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Gertrude and Grace: Margaret Atwood's “Gertrude Talks Back” and *Alias Grace*

Gertrude et Grace : « Gertrude Talks Back »
et *Alias Grace* de Margaret Atwood

Milena Nikolic

Abstract

The aim of this article is to explore the importance of language for the perception and construction of reality from the perspective of two of Atwood's main female protagonists, Gertrude from the short story “Gertrude Talks Back” (*Good Bones*, 1992) and Grace Marks from the novel *Alias Grace* (1996). Atwood's protagonists are the postmodern variants of women described in literary works by William Shakespeare and Susanna Moodie. In constructing her heroines, Atwood uses the technique of gender-oriented revisioning. We will try to point at many similarities that Atwood's Gertrude as the modernized opposite of Shakespeare's Gertrude bears with the cunning and assertive protagonist of *Alias Grace*.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Susanna Moodie, possible worlds, trans-world identity, power of language

Résumé

Cet article a pour objectif d'explorer l'importance du langage dans la perception et la construction de la réalité, plus spécifiquement dans deux textes de Margaret Atwood: « Gertrude Talks Back » (*Good Bones*, 1992) et Grace Marks du roman *Alias Grace* (1996). Les deux protagonistes féminines d'Atwood sont les variantes postmodernes des femmes décrites dans d'œuvres littéraires de William Shakespeare et Susanna Moodie. En construisant ses héroïnes, Atwood opère une révision du genre. Nous essaierons de souligner les nombreuses similitudes entre la Gertrude d'Atwood, conçue comme l'opposé actualisé de la Gertrude de Shakespeare, et le protagoniste fûtée et assertive du roman *Alias Grace*.

Mots clés: Shakespeare, Susanna Moodie, mondes possibles, identité transnationale, pouvoir du langage



Introduction

There are many questions regarding the character of Shakespeare's Gertrude, the beautiful queen of Denmark and Hamlet's mother: Was she complicit with Claudius in the murder of her husband? Did she love her husband? Did she love Claudius, or did she marry him simply to keep her high station in Denmark? Does she intentionally betray Hamlet to Claudius, or does she believe that she is protecting her son? She is not only one of the most enigmatic female figures in world literature but also the Everywoman whose voice is barely heard and whose turn to tell the story is left out in the fictional universe of many prominent authors. These are probably the main reasons why Atwood decided to make her alive again and give her a chance to speak for herself. But what kind of Gertrude are we introduced to in Atwoodian fiction? How is Shakespeare's Gertrude from the sixteenth century different from Atwood's Gertrude (*Good Bones*, 1992)? How is the historical figure of Grace, an Irish immigrant, a servant girl and a convict whose life story was told in *Life in the Clearings Versus the Bush* (1853) by the Victorian chronicler Susanna Moodie different from Atwood's Grace Marks (*Alias Grace*, 1996)? And finally, how is the patient and faithful Penelope, the wife of the hero Odysseus in Greek mythology, different from Atwood's twenty-first-century Penelope, whose version of the story is heard in *The Penelopiad* (2005)? What do Atwood's Gertrude, Grace and Penelope have in common?¹

According to Lubomir Doležel's theory of possible worlds presented in *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds*, a postmodernist adaptation of a literary work forces the reader to analyze classical literature from a perspective based on new aesthetical and ideological postulates (Doležel, 213). Atwood's "Gertrude Talks Back" is a postmodernist adaptation of the character of Shakespeare's Gertrude.² Shakespeare's canonical fictional world is in constant dialogue with Atwood's literary work, which leads to the construction of a new, alternative fictional world full of ambiguities and uncertainties.

It is particularly interesting that Atwood's writing strategy enables readers to imagine that her main protagonist can simultaneously be in parallel worlds where

1) The character of Penelope from Atwood's *The Penelopiad* will not be discussed in this paper.

2) Similarly, Atwood's *Penelopiad* is a postmodern adaptation of the mythical story of Odysseus and his faithful wife Penelope. Like Atwood's short story "Gertrude Talks Back" and the novel *Alias Grace*, *The Penelopiad* is a story told from her main female character's perspective. Atwood's Gertrude is a murderer, her Grace is the most practised liar, and her Penelope is "the most unfaithful wife" – "I led the suitors on and made private promises to some of them [...] Among other things, I used my supposed encouragement to extract expensive gifts from them" (Atwood, 2008: 76) Towards the end of the book, Penelope reunites with Odysseus and says that both of them were "proficient and shameless liars of long standing" (Atwood, 2008: 89). Given that her son, Telemachus, disapproved of his mother's potential marriage (she was getting "remorseful glances" from him), Penelope's Telemachus is seen as a parallel to Hamlet (Atwood, 2008: 60).



fiction and reality are in constant dialogue and where the truth, facts and lies are relativized without turning to a science fiction scenario. The theory of possible worlds insists on the idea that the existence and characteristics of fictional persons are independent of their real prototypes (Doležel, 28). However, fictional persons that have their own “prototypes” in the real world form a special semantic subclass within the class of fictional persons.³ Doležel points at the particular bond that exists between “a historical Napoleon and all fictional Napoleons”, and claims that fictional persons are connected with their real prototypes via their trans-world identity (Doležel, 29).

Very much in line with Doležel's theory of possible worlds, Atwood establishes a trans-world identity between the character of Moodie's Grace Marks and her own Grace Marks, since the fictional Grace Marks has her own “prototype” in the real world. Although we do not know for certain whether Shakespeare's Gertrude is a historical figure, we cannot ignore the possibility of her having a prototype in the real world. What we do know for sure is that she is a sixteenth century fictional creation that has been recreated through Atwood's twentieth century fictional lenses. Since the trans-world identity is established between fictional creations and all their fictional variants, the same pattern can be applied to Shakespeare's Gertrude and Atwood's Gertrude – two characters who share the same name as a signifier. However, it is important to stress that individuals do not need to have the same name in other fictional worlds so that we could be able to determine their trans-world identity. Moreover, they can have several names, aliases, nicknames or pseudonyms (see Doležel, 28–30).

1. Gertrude

Frailty, thy name is woman!
(*Hamlet*, 3.2.148)

Taking into account the fact that Hamlet speaks more than half the text and that the action is viewed from his perspective in Shakespeare's play, we can hardly find any evidence for Gertrude's instinct of self-preservation and ability to act independently of men in her life. Instead, she rarely speaks, and when she does, says little, even in the “closet scene” in 3.4. Hamlet's lengthy monologues confirm the statement that the power of language is enormous and that it is usually in the hands of men – a fact that calls into question the whole concept of patriarchy and triggers many feminist issues. It is interesting to stress how language, if given to women, can transform the concept of reality based on traditional values and create another reality in which the focus of the reader's sympathy is on a potential murderess. Atwood's heroines – Grace

3) For more information see the “triple-domain theory of individuals” see Rescher 69–70.



Marks and Gertrude – use this language potential and turn the prescribed gender roles upside-down.

In the “closet scene” Hamlet condemns his mother’s behavior and urges her to repent for having chosen Claudius over his father, saying, “Mother, you have my father much offended” (3.4.10). He even places a mirror in front of her so that she can see her blemished image in it: “You go not till I set you up a glass / Where you may see the inmost part of you” (3.4.21–22). We can see from this scene that Gertrude plays the role of a submissive wife who addresses her husband as “my lord” and that she is afraid of what her son might do to her: “What will thou do? Thou wilt not murder me? / Help, help, ho!” (3.4.23–24). She lacks self-assurance, since her self-image depends on how she sees herself mirrored by men: “O Hamlet, speak no more. / Thou turn’st mine eyes into my very soul, / And there I see such black and grained spots / As will not leave their tint” (3.4.95–98). Hamlet makes Gertrude believe that her actions fall short of her moral standards, and violate her concept of fair, decent behavior.

Gertrude’s speech in this scene is limited to brief reactions to Hamlet’s condemnation of her behavior such as “O, speak to me no more.” Eventually, we witness how her resistance to Hamlet’s accusations weakens due to his powerful rhetoric and her passive silence. She depends on powerful men and is easily dominated and influenced by them: “O, speak to me no more. / These words like daggers enter in my ears. / No more, sweet Hamlet” (3.4.103–104). Gertrude lacks self-assurance and determination, since she is unable to think critically about her situation and instinctively accepts seemingly safe choices.

Gertrude’s position within Shakespeare’s play points at the sexual morality of the period in which the play was written: women were supposed to reject/suppress their sexuality. Hamlet wants to “wring [her] heart” because she betrayed the king by marrying his brother, who allegedly killed him. After stabbing Polonius through a curtain without even checking to see who he is, Hamlet sees this gesture of his as “a bloody deed” but also adds that it is “almost as bad, [...], / As kill a king and marry with his brother” (3.4.28–30). He keeps condemning her for what he calls “an act that blurs the grace and blush of modesty, / Calls virtue hypocrite, takes off the rose / From the fair forehead of an innocent love, / And sets a blister there, makes marriage vows / As false as dicers’ oaths” (3.4.45–50). She grows more silent and passive until she eventually agrees to take his part and help him: “Be thou assured, if words be made of breath / And breath of life, I have no life to breathe / What thou hast said to me” (3.4.213–215).

In Atwood’s revised version, Gertrude is given the title role. According to Reingard M. Nischik, she is “the modernized polar opposite of Shakespeare’s Gertrude”, whose voice is being restored (Nischik, 2006: 158). There is a reversal in the basic speech situations. It is Hamlet who is now reduced to silence and Gertrude who is armed



with freedom of speech, (sexual) energy, self-confidence, lust for living and self-determination. She speaks freely about the king, her first husband, and Claudius, her second husband. The tone of her voice is assertive, straightforward, informal, ironic, sarcastic and almost offensive. Gertrude's version of the story offers another definition of female gender roles and unravels male control under the surface of so-called "morality". The status of women is altered in "Gertrude Talks Back", since the main female character is depicted as a representative of the twenty-first century woman – strong and independent – whose harsh words are aimed to keep her son in line. Her criticism and confession shocks the audience because of the contrast in her character in the original play.

Atwood's Gertrude uses humor to discredit Hamlet and his father. This is how she tries to eliminate the guilt her son tries to make her feel and reject his male construction of her. In the beginning of her monologue Gertrude claims that her husband's selfishness was the main motive for naming her son after him: "I ALWAYS THOUGHT it was a mistake, calling you Hamlet. I mean, what kind of a name is that for a young boy? It was your father's idea. [...] I wanted to call you George" (Atwood, 1997: 11). She reveals that young Hamlet had been given many nicknames at school and that terrible jokes with the allusion to the literal meaning of his name ('hamlet' being a diminutive of ham /pork) had been made throughout his childhood.

Atwood's Gertrude is a sexually-oriented woman who openly proclaims her guilt and accepts responsibility for her actions. In Shakespeare's play, Hamlet wants to trigger a sense of shame and guilt in his mother so he places a mirror in front of her to make her feel bad. In Atwood's version of the "closet scene" Hamlet is fidgeting with Gertrude's mirror, "the third one [he] has broken" (Atwood, 1997: 11). Hamlet is depicted as a diligent, responsible and neat student from Wittenberg in Shakespeare's play. In Atwood's short story we learn that he is a student of weird habits who lives in a "slum pigpen" and does not bring his laundry home often enough. Atwood treats Hamlet's bad habits with humor and exposes the side of him that makes him appear bland and unobtrusive, which further negatively affects his public image. In Shakespeare's play, Hamlet praises his father, claiming that he makes better marriage material than Claudius. He even makes his mother look at the pictures of his father and his uncle and asks whether she "has eyes" (3.4.28–30). In Atwood's version, she is not left without response. She accepts her son's challenge to compare both husbands by saying: "Yes, I've seen those pictures, thank you very much" (Atwood, 1997: 11). Self-confident Gertrude is not only satisfied with her image in the mirror but also does not depend on how she sees herself mirrored by men. She is in control of her decisions and her opinion is not easily influenced by her son's patriarchal (sic) accusations.



Atwood's Gertrude is not afraid to dismiss her husband on account of his sexual deficiencies. She claims that even though Hamlet's father was "handsomer than Claudius" he "wasn't a whole lot of fun" (Atwood, 1997: 11). This might be an allusion to the fact that he was a failure in bed – a thing that she particularly could not stand. She praises female sexuality, which men want to restrict; she appreciates Claudius's energy and freely admits that it is for sexual reasons that she chose to remarry. She also implies that Hamlet's attitude towards Claudius is the mere consequence of jealousy and average friction between a grown-up stepson and a newly-acquired stepfather: "By the way, darling, I wish you wouldn't call your stepdad the bloat king. He does have a slight weight-problem, and it hurts his feelings" (Atwood, 1997: 12). She advises him to find "a real girlfriend" and have "a nice roll in the hay" instead of being with the "touch-me-not-corset" girl (Atwood, 1997: 17). Gertrude humorously calls into question Ophelia's mental state, claiming that "any little shock could push [her] right over the edge" (Atwood, 1997: 12).

In Shakespeare's play, Hamlet stresses that Gertrude is no longer in the prime of life. However, Atwood's Gertrude seems to be more alive, energetic and sexually at ease than her son: "But I must say you're an awful prig sometimes. Just like your Dad" (Atwood, 1997: 12). She reveals that it was very difficult to live with her late husband, who strongly disliked "*The Flesh*": "And every time I felt like a little, you know, just to warm up my ageing bones, it was like I'd suggested murder" (Atwood, 1997: 12). In the end of her dramatic monologue, she makes another shocking revelation: it was she who murdered her husband, not Claudius. To quote the lines directly and in context:

You think Claudius murdered your Dad? [...]

It wasn't Claudius, darling.

It was me. (Atwood, 1997: 12)

Atwood's Gertrude is also direct in another sense: she constantly breaks the wall of silence that surrounds the concept of sexuality by explicitly stating that it is her sexual energy that makes her feel alive and healthy. Also, the concept of morality does not play any role in Gertrude's life since she considers it another unnecessary and fragile social convention that limits people's minds and makes their lives dull and uneventful. Instead of defending a submissive wife and mother by stressing her softness and lack of independence in the male-dominated world, Atwood gives Shakespeare's character a striking comeback by depicting her as a woman who is beyond sexual or any other morality, who can state her opinions freely, who has control over her decisions and who is ready to deny her son the power to judge her.

In Shakespeare's play, Gertrude remains unresponsive to Hamlet's various accusations. Her silence adds a lot of ambiguity and confusion to the plot and has



led to many different interpretations of her character. In her fiction Atwood tends to create enigmatic female characters with complex, double and multiple identities. Her heroines are free to tell their version of the story in the manner that suits them. Atwood's Gertrude has been given the opportunity to contradict, defend and justify herself. The power of language and the right to speak from another perspective proved to be an efficient strategy that Atwood turned to in creating her Gertrude.

2. Grace Marks

In *Alias Grace*, Atwood reveals how the life story of the historical figure of Grace Marks, first presented in the historical account of one of the most prominent nineteenth century chroniclers, can get another turn if told from another (postmodern and feminine) perspective. In creating the enigmatic character of Grace Marks, the author not only gave her main protagonist the right to speak for herself but also to decide which information she would like to reveal/keep for herself. Indeed, as Atwood related in a personal interview, "*Alias Grace* deals with storytelling as another survival technique. Once upon a time is a very old narrative strategy dating from the Brothers Grimm's modified folk tales. In the twenty-first century this strategy proved to be working as well."⁴

The withholding of information as a traditional narrative ploy is the most striking characteristic that Atwood planted into her heroine: "What should I tell Dr. Jordan about this day?", Grace wonders, making the audience (readers) her confidants (Atwood, 1997: 273). In chapter forty-three, Grace seems to have decided what to tell: "I could say this [...]" (Atwood, 1997: 324). Soon afterwards she explains that her decision was influenced by Dr. Jordan, who "likes to hear about such things, and always writes them down" (Atwood, 1997: 324, 327). Focusing on the relationship between power and storytelling, Ellen McWilliams argues that Grace is "a progenitor of texts, both in the stories that she tells and in the stories that are told about her" (McWilliams, 94). Grace has been given the power to manipulate the language: she can invent, reveal, hide, tell the truth, tell lies, and mix historical fact and fiction. This strategy enables her to create and inhabit alternative worlds in which all different versions of her could exist at the same time.

We first learn about Grace Marks from the first Canadian female literary figure – Susanna Moodie. In her book *Life in the Clearings* (1853), Moodie portrays Grace as a woman who committed a double murder because she was jealous of Nancy Montgomery, the housekeeper and mistress of Thomas Kinnear, the man Grace had

4) The private conversation with Atwood took place during the Struga Poetry Evenings, which ran from 24–29 August 2016.



a passion for. When she visited her in the Lunatic Asylum in Toronto, she changed her opinion and said that Grace must have been deranged all along.⁵ In her essay "Margaret Atwood and history", Coomi S.Vevaina stresses that Atwood paid homage to Moodie as "a literary foremother" by reconstructing her account of Grace's life story in an imaginative way (Vevaina, 92).

The imaginative way that Atwood chose in writing the story of Grace Marks was closely linked to the study of mental illnesses, which became very popular in the nineteenth century. Who is sane, who is not, and who is the one to judge? Atwood problematizes the concept of Grace's (in)sanity in her novel by treating madness as a theatrical element – something that Elizabethan playwrights learned from the Greek classics. Since the behavior of a mad person is never predictable, the level of suspense is always greater. In Shakespeare's plays, some characters are addled, some pretend to be mad, and some really go mad.⁶ Was Grace really mad or did she pretend to be insane, as Dr. Bannerling had suggested, because she did not like "the strict regimen of the Penitentiary, where she had been placed as a just punishment for her atrocious crimes"? (Atwood, 1997: 54).

In her speech given at the Stratford Festival in September 1997, Atwood defined the nineteenth-century literary and dramatic madwoman as a hybrid of Ophelia and Lady Macbeth, a combination of innocence, blood and sexual guilt as a typical Victorian element. The typical Victorian madwoman appears in novels by Charlotte Brontë (Bertha's madness is presented as a hereditary trait in *Jane Eyre*) and Emily Brontë (Catherine's madness in *Wuthering Heights* is due to her marriage with the wrong man). In *Alias Grace* Atwood shows that Susanna Moodie's description of Grace Marks hits all of the expected Victorian notions of madness and melodrama. *Alias Grace* exposes Moodie's fondness for the vengeance-of-God theory, her belief in phrenology and her view of madness as a "malady". This occurs in chapter 6 of *Alias Grace*, where Atwood includes a short excerpt from *Life in the Clearings* in which Susanna Moodie expresses her view of Grace's condition:

Among these raving maniacs I recognised the singular face of Grace Marks – no longer sad and despairing, but lighted up with the fire of insanity, and glowing with a hideous and fiend-like merriment. On perceiving that strangers were observing her, she fled shrieking away like a phantom into one of the side rooms. It appears that even in the wildest bursts of her terrible malady, she is continually haunted by a memory of the past. Unhappy girl!

5) Atwood's "In Search of *Alias Grace*" provides more information about Moodie's meeting with Grace in the Kingston Penitentiary, before the move to the Toronto Lunatic Asylum.

6) Shakespeare made use of many forms of madness in his plays (in *Macbeth*, guilt causes Lady Macbeth to go mad; the hero becomes mad in *King Lear*; in *Hamlet*, Hamlet assumes madness and Ophelia goes mad due to thwarted love and the sudden shock upon realization that her father is killed by the person she loves).



When will the long horror of her punishment and remorse be over? When will she sit at the feet of Jesus, clothed with the unsullied garments of his righteousness, the stain of blood washed from her hand, and her soul redeemed, and pardoned, and in her right mind? What a striking illustration does it afford of that awful text, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord!" (Moodie, 126)

Atwood stresses that Moodie saw the kind of madwoman she had been conditioned to see: Grace fitted into the frames of both the popular images of madness and the scientific explanations available at the time.

According to the historical records, Grace spent fifteen months in the Toronto Lunatic Asylum. After Moodie visited Grace in Asylum in 1851, she retold the double murder in her book *Life in the Clearings*. She believed that Grace would remain in the Asylum until her death, and that Grace's "sins" appeared as a result of her mental illness and that her redemption depended on whether her "disturbed" mind could be healed. In Moodie's version, Grace committed the murder because she was obsessed with her employer, Mr. Thomas Kinnear, and was jealous of Nancy Montgomery.⁷ According to Moodie, Grace offered James McDermott sexual favors in exchange for Nancy's death; this was based on James McDermott's claim that Grace was the instigator of the whole affair. Of the various explanations for Grace's actions, Moodie preferred McDermott's version of the story since it made Grace's character even more fascinating – that is, this version of Grace makes Grace a more enticing character and it satisfies Moodie's need for dramatic expression (blood guilt, haunting, madness). Howells claims that in her account of Grace in the Asylum, Moodie alludes to "the possible connection between female insanity and criminality in a typically mid-Victorian way" and that Atwood's Grace "ironically interrogates contemporary cultural constructions of female monstrosity" (Howells, 2005: 147).

In Atwood's novel, Grace comments on the concept of madness, saying that "a good portion of women in the Asylum were no madder than the Queen of England" (Atwood, 1997: 17). Ironically, this could also be a comment on the Queen Victoria, who reigned from 1837 until 1901 (the Victorian era).⁸ Grace claims that many women in the Asylum pretended to be mad either because they had no other shelter in winter or they wanted to get away from their abusing husbands (Atwood, 1997: 17). Moodie writes in her book that Grace "fled shrieking away like a phantom into one of the side rooms" when she noticed that the strangers observe her. Atwood's Grace explains that she was screaming and behaving as a madwoman because one of the women in the Asylum who was genuinely mad wanted to baptize her with hot soup

7) Moodie gets some names and locations wrong. She is the only commentator who calls Nancy Montgomery "Hannah".

8) The Victorian era was a long period of peace and prosperity for Britain. However, we cannot but notice the ironic commentary on dubious morality under the reign of the Queen.



and poured it over her head (Atwood, 1997: 18). Atwood's "mad" Grace is neither a beast nor a machine. She fits into a definition of madness according to which being mad means being close to an inspired prophet, a shaman, a trickster. She blurs the boundaries between sanity/insanity, innocence/guilt, truth/lies, and fiction/reality by being a wonderful seamstress both of her story and her quilts.

Howells sees *Alias Grace* as telling a story from the feminine perspective (Howells, 2005: 140). The story of Grace's origin and unhappy childhood, which is neglected in Moodie's account of Grace's story, is revealed through Grace's conversations with Dr. Simon Jordan, a fictional character created by Atwood. McWilliams claims that Atwood treats Grace's origin "with the kind of sympathy not afforded by her other biographer, Susanna Moodie" (McWilliams, 108). She also points out "how Grace's Irishness, her difference, affects accounts of her alleged crime" (McWilliams, 109). At the beginning of the novel, Grace starts her life story by pointing out that the papers wrote that "*both of the accused were from Ireland by their own admission*" (Atwood, 1997: 82). The fact that she was from Ireland had already marked her as a potential criminal and made her subject to unapologetic prejudice. Atwood depicts Grace's sentimental journey from her homeland to the New World and makes Moodie's prejudices more explicable, as reflecting attitudes to the Irish that were current at the time.

In *Alias Grace* Atwood exposes Moodie's contradictory responses to Grace's case by providing all the contradictory information she could find while doing research for her novel. According to Dr. Bannerling Grace was "a sham" as a lunatic, "an accomplished actress", "a most practiced liar", "a Siren" like the mythical sailor-luring creature (Atwood, 1997: 53). In the "Afterword" Atwood reveals two contrasting versions she found concerning the story of Grace Marks: "Was Grace a female fiend and temptress, the instigator of the crime and the real murderer of Nancy Montgomery, or was she an unwilling victim, forced to keep silent by McDermott's threats and by fear for her own life?" (Atwood, 1997: 419). Gazing at herself in the mirror in the opening chapter of Atwood's novel, Grace exposes the different versions of her created by the public and wonders "how she can be all of these different things at once?" (Atwood, 1997: 9)

Moodie's reliability is not only called into question by Grace Marks but also by the fictional characters of Grace's doctor, Samuel Bannerling, her lawyer, Kenneth MacKenzie, and Reverend Verringer. Dr. Bannerling calls Moodie's account of the whole affair "inaccurate" and "hysterical" because she is "inclined to believe any peace of theatrical twaddle served up to her, provided it is pathetic enough" (Atwood, 1997: 53) He reveals that Moodie is "prone to overwrought effusions, and to the concoction of convenient fairy tales; and for the purposes of truth, one might as well rely on the 'eye-witness reports' of a goose" (Atwood, 1997: 395). Atwood's ambivalent relationship with a literary foremother is deepened by Reverend Verringer, who discovers that Moodie "has stated publicly that she is very fond of Charles Dickens,



and in especial of *Oliver Twist*" (Atwood, 1997: 168). In the novel Reverend Verringer also adds that Moodie is "subject to influences", especially Sir Walter Scott, that she likes "to embroider" and that "the Spiritualists have got hold of her" (Atwood, 1997: 168–169). Moodie's description of Grace is further discredited by Kenneth MacKenzie, who says that she "has a somewhat conventional imagination and a tendency to exaggerate" (Atwood, 1997: 344). It is clear that Atwood's intention is to question the reliability of Moodie's historical accounts by presenting Grace's character from different perspectives. Moodie is depicted as an impressionable chronicler whose mind was limited by the same Victorian stereotypes that shaped the imagination of other people who misinterpreted Grace's story in a similar way.

3. Conclusion: Gertrude and Grace

Both of Atwood's protagonists reject being defined by male authorities. Men are discredited in Gertrude and Grace's version of the story. Gertrude's first husband is described as a failure in bed, while Hamlet is depicted as a student with a weird name and even more weird habits. Like his father, he lacks sexual energy, he is inferior to his mother, and his accusations are a mere act of jealousy presented as a result of a general animosity between a stepson and a stepfather. The male authorities that try to define Grace's identity are unreliable because their perspective is distorted either by their sexual fantasies, their incompetence or lack of evidence. For example, Dr. Simon Jordan's mission is to trigger Grace's suppressed memories. However, he ends up suffering from amnesia due to the head wound he received during his service in the civil war. His judgment is further distorted by sexual fantasies and romantic feelings he has about Grace. All these factors make him incompetent and unable to complete his mission. Grace's lawyer, McKenzie, is also unreliable when it comes to presenting her life story. He "put a misconstruction upon what [she] told him" because he "was always more fond of listening to his own voice than to someone else's" (Atwood, 1997: 331). McKenzie does not want her to tell the story as she remembers it but "to tell a story that would hang together" (Atwood, 1997: 329). He tries to present Grace as someone who is "next door to an idiot" and make "all of the witnesses appear immoral or malicious, or else mistaken" in order to win the case in court (Atwood, 1997: 10). As Dr. Jordan realizes upon meeting him, McKenzie has "flamboyant tastes as a raconteur", and in fact reconstructs Grace's story to suit his needs (Atwood, 1997: 344). He also tells Dr. Jordan that Grace is "besotted" with him and that she gave him flirtatious looks: "A Hand placed on hers, and she would have thrown herself into my arms" (Atwood, 1997: 346). Similarly, Reverend Verringer's account of Grace's story is inadequate since he is, as Dr. Jordan concludes, "in love with Grace Marks": "Hence



his indignation, his assiduousness, his laborious petitions and committees; and above all, his desire to believe her innocent. Does he wish to wrinkle her out of jail, vindicated as a spotless innocent, and then marry her himself?" (Atwood, 1997: 62) In both Atwood's stories, male authorities are unsuccessful in their attempt to reconstruct the female identity and create *history* instead *her* story.

Both Gertrude and Grace use language and the power to tell a story from their perspective as a strategy to stand up for their rights and discredit male authority's point of view. Gertrude is not afraid to speak about her first husband's sexual deficiencies; she acknowledges her female sexuality; she even makes a shocking revelation by confessing that she is also a murderess. Grace manipulates the language; she chooses to speak/withhold information in order to protect herself; her speech is more a testimony of confusion than that of a confession; she "thinks" she "sleeps" when describing the crucial moments of the story; the events describing the double murder are presented through her dreams, hallucinations and hypnotic trance; her possible confession of the murders is perhaps inscribed in the quilt "The Tree of Paradise" but it is never openly stated. If Gertrude's strategy is to tell the truth and defend herself by taking responsibility for her actions, Grace's is to tell lies and ensure her safety. In both cases the power of language, more precisely, the power of telling and not telling, proves to be the most efficient survival technique, discrediting all the attempts of male authorities to construct the female's identity on their own terms. The narrative technique Atwood uses puts aside the question of the guilt/innocence of her two "celebrated murderesses" and calls for a fresh perspective when interpreting their life story.

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