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Margaret Atwood’s *The Testaments* as a Dystopian Fairy Tale

Karla-Claudia Csürös

Introduction

Ever since its publication in 1985, Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* has been not only controversial, mainly for its subject matter and real-life inspiration, but also extremely popular, even to this day, thanks to its eponymous critically acclaimed TV show, whose success, alongside recent political developments in the United States, prompted Atwood to write a much-anticipated sequel, which she published in 2019 under the title *The Testaments*. This study will focus on both novels’ extensive use of fairy tale imagery and tropes in the creation of its dystopian world.

There have been many studies which explore the fairy tale elements found in some of Margaret Atwood’s novels. Fiona Tolan talks about *Surfacing* and *The Blind Assassin* in the context of gothic fairy tales. W. J. Keith examines the various (mis)interpretations of “Bluebeard’s Egg” as a meta-fairy tale. Essays from *Once Upon a Time: Myth, Fairy Tales and Legends in Margaret Atwood’s Writings* discuss a multitude of Atwood’s novels, with a brief mention of *The Handmaid’s Tale* being made in Scheckels’ article. To the best of my knowledge, only one researcher has analyzed *The Handmaid’s Tale* in terms of fairy tales: Sharon R. Wilson in *Margaret Atwood’s Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*.

Nonetheless, this study focuses on its sequel, *The Testaments*. Given
the fact that it was just published, it is hardly surprising that there is no research available on *The Testaments* yet, let alone any interpretation of the fairy tale-inspired mythos of Gilead. This paper aims to show that the fairy tale elements present in Margaret Atwood’s *The Testaments* are used on two levels: a textual one and a meta-textual one. On a textual level, fairy tale elements are repurposed by the Gileadean authorities to enforce specific gender roles. On a meta-textual level, Atwood rewrites traditional fairy tales in a postmodern feminist key to comment on socio-political aspects of womanhood.

The Dystopian Fairy Tale

To define the dystopian fairy tale, a few key concepts will be introduced and linked to the fairy tale and dystopian literature, which are then analyzed in the context of postmodernism and the feminist movement. The fairy tale is defined by Bacchielega as a transitional genre between folklore and literature, a “literary appropriation” of the folk tale, which still resembles the latter in terms of orality, tradition, and performance (3). Propp observes that many fairy tales share similar structural patterns, which he then classified into 31 functions. Propp summarizes each function with a title (e.g., function II “interdiction”), then offers a brief explanation of the trope. While they do not generally occur at the same time and in the same order, Propp's functions of the fairy tale offer an empirical approach to identifying fairy tale elements in other writings, which will become relevant later in this study. The main purpose of the fairy tale is to present a hero’s journey as he explores quests and meets character types to develop “social
codes, norms, and values” in the “civilizing process” of children (Zipes 14). The fairy tale must suppress disorder to achieve order, reflecting its utopian tendencies (15).

If fairy tales reflect the human need of an ideal life and are concerned with attaining a model society through its civilizing purpose, utopias envision a perfect world. Following the horrors of the twentieth century, such idealism is harder to sustain, leading to the emergence of the dystopian narrative (Moylan xi). Schlobin suggests that utopias and dystopias are created as antithetical responses to the same issues. He claims that, while utopias depict a dream society and “the reverie of the ideal world to escape” real-life concerns, dystopias empathize with the oppressed and “satirize the impotency of the will to free itself” (14-15). Taking this argument further, it becomes evident that dystopias and fairy tales share some fundamental features: both are presented as cautionary tales whose main purpose is to scrutinize societal standards by having an individual challenge an entire system (Coste 95).

Social issues present in dystopias mirror and magnify the faults of different socio-political systems, often presenting totalitarian oppression (Booker 19-21). Postmodern dystopias change the paradigm from a distant future to the present and critique pop culture, conformity, technology, gender identity and more. A type of literature that soared in popularity in the 21st century is that of Young Adult (YA) dystopias, i.e., narratives created with a younger (often female) audience in mind, catering to their specific interests and seeking to empower them (Coste 99). Feminist dystopias, which includes Margaret Atwood’s *The Testaments*, are another postmodern
subgenre that focuses on gender inequality. Feminist dystopias employ post-modern strategies such as parody, irony, intertextuality, and subversion to deconstruct and critique patriarchal representations of women (Bacchielega 152).

The dystopian fairy tale develops as a mixture of both feminist and YA dystopian literature. Coste defines the dystopian fairy tale in relation to Propp’s trope of the hero’s journey, in which the focus is shifted from the experience of an individual to raising society-wide awareness needed to enact change (95). In other words, the hero no longer acts in his or her own interest against the regime, but rather for the “greater good.” Such narratives are concerned with social activism, rape culture, the problematic nature of romance and female embodiment, highlighting feminist concerns by placing them against an oppressive dystopian background. Dystopian fairy tales “call upon a long history of feminist fairy tale subversion” and empower girls through narratives that highlight the significance of female agency (95-96).

As dystopian fairy tales are postmodern, subversion is one of its main features. One manner of subversion is metafiction, a type of writing which highlights its own artifice to examine and critique the relationship between reality and fiction (Waught 2). The “meta” of metafiction can then be extended to meta-fairy tale, identified by Wilson as a “text […] about fairy tales [that] uses straight or deconstructed fairy tale form or style (including structure, language, characterization)” (31). Meta-fairy tales are thus achieved through intertextuality, defined by Roland Barthes as the impossibility of understanding a text outside of its relation to other texts (36). As an example, Connor notices the use of Propp’s functions of
fairy tales as a form of intertextuality in which these structures are flipped and parodied (64). This requires the re-contextualization of a text, achieved through re-writing (Pope 3). In the case of dystopian fairy tales, the purpose of re-writing is not to enchant, but to disenchant by “holding a mirror to the magic mirror of fairy tale” (Bacchielega 23).

To sum up, the historical evolution of fairy tales encompasses both utopian tendencies and distinct dystopian elements. Socio-political aspects of womanhood are depicted in fairy tales and dystopias, both types of cautionary tales, and are expressly emphasized in postmodern feminist rewritings of such narratives. This perspective offers the possibility for an innovative approach to contemporary literature, particularly to Margaret Atwood’s novel, The Testaments, whose dystopian fairy tale elements will now be analyzed.

The Testaments of Fairy Tale Heroines

The Testaments is set 15 years after the events of The Handmaid’s Tale and explores the political dynamics in Gilead on a larger scale than its predecessor, whilst exposing the cracks in the system that threaten its existence. It is narrated from three different points of view, each corresponding to the three main characters: Aunt Lydia, who witnessed the rise of Gilead from its very beginnings, managed to secure her own safety by becoming part of Gilead’s elite, and now plots the downfall of Gilead; Agnes Jemima, a young woman born and raised in Gilead who has no knowledge of the outside world and who must confront the harsh reality of her oppression; and Nicole, a Canadian teenager who, unbeknownst to her, was born in
Gilead and plays a major part in its demise. As in other dystopian tales, the implicit goal of the totalitarian regime is to destroy human individuality and create standardized and obedient citizens. This requires a “scapegoat,” a demonization and persecution of “the others,” blamed for the shortcomings of the system (Booker 10-11): in Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments*, women are considered the scapegoats. In this case, the oppressive power of the state in dystopian totalitarian regimes manifests itself through controlling the characters’ sexual expression, among others. Booker argues that the regime’s stringent views on sexuality derive from the Freudian view that political and societal power is achieved and maintained through repressing sexual desires (11).

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Margaret Atwood underlines the similarities between the patriarchal oppression found in traditional fairy tales and in the dystopian Gilead. Atwood subverts fairy tale elements primarily on a metatextual level by having the story of its female narrator, Offred, follow Propp’s functions of the fairy tale. This is achieved by enacting a meta-fairy tale, i.e., a fairy tale about fairy tales, against a dystopian backdrop (Wilson 279). Fairy tale elements are present in the narrative itself as well, albeit on a much smaller degree: the state-imposed colors of women’s clothing. Its sequel, *The Testaments*, delves deeper into this textual presence of fairy tales in the society of Gilead through an exploration of the inner workings of Gileadean culture. Another significant notion that will be discussed in this study is the contrast between the tone of the two novels, which this paper attributes to Atwood’s sense that Western culture risks “sanitizing” aspects of literature. This switch has been noted both in the history of fairy tales from
their oral versions to Walt Disney’s (Zipes) and, more recently, in the ever-growing popularity of YA dystopian literature (Coste). As expected from a sequel, *The Testaments* follows in *The Handmaid’s Tale*’s footsteps of rewriting, re-centering, and subverting influences from fairy tales and dystopian literature. If we are to extend Wilson’s proposition to this novel as well, *The Testaments* is a meta-fairy tale, as it mirrors the typical fairy tale narrative (271) and features Propp’s functions of fairy tales faithfully.

Agnes Jemima’s biography is clearly inspired by the Brothers Grimm’s “Cinderella”: she grows up in an affluent family and has a close relationship with her “biological” mother, Tabitha (Atwood 18). This status quo is quickly shattered by Tabitha’s death from an unnamed illness (73) and the subsequent rushed marriage between Agnes Jemima’s father, Commander Kyle, and Paula, who, as Agnes herself notes, takes on the role of the cruel stepmother, a trope which is regarded by Ashliman as an outlet for children’s pent-up aggressive feelings towards authority figures, in this case the replacement of their closest parent (“Step Relatives” 362-366): “My mother, Tabitha, had been my protectress; but now she was gone, and my stepmother did not wish me well” (Atwood 83). Agnes Jemima falls in status both in her family structure and in her social circles at school, as Paula did not consider Agnes her child (81). Despite not having any stepsisters who abuse her, the wicked stepmother is more than enough: Paula despises and mistreats Agnes (83), wishing to dispose of her quickly through marriage, a prospect that Commander Kyle, “whom [she] no longer thought of as [her] father,” did not object to (148). Even in a fairy tale setting the blame scarcely falls on the patriarchal figure (Ashliman “Step Relatives” 362-
We will now focus on the bonds between the two young protagonists and their presumed “real” parents. The parental figures in the novel fulfill the first of Propp’s functions: “absentation” from the status quo, in which one of the protagonist’s relatives disappears, setting the narrative into motion. Agnes Jemima reminiscences about her happy childhood and the loving relationship she had with Tabitha, as they would spend hours playing with a dollhouse, tell stories, and pray together at bedtime (Atwood 18, 21). On the other hand, the relationship between Nicole and her parents is distant and often antagonistic, as Nicole claims that “[Melanie] didn’t smell to me like my mother” and that both acted suspiciously cautious around her: “It was like I was a prize cat they were cat-sitting: you’d take your own cat for granted; […] if you lost [someone else’s] cat you would feel guilty about it in a completely different way” (49). Tabitha, Melanie, and Neil are eventually revealed to have adopted their children.

Once the status quos are interrupted, the heroines are expected to begin their quests. The quest is seen as a test of the hero’s prowess, with the goal of achieving individuation. Garry remarks that the quest is part of the hero cycle, where a hero is “marked, called and tested” (Garry and El-Shamy 248-249). This is true for all three characters, who are initially marked on a social level: Aunt Lydia is chosen from the group of female inmates in the Time Before, Agnes Jemima becomes a victim of bullying, and Nicole feels like an outcast at school. Propp’s challenges addressed to the hero (function II “interdiction”) occur in the present time for our young heroines and in the Time Before for Aunt Lydia. Nicole’s interdiction is simple: she is not
allowed to get involved in the anti-Gilead campaign. Nicole misunderstands the reason behind her interdiction, which leads to her rebellious act of going to the protest and having to be rescued (Atwood 50-52). On the other hand, Agnes Jemima’s life has been a series of challenges: she cannot think for herself or learn to read, as females “had smaller brains that were incapable of thinking large thoughts” (19). She must always obey Gilead-ean laws and regulations, which means having no choice in her future (25). Aunt Lydia is the only one whose interdiction is set during the Time Before, when she is abducted from her workplace and tortured until she “converts” (67-68).

In both fairy tales and dystopias, some characters are often not what they appear to be at first sight. They can be deceivers, malevolent individuals who seemingly fulfil the role of a helper character but instead mislead the protagonist towards their downfall (function VI “trickery”). The opposite is true for Atwood’s The Testaments: characters are presumed to have evil hidden agendas, when in fact they have pure intentions, fulfilling the role of donors (function XII “first function of the donor”). This confusion echoes the unfamiliarity of dystopian culture (Coste 101). One such character is George, a homeless man who spends his time at The Clothing Hound. Nicole first sees George as a dangerous man (Atwood 45-46); instead, he turns out to be a Mayday operative who ensures Nicole’s safety and prepares her for her mission (178). His role in the narrative is didactic: he proves to Nicole that she is wrong in considering herself a contemporary Little Red Cap capable of recognizing the Wolf approaching. Her limited perspective attests to her immaturity and lack of real-world experience. Another such
character is Ada, who initially appears as a daredevil: “She looked like a biker, but not a real biker—more like an ad of a biker” (46). Contrary to her tough image, Ada is akin to a fairy godmother: she rescues Nicole from violent protests (60) and brings her to safety when Neil and Melanie are murdered (Chapter VIII).

Donor characters ensure the acquisition of the magical agent needed by the heroine for her journey (function XIV “receipt of a magical agent”). In Nicole’s case, the “LOVE GOD” tattoo on her arm is the key to dismantling Gilead (Atwood 194). This tattoo is neither magical nor meaningful, as Nicole is atheist (47). It proves useful in her journey away from home (function XV “guidance”) to Gilead and her escape alongside Agnes Jemima to Canada. This is a journey of self-discovery for both characters, but also a chance for self-reflection. Nicole’s musings regarding her departure reveal her naivete: “I hadn’t considered what it was like to leave a place you knew, and lose everything, and travel into the unknown.” It also proves her strength of character: “How hollow and dark that must feel, except for maybe the little glimmer of hope that had allowed you to take such a chance” (253).

Agnes Jemima and Nicole must endure multiple trials before earning their victory. During their expedition to Canada, the heroines engage in an ongoing effort to escape (function XVI “struggle”) both psychologically and physically. Firstly, Nicole knocks Aunt Vidala unconscious before leaving Ardua Hall (Atwood 333). They travel across the land to discover the true feelings of the working classes regarding the Gileadean oppression (335-337) and are assisted by a rogue Economan (338-341). After becoming
ing ill on the *Nellie J. Banks* ship (349), they are forced to leave by rowboat under the threat of being discovered (356). The young protagonists then rescue themselves from their plight on the inflatable rowboat and are found by the Mayday operatives (function XXII “rescue”).

As opposed to *The Handmaid’s Tale*, in which Offred did not have a “happy ending,” *The Testaments* ends on a positive note. The heroines are immediately recognized as international heroes and reunited with their long-lost mother (Atwood 368-369). Even Aunt Lydia receives due credit: “in recognition of the invaluable services provided by A.L.” (382), thus fulfilling function XXVII (“recognition”). The villains of the novel, the Commanders of Gilead, are defeated by having their deeds revealed to the entire world (function XXVIII “exposure”) under the form of a document cache (Atwood 368)

The ultimate function of fairy tales is marriage (function XXXI “wedding”). A patriarchal pattern of fairy tales is noticeable when a strong heroine is often “saddled” with a male savior with whom she shares a romance (Coste 104). The romance plot is decentered in some dystopian fairy tales by having the male love interest reject the female protagonist’s affection (103-104), an initiative that is visible in the novel. In *The Testaments*, Aunt Lydia and Agnes Jemima do not share any romantic feelings in their narratives. Nicole develops a “hopeless, puppyish” crush on Garth, the Mayday operative tasked with training her; however, a relationship never occurs (Atwood 191). Ultimately, the marriage function is shown in the *Thirteenth Symposium* section to have been fulfilled: Pieixoto unveils the transcription beneath Becka’s statue, which “was erected by her sisters Agnes
and Nicole […], their children and their grandchildren” (382), although it remains unclear who Nicole marries.

Throughout the novel, Nicole’s perception of Garth is idealized and distorted. She views him as a Prince Charming figure, a “first boyfriend” who is attracted to her. She believes Garth’s sole purpose is to “protect [her], and he did, including protecting [her] from himself,” to which she adds “I like to think he found that hard” (Atwood 246). According to Scheckels’ classification of Atwood’s male characters, Garth is an “uncertain prince,” as the reader is never aware of his true feelings. Nicole describes him as “a real hero” and attempts to flirt with him, but she is aware that his reciprocity is probably insincere: “his hug was acting” (241-245). For the inexperienced Nicole, her pseudo-relationship with Garth is meaningful, fulfilling her romantic fantasy and giving her the opportunity to reminisce about it as a form of escapism: “I really missed Garth. I daydreamed about the things we’d done together. […] Garth probably had a girlfriend. […] I’d never asked him because I didn’t want to hear the answer” (303).

In addition to their rejection of romance, the protagonists of the novel can be considered progressive fairy tale heroes. Propp distinguishes two types of heroes in fairy tales: seeker-heroes, who proactively embark on an adventure, and victim-heroes, who are often compelled to act. Most seeker-heroes are male, whereas victim-heroes are generally female (39). The Handmaid’s Tale follows the traditional path for a female-led tale, with Offred being the passive heroine awaiting rescue and rarely taking risks (Wilson 278). In The Testaments, all three main characters are proactive “seeker-hero[es]” who undertake journeys full of adventure and danger, a
feat that Bacchielega considers unachievable for women in traditional fairy tales (5-7); it is likewise unattainable under the Gileadean law. To achieve their shared goal of fighting Gileadean oppression, each heroine performs a specific role which mirrors a fairy tale figure.

The first protagonist is Aunt Lydia, the ambiguous mastermind behind the plan to overthrow Gilead. A clear-cut villain in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Aunt Lydia appears as a multi-faceted individual in *The Testaments*, revealing the major role she played both in the making and un-making of Gilead. As a neutral character, Aunt Lydia could be considered a trickster: trickster characters are not merely deceptive, but they are creators and destroyers of worlds, heroes, and villains at the same time. More than that, she is a *female* trickster, performing her role as a hero stealthily. As Tatar notes, the trickster is mainly a male figure in the fairy tale mythos, travelling to fulfil his hunger and (sexual) appetite with a mobility that was impossible for women. The female trickster appears in less obvious narratives and operates clandestinely, “covering her tracks to ensure that her powers remain undetected” (60-61). Indeed, Aunt Lydia works in secret, ensuring that she does not fall victim to the Gileadean regime. Other characters recognize Aunt Lydia’s trickster efforts, acknowledging that she “must know the most secrets of all because she had the most power” (Atwood 86). Aunt Lydia is aware of her own multiplicity as she describes her ruling as having “an iron fist in a leather glove in a woollen mitten” (63). She recalls:

In the early days of Gilead, I used to ask myself whether I was Fox or Cat. Should I twist and turn, using the secrets in my possession to manipulate others, or should I zip my lip and rejoice as others outsmarted themselves? Obviously, I was both, since—unlike
many—here I still am. I still have a bag of tricks. And I’m still high in the tree. (238)

Multiple aspects of the trickster type exist in Aunt Lydia’s character, beginning with her hidden identity. Despite the novel being opened by her manuscript entitled *Ardua Hall Holograph*, her identity remains unknown until her second appearance, corresponding to her second journal entry (Atwood 35). She upholds this secrecy of character not only with the reader, but also with other characters. With Commander Judd, she pretends to be a faithful follower to “get [him] back for” the suffering she endured in the Time Before (144). With the other Aunts, Lydia is guarded, preparing to manipulate them later: “Don’t share too much about yourself, it will be used against you. Listen carefully. Save all clues. Don’t show fear” (169).

In relation to Agnes Jemima and Nicole, Aunt Lydia also fulfils the role of a helper character. In particular, she embodies the wise old person, the protective figure who aids the hero in their journey and shares their knowledge to help the hero (De Rose 342-345). This role, however, is undermined by her trickster nature. She appears as an authority figure whose purpose is to educate the young protagonists on their duties, “a model of moral perfection to be emulated” (Atwood 35). On a personal level, she does not embrace the moral values imposed in Gilead. In fact, Aunt Lydia does not hesitate to use the secret knowledge she has gained over the years to betray the society she helped build. She selectively reveals information to the protagonists according to her own agenda: Aunt Lydia secretly places folders on Agnes Jemima’s desk that expose unpleasant truths about Gilead without admitting her own involvement (285-289) and
conceals Nicole’s identity and her relationship to Agnes Jemima until it is advantageous for her plan to destroy Gilead (313).

The protective dimension of Aunt Lydia’s wise old person role is left uncertain, as she cannot be entirely considered a protective figure of the heroines. She offers Agnes Jemima and her friend Becka a chance to escape marriage by becoming Supplicants (Atwood 203-205, 216-217). After discovering that Dr. Grove has sexually assaulted the two girls, Aunt Lydia brings him to justice by forcing Aunt Elizabeth to falsely testify against him (260). However, Aunt Lydia also endangers the girls by sending them on a dangerous journey which ends in Becka’s death (360) and near-death experiences for Agnes Jemima and Nicole (380). This fatal mission, however, accomplishes her plan of initiating the downfall of Gilead. If Aunt Lydia is not necessarily the helper of the fairy tale protagonists, she can be considered a protector of humanity itself, the undercover agent that destroys the dystopia she helped create.

Aunt Lydia is an adult woman who has already reached maturity, both physical and psychological. On the other hand, Agnes Jemima and Nicole are both teenagers who represent “the adolescent experience of “waking up” to the power structures that govern our lives” (Coste 96). Since “tough-girl teenagers who fight against patriarchal oppression” is a prevalent trope in YA dystopian fairy tales (99), it is no wonder then that Atwood created such characters in her novel. Atwood makes ironic references to this trope in The Thirteenth Symposium section, where Pieixoto claims that the age of the two protagonists is suitable for an adventurous narrative, “as the young are idealistic, have an underdeveloped sense of their own mortality,
and are afflicted with an exaggerated thirst for justice” (378).

At first glance, Agnes Jemima and Nicole, by Nicole’s own admission, would correspond to the two sisters with opposing personalities from Grimm’s *Snow-White and Rose-Red*: “It was weird to think of her as my sister; we were so unlike” (Atwood 336). Agnes Jemima resembles Snow-White, the quieter of the two who has domestic interests, such as kneading bread (25), baking cheese puffs (74), and being interested in motherhood (307). Nicole, on the other hand, is the bolder and more adventurous of the two, disobeying her parents to attend an anti-Gilead protest (53-54), undergoing intense training (189), and physically attacking Aunt Vidala when threatened (333). The sisters are raised to be inseparable in the Brothers Grimm’s tale: “We will not leave each other […] Never so long as we live” (602). Conversely, Agnes Jemima and Nicole become aware of their sisterly bond late in the novel (Chapter XX).

More than being depictions of a fractured fairy tale sisterhood, Agnes Jemima and Nicole are metaphorical Sleeping Beauties. They are females who must “wake up” and have an epiphany about the societies they live in (Coste 98-99). As Coste remarks, the awakening of these Sleeping Beauties is illustrative of the shift from general passivity to political action. By facing up to the damaging aspects of their culture, characters are forced to question their own privilege (102-104). Undoubtedly, all three narrators are privileged, despite having the disadvantage of being female. Aunt Lydia is the most powerful female in Gilead by her own admission (Atwood 35). Nicole lives in a two-story house in Canada (44) and attends a private school (51). Agnes Jemima has three Marthas at her disposal because her
father is a high-ranking Commander (24).

The three main characters eventually become disillusioned, or perhaps enlightened. Essential to dystopian fairy tale heroines, these revelations lead to personal growth and political revolution (Coste 102). Aunt Lydia berates herself for depending “as if on a magic charm” on her education and values: “all that claptrap about life, liberty, democracy and the rights of the individual” leaves her blindsided by the coup d’état (Atwood 114). Nicole’s epiphany concerns her hidden identity. She initially feels secure in her Canadian lifestyle as Daisy, but her sixteenth birthday marks her “awakening” as Baby Nicole: “That birthday was the day I discovered that I was a fraud. Or not a fraud, like a bad magician: a fake, like a fake antique. I was a forgery, done on purpose” (41). Indoctrinated from birth in the Gileadean system, Agnes Jemima must be exposed to the most eye-openers. Her first revelation is the fraudulent nature of her family history (84, 90). Then, she realizes that she can avoid marriage by becoming an Aunt (216). As Aunt Victoria, she learns to read, eventually discovering the truth about Gilead from Aunt Lydia’s secret folders (285). Her greatest finding is her own identity: she is the daughter of a fugitive Handmaid and the sister of Baby Nicole (307-309, 313-314). As is the case in traditional fairy tales, the journey to self-discovery involves the continuous growth of the heroines.

In *The Testaments*, character growth is depicted symbolically through non-traditional instances of the fairy tale trope of transformation. Most frequently, transformations occur when a character escapes a pursuer and is most often related to gender or social status (Garry and El-Shamy 125). Adopting the brown Aunt outfit can be regarded as a desired change
in social status for women. On the other hand, puberty is an imposed transformative episode: after she begins to menstruate, Agnes Jemima discovers “she was no longer a precious flower, but a much more dangerous creature” (Atwood 82). Heroines in fairy tales usually become princesses and experience a lift in social status after being transformed by their donors; Nicole’s experience is the opposite, having to wear second-hand clothes which might have lice or bedbugs (121). The success of this transformation is guaranteed, as she “really did look like a waif who needed to be rescued” (252).

Another instance of transformation has Agnes Jemima and Nicole disguise themselves as Pearl Girls (333) and later dress in “male attire” (339-340) to escape Ardua Hall and Gilead.

In *TheTestaments*, fairy tale tropes are used as a means of explaining the Gileadean system to young girls. This method is employed to preserve their innocence and to discourage thoughts of rebellion. As an example, Tabitha tells Agnes Jemima a story about saving her from evil witches and choosing her as a daughter:

I went for a walk in the forest, [..] and then I came to an enchanted castle, and there were a lot of little girls locked inside, and none of them had any mothers, and they were under the spell of the wicked witches. I had a magic ring that unlocked the castle, but I could only rescue one little girl. So, I looked at them all very carefully, and then, out of the whole crowd, I chose you! (16).

Agnes Jemima later discovers that this story is a fabrication with some truthful elements. She *was* taken from a woman in the forest, but that woman was not a “wicked witch.” Rather, she was Agnes Jemima’s birth mother, who was found attempting to escape Gilead by foot and later turned into a
Handmaid (90). Tabitha’s magic ring seems to grant wishes, achieving one of the main goals of fairy tales (Ashliman “Wishes” 172-173). After granting Tabitha’s wish, the magic ring is disenchanted: “[it] had only one wish in it, and I used that one up on you. So now it’s an ordinary, everyday mother ring” (Atwood 17). Agnes Jemima, at age thirteen, considered herself “old enough now to disbelieve the choosing story,” affirming “[t]hat’s only a fairy tale” (26). Just as the ring lost its magic properties when her mother “chose” her, Agnes disenCHANTS her mother’s tale, as she “knows” that she came from Tabitha’s womb, a belief that likewise turns out to be false (84).

Agnes Jemima’s narration does not only offer a glimpse into the effects of fairy tales on girls’ psyche and how they are employed by women themselves. It also presents the chilling viewpoint of a young woman who grows up in a dystopian world without realizing its true nature. In Gilead-ean schools, young girls’ lessons echo general fairy tale tenets addressed to women: “Just learn your lessons and trust your elders to do what is best” (Atwood 15). There are also references to “women’s duty of caring for other people, especially little children and the elderly” (87), which embodies the didactic value of fairy tales (Bacchielega 5) and further links The Testaments to the Grimms’ Little Red Cap, placing Red Cap’s mother, a symbolic “domestic woman,” on a pedestal.

The Aunts’ associations between fairy tales and sexuality have a damaging effect on Agnes Jemima. Agnes recalls Aunt Vidala warning her at a young age of “the urges of men” in a tale inspired by Little Red Cap: men are uncontrollable beasts with heightened senses that lurk and devour innocent girls. In her tale, Aunt Vidala likens virginity to fairy tale motifs:
an “invaluable treasure” that could be stolen and “precious flowers” that could be torn. The violence of the tale underlines the dangers of embracing sexuality: “We would be ripped apart and trampled by the ravenous men who might lurk around any corner” (Atwood 14-15). She develops anxiety related to her relationship with men, leading to her sexual repression: “Aunt Vidala’s tales were about things girls shouldn’t do and the horrifying things that would happen to them if they did” (Atwood 274). She even contemplates suicide as an alternative to forced marriage. Unlike Rapunzel, she cannot be saved from her unjust imprisonment: “I fantasized about miraculous escapes, but all of them required help from other people, and who would help me? It would have to be someone I didn’t know: a rescuer, the warden of a hidden door, the keeper of a secret password. None of that seemed possible” (216).

Agnes Jemima’s perspective is distorted by her frequent references to fairy tales, leading to her subconsciously adopting toxic ideas about womanhood. When recalling her impressions of Ardua Hall from her youth, Agnes describes it as an “enormous” building with “magic properties” where “so much subterranean but ill-understood power” (i.e., feminine power) was found. For young Agnes, a place where the “others”/women exert power must be wicked. As she begins to doubt the nature of Ardua Hall, she realizes that the women inside did not have genuine freedom: “[w]as it a huge castle, or was it more like a jail?” (Atwood 224).

Agnes Jemima’s story is not her own narrative, but rather a transcript of her witness testimony. The orality of her tale reveals itself as an aspect that is lost. In fact, the only narrator who writes her story down is
Aunt Lydia, an educated judge from the Time Before. Her usage of fairy tale imagery is undoubtedly deliberate. For her, subverting fairy tale elements is a means of coping with her traumatic experiences. For instance, she avoids regret for her choices during the early days of Gilead by associating them with the fairy tale crossroads leading to an adventure: “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and I took the one most travelled by. It was littered with corpses, as such roads are. […] My own corpse is not among them” (Atwood 67). Aunt Lydia acknowledges that her choice to become involved in Gileadean politics is widespread and brutal, thus establishing it as the reversal of the decision to walk the road “less travelled by” in Robert Frost’s poem “The Road Not Taken.” In her case, conformity “has made all the difference” since her survival depends on it. As opposed to “The Road Not Taken,” Aunt Lydia does not regret her decision, even if it means accepting violence against her peers.

Aunt Lydia molds herself as a fairy tale character and her references are often ironic, meant to soften the horrors of reality for the reader. She considers herself “a guide” for the reader, “a wanderer in a dark wood,” disassociating the image of the wood from the previous innocent yellow and suggesting that the Gileadean regime is much worse than it seems: “It’s about to get darker” (136). She masks her trauma by ironically claiming that “three is a magic number” when recalling the torture endured at the hands of Commander Judd’s assailants (144). Her most obvious fairy tale reference is correlating Commander Judd to Charles Perrault’s Bluebeard. Commander Judd’s behavior is so abhorrent that Aunt Lydia cannot consider him a real human being; instead, she reduces him to a stereotypical fairy
tale villain with no redeemable qualities: “His Wives have a habit of dying: Commander Judd is a great believer in the restorative powers of young women” (64); “I have no wish to have [Shunammite] join Judd’s Bluebeard’s chamber of defunct brides” (325).

The Testaments can be interpreted as a satirical critique of the evolution of fairy tales and dystopian stories. This would explain the shift in tone from the claustrophobic The Handmaid’s Tale to the action-filled The Testaments. The Testaments is a written appropriation of oral storytelling, one that toys with concepts related to folk and fairy tales. In her story, Agnes Jemima realizes that literature becomes devoid of meaning when it is manipulated for political and ideological purposes (283). Professor Pieixoto, for instance, works with bits and pieces gathered over years and manipulates information to suit his academic narrative. He does not have the full story of Gilead, or even the specific stories of Offred, Aunt Lydia, Nicole, or Agnes. In The Handmaid’s Tale, he crafts Offred’s narrative to cast doubt on the validity of her experiences (293-294). In The Testaments, he is forced to apologize for his crude and dismissive humor at the previous symposium and proposes a new sanitized agenda that is just as damaging to the accuracy of the tales he studies (375-376). In this sense, Crescent Moon’s description of Pieixoto’s work as “spellbinding” is somewhat inaccurate (375)—he is more akin to a folklorist than a storyteller.

The idea of altering folk tales to suit political agendas is not a recent development. Perrault and the French women writers of the 17th century started the trend of the contes de fées, or literary fairy tales, by appropriating folk tales to suit their social agenda of sheltering women and children from
any perceived dangers (Zipes 29-58). The “literary ‘bourgeoisification’ of oral tales” remarked by Zipes in Perrault’s writing was continued during the next century by the Grimm Brothers, whose collections of fairy tales were initially regarded as unaltered collections of folk tales originating from the lower classes. This idea has been disproven, as the tales were collected from the upper-middle classes, reflecting their own biases (43, 61). Similarly, the idea that Pieixoto is an authority on Gileadean history is disproven throughout the Appendixes of both *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments*.

Nowadays, fairy tales are especially known for their “prudish” adaptations into animated children’s movies under the umbrella of the “twentieth-century sanitation man,” Walt Disney (Zipes 67). This, alongside the increased popularity of YA dystopian literature, which could be considered a “sanitized” version of classic dystopian literature, allows us to see that Pieixoto falls victim to his own subjectivity and socio-political biases of his time, just as transcribing folklorists did before, and as contemporary YA dystopian authors do nowadays. We will end with his following statement, where segments that prove the paradoxical and hypocritical nature of his work are in italics:

“My colleague Knotly Wade and I have prepared a facsimile edition of these three batches of materials, which we have interleaved in an order that made approximate narrative sense to us. You can take the historian out of the storyteller, but you can’t take the storyteller out of the historian!” (Atwood 380-381; emphasis added).

In *The Testaments*, Atwood integrates her knowledge of fairy tale archetypes into key aspects of her novel: plot, characters, and setting. Atwood also adopts and subverts elements of Young Adult dystopian literature. This
allows Atwood to re-write the traditional fairy tale as to have a genuine happy ending for its female characters by dismantling the imposed status quo.

Conclusion

In *The Testaments*, a dystopian fairy tale, Margaret Atwood reveals the patriarchal nature of fairy tales by rewriting them in a postmodern feminist key and dramatizing gender politics. Fairy tale tropes and motifs are repurposed in the dystopian Gileadean society to enforce patriarchal stereotypes about women, while long-established plot structures and character types are subverted and parodied on a meta-textual level. As a meta-fairy tale, the novel enables Atwood to use fairy tale archetypes and tropes in the creation of the dystopian society of Gilead and the tales of the women who survived it; additionally, she also subverts said elements and rewrites them in such a manner as to underline the idea that fairy tales are, at their core, harmful and destructive on a societal level, promoting misogynistic perspectives on womanhood. Furthermore, by dramatically changing her style from *The Handmaid’s Tale* to *The Testaments*, Atwood comments upon the changes made to fairy tales throughout history, highlighting the fact that transcribers fall victim to their own biases by inevitably intervening inside the text they are attempting to faithfully reproduce and by subscribing to socio-political agendas of their time, often “rearranging” pre-existing tales in a way that brings a happy ending.

The classifications made in this paper agree with those made by Wilson and prove that the fairy tale elements found in Atwood’s other
novels exist in *The Testaments* as well. This paper attributes most of the same characteristics identified by Wilson in *The Handmaid’s Tale* to *The Testaments*, proving that despite the stylistic differences between the two, they share the same fundamental purpose. Moreover, by adding the label of dystopian fairy tale to those already mentioned, Atwood manages to capture the zeitgeist of the 2010s, bringing academic attention to a relatively unexplored (and perhaps underrated) genre of literature.
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