

**Folktales and patriarchal ethics:
Case study of the persecuted maiden
in Giambattista Basile and Margaret Atwood**

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ABSTRACT

The “handless-maiden” tale type – 706 in the Aarne-Thompson-Uther folklore index (Uther 2004) – has a long tradition of retelling, including in the first Brothers Grimm collection of 1812. The Italian case study for this article is “La Penta Mano Mozza” / “Penta with the Chopped-Off Hands”, from Giambattista Basile’s seventeenth-century *Lo Cunto de li Cunti* (1986) / *The Tale of Tales* (2007). I discuss Penta’s story as an example of the way in which Western folktales are permeated by a heteronormative social substratum and a conventional depiction of marriage as the exchange of gifts between tribes. I then focus on the escape phase of the tale, in which the maiden suspends her social function of patriarchal subject and experiences a journey which temporarily excludes her from the dynamics of power and coercion that oppress her, enacting a strategy of resistance against gender violence. This leads to a discussion of the limited agency of female characters in the logic of folktales, as they represent social models embodying a moral framework. Finally, I examine Margaret Atwood’s 1995 poem “Girl Without Hands”, where the folktale element acquires an allegorical force, inviting reflection on the sense of alienation felt by the contemporary female protagonist. Here I consider how isolation can constitute a strategy of resistance. This article seeks to contribute to the feminist revisionist study of mythology and comparative literature, by establishing an intertextual dialogue between variants of the tale type in different ages and cultures.

Introduction

Mutilation can be interpreted as a symbolic way to narrate sexual abuse in fairy tales. It is an act that seeks to deprive a female character of her agency. In one of the best known retellings of a story involving mutilation of a persecuted maiden, in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Tereus cuts off the tongue of his sister-in-law, Philomela, after raping her, so that she will not be able to tell anybody of her trauma, but Philomela weaves a tapestry for her sister Procne to recount what her husband has done. The figure of Philomela and her act of weaving

can epitomise female narration of trauma and violence, as Philomela reacts to male abuse by narrating her rape through the images in her tapestry (Bottigheimer 2014). Shakespeare took Philomela's story, as representing the trauma of rape, into that of Lavinia, daughter of Titus Andronicus: Lavinia's hands and tongue are cut off by Chiron and Demetrius after they rape her. In this case, mutilation brings the incapacity to communicate the trauma but, at the same time, the mutilation itself bears witness to the trauma, perceptible in the body of the maimed maiden.

The folktale of the "handless maiden" has a long tradition of retelling, from the hagiographies of the Middle Ages to the Italian Renaissance and Baroque folktales. It is classified as type 706 in the ATU folklore index produced by German folklorist Hans-Jörg Uther (2004).¹ In this article I aim to establish an intertextual dialogue between three variants of the handless-maiden tale: its German variant from the Brothers Grimm (2014), first published in 1812-1815 and the most widely known; a seventeenth-century Neapolitan version from Giambattista Basile's *Lo Cunto de li Cunti* (1986) / *The Tale of Tales* (2007); and Margaret Atwood's poem "Girl Without Hands", from her collection *Morning in the Burned House* (1995). I focus on the intertextual motivation of the three handless maidens, their agency and the symbolism of resistance related to mutilation. I use "intertextual motivation" in the sense discussed by Gérard Genette (1997: 324), meaning "the substitution of a motive [as] one of the major procedures of semantic transformation". I will demonstrate how, in Basile's version, the journey of escape experienced by the handless maiden represents a strategy of resistance adopted by women within the patriarchal and traditional universe of folktales, and how the ethics behind this universe requires the final re-absorption of the liminal maiden into normative marriage, a social rite established by men. My analysis of "Girl Without Hands", on the other hand, aims to demonstrate that the figure of the handless maiden is transformed in Atwood's poem into an allegorical symbol of impotence and of non-communication with the outside world; she has retreated into a chalk circle – familiar from the Grimms' tale – as a space of self-isolation and self-defence from the demands of that world and its patriarchal society.

Tales of the handless maiden: "Das Madchën ohne Hande" and "La Penta Mano Mozza"

In the handless-maiden tale type, mutilation is usually connected with gendered violence, and sometimes domestic violence. The Brothers Grimm tale "*Das Madchën ohne Hande*" was drawn from one such tale from the German tradition, where the persecutor was a father with "incestuous desires" (Tatar 2003: 9). As Sharon Rose Wilson (1993) explains, the Grimms cleaned up the oral folktales they collected, erasing any element which could be read as inappropriate, gruesome or eerie, including incest. In "*Das Madchën ohne Hande*", the violation of paternal incest is transformed into the violation of a demonic pact. The father in this story must give his daughter to the Devil in return for having received all the riches he desired. The daughter washes herself and draws a circle of chalk around her, and the Devil is unable to grasp her for as long as she is clean. Even when her father deprives her of water she continues to wash herself – with her own copious tears. The father then decides to cut off her hands so that the Devil can take her and his pact can be honoured.

Giambattista Basile's collection of folktales *Lo cunto de li cunti*, also known as *Il Pentamerone* / *The Pentameron* because the tales are told over five days, was published in Neapolitan, between 1634 and 1636. As Michele Rak (1986: liv) explains in his introduction to the Italian edition:²

The action of these stories begins and ends in the primary social space: the family. Within the family, all kinds of conflict can break out and all kinds of violence are possible. The characters in these stories move out of their family circle ... primarily in order to change it. The adventures with ogres, fairies and beasts, and the times, places and paths traversed can be read as the “external” ordeals that are necessary in order to win “internally”, in the conflict within the family.³

The tale of “*La Penta Mano Mozza*” / “Penta with the Chopped-Off Hands” is the second story narrated during the third day. Characteristically for this tale type, it is a disruption of the patriarchy-governed social and family equilibrium that sets the plot in motion. The widowed king of Roccasecca wants to marry again and his sister Penta seems to him the most suitable candidate for his wife:

It is not the act of a judicious man, my sister, to let what is of value leave his house, and, moreover, you do not know how it will turn out if you let strangers set foot there (Basile 2007: 224).

Penta, on the other hand, shows virtue and rationality; stunned by her brother’s proposal, she refuses his advances. When, after a month of silence and isolation, Penta asks him why he finds her attractive, he confesses:

My Penta, all of you is beautiful and flawless, from your head to your toes, but your hand, more than anything else, is what makes me swoon: your hand, serving fork that pulls my entrails out of the pot of this chest; your hand, hook that lifts the bucket of my soul from the well of this life (225).

Penta soon finds a solution to her brother’s perverse desire: she orders a servant to cut her hands off and send them as a nuptial gift to Roccasecca, who is furiously offended at his sister’s action and has her thrown into the sea in a box.

After being saved by a fisherman but then thrown into the sea again by his jealous wife, Penta is rescued by the king of Terraverde. His queen soon becomes ill and dies, whereupon he marries Penta, their union blessed by the queen on her deathbed. Penta conceives on their wedding night. Nancy Canepa (1999: 125) points out the symbolism of the contrasting names given to the two kings. On one hand, we have Penta’s brother Roccasecca, “Dry Rock”. The name evokes barrenness and a negative example of masculinity – a man who, according to the logic of folktales, would be an inadequate candidate as Penta’s groom. On the other hand, we have Terraverde, “Green Earth”, a name that immediately calls to mind life, fertility and rebirth.

However, Penta’s journey is by no means over. After various mishaps and having to escape yet again, Penta is rescued by the king of Lagotruvolo, who happens to be a wizard. He decides to adopt her as his daughter and protect her from any form of danger. His efforts to help her bring about a meeting of Terraverde and Roccasecca and he realises that they are Penta’s husband and brother. She appears with her child and reconciles with both men. In the final scene, we see the wizard restore her hands, saying:

And so that there remains nothing left to desire for Penta's happiness, let her put the stumps under her apron, and she'll pull out hands that are more beautiful than they were before (Basile 2007: 232).

A key difference between Basile's version and the Grimms' one is that Penta chooses to lose her hands on her own initiative, in order to free herself from being the object of her brother's desire, while, in the German version, it is the father who decides to cut off his daughter's hands because they constitute an obstacle to his giving her to the Devil. Penta enacts a strategy of resistance by deliberately cutting off her hands, before being cast out of home. In terms of Algirdas Julien Greimas's (1968) actantial narrative schema and Vladimir Propp's (1966) analysis of the "functions" in folktales,⁴ she is performing the role of the Helper/Rescuer: she is rescuing herself. There is, therefore, in Basile's version, significant change of motivation driving the characters' actions – in Genette's (1997: 324) sense – and of agency associated with the maiden character, with respect to the Grimms' version. While in the German version mutilation occurs because of the father's desire for wealth and power – and, as Clarissa Pinkola Estés (2008) discusses, his act can be interpreted as physically and symbolically depriving the daughter of agency – in Basile's version Penta knowingly deprives herself of her hands in order to send a clear refusal to her brother.

Marriage, a circular narrative of violence, and female strategies of resistance

It seems that the restoration of Penta's hands is possible only after she has been reunited with both her former family and her new one, as a circle can thus be closed, with a return to the initial state. As observed by Midori Snyder (2006), a recurring pattern in the handless-maiden tale type is the restoration of the hands as the conclusion of the mutilated woman's re-absorption into society – or, rather, into the reproductive, heterosexist schema of marriage as exchange and reinforcement of male alliances – since, as Snyder comments, the narratives "make it clear that without her arms, she is unable to fulfill her role as an adult" (1).

In the traditional societies that are reflected in folktales, as Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969) argued, marriage represents the main process for the construction of a generation. A woman who goes from one tribe to another represents the point of connection between the two tribes, and, by giving birth to children, she genetically and biologically joins the tribes together. Marriage is, basically, a gift transaction. She is the passive object of exchange in a quasi-mystical male union process, in which she has no independent role. Marriage, in other words, concretely embodies what Gayle Rubin defines as the "sex/gender system", since "a 'sex/gender system' is the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which ... sexual needs are satisfied" (1975: 159).

In Basile's tale of Penta, a young woman who does not want to conform to the sex/gender system and become the object of male fantasies reacts and starts acting outside her gender role. However, this eccentricity cannot represent a new permanent condition, as a woman who is not integrated into the system and its social roles cannot be presented as embodying a positive model; that would not serve the pedagogical and moralistic intentions of fairy tales. Thus, her eccentricity must be erased. Only after she has become a model type of woman, by becoming a wife and mother, and only after she has concluded her eccentric experience of escaping, is there the chance for a reconciliation with her incestuous brother, who has, in the meantime, confessed his guilt to Penta's husband.

Furthermore, the contrasting examples of masculinity noted above – Roccasecca’s negative example associated with the sterility of an incestuous union, and Terraverde’s positive counterpart – can be read through Lévi-Strauss’s explanation of the dynamics of a tribal context in which incest is taboo and exogamic unions promoted. As Lévi-Strauss (1969: 51) explains:

The prohibition on the sexual use of a daughter or a sister compels them to be given in marriage to another man, and at the same time it establishes a right to the daughter or sister of this other man.... The woman whom one does not take is, for that very reason, offered up [...] The prohibition of incest is less a rule prohibiting marriage with the mother, sister, or daughter, than a rule obliging the mother, sister, or daughter to be given to others. It is the supreme rule of the gift.

Therefore, even leaving aside ethical concerns, incest is not functional to the exchange of women for the purpose of creating bonds of kinship between men of different tribes.

I propose that we can summarise the narrative of conjugal union and violence in the Penta tale through a circular schema, identifying four main phases. Space does not permit a full survey here, but this four-phase structure can also be seen to characterise several other handless-maiden tales, such as “The Armless Maiden” in Aleksandr Afanas’ev’s collection of Russian tales (2013) and “Biancabella, or the Damsel and the Snake” in Giovanni Francesco Straparola’s sixteenth-century collection, *Le piacevoli notti / The Pleasant Nights* (2012).

The initial phase is that of a disruption to the equilibrium of the nuclear family, set off by a man’s incestuous desire which the maiden resists. He activates the circular structure of the folktale by forcing her to flee, which brings us to the second phase: that of escape. Taking a feminist approach following that of Adrienne Rich (1972), we can read this phase of the tale as the only one in which the female protagonist can make a choice of her own. Escaping, for her, means freedom and safety; thus we can identify escape as a strategy of resistance. Whether escape is spontaneously enacted by her, or forced on her by a reaction to her challenging of patriarchal authority, as in the case of Penta when she mutilates herself, it is the expression of a female subjectivity, the agency of a character who decides to reject gender violence and make decisions for her own body, even if such a decision is one of mutilation. Like other persecuted-maiden characters, Penta renounces her beauty, here epitomised by her hands, which represent a fetish element for the male gaze. In the third phase, the persecuted maiden meets the man who will become her husband, and puts an end to her eccentric condition. In the fourth and final phase, the exchange of the gift is legitimated through the meeting of the husband and the young woman’s previous family, meaning that the conjugal union is blessed by that family.

“La Penta Mano Mozza” is certainly not the only tale in Basile’s collection in which we see female agency producing a strategy of resistance. In fact, there are several, involving various forms of resistance. For instance, Sapia Liccarda, in the story of the same title (day III, tale 4), foils an attempt on her life by a prince who feels humiliated by her rejection of his previous advances. He stabs her in bed, but she has replaced her body with a sugar doll. It is their cunning that allows these female characters to survive in a misogynistic and suffocating scenario, making use of stratagems and alliances in dangerous situations.

Furthermore, as Armando Maggi argues (2014: 159-160), in some of Basile's tales, familiar tropes of male power and agency are attributed to women:

Basile's heroines are often feisty and astute, and in most tales they do not need a prince to help them out of a difficult situation. In the tale "The Three Crowns," for instance, a young princess wakes up three sleeping beauties whose mother had magically put them to sleep to protect them from a grim future, unless a princess (not a prince) would come and wake them up.

There are various female characters in Basile's collection who intercede on behalf of maidens in danger. Among these are the hag-helper in "*L'Orsa*" / "The She-Bear" (day II, tale 6), the fairy from "*La Gatta Cenerentola*" / "The Cinderella Cat" (day I, tale 6), the ogress in the woods who provides Marchetta in "*Le tre cetra*" / "The Three Citrons" (day V, tale 9) with a ring that allows her to avoid death. There are the recurring old hags, who act as good witches endowed with folk wisdom, capable of bestowing gifts and useful advice to characters in crisis.

Although in Basile's patriarchal universe the protagonist's beauty is often presented as a danger to herself, whether from male attention – which seeks to possess her or annihilate her beauty – or from female envy, these female alliances do not engender any potentially damaging rivalry. The fairy's beauty is irrelevant to the narrative, as the fairy merely crosses the path of the protagonists without interfering with that path. Similarly, the grotesque body of the ogress and the physical decadence of the old hags deprive these figures of any erotic power in relation to the objectifying male gaze that prefers the beauty of the young body. Therefore, these characters have no interest in harming the female protagonists, and can assume the function of allies and helpers. As Andrea Dworkin states in *Woman Hating* (1974), the only way for a female character to avoid being considered "wicked" or becoming an outcast in fairy-tale imagery is to play a passive role. This may mean fulfilling her narrative function, motherhood, or her passivity may be expressed through the physical deactivation of her erotic power, as in the case of the old women, the fairy and the ogress (41).⁵

"...an aureole of hot sand, of no sound": the Rapunzel Syndrome as a strategy of resistance in Margaret Atwood's "Girl Without Hands"

The lack of agency for the female subject in fairy tales has been a widely explored theme in twentieth-century and twenty-first-century feminist narratology. Among the most vivid examples are Angela Carter's works, especially *The Bloody Chamber* (2020 [1979]) and her two collections of tales in 1990 and 1991 (published together as *Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales* in 2005). In these works she experimented with the role of women in traditional tale types – especially those in the 1697 collection by Charles Perrault, *Histoires ou contes du temps passé, avec des moralités*, which includes tales such as "Cinderella", "Little Red Riding Hood", "Sleeping Beauty" and "Bluebeard" (see Perrault 2018). Carter investigated how female subjectivity and female eroticism were left out of the scope of the fairy tale. Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* (1990) gives a voice to certain subaltern female characters from the Grimms' tradition: the 12 princesses who were married to 12 men at the end of the tale "*Die zertanzten Schuhe*" / "The Twelve Dancing Princesses". In Winterson's version they speak to the reader while deconstructing the ethics of the fairy-tale universe, narrating stories of unhappiness, gender violence, repression and attempts at resistance against the imposed marital union that closed the original story. The "post-happily-ever-

after” narrative is also explored in Michael Cunningham’s collection of short stories, *A Wild Swan* (2015), where the author tackles some of his usual topics concerning human relationships while imagining how characters from classical tales might adapt to a contemporary world. It is also important to consider Anne Sexton’s collection of poems, *Transformations* (1971), in which she adapts fairy tales from the Grimms’ tradition, exploring the interpersonal dynamics between female characters and their mothers, daughters, husbands or fathers. In Sexton’s “Maiden Without Hands”, as in Basile’s “*La Penta Mano Mozza*”, a positive masculinity (that of the maiden’s husband) is shown in sharp contrast with a negative one (that of her mutilating father), although there is no reference to incest. Sexton highlights the maiden’s incapacity to take an active role in her fate, epitomised by the absence of her hands, which impedes her from grasping anything, so that she is objectified as “a perfect still life” possessed by the king (Sexton 1981: 274).

The retelling of fairy tales is one of the leitmotifs of Margaret Atwood’s work, considering the number of fairy tales she has rewritten in her poems, short stories and novels – adapting, politicising and problematising their plots and characters for the contemporary age. Most of Atwood’s references to the world of fairy tales are connected to the German tradition, like the works of the Grimms and Hans Christian Andersen. In 1983, she published *Bluebeard’s Egg*, a collection of short stories where the eponymous tale is a retelling of Bluebeard’s story based on the Grimms’ “Fitchers Vogel” but exploring the subjectivity of a female narrator. In “Alien Territory”, a short story from *Good Bones* (1992), she analyses the dynamics of power between the bride and Bluebeard, and the secret that connects him to the bloody chamber. Her novel *The Robber Bride* (1993) is a retelling of the Grimms’ “The Robber Bridegroom”, one of the many versions of the Bluebeard story. In Atwood’s version the main female character Zenia acquires the role of predator and the men become the victims of her hunt. This subverts the traditional assignment of roles from the original folktale, where the antagonist was a man who cannibalised women. Moreover, as Wilson (1993) and Eleonora Rao (2014) show, one of the ways in which we may view Atwood’s best-known novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), is as a dystopian parodic and intertextual retelling of “Little Red Riding Hood”, not only due to the evocative red outfit the handmaids are obliged to wear but also because of the dynamics of power and submission on which her creation the Republic of Gilead is founded. They suggest a link to the symbolic representation of power and objectification in the Grimms’ tale, where the character Little Red Riding Hood embodies a passive object of male desire for the wolf who observes her and eats her. In other words, in Atwood’s writing, the intertextual use of the fairy tale is a self-conscious technique to comment on the roles, cultural contexts and social spaces of her characters, so that her works become a celebration of the power of retelling, and a means to subvert the patriarchal values of the Western tradition from within, by reshaping and transforming it.

“Girl Without Hands” belongs to the fifth section of Atwood’s 1995 poetry collection *Morning in the Burned House*. In this poem Atwood explores, through a process of self-examination, the experience of reaching beyond a physical space towards a spiritual and transcendental dimension. A recurring idea in the collection is that of the mortal subject who seeks to sublimate mortality. The reader witnesses the evolution of the speaker’s fragmented subjectivity through successive sections of the collection. The subject comes to terms with mortality by internalising and sublimating it, thus discovering a previously unexplored spiritual dimension. According to Tina Pylvainen:

these poems may be Atwood’s attempt, as a miter, to examine a death so personal and so traumatic that she returns her speaker to that role of

“spectator” which Frank Davey identifies in her early work, in order to formulate an analysis of the event (1996: 115).

This is also suggested by Atwood’s use of the second person in “Girl Without Hands”, which not only creates a dialogue between the narrating Self and the subject of the poem, but also positions the reader as the addressee.

In the poem, a non-identified subject, the “you” protagonist addressed by the narrator, is on their way to work, in a sunlit scenario that appears like a hybrid space between a desert and a city, when a girl without hands appears. The impossibility of any contact between “you” and the outside world is reiterated by Atwood throughout the poem, suggesting a link between the lack of a sense of touch and the feeling of detachment experienced both by “you” and the girl without hands. The only possibility of interaction for “you” lies with the girl without hands, who is in turn a reflection of the isolated condition of “you”.

The girl without hands is like an apparition, in a white dress that underlines her martyrdom, as is made explicit in lines 28-35:

Then there’s the girl, in the white dress,
meaning purity, or the failure
to be any colour. She has no hands, it’s true.
The scream that happened to the air
when they were taken off
surrounds her now like an aureole
of hot sand, of no sound.

Here, the girl without hands can be interpreted as either an alter-ego or a mirror for the “you” protagonist, symbolising the alienation of “you” and physically embodying it in two ways: by showing “you” her amputated limbs that prevent her from holding or embracing anybody, and by confining herself to a circle of chalk – an isolated space of protection and hermitage. The chalk circle suggests, as Wilson (1993) points out, that the fairy-tale reference for the poem is the Grimms’ story.⁶

Both characters – the “you” protagonist and the girl without hands – are hermits who are walking in an eccentric and parallel dimension, an invisible outer dimension that is a counterspace, liminal with the mainstream social space – or *tópos* – of other human beings only because it shares the same physical space. In Biancamaria Rizzardi’s analysis (2007), exile and hermitage are leitmotifs in Canadian literature, together with the search for freedom, and exile and freedom become two archetypal elements which are frequently put together in a literary work, including in Atwood’s. In such works, space can usually be narrated as the external correspondence of an inner feeling. For Rizzardi, the co-existence of these two elements, exile and freedom, give an epic-mythical tone to the content of the poem “Girl Without Hands”, negotiating with the Canadian topics of exile as solitude and freedom as the search for a utopian space – a search that, in some authors, becomes the quest for a promised land.

As we have seen, the circular narrative of handless-maiden tales takes the young protagonist on a journey outside her conventional social space, and this makes her a hermit, an abject, an outcast. The only chance for her to become once again a part of the mainstream societal machine lies in being re-absorbed by her traditional role in society. In the specific

case of Penta, her temporary escape from violence and patriarchal law is the result of cutting off her own hands. This is a maiden's attempt to function as her own Helper, which is the reason why this narrative solution would not work in a mainstream fairy tale, as it would contradict the patriarchal substratum on which folktales grow. But in Atwood's poem "Girl Without Hands", the lack of hands constitutes a situation only of *loss* of agency, especially as, for Atwood, hands are a metaphor for agency. As she explained in an interview with Bonnie Lyons:

Hands are quite important to me. The hand to me is an extension of the brain. And if you read theory on the development of the human species, everybody says that the ability to use the two is central; they are part of one another. I don't think of the brain as something that is just in your head. The brain is also in your body [...] And the brain is certainly in the hands (quoted in Wilson 1993: 149).

In *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972) Atwood identifies a recurring pattern in Canadian literature, which she labels the "Rapunzel Syndrome". She refers to folktale elements from the Grimms' tale, "Rapunzel", to highlight the status of isolation and consequent alienation of many female protagonists:

In the Rapunzel Syndrome there are four elements: Rapunzel, the main character; the wicked witch who has imprisoned her, usually her mother or her husband, sometimes her father or grandfather; the tower she's imprisoned in – the attitudes of society, symbolized usually by her house and children which society says she must not abandon; and the Rescuer, a handsome prince of little substantiality who provides momentary escape. In the original Rapunzel story the Rescuer is a solution and the wicked witch is vanquished; in the Rapunzel Syndrome the Rescuer is not much help (209).

Atwood goes on to say "Rapunzel and the tower are the same. These heroines have internalized the values of their culture to such an extent that they have become their own prison" (209). And this is what, in a symbolic way, we see happen to the girl without hands in her poem: the space of imprisonment and the prisoner herself become the same thing, like the tower and Rapunzel.

Thus, in the poem, the girl and her chalk-circle shelter become an island of isolation. The loss that she has experienced and her acceptance of loss constitute the beginning of a descent into her own identity, a descent which will bring her eventually to the transcendence of physicality and the abandonment of the spatial dimension of her imprisoning body. This isolation cannot constitute a solution within the *physical* world, where it can only amount to a compromise between her and the world of social rules that she is trying to avoid. But through her alienation from society, the woman acquires a deeper and unprecedented encounter with her own mind, which would not be possible if she were immersed in human interactions and relationships. Isolation and solitude become empowering experiences.

In light of the importance Atwood attributes to hands, reflected in the quotation above, we can interpret the mind of the poem's girl without hands as symbolically mutilated, so that mutilation becomes an existential dimension for identity. This is also because we must look at Atwood's literary dimension, where the fairy-tale element acquires a symbolic relevance, and the fairy tale's female counterpart of Atwood's female character is

transformed into a metaphor for the contemporary female condition. Mutilation means not only an irreparable control of the mind and a reminder for the female subject of her subalternity, but also a metaphor for the reshaping of her personal choices in daily life. The mutilated hands stand as a condemnation of intersectional forms of discrimination, by giving the girl without hands a universal power of representation without consigning women's issues to an essentialist reductionism.

Conclusion

In the tale of Penta, the girl without hands from the Neapolitan tradition, we have seen how the escape phase of the circular narrative can represent the implementation of a strategy of resistance against patriarchal power and mainstream ethics, which guide the laws in the universe of folktales. However, we have also seen that this phase of lawlessness experienced by the maiden may represent only a transitory condition, not a final one. Through the act of escaping the maiden enters a spatio-temporal condition that Michel Foucault (2018) would define as "heterotopia", meaning that her escape occurs in a space-time continuum which is simultaneous with the conventional space-time continuum – the continuum where social laws are respected – but also completely other with respect to it. A heterotopia is an alien space which is not considered a normative space, but rather as "other-than-that", and which has, at the same time, the peculiar characteristic of being connected to normative sites, "but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror or reflect" (11). For Foucault, heterotopias, unlike utopias, are spaces that can be located on the cartographic space of reality, since they actually exist; utopias, on the other hand, suggest an unreal possibility that does not exist (11). The handless maiden Penta's journey of escape from male persecution *does* happen, suspending the social role for the maiden in the folktale's universe. She is relegated to a marginal space, a heterotopia, until her conjugal union, which puts an end to her liminality as her female social role in society is re-established and she is re-absorbed by the system. Thus, escape is the ultimate resistance. Penta's journey occurs in a space outside the dimension where her normative social role should be played. In this acting outside time and space Penta is reacting against gendered violence, by excluding herself from society and voluntarily relegating herself to the space of her escape. This strategy of resistance is defective, as we have seen, since the only conclusion for the journey must be heteronormative marriage, which is the achievement of the ritual passage of a gift: Penta is the passive object of exchange for an alliance which empowers male-dominated communities.

Yet nor can the segregating dimension in which Atwood isolates the handless maiden be the ultimate solution to gender inequality or patriarchal violence. The "Rapunzel Syndrome" described by Atwood, or the propensity for female characters to identify themselves with their space of isolation as a continuum, appears as a potential utopian solution to the problem of the cultural values from which Atwood's Rapunzel seeks to distance herself. However, the isolation of the Rapunzel Syndrome can be interpreted as a debatable solution to the struggle against power and social pressures.

Both the circular narrative from Basile and the alienating circle from Atwood present limited experiences of freedom. While the experience of freedom is limited in the Atwood poem because the strategy gives only a utopian (nonexistent) solution, in Penta's case it is limited by her re-absorption into a social scenario ruled by a patriarchal system, answering to its marital rules. As Foucault (2018) makes clear, heterotopias, together with the strategies of resistance that such spaces involve, present some limits, because Power

constrains their inhabitants back into the Norm. At the same time, as spaces of resistance, heterotopias are tangible evidence of the fragility and fallibility of Power, and a spatial condemnation of it. As Pierre Dalla Vigna claims in his introduction to a collection of Foucault's writing in *Poteri e strategie*, "powers, no matter how coercive and apparently omnipotent, always encounter some oppositions that reduce them, so to speak, to impotence" (2014: 9).⁷

In Basile's representation of the motif of the handless maiden, the court becomes a space of power where incestuous desire is not simply an unnatural caprice, and marriage is not simply a bond that is sealed to create a new nuclear family: these symbolic scenarios are in fact legitimising control by patriarchal law of female bodies and restriction of female agency (Rak 2005). Nevertheless, the injured body of the maiden, which is a body deprived of its erotic charge in the masculine eye, is at the same time a body that resists. Resistance characterises the handless maiden both in Basile's tale and Atwood's poem, enacted either by physically abandoning the symbolic male space of the court and crossing social and territorial borders, or by isolating herself in the Atwoodian circle of chalk – a fortress of solitude for the subaltern being who rejects society and its standards.

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NOTES

¹ Uther (2004) revised the 1928 index by the American Stith Thompson, which in turn expanded on that created in 1910 by the Finnish scholar Antti Aarne.

² All translations are the author's except where specified.

³ "L'azione di questi racconti si apre e si chiude nel luogo primario del sociale: la famiglia. All'interno di questa si scatenano tutti i conflitti e sono praticabili tutte le violenze. Le persone di questi racconti si muovono dal suo interno, come si è visto, innanzitutto per modificarne l'assetto. Le avventure con gli orchi, le fate, le bestie, i tempi, i percorsi e i luoghi possono anche essere lette come le prove «in esterno» necessarie per vincere «in interno» il conflitto nella famiglia".

⁴ See Tatar (2003: 68) for a discussion of the formalist criticism of folktales and the theoretical bases underlying Propp's and Greimas's approaches to analysis of folktales.

⁵ See Maggi (2014, 2015) for analysis of female passivity and female agency in the fairy-tale genre from Basile to the contemporary period.

⁶ As Maggi shows in *Preserving the Spell*, the circle is also a symbol often associated with witchcraft and black sabbaths. While it signifies "an enclosed space within which evil triumphs during the night rituals", it is also "the black hole that annihilates those who step into it" (2015: 61).

⁷ "[I] poteri, per quanto coercitivi e apparentemente onnipotenti, trovano sempre, continuamente, delle opposizioni che li riducono, per così dire, all'impotenza".