GENDERED AGENCY IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S READING OF THE "BLUEBEARD" TALE.
A BUTLERIAN ANALYSIS OF *BLUEBEARD'S EGG*

By:
Edit Kovacs

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Supervisor: Professor Jasmina Lukic
Second Reader: Professor Eszter Timar

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Abstract

This thesis examines the manifestations of "gendered agency" (Butler, 2004) in Margaret Atwood's feminist "Bluebeard" tale in order to argue that her approach is anticipatory to feminist theorizing on fairy tales. Existing interpretations of Atwood's work conceptualized agency along the resistance/compliance binary, leaving the concept of agency untheorized and consequently defining feminist revisions of traditional genres as simple gender reversals. I trace the competing discourses on gender in Atwood's short story collection with the help of Judith Butler's theories and through the method of fairy-tale discourse analysis. My main argument is that Atwood's fairy tale revision is an attempt at social transformation in that revises the traditional "fairy-tale discourse" (Zipes, 1983), which opens up the possibilities of her heroine's agency. I argue that Atwood, as a feminist fairy tale writer, combines the technique of "folkloristically inclusive reading" and a critique of the heteronormative discourse on gender in her contemporary tale. This thesis offers two major contributions: it revisits the relation between second-wave feminist literature and theory, including literary criticism and it contributes to feminist conceptualizations on agency.

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Introduction

> The unexpurgated Grimm's Fairy Tales contain a number of fairy tales in which women are not only the central characters, but win by using their intelligence. Some people feel fairy tales are bad for women. This is true if the only ones they are referring to are those tarted-up French versions of 'Cinderella' and 'Bluebeard', in which the female protagonist gets rescued by her brother.
>
> — Margaret Atwood (Atwood 1979, 28)

This thesis offers a feminist reading of Margaret Atwood's fairy tale revision in her short story collection *Bluebeard's Egg* ([1983], 1996) in order to point out that her approach to fairy tales in her fiction is anticipatory to feminist theorizing on fairy tales. Contemporary feminists universalized fairy tales, considered them as emblematic products of patriarchy (Beauvoir 1949; Dworkin 1974; Gilbert and Gubar 1979), while the folkloristic approach applied by Atwood becomes widespread among feminists only a decade later. In this respect Atwood's approach to fairy tales is protofeminist, similarly to her analysis of female acculturation in her novel *The Edible Woman* (Nischik 2009, 19).

This thesis explores the manifestations of agency in a feminist fairy tale, because the genre of the literary tale traditionally reduced the heroine's agency to socially sanctioned forms of submissive femininity. Hence, I suggest that feminist theorizing on agency can gain insights from literary analyses of feminist fairy tale revisions. I argue that Atwood's feminist revision of a traditional, codified piece of literature exceeds the complication of gendered binaries, as it includes a critique of the discourse on gender. The main argument of my reading of Atwood's tale is that it revises the gendered message of the canonized "Bluebeard" tale through combining a "folkloristically inclusive reading" (Benson 2003) and a critique of the heteronormative discourse on

gender.

There has been a remarkable interest in the “Bluebeard” tale among feminist fiction writers (for instance Angela Carter, Doris Lessing), which amounted in a “Bluebeard” tale cluster by the 1980s (Benson 2003). The feminist interest in the tale can be attributed to the tale’s unconventional depiction of marriage and to the possibilities of the heroine’s agency opened up in the folk variants of the “Bluebeard” tale. Further, the canonization of the “Bluebeard” tale is emblematic in the process through which “sexes were reduced to clichés” (Ellis 1983). This means that the protagonist’s agency in the literary tale by Charles Perrault was reduced to a successful cry for help, whereas it manifested itself in the folk variants of the “Bluebeard” tale, “The Fitcher’s Bird” and “The Robber Bridegroom” in the forms of disguise and storytelling, respectively, resulting in the depiction of cunning heroines. The relatively wider range of agency that can be found in folk variants, however, does not exist outside the ideological system of gender norms. Contrarily, the heroines’ practice of storytelling and disguise abuses the social conventions associated with femininity. Therefore, an analysis of a feminist revision of the “Bluebeard” tale, which reflects on both the folk and literary variants, is conducive to understanding gender as a culturally constructed and historically varying norm.

Atwood’s view on fairy tales can be considered unique, because as it was highlighted with the motto of this Introduction, she considers fairy tales more favorably and has a less universalizing approach compared to feminists and feminist literary critics of the day (discussed in detail in chapter 1). Atwood voices her special interest in fairy tales in several interviews (Haase 2008) and her various works include revisionist readings of fairy tales, which have been interpreted as her technique of “fairy-tale sexual politics”

(Wilson 1993). The “Bluebeard” tale has a special status in Atwood’s fiction, since it was revisited in various genres and artistic forms during her oeuvre (Wilson 1993). Hence, my reading of her contemporary fairy tale contributes to studies on Atwood’s fiction.

This literary work by Atwood needs to be revisited because the existing analyses did not account for the depiction of agency that exceeds the compliance/resistance framework. Existing criticism has interpreted the female protagonist of the short story “Bluebeard’s Egg” either as remaining a silent victim (Grace 1984; Stein 2003) or as transforming into the oppressor, Bluebeard (Walker 1996; Bunde 2007), with few exceptions exceeding this binary (Bacchilega 1997; Barzilai 2006). It will be pointed out that Atwood complicates the victim/oppressor binary and depicts the heroine’s agency on two planes, in the form of her doing gender and through her practice of storytelling in the collection of the short stories. My main argument is that Atwood revises the canonized “Bluebeard” tale through combining a “folkloristically inclusive reading” (Benson 2003) and a critique of the heteronormative discourse on gender. I read Atwood’s “Bluebeard” tale as a story of transformation, in which the protagonist realizes the Bluebeardian character of her marriage by retelling an oral version of the tale.

My analysis of Atwood’s retelling of the “Bluebeard” tale contributes to the understanding of the relation between second wave feminist fiction and feminist literary criticism. I argue that Atwood departs from Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s approach to fairy tales expressed in their *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) in that she contrasts contemporary and fairy tale discourses on gender by problematizing the questions of identification with the norms presented in the tales (i.e., the reception of tales) and the continuity between contemporary and fairy tale discourses on gender.

The theoretical framework of this thesis consists of Judith Butler's conceptualization of "gendered agency". I aim to offer a reading of Atwood's feminist fairy tale through this Butlerian concept in order to reveal the potential of social transformation in Atwood's fiction. The reconceptualization of agency by Butler was applied to life narratives by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2010, 57-58), who argue that this theoretical framework can account for the practice of storytelling by literary subjects. I suggest that Butler's conceptualization of "gendered agency", which relies on a theory of the discursive formation of the subject, accounts for the discourses that Atwood's protagonists shape or represent through their storytelling. Butler's notion of "gendered agency" will be interpreted as consisting of two forms: gender performativity and storytelling. This notion has not been theorized before; hence, I contribute to the understanding of Butler's thought.

I offer an inclusive reading of the tale as part of the short story collection, by analyzing the short stories preceding the title story not only as a context, but as an interpretative framework of the title story. More specifically, three stories preceding the title story will be analyzed, which serve as interpretative guides to Atwood's revision of the "fairy-tale discourse" (Zipes 1983) in the title story regarding her critique on contemporary social realities, the identification with ideal versions of gender and her characterization of female storytellers narrating "Bluebeard" tales. The analysis will be presented in two chapters, chapter 4 contains the analysis of the short stories and chapter 5 contains the analysis of the title story. Hence, the thematic analysis of the discourses and discursively constituted forms of agency in the short stories precedes and supports my interpretation of the title story.

My method of analyzing Atwood's fairy tale revision expands on Jack Zipes' concept of the "fairy-tale discourse", which analyzes fairy tales as an institutionalized discourse in the service of promoting gender norms. I interpret Atwood's revision of the "fairy-tale discourse" and its layers similarly to Zipes' analysis of the techniques of classical fairy tale writers. Zipes' analytical approach to fairy tales as a discourse also supports my application of Butler's discursively constituted understanding of agency, which is explored by an analysis of the discourses combined by Atwood.

Chapter outlines

The first half of this thesis contains the historical background, including the feminist approaches to fairy tales, the existing literature on the "Bluebeard" tale and Atwood's contemporary retelling, and the theoretical framework consisting of Judith Butler's theory. The second half of the thesis presents the reading of Atwood's story offered in this thesis, divided into two chapters.

Chapter 1 situates Atwood's retelling among feminist approaches, which either universalize fairy tales as products of patriarchy or view them as historically and culturally specific products. Based on the comparison of the feminist universalizing versus folkloristic approach I argue that Atwood in her fiction differs from feminist theorists, especially Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Moreover, Atwood's approach to fairy tales predates the folkloristic approach, which becomes prevalent only in the 1990s. Chapter 2 contains a brief discussion of the "Bluebeard" tale and its folk variants, their traditional and feminist interpretations in order to highlight the uniqueness of Atwood's fairy tale revision. My analysis is contextualized among the existing interpretations of

Atwood's work in order to highlight my focus on the discursively constituted agency, which enables me to explore the complexities of Atwood's treatment of fairy tales and her relation to the feminist criticism of Gilbert and Gubar. In Chapter 3 I explain the main concepts of Butler's theory in order to synthetize them in my interpretation of her notion "gendered agency".

Chapter 4 provides an interpretation of the stories preceding the title story as an interpretative framework in that the discourses combined in the title story are introduced in previous stories, and both the plot and the interpretation of the female protagonist of the title story is foreshadowed. More specifically, "gendered agency" will be analyzed in three ways: as enabled by the competing discourses on gender, in the metaphors of gender as a cultural norm and in the protagonist's identification with ideal versions of gender. In Chapter 5 I argue that Atwood revises the traditional "fairy-tale discourse" communicated by the literary "Bluebeard" tale in that she rewrites its heteronormative message by including its folk variants. I also point out that Atwood critiques the feminist interpretation of fairy tales expressed by Gilbert and Gubar by complicating the protagonist's characterization as either an "angel-woman" or a "monster-woman".

At this point I find it vital to explain the main terms that inform my reading of Atwood's fiction.

agency

In sociology the term agency is used to describe individuals' capacity for action, emphasizing their intention, choice and free will (Jary and Jary 1991). It is usually phrased as part of the agency and structure debate, which sets out to determine the individuals' ability to impact on social structures. However, it is often used as a mere

"synonym for action" (Marshall 1994, 10). Feminists, including new materialists (Barad 2003; Bennett 2010; Grosz 2010), poststructuralists (Scott 1990; Butler 1990, 1993, 1995) and feminist scholars of religion (Mack 2003; Mahmood 2005) have critiqued the prescriptive usage of the concept. Further, they proposed to reconceptualize the term because of its humanistic, voluntarist and Western-centric presumptions, respectively. In this thesis the term agency is used in its non-voluntarist sense, to designate the discursive processes that interpellate the subject and which he or she in turn can appropriate. The concept of agency needs to be theorized as being reflective on gender norms that are prevalent in and specific to a given society. Therefore, Judith Butler's rethinking of agency as "gendered agency" is explained in chapter 3.

feminist fairy tale

Zipes in his collection of feminist fairy tales *Don't Bet on the Prince* (1989) provides an overview of the development of the field up to the 1980s and characterizes Atwood's retelling as a feminist fairy tale. He defines the feminist fairy tale the following way: "[it] conceives of a different view of the world and speaks in the voice that has been customarily silenced" (Zipes 1989, xi). In other words, the feminist fairy tale is defined by its attempt at social transformation and "giving voice" to the oppressed. However, this interpretation is probably too broadly formulated to account for the specific ways in which the feminist subversion of norms is achieved in Atwood's fairy tale. Patricia Duncker argues that the feminist fairy tale "completes the level of subversion present in the folk tale" (Duncker 1992, 155). This phrasing of the feminist tale grounds the feminist attempt at the revision of the literary canon in the folk tradition, which is

relatively free from the policed, clearly defined gender roles. Therefore, I argue that Atwood's technique of fairy tale revision predates the feminist theorizing on fairy tales. The working definition of the feminist fairy tale used in this thesis is a combination of the definitions by Zipes and Duncker, it refers to the feminist intervention in the genre that aims at social transformation by reflecting on the folk variants of the canonized texts.

revision

My interpretation of Atwood's technique of revision relies on a combination of the understandings of the concept in fairy tale studies and feminism. Zipes (1994) applies the concept of revision in his analysis of the history of fairy tales, arguing that it implies that there is something to be amended in the tale, which is a result of changed social demands and values. Revision is a method by which fairy-tale writers created the genre of the literary tale that he considers to be an institutionalized discourse on gender and other social norms (Zipes 1983, 1994). Revision can be considered as a feminist technique, following Adrienne Rich (1972), who argued that the revision of canonized texts is a mode of feminist critique, a survival strategy that aims at changing their detrimental messages about women. Atwood in her feminist revision of a fairy tale complicates the binary representation of women in traditional fairy tales by including its folk variants.

"angel-woman" and "monster-woman" binary

Gilbert and Gubar structure their analysis of 19th century literature in their foundational

work of feminist literary criticism *The Madwoman in the Attic* by an analysis of the "Snow White" tale. They argue that the plot of "Snow White" is driven by the rivalry between the two female protagonists, the queen and the girl, whose relationship is that of the two available patriarchal definitions of femininity, the "angel-woman and the monster-woman" (36). They argue that Snow White appears as the embodiment of ideal femininity, the angelic woman, who is passive (which can be pointed out in that she is relocated from the father's house to the husband's house) and lacks her own voice in the tale. The wicked queen, in turn, stands for her exact opposite; she is active in the sense that she is the initiator of the plot and creative in that she abuses traditionally feminine devices of "cookery and cosmetology". Consequently, her creativity is associated with evilness and monstrosity (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 40). Although Snow White and the wicked queen are depicted as polar opposites in the tale, they serve a complementary role of regulation into socially sanctioned versions of femininity, since both of them are necessarily annihilated by being objectified or killed. Gilbert and Gubar argue that this binary is present in literature in a more subtle way, femininity is reduced to these clichés in the male-authored text, which they exemplify through their analysis of 19th century literature. The "angel-woman" and "monster-woman" binary will reappear at various points in this thesis, because I argue that Atwood engages in a dialogue with Gilbert and Gubar in her fairy tale revision.

patriarchy

Being aware of the feminist critique as to the universalizing usage of the concept (Butler

1990, 3-4), I reflect on the concept of patriarchy applied in this thesis. Patriarchy mainly appears in chapter 1 and 2 in my analysis of the feminist approaches to fairy tales. In these chapters of the thesis I rely on the usage of the concept by the fairy-tale scholars (Zipes 1983, 1989, 1994; Tatar 1987; Haase 2004) and influential representatives of second-wave feminism (Beauvoir 1949; Dworkin, 1984; Gilbert and Gubar, 1979). In my understanding of the appropriateness of the concept 'patriarchy' I follow Butler, according to whom patriarchy assumes a differentiation, even a hierarchy between the oppression of women and other marginalized groups (Butler 1991, 88-90). Therefore, in my interpretation of Atwood's feminist fairy tale, I do not apply the concept of patriarchy; instead I interpret Atwood's technique of feminist revision as critiquing the heteronormative discourse in the "Bluebeard" tale.

heteronormativity

In my reading of Atwood's fairy tale revision I refer to the heteronormative discourse on gender relying on Michael Warner's definition and on Judith Butler's similar conceptualization of the normalizing discourse on gender. The notion of heteronormativity refers to the conceptual equation of heterosexuality with society, meaning that the only acceptable form of social organization is based on heterosexual ties (Michael Warner 1990). Heteronormativity defines itself not only as society but also as humankind, which means that the prerequisite for being recognized as a human being is that of reproductive heterosexuality. Heteronormativity is however, not "an easily identifiable body of thought", it can manifest itself in various, even contradictory variants (Berlant and Warner 1998, 132). Butler similarly critiques heterosexuality for

masquerading as universal and debunks gender as a norm in her copy/original distinction (Butler 1988, 120), by revealing the imitative nature of gender and pointing out the naturalizing effects of heteronormative gender identity categories.

Chapter 1. Feminist approaches to fairy tales

1.1. The fairy tale as an emblematic product of patriarchy

> It need not astonish us that while her brother plays the hero, the young girl quite willingly plays the martyr: pagans throw her to the lions, Bluebeard drags her by the hair, her husband, the King, exiles her to forest depths; she submits, she suffers, she dies, and hear head wears the halo of glory.
>
> — Simone de Beauvoir (Beauvoir 1949, 319)

Second-wave feminists viewed the fairy tale as an emblematic product of patriarchy [1], especially in that they included the fairy tale in their psychoanalytical analyses of female subject formation (Beauvoir 1949), in their consciousness-raising writings on sexism (Dworkin 1974), and in their foundational works of feminist literary criticism (Gilbert and Gubar 1979). Their approach to fairy tales is traced via analyzing parts of three influential works, that of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* ([1949], 2009), Andrea Dworkin's *Woman Hating* (1974) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) in the first subsection of chapter 1.

Second-wave feminists explored the gendered messages of fairy tales, providing an account of women's victimization and exploring the limited range of the female protagonists' agency in classical fairy tales. Although they offer a powerful critique of the Western dominant discourse on gender representation in the tales, they provide a rather ahistorical, universalizing interpretation of the fairy tales (Zipes 1989, 5-9; Haase 2004, 12-13). Beauvoir offered a reading of fairy tales from a gender perspective approximately three decades before the advent of feminist fairy tale scholarship. In the

[1] A detailed interpretation of Beauvoir's, Dworkin's and Gilbert's understanding of the concept of patriarchy expressed in their analyzed works would exceed the scope of this thesis, thus, it is characterized only as it manifests itself in their approach to fairy tales.

chapter “Childhood” of *The Second Sex* she attributed a significant role to culture and literature, including Greco-Roman myths, fairy tales, biblical stories and contemporary novels, in promoting the girl’s socialization into the hierarchy of the sexes. However, her approach to fairy tales can be considered universalizing in that she subsumes the “Bluebeard” tale together with Christian legends of martyrdom, myths and contemporary literary works in the universal category of “culture”, without reflecting on either the cultural variations of the “Bluebeard” tale or the historical modifications of its text (as it was highlighted by the motto of this chapter).

The radical feminist, Andrea Dworkin (1974) also attributes a central role to the fairy tale in women’s socialization into patriarchal culture, arguing that the fairy tale is the “crystallization of sexist culture” (46). Dworkin argues that history and fairy tales are inseparable as far as their infiltration with patriarchal values is concerned, by comparing the Chinese practice of foot binding to the “Cinderella” tale (39). Hence, Dworkin offers a reading of fairy tales that focuses on the social practices reflected in them. Her approach is universalizing in that she refers only to the main characters of well-known fairy tales without analyzing the texts of the tales.

Not only does the fairy tale appear as an emblematic product of patriarchy in Beauvior’s feminist analysis and Dworkin’s radical critique, it occupies a pivotal role in feminist literary criticism of the 1980s as well. Gilbert and Gubar structure their foundational work of feminist literary criticism *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) by their analysis of the Grimm Brothers “Snow White”, expanding the metaphors of the tale to characterize the male-authored text. They assert that fairy tales “often both state and enforce culture’s sentences with greater accuracy than *more sophisticated* literary texts”

(36; italics mine). I infer from this that Gilbert and Gubar consider fairy tales to be literary texts, which provide interpretative guidelines for the exploration of gender stereotypes that are entrenched but more subtly formulated in Western literary works. However, they do not analyze the effects of the canonization on social norms represented in the tales or view the fairy tale as emblematic of the way in which canonized literature reduces the range of socially acceptable possibilities of female protagonists' agency.

Three main aspects of Gilbert and Gubar's analysis of "Snow White" need to be underlined: their assertion that the female protagonists are the main characters of the tale; their analysis of the "transparent enclosures" – the window, the mirror and the coffin – as symbols of women's objectification in Western literature and third, their interpretation of the queen's agency as utilizing the "poisonous or parodic use" of traditionally feminine attributes (40). These three main aspects of their analysis are discussed in detail because their interpretative technique illuminates Atwood's reading of the "Bluebeard" tale, especially with regard to her depiction of the female protagonist's agency.

According to Gilbert and Gubar the objectification of female protagonists in fairy tales reappears in Western literature in that they are encapsulated in the "glass-coffin of the male-authored text" (44). They interpret the opening scene of "Snow White" in which the queen is sewing in front of the window, looking out, as a metaphor of the angel-woman's objectification. Snow White is enclosed in the glass coffin, which highlights her objectification by the discourse on gender norms in the traditional tale. The "monster-woman", in turn, is depicted through her magic mirror, which they interpret as her internalization of patriarchal values. Thereby, Gilbert and Gubar demonstrate not only the objectification that female protagonists are subjected to, but they also emphasize the

dangers of the internalization of patriarchal gender norms.

Atwood in her revision of the fairy tale in her short story collection also warns about the dangers of the internalization of traditional versions of femininity, in the form of accepting the objectified role of the male poets' muse in the short story "Loulou; or the Domestic Life of the Language" and in the form of identification with the traditional fairy tale heroine regarding her sense of fulfillment with her married status in the title story, "Bluebeard's Egg". More importantly, Atwood reflects on Gilbert and Gubar's interpretation of the opening scene of "Snow White", especially in that she transforms the framing of Snow White's mother as a metaphor of objectification in her title story "Bluebeard's Egg".

The wicked queen violates patriarchal rules by her creativity, by being the initiator of the plot, the storyteller in the fairy tale, whose storytelling practice utilizes the "poisonous or parodic use of a distinctively female device as a murder weapon", which includes abusing certain traditionally feminine arts, "cookery and cosmetology" (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 40). It can be inferred from this that the "Snow White" tale enhances the socialization of young girls into a strictly defined version of femininity, since the creative, transformative attitude to the traditional attributes of femininity is severely punished. Gilbert and Gubar propose an interpretation of the queen's attempts, according to which she uses and abuses the practices that are deemed traditionally feminine. I add to their argument that the "poisonous or parodic use" of traditionally feminine devices highlights the possibilities of subversive repetitions of gender as a norm, following Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which will be discussed in chapter 3.

Based on their analysis of "Snow White" and its variant "The Juniper Tree",

Gilbert and Gubar argue that female acculturation depends on learning the "art of silence", whereas the male initiation into adulthood is a process of gaining speech (43). Consequently, women both in fairy tales and in 19th century novels are hesitant about seizing voice and engaging in storytelling, which phenomenon they famously term the "anxiety of authorship". However, an analysis of the folk variants of the traditional fairy tales reveals that storytelling is not a gendered privilege characterizing the male protagonist, but can be the heroine's attribute as well. This becomes clear upon analyzing the folk variants of the "Bluebeard tale", discussed in chapter 2, that depict the heroine rescuing herself from her abusive husband or bridegroom-to-be via using her storytelling skills. Therefore, the "Bluebeard" tale variants exemplify that the allocation of agency with regard to gender was more varied and generous in the folk variants than in the literary fairy tale. Similarly to Gilbert and Gubar's analysis of fairy tales, the practice of storytelling is the central focus of Atwood's collection. The interpretation of her "Bluebeard" tale provided in this thesis will be a story of a transformation, in which the female protagonist who was silenced by the traditional "fairy-tale discourse" (Zipes 1983) emerges as a storyteller. I explore a wider range of agency in Atwood's contemporary fairy tale, which exceeds the "angel-woman" and "monster-woman" binary and instead, includes the variations on gender performativity and the practice of storytelling as forms of gendered agency.

The heroine's practice of storytelling proves to be a life-saving act in the "Bluebeard" tale variants, similarly to Scheherazade in *The One Thousand and One Nights*. Marina Warner notes that "the story of Bluebeard is the story of Scheherazade" in that the cunning heroines manage to defeat their serial killer husbands through their

storytelling practices (Marina Warner 2010). Warner further argues that in the Western process of canonization, which entailed that certain tales were categorized as children's literature, while others as being aimed at adult audiences, those tales were selected in the popular canon for children that socialized young girls into motionlessness and obedience (Marina Warner 2010).

While second-wave feminists viewed the fairy tale as a symptom and tool of women's subordination, feminist fairy tale scholarship beginning from the 1980s emphasized the limitations of earlier feminist analyses that disregarded the social and historical context of the tales, thereby mystified and universalized them (Haase 2004, 12-13). As it was argued in this section, early feminist interpretations relied on a universal category of culture and bypassed both the comparative analysis of the folk variants and the effects of the canonization process. The next section analyzes the folkloristic approach developed by feminist fairy tale scholars in order to highlight its similarities with Atwood's technique, which is anticipatory to feminist theorizing on fairy tales.

1.2. The fairy tale as an historical, cultural and literary product

Other feminist scholars (Zipes 1983; Bottigheimer 1988) viewed fairy tales as historical, cultural and literary products, which I refer to as the folkloristic approach. In this section I focus on Jack Zipes' influential theory of the "fairy-tale discourse", which influenced my interpretation of the layers in which Atwood engages with the "Bluebeard" tale. The representatives of the folkloristic approach (Ellis 1983; Tatar 1987; Marina Warner 1995), who provided authoritative analyses of the "Bluebeard" tale, will be discussed in detail in chapter 2.

The critiques on the universalizing feminist approach to fairy tales voiced by folklorists accentuate the difference between the two approaches. Donald Haase (2004) critiques early feminists for their tendency to provide stereotypical accounts on gender relations in the fairy tale and to build theories on "speculative" analyses of fairy tales (13). Contrarily to Haase, Zipes provides an affirmative reading of the feminist analyses discussed earlier, arguing that the prevalence of "certain fairy-tale patterns (…) reinforce[s] the male hegemony in the civilization process" (1989, 9). Thereby, he acknowledges the legitimacy of feminist analyses of the tales as reflections of the social realities and tools in the socialization into discrete genders.

According to Donald Haase, a fairy tale scholar providing the next assessment of the field of fairy tale studies approximately 20 years after that of Zipes, the strength of the folkloristic approach of the 1990s[2] is that it explores the culturally specific discourses on

[2] Influential analyses of certain fairy tale writers, such as the Grimm Brothers and Perrault started in the 1980s (Ellis 1983; Zipes 1983; Bottigheimer 1988), yet, the folkloristic approach to fairy tales became prevalent only in the 1990s (Haase 2004).

gender in the tales and the remnants of the folk tradition that survived the editorial modifications (Haase 2004, 11). I argue that Atwood's feminist retelling of the "Bluebeard" tale can be characterized by Haase's description of the fairy tale scholars' approach in the 1990s and after. Therefore, Atwood's approach to fairy tales differs from the contemporary feminist approach in that she includes culturally specific discourses on gender in her tale, rethinks the complexities of the folk variants and voices a critique of the canonized "Bluebeard" tale. Moreover, Atwood's approach to fairy tales in her revision can be considered as a predecessor to the folkloristically inclusive analyses of fairy tales.

The pioneering study of feminist fairy tale criticism, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* (1983) by Zipes explores what he terms the "bourgeoisification" of the fairy tale, which refers to the process of canonization, during which well-known fairy tale collectors, such as the Grimm Brothers and Charles Perrault imposed the morals and ideals of the upper classes[3] on the folk tales (Zipes, 1983). Not only did the editors purr the content deemed inappropriate for the children[4] of the intelligentsia (such as replacing matrilineal bonding with the valorization of patrilineal ties, reversing the gender of assertive female protagonists by replacing them with princes), but they also reinforced "an accepted *discursive mode of social conventions*" (3; italics mine). Zipes argues that

[3] Zipes read the change in the discourse on social norms that fairy tales propagated in the 17th century through a Marxist framework, which accounts for his interpretation that the proliferation of bourgeois values was the cause of women's objectification in fairy tales. Contrarily to his interpretation, Ruth B. Bottigheimer (1988) argued that the value system in the folk tales collected and edited by the Grimm Brothers reflected misogynistic folk tales, not the imposition of bourgeois norms. The importance of the debate as to the origins of gender stereotypical norms in fairy tales notwithstanding, I build on Zipes' theory of the "fairy-tale discourse" particularly because of his focus on fairy tales as an institutionalized discourse.

[4] Although Zipes focuses on the socialization effects of fairy tales on children, the audience of the tales consisted of both adults and children. The Grimm Brothers did not deem the "Bluebeard" tale suitable for children (Ellis 1983, 91), therefore they only included it in their first edition of *Kinder- und Hausmarchen* (1812). In the past century the "Bluebeard" tale has mainly captured the literary imagination, resulting in contemporary retellings (Marina Warner 1995, 266).

fairy tales were part of the social traditions at the time of their codification in the 17th century and that the tales reflected the dominant discourse of the intelligentsia. The fairy tale turned into an institutionalized discourse, the "fairy-tale discourse", which I argue is revised by Atwood in her feminist "Bluebeard" tale in that she reveals the heteronormativity of the literary tale, and transforms its message against curiosity into supporting women's realization of the oppressive discourse they have internalized.

Zipes in the chapter "Fairy-Tale Discourse: Towards a Social History of the Genre" argues that the codification of the fairy tale as a genre resulted in the transformation of folk tales into an institutionalized discourse, which he considers to be a part of the European "mission of civilization" that especially concentrated on the upbringing of children according to the new social mores. Zipes distinguishes four levels of the "fairy-tale discourse" including a reflection on folk tales and the values propagated in them, a dialogue with other contemporary writers, a relation to social norms and a consideration of different types of audiences. I infer from his definition that first, the discourse of the literary fairy tale did not exist in isolation, but co-existed with the discourses of the folk tale, and second, the authors of the tales alluded to each other's works. Third, the fairy-tale discourse did not simply mirror the "prevailing social code" but there was space for some variation, which the writers could utilize and fourth, the fairy-tale discourse also included the writer's attention to different types of audiences.

Following Zipes' assertion that the contemporary fairy-tale discourse can also be described by these levels, I apply his analysis of the "fairy-tale discourse" to Atwood's retelling of the "Bluebeard" tale in order to highlight the main aspects of her approach to a fairy tale that distinguishes them from the universalizing feminist approach. More

specifically, in chapter 5 I will analyze how Atwood's retelling interacts with the discourses of the folk variants of the "Bluebeard" tale, in what ways she "enters into a dialogue" with the nineteenth century women writers and the contemporary feminist critics and how she reflects on the dominant discourses in contemporary Western societies. Hence, I will address the social realities of the tale through the method of fairy-tale discourse analysis.

Chapter 2. Readings of the "Bluebeard" tale

2.1. The "Bluebeard" tale and its patriarchal interpretations

In a discussion that follows, the widespread, patriarchal interpretations of the "Bluebeard" tale will be analyzed with special emphasis on the gender norms propagated in them. The "Bluebeard" tale has come to be associated with "The Effects of Female Curiosity" – which also appeared in the form of a subtitle (Marina Warner 1995, 244) – instead of a condemnation of the serial killer husband committing homicides or a realization of the "threat of gendered death" (Benson 2003, 97) that marriage and childbirths posed to women.

The first interpretation of the tale was provided by Charles Perrault[5] who introduced the tale into the literary canon by publishing it in his *Histoires ou Contes du Temps passé (Tales and Stories of the Past with Morals)* in 1697. Perrault's codified version of the tale transmits a stereotypical version of the heroine's agency, in the prohibition, the ending of the tale and its two morals. In the literary tale written by Perrault, the aristocratic husband leaves his newly-wed wife in his castle, granting her permission to do as she pleases and explore her new home, except for one chamber "the small room at the end of the long passage on the lower floor" (Tatar 1987, 157.)[6], which she should on no circumstances enter. Apart from the explicit directions, the young wife is also provided with the little key that opens the chamber. The prohibition is bound to be broken and so it is, the young

[5] A long tradition of female taletellers preceded Perrault's literary work in the 17th century; moreover, his sources probably included stories by female storytellers (Marina Warner 1995, xvi).

[6] As Tatar pointed out, the description of the route to the chamber is too explicit for a prohibition, it serves rather as a guidance. Bruno Bettelheim and other psychoanalysts interpreted this description as a reference to the vagina, emphasizing the heroine's supposed sexual transgression as the tale's message (Tatar 1987, 157-161).

woman "succumbs to her curiosity", as Perrault[7] phrased it. She enters the forbidden room to find in there a basin full of the blood of the murdered previous wives, to which she accidentally drops the little key. This bloodstained, magic object serves as the proof of her disobedience to her husband, who is ready to punish her to death, similarly to his previous wives. The protagonist begs her husband for some time to pray for her soul in the afterlife, which the cruel husband respects. The time for the prayer, however, is used for calling her brothers who rush to rescue her, behead the abusive husband, share the widow's wealth among them and marry her to someone else to a marriage that lasts "happily ever after". Thus, the protagonist's agency can only manifest itself in crying for deliverance, which is initiated by her brothers. Moreover, her "price" at the end of the tale is a successful union with a man.

Perrault's two morals underline that the "Bluebeard" tale is a cautionary tale about female curiosity containing a just punishment for her transgression, while the significance of the serial murders of the husband is downplayed: "Ladies, you should never pry, / You'll repent it by and by!" While curiosity is coded as an essentially feminine trait in the first moral, male violence is described as a deviation from the norm and an ancient attitude towards women in the second one (Tatar 1987, 160): "Then the husband ruled as king. / Now it's quite a different thing; / Be his beard what hue it may – / Madam has a word to say!" [8] (Bacchilega, 1997, 105). The second moral of the tale also raises the issue of authority in marriage, namely the alleged change of authority between the members of the married couple (Bacchilega 1997, 105)[9]. In the interpretation of Atwood's title story,

[7] His manifold references to female curiosity throughout the text of the tale were analyzed by Tatar (1987).

[8] Bacchilega highlights that the English translation emphasizes the gendered nature of the perceived transgression, which layer of meaning is not so explicit in the French original. However, she argues that even the grammatically gender-neutral French moral valorizes patriarchy as a "paradise, lost" as a result of women's curiosity (1997, 105).

[9] Although Perrault promoted a male-centered, if not misogynistic worldview in his "Bluebeard" tale, it

"Bluebeard's Egg" offered in this thesis I will argue that Atwood critiques Perrault's morals, including the interpretation of curiosity, the relegation of intra-marriage violence to the past and the supposed power relations between couples.

Perrault's initial interpretation in the form of morals proved to be authoritative, since most interpretations followed it (Tatar 1987, 165). The most influential ones are the psychoanalytic interpretations by Bruno Bettelheim and other psychoanalysts, who argued that the bloodstained key symbolizes the act of defloration or acts of female sexual infidelity (Tatar 1987, 157-161). These interpretations focus on the perceived transgression of a prohibition by the heroine and they without exception rely exclusively on Perrault's canonized version of the tale, not on folk variants. Having sketched up an outline of the plot of the literary "Bluebeard" tale and its most influential patriarchal interpretations, I turn to discussing feminist readings of the "Bluebeard" tale by Tatar, Warner and Benson, which include analysis of the folk variants of the tale.

should also be noted that he voiced a certain level of social critique in his work in that he critiqued the tradition of arranged marriage, a common practice in 17th century Europe (Tatar 2004, 56) and critiqued the wealthy and powerful in his tale in that the aristocrat is punished in the end by the community of lower class people (Warner 1994, 245).

2.2. The folk variants and their feminist interpretations

In this thesis I build on the feminist, realistic interpretation of the tale provided by Marina Warner (1995), who interpreted the social realities reflected in the tales by treating them as possible documents on women's lived experiences. Warner argued that fairy tales should not be considered as universal, but should be interpreted in the specific socio-historical context both in the cases of the literary and the folktale. Considering the canonized version of the tale by Perrault, Warner suggested that it reflects the medico-historical context of the 17th century, when numerous women lost their lives during childbirth and as a result of female illnesses; therefore marriage represented a realistic threat to their lives (Marina Warner 1995, 263-264). In my analysis of Atwood's contemporary feminist reading of the tale I will point out the socio-historical context that the feminist retelling explores, namely the medical authority over women's bodies that attaches Bluebeard-like qualities to male protagonists.

Feminist critics revealed the centrality of "gendered agency" to the tale in that curiosity as a characteristic trait is judged differently according to gender, in women it is punished, while in men it is valorized (Tatar 1987). Scholars of folklore revealed the "Bluebeard" tale to be emblematic in the canonization that was a quest through which "sexes [were] reduced to clichés" (Ellis 1983, 91). A combination of the feminist and the folkloristic readings is advocated by scholars (Warner 1995; Bacchilega 1997; Benson 2003), who argue that an interpretation of the "Bluebeard" tale should include the folk variants of the "Fitcher's Bird" and the "Robber Bridegroom" tales. This way, through this "folkloristically inclusive reading" the "Bluebeard" tale is revealed to be a tale about

"female cunning" (Benson 2003, 197)[10]. I would add to this interpretation that the "folkloristically inclusive reading" (Benson, 2003) of the tale reveals the possibilities of "gendered agency" in the form of shaping gender norms to meet one's needs.

I provide an outline of the above-mentioned folk variants collected by the Grimm Brothers[11] in order to highlight the various possibilities of "gendered agency" emerging in the folk variants, which were stereotypically limited in the French literary version. These folk variants are explained because Atwood's technique of revising the gendered message of the traditional fairy tale includes the wider range of the female protagonist's agency present in the folk variants of the "Bluebeard" tale[12].

The "Robber Bridegroom" tale is about a young bride-to-be visiting her bridegroom and accidentally witnessing the cannibalistic murder of a young girl by her bridegroom and his robber companions. The girl saves herself from this horrific fate that would await her by recounting the crime of her bridegroom in the form of a dream narrative during her wedding reception and presenting the girl's finger as evidence. The cannibalistic bridegroom and his companions are punished, the protagonist receives the fortune and marries well in the end. It needs to be highlighted that the heroine's storytelling practice utilizes the gendered expectations of storytelling, in that she recounts the story in a humble manner, phrasing it as a dream, which points to her subversive use of gender

[10] Although Benson does not reflect on the gendered aspect of cunning in fairy tales, it is important to add that the stupidity/cunning binary is usually ascribed to the male hero of the tale. It is the third son, "the stupidest of them all", who is turned into a cunning hero at the end of the tale (Tatar 1987, 87).

[11] In this thesis the "Fitcher's Bird" and "The Robber Bridegroom" variants are referred to as folk variants, despite of the fact that they were published by the Grimm Brothers. These versions were only included in the first edition of their *Kinder-und Hausmarchen*, which was relatively free from editorial modifications (Ellis 1983) and therefore, they are referred to as folk variants in this thesis.

[12] Treating the "Robber Bridegroom" and the "Fitcher's Bird" tales as variants of the "Bluebeard" tale challenges the Aarne-Thompson classification system of folktales (Thompson [1946] 1977), according to Lowell-Smith (1999, 45). This organization of the "Bluebeard" tale group can be considered as a feminist attempt at revising folklore theory, since it concentrates on the female protagonist and views these variants as "sister tales" (Bacchilega, 1997, 107).

norms.

The other folk variant, the "Fitcher's Bird" tale tells a story of an old wizard, who seduces three sisters, marries one after the other, gives them a key which they are prohibited to use for opening a chamber and an egg to take care of while he is away on a journey. The two elder sisters do not obey him and are slaughtered, while the youngest girl is smart, does not let the egg be bloodstained, reassembles the bodies of her two sisters and escapes the wizard by disguising herself as a bird. Meanwhile, the wizard is burnt to death and the heroine's sisters and brothers inherit his fortune.

The three main differences between the variants are the following: the existence of a chamber and a prohibition, the timing of the story either just before or just after marriage, the heroine's agency either in the form of storytelling or disguise, which saves herself and other women as well. I underline that in both variants there is a manifestation of the protagonist's agency towards the end of the tale, which relates to her escape from the abusive husband, however these endings are far from what came to be known as the traditional "happy endings" of fairy tales[13]. A significant difference between these folk variants and the tale written by Perrault is that in the latter version it is the brothers who save the heroine, her agency can only be pinpointed in her successful cry for help.

The analysis of the folk variants suggests that the main message of the tale does not center on the prohibition/violation binary, or on the magic object as a symbol of adultery, but on the young woman's ability to free herself from the abusive partner by abusing the

[13] The "Bluebeard" tale is an untypical in its depiction of marriage as compared to popular fairy tales that praise the union of a heterosexual couple through the formula of the happy ending. Based on this difference fairy tales can be defined as tales of joyous or grizzly marriages (Tatar, 2004, 56). Although a systematic analysis of these tale types would exceed the scope of this thesis, I suggest that both the tales of joyous and grisly marriages contribute to the two polar versions of the normative ideal of femininity, the "angel-woman" and the "monster-woman", to use Gilbert and Gubar's term. Therefore, the different depiction of marriage in both types of tales remains within the framework of heteronormative logic.

gendered expectations. Atwood's contemporary tale, centering on the female protagonist incorporates the folk variants in order to voice a critique on the gendered message of the literary tale and on contemporary social norms supported by the heteronormative discourse on gender.

2.3. Interpretations of Atwood's "Bluebeard tale"

Margaret Atwood's fairy tales have been analyzed by three theoretical frameworks, by an application of psychoanalysis (Grace 1984; Walker 1996), intertextuality (Lowell-Smith 1993; Wilson 1993; Hermansson 2000; Benson 2003), and various literary theories (Godard 1986; Bacchilega 1997; Stein 2003; Barzilai 2006; Bunde 2007). First, a brief overview of the psychoanalytic interpretations is provided in order to stress the limitations of such an approach to a literary analysis[14] of feminist fairy tales. Then, the applications of intertextuality are discussed in order to suggest that they displace the attention from Atwood's social critique that is formulated through her fairy tale revision. Last, my analysis is situated in relation to literary analyses that consider Atwood's short story as a specifically postmodern work in order to highlight that these approaches cannot fully account for the heroines' agency in Atwood's collection.

The psychoanalytic interpretations of Atwood's title story both by Sherill Grace and Sheryl Walker propose Jungian readings of the "Bluebeard" tale. Grace interprets the tale as revealing the "innermost truths of the psyche" (1984, 262), which can be confronted in the forbidden chamber, where women meet their animus and men their anima. Thus, she argues, the tale has different meanings depending on the reader's gender. Atwood's title story in Walker's interpretation is a tale in which the female protagonist confronts the dark side of her self, while the main characters "clearly represent versions of archetypes female and male" (18). She unfolds this argument by

[14] A Jungian interpretation of the tale that does not focus on the gender power relations can prove to be useful for therapeutic purposes. For instance the pivotal Jungian interpretation by Clarissa Pinkola Estes (1992), according to which the Bluebeard figure of the tale is the predator of the psyche, the "ancient and contemporary foe of both genders" (41) proved to be a successful therapeutic tool. However, I point out in this section of my thesis that as an analytical framework, the Jungian interpretation renders Atwood's reading of the tale simplistic and gender-stereotypical.

stating that the protagonist sometimes takes on "the male perspective", meaning that she also has a "predatory side" (18-19). This leads her to conclude that both the male and female protagonists are guilty, because they fail to reveal what they are hiding, i.e. their secret selves. I suggest that the revealing/hiding the truth (of the psyche) binary that both interpretations utilize is exemplary of psychoanalytic discourse combining the tradition of the confessional with scientific discourse, as Foucault described it in his concept of the repressive hypothesis[15] in *The History of Sexuality* (1988-1990).

Likewise, Walker argues that the forbidden chamber has different meanings depending on the gender of the character, for the wife it represents "the history of violence against women" (23), whereas for Bluebeard it stands for the psyche, in Grace's words, it represents "a creative potential locked in a dark cocoon" (24). Moreover, she introduces a third category, for "women *occupying the role of Bb*" (24; italics in original) the chamber is the self as predator and the knowledge of that self. These interpretations of the forbidden chamber as hiding gendered secrets to be revealed, risk reinforcing the binaries that Atwood, as it will be pointed out in this thesis, complicates. Atwood throughout the short story collection portrays female storytellers and the discourses that legitimize their actions and the discourses they utilize and represent, whereas Walker's interpretation attributes the symbol of the chamber as creativity only accessible to the male protagonist. Thus, the Jungian psychoanalytic approach results in gender stereotypical readings of the tale because it disregards the centrality of the gendered power relations in the story[16].

[15] According to Foucault the repressive hypothesis presumes that the relation between power and sex is primarily based on the mechanism of repression, which is characterized by sexuality being restricted to the function of reproduction, the place of the conjugal home and the responsibility of the legitimate couple. Foucault however reveals the productivity of this discourse (regarding identity categories), according to which there is a hidden truth about sexuality waiting to be revealed.

[16] Maria Tatar (2005) remarked that the gendered violence of Bluebeard is bypassed by a translation of the

Another body of scholarship analyzing Atwood's short story applies theories of intertextuality (Wilson 1993; Hermansson 2000; Benson 2003). I concentrate on Sharon Rose Wilson's and Cassie Hermansson's studies, because the significance of their works notwithstanding, they might reinstate the patriarchal interpretation of the tale or disregard the fairy tale intertext, respectively. Sharon Rose Wilson offers the most substantial reading of the "Bluebeard" tale in Atwood's works, analyzing it in her fiction, poetry, criticism and art. Wilson analyzes the title story, "Bluebeard's Egg" by exploring a variety of fairy tale and mythic intertexts, which she considers to be closely interwoven in the text.

Wilson's treatment of the fairy tale motif of curiosity in "Bluebeard's Egg", however, can be considered as somewhat problematic. She argues: "her [the female protagonist's] curiosity, evident in "jokes" hiding rage about the other sirens surrounding this Odysseus, may cause her to fail his Penelope test" (267). Although this interpretation teases out even the literary allusion to *Odyssey* in the text, this statement might reinforce the traditional interpretation of "female curiosity" as the main interpretative focus of the tale; thereby, it might divert the attention from the abuser's responsibility. Moreover, this interpretation assumes that a "test" or prohibition of curiosity existed in the short story. My interpretation of Atwood's tale does not explore the mythic intertexts in "Bluebeard's Egg", because that might eventually reinstate a reading of the tale that blames its heroine for the oppressor's bloodthirstiness.

The "Bluebeard" tale is not considered as an intertext in Hermansson's analysis, in which she interprets the short story "Bluebeard's Egg" as a murder mystery, relying on

main characters as archetypes in psychoanalytical interpretations. I suggest that it does not only apply to the classic, Freudian interpretations that Tatar discusses, but also to Jungian interpretations.

Atwood's textual reference to Agatha Christie novels. Hermansson views the protagonist as an "astute reader/detective" (240), who "demonstrate[s] *escape artistry* through critical reading" (242; italics mine). Concentrating on the protagonist's critical reading practices, Hermansson does not address escape artistry as an intertextual reference to the "Fitcher's Bird" variant of the "Bluebeard" tale, in which the heroine's agency manifests itself in the form of disguise, also called escape artistry in the literature (Barzilai 2005; Hermansson 2009). Therefore, she interprets the open ending of Atwood's short story as an exploration of a new kind of reading practice and a metaphor on the limitations of intertextual reading as such. In sum, intertextual readings can provide wonderfully sophisticated readings of "Bluebeard's Egg", however they displace the attention from Atwood's feminist fairy tale. Thereby they disregard Atwood's social critique regarding the contemporary gendered discourses that limit, but also shape her heroine's agency.

My interpretation needs also to be situated among existing analyses focusing on the theme of storytelling (Godard 1986; Stein 2003), Atwood's postmodern and feminist techniques (Bacchilega 1997; Barzilai 2006) and the female protagonist as a Bluebeard figure (Bunde 2007), or a character with "an active, but blind agency" (Bacchilega 1997, 116). Godard provides a comparative analysis of the first and last short stories of the collection, describing the mother-daughter relationship by a metaphor of natural growth. This is a prevalent theme in her analysis, which disregards the clashes between mother's and daughter's different storytelling strategies. Her romanticizing reading of the mother-daughter relationship can be ascribed to her focus on community building, which she argues that Atwood's storytelling strives for. As it will be argued in this thesis, the mother's and daughter's narratives represent different, competing discourses on

femininity, hence, their continuation is not undisrupted.

Karen F. Stein similarly to Godard addresses the characters storytelling practices and their process of becoming storytellers, arguing that the protagonists of the collection represent stages of "the storyteller continuum" (156). However, she asserts that the collection *Bluebeard's Egg* lacks assertive female storytellers, concluding that the protagonist of the title story remains silent, voiceless and powerless throughout the story, in fact "unable to talk back to Bluebeard" (165). Contrarily to this interpretation, I suggest that the protagonist narrates her own version of the "Bluebeard" tale, which interpretation relies on Atwood's focus on contrasting oral and written forms of narrative and will be supported by my textual analysis of the protagonist's narrated version of the chamber. Thus, the interpretations of Atwood's short story collection provided by Godard and Stein do not contain an interpretation of the title story and more importantly, they do not explore the centrality of the "Bluebeard" tale to Atwood's social critique.

I discuss the feminist interpretations offered by Shuli Barzilai and Christina Bacchilega in detail, because their focus on Atwood's postmodern narrative techniques results in a different interpretation of the female protagonist. Barzilai argues that Atwood transforms the literary convention through her technique of "mise en abyme" in her short story "Bluebeard's Egg", proposing to call it a "negative mise en abyme". She explains that the protagonist, Sally retells the "Fitcher's Bird" variant of the "Bluebeard" tale but omits its ending, which omission suggest her denial of being blind to her husband's personality and her refusal of performing an active role in the act of revenge. Barzilai's interpretation of the two narrative levels as duplicating the structure of each other is expanded on in this thesis; however, her interpretation of the female protagonist as a

Bluebeard figure is not followed.

Bacchilega in her book *Postmodern Fairy Tales* (1997) analyzes postmodern and feminist fairy tales, focusing on the question of agency in the case of Atwood's title story. She argues that the female protagonist is oppressed and an oppressor at the same time, which is a result of Atwood's technique of doubling on two levels: the characterization of the protagonists and the retelling of the tale on two narrative levels (114). Although Bacchilega's analysis of doubling is insightful, her analysis of the female protagonist's agency still relies on the victim/oppressor binary, which Atwood indeed complicates, yet not by combining them but by complicating its gendered aspect.

To conclude, much of existing analyses of Atwood's "Bluebeard" tale (Bacchilega 1997; Wilson 1993; Barzilai 2006;) concentrated on the title story without exploring its place in the short story collection, analyses of the collection (Godard 1986; Stein 2003) did not accentuate the significance of the fairy tale as an interpretative key to the short story collection. In this thesis I deliver an analysis of the short story and the preceding stories in order to argue that Atwood's "Bluebeard" tale transforms the concept of agency inherent in the literary tale written by Charles Perrault so that it reflects the variety and relative flexibility of gendered agency prevalent in folk variants through her technique of combining discourses on gender.

Chapter 3. Feminist theoretical conceptualizations of agency

3.1. The feminist debate on agency

The concept of agency together with autonomy and freedom had played a fundamental role in feminist understandings of subjectivity, however by the 1990s it became a "mantra of liberation" that was left unproblematized and undertheorized in that feminists predominantly concentrated on pinpointing the actual occurrences of agency instead of providing theoretical explorations of the term (Grosz 1997, 140). In the 1990s they started to critique the taken-for-granted category of agency by exposing its liberal connotations and proposing alternative understandings of it. In order to explain the significance of Butler's conceptualization of agency, I situate her in the debate with other feminists on a symposium that was published in the volume *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (1995). I discuss the arguments presented in it in more detail, because Butler in her two essays explicitly addresses the question of agency, explains her approach to the concept expressed in her previous works and debates it with another participant of the symposium, Nancy Fraser.

Butler in her essay "Contingent Foundations" (1995) warns against the danger of using the concept of agency without being reflexive about its liberal connotations, which refers to the idea that people are autonomous persons, outside of the field of discourse and power. Butler builds on social constructionism by saying in her essay "For a Careful Reading" (1995) that "'[a]gency' is to be found precisely at such junctures where discourse is renewed, not in persons" (135). I highlight Butler's choice of the word 'junctures', which has two relevant meanings: a specific moment in time and a place

where things are joined (*Oxford English Dictionary online*, s.v. "juncture," http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/102065?redirectedFrom=juncture#eid [accessed March 16, 2013]). I deduce that agency can be pointed out at a moment in time when the dominant discourse changes or transforms into a slightly different discourse and it can also emerge at cultural crossroads where discourses interconnect with one another. Butler is very careful to emphasize that although subjects are constituted by discourse, it does not mean that they are determined by it; thereby she exceeds the social constructionist view on agency.

Nancy Fraser in the debate positions herself in opposition to Butler and formulates a critique of Butler's theory of the subject, arguing that the subject is reduced to a "discursive position" (66) and consequently it is inherently passive in Butler's theory. Fraser unfolds her argument by pointing out that Butler's theory of subjectivation is based on the Foucauldian framework of subject formation, which she considers to be a negative framework. Therefore, Fraser claims, Butler is entrapped in conceptualizing (female) subjectivity in negative terms, and "women's liberation is a liberation *from* identity" for Butler (71; italics in original).

Apart from voicing a critique of Butler, Fraser proposes to trace agency by pointing out the instances of "critical capacities" (66). In other words, she argues that agency should be theorized in terms of capacities and skills that are reflexive and critical, which qualities can be reached by subjects. Butler in turn critiques Fraser for reinforcing the idea of agency as inherent in the category of the person and for assuming that there are positions to be inhabited outside of the field of power and discourse. Although Fraser's objection to poststructuralist accounts of agency can be considered as a justified worry

about the future of feminism as a political movement relying on a collective identity, the de-centering of the subject does not necessarily exclude the possibilities of agency. Quite the contrary, Butler's notion of "gendered agency" opens up the possibilities for other practices to be considered as agency, specifically agency in gender performativity and agency in the form of storytelling.

The feminist debate on agency continues till today, a new generation of scholars (McNay 2000; Mahmood 2005) have expanded on Butler's conceptualization of agency and critiqued her for offering resistance and subversion as the emblematic examples of agency. Mahmood argues that Butler's theory of agency is based on a Western-centric understanding of freedom[17], which does not account for the various modalities of agency that are constructed in specific historical and cultural regimes (210). Mahmood argues that women's agency is depicted "as consubstantial with resistance to relations of domination" (10), that the desire to be free is "normative to feminism, as it is to liberalism" (10). As it will be pointed out later on in this section, Butler theorizes the bearing and crafting of norms by each subject, which theoretical framework bypasses the possibility of compliance with the norms. Hence, the notion of resistance itself is reconceptualized in her theory. Exceeding the resistance/compliance binary in conceptualizing agency in my interpretation of Atwood's fairy tale revision is especially important, because the agency of her heroines emerges as a result of their navigation between competing discourses, through their crafting the social norms to their needs.

Butler's response to Mahmood's groundbreaking study, which Butler voiced in an

[17] Although both Nancy Fraser and Saba Mahmood critique Butler for relying on what they view as the Foucauldian negative framework of subject formation, Fraser's and Mahmood's perspectives are diametrically different. While Fraser proposes a more liberal understanding of agency in the form of skills or capacities of the individual, Mahmood delineates a mode of agency that cannot be conceptualized by relying on Western assumptions.

interview, was explicitly positive. She discussed that Muslim women in the religious movement "negotiate a complex set of demands and are living in the vector of competing cultural norms" (Butler 2010, 13). Butler continued to explain this point by suggesting that their way of coping with and crafting the norms is "a mode of feminist agency" that needs to be theorized in the future (13). Based on this quote I reiterate that agency is contingent on the available discourses with which subjects negotiate, consequently the modes of agency are culturally dependent and varied. Thus, Butler's understanding of agency can be considered as culturally specific and especially applicable to the analysis of Western subjects. In this respect, Atwood's critique of contemporary North-American social realities can be understood by Butler's concept of "gendered agency" in its specifically Western form.

In sum, the concept of agency is much debated by feminists, some suggest that it should be understood as a capacity of the person (Fraser 1995), others that it should be conceptualized as a discursively enabled possibility (Butler 1990, 1993, 1995) or that it should be rethought without its Western-centric assumptions on subjects (Mahmood 2005). I use this concept in its non-liberal, Butlerian sense and provide a more nuanced understanding of it through analyzing the discourses that account for the instances of the emergence of "gendered agency" in Margaret Atwood's fiction. After having situated Butler in the feminist debate, I turn to exploring her theories of gender and subjectivation in order to explore the emergences of "gendered agency" in Atwood's feminist revision of Perrault's literary "Bluebeard" tale that was pointed out to be an exemplar of the reduction of the heroine's agency in the Introduction.

3.2. Butler's theories of gender and subjectivation

Butler highlighted in her essay "Contingent Foundations" (1995) that she had not formulated a "theory of agency" in her first influential work, *Gender Trouble*; instead, she offered a theory of gender performativity. However, her *Gender Trouble* (1990), and her following works, *Bodies That Matter* (1993), and *Undoing Gender* (2004) contain a substantial discussion and critique of the feminist epistemological accounts of agency. Moreover, Butler provides a reconceptualization of agency in her theories of gender performativity and subjectivation.

In *Gender Trouble* (1990) Butler voices a critique of the sociological notion of agency and the feminist literature that follows the same logic defining the human subject as "the metaphysical locus of agency" (25). Butler argues that agency is located in discursive structures, more particularly, in the repetitions of norms. To quote Butler "[i]n a sense, all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; 'agency', then, is to be located within the possibility of the variation on that repetition" (145). The "compulsion to repeat" refers to the forced reiteration of social norms, especially that of gender, which is a repeated, collective action that is always a failed approximation of the ideal of gender identity, an invariably repeated social practice. I consider the Butlerian reconceptualization of agency as a performative view on agency according to which the emergence of agency is not excluded, neither is it subsumed in the discursive field, but it is enabled through discursive resignification.

The Butlerian concept of resignification refers to her theory of the process of subject formation, which occurs through discursive practices, the signification of these

norms on the subject and the resignification or re-crafting of these norms by the subject. Likewise, Butler argues that agency is also a "double-movement of being constituted in and by a signifier" (220), which movement refers to the compulsion to cite the norms, which in turn are appropriated by the subject. I infer from this that agency is enabled by the social norms present in and formulated by discourse, while the subject's constant citation of the norms, which is doomed to be a failed repetition per se, constitutes his or her agency.

In order to explain Butler's concept of "gendered agency" that she developed in her work *Undoing Gender* I discuss Butler's theory of gender in her works. Butler in her theory of gender performativity expressed in *Gender Trouble* builds on Beauvoir's notion of "becoming woman", arguing that becoming woman is an "ongoing discursive practice" (33), which practice is not initiated by an agent or person. There is no volitional subject who can choose to appropriate gender, in other words, "there is no doer behind the deed" (25), according to Butler.

Both Butler's conceptualization of agency and her theory of gender performativity are linked to the question of subversive practices, she argues that "the task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to *displace* the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself" (148; italics in original). I interpret it as Butler's call for social transformation that is possible through subversive repetitions that question and even displace gender as a norm. In *Bodies That Matter* she argues that the "making over [of dominant culture] (…) is itself *a kind of agency*, a power in and as discourse, in and as performance, which repeats in order to remake – and sometimes succeeds" (137; italics mine). I deduce that although Butler, as a

feminist advocating for the transformation of social norms, is invested in exploring the subversive repetitions of the norms, emphasizes the relevance of subversion for social transformation, yet, she does not reduce her conceptualization of agency to subversion but lists it as one type of agency among others.

Further, Butler argues that the critical task for feminism is "to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention […]" (147). I infer from this that, although Butler has been criticized for providing a theory of the possibility of agency and not accounting for the actual occurrences of agency (McNay 2000, 142), she isolates the feminist task of locating the manifestations of agency. In my literary analysis of Atwood's reading of the "Bluebeard" tale I apply Butler's theory in order to deliver what she calls the feminist task of pointing out the emergences of agency.

Butler expanded on her theory of gender in *Bodies That Matter* by conceptualizing gender performativity as citationality based on the regulatory heterosexual regime (14-15). Following this concept, one performing one's gender is always citing a norm, or rather a set of norms, which citation results in an imperfect realization of one's gender, because a citation is always a copy in a sense that it merely contains a thread of the original, but fails to be the embodiment of the original. Butler first explored the discursive distinction between the copy and the original in her essay "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" (1988). She argued that not only lesbian identity, which is commonly conceptualized as a fake, but all (gender) identities are "copies of copies without an original" (120). The significance of Butler's argument, that there is no distinction between original and copy regarding one's (gender) identity, is that she shifts

the focus of attention from the imperative to reveal the originality of one's identity to the issue of why certain identities are considered to be untruthful copies of a supposed original.

So far I have argued that according to Butler agency has been applied in feminist thought without a critical reflection on its liberal, normative connotations. However, she does not abandon the concept of agency, quite the contrary; she includes a discussion on agency in her theories of gender performativity and subjectivation. As it was pointed out, Butler located agency in the variations on "doing gender", on the ways in which one cites and embodies the norm of gender in everyday life. It was also emphasized that agency is conceptualized as a double movement of signification, which consists of the limitations that discourse poses on one's performance of the norms and on the crafting of the norms through reiterating them. The third section of chapter 3 further elaborates on the relation between agency and gender in Butler's theoretical work, especially on her concept of "gendered agency". The relation between discourse and gender will be spelled out, with special attention to individual language use and the practice of storytelling, since Butler conceptualizes agency as a discursive quality.

3.3. Butler's concept of "gendered agency"

Butler in *Gender Trouble* theorized gender on the level of the Symbolic as "gender fables" or "regulative fictions", while in *Undoing Gender* she moves toward the level of the Social, a theory of gender as a social norm (Butler 2004, 51). This shift in her theory can be granted to her investigation into gender as a condition for social existence, as the primary prerequisite for a "livable life". This characteristic of gender can be pinpointed with great accuracy in the transsexual movement's ambivalent relation to the Gender Identity Disorder diagnosis (from now on GID), which she analyzes in this work. I offer an interpretation of the concept of "gendered agency" through reading it together with her theory of gender as a norm and gender intelligibility. I suggest that "gendered agency" refers to the varying possibilities in realizing one's gender as a ceaseless repetition and to the discursive quality of human agency, which can manifest itself in the practice of storytelling[18].

Butler argues that agency is "riven with paradox"(3), which refers to her assertion that norms are necessary to subject formation and at the same time, the critical relation to these norms is vital. Agency can manifest itself in the ability to negotiate with the norms, people can "derive agency from the field of their operation" (32). Her concept of "gendered agency" as developed in *Undoing Gender* does not refer to a masculine versus feminine type or kind of agency, but to the limitations that the social reduction of gender

[18] My interpretation of Butler's conceptualization of agency in the form of storytelling is indebted to Smith and Watson's reading of autobiographical writing through Butler's theory of agency (Smith and Watson 2010, 57-58). Although Atwood's feminist intervention in the genre of autobiography in her analyzed short story collection would be insightful with regard to her approach to genres, it would exceed the scope of this thesis.

to feminine or masculine entails with regard to the agency of human beings. In fact, femininity and masculinity need to be theoretically separated from gender in order to disclose how the feminine and masculine has come to "exhaust the semantic field of gender" (41).

In *Undoing Gender* Butler provides a detailed analysis of gender as a survival strategy, the ways in which discursively and culturally determined gender norms affect social realities, including the everyday threat of exclusion and stigmatization. Gender as a survival strategy already appeared in Butler's early essay "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" (1988) where she explained that the complementary genders are created through the naturalization process and are produced under duress and constraint. Those who do not perform their gender in a socially sanctioned way are consequently punished and those who manage to fit into the strict norms are rewarded. In *Undoing Gender* Butler argues that gender intelligibility, that is, the approximation of the feminine or the masculine ideal in one's performing gender, is a prerequisite for being recognized as a human being, whose life is livable.

To illustrate the boundaries of what counts as livability and "life" itself, Butler discusses the example of the conservative argument for the protection of "life", which is applied to limit women's reproductive rights (12). Butler concludes with the assertion that the norms "govern[ing] how agency itself is differently allocated among genders" can be transformed, however, in the contemporary realities, "a woman's right to choose, in some contexts, [remains] a misnomer" (12). Hence, Butler provides the example of the termination of pregnancy to signal that agency, as a result of being allocated following gender norms, becomes limited. This however does not mean that agency is not always

already gendered apart from those instances. Butler's explanation of the concept of human life and the limitations on agency through the example of the pregnant woman is revealing, however gender is not reduced to women in her reconceptualization of agency.

Her main discussion concerns the criteria of Gender Identity Disorder, her critique of which contains implications for the understanding of "gendered agency". Butler argues that the criteria for being diagnosed as a cross-gendered person reveals that while the ideal gender norms assumed and propagated by the GID manual are rigid and strict, gender identity is not a result of a "private reflection" but it is performatively constituted in a matrix of social interactions (98). She unfolds this argument through an analysis of the activities that characterize girls and boys suffering from GID, which is diagnosed by the criteria listed in the manual. These boys have a tendency to engage in feminine activities, a preference for women's clothing, which may manifest itself in improvising pieces of clothing from scarves or other materials. These girls "argue with their parents about wearing certain kinds of clothes", are "often misidentified by strangers as boys", and they ask to be called by a boy's name (98).

Butler infers that boys diagnosed with GID are characterized by improvisation, which is a creative practice characterizing all gender performances. She also deduces that the manual differentiates between genuine and false pieces of feminine clothing, relying on the heteronormative logic that defines homosexuality as a copy of its supposed "original", heterosexuality (explained in the previous section). With regards to girls, she deduces that they recognize the significance of the interpellation that initiates their gendered being and social life. Further, they realize that "sex is not a private reflection but a social category" (98), which manifests itself in their wish to being addressed as

boys. Butler emphasizes that the differentiation between the characterization of boys and girls suffering from GID follows from a rigid understanding of gender that does not acknowledge the performative, mimetic and social character of gender identity. I add to her analysis that the restricted understanding of gender identity delimits the "gendered agency" of the diagnosed individuals, because the assumptions behind the criteria of GID are gender stereotypical. It assumes that boys initiate and engage in creative activities as a manifestation of their gender identities, whereas the identity of girls is more reliant on social interactions, such as on their parents' permissions or strangers' opinions. In sum, girls are portrayed as relational beings whose identity is more malleable by social influences and expectations than boys.

The relation of agency to discourse, or what I termed as the discursive quality of agency, manifests itself in two forms: in the enabling and limiting role of discourse in subject formation, discussed earlier in this chapter, and in the subject's storytelling practices, which Butler explored in her work, *Excitable Speech* (1997). In the introduction of this work Butler asks two interrelated questions "[b]ut is the agency of language the same as the agency of the subject? [i]s there a way to distinguish between the two?" (7), which she proposes to answer. Butler argues that human agency is inextricably linked to discursive agency, since subjects are dependent upon their discursive interpellation, which "inaugurates the possibility of agency" (26). It can be inferred from the word 'inauguration' that to be addressed as a subject constitutes an elementary but also fundamental step toward the occurrence of gendered agency. Butler's theory of interpellation has mainly come to be associated with her example of 'girling' (Butler 1993, xvii), which refers to the performative power of designating an infant a girl

or a boy[19]. I point out that that Butler, by interpreting the discursive call into socially recognized human life along the lines of gender identity categories, highlights that subject formation is a process inextricably linked to gender, in this sense the subject's agency is only conceivable as "gendered agency". Especially, reading Butler's discursive understanding of agency developed in *Excitable Speech* together with her primary example of interpellation as a call into gendered subjectivity in *Bodies That Matter* supports my interpretation of "gendered agency".

Butler has developed her conceptualization of agency together with her theories of gender performativity and subjectivation, the reevaluation of the notion has been a central issue in her theorizing that she invariably returned to. As it was pointed out Butler conceptualizes agency as one's "doing gender", in the paradox of freedom opened up by a system of constraint and also as a discursive effect and an opportunity of individual language use. The next chapter provides an analysis of stories of Atwood's collection preceding the title story, "Bluebeard's Egg" because they modify its interpretation. This inclusive reading of the title story enhances our understanding of Atwood's revision of the fairy tale, in which the female protagonist navigates among discourses on gender, crafting and shaping her agency out of them.

[19] The performative power of naming is not only in effect in this initial act, but it is also reiterated or questioned through being addressed by others (Butler 1997, 5).

Chapter 4. Gendered Agency in *Bluebeard's Egg*

4.1. Competing discourses on gender

Atwood critiques the heteronormative discourse on gender and portrays storytelling as a form of agency enabled by competing discourses in the stories of the collection. This section analyzes Atwood's technique of combining the heteronormative discourse on gender with the "Bluebeard tale" imagery in the short story "Significant Moments in the Life of My Mother" and synthetizing the heteronormative perception of cleverness and the romantic discourse on gender in "Hurricane Hazel". I will point out that the clash between these competing discourses on gender enables the female protagonists to gain agency in the form of doing gender and in the form of storytelling.

Atwood voices a critique of contemporary discourses on gender in the first story of the collection, "Significant Moments in the Life of My Mother" (from now on: "Significant Moments…"). This story is generally analyzed as a portrayal of a "warm, well-meaning family, irrespective of gender differences" (Nischik 2007, 336) or as a process of natural growth between the mother's and daughter's storytelling practices (Godard 1986), however, I will argue that they are formed by competing discourses on gender.

The mother's storytelling practice is legitimized by a heteronormative discourse on gender, which manifests itself in her educational intent regarding the socialization into genders. The mother's story about meeting her husband is exemplary in this respect, in which boys are described as "great jokers" and "fun", while girls are characterized by their "proper" behavior, that is, by not committing sexual acts. Thus, according to the

discourse on gender that legitimizes the mother's storytelling men are characterized by assertive language use, while women are defined mostly by their bodily functions. It is a heteronormative discourse on gender, in which the "proper construction to be put on" (24) certain actions is that women and men are complementary.

The "language coming out of" the narrator is not understandable to her mother (29), which reference to the narrator's incomprehensible language use symbolizes the collision between the competing discourses on gender that they represent. The mother is afraid of the narrator because of her diversion from the discourse on gender that she represents. The narrator's language use "bear[s] news of a great disaster" (29), the disaster being a competing discourse on gender, which does not reduce women to domestic productivity, and their stories to the purpose of domestic entertainment or social education but opens up the ways for another female ideal, the female artist.

Atwood combines the discourses on gender with the "Bluebeard" tale imagery, which manifests itself in the difference between the mother's and daughter's interpretation regarding the suitability of stories for audiences of different genders. The interpretation as to why some stories are deemed unsuitable, even harmful for men is a twofold interpretation provided by the mother and the daughter: "*Men, for some mysterious reason, find life more difficult than women do. (My mother believes this, despite the female bodies, trapped, diseased, disappearing, or abandoned, that litter her stories)*" (22). First, it can be inferred that the mother's interpretation relies on a discourse on masculinity, according to which men are incapable of coping with everyday traumatic situations. Second, the narrator's interpretation of the mother's various stories about women "in trouble", going through abortion, left or cheated by their husbands

evokes the “Bluebeard” fairy tale. The mother’s storytelling practice symbolically assembles the body parts of the dismembered women, creates a community of women, who “close ranks” when the father enters the kitchen (22). Atwood combines this discourse on masculinity with the “Bluebeard” fairy tale imagery, which becomes apparent in the portrayal of the maternal grandfather’s feared medical practices behind the closed doors of the family home (11). Thus, the father’s authority is associated with medical authority over women’s bodies in this first story of the collection, which foreshadows the objectifying role of medical technology in the title story.

Thinking about the “The Robber Bridegroom” variant of the “Bluebeard” tale can be revealing about the mother’s above mentioned Bluebeard stories, since the female protagonist of the tale after having witnessed the torture of a young girl, recounts it in front of the community and the perpetrators, thereby she reveals the violence. It can be inferred that in the tale the female protagonist’s agency is strongly related to her storytelling practice, which abuses the gendered expectations of storytelling to save her life. Thus, the storytellers whose stories depict dismembered women’s bodies, do not become Bluebeard figures.

Teasing out the textual allusions to the “Bluebeard” tale complicates the idyllic characterization of the family described in existing scholarly interpretations. In the daughter’s narrative men are represented as contemporary Bluebeard figures possessing medical authority over women’s bodies. The mother’s narratives, told exclusively for female audiences, are described as Bluebeard’s forbidden room, revealing a contemporary form of violence against women. Moreover, the interpretation of “Significant Moments…” offered in this thesis illuminates the interpretation of title story,

especially the question invariably addressed by previous analyses, regarding the relation between the protagonist, Sally and Bluebeard: whether she is a female Bluebeard figure, which debate was sketched up in chapter 2.

Atwood in the second short story, "Hurricane Hazel" voices a critique of the heteronormative discourse on gender, which she combines with the romantic discourse on femininity expressed in 19th century novels, *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). Gilbert and Gubar interpreted Bronte's novel as a metaphor of the female protagonist's socially sanctioned "passage from nature to culture" (303) [20], which parallels women's transgression of social norms in fairy tales[21]. Contrarily to their interpretation of women's social regulation as an ahistorical phenomenon[22], Atwood contrasts the strict discourse on gender in the 19th century novels with the contemporary, North-American discourse on gender in the 1980s in her critique of gender as a norm.

The first person narrator, a teenage girl is influenced by the discourse on gender, which can be pinpointed in her perception of cleverness, manifesting itself mainly in her conversations with her boyfriend, Buddy. The narrator is aware of the gender stereotype that smart women are considered to be undesirable; consequently she voices her insecurities about how to talk to Buddy in order not to be considered too intelligent. On the other hand, she considers another possible gendered interpretation of cleverness, according to which "a controlled display of it" (38) for instance a piece of embroidery,

[20] According to Gilbert and Gubar the initial union of Catherine and Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* is an idyllic, but also natural state, which is disturbed by the imposition of cultural norms.

[21] Gilbert and Gubar interpret Catherine's socialization into gender through fairy tale imagery, as similar to women's transgression of social norms in fairy tales and myths, which is punished more vigorously than the transgression of their male counterparts.

[22] To be more precise, Gilbert and Gubar in their comparison of *Wuthering Heights* and *The Mill on the Floss* assert that Bronte portrays an outside to gender norms, a preceding natural state, whereas Eliot depicts a gendered world, in which there is no outside to the system. Atwood's allusions to both romantic novels in her short story suggest that she also addresses the question of gender norms. However, a more thorough analysis of Atwood's engagement with these works as a possible reflection on the literary tradition of women writers would exceed the scope of this thesis.

piano playing or a special cake is perceived as feminine. This perceived discrepancy in the norm makes the narrator wonder whether Buddy was the "kind of boy for whom cleverness was female" (38). This association of cleverness with gender points out that what is described as two possible interpretations of cleverness (as undesirable in verbal form and desirable in the form of domestic productivity) serve complementary roles of regulation by the heteronormative discourse on gender.

The discourse on femininity that is evoked by textual references to women writers' works includes George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss*, which manifests itself in the perception of cleverness. The protagonist's brother teaches her Greek at home, despite of the belief that girls cannot learn Greek, which is a gender stereotype that was expressed in the 19th century novel as well. In both Eliot's novel and Atwood's short story clever women are perceived as unfeminine, even dangerous for the social order. The interpretation of cleverness appears as a central theme in the title story as well, in which Atwood merges the gendered discourse on mental disorder with the fairy tale discourse on gender, which will be discussed in chapter 5.

While the daughter and son can only be equal in death according to the heteronormative discourse presented in Eliot's novel, the union with the brother is enabled by a shared disillusionment in the idealized gender norms in Atwood's short story. The story of *Mill on the Floss* ends with a reunion between the siblings through death by drowning; the narrative of "Hurricane Hazel" ends with a reunion with the brother over the wreckages left behind by the hurricane. The wreckage can be read as a symbol of the failed attempt at embodying the ideal version of femininity, which is necessarily a failed approximation of the norm, according to Butler's theory. This failure

eventually points to the subversion of the original versus copy distinction regarding (gender) identities, which was revealed to be a regulatory fiction by Butler, explained in chapter 3.

Atwood reflects on Gilbert and Gubar's analysis of *Wuthering Heights* in that she combines the discourse on gender presented in the novel with contemporary discourses. In other words, Atwood voices a subtle critique on the continuity between the 19th century and the 20th century discourses on gender, she expresses a more positive view on the consequences of young girls' nonconformity with gender norms, especially in that she transforms the nature imagery in the *Mill on the Floss* to represent the shared insight that one's doing gender will necessarily be an imperfect realization of the norm. This section explored the protagonists' agency in their storytelling practices, with special emphasis on the discourses that enable their performances, which was pointed out as a main objective of this thesis in the Introduction. The next section addresses the other aspect of Butler's understanding of agency that is explored in this thesis, according to which agency resides in the variations on "doing gender", which Atwood represents by metaphors.

4.2. Critique of gender as a cultural norm

Atwood voices a critique of gender as a cultural norm in two ways: by emphasizing the culturally constituted aspects of gender and through the metaphor of the haiku poetic genre and the North-American social practice of dating. The protagonists' agency manifests itself in the variation on citing gender as a norm and in doing gender as a social survival strategy. These manifestations of their agency are represented by the haiku poem as a metaphor of gender performativity and the social practice of dating as a metaphor of gender as a survival strategy.

The narrator of "Significant Moments…." emphasizes the possibilities of crafting the norms to fit one's needs, which becomes evident in her comment on the various possibilities of flirtation: "[i]t was like the Japanese haiku: a limited form, rigid in its perimeters, within which an astonishing freedom was possible" (18). As Butler argues, agency can be pinpointed in the varying repetition of gender norms that follows from her theory of gender performativity. Based on Butler's theory, the Japanese literary form, which is presented as a metaphor of the linguistic practice of flirting can be interpreted as a metaphor of agency in the form of the variation on "doing gender"[23]. The metaphor of the literary genre of the haiku highlights what Butler describes as the paradox of agency. This refers to her theory that the discourse on gender delimits the boundaries of acceptable, recognizable and socially accepted reproductions or embodiments of the norm, at the same time the bearing and crafting of the norm varies from individual to

[23] Godard provides a different interpretation of the haiku metaphor arguing that "the paradox of freedom in constraint" (1986, 74), as she puts it, refers to the varieties of narrative techniques applied by writers.

individual (explained in chapter 3).

The haiku as a metaphor of gendered agency also expresses the nature/culture dichotomy in Western understandings of gender norms. The haiku relates to nature as its subject with each line consisting of juxtapositions of images (*Encyclopaedia Britannica online*, s.v. "haiku," http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/251787/haiku [accessed March 18, 2013]), which accentuates that the heteronormative discourse renders gender as a natural phenomenon with two polar versions (Butler 1990, 140). The haiku is a genre of poetry specific to a culture, which is even emphasized in the quote as the adjective Japanese is added to accentuate the cultural specificity of the genre. Likewise, gender is a culturally constructed practice, a mode of which prevalent in Western societies was extensively analyzed by Butler.

Atwood reveals gender to be a cultural norm in the second short story entitled "Hurricane Hazel" through her critique of the North-American social practice of dating. The protagonist is influenced by the discourse on femininity that manifests itself in the form of contemporary social expectations, especially in the social practice of dating. The narrative centers on the protagonist's insecurities as to dating, which serves as a spectacle of "proper" gender behavior granting her inclusion in the community. The emphasis on her lack of initiative in the relationship symbolizes the centrality of fulfilling gender norms as the main motivation for her romantic relationships with men. The protagonist's first boyfriend is "handed over to" (38) her by one of her classmates, which offer she accepts in order to be included in the conversations with other girls. Thus, it is narrator's wish to belong to the community of teenage girls that entices her to date a boy.

The narrator attempts to live up to the discourse on gender, because she is painfully

aware that her “deviations from the norm” (51) could make her social life unbearable. Several textual references reveal the narrator’s insecurities about the expectations of gendered behavior, as she puts it “maybe this is what I was supposed to do” or “maybe this was the way I was supposed to behave” (50), which underlines her awareness of the need that gender has to be performed in a recognizable manner. Thus, it can be inferred that her pretended conformity with gender norms functions as a survival strategy to protect her from social reprimands.

This section analyzed Atwood’s reference to the haiku as a metaphor of agency in doing gender in the first short story “Significant Moments…”, and revealed gender to be norm in the social practice of dating in the short story “Hurricane Hazel”. The analysis of these metaphors on gender highlights that the protagonists’ agency can be pointed out in their methods of crafting the norms and abusing them to meet their interests. Hence, Atwood in the two stories analyzed so far depicts competing discourses on gender and young women’s socialization as a result of the double movement, through which discourse creates their subject position and enables them to act out their own version of the norms that can be called their agency according to Butler’s theorization of the concept.

4.3. Identification with versions of femininity

While the first two stories portray the female protagonists' struggles against the limited range of agency enabled for them by the heteronormative discourse on gender, the following story "Loulou; or the Domestic Life of the Language" cautions about the dangers of identification with these dominant versions of femininity. Thereby, Atwood provides a compelling reference point for the interpretation of "Bluebeard's Egg" regarding the protagonist's identification with dominant versions of femininity propagated by the heteronormative discourse on gender.

The protagonist's identification relies on the perception of the male poets with whom she lives together, who describe Loulou as lacking intellectual qualities but being physically productive. The poets emphasize the difference between art and craft, assigning their poetry to art and Loulou's pottery to craft, which discourse engenders artistic creativity as male and bodily productivity as female. Thus, the poets' perception of Loulou highlights women's place in the traditional literary imaginary, which was analyzed by Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Thereby, Atwood reflects on one of the main topics of Gilbert and Gubar's work, the conceptualization of female creativity in the Western literary tradition and the possibilities of coming to a self-understanding in this discursive environment.

Loulou at the beginning of the story accepts the poets' definition of herself, however, she starts to critique this reductive version of her and the action of the plot is set into motion with Loulou being "on her way to seduce her accountant" (70) in order to

acquire his version of herself, a female artist, through the sexual act. Atwood's technique of including a combination of traditionally "feminine" and "masculine" justification for adultery signals her complication of binaries. Loulou's motivations for this sexual act, an act of adultery are her "wistful desire to be taken care of" (72) and her "longing to be first" (73), which can be considered as stereotypically gendered explanations of engaging in sexual relationships. Atwood similarly applies the technique of complicating the gender binaries in the title story, "Bluebeard's Egg" in that the female protagonist, Sally is characterized by her tendencies towards objectification and descriptions of being exploited, which will be explained in chapter 5.

Loulou's attempt at creating an identity for herself through engaging in sexual act with a man is unsuccessful; the act of adultery does not enhance her understanding of herself. However, her perception is changed after the adultery scene, she realizes that she has not been "invented by the poets" (81) and starts to think about herself as being able to shape her own identity. Thus, she manages to unlock herself from the discourse on gender represented by the poets, which assigns her to a linguistic career by reducing her to her bodily productivity.

After having provided a basic analysis of the story, I compare and contrast it with the title story in order to support my interpretation of "Bluebeard's Egg" in that the protagonist's dissatisfaction with her previous identification with the dominant discourse on gender, which foreshadows the plot of "Bluebeard's Egg". The short story "Loulou…" mirrors the plotline of the title story in that it questions the validity of one's perception of others and the story culminates in a scene of adultery. Based on this similarity it will be pointed out that an analysis of the title story should be supported by this preceding story

as well.

The two differences between the plotlines are that in “Loulou….” the protagonist’s perception of herself is challenged, while in “Bluebeard’s Egg” the protagonist’s perception of her husband is challenged, as in the former story the female protagonist commits adultery while in the latter it is the male protagonist who does so. The meaning that the protagonists attach to the act of adultery is similar, since both acts promise a certain kind of knowledge, either self-knowledge or an understanding of the husband’s personality and both attempts fail to bring certainty as to these dilemmas. Loulou’s attempt at evading the influence of the discourse that devalues her creativity as supposedly deriving from her bodily productivity parallels Sally’s attempt at revealing the Bluebeardian plot behind her interpretation of her marriage.

In this chapter I argued that Atwood’s technique of portraying competing discourses on gender serves the purpose of enabling her protagonists’ agency, which is manifested in the variations on their doing gender as it is the case with the narrator of “Significant Moments…”, or in consciously applying it as a survival strategy as the protagonist of “Hurricane Hazel” does, or in critiquing it as a self-definition, similarly to Loulou. It was pointed out that Atwood uses the Bluebeard imagery to complicate her critique on the heteronormative discourse on gender in “Significant Moments…”, which highlights her approach to fairy tales as being distinguishable from the literary tradition. Hence, Atwood’s approach to fairy tales can be interpreted as challenging the contemporary dominant approach represented by Gilbert and Gubar. It will be pointed out that Atwood further departs from the feminist literary perspective in that she does not support a universal category of the fairy tale but explores their cultural components,

literary and folk variants, which technique will be analyzed in detail in chapter 5.

Chapter 5. Atwood's revision of the "fairy-tale discourse"

5.1. Critiquing the heteronormative discourse

Atwood's feminist technique of fairy tale revision includes several levels of the narrative, the level of the embedded and the frame narrative and the level of discourse. Atwood's contemporary retelling is narrated from the perspective of the wife, Sally. The metafictional twist in Atwood's technique of revision is that her protagonist is assigned to rewrite the "Bluebeard tale" from a point of view, in a contemporary setting. Sally's thought process about rewriting the tale is informative about Atwood's retelling on the level of the frame narrative, which will be interpreted as Sally's oral version of the "Bluebeard" tale culminating in a scene of the husband's adultery, which initiates a transformation in the protagonist's perceptions.

Atwood in the title story similarly to her technique in "Hurricane Hazel", interpreted in chapter 4, combines two discourses, the discourse on male sexuality as uncontrollable desire (May and Bohman 1997) with the discourse on cunning in fairy tales (Tatar 1987). I point out that what has been interpreted as the protagonist's tendency of objectification, (Bacchilega 1997; Bunde 2007) or becoming an abusive Bluebeard figure (Walker, 1996), is Atwood's conscious strategy of critiquing the heteronormative discourse on sexuality.

The narrative is overwhelmed by Sally's perception of herself as clever and her husband as stupid with regard to their relationship. There are hints in the narrative at Sally's tendency of simplification in that she symbolically reduces her husband into "a facsimile" (13) in her attempt at understanding him. Sally imagines Ed's stupidity as

something physical, as an “obtuse wall” (133), or a surface she cannot get beneath (150), which metaphors have been and indeed can be interpreted as the protagonist’s objectification of her husband. I analyze textual descriptions of Ed’s stupidity that are underexplored by the existing scholarship in order to reveal that the protagonist’s interpretation of their relationship is legitimized by the heteronormative discourse on male sexuality. Hence, I propose a different interpretation of Sally’s understanding of Ed, according to which Sally internalized the discourse on gender that prevents her from admitting the exploitative nature of their relationship.

This discourse surfaces in examples that exceed the meaning of physical as material and refer to Ed’s stupidity as a bodily, indeed both sexual and mental characteristic. Toward the beginning of the narrative Ed’s stupidity is termed as “too many-thumbs kindness” (133), which reference to his physical clumsiness raises suspicion in the reader as to the validity of Sally’s judgment, given that heart surgeons must be very skillful with their hands. It can be inferred from this expression that Sally perceives Ed’s sociability with women as kindness, as an emotional characteristic, which is coupled with a perceived physical clumsiness.

The heteronormative discourse becomes evident in the climactic scene of the short story, in which Sally encounters a scene that she interprets as a proof of Ed’s adultery and justifies her interpretation by referring to the discourse that men are incapable of controlling their sexuality: “[m]aybe it’s just that Ed, in a wayward intoxicated moment, put his hand on the nearest buttock” (162). It is important to emphasize that the act of adultery is not ascribed to Ed as a person even on the level of the narrative, but it is ascribed to him as a body, which means that it is only his hand, as if detached, which is

described as wandering on women's bodies.

Atwood critiques the heteronormative discourse by delivering a certain level of gender reversal in that Ed's stupidity is not only described as a physical and sexual characteristic but also as a mental deficiency, as a "feeble-minded amiability" (132). The adjective feeble-minded had different connotations over time, starting from being a synonym of faint-heartedness in King James' Bible, referring to mental deficiency in the 19th century or a psychological condition in the 20th century (Oxford English Dictionary online, s.v. "feeble-minded," http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/68950 [accessed 18 March, 2013]), then in the rhetoric of the Third Reich it was applied to justify eugenic policies (Bock 1992). The condition of feeble-mindedness had gendered criteria in Nazi Germany in that the diagnosis was applied to women deemed to be unfit for procreation, while it was rarely applied to men (Bock 1992). Thus, Atwood applies a historically feminized mental illness to describe Sally's perception of her husband.

Atwood's reversal of gender stereotypes appears in Sally's description of their relationship as a manifestation of the supposedly bygone blond tradition, which refers to the attractiveness of dumb blond women, who are loved because of their stupidity (132). In short, according to Sally's interpretation of their relationship, she is the dominant one, the seducer, while Ed reacts to her initiatives, and this "stupidity" is worth adoration. Atwood's gender reversal manifests itself in the spelling of the adjective blond, which is one of the rare English adjectives that have preserved the gender difference in spelling in that the spelling blonde refers to female hair color, while the spelling without the 'e' blond, refers to male hair color (*Webster's New World college dictionary* 3rd ed., s.v. "blond" and s.v. "blonde"). Stupidity is associated with female gender in the blond

woman stereotype, by revealing the applicability of a characteristic, in this case, stupidity to a representative of the male gender, the connection between stupidity and femaleness is severed. It is revealed that the association is not a given but a social fantasy, similarly to Butler's dedifferentiation between the copy and the original with regards to gender identities. As Marina Warner argues blondness in fairy tales traditionally describes the good heroines, as this female hair color constitutes "a piece of value system" in that it symbolizes fairness, childishness and innocence (Marina Warner 1995, 364). Thus, the gender reversal of the characterization of the male protagonist as blonde can be interpreted in the context of fairy tale imagery as well.

5.2. Fairy tale revision

I argue that Atwood delivers a rewriting of the tale that challenges the "fairy-tale discourse" of Perrault's tale to a level that has not been explored before, by revising Perrault's morals, his characterization of the protagonists and the interpretation of the chamber. Atwood includes Bluebeard in the title of her short story, which points to the centrality of the tale for the narrative, however critics disagree as to at which point the tale enters the narrative. It has been argued that Atwood misleads the readers by constructing the false expectation of an abusive husband (Bunde 2007), or that the tale enters the narrative relatively late, only in the form of the embedded story (Grace 1984; Keith 1991) or that both the frame narrative and the embedded story retell a folk variant of the "Bluebeard" tale (Barzilai 2006). I argue that Atwood transforms the "Bluebeard" tale on more levels, on the level of the discourse, on narrative levels and through imagery.

Building on Zipes' characterization of the fairy tale writer's technique, explained in chapter 1, I argue that Atwood "enters into a dialogue" with the writer of the literary "Bluebeard" tale, Perrault[24]. Atwood refers explicitly to his role in shaping the intended message of the tale as a lesson on socially acceptable gender roles and relations in that the instructor of Sally's night course, named Bertha introduces the "Fitcher's Bird" variant by a reference to the literary version: "In Perrault (…) the girl has to be rescued by her brothers; but in the earlier version things were quite otherwise" (154). As Wilson

[24] In my analysis of Atwood's fairy tale revision as engaged in a dialogue with Perrault's version I do not intend to suggest that his literary version of the tale is in any sense the "original" tale. As Warner argues, the originality or chronology of variants of the tales cannot be established (Warner 1995, xxi). I aim to point out, however, that Atwood reflected on this influential literary version as well, apart from the folk variants, which has been explored in existing analyses.

argued, Atwood chose to include the “Fitcher’s Bird” variant in the form of an embedded text in her retelling because of its portrayal of women who do not need to rely on men’s assistance (Wilson 1993, 264).

I add to Wilson’s interpretation that in both the “Fitcher’s Bird” and in “The Robber Bridegroom” the protagonist can use techniques which are viewed traditionally feminine, that of disguise and that of storytelling in the form of dream narrative in order to save herself. In other words, agency in the form of the protagonists’ reshaping the social conventions is present in both folk variants. Therefore, Atwood’s combination of the two folk variants on two narrative levels opens up the possibilities for the protagonist’s agency. Although the plot ends with her realization of the Bluebeardian qualities of her marriage and her internalization of the heteronormative discourse on sexuality, I argue that she recounts an oral version of the tale in the frame narrative.

Apart from the explicit critique on Perrault’s version discussed above, Atwood reflected on the literary tale by reversing its morals in order to reveal their heteronormative logic. As discussed in chapter 2, Perrault attached his lessons to his published version in the form of two morals. The first moral stated that curiosity is a characteristically feminine trait. The second moral relegated the tale to the past with regards to the abusiveness of the husband, interpreting it as an exceptional case and a relic of an outmoded tradition. Perrault claims that in his times it is the woman who has the authority in marriage, despite of the appearances to the contrary.

Sally’s perception of Ed’s extramarital relationships as his past critiques Perrault’s depiction of intra-marital violence against women as an outdated tradition. At the beginning of the narrative Sally relegates Ed’s high school lovers as figures of the past

and imagines her husband's previous wives and their children as a prehistory of their relationship. Thereby, Atwood reverses Perrault's moral regarding the timing of the story in order to reveal that it serves the purpose of displacing the significance of the husband's violence or in the case of the contemporary retelling, his infidelity.

Likewise, the question of authority is addressed in that Sally is described as being in charge of their marriage based on her perception as the clever, dominant one. The first scene of the short story is emblematic in the reversal of Perrault's moral on household authority. Sally seems to be in charge of the household, preparing the dinner for the party in the kitchen, while Ed appears to be enjoying himself by "puttering around" with stones near the garage. This scene has been interpreted as a proof of Ed's mildness (Keith 1991; Bunde 2007), as an effort to prevent her from accidentally scraping her car (Keith 1991). The interpretation of Ed's kindness in this first scene, however, needs to be revisited, because I argue that it is revealed to be a false impression through references to Marylynn's arrival by a car and a van, which needed more space for parking. The first scene that initially tricks the reader into the belief that the wife is the dominant partner in the relationship is revealed to be the concealment of the husband's affair with her best friend. Thereby, Atwood reverses Perrault's moral, which says 'contrarily to the appearances, the woman rules in marriage' to an interpretation 'contrarily to the false impression that the wife rules in marriage, it is the husband that is manipulating her'. Hence, Atwood critiques the heteronormative discourse on women's concealed authority in marriage that legitimizes their exploitation or even physical abuse.

Apart from Atwood's critique of the gendered message of the "Bluebeard" tale, her feminist revision complicates the distinction between the abusive husband and the wife in

that she includes the interpretation of two possible Bluebeard figures in her tale. The question of who is the Bluebeard of Atwood's tale intrigued feminist (Bacchilega 1997), literary (Keith 1991; Bunde 2007), and psychoanalytic (Stein 2003) scholars. Indeed, this question is central to Atwood's feminist technique of complicating gendered binaries. I suggest that the female protagonist's Bluebeard-like characteristics should be interpreted in the larger interpretative history of the "Bluebeard" tale, more specifically with the help of Gilbert's analysis (1998) of *Jane Eyre* as a "Bluebeard" tale and Gilbert and Gubar's analysis of the "angel-woman" and "monster-woman" binary .

Atwood complicates the characterization of the literary tale's main characters, assigning some Bluebeard-like qualities to the male protagonist, the husband and some to the female protagonist, the wife. There are some differences in the description of the protagonist's husband, Ed and the fairy tale abuser, Bluebeard, which I consider to be parts of Atwood's conscious strategy of voicing a critique of contemporary social realities. Ed is considerably older than Sally and already had two wives, however, the similarities with Bluebeard end on this point; he is not an aristocrat but a heart surgeon. The change in her occupation signals Atwood's critique of contemporary social realities with regards to the medical control over women's bodies (Ehrenreich 1996)[25], especially given that the heart surgeons are referred to in the text as "heart men", as an exclusively male company.

Further, the analysis of the climactic scene together with its textual precedents reveals Ed to be the Bluebeard figure of Atwood's tale. Atwood foreshadows the scene of adultery in the description of social gatherings, during which "[w]omen corner him on

[25] Barzilai pointed out that the association of Bluebeard with contemporary medical authority is not an isolated technique, but this association is utilized to voice a critique of this form of patriarchal control, especially in German rewritings (2006, 196).

sofas, *trap him in bay-windows at cocktail parties*, mutter to him in confidential voices at dinner parties" (137, italics mine). This scenario of flirtations in bay-windows during cocktail parties is realized in the last scene of the story, when Sally finds Ed and Marylynn in an intimate situation in their bay-windowed balcony drinking cocktails (172). Ed explains these scenes of habitual flirting with providing medical advice to women regarding their problems with their hearts, which conversations are perceived by the protagonist to be initiated by women. However, Sally recalls that in the beginning of their relationship she also wanted this "mirage" of the woman with a heavy heart, and Ed provided her a medical advice (138). Likewise, Ed upon Sally's entrance to the balcony explains away their conversation with Marylynn by a medical advice. The similarity of the settings in both the former and the latter scenes reveals him to be a contemporary Bluebeard figure.

Apart from the adultery scene being textually foreshadowed, "The Robber Bridegroom" variant supports the interpretation of Ed as Bluebeard. In this variant, apart from recounting the horrific events, the victim's dismembered finger is provided as proof. Critics have drawn attention to Atwood's technique of using the detached arms, fingers in her other retellings of the "Bluebeard" tale as metaphors (Stein 2003), and the interpretation of the seemingly detached hand in the context of the tale is supported within the short story. Atwood's gender reversal of the body part, that the hand could possibly reveal the husband as an adulterer, suggests that she relocates the emphasis from the victim to the perpetrator in her reading of the "Bluebeard" tale. More importantly, Atwood combines her critique of the heteronormative discourse with fairy tale imagery in the adultery scene.

Sally's reaction to the adultery scene is foreshadowed by an anecdote of playing Monopoly, which highlights the change in her interpretation of her marriage that is revealed to be controlled by her adulterous husband. Ed won all the games they used to play with his children, thanks to his calculated strategy, which made Sally consider him selfish. Afterwards Sally would wander around the house and read the endings of detective stories so that she did not have to accept the interpretation of her husband as shrewd. Sally's reaction to the adultery scene is similar in that she starts wandering around the rooms, but she starts thinking about a different ending of the "Bluebeard" tale concentrating on the fate of the magic object, the egg. The significant difference in her reactions is that after the games Sally searched for reassurance in the already known endings, while after the adultery scene she realizes that she herself has to provide the ending of the story, which differs from the traditional fairy tale happy ending containing the union with the prince and the promise of ever-lasting happiness. Thus, it is revealed that Sally notices her husband's character, but she needs to retell the story to herself in order to accept this knowledge of him.

Based on the textual references explained above, the adultery scene cannot be considered as a result of Sally's imagination (Bunde 2007) or a result of Sally's imposition of the fairy-tale motif on her marriage (Barzilai 2006). It is rather a scene in which Sally faces Ed as "enormously clever" (162). The protagonist has to be initiated into this knowledge so that her agency could manifest itself in the form of recounting at least for herself the story of her exploitative relationship, a contemporary "Bluebeard" tale. So far it has been argued that Ed's stupidity is revealed to be Sally's understanding of him that relies on a heteronormative discourse on sexuality. It was pointed out that Ed

can be considered a contemporary Bluebeard figure. However, Atwood complicates the gender binaries represented in the literary tale and assigns some Bluebeard-like qualities to the female protagonist, Sally as well.

As it was pointed out in section 1, Sally's tendency of objectification is interpreted by existing analyses as a proof of her Bluebeard-like qualities (Bacchilega 1997; Bunde 2007). In order to answer the question whether Sally is a Bluebeard figure, those metaphors of Sally's objectification of Ed that are coupled with Bluebeard imagery need to be discussed. Sally's attempt at understanding her husband can be pointed out in the metaphors of assembling mosaic pieces or a surface she wants to get beneath, as it was mentioned earlier. This might cause harm to the observed object, especially in that Sally imagines Ed as a boiled egg, which can only be eaten after having cracked its surface. The protagonist makes references to other women attempting to devour her husband, which is presented through "Bluebeard" tale imagery. Moreover, she expresses her envy of not being the one committing those acts. Thereby, the symbolical act of cutting the husband into mosaic pieces in order to understand him also appears as a part of food preparation. This cannibalistic overtone resembles "The Robber Bridegroom tale", in which a young girl is tortured and eaten by Bluebeard and his companions. Hence, the plot of the tale is represented through the technique of gender reversal in Atwood's text. Although this can be interpreted as a textual reference to the protagonist being the Bluebeard figure, I argue that the monstrosity of the cannibalistic female protagonist serves the aim of complicating the "angel-woman" and the "monster-woman" binary, which will be explained in detail in section 4 of this chapter.

Atwood's technique of fairy tale revision has been interpreted as a combination of two

folk variants (Barzilai 2006), which reading I expand on in my interpretation in that the text will be analyzed as containing three forbidden chambers. This reading focuses on analyzing the chambers in the text and explores a third chamber, which reveals the reduction of women to the role of the "angel in the house"[26]. The analysis of the chamber scenes in feminist revisions of the "Bluebeard" tale are especially important, since feminist fairy tale scholars relocated the emphasis from the magic object, symbolizing the violation of the prohibition, to the forbidden chamber motif, which approach focuses on the violence against women (Bacchilega 1997). My analysis of the third chamber underlines that the protagonist narrates an oral version of the "Bluebeard" tale. First, an interpretation of the much-analyzed two chambers in the text will be provided so that the link between the story's plot and the fairy tale reference were explained, then the third manifestation of the chamber will be analyzed.

In the interpretation of Atwood's tale offered in this thesis so far the emphasis was put on the second chamber in the climactic scene, which reveals the protagonist's husband as an adulterer. Hence, Atwood commits a gender reversal of the patriarchal reading of the literary "Bluebeard" tale by interpreting it as a tale about male infidelity. This reading, however, needs to be completed by an analysis of another torture chamber towards the beginning of the text that portrays the protagonist's husband as a Bluebeard figure from a different perspective, utilizing the imagery of "The Robber Bridegroom" tale. The first chamber in Atwood's contemporary tale resembles the torture scene of "The Robber Bridegroom" tale, in which a young girl is dismembered and devoured, in that Sally is reduced to her body parts and objectified by her husband's medical device.

[26] The Victorian discourse "angel in the house" was extensively analyzed by Gilbert and Gubar as another manifestation of the "angel-woman and monster-woman" binary, which links this 19th century ideal version of femininity to Snow White and Christian female saints in their ordinariness and passivity.

Sally remembers an incident a few years before the time of the narration, when she visited her husband's examination room in order to see her own heart through a diagnostic device. Ed is depicted as exercising medical authority over Sally's body and objectifying her wife in a place that she perceives as a "massage parlor for women" (145).

The two torture chambers, the chamber in the hospital revealing the medicalized control over the wife's body and the chamber at home containing the scene of adultery, were interpreted as the two feasts of "The Robber Bridegroom" tale (Barzilai 2006, 194), during which the protagonist's agency manifests itself. The protagonist of the folk tale first witnesses the cannibalistic feast, then she participates in her wedding feast during which she narrates the crime she had witnessed. Likewise, in Atwood's retelling the first forbidden chamber scene contains a symbolic dismembering of a woman, while the second scene contains a dinner party during which the Bluebeard-like quality of the husband is proven. However, critics emphasized that Atwood's protagonist, Sally does not reveal her husband as an abuser in front of the community but she remains silent (Bacchilega 1997; Stein 2003). I suggest that Atwood complicates the witness/victim distinction in her first rendition of the forbidden room and in the second one she rethinks the distinction between oral/written storytelling in that an oral version of the tale is retold by Sally on the level of the frame narrative.

The interpretation of these two chambers needs to be completed by a structural analysis of the short story, because they are linked by a partial retelling of the "Fitcher's Bird" variant that highlights the protagonist's interpretation of the forbidden room. Existing analyses concentrated on the missing ending of the embedded text and the

protagonist's perspective as the cunning third wife, as it was explained in chapter 2. However, an analysis of the protagonist's interpretation of the chamber is revealing about the contemporary danger that marriage might pose to women. I point out that a third chamber, which is Sally's version of the chamber, can be found in her commentary to the embedded text, which contains a partial retelling of a folk variant of the "Bluebeard tale", the "Fitcher's Bird", which omits the ending of the tale containing the protagonist's life-saving act of cleverness, her disguise and its result, the punishment of the abuser.

The first textual reference to Sally's version of the chamber is made just before the partial retelling, in that the protagonist envisions her husband's "inner world"[27] as a forest, in which he is wandering around healing the plants and animals, while an angel is feeding him occasionally, who is "getting tired of being an angel" (150). The second reference to Sally's interpretation of the chamber can be found right after the embedded text, in that she argues that if her husband were the wizard, the chamber would be a forest. Sally quickly disregards this interpretation thinking that if the chamber is not locked, there is no story (157). However, as it was pointed out in chapter 2, the prohibition is not an indispensable element of the "Bluebeard" tale variants; in fact, neither of the rooms are locked in "The Robber Bridegroom" or in the "Fitcher's Bird" tales. Thus, the protagonist's assertion about the prohibition highlights that she follows the prevalent patriarchal interpretation of the tale, that she internalized its patriarchal message. Moreover, her reference to the role of the angel shows that the danger that marriage might pose to women is the discourse on the "angel in the house", which relegates them to the private sphere.

[27] The interpretation of the chamber as Bluebeard's inner world is a prevalent interpretation that characterizes for instance Béla Bartók's opera "Bluebeard's Castle", which has been interpreted as a possible interpretative guide to Atwood's retelling (Grace 1984).

In this section I argued that Atwood transforms the heteronormative discourse on gender by reversing Perrault's morals and that through her use of the Bluebeard imagery the protagonist's husband is revealed to be the abusive figure of the tale. I analyzed the three possible chambers depicted in the text that symbolize three contemporary discourses as possibly objectifying women, that of the medical authority over their bodies, infidelity, and the discourse on "angel in the house" defining women as relational beings. I pointed out that the protagonist retells an oral version of the "Bluebeard" tale, referred to as the third chamber in the story, which illuminates the manifestation of her agency through storytelling.

5.3. Atwood's feminist literary approach to fairy tales

This section contains an analysis of the ways in which Atwood intertwines the contemporary discourses on gender with fairy tale imagery in the title story. I sketch up Atwood's references to other fairy tales in order to point out that these intertexts nuance my interpretation of Atwood's story as a "Bluebeard" tale. I argue that Atwood views the fairy tale as influential in the socialization into discrete genders, which unites her with feminist literary critics of the time. Nevertheless, Atwood explores the "Bluebeard" tale together with its folk variants with such detail that she can be considered as a predecessor to the folkloristic approach especially developed in the 1990s, as it was explained in the Introduction.

Atwood in her retelling of the "Bluebeard" tale included general fairy-tale motifs regarding the number three, more specifically, critiquing the gendered differences between the characterization of a third son versus a third wife. While the third son is usually described by his naiveté or stupidity in fairy tales, the third wife uses her cunning to save herself from dangerous situations (Tatar 1987). In section 1 Ed's stupidity was analyzed in the context of the heteronormative discourse on sexuality, which Atwood combines with the fairy-tale concept of the third son the following way: "Because Ed is so stupid, he doesn't even know he's stupid. He's a child of luck, a third son, who armed with nothing but a certain feeble-minded amiability, manages to take it through the forest (…)" (132-133). Thereby, Atwood combines the gendered characteristic of feeble-mindedness, which was analyzed in section 1 of this chapter, with fairy tale imagery of the stupid third son.

The third wife in fairy tales is usually portrayed as clever, which applies for the heroine of the "Bluebeard" tale as well, who is crafty in the folk variants. However, Atwood's protagonist perceives herself as clever and her partner as stupid in her interpretation of her marriage, which turns out to be a false impression. Hence, Atwood follows a common strategy of fairy tale writers, which consists of turning opposite qualities into one another (Tatar 1987). Moreover, Atwood completes the level of subversion in the tale by including gender reversal in her complication of the cleverness/stupidity binary.

In order to reveal the full extent of Atwood's critique of gendered binaries propagated by the traditional fairy tale discourse, a closer look is needed at the first scene of the retelling, which adds cannibalistic overtones to Sally's characterization. The first scene introduces the protagonist as cooking for the dinner party and looking out of the window. Both of her activities, simmering a sauce and looking out of the window are fairy tale references to different characterizations of heroines, which were identified as the socially accepted polar versions of femininity, the "angel-woman" and "monster-woman", in Gilbert and Gubar's terms. The woman simmering a sauce appears in Grimm's fairy tales as a symbol of cannibalism; especially in the cannibalistic characterization of the mother-in-law in "Sleeping Beauty" (Tatar 1987, 138). Therefore, this female figure can be identified as the creative woman, who is perceived as evil and destructive to the social order precisely because of her creativity. At the same time, Sally is described as looking out of the window, which resembles the (in)activity of Snow White's mother, who represents the ideal, angelic version of femininity according to Gilbert and Gubar. Based on the analysis above, it can be deduced that the first scene, already analyzed in this

thesis as a metaphor of Sally's perception of Ed and as a part of the text undermining the reader's initial interpretation, is revealing about Atwood's technique of complicating the traditionally dichotomous characterization of women in fairy tales.

Atwood's text engages in a dialogue with Gilbert and Gubar's theory on fairy tales developed in their foundational feminist work *The Madwoman in the Attic* in her complication of the "angel-woman" and "monster-woman" binary in her contemporary tale and via naming the instructor of Sally's night course Bertha[28]. Atwood's choice of naming the instructor who assigns Sally to rewrite the "Bluebeard" tale signals the need to listen to the madwoman's voice in order to be able to come to an understanding of her marriage. Atwood's reference to *Jane Eyre* can also be pointed out in the partial retelling of the tale, the embedded text, in which the chamber is located not in the cellar but in the attic: "[y]ou may go into each of them and enjoy what you find there, but do not go into the small room *at the top of the house*, on pain of death" (176, italics mine). Hence, the displacement of the chamber signals that the danger is not women's sexual curiosity but their reduction to the "angel-woman" and "monster-woman" binary.

In sum, it was argued that Atwood transforms the traditional "fairy-tale discourse" communicated by the literary "Bluebeard" tale in that she rewrites its heteronormative message by including the folk variants. It was also pointed out that Atwood reflects on the contemporary feminist approach to fairy tales expressed by Gilbert and Gubar by highlighting the possibilities of identification and combining the mutually exclusive available definitions of femininity in the traditional tales.

[28] Gilbert and Gubar argue that the name Bertha is used as a symbol by both Emily Bronte and George Eliot, as a way of critically reflecting on each other's works (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 463).

Conclusion

This thesis offered an analysis of Atwood's contemporary feminist "Bluebeard" tale in order to point out that her approach to fairy tales in anticipatory to feminist theoretical conceptualizations of fairy tales as specific cultural and historical products. Hence, I attempted to enhance the understanding of feminist approaches to fairy tales, and the relation between feminist fiction and feminist literary criticism. My main argument regarding Atwood's feminist fairy tale was that she revises the gendered message of the literary "Bluebeard" tale in that she complicates the heteronormative binaries via incorporating the folk variants that provide possibilities for the protagonist's agency.

In order to highlight the significance of Atwood's fairy tale revision, I explained two main feminist approaches to fairy tales, the universalizing and the folkloristic approach. I argued that Atwood acknowledges the effect of fairy tales on contemporary social realities, especially in the form of the heroine's internalization of the heteronormative discourse. At the same time, the "Bluebeard" tale serves as an incentive for Atwood's female protagonist to realize the realities of her marriage and the effect of heteronormative discourse that obscures various types of oppression in society.

I suggested that Butler's notion of "gendered agency" differs from some feminist understandings of the concept, as it is not relying on the active/passive binary. Therefore, it can explain the specificity of a feminist revision of a fairy tale, in which the heroine's agency becomes possible in various, although still in a sense still restricted, forms. Thus, Butler' notion of "gendered agency" enabled me to intervene in the previous dichotomizing interpretations of the female protagonist as a Bluebeard figure or a passive

victim by analyzing her identification with certain discourses.

I argued that the analysis of Atwood's title story needs to be completed by an analysis of preceding stories, because they provide an interpretative guide to Atwood's contemporary feminist fairy tale. I analyzed three manifestations of gendered agency: the practice of storytelling enabled by the competing discourses on gender, the metaphors of gender as a cultural norm and the protagonist's identification with ideal versions of gender. In my reading of gender as a cultural norm I contributed to an understanding of Butler's concept of "gendered agency" through exploring its specific manifestations in a literary work.

Following Butler's assertion that "gendered agency" can be located at discursive junctures, I argued that Atwood combines two discourses, in order to represent the protagonist's agency. In my reading of the title story I proposed to interpret Sally's understanding of Ed as a result of the internalization of the heteronormative discourse. Hence, my reading of the heroine as influenced or at the least susceptible to discourses may suggest a dimension of interpretation for further analysis of feminist fairy tales.

I analyzed Atwood's two techniques of critiquing the heteronormative discourse: her complication of gendered binaries, and her related technique of gender reversal, especially in the case of the cleverness/stupidity binary. This binary appears as a central theme in Atwood's collection, the category of cleverness is revealed to be a manifestation of gendered discourse in 19th century novels and a similar tool of contemporary heteronormative discourse on gender, as well. I argued that the cleverness/stupidity binary in the title story relates to the field of sexuality, which according to the heteronormative discourse is uncontrollable, and its uncontrollability is related to gender.

My discursive analysis of the perception of cleverness/stupidity traced through fairy tales, 19th century novels and a contemporary feminist fairy tale can be considered as a way of drawing up the feminist engagement with social realities in various literary genres.

I analyzed the extent of Atwood's fairy tale revision in her rewriting of the tale's morals, in her complication of the Bluebeard figure and in her rethinking of the motif of the forbidden chamber. I argued that the purpose of revising Perrault's morals was to reveal their heteronormative logic, including the relegation of violence against women to the "uncivilized" past and the argument about women's concealed power in marriage. Thus, I contributed to the interpretation of Atwood's feminist revision that has not explored her revision of Perrault's literary tale so far.

I addressed the question of "who is the Bluebeard figure of the tale", which is central to existing analyses, arguing that Atwood narrates a tale about the possibilities of gendered violence. At the same time her female protagonist is not a passive victim, but she may as well be characterized as the cannibalistic "monster-woman". I contributed to the debate by opening up the interpretative framework of the "Bluebeard" tale, which so far concentrated on the literary tale and its folk variants, to their existing feminist interpretations by Gilbert and Gubar. More specifically, I explored the references in "Bluebeard's Egg" to the *Madwoman in the Attic* as an interpretation of the "Bluebeard" tale and the allusions to *Jane Eyre* as a 19th century version of the tale.

I interpreted Atwood's multiplication of the central motif of the tale, the forbidden chamber as a feminist technique. I analyzed the three possible chambers depicted in the text that symbolize three contemporary discourses as possibly objectifying women, that of the medical authority over their bodies, infidelity, and the discourse on "angel in the

house" defining women as relational beings. I argued that the female protagonist narrates orally her version of the "Bluebeard" tale, which appears as a chamber in the text, revealing the reduction of women to the role of the "angel in the house". My interpretation of the third chamber as Sally's version contributes to the existing interpretations of Atwood's technique, according to which the feminist technique consists of gender reversal.

Based on my analysis of Atwood's fairy tale, I suggest that feminist fairy tales not only caution against a specific gendered danger, but also isolate possible sources of danger in the forms of various, coexisting discourses. Moreover, the displacement of the chamber from the cellar, symbolizing the vagina and the heroine's sexual transgression, to the attic, symbolizing the place of the monster-woman's confinement in the Western (literary) tradition, suggests that a feminist fairy tale highlights that it is the heteronormative discourse on gender that compartmentalizes women into angels or monsters, not their supposed transgressions of social norms.

I argued that Atwood complicates the interpretation of the heroine's characterization in fairy tales as dichotomous by portraying Sally as an "angel-woman" and a "monster-woman" at the same time. Hence, Atwood transformed the fixed message of the "Bluebeard" tale by portraying a female protagonist, who realized the secret of her husband that was concealed by her internalization of the heteronormative discourse on gender with the help of listening to Bertha's voice and retelling her contemporary version of the tale.

The analysis of Atwood's critique of contemporary discourses on gender and North-American social traditions offered in this thesis could be developed by further

researches on Atwood's technique of interweaving Canadian stories with fairy tales in order to enhance the understanding of the shapeshifting of the "Bluebeard" tale in the contemporary Canadian context. Atwood's reading of the "Bluebeard" tale offered in this thesis could also be completed by analyses of Atwood's allusions to the tale in her literary criticism, which could further illuminate the relation between feminist fiction and feminist literary criticism.

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