

**University of Alberta**

The Fairy Tale Intertext in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* and Anne  
Hébert's *Kamouraska*

by

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the use of the fairy tale intertext in contemporary Canadian women's fiction. In using specific fairy tale plots, themes, motifs, and/or characters within their works of fiction, women writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries purposefully express their goal for the revival and continuity of the female narrative voice and sense of agency. To explore the fairy tale-fiction relationship, Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* and Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska* are approached from what fairy tale scholar Jack Zipes has constructed as the theory of contamination of the fairy tale genre. The fairy tale genre's integration into contemporary fiction represents an important development where fairy tale narratives are critically reread so as to bring out deeper meanings for the contemporary audience.

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## Introduction

With the stereotype that all fairy tales are written for and read by children no longer existent in the present day, women writers have found the fairy tale to be a place which encourages them to engage their prowess for interpretation and sense of nostalgia. In the words of the celebrated fairy tale critic Marina Warner:

Fairy tales offered gratifications that were already, at the age of eleven [for her], considered feminine: dreams of love as well as the sweets of quick and capital revenge; they became part of the same private world of growing up female as the treasure drawer in which I [kept] the diary which came with a key. ... I have become even more drawn to them as I have grown older, because they began to represent childhood, that vividness of experience in the midst of inexperience, the capacity for daydreaming and wonder. (xviii)

The feeling of nostalgia Warner speaks of is one of many reasons as to why adult authors return to the fairy tale through the use of stock elements, themes, and motifs within their writings. “There is nothing in the least childlike about fairy tales” (xviii); and significantly, its appearance in contemporary Canadian women’s fiction is a further testament to the fairy tale genre’s ability to adopt and adapt to the current trends of a particular society and time period. Although women have always been at the centre of the storytelling process (Zipes, “And Nobody Lived Happily Ever After” *Relentless Progress* 126), the use of a fairy tale intertext within twentieth and twenty-first century works of fiction has strongly supported the feminine search for “a voice amid a set of conventions and

traditions which do not necessarily encourage them to speak” (Hunter 1). In more recent years, the feminist tradition and the fairy tale have combined in order to produce the feminist fairy tale, which “presents variations of fairy-tale situations with more acceptable values, particularly in the portrayal of women” (Nodelman and Reimer 320).

Statement and Justification of Problem. In this thesis, I have undertaken the challenge of examining how contemporary Canadian women’s fiction engages with the use of the fairy tale intertext. The fairy tale genre’s presence in fiction is a conscious decision made on the part of the woman writer, who utilizes well-known fairy tale components to advance her own particular goal in articulating the recovery and continuity of the woman’s narrative voice and sense of agency. The application of the fairy tale intertext becomes a strategic method “to make meaning out of inarticulate matter, to make silent material speak” (Rowe 300). Whether a particular tale evokes happy memories from childhood or is used to interpret one’s thoughts, attitudes, and/or behaviours as an adult, the fairy tale has proven its worth in cultural importance and critical attention by “addressing issues that have a significant social function – whether critical, conservative, compensatory, or therapeutic ” (Tatar xi). Naturally, however, the fairy tale used must somehow be altered in order to fit within the fiction written by the writer. Through the acts of borrowing and of adjusting to current literary trends, the fairy tale genre has experienced its own modifications of which critic Jack Zipes, a key researcher in fairy tale scholarship today, has conceptualized as the contamination of the fairy tale. Leading to the beginnings of an intertextual relationship that is



unique in its own way, the fairy tale-fiction dichotomy has allowed Canadian women writers such as Margaret Atwood and Anne Hébert to utilize the female agency inherent in the classic tales of the Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault in order to construct their own female agency within characters that are more complex than they first appear to be.

The corpus of my thesis consists of the following works of fiction: Margaret Atwood's Giller Prize winning novel, *Alias Grace*, and Anne Hébert's internationally recognized work, *Kamouraska*. Published in 1996 and 1970, respectively, *Alias Grace* and *Kamouraska* are based on true events of murder found within a Canadian historical context. I have chosen to focus on these particular works of fiction for two reasons: firstly, for their authors' intricate use of fairy tale characters, themes, and motifs to reconstruct their female protagonists' portrayal of split (innocent and/or guilty) selves; and secondly, for their decision to use specific versions of the Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault fairy tales which strongly emphasize the female as an agent of her own destiny. Out of this English-Canadian and French-Canadian pairing, Atwood is the most recognized and perhaps most well-established writer whose oeuvre has generated a significant body of scholarly articles, collections of essays, and reader's guides. The critics' discussion of Atwood's use of the fairy tale is a contrast to the limited amount of criticism surrounding the fairy tale intertext present in Hébert's works; specifically in *Kamouraska* where the subtle fairy tale allusions and references further illuminate the heroine's tragic hopes for idyllic happiness. Atwood's and Hébert's re-appropriation of the female agency present in the Brothers Grimm and

Perrault fairy tales is a self-reflexive strategy that becomes essential to their interpretations of Grace Marks and Elisabeth d'Aulnières as women whose characters are far from transparent and free of ambiguities.

Methodology. In examining two well-known classics of Canadian literature, I have used a comparative methodological approach to accentuate the construction of feminine agency and narrative voice which has its roots in the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm and Perrault. Written so as to allow the literary fairy tale to speak toward “social and political issues as well as the manners and mores of the upper classes” (Zipes, “Perrault, Charles” *Oxford Companion* 380), Perrault combined popular French oral and literary motifs with his own satirical morals to lend his females a sense of agency. The Brothers Grimm exhibited a similar position in their publication of a collection representative of a German national literature by featuring women who also took charge of their own lives. With Atwood and Hébert representing Canada’s bilingual literariness, the English-written *Alias Grace* and French-composed *Kamouraska* address the issues of recovering the marginalized woman’s voice. The use of specific fairy tales which feature feminine agency is an intentionally strategic choice on the part of Atwood and Hébert within their fictional works. In using the agency found in the tales belonging to the Brothers Grimm and Perrault, Atwood and Hébert successfully tap into the lost female voice to construct their own versions of female agency and narration in characters that are both kind and cunning in orchestrating a future for themselves. Through such acts of borrowing and readjustment, the fairy tale genre itself has also experienced its own expansions.

According to fairy tale scholar Jack Zipes, the fairy tale is currently undergoing a “contamination” of which I am exploring the positive implications. Likened to the process of how an infection temporarily weakens the body, the term *contamination* is used by folklorists to suggest that there has been an introduction of foreign elements which have either been added or have seeped into what seems to be an unaffected narrative tradition (“The Contamination of the Fairy Tale” *Sticks and Stones* 102). Yet such exposure to foreign elements becomes necessary for advancement, thus resulting in a beneficial and constructive effect on the fairy tale genre’s current situation within the frameworks of contemporary fiction. For Atwood’s and Hébert’s heroines to be successful agents in constructing an image free of violence, both writers situate their female protagonists in the traditional position of storytellers so that they may negotiate their innocence.

Although Atwood is already acknowledged for her use of fairy tale intertextuality to promote a feminist agenda, Hébert is not nearly as recognized for her use of the fairy tale intertext. Stephen Benson, a scholar in the field of contemporary fiction and the fairy tale, creates a grouping which includes those who have their fictional writings closely and diversely tied to fairy tales and tale-telling. Atwood is indeed present in this selection, alongside Robert Coover, A.S. Byatt, Angela Carter, and Salman Rushdie; however, Hébert is not. One of the reasons behind Benson’s selection of authors is that Coover, Byatt, Atwood, Carter, and Rushdie are all born within the timeframe of the 1930s and 1940s, which strengthens his argument as to these particular writers’ contributions to the fairy tale-fiction relationship during the later part of the twentieth century. Hébert

was not born within that specific period of time, but she did actively participate by writing and publishing her works from that point onward. Hence, in her exploration of new themes and in breaking with the “traditional modes of realistic writing in Québec by juxtaposing and combining real, dreamlike, and unreal elements” (Paterson 479), Hébert may rightly find herself alongside Atwood and her contemporaries in terms of creative approach and, of course, use of fairy tale allusions and stock elements. Furthermore, Hébert’s shared use of the female agency found in the classic fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm and Perrault strengthens her bond with Atwood and her depiction of the power of the female mind.

Chapter Outline. In Chapter 1, I will begin with an exploration of the oral and literary traditions of the fairy tale. An understanding of the fairy tale genre’s evolution from its humble oral beginnings as the folktale to its explosion through print foregrounds how its strength and power has grown and intensified over the centuries. The fairy tale genre’s ability to adopt and adapt to its present society’s trends and literary movements further specifies how individuals continue to find a never-ending source of relevance within the classic tales themselves, which range from “Cinderella” and “Sleeping Beauty” to “Bluebeard” and “Little Red Riding Hood.” Although revisions have led to a sense of distortion by the writers who choose to use fairy tale intertexts in their works of fiction, the fairy tale genre’s “contamination” provides a space for women writers to negotiate newer frameworks and borders, in addition to combining the past with the present in order to create an imagined future.

Chapter 2 will put the theories of Chapter 1 into the mindset of contemporary fiction itself as I investigate the fairy tale-fiction dichotomy present in Margaret Atwood's novel, *Alias Grace*. Based on the true story of Grace Marks, a young servant girl found to be associated with the murders of her employer, Mr. Thomas Kinnear, and his housekeeper-mistress, Nancy Montgomery, Atwood intrigues her reader by pulling threads from traditional fairy tale sources and sewing them into the Canadian collective historical memory. Through Sharon Rose Wilson's astute list of the eight intertextual tactics she has found Atwood to use within her works of fiction, *Alias Grace* is of no exception. Underscored by her fascination for being transgressive and subversive in her writings, Atwood utilizes the fairy tale intertext of a number of Brother Grimms' fairy tales to speak of secrets left unsolved in a true Canadian past. Through an unreliable narrator, dream sequences, and allusions to such stories as "Little Red Cap," "Fitcher's Bird," "Rapunzel," and "The Robber Bridegroom," Atwood re-establishes Jack Zipes' contamination of the fairy tale definition to encompass the merits of uncovering the past in the present.

The re-imagining of history in relation to the fairy tale intertext will be revisited again in my last chapter, which introduces the well-recognized French-Canadian writer, Anne Hébert, and her novel, *Kamouraska*. Considered to be a "classic in Canadian literature" (*Kamouraska* back cover), Hébert's tale of horror, passion, and imagination hinges upon the real Canadian historical murder of a man by his wife and her lover. With the claim that her novel is still very much a work of fiction despite being based on an actual event, Hébert poetically tells of

the life of Elisabeth d'Aulnières, a beautiful and romantic French-Canadian woman who marries the squire of Kamouraska, Antoine Tassy, and enlists her lover, Dr. George Nelson, to violently murder him. Using fairy tales belonging to both the Brothers Grimm and Perrault to draw out a more tangible look into the minds of a murderess and her accomplice, Hébert manifests a diverseness which again supports Jack Zipes' theory of the contamination of the fairy tale. Hébert's use of the fairy tale intertext in her fiction creates a place of intertextual meeting directed towards Canadian literature as a whole, and the role of women writers in disseminating such a specific form of identity through storytelling.

## Chapter 1. Towards a Theory of a Genre

### Distinguishing the Fairy Tale

In Audrey Niffengger's 2004 novel *The Time Traveler's Wife*, six-year-old Clare Abshire meets her future husband, Henry DeTamble (aged 36 at the time) through the inexplicable means of time travel. As Clare grows older and more inquisitive about what point in time of her future or past he is coming from, Henry must not only adjust his omniscient ways of thinking during their many conversations – he must also dodge Clare's numerous attempts to piece together her life before it is time for her to do so. One day during a friendly but competitive game of chess played in their meeting place of the Meadow, the then twelve-year-old Clare struggles to reason with Henry's incredible and unpredictable ability to be pulled back and forth through time:

‘Henry, are you really a person?’

I am a bit taken aback. ‘Yes. What else would I be?’

... ‘*People* don't appear and disappear the way you do. You're like the Cheshire Cat.’

‘Are you implying that I'm a fictional character?’

... ‘It makes me kind of wonder about fairy tales. I mean, if you're real, then why shouldn't fairy tales be real, too?’

... ‘Maybe they are real. Or some little thing in them is real and then people just added to it, you know?’

‘Like maybe Snow White was in a coma?’

‘And Sleeping Beauty, too.’

‘And Jack the beanstalk guy was just a real terrific gardener.’

‘And Noah was a weird old man with a houseboat and a lot of cats.’

Clare stares at me. ‘Noah is in the *Bible*. He’s not a fairy tale.’

‘Oh. Right. Sorry.’ (69-70)

In connecting Henry’s unusual state of existence with the ever-enchanting fairy tale, Clare demonstrates two things: the first is that, as humans, we naturally fall back upon the stories we grew up with in order to make sense of the present; the second reveals the fairy tale genre’s inherent flexibility to be deconstructed, re-shaped, and re-appropriated to fit a certain audience and time period. Clare’s and Henry’s funny sense of reality – Snow White and Sleeping Beauty may just well have suffered from a serious condition which left them in such deep slumber, while Jack might have had a special place in his heart for gardening – is an individualistic and unique take on the more romantic and/or adventurous events found in each of these three classic fairy tales.

However, Henry’s use of the Noah story and Clare’s reaction to it provides an interesting case in point: what is a fairy tale, and what makes it so?<sup>1</sup> According to Jon C. Stott and Raymond Jones’ definition in *A World of Stories: Traditional Tales for Children*, the fairy tale is “a traditional narrative that includes wonders or magic [and come] from oral sources or from authors who

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<sup>1</sup> Although I will not be discussing whether stories of the Bible are or are not fairy tale-like, I would like to draw attention to the connection between the religious and secular traditions. To quote Jack Zipes, “the Church created its own ‘fairy-tale’ tradition of miraculous stories in which people were to believe and still do believe ... The magical tales of the Bible and religious texts have always been compelled to compete with the secular tradition of folk and fairy tales for truth value” (“The Evolution and Dissemination of the Classical Fairy Tale,” *Why Fairy Tales Stick* 53). What Biblical stories and fairy tales have in common is that both continue to encourage groups of individuals to come together, whether it be out of a shared belief or for entertainment and/or educational purposes. “To a certain degree [both] carr[y] truths” (53) within their particular societies and for their particular times.



employ the conventions of those sources” (x, 527). Mary Beth Stein in *The Oxford Companion to the Fairy Tale* is in agreement, but adds that the “narratives of magic and fantasy [are] understood to be fictional ... The words fairy tale can refer to both a category of oral folktale and a genre of prose literature” (“Folklore and Fairy Tales” 167). Even the *Oxford Dictionary of Current English* states that the fairy tale, as a fairy story, is “a children’s tale about magical and imaginary beings and lands” which is “an untrue account” (s.v. n. 1 and 2). *Wonder, magic, fantasy*, and *tradition* all seem to be key concepts in defining the genre, but – as Stott and Jones, Stein, and the *ODCE* indicate – it is the fairy tale’s humble beginnings as the short, imaginative folktale that have given it a base from which to transform and be cultivated by centuries of men and women enchanted by such wondrous words and worlds.

As tales were memorized and passed down by word of mouth, oral folktales were not only considered to be “products of chains of individual, though usually anonymous, narrators” (Stone 17) – they were also used for entertainment and as a specific form of communication which acted to preserve the customs, beliefs, and rituals of the peasantry. Although the folktale remained largely unaltered during the Middle Ages and continued to circulate both within peasant communities and beyond those borders, the folktale eventually forayed into a new and more effective form of dissemination with the invention of the printing press in the mid-fifteenth century. As the popularity of print put spoken words on paper with ink, the oral tradition revolutionized into “a new genre: the *literary* fairy tale, which gradually took on its own conventions (rooted in its oral antecedents) that

appealed to a smaller and more aristocratic reading public” (Zipes, *Norton Anthology of Children’s Literature* 176). The folktale’s power to amuse, entertain, fulfill wishes, and preserve cultural heritage still remained within the literary fairy tale genre. However, instead of the anonymity and communal storytelling effort found as part of the oral tradition, print tradition became attached to author names and, therefore, “belonged” not simply to a particular group but to a specific writer. Authors of fairy tales “altered the motifs and topoi of the oral tradition to mirror upper-class interests” (176); and this is none the more apparent than in seventeenth century France – the country credited for the founding of *les contes des fées*<sup>2</sup> through the fashionable salon tradition.

Established by aristocratic women as a type of game to demonstrate ones wit and articulateness, France’s salon tradition relied upon “folk motifs and narrative conventions” (Zipes, *Norton Anthology* 176) as a base for the more fantastic tale inventions and/or reiterations expressing upper-class concerns. As the games grew in popularity, the tales were taken from the literary salons and transferred quite literally to the page. Individuals such as Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy, Catherine Bernard, Marie-Jeanne Lhéritier, and Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont became significant female figures in gathering, creating, and publishing collections of fairy tales, especially for children.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless and

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<sup>2</sup> The English term *fairy tale* is derived from its French counterpart *conte de fée*, which literally means “tale of the fairy.”

<sup>3</sup> Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy is considered the most famous French writer of fairy tales after Charles Perrault and is recognized for her two collections, *Les Contes des fées* (*Tales of the Fairies*, 1697-98) and *Contes nouveaux ou les fées à la mode* (*New Tales, or Fairies in Fashion*, 1698) (Seifert, “Aulnoy, Marie-Catherine” *Oxford Companion* 29). Catherine Bernard and Marie-Jeanne Lhéritier join d’Aulnoy as being “chiefly responsible for the establishment of the fairy tale as a literary genre in Europe” (Zipes, “The Origins of the Fairy Tale in Italy: Straparola and

contrary to what was once thought, the fairy tale was not originally developed for children (as alluded to above, the salons entertained only adults) and even one of the most celebrated tale-tellers, the French writer Charles Perrault, did not begin penning fairy tales for children until the latter part of the seventeenth century.

Known for his versions of “Cinderella” (“Peau d’âne” or “Donkeyskin”) and “The Foolish Wishes” (“Les Souhairs Ridicules”), Perrault not only visited the salons of Madame d’Aulnoy – he also composed the tales listed above in defense of women and in defiance of Nicolas Boileau and Jean Racine – a literary critic and a dramatist, respectively – who believed that France “had to imitate the great empires of Greece and Rome and maintain stringent classical rules in respect to the arts” (Zipes, “Perrault, Charles” *Oxford Companion* 379). Conversely, Perrault “was more concerned with demonstrating how French folklore could be adapted to the tastes of French high culture and used as a new genre of art within the French civilizing process” (“The Origins of the Fairy Tale,” *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale* 17). Thus, in combining popular French oral and literary motifs with his own retellings of particular stories he had heard in the salons, Perrault allowed the literary fairy tale genre to speak towards “social and political issues as well as the manners and mores of the upper classes” (Zipes, “Perrault, Charles” *Oxford Companion* 380). Furthermore, the added twist of satirical morals urged readers to reflect on the tale’s meaning in its entirety – a cleverly ambiguous way for Perrault to directly address the issues and concerns of his society in addition to his own.

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Basile,” *Art of Subversion* 13). Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont has written the most recognized version of the Beauty and the Beast (“La Belle et la Bête”) tale.

In transforming the salon stories into “moralistic tales that would appeal to children and adults and demonstrate a modern approach to literature” (Zipes, “Perrault, Charles” *Oxford Companion* 380-381), Perrault exercised his own editorial prowess. Gone were the “vulgarity, coarse turns of phrase ... references to bodily functions [and] the racy double entendres” (Tatar 4) originally found in the oral versions; and the result eventually placed Perrault’s stories into what many individuals consider to constitute the classical group of fairy tales today. There is no clear evidence that Perrault’s tales, specifically, influenced another popular European collection of tales, but his *Histoires ou contes du temps passé avec des Moralités* (*Stories or Tales of Past Times, with Morals*) of 1697 did contain stories that would have made their way to Germany towards the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Under the influence of the Romantic movement, the literary fairy tale’s relationship with adults also experienced a shift: “the fairy tale no longer represented the dominant aristocratic ideology” (Zipes, *Spells of Enchantment* xxiii). The tales were again altered in order to be deemed more appropriate for children – a task two famous German brothers undertook in expanding the fairy tale from the simply instructional to the instructional that mesmerized.

In their attempt to garner national unity and identity through a set body of literature, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm collected tales primarily from educated

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<sup>4</sup> These fairy tales include “Little Red Riding Hood” (“Le Petit Chaperon Rouge”), “Cinderella” (“Peau d’âne” or “Donkeyskin”), “Sleeping Beauty” (“La Belle au bois dormant”), and “Bluebeard” (“Barbe Bleue”) (Zipes, *Spells* xxiii).

middle-class individuals or the petit bourgeoisie.<sup>5</sup> Since these two groups had already incorporated bourgeoisie notions into their tales, the Brothers Grimm were not only able to change and/or expand the existing style – characters and meanings could also be adjusted to fit the Grimms’ political and philosophical interests in a similar way to that of Perrault. Yet despite the “literary ‘bourgeoisification’” of the middle-class and petit bourgeoisie oral tales, Jack Zipes notes that the intentions of the Brothers Grimm were admirable:

[The Grimms] wanted the rich cultural tradition of the common people to be used and accepted by the rising middle classes ... they wanted to foster the development of a strong national bourgeoisie by unraveling the ties to Germanic traditions and social rites and by drawing on related lore from France and central and northern Europe. Wherever possible, they sought to link the beliefs and behaviour of characters in the folktales to the cultivation of bourgeoisie norms. (“Who’s Afraid of the Brothers Grimm?” *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* 61)

With the publication of their first fairy tale collection, the Brothers Grimm became “bourgeoisie missionaries” (62) in spreading a sense of German folk spirit to adults – the original intended audience of their stories. As the collection underwent constant revisions and additions, the Brothers Grimm eventually produced a version of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (*Children’s and Household*

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<sup>5</sup> It was commonly believed that the Brothers Grimm had obtained their tales from nursemaids, peasants, and day labourers, and had simply refined the tales while keeping true to the point of views and meanings already inherent. However, according to Zipes, from the 1970s onward these assumptions have been proved false (“Who’s Afraid of the Brothers Grimm?” *Art of Subversion* 61).

*Tales*)<sup>6</sup> where the tales were cleaned up for the reading pleasure of bourgeoisie children. According to Maria Tatar's translation of the preface to the brothers' collection, Wilhelm Grimm declared that "these stories [were] suffused with the same purity that makes children appear so marvelous and blessed" (xi). The word *purity* seems slightly ironic since the Grimms did not remain completely true to the "original" oral versions they had gathered. Nevertheless, the Brothers' goal to educate, entertain, and enlighten a younger readership ultimately helped the literary fairy tale to be incorporated into the formal education of children by the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth.<sup>7</sup> To use the words of Zipes, "the genre had become fully institutionalized, that is, its production, distribution, and reception gained full acceptance within the public sphere as it played a role in forming and maintaining a given society's cultural heritage" (*Norton Anthology* 180). Now stabilized as a genre, the fairy tale's involvement in the "socialization and acculturation of [its] readers" (Zipes, *Spells* xxvi) will spark an artistic process of individualized expression and an ability to subvert literary norms.

### **A Fairy Tale's Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Relevance**

In the introduction to her book *Spinning Straw into Gold: What Fairy Tales Reveal About the Transformations in a Woman's Life*, Joan Gould asks a critical question: "What's your favourite fairy tale?" (xv). While most women

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<sup>6</sup> The first edition of the collection was published in 1812 and 1815.

<sup>7</sup> Alongside the Brothers Grimm and Perrault, Hans Christian Andersen and his fairy tales were also popular during the last part of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth. Andersen was known for his colloquial writing style and for bringing the fairy tale into the everyday (Nikolajeva, "Andersen, Hans Christian" *Oxford Companion* 14) with stories such as "Thumbelina," "The Red Shoes," and "The Little Mermaid." However, given the nature of my discussion I will only focus on the tales belonging to the Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault.

immediately answered “Cinderella” and men looked bemused as they cautiously wondered if “Peter Pan” counted, Gould points out that no matter which tale you chose “so many images fill the classic fairy tales that they are bound to hold a dozen different shades of meaning for a dozen readers” (xv-xvi). Zipes’ use of the term *acculturation* in the quotation found at the end of the previous section speaks towards Gould’s insightful statement for two reasons. The first is that the fairy tale genre easily adopts, as well as adapts, to the cultural traits or social patterns of a group, which in itself could be considered a well-acquired survival technique on the fairy tale genre’s part. The second is that, although the fairy tale genre complies well within a particular societal setting, it also adopts and/or adapts amicably to individual imaginations and seeps into other genres and mediums in ways no other fictional writings have. As Zipes affirms in his chapter “The Moral Strains of Fairy Tales,” fairy tales hint of a utopian happiness and maps out the possible ways to create and achieve this fulfillment in life while “expos[ing] and resolv[ing] moral conflicts that have deep roots in our species” (*Why Fairy Tales Stick* 152). Whether a particular tale evokes a happy memory from childhood or is used to understand one’s feelings, behaviours, or attitudes as an adult, the fairy tale has proven itself to be more than just a story full of fancy and youth:

Although fairy tales are still arguably the most powerfully formative tales of childhood and permeate mass media for children and adults, it is not unusual to find them deemed of marginal cultural importance and dismissed as unworthy of critical attention. Yet the staying power of these stories, their widespread and enduring popularity, suggests that they must

be addressing issues that have a significant social function – whether critical, conservative, compensatory, or therapeutic. (Tatar xi)

The many faces the fairy tale may possess indicate the genre's strong impact on personal self-realization and self-discovery through the medium of beauties, beasts, and believability. The fairy tale is no longer the “infantile and non-serious literature” (Bacchilega, “North American and Canadian fairy tales” *Oxford Companion* 343) it was once accredited with when the stories took a turn toward child audiences. Rather, it has now become “actively beneficial” (Zipes, *Norton Anthology* 181) – and accepted as such – in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

With the fairy tale firmly established and incorporated in the formal education of children by teachers and librarians in the twentieth century, the genre turned towards the growing popularity of films, operas, and the ballet to continue telling its tales. From having the figure of Cinderella animated (à la Walt Disney's popular 1950 film of the same name) to giving her a libretto to sing in the opera, *La Cenerentola*, or seeing her leap across the stage in a magnificent grand jété,<sup>8</sup> the fairy tale has managed to infuse itself in mediums that have progressively developed alongside society's growing interests and innovations. More importantly, just as how the Grimm Brothers' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* and Perrault's *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* served the function of nation-building and cultural preservation, film and the performing arts also solidified the relationship between the people and the “mythifying workings of the ... fairy

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<sup>8</sup> *La Cenerentola* was the first major opera with lasting influence to be patterned after a traditional fairy tale (Ashliman 165). In ballet, a grand jété is a step where both legs are thrown at ninety degree angles to each other during a leap into the air.



tale” (Bacchilega, “North American and Canadian fairy tales” *Oxford Companion* 344). For instance, Disney films have assumed “the dominant notion of what a fairy tale is and should be now” (Zipes, *Norton Anthology* 182) and almost all children experience the magic through Disney before discovering the original oral and/or written tales themselves.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, film, dance, and opera speak towards a larger framework which expresses a sense of romance, adventure, hopefulness, and a (potentially safe) place where dreams do come true – a concept that has been engrained to a certain extent in the early twentieth century and is being constructively broken down during the later twentieth and into the early twenty-first. According to Cristina Bacchilega:

In America, the genre’s association with the nation as it develops in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is different: either America itself is glorified as the fairy-tale realm where wishes come true, or the utopian project of the fairy tale works to remark on the failed American dream and at the same time rekindle hope for change. Thus, on the one hand, the glitter and happy ending of fairy tales promote an acritical consent to the ideological, economic, and social status quo; on the other hand, the transformative dynamics both within the tales and through their multiple tellings enable alternative visions. (“North American and Canadian fairy tales” *Oxford Companion* 344)

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<sup>9</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see Zipes’ chapter “Breaking the Disney Spell” in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture* edited by Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995).

The fairy tale is used in the process of individual and cultural identification; and whether that be through the alternative visions of dancers, singers, animators, or choreographers, the fairy tale within these popular mediums has somehow created a paradox that “marks reality without leaving a trace of how it creates the wondrous effects” (Zipes, *Spells* xxix).

Conversely, the fairy tale has inspired unconventional visions which have greatly affected the literary canon. Used as a point of departure or springboard, the classic fairy tales have not only lent themselves to renowned authors such as Frank L. Baum (*The Wizard of Oz*, 1900), J.R.R. Tolkien (*The Lord of the Rings Trilogy*, 1954-55), Lloyd Alexander (*Prydain Chronicles*, 1964-68), C.S. Lewis (*The Chronicles of Narnia*, 1950-56), and Salman Rushdie (*Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, 1990; *The Enchantress of Florence*, 2008), but also to what is considered to be the most significant fairy tale development of the twentieth century: the emergence of the feminist fairy tale.<sup>10</sup> Drawing from the Brothers Grimm and Perrault, as well as from other fairy tale authors, the women writers of the later part of the twentieth century “rearranged familiar motifs and characters and reversed plot lines to provoke readers into rethinking conservative views of gender and power” (Zipes, *Norton Anthology* 182). Cinderella, as an example, was no longer found to be the docile, subservient, and dutiful young woman as envisioned by such popular versions as Walt Disney’s film, but transformed into a bewitching figure of cunning black magic (Tanith Lee’s “When the Clock

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<sup>10</sup> While the literary fairy tale has had women writers critique the inherent “structures and images of female disempowerment” for centuries (Haase, “Feminist Fairy-Tale Scholarship” *Fairy Tales and Feminism* 19), it became more prominent in the 1970s with the publication of feminist fairy tale criticism by feminist scholars.

Strikes” (1983)) or a strong-minded girl who must regain control of her life after being cursed at birth by her fairy godmother with the gift of obedience (*Ella Enchanted* by Gail Carson Levine, 1997). Resourceful heroines, a de-emphasis on beauty and marriage, the questioning of conventional gender roles and social conventions, and role reversals (Bacchilega, “North American and Canadian fairy tales” *Oxford Companion* 349) are key features in feminist retellings of the classic fairy tales.

Noticeably, what is usually kept somewhat intact is the element of romance. Albeit feminist and postmodernist revisions twist the conventional patriarchal ideals of what love is or should be for their female protagonists, romance is still “the structural core of all fiction: being directly descended from folktale, it brings us closer than any other aspect of literature to the sense of fiction, considered as a whole, as the epic of the creature, man’s vision of his own life as a quest” (Frye 15). Thus, it is of no surprise that mass-produced romance novels, such as those written by Harlequin, not only make use of recognizable fairy tale plots, themes, and characters, but are continually read by women who use them to identify with other women readers and their life issues. The difference, nonetheless, lies in the fact that popular romance novels regularly follow suite with the traditional (and expected) Happily Ever After ending – something contemporary writers choose, more often than not, to upend when either incorporating or negotiating the fairy tale within their fictions. “The readers, viewers, and writers of fairy tales constitute [the genre’s] broadest meaning, perhaps not in the old communal way but in an individualized way that

allows for free expression and subversion of norms” (Zipes, *Spells* xxix). Writers such as Robert Coover, Anne Sexton, Angela Carter, Robin McKinley, Gregory Maguire, A.S. Byatt, Anne Hébert, and Margaret Atwood restructure and redefine the fairy tale for contemporary audiences by questioning gender roles and societal expectations with a certain kind of writing that is “progressive, regressive, liberating and inhibiting” all at the same time (Zipes, “The Liberating Potential of the Fantastic” *Art of Subversion* 171).

With varying degrees of biting satire and irony sprinkled throughout numerous revisionings of the fairy tale, the genre may seem to have grown incredibly serious while dealing with contemporary ideals and values. Despite this, humor, whether dark or hilariously lighthearted, manages to appear in some way, shape, or form within the contemporary – to make us laugh during the process of learning an important maxim a particular writer has to give. Robert Munsch’s *The Paper Bag Princess* (1980), for instance, is a cheerful fairy tale where brave Princess Elizabeth risks her life to save a prince and then walks away from him after he reveals himself to be a selfish “bum,”<sup>11</sup> while a similarly resilient princess uses her common sense to win a husband of her choosing in Jay William’s “The Practical Princess” (1978). Even princes have their turn at being rebellious as can be seen in Jon Scieszka’s “The Princess and the Bowling Ball” (*The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairy Stupid Tales*, 1992) – a retelling of the classic “The Princess and the Pea” story where the prince, finding his true love,

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<sup>11</sup> “In a section entitled ‘And they lived happily ever after,’ Munsch notes that *The Paper Bag Princess* has crossed the generations and that today, adults who loved the book as kids are reading it to their own children. The author’s comment on the book’s popularity is both wise and humble: ‘This story is a success because it is real. There are no princes but there are a lot of bums, and you don’t want to marry one’” (Nielsen).

places a bowling ball instead of the regulated pea under her mattresses so that she is unable to sleep peacefully at night. Amusement, especially in the area of children's literature, arises "because each character refuses to fit into a role defined by a centuries-old genre" (Stott 184). Furthermore, each story showcases a protagonist who must go beyond the restrictions of his or her society in order to achieve personal enlightenment and/or growth. Such a lesson teaches children self-confidence and courage in an entertaining fashion, but also brings awareness to not necessarily what is "wrong" with the classic fairy tales when found in these particular forms, but why, in the words of Zipes, "the art of subversion" has been incorporated seamlessly into a genre already rich with diversity. This is made more apparent when one types the generic term *fairy tales* into an internet search engine and immediately receives page upon page of results. Easy accessibility to recrafted versions, online discussion forums, and interactive online storytelling is where the twenty-first century is positioning the fairy tale – not to mention its recent involvements in the revival of wizards, witches, and eternally youthful vampires with modern day attitudes in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series and Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* Saga. With all that in mind, one thing remains remarkably clear: the fairy tale has yet to waver in its creative power of wonderment, and it will continue to "serve a meaningful social function, providing not just compensation but revelation" (Zipes, *Norton Anthology* 184) to all those who continue to find magic in their favourite version of the "Cinderella" or "Peter Pan" tales many years after they had first encountered it.

### **Women Writers and their Contemporary (Fairy) Fiction**

Fairy tales have a stereotype – and it is not just that they are tales solely written for, read to, or read by children. According to Sharon Rose Wilson in her book *Myths and Fairy Tales in Contemporary Women's Fiction: From Atwood to Morrison*, the fairy tale is “too often dismissed as simple decoration that is not an essential part of a text” (2). Such treatment may be based wholly or in part on the typecast mentioned above, but nothing could be further from the truth. For the fairy tale to appear in contemporary works – and in particular, contemporary fiction authored by women – there is an emphasis on the fairy tale genre as being “one of a small number of key influences on some of the most important and invigorating fiction of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries” (Benson, “Fiction and the Contemporaneity of the Fairy Tale” *Contemporary* 3). Moreover, what makes a particular piece of fiction current in the eyes of critics, reviewers, and readers alike is governed by an understanding of the fairy tale-fiction dichotomy and the nuances this pairing brings to the area of contemporary Canadian literature as a whole. French-Canadian novelist Marie-Claire Blais’ *La belle bête* (the English title being *Mad Shadows*) was first published in 1959 and is best known for its “use of stream-of-consciousness ... phantasmagoric landscapes, experiment[ation] with language and method, [the] blending [of] real and surreal, [and] lyric symbolism” (Mohr 65). The richness of Blais’ story about a vain mother, her beautiful god-like son, and the bitter daughter who yearns to be just as physically attractive but, more importantly, loved for who she is, is interwoven with fairy tale elements that go awry and are slightly horrific in

description at times.<sup>12</sup> Notably, *Mad Shadows* has been kept within the peripherals of the public eye by Canadian publishing houses: Blais' novel was not only published again by McClelland & Stewart thirty-one years after its first appearance on the Canadian scene; it was also recently republished by the New Canadian Library in 2008. The significance of having a book written in the late 1950s still resonate amongst literary audiences at the turn of the millennium suggests that the contemporary searches for what "defines or focuses the time for us ... to make our age what it is, or to form a crucial part of the way that age understands itself" (Wood 9-10).

In conjunction with the fairy tale stereotype mentioned at the beginning of this section, Michael Wood's statement of defining and focusing time mirrors Canadian literature's own struggle to escape the assumptions accredited to it. Considered a fairly young literary area in comparison to its already long-established American and British counterparts, Canadian literature is said to have made its mark in the 1960s when "the provocations were diverse: nationalist sentiment, government support for publishers and artists, and the general feeling that in cultural terms Canada had finally ceased to be what Earle Birney once called a 'highschool land / deadset in adolescence'" (Hutcheon 1). Even the

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<sup>12</sup> Marriage in fairy tales is a constant motif representing security, stability, and the Happily Ever After, especially for a woman. In Blais' novel, however, the fairy tale marriage between Isabelle-Marie and Michael becomes upturned and disorientated. Isabelle-Marie, as the ugly and envious daughter of the story, sees the beautiful but blind Michael as an escape from the neglect she experiences from her mother, Louise, in her devotion to her handsome brother, Patrice. In order to secure Michael's love and her one chance at happiness, Isabelle-Marie pretends to be a ravishing beauty. But when Michael miraculously regains his vision, he beats and leaves Isabelle-Marie for her physical hideousness and painfully cruel lies. Isabelle-Marie returns to the house of her mother only to regain the scrutiny she sought to break free from and she continues to be pitted against the god-like beauty of her brother.

celebrated Canadian author Margaret Atwood ponders in the introduction to the 2004 edition of her book *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*:

In 1972, when I was thirty-two, I wrote and published the book you are now holding in your hands. It ignited a ferocious debate and became, as they say, a runaway best-seller, which was a shock to everyone, including me. Canadian writing, *interesting*? Among the bulk of readers at that time it was largely unknown, even in Canada, and among the cognoscenti it was frequently treated as a dreary joke, an oxymoron, a big yawn, or the hole in a non-existent doughnut. (3)

The tongue-in-cheek commentary Atwood presents in her description of the Canadian literary body and scene is directed to those individuals who questioned whether a “Canadian literature” even existed. But as Atwood lists later on, “i) it exists, and ii) it’s distinct” (7). As Canada found within itself a “renewed interest in its own cultural doings” (3), national self-confidence gained momentum from the works that existed prior to the 1960s; and Canadian novelists, poets, and short story writers achieved a wider audience and greater visibility, nationally and internationally speaking from the 1960s onward. Well-recognized Canadian women writers such as Carol Shields (*Larry’s Party*, 1997), Alice Munro (*Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*, 2001), Camilla Gibb (*Sweetness in the Belly*, 2005), Dionne Brand (*What We All Long For*, 2005), Miriam Toews (*A Complicated Kindness*, 2005), Anita Rau Badami (*Tamarind Mem*, 2004), Ann-Marie MacDonald (*Fall on Your Knees*, 1996), and Hiromi Goto (*Chorus of Mushrooms*, 1996) not only represent a body of literature that is



geographically and historically distinct in its exploration of Canadian spaces, issues, history, and peoples. The diversity found in this minute example of women's fictional writings also suggests that "a tradition doesn't necessarily exist to bury you: it can also be used as material for new departures" (Atwood, *Survival* 9), especially in regards to the woman's voice, the art of narration and, in this case, the use of embedded fairy tales in contemporary fiction.

As a new departure from the conventional themes which run throughout Canadian literature, the use of a fairy tale intertext becomes important for contemporary fiction's concern with "the collapsing of barriers[,] the dismantling of hierarchies, both aesthetic and ideological, and ... the admittance of otherness, or at least the uncovering of an otherness already working within" (Benson, "Fiction and the Contemporaneity of the Fairy Tale" *Contemporary* 3). Issues of failure, multiculturalism, nature, the search for identity, tension between urban and rural, and the use of irony and humor – a few of the traits found in many Canadian fictional writings – compliment the fairy tale genre's ability to be shaped into the definition of what is considered to be "contemporary." The blending of presents, pasts, and "imagined futures" (3) in Canadian contemporary writing is not unlike the fairy tale genre, which in itself is hinged on maintaining a sense of connection between its roots and the creation of newer possibilities grounded on that foundation. One may suggest that the presents, pasts, and imagined futures formula is based solely on a deep sense of nostalgia – and fittingly, the word *contemporary* suggests "joined times" or "times together" (Luckhurst and Marks 3). However, that is only part of the reason as to why the

fairy tale has managed to find a place within contemporary Canadian women's fiction. According to Roger Luckhurst and Peter Marks, "the difference at the heart of the 'now' can be seen as a *constitutive* and *productive* heterogeneity, a circulation of multiple times within the single instant" (3). As "one recent formulation of contemporaneity" (Benson, "Fiction and the Contemporaneity of the Fairy Tale" *Contemporary* 3), Luckhurst and Marks' statement not only touches upon the fairy tale's power to continually attract and maintain an audience throughout its cultural, social, and sociohistorical transformations. The use of *heterogeneity* in connection to *constitutive* and *productive* emphasizes that fiction and the fairy tale may seem, at first, like an unusual pairing. Yet there is something industrious and valuable which arises from such an intertextual meeting.<sup>13</sup> In a sense, the combination of contemporary fiction with the fairy tale produces the allusion of eternal youth, which expresses the circular movement of different times within a solitary moment. Like the boy who would never grow up, the fairy tale becomes almost Peter Pan-ish in form: the genre maintains and is recognized in all of its classicalness; however, it simultaneously evolves and expands so that it may still participate within what Steven Connor states as "the time we keep, and the company we keep, with others, and with their times" (15).

The essence of Connor's quotation can be pushed even further when one examines the term *contemporary*, not only as Luckhurst and Marks has defined it

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<sup>13</sup> Steven Benson observes that "the casual observer could be forgiven for thinking that the notion of a meaningful alliance of contemporary fiction and the fairy tale is something of a contradiction in terms ... For all the leftist charges of a forgetting of history, the fiction in question is pervasively concerned with all things contextual, and so again out of tune with the ostensible otherworldliness of 'Once upon a time.' The fairy tale thus seems an odd choice, one at the very least ill suited for the capture of the zeitgeist" (3).

above, but in separating the single word into two: *con temporary*. *Con*, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, is an abbreviation of the Latin preposition *contra*, which means “against” (s.v. *adv. (n.)*), while *temporary* entails a limited existence, to be transient, ephemeral, and not permanent (s.v. *a. (n.)* 1.a and c). Significantly, both the fairy tale and fiction traditions embody this sense of being against the temporary. As a result, their meaningful alliance allows women writers to remind present day audiences of the fairy tale genre’s richness, both within itself and in its ability to resonate in contemporary fiction (Wilson, *Myths and Fairy Tales* 5). During the 1990s, Canadian women writers emerged from the earlier feminist tone of “‘transgression’ supplants ‘subversion’” and into a cultural shift which renegotiated Canadian literature, society, and identity (Howells, “Writing by Women” *Cambridge Companion* 203). The usual questions Canadian literature asks of itself and of its readers and writers – “where is here,” “who are we,” and “where do we belong” – were ushered into the age of multiculturalism, globalization, and multinationalism. In Coral Ann Howells’ words:

It is within and against these large scale “isms” that women novelists have kept their readerships, precisely because their storytelling gives a human face and emotional particularity to the crises which characterize the present cultural climate in Canada as elsewhere. (206)

Women, as the bearers and conveyers of culture, customs, history, society, and mores through the act of narration, possess the strength to re-imagine the terms already outlining the construction of what a Canadian identity is and to reshape traditional and fictional writings to serve a particular purpose. As the “isms” listed

above continue to persist in contemporary fiction of the twenty-first century, the woman's voice remains at the core of the fictional "conversations [taking place] across temporal and spatial boundaries" (209), all the while whispering the possibilities of escape, the remapping of social boundaries, and for the creation of newer storytelling spaces.

### **The Fairy Tale Thread in Women's Writing**

In the articulation of a feminine space which edges away from a patriarchal hold, a woman's voice becomes her greatest asset. Take, for instance, the beautiful miller's daughter of "Rumpelstiltskin" fame, who rescues her first born child from the initial promise she had made for Rumpelstiltskin's help in spinning her straw into gold. Although it may be argued that the miller's daughter did not personally seek the information she needed on her own, it is ultimately her pronunciation of Rumpelstiltskin's name which consequently makes him tear himself in two out of rage.<sup>14</sup> A contemporary view on the character of the miller's daughter might suggest her as a clever female trickster for she knows Rumpelstiltskin's name on the third night he comes to take her child away; yet she refuses to reveal her knowledge until she "guesses" incorrectly not once, but twice. Did the miller's daughter secretly revel in her own amusement now that Rumpelstiltskin's future, and not hers, was at stake? Perhaps. However, her small example of feminine activity – verses that of feminine passivity – is what many feminist historians and writers have come to celebrate within this and other classic fairy tales.

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<sup>14</sup> In her new position as queen, the miller's daughter had sent a messenger throughout the land to uncover Rumpelstiltskin's name.

Significantly, the lack of feminine compliance commonly found in the fairy tales used as intertexts in contemporary women's writings speak towards the evolution of the female voice and image into what it has become today.

According to Merja Makinen, critics of the 1970s, such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar "in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, looked to latent psychic content as a site of subversion," while for those of the 1980s, the magic of the fairy tale became "specifically feminine in the mystical bid to return the feminine to nature" (149). The 1990s carried with it Marina Warner and her *From Beast to the Blonde*'s restoration of the female voice to a "more material context of women-centered subject matter, which was rooted in the experience of feudal life and of marriage and family relationships, recounted by female tellers" (149). Albeit the figure of the woman has always been a part of the fairy tale formula and the voice itself was never excluded from the genre per se, the representation and diffusion of what encompassed the feminine has been largely determined by men (Zipes, "And Nobody Lived Happily Ever After" *Relentless Progress* 125). The focus on the feminine aspects of fairy tale narrativity from the 1970s onward has created a space for the woman herself to explore the fairy tale's forbidden chambers without fear of dropping the egg into the basin of blood. As such, the twenty-first century not only features tales that "bring about the rearrangement of sex roles [and social and political relations] in a liberating manner" (Zipes, *Don't Bet on the Prince* 26) – the continued emergence and presence of the woman's voice parallels the movements of the fairy tale genre itself in refusing to be locked into the simple and predetermined.

Uniquely, women's rewritings and re-incorporations of the fairy tale thread in contemporary fiction have lead to something that is conventional yet revolutionary. In an observation made by Joan Gould, "fairy tales ... illuminate the metamorphoses at each stage of a woman's life ... We are born to be changed, the stories tell us; we are always on the move from one transformation to the next, whether we want to be transformed or not" (xvi); and interestingly, most fairy tales do in fact focus on the plights of their female protagonists, the struggles faced within the realm of domesticity, and the eventual rise from sweeping the kitchen floor to sweeping through a castle hall in a beautiful ball gown. What takes place within the story of the fairy tale heroine is a rise from one level of consciousness to another that is not only as irreversible as the transformation itself, but also as unalterable as the contemporary woman writer's decision to amplify the past as it is being spoken of in the present and formulated for the future – a recurrence of the triad discussed in the previous section with Luckhurst and Marks' definition of the word *contemporary*.

According to Zipes, "the classical tales were never discarded by women writers" ("And Nobody" *Relentless Progress* 126); and their increased awareness of patriarchal implications within the canon only created a more self-conscious movement in regards to women's writing. Using what writers of the Frankfurt School have called "Aufarbeiten der Vergangenheit" or the working through, absorbing, and elaborating of the past (126), women writers have added another layer to the plurality already existing within the contemporary by re-engaging the

fairy tale genre. In Zipes' observation, Anne Sexton's *Transformations* and Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber and Other Tales* are two such examples:

Both Sexton and Carter had a profound knowledge of the tales written by the Brothers Grimm and Perrault [and] they had fully incorporated the canonical tales into their minds ... They took these tales and made them part of their lives, felt them, sensed them, digested them, and re-generated them to comment politically on the situation of women in their times and on the struggles between the sexes. They appropriated and transformed the canonical tales but *worked through* them to grasp how many of the problems in these tales, raised by these tales, were still with us that they were able to articulate their very particular positions as very different women who critically wrote about [the] social and political norms in the ... societies of their times. (126)

Working through the past – instead of working past it – is what characterizes the contemporary woman's desire to both acknowledge the traditions deeply integrated within the feminine voice and to have the courage to explore divergent paths shaped by their present day mores. Sexton's and Carter's writings from the 1970s still resonate in the minds belonging to those of today's contemporary scene; and their use of *Aufarbeiten der Vergangenheit* in the development of the fairy tale-fiction alliance has proven to be an achievable balancing act where "the known forms operate as compass points around which we can weave new and different stories" (Sellars 29). Moreover, the metaphorical and literal reference to the womanly art of weaving appropriately amplifies the feminine voice. Women,

as storytellers, have woven and spun their yarns not only with as much enchantment as the miller's daughter astounded the king with her sudden ability to transform straw into gold – they have also reworked the fairy tale into becoming “the weapon of the weaponless” (Warner 412). As Warner aptly points out, the struggles of women are not resolved by the heroic combats and contests we see between the men of our literary canon. Rather, it is the raising of the voice which allows women storytellers to be aligned “with the Odyssean party of wily speechmakers” (412). There is strength to be found in the fairy tale that moves as a precise interplay between the known and the new (Sellars 14); and it is within the process of stepping back, through, and along with the past which allows the feminine voice to achieve a versatile and fluid quality in the retelling and re-imagining of age-old tales while negotiating newer frameworks and boundaries.

### **Hybridity and Fluidity of the Fairy Tale Genre**

Writing with a modern sensibility is not without its double-takes over the shoulder – a self-consciousness which further elaborates upon the question of what it means to be contemporary when in collaboration with a genre that is as flexible, varied, and traditional as the fairy tale. For Stephen Benson, both readers and writers of contemporary fiction cannot be completely separated from the need and/or desire to look upon and find inspiration within a previously established literary tradition. “[It] is in one sense the condition to which we are all tethered: to be together with time” (“Fiction and the Contemporaneity of the Fairy Tale” *Contemporary* 1). In stepping back, we connect the past to the present and open



new venues for multilayered texts to explore and create contemporaneous readings of the classic fairy tales more often than not attached to the eminent figures of Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm, amongst others.

However, to have the fairy tale transgress from its traditional versions to what one may consider an *au courant* twentieth and/or twenty-first century style upgrade only adds to the genre's strength. The staying power of the fairy tale is what not only gives the genre a pliable and almost elastic form in the hands of the writers who choose to use it – that flexibility also fuels inherent possibilities that the Once Upon a Time beginning and subsequent Happily Ever After ending imply so much more about and beyond the plot and characters involved. “What we call the beginning is often the end. / And to make an end is to make a beginning. / The end is where we start from” (Eliot 221) – and indeed, these wise words from poet T.S. Eliot embrace the cyclical process the fairy tale has come to experience in its growth within fiction. The end, and paradoxically the beginning, becomes a springboard for many contemporary women writers to spin their own variations, as well as to play with what words are on the page and to tease out what is not. According to Cristina Bacchilega:

Because, on the one hand, the fairy tale continues to provide a convenient repertoire of stock characters and plots as well as a short cut to presumably shared cultural knowledge if not values, and because, on the other hand, the revision of fairy tales in both the individual's mind and historically framed ideologies is an ongoing and unpredictable practice, the influence of fairy tales on 20<sup>th</sup>-century North American literature for

adults is considerable and remarkably diversified ... (“North American and Canadian fairy tales” *Oxford Companion* 350)

Hence, the incorporation of the fairy tale – whether it is through a structural outline, or simply out of ironically playful experimentation on the part of the writer – becomes a way of creating newer intertextual meanings relevant to the current readership, while simultaneously preserving the essence and familiarity of the original Brothers Grimm or Perrault version used. The intertextual weaving of classical fairy tale strands with those influenced by what is contemporary ultimately deepens the fairy tale genre’s survival technique where “mutation and replication” (Tiffin 1) allows for expansion into areas mounting in popularity within the constantly changing interests of society. Notably, what makes the fairy tale-fiction bond even stronger is that the essence of the original fairy tale used is rarely ever lost within the framework of the novel it is brought into. Writers are deliberate in their choice; and whether it is an autobiography of the Wicked Witch of the West or a positive rooting for the candy-loving witch in “Hansel and Gretel,” it is ultimately the reader who meets the writer halfway in order to successfully complete and understand the interwoven space these two genres specifically carve when together.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Gregory Maguire’s *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* (1995) twists L. Frank Baum’s classic tale *The Wizard of Oz* by giving the Wicked Witch a place to tell her side of the story best known from Dorothy’s point of view. The screenwriters of the popular TV series *Sex and the City* also pull at their audience’s knowledge of the Grimms’ tale “Hansel and Gretel” when their character Miranda Hobbes spins the following yarn: “Maybe it’s maturity or the wisdom that comes with age, but the witch in Hansel and Gretel – she’s very misunderstood. I mean, the woman builds her dream house and these brats come along and start eating it” (Goodreads). Both contemporary versions depend upon the viewer/listener’s ability to recognize whichever tale is embedded within a more modern outlook. Contemporary fiction, as is discussed in this section, also takes an identical approach.

Nevertheless, the direction in which the fairy tale genre in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is moving is nothing too unusual. Just as how the fairy tale of the seventeenth century French salon tradition became that tradition due to its capacity to mold itself around the trends that were developing at the time, the fairy tales woven into contemporary fiction also resonate with a similar process of readjustment and solidification. During the past forty years, fiction has continually sought the companionship of the fairy tale in “a mutually transformative relationship of backward glances, revisionary datings, wild anachronisms, and imaginary futures [where] the attraction of such literature may very well lie in this temporal eclecticism” (Benson, “Fiction and the Contemporaneity of the Fairy Tale” *Contemporary* 4). To be composed of elements, ideas, or styles drawn from a variety of sources is to speak of a hybridity which not only enables the fairy tale genre to straddle the dividing line between pre-modern and postmodern timeframes – it also maintains an environment where the genre will be consistently appropriate, accessible, and perpetually caught in the moment of “diffusion, reinforcement, and echo” (Tiffin 7) that follows every artistic act of borrowing.

As a “touchstone for experimentation” (Zipes, “The Contamination of the Fairy Tale” *Sticks and Stones* 100), the fairy tale’s chameleon-like ability to flow smoothly from one genre to another – and thus, from one writer, teller, listener, and time to another – demonstrates the importance of this pattern for the genre’s continued survival. To use the words of Jessica Tiffin:

... the ability of fairy tale to find convivial company in genres as disparate as horror, science fiction, and radical postmodern literature points rather emphatically toward its status as an archaic and familiar form whose patterns and textures underlie more forms of storytelling than might at first be apparent. (7)

The fairy tale has not only just trickled into the genres Tiffin mentions above – it has soaked through to the extent that it has altered the face of each of those genres to a certain degree. As such, romance novels would not be the romance novels that they are today without its variations on the well-recognized journey/quest motif, and the “damsel in distress” and “knight in shining armor” protagonists typically found in fairy tales. Nor would there be, in the case of the ever-popular Harlequin romances, a harkening back to earlier times of dukes and beautiful maidens as seen in their Historical Fiction series – a reading option offered to the public which firmly asserts the fairy tale genre’s in between place of pre-modern and postmodern periods both within fiction and outside of it.

But what of the fairy tale itself? In the presence of contemporary fiction, the fairy tale has again inevitably influenced the genre. Yet in the fairy tale-fiction relationship the opposite also holds true. Through the acts of borrowing and of adjusting to current trends, the fairy tale has experienced its own modifications – a “contamination,” if you will. According to Zipes, the term *contamination* is used by folklorists to show foreign or alien elements that may have “been added to or have seeped into what appears to be a pure, homogenous narrative tradition” (“The Contamination of the Fairy Tale” *Sticks and Stones* 102). He goes on to

state that a contaminated tale undergoes a process of infection similar to how the body is temporarily weakened when hit by a disease. However, Zipes counters that exposure to the disease allows the body to grow stronger – a positive result which is also applicable to the contamination of the fairy tale as it has “lead to the birth of something unique and genuine in its own right” (102).

Naturally, the fairy tale used must be somehow altered in order to fit within the fiction written by the writer; but it is more than just “introducing extraordinary motifs, themes, words, expressions, proverbs, metaphors, and characters into its corporate body so that it will be transformed and form a new essence” (Zipes, “The Contamination of the Fairy Tale” *Sticks and Stones* 103). Instead, it is what the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* offers as one possible definition for the term *contamination*: “the blending of two or more stories, plots, or the like into one” (s.v. c). As a result, this blending produces a hybrid-like text where both the fairy tale and fiction are able to bleed into each other, and thus blur the line between what is just fairy tale and what is just fiction. Interestingly, the writers who choose to utilize the fairy tale in such a contemporarily fictional context echo the movements of the Brothers Grimm themselves. Known for their insistence “on the sacred quality of the fairy tales they collected” (Tatar xi), the Grimms produced a collection, *Kinder –und Hausmärchen* (*Children’s and Household Tales*), which spoke towards German national unity and the preservation of its folk stories. Nonetheless, the Grimms were also “guilty” of contaminating the tales they came across and of which they eventually used within their book:

The Grimms consciously and artfully collated different versions in an effort to reproduce what they imagined was the most representative narrative of a particular tale type that had its own unique intercultural history ... because of the depth and multicultural aspect of the tales, the Grimms were very much influenced by Goethe's advice that folk narratives should be restored and elaborated, if not contaminated to bring out their deep meanings. In fact, the Grimms were the greatest contaminators of fairy tales in the nineteenth century. (Zipes, "The Contamination of the Fairy Tale" *Sticks and Stones* 101; in reference to Heinz Rölleke's essay, "Märchentheorien der Brüder Jacob und Wilhelm Grimm")

Hence, the contamination of the fairy tale has been done before; and even those who are considered to be the "original" tale tellers have used this particular method to their full fairy tale creating advantage. In shaping their tales for a literate adult audience who would potentially spread those stories to other individuals within their communities and the young, the Brothers Grimm indicate that they have "cultivated their own style and perspective to contaminate the tales that fell into their hands" (103). Additionally, the Grimms smoothed away any trace of specific nation, locality, or character through the process of editing and re-editing their tales (103). The Brothers' specific treatment of the fairy tale during the nineteenth century appears to have fallen in step with the trends that have emerged in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as contemporary writers pair fairy tale elements and allusions together with the fiction genre. The

oscillation between past and present – the going back to the end which in turn becomes the beginning, and vice versa – resonates with the poetic eloquence mentioned earlier with T.S. Eliot. However, it must be noted that the Grimm Brothers' approach in recording their fairy tales is far from the extreme case of a *damnatio memoriae*, the abolition of the memory of a person (Ramage and Ramage 272), or in this occurrence, the original fairy tale as heard. Instead, it is a gentler and more artful integration used to serve a particular purpose – a constructive reverberation of how contemporary writers have continued to enrich, forge, and enchant by putting an innovative spin on an old tale.

## Chapter 2. Margaret Atwood

### A Short Introduction to a Woman Who Needs None

When you are considered to be the Queen of CanLit, there is little need for introductions: you should already be on the tip of everyone's tongue. Such is the case for Margaret Atwood – poet, novelist, storywriter, essayist, closet cartoonist, feminist, inventor and, more recently, a Twitterer – with more than thirty-five volumes of poetry, children's literature, fiction, and non-fiction which have been published in more than forty languages and read the world over ([www.margaretatwood.ca](http://www.margaretatwood.ca)). But, as Coral Ann Howells poses in her chapter “A Writer on Writing,” what is the secret behind this well-recognized author's appeal? Howells finds an important clue to this question in a comment made by a reviewer in 1980, a year after Atwood had gained international recognition for her fourth novel, *Life Before Man*:

In spite of the triple handicap of being a token ‘feminist’ author, a Canadian, and a poet, Margaret Atwood manages to be a true novelist. She opens our eyes to ways in which we think and behave, irrespective of sex and nationality. Life among the dinosaurs may have been simpler ... But it cannot have been anything like as interesting. (“A Writer on Writing”  
*Margaret Atwood* 1)

The mention of “triple handicap” by the reviewer leads to Howells' observation that this is what makes Atwood's works so distinct. Not only does Atwood write with a strong sense of “her own cultural identity as white, English-speaking, Canadian and female ... she also challenges the limits of such categories,



questioning stereotypes of nationality and gender, exposing cultural fictions and the artificial limits they impose on our understanding of ourselves and others as human beings” (2).

As integrated in her works and torn apart by a sense of humor and irony, the “limits” mentioned above only add to Atwood’s assessment of the “Canadian ways of life and women’s representation and stereotyping” (Wisker 17). Atwood herself does not “necessarily think there [is] only one appearance vs. only one reality” (qtd. by Hammond “Defying Distinctions” *Waltzing Again* 65); and she takes care to use “cultural and traditional myths to explore and critique [the images] and histories of women” (Wisker 13). *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), Atwood’s sixth and first bestselling novel, for instance, is a feminist and highly political novel demonstrating the constraints placed upon women living in the futuristically dystopic world of Gilead. With a woman’s societal role defined, among other things, by the colour of garb she is required to wear, Atwood satirically intertwines the realistic with the fantastic to make her audience realize “that mankind, unable to bear very much reality, escapes into the hope that reality is only fiction” (Staines 21). *The Robber Bride*, making its debut in 1993, is another tale which centers on the lives of three women who are brought together when a villainous female figure of their past takes each of their male partners away from them. Language, history, identity, and memory merge as “the novel investigates versions of sexuality, gender roles, male/female relationships and female/female relationships” (Wisker 20) – most of which are carried forth in Atwood’s 2005 interpretation of Homer’s *The Odyssey* from the perspective of

Odysseus' long-suffering wife, Penelope. Setting the record straight once and for all according to Penelope's point of view, *The Penelopiad* gives the witty and astute queen power to voice her own story and to portray a side of herself Homer never discussed.

These three fictional works provide only a select glimpse into the wide range of subjects, themes, issues, and genres Atwood has chosen to incorporate and continues to discuss throughout her writing career. More recently, her turn to the environment with *The Year of the Flood* (2009) emphasizes her ability to pick up on current trends and societal concerns which resonate with her current readership and their times. Hence, it may be said that Atwood "continues to re-invent herself as she re-invents her characters and her poetic personae with every new work ... Each [novel] becomes a daring journey that expands the reader's consciousness and defeats expectations" (Gorjup 8) – and her 1996 Canadian Giller Prize winning fiction, *Alias Grace*, is of no exception.

Considered to be part Canadian history, fictive autobiography, Gothic tale, and domestic drama (Howells, "Alias Grace" *Margaret Atwood* 140), *Alias Grace* tells the story of Grace Marks, a young servant girl who at the age of sixteen was convicted of murdering her employer, Mr. Thomas Kinnear, and his housekeeper-mistress, Nancy Montgomery, in 1843. While Grace was sentenced to a life in prison, James McDermott, her accomplice and a stable hand who also worked at the Kinnear residence, was tried and hanged. The fascination with Grace's story arises from her claim that it was actually Mary Whitney, a fellow maid and friend she had met before her employment with Mr. Kinnear, who was responsible for

the double murders – a “psychological defense ... complex enough to cast some doubt on her own sanity or at least her deliberate culpability” (Wisker 26-27) as Mary had died a few years before the Kinnear-Montgomery murders occurred. While in the Kingston penitentiary Grace’s vigilant and ideal prisoner behaviour not only puts her in good terms with the Governor’s wife, but also in view of those who are interested in the rehabilitation of others. The allure of Grace’s potential innocence has lead to many a physician’s visit; however, it is not until the young American doctor, Simon Jordan, arrives to psychoanalyze her that the mystery of possible virtuousness and truth deepens further in its complexity.

Although the character and personality of Dr. Jordan is Atwood’s own invention (Wisker 27), the choice to incorporate him into an historical event already riddled with misremembered details in the official written records and secondhand accounts underscores Atwood’s own conscious role in the retelling and reshaping of a Canadian collective consciousness. Fiction, according to Atwood, is where “individual memory and experience and collective memory and experience come together, in greater or lesser proportions. The closer the fiction is to us, the more we recognize and claim it as individual rather than collective” (“In Search of *Alias Grace*” *Moving Targets* 196). Despite this, it must be noted that Atwood refuses to be molded into such an individualistic mode. In managing to “open a closed, historical story” (Wilson, “Margaret Atwood and the Fairy Tale” *Contemporary Fiction and the Fairy Tale* 108), it is her version of *Alias Grace* which causes us to step back and analyze our own historical inheritance and its role within the web of contemporary storytelling:

Our inheritance. Ah yes ... this is where the interest in historical writing comes in. For it's the very things that *aren't* mentioned that inspire the most curiosity in us. *Why* aren't they mentioned? The lure of the Canadian past ... has been partly the lure of the unmentionable – the mysterious, the buried, the forgotten, the discarded, the taboo. (“In Search of *Alias Grace*” *Moving* 205)

Naturally, Grace is the embodiment of the unmentionable – the Pandora's Box that all are curiously peeking into in an attempt to uncover and release some sort of new-found revelation. Yet for Atwood to “breath[e] new life into one of the most enigmatic and notorious women of the nineteenth century” (*Alias Grace*, back cover) and to direct it towards those belonging to the twentieth century and beyond parallels similar methods used by two famous fairy tale tellers: Charles Perrault, and the Brothers Grimm. Just as Perrault and the Grimm Brothers both gathered and recorded their nations' past with the goal of garnering a sense of national pride and cultural identity with their collections, Atwood immortalizes a distinctly Canadian voice, individuality, and recollection of history within *Alias Grace* to not only accomplish a similar awareness – she also felt “free to invent” (“In Search of *Alias Grace*, *Moving* 214) when solid facts provided her with unfilled gaps. The ability to alter and/or introduce elements into a previously existing story framework is what Perrault and the Brothers Grimm practiced when they recorded the stories they had heard from the women of their societies. However, as Atwood states, “The past no longer belongs only to those who lived in it; the past belongs to those who claim it, and are willing to explore it, and to

infuse it with meaning for those alive today” (217). It is within that action of claiming, exploring, and infusing the past which, in looking back, we may place and understand ourselves in what is considered to be our (contemporary) time.

### **Elements of the Fairy Tale Intertext in *Alias Grace***

Although both time and situation define the ways in which any author may shape his or her story for their given audience, “we all belong to our own time, and there is nothing we can do to escape from it. Whatever we write will be contemporary, even if we attempt a novel set in a past age” (Davies 358). Those words, taken from famous Canadian writer, playwright, and scholar Robertson Davies, speak to a large extent about the inevitability of the past mingling with the present in order to produce an awareness for where the imagined future will be. “We cannot help but be modern” (Atwood, Charles R. Bronfman Lecture 4) when writing in the present – or what was then considered to be the present in the case of *Alias Grace*’s publication in the mid-twentieth century – and this is especially true when two seemingly different genres are not only brought together, but are found to seep effortlessly into each other’s established traditions. More often than not, there is a dual project working constructively within Atwood’s compositions: to write about and for women, and to rework, retell, and re-imagine “the symbolic and woman-centred core of a few Grimm tales throughout her work” (Bacchilega, “Atwood, Margaret” *Oxford Companion* 29). In blending her contemporary fiction with the fairy tale, Atwood promotes what critic Jack Zipes has described as the contamination of the fairy tale – a process where, through the act of

restoration and elaboration, the “original” tales are altered in order to bring out their deeper meanings and current relevance for and within the particular time period in which the writer is writing.

Atwood is, of course, no stranger to the world of fairy tales; and having read the complete and unexpurgated *Grimm’s Fairy Tales* at a young age has proven to be an important influence on her writing. As she distorts and modifies her favourite fairy tales with a modern flair, Atwood “criti[ques] the dynamics of sexual politics and [urges] change” (Bacchilega, “Atwood, Margaret” *Oxford Companion* 29) through the themes of violence, cannibalism, dismemberment, and transformation. “I don’t write pretty books, I know that,” Atwood asserts in an interview with Jo Brans (“Using What You’re Given” *Waltzing Again* 89); and indeed, one will be hard pressed to find any sugar-coated treatment within her works. Furthermore, Atwood is also non-obliging towards an audience’s expectation of closure: “Endings, in general, are always a bit hard because any ending in life is artificial. Life doesn’t end. People’s lives end. But other lives keep going from that and the dance goes on” (*Waltzing* back cover). The story of storytelling is a tale that will never be finished (Warner xxi); and although the classical fairy tales usually do offer a Happily Ever After, when combined with contemporary fiction, it can no longer function fully – and sometimes, satisfactorily – in that particular way.

Such is the case with *Alias Grace*. At times subtle in its allusions and portrayal of fairy tale elements through plot, characters, and situations, Atwood relies on her reader’s own folkloric knowledge, analysis, and interpretation to

stitch together the quilt pattern pieces she has spread before us.<sup>16</sup> The notion of “This is my story, I’ve told it, and in your hands I leave it” (Warner xxi) figures greatly not only within the context of how Grace narrates her story, but in Atwood’s approach to embedding the fairy tale in fiction. According to Sharon Rose Wilson, Atwood achieves this using a number of intertextual tactics:

1. Building a scene based on a fairy tale image
2. Reversing the gender of fairy tale characters, and moving her female protagonists from object to subject
3. Subverting reliable and trustworthy traditional narratives into unreliable ones that are self-conscious and constantly developing
4. Using tropes and symbols to deepen the meaning of the mundane
5. Dislocating the fairy tale plotline to make the marginalized subtext central
6. Taking the fairy tale intertext’s happy resolution and exposing it to numerous interpretations
7. Bending and blending of tones and genres
8. Applying irony as a subversive discourse
9. Using language to defamiliarize, transgress and parody what fairy tale costumes, settings and motifs are retained
10. Revising or reversing the norms or ideology of the intertext itself

(“Margaret Atwood and the Fairy Tale” *Contemporary* 100).

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<sup>16</sup> Noticeably, the structure of *Alias Grace* is a quilt pattern in and of itself with its use of quotations, newspaper clippings, poetry, images, letters, extracts of confessions, and chapters named after specific quilting patterns. These significantly surround Grace’s narrative so as to highlight that “for Grace ... quilts provide an opportunity for social critique and for clarifying certain aspects of her life story” (Siddall 138).

Each of these methods is featured to a varying degree within *Alias Grace*. For example, the opening chapter – tactic one – has Grace describe peonies growing out of the gravel which transform into “huge dark-red flowers all shining and glossy like satin” (AG 5) as they burst and fall to the ground (an echo of the “Fitcher’s Bird” tale with petals representing drops of blood). While Grace is seen as both a seductress and a docile woman – tactic two – she becomes the unreliable narrator when she – tactic three – relates a story to Dr. Jordan, but quietly states to her reader that “this is what I told [him], when we came to that part of the story” (6). Apples, as well as a range of root vegetables, are used by Dr. Jordan in the hopes of triggering Grace’s subconscious memory – tactic four. Although he does not succeed in unearthing the particular associations he is looking for (Grace, with her common sense, offers this bachelor recipes on how to cook the items displayed in front of her), Dr. Jordan fails – tactic five – to become the ideal fairy tale prince with the sole mission of heroically rescuing her. Instead, Grace is liberated through her marriage to Jamie Walsh, the young errand boy who visited the Kinnear residence. But her new life becomes uncertain when – tactic six – two possibilities about her health are made. The mélange of tone and genres, and the use of irony – tactics seven and eight – are used seamlessly by Atwood in order to – tactics nine and ten – distort fairy tale elements, so that Grace’s refusal to bite into the apple under the watchful eyes of Dr. Jordan becomes a symbolic act of defiance. To eat the apple would be a subconscious consent to give “the collector ... what he’s after” (AG 45).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Grace’s ability to resist biting into the apple when Dr. Jordan presents it to her upends one of the most famous scenes in the Grimm Brothers’ “Snow White.” In the Grimm fairy tale, Snow White



Resting at the core of Atwood's fairy tale intertext lies a fascination for a "country [that] has a literary life still unexplored and unknown ... [with] treasures that lay still undiscovered" for which, in turn, shapes "our existence as Canadians" (Staines 25). Through the ten Atwoodian tactics listed above, it is evident that the fairy tale has acquired a suppleness which befits its ability to fuse "multivalent narrative wonder" (Benson, "Fiction and the Contemporaneity of the Fairy Tale" *Contemporary* 14) into our definition of Canadian contemporary fiction. Moreover, with such "transgressive and subversive genre bending" (Wilson, "Fiction Flashes" *Margaret Atwood's Textual Assassinations* 19) the reciprocal fairy tale-fiction relationship allows you to "pick any strand and snip, [it] comes unravelled" (Atwood, *The Robber Bride* 87) thus leaving the teller free to piece together their own version.

### **The Atwoodianized Brothers Grimm**

In the act of recovering the female fairy tale tradition and voice, Atwood's fairy tale reincarnations of some of the most popular Brothers Grimm tales emphasize "that in the history of folktale and fairy tale, women as storytellers have woven or spun their yarns, speaking at one level to a total culture, but at another to a sisterhood of readers who will understand the hidden language, [and] the secret revelations of the tale" (Rowe 57). An example of this may be seen in Atwood's

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meets her death after biting into the poisoned apple given to her by the queen disguised as an old woman. Snow White is eventually rescued by a prince, whose servants' stumble while carrying her coffin dislodges the poisoned piece of apple in her throat. As will be discussed further on, Grace does not necessarily wait for her Prince Charming to appear, and her decisions of what to say and what not to say emphasizes her own female agency in initiating her eventual release from the asylum.

own reception of the Grimms' fairy tale collection, as while many found it charged with sexism, "the courageous, spell-casting women she remembers from 'her' book of tales taught her the power of the word" (Haase, *The Reception of the Grimms' Fairy Tales* 18).

Fittingly, our protagonist and (supposed) murderess is also versed in the potency of words; and her narration paints vividly distorted fairy tale themes, motifs and character portraits into her already duplicitous nature and story. One such instance occurs when the reader first hears Grace offer a small description of what it is like to be within the walls of the Toronto Lunatic Asylum. Being "a model prisoner [who] give[s] no trouble" (AG 5), Grace is allowed the privilege of spending a few hours at a time outside of the asylum and in the presence of the Governor's wife. However, this sense of controlled freedom is not enough, as is evident when Grace returns to her institutional room:

I sit down on the straw mattress. It makes a sound ... like water on the shore. I shift from side to side, to listen to it. I could close my eyes and think I'm by the sea, on a dry day without much wind. Outside the window far away there's someone chopping wood, the axe coming down, the unseen flash and then the dull sound, but how do I know it's even wood? (35)

Grace's thoughts are at once sane and suggestively mad – the former exemplified by her desire to escape her room and be a part of the outside world again; the latter as seen in the question she poses to herself which, paradoxically, puts to question her own sanity. The "little high up window" (36), as Grace later

describes it, imprisons her both literally and figuratively as if she were Rapunzel trapped in the highest of towers. Albeit Grace is able to move about within the “tower” (her asylum room), she can only see – or rather, hear, in relation to the sound of the axe – a certain distance into the world beyond where she is being held.

In allowing Grace to perceive the sound of the axe and to envision its chopping motion, Atwood quickly transitions her maiden from that of a Rapunzel-like figure to one resembling the Grimm Brothers’ Little Red Cap. In the Grimms’ version of the Little Red Riding Hood tale, Little Red Cap is sent off through the forest to deliver a basket filled with cake and wine to her ill grandmother. Upon entering the house, the wolf (who has already devoured the grandmother) quickly gobbles up Little Red Cap and falls into a deep slumber. Hearing the wolf’s loud snoring, a huntsman enters the house to find the wolf fast asleep on grandmother’s bed; yet instead of firing his musket, he takes out a pair of scissors and frees Little Red Cap and her grandmother from the wolf’s belly. The symbolic act of cutting the huntsman performs is parallel to that of the chopping done by the figure that is unknown to both the reader and Grace. As such, one could say that the axe not only cuts through whatever object it is encountering (wood or otherwise), but that it is also cutting through the air towards Grace in her locked asylum room and piercing her memory – a heavy thud which allows Atwood to cleverly remind readers as to the reason why Grace is in the asylum to begin with.

In a manner of speaking, Grace has also experienced being placed on the chopping block not only through the repeated interrogations done by the doctors

who visit her in the asylum, but in being forced to live within the representations society has created for her:

My hair is coming out from under my cap. Red hair of an ogre. A wild beast, the newspaper said. A monster. When they come with my dinner I will put the slop bucket over my head and hide behind the door, and that will give them a fright. If they want a monster so badly they ought to be provided with one. (AG 35-36)

Regardless of the fact that she would “never do such things [but] only consider them” (36), it is interesting to note that Grace wears a cap as part of her asylum uniform. Yet unlike the “little cap of red velvet” which is “so becoming” (Grimm, “Little Red Cap” 13) on the Grimms’ young girl, the red worn by Grace is neither removable nor as easily hidden which is confirmed in the line, “My hair is coming out from under my cap” (AG 35). The strands which the cap cannot retain accentuate Grace’s inability to hold on to an unsullied reputation and to live separately from the incident that she cannot – as she claims – clearly remember herself. Grace’s natural red hair immediately pinpoints her as a dangerous, seductive, beautiful, and desirable young woman; and she walks along the wooded path where only she will unintentionally entice the wolf to come towards her.

In combining her looks with the title of “*Murderess*” (AG 23), Grace “is simultaneously seen as a seductive monster, an innocent victim too beautiful to be evil, a sly cat, and a sick person with multiple personality disorder” (Wilson, *Myths and Fairy Tales* 17). These labels, along with the “ogre,” “wild beast” and

“monster” (AG 36) found in the quotation on page 54, lend Grace a type of power in the collective mind and memory of society. But curiously, even she is unsure of to how to think about these terms: “I think of all the things that have been written about me – that I am an inhuman female demon, that I am an innocent victim of a blackguard ...that I am a good girl with a pliable nature ... that I am cunning and devious ... And I wonder, how can I be all these different things at once?” (23). On the contrary, Grace is capable of embodying all of those differences at the same time in a comparable fashion to how Little Red Cap, who at first appears to be an innocent victim, is the one to fetch the stones of which she fills the wolf’s belly after being saved by the huntsman. As the wolf instantly falls dead from the unexpected weight inside of him, Little Red Cap is placed in a new light: she is not just a simple-minded and inexperienced little girl, just as Grace is not as unpretentious as she makes herself to be.

Through her participation in the wolf’s death, Little Red Cap shares with Grace the title of *Murderess* – the word that “rustles, like a taffeta skirt across the floor” (AG 23) – as well as a wolfishness which is twisted by Atwood into a form of self-defense that is cannibalistic in nature. As the asylum’s Dr. Bannerling places her in a straight jacket so that he may take a careful examination of her “cerebral configuration” (37), Grace’s behaviour abruptly grows animalistic in nature:

... Dr. Bannerling, a devious dissembler ... I knew what he was up to ... but all I could say was Oh no, oh no, and no way to twist and turn, not how they’d fixed me, trussed up to the chair with the sleeves crossed over

in front and tied behind; so nothing to do but sink my teeth into his fingers, and then over we went, backwards onto the floor, yowling together like two cats in a sack. (37)

The panicked tone with which Grace relates the situation to her reader in the first part of the paragraph marks her transition from the complacent and quiet figure of Little Red Cap to a more aggressive wolfish shape. In the presence of Dr. Bannerling, Grace is physically restrained and psychologically caged, but what is even more disturbing is how she emerges from the situation of yelling and falling over. Similar to when Little Red Cap resumes her composure and becomes “overjoyed” (Grimm, “Little Red Cap” 16) with the death of the wolf, Grace also appears to have retained some sense of propriety with the incident as she calmly states that “[the doctor] tasted of raw sausages and damp woolen underclothes” (AG 37). The way in which Grace describes the taste of the doctor is closely related to the act of eating done by the Grimms’ wolf when he devoured Little Red Cap and her grandmother in their raw, so to speak, forms.

The Grace-as-wolf imagery continues when, as a result of her behaviour earlier that day, she is not given anything more substantial than bread to eat for supper. Starvation, according to Grace, is calming to the nerves (AG 37) and her reflection emphasizes that she has some level of self-control over her “savage” appetite. But as she goes on to explain why only bread and water are provided to those within the asylum, it appears that both she and the doctors agree that “meat is exciting to criminals and maniacs, they get the smell of it in their nostrils just like wolves and then you have only yourself to blame” (37). The “wolves” (those

held in the asylum) must be detained and the things which remind them of flesh and blood must be either erased or checked into place before they are even considered worthy of being resubmitted into society. Grace is not as naïve of her situation as she makes herself appear to be in front of the asylum doctors who persistently visit her. As such, Grace's specific use of the word *wolves* in relation to *meat* accentuates her knowledge of how the Little Red Cap/wolf dichotomy functions within her role as a prisoner: not only has her name become "synonymous with monstrous and uncontrolled criminality" (Lovelady 174), but her personality has, as well. This is further established when, upon hearing a second knock on her asylum room's door, Grace not only tucks her hair back under her cap, smoothes down her dress and apron, and stands as far back into the corner of the room as possible – she also tries to "keep hold of [her] dignity" by courteously saying "Please come in" (AG 39). Grace is willing to face another man like Dr. Bannerling with as sweet a demeanor as she can muster; however, she is not afraid to reveal and use her sharp teeth if forced to do so.

The man who knocks on her door is not another Dr. Bannerling, but both the huntsman who can release Grace from the wolf's stomach and the Prince Charming who may free her from the Rapunzel imagery discussed earlier. The young, clean-shaven, and unmarried Dr. Simon Jordan is a member of the up-and-coming area of psychiatry and is attracted to Grace's case in the hopes of not only discovering whether she is guilty, but "also what caused her actions and her version of them, to understand her psychologically in order to psychoanalyze her" (Wisker 27). Little does Dr. Jordan know that Grace is also psychoanalyzing him

in her own quiet way. As is evident from her description of Dr. Jordan's physical appearance and mannerisms (of which she only relates to the reader), Grace knows that she must be on her guard as it is "too early to tell what he wants. No one comes to see me here unless they want something" (AG 41). Grace maintains this sense of caution throughout the novel; and her constant trust and/or distrust of Dr. Jordan leaves her spinning a story which she "could elaborate and redesign versions of events" (Wisker 57) in a similar way to that of her embroidery.

As ambiguous as Atwood leaves the issue of her protagonist's motives, Grace is still pictured as a monstrously charming creature – she has the capacity to encompass the "maiden incarcerated in a prison/tower, needing rescue" (Wisker 71) while simultaneously being like the Grimms' Rapunzel in learning "that the power to change her situation resides in herself and can be expressed through her body (her hair and tears)" (Wilson, "Frozen Touch in *You Are Happy*" *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* 138-139). Thus, if Grace reassumes the role of Rapunzel imprisoned in her tower by the wicked witch (or the asylum matrons), Dr. Jordan naturally becomes the rescuer in what Atwood has deemed the "Rapunzel syndrome":<sup>18</sup>

I would like to help you, Grace, he says.

That is how they get in through the door. Help is what they offer

but gratitude is what they want, they roll around in it like cats in the

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<sup>18</sup> According to Atwood, there are usually four elements to the 'Rapunzel syndrome': Rapunzel, the tower she is trapped in, the wicked witch who imprisons her, and the rescuer. "In Canada's version, Rapunzel is also silenced [and] she and her tower are synonymous: 'These heroines have internalized the values of their culture to such an extent that they have become their own prisons.' In most cases, 'the Rescuer is not much help' (Atwood, *Survival* 209-10)" (Wilson, "Frozen Touch" *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* 138).



catnip. He wishes to go home and say to himself, I stuck in my thumb and pulled out the plum, what a good boy am I. But I will not be anybody's plum. I say nothing. (AG 45)

As can be seen, Dr. Jordan openly admits that he is willing to help Grace recover her memory of the murders she has been accused of committing with the assistance of James McDermott, the Kinnear residence's stable hand who was hanged when found guilty of murder. However, Dr. Jordan's gallantry is met by Grace's skepticism in a postmodern fairy tale kind of way – she is not the damsel in distress of conventional masculine ideals, but rather an untraditional one who creates or shapes her destiny through what she specifically chooses to reveal about herself. In later conversations with Dr. Jordan, even Grace admits to her reader that “little by little I found I could talk to him more easily, and think up things to say” (AG 76). This comment indicates that Grace is thinking to her benefit and providing Dr. Jordan with what he may find interesting. Conversely, Dr. Jordan sees Grace within the symbolic fruit he presents her with: she is “a woman to be nurtured and then used [as an information source on woman's madness]” (Wisker 40). The apple he gives her “feels precious, like a heavy treasure” due to the “odour of outdoors on it” (AG 43) and becomes an offer of the taste of freedom he could potentially give her if she is willing to cooperate. In spite of that, the apple for Grace is also a reminder of the Knowledge (her own Biblical Tree of Knowledge) he is trying to tap into from the outside:

He smiles his lopsided smile. What does Apple make you think of?  
he says.

I beg your pardon, Sir, I say. I do not understand you.

... He's playing a guessing game, like Dr. Bannerling at the Asylum. There is always a right answer, which is right because it is the one they want, and you can tell by their faces whether you have guessed what it is ...

The apple of the Tree of Knowledge, is what he means. Good and evil. Any child could guess it. But I will not oblige. (43-44)

Grace may "press [the apple] to [her] forehead" (46) at the end of their conversation as a sign of surrender to the prince sitting patiently before her, but she is the one who will ultimately rescue herself and satisfy the craving she has for what is beyond the cold walls of the asylum.

Comparable to how Grace presents a good and evil fairy tale duality within her personality, Dr. Jordan also goes beyond the simple huntsman/Prince Charming façade. He is "not the usual kind of doctor" (AG 41) as he tells Grace during their first meeting for he does not perform any cuts which result in scars – the physical reminders of an experience. Rather, Dr. Jordan attempts to invisibly cut into Grace's mind through the questions he prompts her with over the course of their meetings. Dr. Jordan, however, also exposes his own eagerness to turn the key in the lock of her mind's forbidden door: "Grace at least represents to him some goal or accomplishment ... [and he tries] in vain to open her up like an oyster" (AG 346; 152). The power he exhibits over Grace as he records everything she says ("While he writes, I feel as if he is drawing me; or not drawing me, drawing on me – drawing on my skin – not with the pencil he is using, but with an

old-fashioned goose pen ...” (77)) is not unlike the eeriness found in the Grimms’ Fitcher and Robber characters of “Fitcher’s Bird” and “The Robber Bridegroom,” respectively. In the words of Wilson:

‘Fitcher’s Bird’ [and] ‘The Robber Bridegroom’ ... intertexts again underline the dismemberment, cannibalism, and male/female conditioning in *Alias Grace*, including blood, the forbidden door and chamber, the casket of secrets, a missing hand, Pandora’s box, punishment, disguise, trickery, and escape motifs. (“Margaret Atwood and the Fairy Tale” *Contemporary* 107)

In using these specific motifs, Atwood sets up her historical fiction to include Dr. Jordan as a type of sorcerer/seducer not necessarily to Grace, as will be discussed below, but to the other women he encounters, namely the Governor’s wife, her daughter Lydia, and his landlady, Mrs. Rachel Humphrey, during his stay in Kingston. Dr. Jordan is extremely conscious of the aura he creates when in the presence of the “women of the better classes” (AG 92) and even more so of the potential manipulation laying at his fingertips for possessing a forbidden knowledge they all crave:

He has been where they could never go, seen what they could never see; he has opened up women’s bodies, and peered inside. In his hand, which has just raised their own hands towards his lips, he may once have held a beating female heart.

Thus he is one of the dark trio – the doctor, the judge, the executioner – and shares with them the powers of life and death. To be

rendered unconscious; to lie exposed, without shame, at the mercy of others; to be touched, incised, plundered, remade – this is what they are thinking when they look at him, with their widening eyes and slightly parted lips. (93)

The doctor, judge, and executioner titles form parallel roles to those found within one of the Grimms' versions of the Bluebeard tale. In "Fitcher's Bird," Fitcher judges his potential bride by entrusting her with an egg and a key to a forbidden room; he becomes the executioner when the potential bride breaks her promise and enters the chamber out of curiosity; and is a doctor in controlling life and death within the story. Dr. Jordan lives within a society where his respected medical standing places him in a position to be a judge (of the inner workings of the mind), an executioner (for instance, his affair with Mrs. Humphrey sullies both her name and his), and a doctor (which is his profession). Even Grace admits to Dr. Jordan that "I have already been judged, Sir. Whatever you may think of me, it's all the same" (AG 104), thus making Fitcher the sorcerer and Dr. Jordan one and the same.

The women I have mentioned above – the Governor's wife, Miss Lydia, and Mrs. Humphrey – are representative of the two "Fitcher's Bird" sisters who fail to keep away from the banned chamber. At various points within the novel each woman is somehow cast under Dr. Jordan's spell of which, if they were allowed to do so, would most certainly have "jumped into his basket" (Grimm, "Fitcher's Bird" 148) as effortlessly and helplessly as Fitcher's first and second

girls did.<sup>19</sup> However, in describing the Governor's wife's, Miss Lydia's, and Mrs. Humphrey's outward attraction to Dr. Jordan and what he represents within nineteenth century society, Atwood cleverly places Grace within the role of the third "Fitcher's Bird" sister, as well as the beautiful daughter in "The Robber Bridegroom." In the context of the former Brothers Grimm tale, Grace as the third sister is both "clever and cunning" ("Fitcher's Bird" 148), which is indicated in her determination to tell Dr. Jordan a convincing story quilted together by threads of truth – that is, as she supposedly remembers them to be. Grace senses that Dr. Jordan is seeking something from her; and it not only puts her on guard from the first time they meet in her asylum room, but also lends her the same sense of confidence that the third sister possesses when exploring Fitcher's house. Both women tread lightly, not to mention egg-free, into the forbidden chamber and refuse to be caught.<sup>20</sup>

To further expand upon the "Fitcher's Bird" intertext, Atwood has her heroine gracefully weave in and out of Dr. Jordan's memory prompts in an identical way to how the Grimms' third sister shrewdly outwits the sorcerer by drenching herself in honey and covering herself with feathers until she is completely unrecognizable:

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<sup>19</sup> "One day [Fitcher] appeared at the door of a man who had three beautiful daughters. He looked like a poor, weak beggar and had a basket on his back, as if to collect alms. He asked for something to eat, and when the eldest girl went to the door and was about to hand him a piece of bread, he just touched her and she jumped into his basket" (Grimm, "Fitcher's Bird" 148).

<sup>20</sup> As is usually found in the tales grouped under the Bluebeard category, the male protagonists exhibit a fascination of the body. "Simon is obsessed with flesh" (Wilson, "Margaret Atwood and the Fairy Tale" *Contemporary* 108) and objectifies the women he meets as items to be consumed. Dora, Mrs. Humphrey's cook, is classified as ham; Miss Lydia is a confection and "garlanded with flowers ... and with perhaps a border of hothouse grapes and peaches" (AG 225). Grace becomes a ripe peach, a nut to be cracked, and an oyster to be shelled.

Every day he has set some small object in front of her, and has asked her to tell him what it causes her to imagine. This week, he's attempted various root vegetables, hoping for a connection that will lead downwards: Beet – Root Cellar – Corpses, for instance; or even Turnip – Underground – Grave. According to his theories, the right object ought to evoke a chain of disturbing associations in her; although so far she's treated his offerings simply at their face value, and all he's got out of her has been a series of cookery methods. (AG 103)

Grace, in the style of the third sister, refuses to let Dr. Jordan-as-Fitcher get the better of her – she “will not oblige” (AG 44) him now as she did not oblige him then when he offered her the apple meant to draw out the correlation of good and evil imagery from the Biblical Tree of Knowledge. As such, Grace “disguises” her true thoughts so as to make her mind appear differently from what it actually is. It can also be said that Dr. Jordan is tempting Grace to say the correct or desirable answers – a parallel to how Fitcher indirectly lures the third sister into exploring the forbidden cellar by providing the egg and key before leaving her alone in his house. The duality of Grace's face in appearance versus reality draws a striking resemblance to the garland wearing skull the third sister places in the attic window so that she may escape as Fitcher's feathered bird in the end. Grace “knows she must maintain a front, foresee the next move of those who control her, find ways of managing knowledge and truth for her own self protection” (Wisker 36). For this reason, the everyday beet and turnip “fail” to trigger the deeper links to murder Dr. Jordan seeks, while the mention of *corpses* and *grave*

by the narrator ironically prompts the reader into envisioning Nancy's and Mr. Kinnear's bodies lying in the "grave" of the root cellar and its not unsubtle connection to the womanly bodies laying in pieces on the floor of Fitcher's dark and bloody chamber.

On her use of the fairy tale intertext within her works of fiction, Atwood states that "it was not the gore – being rolled downhill in barrels full of spikes and so forth – that caught [her] attention [within the *Grimms' Fairy Tales*], but the transformations" (Oates 39). In discussing Grace's ability to mask what she is truly thinking under a composed and, at times, intellectually simple façade, Atwood takes the physical transformations of girl-into-skull and girl-into-bird from the Fitcher story and molds it into one embracing Grace's psychological transformation of which only the reader is able to fully trace. Grace's mind could be seen as a sort of Fitcher's egg – it contains evidence of the murders (it is stained, in a manner of speaking, from the bloody basin it is dropped into by the first two sisters), but she is clever enough to tuck it safely away from Dr. Jordan (as the third sister does with her egg before exploring the forbidden chamber). As a result, Dr. Jordan is prevented from knowing the many dreams Grace has over the course of their meetings – dreams that lend themselves to haunting visions of punishment, disguise, trickery, and dismemberment found within the Grimms' other Bluebeard tale, "The Robber Bridegroom."

In her first dream, Grace envisions herself standing at the kitchen door of Mr. Kinnear's house. Having just finished scrubbing the floors, her skirts are tucked up out of her way and her feet are bare when a peddler arrives to sell her

some of his goods. Although she feels as if he is someone she should know, Grace senses that something is not right – an echo of how the Robber’s bride intuitively knows that her soon-to-be husband is somehow untrustworthy. Needless to say, as Grace tells the peddler that she does not have any money to purchase the silks, combs, buttons, and ribbons he has laid on the ground before her, he teasingly demands that they bargain instead:

What he had was one of my hands. I could see it now, it was white and shriveled up, he was dangling it by its wrist like a glove. But then I looked down at my owns hands, and I saw that there were two of them, on their wrists, coming out of the sleeves as usual, and I knew that this third hand must belong to some other woman. She was bound to come around looking for it, and if I had it in my possession she would say I had stolen it; but I did not want it any more, because it must have been cut off. And sure enough, there was the blood now, dripping and thick like syrup ...

(AG 113)

A vivid example of what critic Jack Zipes has called the contamination of the fairy tale, the dream not only pulls together Grace’s subconscious thoughts about the time she spent at the Kinnear residence in relation to her present state of being seated in front of Dr. Jordan, who has just asked her what she had dreamt last night – this also ties to the Robber’s bride’s first experience inside the house of the bridegroom. Ignoring the warning from the bird who calls out, “Turn back, turn back, my pretty young bride, / In a house of murderers you’ve arrived” (Grimm, “The Robber Bridegroom” 152), the bride enters her fiancé’s house and



explores each of the rooms. Finding the house completely empty, the bride goes down to the cellar where she finds “a woman as old as the hills, her head bobbing up and down” (152). Suddenly, the bridegroom and his band of robbers return to the house, bringing with them a beautiful girl of whom they immediately chop into pieces. When one of the robbers fails to pull off the girl’s ring, he takes an axe and chops the finger off. The ringed finger flies into the lap of the bride, who has found a hiding place behind a barrel; but before the robber can begin his search for the finger – and consequently find the bride – the old woman announces that it is time for the robbers to have their supper.

As can be seen, the images of another woman, the hand, a peddler, and copious amounts of blood spilling across the floor in Grace’s dream are all symbolic of the cut-up maiden the Robber’s bride observes, the ringed finger which flies into her lap, the old woman she meets in the cellar, and the blood symbolic of death in marriage and the dangers of a woman’s curiosity and/or defiance. Moreover, the sense of horror seems but a dream – and the bride shrewdly relates it as such when prompted by the Robber to speak at their wedding celebration, only to twist it around by producing the ringed finger and thus ensuring that he and his band are caught. What the bride witnesses in the Robber’s cellar is as unbelievable as Grace’s dream is somewhat nonsensical (at the end, Grace can only think of the how the floor she has just cleaned will be soiled if the peddler does not take the dripping hand away). Yet Grace’s dream recalls the murders of Nancy and Mr. Kinnear in the clearest of ways, therefore questioning again what role she has played in those particular events and of how

much she remembers of them. “*Alias Grace* offers no regrown hands” (Wilson, “Margaret Atwood and the Fairy Tale” *Contemporary* 109) where regeneration denotes a hopeful return to the way things were before the hands came off – or rather, before being immersed in Grace’s confusing case where fact and fiction continually battle against each other. But the failure to be renewed may also allude to the frustration felt by Dr. Jordan, who not only has to face Grace’s simple answer of “I can’t remember what I dreamt last night” (AG 114) when it is quite evident to the reader that she does recall her dream remarkably well.

With Grace as the unreliable narrator undergoing a “fairy-tale transformation [which turns her] into an accomplished creator” (Wilson, “Margaret Atwood and the Fairy Tale” *Contemporary* 109), Atwood pushes her protagonist to go beyond the position of the third sister in “Fitcher’s Bird” and the Robber’s clever bride so that she may assume a further duality within the masculine Robber/Fitcher role itself. As discussed earlier, Dr. Jordan undertakes the Robber/Fitcher role through his manipulation of objects, the questions and diagnosing methods used on Grace, and in the effect he has on the other women in society. Nevertheless, as Dr. Jordan spends more time with his patient, it would appear that the roles have now reversed. Grace is not only able to seduce or entice him to stay for longer periods of time with her in the Governor’s wife’s sitting room through the amount of information she releases – she also embodies the skills of observation, quiet manipulation, and imagination needed to keep her doctor within her plan of freedom (if such a plan is indeed in place). As is noted in the following quotation, Grace is exceptionally perceptive of Dr. Jordan’s

behavior – an alertness which influences her decision of whether or not to reveal her second dream to him:

Dr. Jordan came in as usual in the afternoon, and seemed fatigued, and also troubled in mind. He hadn't brought any vegetable with him, to ask me what I might think of it; and I was a little taken aback, as I had become used to this part of the afternoon ...

So I said, Sir, you are without any item today.

I [Dr. Jordan] have decided to ask you, what it is that you yourself would like me to bring.

Well Sir, I said ... I would have to consider it.

So he said I was welcome to do that; and meanwhile, had I had any dreams? As he was looking forlorn, and as it were at a loss, and as I suspected that not all was going well with him, I did not say that I could not remember. Instead I said that I had indeed had a dream. And what was it about, said he, brightening up considerably, and fiddling with his pencil.

(AG 285)

Grace “feeds” Dr. Jordan information about herself in what appears to be a considerate method to cheer him up. Nonetheless, if Grace is anything like the Robber’s bride with an added touch of the Robber’s sense of trickery, that information will not be told in vain as both Grace and the Robber’s bride expose their dreams in order to achieve a certain reaction and to gain a particular, favourable result. For the Robber’s bride, reiterating her story of the cellar as if it were a dream and then shattering the allusion by displaying the ringed finger to all

those gathered at the wedding celebration skillfully traps her bridegroom and his murderous band for execution. As such, the Robber's bride-turned-Robber ensures a future for herself that the maidens before her had failed to achieve.

Grace, on a similar level, reiterates a dream that is not entirely a dream when she mentions "red flowers ... quite large, with glossy leaves like a peony" (AG 286) to Dr. Jordan. Notably, Grace releases just enough about her "dream" to entice Dr. Jordan to think that he is slowly achieving his goal ("But I did not say that they were made of cloth, nor did I say when I had seen them last; nor did I say that they were not a dream" (286)), thus making the "paradoxical relation between truth and fabrication, fact and fiction" (Rigney 159) not only live side by side, but bleed and blend into each other as the fairy tale intertext does when combined with contemporary fiction. This is further established when the reader is made to draw the connection Atwood sets up in the novel's first chapter, "Jagged Edge." Here, Grace describes peonies growing out of the gravel, but before they "burst and fall to the ground" (AG 5), they suddenly transform into peonies found in the front garden at Mr. Kinnear's. In the garden cutting the peonies is none other than Nancy dressed in her finest clothes, who "when she heard us and turned to look ... put her hand up to her throat as if startled" (5). The *us* suggests that Grace has an accomplice with her, presumably James McDermott, and the way in which Nancy reacts is not unlike one who lives with some sort of fear in her life. Significantly, Nancy's hand to her own throat ironically foreshadows how she will die: she will be found strangled to death.

Appropriately, this “Secret Drawer” (AG 155) of a dream remains locked to Dr. Jordan; and he is pulled along, little by little, as is evident when he thanks Grace for telling him her dream and is stopped in his tracks when she voices that she will try to remember more of them if it will help him with the trouble he is in:

What makes you think I am in trouble, Grace? And I said, Those who have been in trouble themselves are alert to it in others, Sir.

He said it was a kind thought in me; then hesitated a moment, as if to tell me more; but he thought better of it and nodded goodbye. (AG 287)

Grace, in being able to observe and harness the minute weakness he exhibits, captures Dr. Jordan in a moment of uncertainty and indecision that will ultimately make him “[abandon] her case without ever solving the mystery” (Howells, “Alias Grace” *Margaret Atwood* 142). Additionally, Dr. Jordan’s momentary hesitation in this particular scene heightens Grace’s continued duplicity both within the fairy tale intertext and the historical context – the former as seen through her ability to occupy the spaces of “a maiden in a towered dungeon, awaiting ... the last-minute champion come to rescue her” (AG 66), and latter, through the suppression of a woman who was encouraged by her lawyer to “not appear to be too intelligent ... as [she] was little more than a child at the time [of the murders and trial]” (24).

Ultimately, quilt making – a form of female discourse which empowers women to speak in a language not universally accessible (Wisker 33) – becomes Grace’s method for weaving together her twin selves of Robber/Fitcher, Robber’s bride-turned-Fitcher, Little Red Cap with a wolfish grin, and a Rapunzel who

needs no prince. As Atwood does not resolve to what extent Grace was involved in the murders, the above dualities play lovingly with interpretation and lends our supposed murderess the position as “an object of pity and an object of horror and fear” (Wilson, “Margaret Atwood and the Fairy Tale” *Contemporary* 109). After Dr. Jordan’s quick departure (of which he returns to the United States, joins the forces, and, due to an accident, loses most of his memory of the time spent in Kingston), Grace is finally released from the asylum to marry her childhood friend, Jamie Walsh, “giving both of them the opportunity for happiness” (Wisker 28).

Although Jamie testified against her at the time of her trial, Grace accepts that she “was to have [her] happy ending” (AG 527); and to be sure, she settles down with Mr. Walsh (as she entitles him to herself) in a picturesque home and community where she changes her identity so as “not to reveal too much of the past” (AG 546). But it is here within her new life where she makes the most important quilt of all, the Tree of Paradise, linking together all those who were a part of her life:

On my Tree of Paradise, I intend to put a border of snakes entwined; they will look like vines or just a cable pattern to others, as I will make the eyes very small, but they will be snakes to me; as without a snake or two, the main part of the story would be missing. ...

But three of the triangles in my Tree will be different. One will be white, from the petticoat I still have that was Mary Whitney’s; one will be faded yellowish, from the prison nightdress I begged as a keepsake when I

left there. And the third will be a pale cotton, a pink and white floral, cut from the dress of Nancy's that she had on the first day I was at Mr. Kinnear's, and that I wore on the ferry to Lewiston, when I was running away. (AG 551-552)

Grace's quilt takes on its own variations from the regular pattern used by many just as her story refuses "the imposition of a single version and pattern" (Wisker 29), which again draws attention towards the duplicity of identity and the act of narration. This harmonious and seamless blending through sewing and embroidery, however, does not surrender to a true Happily Ever After. Despite the replacement of Dr. Jordan – the failed hero/Prince Charming – with Mr. Walsh, "the happy endings of fairy tales are only the beginning of [another] story" (Warner xxi); and Atwood takes care to twist audience expectations by putting Grace's health to question. The uncertainty of whether Grace will live for long in the new life she has created exposes the fact that even if she has been given the miracle of a pardon, she "cannot have everything in this life" (AG 533). But for now, Grace has emerged: her voice has been heard, her good behaviour rewarded, and her duplicitous nature only known to some. Grace's success as an accomplished storyteller and quilt maker arises from her not getting caught within her own murder story as those around her do; and she survives long enough within the fairy tale context to come forward almost unscathed in Atwood's fiction.

### Chapter 3. Anne Hébert

#### Introducing “one of the best-known contemporary writers from Quebec”

For a quiet, reserved woman who has led an orderly and tranquil existence (Royer 13), one may find it paradoxical to learn that French-Canadian writer Anne Hébert actually regarded herself as “une révoltée” (Radio-Canada). As a woman who took risks in her writing with stories entangled with passion and violence, Hébert has become known as “la grande dame de la littérature québécoise” (Radio-Canada) not only for her genre versatility as a published and award-winning poet, novelist, short story writer, and playwright; but also for her contribution towards “l’invention de la littérature québécoise” particularly between the time of 1945 to 1960 (Biron, Dumont, and Nardout-Lafarge 6) – a period when Quebecois literature began its steady growth. Previous to the 1950s, there was nothing within the Quebecois tradition which resembled the literary work Hébert had created with her inspiration coming from individuals and/or other literatures that were “très proches (Saint-Denys Garneau) ou très lointains (en particulier la Bible comme réservoir de mythes ou la psychanalyse comme traversée des forces obscures de l’être)” to her (Biron, Dumont, and Nardout-Lafarge 310). In regards to the former, Hébert, who was born in 1916 in Sainte-Catherine-de-Fossambault, was raised in a family environment which encouraged her literary talent. While her father, Maurice Hébert, a civil servant, writer, and literary critic, was the one to convince Hébert that her pastime held great possibilities for her, it was through the example and support of her older cousin, Hector de Saint-Denys Garneau, that she published her first volume of poetry



(Russell 2). With her creative writing under the guidance of her cousin, Saint-Denys Garneau's drowning during a solitary canoe trip in 1943 along with the sudden passing of her sister, Marie, in 1952, were two painful events which have made their mark in Hébert's creative conscience so much so that images of drowning and death would poetically "haunt her writing" from that point onwards (Paterson 478).

Beginning to publish stories and poems at the same time other writers of the Quebec literary establishment were actively breaking away from the "artistic straitjacket [of] romans à thèse" (Russell 2) – novels with a political or social message (*Encarta*) – Hébert's contribution to what was to become the Quiet Revolution was not "immediately recognized for what it was" (3) until the publication of her *Poèmes* in 1960 and the second edition of her short story collection, *Le torrent* (*The Torrent*), in 1963 which was "acclaimed as having an explosive and profound relevance to Quebec society" (3). What is particularly significant about *Le torrent* is that Hébert had written it in 1945, the same year fellow French-Canadian author, Gabrielle Roy, published her *Bonheur d'occasion* (*The Tin Flute*) – one of the novels regarded by many as to have helped Quebec move towards "a time of dramatic change that [would see] a radical secularization and a massive socio-economic restructuring of the province" (Santoro 10). The difference between Roy and Hébert, however, lies in the fact that Hébert faced the challenge of finding a publisher who would agree to distribute a short story collection that was found to "contest a repressive and religious climate" (Paterson 479). Unsuccessful, Hébert brought out the first edition of *Le torrent* at her own

expense in 1950, and moved to Paris four years later “to escape the repressive Quebec society of the time and find a more receptive audience for her work” (Skallerup). Although she occasionally returned to Quebec before permanently residing in Montreal before her passing in 2000, Hébert’s life as an “artist in exile” (Russell 3) in no way altered what lay at the heart of her “identité québécoise” (Biron, Dumont, and Nardout-Lafarge 310). In fact, much of Hébert’s literary grace and power are securely embedded in the social realities and history of her home province.

“Characterized by an exploration of new forms of thought and expression [that] heralded new modes of writing in Quebec in both style and content” (Paterson 479), Hébert’s works inevitably bring to the surface human truths which powerfully refuse to be placed in any one particular time and place. The short story “Le torrent,” which shares its name with the collection it is placed in, is based on the true story of a young man who, in an act of rebellion and hopelessness, murders his cruel and officious mother. The former seminarian’s devastating feeling of “dispossession can be viewed as a metaphor for Quebec’s deep sense of alienation at that time” (Paterson 479) and could even be extended to the current situation of Quebec’s continuous desire for sovereignty. *Les chambres de bois* in 1958 (later translated as *The Silent Rooms* by Kathy Mezei in 1974) also explores the need for “spiritual rebirth” (479) in its exploration of the life of Catherine, a young woman whose husband’s artistic turn leads to a desire for his wife to “perfect leisure pursuits and to make herself into a pale masterpiece, the very image of death which [he] seek[s]” (Russell 53).

Catherine's experience of isolation at the hands of her husband and her struggle for re-entry into life is metaphorically intertwined with Hébert's own willingness to break "taboos by delving into the realm of incest and by once again challenging traditional social values" (Paterson 479) through Catherine's actions. Crossing the invisible boundaries through the experimentation of literary forms and the exploration of new themes becomes even clearer in 1975's *Les enfants du sabbat* (*Children of the Sabbath* as translated by C. Dunlop-Hébert in 1977) where Hébert inverts the sacred and profane dichotomy found in religion by dealing with witchcraft present in a convent. Furthermore, *Héloïse*, published in 1980 and translated by Sheila Fischman in 1982, dabbles with the coexistence of the living and the dead in the fantasy world of a blood-thirsty and seductive female vampire – a foil to her earlier work of *Les chambres de bois* in its fascination with death, as well as to her most famous novel, *Kamouraska*.

Published in 1970 and translated three years later into English by Norman Shapiro, *Kamouraska* delves "into the dark and violent side of human passion" (*Kamouraska* back cover) as it reveals the story of Elisabeth d'Aulnières, a beautiful French-Canadian woman of aristocratic descent who marries the squire of Kamouraska, Antoine Tassy. Due to Antoine's love of drink and unruly habits of running off with village girls, their marriage is an unhappy one and Elisabeth leaves to seek refuge in the house where her mother and three aunts had raised her. One day when sick, Elisabeth is visited by George Nelson, an American doctor, who is not only a childhood rival of Antoine's but also becomes Elisabeth's lover and plots Antoine's death with her. When their plans go awry,

Dr. Nelson shoots Antoine and escapes across the border to the United States, leaving Elisabeth to be arrested and interrogated. Elisabeth later emerges from her time in prison with a successful defense due to the poor reputation of Aurélie Caron – the servant who was originally sent by Elisabeth and Dr. Nelson to poison Antoine – and marries Jérôme Rolland, a respectable notary in the city of Quebec, to restore her honour and position in society.

As was found with Margaret Atwood and her historical fiction *Alias Grace*, Hébert's *Kamouraska* is not only based on a true Canadian historical event with the character of Elisabeth founded on Josephte-Joséphine-Eléonore d'Estimauville – she has also allowed the real individuals involved in this dramatic love story to become imagined creatures all her own:

Quoique ce roman soit basé sur un fait réel qui s'est produit au Canada, il y a très longtemps, il n'en demeure pas moins une œuvre d'imagination. Les personnages véritables de ce drame n'ont fait que prêter à mon histoire leurs gestes les plus extérieurs, les plus officiels, en quelque sorte. Pour le reste, ils sont devenus mes créatures imaginaires, au cours d'un lent cheminement intérieur. (Hébert, *Kamouraska* 6)

In recreating the personalities of her characters, Hébert combines her own personal awareness of this incident with a period in Canadian literature which saw an increased fascination in the uncovering of “secrets hidden within written history” (Howells, “Ann-Marie MacDonald” *Where are the Voices Coming From*

53).<sup>21</sup> Through the merging of the personal and the public, Hébert ushers the past that everyone knows into a “contemporary exploration of Canadian identity” (53) while adding more layers to the movement and image of the age-old question of what it means to be Canadian.<sup>22</sup> Despite the changes she has made to the historical recordings in making it her own, it must be noted that Hébert’s adjustments “are relatively few, and serve to create an appropriate psychological background to the drama, as well as to concentrate our attention on the main characters” (Russell 80). Thus, to infuse the past with a meaning that would make it alive and significant for today’s readership accentuates that history does not only belong to those who have lived in it. Rather, the past becomes fluid in allowing the “coming into one’s own present, [where] one is always coming into ‘con-temporal’ being, alongside others in time, and alongside the other times that abut our presentness” (Connor 15). “The contemporary is in part ... a historical marker” (Benson, “Fiction and the Contemporaneity of the Fairy Tale” *Contemporary* 13); and when used as a conceptual frame for the here and now within a body of literature that is youthful in comparison to its English-language counterpart, Quebecois literature has demonstrated its ability to embrace a sense of innovation. As Louise Dupré observes, “[the literature of Quebec] follows the evolution of society in order to adapt to modern realities or, as has often been the case, to foreshadow or precede them” (21). Hébert has accomplished this with

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<sup>21</sup> The writing of *Kamouraska* itself was inspired by Hébert’s family’s discussions of the events which took place between 1838 and 1839, as well as being distantly related to the victim of murder through her mother’s side (Russell 74).

<sup>22</sup> Significantly, during the four years that Hébert took to write her novel (1966-1970) the centennial of the Canadian Confederation occurred in 1967. Undoubtedly, Hébert “received added impetus at this time” (Russell 74) in publishing *Kamouraska*, but the novel’s popularity also emphasized her unwavering interest in society, and in particular, that of the Quebecois.

much poetic poise. In having added to the “collective imagination, which would permit the revision of Quebec’s system of values” (21), she has also provided a place for the fairy tale-fiction dichotomy to exist and for the fairy tale genre’s growth to be traced as it continuously adapts and reflects the progressions of its present society’s ideologies and trends.

### **The Hébertian Way to the Fairy Tale**

Regarded by many a reader to be the greatest novel in Quebecois literature (Paterson 480), *Kamouraska* inevitably contains everything a novel of that recognition should. Full of “la passion démesurée, le meurtre, un seigneur ... un médecin, [et] une héroïne jeune et romanesque” (Brochu 111), *Kamouraska* has given its author enormous success and an international reputation with awards from the Prix des libraires de France and the Grand prix of the Académie royale de langue et de littérature françaises de Belgique (Paterson 480). As touched upon in the previous section of this chapter, *Kamouraska* also records Hébert’s own childhood and family experiences within a historically recorded event. Growing up, Hébert had spent summers in the village of Kamouraska visiting her grandmother, as well as in Sainte-Catherine and Sainte-Foy;<sup>23</sup> and as such, it is of no surprise that she makes allusions to these and other older villages found in Quebec throughout her novel, specifically when Elisabeth traces Dr. Nelson’s winter journey from her aunts’ house in Sorel to the Tassy manor in Kamouraska

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<sup>23</sup> A personal account of Hébert’s memories of her summers at Kamouraska, Sainte-Catherine, and Sainte-Foy can be found in the 28 October 1972 edition of *Le Devoir* entitled “Les étés de Kamouraska et les hivers de Québec.”

– the place of Antoine’s murder – silently to herself and only for her readers to hear in a voyeuristic way.

*Kamouraska* itself is careful to respect the “objective existence of the major characters and events in the historical incident” (Russell 76); however, Hébert’s decision to artistically twist the recorded and remembered account with a deeply human context exploring the unconscious mind allows for the author and her readers to come “to grips with certain concrete and physical realities of Quebec” (76). Through the intertwining of dreams with reality, such a purpose – as expressed by her taking of history’s “brick-by-brick, life-by-life, day-by-day foundations” (Atwood, “In Search of *Alias Grace*” *Moving* 198) and imaginatively building upon them so that the past may speak with new meaning in the present – effectively “recover[s] the lost and silenced voices” (Howells, “Introduction” *Where Are the Voices* ix) that have shaped the contemporariness of Canada thus far. Moreover, Hébert’s awareness of time passing and its inability to return to where it once was provides a significant resemblance to the fairy tale genre and its relations to women’s contemporary fiction.<sup>24</sup>

Contemporary fiction and the fairy tale share a particular trait which has made their merger a successful one during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. To hinge greatly upon the mixing of presents with pasts in order to create an imagined future, the fairy tale-fiction dichotomy not only draws from

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<sup>24</sup> In an interview with Jean Royer, Hébert has stated the following: “I long for a stable, durable world. But at the same time I feel anguish at the thought that it’s a finite world. That things happen only once and then it’s over, it’s gone, it’s obliterated. Even landscapes change. Cities change (look at Quebec City for instance). Nothing is immutable. People grow old. And it will happen to all of us. I’m very conscious of time passing and that it is gone forever. It has made a deep impression on me” (17).

“the legacies of Canadian history” (Howells, “Introduction” *Where Are the Voices* ix) in an act of contemporary renewal and imagination – it also creates a method of transmission and the preservation of heritage. In the case of Quebecois literature, the folktale’s role in establishing a society’s cultural identity is, as discussed by Mary Ann Garnett, highlighted in Jeanne Demers’ definition of the *conte traditionnel*: “On appelle communément conte traditionnel tout conte transmis oralement de génération en génération dans une société donnée dont il est en quelque sorte l’imaginaire collectif et parfois la mémoire” (30; Garnett 303). Although Demers specifically describes the folktale (*conte traditionnel*) in her quotation, the fairy tale (*conte merveilleux*) functions in a comparable manner and has similar origins based in the oral tradition. Notably, it is the transfer of an individual’s or group’s memory to another – whether it be through verbal retellings, or now, as it is re-envisioned in works of fiction – which again promotes the fairy tale genre’s consistent method of survival throughout the centuries and its capacity to adjust to what is considered to be contemporary at the time.

Fittingly, the strength of Quebec’s collective cultural memory comes in part from those who become the “contemporary practitioners” (Garnett 303). An example of this can be seen in the popular tale *le diable à la danse*, more commonly known as the story of Rose Latulipe and the focus of a 2006 study by Jean Du Berger. Written by Aubert de Gaspé in 1837, *le diable à la danse* tells the story of Rose, a young woman who neglects her fiancé in order to dance with a handsome stranger. The stranger convinces her to continue dancing past midnight



when she, as a good Christian, should be doing penance; and when Rose gives him her hand, she is scratched and becomes deathly pale. The local priest, who suspects that Rose is in danger, arrives just in time to prevent the stranger, who is Satan, from carrying her off. Rose's story ends with her entering a convent where she dies five years later and is mourned by her fiancé, father, and the priest who saved her soul (304). In his analysis, Du Berger found that in the nineteenth century *le diable à la danse* had a strong "monitory function aimed at controlling female sexuality" (304) and a promotion of the clergy through the presence of a priestly figure. But as Garnett asks, "What happens, however, when this story is transposed to a secularized Québec at the beginning of the twenty-first century?" (304). Many bleak versions of *le diable à la danse* surrounding drugs and disease have occurred, along with the replacement of religion with science. Yet the original fairy tale's transformation is clearly marked by a need to advance itself while maintaining certain recognizable elements and interpretations in order to assure its "transmission to new generations and the preservation of this important part of Québec's cultural heritage" (306).

Although Hébert does not use this particular *conte merveilleux* directly in the story of *Kamouraska*, the fantastic and magical are nonetheless present through the elements of a handsome but dangerous stranger, the issues of temptation and death, and a beautiful woman in much distress. As Quebec is considered to be the original heart of Canada for Hébert (Russell 74), she is exceptionally familiar with the art of storytelling within her province, as well as

with the literary works and traditions that have emerged there. However, as many have done before her, Hébert also looks back upon her childhood for inspiration:

I was lucky to have had a father who was a writer and literary critic. His main interest was in books written by Quebec authors. I would read all the books he talked about on the radio. And I listened to his lectures of course. In addition to this ambience, there were all the wonderful books you read as a child, the ones that probably mark us the deepest, the books of fantastic adventures and the whole realm of the Imaginary in children's books: Andersen, Green, Poe, and of course the Comtesse de Ségur. You have to dream a lot to write... (Hébert as qtd. by Royer 14-15)

In referring to Hans Christian Andersen – the Danish writer “often regarded as the father of modern fairy tales” (Nikolajeva, “Andersen, Hans Christian.” *The Oxford Companion* 13) – Hébert indicates that she is no outsider to the fairy tale genre and, in particular, to the cruelty and violence which was originally featured in some of Andersen's stories. Even though Andersen will not be focused on in regards to Hébert's use of the fairy tale intertext within contemporary fiction, it is significant to mention this link so as to connect her to the vivid allusions she makes to the fairy tale – specifically, those of French and German origin – throughout *Kamouraska*. In addition, this connection will also place Hébert's voice in a group where the fairy tale intertext is used to remap the “boundaries of what constitutes Canadian fiction” (Howells, “Writing by Women” *The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature* 212) and what establishes this new form in conjunction with the fairy tale genre.

In his study of contemporary fiction and the fairy tale, Stephen Benson places the following authors together in order to establish “both implicitly and via a host of constitutive cross-references, a group of indisputably influential writers of fiction for whom the fairy tale served, and in the case of all but one, continues to serve, as a key point of [aesthetic and ideological] reference”: Robert Coover (1932 – ), A.S. Byatt (1936 – ), Margaret Atwood (1939 – ), Angela Carter (1940 – 92), and Salman Rushdie (1947 – ) (“Fiction and the Contemporaneity of the Fairy Tale” *Contemporary* 2). Having their fictional writings “intimately and variously tied to tales and tale-telling” (2), the above authors have not only created a niche for Jack Zipes’ aforementioned theory of the contamination of the fairy tale where “contemporary writers ... contaminat[e] the Grimm legacy [for instance] while enriching it and forging new concepts of the fairy tale” (“The Contamination of the Fairy Tale” *Sticks and Stones* 108). This fairy tale generation of writers have popularized and centralized the unique results of the intertextual meetings between fairy tale and fiction with much positive success.

Notably, Hébert is not directly mentioned in this special grouping which has also been christened as the Angela Carter generation by Benson due to Carter’s influential contributions to the use of the fairy tale in fictional works.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, in her exploration of new themes and in breaking with the “traditional modes of realistic writing in Québec by juxtaposing and combining real, dreamlike, and unreal elements” (Paterson 479), Hébert may rightly find

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<sup>25</sup> The extensive work Carter has accomplished on the traditions of the fairy tale in her role as author, editor, and critic have been influential in establishing “a late-twentieth-century conception of the tales,” while her writing’s “vibrant and polemic fashion” can be said to provide the foundation for the fairy tale’s current contemporary state (2).

herself alongside Atwood in terms of creativity and, of course, use of fairy tale allusions and stock elements:

Further shattering the image of a unified rational world, [Hébert] frequently delves into supernatural elements by introducing figures of witches (*Les enfants du sabbat*), devils (*Kamouraska*), vampires (*Le tombeau des rois*, *Héloïse*), princes, and fairy godmothers (*Kamouraska*).  
(479-480)

One of the reasons behind Benson's selection of authors is that Coover, Byatt, Atwood, Carter, and Rushdie are all born within the timeframe of the 1930s and 1940s, hence strengthening his argument as to these writers' contributions to the "shifting sense of contemporaneity" ("Fiction and the Contemporaneity of the Fairy Tale" *Contemporary 2*) within the fairy tale-fiction relationship during the later part of the twentieth century. At the same time Canadian literature written in English experienced a "heightened national consciousness [that was] more experimental in approach and universal in theme," French-Canadian literature began its own venture into the intricate theme of human inner nature which ultimately allowed Quebecois writers to shift their focus away from the subjects of religion and patriotism (Stephens). The changes Canadian literature underwent in both official languages nonetheless signify and reflect the current issues and interests of its writers – and although Hébert was not born in the times of Coover, Byatt, Atwood, Carter, and Rushdie, she was continuing to write and was already

publishing from that point onward in a corresponding way.<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, Hébert has generated numerous critical articles and reviews, but unlike the other writers mentioned above, not many have investigated her in the direct sense of the fairy tale or her position as an “Angela Carter generation” participant. Nonetheless, in following with the Quebecois tradition of women being “the guardians of the language [and of] French culture” (Dupré 21), Hébert has managed to not only keep the French spirit alive in an English-speaking world for over three decades – she has also left behind “one of the most impressive and influential bodies of literature ever” (Skallerup) and a legacy of unquestionable originality as resonant today as it was then.

### **Where the Rushes grow at the Water’s Edge: *Kamouraska*’s Fairy Tale Intertext**

Getting its name from the Algonquin word meaning “where the rushes grow at the water’s edge” (Morais), the village of Kamouraska is the epitome of the picturesque with its beautiful sunsets, quaint houses, and tranquil environment. Yet despite the peaceful surface, this village’s history – as is evident on Kamouraska’s tourism website – remains hinged on the one event which Hébert has made even more famous through her hero and heroine, Dr. Nelson and Elisabeth, and their continued obsession to possess an ideal love.<sup>27</sup> As noted in the

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<sup>26</sup> *Kamouraska*’s publication in 1970 fits neatly within, for example, Coover’s *Pricksongs and Descants* (1969), Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), and Atwood’s *The Edible Woman* (1969) and *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1986).

<sup>27</sup> Underneath the history section of Kamouraska’s website, there is an informative account of the village’s development from 1674 to approximately the twenty-first century. It also traces how Achille Taché, the real-life counterpart of Hébert’s Antoine Tassy, became an integral part of Kamouraskian history through a respectable and long family line and ending with the event of his murder.

previous section with the quotation from Janet M. Paterson, Hébert's use of supernatural elements demonstrates that she is no stranger to the inner workings of the fairy tale with princes and fairy godmothers making timely entrances for her troubled leading lady. But whether the prince's fearless valor or the fairy godmothers' protective barriers are enough to secure the happy ending is another story. As Hébert takes historical fact and weaves it into an intricate pattern, French and German fairy tales foreground the use of horror and imagination in Elisabeth's literal and metaphorical journey into darkness and closed spaces signified by marriage and the conventional roles of wife and mother her society expects of its women.

In using the fairy tale in *Kamouraska*, Hébert strongly relies on the knowledge her readership has with tales ranging from the Grimm Brothers' "Little Red Cap" and "Rapunzel" to Perrault's renditions of "Bluebeard" and "Cinderella." Additionally, Hébert also draws upon the natural "interplay between the known and the new: like the good fairy, the presence of customary elements reassures and underpins our daring to defy prohibition and go to the ball" (Sellars 14) – a bold move her female protagonist, Elisabeth, will take and of which will be further discussed below. To trace her heroine's reflective stage in life where an inner awareness begins to ebb away at the romantic airs she carries, Hébert opens her story with Elisabeth in the confines of her present home on Rue du Parloir where her second husband, Jérôme Rolland, lies on his death bed. While the action of Elisabeth's situation occurs only within a few hours, Jérôme's slow but natural death becomes the frame narrative and a stark contrast for the

uncontainable “real drama re-enacted [through Elisabeth’s] dreams and memories [which span] her entire lifetime in places as different as the town of Sorel and the wild landscapes of Kamouraska” (Paterson 480). Elisabeth’s former identities – first as the beautiful and unmarried Mademoiselle d’Aulnières, then as the wedded and murderous widow, Madame Tassy – speak to a large extent of the numerous roles she easily assumes within her lifetime, as well as in the structures of many well-known fairy tales.

Being raised in an idealistically sheltered way by her widowed mother and three aunts in the town of Sorel, Elisabeth has been encouraged from a young age to behave “in conformity with [her mother’s and aunts’] own beliefs of what constitutes social refinement [:] proper dress and religious habits [which prove to] shield [her] from the facts of life and death” (Russell 81). With her mother’s promise of “un collier de perles, pour aller au bal du gouverneur” and her desire to “danser toute la nuit” (*Kamouraska* 64), Elisabeth does not truly realize the hidden intents of her début – the search for a suitable husband, as is constantly repeated in her mother’s voice as she replays the memory in her mind. Although the Governor pays particular attention to Elisabeth in her shimmering dress and uncovered shoulders, he is not the Prince Charming either she or her mother and aunts have in mind for marriage. Instead, it is Antoine Tassy, the fair-haired, blue-eyed squire of Kamouraska, who Elisabeth meets for the first time while out on a hunting trip. Hébert’s artful transition of her heroine from a glamorous ball with glittering chandeliers to being hip-deep in mud and waiting with finger on the trigger for her goose and duck, cleverly reveals the duality of Elisabeth’s persona

as well as the use of Perrault's "Le Petit Chaperon Rouge" or "Little Red Riding Hood."

In Perrault's version of the tale, a village girl, "the prettiest you can imagine" ("Le Petit Chaperon Rouge" 11) and adored by all, is sent into the forest with some cakes for her grandmother. Not long into her journey, Little Red Riding Hood encounters the wolf and is challenged to a race to see who would be the first to reach Grandmother's house. The wolf succeeds; and after devouring the grandmother and assuming her place under the covers of the bed, he convinces Little Red Riding Hood to climb in with him and quickly gobbles her up. Albeit this little girl does not transform into the resourceful "Little Red Cap" where the Brothers Grimm have her place stones in the wolf's belly after being set free by the huntsman, Little Red Riding Hood's unfortunate ending resonates with Elisabeth's marriage to Antoine in two ways: first, in the death of her innocence as she goes from Mademoiselle to Madame; and second, in the amount of physical and emotional violence hidden by Antoine's never-ending pleas for forgiveness. The fact that Elisabeth's and Antoine's first encounter takes place during a hunting trip and not a more elegant or formal event further reiterates the Little Red Riding Hood-wolf relationship which can be seen in the following quotation:

[Antoine comments] 'Quel joli coup de fusil! Vous me semblez bien gaillarde, mademoiselle d'Aulnières?'

Je souris. Gaillarde, je le suis. Tu me devines, Antoine Tassy, et tu me traques, comme un bon chien de chasse. Et moi aussi je te flaire et je te



découvre. Seigneur de Kamouraska. Mauvais gibier. Gibier facile, à demi enfoncé dans une cache de vase, guettant l'oie et le canard, le doigt sur la détente. (*Kamouraska* 66)

On her trail like a good hunting dog, Antoine transforms into Perrault's wolf not only in his admiration of Elisabeth's talent for shooting – which he admits is “rare pour une femme” (66) – but also in conversing with Elisabeth during the hunt with the secret intention of securing her hand in marriage. Their discussion and actions are not unlike Little Red Riding Hood's first encounter in the forest with the smooth-talking wolf where he interrogates her in order to fully catch her in the end. As such, Antoine momentarily disguises his true self behind the reputation of a *vieille famille*, much land, and enviable privilege – the weakness of this society's search for a woman's security in life through marrying well – just as the wolf, in his second meeting with Little Red Riding Hood, dons her grandmother's clothing to create a false sense of security and trust.

Nevertheless, as the moral from Perrault's tale states, pretty, well-bred, and genteel young girls “are wrong to listen to just anyone” (“Le Petit Chaperon Rouge” 13); and for Elisabeth, it includes the mother who sends her off into the forest with little to no advice. Through Madame d'Aulnières' wish to have nothing more than an excellent match for her daughter, Elisabeth is literally placed between the paws of the wolf with his promise of wealth and a good name. Moreover, there is little room for Elisabeth's own growing intuition to save her from experiencing Antoine's voracious appetite until it is too late. Similar to the implied concern Little Red Riding Hood feels when she questions her

“Grandmother” as to why she suddenly has such big ears, eyes, and teeth, Elisabeth senses that Antoine is a scoundrel and her thoughts are confirmed when she sees her fiancé with another woman before their wedding:

Voyou. Beau seigneur. Sale voyou. Je vous ai bien vu dans la rue. Mary Fletcher, une prostituée. Seigneur! Son manteau rouge. Ses cheveux carotte. Et vous triste sire qui la suiviez sur le trottoir, comme un sale petit mouton. Vers son grand lit, aux draps souillés. Ah! je l’ai bien devinée, avec quel coup au ventre, la fête effrontée entre vous deux. Moi, moi, l’innocente. Elisabeth d’Aulnières, jeune fille à marier. (*Kamouraska* 68)

Elisabeth takes pride in her marriageability and confronts Antoine about his behavior, but the image of this woman dressed in red from head to toe surprisingly unsettles her own position of innocence as it will foreshadow her exact figure in the beautiful cherry-red velvet dress worn to the ball at Saint-Ours while accompanied by Dr. Nelson, as well as the gown she tempts Aurélie, her maid, in exchange for accepting the responsibility of the murderous deed to be done at Kamouraska.

As such, Elisabeth is not as harmless as she continuously declares herself to be. Albeit during the hunting scene it is Antoine who appears to be the hunter with his gentle words and admiring glances, Elisabeth’s comment of “Et moi aussi je te flaire et je te découvre” (*Kamouraska* 66) on pages 90 and 91 emphasizes that she is simultaneously tracking Antoine down in a cunning manner and can pull the trigger anytime she pleases. However, she does not. The

thrill of the hunt – “Et moi j’aime la chasse. Et j’irai à la chasse” (65) – and the challenge of making Antoine show her the respect “une jeune fille à marier” (66) deserves are attractive to her and all the more part of the perfect Sleeping Beauty wish “les trois fées de [son] enfance” (185), Elisabeth’s three aunts, have crafted to ensure her future.<sup>28</sup>

Their marriage, however, falls short of the expected storybook ending as Elisabeth becomes unromantically trapped behind the walls and windows of Kamouraska “with her harsh mother-in-law, who, with no illusions about her son, spends much of her life either turning a blind eye to his misdeeds or covering them up” (Noble 41). Indeed, Madame Tassy’s words of advice to her new daughter-in-law are at once sensible and disturbingly passive:

Ma fille il faut que je vous dise. Mon fils est un bon garçon. Seulement il fait de petites fêtes de temps en temps. Je ne vous demande pas de vous habituer. Moi-même je n’y suis jamais parvenue ... Il s’agit de conserver ses distances avec tout ce qui est choquant et grossier. Ignorer tout simplement. Ceux qui vous disent que la vie est belle ne font pas autrement. Mettez-vous bien cela dans la tête et vous serez heureuse. Quoi que mon fils fasse contre vous, sa femme. (*Kamouraska* 77)

The key to happiness, according to Antoine’s mother, is to ignore the coarse and the shocking – an enchantment which her and the beauty of Kamouraska fail to

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<sup>28</sup> Aunts Adélaïde, Luce-Gertrude, and Angélique are consistently present at key moments in Elisabeth’s life. For example, when Elisabeth runs away from Antoine and Kamouraska, the three sisters declare that they should “‘garderons la Petite ici [Sorel]. Bien à l’abri avec ses enfants. Quant à son mari...’ ‘Qu’il retourne chez sa mère à Kamouraska!’ (*Kamouraska* 97). Additionally, after Antoine’s murder Aunt Adélaïde accompanies Elisabeth as she attempts to flee the police.

protect Elisabeth from.<sup>29</sup> Paradoxically, Elisabeth feels that she herself has become “une tour, la tour prend garde” (78) in watching her husband run off to Quebec with silly little village girls while she remains behind and pregnant with their first child. This imagery subverts the Grimm Brothers’ Rapunzel tale to represent Elisabeth’s ability to see her body as a fortress and to defy Antoine by refusing to repetitively let down her braided hair as a sign of forgiveness.

Safe once again in the Sorel home of her mother and aunts after fleeing from Kamouraska, Elisabeth now has a clearer perspective on what her marriage to Antoine entails; but her disappointment allows her to daydream “about extravagantly romantic passion” (Russell 80) when she encounters the American doctor, George Nelson. Delighting in the anger he displays when he sees the bruises on her arms from Antoine’s violent love-making, Dr. Nelson fills Elisabeth “with a violent passion” (Noble 42) which marks her transformation from the figure of Little Red Riding Hood to that of the wolf. With her body enrobed in a fur coat and her hands covered by fur-lined mittens, Elisabeth pays a deliberate visit to Dr. Nelson’s office in the hopes of drawing out a confession of his love for her. After being revived from her faint with a glass of water, it is undeniable that Dr. Nelson is trying to resist falling prey to Elisabeth’s pleading:

‘Vous savez très bien que je suis malheureuse...’

Tout son visage tressaille. Il parle bas, pourtant sans me regarder.

Il me rejette. Ses paroles, une à une. Comme des pierres.

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<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, Madame Tassy has two club feet of which she places in high-button shoes specially made for her – a reference to Hans Christian Andersen, whose fairy tales feature deformed feet. Marina Warner discusses feet as a fairy tale motif in more detail in her chapter “The Glass Paving and the Secret Foot” (*From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and their Tellers*, London: Vintage, 1995).

‘Je ne peux rien pour vous, Elisabeth. Je ne suis qu’un étranger...’

Nos ombres énormes sure le mur, distantes l’une de l’autre. Une sorte de désert se creusant entre nous. Le silence. Le vide. George s’éloigne de moi à nouveau. Comment faire pour le rejoindre? (*Kamouraska* 121)

Although she adamantly loves him in a way she has never experienced with Antoine, the fur-lined Elisabeth is the greatest threat to Dr. Nelson who, it may be said, adopts Elisabeth’s former spot as Little Red Riding Hood. Perrault’s moral – “But watch out if you haven’t learned that tame wolves / Are the most dangerous of all” (“Little Red Riding Hood” 13) – speaks most clearly of Elisabeth’s quiet but manipulative ways.

Elisabeth’s controlling powers as a beautiful temptress and seductress successfully wins over Dr. Nelson as is evident in his gallant invitation for her to accompany him in his sleigh to the ball at Saint-Ours – an offer that is socially unsuitable for a married woman and an unmarried man. To be in society’s good praises, though, is nothing in comparison to being “la plus heureuse des femmes” (*Kamouraska* 129); and as Elisabeth dons her cherry-red velvet party dress, she can only think of her “cœur fou d’amour” (131). Notably, the colour of Elisabeth’s dress will stain her literally and metaphorically like Lady Macbeth’s inability to clean the invisible blood stains from her hands, or the unwashable stain on the key Bluebeard gives his wife for safe keeping. But for now, Antoine is still alive, and bursts into her bedroom after running about town with a woman by the name of Horse Marine. Forbidding her to go to the ball, Antoine not only turns into the evil stepmother of the Grimm Brothers’ “Cinderella” in another

gender reversal by Hébert, but also grimly violent as he strikes Elisabeth out of anger before leaving again. Recovering from her pain, Elisabeth shrewdly reveals Antoine's actions to Dr. Nelson once she is safe inside his sleigh:

Je regarde avec avidité le visage de George. Une pâleur grise lui blanchit les lèvres. Comme celles des morts. Je voudrais l'apaiser, m'excuser de l'avoir réduit à une telle extrémité de rage. Et, en meme temps, une joie extraordinaire se lève en moi. Me fait battre le cœur de reconnaissance et d'espoir. Toute haine épousée, me voice liée à cet homme, dans une seule passion sauvage. (133)

Fittingly, both Elisabeth and Dr. Nelson are dressed in furs for their sleigh ride – “Sous les robes de fourrure” (133) – and as Dr. Nelson leaps to his feet and brings the whip crashing down upon his black horse, it is almost as if Elisabeth's wolfish aura has transferred to Dr. Nelson himself. Lying on their backs together in the snow with the sleigh upturned and the horse covered from the cold, the relationship between Elisabeth and Dr. Nelson is no longer strictly a patient and doctor one as a hatred for Antoine embeds itself in their growing passion for each other – and as they enter the Saint-Ours ball side by side and wet with snow, there is a new-found sense of wolfish fluidity as it is Elisabeth who “parviens avec peine à enlever mon manteau de fourrure, à me dégager des écharpes de laine” (135) and not Dr. Nelson.

As a man of medicine, Dr. Nelson embodies at once the doctor, judge, and executioner triad mentioned with *Alias Grace's* Dr. Jordan in Chapter Two. The difference between the two men, however, lies in the ruling and carrying forward

of the issues surrounding life and death, as well as the sense of heroism which takes its form through a sense of duty. For Dr. Nelson, his animosity towards Antoine arises first out of sympathy for the physical mistreatment Elisabeth receives from her husband, and secondly in his attempt to keep his emotions controlled as his and Elisabeth's affair continues to grow. The convenient appearance of Dr. Nelson at a time when Elisabeth becomes a damsel in distress focuses the function of a handsome Prince Charming upon him – he is the only one in her eyes who can offer the dangerous and elusive promise of freedom with a single kiss. Momentarily, Dr. Nelson's faith in his respectable title and profession allows him to “exercise [his] public role [as] the fighter against evil, sickness, and superstition” (Russell 83). However, all of this is shaken when his sister Catherine, the Ursuline nun, renounces her faith in God and turns to him – as a representative of the scientific world – to save her from impending death:

‘Ce n’est pas le temps de prier! Docteur, sauvez-moi!’

... Catherine des Anges meurt dans ce cri ... George quitte le couvent.

Comme un fou. Son cheval lancé à fond de train. Il rentre à Sorel. Je

l’entends qui vient vers moi. Ce cri insupportable dans son oreille et la

mienne. ‘Docteur, sauvez-moi!’ (*Kamouraska* 167)

According to Delbert W. Russell, Catherine's loss of faith is the final event needed to “swing the balance in favor of science, to convince George that there is no God, that man alone is responsible for life and death.” (83). Indeed, Dr. Nelson's inability to save his sister causes him to be disillusioned in the faith of

his own profession and even more reckless in the life he has irreversibly intertwined with Elisabeth as he agrees to her proposal of murder.

In his growing conviction that Antoine deserves to die, Dr. Nelson becomes the judge in choosing maid Aurélie to carry out Elisabeth's wish of putting an end to her husband's life once and for all. With Elisabeth's encouragement to "débarrasser le plus rapidement possible de la mort de Catherine des Anges et de toute mort consommée ou à venir" (*Kamouraska* 170), Dr. Nelson helps Elisabeth put her plans into place by first giving her ample time to work on lessening Aurélie's defenses through glasses of port, delicious cakes, offers of ribbons in red and green, and the beautiful red velvet dress she had admired when Elisabeth was preparing for the Saint-Ours ball. Upon his entrance, Dr. Nelson puts a twist upon the heroic huntsman who saves the day in the Grimm Brothers' "Little Red Cap" by not arriving to save Aurélie from Elisabeth-the-wolf, but in joining his love to secure the maid's services.<sup>30</sup> His appearance, with a "barbe de trois jours fait des ombres bleues sure ses joues" (*Kamouraska* 172), is also strikingly reminiscent of the one found in Perrault's "Bluebeard."

Perrault's version of the legendary Bluebeard tale begins with a man who has the misfortune of possessing a blue beard which "[makes] him look so ugly and frightful that women and girls alike fled at the sight of him" ("Bluebeard"

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<sup>30</sup> Dr. Nelson's entrance into the room where Elisabeth convinces Aurélie to poison Antoine for her is described as follows: "Quelqu'un est entré dans la pièce. Quelqu'un qu'on n'attendait pas si tôt et qui est là soudain avec nous. A bout de souffle. Après une longue course" (*Kamouraska* 171). In this section, Hébert also makes an allusion to another Andersen tale, "The Marsh King's Daughter," through Elisabeth's fear of falling into the power of the Marsh King: "Dans une si horrible nuit quelqu'un me souffle que le roi de la vase vient vers moi. Me traînera par les cheveux, me roulera avec lui dans des fondrières énormes, pour me noyer. Je parviens à maintenir le feu dans la cheminée au prix d'incroyables efforts. Le bois ne prend plus et emplît la chambre de fumée. Je crois que j'ai bu trop de porto" (*Kamouraska* 171).



144). After approaching his neighbor, a respectable lady with two beautiful daughters, Bluebeard holds a week-long party in order to attract one of the sisters' admirations. He succeeds in obtaining the consent for marriage of the youngest sister, and it is not long before she finds herself settled in her new home. A month after they are married, Bluebeard travels away to take care of some urgent business, but not before entrusting his wife with the household keys. Encouraging her to use all of the keys except the one which leads to a small room at the end of the long passage on the lower floor, Bluebeard departs and his wife hosts a large party. Unable to resist the temptation of the key, the wife leaves her party guests to enter the forbidden room. Shocked to find the bodies of several dead women hanging on the wall, she drops the key and it obtains a stain that she, try as she might, fails to remove. Bluebeard returns the next day, and in discovering the stained key, attempts to behead his wife. She is finally rescued by her sister, Sister Anne, and their two brothers who arrive just before Bluebeard is able to chop off her head.

The parallels of the "Bluebeard" tale and handsome but fierce character of Dr. Nelson are synonymous. Not only does love and violence intertwine with his appearance of heroism and gentleness – his sudden lust for finally being able to give Antoine what he deserves is not unlike the rage Bluebeard unleashes when his secret is discovered by his wife. In fact, Dr. Nelson explicitly states that there is nothing he hates more than being found out, as is confirmed when Elisabeth reveals that she has seen and heard him riding beneath her windows every night: “‘Vous n’auriez pas dû me dire cela, Elisabeth. Vous n’auriez pas dû. Apprenez

que je ne crains rien tant que d'être découvert...'" (*Kamouraska* 121).

Furthermore, to have Dr. Nelson's face partly covered by the dark blue shadows of a growing beard as quoted on page 98, Hébert accentuates her hero's evolution into the murderer he will become when Aurélie fails to completely poison Antoine with the vials he provides her with:

Noir sur blanc. Barbe, cheveux, yeux, cœur (ah! surtout le cœur), noir, noir, noir, le cheval et le traîneau. Et la neige blanche, aveuglante, sous tes pas, jusqu'au bout du chemin. De tous les chemins. Là où l'horizon bascule sur le vide. Tuer un homme à la limite de ce vide. Se maintenir en équilibre au bord du gouffre. Le temps nécessaire pour ajuster son arme et tirer. Un gallon de sang, environ, pas beaucoup plus, à verser. Tu es médecin et connais ces choses. Ta familiarité avec la naissance et la mort n'a de comparable ... (*Kamouraska* 187)

With the blue significantly turned to a colour representing loss of life and a sign of mourning, Dr. Nelson's image of darkness completes his role as the ultimate dealer in the game of life and death: he now fully possesses the roles and responsibilities of the doctor-judge-executioner triangle. In spite of this, such power comes at a price. As determined by his winter journey to Kamouraska over the roads of hardened snow and without a change of horses, Dr. Nelson obtains his "mains d'assassin" (*Kamouraska* 148) in a beastly, almost inhuman way.

According to Peter Noble, Dr. Nelson's trip "into the heart of destruction, into the moral void, [is] beyond humanity" and he becomes inhuman in committing the murder "which was not as neat as his scientific training had made

him think” (85). Thus, when Antoine’s murder is complete and the stains of blood linger on the sleigh and in his memory, Dr. Nelson emerges a changed man from what he once thought was a valiant show of his love for Elisabeth. It is true that Dr. Nelson takes satisfaction in his mission to “délivrer la princesse suppliciée, terrasser le dragon féroce qui la tient captive. Justice, justice, justice... Antoine Tassy mérite la mort. Il réclame la mort” (*Kamouraska* 161). But this feeling is based upon the rationale that “the more he saves lives, the more he has the right to take one” (Russell 84). The knightly Dr. Nelson’s moral erosion is deeply contrasted by Elisabeth’s sense of romanticism as she envisions Antoine’s death as an old fashioned duel complete with much blood and smoking weapons:

Bien qu’il soit peu probable que mon mari provoque mon amant en duel, nous choisissons avec soin un pré, en bordure de la forêt. Imaginons à loisir le petit matin. La lumière tremblante sur la rosée. Les chemises blanches. ... La boîte noire du chirurgien. Le choix des armes. Les lourds pistolets brillants. Les quinze pas réglementaires. La détonation brutale dans l’air sonore. La brève célébration de la mort. La fumée dissipée, on découvre le vainqueur, tête découverte. Debout en plein champ. L’arme fumante au poing. Il contemple d’un œil ahuri son adversaire, étendu sur le pré. Justice est faite. Voici l’épouse en larmes. Courant à perdre haleine dans l’herbe mouillée, Ses souliers sont trempés. Elle relève ses jupes pour mieux courir. Crie avec l’accent inimitable des veuves: ‘Mais c’est mon mari! Vous avez tué mon mari!’ Pauvre Antoine, c’est fait ... Ton sang

répandu ... Si par malheur, le cœur déchiré d'une balle, c'était le tien,  
amour? J'en mourrais. (*Kamouraska* 145-146)

The real murder, of course, is anything but idealistic; however, the mixed reactions Elisabeth expresses in regard to Antoine's death – "But that's my husband! You've killed my husband!" which is quickly followed by an unsympathetic "Poor Antoine, it's finished" – displays that her "heart is harder than any rock" (Perrault, "Bluebeard" 146) and will mimic the ways in which she defends herself in front of the jury. With Antoine associated with death in marriage and Dr. Nelson symbolic of elusive liberation, Elisabeth, in a sense, rescues herself in selecting Dr. Nelson to take up battle with the "dragon" – demanding the impossible when she knows their all-consuming passion will drive him forward to complete the task.

But she, too, leaves her favourite hero scathed as she assumes Bluebeard-esque qualities. In the words of Perrault's "Bluebeard" moral, "Curiosity, in spite of its many charms, / Can bring with it serious regrets; / You can see a thousand examples of it every day / Women succumb, but it's a fleeting pleasure; / As soon as you satisfy it, it ceases to be. / And it always proves very, very costly" (148). Elisabeth's idea of murder is but "a fleeting pleasure;" and although she longs to "tuer mon mari avec lui [Dr. Nelson]" (*Kamouraska* 197), she may only do so through a violent memory which openly admits her involvement to the reader. The coldness in Elisabeth's manner of speaking and thinking draws attention to the way in which she chooses to move on after Dr. Nelson returns across the border and is exiled from Canada. Just as the wife of Bluebeard "banish[es] the

memory of the miserable days she had spent with [her husband]” (“Bluebeard” 148) at the end of Perrault’s tale, Elisabeth denies any recollection of Dr. Nelson when she is on trial:

La tête dans les mains. [Dr. Nelson] s’est mis à pleurer, dans une grande agitation de tous ses membres, de tout son corps. Je n’ai jamais vu, de ma vie, un homme dans un tel désespoir. Il a ajouté: ‘*It is that damned woman that has ruined me.*’

Vous parlez en langue étrangère, docteur Nelson. Non, je ne connais pas cet homme! Je suis Elisabeth d’Aulnières, épouse en premières noces d’Antoine Tassy, seigneur assassiné de Kamouraska, épouse en seconds noces de Jérôme Rolland, notaire de Québec ...

(*Kamouraska* 244)

Elisabeth greatly contradicts herself in both identifying with the heaviness of Dr. Nelson’s deed and in disassociating herself from him as she stands in front of the jury, refusing to admit her knowledge to the many witnesses who saw Dr. Nelson after Antoine’s murder. As “la petite femelle blonde et rousse pour laquelle tu as provoqué la mort” (237), Elisabeth – who speaks the above quotation aloud to her readers – attempts to “exorciser le passé par la force du présent” (Harvey 16); and the furiousness she feels in having been left behind by the man she loves is not unlike when Bluebeard finds that his wife has entered the forbidden room.

Elisabeth’s mention of her second husband, Jérôme Rolland, confirms that, although her hands are stained with blood only she can see, she has regained

respectable stature and responsibility in society as the perfect wife and mother figure:

Quelle femme admirable vous avez, monsieur Rolland. Huit enfants et une maison si bien tenue. Et puis voici que depuis que vous êtes malade la pauvre Elisabeth ne sort plus. Elle ne quitte pas votre chevet. Quelle créature dévouée et attentive, une vraie sainte, monsieur Rolland. Et jolie avec ça, une princesse. L'âge, le malheur et le crime ont passé sur votre épouse comme de l'eau sur le dos d'un canard. Quelle femme admirable.  
(*Kamouraska* 15)

With such comments, it would seem as if Elisabeth has been cleansed of her past – at least, in the eyes of society. In marrying Jérôme, Elisabeth's vice resurfaces and “Madame Rolland is waiting not only for the death of her husband but also for some revelation that is to come in the wake of that event” (Purdy 114). Jérôme is aware that he has given Elisabeth a second chance at life – to redeem herself from an “earthly damnation” (Russell 89) – however, he cannot completely rid her of the deathly aura she possesses. In taking care of him, Jérôme lives in constant fear that Elisabeth will be the one to miscount how many drops of medicine there must be on his lump of sugar, or to place poison in his glass of water:

Il ne faut pas que je boive une seule gorgée quand elle est là. Non. Rien quand elle est là. Elle me tuera. Surtout qu'elle ne me prépare pas mes gouttes elle-même! Voir le sucre se mouiller, se teindre peu à peu, pendant

que cette femme presse le compte-gouttes. Non, non, je ne le supporterai pas. Plutôt mourir tout de suite. (*Kamouraska* 15)

Elisabeth, who has lived the past eighteen years trying to conform to her society's expectations and has given up her identity to Jérôme to do this, is shocked to discover that he has never truly trusted her. Even though Jérôme can never offer her the love Dr. Nelson did, he can and does provide her with the protection she needs from "the violence of the world outside" (Nobel 44) in a way that Antoine failed to do. As such, Jérôme becomes offended when he discovers that Elisabeth escapes his approaching death by reliving the passionate and cruel memories of her past. Elisabeth's inattention arouses his desire to punish her through his boasts of dying a natural death with a clear conscience. Nonetheless, Elisabeth will never fully escape the violence and death of her past with her thoughts and memories being an eternal punishment; and the gentle figure she appears to be as she holds Jérôme's hand "is a striking response to the fantasy of herself in which she indulged at the beginning of the novel" (Russell 90). Rather than believe that she will be able to continue to attract the attentions of the men who see her as she did in her youth, Elisabeth now envisions herself as isolated with "des portes fermées et le désert de terre battue dont sont faites les rues" (*Kamouraska* 246). There is simply nothing left for Elisabeth to do but "mourir de faim et de solitude" (246) as Bluebeard does in being stabbed by his wife's two brothers with no emotion but hatred from them.

## Conclusion

In examining the places where Canadian women writers Margaret Atwood and Anne Hébert purposefully intertwine fairy tale elements with their contemporary fictions, my thesis reveals that the fairy tale intertext has become a useful strategy for the articulation of the female narrative voice and sense of agency in twentieth and twenty-first century writings. For many writers, it is nostalgia which brings them back into the realm of the forgotten fairy tale from childhood; while for others, it is a chance to “reconfirm – and sometimes simultaneously to resist *and* reaffirm – the boundaries of gender and the masculine authority associated with older fairy tales” (Haase, “Feminist Fairy-Tale Scholarship” *Fairy Tales and Feminism* xiii). The question of female subjectivity in relation to the treatment of gender, the fascination with history, and the constant changes in cultural and societal boundaries all contribute to the reception, interpretation, and manipulation of the fairy tale when placed in fiction. As Linda Anderson observes in her article, “The Re-Imagining of History in Contemporary Women’s Fiction”:

The uses women are currently making of fiction, where a greater freedom could be said to exist ... suggests that something more is at stake: a powerful desire for women to exist historically in the world, to be more than textually present. (131)

Anderson’s comment fits neatly into the contemporary woman writer’s use of the fairy tale intertext to advance her own goals within a genre that has not always allowed her to “talk about power, violence, alienation, social conditions, [and gender] roles” (Zipes *Don’t Bet on the Prince* 2). Most of these concepts are used



in conjunction with the constructs of a female agency and narrative voice in order to further articulate the premeditated choices Atwood and Hébert have made in using the fairy tale intertext to shape their protagonists, Grace Marks and Elisabeth d'Aulnières, into women who are in charge of their lives.

In Chapter 1, my focus on the fairy tale genre's movement from that of the oral tradition to one encompassing print emphasizes the fairy tale's ability to embrace, as well as become accustomed to, the changing interests of its current society. The strength in staying power exhibited by classic fairy tales such as "Little Red Riding Hood," "Cinderella," "Bluebeard," and "Rapunzel" maintains a universal significance and relevance which is capable of being adjusted according to the current interests and ideals of its society. The misconception that the fairy tale is simple, uncomplicated, and strictly for children has become a thought of the past; and its placement in contemporary women's fiction has resulted in the fairy tale genre being "considerable and remarkably diversified" (Bacchilega, "North American and Canadian fairy tales" *Oxford Companion* 350). My discussion of Roger Luckhurst and Peter Marks' definition of the contemporary – to have the times of past and present joined together in order to create an imagined future – ultimately foregrounds the structure of the fairy tale intertext itself. In its ability to attract and maintain an audience's attention despite ceaseless transformations in cultural, social, and sociohistorical areas, the fairy tale intertext has supplied writers with a storehouse of characters and plots to be reworked and re-imagined. Jack Zipes' theory of the contamination of the fairy tale promotes the use of the fairy tale's intertextual meeting with contemporary

fiction on a positive level where the blending of both creates a hybrid-like text that is charged with newer, more relevant meanings.

With the introduction of Margaret Atwood and her novel, *Alias Grace*, Chapter 2 examines how the concepts and theories of contemporary fairy tale scholarship apply to the enigmatic character of Grace Marks. Whether Grace is truly responsible for the murders of Mr. Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery remains unsolved; but it is Atwood's modification of an historical event with a fairy tale intertext which puts a new twist on Grace's past. The eight fairy tale intertextual methods that critic Sharon Rose Wilson has found Atwood to use in her writings provides a clearly subversive view to *Alias Grace* and the art of storytelling.

Atwood's decision to incorporate specific themes, motifs, and characters from the Brothers Grimm tales of "Fitcher's Bird," "Little Red Cap," "The Robber Bridegroom," and "Rapunzel" furthers her characterization of Grace. Atwood consciously approaches a form of female agency and recovery of the woman's narrative voice that is significant in leading her protagonist towards a duplicity most recognized in her voiced and unvoiced thoughts. In going back in history and extracting the figure and persona of Grace, Atwood not only problematizes her protagonist's inherent duplicity in looks, appearance, and mannerisms with the fairy tale intertext – she also enforces Zipes' contamination of the fairy tale theory to show that her borrowing from the Brothers Grimm is in fact an echo of what the two brothers did themselves in gathering tales for their collection.

"Guilty" of eliminating any sign of specific nation, character, or locality within the tales they had heard, the Grimm Brothers' modifications were done so as to

achieve relevance under their current society's sense of morals, ideals, and customs. Atwood performs a similar act by using the Brothers Grimm tales within the story of Grace, thus allowing her historical character to achieve further relevance for the contemporary fiction's renewed interest in the past.

My comparative method of analyzing the fairy tale intertext within contemporary fiction is further emphasized in Chapter 3 with French-Canadian writer Anne Hébert and her novel, *Kamouraska*. In retelling the story of her character of Elisabeth d'Aulnières, Hébert has been careful to show an appreciation for the real-life individual, Josephte-Joséphine-Eléonore d'Estimauville, caught in the murder of her husband and desire for an ideal love never to be achieved. According to Paul Raymond Côté:

Contes de fées, sorcellerie, démonologie, délires fantastiques, voilà quelques-uns des éléments auxquels recourt, de façon systématique, Anne Hébert pour nous communiquer sa vision intérieure. (99)

Known for her rejection of the traditional modes of writing which existed at the time of her writing, Hébert has expressed "intense feelings of alienation, estrangement, and violence" (Paterson 479) in her interior vision of the dark and tragic experiences of life. For Elisabeth, her attempt to erase the murder of her husband, Antoine, the squire of Kamouraska, after being married for eighteen years to her second husband, Jérôme Rolland, is psychologically and emotionally impossible. Elisabeth's struggle to revive her honour after the death of her first husband, and her self-imposed obedience to the conventions of her society soften the more spirited side she had possessed during her youth. Hébert's use of both

German and French fairy tales authored by the Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault allows Elisabeth to develop a sense of female agency through the memories which recover her female narrative voice. The interplay between fairy tale and fiction is used by Hébert to foreground Elisabeth's multiple identities, which range from that of wife and mother, to the wolfish nature of Little Red Riding Hood's pursuer and the merciless, cold-hearted Bluebeard.

"The fact that stories are always retold, reread, [and] that narrative is a repeating form for discourse" (Kroeber 3) is an observation most fitting to the unique intertextual meeting that has emerged from the fairy tale genre's use in contemporary women's fiction. Cyclical in nature, Kroeber's three Rs – to retell, reread, and repeat – encourages readers and writers to explore new texts and ways of writing as our sense of what is contemporary continuously shifts towards the future. It is my hope that the observances made in this thesis will further the conversation of the female narrative voice and agency created through the fairy tale's expanding relationship with fiction "in which repetition is unique" (3).

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