). I will show that Atwood's fairy tale intertexts are indeed adapted fairy tales adapted to fit the problems of her characters, in which transformation often has a positive result but which does not always result in a "happily ever after".

Chapter 2 – The Little Mermaid

Tattooed on sailor's arms, cast in copper or eternalized as a perky cartoon redhead with puzzling seashell-bra, the Little Mermaid has a widespread appeal. Hans Christian Andersen wrote this fairy tale himself, basing his tale on a combination of oral fairy tales about other aquatic creatures such as selkies, nymphs, nixies and undines and his contemporary Fouqué's short story "Undine" in which "a knight falls in love with the daughter of the King of the Sea and betrays her" (Tatar 120). This fairy tale is of interest in my discussion because of its theme of transformation, sacrifice and failure.

"The Little Mermaid" is about the beautiful youngest daughter of the Sea King, the mermaid after whom the tale is named. From the very start of the tale the Little Mermaid has an obsession with life on land, which is further fueled by a chance look at a human prince with whom she promptly falls in love. After the prince is shipwrecked during a storm, the mermaid even rescues him, only to find out later the prince attributes his mysterious saviour to be the girl from a nearby temple. In order to get closer to the object of her affection, the mermaid makes a gruesome trade with a sea witch. The mermaid's first transformation takes place: she sacrifices her tongue, and thus her ability to sing, in exchange for a pair of human legs and feet. Her sacrifice is even greater since her feet will feel like "treading on knives" with every step. She is warned she will have to succeed in making the prince fall in love with her or she will die. She is accepted in the prince's household but even though he appreciates her company, she fails at securing the prince's love. He loves the girl from the temple, who turns out to be a princess in disguise. On the eve of their wedding, the Little Mermaid is offered an escape from her imminent death by the sea witch: if she murders the prince and his bride then she will revert back to her mermaid form. Out of love for the prince, the mermaid refuses. Yet she is spared the cruel death she was promised: instead she transforms once again, this time into an air spirit. The other air spirits tell her that after three hundred years of good deeds she will gain an immortal soul and ascend to heaven.

Critics writing about "The Little Mermaid" tend to focus on the sacrifice the mermaid makes to be able to walk on land: trading her voice (and thus her ability to sing) for a pair of legs, even though she will be in pain. Most critics view this sacrifice as part of the bargain made by women in marriage: to give up your opinion or even your identity in exchange for a husband. Dorothy Dinnerstein poses the trade as a metaphor for growing up and becoming a sexual being (qtd. in Tatar 143) whereas Fass regards the tale as "the artist's painful endeavour to locate his place within a society hostile or at best indifferent to creative imagination" (qtd. in Tatar 144). Atwood's mermaidlike characters suffer from similar dilemmas, but the focus of these intertexts is on the subject of transformation.

Atwood mainly uses the "The Little Mermaid" intertext in *The Edible Woman*, *Lady Oracle* and *Oryx and Crake* in order to demonstrate the advantages and drawbacks of transformation. Atwood's mermaids are far more focused on transformation itself than the original Little Mermaid ever was. The literary mermaids are aware they can bring about their own transformation by means of changing their behaviour. For them, transformation is not a source of sorrow as it was for the mermaid but a useful tool to get what they want. A real source of sorrow is revealed to be the transformation of society,

The theme of failure is interwoven with the enhanced theme of transformation in the "The Little Mermaid" intertext. Failure manifests itself in the original tale by means of the mermaid's attempt to make the prince love her. Yet even though this love affair has lost its dominant presence in the tale, the theme of failure has not lost its prominence. Instead, failure has become a more general theme in the novels. Apart from failed love affairs, the novels also feature failure as both the cause and the result of the mermaids' transformation. A sense of failure fuels the mermaids to attempt transformation, which also results in failure, thus prompting another transformation.

This means that in her use of the "The Little Mermaid" intertext, Atwood has shifted the emphasis of the fairy tale from love story to transformation story. Although her literary mermaids follow the same basic plot as the original mermaid did, Atwood's focus on the consequences of transformation provides the fairy tale with an extra layer of meaning. It results in an intertext which does not merely allude to a pre-existing fairy tale but which annexes the fairy tale to change its focus and ending. As I will show, Ainsley Tewce from *The Edible Woman* longs to transform into a mother, Joan Foster from *Lady Oracle* first transforms in order to be both lover and artist at once but develops a taste for transformation itself and finally Jimmy, or Snowman, from *Oryx and Crake* longs for transformation for the sake of fitting in.

The Edible Woman

Atwood's debut novel *The Edible Woman* (1969) is about Marian, a young woman who becomes increasingly apprehensive about her upcoming wedding. She feels trapped in a relationship and a society in which she has no choice but to conform to expectations. As a result, she develops an eating disorder. The subplot of this novel features Ainsley Tewce, Marian's housemate. She is introduced in the novel as an outspoken and self-assured character, much more so than Marian. Even though both struggle with similar issues such as relationships and motherhood, Ainsley does not suffer from the feelings of powerlessness Marian does. The subplot about Ainsley functions as a commentary on the main plot about

Marian: Marian feels oppressed by society's expectations but Ainsley proves it is possible to use those expectations to your own benefit.

The theme of transformation is omnipresent in this novel. In the article "From 'Places, Migrations' to *The Circle Game*" Judith McCombs already stated that Atwood's first collection of poetry, *The Circle Game*, is about female metamorphosis, which was later expanded on in *The Edible Woman*, among others (Nicholson 56). Protagonist Marian suffers from a fear of transformation: she spends much of the novel dreading her upcoming change in marital status, dreading motherhood, dreading even a positive change in her own appearance. In this aspect Ainsley is her opposite, just as she is Marian's opposite in character. Ainsley actively pursues transformation, both temporary and permanent. By means of the "The Little Mermaid" intertext concerning Ainsley, Atwood proves that transformation, even with all its dangers, is to be preferred to inaction.

Both the original Little Mermaid and Ainsley initially transform in order to seduce a man. Where the Little Mermaid longs for a spouse, Ainsley only desires to be impregnated by a male of her choice. Ainsley's transformation is less rigorous than the mermaid's, but it is rather more effective: in order to seduce the man she has chosen to be the father of her baby, Ainsley decides to pretend to be a demure and silent young girl (reminiscent of the silent, tongueless Little Mermaid). The first time Marian sees Ainsley in her innocent-schoolgirl outfit she even fails to recognize her housemate who usually prefers neon-pink clothing. The following morning she has no trouble recognizing Ainsley again, but this time she remarks that her roommate looks "like a mermaid perched on a rock" (85). In the privacy of her own home, Ainsley easily reverts back to her real self: the self-assured woman who is out to fulfill her own ambitions. She is in charge of her own transformation and can change back and forth at her own disposal. Ainsley did not need a tentacled sea-witch's magic or a rigorous removal of her tongue. Instead, she devises a tactic to behave in a demure and silent manner in order to attract her prince, only to revert back to her mermaidlike self when the prince is not in sight. So even though Ainsley and the Little Mermaid share goal (boy) and the result (silence) of the transformation, Ainsley is much more empowered than her fairy tale double.

Ainsley's temporary transformation to shy girl is instrumental in achieving her desired final transformation: to become a mother. Ainsley's successfully deployed her tactic and has become pregnant according to plan. This transformation takes place easily and without a hitch. This is a sharp contrast with the Little Mermaid's transformation. Even though the mermaid's appearance is wholly changed, she remains the same mermaid inside with a few handicaps thrown in as well. This shows that a purely physical or behavioural transformation is harder than a change in identity. The first two are merely pretending: the mermaid pretended to be human; Ainsley pretended to be a shy girl. Ainsley's change in identity from

single girl to mother is not just a change on the surface; it is a comprehensive transformation which cannot fail.

Although Ainsley's transformations are very successful, the theme of failure is also features in this novel. Ainsley is quite aware of the possibility of failure and instigates yet another transformation in order to prevent it. Although she initially planned to raise her child on her own, Ainsley is convinced by a psychologist at the pre-natal clinic the child is "absolutely certain to turn into a homosexual" (186) if they grow up without a father image. To Ainsley, this possibility is unacceptable and she swiftly takes measures to prevent it. She proposes marriage to Leonard, who refuses. Ainsley is not in the least discouraged by this failure. "I'll simply have to get another one, that's all" is her reaction, and so she does. This shows that Ainsley's reaction to (possible) failure is one of cool-headedness and practicality. Faced with the possibility of a homosexual son, she sets in motion her transformation from single mother-to-be to married woman. Failure is thus instigation for further transformation and not a sign to abandon all hope like the Little Mermaid does.

Overall, the "The Little Mermaid" intertext in *The Edible Woman* is focused on transformation as a powerful means to give your life a new direction and it is a commentary on Marian's state of invariance. Marian's fear of possible failure is contrasted with Ainsley's adequate handling of actual failure. Even though in the original fairy tale the mermaid's transformations were always the last resort, Ainsley actively seeks out transformation as a solution to whatever problem she encounters. It poses transformation as the solution to trouble, instead of its source.

Lady Oracle

Lady Oracle (1976) recounts the life of Joan Foster from childhood to early middle-aged woman, as told by herself. She starts out in life as an unhappy little fat girl with an overly ambitious mother who urges her to be more like the other children. Joan suffers several instances of severe humiliation by her mother and develops an intense dislike for her. From early childhood on she is aware she has to make choices: she cannot be both a fat girl and a graceful ballerina, and later in life she cannot be both wife and artist. During childhood she resists her mother, who urges her to lose weight and to behave in a more socially acceptable manner. Yet as she grows up and her dilemma shifts to the wife-artist contrast, Joan is no longer willing to sacrifice one of her desires in favour of the other. She develops several secret identities between which she constantly transforms in order to achieve both her artistic and romantic ambitions. Her failure to appreciate either identity to the fullest causes her to stage one final, theatrical transformation.

Joan identifies with several literary heroines and pop culture icons, and as a consequence she initially feels unable not to imitate the lives of her fictional doubles. She identifies with the protagonist in a film based on "The Red Shoes", the wronged wife in gothic novels, the proverbial fat lady and many more; her identification goes to such an extent that during a nightmare she even ends up in the setting of one of her own gothic novels. According to Ellen McWilliams in *Margaret Atwood and the female Bildungsroman*, Joan has the "potential of imagining the self as compromised of different narrative strands" (89). The trouble with her habit of identifying with fictional characters is that she becomes to feel obliged to obey the rules of the genre with which she identifies every step of the way. While most discussions of *Lady Oracle* define this habit as a limiting factor, McWilliams poses that "rather than being a victim of those fictions, Joan effectively exploits them for her purpose" (85). I will show that as the plot progresses, Joan indeed finds a way to deftly alter the way she imitates "The Little Mermaid" in order to make it fit her own ambitions.

Where the Little Mermaid gives up her singing voice in order to transform to try and get the prince to love her, Joan abandons neither her artistic abilities nor her romantic desires. Instead, she chooses to transform back and forth continuously. The trade in the fairy tale is commonly interpreted as "the fatal bargain women make in Andersen's culture and our own" (Tatar 144). Joan is convinced that, like the mermaid, she cannot have both at the same time. She is convinced her husband will not appreciate her second identity as a writer of gothic novels or as a poetess, so she hides those activities from him. As Joan realizes her desire to be both artist and wife at once, she directly compares herself to the Little Mermaid. She blames the mermaid's failure to marry the prince on the fact that she did not keep her aptitude for dancing a secret. Joan reasons that if the little mermaid had only danced in private she would have been able to be both a dancer and a wife at once, if only secretly so. She assumes this interpretation of the fairy tale as a tactic, and for a while she is relatively happy with that situation.

Joan's memory of "The Little Mermaid" is focused on the sacrifice. She recounts that "in order to get a soul you had to suffer, you had to give something up; or was that to get legs and feet? I couldn't remember. She'd become a dancer though, with no tongue" (216). It is typical of Joan that she is unclear about what the positive result of the sacrifice is in the fairy tale, since she is herself mostly confronted with constant sacrifice and rarely reaps the benefits of her sacrifices. As she is in her role of housewife, she is reminded of her desire to dance and write; as she practices her art, she constantly aware this is an unattractive quality which will damage her relationship with Arthur if she is ever found out.

Because of her tendency to transform back and forth, Joan has trouble discovering her own style. Where the mermaid was robbed of her voice completely, Joan is, as Coral Ann Howells puts it, "struggling to find her own voice even as she takes enormous pains to

disguise it through her slavish adherence to clichéistic Gothic conventions and her automatic writing" (167). Joan is not only a silenced mermaid in the sense of keeping her art secret; she is also silenced in the sense of not knowing her own purpose, method or goal.

Joan's constant transformations with its accompanying sacrifices results in a failure to either enjoy or keep up her multiple identities. Her initial idea to be a Little Mermaid who simply keeps her dancing habits a secret proves to be unsuccessful. She is aware that her own "dancing behind closed doors" (216) is unsatisfactory, she feels her art without an audience is unfulfilling. Near the end of the novel, as she rejoices in a rare moment of artistic freedom and dances barefoot and alone, she cuts her feet on glass splinters. A powerful image which reminds of the original mermaid who felt like treading on knives with every step she took, and a sign that even when performing alone, her art comes at a price.

After Joan decides her constant transformation does not bring her happiness and is impossible to keep up any longer, she undergoes a final, more complete transformation. Similar to the mermaid who is turned into an air spirit to do good deeds instead of dying, Joan fakes her own death and afterwards realizes she wants to be less self-absorbed. After being preoccupied with herself for her entire life, she suddenly realizes that "all kinds of things had been happening in the world" (255). Even though she has been a political activist for years in support of her husband, Joan now for the first time realizes there is more to life than her own personal dilemmas. After receiving a postcard from her accomplice in her faked death, Sam, she decides she has to return in order to aid her friends. Joan has once again chosen a course of action which is reminiscent of "The Little Mermaid", but it is by no means a slavishly following of what the fairy tale prescribes. She has chosen to interpret the tale differently, to change from mermaid in a perpetual state of transformation to benefactor air spirit.

The function of the "The Little Mermaid" intertext in *Lady Oracle* is to show that continuous transformation is accompanied by continuous sacrifice which ultimately results in failure. Joan is aware that her predicament is similar to that of the Little Mermaid, and tries to find the solution within the fairy tale narrative. Proving to be indeed an author at heart, she is not 'freed' as such from her constant identification with the Little Mermaid or with any other literary character, but she deftly tweaks the plot of the story she feels a connection with in order to set her own course.

In both *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle*, the theme of transformation is in tune with Zipes' theory. Transformation is the core of the story, which offers escape and happiness. Joan's 'pick and mix' attitude towards the fairy tale she relives is exemplary of a modern reliving of ancient tales as Zipes described it. Ainsley and Joan do indeed find solutions to their modern-day dilemmas by looking towards fairy tales and giving them their own interpretation.

Oryx and Crake

Oryx and Crake (2003) is radically different from *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle* in its use of the "The Little Mermaid" intertext. *Oryx and Crake's* protagonist Jimmy is a lonely human survivor of a worldwide disease in the near future; his flashbacks explain how his best friend Crake orchestrated that disaster. Jimmy grows up in a world of incredibly advanced technology which includes an abundant use of genetic enhancement. It is a world in which science is dominant and where stories, belief and ethics have not place. One of the many new species created is an invention of Crake's: the Crakers. The Crakers are a human race with added bonuses like a citrusy aroma to ward off insects and a slightly disturbing ability to extract nutrients from food they have already processed once. The killing virus which only Jimmy and the Crakers escaped is also Crake's creation. In a megalomaniac attempt to bring about an entirely new creation, Crake decided to kill off humanity and make a fresh start with the enhanced Crakers, leaving Jimmy alive as a protector for the innocent, childlike Crakers.

Early on in the novel, a connection between Jimmy and "The Little Mermaid" is established as he stares out at sea and imagines a group of mermaids beckoning him to join them, like the mermaid's sisters once waved to their suffering sister on land. However, closer inspection of the novel reveals that many aspects Jimmy's life are the inverted elements of "The Little Mermaid". Even though the use of the intertext is so different in this novel, the themes which were of importance in *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle* still apply. I will go on to show that Jimmy is the victim of radical transformation of the world around him, which leaves him virtually helpless on a physical and verbal level. Furthermore, because of the highly mercenary concept of love his object of affection entertains, he also fails at securing his love. The only consolation for Jimmy is that in the end his voice becomes heard again, as the human need for stories resurfaces.

First of all, even though Jimmy himself never radically transforms in the novel, he is always surrounded by people who are increasingly different from himself, which still makes him an outsider, similar to the mermaid among humans. Jimmy has never felt he belonged among the people he lives with. Even as a small boy he realizes he is a 'word-person' and not a 'numbers-person', and that he is surrounded by people of the other kind. His sense of not-belonging is dramatically increased after he is left stranded with the Crakers. Jimmy is clumsy and ill-adapted to the wilderness the world is reduced to, whereas the Crakers thrive on their instincts and ideal physique. Jimmy is the only non-hybrid creature left: he is the human who fails to transform into a mermaid, who cannot adapt to the new circumstances in a post-apocalyptic world. He is acutely aware of his inability to adapt, as he fantasizes about

the mermaids singing to him offshore, and predicting his demise as a result of a shark attack should he attempt to reach the singing beauties.

Jimmy never undergoes a transformation himself, but he does suffer the same disadvantages as the mermaid in the fairy tale. As Jimmy is rummaging through the remains of the once highly luxurious compounds, he steps on the shards of a broken bottle of scotch, reminiscent of what the little mermaid feels every time she takes a step. The wild and polluted environment causes the wound to infect, which no antibiotic cream seems to solve. The mermaid's hurting feet were one of the sacrifices she had to make for her transformation, yet Jimmy's injured foot is the result of his failure to adapt to new circumstances. It was the transformed world which provided the grounds for Jimmy's injury, the price he has to pay for staying the same.

This emphasizes the novel's criticism of unchecked scientific progress: even though the objective of changing the world was to make life more enjoyable, it results in an inhospitable earth, like the mermaid's cause for transformation was to find love but resulted in pain and failure. The fact that Jimmy hurts his foot on the shards of a bottle of alcohol, an article which can only be associated with the pre-apocalyptic world, and in a setting which is the domain of the that old world further underlines that the cause of misery is not in the dangers of nature but in the dangers of technological progress.

Like the Little Mermaid, Jimmy finds himself isolated because of the use of his voice: it is talent for language which sets him apart, and the lack of anyone to communicate with which truly isolates him. When he is living among humans, he is one of the few who is able to make use of his abilities as a "word-person", who usually end up living in the dangerous "pleeblands" for lack of scientific talent. Yet as one of the very few "word-persons" in the Compounds, he is in a truly isolated position. Within the community in the compounds, communication and genuine human interaction are rare. As Dunning argues in "Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake: The Terror of the Therapeutic*", that in Jimmy's world, quantitative ethos and dominant technologies -especially 'communications' technologies- mitigate against authentic communication" (91). Thus, Jimmy is much more silenced than the mermaid ever could have been: silenced by lack of anyone willing or able to understand him.

Even though Jimmy has an extraordinary talent for communication, he fails to make effective use of it. He uses his abilities to entertain his classmates in school and as an adult he woos bored housewives in the compound who are charmed by his talk, yet he does not use it to find out more of Crake's dubious plans. When it is all too late he realized he could have known something was wrong by the change in Crake's preferred fridge magnets, and when recalling conversations with Crake he thinks to himself: "[t]here were signs and I missed them" (320).

Underused and underestimated as his talent for communication was among humans, Jimmy finds himself even more isolated and misunderstood among the Crakers. Where he at least shared a common background and the same vocabulary with his fellow human beings, his conversations with the Crakers are constantly stranded when Jimmy mentions items or concepts which are unknown to the Crakers.

Ironically, this means that the task to protect the Crakers from harm, which was set to him by Crake, is both impossible and pointless, which results in Jimmy providing the Crakers with the only thing he can: stories. Jimmy's initial task is impossible because of their stunted conversations, but he also soon finds out it is pointless because the Crakers were so carefully designed they form a thriving, self-supporting community in which the concepts of crime or evil are not valid. The Crakers' only need is of explanations, which Jimmy tries to provide. Yet because of the Crakers' ignorance of the pre-apocalyptic world, Jimmy's explanations soon become more like a creation myth. Even if it is unintentionally done, Jimmy provides the Crakers with the basis for a vocal and artistic society. When Jimmy discovers they have fashioned a doll in his likeness to help him, he is reminded of Crake's greatest fear: "Watch out for art, Crake used to say. As soon as they start doing art, we're in trouble" (361). But in the novel, this signals the welcome change from the stale, humourless world of science to an evolving, creative society.

An obvious inversion of the original fairy tale is Jimmy's gender. As a consequence, the other genders in the love-triangle of the fairy tale are also inverted. In "The Little Mermaid", the Little Mermaid and the girl from the temple love the prince, who eventually marries the latter. In *Oryx and Crake*, this triangle is gender inverted: both Jimmy (Little Mermaid) and Crake (girl from the temple) long for Oryx (the prince), who is in death united with Crake. Even though Jimmy and Oryx do form a romantic attachment where the mermaid never even came close to the love of the prince, Jimmy's love can still be regarded a failure. The fact that their love-affair is a secret and that Oryx and Crake are ultimately united in death (as opposed to a dead mermaid who leaves behind two living lovers) identifies him as the unlucky mermaid.

This love-triangle is an important aspect of the novel because it reveals a notion of love as a commodity which is the reason why Jimmy fails to secure an exclusive relationship with Oryx. In the fairy tale, the only reason why the prince chooses the temple girl over the mermaid is because the prince believes she was his rescuer. In the novel, Crake liberates Oryx from her life as a semi-prostitute but she hardly regards him as her saviour. She recalls her life as a child-prostitute and sex slave as no great injustice. She experienced it as a relatively fair trade: sexual favours in exchange for money or food. Her romantic attachment to Crake is suggested to be not much more than a repayment of his job offer which saved her from prostitution. Her love for Jimmy appears to be more genuine, or as Oryx herself

puts it: "Crake is my boss. You are for fun" (313). Margaret Atwood once remarked in an interview that "[b]eing rescued has also its price" (qtd. in McWilliams 99), and while Oryx does not even consider herself rescued as such, she still feels the need to repay Crake.

After Oryx and Crake's death, Jimmy becomes the Crakers' guardian as promised, which alludes to the mermaid's final transformation to air spirit. However, where the mermaid was able to fulfill her desire to acquire a human soul by this transformation, Jimmy is not offered any reward for his good deeds for the Crakers. He obeys Crake's request because there is nothing else for him to do, and even though he develops a strong protective instinct for the Crakers, his task brings him little joy. In the novel he is now being presented as a combination between a Moses and a Jesus figure, leading the Crakers from their threatened Paradise accommodations, pondering about which possible commandments to give them and to his own surprise, being prayed to after a fashion. This puts every benign supernatural creature in a different light: Atwood suggests their actions stem not from an innate desire to do good but rather from a lack of anything else to do, which results in a caring but rather weary attachment.

His task as a helping air spirit for the Crakers is the only thing Jimmy succeeds at in this novel. Although the Crakers do not seem to need the kind of care Crake had in mind, Jimmy provides them with a creation myth which they seem to appreciate very much. Although Jimmy is still far from comfortable in this position, he is finally able to practice and be appreciated for what he does best. He provides the slowly diversifying world of the Crakers with a basis for mythology and legend, proving that a society cannot function with stories. Finally, mermaid Jimmy has moved from a world of science to a world of stories, in which he is more at home than ever.

The function of "The Little Mermaid" intertext in *Oryx and Crake* is to show that Jimmy, as the ultimate inversion of the mermaid, fails and succeeds at the same things as the mermaid did, but for different reasons. Jimmy's body fails him, not because of rather cruel magic but because of the impact of unchecked scientific experimentation on all living creatures. His voice fails him among humans because they do not care for stories or art and he realizes only too late he could have used his vocal talents to uncover the truth about Crake's plans. Among the Crakers he attempts to use his voice to tell the truth about Crake but fails because of their inability to understand the human world. Jimmy's failure to secure Oryx's attention for his own does not stem from physical inability but from Oryx's concept of repayment. She does not choose Crake as her official companion out of love but rather out of debt. Jimmy's only success as the protector of the Crakers is telling: it underlines the human need for stories.

In a sharp contrast to *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle*, the fairy tale intertext in *Oryx and Crake* only partially fits Zipes' theory on literary fairy tales. Atwood uses

the fairy tale to point out the dangers of the transformation of a society, rather than the benefits of personal transformation. This means she does actually use the fairy tale to confront a modern problem: a society which increasingly invests in scientific advancement at the cost of environment, ethics and social relations. Yet where Zipes posed that the literary fairy tale's strength is in the offering of solutions and happy endings, *Oryx and Crake* fails to produce either. Atwood turns the intertext into a dystopian fairy tale, in which mass transformation signals the onset of despair instead of its end.

Chapter 3 - The Sleeping Beauty

"The Sleeping Beauty" is a classic fairy tale. A royal couple is overjoyed as their longtime desire to have a child is fulfilled. At the feast celebrating the birth of their daughter, a number of fairies is present. These fairies bless the baby with various sorts of admirable qualities. However, an uninvited fairy shows up and takes revenge for not being invited by speaking a curse: at her fifteenth birthday the child will prick her finger on a spindle and die. To avert total disaster, the last of the good natured fairies who had not yet spoken her blessing changes the curse. The girl will prick her finger, but instead of death, a hundred year sleep will ensue for all the inhabitants of the castle. The sleeping spell will be ended by true love's kiss. The alarmed parents of the girl order every spinning wheel to be removed from the kingdom in an attempt to protect their daughter but to no avail: the curiosity of the girl makes her explore the castle, where she inevitably finds a spindle. After the hundred year period, a prince visits. As he enters Sleeping Beauty's chamber she wakes and they kiss. A marriage follows.

The source of the summary is the version collected by the brothers Grimm, but their version was preceded by a very similar tale published by Perrault. It is the Grimm plot which became the most famous, if not the title of "Briar Rose". Perrault's version is significantly different on two accounts. First of all, Perrault has the princess wake up as the prince kneels by her side, leaving no room for indecent pre-marital sexuality. Furthermore, the tale does not end at the marriage of the happy couple. After the wedding, the Beauty bears a set of twins and the family goes to live with the prince's mother, an ogre. When the prince is away, the mother-in-law threatens to eat the infants. Sleeping Beauty craftily hides her children and the steward of the household fools the ogress with an animal piece of meat. At the prince's return, he discovers his mother's gruesome cannibalistic inclinations and she promptly throws herself into a vat of toads, vipers, adders and serpents.

This fairy tale is commonly associated with sexual violence by critics, and this theme is also present in Atwood's novels. Because of the fairy tale's reputation of being the height of romance most readers will not interpret the waking scene of Sleeping Beauty as a metaphor for rape, but in essence the prince erotically uses the Sleeping Beauty without her consent. Bettelheim's interpretation of this was that the Beauty's sleep is a metaphor for parental attempts to prevent or delay the child's sexual awakening, in which the pricking of the finger with the spindle signals the onset of female sexual maturation. In Atwood's novels it usually resurfaces as rape scenes, and sex is never portrayed as the goal or solution to the one hundred year sleep. Because the cause and end of sleep are reversed in the novels, forced

sex is rather portrayed as the onset of sleep, or at the very least as something which is only possible only because of the metaphorical sleep of the protagonist.

The theme of predestination appears in the fairy tale in the form of the fairies' predictions, but in the novel it is often a partially maledictive parent or parent-figure who dooms a child by giving their harsh opinion on what the future will bring. The solution to the curse is thus brought back not to an external helper but to the cursed character itself.

This fairy tale is of interest in my discussion because of its themes of predestination, passivity, curiosity and sexual violence. In her use of the "The Sleeping Beauty" intertext, Atwood's *Sleeping Beauties* commonly go through a period of passivity and inaction as a metaphor for the princess's prolonged sleep. For the literary Beauties, the cause and end of sleep are always reversed. Where the original Beauty finds her doom after a bout of curiosity and are woken after nothing but passive waiting, Atwood's Beauties discretely glide into a state of passivity and powerlessness which they can only end by being becoming curious and active again. This is in tune with Bettelheim's view of the fairy tale that Sleeping Beauty's coma is a sign of her failure to fulfill the tasks life has set her. The sleep is a period of reflection and introspection which precedes maturity.

This fairy tale intertext easily fits in with Zipes' theory on the function of the fairy tale. Atwood adapted the tales to fit modern times and offers hope of solution by means of a personal transformation.

Life Before Man

Life Before Man (1979) is considered "dreary" and "pessimistic" not only by many critics, but also by Atwood herself (Wilson 166). "The Sleeping Beauty" intertext does little to alleviate the permeating feeling of depression of the novel; in fact, it greatly contributes to the absence of action, decision-making and general progress. The novel consists of the three life stories of Elizabeth, Nathaniel and Lesje. Elizabeth and Nathaniel's marriage is in a state of decline. Elizabeth is mourning the suicide of her lover and Nathaniel has his own extra-marital distractions. Lesje is Elizabeth's colleague at the Royal Ontario Museum and becomes Nate's new lover during the novel. All three protagonists are overwhelmingly passive during the novel, reverting to futile daydreaming and obsessing over their past. This results in what Alice M. Palumbo identified as the novels main motifs of displacement and absence.

Life Before Man starts with a powerful fairy tale image of a fully clothed woman lying on bed, still like a statue, firmly establishing "The Sleeping Beauty" as an intertext. It is

Elizabeth who re-enacts, although not consciously so, the famous comatose Sleeping Beauty, displaying a scene popular for illustration. Throughout the novel she suffers from her passive attitude and struggles against her own indifference as do both other protagonists. Their mutual passivity is a metaphor for Sleeping Beauty's sleeping state. All three of them feel useless and ineffective, unable to control their lives; they find it hard to experience emotions, of which they are accused by others on multiple occasions.

Elizabeth, Nate and Lesje are surpassed in passivity by Elizabeth's mother and sister, who never manage to leave their comatose state. Caroline's passivity progresses to such an extent she becomes catatonic and drowns in a few inches of water in a brief moment of negligence. Elizabeth's mother dies after falling asleep in bed, drunk and with a burning cigarette which sets fire to the bed. These scenes reiterate the importance of saving yourself: even when in dire need, a knight in shining armour does not show up for these passive Beauties. It is revealing for Elizabeth's state of mind that she wonders "why she herself has never done the same thing. At these times Caroline is clear, logical, pure" (77).

The cause of Elizabeth, Nathaniel and Lesje's passivity springs from a malevolent maternal presence during their youth, like the Sleeping Beauty suffered the uninvited fairy's wrath. Elizabeth's aunt Muriel, Nate's own mother and Lesje's grandmothers were not intentionally cruel, yet by having very specific expectations of their younger relatives they did hinder them in their natural development. Like Sleeping Beauty is prophesied to prick her finger and sleep, these characters are determined by their family's expectations. Where Sleeping Beauty can do nothing but wait for the day the prophecy comes true, the protagonists from *Life Before Man* spend a long time trying to fulfill the dreams of the future their family made for them. This gives the fairy tale intertext a cruel streak: in the tale the harm is done by a bad fairy, but in the novel there is no escaping the possible destructive influence of family.

The cause of Sleeping Beauty's awakening the prince's kiss, but in *Life Before Man*, the passive characters do not benefit from either consensual or forced sexual encounters. Elizabeth uses sex to displace grief which prevents her from actually grieving and letting go of the past. She acquires this habit after her mother's death and keeps looking for emotional relief by means of unemotional sex from then onward. Later, when she changes her mind during another attempt to have a casual sex, she is assaulted. Her response is the same as Lesje's response to an attempted rape by her boyfriend: both react by an even greater emotional withdrawal and a cool politeness to the perpetrator of the crime. Bettelheim's interpretation of the fairy tale is that the princess's sleep is vital for her to come to a sexual awakening, yet in *Life Before Man* sexual encounters only delay the point of awakening.

What does revive the three protagonists from their prolonged period of passivity is rather more complex than a simple kiss from Prince Charming. In all three cases, they come

to understand more about their past, and because of this knowledge they are once again able to take action. Elizabeth comes to a better understanding of her mother and her aunt Muriel. She spends much of her time in the novel reminiscing her unhappy childhood, thinking about it in polarized terms, imagining her mother as Glinda the Good and auntie Muriel as the Wicked Witch from *The Wizard of Oz*. But as she listens to her aunt Muriel talking about her mother in the hospital, Elizabeth begins to realize that her mother never was the "wronged party, a saint under the street lights" she always believed her to be (259). Aunt Muriel on the other hand, whom she has regarded as a one-dimensional evil step-mother throughout the narrative, turns out to be the sole benefactor of her mother after everyone else had given up on her. Elizabeth's black and white view of the world makes place for a more mature, nuanced attitude. Her desire for perfection immobilized her; her realization that perfection can be desired but never achieved empowers her to start living again.

Nathaniel's passivity mainly manifests itself as a refusal to concern himself with adult issues. His career change from lawyer to toy maker is exemplary of this. His regression into childhood was caused his disillusionment with idealism which, he remarks, "now bore[s] him about equally" (40). He arrives at a turning point when he finds out his mother began her seemingly unending charity work not out of idealistic beliefs but to drown her own feelings of powerlessness after her husband died. Her selfish motives inspire him to make a new start at idealist work himself, now realizing that even though it is not always purely selfless at heart, it is still a worthy cause. He comes to appreciate unpredictability, both in the usefulness of his idealistic folders and in human relationships. This signals the ultimate break with the "The Sleeping Beauty" narrative, in which everything happens according to prediction.

Lesje benefits from a break with her background instead of getting to a renewed understanding like Elizabeth and Nathaniel do. Her suffering stemmed from her constant obsession and confrontation with her heritage. She has internalized her warring grandmothers and is thus never at ease with her own identity. Her decision to stop using contraceptives and her following pregnancy are her cause for awakening. The realization she is no longer only a child and a grandchild but now also a mother-to-be with a responsibility makes her aware she also has a future, instead of only an oppressing past.

On the whole, the main disparity between the fairy tale and the novel is that the literary Sleeping Beauties cannot be woken up by force of some outer influence. This negates the traditional criticism of Sleeping Beauty's passivity. Although the characters in *Life Before Man* are passive during most of the novel, the solution to their predicament lies in making decisions and taking action. The order of the traditional fairy tale is reversed. In the fairy tale, Sleeping Beauty falls asleep because despite the curse, she curiously enters the room with

the very last spinning wheel in the whole country, and is woken up after simply passively waiting for the saviour prince to show up. In the novel, the expectations of family (curse) is the immediate cause of the protagonists' passivity (sleep) which is ended only by taking action or taking an interest in personal history (curiosity). This reversal partially strengthens Bettelheim's interpretation of the original fairy tale, in which the hundred year sleep is experienced as a maturing process. Although it is not the sexual maturing process which Bettelheim described, it is a period of coming to terms with burdens from childhood. The intertext serves as a reminder that passivity will only worsen an unpleasant situation and that relationships or sex do not solve a personal crisis either. Sleeping Beauty will only wake after coming to understand her past and living up to the future.

The Robber Bride

"The Sleeping Beauty" intertext is also memorably represented in *The Robber Bride* (1993). This novel is about three women, Tony, Roz and Karen (later known as Charis), who have all been wronged by antagonist Zenia. Zenia is an elusive figure of who very little is known and who has seduced the three protagonist's lovers one after another. Although Zenia had been reported to have died, she returns once more to ask a favour of the women she has previously wronged. History repeats itself as Zenia once more tries to rob the three women of their husbands. *The Robber Bride* features abundant fairy tale intertexts, not the least of which is "The Robber Bridegroom", the tale to which the title refers. Karen, a dreamy woman with an inclination for New Age ideologies and a troubled past of abuse and incest resembles Sleeping Beauty.

The "The Sleeping Beauty" plot is reversed in *The Robber Bride*, much as it is in *Life Before Man*. The cause of Karen's sleepy and passive state is the sexual abuse by her uncle. This traumatic experience causes a split personality to be created: a separate identity called Charis. Charis is detached, sleepy and naive. She is hardly capable of dealing with the outside world and is oblivious to much of what is happening around her. Where the real Sleeping Beauty falls asleep after pricking her finger on a spindle, Karen glides into a sleepy state after sexual abuse, being 'pricked' by something other than a spindle. The sexual abuse, reminiscent of the prince's kiss does not end a period of sleep but is the cause of it.

A sexual encounter being the onset of sleep means Bettelheim's theory about Sleeping Beauty's coma being a period of maturation no longer applies. In Karen's case, her sleepy state is a survival technique which hinders her maturation process. Unlike the protagonists in *Life Before Man*, Karen does not revive from her sleep and emerges as a

more capable adult. Atwood uses to intertext to draw a terrifying picture: a childhood trauma so terrifying and all-consuming that Sleeping Beauty will never fully wake again, who sleeps amidst thorny hedges so immense no knight will ever enter.

Even though Charis remains the dominant but dreamy personality, Karen resurfaces once, the equivalent of Sleeping Beauty's (temporary) awakening. In Charis's perception, it is an incorporeal Karen who murders Zenia. She realizes this is the result of repressing her angry, other personality: "Karen has murdered Zenia, and it's Charis's fault for holding Karen away, separate from herself, for trying to keep her outside, for not taking her in" (491). It is significant that Charis uses the metaphor of keeping Karen outside; this defines not only Charis as the Sleeping Beauty but Karen as the prince outside the castle. It is Karen's anger and lust for vengeance which is kept at bay by the sleepy Charis.

The cause of the resurfacing of Karen, and thus of Charis's awakening is Charis's confrontation with the truth as Zenia tells it, reversing the order of the original fairy tale even further. Zenia bluntly tells Charis to stop mooning over a long-lost lover, which triggers the resurfacing of Karen: "Inside Charis, something breaks. [...] Then she is over behind the flowered drapes, near the door to the balcony, outside her own body, watching The body stands there. Someone else is in charge of it now. It's Karen" (473). This is further proof Atwood reversed the order of the original fairy tale: a sexual encounter caused Charis's sleep, and the truth triggers her awakening, even though this truth is no prediction of the future but an explanation of the past. The reversed fairy tale thus reveals the power of truth.

Similar to the use of "The Sleeping Beauty" intertext in *Life Before Man*, in *The Robber Bride* the cause and end of the magic sleep are reversed as well. In Charis's case, it is the sexual abuse which actually triggers her sleep. Charis keeps her dormant personality Karen at bay after this, refusing feelings of hate, anger and thoughts of revenge. This identifies Karen as the figure of the Prince who is unable to break through the thorny walls. The only time Karen resurfaces is after a harsh confrontation with the truth. Atwood's inverted use of this fairy tale illustrates that an involuntary sexual encounter is more likely to cause an emotional coma than to end one and that a confrontation with the truth may be the only way to wake dormant feelings of anger.

Both *Life Before Man* and *The Robber Bride* coincide with Zipes' literary fairy tale theory. Atwood has altered the fairy tale to reflect modern-day problems, and offers hope in the form of renewed understanding and subsequent action. Although these novels can hardly be said to contain actual physical transformation, is it a transformation in attitude which provides the solution to the initial predicament. In *Life Before Man* the solution is suggested to be more permanent and positive than it is in Charis' case, where the action is more presented like an incident. Yet both novels

tell of Sleeping Beauties who can at last take action when it is essential that they do, and can do so at their own bidding instead of depending on others for a waking kiss.

The Blind Assassin

Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* (2000) is another novel about the dangers of passivity and the power of truth. It concerns the lives of Iris and Laura, daughters from a wealthy industrial family in decline. They are raised as proper, obedient ladies, being taught how to behave appropriately and demurely. Both sisters are abused and controlled by Iris's industrialist husband and his family, and both are in love with activist socialist Alex Thomas. *The Blind Assassin* is interwoven with excerpts of a novel about illicit meetings between lovers which is also called *The Blind Assassin*. This novel contains yet another novel, namely the science fiction stories the man publishes and tells to his lover. Both the novel within the novel and the one within that are commentaries on the events in the framing narrative.

The Sleeping Beauties in the novel are Iris and Laura, who are metaphorically asleep because of their inability to control the course of their own lives. The secluded upbringing Iris and Laura had, not unusual for upper class girls during the first half of the twentieth century, renders them as isolated and powerless as Sleeping Beauty is behind her wall of thorns. As Iris recalls her childhood she describes it in those terms: "the two of us on our thorn-encircled island, waiting for rescue; and, on the mainland, everyone else" (43). It is especially Iris's belief that she cannot violate social decorum or escape what is expected of her. Similar to the protagonists of *Life Before Man*, Iris and Laura feel determined by their family how to behave which prevents them from taking action.

The sexual abuse of both Iris and Laura does not function as a waking kiss but is rather made possible by the sisters' metaphorical sleep of powerlessness. The abusive Mr. Erskine yells at Laura she's "not the Sleeping Beauty" (164), which causes her to go limp and regress even further into inaction and absent mindedness. She reacts with the only meager defense she has: to be mentally absent. Laura is saved from Mr. Erskine by intervention by Reenie, who is not hindered by upper class restrictions. Later abuse by Richard Griffin is never stopped because Iris is too much aware of the social implications of any rigorous action and Laura simply does not manage to escape successfully. Rather depressingly, neither sexual encounters nor anything else ever truly wakes up Iris and Laura. They remain powerless throughout their lives, their meager attempts at influencing

their own circumstances not working out in their favour. It is only at the end of her life that Iris takes control, as I will show in the following paragraphs.

Laura and Iris are not alone in their helplessness, it is suggested the family does nothing but produce powerless women such as their mother and Iris's daughter Aimee. Although Iris's mother and her daughter are never compared to the Sleeping Beauty, it becomes apparent in the narrative that both suffered the same powerlessness. It is telling that her mother Liliana met and fell in love with her husband while they were rehearsing *The Tempest*, in which the couple played the parts of Miranda and Ferdinand. Since the novel's intratexts and intertexts are a comment on the plot, it is safe to assume Liliana and Norval's marriage was just as patriarchally orchestrated as that of Miranda and Ferdinand. Although little is told about Aimee's life, she leads a troubled life and suffers from the ignorance about her own past and the less than ideal youth she had with her parents.

Iris breaks the cycle of helpless women by means of the exposing memoirs, thus also causing her own metaphorical awakening. Iris recounts a daydream in which she appears as the uninvited fairy at the crib of her granddaughter, where, instead of predicting death, offers the truth as a gift. Winnifred is also present and laughs derisively that Iris "look[s] a hundred and two" (439). It is no coincidence that Iris is told she looks just over a hundred: she is a little late, but after a century of sleep she has finally awakened. And again, as before in *The Robber Bride*, the truth offers an escape to the magic sleep. Ellen McWilliams identifies Iris's revelations as one of the many examples of Atwoodian heroines who invent and reinvent their own self by means of reading and storytelling. And indeed, although the effect on Aimee is not disclosed, by means of telling her own story Iris has at least freed herself from her suffocating sleep.

The Blind Assassin is a powerful tale of upper class female powerlessness. The "The Sleeping Beauty" intertext is used to show that a society's and family's expectations are just as inhibiting as a cursed sleep, which renders women powerless victims of (sexual) abuse. Iris's triumph over her family by means of her memoirs reveals that a revelation about the past can be just as determining as a prediction of the future.

Atwood's use of the "The Sleeping Beauty" intertext in *The Blind Assassin* coincides less with Zipes' theory than *Life Before Man* and *The Robber Bride* do. Yes, yet again the tale is adapted to reflect new problems, but the solutions it offers are not to do with transformation but with storytelling. As in *Oryx and Crake*, storytelling is portrayed as an influential and healing property. It is through stories that both Jimmy and Iris tell the truth and thus find at least a minute sparkle of hope: their stories are heard and will not be forgotten. Transformation is no longer possible for these protagonists, but they find solace in the cautionary and protective function of their stories.

Chapter 4 - Snow White

"Snow White" is of interest in my discussion of Atwood because of its theme of female adversity and the mirror symbol. The tale begins with the birth of a beautiful girl, Snow White. She is of an uncanny beauty and is named for her snow white skin. Her mother dies and her stepmother turns out to be obsessed with her own superior beauty. She owns a magical mirror which tells the truth. The only recorded use of this mirror she makes is to check daily whether she is still the "prettiest of them all". One day the mirror replies that Snow White has become prettier, which sends the stepmother into a fury. She orders a huntsman to take Snow White into the woods and kill her, but he takes pity on Snow White and merely leaves her in the forest. She finds shelter with seven dwarves living in the woods. The stepmother soon finds out that Snow White is still alive and sets out to kill her once and for all. She tricks Snow White into taking a bite from a poisonous apple, after which she appears to die. She is laid out in a glass coffin by the grieving dwarves and remains there until a prince visits and is struck by Snow White's unearthly beauty. He convinces the dwarves to give him the coffin with Sleeping Beauty. As it is moved to his castle, the coffin slips and hits the ground, causing Snow White to cough up the bite of the poisonous apple. She is revived and immediately falls in love with the prince. They are married and the stepmother is forced to dance to death wearing red hot iron shoes.

The element of female passivity and waiting in "Snow White" is very similar to that in "The Sleeping Beauty" but it is not considered the central theme of the fairy tale. The novels I will discuss do not focus on the period of passivity and therefore the function of their "Snow White" intertext is not interchangeable with "The Sleeping Beauty". It could be that Atwood found the narrative of "The Sleeping Beauty", as well as its catchy title, more appropriate to refer to in order to illustrate female passivity. It is certain that she found a whole other use for Snow White's supposed death and cruel mother, which both feature in the novels I will discuss.

Critics tend to focus most on the theme of female adversity in this fairy tale. According to Bettelheim, this tale tells of an oedipal conflict, where the wife and the daughter are competing for the attention and approval of the father (194). Atwood certainly uses this intertext to indicate a power struggle between mother and daughter, but she takes it even further to stand for all sorts of female competition. *The Madwoman in the attic* mentions "Sleeping Beauty" as a battle between the two extremes of femininity: one beautiful, sweet, young, passive and eager to please, the other beautiful as well, but older, vengeful, and powerful, not to mention the instigator of action.

An interesting aspect of this fairy tale is its cyclical nature. Although the fairy tale ends with the stepmother's death, it is not unlikely that Snow White will turn into a new version of the stepmother herself. After all, now Snow White is the most beautiful woman in the country, and if she has learned anything from her own stepmother it is that remaining the "prettiest of them all" is essential, and her saviour prince only saved her because of that beauty. In his discussion of the Disney adaptation of "Snow White" in *Breaking the Magic Spell* Zipes came to the same conclusion, stating that "the social order is not changed but conserved and restored" (114). In my discussion I will show that Atwood's *Sleeping Beauties* come to realize the futile cycle of Snow Whites and stepmothers, and attempt to find new roles for themselves.

Although it is the evil stepmother who orders the death of her child, she is prompted by her mirror's observations, its function in the story being one of male observation and judgment. Feminist critics have tended to identify the voice in the mirror as the voice of society, condemning women to being objectified. It brings to mind the concept of the male gaze. "The determining male gaze" in the words of Laura Mulvey, "projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness" (837). Her theory, long since proven to apply to literature as well as cinematography, determines women as viewed objects, their only possible function to look nice for their viewers.

This theory applies to "Snow White" particularly well: the evil stepmother is so aware of her only possible function to be beautiful that she is willing to kill. Even though Snow White does not suffer from this obsession and seems not particularly smitten with her own beauty, she is objectified not only by her stepmother but also by the prince. Both stepmother and prince regard her purely as a woman of beauty, without any other features. The fact that Snow White is appointed only two other minor qualities in the tale, namely her housekeeping skills and her gullibility regarding murderous door-to-door saleswomen, contributes to her one dimensional character. In my discussion of Atwood I will show how she uses the concept of women as a spectacle in relation to the "Snow White" intertext.

This female adversity and women as viewers or viewed objects is reminiscent of Angela Carter's fiction. In an essay by Atwood on Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* and *The Sadeian Woman* she comments that in her fiction, Carter searches for an alternative to the binary choice of predator/prey or tiger/lamb for women. Atwood concludes that "[i]t is Carter's contention that a certain amount of tigerishness may be necessary if women are to achieve an independent as opposed to dependent existence" (121). This also goes for Atwood's *Sleeping Beauties*: they must

incorporate a certain amount of 'stepmotherness' in order to survive, even though a total transformation to stepmother is unsatisfactory.

This fairy tale is represented in *Lady Oracle*, *Cat's Eye*, and *Alias Grace*. All three novels feature troubled relationships among women, which is emphasized by comparing these women to either Snow White or the stepmother of the tale. In *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye*, the use of a mirror is used to illustrate their move from the victim status of Snow White to the controlling, mirror-wielding status of stepmother. The mirror in *Alias Grace* symbolizes the absence of truth and the power of appearances.

As was the case with "The Little Mermaid" and "The Sleeping Beauty", Atwood's use of this fairy tale is again partly congruent with Zipes' fairy tale theory. The function of "Snow White" in these novels is adapted to reflect the protagonists' problems. Also, these novels all feature a transformation from being the viewed to being the viewer, from being Snow White to being the angry stepmother. Yet this transformation does not always result in the happy end but reiterates the cyclical nature of this fairy tale.

Lady Oracle

In my earlier discussion of *Lady Oracle*, my focus was on Joan's artistic ambitions in relation to "The Little Mermaid", in this chapter my focus will be on Joan's troubled relationship with her mother and her difficulties with first being overweight and then being thin. It is the prominent role of several mirrors in this novel which signals a connection to the tale of Snow White, which the hostile mother and major theme of beauty ratifies. I will go on to show that the "Snow White" intertext is used in *Lady Oracle* to show a move from Joan behaving like the powerless, looked-at and judged but never active Snow White to the powerful stepmother who both sees and is seen.

Joan starts out in the novel being a viewed object, like Snow White is throughout the fairy tale. The first instant in which they are portrayed as objects is in their mothers' judgment. Both Joan and Snow White are unacceptable to their (step)mother, but in Joan's case it is because she fails to be just as beautiful as her mother. She is a victim of her mother's look, made into a spectacle because of her unacceptable appearance. Later on in the novel, when she has lost weight and has become a fairly attractive woman, she is still ill at ease with being seen. She notices that "strange men [...] began to look at me [...]; a speculative look, like a dog eyeing a fire hydrant" (123). Joan does not appreciate being regarded by others, regardless of whether her looks are pleasing or not.

Her unwillingness to be seen extends not only to her looks but also to her art. Joan keeps her writing of gothic novels secret from everyone, and even when she publishes a work of poetry she tries to ward off responsibility by saying the inspiration came from the mirror, and not from her. Joan acts like a Snow White who is aware of the dangers and implications of being on display.

Joan eventually realizes that she will only cease being the viewed subject when she refuses to be one anymore. She is haunted by the image of her mother, receiving visits from her mother in an astral body and seeing her mother standing behind her in the mirror. Similar to Snow White, Joan is never quite free of her mother, who imposes her judging and viewing presence by means of a mirror. As she ponders on how to make these appearances stop, she muses: "my mother was a vortex, a dark vacuum, I would never be able to make her happy. Or anyone else. Maybe it was time for me to stop trying" (331). She finds her release from her mother by refusing to live up to her standards like an empowered Snow White smashing the mirror.

The appearance of the mirror in the story as a source of art signals Joan's move from being like Snow White to being like the stepmother: it was the mirror which instigated the action in "Snow White", and it is the mirror which induces Joan to write in a more literary and personal style. She moves from being purely the viewed object to being a viewer and taking action herself. This use of the "Snow White" intertext identifies the stepmother not as the predominantly evil figure but as a source of inspiration. It negates the earlier function of the mirror as the voice of the male gaze, demanding female beauty. This is in tune with the interpretation of Snow White in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, in which the stepmother is regarded not as the culmination of maternal evil but as a "plotter, a plot-maker, a schemer, a witch, an artist" (qtd. in Tatar 249). Joan has discovered the mirror as a source of personal discovery rather than external judgment.

In her new role of metaphorical stepmother, Joan realizes that even though she is now no longer purely a viewed object, her art is not meaningful without an audience. Her solitary dance behind closed doors brings her no joy and she realizes an artist is not complete without an audience. As she gets used to the idea of voluntary exposure to the outside world, Joan creates an alternate ending for the stepmother. The stepmother who originally had to dance to death wearing red-hot iron shoes transformed into a woman at ease with both viewing and being viewed, who dances as a celebration instead of as a punishment.

On the whole, the "Snow White" intertext in *Lady Oracle* is used to reveal Joan's move from being solely the viewed object, victim of the mirror, to being the viewer herself. To be the viewed Snow White has been unappealing to Joan her entire life, yet after she manages to free herself from the judging look of her mother, she realizes that there is a need for being viewed when it comes to being an artist. This kind of viewing however is not passive

spectacle of Snow White in her glass coffin, but the conscious choice of what to show. **This transformation is in tune with Zipes' theory: Joan finds a solution to her modern-day fairy tale predicament in transformation. She rejects both her Snow White role and her stepmother role, in order to transform into a more rounded character. Joan finds a solution in Carter's tigerishness.**

Cat's Eye

Cat's Eye is a bildungsroman about Elaine Risley, a controversial feminist painter who looks back on her life. As she grew up she had trouble relating to females and much of her artwork reflects her incomprehension of female friendship and hostility alike. Her most vivid memories concern Cordelia, a girl she befriended in childhood but who bullied her mercilessly, resulting in a dangerous prank which nearly kills Elaine. After this event Elaine has hardened towards Cordelia. She refuses to be made into a victim anymore, and roles change. She turns on Cordelia and viciously repays her for the years of terror.

This novel is filled with snowy images, icy landscapes and a permeating cold, signaling the first connection to "Snow White". Though it does not deal with a particularly troubled mother-daughter relationship, it is about the feud between Cordelia and Elaine, in which both girls each come to represent both Snow White and the cruel stepmother. Like in the "Snow White" intertext in *Lady Oracle*, the mirror symbol comes to stand for Elaine's birth as an author, but in *Cat's Eye* it also signals a period of emotional depravity.

In this novel, Atwood uses the "Snow White" intertext as a metaphor for general female adversity as opposed to a specific mother-daughter problem. Elaine Risley is a Snow White who is tormented not by her mother but by classmate Cordelia who punishes Elaine for supposed improper behaviour. One of the most extreme punishments Elaine suffers is a faux burial during which Elaine is left in a hole in the ground for several hours. As Elaine recalls this incident she thinks to herself "I can't really remember what happened to me while I was in it. I can't remember what I really felt. Maybe nothing happened, maybe these emotions I remember are not the right emotions. [...] Perhaps [...] it's only a marker, a time marker that separates the time before it from the time after. The point at which I lost power" (112-113). It is Cordelia who plays the part of the stepmother in this incident, punishing Elaine for unacceptable characteristics by temporarily putting her in a grave, reminiscent of Snow White's coffin.

Cordelia does not torment Elaine because Elaine is the superior beauty, but because of her unacceptable behaviour. Yet the mirror also plays a part in their relationship. Cordelia

brings a small mirror to school and angrily tells Elaine “[l]ook at yourself! Just look!’ Her voice is disgusted, fed up, as if my face, all by itself, has been up to something, has gone too far” (158). The mirror does not function as a tool for esthetic judgment; it is rather instrumental in demonstrating the overall inappropriateness of Elaine.

Cordelia's temporary burial of Elaine confirms her as the tormenting stepmother, but after Elaine's second brush with death, their roles are reversed. Cordelia's final prank is to send Elaine into the freezing ravine, symbol of the mythic underworld according to Wilson (Nischik 220). Again, Elaine is made the victim of Cordelia's stepmotherlike view, the judging view of the mirror. Their roles are reversed when, soon after this incident, Elaine starts taking a cat's eye marble with her as a good luck charm. The marble allows her to “see people moving like bright animated dolls, their mouths opening and closing but no real words coming out. I can look at their shapes and sizes, their colours, without feeling anything else about them” (141). Elaine changes from victim to tormentor, from observed and persecuted Snow White to observing wicked stepmother. The marble functions as Cordelia's mirror, it allows Elaine to see other's imperfections, to see the other's inability to fit in. Further on in the narrative, Stephen teases Elaine by comparing her to the evil Queen, jeering “mirror mirror on the wall” (228) while she is in the bathroom, confirming her new identity as tormentor.

Elaine enjoys her newfound power, but over the years comes to realize that her role of stepmother is not much better than that of Snow White. That Elaine is at ease with her part in the "Snow White" narrative becomes clear when she mentions she likes her neighborhood, which is filled with “cottagy houses that look as if they were built by the Seven Dwarfs” (14). She has nothing to fear from possibly ferocious females since she discovered her cat's eye, so this Snow White realm is a comforting place to live. Klaus Peter Müller briefly discussed the power struggle between Cordelia and Elaine, arguing that "Elaine's story [...] shows that her independence from Cordelia and from what others think of her is combined with her lack of concern for others. Eventually, Elaine learns that this phase of 'ill will' (422) has been the result of the same ignorance as her former dependence and has led to further cruelty and destruction, but not to a better understanding of her life: 'I have not done it justice, or rather mercy. Instead I went for vengeance. An eye for an eye leads only to more blindness' (427)" (Müller 236). Finally, Elaine realizes she has to stop acting either as Snow White or as the stepmother of the fairy tale because neither has a positive result.

This suggests that Elaine may finally be able to break the cycle of Snow Whites and stepmothers. Although the tale ends with the stepmother's death, it is not unlikely that Snow White will turn into a new version of the stepmother herself. After all, now Snow White is the most beautiful woman in the country, and if she has learned anything from her own stepmother it is that remaining the "prettiest of them all" is essential for survival. The novel

strongly suggests that the stepmother's behaviour will only result in another generation of persecuted Snow Whites, but Elaine's realization may at least end her participation in this witch hunt.

Atwood's use of the "Snow White" intertext is here solely to show the destructive potential of female adversity. Under a thin veneer of upholding social standards Cordelia and Elaine torment each other, trading places in their power structure after Elaine discovers her detached way of seeing: her metaphorical mirror. In the end of the novel she realizes that either behaving like Snow White or like the stepmother does not bring anyone happiness and will only produce more tortured Snow Whites who may turn into stepmothers. Atwood has used the fairy tale to illustrate the cycle of female adversity and shown why it must end.

This use of "Snow White" again partly adheres to Zipes' theory. As was the case in *Lady Oracle*, Elaine discovers neither Snow White role and stepmother role is fulfilling or rewarding. The true transformation is the refusal to be part of that cycle anymore. Like Carter's heroines, Elaine refuses the binary opposition of lamb and tiger and chooses to be the tigerish lamb in between.

Alias Grace

Alias Grace (1996) is a Victorian novel based on historical events. It describes the life of Grace, the suspected murderess of Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper Nancy Montgomery. Grace has been convicted of the crime and has spent her life in prison since, working in the household of a local judge from time to time. She has no memory of the fatal night and is visited by young psychologist Simon who tries to revive her memory in the name of science. The modern interpretation of Grace's plot would be to identify her as a person with a multiple personality syndrome who suffers from absences of which she has no memory. In style with the gothic novel, no such scientific answer is given, it is rather suggested that Grace is possessed by the ghost of her friend Mary who took control of Grace's body to take (displaced) revenge. Mary has been dormant in Grace's body since the day she died, and Simon tries to pry her loose.

There are many instances of female adversity in this novel, but it is Mary's hatred for Nancy which is most reminiscent of the plot of "Snow White". Her hatred stems from jealousy: Mary's love affair with an upper class gentleman went horribly wrong, and she cannot bear the fact that Nancy's affair with Mr. Kinnear appears to have a happy end. Mary has killed her unborn baby which was the result of her disastrous love affair and this likens

her to the stepmother of the tale. It is her jealousy of Nancy which further confirms this connection.

Incidentally, Mary's life story is also like that of Snow White herself, although it is reversed. Her death was indirectly caused by getting involved with an upper class gentleman (the prince), and Simon tries to revive her dormant presence in Grace by offering Grace an apple, hoping to win her trust. Atwood shows again that entanglements with (gentle)men are more likely to cause trouble than an apple.

Even though Mary is both literary Snow White and stepmother, she does not come to reject the tiger/lamb opposition as Joan and Elaine do. It could be argued that Mary does not desire this and instead goes from innocent lamb to ravenous tiger without need for nuance, but I think this is too limiting a view. Since this is a modern Victorian novel, I think Atwood takes into account the impossibility for women to reach this in-between state of tigerish lamb. Even more than is now still the case, women were either angel-women or monster-women, as described in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, and Mary's behaviour is in tune with the age she lives in.

The role of the mirror in this novel is interesting because it does not show the absolute truth but a multitude of possible realities. In the very first chapter, Grace looks in a mirror and she recalls everything that is written and said about her, and she wonders "how can I be all of these different things at once?" (23). The mirror, like the novel, does not offer one truth but leaves open several possibilities. Klaus Peter Müller believed that *Alias Grace* "shows that reality or the truth is not as important as preserving appearances, or, as Grace puts it, 'to keep hold of your dignity if at all possible'" (Müller 236).

The blunt truth is that Grace was not convicted of murder after a fair trial but because her appearance was against her, which places the significance of the intertext not on truth but on appearances. The newspapers articles and snippets do not speak of facts but of Grace's appearance which is either describes as innocent, childlike or even simple or as conniving and haughty. This way, the novel reiterates a point made by the fairy tale in a slightly different interpretation: it is appearances that get you in trouble. Even though it was Snow White's physical appearance of beauty and Grace's appearance of cunning, truth has little to do with it.

The "Snow White" intertext in *Alias Grace* is again used to show that one character can be both Snow White and stepmother, first victimized and later vengeful. The function of the mirror is altered to show that the truth does not exist, only variable interpretations, and that appearances are everything.

This novel both adheres to and deviates from Zipes' theory. Mary's Snow White-stepmother cycle shows the transformation as a solution, if a rather violent and binary one. Yet in the case of Grace, transformation is not an option. She finds relief

and eventual freedom in storytelling. In all three novels I have discussed in which transformation is not the solution, namely *Oryx and Crake*, *The Blind Assassin* and *Alias Grace*, storytelling the meager comfort for the protagonists. Their failure to construe a happy end in their own literary fairy tale causes the birth of a new tale, which may find its own fitting solution in time. Although it may not solve the problems of the storyteller, their stories may warn future generations. Zipes commented on the cautionary function of the original fairy tales that "[t]hey alert us to dangerous situations, instruct us, guide us, give us counsel" (27), and this is partially what Atwood's characters aim for: to tell the truth and protect future generations from the same mistakes. And if even this should fail, then the storytellers at least find comfort and pleasure in the pure act of telling: the fairy tale as a healing influence both for teller and audience.

Conclusion

Atwood's use of the fairy tale intertext is complex and nuanced. Fairy tale plot is reversed or inverted, characters take on different fairy tale roles and fairy tale symbols take on different meanings. Atwood creates characters who first seem to live out a fairy tale but goes on to show that true liberation or empowerment lies not in the blind following of the fairy tale but in another direction. She shows that her Little Mermaids are empowered through transformation, rather than impaired, and that true powerlessness lies in the transformation of the outside world. She reverses the order of "Sleeping Beauty" to show that passivity never solved any problems, but understanding and acceptance of the past does. And finally, using "Sleeping Beauty", Atwood reveals that empowerment lies not in the tormenting of others but in accepting yourself and unapologetically presenting yourself to the world.

Atwood uses the "The Little Mermaid" intertext to show the power and inevitability of transformation. Ainsley from *The Edible Woman* uses her powers of transformation only temporarily and on her own terms. She is aware of society's expectations and deftly maneuvers as to get her own way. Similarly, Joan from *Lady Oracle* transforms her own conception of what "The Little Mermaid" tale means. She learns to interpret the fairy tale in such a way that her habit of imitating the mermaid benefits her own plans. She changes from a life in which she could only fulfill one desire or use one talent at a time to a situation in which she can have both at the same time. The story of Jimmy in *Oryx and Crake* gives a less appealing account of transformation: it shows Jimmy's powerlessness as the entire world around him transforms. The inverted "The Little Mermaid" intertext in *Oryx and Crake* illustrates that true powerlessness follows not from personal transformation but from the colossal transformation of the surrounding world. Though Jimmy does finally find a use for his talent for storytelling, he is a constant victim whereas Ainsley and Joan have empowered themselves, illustrated by the "The Little Mermaid" intertext. Atwood has used the original tale of a love sick teenage mermaid to illustrate the power of transformation, and that the true source of powerlessness lies not in personal transformation but in massive external transformation.

The "Sleeping Beauty" fairy tale is consistently reversed by Atwood. Atwood's Beauties glide into their metaphorical sleep of passivity or mental withdrawal either because of a discouraging parental influence or sexual abuse during their youth. The solution to their sleep comes in the form of a renewed understanding and acceptance or confrontation with the past, which allows the metaphorical sleeping beauties to take action again. Though an involuntary sexual encounter is the solution in the fairy tale, in Atwood's novels these

unsavoury situations are either the gruesome onset or the result of, but not the solution to, the beauties' passive behaviour. By means of the reversed fairy tale intertext, Atwood warns about the dangers of passivity and relying on 'the other' to solve problems; she places a higher value on the healing influence of understanding your past and getting to know the truth. It is not the prediction of what will happen in the future that brings trouble, but the understanding of what happened in the past that brings peace.

Atwood uses the "Snow White" intertext to show the power structure of viewing and being viewed. Joan comes to realize that even though she despises being scrutinized by her mother or anyone else, her art is meaningless and unfulfilling without an audience. The stepmother in the fairy tale had to dance to death wearing red-hot iron shoes, but to dance without an audience is the real punishment for Joan. In *Alias Grace* and *Cat's Eye*, the "Snow White" intertext illustrates that this fairy tale is cyclical: Snow White is likely to turn into the stepmother, thus perpetuating the cycle of female hostility. Although the change from Snow White to stepmother is empowering, it results in a lack of compassion and destructive behaviour. On the whole, the "Snow White" intertext is used to show that being viewed can be demeaning or even a punishment, like Snow White on display or the stepmother dancing to death. True empowerment comes not from being the viewer or tormentor yourself but from being able to choose what you display of yourself.

Though many of Atwood's fairy tale intertexts are congruous with Jack Zipes' theory that literary fairy tales feature adaptations of original fairy tale problems, and offer hope by means of transformation, she also implies the solution is not to be found within the fairy tale narrative on numerous occasions. In novels where transformation is not possible (*Oryx and Crake*, *The Blind Assassin*, *Alias Grace*), protagonists revert to storytelling as a rather more passive solution. It is the creation of a new story which offers the hopeful note in the narrative, and it is that hopeful note which is essential to the (literary) fairy tale according to Zipes.

In the light of further research, I would like to mention that there are many other fairy tales with passive or sometimes even positively ditzy heroes and heroines, and research of the function of "The Frog King", "Little Red Cap", "Thumbelina", "Cinderella" or "Rumpelstiltskin" may bear equally interesting results. In my research I have come across quite a few references to the possible fairy tale intertexts concerning minor characters. For example, there are a bit too many instances in which matchmaker and sister-in-law from hell Winifred is compared to a frog not to suspect a connection with "Thumbelina", and Walter's habit of wearing red cap while he drives around the elderly Iris must have something to do with "Little Red Cap", though a wolf never shows up.

Another interesting subject for research would be the egg motif. While reading Atwood's novels, it struck me how many times she refers to eggs. Not only are eggs

often consumed by Atwood's characters, boiled, scrambled or fried, the pages are also cluttered with crystal eggs in gift shops, brightly coloured Easter eggs, empty egg cups and raw eggs smashed on the floor. Cordelia's sisters call eggs "eggie-poops" (223), Elaine paints in egg tempera, a medieval technique and Leonard made a horrible discovery as a child, discovering a cooked baby chick when opening a boiled egg. The obvious explanation would be the egg as a symbol for transformation and maturation, the smashed and boiled eggs representing a halt in natural transformation, the artificial eggs a deviation from natural processes altogether. The egg could also be symbolic for the nurturing capabilities of Atwood's characters, signifying a possible empathic failure. I think it would be rewarding to explore the function of the egg more extensively, determining exactly how it operates within the narrative.

The relevance of this research has been to show that the fairy tale intertext is not always implemented literally. Sharon Rose Wilson proved the permeating presence of the fairy tale in Atwood's oeuvre and paid special attention the presence and function of fairy tales with active and adventurous heroines. This resulted in the conclusion that these fairy tales were used to strengthen and underline Atwood's characters' change from powerlessness to power. My thesis has proved that fairy tales with predominantly passive and inactive heroines are used for the same purpose, which means that Atwood did not use the literal interpretation of these fairy tales. She has given the mermaid the magic to transform herself, Sleeping Beauty an alarm clock and Snow White a mirror of her own. By doing this, she has given a new life to old tales which continue to influence children and adults.

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