

Myths of Violence and Female Storytelling in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Kate Atkinson's *Human Croquet*

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Abstract Stories of violence and oppression from classical mythology and fairy tales are re-deployed in two novels by Atwood (1985) and Atkinson (1997) as archetypal pre-texts that impact on plot and narrative process. Although they are very different in genre and theme, both novels present first-person female narrators who are trapped in a claustrophobic present, and pose the question of the extent to which a story can be told from within the boundaries traced by myth, fairy tales and quasi-mythical literary texts. Clearly indebted to Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts a dystopian world where women live segregated by a male regime. References to the tale of Little Red Cap, classical myths and ceremonies are embedded in the text and reveal the story as a narrative that replicates the oppressive structure in which the female protagonist is imprisoned. On the other hand, Atkinson's *Human Croquet* is a metafictional family saga where Ovidian imagery, fairy tales and Shakespearean texts shape throughout the hyperliterate narrator's vision of the world, leaving her (and the reader) with a sense of inescapable and at times threatening *déjà-vu*. Besides the connections between myths of violence and plots, the essay will highlight the structuring principle of repetition, which in both works emerges as a form of epistemic violence that tragically questions or diminishes the narrative voice.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Frustration, Repetition and Closure in *The Handmaid's Tale*. – 3 *Human Croquet*: the Character, the Reader, her Story and its Author. – 4 Conclusion.

Keywords Margaret Atwood. Kate Atkinson. Myth. Fairy tales.

We are in the gravitational pull of past and future. [...] We lie helpless in the force of patterns inherited and patterns re-enacted by our own behaviour.

(Winterson 2006, 99)

The writer thinks less of writing originally, and more of rewriting.
(Said 1983, 135)

1 Introduction

The dimension of violence is central to several classical myths and fairy tales and, especially in the latter ones, it was often sanitized to tailor them to specific readers and moral values, as is the case of the famous Grimms' tales. In the twentieth century, Greek myths, fairy tales and literary clas-

sics became part of the female (or openly feminist) revisionist writing, which sought to rediscover a neglected female tradition or marginalized perspectives inside canonical texts in order to question the male-centred literary tradition. The redeployment of the same sources also characterized much postmodernist fiction, as a fascination with ancient materials and fabulation became its distinctive hallmark. The ever-expanding corpus of female and postmodernist rewritings has indeed enriched the literary canon and liberated new hermeneutic potential from the texts being rewritten. Two late twentieth-century novels literalize the postmodernist tenet about the power and the necessity of storytelling, showing the dramatic constraints derived from the textualization (and ideologization) of history and reality. What the present essay sets out to interrogate are the effects, tonal and structural, of the use of pre-given narrative patterns in two novels by Margaret Atwood and Kate Atkinson, the modalities with which the story 'stages' within itself those patterns and the extent to which repetition inscribes violence upon narratorial agency.

These novels make use of repetition both as a thematic device and a structural strategy, with the metafictional dimension adding to its effect. Repetition is clearly visible in chapter titles. Offred's story in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) opens and closes with "Night", a title given to other chapters as well, and *Human Croquet* (1997) has both the first and the last section entitled "Streets of Trees". In Atkinson's novel, these chapters are part of larger unities, which are titled respectively "Beginning" and "Future"; such headings seemingly tell of a progression in time, which is in fact contradicted by the alternating of sections bearing the titles "Present" and "Past" throughout the story. Both novels establish a close connection between textuality and circularity of history and time. For the two protagonists, repetition also means being trapped in a claustrophobic present, in which the act of telling is both a form of resistance and inescapably doomed to perpetuate circularity.

2 Frustration, Repetition and Closure in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Whereas *Human Croquet* presents a highly interlaced structure which flaunts at every turn its own textuality, Atwood's novel explicitly points at only few of its intertextual connections. Even so, the way these few mythic or fairy-tale narratives are inserted in the story is often allusive or fragmentary. One of these references appears in chapter two:

Everything except the wings around my face is red [...]. I never looked good in red, it isn't my colour. [...] I go out into the polished hallway, which has a runner down the centre, dusty pink. Like a path through the forest, like a carpet for royalty, it shows me the way. [...] There remains a mirror,

on the hall wall [...] and myself in it like a distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairytale figure in a red cloak, descending into a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger. (Atwood 2011, 18-9)¹

In a regime where brutality is enforced upon the most minute aspects of everyday life but masked under petty routines, a woman sees herself as a distorted version of *Little Red Cap*. Much of the distorting effect lies in tonal and generic difference, being the fairy-tale subtext treated with irony by the self-conscious first-person narrator and appearing in an Orwellian world in which power is exerted through the control of biology, namely women's reproductive ability. Offred finds herself to live in a tragic parody of the Grimms' tale, one in which, according to Atwood scholar Sharon R. Wilson (1993), she has already been devoured by the wolf, here the Commander, to whom she has been assigned by the State to bear him and his wife a child. A second, allusive reference to Red Cap similarly mentions "a cloak, with a hood" (Atwood 2011, 243); this is a disguise the Commander makes her wear in order to safely reach "the Club", a secret brothel that high officers of Gilead have arranged for themselves. The disguise allows her to enter yet another world of deforming mirrors; this journey to an unknown place can be seen as a second experience in the wolf's belly, an immersion into the depths of the mechanisms of exploitation of Gilead. This episode also recalls Persephone's descent to the Underworld, first as raped girl and later as Hades' spouse.²

The repetition of the title "Night" throughout the novel thus acquires archetypal resonances that suggest a cyclical descent into the nightmare as well as the passage of time, being (biological) time the ruling principle of the Handmaids' lives.³ "The bell that measures time is ringing" (18): so begins Offred's day; perhaps a distant echo of the opening of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, this seemingly neutral remark turns into the Commander's wife's more threatening comment to Offred that "[y]our time is running out" (214) and later into a mock reference to Cinderella: "I must be back at the house before midnight; otherwise I'll turn into a pumpkin, or was that the coach?" (266). The sense of incumbent threat seeping into everyday

1 Page references to the novels discussed are from the editions cited in the bibliographical section. Only page numbers are given parenthetically within the essay.

2 In fact, the same mytheme appears in both fairy tale and classical myth. The myth of Persephone has been reworked by Atwood several times. On the connection between this mythic figure and fairy-tale characters, cf. Wilson 1993, 53; Wilson specifically sees Offred as both "already eaten Red Cap [and] raped Persephone maiden" (272). On the use of mythological intertexts in Atwood's works in general, see also Wilson 2000, 215-28.

3 Nevertheless, the night has also positive connotations, being Offred's "time out", namely the only moment during which she can travel through her memories back to her former life (cf. 47).

life that we find in the opening sequence of chapter two is also reminiscent of the beginning of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. However far apart they may seem, *Little Red Cap* and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, converge in their predictive and warning quality. Orwell's dystopia projects into the future negative aspects of the present, creating a 'thought experiment' in order to make the reader face the potential outcome of dangerous trends of his own epoch. For its part, the fairy tale of *Little Red Cap* is included by Jean-Michel Adam and Ute Heidmann among *Warnmärchen*, as opposed to *Schreckmärchen* (2010). Indeed, it contains a double warning: the first one, before Red Cap sets out for her grandmother's house, comes from her mother and is concerned with the child's behaviour ("Be nice and good, and give her my regards. Don't tarry on your way, and don't stray from the path, otherwise you'll fall and break the glass", Zipes 1993, 135); a second warning appears after Red Cap has been rescued by the hunter, and this time is uttered by her own voice ("and Little Red Cap thought to herself: Never again in your life will you stray by yourself into the woods when your mother has forbidden it", 137). In the Grimms' story - the version probably chosen by Atwood (cf. Wilson 1993, 278) - this happy culmination of events is followed by a shorter episode, which didactically puts to test the character's newly acquired experience ("But this time Little Red Cap was on her guard, went straight ahead", Zipes 1993, 138).

Red Cap's brief introspective reflection mentioned above and the positive outcome of her second visit to her grandmother mark her growing awareness of the dangers of life; the use of free indirect thought and the occasional diaristic form in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* give access to a changing consciousness, caught in its fragility, strengthening, neurosis and breakdown. The combination of cautioning element and confessional narrative bears on to the voice in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Neither in Winston Smith's diary, nor in Offred's account do the first-person narrators say that their stories are intended as a warning; besides the fact that this aspect is specifically performed by the dystopian genre, Offred's record does contain predictions and warnings that she reads as such only retrospectively and which, as in Red Cap's tale, first come from someone else and only much later are internalized. They are voiced mainly by Offred's lesbian friend Moira in flashbacks. Moira, the rebel who had believed in "a women-only enclave" (Atwood 2011, 181) and defied the totalitarian matriarchy of the instructors (the Aunts), was alert to the slow changes that were turning the country into an oppressive regime. Whereas most people "lived, as usual, by ignoring" (66), Moira had foreseen the danger and sensed something more terrible yet to come.

A confessional narrative, however, always presupposes a 'you' and Offred's is no exception. In the following passage, Offred considers the events she is recording: "But if it's a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always

someone else. Even when there is no one. A story is like a letter. *Dear You*, I'll say. [...] I'll pretend you can hear me. But it's no good, because I know you can't" (49-50). These words testify to the clash between the urge to reach someone else and the painful awareness that any attempt is vain. Frustration is the dominant note. Of course, we know that Offred's story has reached a number of readers and we know that from the "Historical Notes" closing *The Handmaid's Tale*, the most destabilizing moment of the novel. But if we keep our gaze at the level of the Handmaid's tale (and not *The Handmaid's Tale's*), we will note that Offred's self-reflexive passages, including those instances addressed to a 'you' in the future, similarly betray the narrator's frustration; her story mirrors her oppressive present and accordingly engenders circularity, in the sense of a text folding up on the 'I' speaking. Near the end, however, the 'you' becomes more solid, as a result of Offred's need to believe in the existence of a narratee in the future: "I tell, therefore you are" (279). Sherazade-like, Offred keeps telling her story, which both "will [the reader's] existence" (279) and keeps her alive for her imagined reader. At a certain point, she briefly sketches an alternative story about herself that also reveals her artistic quest: "I wish this story were different. I wish it were more civilized. I wish it showed me in a better light, if not happier, then at least more active, less hesitant, less distracted by trivia. I wish it had more shape. [...]. I'm sorry there is so much pain in this story. I'm sorry it's in fragments [...]. But there is nothing I can do to change it" (279). The last statement metafictionally suggests the irrevocable nature of both History and her narrative.

In my reading, what I see as 'alternative versions' represent indeed another symptom of circularity; they consist of possible destinies, including happy endings, that Offred makes up for her beloved. At a first glance, this would sound rather contradictory, since providing an alternative reflects the prospect of a deviation from a prescribed pattern; however, this is precisely what the narrative forestalls.⁴ This is clearly visible, for instance, in the frames introducing or closing the alternative stories involving Offred's former lover, Luke (1) and Moira (2):

- (1) There's nobody here I can love, all the people I could love are dead or elsewhere. Who knows where they are or what their names are now? [...]. I can conjure them but they are mirages only, they don't last. (113)
The things I believe can't all be true, though one of them must be. But I believe in all of them, all three versions of Luke, at one and the same time. (116)

4 Cataldo starts from similar premises but sees Offred's alternative versions and her storytelling in a more optimistic light, as an effective way of "coming out of the labyrinth of her own mind" (2013, 160).

- (2) [Moira] shrugs again. It might be resignation. Here is what I'd like to tell. I'd like to tell a story about how Moira escaped, for good this time. Or if I couldn't tell that, I'd like to say she blew up Jezebel's, with fifty Commanders inside it. I'd like her to end with something daring and spectacular, some outrage, something that would befit her. But as far as I know that didn't happen. I don't know how she ended, or even if she did, because I never saw her again. (262)

Both passages betray Offred's frustration at not knowing anything about her beloved, or knowing that she can only make up alternative stories. The second passage is preceded by Moira's first-person account of how she became a prostitute in the Club ("Jezebel's"); although her story has no happy ending, it is a true story, and for a moment the reader forgets that it is told vicariously by Offred in Moira's voice ("I've tried to make it sound as much like her as I can. It's a way of keeping her alive" is the introductory statement, 256). The effect of 'hearing' it (almost) from Moira's lips makes us feel relieved at knowing that this fierce woman is alive. The fact that Offred has chosen to tell it as if she were Moira mirrors the role her friend has played in her life; the same fact, however, also makes us more aware of the (re)constructedness of the narrative, which, significantly, culminates with the revisionary conclusion quoted above.

Little Red Cap and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are not the only intertexts that inscribe epistemic violence in the form of repetition, closure and consequent forestalling of alternative versions. In addition to the myth of Persephone, other references to the Greek-Roman past contribute to this effect. For example, one of the first descriptions of Serena Joy, the Commander's Wife, depicts her while "knitting scarves" (22). In a society that claims to be founded on the respect for individual abilities and needs, in fact on a preconceived distinction of sexual roles,⁵ a woman who devotes much of her time to the traditional female activity of sewing, quite naturally brings to mind several characters from classical epic and mythology, all described while spinning, weaving or both. Several implications, practical and metaphorical, emanate from this activity. In addition to possessing an aesthetic and self-reflexive dimension (as Helen's web in the *Iliad*; Athena's and Arachne's tapestries in the *Metamorphoses*), weaving can perform a subversive function and be instrumental to a heroine's life (Penelope, Philomela) or the life of another (Ariadne's thread); spinning is explicitly connected to human life, or rather the control over it, in the image of the three Moirae (cf. Frontisi-Ducroux 2010).

5 Cf. 127: "From each" says the slogan "according to her ability; to each, according to his needs".

According to Offred, Serena Joy's scarves look rather "too elaborate" (Atwood 2011, 22) to be sent to the soldiers at the front, and look instead more suitable for children. Children are Serena's (and the Wives') most cherished goal; knitting scarves can thus be seen as a way of wishing a child into existence ("her form of procreation, it must be", 162). In fact, Offred believes that knitting scarves is maybe "just something to keep the Wives busy, to give them a sense of purpose" (23) and even imagines that those scarves are "unravelling and turned back into balls of yarn, to be knitted again in their turn" (23); Offred, too, wishes she "could embroider [...] [w]eave [and] knit, something to do with my hands" to deceive "the amount of unfilled time" (79). These remarks inevitably evoke Penelope's cunning in the *Odyssey*, but perhaps they more appropriately suggest a Penelope *manquée*.⁶ Indeed, whether it is a substitute for procreation or the means to fill their empty days, sewing only allows the Wives to make their frustration tangible and reveals an entropic quality that is absent from the Homeric heroine's web. Serena Joy is probably closer to the Moirae spinning, dispensing and cutting the threads of human lives, since the Wives, not the Commanders, have power over the Handmaids.⁷ This mythic subtext is reinforced in the passage in which Serena points out to Offred that her time "is running out" (214), the scene taking place while the wife asks her handmaid to help her holding and winding a wool skein.

Classical antiquity is explicitly mentioned in the novel in connection with (legendary) history: it is the allusion to the rape of the Sabine Women that is mentioned during a secret meeting between Offred and the Commander ("The picture is called *The Sabine Women*", 197). No explanation of this ancient event is provided within the text, no hint at whether Offred knows who the Sabine Women were and what happened to them. What are we to make of this reference? Even though no comment is given, the allusion is so plain that we could easily conclude that Atwood expects the specialized reader to pick up the obvious mirroring between the misogynistic violence lying at the heart of Gilead's project and the abduction of those women by the ancient Latin tribes. As the story of the Sabine Women is writ large in the foundational act of the modern state, it provides an even more paradigmatic subtext to *The Handmaid's Tale* than the Biblical intertext of Jacob, his wife Rachel and her maid Bilhah, which thematically plays such a fundamental role in the novel. However, this reference does not so much interrogate the reader's classical background, as it puts centre stage a gloomy meditation on the appropriation of knowledge. As my analysis

6 Brown (2012, 214-5) suggests parallels between Serena Joy and the Penelope of Atwood's revisionary epic, *The Penelopiad* (2005).

7 Cf. 127: "the transgressions of women in the household, whether Martha or Handmaid, are supposed to be under the jurisdiction of the Wives alone".

will show, this classical allusion also questions the reader's neutral position: we are safely outside the fictional reality of the novel yet possibly and unconsciously in collusion with the Commander, the only one in the story who apparently has the power to control knowledge.

In order to explore the ideological implication of this episode of Roman history, we need to take a step back and consider the following passage earlier in the story: "The Marthas are not supposed to fraternize with us. *Fraternize* means *to behave like a brother*. Luke told me that. He said there was no corresponding word that meant *to behave like a sister*. *Sororize*, it would have to be, he said. From the Latin. He liked knowing about such details. The derivations of words, curious usages" (21). Offred soon realizes that she will not 'sororize' with any woman in the household, the regime forbids it. Even though in Gilead the concept does exist, and the bond among some of the maids proves it, one suspects that the State aims at eradicating that instinct for good once the ideal society will be completed. In a totalitarian state, power rests on language as much as it does on violence. Words like 'Handmaids', 'Angels', 'Ceremony' and names that ostensibly unname women like 'Offred', show the basic principle of renaming and erasing individual identity. The word 'sororize', however, escapes these mechanisms, since it has never existed officially and, ironically, its non-existence seems to have become more significant to Offred in her present situation. It is noteworthy that Offred is only aware of its meaning thanks to Luke, who probably knew Latin or at least was interested in "the derivations of words". This detail, however innocent as it may appear, takes a much more revealing turn when Offred comes across Latin a second and a third time. She discovers a sentence carved in a corner of her cupboard: *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum* (62). These words lead to another circular pattern. In her mind, they become a message from the former Offred who occupied her room in the Commander's house and a way to 'sororize' with that unknown woman; later she repeats them as a prayer during the ritual reading that precedes the regular intercourses between Jacob-the Commander and Bilhah-Offred, assisted by Rachel-the Wife; finally, she comes to consider them as a "hieroglyph to which the key's been lost" (156). At first, Offred is attracted to the transgressive lure of those words and although she does not know their meaning she senses their power; when the phrase cannot be decoded, Offred is brought back to isolation, her hope and desire for knowledge turned into resignation.

In Offred's third encounter with Latin, that lost key is unexpectedly provided by the Commander. This is the episode in which she sees the picture - of a statue perhaps - of the Sabine Women. By this time Offred has gained confidence enough to ask the Commander straightforward questions; this confidence does not stem from sexual intimacy, but from two illicit acts involving language: playing Scrabble and reading. Without

revealing where she has seen the sentence, she writes it down, performing another transgressive act ("The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains" 196). The following is an excerpt of the relevant scene:

[The Commander] begins to laugh [...] "That's not real Latin," he says. "That's just a joke".

"A joke?" I say, bewildered now. It can't be only a joke. Have I risked this, made a grab at knowledge, for a mere joke? "What sort of a joke?"

"You know how schoolboys are", he says. His laughter is nostalgic, I see now, the laughter of indulgence towards his former self. He gets up, crosses to the bookshelves, takes down a book from his trove; not the dictionary though. It's an old book, a textbook it looks like [...].

What I see first is a picture: the Venus de Milo, in a black-and-white photo, with a moustache and a black brassiere and armpit hair drawn clumsily on her. [...] "There", he says, pointing, and in the margin I see it, written in the same ink as the hair on the Venus. *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*.

"It's sort of hard to explain why it's funny unless you know Latin", he says. "We used to write all kinds of things like that. I don't know where we got them, from older boys perhaps". Forgetful of me and of himself, he's turning the pages. "Look at this", he says. The picture is called *The Sabine Women*, and in the margin is scrawled: *pim pis pit, pimus pistis pants*. "There was another one", he says. "*Cim, cis, cit...*". He stops, returning to the present, embarrassed. Again he smiles; this time you could call it a grin. [...]

"But what did it mean?" I say.

"Which?" he says. "Oh. It meant, 'Don't let the bastards grind you down'. I guess we thought we were pretty smart, back then". (195-7)

This scene shows how knowledge is coded in the Commander's language: access to it takes place only once Offred has stepped into his study, first in the playful frame of Scrabble, later through the reading of a women's magazine, and finally through the Latin textbook. Offred teeters between the illusion of having gained some power over him and the awareness of being at his mercy. The way the Classics are conceptualized in this passage is revealing. On the one hand, the Commander's attitude towards them – both in his youth and in the present – is mocking; they are surrounded by the innocent playfulness of a schoolboy (the Latin phrase turns out to be "just a joke"; "the Venus de Milo [...] with a moustache"; the fake verb forms); on the other hand, that attitude, by the Commander's own admission, was inherited from "older boys" and fed, as it were, the sense of camaraderie of generations of students who thought themselves to be "pretty smart". Both these elements are far from neutral of course. The mocking attitude

also debases its object: one finds difficult to overlook the fact that both visual examples feature women's bodies; the two mock-conjugations are also sexual puns. Only boys, not girls, are mentioned; the former Offred, who "was never a schoolboy", must have seen the sentence in similar circumstances in the Commander's study "during some previous period of boyhood reminiscence, of confidences exchanged" (197); likewise, it was Luke, not the protagonist, who knew some Latin. These details inevitably force us to imagine a society where Latin was still largely a prerogative of male education. We can picture the Commander and his fellow students turning from innocent schoolboys scribbling all over their Latin book into fervent reformers of their society. According to many studies in the field of Classical Reception,⁸ the Classics have contributed for centuries to shape the Western imperialistic mentality via the education of the future members of the ruling classes, and well into the last century, they were considered a property of the Western white male elite and appropriated in a variety of ways for specific political agendas. Similar ideological resonances can be detected in the scene quoted above, in particular in the Commander's remark that "It's sort of hard to explain why it's funny unless you know Latin", a comment that emphasizes the distance (of class and gender) between them.

In the same episode, knowledge is also sinisterly connected to death. When Offred finds out about the origin of the phrase, she also learns that the previous handmaid had killed herself. Nonetheless, at the end of their encounter frustration turns again into a sense of power; her new weapon is the tacit threat of taking her own life. In exchange, she asks for knowledge: "Things have changed. I have something on him, now. What I have on him is the possibility of my own death. [...] 'What would you like?' he says. [...] 'I would like...' I say. 'I would like to know.' [...] 'Know what?' he says. 'Whatever there is to know [...] What's going on'" (197-8). Whether Offred's request is fulfilled or not by the subsequent events is open to question. For instance, should we take the Commander's explanations about the origin of Gilead at face value, especially considering the sarcastic attitude mixed with indifference with which Offred listens to them? Was men's "inability to feel" (221) the deepest reason why the old way of living had to be erased and a new one be built? Might we not interpret the *katabasis* of Offred-Persephone into Jezebel's as a journey of knowledge orchestrated by the Commander himself in order to give her what she had asked for? Given his position at the highest hierarchical level of Gilead and as one of its ideologists, the Commander at the same time is and is not the most reliable source of information; in other words, he is in control of the codification and decodification of meaning.

8 Selected reference works include Edwards 1999, Goff 2005, Schein 2008, Bradley 2010.

Atwood's novel is devised in a way that assumes us always as secondary or deferred readers as opposed to Prof. Pieixoto and his colleagues, who are the primary exegetes of Offred's record and the 'protagonists' of the "Historical Notes". How are we to situate ourselves at this stage? Do we run the risk of being conspiratorial with the Commander's and Prof. Pieixoto's patronizing gaze? Of course, knowing classical languages (and being a literary critic) is not a guilt. However, the "Historical Notes" call into question, by means of parody, a kind of attitude that is based on the claim of cultural superiority and that unsympathetically dissects its object of study. This, I would argue, is the web of questions in which the rape of the Sabine Women and the other classical references are discursively embedded. The "Historical Notes" also help us to put into a larger historical perspective Offred's account (her assertion that "context is all" is, after all, a compelling invitation to the critic). Yet Atwood is clearly making fun of academic readers, while at the same time striking a very serious note: that of readerly responsibility and the use (and misuse) of knowledge.

The "Historical Notes" radically change the reader's perspective. Even though *The Handmaid's Tale* is often read as an open-ended novel (cf. Baccolini 2000, Cataldo 2013), I believe that this is more accurate in relation to Offred's story alone; as a matter of fact, the last section brings closure by presenting a ready interpretation that imposes pre-given patterns from the outside. For instance, we learn from Prof. Pieixoto that the title he has given to the anonymous record he has found is "partly in homage to the great Geoffrey Chaucer" (Atwood 2011, 313). The last reference to the Classics that I would like to discuss appears at the end of this section, and its position doubly invites the reader to take a retrospective look at the story s/he has just finished. Speculating on the possible destinies Offred may have met after the van has taken her away, Prof. Pieixoto aligns her with the mythic Eurydice and us, implicitly, with Orpheus: "We may call Eurydice forth from the world of the dead, but we cannot make her answer; and when we turn to look at her we glimpse her only for a moment, before she slips from our grasp and flees" (324). Looking back involves circularity, too. Is Prof. Pieixoto's look, and ours, appropriate or appropriative? Whereas at the beginning Offred reluctantly sees herself as a version of Red Cap ("I never looked good in red"), at the end she has become a new Eurydice. However, by comparison with the former, the latter is usually a silent character in myth; likewise, silent and fading away is how Prof. Pieixoto portrays her at the end of his speech.

3 *Human Croquet: the Character, the Reader, her Story and its Author*

A mosaic of literary intertexts, Atkinson's second novel is the story of an English girl who tells about the tragic, mock-tragic and frightening adventures that she experiences in the months after her sixteenth birthday, until Christmas Day, a date that she relives twice. Whereas the most part of the story is narrated by Isobel Fairfax in the first person, other sections are told from her omniscient perspective⁹ in the third person and go back in time to events that took place in her childhood and in the past of her family, in particular of her mysterious mother Eliza who one day disappeared in the woods. Shakespearean allusions pervade the entire novel, starting from the chronotopic name of Isobel's house, Arden, which was once surrounded by a forest now almost vanished.

In "On Originality" Edward Said asked a question about the purpose of reading - "reading as development or reading as appropriation?" (1983, 129) - that can be applied to the young protagonist of Atkinson's novel, who, besides being a storyteller, is a voracious reader by her own admission (cf. Atkinson 1998, 45). In the same essay, Said raises another interesting point about "contemporary writing [...], as in the case of fabulists like Borges, Pynchon, and García Márquez": writing, for them, "is a desire to *tell* a story much more than it is one for telling a *story*" (1983, 130). The word 'desire' is equally important here, especially given Said's previous discussion of the "original (irreducible) impulse" to write, and of writing as a gesture that is "never exhausted by the completion of a piece of writing" (128). This impulse to write and rewrite is what drives much post-modernist fiction, with its emphasis on the process of storytelling (and proliferation of stories, to be sure). Said's second point on desire and telling is relevant to the adult Isobel, who is the narrative voice of the last chapter and is surprisingly neglected more often than not by criticism on this novel. This Isobel is a writer of historical romances (cf. Atkinson 1998, 436) and perhaps the author of the improbable, labyrinthine story that is *Human Croquet*. This hypothesis does not solve the riddle of a novel where, as Smith effectively shows (2007, 57-86), everything, until the last page, remains suspended between the fairy-tale and the realist chronotopes.

(Re)reading and (re)telling can be seen as the shaping drives of the universe of *Human Croquet*, where life blatantly imitates and parodies art. As in Atwood's novel, character and narrator overlap, with the added possibility of the (fictional) author comprising them both. If, on the one hand, Isobel is more graspable than Atwood's Offred and her narratorial

9 In the first chapter, Isobel boasts about her omniscience: "I am the alpha and omega of narrators (I am omniscient) and I know the beginning and the end. The beginning is the word and the end is silence. And in between are all the stories. This is one of mine" (26).

voice much more self-confident from the outset, on the other hand she equally resorts to pre-given narratives and falls victim to them, although for different reasons. In this novel, not only does the world of Isobel and the other characters often follow recognizable plots of fairy tales, Shakespeare's plays and myths; also, events, situations and even days in their lives are doubled. Some motifs are repeated in different plots with minor differences; for instance the sudden appearance and disappearance of a child occurs first in Isobel's life, when a baby is found at the door of Arden house, and in the second-to-last "Past" section, which dispels the mystery surrounding Eliza, herself a stolen child. At other times, the same event is narrated from different perspectives, adding to narrative and structural repetitions. The episode in which Eliza is rescued by the soldier Gordon from a bombed building during World War II serves as an example: it is briefly told from the grandmother's perspective, then a second time from Gordon's and later Eliza's (of course, behind all three versions is Isobel, the silent omniscient narrator).

Several hypotexts contain evil or evil intentions but little explicit violence; Atkinson's most recurring strategy is to exploit this violent potential and create macabre versions of the tales. A case in point is the story of Eliza's death. Several motifs from Cinderella, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, Hansel and Gretel and Little Thumb can easily be detected in the story: the siblings Charles and Isobel get lost in the woods while searching for Eliza and Gordon, their father, who is also looking for his wife; Charles finds a shoe belonging to their mother; they find Eliza "lolling against the trunk of a big oak tree, like a carelessly abandoned doll or broken bird" (154). While previous descriptions of her usually conjure up beautiful and wicked queens, now Eliza evokes innocent characters like Sleeping Beauty and Snow White; the blood that in their respective stories is safely kept at a distance in the form of few drops, a comparison for a colour, and an unfulfilled request (the hunter who is about to kill Snow White spares her), is converted here into the unmistakable sign of a murder ("this sleeping mother who refused to wake up [...] looked very peaceful [...]. Only the dark red ribbons of blood in her black curls hinted at the way her skull might have been smashed against the trunk of the tree", 154). On their return way, Charles wishes "they'd brought the uneaten sandwiches with them. 'We could scatter the crumbs [...] and find our way back.' Their only blueprint for survival in these circumstances, it seemed, was fictional. They knew the plot, unfortunately, and any minute expected to find the gingerbread cottage - and then the nightmare would really begin" (156). In chasing his wife, Isobel's father is partly a hunter figure; after many years, however, he confesses his daughter what he believes to be his crime, the murder of Eliza, while in fact she met her death at the hands of Mr Baxter, her lover (who previously in the novel is also revealed as incestuous father). The story of Eliza's disappearance in the woods also parallels

the mysterious vanishing of the first Lady Fairfax back in the late sixteenth century. Initially, both women are presented as malevolent *femmes fatales*; later we learn about their stories of suffering and family abuse. By contrast to Lady Fairfax, whose disappearance is finally clarified as a flight with her lover, Eliza meets no romantic end and dies instead struck with one of her shoes. Therefore, this conclusion revises both the happy ending of fairy-tale princesses and of the Fairfax ancestor – in itself a suspicious grand finale¹⁰ –, and replaces them with a version more appropriate for a story of female envy and male jealousy set against a suburban background.

At some point Isobel wakes up in a hospital and learns about the car accident she had on her birthday and that consequently she has spent nearly a month in a coma. This forces us to reconsider what happened before as the result of her hallucinations (“The cosmic journey I took was the world of the comatose”, 365); in fact, this rational explanation dispels neither Isobel’s nor the reader’s hesitation as to the strangeness surrounding Arden, since some events in the ‘real’ world double events that took place in Isobel’s comatose world, only with minor differences, producing an effect of “permanent *déjà vu*” (413) that makes her question the ontological status of reality. In my reading, however, what is more important than to assess what is ‘real(istic)’ and what is not, are the reasons and the ways in which Isobel – character and narrator – textualizes her life. Sixteen-year-old Isobel appropriates fairy tales and other texts to mediate and perhaps exorcise her sense of a fragmented self and the painful memory of her mother’s loss. This mediating function of literature becomes apparent when we take into account some clues related to Isobel’s young age: the uneasiness, desires and fears deriving from her changing body and the first erotic experiences of adolescence. Despite her bold and over-confident tone, her narrative betrays anxiety and fragility, as well as the belief that the comedy of life has a fundamental tragic quality.

These feelings emerge already in the opening section of the first “Present” section. Echoing the alliterative *incipit* of Nabokov’s *Lolita* – an allusion that has gone unnoticed so far, yet tellingly connected with the themes of incest and family tragedy so recurring in this novel –, Isobel discusses her appearance: “Is-o-bel. A peal of bells. Isabella Tarantella – a mad dance. I am mad, therefore I am. Am I? Belle, Bella, Best, never let it rest. Bella Belle, doubly foreign for beautiful, but I’m not foreign. Am I beautiful? No, apparently not” (29). She goes on describing her “human geography”

10 The ‘myth’ of the happy ending is deconstructed by Isobel herself at the end of the section immediately preceding Lady Fairfax’s story, related in the first person (the only first-person narrative in the novel up to this chapter is Isobel’s): “Only the imagination can embrace the impossible – the golden mountain, the fire-breathing dragon, the happy ending” (418). This sentence thus casts doubts on the happy ending and, as a consequence, on the implicit claims to authenticity of the subsequent chapter.

and concludes: "I'm a big girl, in other words" (29); her stature clearly troubles her, especially when it is linked with adulthood by Mrs Baxter, who sees it as a sign of Isobel's being "a real woman now" (31). The piece of information about her age is surrounded by allusions to fairy tales that show both her awareness of their sexual subtext and her preoccupations about that subtext: "It's the first day of April and it's my birthday, my sixteenth - the mythic one, the legendary one. The traditional age for spindles to start pricking and suitors to come calling and a host of other symbolic sexual imagery to suddenly manifest itself, but I haven't even been kissed by a man yet, not unless you count my father, Gordon, who leaves his sad, paternal kisses on my cheek like unsettling little insects" (29-30).¹¹ While working on a school essay on Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Isobel writes that the play "is about darkness and death - the music and the comedy only serve to highlight what lies beyond the pools of golden light - the dark, the inevitability of death, the way time destroys everything" (267). Perhaps more than the phrase "appearances can be deceptive" (267) and other similar hints to look behind the surface of things, this comment on Shakespeare's comedy plays a similar role to Offred's "context is all", because it provides the reader with the key to the peculiar tonal quality of this novel.

Isobel's anxiety about her changing body is enfolded in, and mediated through, the allusions to the master epic of shape-shifting, namely Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The poem is a repertoire of episodes of violence performed on the human body, especially the female one - often preyed on, raped, chased. If, on the one hand, we can contend with Sanders that "Atkinson does, in a manner akin to Ovid and Shakespeare, use the metamorphic idea to swerve away from tragic potential" (2001, 79), on the other, we should not overlook the fact that the experience of metamorphosis is itself both marvellous and violent. In particular, Isobel picks up the "intense somatic nature" (Gildenhard & Zissos 1999, 163) of the transformation in the episodes of Phaeton's sisters metamorphosed into trees (cf. Atkinson 1998, 194; *Ov., Met.*, 2340-66) and Daphne into laurel (cf. Atkinson 1998, 312-3; *Ov., Met.*, 1548-52). Whereas the former myth appears as a passage that Isobel translates for her Latin class, the latter is actually experienced when, like Daphne, she is suddenly, yet only provisionally, metamorphosed into a tree as a consequence of her silent request to be rescued from an attempted rape. Although metamorphosis saves Isobel from the tragedy of rape, it does not prevent her from acknowledging the erotic potential of her own body and experiencing that sense of tragedy that typically stems from teenage melancholy: this episode is preceded by the aggression of a boy in her room (cf. 270) and by her dissatisfaction about her party dress

11 On the last line of this passage (Gordon kissing his daughter), cf. Sanders 2001, 67.

(cf. 275). If we look closer at the frame in which the myth of Phaeton's sisters occurs, we realize how central it is to Isobel's perception of her grief: it includes elements like the sad music on the radio, the feeling that she has been "turned by grief into something strange", musings like "Will I ever be happy? Probably not. Will I ever kiss Malcolm Lovat? Probably not", and finally her dream about "[being] lost in an endless dark wood, alone and with no rescuer" (194-5).

The transformation of fairy tales into stories of domestic violence¹² can be interpreted as a sign of Isobel's transition from childhood to adulthood and her discovery of evil in the ordinary, everyday world.¹³ However, the question about the ways in which she rereads and retells fairy tales and other texts is further complicated by the fact that two opposite sets of versions are available to her since her childhood. At one point, the narrator compares Mrs Baxter's and Eliza's fairy tales: whereas the former ones "all had happy endings", her mother's versions "had frequently ended badly and contained a great deal of mutilation and torture [and] everyone usually died, even Little Red Riding Hood" (229). Isobel is familiar with both versions, the conventional ones - where violence is temporary or used to restore moral order (as in "Red Riding Hood") - and the macabre ones, which can also be seen as the non-sanitized versions of the former. These gruesome stories also recall the tragic events of Eliza's life, and later Isobel and her friends' lives will resemble (or will be made to resemble) them, too.

In a novel that repeatedly deconstructs itself, and in keeping with the best postmodernist tradition, both these statements are equally valid: Isobel appropriates stories and stories appropriate Isobel. This means that

¹² In addition to the murder of Eliza in the woods, the Baxter family fleshes out the incestuous and violent potential of fairy tales like Grimms' "Rapunzel" and "Thousandfurs", Joseph Jacob's "Tattercoats" and Perrault's "Bluebeard", all of which feature either daughters or wives who are oppressed by a tyrannous father/husband (cf. Smith 2007, 68-71). Mrs Baxter, who plays the role of the benign fairy godmother to Isobel, is beaten by her husband; the man also abused Audrey, their daughter, who gives birth to a child; Mrs Baxter eventually murders her husband when Audrey reveals the identity of her child's father. These facts take place on Isobel's second Christmas Eve, and precede the two Christmas Days in a row, both of which end with Malcolm Lovat's death and Isobel's awakening in the hospital. Incest and murder haunt the narrative, and Isobel's imagination, as it were: after she has woken up from coma and unwilling to believe the official version of Mr Baxter's suicide (depression), she reconstructs an alternative explanation that involves poisoning and shooting, and once again Mrs Baxter in the role of the murderess. Not only does this version replicate the story given in Isobel's comatose world, it is also the only one that she acknowledges as untrue: "Maybe there can be more than one version of reality [...]. Take Mr Baxter's death, for example, perhaps there are other versions. Imagine -" (408). On a metafictional level we could read this gesture as Isobel (the fictional writer)'s imposition of narrative justice on her story.

¹³ Significantly, in the first version of the murder of Mr Baxter, the narrator alludes to her and her friends' "lost innocence" (343), when she tells how they helped Mrs Baxter and Audrey to bury the corpse in their garden.

Isobel epistemically, that is linguistically in the first place, is imprisoned in a world that she cannot imagine without resorting to pre-given texts. Certainly, circularity, doublings and *déjà vu* suggest a claustrophobic universe. However, stories, including stories of violence, also have a mediating role in her development as a character and narrator. Isobel literally inhabits the world of fiction and claims that books are “the only reliable otherworlds I’ve discovered so far” (45). They provide her with recognizable situations that can be reassuring and frightening at the same time (like her Ovidian transformation into a tree) or utterly upsetting and that ultimately become part of the complexity of life with which Isobel, as a teenager, is struggling.¹⁴ For Isobel, storytelling represents both a necessity and an experiment: Meyer notes that it is necessary “in order to arrive at a coherent construction of the self” (2010, 452) and speculates that “[Isobel] could in fact use the narration as a kind of experiment on paper to find out what could happen if the parameters change” (454). Experimenting is perhaps more relevant to Isobel in her narratorial and authorial role; indeed, if the novel appears as a palimpsest of the genres of *Bildungsroman*, family saga, crime and science fiction, assembled through the modes of magic realism and metafiction, this is also because it can be interpreted as the result of the aesthetic training of its young narrator. For instance, Isobel acts out her fears when she reconstructs her mother’s death in the wood and tests her desire of the perfect family when she relives her second Christmas Day with her parents reunited; these are narratorial experiments that, by imitating one of those otherworlds, at the same time test her as a character in her own story.

Character, narrator and writer cannot be easily distinguished one from the other. About Isobel as author we only know the few pieces of information that she tells us in the “Future” section, in which she appears as a grown woman, a mother and a professional novelist. If we took the whole novel as a story written by Isobel Fairfax, that is a fictional autobiography, we could venture to conclude that, firstly, she makes fairy tales relevant to a female narrative not by empowering their protagonists but by problematizing their violent subtexts; and secondly, that repetition and *déjà vu* are less indications of female oppression than evidence of the sheer pleasure of narration, Said’s “desire to *tell*”.

14 In an interview Atkinson says that “[f]airy stories teach girls about life. They teach girls about how to negotiate the pitfalls of living in a male world: that’s what they do *par excellence*” (Tolan 2008, 8). On this topic also cf. Sellers 2001, in particular chapter one.

4 Conclusion

In both novels, structural repetition creates the impression that neither protagonist is fully in control of her narrative. In *The Handmaid's Tale* Offred lays bare the problem when she states: "If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending. [...] It isn't a story I'm telling. It's also a story I'm telling, in my head, as I go along" (Atwood 2011, 49). By contrast, Atkinson's narrator apparently knows "how it ends" (1998, 441). Her character, however, is not so self-confident and asks, instead, "Can you step into the same river *thrice*?" (351) and when she does know the plot, she fears the worst ("They knew the plot, unfortunately, and any minute expected to find the gingerbread cottage – and then the nightmare would really begin", 156). In Atwood's novel, circularity is only provisionally undermined by a few uncertain alternative versions and the open ending, and reinstated in the academic conclusion. Offred is seen through the lens of myth from cover to cover and the only site of resistance against epistemic violence is not language (that is, not even storytelling), but, as in Orwell's dystopia, the body, once she has freely given herself to Nick. In Atkinson's novel, myths of violence and their repetition appear to be related in different ways to the three layers of agency that can be (speculatively) 'located' in Isobel (character, narrator, author). Whereas as a writer she is free to experiment with pre-existing narratives and motifs, as a character and narrator she has to negotiate between their oppressive force and predictability and their heuristic value.

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