Feminist Fairy Tale Retellings: A Genre of Subversion

by Laura Campbell

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Abstract

Fairy tale allusions and gendered fairy tale stereotypes pervade our culture. These shared cultural myths affect identity and social interaction in profound if subtle ways. Since the 1970s, several feminist authors have worked to undermine or transform cultural myths by using fairy tales, paradoxically using the a medium to confront its own flaws. In my thesis, I explore the ways in which feminist fairy tale retellings engage in debates about feminism and explode gender myths and stereotypes. My sources are five collections of retellings of well-known tales in either poetry or prose, three from the 1970s and two from 1990s. By selecting texts from the 1970s as well as more recent fairy tale retellings, I explore two different moments of feminist thought, allowing for a comparative perspective on feminist discourse and accepted gender

stereotypes.

The first section of my thesis focuses on feminist debates and fairy tale retellings of the 1970's. The feminist movement has never been completely unified, but as the authors whose retellings I discuss are situated within the tradition of white, middle-class feminism, I explore this strand of feminism. Relevant feminist issues of the 1970s include the rejection of the passive housewife and the push for sexual freedom. Anne Sexton's 1971 collection of revisionist fairy tale poems, *Transformations*, satirizes contemporaneous American culture and simultaneously illuminates and illustrates Betty Friedan's foundational feminist text, *The Feminine Mystique*. Sexton reveals the problems with marriage, consumerism, and overbearing mothers. Angela Carter's 1979 collection of retold tales, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, alters fairy tales in surprising ways, forcing the reader to confront feminist debates about sexuality, violence, and pornography. Carter's heroines refuse male domination, and in this way Carter destroys cultural myths and supports a powerful female sexuality. In her 1979 poetry collection, *Beginning with O*, Olga Broumas explores her struggle with the forces of patriarchy and heterosexual normativity—as described by feminist Adrienne Rich—using the images and context of fairy tales.

The second section of my thesis transitions to the present day. Since the 1990s, a body of feminist literature has emerged that seeks to define and critique the current state of feminisms. Contemporaneous critiques of feminism argue that some movements have become selfish, ineffectual, or commercialized. I focus on a critique by Gloria Bellafonte as well as on Baumgardner and Richards' *Manifesta*. These critiques give insight into Emma Donoghue's 1997 collection of short fairy tale retellings, *Kissing the Witch*. The collection depicts strong female protagonists who consciously respond to fairy tales by rejecting the traditional fairy tale patterns and by exploring alternate roles for women. Nonetheless, the stories simultaneously contain reactionary depictions of women, suggesting that even in a progressive text not all gender stereotypes and damaging gender roles are necessarily eliminated or subverted. Francesca Lia Block's 1995 collection of fairy tale retellings, *The Rose and The Beast*, mixes realism and fantasy. Block uses familiar fairy tale structures to discuss current issues, including the "beauty myth," anorexia, low self-esteem, pornography, and abuse.

In my conclusion, I explore the different relationships between feminist fairy tales and feminist debates and consider how changes in feminisms and feminist fairy tales coincide. I end with an analysis of the state of the feminist fairy tale genre. How do the revisions from the two moments compare? Are feminist fairy tales still relevant today? What role will fairy tale

revisions play in future feminist discourse?

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Short Titles

Block, Francesca Lia. <u>The Rose and the Beast: Fairy Tales Retold</u>. New York: Harper Collins, 2000.

Broumas, Olga. Beginning with O. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977.

Carter, Angela. The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories. New York: Penguin Books, 1979.

Donoghue, Emma. Kissing the Witch. New York: Harper Collins, 1997.

Sexton, Anne. <u>Transformations</u>. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1971.

Introduction

The fairy tale, which to this day is the first tutor of children because it was once the first tutor of mankind, secretly lives on in the story. The first true storyteller is, and will continue to be, the teller of fairy tales.

-Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller" 102

[A fairy tale is] a dramatic projection in symbolic images of the life of the psyche and it can travel from one country to another, one culture to another culture, whenever what it has to say holds good for human nature in both, despite their differences.

- W. H. Auden, "Introduction to Grimms' Fairy Tales" 294

Fairy tales developed from the oral tradition of storytelling. This long, necessarily undocumented oral history has led to the popular romantic notion that fairy tales contain universal psychological experiences or timeless truths about humanity. Many famous authors and literary theorists, as evidenced in the epigraphs, ascribe to this belief. Indeed, publishers as far back as the first print editions of fairy tale collections nurtured in readers the idea of universal and timeless fairy tales through their illustrations and introductions. Nonetheless, this view of fairy tales is quite simply false. The genealogy of fairy tales—from the first documented allusion to oral fairy tales in Plato's *The Gorgias* to the well-known printed collections of the Grimm brothers to the recent phenomena of feminist fairy tale revisions that my thesis will consider — manifests the vast transformation of fairy tale form and content. These transformations reflect not only changes in cultures and cultural values but also intentional editing and elisions by

¹ My understanding of the history of fairy tales is greatly indebted to Elizabeth Wanning Harries. For additional information, see Tatar, Introduction; and Zipes, Introduction and "Breaking the Disney Spell."

² Many scholars, including Maria Tatar and Marina Warner, cite the reference to old wives' tales in Plato's *The Gorgias* as the first allusion to fairy tales. See Tatar, Introduction x; Warner, "The Old Wives' Tale" 309.

writers and collectors. Thus fairy tales should be considered part of a dynamic, historically formed cannon.

This history of the fairy tale reveals the male control of the literary fairy tale cannon, which resulted in whitewashed, paternalistic, pedagogical stories. Generally, the fairy tales commonly known today emerged with the popularization of the works of Charles Perrault and the Grimm brothers and the exclusion of the tradition of stories written by women at the end of the 17th century in France.³ Of course, these versions reflect their contextual cultures, but they also forward the agendas of their male authors. Indeed, both Perrault and the Grimm brothers attribute their stories to female storytellers and emphasize the "purity" of the tales,⁴ yet these collectors simultaneously admit their own editorial aims—namely instilling the appropriate moral values in children.⁵ This male control of the fairy tale cannon underscores the need for feminist analysis and critique of fairy tales.

The versions of fairy tales best known today have undergone even further alteration by men since their collection and revision by Perrault and the Grimm brothers. In contemporary American culture, the Disney version of fairy tales may be known more widely than the

³ French *conteuses* in the 17th century told long, self-reflexive and witty fairy tales with many layers and embedded stories as a form of oral parlor entertainment; see Elizabeth Wanning Harries's *Twice Upon a Time: Women Writers and the History of the Fairy Tale*.

⁴ The first collectors of fairy tales— Giovanni Francesco Straparola, Giambattista Basile, the Grimm brothers, and Charles Perrault—emphasized that they compiled stories that they had heard first-hand from female-storytellers. Likewise, frontispieces of early editions depicted images of female oral storytellers. For a consideration of the attribution of fairy tales to female storytellers, see Maria Tatar, "Introduction." For an analysis of the frontispieces of early editions of fairy tales, see Harries, *Twice Upon a Time: Women Writers and the History of the Fairy Tale* 46-58.

⁵ For example, Wilhelm Grimm in the preface to his collection of fairy tales asserts: "These stories are suffused with the same purity that makes children appear so marvelous and blessed." Yet, in other instances he refers to the stories as a "manual of manners" (Grimm, Preface 206, 207).

traditional versions.⁶ In his essay, "Breaking the Disney Spell," Jack Zipes describes the alterations made to fairy tales by Disney. In Disney cartoons, Zipes argues, technology gains preeminence over the stories, and consequently, characters become mere stereotypes devoid of growth. Further, Disney fairy tales contain American moral values—including "cleanliness and control" as well as the American belief that hard work results in success—and these values exert a colonizing influence as the cartoons spread to different countries and cultures (Zipes, "Breaking the Disney Spell" 352). Further, Disney films erode the power of fairy tales as they are "geared toward non-reflective viewing" and, therefore, allow audiences to consume a product without necessarily considering a story's messages (Zipes, "Breaking the Disney Spell" 352). Individuals who are familiar only with Disney fairy tales may miss the complexity of fairy tales, and these versions contain more paternalistic themes and gender stereotypes than even the Grimms' stories.

The male control of the genre of the literary fairy tale—though often obscured by the emphasis on female storytellers as their source—makes it particularly important to consider the question of what stereotypes and expectations for women are portrayed in these stories. Fairy tales function as important cultural myths. They contain messages of social expectations that readers may internalize, either consciously or unconsciously. Indeed, a little girl who reads fairy tales might begin to think that Prince Charming can bring happiness—or even that she *needs* Prince Charming to attain happiness. In her essay, "An Autobiography of Scheherazade," female author Julia Alvarez laments the expectations placed on her by fairy tale stereotypes:

chop off pieces of their heels and toes to fit (Grimm, Grimm's Complete Fairy Tales 80-86).

⁶ Many of the recognizable elements of the Grimms' "Cinderella" are absent in the Disney version. For example, the Grimms' story lacks a fairy godmother. Instead the spirit of Cinderella's dead mother provides assistance via a birch tree that grows on her grave. Also, in the Grimms' version, Cinderella attends three balls (not just one), and her stepsisters try to deceive the prince by wearing Cinderella's golden shoe (not a glass slipper) although they must

The ready-made autobiography I was given by my parents, my aunts, and teachers was the age-old fairy tale-princess story: Cinderella, mixed in with lots of Sleeping Beauty and the Virgin Mary.

Once upon a time there was a sweet, pretty, passive, powerless, and probably blond (stay out of the sun!) princess who never played hooky from school or told lies about who broke the crystal ball in her grandmother's garden. The handsome (Catholic) prince of the land fell in love with her, married her, and she lived happily ever after as his lucky wife and the mother of his children.

(Alvarez 16)

The pressure to conform to this story that Alvarez articulates reveals the strong cultural presence of fairy tale stereotypes—including the equation of fair skin and hair with female beauty and the emphasis on marriage and children as a woman's aspirations. Indeed, feminists since the 1970s have analyzed the messages about women contained within fairy tales. Feminist scholars examine the gender roles and power relations depicted by fairy tales and consider their effects on the socialization and acculturation of women. The results of feminist analysis, however, vary greatly.

In her controversial feminist essay of 1970, "Fairy Tale Liberation," Alison Lurie argues that fairy tales empower women by placing them in roles as heroines and in positions of power. Lurie even suggests: "To prepare children for women's liberation, therefore, and to protect them against Future Shock, you had better buy at least one collection of fairy tales" (42). Many feminists, however, condemn fairy tales for perpetuating gender inequality by subtly encouraging women to accept or even desire passive roles and limited possibilities. For example, in her 1972 essay, "'Some Day My Prince Will Come': Female Acculturation through the Fairy

Tale," Marcia Lieberman responds to Lurie and rejects fairy tales as a model for women's liberation. As a point of attack, Lieberman explores stereotypes contained in the well-known fairy tales of Andrew Lang's *The Blue Fairy Book*. The majority of heroines in Lang's stories are beautiful and passive. Plain girls are always bad-tempered and never chosen for reward. The only powerful women are older, evil women. Further, marriage is the central event of most plots although few married characters are featured. Courtship becomes the most exciting part of life, after which women lose their personal identity and take that of their husband. These limiting depictions of women, Lieberman insists, negatively influence the behavior and expectations of female readers by romanticizing and normalizing passive female behavior while vilifying active, powerful women.

Other feminist fairy tales scholars, notably Maria Tatar, suggest that fairy tales should be neither reductively demonized nor overly lauded but instead emphasize the diversity of these stories and their receptions (xii-xv). Although many popularized fairy tales—for example, "Sleeping Beauty," "Snow White," or "Little Red Riding Hood"— feature these damning patriarchal stereotypes, other fairy tales do feature strong heroines or powerful, benevolent women, as in "East of the Sun and West of the Moon" or "Clever Maria." Any interpretation of the relationship between fairy tales and feminism, therefore, depends on the collection of fairy tales considered. Further, the reception of even the exact same version of a fairy tale by two

⁷ A Scottish folklorist, Andrew Lang compiled a series of collections of fairy tales, beginning with *The Blue Fairy Book* in 1889. Lang's fairy tales achieved great popularity and influenced the versions of fairy tales common today (Avery).

⁸ For a version of "Clever Maria," see Lang, *The Crimson Fairy Book* 359-367. For a version of "East of the Sun and West of the Moon," see Lang, *The Blue Fairy Book* 19-29.

different readers cannot be assumed to be identical. In recognition of this variety, Tatar advocates an understanding of the complex nature of fairy tales. In

Fairy tale authors have developed different strategies to address feminist concerns about fairy tales. Generally, responses may be categorized into three different groups. Some authors seek to rediscover older alternative versions of fairy tales or lesser-known fairy tales that feature strong female protagonists. This response, however, does nothing to combat the fairy tale stereotypes already in place. Likewise, because recovered fairy tales are from the past, these stories do not comment on current cultural situations and may even feature other types of outdated social mores. A second group of feminist authors seeks to move forward and cover fresh ground by writing new fairy tales to replace the old stories' damaging messages. Although new fairy tales may address contemporaneous feminist concerns, they fail to directly combat the roles and stereotypes of existent fairy tales.

A third type of feminist fairy tale, the type that my thesis considers, overcomes many of these failures. By adopting a tactic of revision, feminist authors can reappropriate traditional fairy tales in order to emphasize or subvert stereotypes—exploding old cultural myths to create new ones. Although nothing can erase existing fairy tales, the process of revision forces the reader to contrast old and new versions of the story, thus directly attacking and addressing these myths. This homeopathic response—through which the disease becomes the cure—

⁹ Recently, Kate Bernheimer asked several women writers to reflect on the influence of fairy tales on their lives. These personal essays, gathered in the collection *Mirror*, *Mirror* on the *Wall: Women Writers Explore Their Favorite Fairy Tales*, demonstrate the continued variety of reaction to fairy tales as mentioned above.

defamiliarizes the traditional stories. Thus feminist fairy tale revisions multitask; they combat current female stereotypes, critique culture, and engage in feminist debate.

By exploring feminist alterations of fairy tales through the lens of contemporaneous feminist dialogue, a deeper understanding of both fairy tales and feminist discourse can be gained. Toward this end, this thesis teases out the subtle relations of feminist movements and feminist fairy tales in both the 1970s and the 1990s. The structure and language of fairy tale retellings allow for a unique and thought-provoking consideration of feminist concerns. A single image or even a single word can evoke an idea that might require pages of argumentative writing and may even explore an idea that is undeveloped in the writer's own mind. Likewise, the fantastical setting of fairy tales allows writers to emphasize stereotypes through exaggeration or to try out new roles and conditions for women. The continued popularity of fairy tales perhaps may stem from their vast interpretive potential and the fantastical nature. Although fairy tales do not encode timeless beliefs, their persistence despite alteration suggests a strong relevance and appeal, and feminist authors channel this potential.

¹⁰ Tatar considers the extreme viewpoints of fairy tales by comparing the analysis of fairy tales by Andrea Dworkin, who entirely condemns fairy tales, with that of Alison Lurie, who whole-heartedly praises fairy tales.

These three different responses to feminist fairy tales are recognized and similarly categorized by many fairy tale historians. See, for example, Harries; Tatar; and Zipes, Introduction.

Chapter One: The Birth of Fairy Tale Revisions in the 1970s

I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the bottles explode.

- Angela Carter, "Notes from the Front Line"

Before embarking on the dual analysis of feminisms and feminist fairy tales, the relevant feminist lens must be determined. The media often portrays feminism as a single entity, and consequently, popular opinion falsely conceives of a single, unified feminism. Feminism, however, contains a confusing number of subsets and generates an overwhelming array of definitions and considerations. Some feminist scholars seek to understand the messy entity that is feminism by simplifying and dividing the evolution of feminist movements into two epochs—or waves. According to these scholars, the First Wave of feminism spanned the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as women campaigned for the right to vote, and then the Second Wave began with the resurgence of feminist activity in the 1960s. This Second Wave of feminism particularly informs 1970s feminist fairy tales and therefore merits further consideration.

The impetus for this latter wave is often attributed to two causes—first, some women's increased political awareness as a result of their work for the civil-rights and anti-war movements, and second, some white middle-class women's rejection of the confining role of housewife, a role idealized in the 1940s and 50s (Baumgardner and Richards 73). The publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and its identification of the "happy

¹ This method of parsing feminism into different waves pertains mostly to feminisms of white, educated, middle-class women. Women of color, as well as many other subsets of women, often use an entirely different historical framework to highlight important moments in feminisms. Although it is limited, I employ this two-wave framework because it emphasizes and maps relevant trends within my primary texts, since the authors whose works I will consider are all white, middle-class, well-educated women from Western Europe and North America.

housewife heroine" ideal represent an important moment in this phase of feminism (Freidan). Second Wave feminists fought for political and occupational equality, demystification of women's bodies, sexual freedom, and in the United States, the Equal Rights Amendment (which sadly, has yet to be passed). Toward these ends, many Second Wave feminists emphasized unity among women as well as the political nature of individual, personal experience: "the personal is political." 1970s fairy tale revisions highlight these concerns and employ the tactics of Second Wave feminists—particularly the rejection of the passive housewife and the push for sexual freedom.

Anne Sexton: 1971

In what is perhaps the first instance of feminist fairy tale revision, Anne Sexton's 1971 poetry collection, Transformations, retells seventeen of the Grimms' stories and offers an explicit critique of contemporaneous culture that resonates strongly with Betty Friedan's *The* Feminine Mystique. By using images and language from popular culture and advertisements. Sexton reveals the purpose of her writing: a humorous critique of consumer culture and women's roles within this culture. Through satire and exaggeration, facilitated by the fantastical nature of fairy tales, Sexton uncovers the unhappiness and boredom of women who strive only for marriage and the creation of a family. Sexton also suggests that the condition coined by Betty Freidan as the "feminine mystique" leads to women engaging in damaging competition for male approval and becoming mothers who smother their children.

In her canonical work, *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan diagnoses the "problem that has no name"—the dissatisfaction and depression of educated, middle-class American women who seem, on the surface, to be happy housewives. Contemporary American culture, she suggests, instills in women the ideology that truly feminine women find fulfillment in getting

married and raising children. Friedan equates this standard of success with a rigid, glorified ideal that results in an almost religious devotion:

> The new mystique makes the housewife-mothers, who never had a chance to be anything else, the model for all women; it presupposes that history has reached a final and glorious end in the here and now, as far as women are concerned. Beneath the sophisticated trappings, it simply makes certain concrete, finite, domestic aspects of feminine existence—as it was lived by women whose lives were confined by necessity, to cooking, cleaning, washing, bearing children—into a religion, a pattern by which all women must now live or deny their femininity. (43)

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Contemporaneous women's magazines and documentaries, Friedan indicates, reinforce this model by describing and depicting women who conform to the feminine ideal of devoting their lives to children and home. In this way, cultural discourse suggests that marriage is a woman's ultimate goal. The depiction of *only* happy marriages obfuscates the unpleasant quotidian events of marriage, and so the type of marriage women aspire to is really fictional. In forcing women to compete for this impossible goal, gender ideologies emphasize female beauty and create unhealthy rivalry between women.

Further, Friedan insists that with the advent of modern technology—including dishwashers, washing machines, store-bought clothes, and microwaves—housework no longer demands as much time as in the past and therefore no longer requires a woman to devote herself exclusively to the role of housewife. Consequently, women cannot occupy their time productively, find fulfillment, or develop an individual identity by living entirely for their families. Even those women who do achieve "success" and secure the ideal of a husband and

children remain dissatisfied. Nevertheless, women remain trapped in this role by the feminine mystique because "in the feminine mystique . . . There is no way [a woman] can even dream about herself except as her children's mother, her husband's wife" (62). Women thus make housework expand to fill their time and strive to become better wives and mothers. Women also live vicariously through their husbands and children. Consequently, mothers may "dehumanize" their children by over-mothering and thus overwhelming their children's personalities and self-identities (297). Friedan observes that the women's movement has changed the political, economic, and educational system in America, and now women must throw off the "feminine mystique" and take advantage of these new opportunities.

A parallel between Friedan's analysis and Anne Sexton's fairy tale revisions becomes apparent in the opening poem of *Transformations*, "The Gold Key." In this poem, Anne Sexton frames the stories to follow in a manner that sets the tone of the text and allows for a rich and irreverent critique of women in contemporaneous culture. Thus Sexton uses fairy tales to embark on a project similar to Friedan's. The speaker of the opening poem—and the rest of the collection—describes herself and the collection of tales she is about to read:

The speaker in this case

is a middle-aged witch, me—

tangled on my two great arms,

my face in a book

and my mouth wide,

ready to tell you a story or two. (1-6)

The speaker sounds like Sexton—a middle-aged woman—and the pronouns "me" and "my" seem to corroborate the interpretation that the speaker and the writer are linked. By associating

the speaker with herself, Sexton introduces the idea that the stories, while ostensibly set in a fairy-tale "once upon a time," actually depict contemporaneous culture. Sexton's poems generally were autobiographical and reflective, supporting this argument. Indeed, in a letter to her editor, Paul Brooks of Houghton Mifflin, Anne Sexton says of *Transformations*: "it would further be a lie to say that [these poems] weren't about me, because they are just as much about me as my other poetry" (Sexton and Ames, 362).

At the same time, by using the frame of an old woman, the collection resonates with the oral fairy-tale tradition and the frequently used image of an old woman telling stories to children around a hearth.² The speaker's description of herself, however, undermines the feeling of comfort or nostalgia that one would expect from this frame. The speaker seems sinister. She is not just an old woman but also a "witch" (2). She does not gracefully lean over the book but is "tangled on her two great arms" (3). The word "great" suggests an overly large or hulking woman, and "tangled" suggests an air of awkwardness or bulkiness. Likewise, the phrase "my mouth wide" seems unsophisticated or even vulgar. This description establishes the irreverent, slightly grotesque tone of the text.

At the end of the opening poem, Sexton reveals the meaning of the collection's title—

Transformations—as well as the tone and project of the collection: namely, a darkly humored critique of contemporaneous culture and consumerism. The speaker describes the book she is about to read, and a boy (one of the listeners) possesses the "golden key"—presumably his curiosity or interest—to unlock this book of stories:

Its secrets whimper

² Engravings of the image of an old woman telling stories around a hearth were often used as the frontispiece of early editions of fairytales (Harries 47).

like a dog in heat.

He turns the key.

Presto!

It opens this book of odd tales

which transform the Brothers Grimm.

Transform?

As if an enlarged paper clip

could be a piece of sculpture.

(And it could.) (42-51)

From the outset, the "book of odd tales" contrasts sharply with the Grimms' fairytales. One might expect the secrets of a book of fairy stories to enchant the reader or seduce the reader into opening the book. Instead, in Sexton's book, "secrets whimper / Like a dog in heat" (42-43). This crude image suggests that the book's secrets are socially inappropriate or lewd rather than romantic, mysterious, and enlightening. Whereas the Grimm brothers' stories served pedagogical ends and instilled patriarchal and socially approved values in children, Sexton's stories may be viewed as inappropriate and irreverent. This almost tasteless humor pervades the collection and allows Sexton to expose and challenge social expectations and cultural myths that polite society prefers to keep hidden. Sexton describes the poems as "kind of a dark, dark laughter" (Sexton and Ames 365). Biographer Caroline King Barnard Hall likewise accurately observes: "we laugh our way through this book even when we tell ourselves that we shouldn't be laughing" (Hall 112).

The speaker's description of an enlarged paper clip—"Transform? / As if an enlarged paper clip / could be a piece of sculpture"—refers to the contemporaneous pop art movement.

Pop artists such as Andy Warhol, Claes Oldenburg, and Roy Lichtenstein used images of consumer culture in art as a means of exploring the link between popular culture and high art.³ This allusion foreshadows and reveals the importance of Sexton's use of images of consumer culture throughout the text. These images force the reader to acknowledge that the stories comment on contemporaneous culture by ostentatiously situating them within this culture. Like Sexton's description of a dog in heat, these images of commodities are humorous, often in a slightly grotesque way, and they consequently satirize both the original fairy tales and consumer culture.

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In Sexton's retelling of "Hansel and Gretel," for example, the gruesome death of the wicked witch becomes comical through the use of pop images:

The witch turned as red

as the Jap flag.

Her blood began to boil up

like Coca-Cola.

Her eyes began to melt.

She was done for.

Altogether a memorable incident. (112-118)

³ Art historian David Joselit explains: "Pop art collapses 'high' art into 'low' by incorporating commercial imagery and industrial modes of mechanical reproduction into painting and sculpture" (Joselit 65). Pop artists, he explains, use commodities in their work because they have become cultural symbols and icons imbued with meaning. For example, citing Andy Warhol's famous work with Campbell's Soup cans, Joselit asserts the meaning contained in a familiar consumer image: "for anyone raised in mid-twentieth-century America [a Campbell's Soup can] conjures up an idealized vision of home and family" (Joselit 77). Referencing the work of Lichtenstein—who often defamiliarized an everyday object by making it the subject of a work of art—Joselit argues, "in a commercialized Western culture, it is the everyday commodity which structures our experience of place and time" (Joselit 78).

The image of a woman turning red, boiling, and melting would, if described naturally, be

At the same time, Sexton's exaggerated language and dark humor border on tasteless.

"Jap" is not just a neutral slang term but rather has been a derogatory ethnic slur since World

War II. Thus, Sexton's language not only makes the poem feel more pop-culture and

contemporary but also rubs the reader the wrong way—even more than the earlier image of a

"dog in heat." Sexton refuses to allow the reader to become comfortable. She does not just

critique culture but wages war against it, preventing the reader from slipping into a state of ease

and forcing him or her to confront all kinds of cultural expectations and mores.

In "Hansel and Gretel," Sexton transforms the story in a disturbing way that illustrates Friedan's observations about the ways in which the feminine mystique affects the relationships between mothers and their children. Sexton uses images of mothers devouring their children.

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Before the actual story of Hansel and Gretel begins, the speaker opens with a monologue that foreshadows the story, adopting the voice of a mother addressing her son:

Little plum,

said the mother to her son,

I want to bite,

I want to chew.

I will eat you up. (1-5)

This exchange, at first, could describe the sweet nothings of a mother talking to her adorable baby son. However, although "I want to eat you up" seems innocuous, the images of biting and chewing may strike the reader as taking the sentiment a bit too far. Then, Sexton further reveals the alarming undertones of the mother's love as her obsession with consuming her child continues with unmistakable images of cooking and eating:

I have a pan that will fit you.

Just pull up your knees like a game hen.

Let me take your pulse

and set the oven for 350. (17-20)

The intermingling of descriptions of a loving mother—"let me take your pulse"—and cannibalism disturbs the reader and satirizes the problem of smothering mother-love.

Not only does the opening of the poem contain troubling images of voracious mothers, the following narrative section that explicitly retells "Hansel and Gretel" continues the motif of maternal cannibalism. When the witch takes Hansel and Gretel in, tricking them with her house of gingerbread, she becomes a surrogate mother. She, too, harbors impure intentions for the children:

She was planning to cook him

and then gobble him up

as in a feast

after a holy war.

Here the poem makes an interesting transition to religious imagery, the "holy war." Religion and religious wars indicate a great fervor and dedication. This image suggests that mothers become obsessed with their children in a way that is similar to religious devotion. Other religious references link mothers and children throughout the poem. For example, as Hansel and Gretel's true mother sends them into the forest, she gives "them / each a hunk of bread / like a page out of the bible" (44-46). This image strikingly recalls Friedan's hypothesis that the feminine mystique turns aspects of femininity, including bearing children, into a religion.

Further images of war throughout the poem emphasize and disturbingly satirize the love of a mother. In the introduction to the poem, in yet another string of terms of endearment that double as descriptions of food, the mother says:

Little child,

little nubkin,

sweet as fudge,

you are my blitz. (6-9)

In the last line, the word "blitz" seems to have been substituted for what should be "bliss" or perhaps "blintz." The former would indicate the love of the child, and the latter would continue the association with delicious food. Instead, blitz refers to a sudden attack in war. Does this mean that the mother attacks her child? War seems out of place in images of motherhood. The jarring association of war and motherhood emphasizes the violence behind the mother-child

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relationship even more explicitly than the images of devouring a child. Further, war and aggression generally function as masculine images. By using masculine images to describe a maternal relationship, Sexton not only illustrates the horrifying results of female stereotypes—the "feminine mystique"—but also demonstrates the arbitrary and constraining nature of male stereotypes.

Likewise, a disturbing image of war and genocide appears in the section of the poem that retells "Hansel and Gretel." As in the Grimms' story, the family lacks sufficient food, and the children are sent into the forest with the intention that they will become hopelessly lost:

The final solution,

their mother told their father,

was to lose the children in the forest. (32-34)

Most unpleasantly, the mother terms her plan the "final solution," which references the Nazi plan to commit genocide during World War II. The phrase has horrible connotations, and for a mother to refer to a plan for her children with such a phrase is positively gruesome. Indeed, Sexton confers extreme power on the mother by aligning her with an omnipotent dictator. The comparison is in very poor taste, and this places extreme emphasis on Sexton's point.

In addition to the mother-child relationship, Sexton also critiques the idealization of marriage in contemporaneous culture by revealing the falseness of the idea that marriage ends in "happily ever after." Indeed, biographer and critic Caroline Kind Bernard Hall cites the alteration of the traditional "happily ever after" as a recurrent theme in the stories: "in many other poems of *Transformations*, sexual themes are magnified, and the fairy-tale promise of finding an emotionally mature, psychologically integrated, happy life remains unfulfilled" (Hall 104). The fairy tale "Cinderella" is perhaps the story most frequently associated with Prince Charming and

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the idea of marriage as a means of salvation. Sexton opens her retelling of "Cinderella" with several quick rags-to-riches Cinderella stories, for example:

You always read about it:

the plumber with twelve children

who wins the Irish Sweepstakes.

From toilets to riches.

That story. (1-5)

This suggests that the "Cinderella" story has become cliché and unbelievable. The quite literal, and consequently comical, description "toilets to riches" delightfully illustràtes the ubiquity of the Cinderella story. The short and pithy phrase, "That story"—set off by punctuation and repeated after several similar examples of rags to riches stories—shows that the story has been repeated so often that it has become boring or cliché. At the same time, the continued presence of Cinderella stories in our culture and the interest in such stories reveal the persistent appeal of the happily-ever-after and rags-to-riches aspects of the myth.⁴

The conclusion of Sexton's "Cinderella," however, questions the very plausibility or desirability of "That story." Sexton begins the concluding stanza, "Cinderella and the prince / lived, they say, happily ever after" (100-101). The aside "they say" suggests that this is not actually the case. Indeed, Sexton's description of "happily ever after" hardly sounds like something to which one should aspire:

... happily ever after,

like two dolls in a museum case

never bothered by diapers or dust,
never arguing over the timing of an egg,
never telling the same story twice,
never getting a middle-aged spread,
their darling smiles pasted on for eternity.
Regular Bobbsey Twins.

That story. (101-109)

The poem harshly de-romanticizes "happily ever after" by comparing the fairy tale couple to "dolls in a museum case" or the fictional characters the "Bobbsey Twins." Through this comparison, Sexton reveals that the perfection of "happily ever after" requires a stasis that cannot be achieved and should not be desired. The instantiation of such an ideal would be fake: dolls. The "Bobbsey Twins" description also suggests a bizarre, necessarily sexless, marriage between children—twins nonetheless. Although Cinderella and her prince "smile," these smiles are "pasted on for eternity" rather than earned and are described condescendingly as "darling smiles." Thus the reader discovers that the ideal of perfect happiness in marriage is an illusion or an act—"that story." The images of mindless children and dolls also suggest that believing in such an ideal is an act of naiveté or child-like ignorance.

Sexton contrasts the "happily ever after" ideal with reality by enumerating the everyday, mundane events that Cinderella and the Prince "never" have to encounter. This unexciting, imperfect life seems preferable to the eerily, stagnant happily ever after. By casting seemingly unpleasant aspects of reality as the better alternative, Sexton offers her reader the possibility to refine their expectations and no longer desire perfection. Instead, readers may appreciate the quotidian as evidence of a satisfying, realistic married life.

⁴ The well-known romantic comedy film, *Pretty Woman*, and the recent Oscar-winning *Slumdog Millionaire* are two mainstream examples of the popularity of the rags-to-riches and, in the case of the former, happily-ever-after myths.

In satirizing mothers and marriage, Sexton undermines the feminine ideal of her time. She uses cultural myths—fairy tales—to reveal and destroy other cultural myths surrounding women. In her essay, "Recreating Fairyland—A Feminist Perspective: Transformations by Anne Sexton," feminist scholar Cathryn Essinger asserts that fairy tales no longer appeal to "feminist readers" because they are "based upon patriarchal myths" and thus "destructive to [such readers'] concept of personhood" (14-15). Essinger envisages Sexton's collection as a positive step in that it is a feminist reappropriation of fairy tales: "By exaggerating the fairy tale characters and their relationships, Sexton exposes the myths we perpetuate by retelling these stories to our children" (16). Doubtless, Sexton's satiric poems force the reader to reconsider the myths and expectations encoded in fairy tales. Essinger misses, however, the second important subject of Sexton's satire. As I have illustrated, Sexton satirizes not only gender stereotypes within fairy tales but also the way these myths play out in contemporaneous culture and thus illustrates the ideas explored in feminist tracts—exemplified by the important work of Betty Friedan.

Anne Sexton, however, translates into fairy tale only Friedan's critique of culture and not the promise for women to free themselves from the stifling role of housewife that Friedan suggests at the end of *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan's work was a major impetus for the Second Wave of feminism, a clarion call that alerted many women to their own desires and led these women to pursue careers and equal opportunities in the work force. Her analysis of society illuminates the gender roles challenged by 1970's fairy tale revisions and illustrates the need for such revisions. Sexton's *Transformations* also highlights the real need for action to confront the feminine mystique and further suggests that reading neither Freidan's text nor feminist debate

can suffice for freeing women already trapped.⁵ Sexton battled "the feminine mystique" throughout her life; she was upper-middle class, a mother, and a housewife. Although she found some solace in writing, she still struggled with depression.⁶ Anne Sexton ended her own personal battle with the feminine mystique by committing suicide in 1974 at the age of 46. Thus, not only Sexton's work but also her struggles evidence the need to challenge cultural myths and stereotypes.

Angela Carter: 1979

Like Sexton's work, Angela Carter's collection of prose fairy tale retellings, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, speaks to feminist debates surrounding marriage, gender roles, and women's relationships with men. Angela Carter also engages in debate surrounding female sexuality, but, unlike Sexton, Carter uses fairy tales as a means not only to critique female

In light of Sexton's critique of contemporaneous culture and women, it should be noted that critics and biographers of Anne Sexton often puzzle over her relationship with feminisms and feminist concerns. Biographer Caroline King Barnard Hall admits:

The available evidence indicates that Anne Sexton did not consider herself a feminist; she did not, that is, claim for herself a public position supporting women's issues or advocating women's rights, either as an individual or as the member of an organization. (81)

Indeed, "Anne Sexton was a suburban housewife and for most her life claimed to be relatively comfortable with that role" (81). Further, Hall observes a pattern of submission to "male authority figures" and a desire for the approval of these figures in both Sexton's poetry as well as her aspirations, as evident Sexton's letters (83).

Despite Sexton's purported happiness as a suburban house-wife (belied by repeated suicide attempts and inescapable depression) and her disassociation with feminist concerns, Hall suggests that Sexton may have developed some feminist sentiments toward the end of her life. Hall reports that when asked in 1974, "What difference would it have made if there had been a women's movement?" Sexton replied, "we would have felt legitimate" (91).

⁶ After the birth of her first child, Sexton found motherhood difficult to handle. Consequently, she spent some time hospitalized for attempted suicide. The birth of her second child, two years later, also resulted in anger, depression, and admittance to a mental hospital. After leaving this hospital, Sexton began seeing a psychiatrist who encouraged writing poetry as a mode of therapy. Thus began her career as a writer (Hall 4-5).

stereotypes but also to explode these myths by exploring alternate roles for women. To this end, Carter's stories critique or satirically reverse stereotypical male-female dynamics and spotlight women who embrace their libido. The depictions of highly sexualized women and of sexual violence speak to feminist debates about pornography and earn Carter an uneasy place within feminist scholarship.

The relationship between pornography and feminist movements has been a complicated one. Feminists have struggled even to define pornography and have advocated a wide range of levels of regulation and tolerance.⁷ On one hand, feminists such as Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin stridently have condemned pornography. In her essay "Pornography and Grief," Andrea Dworkin enumerates the offences of pornography against women in these terms: "pornography functions to perpetuate male supremacy and crimes of violence against women because it conditions, trains, educates, and inspires men to desire women, to use women, to hurt women" (Dworkin 42). In contrast, Amber Hollibaugh and Cherrie Moraga note the whitemiddle class dominance of the anti-pornography movement and argue that feminisms avoid discussions of sexuality, particularly deviant or violent sexuality (Hollibaugh and Moraga). When sexuality must be discussed, Hollibaugh and Moraga argue, feminists often try to present sexuality as clean or pure. In response, Hollibaugh and Moraga advocate increased feminist discussion of sexuality and the recognition of alternate types of sexuality—specifically various aspects of lesbian sexual culture, including sadomasochism. Thus feminists may ask: "Can sexually explicit literature, videos, art, and music serve the purpose of sexual freedom?" (Cornell 111).

In her analysis of pornography, "Polemical Preface: Pornography in the Service of Women," Angela Carter tackles the subject of pornography and espouses a belief that pornography may be altered and used in positive ways. Culture mythologizes the relations between men and women, Carter argues, and this creates a situation where men and women engaging in sexual behavior see themselves participating in an anonymous ritual. This mythologizing of sexuality removes individuality and prevents sensual pleasure. Carter notes that these myths of sexuality and a universal experience of sexuality are false. Instead, she argues that culture shapes sexual actions:

Flesh is not an irreducible human universal. Although the erotic relationship may seem to exist freely, on its own terms among the distorted social relationships of a bourgeois society, it is in fact, the most self-conscious of all human relationships, a direct confrontation of the two beings whose actions in the bed are wholly determined by their actions when they are out of it. (Carter, "Polemical" 531)

As a result of the influence of culturally constructed myths on individual sexual practices, women often fill positions of inferior power in sexual relationships. Carter argues, for example, that the missionary position subjugates a woman by transforming her into a passive receptor. Further, the economic dependency of wives—whether real or merely a cultural illusion—means that "all wives of necessity fuck by contract" (531). Carter suggests that culture also perverts the sexual act by converting what should be a free sexual exchange into an economic contract with a dependent party.

According to Carter, pornography perpetuates the false universalizing of sexual experience and the subjugation of women. She describes this effect by using images of flesh and meat, a recurrent theme in her essays and fictional work: pornography affords men "the

⁷ My analysis of pornography and the feminist movement is heavily indebted to the work of Drucilla Cornell; see Cornell, Introduction.

opportunity to purchase the flesh of other people as if it were meat" (535). In a controversial move, Carter nonetheless asserts that with certain alterations, pornography can become a force for subverting rather than perpetuating damaging cultural myths: "the more pornographic writing acquires the techniques of real literature, of real art, the more deeply subversive it is likely to be in that the more likely it is to affect the reader's perception of the world" (539). Carter's view that sexually explicit or sexually violent material can be transformed and used to empower women places her at odds with many other feminists.

Carter's controversial views on pornography pervade not only her essays but also her fictional work, including the collection *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*. Indeed, she sees prose as another medium through which to argue, since "a narrative is an argument stated in fictional terms" (Haffenden 79). Many feminists, however, condemn Carter's use of sexual violence and explicit, disturbing sexual images as pornographic. Nonetheless, in *The Bloody Chamber*, Carter effectively channels sexuality and violence to explode female stereotypes, which suggests that feminists should not so quickly dismiss Carter's work.

For instance, in the short story "The Bloody Chamber," Carter uses the fairy tale "Bluebeard" as a subject for satiric critique. Although present in many variations, "Bluebeard" generally relates the story of a murderous husband who decapitates a series of wives. The story opens as the king brings home his latest wife. He leaves suddenly and entrusts his new bride with the keys to every room in the house yet forbids her to use one key. The bride—a victim of temptation—disobeys her husband and opens the forbidden door only to find the corpses of his previous wives. In her horror, the wife drops the key, which becomes stained in telltale blood. When the husband returns, he discovers the blood and prepares to kill his wife for her disobedience. She, however, escapes death at the last minute, saved either by her brothers or by

a lover. Feminist scholar Kari E. Lokke identifies the salient theme of the "Bluebeard" story as "the broken taboo, the forbidden chamber motif" (8). Thus the story traditionally functions as a cautionary tale against the curiosity of women, but in Carter's deft parody, it re-emerges as a complex feminist critique of violence, sexuality, and power in the relations between men and women.

Carter uses exaggerated language and ostentatiously violent and sexually explicit—
perhaps pornographic—imagery to build suspense and the anticipation of murder. The detailed description of a jeweled collar as "the necklace that prefigures [the narrator's] end," for example, marks an explicit and horrifying indication of future decapitation (Carter, *Bloody* 36). Yet Carter thwarts the reader's anticipation by revealing the outcome of the tale at the outset. The primacy of the personal pronoun in the first sentence of the story, "I remember how," emphasizes the narrator's survival (7). This assurance undermines the exaggerated building of suspense, just as the convention of "happily ever after" in fairy tales reduces the reader's apprehension when the story's heroines and heroines encounter perilous obstacles. Thus Carter parodies the artifice of storytelling and leads the reader to recognize and examine the expectations that she has when reading a fairy tale.

The narrator of "The Bloody Chamber" begins by relating the history of her courtship and engagement while traveling via train to her husband's chateau for her honeymoon. Several moments reveal the narrator's objectification by her future husband. For example, the narrator describes being observed while attending the opera:

I saw him watching me in the gilded mirrors with the assessing eye of a connoisseur inspecting horseflesh, or even of a housewife in the market,

inspecting cuts on the slab. I'd never seen, or else had never acknowledged, that regard of his before, the sheer carnal avarice of it. (11)

The narrator reveals that, under the male gaze, she has been transformed into a commodity: meat. This transformation from flesh to meat parallels Carter's description of the disempowering results of pornography, as females can be purchased for the male gaze. The narrator's husband desires possession and power rather than sensuality or an equal love. Indeed, the narrator recognizes that her marriage is an economic exchange, describing the monetary benefits for her mother and herself. While analyzing the feelings of loss that she experiences in leaving her mother, the narrator envisions herself as a commodity passed from the hands of her mother (who fills the role of her dead father) to those of her husband: "And in the midst of my bridal triumph, I felt a pang of loss as if, when he put the gold band on my finger, I had, in some way, ceased to be her child in becoming his wife" (7). Disturbingly, the narrator knowingly chooses to accept the Marquis's offer although it positions her as an object and even sees the marriage as inevitable—"her destiny" (8). In fairy tales, marriage is usually a desirable destiny, thus the reader's apprehension about the narrator's marriage is ironic.

Despite the warning signs of violence, the narrator aligns her experience with myths of heterosexual romance. She describes her future home as "that magic place, the fairy castle whose walls were made of foam, the legendary habitation in which he had been born. To which, one day, I might bear an heir. Our destination, my destiny" (8). The desire for a happy marriage revealed in this description prolongs the narrator's acceptance of violence and inequality. Yet, the image also suggests the impossibility of the narrator's desires. The future home she envisions, a "fairy castle whose walls are made of foam," is not a firm, real object. Foam dissolves quickly when touched. Indeed, the fairy castle's foam walls suggest that the narrator's

personal dream of "happily ever after," and also the "happily ever after" ideal, also cannot be reached. The idea of the unattainable fairy tale dream recalls Sexton's de-romanticizing of "happily ever after" in "Cinderella."

After the marriage takes place, the narrator and her lover consummate their relationship in such a way that they are reduced to positions of anonymity, a process described by Carter in her essay on pornography. Many mirrors surround the lover's bed and reflect the sexual act many times over, magnifying the violence of the scene: "A dozen husbands impaled a dozen brides" (17). The reflection in the mirror, and the scene the Marquis creates, form the tableau of a pornographic image:

I saw, in the mirror, the living image of an etching by Rops from the collection he had shown me when our engagement permitted us to be alone together . . . He in his London tailoring; she, bare as a lamb chop. Most pornographic of all confrontations. And so my purchaser unwrapped his bargain. (15)

Once again the narrator has been reduced to purchased meat. In the recreation of this famous pornographic scene, the narrator and her husband engage in a disturbing role-play that robs them of any sexual intimacy and strips the narrator of power or identity. The narrator's view of herself becomes strangely distorted as the disturbing sexual relationship with her husband escalates: "I seemed reborn in his unreflective eyes" (20). The word "unreflective" suggests that the narrator's self-identify is not only a creation of her new husband, but also that this identity comes entirely from within her husband with no anchor in reality. The aspects of anonymity are reinforced by the fact that the names of the narrator and her husband are never revealed. In this way, Carter demonstrates her characters' loss of identity as they conform to cultural gender roles of sexuality via the schematizing of pornography.

Indeed, a rigid gender identity traps not only the narrator but also her husband. The narrator repeatedly refers to the physiognomy of the Marquis as a "mask" or describes his face with images of "death" or "stillness" (9, 18). From behind a mask, only a man's eyes are visible. Thus the husband has been reduced to the objectifying male gaze. The narrator struggles to find the true identity of the Marquis—playfully asking for the "key to his heart"—because she cannot see past this social mask (21). Even though the husband sadistically enjoys his dominance and the violent, exploitive relationship he establishes with the narrator, at moments he reveals uncertainty:

Yet, when he raised his head and stared at me with his blind, shuttered eyes as though he did not recognize me, I felt a terrified pity for him, for this man who lived in such strange secret places that, if I loved him enough to follow him, I should have to die.

The atrocious loneliness of that monster! (35)

Although the husband is undeniably a "monster," and the reader hardly echoes the narrator's "pity," the role of male dominance he fills—while clearly an exaggerated and alarming case—is every bit as culturally constructed as the sexual roles into which women are forced. The narrator's observation of her husband's "loneliness," suggests that conforming to masculine stereotypes, like feminine ones, involves great cost. In assuming the "mask" of the male gaze and male supremacy, the Marquis becomes trapped in role, resulting in his isolation and inability to form meaningful interpersonal connections.

Interestingly, Carter ironically subverts the tradition of masculine power through the antihero, the male piano-tuner Jean-Yves. A young, blind, and powerless character, Jean-Yves contrasts with the traditional fairy-tale hero as well as with the Marquis. When the narrator discovers the murderous extent of her husband's violence, she no longer passively submits to his wishes and commands. Nonetheless, the narrator's knowledge of her husband's treachery is not enough to save her; nor can her lover Jean-Yves come to the rescue. As the Marquis prepares to decapitate and murder the narrator, Jean-Yves admits to her: "I can be of some comfort to you... though not of much use" (37). When capable help does arrive, Jean-Yves requires the narrator's assistance to open the door because he cannot see the latch. Yet, as feminist critic Merja Makinen suggests, the very weakness of Jean-Yves creates his appeal as a lover: "later psychoanalytic feminists readings, . . . could allow Carter's protagonist to elect for a man with whom she will not be the object of the male gaze, as she was with her husband" (Makinen 5). Without the subjection and dominance of the male gaze, the possibility for an equal, rewarding sexual relationship emerges.

In a humorous and ironic twist, Carter reverses the reader's expectations with a delightful feminist ending in which the heroine's mother stages a dramatic rescue. The mother is characterized by a past in which she assumes the traditional characteristics of the masculine hero—power, violence, and bravery. For example, the mother has "outfaced a junk full of Chinese pirates . . . [and] shot a man eating tiger with her own hand" (7). Now she unhesitatingly shoots and murders the villainous Marquis. Carter further emphasizes this reversal of gender stereotypes by vesting the mother with masculine power symbols. For example, the mother keeps her dead husband's pistol "always in her reticule" (8). Likewise, as discussed previously, the economic exchange of daughter for dowry, typically a father-husband exchange, occurs between the mother and the Marquis. Thus, Carter shows that women can be both powerful *and* nurturing by simultaneously highlighting the mother's heroic and compassionate maternal sides. Early in the story, the mother doubts the wisdom of her daughter's marriage even though it will

bring material prosperity. In the end, maternal instinct triumphs over masculine violence as the mother notes something suspicious during a phone conversation with the narrator—"I'd never heard you cry before"—which piques her curiosity and results in her timely entrance and intervention (40). Maternal feeling and female curiosity save the narrator's life and undermine "Bluebeard's" paternalistic moral message—that female curiosity should be contained and that husbands must always be followed.

At the end of the story, the mother, daughter, and lover form a new tripartite household together, but it is not jubilant—"we lead a quiet life the three of us"—and thus contrasts with the typical establishment of a new household at the end of fairy tales (40). Nonetheless, the promise for happiness seems greater and more real. The narrator and Jean-Yves are united by love, not economics or sadomasochism. Without the damaging male gaze, the narrator is no longer a commodity. She remains with her mother and continues practicing music, and thus all forms of her unique identity are given expression. The non-traditional family is subject to the censure and suspicion of society, but the reader has come to see the damaging nature of the stereotypes and expectations imposed by society and can hardly lament their separation from such a society.

Similarly, in "The Company of Wolves," a revision of "Little Red Riding Hood," the protagonist destroys sexual gender stereotypes by refusing a submissive role. The story starts off by relating several "local" myths of wolves and werewolves to set the scene. These stories depict wolves that change into men and men who change into wolves. They emphasize the violence of the wolves and the danger they present, particularly to women. These wolf myths thus establish the mythic, violent nature of male sexuality as well as the idea that sexuality is something for women to fear. As in "The Bloody Chamber," images of violence and sexuality

contribute to the process of subversion when they are seized by women for empowerment rather than used by men to reassert supremacy.

As the narrative begins, Little Red Riding Hood, an adolescent girl newly experiencing her sexuality, sets out to visit her grandmother deep in the dangerous forest full of wolves/men:

She stands and moves within the invisible pentacle of her own virginity. She is an unbroken egg; she is a sealed vessel; she has inside her a magic space the entrance to which is shut tight with a plug of membrane; she is a closed system; she does not know how to shiver. She has her knife and she is afraid of nothing. (113-114)

The emphasis on the girl's virgin sexuality reveals that this is a story of sexual exploration, as "Little Red Riding Hood" generally has been interpreted to be since the revisions of Perrault and the Grimm brothers. This description also suggests that, as an innocent virgin, Little Red Riding Hood does not fear sex. Her virginity is a "pentacle" that protects her from fear; she is too innocent to anticipate harm, and so she is "afraid of nothing." At the same time, the passage suggests that the fear of sexuality is not natural or instinctual. That the girl "does not know how to shiver" indicates that this fear is something that must be learned. "Shiver" may also indicate that the girl does not yet know how to orgasm. The dual connotation of the word thus further links the advent of fear with the awakening of one's sexuality. Indeed, if the virgin girl is a "closed system," fear is something that must come from outside or from sexual experience; perhaps social norms and cultural myths surrounding the way women experience sexuality establish this fear.

⁸ For an illuminating analysis of the history of "Little Red Riding Hood," including the introduction of sexual meaning by Perrault and the Grimm brothers, see Zipes, "A Second Gaze at Little Red Riding Hood's Trials and Tribulations."

The introduction of the girl's father illustrates the social/cultural aspects of sexuality: "Her father might forbid her, if he were home, but he is away in the forest, gathering wood, and her mother cannot deny her" (114). Her father has the power to "forbid" her from exploring her sexuality, but the girl sets out without waiting for her father's sanction. In contrast, the mother has no power over her daughter's sexuality. This resonates with the themes of the objectification of women and the commodification of female sexuality, passed from father to husband.

As in the Grimms' story, Little Red Riding Hood meets the hunter/wolf and succumbs to his seduction. Then the hunter/wolf rushes ahead and devours the grandmother. As in "The Bloody Chamber," however, Carter comically subverts the traditional ending. Little Red Riding hood refuses to be eaten. Instead, she strips and joins the wolf, embracing her sexuality:

The girl burst out laughing; she knew she was nobody's meat. She laughed at him full in the face, she ripped off his shirt for him and flung it into the fire, in the fiery wake of her own discarded clothing. The flames danced like dead souls on Walpurgisnacht and the old bones under the bed set up a terrible clattering but she did not pay any heed. (118)

Throughout previous stories of the collection, meat represents the sensual flesh of the body reduced to a commodity of exchange. By insisting that she is "nobody's meat," Little Red Riding Hood refuses to be turned into a commodity. Just as she freely chooses to leave her father and explore her sexuality without consent, the girl chooses to fulfill her sexual desire independently. Indeed, the story ends happily and humorously. The narrator describes the scene in Grandmother's house the next morning: "See! Sweet and sound she sleeps in granny's bed, between the paws of the tender wolf" (118). Carter thus suggests that women can escape the

economy of sexual exchange and achieve a fulfilling, non-violent, non-oppressive sexual relationship by actively embracing their libido and demanding an equal sexual relationship.

Carter stresses that this decision is unorthodox, a break from the past. As Little Red Riding Hood shockingly strips off her clothes, "The flames danced like dead souls on Walpurgisnacht and the old bones under the bed set up a terrible clattering but she did not pay any heed" (118). Walpurgisnacht is a festival celebrated on April 30th in Germany. Although elements of Christianity have since been incorporated into the festival, the holiday originated from Norse pagan customs, including a belief that on Walpurgisnacht the boundary between the living and the dead is porous. Today, loud noises are made and bonfires are burned to keep evil at bay and to keep away the dead. The reader assumes that the bones under the bed must belong to the grandmother. In light of the reference to Walpugisnacht, it seems that the burning clothes keep the spirit of the dead grandmother away. The grandmother evokes elements of tradition throughout the story, including when she unsuccessfully attempts to use religion to protect herself from the violent wolf:

You can hurl your Bible at him and your apron after, granny, you thought that was a sure prophylactic against these infernal vermin . . . now call on Christ and his mother and all the angels in heaven to protect you but it won't do you any good. (115-116)

Despite the clattering, Little Red Riding Hood does "not pay any heed" to the bones of her Grandmother. Because the Grandmother endorses religion and seems afraid of sex, this emphasizes Little Red Riding Hood's rejection of traditional sexual roles and voices of the past.

⁹ For succinct explanations of Walpurgisnacht, see "Walpurgisnacht," <u>Identity Politics in the Women's Movement</u>; "Walpurgisnacht" <u>A Dictionary of Phrase and Fable</u>. For a longer exploration of Germanic magical lore, see Thorsson. For the Catholic elements of Walpurgis Night, see Bracken 59.

As the foregoing examples illustrate, Carter effectively mixes violence and sexuality and employs pornographic images to challenge female stereotypes in her fairy tale revisions. Unlike Anne Sexton, Carter sees the possibility for women to overcome the stifling and dangerous roles that society dictates. Yet the humor and happy endings of Carter's stories may obscure the fact that her female characters have not completely escaped male control. Women refuse to become passive victims and instead embrace their own powerful sexuality, and this decision to take matters into their own hands represents a real step forward. At the same time, these women still rely on men and react to men to define their own sexuality—the power dynamic has not been completely destroyed. Little Red Riding Hood avoids being eaten by jumping into bed with the wolf, but it seems like there should be a third option in which the wolf asks Little Red Riding Hood for sexual consent, and she is able to refuse.

Olga Broumas: 1979

In 1979, lesbian author Olga Broumas published a collection of poems titled *Beginning* with O that also explore female sexuality. While the opening poems of the collection feature women from Greek mythology, those in the second half—inspired by the work of Anne Sexton¹⁰—revise fairy tales. As in Sexton's *Transformations*, each of Broumas's poems indicates its relationship with a fairy tale from the outset by adopting the traditional name of the

fairy tale—for example, "Sleeping Beauty," "Cinderella," and "Rumplestiltskin." In contrast to Sexton or Carter, however, Broumas does not replicate the plot of these fairy tales. Instead, she merely incorporates salient symbols or elements. Broumas writes in the first person; the speaker explores her own emotions through a series of loosely connected images and moments rather than a narrative. Fairy tale scholar Elizabeth Wanning Harries argues that Broumas "transposes the traditional images of the tales she chooses into a new and often unfamiliar key" (149). In so doing, Broumas pushes the reader to compare the poems with her expectations. The surprisingly re-contextualized images of well-known fairy tales destabilize the reader's assumptions and call into question the heteronormative roles of women in the original stories.

Broumas's exploration of lesbian existence within a heteronormative culture maps onto feminist debate of the time. In the 1970s, feminists began to emphasize the diversity of women—including differences in sexual orientation. Broumas's work resonates particularly with feminist author, theorist, and activist Adrienne Rich. In her 1980 essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Rich criticizes the "erasure of lesbian existence" within the feminist movement as well as "the bias of compulsory heterosexuality, through which lesbian experience is perceived on a scale ranging from deviant to abhorrent or simply rendered invisible" (26). Rich posits a lesbian continuum of female relationships that have been systematically ignored and marginalized and also illustrates, with compelling examples, the suppression of the history of lesbian existence.

Rich insists that heterosexuality is a form of ideological domination. Through this ideological domination, a belief in the primacy of the male sexual drive has become universal, but this "fact" is illusory. Rich views romance and cultural myths such as fairy tales as methods through which this ideology is inculcated in new generations of women: "The ideology of

¹⁰ Several of Broumas's poems use quotations from Sexton's poetry as epitaphs. For example, Broumas's "Rapunzel" begins with a quotations from Sexton's own version of "Rapunzel" in *Transformations*:

A woman

Who loves a woman

Is forever young.

Anne Sexton

Aptly, Sexton's "Rapunzel"—within a collection that focuses heavily on marriage and heterosexual relationships—explores lesbian themes.

heterosexual romance, beamed at her from childhood out of fairy tales, television, films, advertising, popular songs, wedding pageantry, is a tool ready to the procurer's hand and one which he does not hesitate to use" (46). Further, economic and political forces make heterosexuality a necessity, and Rich posits that compulsory heterosexuality and male control of sexual power lead to unequal wages, a sexualized depiction of women in art, oppression through pornography, and other forms of female exploitation and control.

Rich calls for women to recognize the lesbian continuum of female relationships that have been ignored. Women, she suggests, must recognize heterosexuality as an ideological and political force. By embracing the lesbian continuum, Rich believes that women will be able to recreate the female erotic and the language of this erotic which have been suppressed and lost. Through the lesbian continuum, "we begin to discover the erotic in female terms; as that which is unconfined to any single part of the body or solely to the body itself; as an energy" (53).

An understanding of Rich's argument for a lesbian continuum and her analysis of the erasure of lesbian existence throughout history illuminates Olga Broumas's fairy tale poetry. In "Sleeping Beauty," for example, Broumas uses the reader's knowledge of the plot and images of the familiar fairy tale to explore the contemporaneous social censure of lesbian relationships.

The speaker begins by describing the most well known element of any "Sleeping Beauty" retelling, the long sleep of the heroine:

I sleep, I sleep

too long, sheer hours

hound me, out

of bed and into clothes. (1-4)

Within the context of a poem called "Sleeping Beauty," the reader expects the speaker to be awakened from this sleep by a kiss from her true love, a handsome prince. Instead of a prince, however, merely the length of the sleep wakes the begrudging speaker. Then, when the speaker looks in the mirror, she observes, "Lovebites like fossils. Evidence. / Strewn / round my neck" and is jarringly "shock[ed] ... / back from the dream" (10-11). The word *fossils*—remnants of dead creatures—further suggests that the lover is absent for they indicate that the act that created these bites is over. Although a lover's kiss presumably creates the speaker's "lovebites," the image does not evoke the positive or cherishing connotations that would be expected from an affectionate encounter. Instead, the word bite underscores the violence of love rather than the positive aspects of intimacy.

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Likewise, "evidence" suggests that the physical proof of the relationship between the speaker and her "biter" threatens. This significance of "evidence" is emphasized by a line break and capital letter: "Evidence. / Strewn / round my neck" (19-21). In contrast to the jarring, dreaded evidence of bruises from kisses, the speaker observes that "dreams have the perfect alibi, no / fingerprints" (15-16). Although the speaker fears physical evidence of the encounter with her lover, she desires memories or dreams of it. Further, the speaker suggests the destructive potential of the relationship as she elaborates on the images of bruises:

Evidence.

Strewn

round my neck like a ceremonial

necklace, suddenly

snapped apart. (19-23)

This violent snapping of the "necklace" of evidence resonates with the violence of the word *bite*. The necklace is "ceremonial" and, therefore presumably represents tradition. Thus, the image of a "snapped" necklace suggests that the lovers' relationship results in a rupture from the past and the destruction of a tradition. In contrast to the traditional story, Sleeping Beauty's kiss does not mend a curse and lead to "happily ever after," but instead creates a hostile, chaotic situation. The reader wonders: where and who is the lover/prince? What traditions shatter at the evidence of the lovers' union?

The next section of the poem continues with the tone of violence established in the previous section: "Blood. Tears. The vital / salt of our body" (24-25). The word *our* unites the speaker and her lover. The images of salt and water recall the ocean or amniotic fluid. The hinted marine imagery becomes realized with the word *shells*, "the taste of you / sharpens my tongue like a thousand shells" (29-30). Although potentially violent, the image does not evoke a negative connotation:

..... I know

as I sleep

that my blood runs clear

as salt

in your mouth, my eyes. (31-34)

The images of kissing, the ocean, blood, and salt all resonate with language and images used to describe women. The imagery hints strongly of female love independent of any relationship to men, and the language suggests an intimate scene between the speaker and her lover; free from the dreaded outside forces of the last stanza. The reader struggles to reconcile this image with

the previous scene as well as with her expectations for a story that purports to retell Sleeping Beauty. The reader begins to suspect that Sleeping Beauty's lover may be a woman.

This tension resolves at last in the final stanza as the reader's suspicions are confirmed; the speaker's "Prince Charming" is indeed a woman. This gender reversal goes against the traditional story of "Sleeping Beauty" as well as all pop culture references to the story. The deviation from the accepted story helps to explain the violence and threat of discovery from the first stanza and the puzzling combination of images in the second. In the final stanza, the speaker strives to reconcile her emotions with the mores of society:

City-center, mid-

traffic, I

wake to your public kiss. Your name

is Judith, your kiss a sign

to the shocked pedestrians, gathered

beneath the light that means

stop in our culture

where red is a warning, and men

threaten each other with final violence: I will drink

your blood. Your kiss

is for them

a sign of betrayal, your red

lips suspect, unspeakable

liberties as

we cross the street, kissing

against the light, singing, This

is the woman I woke from sleep, the woman that woke

me sleeping. (35-53)

The images of blood, lips, and a red-light indicating stop become entwined. The kiss of the lovers shocks the pedestrian and consequently is compared to a red light. The love of the speaker is not culturally sanctioned. The speaker and her lover are not truly at "liberty" to display their love publicly; such a display is an "unspeakable liberty." Yet, the women do speak—their kiss is "singing." The images of blood become violent once again, as they are linked with men who view homosexuality as "betrayal" and respond with violence. This violence contrasts with the positive images of blood in the previous section, which describes the women's love for each other. The speaker realizes the danger of asserting her sexuality in the public sphere. Although Broumas's Sleeping Beauty does choose to wake up from her sleep and to go forth with her lover publicly, the violent imagery shows the continued prejudice against homosexuality. By framing a story of lesbian lovers within the conventions of Sleeping Beauty, Olga Broumas forces the reader to consider the ways in which heterosexual behavior is compulsory.

In "Rumplestiltskin," Broumas further explores the difficulty of developing a lesbian relationship given the ideology of compulsory heterosexuality and the erasure of lesbian existence; the speaker in the poem struggles to find a way to communicate with her lover and to develop adequate language to explain a lesbian erotic. The poem's connection to the original fairy tale is tenuous. The key features of the story are missing, including the father's boast, the

insurmountable task faced by the miller's daughter, the troll who saves her, her promise to give her first-born child to the troll, and her correct answer to the troll's riddle. The connection between the stories seems to lie in the struggle to communicate—to find the right words or language. Even as the miller's daughter tries out many names for the troll in order to defeat his riddle and save her child, so the narrator in Broumas's tale must struggle to find words adequate for a lesbian erotic.

The poem begins by sketching the pain and difficulty entailed in pursuing a lesbian relationship. The narrator describes her first sexual interaction with her lover—the "First Night" (1). The narrator's complicated emotions demonstrate the fear that may preclude or accompany the decision to act on lesbian desire:

Frightened

with pleasure as I came.

Into your arms, salt

crusting the aureoles.

Our white breasts. (3-7)

The act of love becomes permeated with fear. Rather than experiencing a jubilant sexual encounter, the narrator is "frightened / with pleasure" (3-4). Perhaps she fears her ability to enjoy "deviant" sexual acts. Or perhaps she is frightened by her ability to enjoy a sexual encounter after many years of disappointing heterosexual relationships. Because compulsory

The story "Rumplestiltskin" generally relates the fate of a young girl whose father exaggerates her skills at spinning, claiming that she can spin straw into gold. The king—hearing the miller's boast—locks the miller's daughter in a room with straw, threatening death if she fails to spin the straw into gold and promising marriage if she succeeds. The miller's daughter succeeds with the assistance of a troll, Rumplestiltskin, but she must promise to give the troll her first-born child. When the child is born, however, the miller's daughter (now a queen) avoids following through with this promise by guessing the troll's name correctly. For a traditional version of "Rumplestiltskin," see Grimm, *Grimm's Complete Fairy Tales* 235-238.

heterosexuality and the myth of heterosexual romance are not only political and economic but also ideological systems of power, the ability to recognize one's homosexuality is not only a struggle against society but against the self. Throughout the poem, the narrator refers to her lover's "ugly memories" and her own "decades of scar and habit" (64, 46). These images reference the pain and history imposed by heterosexuality that must be overcome by the narrator and her lover as they pursue a relationship.

The narrator's fear of her sexual enjoyment may also spring from her fear that finally acting on her desire creates a physical act—empirical evidence—of her non-heterosexual attraction and desire. This physical proof allows for discovery and reactions of disgust or disapprobation. The poem "Rumplestiltskin" directly follows "Sleeping Beauty," and therefore the images of damning physical evidence and public censure remain fresh in the reader's mind. In the second movement of the poem, the narrator explains this vulnerability to attack:

... To name

yourself beautiful makes you as vulnerable

as feeling

pleasure and claiming it

makes me. (31-35)

The narrator's sexual pleasure seems to be a new experience. It is also one that strips away her protective veneer of heterosexuality and places her in the open for attack. The poem emphasizes this danger by reintroducing an image from the previous poem: the image of two openly lesbian women in public:

... Two

women, laughing

in the streets, loose-limbed

with other women. Such things are dangerous.

Nine million

have burned for less. (48-53)

This scene, like the narrator's fear of physical consummation earlier in the poem, recalls the narrator's "fear of public censure" in the previous poem. Now, the speaker emphasizes the validity and magnitude of this fear by reminding the reader of the most famous and widespread moment of gynocide: the witch burnings in early modern Europe: "Such things are dangerous / Nine Million / have burned for less" (51-53). 12

As the scene of the narrator's first sexual experience continues, the reader discovers an additional difficulty encountered by the narrator as she forges a new relationship. The narrator is troubled not only by fear of others but also by personal uncertainty:

... You

saying

I don't know

if I'm hurting or loving

you. I

didn't either. (7-13)

¹² The allusion to nine million women who were burned at the stake creates a striking and poignant image. Most historians, including Robin Briggs, contest the accuracy of these numbers, placing the number of actual witch burnings far lower and suggesting that as high as 25% of accused witches were men (259-260). Historian Diane Purkiss even goes so far as to say: "this witch-story . . . is a religious myth, and the religion it defines is radical feminism" (8). Nonetheless, the number of witch executions, although contested, is still alarmingly high and evidences the fear and persecution of women throughout history.

Lesbian experience, the reader learns, has been erased to the degree that it has turned into an unknown. Despite fear and uncertainty, however, something compels the narrator to describe her experience: "I have to write of these things" (21). The narrator struggles to overcome her apprehension and forge a path for other women in the future. The uncertainty of the narrator also stems from a "loss / for words" (72-73). Indeed, the erasure of lesbian sexuality throughout history has precluded the development of an experience of the erotic in female terms, as described by Adrienne Rich. The poem questions this struggle to communicate, as Broumas must grapple to find the words for her protagonist's experiences:

Approximations.

The words we need are extinct.

or if not extinct

badly damaged . . . (61-64)

Broumas concludes that her descriptions inadequately reflect her experience because the very language she requires has been lost or harmed.

The possibilities for adequate language, however, become more promising in the last movement of the poem. Broumas uses images of archaeology to combine the theme of the quest for a suitable erotic language with the theme of lesbian sexual experience:

Tongues

sleepwalking in caves. Pink shells. Sturdy

diggers. Archaeologists of the right

the speechless zones

of the brain. (76-80)

The reference to archaeology suggests that discoverable traces of the "extinct" language exist and can be slowly, carefully uncovered. Indeed, Broumas's language describes both a rediscovery of language and lesbian sexual exploration. In erotically articulating this sexual experience, Broumas exemplifies the success of the archeological project of uncovering a lost erotica.

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Thus Olga Broumas uses the cultural myths of fairy tales to give voice to the erased experience of lesbian existence and to begin the discovery and creation of a lesbian erotica.

Broumas uses the images and sensations from fairy tales, rather than their narrative structures and plots, to demonstrate how a female erotic language may differ from the normal linear structure of discourse.

Chapter Two: New Revisions In the 1990s

Feminism arrived in a different way in the lives of the women of this generation; we never knew a time before "girls can do anything boys can!" . . . For our generation, feminism is like fluoride. We scarcely notice we have it—it's simply in the water.

- Baumgardner & Richards, Manifesta 17

Since the late 1970s, feminists have become increasingly aware of the divisions among women and among feminist movements. Throughout the 1970s, mainstream Second Wave feminism was criticized for an elitist focus on white, middle-class, well-educated women. By claiming to speak for all women, feminisms ignored real differences and alienated minority women. In 1981 in "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," for example, black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde criticizes another prominent feminist, Mary Daly, for failing to include the voices of black and minority women in her (now) foundational text *Gyn/Ecology*: "The oppression of women knows no ethnic or racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical within those boundaries... To deal with one without even alluding to the other is to distort our commonality as well as our difference" (Lorde, *Letter* 97). Ultimately, Lorde argues, the differences among women must be identified and bridged in order to achieve empowerment for women: "Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is foraged" (Lorde, *Master's* 99).

Indeed, the need to recognize difference underpins many writings by women of color, lesbians, and lower-class women, particularly since the 1970s. In 1981, Gloria E. Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga published the very influential anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, to explore the concerns of women of color—this collection is often

considered a part of a movement termed "Third World Feminism" that recognizes differences among women. Third World Feminists strive to recognize all aspects of their own identities—race, gender, class—and to create awareness of the ways in which different aspects of power interact. In a forward to the text, Gloria E. Anzaldúa describes the inspiration for the anthology in these terms: "The idea of el mundo zurdo [left-handed world]—the vision of a blood/spirit connection/alliance in which the colored, queer, poor, female, and physically challenged struggle together and form an international feminism" (xxxv). More recently, in a 1994 essay called "A Question of Class," Dorothy Allison considers the relationship of class to the feminist movement. She argues that class should be a central part of one's self-identity but has been largely ignored by feminists, who are principally well educated and middle-class. Allison explores her own feelings of alienation and the need to hide her lower-class background.

Despite this emergent emphasis on difference, the media tends to homogenize all feminisms and ignore these important divisions, leading to misunderstandings and misrepresentations of feminisms and feminists. This misrepresentation of feminisms by media sources and the media's negative effects on women have emerged as central debates of contemporary feminisms. In 1992, African-American feminist Rebecca Walker declared a new epoch of feminism: "I am the Third Wave." Many other young feminists felt the need to reinvigorate the movement and heard Walker's statement as a much-needed call for a new generation of feminists with new concerns to take the reigns. This "Third Wave" of feminism continues the emphasis on individual identity. Feminisms since the 1990s also criticize the media's unhealthy standards, which contribute to the increasing prevalence of eating disorders, the portrayal of women as sexualized objects, and anti-intellectualism.

The emphasis on differences among women has resulted in a recent critique that the infinite fragmentation of feminisms and the focus on individual identity create a feminism that is neither political nor unified. In a 1998 article for *Time Magazine*, "It's All About Me!," Ginia Bellafante argues that feminists no longer focus on real issues and political change. She views many contemporary feminists as narcissistic celebrities and disparages feminist leaders, such as Katie Rophie and Rebecca Walker; icons, such as *Bust Magazine*; and fictional characters, such as Bridget Jones and Ally McBeal. Bellafante argues that the movement still has work to do and insists that feminism should return to real issues (8). Likewise, some critics of feminism argue that feminism has developed a cultural rather than political agenda.

However, Baumgardner and Richards' 2000 analysis of contemporary feminisms, *Manifesta*, suggests that this image of feminism has resulted from the media's inaccurate portrayal of feminism. The media merges all strands of feminism and allows the voice of a single feminist to speak for the movement. Increasingly, the media publicizes feminism "as cultural events starring feminists" rather than focusing on the diverse issues and agendas of feminisms (Baumgardner & Richards 79). Further, many feminist issues are not identified as such (95). The third wave of feminism, as defined by Baumgardner & Richards, also fights against date rape, sexual harassment, and sexual violence. Baumgardner and Richards advocate a "pro-women" view (96) as well as an identification of the combined power of women: "Feminism's goal is change, and this requires that we take responsibility for our own lives and actions, but also that we come together with others in a shared purpose and create change beyond our personal spheres" (125).

A new wave of fairy tales in the 1990s addresses many of these contemporaneous feminist debates—including issues of body image or sexual violence, just as 1970s revisions

tackled contemporaneous feminist concerns such as the "feminine mystique" and limiting sexual roles for women. Further, 1990s revisions explore a major problem that confronts feminist movements—namely the friction between individual difference and the struggle for collective action that has troubled feminisms since the 1970s.

Emma Donoghue: 1997

In her 1997 collection of prose fairy tale retellings, *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins*, Emma Donoghue retells yet profoundly alters fairy tales. Donoghue's method is most similar to Angela Carter's: the broad plot and major motifs of each story remain, but surprising details and unexpected conclusions transform the stories. Donoghue's alterations speak to many of the aspects of fairy tales that feminist critics condemn as well as to the concerns of Baumgardner and Richards' *Manifesta*. Whereas traditional fairy tales acculturate women to accept limiting roles and reinforce stereotypes, Donoghue's stories showcase women who break free from the confines of society's prescriptions, recognize their individuality, and pursue power or freedom, sometimes ruthlessly.

Donoghue uses first-person narration to give women the power to rewrite fairy tales and break stereotypes. Each fairy tale protagonist (for example Cinderella, Snow White, or Rapunzel) narrates, and thus controls, her own story. This returns fairy tales to their oral and feminine roots. Fairy tales no longer function as tools to reinforce paternalistic structures but instead break these structures from within. Each narrator emphasizes her transformative power by indicating that she knows the original of the fairy tale she rewrites and increases the reader's expectations that she will transform them. The locations and time-periods of the stories remain vaguely European and feudal, as popular culture generally imagines fairy tales. However, the

narrators also exhibit familiarity with contemporary social expectations for women and fuse the generative fairy tale with these social norms. This emphasizes, particularly to a reader unfamiliar with feminist fairy tale criticism, that a critique of fairy tales represents simultaneously a topical cultural critique. Ultimately, each narrator makes a choice that causes her story to diverge from the conventional fairy tale plot and surprises the reader. The reader's surprise reveals and invites consideration of her expectations.

In the "Tale of the Shoe," for example, the narrator's knowledge of Cinderella reveals the constricting standards of beauty and the expectations of heterosexual courtship that women encounter. Donoghue retains the characteristic features of Cinderella: a motherless, house-cleaning daughter receives the aid of her godmother, goes to a series of balls, meets a Prince, runs away at midnight, and leaves behind a shoe. The narrator indicates her familiarity with this story when she describes the events at the ball as "all very fairy-tale" (6). Likewise, as the prince's intention to propose becomes apparent, Cinderella observes: "But I didn't have to listen ... to know how the story went: my future was about to happen" (5). She sees the trajectory of her life mapped out by fairy tale expectations.

"The Tale of the Shoe" suggests that this mapped fairy tale story has become the cultural expectation for women. Cinderella proves this point when she mixes generalizing statements about women's expectations with her prescience of fairy tale endings. When Cinderella solicits the help of her godmother to attend the ball, she asks: "Isn't that what girls are meant to ask for?" (3). The honesty with which Cinderella describes her project of conforming to expectations in order to follow the map of the fairy tale story reveals the frightful constraints that this plot imposes. At the ball, Cinderella successfully attracts the prince, but her success is contingent upon behaving passively and complying with standards of beauty:

I knew just how I was meant to behave. I smiled ever so prettily when the great doors swung wide to announce me. I refused a canapé and kept my belly pulled in. Under the thousand crystal candelabras I danced with ten elderly gentlemen who had nothing to say but did not let that stop them. I answered only Indeed and Oh yes and Do you think so? (4)

Cinderella shows the pressure young women face to be beautiful and thin. She refrains from eating, even though the choice of food—"canapé"—sounds particularly exotic and appealing. Likewise, the narrator must "pull" her stomach in to maintain an illusion of thinness. Not only does Cinderella exert great effort to maintain a doll-like appearance, she even restricts her behavior and conversation.

As Cinderella attends successive balls, her condition degenerates. The sense of a danse macabre inevitability increases as the "musicians [play] the same tune over and over." The emphasis on beauty and thinness becomes a disease: "I swallowed a little of everything I was offered, then leaned over the balcony and threw it all up again" (6). In an effort to keep up the façade, Cinderella begins to lose her grasp of her own identity: "He asked me my favorite color, but I couldn't think of any. He asked me my name, and for a moment I couldn't remember it" (5). Cinderella's inability to remember her favorite color contrasts with the lush colors used to describe her "transformation" after meeting her fairy godmother: "My dusty self was spun new. This woman sheathed my limbs in blue velvet" (3). Thus Donoghue juxtaposes the loss of identity and freedom that Cinderella undergoes as she struggles to fit the mold of the desirable, beautiful bride with the self-possession she learns from her fairy godmother. The reader cannot help but be horrified as Cinderella willingly fades into little more than an automaton.

Ultimately, however, Cinderella breaks free from the vicious pattern of the story. When the clock strikes midnight, she realizes the insufficiency of the fairy tale as a life: "just then the midnight bell began to toll out the long procession of years, palatial day by moonless night" (7). The narrator runs from the prince and refuses to conform to the expectations of society any longer. In a delightful and surprising twist, Cinderella writes an alternative "happily ever after."

Like Broumas's Sleeping Beauty, Donoghue's Cinderella rejects the heterosexual expectations of fairy tales—and contemporary culture—and instead pursues a lesbian conclusion. Not only does Cinderella run from the palace as the clock strikes midnight, she runs towards her fairy godmother: "I had got the story all wrong. How could I not have noticed she was beautiful?" (7). As in the traditional fairy tale, Cinderella loses one shoe on the steps. In Donoghue's story, however, she also throws the second shoe into a tree—seeming to throw off the rules of society. Cinderella and her fairy godmother are then free to enjoy a happy ending together: "So then she took me home, or I took her home, or we were both somehow taken to the closest thing" (8). The success of Donoghue's narrator in choosing an alternative ending perhaps evidences the progress of lesbian existence since Broumas's experiences in the 1970s. 1

Like Cinderella, the protagonist in "The Tale of the Voice," a retelling of "The Little Mermaid," faces the pressures of beauty and objectification. Unlike Cinderella, who realizes her own self-worth early on with the assistance of her fairy godmother, the Little Mermaid continually doubts her own beauty and value. As in the original story, ² the Little Mermaid pleads with a witch to transform her in order to pursue a handsome man:³

¹ In a 2000 interview, Donoghue describes the great change in lesbian culture in her native country, Ireland, since her adolescence. She celebrates the increased visibility and acceptance of lesbianism yet recognizes that further steps must be taken to achieve equality (Bensyl).

² "The Little Mermaid" was rewritten and popularized by Hans Christian Anderson. Anderson's fairy tales mostly originate from Danish folk talks. Andersen, however, saw his project as

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This is the truth, I shouted. I want to walk where he walks. To walk in his world, down there in the big city. For his eyes to catch on me when I'm dancing.

Go dance for him, then, what's stopping you?

No, I said, stamping my foot on the turf. You must change me first. Make me better. Make me right. Make me like a woman he could love.

She knotted her hands in her frayed shawl. What's wrong with you girl, that you would make yourself over again?

Everything.

Change for your own sake, if you must, not for what you imagine another will ask of you (192-193).

Unlike the traditional "Little Mermaid," or the version popularized by Disney, the protagonist in Donoghue's story is not actually a mermaid. Thus, the Little Mermaid's sense of inferiority, rather than a physical inability to interact, forms the boundary between the lovers. The witch's candid response paints the Little Mermaid's sacrifice in an unfavorable light. Her bargain with the witch no longer seems like a brave act of love but a foolish gesture. Indeed, the witch's criticism resonates with women's preoccupation with body image today—for example, the focus

creating "new literary works based on folklore" rather than simply collecting, editing, or translating folk tales (Nikajova 13-15).

in women's magazines on clothes, diet, and cosmetics. The Little Mermaid's infatuation and need to impress a man she has never met parallel women making themselves over to be validated by the approval of men.

The Little Mermaid does succeed in securing her lover, but her victory is fleeting. The man calls her his "little foundling" (196). The partnership is not that of equals. Indeed the Little Mermaid has become merely an easily replaceable courtesan. When the Little Mermaid eventually returns to the witch and begs to reverse their bargain, the witch responds: "I don't have your voice, you know ... You do" (202). Thus, Donoghue suggests that women possess the latent power to find their individual voice and seize agency. Ultimately, the Little Mermaid does find happiness in an equal relationship: "Yet another year went by, and I married a fisherman with green eyes who liked to hear me sing, but preferred to hear me talk" (204). Donoghue portrays happiness in a relationship based on standards other than beauty and shows a strong, active woman in a position of success, subverting the fairy tale stereotype that passive heroines achieve romantic happiness. Like Donoghue's Cinderella, The Little Mermaid's happiness requires that she accept agency for her own life. Whereas Cinderella achieved happiness in a lesbian relationship and by rejecting her expected role, the Little Mermaid finds happiness by returning home and marrying a fisherman—perhaps the role that society expected for her from the start. Thus the Little Mermaid's story not only suggests that women should take control of their own lives but also indicates that female agency is no less valuable or progressive if a woman's choice fits with social expectations.

In Andersen's story, the little mermaid is the youngest of the mermaid princesses who live in the bottom of the ocean. When the little mermaid turns fifteen, she is allowed to go to the surface of the ocean, sees and falls in love with a handsome prince, and saves his from drowning. The mermaid then makes a bargain with the sea witch, trading her beautiful voice for legs. If the prince marries another woman, however, the little mermaid will die and turn to sea foam, and she will not gain an immortal soul (which the love of a human would give to her). Unfortunately, the prince does not fall in love with the little mermaid and marries another woman. The little mermaid's sisters trade their hair to the sea witch for a magical knife. If the little mermaid will murder the prince on the night of the wedding, she will escape death and can return to the sea. The little mermaid, however, refuses to kill the prince. Spirits of the air reward the little mermaid's goodness by turning her into a fellow spirit. If the little mermaid performs 300 years of good deeds as a spirit, she will earn an immortal soul (Anderson 122-170).

Similarly, in "The Tale of the Skins"—a retelling of "The Princess in Disguise" or "The Many Furred Creature" —the narrator initially looks to men to validate her worth and construct her identity before recognizing her own power and individuality. She needs the prince to validate her: "Inside my head I said, look at me. Make me beautiful in your beholding" (161). The narrator, having fled from an incestuous father who desires to marry her, disguises herself in a hideous donkey skin. She throws off her disguise briefly, attends a ball, and captures the prince's heart before reassuming the garb of a dirty kitchen maid. As the prince searches the castle to look for the princess, the narrator anticipates that the prince will recognize her from the ball even though she is now disguised in a dirty donkey skin. In the Andrew Lang and the Grimms' fairy tales, the prince discovers the identity of the hidden princess, and the story ends happily. The narrator of Donoghue's story knows the outcome of the fairy tale: "I knew exactly what would happen; my ears were pricked for the royal step on the stair" (160). When the prince fails to recognize the princess, however, she becomes disgusted, leaves the castle, and returns to her kingdom to claim the throne.

The narrator realizes that beauty should not be the standard of self-worth nor should men determine one's power and position in society: "These were my feet, balancing like a cat's. This was my hand, the color of a rose. I looked down and recognized myself" (164). Now, the narrator no longer needs a man to define her or to make her beautiful. The repetition of the word my emphasizes the narrator's agency in creating her own identity. She chooses to describe her body in ways that emphasize its capability and power—agile feet and hands. The image of the rose usually evokes images of passive beauty; for example, the speaker of a sonnet might compare his distant lover to a rose. In these lines, by contrast, the description of the hand—a

⁴ For a version of "The Princess in Disguise," see Grimm, *Grimm's Complete Fairy Tales* 75-80. For a version of "The Many Furred Creature," see Lang, *The Green Fairy Book* 276-282.

symbol of power, control, and the ability to manipulate situations—with the image of a rose equates beauty with activity.

As these examples illustrate, the protagonists of Donoghue's fairy tales each develop unique stories. Some of the protagonists choose heterosexual relationships, others homosexual relationships, and some of the women prioritize their individual freedom above everything. The fairy tale heroines both ruthlessly acquire positions of political or economic power and run away from positions of power that they are unable or unwilling to fill. Were all of Donoghue's characters to defy fairy-tale expectations in the same way, the opportunities for women would still be monolithically portrayed. Donoghue's message resonates with the feminism espoused by Baumgardner and Richards, who emphasize freedom to choose from multiple opportunities. Further, the choice to reject social norms unites the otherwise disparate women by creating a common characteristic.

The structure of the novel also connects the protagonists of the novels and creates a community of women. Each tale is connected by a question from the narrator to a central female character in the subsequent story. For example, after "The Tale of the Rose" (a retelling of the story "Beauty and the Beast") concludes, the next page reads:

Another summer in the rose garden,

I asked,

Who were you

before you chose a mask over a crown?

And she said,

Will I tell you my own story?

It is a tale of an apple. (41)

On the following page, "The Tale of the Apple" begins as a new narrator takes over. By linking the narratives, Donoghue evokes the origin of fairy tales—stories passed from woman to woman. The dialogue unites the narrators and suggests that sharing stories is a form of empowerment that links women together. It also takes stories that are individualized by the "I" of the narrator and shows their connection and link with all women.

Occasionally, a tale lacks a secondary female character to begin telling the next story. The speaker of the story must somehow continue the chain but lacks a woman to whom she can pass the torch, and the linked structure flounders. Yet even in such cases, Donoghue asserts the greater aim of her plot and resorts to rather unconvincing machinations to keep the stories linked. At the end of the "Tale of the Bird," for example, the narrator asks a bird to continue the sequence (25). Then in the next tale, "The Tale of the Rose," this bird-narrator explains: "In this life I have nothing to do but cavort on the wind, but in my last it was my fate to be a woman" (27). Donoghue evokes an image of reincarnation. Never in the story does the speaker explain how she becomes a bird; nor does the idea of reincarnation or transformation into animal ever again appear. Indeed, for a collection of fairy tales, Donoghue's stories contain few overt depictions of magic—fairy godmothers do not transform pumpkins but instead provide real coaches; witches work magic with advice rather than spells. Thus, the image of a bird that used to be a woman suggests that Donoghue forces the stories to fit the image of sisterhood. This forced fit demonstrates the thematic importance of the structure.

Donoghue's emphasis on female connection exemplifies Baumgardner and Richards' argument that women much achieve some type of unity despite individual differences in order to achieve meaningful political change. Baumgardner and Richards insist: "Feminism's goal is change, and this requires that we take responsibility for our own lives and actions, but also that

we come together with others in a shared purpose and create change beyond our personal spheres" (Baumgardner and Richards 125). Donoghue's difficulty in representing such connections corresponds to the difficulty that feminisms face in achieving cohesion.

The linked structure must end with the collection, but Donoghue still refuses to break the community of women that she has created, further evidencing the thematic importance of the linked structure. The last story of the collection, "The Tale of the Kiss" borrows many fairy tale motifs yet is an original story. The narrator is a witch or wise-woman who cannot perform magic but instead sagaciously (though mysteriously) advises the villagers when asked for magical remedies. The woman's ability to step outside of the patriarchal system by refusing marriage and to carve out a niche of power for herself delights the reader's feminist sentiments. Throughout the story, the witch advises the parents about their rebellious daughter, who also refuses to conform to society's expectations, and in the process falls in love with the girl. Near the end of the story, the witch offers the girl a place with her in the cave—a yonic image. The power of the witch—and the cave—becomes for women an alternative to conforming to society.

Unlike the other narrators, the witch does not reveal the end of her story. Although the reader may like to assume that the narrator successfully wins over the girl, the conclusion purposely remains unknown. In contrast to a decisive ending signaled by "The End" or "And they lived happily ever after," the speaker refuses to stop the chain of narratives, even though the text comes to an end. The speaker leaves it to the reader to finish the story:

And what happens next, you ask? Never you mind. There are some tales not for telling, whether because they are too long, too precious, too laughable, too painful, to easy to need telling or too hard to explain. After all, after years and travels, my secrets are all I have left to chew on in the night.

This is the story you asked for. I leave it in your mouth. (228)

In this way, the narrative never truly ends. The (presumably female) reader becomes the next storyteller and continues the chain through the project of telling her own story, her own life. If the reader would see the witch succeed and end happily ever after, it is within her power to imagine that ending. In this way, Donoghue urges the reader to join the community of women she has established. By asking the reader to tell the story she wishes, Donoghue also invites this reader to reject the proscriptions of society and pursue freedom and power on her own terms, continuing the aims of the work.

The main title Kissing the Witch suggests the manner in which change will occur. Many fairy tales, or cultural impressions of fairy tales, emphasize the kiss of true love between a princess and her prince charming. Witches are generally a symbol of powerful but evil older women, and so "kissing the witch" indicates a reappropriation of the witch. Donoghue depicts powerful, independent women in a positive light. The collection focuses on the relationships between women—there are few male characters and their roles are minimal—and the relationship between women and power. At the same time, the title of the work hints that the project of the collection may not be as progressive as could be hoped. Although the feminist reader applauds Donoghue's decision to give Old Tales New Skins—the subtitle of the collection—and use cultural myths to explore women's positive choices, it seems insufficient merely to give the tales new skins. Skin implies a surface-level alteration. Although the tales appear new, one might infer, this change is "only skin deep." For this reason, Donoghue's title may communicate subtly that these old myths have not been radically transformed but merely repackaged. Or perhaps, the title suggests that fairy tales need only be repacked in order to retain their cultural relevance.

In any case, this possible tension forces the reader to consider just how progressive Donoghue's work is. An analysis of the choices made within "The Tale of the Kiss" reveals that the power of the witch is less delightful than one's initial reaction may suggest. The woman chooses to leave her community partially because she is barren, a failed woman. Furthermore, she gains power by living alone outside of the village. Her power is based on deception and pretense of evil. Although the reader admires the speaker's intelligence and perspicacity, the message is not completely empowering. The story raises many troubling questions. Are powerful women still typecast as evil? Are barren women less womanly? Must lesbians live on the outskirts of society?

Likewise, Donoghue does not unequivocally applaud powerful women who seize control of their own lives. For example, the "Tale of the Handkerchief," a retelling of the Grimms' "The Goose Girl," features a powerful but unsavory narrator. Donoghue makes the surprising decision to retell the story not from the viewpoint of the protagonist but from the viewpoint of the villain, the usurping maid.⁵ In Donoghue's version, the true princess (the traditional protagonist) becomes an insipid character, described as "yellowish... slightly transparent, as if the sun had never seen her face. All she liked to do was walk in the garden, up and down the shady paths between the hedges" (62). The reader could hardly sympathize with so spineless a creature and may expect to sympathize with the narrator instead. To a certain extent, the reader admires the narrator for cunningly sizing control of her life and taking power. At the same time,

⁵ In "The Goose Girl" a maid usurps a true princess's position while traveling to meet the princess's betrothed in the neighboring kingdom. The maid's deception is initially successful, and the true princess works for some time as a goose girl. On the wedding day, however, the maid is discovered and summarily killed, and the prince marries the true princess instead (Grimm, *Grimm's Complete Fairy Tales* 65-70).

however, the narrator's unethical pursuit of power and ill treatment of the princess prevents the reader from completely approving. ⁶

Donoghue further complicates her depiction of powerful women by portraying the cost of the narrator's struggle for power as alarmingly high. The narrator constantly fears being denounced. Together, her terror and the reader's knowledge of the Grimms' fairy tale (that the narrator will be discovered and killed) create a tense, almost panicked, tone throughout the story. This tone drops briefly when, in a departure from the original story, the goose girl surprisingly renounces her claim, but only a page later the narrator realizes that her husband is sick:

Once more I seemed to feel the barrel locked around me, the spikes hammering through. I knew if I was not with child in a month or two, I would have nothing to hold onto. The day after my husband's funeral I would be wandering the world again in search of a crown to call my own. (80)

This tension suggests that although a woman may seize power, she must constantly work to maintain her position. Donoghue's complex portrayal of the narrator may indicate that the difficulties that a woman experiences in order to hold power may have deleterious effects on her character. At the same time, in the creation of a ruthless protagonist, Donoghue paints a realistic picture of the variety of women—for example, some women are kind other women are heartless. Thus, Donoghue reminds the reader that even women who "get" the feminist message and seize agency may not be admirable women.

In another complicated portrayal of female power and an inversion of good and evil characters, the miller's daughter from the story "Rumplestiltskin" becomes a heartless yet

business-savvy woman as the narrator of "The Tale of the Spinster." The narrator's lack of compassion chills the reader. After her mother's death, the narrator quickly moves on: "Then I prized my mother's cold fingers off mine and stood up" (120). The narrator's unfeeling behavior becomes further evident when, in a surprising transformation, the character Rumplestiltskin is a mentally challenged girl whom the narrator coerces to spin for her by pretending to treat her as family.

Despite the narrator's coldness and manipulations, the reader admires her business acumen in a male-dominated arena. After the miller's daughter employs Rumplestiltskin, she becomes a skilled entrepreneur and attracts many customers. The narrator's evaluation of her own success, however, reveals a tension:

And, finding my vocation, I learned that my mother was right after all. Work was a rope on a ship in rough water, a candle on a creaking staircase, a potato in a beggar's embers. It kept me sane and bright-eyed; it kept me from dwelling on the past; it even kept me from remembering that I was a woman. (125)

The narrator's praise of work is double-sided. Work is not just a rope on a ship, but on a ship in *rough* water. In entering the masculine world of business, the reader admires the miller's daughter for becoming a "woman of business now, a woman of affairs, far too far gone to make a good wife" (125). Although the narrator comes to see herself as one with the men of business, she suddenly must confront her identity as a woman when she finds herself with child. In order to allow the narrator to continue her role as entrepreneur and avoid scandal, she and Rumplestiltskin disguise the narrator's pregnancy and then pretend that the child is Rumplestiltskin's. Still the narrator lacks compassion. She resents the child for decreasing her employee's productivity and thus negatively impacting her mercantile empire.

⁶ After the narrator usurps the true princess's position and becomes betrothed to the prince, she fears discovery and demotes the true princess from maid to goose girl while ordering the princess's horse to be killed.

Eventually, the narrator hits the child in rage, and Rumplestiltskin takes the child and leaves. When the narrator rushes after her, Rumplestiltskin destroys any sense of sympathy that remains by shouting:

Never asked my name.

Didn't I?

Never asked boy's name either, she said. Taking him away now so he know who. (129)

The narrator's work has been an opiate for her unhappiness in life and her inability to form personal relationships. Although the narrator feels that she has profited by calling Rumplestiltskin "little sister" and exploiting her labor, the narrator also has shortchanged herself.

Thus the only woman in the collection who tries to seize power in business fails as a mother and as a woman. She even "forgets" that she is a woman. Moreover, although the miller's daughter is an excellent businesswoman, ultimately her work relies on the exploitation of another woman. The emphasis on sisterhood and solidarity between women within Donoghue's stories resonates with feminist ideals yet many of the relationships between women and men, as well as women's difficulties in holding power, realistically reflect areas of society that are unchanged by feminist advances or require further attention. Perhaps Donoghue desires that the reader notice that women's roles in contemporary society remain limited despite a veneer of progress and female empowerment.

Francesca Lia Block: 1999

67

Like Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch*, Francesca Lia Block's 1997 collection of fairy tale revisions, *The Rose and the Beast*, embodies concerns of Third Wave feminism. Block engages with debates about feminisms by re-imagining fairy tales in terms of situations that confront women today. Block uses familiar fairy tale structures to discuss current issues including the "beauty myth," anorexia, low self-esteem, pornography, and abuse. The stories alternate between first and third person modes of narration, and either the narrator or the main character is always a young woman who fills the role of the protagonist in popular fairy tales. When the stories are in first-person, the narrative voice mirrors the speech patterns of a contemporary teenager. To emphasize the relevance of the issues to current readers, Block chooses a real location for the setting of her stories: Los Angeles. However, she intermixes magical elements with references and images that recall the contemporary city, and she refers to her imagined city as "Shangra-LA" (www.francescaliablock.com/bio/htm).

The feminist issues addressed in *The Rose and the Beast* resonate with Naomi Wolf's explanation of the "beauty myth." Wolf describes how the "beauty myth" is introduced to girls through cultural products, and she cites the work of Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, and Thomas Hardy: "A girl learns that stories happen to 'beautiful' women, whether they are interesting or not. And, interesting or not, stories do not happen to women who are not 'beautiful'" (Wolf 61). Thus the need for approval on the basis of beauty renders women passive and subservient, as did marriage expectations or legal inequality prior to the Second Wave.

In one story in Block's collection, "Bones," the narrator finds herself trapped in a retelling of the fairy tale "Bluebeard." Like the heroine of Angela Carter's Bluebeard retelling, "The Bloody Chamber," the narrator at first wants to be seduced by a violent, potentially

murderous lover. Block's narrator, at the outset of the story, feels disconnected from life: "I dreamed of being a part of the stories—even terrifying ones, even horror stories—because at least the girls in stories were alive before they were dead" (153). Thus, she desires Derrick Blue (Bluebeard) because his approval throws her into the category of girls who merit stories (even terrifying ones) and indicates her worth.

The narrator's desire for the attention of the male gaze becomes disturbingly strong and even compares to a ravenous hunger:

Then he ... looked into my eyes and how hungry I was, in every way. I was always hungry for food—blueberry pancakes and root beer floats and pizza gluey with cheese—I thought about it all the time. And other things. I'd sit around dreaming that the boys I saw at shows or at work—the boys with silver earrings and big boots—would tell me I was beautiful, take me home and feed me Thai food or omelets and undress me and make love to me all night. . . . And then I was hungry for him, this man who seemed to have everything, and to actually be looking at me. (157-158)

The narrator feels empty without the desire of men; she lacks the power to describe her own identity. This need for approval renders the narrator inactive; she merely "dreams" of men. The images of ravenous, unfulfilled hunger also resonate with images of eating disorders. The massive amount of food that the narrator wants to eat recalls the binging of a bulimic. However, the association of constant hunger with the desire for male approval suggests that some anorexic women may starve themselves in the pursuit of men. The images of hunger also suggest the need to fill a void in one's self-identity. This desire for validation through the male gaze resonates with Naomi Wolf's observations of contemporary culture. The prevalence of beautiful,

passive heroines within fairy tales has been an object of feminist criticism. In a strident critique of fairy tales, for example, feminist scholar Jennifer Waelti-Walters asserts:

The reading of fairy tales is one of the first steps in the maintenance of a misogynous, sex-role stereotyped patriarchy, for what is the end product of these stories but a lifeless humanoid, malleable, decorate, and interchangeable—that is a 'feminine woman' who is inherited, bartered or collected in a monstrous game of Monopoly. (Waelti-Walters 2)

Indeed, an economy of beauty pervades the traditional fairy tale. Beauty and goodness are aligned; fairy tales reward and depict beautiful girls. In Block's retelling of "Bluebeard," the narrator's longing evidences her initial belief in these fairy tale myths. The narrator decides to stay with Derek after everyone leaves in order to fill the void within her; this decision further confirms her acceptance of the myth that by playing the role of the passive fairy tale heroine, one will achieve happiness and fulfillment.

Unlike Donoghue's prescient narrators, the narrator of "Bones" fails at first to recognize her situation as a fairy tale retold. Even as Derek Blue begins to recount the story "Bluebeard," the narrator "[ca]n't quite remember the story" (162). When the narrator finally remembers the horrible actions of Bluebeard and recognizes that Derek's story foreshadows such intentions, she expresses surprise and shock that she has found herself in such a situation. At this point, the narrator refuses to be the passive, powerless woman that Derek desires and the fairy tale demands. Instead, the narrator rebels: "I will rewrite the story of Bluebeard. The girl's brothers don't come to save her on horses, baring swords, full of power and at exactly the right moment...

There is only a slightly feral one-hundred-pound girl" (165). The narrator runs away from Derek

⁷ Blue compliments the narrator by comparing her to a doll: "You're so tiny, like a doll, you look like you might break" (161).

Blue and his house. In resisting, she becomes a spokesperson for the previous women abused by Derek—and perhaps all victims of rape or violence: "I thought of the bones; I could hear them singing. They needed me to write their song" (166). Thus, the narrator realizes her own self worth, apart from men and identifies female collaboration and open dialogue as a means to prevent the repetition of violence and objectification. The narrator's desire to speak about her experiences and the experiences of other women parallels Wolf's call for women to "tell our stories" in her conclusion to *The Beauty Myth* (276). Wolf insists, "when the conversation commences, the artificial barriers of the myth will begin to fall away" (286).

Block's collection speaks to another concern of Third Wave feminisms related to the "beauty myth": pornography. Block shows that, like the "beauty myth," women can overcome the exploitation of pornography by working together. In "Charm," Block retells "Sleeping Beauty." In a startling transformation of imagery, a heroin needle serves as Sleeping Beauty's spindle. Rev (Sleeping Beauty) has been the victim of sexual abuse since being forced into child pornography. At the start of the story, the narrator compares Rev with Sleeping Beauty in order to describe her horrible situation: "She felt like the girl in the fairy tale. Maybe there had been some kind of curse. Inevitable that she would prick her arm (not her finger) with the needle" (73). Like Blue, the men of "Charm" approve of Rev's inactivity, induced by heroin: "Sleeping Beauty, he said. I like you this way" (77). Subscribing to the beauty myth and recognizing that beautiful girls are singled out for stories, Rev attributes her ill fortune to her beauty and muses: "Was the curse that she was born too beautiful? ... Was it the reason the men with cameras had sucked away her soul in little sips, because any form that lovely must remain soulless so as not to stun them impotent?" (79-80).

71 Like the narrator of "Bones," whose action was propelled by the need to speak out for other victimized women, Rev changes her life and seizes agency after forming a connection with a woman. Rev chooses to come clean from heroin with the help of this woman, named Charm. who drives off a group of men trying to gang rape Rev and takes care of her while she sobers up. After her recovery, Rev realizes that Charm has also been a victim of child pornography. In fact, the two have been photographed together as young girls. At the very end of the story, Rev suddenly remembers her childhood with Charm and other repressed memories, and Charm comforts her: I thought [a pornographic photographer] had taken my soul, said Rev. I thought he took mine, too. But no one can. It's just been sleeping. When Charm kissed her, Rev felt as if all the fierce blossoms were shuddering open. The castle was opening. She felt as if the other woman were

breathing into her body something long lost and almost forgotten. It was, she knew, the only drug either of them would need now. (97)

This ending suggests a homosexual romance. Charm takes the role of the prince, kissing Rev to wake her from her sleep. At the same time, the kiss may indicate friendship or female solidarity that will protect her in the future. In any case, Block indicates that Rev has reached her happy ending by describing the final, "happily ever after" scene of Sleeping Beauty: "all the fierce blossoms were shuddering open. The castle was opening" (97). The image of "blossoms" opening has sexual resonances and supports the identification of a romance between Charm and Rev. Charm's love and support bring Rev to this happy ending and reversed the damage to Rev's sexuality committed by the child pornography industry. Rev's transformation proves that together women can free themselves from the paternalism of fairy tales and protect against male

abuse. Once again, this message resonates with Wolf's conclusion that solidarity and communication between women can destroy the violence and psychological damage that results from our society's emphasis on female beauty

Conclusion

Fairy tales function as powerful cultural myths that color childhood and pervade popular culture. Feminist critique of fairy tales since the 1970s reveals the potentially damaging female stereotypes acculturated through these stories. The genre of fairy tale revision developed as an efficacious means to counter traditional fairy tales. Indeed, fairy tale revisions are a useful avenue for authors to explore and explode female stereotypes and to present alternative roles for women. In their analysis of gender stereotypes, feminist fairy tales reflect the influence of feminisms and thus engage in a mutually illuminating dialogue with feminist debates.

As we have seen, the conversation between revisionist tales and feminist thought can function in many ways. Fairy tale revisions can illustrate and corroborate feminist arguments. Francesca Lia Block's revisions, for example, provide poignant examples of the very problems suggested by Naomi Watt's *The Beauty Myth* and even present a similar plan of attack to counter this myth. Other fairy tale revisions explore solutions to feminist concerns. Broumas's poetry begins the complicated process of establishing a language to describe the female experience of the erotic, as called for by Adrienne Rich.

Nonetheless, while these stories combat old fairy tale stereotypes by directly addressing them, old fairy tales can only be defamiliarized; they cannot be completely obliterated. Disney fairy tales, for example, remain powerful cultural icons despite the progressive work of fairy tale revisions. By guiding readers to reconsider traditional fairy tales, however, revisionist fairy tales render these traditional stories less powerful. In fact, revisionist stories may even colonize the original myths by changing readers' relationships to these stories. After reading Angela Carter's "The Company of Wolves," for example, the fairy tale "Little Red Riding Hood" can never be experienced in the same way again.

Further, the ability of feminist fairy tale revisions to address not only past stereotypes but also current concerns means that the possibilities of the genre of fairy tale revision have by no means been exhausted. As Donoghue's revisions illustrate and recent feminist tracks attest, women still face inequality despite great progress. The continued presence of fairy tale revisions can assist women in subverting gender expectations and suggesting new roles for women. Just as feminist movements must adapt to cultural change in order to remain relevant, so new waves of feminist fairy tales must respond to changing social conditions and feminist concerns.

In fact, in my consideration of 1970s and 1990s feminist fairy tales salient general differences emerged that emphasize the responsiveness of feminist fairy tales to changes in feminist discourse. Whereas 1970s feminist fair tales are more overtly political and critical of particular aspects of culture, 1990s fairy tales emphasize the importance of difference and individual choice and empower women while presenting less controversial messages. This difference maps onto current criticism of the feminist movement—namely that political unity and action has been lost in the emphasis on individuality and individual expression. This shift in ideology suggests both the possibilities and limitations of feminist fairy tales. Feminist fairy tale revisions function as powerful tools in motivating and reflecting ideological change. As critiques of Third Wave Feminism point out, however, changes in ideology do not suffice, changes in action must occur.

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