RE-CONCEPTUALIZING GENDER THROUGH NARRATIVE PLAY

IN FAIRY-TALE RETELLINGS

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for my father, KD Lawson,

who encouraged my addiction to stories

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation contributes to scholarship on contemporary fairy-tale retellings by exploring how gender is conceptualized, or not, as an unstable construct through specific narrative strategies. The texts I analyze are primarily American literary fiction and films, aimed at adults and young adults, from the past twenty years. I argue that narrative strategies affect the way gender is conceptualized in retellings even if they do not directly engage with gender concepts on the level of story. I suggest that gender conceptualization and narrative structures can work in concert, in opposition, or by revealing alternate possibilities, and I focus on the complexity with which retellings re-envision traditional fairy tales—paying particular attention to plot, narration, and metafiction. My purpose is to show how gender ideologies and narrative structures interact, and I conclude that the more disruptive the narrative strategies are to fairy-tale patterns, the more enabled the retelling is to question gender as a concept. Contemporary retellings engage their intertexts in intricate and complex ways that reflect contemporary theoretical work with gender by theorists such as Judith Butler and Judith Halberstam, and the resulting degeneration of fairy-tale narrative patterns opens up fairy-tale fragments to be signified in new and multifaceted ways.

In each chapter I engage in both narratological and interpretative analysis in order to demonstrate the varied relationships between discursive structuring and story in fairy-tale retellings. I show how disruptive and destabilizing narrative strategies can reinforce thematic arguments about the construction of the wicked witch character in Robert Coover's *Stepmother*, Garth Nix's "An Unwelcome Guest," and Catherynne M.

Valente's "A Delicate Architecture." I explore how reliance on plots from source tales undercuts thematic representations of gendered identity in three films, *Ever After*, *Sydney White*, and *Aquamarine*. I demonstrate how destabilizing narrative strategies, most notably lack of narrative closure, enable conceptualizations of gender not present in the source tales in Kelly Link's "Swans," "Magic for Beginners," and "The Cinderella Game." I analyze how Iserian narrative gaps and blanks produce a space for conceptualizing alternative gender configurations not present in the story in Robert Coover's *Briar Rose* and Jane Yolen's *Briar Rose*.

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INTRODUCTION

In his 1986 collection, *Don't Bet on the Prince*, Jack Zipes argues, "The significance of the feminist fairy tales lies in their Utopian functions to criticize current shifts in psychic and social structures and to point the way toward new possibilities for individual development and social interaction" (Introduction 32). *Utopian* is a key word here as it suggests an ideal feminist fairy tale and a representation of a world in which gender disparity either has been resolved or does not exist. But if many feminist fairy tales in the late 1970s and early 1980s were utopian, it was because most of them promised a future where gender equity would be the norm. The less utopian tales of today, published some forty years since the explosion of feminist movements in the United States, offer no such promise. Their protagonists are entangled in multiple power structures, not gender ones exclusively, and they are more concerned with getting by than with building a world marked simply by gender equality abstracted from other realities.

More recently, in 2009, Zipes diagnoses in feminist fairy tales a dystopian view (though ne never uses the term), which contrasts with his more "utopian" description of feminist fairy tales from 1986:

> Instead of focusing directly on gender issues and radicalizing the canon, women writers nowadays tend to depict baffled and distressed women and men caught in a maize [sic] of absurd situations. In doing this, they are endeavoring to unravel the causes of their predicaments and use narrative strategies that both reflect the degeneration of communication and are somewhat degenerative themselves. The result is dissent that seeks to

disassociate writer and reader from the brutalization and banalization of

American life, but it is also a dissent that is worrisome, for it reflects how

estranged Americans are from one another. (*Relentless Progress* 130)

Zipes recognizes that some contemporary women writers of fairy tales treat gender issues

as part of a larger complex of problems instead of in isolation and that protagonists in

these retellings are often "baffled and distressed." His observation usefully points to a

shift in how gender issues are being addressed by women in fairy-tale retellings. For

Zipes, these trends create a "dissent that is worrisome" and speak to American

estrangement (*Relentless Progress* 130), meaning that he sees these trends as evidence of

a problem. Zipes sees in these new fairy-tale fictions by women a fragmenting of ideals

associated with gender issues and an abandonment of the utopian ideal. In registering an

inability to pin down these new narratives, Zipes analyzes three writers as examples of

this trend—Aimee Bender, Kelly Link, and Lauren Slater—and notes that the work of all

three resists generic categorization and results in troubling narratives. To be fair, Zipes

sees this "dissent and dissonance" as a "powerful" urge to reconsider "how we form

gender, class, and race relations" (*Relentless Progress* 139). But he clearly would like a

"more joyful and hopeful" fairy-tale canon (*Relentless Progress* 139).

The fact that "nobody" lives happily ever after in these new fictions is a problem

for Zipes, but it is not for me. I believe that this shift is a productive one as these fictions

reflect contemporary theory and demonstrate that feminist ideals have changed in forty

years. Rather than simply abandoning the utopian ideal to reflect the stress of attempting

to navigate socially constructed norms (all the while knowing they are constructed), these

writers' tales suggest a shift in thinking about gender that is tied much more closely to

contemporary work in gender theory than to the feminism of the 1970s. I see this shift as producing new conceptualizations of gender in fairy-tale retellings, conceptualizations that are actually enabled by the degenerative narrative strategies employed. What I explore is how this "dissent" and "degeneration" are recognized and enabled by contemporary theoretical work with gender; how these fictions shift the focus from outcomes (happily-ever-afters) to actions; and how this focus on action is tied to identity as process, to agency within power struggles that are not limited to gender, and to gender categories as unstable.

I will be arguing that discordant and disruptive narrative strategies that call attention to the constructedness of the narrative affect how the notion of gender as a construct is conceptualized in the texts. Fairy-tale retellings that rely on the traditional narrative patterns of their sources, particularly plot, are limited in how they can conceptualize gender because gender is so fixed in the popularized fairy tale, or at least in the way society thinks about fairy tales. Even retellings that make direct interventions into how gender is conceptualized, such as gender role-reversal, are still constrained by expectations of plot. In contrast, retellings that pull fragments rather than plot structure from fairy tales have more possibilities in conceptualizing gender because they are removing recognized fairy-tale elements from their expected context, thereby invoking a particular fairy tale without reproducing the source tale's ideology through plot and other patterns. I argue that such retellings can question or trouble gender as a concept more effectively, even when the plot of the retelling does not explicitly question gender constructs.

Fairy Tales and Contemporary Feminisms

Fairy tales are a kind of fiction that scripts lives, and how they do this is a primary concern of critics interested in fairy tales as literature of socialization. Marina Warner (1994) has said that fairy tales "include . . . the audience," that "they point to possible destinies, possible happy outcomes, [that] they successfully involve their hearers or readers in identifying with the protagonists . . . . Schematic characterization leaves a gap into which the listener may step. Who has not tried on the glass slipper?" (*From the Beast* 23). Warner's point here is that tellers of tales and their audiences are all tangled up together, and by examining tales in terms of what they suggest about their tellers and audiences, she constructs a decidedly female history of the fairy tale. But her work also demonstrates how fairy tales are a part of lived experience and how they become a way to speak about social constraints, thus, Warner argues, "advocating a means of escaping imposed limits and prescribed destiny" (*From the Beast* 24). In this way fairy tales suggest alternative ways of being.

Many feminist retellings of fairy tales seek to counter the representations of women as passive princesses that Marcia Lieberman (1972) argued reinforced limiting notions of femininity and worked to acculturate girls into passive roles under patriarchy, and this has been the dominant mode of explicitly addressing representations of gender in fairy tales for decades. These more active princesses can been seen in contemporary young-adult novels like Gail Carson Levine's *Ella Enchanted* (1997, also a popular film released in 2004), which shows a Cinderella heroine who has been cursed into submission learning to act for herself, as well as the self-identified feminist projects like the Attic Press *Fairytales for Feminists* series in the 1980s and early 1990s, or even Jack

Zipes's own *Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England* (1986). But Zipes (2009) argues that recently both feminism and fairy tales have been "co-opted by the mass media" (*Relentless Progress* 129), forming a commercial project of pseudo-feminist hegemony that focuses on individual achievements of gender equality abstracted from other realities and acceptant of dominant ideologies. The current market for fairy-tale retellings offers a mass-mediated idea of feminism in which individual women can be strong and achieve equality through personal actions that do not, however, work to challenge or change the underlying patriarchal structure of society. Linda Pershing and Lisa Gablehouse (2010) aptly refer to this idea as "faux feminism" in their analysis of Disney's 2007 film *Enchanted*, and Zipes lists several other examples, including Levine's novel mentioned above. These critical works suggest a disconnection between how feminism is conceptualized in commercial fairy-tale products and how it is conceptualized in academia and fairy-tale studies.

The pro-girl fairy tales that are currently popular tend to present a monolithic feminism of individual female strength that does not account for the wide range of feminisms that exist in academic and political circles. Furthermore, this popularized representation of feminism in fairy tales is not representative of the range of responses fairy-tale fiction and film has had to feminist theory. One question that I ask is, are any fairy-tale adaptations keeping up with the theory? If the popular books and films marketed to young teens and adolescent girls (such as those by Levine) are the model, then the answer is a vehement no. But this is only one way of addressing gender, and I will examine how popular fairy-tale films differ from experimental fairy-tale fiction in terms of gender and narrative construction.

Stephen Benson (2008) has described contemporary fairy-tale fiction by writers such as Emma Donoghue and Jeanette Winterson as "post-Angela Carter" fairy-tale fiction (Introduction 13). "Post-Carter" fixes the work in a specific time, published after Carter's death in 1992 and at the cusp of the twenty-first century, but also acknowledges the immense influence that Angela Carter has had on fairy-tale studies and fairy-tale fiction. Benson describes a "rich creative-critical dialogue" that characterizes what he terms the Carter generation of fairy-tale writers and scholars, which includes authors such as Robert Coover and A. S. Byatt (Introduction 7). Citing Carter and Zipes as figureheads, Benson sketches a contemporary understanding of the fairy tale in which scholarship and fiction function reciprocally. More recently, Vanessa Joosen (2011) examines the intertextual dialogue between retellings and criticism. Joosen argues that retellings draw on criticism of fairy tales when remaking the fairy tale, and she specifically charts how retellings engaged in dialogue with Marcia Lieberman (1972), Bruno Bettelheim (1976), and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979). She does not argue that the writers of the retellings necessarily have read the criticism, though it is clear in several of her examples that they have, but rather that the writers of retellings she discusses are concerned with the same ideas as the critics (Joosen 17).

Bringing in contemporary theory can open up readings of new fictions because we have a different understanding of gender and narrative than was prevalent forty years ago. Readers are able to ask different questions about gender because our understanding of gender has shifted from that of the early feminist retellings. I refer to Judith Butler's work with gender performativity and undoing throughout my analysis, as her theorizing in particular has changed the questions. Butler's work has also been influential to

contemporary fairy-tale scholars turning to queer theory to read fairy tales and retellings, for example, Pauline Greenhill (2008), Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère (2009), Jennifer Orme (2010), and Santiago Solis (2007). While queering the fairy tale is a very important intervention in the field, it is not my intention to enter into that discussion here.

One of Butler's important points in *Undoing Gender* (2004), which continues her earlier work in *Gender Trouble* (1990/1999) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), is that gender is a relational category—a norm produced by (and producing) the recognition of others. We, in part, become "gendered *for* others" (*Undoing Gender* 25). The body is not solely private, but has a public dimension and is socially and politically constituted through the process of recognition. In addition, sexuality and gender are not "things" possessed by an ego, but are a process of relating to others. Butler defines gender as "the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place along with interstitial forms of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic, and performative that gender assumes" (*Undoing Gender* 42). Gender is a "doing"—a performative act of reiteration and citation of norms within a socio-political matrix. But gender is also an "undoing"—in ascribing to a gender, a person is defined and limited; and that definition defines and limits other possibilities of gender *and* possibilities of gender for others. "Gender is . . . a regulatory norm," in that it both regulates behavior and relationships and is produced through regulation (*Undoing Gender* 53). Norms produce themselves through reiteration; gender is no exception. Butler points out that the conflation of *gender* with masculine/feminine is evidence of the gender binary being naturalized as male/female. She also explains that violence against the "otherwise gendered" is a desire to keep the gender binary intact and natural. While theoretically very important, Butler's work also

has a strong political dimension, as she focuses on the experiences of doing and undoing gender. For Butler, these theories have real consequences and are tied very much to human experience: the processes of doing and undoing gender involve violence.

My focus is to connect the act of troubling gender more generally with constructions of identity and narrative. I analyze retellings that engage in the creative-critical exchange that Benson and Joosen describe above, and texts whose engagement with contemporary critical theory is not just on the level of plot (e.g., role-reversal) but also in how the story is told. While I am not limiting myself to feminist fairy-tale retellings, I focus in this dissertation on how the narrative strategies used by writers of fairy-tale fiction today intersect with these writers' somewhat ambivalent address of gender problems. My central concern is to examine how fairy-tale fiction at the turn of the twenty-first century (1) conceptualizes and troubles gender as a category, and (2) how that conceptualization intersects with destabilizing narrative strategies in the texts. More generally, I ask, how do contemporary fairy-tale retellings and adaptations, shaped by postmodernism and feminism, conceptualize gender through narrative play?

Most of the scholarship in the field focuses on retellings that directly intervene in gender through plot and narration interventions. They look at how the characters are portrayed differently (the women are weak or strong, vocal or silent, etc.), how the plots are changed (there is no marriage or the woman chooses her mate as opposed to being a prize given away), and how narration is shifted in retellings that have first-person narrators (which give agency to secondary characters, silent protagonists, or villains). These approaches are useful for analyzing representation of gendered social roles, and I also engage in this type of criticism in this dissertation. However, what distinguishes my

position is my argument that narrative strategies in the retellings, even if they do not directly engage with gender concepts, *do* affect the way that gender is conceptualized in the works. In some cases the narrative strategies reinforce the representation of gender in the plot, and in others they work against how gender is represented in the plot. The chapters in my dissertation demonstrate different ways that metafictional narrative strategies work with and against how gender is conceptualized as a construct in the text. In the process, I offer new readings of individual texts and further the conversation between narrative studies and gender studies.

One of my contributions, then, in studying fairy-tale retellings is to shift the focus from gender socialization to considerations of gender construction that trouble the institution of gender. The production of gender in fairy-tale fictions by Kelly Link and other writers disrupts the notion of gender as a stable construction. My interest is not in how fairy tales socialize people into gender, but rather how some contemporary fairy-tale retellings are undoing gender constructs. By asking *how* fairy-tale retellings navigate these new gender issues through narrative and by using narrative theory as a feminist methodology, I also intervene in existing discussions on gender and narrative in fairy-tale retellings. I am shifting the questions from what fairy-tale retellings say about gender to *how* gender as an unstable construct is conceptualized through the narrative strategies employed in fairy-tale retelling. Thus, I see my dissertation project as intervening in several ongoing discussions—gender and fairy tales, the undoing of gender in narrative, narrative and fairy tales—and working with tools and problematics from poststructuralist feminism, classical and feminist narratology, and postmodernism.

The History of Fairy Tales and Gender Criticism

In tracing the history of feminist fairy-tale scholarship, Donald Haase (2004) notes that the pairing of feminism and fairy-tale studies is fairly logical and goes so far as to say that "the agenda for feminist fairy-tale scholarship parallels in large measure the agenda for fairy-tale studies itself" ("Feminist Fairy-Tale Scholarship" 31). Both fields of scholarship emerged in the 1970s and asked similar questions about socialization. Haase lists several types of projects at the intersection of feminism and fairy-tale studies: studies in gendered socialization, interventions into the editorial history of the Grimms' tales, reclaiming a female fairy-tale tradition (he discusses the publication of feminist and woman-centered folk- and fairy-tale anthologies), the use of fairy tales in female-authored literature, and the revisionist project of retelling fairy tales for a feminist audience.

Early studies focused on the representations of women. The Lurie/Lieberman debate, for example, concerned representations of heroines as passive or active. Marcia R. Lieberman (1972) and Andrea Dworkin (1974) argued that popular fairy tales were saturated with passive princesses and only reinforced stereotypical gender roles that socialized women as submissive. Alison Lurie (1970, 1971), however, saw fairy tales as offering strong female role models, in both the traditional tales and those marginalized by sexist editorial practices. Taking as her focus the popularity of the passive heroines from the Grimms and Disney, Kay Stone (1975) traced the path of the passive princess, arguing that she is a minority figure in fairy-tale tradition that has been singled-out and popularized in Anglo-American collections of the Grimms and in Disney films. Stone demonstrates that there are many active heroines in the Grimms' collection and that oral

Anglo-American folktales are actually full of them. Karen Rowe (1979), however, argued that the passive princess plots have been recycled into women's magazines and novels via romance plots, making fairy tales "powerful transmitters of romantic myths which encourage women to internalize only aspirations deemed appropriate to 'our' real sexual functions within a patriarchy" ("Feminism and Fairy Tales" 211). Rowe emphasizes the stories with passive princesses to demonstrate the chasm between feminism and these popular stories, and how women become transmitters of patriarchy through repetition of the passive-princess tropes. Also popular with representation studies was the analysis of the marriage plot: many fairy tales figure women as prizes to be won or rewards for male prowess and suggest that the only path for a good woman is one that ends in marriage and motherhood. However the reception of these passive representations of women has proven to be varied, as women readers do not always interpret the passive princesses as weak. In interviews conducted in 1973, Stone found that while some women admired the passive princesses, others "transform[ed] relatively passive heroines into active ones" or pitied the passive heroines and rejected their stories (49). The role of the female audience in conferring agency on female characters written as without agency and the rejection of plots that promoted female passivity both suggest a more complex relationship between tale and female audience than one of passive socialization.

Ruth Bottigheimer's early work examines not how female characters act, but what they say. In "Silenced Women in the Grimms' Tales" (1986), Bottigheimer argues that the Grimms' "fairy tales offered an apparently innocent and peculiarly suitable medium for both transmitting and enforcing the norm of the silent women" (130). She equates the silence of women with powerlessness, contrasting it to the silence of men in the Grimms'

tales, stating, "Men could be silent, but women were silenced" (Bottigheimer, "Silenced Women" 118). Her emphasis in this gendered distinction is that male silence is marked by choice or limited to a short time and under specific circumstances (such as not speaking to a particular group of people, but allowed to speak to others), while female silence is marked by punishment or totality (such as not being able to make any vocal noises under any circumstances). She further identifies three types of female silencing in the tales—that which is a part of the narrative plot, the editorial choices of using direct or indirect speech, and the lexical context of direct speech (specifically the introductory verbs) ("Silenced Women" 125-6). Bottigheimer expands this work in *Grimms' Bad Girls and Bold Boys* (1987).

Karen Rowe (1986) focuses on the representation of women as storytellers. Rowe traces the lineage of the female voice of women tale-tellers and writers from the fictional Philomela and Scheherazade to the French women fairy-tale writers of the seventeenth century and the German women who were sources for the Grimms' tales in the nineteenth century. She argues that "to tell a tale for women may be a way of breaking enforced silences" ("To Spin a Yarn" 53). Moving outside of the world of the tale, she emphasizes the common assertion of a female source of the tales themselves, even when attributed to a male author (as with Philomela) or authorized by a male voice (as with Scheherazade). Rowe also points to the common representation of female storytellers and female audiences in illustrations that accompany published collections of tales, suggesting that fairy tales are a predominately female domain—written and told by women, for women. Beginning with Philomela, Rowe demonstrates that weaving and spinning have long been associated with female narrative voices and storytelling action.

Jack Zipes, throughout his career, has argued for the necessity of understanding the socio-historical context for fairy tales, and he has in the process made some feminist interventions, though that may not have been his main purpose. In *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* (1988/2006), Zipes describes how fairy tales are not only socializing narratives but have been used as a means of subverting dominant ideology. Historically, Zipes identifies the influence of the Italian writers Giovanni Francesco Straparola and Giambattista Basile on the French writers of the 1690s as providing them with "a narrative strategy that enabled them to intervene in the civilizing process and allowed them to publish and publicize subversive views that questioned the power of hegemonic groups" (*Fairy Tales* 20). The ideologies expressed in fairy tales change over time, which is accounted for by revisions of tales to meet new ideological shifts and by appropriations of tales by writers who wish to challenge established ideologies.

Marina Warner builds a similarly large project, but she focuses on fairy tales as a female genre. In *From the Beast to the Blonde* (1994), she contextualizes fairy tales as stories from particular socio-historic settings—both the setting of the writers and editors who recorded, revised, and wrote tales *and* the folk setting of the oral tales that were published. Of interest to her is a "pattern of female authorship" of fairy tales, a tradition of female storytellers and audiences, and the references and allusion to women's "lived experience" in the tales she studied (Warner, *From the Beast* xvi, xxiii). Warner picks up on Rowe's earlier connections between female storytellers and female industrial arts, both in the metaphor of the female storyteller as spinner that Rowe describes and the historic context of women telling tales to each other during the completion of repetitive domestic tasks and domestic arts, like spinning and weaving. She argues that fairy tales

offer a haven for women to speak to each other about women's issues and that "[t]he story itself becomes the weapon of the weaponless" (Warner, *From the Beast* 412). Warner notes that women's power is often verbal in tales, giving Scheherazade and spell-casting witches and fairies as examples. But she also ties this verbal weaponry to subversive retellings, noting in particular how retold tales have proved to be a weapon for postmodern writers Angela Carter and Salman Rushdie.

Literary critic Elizabeth Wanning Harries, in *Twice Upon a Time* (2001), builds on Warner's study and argues that the formation of the Euro-American fairy-tale canon relegated the women writers of the seventeenth century to a neglected position. As Warner does for the fairy tale more generally, Harries sees a great deal of women's history in the literary fairy-tale genre. Harries' project is, in many ways, a feminist reclaiming of the fairy-tale tradition, showing that not only is its oral tradition gendered female, but the literary tradition of the fairy tale is also steeped in female writers. Not only is Harries' main focus on literary tales, but she also argues that the notion of an oral peasant tradition is misleading and is the product of narrative structures created by male writers. She suggests that unlike Charles Perrault who mimicked "peasant" voices as narrators, "the *conteuses* [of the seventeenth century] often emphasize[d] their own position as knowing, educated, worldly-wise, female subjects, with a wry and sometimes sardonic view of the narrative constellations they are reusing and revising" (Harries 15-16). Her study traces these complex narrative strategies of early female fairy-tale writers to the strategies of contemporary women writers who likewise tell and retell fairy tales in complicated ways.

The popularity and adaptability of the fairy-tale genre makes fairy tales particularly alluring to both feminist and postmodern writers, for whom, according to Stephen Benson (2008), the "fairy tale offers to fiction a ready-made store of images and plots of gender relations, class conflicts, scenarios of sexuality, and dramas of ethnicity, each ripe for scrutiny and overhaul via a contemporary ideological agenda committed to the overturning of conventions of inequality and restriction" (Introduction 12-3). Most retellings of fairy tales take aim at gender issues, and many of them are feminist texts operating in the mode of reversal—replacing passive heroines with active ones and reversing gender roles or plots. However, some postmodern retellings of the fairy-tale form and conventions, such as those of Angela Carter in *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), also use parody to comment on modern ideological and social issues rather than to mock the fairy tale as a genre. Donald Haase (2004) argues that one must read retellings for the "the ambivalence with which women writers and other creative artists often approach the [fairy-tale] genre" ("Feminist Fairy-Tale Scholarship" 30). He explains that "[r]evisionist mythmaking, after all, enacts ambivalence by simultaneously rejecting and embracing the fairy tale" (Haase, "Feminist Fairy-Tale Scholarship" 30). This ambivalence is important because it can be a site of productivity.

The Variety of Terminology in Analyzing Retellings

One important discussion in fairy-tale narrative studies is how to classify the different types of retellings. In *Fairy Tale as Myth/ Myth as Fairy Tale* (1994), Zipes suggests a pair terms to classify texts that retell traditional fairy tales: *duplication*, which reproduces and reinforces the ideology, patterns, and images of the traditional tale

creating a "look-alike," and *revision*, which transforms the traditional tale and "alters" its traditional values, patterns, and images (9). He argues that the tradition of the fairy tale is one of duplication and revision, and that the history of the genre must take into account this long-standing practice of repetition and repurposing. Thus, for Zipes, revision is not necessarily a postmodern move despite the bounty of ideological retellings of fairy tales within postmodernism. He does, instead, suggest a distinct, opposite, and general pairing with his terms.

Cristina Bacchilega (1997) complicates Zipes's pairing by arguing that retellings can both "reproduce" and "transform" the stories that they tell (*Postmodern Fairy Tales* 10). She does not suggest that the two categories are mutually exclusive, but rather that postmodern retellings do both simultaneously by reflecting, refracting, and framing their source tales (Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales* 10). Bacchilega turns to Judith Butler and her discussions of performativity to explain how, as performances of fairy tales, retellings both cite the ideologies and narrative structures of the source texts and reveal them as constructions at the same time. However, she too makes a distinction between postmodern and other contemporary retellings, suggesting that "narrative strategies (doubling as both deconstructive and reconstructive mimicry) and subject representations (self-contradictory versions of the self in performance)" are the distinguishing factors of postmodern fairy tales (Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales* 140-1). This both/and position that retellings can inhabit is precisely the ambivalence that Haase notes as an important site of interpretation.

While Bacchilega focuses on fairy-tale retellings in the late twentieth century, Elizabeth Wanning Harries also addresses Zipes's pairing by arguing that revision has

always been a part of fairy-tale tradition and that "we need to develop a new word for procedures in retellings that go beyond simple revision" (15). Harries argues that the distinction should not be what a twentieth- or twenty-first-century tale does to a traditional tale, but the narrative strategy employed in the revision. Specifically, she offers the terms *compact* for traditional tales that employ "carefully constructed simplicity" and *complex* to describe old and new tales that are decidedly intertextual and "work to reveal the stories behind other stories" as alternatives (Harries 17). Harries argues that the fairy tales of the seventeenth-century French *conteuses*, as well as those of contemporary writers like Emma Donoghue, are *complex*, the privileged term in her pairing. Though she resists the postmodern, historical categorization of retold tales and their retellings, like Bacchilega, Harries shifts the focus from the ideological one presented by Zipes to one in which narrative is a key element.

In the recent collection of essays on fairy-tale fiction *Contemporary Fiction and the Fairy Tale* edited by Stephen Benson, Merja Makinen's essay stands out as seeking to theorize fairy-tale fiction. Her discussion of postmodern fairy-tale fiction (2008) echoes Harries' discussion of *complex* tales in calling for "a new way of discussing this complex, multiple reconception" of fairy tales as postmodern "pre-texts" (Makinen 155) and at the same time mirrors Bacchilega's understanding of these complex retellings as postmodern. In examining Zipes's initial terms, Makinen concludes, not surprisingly, that binary categories are semiotically bankrupt when applied to fairy-tale retellings.

My point in bringing up this discussion of terminology is to show that at the turn of the twenty-first century, and in light of the differing ways contemporary writers use fairy tales, fairy-tale scholarship has been struggling with how to distinguish between

different types of contemporary fairy-tale retellings. I think this struggle for words demonstrates that fairy-tale adaptations go about the narrative work of retelling in a variety of complicated ways, and that the exclusive focus on postmodernist revision as a critique of ideology is inadequate when it comes to understanding what fairy-tale retellings do. In addition, creating pairs of terms to discuss the approach to ideology or narrative, while seemingly useful, forces a binary frame on works that, in many ways, seek to dismantle ideological binaries. Starting to address this problem, Phyllis Frus and I (2010) have argued for the term *transformations* to be used more generally for any texts (not just fairy-tale retellings) "that move beyond mere adaptation and transform the source text into something new that works independently of its source" (Frus and Williams 3).

One factor in this discussion is that fairy-tale adaptations are often not categorized generically as "fairy tales." Rather, as retellings, they are not only different from fairy tales, but they also cross a variety of standard genres. Angela Carter's work (1979), for example, brings in elements of gothic, romance, fantasy, and horror in addition to fairy tale. Kelly Link's more recent work also blurs multiple genres, drawing from the range of speculative fiction categories. Folklorist Cathy Lynn Preston (2004) suggests that the fairy tale, though categorized as a genre, is not confined by genre boundaries, an observation necessary for the genre-blurring work that Gregory Rubinson (2005) argues is so crucial to postmodern critique. In her article, "Disrupting the Boundaries of Genre and Gender," Preston argues that "[i]n postmodernity the 'stuff' of fairy tales exists as fragments (princess, frog, slipper commodity relations in a marriage market) in the nebulous realm that we might most simply identify as cultural knowledge" (210). She

goes on to argue that despite any "genre classification[s]" imposed on these fragments, they can be brought into play in a variety ways, only one of which is the traditional fairy tale (Preston 210). Preston's argument and her analysis of fairy-tale texts focus on the blurring of genre boundaries through the process of cultural reproduction. The fairy-tale fragments she analyzes are found simultaneously in multiple genres: fairy tale, joke, legend, film, reality television show, advertisement, and/or email message. The postmodern fairy-tale texts that she presents are not restricted by genre, but instead disrupt genre boundaries to "tell a different story" about fairy tales (Preston 211).

While it is clear that many critics have been reflecting on narrative and gender, much work on this subject is primarily about the technique of retelling, as the above discussion demonstrates, and how the act of retelling challenges the ideology of the fairy-tale "pre-texts." Furthermore, the privileging of either narrative inquiry or gender inquiry is fairly common in the field. In some texts, the interest in narrative takes precedence; in others it is gender. Stephen Benson's *Cycles of Influence* (2003) is a good example of a book that treats narrative in conjunction with gender and feminist critique, but confines feminist critique to a single chapter. In my project, I aim to focus precisely on how understandings of gender are enabled (or not) by the narrative strategies employed in retelling.

Narratology in Fairy-Tale and Feminist Studies

Folktale analysis has long had a place in narrative studies extending back to the work of Russian formalist Vladimir Propp (1928) and the Finnish school. Early work in narratology drew on folktales to create models of narrative. Stephen Benson, in *Cycles of*

Influence (2003), synthesizes a history of fairy tales and narratology, but he also looks at postmodern and feminist interventions in studying narrative in fairy tales. He explains, "Folktales are intrinsically unstable, furnishing perhaps the best example of the theory—fundamental to narratology—that the basic constituent elements of a narrative can be manifest in a number of versions, and it was partly a desire to account for this instability that gave rise to catalogues of tales" (Benson, *Cycles of Influence* 22-23). Armed with a catalogue of tale patterns and types, critics could impose order on an otherwise disordered set of tales that change with each new oral or literary teller. Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928) identifies basic structures of folktales which allows for the consistent structural analysis of plot. Basic plot types have also been catalogued by Antti Aarne and translated by Stith Thompson in *The Types of the Folktale* (1961) and expanded by Hans-Jörg Uther in *The Types of International Folktales* (2004). This classification allows the critic to identify a particular tale based on different sequences of episodes and plot patterns.

Readings such as those based on "general character" (Propp 3), however, have gone out of fashion, as Benson explains:

> In the case of theory, enquiry into the workings of narrative has moved away from, indeed critiqued, the search for deep structures and abstract, essential geometries, in favor of a pluralistic concern for desire itself in the productive interaction of narrative space, including the possibilities of interactivity, in postmodernist theories; and for the specificities of context on feminist and postcolonial concerns for a pragmatics of narrative.
> (*Cycles of Influence* 17)

There has been a significant shift in how narrative is analyzed in fairy-tale studies. Rather than a continuing interest in finding a stable core, some current fairy-tale scholarship uses the catalogued structures and types to examine the instability and malleability of tale types. The establishment and wide circulation of the specific criteria needed to construct a fairy tale of a certain type, however, has opened up possibilities, not just for the critics and writers of fairy-tale retellings, but also for the readers of fairy-tale retellings in constructing a sophisticated understanding of fairy tales and how they work.

More generally, Kathy Mezei (1996) has argued that feminist narratology is particularly useful in "expos[ing] ambiguities and indeterminacies" in postmodern texts concerned with "the elusive or decentered subject" (10). Feminist narratology or narratologies, since they are not a cohesive cluster, provide a way of talking about gender in text that is not confined to bodies and politics of feminism. Narratological analysis is not interpretive, and much of the debate among feminist narratologists concerns the point at which the introduction of gender to narratological analysis becomes interpretive. Susan Lanser (1986, 1988) presents feminist narratology as interpretation concerned with the gender of authors and narrators. While Nelli Diengott (1988) contends that introducing a feminist heuristic to narratology defeats the objective purpose of narratology to analyze texts outside of thematic interpretation, Robyn Warhol (1989) has argued that feminist narratology can bring questions of gender to bear on textual discourse without imposing a feminist interpretation. Joan Peters (2002) argues that a focus on the gender of the author, narrator, character, or reader "produces yet another interpretive methodology that attempts to account for the entire work from a feminist perspective, and this is not something that narratology is designed to do" (13). In her work on feminist metafiction,

Peters draws on Julia Kristeva's argument (1974) that a "woman's" voice is one that

challenges conventional discourse in order to argue that when women's narration is

contrasted with conventional male discourse or parodied male discourse, the distinction

between voices is one of types of discourse (rather than of gendered bodies) and that the

female voice is identified with the subversive or new discourse. Thus female voice is a

discourse tied to subversive forms of narration.

Sally Robinson (1991) is also interested in "how gender is produced *through*

narrative processes, not prior to them" (198, n. 23), and she argues that "women's self-

representation most often proceeds by a double movement: simultaneously *against*

normative constructions of Woman that are continually produced by hegemonic

discourses and social practices, and *toward* new forms of representation that disrupt those

normative constructions" (11). While I echo Robinson's interest in how gender is

produced through narration, like Peters, I do not focus on the gender of the author as

Robinson and many of the other feminist narratologists cited here do. Nor am I concerned

with how the discourse in the novel itself is gendered, as Peters is. Rather I am concerned

with how gender *as a concept* that is socially structured is produced in a text. In order to

explore this discursive construction of gender, I analyze narrative at both the level of plot

and discourse, and I explore how the interaction between these narrative levels or aspects

of a text produces ambivalence and ambiguity, which in turn affects the ways in which

gender is conceptualized. While feminist narratology may seem like an obvious

methodology for my analysis because I am interested in intersections between gender and

narrative, my focus on gender as a category, rather than the gender of authors, narrators,

characters, or readers, means that much of the contextual aspect of feminist narratology is not applicable for my project.

Rather than drawing on the specific methodologies of feminist narratologies, I am indebted to the multiple ways of understanding how gender is present in texts beyond the idea of how gender is represented. In this project, I am using narratological tools to understand how certain concepts of gender are produced in a text and to explain why retellings of fairy tales that challenge gender norms only on the level of representation differ from those that tackle gender norms on multiple levels. I would not call my project a feminist narratological one because I am also interested in interpreting how gender is represented in the texts I analyze and exploring how the narrative strategies employed in the texts support, complicate, or undermine those representations.

Underpinning my argument is the idea that narrative is multi-vocal, which means that multiple discourses can work with and against each other in a text. Retellings make that multivocality explicit by reproducing and challenging the ideological discourse of the source tale. Donald Haase has described this as "simultaneously rejecting and embracing the fairy tale" (*Fairy Tales and Feminism* 30). In retellings that blur genres, as Kelly Link's do, this multivocality can also be seen in how the multiple genres destabilize each other and how they appeal to multiple authorities (the latter is part of Preston's critique of how disrupting genre also disrupts gender). Mikhail Bakhtin's arguments about dialogism in the novel have, thus, been crucial in my understanding of how fairy-tale retellings can present opposing ideas. In "Discourse in the Novel" (1975) Bakhtin defines the novel as a "diversity" of voices (262). For Bakhtin, all discourse is ideological, and the novel orchestrates multiple ideologically oriented discourses.

Bakhtin describes multiple ways that such heteroglossia can be organized in a novel. As with my use of feminist narratology, I do not cite Bakhtin specifically in my readings, but my analysis is informed by his concepts of dialogism, of the presence of opposing discourses, and of double-voice, the way in which an utterance conveys two positions simultaneously.

Defining Terminology

While I am indebted to the larger aims of feminist narratology, I also find structuralist narratology, particularly the typology developed by Gérard Genette (1972, 1983), useful in describing how the different narratives I analyze are constructed. Of particular use is Genette's contribution of the concept of focalization. Traditional fairy tales are often narrated by external narrators with an authoritative voice. Retellings often use characters as narrators to introduce subjective points of view. Genette's distinction between *narration* "who speaks" and *focalization* "who sees" is useful in discussing differences in voice and perspective. Mieke Bal's (1985) additional attention to *focalizer* and *focalized object* allows for a more subtle discussion of focalization by also accounting for what is perceived and what is not.

I utilize Propp's grammar in referring to the functions of characters. *Function*, for Propp, is the "*act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action*" (21, emphasis in original). His concept of function is useful when discussing retellings because it is a stable, plot-based role not defined by the character; therefore, using *function* in this sense allows one to differentiate, in a retelling, between changes to characterization and changes in function (taking on a different role in a

traditional fairy-tale plot). It is, however, problematic when discussing works that remove specific functions from expected plots altogether. I take the inability to apply Propp's functions in a retelling as a clear sign that the structure of the source tale has been disrupted.

A problem with drawing from multiple disciplines is the various ways in which critics use the term *story*. For narratologists like Genette, *story* is what is being represented by the narration—the plot, setting, and characters—and *discourse* is how the story is told. But in dealing with fairy-tale retellings, in which the same plot, settings, and/or characters are retold in a variety of different ways, *story* can also be used to refer to the tale type; thus a particular work of fiction is a "Cinderella story." Monika Fludernik (2006/2009) distinguishes the two meanings of "story" by returning to the Russian formalists' term *fabula* for the episodic sequence that makes a fiction recognizable as a particular tale type. She then uses *plot level* or *fictional world* for a specific iteration or organization of those events (*An Introduction to Narratology* 4). I am tempted to use Fludernik's terminology as it provides a way of discussing story at multiple levels across different iterations, but I am hesitant to introduce more specialized terms than absolutely necessary given the multiple disciplines from which I draw. Therefore, I will use *story* in the standard narratological sense to refer to what is being narrated in a particular fiction or film. When referring to the shared characteristics of stories (multiple versions of "Cinderella," for example), I will use *tale* (as in fairy or folk tale) thus pointing to a specific plot type or *fragment*. When referring to the individual elements that make a tale distinguishable, I prefer Preston's *fragments* to the folklorists' *motifs* precisely because *fragment* connotes the unbound existence of the bits of fairy

tales that are culturally reproduced, whereas I see *motifs* as more constitutive of the core

tales they combine to make up. Motifs and fragments are both the building blocks of fairy

tales, but *fragment* implies a divorce from context that I find useful when discussing

retellings that recontextualize bits of fairy tales by removing them from the plots and tale

types with which they are associated. Fragments can be reproduced outside of traditional

fairy tales and function on their own.

In my analysis, I examine a variety of metafictional narrative strategies, strategies

that draw attention to the constructedness of the text and remind readers that they are

reading a work of fiction. Linda Hutcheon (1980) defines metafiction as "fiction about

fiction—that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative

and/or linguistic identity" (*Narcissistic Narrative* 1). Hutcheon divides contemporary

metafiction into diegetically and linguistically self-conscious texts, and further divides

those categories into "overt"—those that call attention to their own construction—and

"covert"—those that refer to or discuss other texts within the text (*Narcissistic Narrative*

23). In *A Theory of Parody,* Hutcheon (1985) argues that parody is a type of metafiction

that is "imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the

parodied text," and "repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than

similarity" (6); thus parody is not mocking a text, but imitating a text with ironic

interventions. Margaret Rose (1979) argues that parody is "the meta-fictional 'mirror' to

the process of composing and receiving literary texts" (59). Metafictional parody raises

questions about the production and reception of literature. Rose explains that parody

requires that the parodist be "seen in the dual role of reader [of the parodied text] and

writer [of the "new" text]" (69), and the text be read as both itself and as a criticism,

encompassing two positions at once. She also argues that parody as meta-fiction shows *what* is being represented as well as *how* it is being represented (Rose 90). Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nünning (2012) define *metafiction* as the "capacity of fiction to reflect on its own status as fiction and thus refers to all self-reflexive utterances which thematize the fictionality (in the sense of imaginary reference and/or constructedness) of narrative" in *the living handbook of narratology*, a wiki maintained by narratologists (par. 5).

Neither Hutcheon nor Rose makes a distinction between metafiction and metanarrative, and it is only recently that critics argue that the two terms are not interchangeable. Ansgar Nünning (2004), in making an argument for the need to differentiate *metanarrative* from *metafiction*, limits the term *metanarrative* to narratorial comments about narrative. Fludernik (2003) explains that Nünning "starts out from a distinction between metanarration and metafiction, arguing that *metanarration* 'thematizes the act and/or process of narration', whereas *metafiction* 'discloses the artefactual nature of the narrated on the act of narration'" ("Metanarrative" 4). Neumann and Nünning further clarify the difference between the two terms: "whereas metafictionality designates the quality of disclosing the fictionality of a narrative, metanarration captures those forms of self-reflexive narration in which aspects of narration are addressed in the narratorial discourse, i.e. narrative utterances about narrative rather than fiction about fiction" (par. 2). Both Fludernik and Nünning explicitly define *metanarrative* as narration about narration, that is, self-reflexive narrative comments that refer to the process of narrating. Both critics schematize ways in which metanarrative can be further broken down as a category.

My analysis focuses on narrative strategies that disrupt fairy-tale plots and structures, calling attention to how the narratives are constructed. While on occasion I refer to metanarrative narratorial comments, the majority of techniques I describe— change in perspective and voice, interruptions of one narrative thread with another, embedded stories, suspending or denying fairy-tale endings, collapsing character types— are not self-reflexive narrative comments. While they demonstrate the constructedness of the text and are self-conscious of fairy-tale narrative structures, they do not *comment* on the process of narration itself. Whenever possible, I refer to strategies specifically rather than grouping them together under a metafictional or metanarrative umbrella. However when I do group them, I use the more general and widely used definition of *metafiction* and refer to the strategies' metafictional effect.

Finally, a word on *retellings*. I could have chosen a variety of terms for the fairy-tale-indebted fictions and films I analyze. Indeed, as I hope the section "The Variety of Terminology in Analyzing Retellings" demonstrates, what to call these texts that retell existing fairy tales is up for debate in fairy-tale studies. Vanessa Joosen has helpfully, cataloged a list of terms currently in circulation: "fairy-tale retelling, reversion, revision, reworking, parody, transformation, anti-fairy tale, postmodern fairy tale, fractured fairy tale, and recycled fairy tale" (9). Like Joosen, I prefer the term *retelling* because it is neutral and because its prefix indicates a clear connection to a source text (9). Though I have argued for the term *transformation* elsewhere,[1] I do not use it here. *Transformation* refers to a type of adaptation that so drastically reworks the source that it may not be recognizable as an adaptation (Frus and Williams 3). Phyllis Frus and I chose this term because it describes the relationship of the new text to the source, in that the source is

transformed into something new rather than adapted for a new environment. *Retelling* is a more general term in that a retelling could be a transformation, wholly reworking the source fairy tale, but a retelling could also be an adaptation to different media codes or an update of the source tale that does not make dramatic changes to it. The other reason that I prefer *retelling* for this project is that my focus is a narrative one, and *retelling* emphasizes the act of narration. *Transformation* or even *adaptation* does not suggest the same focus on narrative changes that *retelling* does. A retelling is in direct engagement with its source(s), and that engagement is, at its most basic, the act of telling again with difference.

For the source texts, I use *traditional fairy tale* because it is the repetition of these popular tales from collections by Charles Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, and Walt Disney Studios that has created the tradition from which popular cultural (as opposed to academic) expectations of fairy tales come. Readers do not need to have read a specific version of a tale like "Sleeping Beauty" to know what to expect from a retelling of "Sleeping Beauty." Karin Kukkonen's (2008) concept of *popular cultural memory* is particularly useful in understanding how fairy-tale fragments can exist outside of specific texts. Kukkonen expands Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory to include popular culture, and she uses fairy tales as her primary example. For an item to enter into popular cultural memory, it has to have a shared audience, be constantly reproduced, and be "objectivised" or "generalised" from its textual context (Kukkonen 263). Repetition ensures that the audience shares an understanding of "codes and conventions," which are created through the process of generalization (Kukkonen 262). Elements of fairy tales that have been removed from their "textual surroundings and

original social contexts" are "turn[ed] into conventions, icons, character types and standard situations of popular media texts" (Kukkonen 263). Kukkonen describes how elements of fairy tales are fragmented from their source tales and are able to exist independently from those tales. She explains that "[p]opular cultural memory works through imagination and appropriation rather than through research and historical exactitude" (Kukkonen 265). Once a fragment enters popular cultural memory, it "can then be reconstructed in new contexts and can express or comment on them" (Kukkonen 264). The concept of popular cultural memory explains the process by which fairy-tale fragments can be recontextualized but still be recognized as and have meaning as fairy tales.

The Chapters

My analysis will focus on both popular and experimental fairy-tale retellings in fiction and film. I examine novels, short stories, and films aimed at young adults in addition to texts intended for older audiences. Though many of the works are explicit retellings of specific tale types, two, Robert Coover's *Stepmother* and Kelly Link's "Magic for Beginners," function more as pastiche, drawing from a variety of tales and playing with the genre of the fairy tale as a stable entity. The scope of my analysis will also be limited to fairy-tale fiction and film in the Euro-American/ Western tradition. At the center of my inquiry are fairy-tale works of the Angela Carter and post-Carter generations that engage in the creative-critical exchange noted by Benson and Joosen, and to a lesser extent Haase, that characterizes fairy-tale retellings being produced at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Not surprisingly, the fairy-tale fictions I will analyze have been connected with postmodern narrative strategies. Gregory Rubinson (2005) lists the most common "conventions" of postmodernism as "genre mixing and self-consciousness about genre convention; an explicit attention to the construction and constitution of cultural sign-systems; intertextual references; re-readings and re-writings of old texts including literature, myth, and scripture; metafictional authorial intrusions; a de-personalized, analytical tone; parody; satire; and a denial of realist conventions including narrative closure" (13). Many of the texts I will analyze employ multiple techniques from Rubinson's list to engage in the postmodern work of challenging belief systems, and I am specifically interested in how they challenge established systems of gender. In addition to parody and rewriting, the fictional fairy-tale texts I focus on often avoid linear plotlines, preferring instead recursive, fragmented, and stalled plots (Coover), and plots that do not have an ending (Link); use metanarrative and metafiction, both talking about stories and calling attention to the fictiveness of the story, through narrative interruptions, metanarrative addresses to the reader (mimesis of narration), framing, and embedding; and employ first- (and occasionally second-) person narrators in opposition to the external narrator common to traditional fairy tales. These narrative strategies are not solely postmodern, as many of them have long been a part of the fairy-tale tradition and have been used in feminist writing. Specifically, my contribution is to examine how these narrative-destabilizing techniques are used in conjunction with the texts' destabilization of gender.

In each chapter I engage in both narratological and interpretative analysis in order to demonstrate the varied relationships between discursive structuring and story in fairy-

tale retellings. In the first chapter, I show how disruptive and destabilizing narrative strategies can reinforce thematic arguments about identity in the story. In the second chapter, I focus on how reliance on plots and other narrative patterns from source tales undercuts thematic representations of gendered identity in the story. In the third chapter, I demonstrate how narrative strategies that destabilize the source tales' patterns enable conceptualizations of gender in the story not present in the source tale. In the fourth chapter, I reveal how disruptive and destabilizing narrative strategies produce a space for a conceptualization of alternative gender configurations not present in the story.

My focus in Chapter 1 is how traditional fairy-tale narrative patterns are disrupted. I analyze three retellings that question the fairy-tale genre's authoritative narrative patterns by unmaking the concept of wickedness, which is identified with traditional fairy-tale witches in these texts. In troubling the good/wicked division that orders traditional fairy tales and revealing it to be subjective, the texts also encourage readers to recognize the gendered traits of fairy-tale villains as constructed. None of the texts in this chapter directly address gender. Instead the constructedness of gender norms is revealed through the ways in which female villains are represented and characterized differently than in the source tales. The narrative strategies that support the re-characterization of female villains do so by dismantling traditional fairy-tale narrative patterns. In Robert Coover's *Stepmother* (2004), my primary case study, I analyze Coover's use of first-person narration from a traditional villain to recontextualize her actions and the metafictional moves of creating characters aware of their own existence in a fiction, collapsing character and tale types into single characters, and naming characters after roles. In the first of two briefer analyses, I examine how focalization

through a traditional villain likewise recontextualizes her actions and how naming characters after their roles supports thematic arguments about wickedness being subjective in Garth Nix's "An Unwelcome Guest" (2009). In the second of the two shorter analyses, I examine how first-person narration from a traditional villain recontextualizes the villain's actions and characterizes her as a victim, thus creating reader sympathy for the villain in Catherynne M. Valente's "A Delicate Architecture" (2009). In all three cases, the interrogation of wickedness and master narratives is facilitated through traditional female villains. A side effect of challenging narratives about wickedness and showing that they are subjective is to raise questions about the stories we construct about gender.

In Chapter 2, I argue that complex representations of gender as a construct, which seem to be in line with current theoretical notions of gender, can be undercut in fairy-tale retellings that transform representations of gender but not their accompanying gendered plots. I analyze three films, all targeted toward a young female audience. *Ever After* (1998), my primary example, is a "Cinderella" retelling that utilizes role-reversal techniques to represent the Cinderella figure (Danielle) as a strong, independent protagonist who does not need to be rescued. Through the negotiation of her roles as servant and lady, Danielle demonstrates that gender is a fluid construct by performing both hypermasculinity and tomboy female masculinity as needed. The feminist overtures of the film and conceptualization of gender as an un-fixed, fluid category are, however, undercut by the film's narrative framing, its reliance on the marriage plot from the source tale, and its reliance on patriarchal authority in both the plot and visual narrative. I also analyze the tension between representations of gender as a constructed and fluid category

and the marriage plot inherited from the source tales in two more recent films. In *Sydney White* (2007, a "Snow White" retelling) a range of femininities and masculinities are represented for both women and men; however, acceptable masculinities are limited by the heterosexual imperative of the plot. In *Aquamarine* (2006, a "Little Mermaid" retelling) the same marriage plot is undermined by the film's focus on female friendship as an alternative to competitive femininities. I draw on Judith Butler's work with performativity, Judith Halberstam's discussion of female masculinity, and Mary Ann Doane's analysis of feminine masquerade to show how gender is conceptualized in the films.

In Chapter 3, I propose that reliance on structures from traditional fairy tales limits the possibilities for conceptualizing gender in retellings. Retellings that reproduce gendered plot structures from their sources are restricted to concepts of gender that allow for the heteronormative, happily-ever-after marriage plot that dominates traditional tales. However, literary retellings that use fairy-tale fragments that have been wrested from their source structures are more able to freely resignify those fragments and represent gender differently from that of the source tale. I analyze the work of Kelly Link, whose slipstream fiction combines fairy-tale fragments with horror tropes in plots concerned with adolescent development and finding a place for oneself. Though Link does not thematically address gender norms in the three stories I analyze, her reliance on fairy-tale fragments rather than structures results in a conceptualization of gender that diverges from the source tales' representation of femininity and masculinity as bound by heterosexual marriage. Specifically, I argue that Link's lack of closure in her fiction—ending the story before the resolution of the plot—allows for gender to be represented as

outside a heterosexual matrix by circumventing the marriage that is expected as a fairy-tale conclusion. I rely on the work of Judith Roof and Robin Warhol to demonstrate how sexuality is ingrained in narrative and on Judith Butler to demonstrate how identity (of which gender is a part) is constructed and regulated through social relationships and structures. In "Swans" (2000), I analyze the lack of closure, use of first-person narration, and explicit critique of the source tale to show its anti-heteronormative representation of femininity. In "Magic for Beginners" (2005), I analyze lack of closure, the use of multiple diegetic levels that do not maintain their separation, and playing with the role-reversal technique. Additionally, gender and biological sex are represented as separate, independent categories in the description of one of the main characters. Finally in "The Cinderella Game" (2009), I analyze how genre ambiguity is created in the story through blending fairy-tale structures with monstrous language. This ambiguity is disruptive and, I argue, tied to a thematic questioning of fairy-tale gender representations.

In Chapter 4, I suggest that destabilizing narrative structures that rely on specific configurations of gender and sexuality, such as the marriage plot, also destabilizes gender itself as a stable category. The two novels I analyze in this chapter, *Briar Rose* by Jane Yolen (1992/2002) and *Briar Rose* by Robert Coover (1996), do not thematically question how gender is conceptualized in their source tales, nor do they offer alternative representations of gendered identity. Rather the unsettling of narrative structures that are imbued with expectations for gendered identity in the novels implies that hegemonic or naturalized conceptions of gender, like the narrative structures, can be unraveled. My focus in this chapter is on how readers are compelled by textual gaps to make connections between different sections of these novels and how those gaps offer a space

for readers to imagine alternatives to what is represented in the novels. Gaps are created from section and chapter breaks as well as changes in narrator or focalizer. Many of the gaps are created by the metafictional narrative techniques both writers employ: suspension of the narrative, multiple focalization, embedded stories, competing narrative threads, and suspension and negation of closure. In examining the gaps, I foreground not only how structural shifts relate to thematic elements of the novels but how the gaps raise questions of gender.

The texts that I have chosen demonstrate a variety of ways in which the conceptualization of gender in a story, through techniques like representation and characterization, relate to the narrative strategies employed by the texts. While I offer readings that suggest representation and narrative structures can work in concert, in opposition, or by revealing alternate possibilities, I do not mean to provide a new set categories for analyzing retellings of fairy tales like Zipes's *revision* and *duplication* or Harries *complex* and *compact*. Rather than provide yet another set of categories that does not fully represent the complexity with which retellings re-envision traditional fairy tales and the ways in which ideology and narrative structures interact, I instead offer a means to describe how fairy-tale texts retell the traditional tales and transform the genre. Contemporary retellings engage their intertexts in intricate and complex ways that reflect contemporary theoretical work with gender, and the resulting degeneration of fairy-tale narrative patterns opens up fairy-tale fragments to be signified in new and multifaceted ways.

CHAPTER 1

WHO'S WICKED NOW? THE STEPMOTHER AS FAIRY-TALE HEROINE

In Garth Nix's "An Unwelcome Guest," one character asks, "Wickedness depends on where you're standing, doesn't it?" (32). Changing point of view, narrator, or focalizer is an obvious way to move to another position or standpoint. Telling a story from the witch's perspective is certainly a common strategy for deconstructing a good/evil binary, as it can blur that division as well as reverse it. A shift in perspective can complicate the reader's understanding of the source text, forcing her to ask what led her to align herself with one character or perspective over another. Retellings that shift the traditional fairy tales' perspectives, such as Gregory Macguire's *Wicked*, which retells *The Wizard of Oz* focalized through the Wicked Witch as the protagonist,[1] help audiences see how narratives are constructed and naturalized as authoritative in the source tales by challenging the seemingly objective position of the narrator and revealing its subjectivity. Retellings that propose to unmask or unmake wickedness are necessarily intertextual, but they also have a metafictional effect by suggesting that "reality" is subjective and can be challenged. A retelling cannot be read in isolation, as it will always invoke its source and suggest a comparison between the retelling and its source(s). This constant reference to and remaking of a source calls attention to the constructedness of both the source and retelling. If the retelling critiques the ideology of the source by showing its constructedness, the reader is further empowered to critique and question the source on her own. With fairy-tale retellings this questioning means unraveling the moral and social values bound up in the source tales—clearly products of specific places in time and

space, but naturalized as timeless and ahistorical by (1) narrative strategies that authorize

cultural perspectives as universal fact, (2) a body of scholarship that catalogues tales by

similarity across cultures, and (3) psychoanalytic interpretation of tales that argues for

universal themes. By pointing our attention to the constructedness of fairy-tale

ideologies, these retellings then also question the authority of such universalized values

in our everyday world—and calling forth the fictionality of such social norms or master

narratives is what I refer to as these retellings' "metafictional effect."

In this chapter, I explore how the narrative authority of the source texts are

challenged in certain retellings and how, in the process, gender norms and their

naturalization are also challenged. I argue that retellings of fairy tales that question the

genre's authoritative narrative patterns by unmaking the concept of wickedness also

encourage readers to recognize how constructed the gendered fairy-tale villain is. While

in the texts I discuss in the next chapter, narrative strategies undercut the plot-level

address of gender, here I focus on how self-conscious narrative strategies are employed to

deconstruct authorizing master narratives, and in the process the representation of gender

in those master narratives is also deconstructed.

The wicked stepmother is a staple of the popular fairy-tale tradition and arguably

its most famous villain. The wicked stepmother can be found in a variety of well-known

Western fairy tales, although many of her folklore predecessors are natural mothers and

less obviously wicked. The Brothers Grimm feature some of the best-known stepmothers,

such as those in "Cinderella" (ATU 510A), "Snow White" (ATU 709), and "Hansel and

Gretel" (ATU 327A) as well as lesser-known stepmothers, such as those in "The Six

Swans" (ATU 450) and "The Juniper Tree" (ATU 720), all of whom are wicked. Walt

Disney took the Grimms' wicked stepmother and gave her an unforgettable face in his

1937 film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Snow White's stepmother stands out for

her terrifying image as the wicked queen. Since then, the wicked stepmother has become

an icon, a fairy-tale type that invokes a vivid image at the mention of her role—so much

so that stepmothers in general have had to fight against their fairy-tale reflections. A

quick internet search for the term "wicked stepmother" produces hundreds of websites

dedicated to the plight of stepmothers fighting against the "wicked" moniker they have

inherited from fairy tales.

Robert Coover's novel *Stepmother* (2004) takes on the wicked stepmother figure

of fairy-tale tradition and offers a more complex depiction of the character. The plot of

Coover's novel is quite simple; the novel, however, is far from simple. Stepmother, the

title character and the novel's protagonist, is trying to save her daughter's life. Her

unnamed daughter has been found guilty of an unnamed crime against the court of

Reaper's Woods and is to be executed. Stepmother breaks her daughter out of prison, and

the two of them flee to the woods. Stepmother hides her daughter and, once the daughter

is recaptured, tries various schemes to prevent, or at least to delay, the planned execution.

She tries appealing to the Reaper, her archenemy and the authority in the woods, with

magic, sex, and reason, but she fails. Her daughter is executed, and Stepmother seeks

vengeance. The sequence "execution of her daughter and Stepmother's subsequent

revenge" is not a new plot to Stepmother, as she repeats it over and again with each of

her daughters, the many heroines of fairy-tale tradition:

How many I've seen go this way, daughters, stepdaughters, whatever—

some just turn up at my door, I'm never quite sure whose they are or

where they come from—but I know where they go: to be drowned, hung,

stoned, beheaded, burned at the stake, impaled, torn apart, shot, put to the

sword, boiled in oil, dragged down the street in barrels studded on the

inside with nails or nailed into barrels with holes drilled in them and rolled

into the river. Their going always sickens me and the deep self-righteous

laughter of their executioners causes the bile to rise, and for a time

thereafter I unleash a storm of hell, or at least what's in my meager power

to raise, and so do my beautiful wild daughters, it's a kind of violent

mourning, and so they come down on us again and more daughters are

caught up in what the Reaper calls the noble toils of justice and thus we

keep the cycle going, rolling along through this timeless time like those

tumbling nail-studded barrels. (1-2)

Stepmother explains that there is nothing new in what we are about to read; she has

experienced it all before and will experience it all again. But she still has to try to save

her daughter, and as readers we are left with the impression that she will keep trying with

each new daughter's appearance.

The impetus of the novel is summed up in its second sentence, narrated by

Stepmother: "my poor desperate daughter, her head is locked on one thing and one thing

only: how to escape her inescapable fate" (1). Throughout the novel, Stepmother and

other characters struggle against their predetermined fairy-tale characterizations and

roles. Despite recognizing the "inescapability" of their fates, they still try to change the

cycle of events they know will unfold by manipulating fairy-tale patterns to their advantage. Stepmother too is engaged "in what the Reaper calls the noble toils of justice"; as an adversary, she challenges the Reaper and his values. Unlike the Reaper, Stepmother is not motivated by a larger cause but works to save lives, one daughter at a time. And yet, her focused actions have a wider impact in that by trying to save the lives of her daughters, she begins to undo the master narratives that make her daughters victims. In attempting to change the rules, she shows that they are not "natural." There is no evidence in the text that she hopes to succeed, but she still fights the master narrative because it "sickens" her and *someone* has to.

In this postmodern retelling of fairy-tale conventions, Coover challenges the static, predetermined roles of fairy-tale characters. His characters express dissatisfaction with their positions in the narrative and a frustration with the predetermined roles they enact. This creates a tension between the prescribed roles of popularized, conventional fairy-tale characters like the wicked stepmother and a postmodern re-scripting of those roles. Coover's retelling wherein traditional fairy-tale figures are conflated into a few characters, fairy tales collide in Reaper's Woods, and characters are aware of their own irremediable place in a fairy-tale cycle works to unmake recognizable plots and motifs of well-known fairy tales. This collision of Coover's retelling of the fairy-tale genre and of the stepmother figure with what readers know and expect about fairy-tale stepmothers creates an intertextual space that allows for the exploration of further possibilities for fairy tales in contemporary Western societies and, as Cristina Bacchilega puts it in her review of *Stepmother*, "denaturalize[s] their hold on our imaginations" (198). In doing so, *Stepmother* challenges the authority of popular fairy-tale narrative patterns. In "Popular

Cultural Memory: Comics, Communities and Context Knowledge," Karin Kukkonen refers to these types of popular fairy-tale patterns as elements of "popular cultural memory" (261). Popular cultural memory is formed when a community shares knowledge of a text, it is "*constantly reconstructed*," and it is fragmented so that the "unspecified elements" of the text are objectified out of context and become "generalized . . . . into conventions, icons, character types and standard situations" (Kukkonen 263, emphasis in the original). These fairy-tale patterns—perpetuated by the reproduction of a fairy-tale "canon" contrived from a few select stories from Charles Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, and solidified by Walt Disney—are so pervasive that they dominate the possibilities for fairy tales in Western popular cultural memory and do not allow other stories to take root.

I argue that in this de-naturalizing project, Coover's conflation of fairy-tale conventions in the novel *Stepmother* rewrites female roles in popularized fairy tales by complicating the situations and motivations of the female characters and creating alternate paths to the end of the story. While his characters do not escape their predetermined fates and continue to enact the roles for which they are named, Coover's *Stepmother* explodes the standard notions of what a fairy-tale heroine is by revealing an (embedded) under-story that complicates and contrasts the popular fairy tales we have come to identify with the genre. I maintain that changes in narrators and focalizers, combined with plot elements that call attention to the constructedness of both individual fairy tales and the popular conception of fairy tales as a genre, destabilize and deconstruct the source fairy tales and the patterns that perpetuate the popular myth of what fairy tales are. *Stepmother* encourages readers' identification with a traditional villain through

shifting focalization, and it unmasks the limitations of one-dimensional gendered character types by collapsing the mainstays of the fairy-tale genre on a diegetic level. Though gender is not the focus of Coover's deconstruction, his critique of master narratives that regulate identity constructs necessarily relies on a demonstration of how gender is a constructed concept. His is a critique of the authority of narratives in general, and narratives about gender are disrupted as a consequence. Within a deconstructive framework, then, *Stepmother* performs a struggle that is aligned with that undertaken by feminist writers who try to reshape the gendered narrative patterns entrenched within the genre without losing the wonder that makes these fairy tales the stories to which we keep returning.

The Making of a Wicked Stepmother

By using well-known figures and motifs, rather than inventing wholly new ones, Coover forces a comparison between his Stepmother and her cruel foremothers. Coover collapses and dismantles a variety of tales, tale types, motifs, and functions in *Stepmother*, challenging not only the popular conception of fairy tales in Western culture, but also the structuralist base of fairy-tale and folklore studies. He does not change the actions of stepmothers who have been previously identified as villains (by Vladimir Propp) or as cruel (by Stith Thompson). Instead he shifts the focalization and the motivations for these actions, thus recontextualizing specific acts by cruel stepmothers to allow for meanings not possible in Propp's rigid and gendered functions[2] or Thompson's limiting motifs. For example, when Stepmother sends the "kind" stepdaughter on an impossible task in an embedded recounting of tale type ATU 480, The Kind and the

Unkind Girls (a tale identified as including the cruel stepmother motif S31), she does so as an act of protection. The "kind" stepdaughter is annoying and sanctimonious, and Stepmother is afraid she is going to hurt the stepdaughter; to avoid this, Stepmother devises ways "to get her out from underfoot" (23). The girl returns home "coughing up gold pieces," a curse courtesy of Stepmother's rivals (23). When the "unkind" daughter duplicates the task, she does so without Stepmother's blessing and in order to stand up for her mother. From Stepmother's point of view, she is protecting her "kind" stepdaughter by removing her from the house so as not to harm her. And though the "unkind" daughter is cursed to spit toads, it is not a punishment for her and Stepmother's greed (as it is often explained), but it is in reaction to her actively defending her mother. The actions of Stepmother remain consistent with those identified in the tale type, but in changing the context of those actions Coover challenges the traditional classifications and understandings of the fairy tale.

This generic self-consciousness relies on the reader's familiarity with the genre for any critique to work. Merja Makinen, in "Theorizing Fairy-Tale Fiction, Reading Jeanette Winterson," asserts that "[t]he fairy tale, as a well-known, culturally familiar body of texts with an almost canonical status . . . is a ripe site for both reduplication and rewriting, for pastiche and for parody, within a broadening of the concept of literary historical metafiction" (148). It is precisely fairy tales' status as popular cultural memory that makes them such a frequent intertext for retellings. In her article "Disrupting the Boundaries of Genre and Gender: Postmodernism and the Fairy Tale," Cathy Lynn Preston argues that "[i]n postmodernity the 'stuff' of fairy tales exists as fragments (princess, frog, slipper, commodity relations in a marriage market) in the nebulous realm

that we might most simply identify as cultural knowledge" (210). I would also add

"wicked stepmother" to Preston's list of examples. Preston's fragments are the

"unspecified elements" that exist out of context in popular cultural memory (Kukkonen

263). Coover's rewriting of the stepmother figure depends on the reader's familiarity

with the popularized stepmother character and the associated narrative conventions.[3]

Preston's focus on "fragment" is particularly useful for analyzing *Stepmother* because

Coover does not work solely from the "cruel stepmother" motif (S31), but instead

combines a variety of other stepmother motifs, stereotypes, and assumptions from

popular cultural memory.[4] Motifs are the smallest recognizable units of meaning in the

tales catalogued by folklorists, but fragments take their meaning from a wider cultural

context. The term "fragment" is more flexible than "motif" because it is not tied to

specific academic designations. Referring to "fragment," then, redirects the unit's

meaning by breaking up the motifs into smaller parts or placing them in different

contexts, thereby destabilizing motifs and opening the unit (stepmother) to multiple

possible meanings. As a fairy-tale fragment, whose reach is wider than the folklore

designation of "cruel stepmother," the wicked stepmother exists outside of any specific

tale. She is a stock character who is evil and always has been in popular cultural memory.

This cultural knowledge of the character creates the ground on which Coover's rewriting

stands.

The character of the stepmother has changed over the course of fairy-tale history,

and Coover's rewriting of the character plays with and builds on her complicated history.

The villains that we know and love as wicked stepmothers were not always *step*mothers

in fairy tales. As both Maria Tatar and Marina Warner, among others, have pointed out,

the Brothers Grimm made editorial changes to various stories from one edition of their collection to the next. These editorial changes led to the absent mother and the wicked stepmother becoming staples of the fairy-tale genre (Tatar, *Hard Facts* 36-7; Warner, *From the Beast* 210-13). The mothers of Snow White and Hansel and Gretel had been the first villains in their stories, siding with the father over the children and attempting to kill the children they viewed as threats. As the Grimms increased the violence in their tales in order to make them more didactic, they changed these wicked mothers into stepmothers, effectively killing off the good mothers to make room for the villains. In *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales,* Tatar states that "Wilhelm Grimm recognized that most children (along with those who read to them) find the idea of wicked stepmothers easier to tolerate that that of cruel mothers" (37).

Bruno Bettelheim's Freudian interpretation of the Grimms' tales in *Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* provides a psychological reason for Wilhelm Grimm's editorial choices. Bettelheim is fixated on the psychic and emotional development of a child who splits the mother into two people. Bettelheim suggests that "[t]he fantasy of the wicked stepmother not only preserves the good mother intact, it also prevents having to feel guilty about one's angry thoughts and wishes about her—a guilt which would seriously interfere with the good relation to Mother" (69). The figure of the mother is split into two roles in fairy tales, says Bettelheim, as a way to provide children with a means of handling the troubling emotion of anger toward a beloved parent. Bettelheim's application of Freudian theory, however, does not take into account the editorial history of the tale, nor does he recognize the literary features of the fairy-tale genre. Warner, in *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their*

Tellers, argues that the popularity of Bettelheim's application of Freudian theory to fairy

tales has done irreparable damage to the genre and to motherhood:

> The bad mother has become an inevitable, even required ingredient in
>
> fantasy, and hatred of her a legitimate, applauded stratagem of psychic
>
> survival. Bettelheim's theory has contributed to the continuing absence of
>
> good mothers from fairy tales in all kinds of media, and to a dangerous
>
> degree which itself mirrors current prejudices and reinforces them. His
>
> argument, and its tremendous diffusion and widespread acceptance, have
>
> effaced from memory the historical reasons for woman's cruelty within
>
> the home and have made such behaviour seem natural, even intrinsic to
>
> the mother-child relationship. It has even helped to ratify the expectation
>
> of strife as healthy and the resulting hatred as therapeutic. (212-3)

Warner's problem with Bettelheim's reading of the stepmother figure is relevant because

of its two-pronged attack. She not only recognizes what the reading has done to the genre

by reinforcing negative female stereotypes, but she also sees the damage caused by taking

a fictional genre and using it as treatment for psychological and social discord. Had

Bettelheim's theory not been so popular, perhaps the wicked stepmother would not be

embraced as *the* fairy-tale villain.

In this case the psychoanalytic approach neglects both the editorial and the

historical origins of the stepmother. Both Tatar and Warner point out that a

straightforward psychoanalytic reading of the wicked stepmother figure is incomplete, as

in addition to the Grimms' editorial practices, it neglects sociohistorical cultural context

(Tatar, *Hard Facts* 49-50; Warner, *From the Beast* 212-14). Both scholars refer to the

high rates of mortality for mothers during childbirth before medical intervention was commonly practiced: the stepmother was a common figure in history. Arguing that Bettelheim's approach "leeches history out of the fairy tale" (*From the Beast* 213), Warner suggests that the cruelty of stepmothers found in fairy tales has a historical origin in addition to the editorial one. With remarriage, the second wife could easily find herself competing with her stepchildren for the very resources for which she married (Warner, *From the Beast* 213). Thus, cruelty to her new husband's biological children would be a way to ensure survival for her own biological children. Warner also suggests that the villainy of the stepmother figure is partially the result of "psychoanalytical and historical interpreters of fairy tales usually enter[ing] stories like 'Cinderella', 'Snow White', or 'Beauty and the Beast' from the point of the view of the protagonist" (*From the Beast* 214). As Warner points out, popular fairy tales rarely involve first-person narration (*From the Beast* 215).

Coover's Unmaking of the "Wicked" Stepmother

Coover's use of first-person narration, with the stepmother telling her own experience of events, encourages reader-identification with Stepmother. In referring to Coover's rewriting of fairy tales in his collection *Pricksongs & Descants*, Jackson I. Cope states, "Coover in these stories accepts and preserves the integrity of the narrative history presented him in his folk sources. The significant difference is in the place of the narrator" (*Robert Coover's Fictions* 19). Coover employs the same technique in *Stepmother*; he shifts the narration out of extradiegetic narration and into multiple narrative positions for the stories being told. Stepmother narrates four out of fourteen

sections (including the first and last sections), and the extradiegetic narration in other sections is focalized through other characters. In *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies*, Cristina Bacchilega explains that "an external or impersonal narrator whose straightforward statements carry no explicit mark of human perspective—gender, class, or individuality . . . present[s] the narrator's vision as the only possible one" (34). Statements such as "'there was,' 'there are,' [and] 'she was,'" when made by an extradiegetic narrator, present information as objective knowledge or "fact" (Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales* 34). In this way, extradiegetic narration discourages questioning of the narrative voice, and "naturalizes" the "social conventions" presented by that voice (Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales* 34, 35). First-person narration, on the other hand, acknowledges the subjectivity of the narrative position.

Rather than presenting a single external narrator that functions as the moral authority for the tale, moral judgment shifts between Stepmother and the external narrator which prevents either authoritative voice from dominating the text. While the reader is made to identify with Stepmother through her position as narrator, other viewpoints are also present in the text and given authority by the external narrator. Stephen Benson, in "The Late Fairy Tales of Robert Coover," describes the voices of *Stepmother*—Stepmother herself and the extradiegetic narrator—as "dense, elaborately loaded and knowing," voices "freighted with knowledge and tradition" (123). Both narrating voices are fully entrenched in fairy-tale tradition and so carry with them the authority of that tradition. Coover not only provides Stepmother with a voice, but with a voice recognizable as knowledgeable in fairy-tale tradition. Thus the reader is able to both identify with Stepmother because of her first-person account, which diminishes the

distance between character and reader in the popular tales, and recognize that voice as imbued with the authority expected of a traditional extradiegetic narrator.

This inclusion of Stepmother as narrator makes it difficult to simply characterize her as wicked. In telling her own story, she provides motivation and context for her actions, thus questioning traditional interpretations of the same actions rendered in popular tales as "wicked," or "cruel" as Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index* would have it. This challenge provokes the question, who decides that the stepmother is wicked? The context in which a story is told is just as important as its plot and can allow for a more complex reading than critics like Bettelheim provide. Coover avoids a single interpretation of Stepmother's character and actions by shifting narration and focalization, but Stepmother never has total control over the story, as her inability to change it demonstrates. However, aligning the reader with Stepmother through narration and focalization encourages the reader's identification with a traditional villain. In doing so, Coover breaks down one of the barriers that constructs and reconstructs the stepmother-figure as wicked.

Postmodern fairy tales that are self-conscious of genre, using and abusing the fairy-tale form to comment on how the genre creates gender narratives without simply reproducing or reversing them, offer rich possibilities for both postmodernists and feminists wishing to reclaim a much-loved tradition for viable use in a culture at odds with the master narratives popular fairy tales can reinforce. Many feminist retellings of fairy tales in literature and popular culture often try to subvert what have been perceived as narrowly-defined roles for women in the popular tales, with role-reversal being a favored technique. Rather than creating "new" feminist fairy tales, these retellings seek to

reclaim the figures of women in the better-known tales where women are constructed in less than flattering ways: from passive objects of male desire to powerfully evil figures working from selfish motivations. Makinen explains that part of the task of feminists working with the fairy-tale genre is to establish a tradition in which women are not relegated to this victim/villain dichotomy where passivity is virtuous and activity villainous:

> feminist theorists point to the patriarchal inscriptions of the best known tales such as "Cinderella" and "Sleeping Beauty," with their vaunting of feminine passivity and rejection of feminine activity as wicked or monstrous. Feminist fairy-tale historians argue for women's active roles as tellers of stories and for tales that celebrate active female protagonists and feminine wisdom while acknowledging that these tales have been largely suppressed by the predominantly male compilers. (148-9)

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar refer to these dichotomous representations of women in fairy tales as "the angel-woman and the monster-woman" in their reading of "Snow White" in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (36).

Coover challenges the hold of popular fairy-tale conventions, including the female victim/villain dichotomy, by reducing many standard fairy-tale characters to their roles and then exposing the limitations of those roles with both characterization that conflicts with functions, thereby recontextualizing the functions and opening them up to new interpretations, and characters who show metafictional awareness of the predetermined roles and express dissatisfaction with them. Though Coover characterizes his characters against expected types (stepmothers can be kind and princes cruel), the

roles remain stable. Here Coover is drawing on Propp's functions from *Morphology of the Folktale*, which suggest that fairy tales can be analyzed by the actions of the plot which remain stable even as characterization changes among variants. This fixity of role is a thematic focus of the novel. In the second section, the external narrator asserts that in Reaper's Woods, "nature . . . is all" and "character is character and subject to its proper punishment; tampering with endings can disturb the forest's delicate balance" (11). This proclamation sets up a problem: within the fairy-tale forest, characters are defined by their functions, as many of their names demonstrate, and the endings of their stories cannot be altered. The external narrator speaks with the authority of fairy-tale tradition, suggesting that the characters have no recourse against these entrenched functions; however, Stepmother too speaks with authority and challenges this proclamation in the sections she narrates and by the actions she takes against the Reaper, who represents the traditional fairy-tale authority within boundaries of the storyworld of Reaper's Woods.

Coover conflates well-known fairy-tale stepmothers into one character, though Stepmother is complex enough not to be an archetype or stereotype. Likewise, he blends all fairy-tale maidens—"daughters, stepdaughters, whatever"—into a single role where biological relationship between Stepmother and child is less important than Stepmother's care-giving attitude toward the innumerable girls who need her help (1). Coover's conflation of fairy-tale characters is not unique to his novel, but is a part of long-standing fairy-tale tradition. As noted earlier, the Brothers Grimm changed mothers into stepmothers to make the violence perpetuated by the maternal villains in their tales more palatable, and Warner has noted that in French, the word for "stepmother is the same as the word for mother-in-law—*belle-mère*" (*From the Beast* 218). Warner describes how

mothers, stepmothers, and mothers-in-law present the same threat and occupy the same role in the fairy tales they inhabit, an observation also made by Tatar. For Warner and Tatar, female villains are anti-mothers, functioning as consumers rather than nurturers. Coover's characterization of Stepmother, though, is not one of role-reversal. Stepmother is no anti-mother; neither is she merely "good." Coover avoids reducing her into a flat fairy-tale character by writing her as one who tries to work against the predetermined pattern of events, and by allowing her to narrate. Stepmother is not a wicked cannibal bent on her daughter's destruction, and although she is doomed to fail, she does try to save all of her daughters.

While Coover takes on this task of disassociating "wicked" from "stepmother," he does not try to make a wholly virtuous character. Instead, Coover reconstructs his stepmother as a witch who tries to destroy her fellow characters, shifting not her action, but its context: "[Stepmother's] wickedness is beyond dispute, nor does she dispute it herself" (15). Stepmother has done all of the things we expect of witches—spells, murder, cruelty, selfishness—but "she has also been wrongly blamed" for all evil in the wood, whether it be imaginary or not (15). She is kind to her daughter, but that kindness is also a part of her larger struggle against naturalized, traditional authority. Coover's vision of the wicked stepmother is not a role-reversal into a good stepmother in order to make her into a heroine. While role-reversal would effectively challenge the ideology of the source tales, it would not destabilize the narrative authority of the fairy-tale tradition nor question the ways in which that ideology is authorized. By maintaining her villainy but complicating her character so that Stepmother is also wrongly accused of evil, Coover calls attention to the authorizing function of narrative. Coover challenges not only the

definition of wickedness but the authority with which fairy tales represent wickedness. He develops Stepmother as a character, exploring her motivation and ambition rather than changing her into an opposite type. Thus Coover creates a new story on old patterns by dismantling the caricature of the wicked stepmother.

Many of the characters in *Stepmother* are, like the title character, named for the roles they play which emphasizes their inability to escape their fairy-tale functions. Naming the characters for their roles restricts their available actions and allows for no possibility for development. Even Stepmother, the character who comes closest to breaking the fairy tale's hold on her life by working to thwart established plotlines, is only capable of being a stepmother figure; she did not become the stepmother figure after being something else. Stepmother explains, "I was born a long-nosed toothless crone with warts and buboes and hair on my chin and dugs that hang to my knees, or it seems that I was, for I have no memories of happier, more delicate times" (25). She is able to transform temporarily into something else, as when she transforms herself into a unicorn to break her daughter out of jail (7), but it is only a temporary change, and she reverts back to her "old" self earlier than she would like (22). Unlike other postmodern retellings that, recognizing the passage of time, conflate characters so that Beauty (of "Beauty and the Beast," ATU 425C) ages into Granny (of "Little Red Riding Hood," ATU 333), as in Coover's "The Door," characters in *Stepmother* do not have the possibility of transcending their appellations.

By utilizing the metafictional technique of creating characters aware of their existence in a fiction, Coover illustrates how one-dimensional victim/villain roles reserved for female fairy-tale characters constrain representations of femininity. Initially,

Stepmother identifies herself as a witch: "I'm a witch, I should be able to do something. And it's true, I do have a few tricks, though in general it's more useful to be thought a witch than to be one" (2). She suggests here that characterization is more powerful than the acts committed by the character. After being rescued from prison, Stepmother's daughter says, "I feel trapped by life itself, mama. I want more than this" (20). She articulates the problem of the novel: "she is who she is" (84). The fairy-tale characterizations are a trap and do not allow for the possibility of a richer existence. Women can be princesses or witches, but not much else. Stepmother is a conflation of the powerful female characters with agency, and they are mostly if not always dangerous in the fairy-tale realm.

As a part of his larger critique of traditional authorities, Coover, however, goes further to demonstrate that the misogyny of popular fairy tales also restricts representations of masculinity. Princes are less charming than they are criminal in Reaper's Woods. Coover collapses many of the misogynistic motifs of fairy tales into the characters of the princes and recontextualizes them so that their characterization as villains conflicts with their roles as heroes. The wickedest characters are, arguably, the two oldest prince-brothers who rape and murder maidens, mutilate their "simple" brother, and plot his demise. But even they are acting their parts, repeating the same fairy-tale plots of princes and brothers in the popular tales. Coover's version is more explicit about the rapes and murders, but the scenes recalled by the brothers invoke "The Six Swans" (ATU 451), "Brother and Sister" (ATU 450), and "Rapunzel" (ATU 310), all Brothers Grimm stories of maidens bedded, and sometimes wedded, after being found by prince or king. The prince brothers hope to encounter "naked or near-naked maidens" they can

rescue (41). They are aware of the damsel-in-distress plot and plan their time accordingly. Likewise, they recognize that though "their royal line is favored, . . . clever elder brothers are not, being often ill-treated by fortune and the way things are" (42). The brothers' malicious behavior is all part of the misogynistic patterns established by popular fairy tales. They cannot act differently because they are written in this way. They may seek to use the patterns to their advantage as they plot to use Stepmother's daughter to rid themselves of their youngest brother who is competition for the crown, but they are just fulfilling their princely roles; like Stepmother, they know they will not succeed.

Coover underscores some of the gender inequality in popular fairy tales by describing the hypocrisy with which differently-gendered characters' actions are valued in the context of the storyworld: "Rudeness here will get a girl in trouble quicker than anything. Boys can get away with rape, incest, theft, torture, murder, for them it's just part of growing up, but a girl need only be discourteous to have the world fall upon her like a dropped millstone," says Stepmother (4). As the daughter's crime for which she has been imprisoned is unnamed, the reader does not know why she has been incarcerated, although ultimately it does not matter because she, like her predecessors, is doomed to be the victim, just as the princes are fated never to gain the crown. But in contrast to the princes' plot, it is precisely her agency that dooms her. That Stepmother speaks this observation of hypocrisy, rather than it only being represented in the plot is important. Stepmother's narrative activity differentiates her from the other characters in collapsed, fixed roles. As a character, she is limited by the fairy-tale patterns that script the action of the plot. As a narrator, however, Stepmother is able to challenge those fairy-tale patterns

by presenting an alternative narrative authority that actively questions and opposes the patterns the characters must enact and the ways in which she is characterized.

Retellings of fairy tales that challenge gender norms by representing alternatives to the normative gendered behaviors of the source tales reconstruct gender norms so that a wider range of behaviors is authorized for women and men. Teresa de Lauretis argues in *Technologies of Gender* that "[t]he representation of gender *is* its construction" and that "the construction of gender is also effected by its deconstruction: that is to say, by any discourse, feminist or otherwise, that would disregard it as ideological misrepresentation" (3). The representation of gender in the source tales is tangled up with representations of good and evil. In deconstructing one ideological set, that of good and evil, the other is disrupted in the process.

Who's Wicked Now?

The ambiguity in *Stepmother* created from the narrative, character, and metafictional destabilizing eliminates the categories of good and evil that are seen as crucial to the fairy-tale genre, not by replacing them with new categories but rather by mixing them up so the differences are no longer clear. In light of these transformations, no character snugly fits into the role of Propp's villain. What is left, then, is the plot and its relationship to pattern. The wicked elements of the story are the popularized, conventional fairy-tale patterns that have been reproduced and naturalized as authoritative in Western popular culture and fix the characters of *Stepmother* into well-defined roles and plots. Coover unmakes these patterns in three primary ways: (1) he reveals that the patterns have a stranglehold on which conventions are recognized as

making up the genre in popular culture; (2) he challenges the authority of those patterns to have that hold by showing that they can be contested and are not inevitable; and (3) he offers a way to contest those patterns by staging these conflicts from within the stories.

Coover's deconstruction of fairy-tale narratives relies on his impeding of those narratives. His use of features uncommon in traditional fairy tales, such as first-person narration, complex and self-aware characters, and metafictional critiques, breaks genre boundaries and expands the possibilities for fairy tales as a genre in a postmodern and feminist culture. Coover's work in *Stepmother* is similar to that in his earlier novel *Briar Rose*, which suspends the "Sleeping Beauty" story (ATU 410) before the princess is awakened and a novel I will address in Chapter 4. In both novels, characters are reduced to functions, plots are unchangeable, and patterns are limiting. But unlike the characters of *Briar Rose*, Stepmother actively tries to change the patterns. The characters in *Briar Rose* do express frustration with the reiteration of pattern and even a desire to change those patterns, but they are not able to do anything to change their situations (only inhabit different variants of the same tale type).[5] Stepmother too is dissatisfied with her lot, but she does not accept that it is unchangeable. *Stepmother*, in offering possibilities for the genre, changes Coover's own pattern of deconstructing fairy tales. He does not reconstruct a new ideal for the genre, but lays it bare as a genre in flux, one that can change.

Coover does not make the fairy tale into something else but shows it for what it is: a complex genre that authoritatively disseminates narratives of social construction. He does not show us how to use fairy tales, but shows how the fairy-tale genre is being used. He reveals that the authority of the narratives and the authors to whom we attribute those

narratives are not as stable and as natural as they purport to be. Coover deconstructs the

popularized, conventional patterns of the Western fairy-tale genre to reveal them as

patterns *without* the authority that we, as authors, readers, and popularizers, give them.

The authority of the convention comes not from the tales or even their authors, but from

the people who assume them to be authoritative.

As such, it is only fitting that the protagonist's greatest enemy is Reaper, the

character who thrives on patterns and is intent on reproducing them: "[The Reaper] does

not disturb the way things are and is angered by those who do; thus his unending conflicts

with Stepmother, who would hang the lot and burn the forest down if she could, and all

the world beyond it" (13). By maintaining order, the Reaper preserves his authority in

Reaper's Woods, named after him for his constant presence. He is the authority *because*

the other characters recognize him as the authority. In the final pages of the novel, the

conflict between Stepmother and the Reaper comes to a head, and they discuss the

inescapability of plot and Stepmother's desire to change it:

> I [Stepmother] would like my daughter to be set free. I can arrange for her
> immediate disappearance, never to return, so she will never trouble you or
> the forest again.
>
> Alas, madam, I [Reaper] cannot do that. She has been adjudged wicked
> and must be rightfully punished.
>
> Others have gotten away with more. Send the barrel rolling without her.
> No one will ever know.
>
> You and I would know. Things will happen as they must. (87-8)

Stepmother suggests removing her daughter from the situation altogether in such a way as to maintain the appearance of fidelity to the established pattern. The Reaper, however, argues that the appearance of fidelity is not fidelity.

This simple exchange contains the crux of the novel: the Reaper argues that patterns do not change because they cannot change. This rhetorical move employs discourse that naturalizes the status quo. Altering the established patterns, even subtly, undoes their authority and jeopardizes the Reaper's position of power. Stepmother, too, recognizes the power in the minute changes but unlike the Reaper, she welcomes the rupture small changes can enable. Once one daughter escapes, after all, the pattern is broken and the possibility for further escapes exists. The immediate change that she seeks results in the saving of a life. She argues that making this change will have no *real* effect on the woods as "no one will ever know" about it. But of course the reader recognizes this for the rhetoric it is and sees the magnitude of puncturing the Reaper's authority: the reader will know. While the Reaper upholds the stability of patterns and the impossibility of altering the popularized, conventional patterns, Stepmother and the novel argue that the possibility for change is there and that, though dangerous, it is desirable. In her fight for justice, as opposed to the Reaper's adherence to punishment, Stepmother argues for the moral right of that change. But, paradoxically, by trying to work within the pattern and appealing to the Reaper, Stepmother, as a character, reaffirms his authority. As a narrator, however, Stepmother speaks authoritatively of new patterns that she cannot enact as a character. The narrative gives her authority that the plot does not, and the values she speaks become the privileged ones in the novel even though her actions as a character are not wholly successful.

The struggle between Stepmother and the Reaper mimics that of postmodern feminist re-tellers of fairy tales and the fairy-tale popularized tradition they are writing against. The Reaper's actions to impose order on the woods recall the editorial decisions made by the Grimms to Christianize folktales and make them more moral and proper behavioral models for children. While the Grimms began to edit the tales for a younger audience as the popularity of their work grew, their original intention was not to produce didactic tales for children. Instead their goal was a scholarly one, to preserve German folk traditions for adult audiences (Tatar, *Hard Facts* 11; Haase, Introduction 10; Zipes, "Once There Were" xxiv). Like the Grimms' initial purpose of collecting folktales to preserve German folk culture, the Reaper seeks "[t]he revelation of some kind of primeval and holy truth . . . the telltale echo of ancestral reminiscences" (14).

While the Reaper represents the Grimms, the socializing force behind some of their editorial revision is represented by the Holy Mother. In seeking the revelation of truth and to impose order, the Reaper introduces the Holy Mother, Stepmother's other enemy, to his woods. The Holy Mother is a Virgin Mary figure representing Christianity and the figure of Mary in tales like the Grimms' "The Virgin Mary's Child" (ATU 710). In this tale, Mary commands a girl not to enter a forbidden room, much as in "Bluebeard" (ATU 312), and then punishes the girl when she does so by banishing her from heaven, removing her ability to speak, and later stealing her children so that the girl is accused of cannibalism and is to be burnt at the stake until she confesses her sins. Like the Reaper, Holy Mother's emphasis is on obedience and punishment. Stepmother refers to the Holy Mother as the Ogress, recalling another staple of female fairy-tale villains. In tales like "Sleeping Beauty" (ATU 410), the mother-in-law, who is sometimes identified as an

Ogress, attempts to eat her grandchildren. In her dual naming of Holy Mother/Ogress,

Coover conflates two traits often associated with wicked or cruel stepmothers—

punishment and cannibalism. She is offered as a counter-character to Stepmother,

embodying a recognizably cruel mother for Stepmother to be contrasted against as a

potentially good mother—one who wants to nurture and help her children rather than

consuming and punishing them as popularized, conventional fairy tales would have her

do. The Holy Mother/Ogress is, like the Mary of fairy tales, a character who guards souls,

not lives; collects confessions of sins rather than offers aid; and "mak[es] one feel guilty

merely for having been alive" (84). While certainly not a positive portrayal of

Christianity, the Holy Mother is introduced as a character brought to the forest by the

Reaper to possibly civilize the fairy-tale characters (12). Thus aligned with official

religion and inviolable tradition, the enemies of Stepmother represent the authority of the

popular tales against which Coover is writing and the means by which the authoritative

narratives are naturalized.

Coover's most recent work, then, continues to provide a useful metaphor for the

retelling and study of retellings of fairy tales. As a stand-in for the canonical male

authority responsible for compiling and editing the most popular Western tales, the

Reaper is, as the silent pun in his name implies, Grimm. Metaphorically, this establishes a

struggle between the Reaper, a representative of the popularized, conventional patterns

associated with the fairy-tale genre and the authoritative male traditions that employ and

disseminate those patterns, and Stepmother, a character aligned with feminist and

postmodern writers who revolt against the patterns, trying to unmake them and resist the

tendency to repeat what has come before. The novel *Stepmother* enacts the challenges

that arise in trying to rewrite the fairy-tale genre: reproducing patriarchal and heteronormative ideology, relying on male-authored and edited stories and ignoring the contributions of women to the genre, granting authority to an already narrowly defined definition of fairy tales and the genre, and perpetuating the misconceptions that fairy tales are simple stories for children. The tension implicit in these challenges stems from the necessity of using the popular, conventional tales as fodder in order for new tales to be recognized as retellings or fairy tales.

Tales that adhere to the established patterns are limited by those patterns, and Coover demonstrates how characterization and representation cannot fully rupture those conventional patterns. As a character Stepmother is never able to truly break free from the plot set in motion in the first lines of the novel. She makes a lot of noise, and shatters a few of her enemies, but the cycle in which she spins remains unbroken. She is doomed to repeat the scenario again, watching her daughters be executed to the delight of the folk and seeking her revenge for their deaths in a "kind of violent mourning," again and again, "keep[ing] the cycle going" (Coover 2). She maintains the power of the traditional wicked stepmother, with the ambiguity of her character transforming her into a believable protagonist, but Stepmother's authority is achieved through her role as focalizer and narrator. Therefore the novel does break new ground and revises the fairy-tale genre, even if plot conventions keep her character powerless. Writers of fairy tales today who are dissatisfied with the roles of women projected by the seemingly endless reproduction of a small canon of popular tales are struggling, like Stepmother, with the narrative patterns that came before them.

The future of postmodern feminist fairy tales lies in stories that can rewrite the genre without totally unmaking it. As mentioned in my introduction, Jack Zipes, in *Relentless Progress: The Reconfiguration of Children's Literature, Fairy Tales, and Storytelling*, explains that contemporary writing of fairy tales by women does not seek to construct a new, feminist fairy-tale canon. Rather, women write fairy tales and retellings that challenge the canon, featuring "baffled and distressed" characters struggling against "absurd situations," and Zipes emphasizes these writers use of "degenerative" narrative strategies (*Relentless Progress* 130). This I believe is true of Coover's work as well. Coover's novel does not reveal liberated women and strong heroines in opposition to the popular tales that are the fodder for his novel; however, by using narrative strategies that show that carefully scripted gender roles are unsatisfying and detrimental in and beyond the fairy-tale storyworld, Coover's novel does feminist work, even though that is not the main focus of his poetics. His critique of misogyny is part of his larger critique of the authority of authors and genre.

Coover's construction of *Stepmother* exhibits how similar the most popular fairy tales in Western culture are by how seemingly effortlessly they are collapsed into their characters' roles. In making the characters aware of their ultimate fates, Coover gives his characters, well, character. The princes, for example, though repugnant, are more complex than their popular predecessors—they have motive for the rapes and murder they commit and are nevertheless clever in their manipulation. The stories never reach a level of realism, as Coover of course is not attempting realism, but they are more interesting as characters because they are provided with motivation and agency. The plots remain stable, but the details and distortions that Coover supplies enrich the fairy-tale

genre he is parodying. The possibility of evolution here lies not with the characters in Coover's novel, but with the reader. The characters are bound by their roles, and as they struggle to change their predicaments, they are only further embittered by the trappings of the fairy tale. The characters are trapped by the plot, but the *reader* is shown how complex fairy tales can be and is led to question the authority of the popularized conventions. The reader is free to understand the characters in a new light—traditional heroes are rendered less gallant, victims are availed of agency, and villains are humanized. As Brian Evenson argues in *Understanding Robert Coover*, "[b]y clearing a space for his readers, [Coover] allows them to move into the freedom that they always have but which they sometimes are unable to perceive" (22). The reader is provided with a way to reimagine the genre.

Though *Stepmother* is clearly a postmodern novel, it also is a fairy tale. It contains all of the recognizable traits of the fairy-tale genre and then plays with them. The novel does not abandon fairy-tale patterns in remaking the genre, but instead shows possibilities for those patterns. Coover's work reminds us that fairy tales are not static monoliths. Though the patterns may appear to be stable, there is room for play. Near the end of the novel, when confronted with Stepmother's plot to save her daughter from execution by preventing the Reaper, a fixture at all executions, from attending the event, the Reaper says, "Not all legends are true" (89). When the Reaper tells this to Stepmother, he is explaining that though the pattern is for him to be at all executions, it is not a causal relationship nor does it hold some essential truth about how executions happen. Therein lies the future of the genre; fairy tales as they have been canonized are not "true." Just because a narrative pattern is pervasive, does not mean that it is essential to the genre of

fairy tales. The tone of *Stepmother* is fairly pessimistic as the characters are trapped in roles they do not want, always repeating an endless cycle. But by emphasizing the constructedness of the patterns, the text encourages the reader to recognize those patterns as open to change. If the patterns are constructed, then they can also be broken, and the plot can continue. Writers can rewrite the popular fairy tale, changing the patterns, and *still* write fairy tales.

Understanding Wickedness

    Troll's-Eye View: A Book of Villainous Tales (2009), edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling, is a collection of fairy-tale retellings for young readers that take as their subject the villains of the traditional fairy tales. The collection works from a similar premise as Coover's *Stepmother*. It complicates the concept of "wicked" in fairy tales and offers various models of doing so with narrative strategies similar to those used by Coover: first-person narration by the conventional villain and the conflation of tales and characters. Some stories also offer differing characterizations of the villains and/or contexts for their actions, such as role-reversal, so that the traditional hero is the villain and the villain the hero. Unlike Coover's novel, however, most of the stories (three of the fifteen retellings are poems) are conventional narratives and do not contain obviously metafictional elements. As one would expect of a collection aimed at adolescents, there are no discussions of fiction or narrative within the stories. The stories in *Troll's-Eye View* and *Stepmother* are doing very different things and approach the fairy-tale genre quite differently, in part because of the difference in audience. The stories do not deconstruct master narratives or interrogate how narratives authorize and limit lived

experience, as Coover's novel does. However, these stories still invite questions about narrative authority through the intertextual space created via their changes to recognizable fairy-tale plots and characters. In making a traditional villain sympathetic, whether through characterization or shift in narrative voice and perspective, these stories question the authority of the traditional fairy tales on which they are based. These retellings are very different from Coover's *Stepmother*, yet still manage to question narrative authority through the remaking of wickedness.

While the collection offers a variety of stories and poems of villains remade, I focus on only two here. Both stories, like Coover's novel, impact the reader's understanding of gender as a construct by centering on wicked witches in maternal roles and offer a new way of understanding their "wicked" behavior. Though less obviously deconstructive and not overtly metafictional, Garth Nix and Catherynne M. Valente, like Coover, use shifts in narrative point of view and focalization to encourage reader sympathy with wicked fairy-tale witches and challenge the construction of "wickedness." In this discussion, I show how a retelling can question the stories we tell ourselves about gender as a part of a larger investigation into *how* we tell stories. Garth Nix retells the events of "Rapunzel" (ATU 310) from a perspective that questions the moral positioning of the source tale (what constitutes wickedness), and Catherynne M. Valente offers a prequel to "Hansel and Gretel" (ATU 327A) that tells an origin story for the witch. In both cases, the authors are interested in exploring the motivation of a traditional villain (why does the witch do this?) in a way that creates reader sympathy with that villain. In neither case does the retelling contest the events of the source tales. These witches did indeed do what they are accused of, just as Stepmother is also guilty of her crimes in

Coover's novel. But by providing a different perspective, these retellings complicate their sources and the moral ideology embedded in them. Because these stories are about women and women's actions and desire, and the source tales have been read as stories that socialize women, the retellings additionally critique the gender norms embedded in the tales.

Garth Nix's "An Unwelcome Guest" (2009)

In "An Unwelcome Guest," Rapunzel has broken into the Witch's tower room and will not leave. A magic treaty between humans and magical folk prevents the Witch from calling the police (out of their jurisdiction) or simply kicking her out (Rapunzel invoked guest status by eating the Witch's food), so she is left to devise a way to trick Rapunzel into leaving. She does so by declaring Rapunzel to be a prisoner and then facilitating her "rescue." Rapunzel resists rescue because she is possessed by a Bad Old One, and the Witch ends the possession by cutting Rapunzel's hair. What is interesting about Nix's "An Unwelcome Guest" is not the plot twist that the bad Rapunzel is the antagonist and possessed by one of the Bad Old Ones. It would be more original to leave her as the annoying teenager she is described as rather than explain away her behavior with magic. Instead Nix characterizes the Witch figure as good-natured and law-abiding, and her actions as valid and noble. She is more complex than her fairy-tale source; however, this complexity does not result in a name.

The protagonist, the Witch, is named after her role in the story, just like Coover's Stepmother. She does not have a proper name, but Rapunzel does. The Witch's familiar has two names: Jenny, her cat name, and Jaundice, her "evil" familiar name (31). Another

familiar is mentioned in passing, as going by both Bluebell and Fangdeath (32). The external narrator refers to the cat as Jaundice for the first three pages of the story, but switches to Jenny after the Witch argues that Jenny is not evil and the Witch is not wicked (32). The narrator primarily, then, refers to the familiar as Jenny, not Jaundice, affirming the Witch's position that they are not evil by nature. Rather the evil appellation is a name used to enact a role dictated by outside forces. The Witch, however, is named only for her role as a witch. Like the brownie, who is also a magical creature, the Witch's identity is determined by her function. What is interesting is that she could have a name within the logic of the story, as there is another witch referred to as Decima (32). But the fact that she does not have a name, not even Mother Gothel, the name of the witch in some variants of the Rapunzel story, emphasizes that what is at stake in this retelling is not who the witch is, but rather *how she is seen*. Nix does not alter or contest her identity as a witch, but rather calls into question the assumption that she and her actions are necessarily wicked.

Like Stepmother, the Witch is forceful about her identity. "I *am* a witch," she reminds her familiar and the reader (30). What she disputes is the "wicked" moniker. "I've never been wicked," she says. "Least, not by my measure. Just independent-minded" (32). At this point her feline familiar Jenny states the point of the entire collection, "Wickedness depends on where you're standing, doesn't it?" (32). The identity of the Witch is not in question, just the idea that witches are necessarily evil or wicked. Unlike other tales in the collection that offer motivations that humanize the villains retold, this story questions the subjectivity of the adjective, recognizing that wicked is a moral judgment that is relative. From Rapunzel's point of view, the witch's

behavior is wicked: she imprisons Rapunzel in the tower, lets the rescuers be blinded, cuts Rapunzel's magical hair, and banishes her. From the Witch's point of view, her behavior is valid: Rapunzel breaks into the Witch's tower and demands to be pampered, casts the spell that blinds the rescuers, and is in fact possessed by an ancient evil. The Witch is the hero because she is fighting a larger evil.

The changes Nix makes to "Rapunzel" are mostly plot-level changes; however, the story is focalized primarily through the Witch and not Rapunzel. In addition, when the story is focalized through Rapunzel, the narrator's characterization of her encourages reader alignment with the Witch. Rapunzel is said to be "thinking evil thoughts" (40) and described as "scowl[ing]" (40), "snapp[ing]" (41), and "shriek[ing]" (41) when she speaks. While the Witch is also described as angry and frustrated when speaking, her speech is more often than not marked with "said" or "asked," though she does once "hiss" at Rapunzel (34). The Witch does have adjectives like "sternly" describing how she "said" something (29), but overall the Witch is given more neutral speaking verbs than Rapunzel. These narrative cues encourage the reader to identify with the Witch, even when the actions are seen from Rapunzel's perspective. This shift in focalization results in confusion of the concepts of good and evil, which are clear in the source tale.

The choice of focalizing primarily through the Witch demonstrates the plot's theme by showing how a story can be dramatically different after shifting point of view. The thematic argument that *good* and *wicked* are subjective terms, not universal moral traits, explicitly challenges the assumption in the source tale that there are good and evil opposites. In Nix's story neither the Witch nor Rapunzel is truly evil, as Rapunzel is ultimately not responsible for her actions. This argument encourages the reader to

question the source tale: Why does the witch lock Rapunzel in a tower? Why does she want her? How are the witch's actions characterized? By demonstrating that the naturalized values of the source tale are subjective, Nix arms his reader with tools for interrogating the fairy-tale intertexts, which opens up the source tale to new interpretations. In performing the deconstruction of one set of fairy-tale values, the story opens up other fairy-tale constructs, such as gender, for destabilization.

Catherynne M. Valente's "A Delicate Architecture" (2009)

"A Delicate Architecture" is narrated in first-person, and the adult narrator begins by recounting her life as a child who lives in a house of spun sugar with her confectioner father. Four pages into the story her father reveals that she too is a confection crafted from sugar (147). She does not believe him, as "every girl has a mother" (147), but his claim is shown to be true by the end. Though the story being retold is "Hansel and Gretel," this information is withheld until the final paragraph, effectively barring reader bias brought from the source tale. Reader sympathy for the girl is created before it is revealed that she is a child-eating witch. It is also four pages in that her name is revealed to be Constanze. Unlike the unnamed witch she will become in "Hansel and Gretel," this girl has a name, an identity not correlated to her function. Constanze becomes a skilled confectioner like her father, and he takes her to Vienna and the emperor. Alonzo, the father, declares that she is not human but his greatest confection. Thus Valente also invokes "The Gingerbread Man" (ATU 2025) as a source tale. Exiled from the court he loves, Alonzo offers his daughter to the emperor if only he can return. In a scene that is quite disturbing to read in first-person, Constanze is forced to her knees as Alonzo cuts

her face to show that her blood is not real. The empress approaches, objectively and without sympathy from Constanze's perspective, and tastes the raspberry blood (152). Constanze is relegated to the kitchen and strung up like a "length of garlic" and used like other kitchen ingredients (153).

This first-person filter controls the characterization of events and encourages reader identification with the narrator. As Constanze is objectified and consumed, the first-person narration shows her distress, compelling the reader to empathize with her and identify her as the victim of the story. Constanze is first objectified seven pages into the story by the emperor who refers to her as a "thing" (150). At this point, her character and personhood have already been established for the reader by a first-person account of her happy childhood with an adoring father. Her father also refers to Constanze as a "thing" (151) as well as "nothing but sugar, nothing but candy" (152). This statement is in sharp contrast to the doting father Constanze has already described. She narrates, "My father drew a little silver icing spade from his belt and started toward me. I cried out and my voice echoed in the hard, white hall like a sparrow cut into a fork" (151). The reader is not allowed to experience the events from another perspective or another character's interpretation of those events. Toward the end of the scene, Constanze says, "She [the empress] looked at me, her gaze pointed and deep, but did not seem to hear my sobbing or see my tears" (152). The reader does not know if the empress recognizes Constanze's distress, but the first-person point of view encourages reader identification with the subjective view of Constanze who sees herself as a person and a victim. It is also important to note here that the story is told in past tense, meaning that Constanze is narrating from a point subsequent to the events of the story (after she becomes the witch).

The objectification of Constanze by the other characters in the story, their refusal to see her as a person despite her demonstrated autonomy, is in sharp contrast to the first-person narrative that demonstrates her agency. Her alterity means that they see her as an object, or at least that she interprets their actions to mean that they see her as an object. This discontinuity encourages reader sympathy. The first-person narration aligns with her, and being exposed only to her thoughts means that readers are not allowed to sympathize with or be given motivation for the characters who abuse her. Readers are clearly encouraged to see her as a victim both because of the torture plot and the sympathy created by her first-person account of her emotional reaction to that torture. At this point in the story, readers are not aware that she is the witch from "Hansel and Gretel," but allusions to "The Gingerbread Man," in which the cookie-protagonist flees various characters that want to eat him, are clear. After the death of the emperor, empress, and Alonzo, Constanze is eventually released by a butler who was kind to her when he was a kitchen boy. She is old and withered, and she flees into the forest, where she builds a house made of gingerbread and candy from ingredients she begged from nearby villagers. It is at this point that she identifies herself as a witch (156), and in the last paragraph (157) it becomes clear of which story she is the villain.

The discontinuity described above also provides a motivation, and perhaps justification, for the acts for which the reader knows her and which make her wicked: she eats human children because she has been tortured and eaten by humans. But she has also been trained by her father to enjoy the taste of bones. Constanze's father gives her utensils made of bone to use and tells her not to forget the children who crushed the sugar she eats when she, herself, is a child in the first scene of the story (145). This is

interesting social commentary on child labor and how those who enjoy the products of that labor are complicit in the abuse of the children. But it also implies that we see what we want to see and ignore what we want to ignore, which sets up the idea that perspective is subjective before the story unfolds.

After she tells her own story of victimization and abuse, the revelation that Constanze is Hansel and Gretel's witch provokes the reader to reconcile this story with that of the source, and to perhaps see "Hansel and Gretel" from the witch's perspective. The use of first-person narration by the traditional witch enacts the story's argument that the traditional witch is not simply evil. She becomes a villain for a reason, and for Constanze it is in response to the way she was treated by others. The argument that she is constructed as a witch easily translates to the story as a whole and its source. It is not difficult to make a metafictional leap into understanding how narratives like fairy tales construct concepts of good and evil. The reader is enabled to ask why certain characters are wicked. While Nix's story encourages questions more along the lines of who decides what evil is, Valente's story encourages questions about who is telling the story and who is the subject of that story. "A Delicate Architecture" suggests that wickedness is not a stable identity and that characters are not wholly one or the other, enabling the reader to approach its fairy-tale intertexts with a critical eye towards subjectivity.

While neither Nix nor Valente directly addresses gender issues in their stories, their unmaking of wicked witches troubles the good/evil binary of fairy-tale characters and the popular idea that fairy-tale women are either victims or villains.[6] These writers, like Coover but for a different audience, tackle larger narrative authority in their

retellings, and in doing so question the master narratives embedded in the source tales

that regulate gender. Coover makes a direct critique of gender inequality in *Stepmother*,

but his emphasis is on how gendered behaviors are characterized, reminding readers that

the values associated with those behaviors are constructed. While Nix and Valente do not

directly address gender inequality, their focus on the construction of wickedness and how

it is a subjective value demonstrated specifically through female characters questions

why some behaviors of women are characterized as good and others as wicked.

The texts in this chapter demonstrate the restrictions of the fairy-tale genre when

it is conceptualized only in traditional ways and how it authorizes subjective viewpoints.

Role-reversal and complex characterization can be disruptive and question the authority

of the genre, enabling readers to approach other fairy-tales critically; however, these

texts' disruptive narrative strategies fortify thematic arguments about subjective

constructions of wickedness and gendered identity, destabilizing their fairy-tale intertexts

in the process. While they do offer critiques of gender, gender is not the primary focus of

these texts' destabilizing of fairy-tale authoritative patterns. In the next chapter, I

examine texts that do take traditional constructs of gender as their thematic focus and use

similar role-reversal and characterization techniques to do so. However the fairy-tale

films in the next chapter do not also engage in metafictional and thematic critiques of

fairy-tale authority, but rather reinforce it despite their more progressive representations

of gender. Metafictional engagement with fairy-tale authority has the potential to disrupt

not just a single source tale, but the wider fairy-tale genre. Examining fairy-tale retellings

for destabilizing and metafictional narrative strategies in conjunction with plot and

character provides a more complex understanding of the ways in which fairy-tale

retellings can disrupt generic expectations.

CHAPTER 2

THE SHOE STILL FITS: *EVER AFTER* AND THE PURSUIT OF A FEMINIST CINDERELLA

As I have explained, role-reversals, including re-characterizing traditionally passive fairy-tale heroines with behaviors traditionally gendered as masculine, are fairly common feminist retelling techniques. Though it may seem like these are straightforward cases of representation, these techniques do have great potential in demonstrating how gender is a socially constructed concept inscribed onto an un-gendered body. This is particularly true in those cases where the characters demonstrate a range of gendered behaviors suggesting a continuum of gender possibilities rather than fixed femininity and masculinity. As readers and viewers, we attach symbolic meaning to the appearance and behavior of the characters in a known fairy-tale retelling. We expect that the physical descriptions in fairy tales correlate to the virtues and vices of the characters (for example, that characters identified as pretty are good and as ugly are bad) because that is a familiar pattern in traditional fairy tales. Twisting those characterizations in the retelling opens up an intertextual space in the retelling for readers to question the ideology attached to those characterizations in the source tales. Making the princess in need of rescue capable of rescuing herself, for example, encourages a reader to question why she needs rescuing in the first place. Princesses who slay dragons offer a different model of femininity than those who are captured by them, and princesses who make friends with dragons complicate that even further. It is easy to see why this is such a popular technique. However, if this is the only major intervention to the source tale, the feminist retelling

can fall flat, or more problematically, reinforce the very traditionally gendered behaviors they seek to unmake.

Presenting a strong, independent female protagonist in contrast to her passive traditional counterpart, as many retellings of "Cinderella," "Sleeping Beauty," and "Snow White" do, challenges the representations of femininity in the source tales and helps to show that gender is a construct. But if this strong, more feminist princess is placed in the same plot as her predecessors, one that emphasizes her marriage above all else, her characterization is limited by the expectations of the plot. Characters who represent a model of gender that challenges traditional representations of gender, but who act in a plot that necessitates strict patriarchal gendered behaviors, most notably marriage and rescue plots, can duplicate the gendered patterns of the traditional characters they are supposed to challenge. This results in a tension between the princess's characterization and the plot she enacts—between the concept of gender represented by characterization and the expectation for specific gendered behaviors bound up in the structure and patterns of the plot. In this chapter, I analyze three fairy-tale films to demonstrate how plot structure and narrative framing can contrast and complicate the feminist work of both re-characterizing traditionally gendered princesses as strong and independent and representing gender as a multi-faceted construct with a range of femininities and masculinities. I focus on how the marriage plot in particular limits the ways in which the more feminist heroines can be represented.

The 1998 film *Ever After: A Cinderella Story*, directed by Andy Tennant and starring Drew Barrymore, is a delightful retelling of "Cinderella" (ATU 510A) for a

contemporary audience who has grown up with second-wave feminism and its arguments about the problematically sexist representation of women. Unlike other popular literary and cinematic Cinderellas who need the help of birds (Grimms and Disney), mice (Disney), or fairies (Perrault and Disney) to accomplish chores and prove themselves worthy of respect and love, Danielle (Drew Barrymore) wins the affection and esteem of her prince (Dougray Scott) by being smart, caring, strong, and assertive. She does not rely on the prince to save her or on others to solve her problems. What sets Danielle apart from her fictional and cinematic predecessors, as well as from the other women in the film, is her self-confidence and her lack of interest in material wealth, social status, and prince hunting. However, she does not completely break from tradition, and the film fails to question the patriarchal structures of the "Cinderella" story.

Some critics and reviewers have labeled *Ever After* a feminist film due to Danielle's strength in contrast to the expected passive heroine of popularized fairy tales. Despite disagreements as to the merits of the film, popular reviewers have often bestowed the "feminist," or even "post-feminist," label upon it,[1] calling attention to its "girl-positive" (Schwazbaum) and "female empowerment" (Burr) qualities. While academic critics have been more resistant to calling *Ever After* a feminist film, their analyses emphasize characteristics that generally fit feminist ideology, and they praise the film for its efforts at representing a strong heroine. Elisabeth Rose Gruner claims that the film "rewrit[es] Cinderella for a feminist, perhaps even a post-feminist, future" in the article "Saving 'Cinderella': History and Story in *Ashpet* and *Cinderella*" (146). John Stephens and Robyn McCallum recognize it as "a story of female resistance within a dominating patriarchy" in their article, "Utopia, Dystopia, and Cultural Controversy in *Ever After* and

The Grimm Brothers' Snow White" (206). And Cathy Lynn Preston argues that *Ever After* attempts to "redefine gender boundaries" and "respond to the last thirty years of feminist critique of gender construction" in popular fairy tales in her "Disrupting the Boundaries of Genre and Gender: Postmodernism and the Fairy Tale" (206, 203). These critics' careful wording situates the film firmly in feminist territory by recognizing what it attempts to do with gender representation without stating directly whether or not it succeeds in this portrayal. Their resistance to explicitly making a "feminist" claim for the film, as many of their popular counterparts do, indicates a tenuous relationship between the pro-girl posturing of the film and contemporary feminism.

Resistance to calling a popular fairy tale "feminist" is not new to fairy-tale studies. In the early 1970s, Alison Lurie and Marcia R. Lieberman began the debate as to whether or not traditional fairy tales could be feminist. The problem Lurie outlined was that though there were strong female heroines in the traditional tales, they had been hidden from view by the male-dominated publishing industry. Fairy tales, even the traditional ones, she argued, have strong female characters and are indeed feminist. Lieberman responded that the Disney versions constituted the primary image of fairy tales and that the passive heroines within them superseded lesser-known heroines who might have had some pluck. The *popular* fairy tales, the ones actually affecting mass culture, she argued, were not feminist. They reinforced limiting notions of femininity and worked to acculturate girls into passive roles under patriarchy.

As the heroine of a popular retelling of a traditional fairy tale, Danielle's 1998 appearance would seem to suggest that the debate over feminist/antifeminist fairy tales has been settled. Not only is she a strong female lead who represents the ideals of girl

power and liberal feminism, but she recaptures the strength of the older heroines Lurie described. Preston suggests that *Ever After* "plays off of what both folklorists and feminists have asked for: an acknowledgment that there have been many versions of 'Cinderella' and that there is a need to return, as it were, to a Cinderella figure who is a 'shrewd and practical girl persevering and winning a share of the power'" (204). Danielle, according to the impressed prince, "swims alone, climbs rocks, and rescues servants," suggesting a turn in American cinema toward a strong fairy-tale heroine.

Though certainly a strong heroine, Danielle is focused on her immediate world, and her actions change her individual circumstances more so than the society that created them, despite the utopian philosophy she claims to value. Stephens and McCallum explain that "Danielle's free-spirited behavior overturns social hierarchy, codes governing female conduct, and dress regulations" (208); however, all of these changes affect only Danielle. She overturns social hierarchy, but only for herself. In their discussion of agency in the film, these same critics note the inadequacy of Danielle's shift from a "vision of a just society . . . to the more private well-being envisaged within the schema of romantic love" (Stephens and McCallum 208). Though Danielle speaks of changing society, her actions primarily affect her own social standing through marriage. I agree that containing Danielle's utopian ideology within the frame of heterosexual romance is problematic; however, my criticism is not of the film's romantic vision of utopia, but instead of its narrow depiction of feminism.

Ever After assumes a feminist stance, but offers a mass-mediated idea of feminism in which individual women can be strong and achieve equality through personal actions that do not, however, work to challenge or change the underlying

patriarchal structure of society,[2] and these heroines can still be (sexually) desirable and marriageable in doing so. The problems identified in second-wave feminism are simplified, emptied of radical critiques of systemic gender inequality, and marketed to young women.[3] This limited version of feminism, which draws on girl power and liberal feminism, reinforces patriarchal authority by its focus on individual achievements and by isolating one woman, the heroine, as an exception to standard feminine behavior. To denaturalize the idea of feminism *Ever After* projects, I focus on the limited power of Danielle's action within the film's dynamics of narrative authority, the highly gendered representations of Danielle, the reversal of the damsel-in-distress plot, and the re-gendering of the fairy godmother as male. The fragments of the "Cinderella" tale that are maneuvered most consistently in *Ever After*—the phrase "once upon a time," the dress, the rescue, and the godmother—placate a late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century audience's expectations of popular feminism, but fail to move the "Cinderella" story beyond the structural misogyny bound up in the tale's plot and reinforced by its narrative frame.

Framing Danielle's Feminism

Ever After opens with a frame narrative in which Danielle's elderly great-great granddaughter, the Grand Dame (Jeanne Moreau), tells the Brothers Grimm about Danielle, the "real" Cinderella. This storytelling scene then shifts into the primary embedded tale that reclaims the Cinderella story for Danielle and a contemporary, mainly female, audience before returning once again to close the frame at the end of the film. In the final scene of Danielle's story, after she has wed her prince, Danielle chides Prince

Henry, "You, sir, are supposed to be charming." He replies "And we, Princess, are supposed to live happily ever after." "Says who?" she challenges, and he replies, "You know? I don't know." The two are in the center of the screen, framed by the window behind them and they kiss. This scene has been cited for its genre-establishing (Gruner 150), transitional (Preston 200), and metafictional (Stephens and McCallum 204) work. In addition to the scene's already identified metafictional work, it also serves to question the authority of fairy-tale formulas. The characters recognize the pattern, but not the authority that gives it power. Jessica Tiffin, in *Marvelous Geometry: Narrative and Metafiction in Modern Fairy Tale*, claims that "they leave [the pattern] uninterrupted" (203). As the scene ends and the film returns to the frame story, the audience is prompted to ask why the Grimms (or other fairy-tale collectors) get to establish the authoritative version of this fairy tale. While the visual framing of the couple and the closing kiss in Danielle's story place the film into fairy-tale and romance genres, the dialogue opens up questions of agency.

In positing Danielle's story as an alternative to the Grimms,' the frame further explores the struggle of who gets to tell stories and whose versions become most authoritative. Preston suggests that the film questions male authority:

> In the case of *Ever After* the appeal to authority is multivocal. The film invokes the historical authority of male tradition (Perrault, Brothers Grimm, da Vinci), which it then contests through a performance of gendered genre . . . . By disrupting genre boundaries, she [the Grande Dame] is able to tell a different story, one that played to the competing authority of a popularized 1990s film. (211)

Similarly, Gruner argues that *Ever After* "finally privileges the story of woman over the history of men, the passion of women over the rational rulings of men" (146). Stephens and McCallum add that the frame "asserts that the story is told by a woman and therefore presents a female point of view, and that this view is reliable. As Marina Warner suggests about other female narrated folktales, it authenticates the tale's misogynistic attitudes" (203). While I would agree that the film cultivates the privileging of female voice and desire and that it certainly questions male authority, the means by which *Ever After* is constructed and the ways in which the story is told undermine the girl power and liberal feminist stance it makes by qualifying and containing feminist action and speech within patriarchal structures and frames. The female narrator and overtures to feminism conceal, as Warner suggests in *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*, the male authority behind the female voice (208-9).

While the film seems to offer an alternative to the authority of the Grimms, Perrault, and Disney by presenting a superficially feminist heroine (who despite her displays of independence still needs a happily-ever-after with a charming prince to be satisfied) in a female-narrated story, the frame ultimately undermines the film's representation of a strong heroine and female narrative authority. The film begins and ends with a crane shot of the carriage of the Brothers Grimm (Joerg Stadler and Andy Henderson), which has brought them to an unnamed Grande Dame they address as "your majesty." The Grande Dame has sent for the Grimm brothers to "set the story straight." Their version of "Cinderella" is not correct, and due to her heritage, *she* possesses the painting, the shoe, and therefore, the true tale. However, *Ever After* undercuts the dominance of the Grande Dame's version by positioning her story against the Grimms'

and by containing it, since the audience knows that the Grimms did not change their text. Ultimately the frame depicts the suppression of female agency and the power of men to control narrative.

The Grande Dame imitates the narrative patterns of traditional fairy tales in telling her story, but in doing so she grants authority to the traditional tales. She begins her story with "Once upon a time, there lived a young girl who loved her father very much," a phrase that immediately establishes Danielle in relationship to a patriarchal figure. The Grande Dame recognizes that her opening gesture is an allusion to the Grimms, but her use of the phrase is ironic. As explained by Elizabeth Wanning Harries in *Twice Upon a Time: Women Writers and the History of the Fairy Tale*, a fairy-tale opening gesture is usually used to distance the audience from the time and place of the tale and to denote that a fictional space is being created (104). However for her reclaiming to work, the Grand Dame clearly requires her audience to recognize the historical setting of her story. This claim of truth suggests a blurring of genre identified by Preston and Gruner as "legend" (201) and Stephens and McCallum as "historical narrative" (206).[4]

The legend status offers a narrative validity to the Grande Dame's version of "Cinderella" that other storytellers cannot claim. Preston argues that the shift from fairy tale to legend "provid[es] a fictionalized historical precedent" for the assertive and independent young women viewing the film, thus validating their own transgressive behaviors (202). For the young female audience members who identify with Danielle's assertive behavior, the fairy tale-*cum*-legend, which blurs truth and fiction, authorizes their own behavioral possibilities. Thus with her use of the formula, the Grande Dame mocks the Grimms for not believing that the story could be true. However, because the

formula "once upon a time" denotes a fairy tale, not legend or history, she undercuts her own assertion of truth.

In closing her story (and the film), the Grande Dame declares that "the point, gentlemen, is that they lived." As Gruner, Preston, and Stephens and McCallum have identified, the film conflates fairy tale with legend and history, thus allowing the Grande Dame's assertion "that they lived" to make an argument for the validity of her version of the tale, which would seemingly trump all other versions due to its claim of truth. However, the use of "gentlemen" reminds the film's audience that without the Grimms and their authority, there would be no situation requiring the telling of Danielle's story. The setting of the storytelling and the narrative patterns employed by the Grande Dame are reactionary and framed by male authority.[5]

The film does not give the Grimms the possibility of revising their "Cinderella" to mirror the authentic tale provided by the Grande Dame or to acknowledge the authority of her tale. They come, they listen to the nice old lady tell her story, and then they leave, taking her story with them. The brothers acknowledge other versions of the story (Perrault's glass slipper), but it is not those versions that the Grande Dame sets out to correct. Though she claims higher social status, wealth, corroborating evidence, and a historical setting for her version, the power remains with the Grimms. While her telling of the story provides a context for the plot of the film, it does not impact the most authoritative version of the text. The Grimms' carriage, which begins and ends the movie, remains a closed vessel, containing within it Danielle and the Grande Dame's story. Though the film offers an alternative version of "Cinderella" more amenable to contemporary audiences and points to problems with the Grimms' story, the narrative and

visual framing implicitly validates the authority of the Grimms' version, thus

undermining the feminist ideology of the entire film.

Danielle's Masque

The establishing scenes of Danielle's happy childhood introduce the issue of

gender to the film and Danielle's lack of normative gender performance. A young

Danielle (Anna Maguire) is portrayed as a typical tomboy who nevertheless attempts and

fails to act like a girl in her stepfamily's presence. In the first scene of the embedded tale,

an exchange between the eight-year-old Danielle and her male, peasant playmate Gustave

(Ricki Cuttell) establishes the underlying problem. Upon seeing his tomboy friend clean

and in a dress, Gustave exclaims, "You look like a girl!" Danielle replies, "That's what I

am, halfwit." Danielle's problem is that she is a girl who does not act or look like a girl.

Judith Butler argues in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* that

gender is performative. Rather than expressing an essential identity, it is constructed by

the repetition of bodily "acts and gestures" within social and political contexts (Butler,

Gender Trouble 173). Repeated behaviors are assigned gender labels within a regulating

social practice, which Butler identifies as "reproductive heterosexuality" (*Gender

Trouble* 173). Danielle is not shown on camera deciding to be a boy or a girl and then

acting accordingly. Instead, she is shown responding to other characters and situations

and using a male or female identity in order to solve problems. Though it seems her own

choice would be a potentially androgynous tomboy position, her behavior is gendered by

the characters in the film and the viewing audience. Danielle is identified as female by

the romance plot that ultimately results in her marriage to a male, but her behavior in the

film is a mix of gendered behaviors ranging from hyper-feminine to tomboy. In "Film

and Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," Mary Ann Doane describes the

performance of hyperfemininity as a masquerade that distances the female spectator from

the on-screen, amplified expression of femininity, thus constituting "an

acknowledgement that it is femininity itself which is constructed as a mask—a decorative

layer which conceals a non-identity" (426). The masquerade "flaunt[s] femininity"

showing that "[w]omanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed" (Doane 427).

Like Butler, Doane notes, "Femininity is produced very precisely as a position within a

network of power relations" (434).

Though gender performance is not as simple as a changing of clothes, Danielle's

performance of femininity and masculinity is often marked by her change in wardrobe

(from her blue and white servant ensemble to a variety of fancier dresses). Danielle's

masquerade—her donning of the costume, mannerisms, and behavior of a lady—is

contrasted with her masculine behavior. In *Female Masculinity* Judith Halberstam

accounts for socially accepted forms of female masculinity, such as those demonstrated

by Danielle; "Tomboyism tends to be associated with a 'natural' desire for the greater

freedoms and mobilities enjoyed by boys. Very often it is read as a sign of independence

and self-motivation, and tomboyism may even be encouraged to the extent that it remains

comfortably linked to a stable sense of girl identity" (6). Though the characters in the

film tolerate Danielle's masculine behavior and the audience applauds it, her

heterofemininity is never truly at risk. The balance of female masculinity with feminine

masquerade ensures that though Danielle may act like a boy, she is still recognizable as a

girl. Halberstam argues that female masculinity is less threatening when it is coupled with

easily identifiable heterosexual behavior. Thus, Danielle's masculine behavior as an adult is rendered unthreatening because she is playing a part in a heterosexual romance, and her masculine behavior as a child is naturalized as a phase to be outgrown.

Danielle's gender performance is in negotiation, and she cannot conform to either expectation presented in this early scene. Danielle is quickly identified as a tomboy in this first scene of her story. Later, when she is dressed in nice, clean clothes to meet her new stepfamily, at Gustave's identification of her as a girl, Danielle responds, "Boy or girl, I can still whip you." The two children engage in an off-screen mud fight, and when approached by the now muddy Danielle, her father (Jeroen Krabbé) says, "I had hoped to present a little lady, but I suppose you'll have to do." Because she is presented as a tomboy, Danielle's femininity is called into question by the authority figures presented in the film: her father and her new stepfamily. Danielle's father recognizes that she behaves in a mode more masculine than feminine and points to that disjunction as a problem. While her father hugs Danielle and laughs when speaking the chastising line, the words themselves denote disapproval of her unladylike appearance and behavior. Resolving this lack of sex-gender coherence is a task that she accomplishes as the film progresses.

Through Danielle, gender is depicted as constructed rather than as an essential trait. Her performance of gender varies, with Danielle performing behaviors coded as masculine or feminize depending on the social context of the scene. Her gender performance is also tied to class performance. The use of the term "lady" alludes to class position as well as femininity. Danielle is the daughter of a merchant landowner and becomes the stepdaughter of a baroness. The scene in which she meets her new stepfamily foregrounds Danielle's gender as a product of social negotiations and

demonstrates how these negotiations are related to class equations. It establishes a pairing of gender and class mobility that Danielle continues to enact throughout the film, as her occasions for performing a more intensified femininity also require her to perform nobility.[6] Halberstam has noted a greater level of gender fluidity available to those with lower class expectations (57-8), as Danielle's wearing of her more masculine masks while in servant dress demonstrates.[7]

The remainder of the film, which focuses on Danielle's adult life, reflects her ability to alternate differing degrees of feminine and masculine behavior in a way that, to contemporary spectators, still falls comfortably within her representation as a female heroine. Her stepmother acts predictably as the female villain who cannot accept Danielle's new or "feminist" behavior. Much later in the story, Rodmilla (Anjelica Huston) blames what she calls Danielle's "masculine" behavior on her "masculine" features and on being an only child raised by a man. Indeed, Drew Barrymore, the actor playing the adult Danielle, while certainly pretty, is not Western idealized supermodel skinny. Though she is hyperfeminine (curves, long hair, soft edges), in her film roles and public discourse on her life she has been infantilized in a way that presents a non-threatening female sexuality (perhaps due to Barrymore's child-star status and the film's family audience). The scene in which Rodmilla accuses Danielle of being masculine begins as a touching implication of the possibility of mother-daughter bonding, as Rodmilla gazes fondly on Danielle, recalling her similarities to her father. However any possibility of a reconciliation is harshly cut short as Rodmilla reidentifies Danielle as a rival for her husband's (Danielle's father) affection and her daughters' future. The stepmother acts as a female agent of patriarchy, ensuring that the patriarchal ideals of

gender behavior and hierarchy are not solely passed on through male figures. It is clear from Rodmilla's comparison of Danielle to her father that masculine traits on a female body/mind are unacceptable.

Danielle's transgressive behavior is enabled by men, in reaction to men, or framed by men, and is thereby safely contained in a clearly patriarchal structure. As an adult, well knowing that dressing above one's station is a crime, Danielle masquerades as a courtier to rescue a male servant from being shipped off to the Americas (one of the few times when her actions change the fate of others). When she demands his release, her assertive behavior and argument attract the attention of the court, including that of the prince. The man with whom she disputes responds to her forcefulness by shouting, and Prince Henry chastises him, "You dare raise your voice to a lady." Danielle's behavior is masculine, though her dress is feminine. The man with whom she contends responds to the masculine behavior, the prince to the feminine and class-inflected dress. The film seemingly offers flexibility in defining femininity. Danielle is able to act out-of-character for a woman, by communicating with men on equal terms and taking direct and aggressive action to solve problems she encounters. She is, however, the only woman in the film given this opportunity, and it is explicitly linked to a masquerade as a person of higher class.

Danielle's many masks present both gendered and classed positions, and she easily changes her gender and class identifying markers as needed. Her trouble arises in choosing the correct mask for the situation. Danielle must wear the mask preferable to the powerful men whose gazes frame her life: her father in her childhood and Prince Henry in her adult life. The audience is led to identify with the prince's position through point-

of-view shots that align the camera with Henry's perspective in several scenes (such as when Danielle climbs the rockface) so that we fall in love with her for her "spirit," just as he does. The framing gaze of men is supported by the narrative. Once Danielle's story has started, the narrator breaks in after the death of Danielle's father to say, "It would be ten years before another man would enter her life." The elision of ten years not only suggests that nothing important has happened, but completely ignores the plethora of servants, neighbors, courtiers, and other males whom she must inevitably have encountered over the time, including her best friend Gustave. The only men who matter are patriarchs or potential patriarchs. Danielle's story consist primarily of how two men influenced her—one raised her to be like him, the other raised her to his own position in society. Though she seems to have gender fluidity, the gaze of Danielle's father and the prince are naturalized throughout the film so that she appears to have gender coherence. The tomboy is naturalized as a phase and the hyperfemininity of masquerade is expected behavior for a princess.

Girl Power to the Rescue

More like the young women of today than those of the time frame of the film, Danielle, as well as the actress who plays her, is a symbol of the girl-power culture that began in the 1990s, most famously embodied (and marketed) by the Spice Girls. Though it has more radical roots, aspects of girl power have become a commodified form of feminism that emphasizes individual strength and independence (while still being sexually attractive) over working toward social or systemic change, thereby limiting the ways in which girl power can affect social change. While not calling it girl power, Jack

Zipes, in *Relentless Progress: The Reconfiguration of Children's Literature, Fairy Tales, and Storytelling*, takes issue with this representation of feminism in contemporary fairy tales, claiming that "the majority of fairy tales produced for children and adults pay lip service to feminism by showing how necessary it is for young and old women alike to become independent without challenging the structural embodiment of women in all the institutions that support the present socio-economic system" (129). In an earlier work, *Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England,* he argued, "The significance of the feminist fairy tales lies in their Utopian functions to criticize current shifts in psychic and social structures and to point the way toward new possibilities for individual development and social interaction" (Introduction 32). Tales that "pay lip service to feminism," often by relying on the popularity of girl power as in *Ever After*, but do not challenge systemic sexism, fail to make the social criticisms that mark many feminist fairy tales as potentially transformative.[8]

A common strategy in feminist fairy-tale retellings is to empower a traditionally passive heroine, popularized in tales of the innocent persecuted heroine[9] like "Cinderella," "Sleeping Beauty" (ATU 410), and "Snow White" (ATU 709). The value systems within the tale that privilege certain behaviors—bravery, cleverness, dedication, attention to beauty—remain consistent. While certainly a feminist move that accounts for some of the girl-power heroines popular in the late twentieth century, this reversal from passivity to activity does not necessarily challenge the *systemic* misogyny in fairy tales, thus failing Zipes's criteria for a feminist fairy tale. In the preface to *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches*, Donald Haase argues, "Some feminist fairy-tale analyses remain stuck in a mode of interpretation able to do no more than reconfirm stereotypical

generalizations about the fairy tale's sexist stereotypes" (ix). I would argue that his

critique is also valid for fairy-tale retellings like *Ever After* that remain focused solely on

reversing the representation of the traditionally passive heroine. An exclusive focus on

representation confirms yet again sexist "stereotypical generalizations" of how fairy tale

heroines are supposed to behave.[10]

Role-reversal is employed in *Ever After* to demonstrate Danielle's strength as a

character and to show that she is not a stereotypical weak princess. However, these

scenes are undermined by a context of male social regulation that devalues her acts of

strength. The themes of rescue and role-reversal are first associated with Prince Henry.

He is shown escaping from his tower room down a rope of bed-sheets, a scene visually

reminiscent of "Rapunzel" (ATU 310). As a reversal of the princess-locked-in-a-tower

motif, this is a visual cue to the viewer that it is not the prince who will be doing the

rescuing in *Ever After*. In two separate scenes, Danielle subverts the damsel-in-distress

trope when the prince attempts to rescue her. The first is when they encounter Gypsies in

the forest and Danielle rescues the prince; the second is at the film's conclusion when she

has been sold into slavery and extricates herself from danger before the prince can save

her. In both cases, her subversion is undercut. Danielle's decisive action is transformed

into a joke and explained away. So even though these scenes subvert traditional fairy-tale

tropes about women, the deconstructive work that they do is also undermined by the

ways in which female strength are contextualized.

In the first scene in which Danielle subverts the damsel-in-distress plot, her role-

reversal is softened by humor. Danielle rescues Prince Henry from Gypsies in the wood.

Danielle and Henry are lost, and she has climbed to the top of a tree-covered rockface to

get a better sense of their location when Gypsies arrive and attack the prince. They steal

her dress, which she has cleverly removed as it would have made it impossible for her to

climb the rockface, and Danielle enters the fray by jumping on a man's back, fists flying.

The prince barters for her release, as two people are no match for a band of Gypsies.

Danielle asks for her dress and a horse, and the leader tells her she can have anything she

can carry, expecting Danielle to take the dress. Instead, she lifts the prince over her

shoulders in a firefighter's hold and begins to carry him off. Plot-wise, this creates a light

moment in the film where everyone can laugh at Danielle's pluck. But it also undermines

her courage and resourcefulness by turning it into a joke. The joke only works if the

audience (and the characters in the film) recognizes that Danielle is acting out of

character for a woman. She is bold and strong, and is rewarded for those characteristics

by the Gypsies with the return of her dress, the use of a horse, the freedom of the prince,

and a night of revelry. In fairy-tale tradition, there are many heroines who succeed by

being clever and strong, so this is not an original move on the part of the filmmakers.

However, in many of these tales, like "Molly Whuppie" (ATU 327B) and "Kate

Crackernuts" (ATU 306 and 711),[11] the heroine's actions do not inspire laughter in every

witness to her cleverness.

      Danielle is only allowed to act outside of gender norms as an adult when the men

in her life—the prince, her father, Gustave, and her fairy godfather, Leonardo da Vinci—

permit it. Significantly, Danielle's feminism and strength are superfluous when it comes

to being assertive with the prince about who she is. The day after the Gypsy revelry and

after Danielle has been beaten for her insolence at punching her stepsister (the punch is a

popular example of the film's girl power), Danielle attempts to tell the prince she is

Danielle De Barbarac, but he refuses to hear her as he is too excited by his own plan to create a university. She tries to correct his misconception more than once, and he silences her, a silence she accepts as they kiss. While in terms of plotting, this is an effective way of deferring her revelation to the climax of the film, rhetorically this scene demonstrates Danielle's inability to speak when confronted by male hegemony; rather, she is seduced.

The second scene in which Danielle defies the damsel-in-distress stereotype demonstrates male objectification of women as villainous. After she has been rejected by the prince for lying about her identity, but before the requisite happily-ever-after ensues, Danielle is sold by Rodmilla to Pierre le Pieu (Richard O'Brien), a lascivious neighbor who, dressed in black, is a walking stereotype of male villain. Despite variations in how the two men are presented, le Pieu and Prince Henry are not very different in their attitudes: both wish to claim Danielle for their beds. At the masque, Henry intended to announce their betrothal without her consent or foreknowledge. Then, after she has been sold, Danielle is shown in shackles and the unnamed threat of rape lingers in the exchange between her and le Pieu. Danielle's restriction and immobility, however, is the primary danger; she is clearly denied her freedom *because she is a woman* and therefore can be possessed—either as servant or wife. Danielle has no say in either case. When told that she belongs to le Pieu, Danielle responds, "I belong to no one." Then she skillfully takes his weapon when he least expects it. Using sword and dagger, she defends herself and threatens le Pieu with death. He hands over the key to her shackles and all is well.

Even in this moment of triumph, when Danielle is subverting the princess-rescue-story pattern by "rescuing" herself, the action is qualified and framed by men. Not only are le Pieu and Henry depicted as polarized forces, but Danielle says to le Pieu, "My

father was an excellent swordsman, monsieur. He taught me well. Now hand me that key or I swear on his grave I will slit you from navel to nose." Her swordplay and courage are attributed to her father: she is not allowed to have this moment of strength for herself. It is not Danielle who learned well, but Danielle's father who was a good teacher. Her ability to defend herself is explained away by her father's everlasting influence, just as is her utopian personal philosophy of social equality.[12] When Danielle explains to Prince Henry that Thomas More's *Utopia* is the lasting connection she has to her father, Prince Henry exclaims, "That explains it."

Once Danielle has left the home of le Pieu, the prince rides up to rescue her, and is surprised that she has escaped so expeditiously. He recovers enough to propose to her, sliding her lost shoe on her foot in the defining "Cinderella" scene. In their exchange before the shoe is returned to its rightful owner, Danielle is struck, not by the prince's apology for his rejection of her, but by his use of her name. Up until this point in the film, Henry has called Danielle "Nicole," the pseudonym she gave Henry while dressed as a courtier and her mother's name. A romantic might argue that in this moment he sees her for who she truly is and loves her for being Danielle, not a courtier who reads Thomas More. However, the romance depends upon Danielle's abandonment of her earlier commitment to protecting her father's land and property. She marries Henry, neglecting her previous desires to run her father's property, and goes on to become the princess and live in the castle. She leaves everything she has been fighting for when marriage is offered.

The Absence of Female Power

The only undeniable location of female power in the traditional versions of "Cinderella" is with the fairy godmother in Perrault's version and the dead mother's spirit in the Grimms.' In other words, the most potent figures in both stories are women in maternal roles who provide Cinderella with the material goods she needs to win the prince. Warner explains that both the godmother figure and the mother's spirit wield a great deal of power, marking their influence for the success of the tale (*From the Beast* 48, 205). Jeana Jorgensen notes in "A Wave of the Magic Wand: Fairy Godmothers in Contemporary American Media" that fairy godmothers are notably absent from many traditional versions of "Cinderella," but that "[l]ater literary incarnations of fairy tales often feature fairy godmothers whose appearances erase Cinderella's initial efficacy" (219, 217). In other words, by "helping" Cinderella, the fairy godmother displaces the heroine's agency. In *Ever After*, this character and all of the power associated with her is made male. The role of the fairy godmother is split between two men—Leonardo da Vinci (Patrick Godfrey), who builds Danielle wings for the masque and breaks her out of her cell, and the adult Gustave (Lee Ingleby), who finds Leonardo when he is needed and enacts Danielle's first makeover when she goes to court to save a servant. In both cases, men provide Danielle what she needs to win the prince. Implicitly, then, power is denied to women, but its removal is less noticeable because that act is performed by queered men who do not threaten heterosexual romance.[13] By reversing the gender of the godmother, this feminist version reinforces male authority and removes the main locus of female power from the story entirely.

The magic situated with the maternal figures in the traditional tales is replaced by logic and science, or "forward thinking" as the prince would say, in this modernization of the "Cinderella" story. Gruner argues that because Leonardo (and not the prince) frees Danielle from the cellar, "art, not love, is her true salvation" (149). However, I would argue that it is not Leonardo's art, but his logic and science that frees Danielle. Rodmilla has locked Danielle in the cellar to prevent her from attending the royal ball, and Leonardo breaks her out by removing the door's hinges. Gruner argues that magic being replaced by rational thought implies that as "Cinderella's situation is realistic, her solution might be as well" (147). But with that realism comes the erasure of female power. To further deny female authority, when forced to choose by her stepfamily between her father's book and her mother's dress, Danielle chooses her father. As both of Danielle's parents are missing from the majority of the film, these two objects, which are always mentioned in the context of the parent who left them to her, come to symbolize her parents. *Utopia* both symbolizes her father and represents Danielle's desire for a more just society. The dress indicates her mother's legacy and her entry into the current social order. She is of course denied both objects by her stepfamily, and the book is burned. The dress resurfaces as the dress she wears to the masque, but that too is not just her mother's dress anymore; it has been transformed by Leonardo into a costume that marks Danielle's metamorphosis. Adorned by wings, her costume is symbolic of both butterfly and angel: the heroine is transformed from the tomboy of her childhood into a virtuous woman worthy of being a princess. Leonardo's wings, not her mother's dress, make Danielle's appearance at the masque spectacular. The mother, the *woman*, in fairy godmother is erased, and her erstwhile power is firmly placed in the hands of men.

The Obligatory Happily Ever After

The problem with *Ever After* is not that it fails as a feminist revision of "Cinderella." It is certainly a feminist film that undermines traditional representations of femininity from popular versions of "Cinderella." However the popularized, restricted, and simplified version of feminism it presents masks the elements of the film that reinforce social and patriarchal structures that determine and limit the action of the plot and the possibilities for Danielle as a character. The film both presents a feminist re-envisioning of "Cinderella" and reinforces patriarchal authority. The reversal of the passive-heroine trope, while certainly offering an alternative to the weak-minded Cinderellas of the past, further naturalizes gender expectations and the idea that demonstrations of female strength are akin to gender equality. Danielle's stylized strength surfaces in reaction to and is enabled by hetero-patriarchal ideology. Her independence and self-reliance as a character are possible because of the liberal, sensitive, forward-thinking men who *allow* her to step outside of gender boundaries, not because she herself has fought for and won a state of gender equality in society. Female power in *Ever After* is contained, undermined, and erased. The men are still in control, and despite Danielle's strength, she does not have more options than the passive Cinderellas with whom she is supposed to contrast.

Masking its reliance on the patriarchal structures of the romance plot by dressing its heroine in the mass-mediated commodification of girl power, *Ever After* offers no critique of systemic gender oppression and creates in Danielle a Cinderella who may be more outspoken, literate, and active than her predecessors, but who is ultimately sucked back into heterosexual romance. She is so embedded in the naturalized complex of

gender, class, political power, and upward mobility that any power she might wield as a strong, feminist individual is bound by the patriarchal authority demonstrated throughout the film. As a feminist character, Danielle is limited by the stereotypical girl power and liberal feminism popular in today's media. Her feminism has thus been distilled into a matter of representation: show a strong woman standing up for herself and working for equal relationships with the men in her life, and a film can be called feminist. This perspective on feminism suggests that as a social movement it is no longer necessary because women *are* strong; the simplified version of feminist goals has already been met. Its logical conclusion is that there used to be something wrong with women—they were weak and passive—but now that they are stronger, everything is okay. Such a view does nothing to critique social structures, and it suggests that feminism is only about women, not about gender and society.

Furthermore, the feminist idea of gender as socially constructed is used in a restrictive way in *Ever After* to create the tension between Danielle's hyperfeminine masquerade and her supposedly inherent androgyny or masculinity. The multiplicity of her masks reaffirms for an audience familiar with basic concepts of feminism that girls can be physically and intellectually strong without questioning their femininity. The characters in the film may take issue with Danielle's masculinity, but today's young female audience embraces it. Gender is once again naturalized, as is its coupling with heterosexuality. Although initially skeptical about her eventual partner, Danielle never challenges the romantic myth of compulsory heterosexuality, embracing the soulmate wedding and happily-ever-after ending when it is presented to her. As an audience, we suspect that Danielle would have been fine if she had not married the prince, but the film

does not allow for that possibility. Once Danielle is married, there is no representation of her desire to reform society because her story ends there. In concluding Danielle's story with her marriage, the film privileges it. Tiffin, too, argues that *Ever After* "ultimately celebrates a fairy-tale romance which ends in the heroine's acquisition of wealth and social position through marriage" (204). In his review, Michael Wilmington states that the film "might have ended more logically and congenially if Danielle had run off to organize and care for country peasants with the good stepsister . . . . But you don't want to mess with fairy tales too much. Especially when everybody knows the ending." Danielle believes and enacts upward mobility through the American ethic of hard work, but reinscribes the notion that for women upward mobility is still best attained by marrying a prince. Danielle, though a stronger and more independent heroine than her foresisters, has yet to outgrow the glass slipper worn by the traditional, passive Cinderellas of Charles Perrault, the brothers Grimm, and Walt Disney.

After *Ever After*

  Ever After is an excellent example of the kind of fairy-tale film marketed to young adult women and adolescent girls at the turn of the twenty-first century. It is a film that offers a safe model of feminism that *appears* to be on par with contemporary gender theory and encourages girls and young women to be independent and self-reliant. However, because the possibly subversive ideas about gender are safely undermined by reliance on patriarchal plot structures, the feminism represented in the film is not socially disruptive. The film demonstrates through characterization that gender is not an innate trait but rather a social construct that can be manipulated at will; nevertheless, it

contradicts that characterization with plots that show marriage as the ultimate goal for women, one that supersedes any social work in which one might be interested. But *Ever After* is only one example. Since *Ever After* was released in 1998, there have been a variety of fairy-tale films that update popular princess stories. I briefly offer here two additional examples of the tension between the representation of gender as a concept and the narrative patterns retold from source tales. While the manifestation of the tension differs in these films, they demonstrate that this discontinuity is a hallmark of this subgenre of fairy-tale films for a young female audience.

Sydney White (2007) and *Aquamarine* (2006) are two more recent fairy-tale films that rework princess fairy tales for a girl-power audience. Both films rely on the tomboy trope, which is, as Halberstam points out, an example of potentially subversive gender play that is safely contained by heterosexuality (i.e., being a tomboy is okay if one eventually puts on a dress for a boy). Both films provide conflicting representations of femininity and masculinity that demonstrate that gender is a set of acquired behaviors that can be learned. *Sydney White* also offers a strong, masculine-gendered female protagonist and a continuum of gender possibilities, but restricts those possibilities to comply with a heterosexual marriage plot, much like *Ever After* does. However *Sydney White* more directly represents a range of masculinities for the male characters as well. The marriage plot in *Aquamarine* is itself critiqued by the film when it is in tension with a model of femininity that does not center on competition but rather on female friendship. In both cases, I am interested in the tension between the concept of gender presented in the film and the marriage plot taken from the source tale.

Sydney White (2007)

    Sydney White is surprisingly well-done and charming despite its *Snow White*
meets *Revenge of the Nerds* premise. It has its rocky moments, clichés, and camp, and it
turns what is framed as a female-bonding story into a male-driven story, but it also
develops the political subtext of the "Snow White" fairy tale. Sydney White (Amanda
Bynes) is actively trying to take down the reigning Queen and her oppressive empire. In
this film, the protagonist attends her deceased mother's college in hope of joining her
mother's sorority, Kappa Phi Nu. However, Sydney's non-traditional female masculinity
makes her unsuitable Kappa material; it also attracts Tyler Prince (Matt Long), president
of the Kappa's brother fraternity and love object of the Kappa queen, Rachel Witchburn
(Sara Paxton). Rachel, jealous and worried about maintaining both her position as fairest
of them all according to a Hot-or-Not social website and as head of the pro-Greek student
government, decides that "Sydney White must die a social death." Seven male outcasts,
the dorks who are modeled after Disney's dwarfs, give Sydney a place to stay, and
together they take back the campus and help Sydney win the prince.

    Like many contemporary films targeted to young women, *Sydney White* utilizes
the tomboy model of female masculinity. However, *Sydney White* employs the same
rationale used in *Ever After* to explain the protagonist's masculine behavior and dress.
Sydney is a girl raised by men. Her mother dies when she is nine, and Sydney is raised by
her father (John Schnider), a plumber, and his construction worker buddies (which
foreshadows her living with the dorks as outcasts in a non-normative setting). Sydney
explains in a narrative voiceover that she was raised by construction workers, which is
like being "raised by wolves." An example of Sydney being raised by wolfish

construction workers follows this statement with one man at the construction site wolf-whistling at a woman passing by and an adolescent Sydney doing the same when a boy her age passes by. She is rewarded for her masculine behavior with a high-five from the construction worker. Sydney's adolescent dress mirrors the construction worker's too, as she wears a flannel shirt and jeans. The voiceover frames the film with Sydney asserting her unusual upbringing to open the film and then concluding the film with the statement that she and her friends lived "dorkily ever after." This setting shows us that like Danielle, Sydney has been acculturated into masculine gender codes by her father and father-figures.

This potentially subversive gendering is, however, revealed to be non-threatening as Sydney "clean[s] up nice" on multiple occasions when expected to perform femininity, primarily at the beginning of the film at sorority events and then on dates with the prince after she has been rejected by the sorority. However, Sydney is shown to be particularly inept at dressing like a girl as she chooses none of the dresses in the film for herself. In the first instance, her fellow legacy pledge, Dinky Hodgekiss (Crystal Hunt), lends her a dress for the first sorority party. In the second instance, Rachel, the evil queen figure, lends her a dress for the formal party. In the third instance, when she goes on her first date with Tyler, the dorks dress her in a denim skirt and fitted T-shirt after she models several inappropriately conservative outfits for dating. This is very much like the makeover scenes in *Ever After* where Danielle's feminine masquerade is enabled by men. So too is Sydney's femininity a performance staged by others.

There are very few models of femininity in the film that counter Sydney's female masculinity. Rachel exemplifies the dominant model, which is very consumer-based.

Rachel's "soothing words" are Prada, Gucci, Chanel, and Armani, and physical beauty is a woman's most important feature. The Kappas are called "illegally blonde" by Tyler, a reference to the fact that all of the Kappas are blonde or become blonde (Sydney is a brunette) and a nod to the 2001 film *Legally Blonde*, which shows that conventionally attractive blonde women can also be very smart.[14] In making fun of the Kappas and reducing them to stereotype, Tyler rejects their model of femininity, which is purely appearance-based. Sydney eventually rejects it as well because of its destructiveness. She is looking for sisters at the sorority, young women who in her understanding will "like you for who you are." However, the model of femininity she encounters at the sorority encourages competition between women, which is fought with beauty regimen, wardrobe, and accessories. The young women are all made-over to look and act like each other, all the while competing for the affection of men, and more importantly, social status and the power to control the university culture and finances.

Indeed, one very interesting aspect of the film is the statement it makes about female bonding. Dinky tells Sydney early in the film that they will be sisters, not just girlfriends, by joining the sorority. Sydney's deceased mother has left her a box of college memories that contains images of her own Kappa days with "Sisters Forever" written on the back of one of the photographs. Sydney imagines that joining the sorority will bring her close to her mother and provide her with the female bonding that she has never experienced in her male-dominated life. However, sisterhood is fraught with competitive danger as Rachel is quite jealous and despises Sydney on sight because Tyler shows an interest in Sydney. This competitiveness comes to a head at the pinning ceremony when Rachel denounces Sydney and claims that she is unfit to be a sister.

Sydney responds to the public humiliation by saying, "If this is what sisterhood is all

about, then I don't want any part of it" and begins to storm off. Rachel demands her dress

back, and Sydney rips it off, revealing a fitted black slip underneath (which is much more

like a party dress than a slip). This rejection of sisterhood and female formal wear is a

rejection of traditional femininity and competitive female relationships. Dinky appears

several other times in the film as an ally to Sydney, but their relationship is never

addressed on screen. If anything, Dinky's appearances are more about eliminating Lenny

(Jack Carpenter), one of the dorks, as a possible romantic interest for Sydney than they

are about establishing a female friend for Sydney. Lenny has much in common with

Sydney and is a logical choice for a romantic interest; however, he is a dork and therefore

not a suitable match for the film's protagonist. Her model of female masculinity cannot

be shown to be more powerful than Rachel's more traditional and competitive femininity

unless Sydney wins the female competition, meaning winning Tyler Prince. Any possible

romantic relationship between Sydney and Lenny is quickly rendered platonic by

introducing Dinky as a better-suited mate for Lenny.

What is disturbing in the film is that even though the seven dorks present a model

of masculinity to oppose the jock/frat model of hypermasculinity, they are clearly judged

as inferior by Sydney, whose view controls the film. Though quirky, unique, and friendly,

the dorks are not accepted by the wider college society. Just as they, as outsiders, help

Sydney win her prince, she decides to help them fit in. Sydney fixes the dorks: she

recalibrates Embele's (Sleepy/ Donté Bonner) internal clock to the correct time zone,

helps Jeremy (Bashful/ Adam Hendershott) gain the courage to speak without his puppet

Skoozer, teaches George (Dopey/ Arnie Pantoja) to tie knots so he can graduate from the

Junior Tiger Guides to the Tiger Guides (and thus transition out of boyhood), and helps

Lenny (Sneezy) deal with his hypochondria and Gurkin (Grumpy/ Danny Strong) deal

with his antisocial behavior so that they can both find appropriate girlfriends. Spanky

(Happy/ Samm Levine) and Terrence (Doc/ Jeremy Howard) also need help as Spanky

does not know how to act around girls and comes off as creepy, whereas Terrence

graduated from college six years ago but has stayed to continue to learn so he can perfect

his "predictive analytical probability theory." Sydney is not shown to directly intervene

in their lives as she does with the others (there is a montage where she is setting Embele's

clock, showing George how to tie knots, etc.), but it is clear that her presence is a catalyst

for their happy endings. The film ends with Spanky being hit on by a group of lost

cheerleaders, and Terrence sells his formula to an online gambling site for ten million

dollars. Success for the dorks is fitting in, getting girlfriends, and becoming rich.

While Sydney was raised by construction workers, which has led her to favor a

very strength-oriented masculinity, the dorks perform more of a knowledge-based

masculinity. The dork or geek masculinity presented in the film is what R. W. Connell

would call a heterosexual "subordinated masculinity" (79). This lack of strength, a trait of

dominant masculinity that Sydney herself embodies, is reinforced in scenes like the one

in which Sydney and the dorks are hammering campaign signs into the ground. Sydney

does hers by herself (though Tyler gives her an expensive hammer), but the dorks each

require two men per sign. So while the film celebrates dorkiness and difference at the

end, Sydney works to bring the dorks more in line with the dominant masculinity of the

film so that they can be accepted into the college society. As I have shown with female

masculinity, this necessarily includes a heterosexual dynamic to render dork masculinity

non-threatening; while they are not mating material for Sydney, their masculinity has to be functional within a heteropatriarchal society, and they have to be able to talk to girls.

The non-romantic plot of the film shows Sydney uniting the disenfranchised groups on campus to topple "Greek oppression." She and the dorks are running for student government to stop Rachel (and Tyler, for that matter) from continuing a regime that only spends money on Greek needs. Following the advice of a political science professor, they campaign to special interest groups—the Pacific Islanders Association; the ROTC; the Jewish Student Union; the marching band; the Gay, Lesbian, Transgender, and Searching Alliance; and the unorganized fans of Gurkin's anarchy blog. The film ends in a celebration of difference over conformity as several characters confess to an embarrassing trait (embarrassing because it does not fit with mainstream gender assumptions, such as the football team's tight end being a champion ice skater) and then state "and I'm a dork." While this show of solidarity is portrayed as a celebration of difference, it is undercut by the film's constant reinforcement of mainstream heterosexual masculinity and femininity. The competitive model of femininity that Rachel exemplifies is problematized when it is rejected by the sorority sisters who, emboldened by Sydney's candidacy speech, kick Rachel out of the sorority. This is a symbolic rejection, however, as the women leave the grounds chanting the sorority song that Rachel wields at the beginning of the film and which marks Kappas as superior women. They do not accept Sydney back into their fold or embrace the others oppressed under the Greek system, nor is there anything in the film to suggest that the system of which they are a part is a problem. Rather it is Rachel only who is a bad apple, and the social system itself is not questioned. Sydney and Dinky, though, are shown to have escaped the system, working

with the dorks and Sydney's constructor-worker friends to repair the home she shares

with the dorks.

The ways in which representation is constrained by plot and pattern is not limited

to gender. Other identity markers that are socially constructed are also limited when the

patterns of the tale depend upon and reinforce specific constructions. Snow White's

whiteness, for example, is an integral part of the plot, and making her dark-skinned in a

retelling, as an attempt to represent racial diversity, does not challenge the underlying

racial hierarchy that makes one skin color superior to another. The "Snow White" tale is

an obvious example of how assumptions about race are ingrained in plot, as she is

defined as a character by the whiteness of her skin, but this is true for other popular fairy

tales as well. Changing the skin color of the characters does not necessarily change the

characters' race, as race is a socially constructed category and skin colors signify

differently in different places. Making one of the dwarfs black in *Sydney White* (Embele/

Sleepy is from Nigeria), for example, is an act of tokenism as is the presence of the

Pacific Islanders Association which, like the Jewish Student Union, is a representation of

racial otherness for the express purpose of making Sydney White a better person/leader

than Rachel. All of the special-interest groups are dressed in blatantly stereotypical

costumes of the culture they represent (the Pacific Islanders in grass skirts and the LGBT

students in drag, for example) which calls attention to their tokenism. Their presence is a

stark reminder of just how naturalized whiteness is in the "Snow White" tale.

The 1997 Disney television movie version of Rogers and Hammerstein's

Cinderella is another example of how racial representation alone fails to transform the

tale. The movie boasts a multiracial cast that is never addressed on screen: Brandy as

Cinderella, Whitney Houston as the fairy godmother, Paolo Montalban as the prince,

Whoopi Goldberg as the queen, Victor Garber as the king, Jason Alexander as the

prince's valet, Bernadette Peters as the stepmother, and Natalie Desselle-Reid and

Veanne Cox as the stepsisters. I applaud the movie's producers and director for casting

based on the actors' abilities, not the characters' racial identity, and choosing a

multiracial cast. But the presence of a multiracial cast with *no* discussion of race in the

narrative rings false. In a review, critic Caryn James points out:

> The matter-of-fact racial casting works so smoothly that it becomes one of
>
> the show's happiest effects. There is no cause to wonder why one
>
> stepsister is black and one white. The entire kingdom is blissfully
>
> multiethnic, with a black queen in Ms. Goldberg, a white king in Victor
>
> Garber and the Philippine-born Paolo Montalban as their son. (The fact
>
> that this racial utopia exists in a fairy tale only emphasizes its distance
>
> from reality.)

The "racial utopia," as James calls it, does not problematize constructions of race so

much as it reinforces the ways in which whiteness is a part of the pattern. The casting

necessarily brings race to the forefront and encourages viewers to be aware of racial

expectations for fairy tales they might have taken for granted. Though the narrative does

not call attention to the racial make-up of the cast, the assumption of whiteness in the tale

type does. Even in my own analysis I have not identified the skin color or race of

characters because I have not needed to. It is assumed that fairy-tale princesses are white,

not just from popular cultural memory, but from the dominance of traditional European

fairy tales that specifically describe princesses as white, fair, and/or golden haired, and

associate these traits with extreme, at times divine, beauty. Race is only mentioned when it does not conform to the expectation. The representation of multiple multiracial families *alone* is not enough to move the racial utopia from the realm of fantasy. What representation can do, and what I believe it does when critically engaged, is help to reveal the ways in which identity is constructed through social relationships.

Aquamarine (2006)

Aquamarine, based on an Alice Hoffman novel of the same name, retells the story of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale "The Little Mermaid." Like *Ever After* and *Sydney White*, *Aquamarine* draws on a variety of intertexts including the Disney film and Princess product line. Fairy-tale retellings are necessarily intertextual, and, as I have said before, all retellings necessarily offer comment on their source texts. Significantly, *Aquamarine* critiques the love story central to Disney's retelling more directly than it comments on either the Hoffman novel or Andersen's fairy tale. The film focuses on the two girls who befriend the mermaid, Aquamarine (Sara Paxton). In this version, the mermaid comes to land to prove to her father that love exists as part of a pact made to enable her to escape an arranged marriage. Unlike her predecessors who seek marriage, Aquamarine is trying to escape it. This mermaid does not sacrifice anything to complete her task, but gains friendship. Aquamarine must make the "hot" lifeguard Raymond (Jake McDorman) fall in love with her in three days to prove that love exists, the same time frame Disney's mermaid has to complete the same task. The sacrifice that one expects based on the mermaid source tales is made by the two girls who befriend her, Hailey (Joanna "JoJo" Levesque) and Claire (Emma Roberts). Claire must overcome her fear of

the water specifically and life more generally to help her friend. More importantly, the girls must decide to forgo making a wish (granted by Aquamarine as a reward for helping her) to prevent Hailey and her mother from moving to Australia. Both girls learn to put aside their selfish desires and their fears—of the water and risk for Claire and of the move for Hailey—in order to help someone they love, Aquamarine and Hailey's mother. The love that Aquamarine seeks resides not in the romantic relationship she develops with Raymond, but the friendship she finds with the girls.

Aquamarine, then, promotes female friendship as an alternative to the model of femininity in which women use beauty and their feminine wiles to compete for men. In Disney's *The Little Mermaid* the subversive gender performance suggested by the sea witch Ursula is undercut by the film's adherence to traditional values that beauty and femininity are of utmost importance and that a girl's only desire should be to get married. But in *Aquamarine* these same values are critiqued. Gender is taught in *Aquamarine* through teen magazines, *Cosmogirl* and *Seventeen*, and trips to the mall. But Hailey and Claire are still girls, not yet women, as is evident from their clothing. The girls are presented androgynously, in gender-neutral shorts and T-shirts, for a great deal of the film, only dressing in girls' clothes when they go shopping to dress up for a party. They do not dress like sexualized women, but wear one-piece bathing suits and coverups. They do not wear makeup or carry purses or any of the other adornments of women adopted by the villains of *Aquamarine*, the popular girls who are ultimately jealous of Aquamarine's seemingly natural and breezy beauty and confidence. The lessons learned about femininity are rendered ridiculous on screen as they are shown to be ineffective and part

of a phase. Claire and Hailey are only playing at being women, as evidenced by their

frequent giggling.

The villains are the girls who are successful in donning traditional femininity and

using it to compete with other women for men, such as Raymond. While Cecilia (Arielle

Kebbel), leader of the popular girls, competes with Aquamarine for Raymond's affection,

Hailey and Claire, who are shown obsessing over Raymond in the beginning of the film,

give up any prior claim they might have on Raymond for the opportunity to help

Aquamarine. Even though the girls are promised a wish as a reward for their help,

friendship is still their motivation as they plan to use their wish to keep from being

separated by Hailey's impending move across the globe. This rejection of femininity

based on conventional beauty for the sake of obtaining a man suggests an alternative to

Disney's Ariel. Aquamarine still becomes a conventional beauty for the sake of fitting in

and competition, but Claire and Hailey do not. Aquamarine shows the girls the

confidence that they cannot find in the fashion magazines and competitive woman-

against-woman culture the magazines and their schoolmates endorse. Gendered bonding,

not the competition taught by *Cosmogirl*, supports the characters' transformations.

Aquamarine directly critiques the values of Disney's *The Little Mermaid* in how it

represents romance. When Aquamarine first meets Raymond, she asks him if he loves

her, and he replies "No, but I think you're hot," which contradicts the earlier "true love"

model presented by Disney's film. At the end of the film, Aquamarine repeats her

question and Raymond stutters: "Well, I mean, we've had one date. Don't get me wrong.

I like you." He is not able to fall in love with Aquamarine after knowing her for only

three days. This version harkens back to Andersen's tale, in which love is not achieved in

an instant, and the repetition of the kiss-in-three-days task offers a direct comment on the

Disney formulation of love. As Roberta Trites, in "Disney's Sub/Version of Andersen's

The Little Mermaid," points out, turning "the process of human love into a rushed affair"

has the effect of equating love with "physical sexuality" (par. 9). Whereas Ursula tells

Ariel "the prince must 'fall in love with you—that is—kiss you'" (Trites par. 9),

Aquamarine challenges that assertion by demonstrating that sexual attraction is not love.

If all it took was sexual attraction, then Aquamarine would have no problem, but this film

suggests that true love is far more complex. Unlike Andersen's story, in which divine

intervention is necessary to soften the fatal effect of the absence of romantic love, in

Aquamarine the idea of love is expanded to include nonromantic relationships between

friends and among family. Sacrifice is still a part of this love, but it is a matter of

sacrificing selfish desires, not one's self.

Part of the "sad" ending of Andersen's version, that there is no such thing as love

at first sight, is contradicted by the ending of *Aquamarine*. The result is the same—the

prince does not love the mermaid because he has not had the opportunity to fall in love

with her—but it is not sad for Aquamarine and certainly not fatal (Andersen's mermaid

commits suicide after the prince marries another princess). The girls who befriend

Aquamarine know her much better than Raymond does and they do love her, as

evidenced by the lengths they go to so as to help her. It is not the kiss but the female

bonding and friendship that save Aquamarine. Much like the sisters in Andersen's story,

who demonstrate sisterly love by trading their hair for a way to save the little mermaid,

family and same-gender friends, not romantic conquests, take risks and make sacrifices in

Aquamarine. As Trites has pointed out, the Disney film "destroys" the strong female

characters and female-female relationships in its emphasis on the marriage plot (par. 30).

These supportive female relationships are absent in many fairy-tale films, *Ever After* and

Sydney White included, reinforcing the assumption that female relationships are

necessarily competitive. This naturalizing is in part due to the marriage plot, in which

women literally compete over who gets to marry the prize prince and other women are

seen as competition for resources.

What makes *Aquamarine* stand out is that, despite engaging in the standard

tomboy trope and following the marriage plot—which is not the emphasis of Andersen's

"The Little Mermaid" but is nonetheless part of the mermaid fairy-tale popular cultural

memory due to Disney's film—the film emphasizes same-sex bonding and undermines

the marriage plot by subverting narrative expectations at the climactic rescue scene. In

the expected damsel-in-distress plot, the prince rescues the princess. At the climax of

Aquamarine, when Aquamarine is pulled back to sea for the arranged marriage forced

upon her by her father, Raymond goes to rescue her. He is a lifeguard and runs back to

the beach to retrieve his surfboard before jumping in the ocean to get Aquamarine. Hailey

and Claire, however, take off their shorts and jump in. This an important moment in

Claire's story because her fear of the ocean has kept her out of the water since her parents

were lost at sea years before. She is shown screaming hysterically earlier in the film when

someone threatens to throw her into a pool. This act of bravery by Claire is evidence of

her love for Aquamarine. Hailey too shows bravery in that when she and Claire reach

Aquamarine, who has grabbed onto a buoy to keep from being pulled into deeper water,

she gives up the magic wish to keep from moving to Australia so that Aquamarine can

use it to free herself of the arranged marriage. These acts of sacrifice and bravery, when

coupled with Claire's statement that "we love you, Aqua," demonstrate to Aquamarine's father that love exists.

When Claire's tears hit the ocean, the storm that Aquamarine's father has created disperses, and the water calms. It is only at this point, post-rescue, that Raymond joins the girls. Raymond and Aquamarine agree to go on a second date after she deals with problems back home. By replacing romantic love with friendship and by featuring no marriage (indeed a revulsion to marriage as Aquamarine is fleeing from one marriage and never mentions the concept of marriage in relation to Raymond), the film presents a very different model from Disney's film of what is important to the female characters and young female audience. Heterosexual romantic love is presented much more realistically and same-sex friends' love is depicted as precious. In contrast to both *Ever After* and *Sydney White*, here we see that female friendship can be quite powerful, more powerful even than romantic heterosexual relationships. In addition, a positive model of female bonding is offered in opposition to the competitive female relationships exhibited by Cecilia, who competes with Aquamarine for Raymond's affection and loses the support of her own friends in the process. The tension between representation of female masculinity and gender performance in the characterization of the girls and the movie's adherence to the marriage plot is softened in *Aquamarine* by the narrative restructuring that moves the marriage plot to a secondary level in the film and by shifting the focus from romantic love to friendship.

Aquamarine is more successful than *Ever After* and *Sydney White* in resolving the tension between the marriage and rescue plots, and it offers a socially constructed model

of gender that allows for a range of possible gendered behaviors because, though it invokes the marriage plot, it is not constrained by it. Like the other two films, *Aquamarine* demonstrates that gender is regulated by heterosexual reproductivity, as femininity is performed for the express purpose of catching a man; however, it also acknowledges the possibility of same-sex friendships that are not restricted by the matrix of heterosexual romance. Whereas all female relationships in *Ever After* and *Sydney White* are filtered through competition for a mate, Hailey and Claire's friendship exists outside of that triangulation. Heterosexual romance is still a vital part of the film and shown as an eventuality, but it is not the primary plot of the film, as it is in *Ever After*. In *Sydney White*, there is also an attempt to minimize the marriage plot by emphasizing the fight against social oppression embodied by the Greek system; however, the attempt fails because the dorks cannot win their place as leaders in society until Sydney transforms them into more acceptable representations of masculinity. They are still regulated by heterosexual romantic norms. And the bitterness between Sydney and Rachel, which is Sydney's motivation for running for student government president, is motivated by jealousy over Tyler.

The tension between characterization and plot in these films exists because the marriage plot is seen as vital to the fairy tale. Would there really be a "Cinderella," "Snow White," or "The Little Mermaid" retelling without the marriage and rescue plots? These films argue no. As Wilmington states, "[Y]ou don't want to mess with fairy tales too much. Especially when everybody knows the ending." This emphasizes the ending, the plot, as the defining feature of the fairy tale; that is what makes it recognizable. This belief relies on the idea that what audiences expect and want is the happily-ever-after

wedding. But the happily-ever-after marriage is not necessarily a defining feature. Other retellings, such as those by Kelly Link discussed in the next chapter, take fairy-tale fragments out of their recognizable plots and spin new tales for them. There are retellings that promise lesbian romances and disappointing heterosexual relationships, as in Emma Donoghue's collection of retellings *Kissing the Witch*. If Danielle had run off with the good stepsister but not away from Danielle's land and social responsibilities, as Wilmington suggests is logical, it would still be a Cinderella story, but one in which the heroine finds a way to transform and elevate herself in society that does not depend on marriage, or one in which she rejects one set of values for another. Even when absent, marriage will be an implicit option because the story is a retelling; thus the marriage plot *can* be invoked without being repeated, fragments and scenes *can* be freed from the plots in which they are bound. But when retellings only intervene in characterization, and do not "mess" with the plot, when reconfiguring the concept of gender represented in the tale, they are limited by possibilities for gender allowed by that plot.

CHAPTER 3

AMBIVALENCE AND AMBIGUITY IN THE FRAGMENTED FAIRY TALES OF KELLY LINK

In the previous chapter, I showed how the repetition of the marriage plot in *Ever After* constrains the feminism suggested by the film's representation of gender as a fluid, socially constructed category that spans a continuum of femininity and masculinity. The range of femininities and masculinities available is limited by the heterosexual marriage plot that denotes the traditional fairy-tale happily-ever-after ending. Retellings that do not result in typical happily-ever-afters are able to present a broader range of acceptable representations of gendered identity than those that do. Dark fantasy fairy-tale retellings that deny the happy ending (such as those by Tanith Lee) and other retellings that flat-out reject heterosexual marriage as necessary for a happy ending (such as Patrice Kindl's *Goose Chase*) represent gendered possibilities outside of the heterosexual imperative. Retellings that do not even engage in the possibility of a happily-ever-after by not resolving the fairy-tale plot offer further possibilities. In this chapter, I explore how the disruptive narrative strategies used by one author, Kelly Link, decouple fairy-tale fragments from fairy-tale plots, enabling more open productions of gender.

Using fragments (see my earlier discussions of Preston and Kukkonen) instead of plots allows the fairy-tale elements to come untangled from the plots that housed them. Working from fragments enables writers to use the fairy-tale genre to question concepts of gender because they are not reproducing the gendered ideology bound up in the source tale's plot. Instead, extracted from the plot, the fragment can be more freely resignified. By denying the reader a resolution to the plots in her stories, Link deemphasizes what makes an ending a happy one and focuses more on the desire and action of the characters.

Because she does not replace one model of gender with another, but questions the parameters of the construct, she avoids reproducing binaries.

Link uses a variety of discordant narrative strategies that trouble not only the tales and traditions she draws upon, but also the reading experience itself. I will explore how the destabilizing narrative strategies Link uses reinforce the conceptualization of gender as a social category formed through relationships, an articulation of gender that mirrors Judith Butler's work in *Undoing Gender* (2004). As Vanessa Joosen explains in *Critical and Creative Perspectives on Fairy Tales: An Intertextual Dialogue between Fairy-Tale Scholarship and Postmodern Retellings*, an intertextual relationship can exist between a retelling and a critical work without the writers' having read the critical work. Rather it is the "overlappings of concern" between retellings and criticism that Joosen highlights (3). I do not argue that Link's short fiction represents or demonstrates Butler's theories, but rather that both she and Butler are interested in the same process of identity formation through social relationships. While there are many aspects of identity that are socially constructed and regulated, my primary focus is on how femininities and masculinities are shown to be formed through the socially regulated interaction between characters.

I analyze three stories in this chapter, two of which ("Swans" and "The Cinderella Game") were published in collections for young readers and all of which are focused on adolescent protagonists. I also focus on three narrative strategies that disrupt fairy-tale structures: (1) lack of closure, which I discuss in "Swans" and "Magic for Beginners"; (2) playing with the reversal technique, in "Magic for Beginners" and "The Cinderella Game"; and (3) blurring genre boundaries in "The Cinderella Game." Even though I focus my analysis of genre on "The Cinderella Game," the blurring of genre, specifically

of horror and fairy tale, occurs to a lesser extent in "Magic for Beginners" as well. I do not explore genre blurring in "Magic for Beginners" in this chapter, however, because though present, it is a trait of Link's slipstream writing style that informs all of her works, while the genre blurring in "The Cinderella Game" is the main strategy of disrupting fairy-tale structures in the story.

Link's fiction has been termed *slipstream* because it spans both speculative and literary genres and is often characterized by its strangeness. In his article "Slipstream," Bruce Sterling, who coined the term with Richard Dorsett in 1985, explains that slipstream is not so much a genre as "a contemporary kind of writing which has set its face against consensus reality. It is a [sic] fantastic, surreal sometimes, speculative on occasion, but not rigorously so" (par. 16). For Sterling, "the heart of slipstream is an attitude of peculiar aggression against 'reality.' These are fantasies of a kind, but not fantasies which are 'futuristic' or 'beyond the fields we know.' These books tend to sarcastically tear at the structure of 'everyday life'" (par. 26). Particularly interesting is the way in which slipstream uses source texts: "Slipstream tends, not to 'create' new worlds, but to *quote* [sic] them, chop them up out of context, and turn them against themselves" (Sterling, "Slipstream" par. 29). The process Sterling describes here is one of fragmentation—quoting elements of popular cultural memory and recontextualizing them in a way that frees them from the patterning of the source, which Sterling describes as "turn[ing] them against themselves."

Sterling's list of slipstream authors and books includes such notable postmodern authors as Angela Carter and Robert Coover, and any student of postmodern literature would be well familiar with the authors he names. However, he rejects the postmodern

label for this literature because the phrase he considered, "Novels of Postmodern Sensibility," "looks pretty bad on a category rack, and requires an acronym besides" ("Slipstream" par. 17). In a follow-up article, "Slipstream 2," Sterling adds that slipstream is "post-ideological" and closely aligned with Cultural Studies (8). *Slipstream* is a simpler term, but it is also a slippery, indefinable category that is recognized more by strangeness than by literary technique or thematic focus. Of importance to Sterling's description is that slipstream works defy genre categorization.

Slipping between genres is part of what enables Link's stories to move out of the traps that ensnare other fairy-tale retellings, which I will demonstrate in the section dealing with "The Cinderella Game." The strange elements of Link's fiction are part of what may turn off readers expecting more traditional fairy tales and more traditional fairy-tale retellings that follow fairy-tale plots, as well as more straightforward and easily categorized works of fantasy. But it is this strangeness that helps to change reader expectations.

Jack Zipes's observation in *Relentless Progress: The Reconfiguration of Children's Literature, Fairy Tales, and Storytelling* that contemporary protagonists are more likely to be distressed than triumphant and that their trials are not solely caused by gender injustice is useful in understanding how Kelly Link's fiction troubles fairy-tale patterns (130). He makes the point that Link is not a commercial writer and is therefore not participating in the commercial project of feminist hegemony that focuses on individual achievements of gender equality abstracted from other realities and that accepts dominant ideologies. His larger argument is that feminism and fairy tales have

been "co-opted by the mass media" and consumerism (Zipes, *Relentless Progress* 129),

and he presents Link as one example of a contemporary writer who avoids the

commercial trap. Though he finds Link's work "unnerving" and "sometimes boring"

because of her discordant narrative strategies and unresolved endings, he is right on target

when pointing to these unsettling qualities as the key to her work (Zipes, *Relentless*

Progress 133). It is this refusal to settle down that is reminiscent of Angela Carter.

Kelly Link's work is undeniably indebted to fairy tales and to the rich tradition of

retelling those stories, and it is no surprise that she identifies Angela Carter as an

influence (Jamneck par. 11; Timberg par. 18-19). In *The Bloody Chamber*, Carter works

within the patriarchy embedded in canonical tales to undo it rather than dismissing or

reversing representations of women as weak objects of male desire. Gender

representation in Carter's tales is contingent upon its context, and her vision of a feminist

world is ambiguous. Similarly, Carter's refusal to provide a straightforward alternative to

patriarchy is advanced by contemporary writers of fairy tales like Kelly Link who refuse

to isolate gender and ignore its place in a larger complex of oppressive systems. Link

does not treat gender simply in order to present a feminist happy ending, but instead she

troubles assumptions of gender and works within plots to disrupt the happy ending.

Characters are identified as not just "women" and "men," but as humans who inhabit

complex social positions in the storyworld, and gender structures are not simply

manifested as oppressive heterosexual relationships.

Like Carter, Link does not provide easy answers and happy endings. Many of her

stories end before the resolution: "The Faery Handbag," "Magic for Beginners," and

"Swans" are just three examples. Still others openly reject and mock the possibility of a

happily-ever-after ending, as in "Catskin," "Shoe and Marriage," and "Travels with the Snow Queen." Endings are not a big part of Link's repertoire, but her stories are not unfinished or incomplete; closure is simply irrelevant. What is significant in these stories is that the characters suffer and try to do something about it irrespective of signs that a happy ending is not guaranteed. Success is less important than the choice to act. Of the stories mentioned above, "Magic for Beginners" has a particularly ambiguous and unsettling ending.

A common approach in fairy-tale fiction that retells traditional fairy tales is to turn sleeping beauties and waiting maids into strong, active heroines who go out to seek their own fortunes and find their own princes, such as Gail Carson Levine's *Ella Enchanted* and Patrice Kindl's *Goose Chase*. Recently, however, some fairy-tale retellings for young adults have begun to approach gendered identity in fairy tales more complexly than simple role-reversal. Instead of starring strong and confident young women, these stories present female and male protagonists who may be strong, but are also confused and just trying to get by. These stories also treat gender as part of a larger complex of social identities.

Kelly Link draws on fairy tales in much of her young-adult work, and like earlier feminist revisions of fairy tales, her stories do not feature passive princesses waiting to be rescued. Unlike earlier feminist revisions, however, Link's stories do not hinge on a feminist utopia where girls are strong and everyone is equal. Instead, her protagonists struggle with their identity and with making their way in a world marked by a variety of inequities, of which gender is just one. Link's fiction is troubling, not just because her strong characters are not guaranteed a happy ending, but also because the readers are not

provided tidy stories, as is expected with fairy tales. Link employs a variety of narrative techniques that disrupt traditional fairy-tale patterns and leave the readers with fragments, and leave them just as confused as the protagonists. Most notably, she rarely concludes the plots of her stories. The following sections discuss how these narrative strategies enable the complex conceptualization of gender in Link's fairy-tale fiction.

Structured Gendering

Many young-adult retellings of fairy tales address gender by replacing passive princesses with active ones. Strong Cinderellas and Sleeping Beauties who do not sleep are fairly commonplace now and quite popular in novels and films for young adults (*Ella Enchanted, Ever After, Sydney White, Aquamarine,* etc.). But as I demonstrated in the previous chapter with *Ever After*, this role-reversal is problematic when one model of gendered behavior replaces another but does not disrupt the script in which the representation of gender is located. Making heroines strong can only go so far when they still are continuously presented with the same choices for heterosexual romance, even when they choose not to marry. Many traditional collections of folk and fairy tales, such as those by Joseph Jacobs, feature strong, clever girls such as Molly Whuppie and Katie Crackernuts. While these collections do offer a contrast to the popularized passive princess, they are not, unfortunately, as popular, and even these strong women are scripted into heteropatriarchal marriage plots. For example, Molly Whuppie's reward for her cleverness and bravery is, after all, a royal marriage. But I am interested in retellings of fairy tales that may take role-reversal as a starting point for exploring gendered

identity but complicate it by changing the context in which the protagonists act by changing the narrative structure of the fairy tales being retold.

The argument that reproducing structure reproduces heteronormative configurations of gender is one that has been made before in reference to fairy-tale retellings. Angela Carter has been criticized for not presenting a clear representation of strong feminist heroines. Her collection, *The Bloody Chamber*, was published in 1979 and rewrites canonical fairy tales mostly within their recognizable plots and motifs. Not all of her stories stick to their source texts' formulas, but most do. This reliance on older, patriarchal texts, such as those by Charles Perrault, is one source of the criticism against her work. Patricia Duncker, in her article "Re-imagining the Fairy Tales: Angela Carter's Bloody Chambers," argues,

> Carter is rewriting the tales within the strait-jacket of their original structures. The characters she re-creates must to some extent, continue to exist as abstractions. Identity continues to be defined by role, so that shifting the perspective from the impersonal voice to the inner confessional narrative as she does in several of the tales, merely explains, amplifies and re-produces rather than alters the original, deeply, rigidly sexist psychology of the erotic. (6)

Duncker's critique rests on two observations. The first is that Carter's method relies primarily on changing the standard narration of the fairy tales she retells from third-person to first-person, giving voice to previously silenced heroines, which effectively allows for agency. The second is that Carter's interventions in the fairy tales are erotic, bringing to the forefront the sexuality that had been repressed and buried through

multiple translations and editions of her source texts. The problem that Duncker identifies is that Carter's representation of the erotic relies solely on heteropatriarchal sexuality, with women as objects of desire. The heroines who desire in Carter's work are, according to Duncker, not representative of a female-empowered sexuality, but reinscribe male sexuality because the heroines are shown desiring to be objectified by men.

Duncker makes some astute observations and certainly asks feminists to think about what we expect from a feminist text. Though her criticism is indispensable for a thorough critique of *The Bloody Chamber*, I think that Duncker misses the point. Yes, Carter works within a patriarchal frame, but she does so with the effect of making that frame livable. Carter does not leave the patriarchy behind in her feminist revisioning. Instead, Carter engages it. *The Bloody Chamber* challenges assumptions about the roles of women in heterosexual relationships and represents women taking control of and enjoying their (hetero)sexuality. But Duncker argues that Carter "could go much further than she does" (12) in her exposure of the sexual symbolism of the older tales. Unfortunately for us, Duncker does not explain what Carter could have done or what a more satisfying feminist fairy tale would look like.

Despite disagreeing with Duncker's reading of *The Bloody Chamber*, I do agree that there is something disconcerting about a feminist fairy tale that does not actively reject the patriarchy of its source tales. Duncker is, after all, attempting to identify a feminist project of retelling canonical fairy tales. Her argument that "Carter is rewriting the tales within the strait-jacket of their original structures" is key (6); however, Duncker is concerned with representations of gender and sexuality in Carter's work and so does not delve into how heteropatriarchy is structurally mandated. In *Comes as You Are:*

Sexuality and Narrative, Judith Roof has argued that traditional narrative structures are fundamentally heteronormative, and that a text must change the structure of the narrative as well as the content to truly subvert heteronormativity in text. Robyn Warhol, in "Queering the Marriage Plot: How Serial Form Works in Maupi's *Tales of the City*" (a serialized novel about gay sexuality by Arimstead Maupin), explains that serialization undermines the domestic marriage plot by suspending closure and "unraveling instances of closure that turn out to be only provisional and temporary" (232). She argues that the *form* of serialized novels "(in concert with its overt content) has the potential to subvert dominant ideologies of sexuality" (Warhol, "Queering" 232). Warhol's emphasis on form is what is relevant here.

While Kelly Link's work does not overtly address sexuality, her habit of suspending closure to plot undermines the heterosexual marriage plots inherited from her fairy-tale sources by removing emphasis from the happily-ever-after ending. Warhol turns to Roof to explain the connection between narrative structure and sexuality, explaining that "Roof has argued that there is something intrinsically straight, something essentially heteronormative about narrative—all narrative, any narrative that comes (as most narratives do) to closure" ("Queering" 233). Warhol identifies this essential something as the marriage plot ("Queering" 233). She states that texts cannot *only* change the content of the story to account for "alternative sexualities" if they follow traditional narrative patterns; instead, they must "employ radical innovations in their discursive forms" in addition to representing alternative sexualities (Warhol, "Queering" 233). Because the marriage plot is "intrinsically" a part of narrative structure, changes to narrative pattern are necessary to effectively subvert that plot. With retellings like *Ever*

After, gender is understood primarily in terms of heterosexuality within a marriage plot, and sexuality is collapsed into gender. Roof and Warhol argue that heterosexuality is ingrained into the narrative structure of closure in the marriage plot. By removing the expected fairy-tale endings and by using narrative strategies that disrupt fairy-tale structures, Link decouples gender from sexuality so that gender is not only being understood in terms of heterosexual relationships.

"Swans" (2000)

In the children's story "Swans," Kelly Link creates a stronger and more independent heroine than the ones in popular fairy tales, but she also challenges the idea that there are appropriate gendered model behaviors and encourages her audience to critique the models we are given. "Swans" is published in *A Wolf at the Door and Other Retold Fairy Tales*, one of Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling's anthologies aimed at adolescents. The age range of the intended audience (eight-to-twelve-year-olds according to the publisher) plays a part in Link's enabling the heroine to break type. The young protagonist and first-person narrator, Emma Bear, age eleven, while old enough to be married in the more traditional fairy tales in which girls are eligible for marriage at the onset of puberty, is not old enough to be married by today's Western social standards. The concept of the child is, like many identity categories, a constructed one that has changed over time and extends to a greater age range today. The choice not to make the protagonist of marriageable age and to keep her young helps to remove marriage from the plot.

I am interested in three primary aspects of "Swans": ending the narrative before the fairy-tale plot is resolved; rejecting the solution of the source tale, with Emma calling it "silly"; and using first-person narration to provide agency for a traditionally silenced character. The plot-level representation of an independent, critical, and vocal girl is supported by these three elements that disrupt the expected fairy-tale plot and patterns. The first and third elements break traditional fairy-tale narrative patterns, and the second is a direct, intertextual critique of the logic of the source tales. The model of femininity represented by Emma challenges that of the source tales, but it is also shown to be produced by a complex system of relationships that does not place Emma within heterosexual romantic relationships as the source tales do. This is not just a matter of a plot-level change, however, as the deferment of the expected resolution is a key part in reconfiguring the fairy tale.

"Swans" draws from several fairy tales. Emma's surname, Bear, connotes "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" (ATU 179), but bears are also present in a variety of beast tales, such as "East of the Sun, West of the Moon" (ATU 425A). Emma's mother is the maiden from "Rumplestiltskin" (ATU 500). Rumplestiltskin is Emma's fairy godfather, as well as Cinderella's (ATU 510), and he loved Emma's mother (75). Emma's favorite of the quilts made by her mother depicts a scene from "Rapunzel" (ATU 310), and the principal of her middle school is Mr. Wolf, a name that invokes the "big bad wolf" from tales like "Little Red Riding Hood" (ATU 333) and "The Three Little Pigs" (ATU 124). However, the primary fairy tale retold is of "The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers" tale type (ATU 451),[1] which includes stories by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm ("The Six Swans") and Hans Christian Andersen ("The Wild Swans").[2] The basic

plot for this tale type involves the royal sons of a family being transformed into birds (in several variants, it is a wicked stepmother who curses them), and the youngest child, a daughter, saving them. The girl undergoes a period of silence in which she must weave shirts for the boys out of a specific plant (the plant varies among versions, but in Andersen's it is stinging nettles, making the task painful as well as difficult). Her task takes many years, and she cannot utter a sound or she risks undoing the magic. A king comes across her during the task, takes her to his home, and marries her. She meets with misfortune during this time, as she is falsely accused of either witchcraft or cannibalism of her own children and is to be burned. She cannot defend herself, having to maintain silence for the sake of her brothers. Her bird brothers fly around as she is to be executed, and she throws the shirts over their heads, returning them to their human forms. In some versions, the youngest brother receives an unfinished shirt and is left with one wing. At this point she is able to speak and defend herself, although in Andersen's story, her brothers explain what happened as she faints upon proclaiming her innocence.

In Kelly Link's "Swans," Emma's stepmother turns her brothers into swans because they are too noisy. Emma, who is still mourning the death of her mother, does not speak and is therefore safe from her stepmother's curse. The stepmother is not evil, but is in distress and unsure of how her magic works (85). The stepmother is a bird who is trapped in human form for some unknown reason. After she turns Emma's brothers, father, teachers, and friends into swans—all for being too noisy—she turns back into a bird and flies away. At first Emma likes her brothers being swans: it is fun and she finally gets to have pets (84, 86). Her brothers were also fairly mean to her, pulling her hair and such (80). At the end of the story, after everyone has become a swan, Emma yells

"WHAT?" at her stepmother in anger (89). It is when she yells that the stepmother becomes a bird and flies away. Emma's reaction is to call after her, "I want to be a swan, too! I want my mom!" (89). After crying, Emma decides to do some research to solve her problem. She narrates, "My fairy godfather is never around when you need him. This is why it's important to develop good research skills, and know how to find your way around a library. If you can't depend on your fairy godfather, at least you can depend on the card catalog" (90). Through her research, she finds a way to return the swans to their human form; however, she thinks the fairy-tale solution of making shirts out of nettles sounds painful, is not practical, and is "silly" (90). Instead she decides to use her mother's quilting supplies to make a giant quilt with swans on one side and shirts on the other that can cover all the swans. The whole story is narrated by Emma after she has made the decision to make the quilt, but before she has started the process, as evidenced through her verb tense shifts.

"Swans" ends after the protagonist has decided to act but before the main action of the plot is resolved, in effect denying closure. The gendered expectations for Emma's character are subverted by this shift in focus because the marriage-plot ending is never introduced. By shifting focus to Emma's choice to save her brothers and not the heteronormative subplot of the fairy tale, "Swans" disrupts the embedded heterosexual impetus of the traditional ending. Denying the marriage plot opens up a way for femininity to be represented as not dependent upon heterosexual relationships or female competition, both important parts of "The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers" tale type and the fairy tales I discuss in the previous chapter. Emma's young age alone is not enough to deny the introduction of gender as a sexual performance, as my analysis of the

film *Aquamarine* in the previous chapter demonstrates. The marriage plot in *Aquamarine* is effectively questioned through a redefining of love that emphasizes same-sex friendship; however, it is not the age of the adolescent protagonists that allows for a configuration of gender as separate from heterosexual romantic relationships. In "Swans" it is the denial of the marriage plot by suspending closure that allows the story to present a non-sexualized model of femininity.

One reason this deferment technique works in "Swans" is because of course Emma gets her happily-ever-after; it is just not the one the reader might have been expecting. There is nothing in the story to suggest that Emma's plan will not work, unlike in "Magic for Beginners" where the result of Jeremy stealing the books is left ambiguous. In fact, the tone of the narration in the final lines is extremely confident and determined; at no point is doubt introduced. Emma states, "I'm going to turn them back into people. The quilt is going to be as beautiful as sky. It's going to be as soft as feathers. It's going to be just like magic" (91). In both cases, however, not resolving what seems to be the main problem of the plot shifts focus from the action to the choice to act, suggesting that the decision itself is what is interesting. The lack of resolved plot forces the focus of the story onto the act of the characters making choices, not the results of the choices or the choices themselves. For Emma, it shifts the fairy tale from being about a girl who sacrifices her autonomy to save her brothers to a story about a girl finding the confidence to assert herself. What matters is not that Emma saves everyone, but how and why she decides to save everyone. So even though it seems safe to assume that Emma's rescue will be successful, in part due to the confident tone of the text, the effect is very similar to the effect in "Magic for Beginners" in undoing the fairy-tale patterns on which the story

is built. The happiness of the ending is not questioned as it is in "Magic for Beginners," but closure is still denied in that the resolution to the fairy-tale plot is not part of the story.

Emma rejects the solution of the source tale, calling it "silly," thereby directly critiquing the fairy-tale logic. This assumes that the young audience of the story would be familiar with one or more versions. Emma's research takes her to the "enchantments" section of the library (90). One can assume that readers of "Swans" will know that it is based on a fairy tale, as "Retold Fairy Tales" is in the title of the collection, and Link's author's note states that she "wanted to retell the story of the girl who makes shirts out of nettles for her brothers, who have been turned into swans by their wicked stepmother" (92). "Nettles" is a direct reference to Andersen's version, but neither "The Wild Swans" nor any of the Grimms' versions, have been made into films or carry the popular cachet of the many princess movies made by Disney.[3]

"Swans" critiques the source tale, explicitly showing that the behaviors that worked in the past are no longer appropriate for today:

> It seems that to break my stepmother's pinkie spell, I need to make shirts for all of the birds and throw the shirts over their necks. I need to sew these shirts out of nettle cloth, which doesn't sound very pleasant. Nettles burn when you pick them. Really, I think linen, or cotton is probably more practical. And I think I have a better idea than a bunch of silly shirts that no one is probably going to want to wear again, anyway. And how are you supposed to sew a shirt for a bird? Is there a pattern? (90)

Emma's critique is multilayered. First, she recognizes the pain involved in the earlier enchantment, as well as the impracticality of using nettles, making shirts for a single wearing, and making shirts for birds. Her method of solving the problem—doing research and then coming up with a plan—emphasizes independence, research, and critical thinking. Traditional heroines do break the spell, but they do it by following orders; Emma makes logical, well-reasoned decisions for herself. In addition, the story itself rejects the silence required for the source tales' heroines to be powerful by directly contradicting that part of the magic.

Unlike her fairy-tale predecessors, Emma has agency. The act of narration takes place after Emma has regained her ability to speak, meaning that she tells her own story. Silence is a key part of breaking the spell in many of the tales in this tale-type. This means that the protagonist cannot ask for help, nor can she express her feelings, communicate with others, give her consent, or defend herself against false accusations. Emma, however, does communicate, even when she is silent, through writing and gestures. More importantly, she narrates her own story. Using first-person narration in retelling is not unique, and other writers have made that choice in retelling this tale type.[4] As I explain in the first chapter, first-person narration emphasizes the subjectivity of the narrator's view and encourages the reader to identify with the character-narrator. Making the silent sister the narrator gives the character more depth, creating a complex character in opposition to the stock figure of the source tales. Her emotions, thoughts, and desires are part of the story. It also shows her dilemma, what is at stake for Emma, and the fact that she wants to be a swan too.

Emma's desire to be a swan means she is not in opposition to her stepmother either, which makes the stepmother less of a fairy-tale villain and more like another victim of a curse. The stepmother is not presented as a counter to Emma or her mother. She is, like Emma, confused by the current situation and not quite herself. Emma suspects that she is either a witch or enchanted because "[w]itches and people under spells, magic people, always have sweet tooths," and the stepmother eats a lot of dessert (80-1). But she and Emma get along, and Emma understands her stepmother's aversion to her brothers' noise. The stepmother has been transformed from her bird form and caged in a human body. She transforms back into a bird when Emma, in anger, yells at her, breaking Emma's silence. The description of the stepmother in bird form suggests a phoenix: "She was like an owl, but bigger, or maybe a great auk, or a kiwi. Her feathers looked fiery and metallic. She had a long tail, like a peacock. She fanned it out" (89). The imagery of the phoenix, a mythological creature for whom death is temporary, both reinforces the deferment of closure and the idea of death as transformative. In the scene, Emma mirrors the stepmother's actions, pointing at her as she in turn points at Emma. (The stepmother transforms people by pointing at them.) According to Emma, "She looked extremely relieved" after her transformation (89). When Emma yells after her, she yells, "I want to be a swan, too! I want my mom!" (89). It is at this point that Emma cries, something she says she was not able to do when her mother died (80).

It is important to recognize that Emma's silence is not a condition of her power; it is a part of mourning. Judith Butler explains in *Undoing Gender* that "one mourns when one accepts the fact that the loss one undergoes will be one that changes you . . . possibly forever, and that mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation the full

result of which you cannot know in advance" (18). Emma's becoming undone by grief

for her mother propels her into becoming the confident narrator of the story. At the start

of the story, Emma has been commissioned as a seamstress by Rumplestiltskin (76) and

is working on a quilt started by her mother, but she is not willing to finish it (77). In

neither instance does she initiate the project. At the end of the story, she designs her own

enchanted quilt, transforming her grief into magic. Emma breaks her period of mourning

and is transformed by her angry outburst and loss of identity at becoming the only human

in a school full of swans.

Because this story retells a traditional tale type that locates female power in

domestic arts and models silence, submission, and sacrifice as the appropriate behaviors

for women, it is important to underscore the narrative choices in Link's text that undo this

restrictive idealization of womanhood: ending the story before resolving the plot, having

Emma reject and judge the solution of the source tales, and giving Emma agency. The

ambiguity of Link's narrative questions the fairy-tale patterns on which it is built, and as

those patterns are highly gendered, the ambiguity disturbs notions that these concepts of

gender are fixed. The lack of a conclusion means the focus is not about action or being

strong, but about desire. Emma is not presented as an active heroine in contrast to a

passive one. Silent as they are, it would be a mistake to refer to the protagonists of this

tale type as passive. They are very active and are clearly powerful women, despite their

inability to protect themselves. Link does not present a strong model of how girls should

behave, but rather shows a character who can decide for herself how to act. The focus on

the choosing rather than the action suggests that there is a choice. Emma does not have to

do what her fairy-tale sisters did, and neither does the young reader. While it is overly

simplistic to argue that fairy tales provide models of behavior only, the history of reading and critiquing fairy tales as socializing children into gender roles makes the criticism of critics like Marcia Lieberman an intertext for retellings, particularly those with a young target audience. In contrast to the promotion of female passivity that Lieberman identified in popularized fairy tales, the behavior that "Swans" promotes is that one should do research to solve problems. That is not particularly gendered, nor opposite to earlier versions. The emphasis is on choice, not following prescribed patterns.

Emma Bear is not granted independence or shown her abilities by brothers or a fairy helper; she finds it herself by means of her agency and intellect. She is strong and independent, but she is also weak at times, given to impulse, and grieving. "Swans" provides a more complex critique of gender than replacing a passive character with an active one or giving a voice to a character who did not have one. "Swans" questions the very notion that there is a model for appropriate gendered behavior by explicitly rejecting the model of femininity in the source tale and focusing not on the happy ending but the desires and choices that enable any ending. By not revealing if Emma's actions are successful or not, Link avoids replacing one model of femininity with another. Crucial here is Link's deferment of closure, use of first-person narration, and fragmentation of her fairy-tale intertexts, which reinforce the thematic focus on action and agency, subverting gendered fairy-tale patterns while producing a text that is still recognizably a fairy tale.

"Magic for Beginners" (2005)

"Magic for Beginners," published in Link's short story collection of the same name,[5] is not aimed specifically at an adolescent audience like "Swans" and "The Cinderella Game." Its distinguishing characteristic is its structuring on multiple diegetic levels. The external narrator begins by saying that there is a "television show called *The Library*," an episode of which stars Jeremy Mars (203). Within Jeremy's episode, other episodes of *The Library* are watched by the characters, the most important of which is one in which Fox, a character on the show, apparently dies. Jeremy's episode is the frame story for the story of Fox's death, which is an episode within an episode. The episode starring Jeremy is described by the narrator and enframed by the introductory remarks of the narrator: "Fox is a television character, and she isn't dead yet. But she will be, soon. She's a character on a television show called *The Library*. You've never seen *The Library* on TV, but I bet you wish you had" (203). The diegetic levels collapse as the story progresses and the episode starring Jeremy and the episode he watches collide in dreams and through phone calls so that what happens in one affects the other. The narrator describes other episodes of *The Library* which are separated by line breaks from the narration of Jeremy's episode and describes episodes that Jeremy watches, making some episodes external to Jeremy's and others embedded within Jeremy's episode. At one point, the narrator gives a plot summary of Jeremy's episode in the same style in which the other, external episodes are narrated (250-1). This section is separated from the more detailed narration of Jeremy's episode, the primary diegetic level of the story, and fills in information missing from the primary level. In addition, the narrator's introductory remarks are not matched with closing remarks so that the frame at the

highest diegetic level is not closed. Because the boundaries between diegetic levels blur, I will refer to the different levels by the character who is the subject of each story rather than the level of embedding: Jeremy's episode is the first embedded story, and Fox's episode is embedded in Jeremy's.

Primarily due to its complex narrative structure, "Magic for Beginners" is a difficult story to summarize. In brief, it begins with the following line: "Fox is a television character, and she isn't dead yet" (203), and ends with the protagonist, fifteen-year-old Jeremy Mars, waiting to see if he has saved Fox. Jeremy and his friends are obsessed with *The Library*, a pirate television show that airs irregularly on random channels. And it would seem that Jeremy is the protagonist of a meta-episode of the show, for in addition to being a viewer, Jeremy, like Fox, is a character on the show. Even more befuddling, *The Library* does not have a set cast. The actors swap roles in every episode; only the actors in the lead romantic roles remain the same, a nod to the ways in which romance plots fix characterization in fairy tales. Fox, seemingly the most popular character, is played by both women and men, and is recognizable by her body's "public dimension," to borrow a term from Butler (*Undoing Gender* 21): her costume, body language, and "breathy-squeaky voice"—those parts of the character not tied to a specific actor's body but make her character recognizable (Link, "Magic" 210). She is "funny, dangerous, bad-tempered, flirtatious, greedy, untidy, accident-prone, graceful, and has a mysterious past. . . . She is always beautiful" (210). And she is always gendered female, regardless of who plays her.

In Jeremy's episode, his parents are not speaking to each other, he is in love with two girls, his best friend is jealous of him, and he and his mother are about to embark on

an "adventure" (225) to claim an inherited phone booth and horror-themed wedding chapel in Las Vegas. During Jeremy's episode, an episode of *The Library* airs in which Fox is, apparently, killed. The evidence on the show suggests that she is dead; Jeremy and his friends hope that she is not. Jeremy and his friends are not convinced that *The Library* is just a television show—it could be magic, or real, or a retelling of a legend and "this is just one version of how it happened" (241); the show is simply too good to be *just* a television show. They want it to be real, and Jeremy is afraid that if it is real, then Fox is really dead (240). As Jeremy's story progresses, he begins to communicate with Fox via dreams and his inherited phone booth. Fox sends Jeremy on a mission to steal three books from a library in Iowa for her. Though she does not tell him this will save her, he assumes that is his task, and Link's story ends with Jeremy in the wedding chapel in Las Vegas, sitting on a couch as a new episode of *The Library* airs and waiting to "find out if he's saved Fox" (256).

The possible rescue in the Jeremy episode is parallel to a rescue plot in the episode of *The Library* in which Fox is killed. The episode begins as Fox is about to rescue the romantic hero, Prince Wing. He has been turned into a teapot, smashed into bits, and buried under a statue of George Washington in the "Angela Carter Memorial Park on the seventeenth floor of The World-Tree Library" (209). Fox finds Prince Wing, pieces him back together, and turns him back into a human. At which point, he attacks, mutilates, and kills her. After he leaves, Fox is cleaned up by the librarians who have been hiding, and then she is taken out of the library, something that, according to narrator, has never happened before—nobody leaves *The Library*.

Though both are fictional characters in the same story, and both are identified as television characters by the narrator, Fox and Jeremy are presented as inhabiting separate storyworlds. Jeremy does not consider Fox to be "real" until it becomes possible that she has died and his "reality" begins to merge with what he watches on television. At one point in Jeremy's story, he discovers that the reason his parents are fighting is that his novelist father has written Jeremy into a story and killed him. Following this revelation, the narrator, focalized through Jeremy, states, "Now Jeremy and Fox have something in common. They're both made-up people. They're both dead" (226). When Jeremy later speaks to Fox, he asks, "Are you real?" (246). When Jeremy again in their conversation refers to a part of the "real" world, suggesting that Fox is not a part of it, she is "amused" (246). Though he sees the two as distinct—he is reality and she is fantasy—that conception is challenged as events unfold. Butler explains that "[t]he critical promise of fantasy, when and where it exists, is to challenge the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality. Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home" (*Undoing Gender* 29). Though Butler is using fantasy to describe multiple articulations of gender and the political presence of those articulations that allows for imagining gender outside of a heterosexual binary, her point is useful here. As embodied fantasy, Fox creates a situation that enables Jeremy to *dis*identify with the parameters of his character at the beginning of the story and reimagine himself otherwise. As the reality/fantasy binary collapses for Jeremy, he is undone.

For Butler, *undoing* is not simply a relational activity, although that is the place to start conceptualizing becoming undone. Her discussion of undoing focuses on the ways in which recognition (both of self and other) alters identity by both "conferring recognition" and "withholding recognition" (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 2). Recognition fixes a person as a specific identity, undoing previous ones. As we identify through recognition of others, we undo and are undone by those relationships. Ecstasy and grief are two models that Butler presents to conceptualize becoming undone. Butler's work with this concept focuses both on undoing "restrictive concepts of sexual and gendered life" and undoing personhood: "undermining the capacity to persevere in a livable life" and undoing "a prior conception of who one is only to inaugurate a relatively newer one that has greater livability as its aim" (*Undoing Gender* 1). At stake is the production of the category of human and who does or does not qualify as human. As her book is titled *Undoing Gender*, many of her examples center on how those "restrictive" categories of gender and sexuality undo people and in turn, can be undone.

Jeremy's becoming undone by his relationship with Fox is most symbolically evident when he changes names. Throughout the story, Jeremy—who is always called Jeremy by the narrator—is called by his name, Jeremy, and by his nickname, Germ. Fox, in the above-mentioned telephone call, refers to Jeremy as "Jeremy" until he accepts her task. She then calls him "Germ" when asking him to promise not to tell anyone about her (247). As it is only Jeremy's friends and parents who call him Germ (205), this change in address signifies a change in his and Fox's relationship. Fox is now reidentified as his friend, undoing her earlier identity of fictional character. Jeremy's acceptance of her as real marks his recognition of her life as livable and thus worthy of rescue. Because he

sees her as real, and now as a friend, he can risk himself and his conception of self to undo her death instead of just grieving her loss. Jeremy follows up Fox's use of his nickname with a request:

> "Only if you promise you won't call me Germ," Jeremy says, feeling really stupid. "I hate when people call me that. Call me Mars instead."
>
> "Mars," Fox says, and it sounds exotic and strange and brave, as if Jeremy has just become a new person, a person named after a whole planet, a person who kisses girls and talks to Foxes. (247-8)

Germ is undone, and Jeremy's new conception of himself, Mars, is marked by heterosexual relationships. In the beginning of the story, he is a person who does not kiss girls, a fact introduced immediately after the introduction of his nickname (205). But as the story progresses, Jeremy, who is attracted to two girls, has kissed both girls. He has become a person who does kiss girls, which is part of the new identity he has assumed and which is marked by his new name, Mars. But it is not the act of kissing girls and entering into heterosexually charged relationships that undoes Germ. Rather it is the *recognition* of Jeremy's change that undoes Germ for Mars. Butler explains that "our very sense of personhood is linked to the desire for recognition, and that desire places us outside ourselves, in a realm of social norms that we do not fully choose, but that provides the horizon and the resource for any sense of choice that we have" (*Undoing Gender* 33). Jeremy's previous identity is undone by his desire to be recognized within the social context of heterosexual norms.

It would be overly simplistic to say that Jeremy is undone *only* by his relationship to Fox. While this relationship is the most dramatic, Jeremy's episode is a story of

becoming undone and undoing. His conception of who he is changes throughout the story from interactions with his friends, his parents, and Fox. Likewise he undoes others, as they are recognized in relation to him. Part of this undoing is the conceptualization of formations of masculinity in heterosexual and homosocial contexts. The parallel rescue plots of Fox and Jeremy enable Jeremy's undoing, his "inauguration" of a newer self, and the undoing of the restrictively gendered fairy-tale rescue plot. The rescue of Prince Wing by Fox subverts the gendered coding of the prince-rescues-princess motif and challenges the assumptions of rescue by not facilitating a happy ending. Jeremy's attempt to rescue Fox is tenuous at best and not guaranteed to succeed. It requires that he alter the assumptions of his own identity and morality: from one who does not steal to one who does.

Many retellers of fairy tales have subverted the princess-rescue-plot by having the female victim rescue herself, or by reversing the gender roles so that the woman rescues the man (both occur in *Ever After*, for example); one only need be reminded of the *Shrek* franchise to see that move as a feminist cliché. It is less common to see the rescue fail, or the rescuer betrayed and killed by the one she saves, as happens in the case of Fox and Prince Wing. Link uses a standard feminist retelling technique and troubles it, questioning the implied assumption that reversing the gendered binary roles of the fairy tale is adequate. The female character embodies the rescuer role, and is successful, but her triumph is interrupted and denied. Additionally, it is unknown if the body in Fox's clothes is biologically female, as the gender of the TV actor is not tied to the female gender of the character. The actors perform Fox and her gender. The possibility of gender ambiguity here implies that biological sex, performed gender, and executed gender roles

are not fixed, but changeable. They can be done and undone. The truncated success of Fox's rescue also suggests that maintaining the restrictive gender roles of the fairy-tale plot, either by employing or reversing the binary, is problematic. She is not successful just because she is a feminist heroine in a feminist fairy tale—and her success is only provisional.

These parallel rescues destabilize the expectations for closure in rescue plots. As readers of fairy tales, and consumers of romance and adventure stories that hinge on a rescue, we expect rescuers to succeed. The prince rescues the princess, and they live happily ever after. In fairy tales of this type, the rescuer-hero represents ideal masculinity just as the passive princess has been demarcated as idealized femininity. In "'Some Day My Prince Will Come': Female Acculturation Through the Fairy Tale," Marcia Lieberman identifies this pattern in popularized tales like "Snow White" and "Cinderella," saying "Girls win the prize if they are the fairest of them all; boys win if they are bold, active, and lucky" (385). Disney's *Sleeping Beauty*, which draws on the quest narrative of medieval romances, exemplifies both ideals, depicting a brave prince battling with a dragon to save a beautiful princess. The male hero attains his happily-ever-after ending by action that is coded in the various fairy tales as noble; for example, as in innocent persecuted heroine stories[6]. This masculinity, in many canonical fairy tales, is tied to a heterosexual relationship in which the male is assertive and the female is submissive. The binary that has long been characterized as limiting the possibilities of female behavior to primarily submissive roles also limits male behavior to primarily a rescuer-role. The implied guarantee by the fairy-tale structure, though, is that the rescue will succeed and herald a happy ending. In Link's narrative, Jeremy and Fox, as rescuers,

do not have that guarantee. Fox's happily-ever-after is violently cut short, and the intervention into the success of her rescue-plot is traumatic for Jeremy, undoing his identity and throwing into question the viability of rescue as a productive action.

Jeremy cannot immediately re-watch the episode in which Fox is killed (211) as the other devotees can, and the narration of the violence is delayed and strung out over several scenes in the story. By interspersing the details of the episode in which Fox dies with depictions of Jeremy's problems with his family and friends, Link certainly heightens the drama of the stories, but she also demonstrates Jeremy's inability to accept the death of Fox and the subversion of the rescue-plot. This narrative strategy prompts the reader to consider the possibilities of rescues that never play out. When it is Jeremy's turn to rescue the damsel-in-distress, he does so not knowing if she is even real, thinking she is already dead, and with the message that recues are not guaranteed to turn out the way one expects them to.

Also troubling for Jeremy is the form his rescue must take. Like in many stories with teenage protagonists, Jeremy must negotiate his morality in an imperfect world where lines between good and bad are not as clear as they are in stories with happy endings. Much of the family drama in Jeremy's life stems from his father, a horror novelist, and his quirks, one of which is to shoplift, an action that Jeremy thinks is wrong (249). Before leaving for Las Vegas, Jeremy asks his father to promise not to shoplift (239). But on the day of departure, Jeremy asks his father for advice on how to steal so that he can rescue Fox (249). The rescue Jeremy undertakes requires a moral compromise. He must embrace the values of his family patriarch, at least to a limited extent. In his efforts to become a rescuer, even if a potentially unsuccessful one, Jeremy

has to take cues on masculinity from his father, whose representation of masculinity is not met with approval by the Jeremy we encounter at the start of "Magic for Beginners."

The story begins and ends with the uncertainty of Fox's life and death. It is not important to the resolution of the story if Fox is dead or not. The story is not about whether or not Jeremy's rescue attempt is successful; after all, as shown by Fox's rescue attempt, success is not equivalent to a happy ending. Like Emma in "Swans," it is Jeremy's decision to act, without any evidence that his actions will have the desired effect or if the problem he wants to solve is even real, that is crucial in the story. Despite the ambiguity of the situation, Jeremy tries to rescue Fox. It is helpful to think of the ambiguity in Link's story in terms of Butler's concept of undoing gender and her example of being undone by grief. As I quoted earlier, Butler explains that mourning is a transformative experience, one in which a person "cannot know [the full result] in advance" (*Undoing Gender* 18). It is the *not* knowing that is significant here. When Jeremy begins to mourn Fox's death, he undergoes a significant change in how he sees himself. Butler states that when we lose someone, "we lose our composure in some fundamental sense: we do not know who we are or what to do" (*Undoing Gender* 19). It is the loss of Fox, and with her the loss of Jeremy's comfortable identity, that opens Jeremy up to other possibilities. That undoing of self enables Jeremy to then accept the ambiguity and fantasy of the rescue. The disjointed narrative and fragment fairy-tale plots perform Jeremy's changing and disjointed identity as he navigates the breakdown of expected narratives.

"The Cinderella Game" (2009)

In "The Cinderella Game," published in *Troll's-Eye View: A Book of Villainous Tales*, it is not the ending but the character roles and genre that are ambiguous. "The Cinderella Game" is narrated by an external narrator and is focalized through Peter, the twelve-year-old protagonist. He and his eight-year-old stepsister, Darcy, are home alone after the babysitter has had to leave for an emergency. The story begins with Peter in his stepfather's "forbidden room" watching a werewolf movie (185). Darcy interrupts the movie and bribes Peter into playing a make-believe game with her, and Peter insists that she be the evil stepsister and he be Cinderella. Almost immediately, Peter makes Cinderella "evil" as well, insisting that the abuse from her stepfamily justifies the transformation (191). Evil, for Peter, means that Cinderella is violent and destructive, and that the story of "Cinderella" is devoid of magic helpers and happy endings (191). Darcy adds hide-and-seek to their game and hides. While Peter is searching for her, he catches his reflection in a mirror, leading him to contemplate his own dark side and realize that others see him as a problem. When Peter finds Darcy hiding under the kitchen sink, she stabs him in the leg with a fork because she's "the evil stepsister," saying, "Of course I stabbed you. I'll stab you again if you don't do what I say" (195). They argue, she pushes him, and he hits her while trying to catch his balance, knocking Darcy to the floor. His reaction is fearful and he shakes Darcy, yelling, "I don't know what I'm doing here! Tell me what I'm doing here (196). Darcy responds, "You're Peter" and "You're being my stepbrother" (196). She begins cleaning up the mess while Peter sits on the floor. When their parents arrive home, Darcy distracts her stepmother, Peter's mother, with a hug and by calling her "Mommy" (198). She tells their parents about the game, leaving out the

fight. The story ends with Peter planning to run upstairs and clean up any evidence of his presence in the forbidden room, and Darcy wiping Peter's blood off her hand and onto her tattered princess dress.

Every character in "The Cinderella Game" is painted with monstrous imagery, invoking werewolves and zombies, and both child characters play at being evil in their game of "Cinderella" (ATU 510). Peter and his younger stepsister Darcy argue over who gets to be Cinderella and who is the evil stepsister. Peter claims the role of Cinderella and immediately turns her "evil," transforming the traditional heroine into another villain. The word *evil* is used thirteen times, almost always in relation to the characters of the stepsister and Cinderella in the game. The "new, improved version" of "Cinderella" Peter imagines contains no heroes, princes, nor magical helpers (191). If everyone can be "evil," the fairy-tale conventions break down, and the fairy-tale game the children in the story play slips into the horrific.

In the author's note to her story, Kelly Link says that "everyone in it could be a villain. It just depends on which fairy tale you think you're reading" (200). Link's comment highlights both the importance of focalization and the idea that *villain* is a relational term. The ambiguity of the villain that Link addresses is created in multiple ways: lack of a clear hero, slippage between *villain* and *monster* so that every character's monstrous traits make her or him possibly a villain, and the blending of fairy-tale and horror genres. These three ways intersect throughout the story and often work together to destabilize fairy-tale patterns. The fairy-tale conventions invoked in Link's "The Cinderella Game" are disrupted and transformed by questioning both the concepts of gender and evil, and by suggesting that one is constructed as monstrous by others. As

such, *villain* becomes a relational term: who the villain is depends on from whose point of view one is seeing the story; it is not a matter of opposition to the hero.

The villain is traditionally understood to be the antagonist in a story—one who works against the protagonist's desires. Vladímir Propp, in his structural analysis of Russian fairy tales, *Morphology of the Folktale*, identifies the villain as one of the primary dramatis personae in fairy tales. That Propp uses *dramatis personae* instead of *characters* here is important in that each dramatis persona is associated with a sphere of action, and multiple characters can perform the acts associated with that sphere. According to Propp, the characters who perform the actions can change among different variants of the same tale, but structural analysis is still possible by focusing on dramatis personae and functions which, he argues, are stable. He identifies the villain's sphere as struggles against the hero (79); for the hero, the sphere includes leaving on a quest (seeker-hero only), reacting to magical aid, and wedding a princess (80). The last two acts are performed by both seeker- and victim-heroes. While it is possible to match up dramatis personae with specific characters in a fairy tale, Propp also allows that one character can be "involved in several spheres of action" (80) or that "a single sphere of action is distributed among several characters" (81). While Propp focuses his examples on the many ways that different characters can fulfill the helper or donor spheres, including the hero being his own helper, villainy can also be spread amongst multiple characters, as occurs in "The Cinderella Game." If *villain* is defined by struggle against the hero, then all characters at odds with the hero participate in the villain's sphere of action.

There is a fairly straightforward reading of the story in which Peter is Cinderella—an innocent persecuted hero. He sees himself as neglected, unloved, and an outsider, possibly crazy, but definitely a troublemaker. Or at least that is how he thinks others see him. The game of Cinderella is a plotting device that tells the reader to read Peter as the Cinderella-figure in the story despite the monstrous language that makes him seem more villain than hero. Darcy is obviously the stepsister whose meanness and higher familial status turns Peter's Cinderella evil. But she also fulfills the role of helper in that she, who is first described with her "holstered . . . fairy wand" (186), grounds Peter when he is panicking and cleans up the mess of their game, protecting Peter (and herself of course) from the punishing adults.[7] Doling out punishments is a task assigned to Propp's princess (a sought-after person) and her father (the two of whom always exist in concert for Propp). Darcy orders the chaos left in the wake of their game. Peter, then, is the hero, but even in this reading who is the villain remains unclear. Who is Peter, as hero, struggling against? Everyone. He is opposed to everyone, and the monstrous imagery characterizes him as wolfish, as a typical fairy-tale villain. My goal here is not to offer a fixed reading in which I fit the characters of the story into Propp's dramatis personae, but rather to show how the ambiguity in the story makes it impossible to pin the characters down. Here, as in "Magic for Beginners," characters assume fairy-tale roles consciously, as actors. This distancing technique allows for a kind of commentary and reflection on the tales from the standpoint of the stories' characters. The stories break traditional fairy-tale patterns in terms of plotting and narrative structures, but the characters' awareness of their own troubling of fairy-tale patterns provides a metafictional commentary that reinforces the structural disruptions to the fairy-tale genre.

The ambiguity of the villain is created in part by slippage between the concepts of *villain* and *monster*, as the two terms are interchangeable in this story. Fairy-tale villains are often monsters—talking wolves and bears, ogres, witches—so it is no surprise that monstrous imagery would be deployed in setting up a fairy-tale villain. But *monster* is itself a relative term as it implies a distancing from society and recognizing another as nonhuman. Jeffery Jerome Cohen explains in "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," "The monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us. In its function as dialectical Other or third-term supplement, the monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond" (7). For Kevin Alexander Boon in "Ontological Anxiety Made Flesh: The Zombie in Literature, Film and Culture," "That which is defined as 'monstrous' . . . was not supposed to happen; that is, it is 'unnatural' and as such a malformation of some universal design" (34). The monstrous divides that which is human from that which is not, and that which is constructed as monstrous is marginalized—separated and othered as nonhuman. Monsters in fairy tales have human traits—they are intelligent, speak, and have a role in the social order of the storyworld—and many horror monsters are often hybrids, creatures who were once human but have been transformed. In his preface to *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, Cohen argues that the monster is "a category that is itself a kind of limit case, an extreme version of marginalization, an abjecting epistemological device basic to the mechanics of deviance construction and identity formation" (ix). While cultural-studies analyses of monsters might demonstrate how they are symbolic of social issues and fears, I am more interested in how the construction of a monstrous other in a text is linked to representations of how identities are formed.

References to monsters from horror films (werewolves, zombies, and serial killers) are mixed with descriptions of evil throughout the story. Sue Short, in *Misfit Sisters: Screen Horror as Female Rites of Passage*, explains that a blending of fairy tales and horror is actually a logical one:

> Horror's kinship with fairy tales is demonstrated through several shared elements, including an emphasis on fear . . . often involving the transgression of existing laws and boundaries; and what many critics perceive to be the social function of both forms: their invocation of particular initiation rites—with plots highlighting the necessity of separation from friends and family (and comforting familiarity) prior to maturation. (vii-ix)

This distinction, however, is that "far from aiming to reassure its audience, horror aims to unsettle us, even as it draws upon many of the same motifs" as fairy tales (Short 6-7). Unsettling the audience is something at which Link excels, and it is achieved by subverting the expectations of the reader. The fairy-tale structures, here exemplified by Propp's dramatis personae, cannot be maintained when the horror element is introduced to the story.

All of the characters are described by the external narrator with monstrous imagery, which marks each character as a potential villain in a seemingly objective, authoritative way. Peter is primarily described in wolfish terms drawn from fairy-tale villains and werewolf legends; even his name connotes the orchestrated Russian children's story that was adapted by Disney, *Peter and the Wolf*. When Peter is introduced, he is in his stepfather's forbidden room watching a werewolf movie. In his

initial contact with Darcy, the werewolves in the background are continually referenced. One werewolf is "roaming through a house, playing hide-and-seek" amongst "puddles of blood" in a scene that foreshadows the children's own bloody game of hide-and-seek (187). There are sixteen wolf references in relation to Peter, including the werewolf film he is watching. The big bad wolf from fairy tales is alluded to four times, twice each from "The Three Little Pigs" (189, 192) and "Little Red Riding Hood" (190, 196). Peter is also described as "wolfish" (192), "howling" (194, 196), and "wild" (192, 197).

The monstrous references that surround Darcy paint her as something inhuman, both undead and beastly, blending fairy-tale and horror genre tropes. Darcy is introduced as a sort of zombie princess, feral and rank. The very first description of her begins with her hair, which is "black and knotted and stringy" (185). She is "wearing one of her dozens of princess dresses," but the dress is tattered and faded, "like something a zombie would wear to a fancy dress party" (185). There are seventeen references to Darcy's appearance or behavior that call attention to her lack of civilization, including the reference to zombies above. The terms used to describe her are not as connected as Peter's wolf allusions, but the combination of adjectives and phrases about her "ratty" (196) appearance and "feral smell" (188) paint her as a feral animal-child, including a reference to her "abandonment issues" (190) and her "monstrously loving hold" (198).

Darcy's father is painted in imagery that marks him more as a human monster who does not abide by social regulations; in this case, a serial killer who is clearly a villain. He is described as a Bluebeard figure. The references to his "forbidden room" (185, 199), his wealth, and his collecting are easily seen as "Bluebeard" references in the context of the physical description of his "bearish, bluish-blackish beard" (198).

However, it is unlikely that the young audience would be as familiar with the story of "Bluebeard" as they would with the other fairy tales referenced, owing to its lack of popularity in children's collections. The use of "bearish," however, also suggests a beastliness reinforced by the portrayal of his daughter as animalistic. Neither of the parents has a name.

Peter's mother is the least described in monstrous terms, but that may simply be because she, as a stepmother, is most easily identified by an audience as evil or wicked in a fairy-tale context. It requires far less description to establish her as villainous when readers familiar with fairy-tale tropes expect stepmothers to be villains. She is described as poor, and Peter suggests that she married his stepfather for money (187). Mostly her behavior in regards to Peter is described from his perspective as unfair. It is important to recognize here that the descriptions are focalized through Peter. Though in external narration, the descriptions are clearly filtered through Peter's perspective. She is "*only going to pay for half*" of the new laptop Peter needs because his is ruined (188, italics mine). "Only" emphasizes judgment, suggesting that from Peter's perspective half is not enough. When Darcy teases Peter that she has to be nice to him until he "die[s] or get[s] sent away to military school or something" (189), Peter at first assumes that military school is his stepfather's idea. Then he decides that "maybe it was his mother, still working out the details of her new, perfect life, worrying that Peter was going to mess things up now that she'd gotten it" (190). This description emphasizes both Peter's fear that his mother does not love him and his low image of himself as a troublemaker.

While the other characters' monstrosity is built objectively into the text as descriptions from the external narrator, for Peter's mother, *monster* depends not only on

the tradition of the fairy-tale stepmother as wicked, but by the narratorial judgments of her son. Peter's mother becomes monstrous by neglecting her biological child for the stepchild, a reversal of the standard wicked stepmother, who neglects the stepchild for her biological one. She is also shown to have "changed" from Peter's perspective, wanting a daughter and insisting that Peter become a role model (193). She is described as giving Darcy preferential treatment because she's a girl (193). Peter's jealousy of his stepfather also comes through in how he sees his mother as "happy" (194) and "laughing" (197) in her husband's presence only. When she enters the house at the end of the story, the narrator states, "It was one of the things Peter hated most about his stepfather, how quickly her face would change from laughter, when she talked to Peter, or like now, when she looked over and saw Darcy at the sink, Peter on the floor" (197-8). His mother immediately assumes that something is wrong and presumably Peter's fault, but is quieted by Darcy's use of the name "Mommy" (198).

This slippage between *villain* and *monster* is furthered still by the transformation of the one traditional heroine, Cinderella, into an evil figure. In making Cinderella evil, no one character is left untainted. It is important to note that the good/evil binary begins to be disrupted when the children question and undo the fixed gender-role of Cinderella as a girl, which in turn allows the story to unravel. When Peter suggests that he be Cinderella, Darcy reacts by yelling, "You can't be Cinderella!" (189). When Peter asks why, she explains, "Because you're a boy" (189). When pushed to explain why boys cannot be Cinderella, "Darcy seemed to have no answer to this," and she changes the topic (189). Allowing Cinderella to be played by a boy—thereby not matching character

gender to biological sex—completely changes her role in the story of "Cinderella," and the fairy tale falls apart.

While there are versions of the Cinderella tale-type (ATU 510) that feature boys, Darcy says that Peter cannot be Cinderella "[b]ecause [he's] a boy" (180). For her and Peter—and thus the logic of the storyworld—Cinderella's gender is part of her character and what makes her Cinderella. The version of the Cinderella invoked in the story is one derived from popular culture memory, which is dominated by Disney's version rather than the variety of tales known to folklorists. Both children refer to Disney's version in their crafting of the game (191). Darcy's inclusion of mice as a defining characteristic makes it clear that she is referencing the Disney version: "Cinderella isn't evil. She gets to go to the ball and wear a princess dress. And mice like her" (191). Peter also invokes Disney's version to justify making Cinderella evil: "Everybody treated Cinderella like she was a pushover. Didn't she sleep in a fireplace? 'If her evil stepsister keeps making fun of her and taking away her PlayStation, she might burn down the house with everyone in it'" (191). Disrupting the male/female binary also disrupts the good/evil one.

Peter questions the fixed gender roles of the tale as they have been told it, and his questioning is enough to open that role to other possibilities: Cinderella can be a boy and evil. Darcy attempts to enforce gender roles, not just that Cinderella is female, but that as a girl, she is also good, a domestic servant, and a victim—traits marked by Cinderella's crying and singing and Darcy's ordering Peter-Cinderella to get her food and toys (190). Peter rejects not just the gender of the character, but also how she is characterized, rationalizing that a person who is constantly ordered around will eventually snap and "burn down the house with everyone in it" (191). Because the gender and gendered

behavior of Cinderella is so ingrained in the narrative as Darcy and Peter know it, a small question about gender ideology embedded in the narrative ruptures the story. As a boy, Cinderella is no longer a victim-hero, but neither is he a seeker-hero, as he does not fulfill the actions that, according to Propp, are associated with heroes: leaving to go on a quest, reacting to magical assistance, and wedding a princess. Peter unmakes Cinderella as a hero by making her male, active, and evil. Darcy's reaction to Peter's rupture—"This isn't how the story goes. This is stupid" (191)—demonstrates how deeply the story is changed for the children. Cinderella is no longer Cinderella, but Darcy plays along, and both children embrace their evil roles. Once the parameters of the game have been set— all roles are evil ones—there is a line break, and the next section begins with Peter seeing himself as dangerous.

Perspective is key here, and it is through the focalization of a troubled boy that ambiguity is in part created. In one scene Peter is seeking the hidden Darcy. As he searches, he recalls the first time he visited the house he now lives in. The narrator describes what he thought and how he purposely was rude at dinner. Then the narrator says, "Everyone was always watching him. Waiting for him to mess up. Even his friends at his last school had acted sometimes like they thought he was crazy" (193). This passage demonstrates how Peter defines himself and his role as villain through his interpretation of social interaction. Peter's understanding that he is monstrous and possibly evil is connected to how he perceives others as viewing him. They expect him to "mess up" and be "crazy," which in turn makes him see himself as such.

Peter's view of himself is transformed into an issue of relational identity

formation through narrative style. In this scene, Peter looks at himself in a mirror while

hunting Darcy:

> Back in the dark hallway again he saw something and paused. It was a
>
> mirror, and he was in it. He paused to look at himself. No Cinderella here.
>
> Something dangerous. Something out of place. He felt a low, wild, wolfish
>
> delight rise up in him. His mother looked at him sometimes as if she
>
> wasn't sure who he was. He wasn't sure, either. He had to look away from
>
> what he saw in the face of the mirror. (192)

This passage is one of those that paint Peter as monstrous, connecting him with

something wolfish and—through the context of the horror film he has been watching—

werewolfish. But it also shows how his view of himself is framed by how he perceives

others as viewing him. The language of the first passage, "messed up" and "though he

was crazy," gives Peter's thoughts in free indirect discourse. Readers are shown his

childish understanding of how others see him. In the second passage I cite, while

focalized through Peter, the descriptions are the external narrator's phrasing and are more

sophisticated in tone. The more literary language in the scene broadens the scope from a

boy feeling like he is a disappointment to others to issues of identity as part of social,

relational context.

The narrative transformation of Peter's feelings of rejection into discourse about

identity creates his monstrous alter ego. Marina Warner explains, in *Monsters of Our

Own Making: The Peculiar Pleasures of Fear*, that the monstrous alter ego has become a

standard in children's texts: "Monsters have become children's best friends, *alter egos*,

inner selves. While the monster mania of the last few years has obviously been fostered by commercial interests, it has also diagnosed an identification that children themselves willingly and enthusiastically accept" (Warner, *Monsters* 15). For Warner, monsters in children's texts reflect "our expectations of children and our images of ourselves, *in potentia*" (*Monsters* 16). Seeing the monstrous potential in one's self becomes a way of confronting fear and anxiety. Here, Peter's fear is shown to be that his perception that others see him as monstrous is true. It is that possibility that scares him—that he truly is the villain and not a victim-hero. What this scene demonstrates is the power of identification through relationships: one is constructed as monstrous by others.

Peter's identity is also formed by his place within the social relationships of his new blended family which mirror the fragmented functions of the fairy tale the children enact. After their fight in which Darcy is injured and Peter cries out, "I don't know what I'm doing here! Tell me what I'm doing here!," Darcy responds "You're Peter" and "You're being my stepbrother" (196). The word choice, "You're *being* my stepbrother," implies acting, pretending; he is playing the role of a stepbrother. It is a continuous action rather than a state of being (You *are* my stepbrother). For Butler, *being* can be a *doing* in that one's actions can make up one's existence, but one's actions inscribed within social relationships are not of one's choosing (3). Darcy defines Peter's identity for him as a product of a relationship that neither of them chose. Also important is that Darcy does not use the term "evil" now that they are not playing the game anymore. Peter responds, "Your evil stepbrother" (196). Here the context is still one of action, as it is a reference to Darcy's comment; he is *being* her evil stepbrother, trying to understand his identity within the structure provided by the Cinderella narrative of stepfamilies.

The use of *evil* rather than a different adjective, such as *wicked* or *bad*, both terms used in conjunction with fairy-tale characters referenced in the story, invokes the monstrous as well. *Evil* has a different connotation, suggesting something otherworldly or inhuman. Peter laughs when he says that he is evil, and the narrator describes it as "a wild, evil laugh" (197). This description and the line about the evil stepbrother above are the only times in the story in which *evil* is not used to refer to Cinderella or her stepsister. When Peter says he is Darcy's "evil stepbrother," he is still using the narrative of Cinderella to make sense of his role in his family. However, in describing Peter's laugh, *evil* is being used by the narrator, and it does not describe the roles in the game. Children can easily be described as having wicked or bad behavior, but an evil child suggests something more sinister and invokes the horror genre as it implies something beyond the human and monstrous. That the story ends here, when the evil of the game bleeds into the context in which it is played, furthers the ambiguity created from blending genres and recontextualizing fragments of "Cinderella." The narrator's seemingly objective description of Peter's laugh as evil suggests that Peter has moved from the open and shared category of villain in the game to a monster in the story about his family. The villain of the story is left ambiguous, though, as he is not the only monster.

The ambiguity of Link's narratives, in which the resolution of the action is not the conclusion of the story, questions the fairy-tale patterns on which it is built. And as those patterns are highly gendered by a heterosexual binary, the ambiguity troubles notions that these concepts of gender are fixed. Like Angela Carter, Kelly Link works within the patterns of the tales that came before her. But Link also builds on the legacy left by

Carter. In *The Bloody Chamber*, Carter refuses to provide a straightforward alternative to

patriarchy and offers multiple retellings of the same tales, each presenting different

variations of femininity and masculinity, sexuality, and feminism. Though still structured

by heterosexual relationships, Carter's reluctance to fix feminism in a utopian frame or

reject patriarchy wholesale in her retellings acknowledged gender's place as part of a

complex and troubling matrix. Link continues Carter's work, treating gender as part of

identity in her stories, but not as the most important or even most interesting part. The

ambiguity created by Link not only troubles questions of gender, as Carter's work does,

but it also troubles concepts of reality and identity, and the expectations of those concepts

as constructed by fantasy. By reading Link's stories as stories of undoing gender,

identity, and the social conceptions of these categories rather than as just a complication

of fairy-tale plots, we can see how, even when framed by heterosexual relationships,

gender and gendered identity are more complex than their heteronormative frame would

allow.

Though it is perhaps a stretch to say that the passages I quoted from Zipes in the

beginning of this chapter set up a binary of commercialized and utopian feminist fairy

tales against "dissident" and "troubled" feminist fairy tales, it is a contrast that holds

(*Relentless Progress* 130). While Zipes clearly comes out on the side of the dissident

voices, he expresses dissatisfaction with the "baffled" and "distressed" protagonists and

their "degenerative" tales: "it is also a dissent that is worrisome, for it reflects how

estranged Americans are from one another" (*Relentless Progress* 130). It is here that I

disagree. Tales like Link's do not reveal social estrangement, but dependence. Feminist

and queer interventions into identity formation, such as Butler's arguments for doing and

undoing gender, show us that we are irrevocably dependent upon one another for our own identities, and that in our recognition of ourselves and others, we produce what it is to be human. Though dangerous and potentially devastating, as Butler demonstrates, this power does not separate us, but binds us together. Link's degenerative narrative strategies, which fragment and rupture fairy-tale patterns, open up the traditional fairy-tale genre to represent and perform more complex social formations. These disruptive narrative strategies resignify fairy-tale fragments with new meanings that both reflect the ways in which our understanding of social construction and regulation have changed and leave the fragments open to be resignified again.

CHAPTER 4

GAPS IN THE BRIAR HEDGE: THE READER'S ROLE IN AWAKENING *BRIAR ROSE*

As I explored in Chapters 2 and 3, fairy-tale structures contain within them configurations of gender and sexuality that limit what can happen in the stories. In Chapter 2, I showed how complex representations of gender as constructed, performative identity are constrained by adherence to the marriage plot. In Chapter 3, I explored how, when structure is not reproduced, fragmentation and lack of closure open up fairy-tale retellings to a wider range of possibilities for conceiving of gender and sexuality. In this chapter, I explore how destabilizing narrative can also destabilize gender as a side effect even if the plot does not make interventions into how gender is conceptualized or if gender is not a thematic element of the retelling. The two novels I analyze in this chapter, *Briar Rose* by Jane Yolen and *Briar Rose* by Robert Coover, do not wholly abandon fairy-tale structures as Kelly Link often does. Yolen and Coover repeat structure, including the marriage plot, in their retellings, but in doing so both novels extensively unsettle and call attention to fairy-tale narrative patterns.

I use Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory and Linda Hutcheon's arguments about metafiction to show how a metafictional retelling can, by destabilizing fairy-tale narrative patterns, also question conceptions of gender. The gaps that are a product of destabilizing the narrative in these retellings of "Sleeping Beauty" do two things. First, they direct readers to bridge the gaps, inviting interpretation by linking separate sections of text, and second, they give space within the text to questions of gender, so that even

when the plot is fairly traditional in its treatment of gender, the questioning of its

normative conception is given weight by its proximity to the gaps.

Jane Yolen and Robert Coover take established fairy-tale narratives that would be

familiar to most adult or young-adult Western audiences and transform them into new

tales. They base their retellings of the "Sleeping Beauty" fairy tale (ATU 410) on popular

variants by Charles Perrault, "Sleeping Beauty in the Wood" ("La Belle au bois

dormant," 1697), and the Brothers Grimm, "Little Briar Rose" ("Dornröschen," 1812,

1857). The animated Disney film *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) is also a well-known popular

version. Yolen's *Briar Rose* (2002) is the story of a young woman who, when faced with

her dying grandmother's claim that "I am Briar Rose" (17), embarks on a journey to

prove the claim true and learn who her grandmother *really* is. Coover's *Briar Rose*

(1996) is the story of the prince, the sleeping princess, and the fairy who cursed the

princess into dormancy and now fills her dreams with different versions of their own tale.

Both writers' projects have a metafictional focus. Yolen uses the "Sleeping Beauty" tale

to mediate a story of the Holocaust and demonstrates both the limits and possibilities of

narrative in representing the Holocaust, and Coover blends several versions of the fairy

tale together, each interrupting the previous one, to reveal the instability of narrative.

Even though both Coover's and Yolen's works rewrite the same fairy tale, it may

seem counterintuitive to analyze them together because Coover's novel is usually

mentioned in connection with his other deconstructive fairy-tale retellings, most notably

those in *Pricksongs and Descants*, and Yolen's novel has at its center such a difficult and

complex subject matter. Coover's *Briar Rose* deconstructs fairy tales to illustrate that

they are stagnant narratives with no possibility for expansion outside of the fairy-tale structure and, at the same time, flexible tales full of endless possibilities with ever-changing variables. Yolen's *Briar Rose* is notable for its coverage of the Holocaust for a young adult audience. Her novel reveals the embedded fairy tale to be a powerful metaphor for a real-life horror story that is unspeakable. In Yolen's work, the power of symbolic narrative to communicate an experience of inexplicable atrocity is celebrated while, at the same time, recognizing the limits of what narrative can convey. The two writers' projects in these novels are incommensurable, and their expected readerships quite different.

Seemingly all the two *Briar Rose* novels have in common is the story of "Sleeping Beauty"; however, as I will be arguing, they expand notions of the fairy tale and use similar metafictional narrative strategies to do so: suspension of the narrative, multiple focalization, embedded stories, competing narrative threads, and suspension and negation of closure. Yolen's and Coover's *Briar Rose* novels are both constructed in ways that compel the reader to interpret the text in specific ways via the negotiation of the gaps created. The gaps also encourage readers to imagine additional possibilities for the fairy tale, such as how gender and sexuality are configured in the tale, due to the destabilizing of fairy-tale narrative structures and the ways in which both novels explore multiple versions of the "Sleeping Beauty" tale.

Each novel contains three different lines of narrative that converse with one another, textually creating an undercurrent that questions the novels' thematic stance on the place of narrative, specifically fairy tales, in the "real" world. The competing narrative positions reveal a more complex and ultimately more satisfying understanding

of the discursive work of fairy tales than the individual stories the novels provide. Thus, both retellings of *Briar Rose* celebrate the expansive possibilities of the fairy tale, not by the introduction of new subject-matter to the work, but by the gaps in the text that invite the reader to participate in the narratives' thematic construction. The intertextual elements of the retellings create a third text where the reader not only relates the disparate sections in each novel to each other, but relates the retelling back to the traditional versions of "Sleeping Beauty" that are being rewritten in the novels. Among the narrative strategies used in the two *Briar Rose* novels, the gaps that create a visual space on the page as well as the juxtaposition of narrative threads further encourage comparison by creating a space within the reading experience of the novel to contemplate that comparison. I will show how these gaps encourage the reader to question normative conceptions of gender even if the plots of the novels do not offer direct challenges or alternatives to the concept of gender presented.

Feminist retellings that make direct interventions into the concepts of gender in the source tale are fairly common, and even Disney fairy-tale films, as seen in *Tangled* (2010), now offer strong-willed, ninja-like heroines instead of passive princesses. However, as I have explained in earlier chapters, this kind of modified gendered behavior does not destabilize concepts of gender as much as offer a new stable replacement of femininity. Retellings that complicate popular fairy-tale narrative structure, like these by Yolen and Coover, disrupt and question the source tales rather than offer new stable versions of the tales. The novels unsettle ideological constructs, like concepts of gender, by playing with what Stephen Benson, in *Cycles of Influence: Fiction, Folktale, Theory,* terms the "intrinsically unstable" aspect of folktales (22-23) and by destabilizing the

progression of narrative itself. Both *Briar Rose* texts disrupt the linear structure of the source fairy tales, offering instead multiple, fragmented, jumbled, and in the case of Coover, contradictory and competing narratives. Switches between narrative threads, focalizers, and embedded stories create gaps that play a significant role in readers' interpretations of Yolen's and Coover's retellings. I have found both Wolfgang Iser's and Linda Hutcheon's work helpful in reading these challenging narratives.

Wolfgang Iser explains in *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1978) that a text is dynamic, deriving its meaning "as the reader passes through the various perspectives offered by the text, and relates the different views and patterns to one another" (21). The thematic elements of the work are a negotiation between text and reader; however, the reader does not simply bring to the text a set of interpretations. Rather, through various techniques, the text invites those readings, creating a space where reader and text interact. Gaps are created by the distance between the text and the reader's experience of the same narrative, and are initiated by what is *not* in the text. What is missing from a scene or section solicits a reaction from the reader to fill in the gap and interpret the meaning of what is *not* there in relation to what *is* there. These gaps focus the reader's attention on connecting elements of the text to make meaning of it. The resulting interaction between reader and text creates what Iser calls a "virtual work," which is not located with the text or the reader but as a third text constructed through constant negotiation (21). Gaps can occur within the story when new characters or settings change the scene, or on the page through chapter and page breaks, series of ellipses or asterisks, or in the work's dynamic differences between perspectives of author, narrator, character, and reader.

Blanks are a type of gap that, according to Iser, "indicate that different segments of the text *are* to be connected, even though the text itself does not say so" (182-3). They are formalized breaks that suggest the need for connection. Gaps and blanks are not interchangeable despite the fact that they are treated as synonyms in some translations of Iser's earlier work. The primary difference between the two is the way in which they direct the reader. Gaps signal "the need for completion," whereas blanks signal "the need for combination" (Iser 182). Gaps direct the reader to fill in missing information, and blanks suggest that two sections of text need to be connected. Winfried Fluck explains that blanks, which are described in Iser's *The Act of Reading*, are a reworking of Iser's earlier ideas about negation, and she carefully differentiates between the two concepts in "The Search for Distance: Negation and Negativity in Wolfgang Iser's Literary Theory":

> [A blank] is an intentional, often carefully crafted, suspension of connectivity in order to make us provide links for what is disconnected. . . a gap allows readers to indulge in their own projections (or suspicions); a blank compels them to set up relations between their own imaginary projections and the world of the text and thereby prevent a mere identification with either one of them. (Fluck 188)

Gaps direct the reader to fill in missing information, but do not tell her with what to fill the gap. Blanks compel the reader to fill in missing information by making a connection between specific sections in the text. For instance, the division of the text into sections implies a relationship between sections to which the reader must ascribe meaning. In this chapter, I primarily discuss these structural blanks created by the division of the texts into sections, chapters, and scenes. Vacancies occur when, through negotiation of the blanks,

one section of the text replaces the other as a privileged "thematic" element (Iser 198).

Readers can fill the vacancy of the replaced text as a way to understand the thematic

relevance of the new section. The reader, in this sense, is not a real person but rather a

reader produced by the text through the cues that suggest a particular interpretation

By switching among the three narratives, the novels also break narrative

expectations, reminding the reader that this is a constructed work. Metafiction is fiction

in which the narrative text calls attention to its own construction by reminding the reader

that she is reading a textual production. Linda Hutcheon, in *Narcissistic Narrative: The*

Metafictional Paradox, argues that reading metafiction is problematic because "while he

[sic] reads, the reader lives in a world which he is forced to acknowledge as fictional.

However, paradoxically the text also demands that he participate, that he engage himself

intellectually, imaginatively, and affectively in its co-creation. This two-way pull is the

paradox of the reader" (7). Hutcheon's interest in the reader hinges on her argument that

reading requires active participation on the part of the reader, not just the passive

consumption of a text. What Hutcheon describes is parallel to Iser's concept of the virtual

text created when text and reader interact to construct the thematic reading. However, in

Hutcheon's focus on metafiction, the emphasis is on the construction of a thematic

interpretation that accounts for how narrative works. "The point of *meta*fiction" argues

Hutcheon, "is that it constitutes its own first critical commentary, and in doing so [. . .]

sets up the theoretical frame of reference in which it must be considered" (*Narcissistic*

Narrative 6). The gaps direct the reader in how to interpret the texts and their makings,

by suggesting specific connections.

Jane Yolen's *Briar Rose* (1992/ 2002)

Thematically, Yolen's *Briar Rose* uses the symbols already present in the "Sleeping Beauty" tale to tell a story about the Holocaust for young readers. The story is presented in an investigative mode with the protagonist trying to validate her grandmother's dying claim that she is the real Briar Rose. The novel consists of three types of narrative discourse presented as separate narrative threads that do not join together: fairy tale as metaphor, historical reconstruction, and personal testimony. Though structurally separate, it is implied that two of narrative threads (the fairy tale and testimony) are embedded in the third. The three narratives disrupt each other, with the first and last sections of the book ("Home" and "Home Again") alternating between fairy tale and historical reconstruction, and the second section ("Castle") presenting an embedded narration of personal testimony. The novel is narrated by an external narrator, and each section focuses on the experiences of one of three different characters. Though each narrative tells a story of one woman's experience during the Holocaust, none can represent her experience alone. The novel suggests both that fairy tales are a way to speak the unspeakable *and* that a single narrative is not able to fully convey the atrocities of the Holocaust. Though thematically the novel focuses on the Holocaust and storytelling, the strategies that disrupt the three narratives also open spaces in the text that trouble notions of gender and sexuality.

Discussions of Yolen's novel quite logically focus on how she uses the fairy tale as a metaphor for the Holocaust in young adult literature and the various ethical, psychological, and narrative implications of this representation. Marianne Hirsch and Irene Kacandes, in their introduction to *Teaching the Representation of the Holocaust*,

argue that when studying texts about the Holocaust, it is important to discuss not just what the texts say about the Holocaust, but also how they say it, including how the texts address the debate over how to represent the Holocaust. In *My Mother's Voice: Children, Literature, and the Holocaust,* Adrienne Kertzer explains that a particular concern in children's literature is the focus on hope and constructing a coherent narrative despite the reality of the murders of millions of people and the understanding of the Holocaust as something that cannot be explained. Kertzer describes the Holocaust as that which cannot be narrated and states that most writers of children's literature avoid bringing the reader into the concentration camps, and yet try to explain what adult works about the Holocaust cannot—why the Holocaust happened.

Explaining why—offering a rational understanding of the Holocaust in a coherent narrative—is itself problematic as it suggests that the extermination of millions of people is understandable. Both Kertzer and Kenneth B. Kidd explore the ethical issues of children's fiction that presents the Holocaust as part of a story of hope or which draws from it a lesson about humanity at the expense of historical facts and complexity. In *Freud in Oz: At the Intersections of Psychoanalysis and Children's Literature*, Kidd in particular discusses children's literature that appropriates the Holocaust "to authorize personal loss," a move that he identifies as clearly problematic and "abusive as defined by [Lawrence] Langer" (195, 192). Kidd suggests that *Briar Rose* offers "emotional truth" but "not necessarily the truth of historical accuracy" (188) and cites Kertzer's claim that the plot of *Briar Rose* is ridiculous (Kidd 188, Kertzer 69). While Kertzer does say that the plot of the grandmother telling her family nothing of her past is "absurd" (69), Kidd misses Kertzer's larger point that Yolen presents a "double narrative" that

both represents the "hope and happy endings" of the fairy tale (75) and the "reality of historical facts and the difficulty such facts pose for representing this particular history" (67). Kertzer focuses on the Author's Note at the end of Yolen's novel that contradicts the fairy tale of the grandmother as a Holocaust survivor by stating that no woman survived that particular extermination camp and by giving its death toll (Yolen 240-1). Kertzer draws attention to *Briar Rose* as a novel that successfully meets the challenge of exposing young readers to the historical atrocities of the gas chambers.

Yolen does not attempt to explain why the Holocaust happened, but rather explores this difficulty in talking and writing about the Holocaust, especially for a younger audience. She uses the symbolic properties of fairy tales by presenting a fairy-tale mediation of the Holocaust in contrast with accounts represented as factual. Yolen's sophisticated narrative strategies allows the novel to do multiple things at once, so that it opens up space to question issues of representation—about the Holocaust, certainly, but also about other concepts present in the novel—and the role of fairy tales as representative texts. Her novel gives young readers a "comprehensible" narrative of the Holocaust, but it also shows them how to question and deconstruct it and other narratives. The analyses of *Briar Rose* I discuss focus on the complicated ways that the novel represents the Holocaust, trauma, and fairy tales and storytelling as a means of psychological defense. Here I also examine how the narrative strategies open up a space to question other, non-thematic elements of the novel.

The structural blanks in Yolen's *Briar Rose* are demarcated with traditional chapter headings (twenty-four in the section "Home," six in the section "Castle," and three in the section "Home Again") and switches in narrative style. The chapters are

further broken into three sections marked by headings and epigraphs. The blanks that are

created by these formal breaks of alternating narrative threads direct the reader to make

connections between the three different sections and the alternating chapters. The first

and third sections of the book are narrated by an external narrator and focalized through

Becca, the protagonist. The chapters of these two sections alternate between the fairy tale

of "Sleeping Beauty" and Becca's search for evidence that her grandmother is Briar

Rose. The even-numbered chapters are about Becca reconstructing her grandmother's life

and discovering that her grandmother lived through the Holocaust and escaped an

extermination camp. The odd-numbered chapters, printed in italics, are presented as

Becca's memories of different situations in which her grandmother, Gemma, told her

version of "Sleeping Beauty" to a child audience of which Becca is always a part. The

time frame of these narrative settings progresses from Becca as a toddler to Becca as an

adolescent, to the last section in which she is an adult aunt and Gemma is telling the story

to her great-grandchildren. The grandmother's story is suspended by regular interruptions

from the novel's plot about Becca's research (in even-numbered chapters) and

intervening sections, placing the chapters that contain Becca's reconstruction of her

grandmother's story in conversation with the chapters that contain the grandmother's

fairy tale. Becca's story and her grandmother's telling of the fairy tale are chronologically

separated and not joined at any point in the novel. The book begins and ends with

Gemma telling her fairy tale; however, despite this framing, Becca's story is on the

highest diegetic level, meaning that it is the primary narrative. The italics and fragmented

narrative settings of Gemma's telling suggest these chapters are to be read as Becca's

memories.

The novel's structure is further complicated by a multi-chapter embedded narrative of a personal account of Gemma's survival from one of the men who saved her. The second section of the novel, "Castle," is not interrupted by the grandmother's tale and, though divided into chapters, it is one consistent narration. Josef Potocki tells Becca and her Polish guide and translator, Magda, the story of his life during the Holocaust as a homosexual man sent to a labor camp and how he met Gemma. Josef is the narrator of this embedded story, but he talks about himself in the third person. The only direct textual clue that the narrator is different from the narrator in the rest of the novel is the diegetic tag "he said," parenthetically inserted at the beginning of each chapter, and the context of this narrative moment in the framing chapters. This multi-embedded structure that uses different narrative styles calls attention to itself as constructed, which reminds the reader that this story of the Holocaust is fiction, a fact reinforced by the Author's Note at the end of the novel, which states that no woman survived the extermination camp that Gemma is supposed to have escaped (241). But the narrative structure also raises questions about narrative style and makes an argument for interpretation in the way described by Hutcheon.

Alternating between narratives encourages the reader to make a thematic connection between the "invent[ed] details" of Gemma's fairy tale and the details of the Holocaust unfolding from Becca's investigation in each subsequent chapter (37). Becca suggests that the grandmother's story of "Sleeping Beauty" is a metaphor in the second chapter, but she does not know what it is a metaphor for, and the rest of her family dismisses the idea in this and subsequent chapters (13). That statement directs readers to look for connections between the alternating chapters, as do structural blanks created by

switching from one chapter to the next that tell the reader to look for a connection

between the chapters, and specific readings are prompted by what is common to both

sections—details, themes, and questions. With each even-numbered chapter, the reader is

provided a new piece of information with which to make sense of the symbols in the

previous odd-numbered chapters.

The invented details of the fairy tale in the odd-numbered chapters, the details that

do not match popular versions of "Sleeping Beauty," are given thematic relevance once

the plot of the even-numbered chapters has been developed. Chapter 9 contains the

portion of the "Sleeping Beauty" story where the briar hedge grows. Gemma describes

the hedge as having "thorns as sharp as barbs" (58). The character of Becca as a child

asks what barbs are, calling the reader's attention to the added detail of the barbs. A later

chapter reveals that the refugee shelter in which Gemma lived in the United States was

enclosed in barbed wire. This pattern of introducing an added detail to the "Sleeping

Beauty" tale in an odd-numbered chapter and then prompting a connection (by questions

and repetition across the blank) to something in the following even-numbered chapter

that explains it continues throughout the novel. Additionally, chapter 9 emphasizes the

willful blindness that outsiders had toward the Holocaust as it occurred, by Gemma's

added detail that "no one cared to know about the sleeping folk inside" (58). This detail is

highlighted by a parallel in the plot in that the girls are more interested in engaging in

sibling rivalry than in listening to the story, so Gemma stops telling her story.

Thematically, the reader is invited to compare Becca's investigation to the indifference

on the part of the outsiders in the fairy tale because of the repetition of the theme, which

occurs again in chapter 22 when Becca visits the site of Chelmno, the extermination

camp in Poland from which Gemma escaped, and none of the villagers will speak to her about the past.

The fairy tale is represented as a way for Gemma to distance herself from the horror she experienced and still tell her story, while the details Becca uncovers provide her (and readers) with a way to interpret the tale and uncover some of the past that Gemma is only able to convey through metaphor. At no point is it revealed that Gemma spoke directly of her experience to her family, including to her daughter. In fact, Yolen makes it clear that Gemma's family know nothing of her history before she immigrated to the United States, including her real name (25, 29) and that she came to the United States during World War II and not before the war as she told her daughter (24, 30, 44). Gemma's memory loss of her time in the camp and before is explained as a side effect of the gassing which was supposed to kill her, a narrative strategy that Kertzer identifies as allowing Yolen to "protect [her] readers" from this experience (Kertzer 70). However, Gemma's fairy tale also covers the period after her awakening and recovery, during her time living in the forest with the partisans and her marriage, the death of her husband and her escape from Poland, ending with the birth of her daughter in the United States at a refugee camp, events she has not revealed to her daughter or anyone else.

Using fairy tales as metaphor to distance oneself trauma in the way that the grandmother does in Yolen's fiction is not new. Donald Haase, in his article "Children, War, and the Imaginative Space of Fairy Tales," explains that "the fairy-tale is adopted as an 'interpretative device' to understand, even if retrospectively, the child's physical displacement and emotional trauma" (372). Haase bases this observation on testimonials and documentation of the exile and displacement of children during World War II and the

Holocaust. He explains that the fairy tale functions as an interpretive device in two ways. First, children associate the "distressing disfigurement of familiar places and dislocations such as imprisonment with the landscape and physical spaces of the fairy tale" (Haase, "Children" 362). The dark forests, castles, towers, huts, woodland cottages, and cages of fairy tales are often locations that isolate or trap characters or are otherwise associated with violence and danger. Fairy-tale spaces are open symbols of danger onto which children can map their own violent environments. Second, "within that imaginative space, [children] transform their physical surroundings into a hopeful, utopian space as a psychological defense and means of emotional survival" (Haase, "Children" 362). The hopefulness and utopian ideals that mark the fairy-tale happily-ever-after ending provide a psychological coping mechanism for the children.

The symbols of death and danger already exist in fairy tales and can be given a context, making them a useful frame for negotiating trauma too difficult to face without mediation. In fact, Kidd explains that "the fairy tale has been remodeled as a key genre of the children's literature of atrocity" (187), which he traces back to Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976).[1] Additionally Margarete J. Landwehr argues in "The Fairy Tale as Allegory for the Holocaust: Representing the Unrepresentable in Yolen's *Briar Rose* and Murphy's *Hansel and Gretel*" that fairy tales are particularly well suited as allegories for the Holocaust because they "resolve . . . the tension between *historical knowledge* and *emotional understanding*," "consist of powerful and evocative metaphors that portray unspeakable horrors," and feature "protagonists that not only survive, but thrive" (154, 157, 162, emphasis in the original). Landwehr, like Haase, identifies the symbols of horror and violence in combination with the hopeful tone of fairy tales as the

traits that draw writers to fairy tales as frames for stories of the Holocaust.[2] However, she also addresses the issue of authenticity and empathy, arguing that fairy tales provide for authors attempting to represent the Holocaust in fiction a means of "put[ting] the horrific, the unimaginable, into comprehensible form" (Landwehr 155). Landwehr argues that the fairy tale allows Yolen and other writers who use the tales to include historical facts and provide children with a means of emotionally contextualizing those facts; thus, she claims that the fairy tale is "bridge between the horrific world of the Holocaust and the commonplace world of the reader" (Landwehr 156).

Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère and Géraldine Viret also see the fairy tale functioning as a bridge in *Briar Rose*, both for the grandmother and the reader. Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère and Viret analyze *Briar Rose* as a trauma narrative in "'Sleeping Beauty' in Chelmno: Jane Yolen's *Briar Rose* or Breaking the Spell of Silence," explaining, "The fairy tale . . . mediates between traumatic memory and consciousness, past and present, reality and fantasy, insofar as the old woman's compulsive retelling of the tale both articulates and disguises an intimate truth that resists language, logic, order and coherence" (401). They explain that readers are encouraged to empathize with Becca as a *cowitness*, a concept drawn from Irene Kacandes's work. Kacandes explains that "readers at a historical or cultural remove co-witness the stories in the text by acknowledging and explicating those stories as uncompleted attempts at recounting individual or collective trauma," though Kacandes cautions *cowitnesses* to be "as self-conscious as possible about the stories *they* construct about trauma narratives" (Hirsch and Kacandes 18, emphasis in the original). Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère and Viret

argue that Becca, as a *cowitness*, demonstrates for readers a model of empathizing with the victims of trauma while still understanding the story as a construction (406).

The metafictional theme of the novel is that stories are powerful and contain truth. The different sections of the book each represent a different mode of storytelling, but they do not merge, which counters the thematic suggestion that the Holocaust can be represented through stories. Gemma's fairy tale, Becca's investigation, and Josef's testimony represent three different ways of telling the story of the Holocaust—fairy-tale metaphor, historical reconstruction, and personal testimony—but each is incomplete without the others. One problem with writing about the Holocaust in children's literature, as Kertzer argues, is deciding *how* to tell the story, particularly how one can recreate the horrors inside the camps. The Holocaust is often referred to as an unspeakable event, whose meaning cannot be conveyed through words. Any narration is assumed to be inadequate, and the three narrative styles presented in Yolen's *Briar Rose* enact those inadequacies. The metaphor may convey the "overpowering evil . . . unimaginable villains," and terror (Landweher 155) and the traumatic "isolation, danger, and violence" (Haase, "Children" 364) that Landwehr and Haase identify as part of fairy tales, but it cannot be interpreted without the facts from history and testimony. The historical reconstruction and testimony need each other as verification, but they also need the "hope and happy ending" of the fairy tale to make reading about the atrocities bearable (Kertzer 75). The metafiction of Yolen's book creates tension by alternating among the three different styles of discourse. Ultimately it is this tension between the three narrative discourses that creates meaning in the story. The blanks created by switching from one narrative style to another directs readers to connect the different sections of text and read

the fairy tale as a metaphor for the Holocaust, and the interplay among them emphasizes the value of a multivocal text.

However, these blanks that direct interpretation also open a space that raises issues of gender and sexuality not directly addressed in the plot. Chapter 13 introduces the question, "*Why is it always a prince that rescues her?*" (86), and the subsequent chapter introduces information about Josef Potocki, who later is revealed to be the prince-rescuer figure. Gemma responds dismissively to the question asked by the child Becca: "*You watch too much television [. . . .] Too much women's rights. In the old days, it was a prince*" (86). The answer given to Becca's question in the text implies that what she is actually asking is why is it always a *man* that rescues a woman. Readers may note that the question "*Why is it always a prince that rescues her?*" also interrogates class position and the need for a rescue. Though the possibility of a female rescuer is dismissed in the plot, it is given presence in the novel by the gap that follows it. The reader is compelled to give weight to the question about gender as it calls attention to what is *not* part of the source tale. The blank created by switching chapters and narrative styles directs readers to connect this question about gender patterns with the story that follows.

Taken as part of the whole novel, this early questioning of the tale sets up how Yolen changes the expected "Sleeping Beauty" tale in the second section of the novel, "Castle," in which the rescuer is a prince but not a romantic interest. The prince is Josef Potocki, a descendent of Polish aristocracy (the Potockis are a real Polish noble family), and he was sent to a labor camp for his homosexuality (he has escaped the camp at the point he meets Gemma). Gemma, known as Księżnicka (princess) at this point in the story, marries a partisan, Aron Mandlestein, but not the one who revived her with a kiss

of life—mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. This focus on the "prince" and the subsequent

refiguring of the role calls into question the reader's assumptions about the fairy tale, and

the gaps provide a space for the reader to think about that—*why is it always a prince that*

rescues her? And why does she have to marry him?

The characterization of Josef that distances him from fairy-tale princes mirrors

and emphasizes the narrative strategy of the gaps that focus readers' attention to what is

not being said. Becca's own construction of her grandmother's history as a fairy tale

duplicates the process of interpretation in which the reader engages, but it also leads the

reader to make similar assumptions about the plot of the novel based on fairy-tale

patterns they associate with the "Sleeping Beauty" tale. Once Becca recognizes Josef

from photos and identifies a family ring as his, she immediately assumes that he is her

grandfather (156). Becca knows that he does not look like her, her siblings, or her

mother, and all the evidence that she has is a passport photo and a ring with his initials

(156). But she assumes that if he is the prince, then he must also be the husband and true

love of her grandmother. There is nothing in the text to suggest a marriage except the

frame of the "Sleeping Beauty" story, but Becca assumes that the prince and the husband

are the same character and that the kiss is romantic solely based on the fairy-tale pattern.

The historical context of Josef's internment because of his homosexuality also

mirrors and complicates specific narrative gaps. While Josef's sexuality initially disrupts

the fairy-tale pattern, the primary purpose of this characterization is to educate young

readers about the multiple reasons people were imprisoned and killed during the

Holocaust. While the majority of the millions of victims of the Holocaust were Jewish,

victims also included the mentally and physically disabled, the Roma-Sinti (Gypsies),

homosexuals, people racially constructed as non-Aryan, and those that opposed the Nazi party.[3] The plot twist makes the story more historically accurate by acknowledging the different types of victims during the Holocaust. The novel brings up sexuality in a historicized context, but its disruption of the expected fairy-tale pattern also questions the heteronormative direction of fairy tales. The presence of homosexuality in a traditionally heteronormative tale encourages the reader to question the heterosexual romance of the source tale.[4] It destabilizes by compelling readers and Becca to assume an outcome based on fairy-tale patterns, realize this assumption is wrong, and then question *why* they/we made the assumption. In the novel, romance and sexuality are decoupled from the kiss-rescue. The kiss is not romantic, and the rescuer and rescued do not engage in a sexual relationship. The love match comes later and is treated as a separate part of the story, in both Gemma's retelling of the fairy tale and Josef's telling of the past. Separating marriage from the rescue disrupts the fairy-tale structure in which marriage is the prize for the rescuer.

Structural disruptions sufficiently weaken the marriage plot in a way that enables readers to see alternate sexualities and alternate closures for the fairy tale even though the novel ultimately upholds heteronormativity in the conclusion of Gemma's tale and Becca's plotline, which presents her beginning a romantic relationship with a man and promises that they will "get to happily ever after eventually" (237). Heterosexuality is embedded in the fairy-tale structure that ends with marriage, so much so that the representation of homosexuality alone cannot destabilize that structure. As I explained in Chapter 3, Judith Roof and Robyn Warhol have both shown that the representation of homosexuality in a traditionally heterosexual plot alone does not successfully subvert

heterosexual marriage as normative. To be truly subversive, the structure of marriage as narrative closure must be disrupted. Warhol demonstrates this through her analysis of the serial format that defers closure from episode to episode or presents temporary closures that are undone in subsequent episodes. The search for romantic partners in *Tales of the City*, Warhol's case study, is "queered" by reconfiguring familial relationships in decidedly non-nuclear formations ("Queering" 234-5) and "detouring" from the traditional marriage plot ("Queering" 236). Closure is deferred in *Briar Rose* by suspending one narrative thread for another. The happily-ever-after expected in the "Sleeping Beauty" story is not only interrupted by the other two narratives, but marriage is configured differently, almost as an afterthought as opposed to the desired outcome.

The representation of marriage in the fairy-tale narrative embedded in *Briar Rose* is not traditional, which reflects the structural deferment of the marriage plot and its unsettling by gaps that question its necessity. Marriage as the prize for the good deed of the rescue is negated and replaced with motherhood as the reward for survival. I have explained that prince and husband are different characters in the recounting of Gemma's life. In the fairy tale, that detail is left ambiguous. The final chapter of the book, in which an adult Becca is part of the audience of Gemma's retelling, begins,

> *"And as he did so, giving her breath for breath, she awoke saying 'I am alive, my dear prince. You have given me back the world.' After she was married, she had a baby girl, even more beautiful than she. And they lived happily ever after."*
>
> *"The prince, too, Gemma?" asked Becca. "I don't think I was ever really clear in that point."* (238)

Gemma does not answer the question, merely replying "*Happily ever after [. . .] means exactly what it says*" (239). This exchange shows us that as a listener the adult Becca questions the role of the prince in the princess's happily ever after *before* Gemma dies and therefore before Becca makes assumptions about Josef being the prince; however, though the character has this doubt, in reconstructing Gemma's past she still assumes that prince (Josef) and princess (Gemma) are married based on the fairy tale. And yet, there is nothing in Gemma's retelling to say that the prince marries the princess. The "they" in "*And they lived happily ever after*" grammatically refers to the princess and her daughter.[5] There is no statement that the prince and princess are married, just that after she wakes, she marries. The husband is never mentioned. It is only knowledge of other versions of "Sleeping Beauty" where the princess marries the prince-rescuer (and knowledge of the more general marriage plot of many princess-rescue fairy tales) that would lead Becca and a reader to assume that the prince marries the princess.

The characterization of Gemma as a mother and grandmother emphasizes this negation of marriage as the expected closure of fairy tales. In Gemma's fairy tale, motherhood is the reward for her survival, and in the reconstruction of her history, her position as a mother and grandmother is at the forefront. The primary name used for her in the novel, Gemma, is a version of her role *Grandma* because one of Becca's sisters couldn't say *Grandma* when she was little (25).[6] Motherhood is also emphasized thematically by the stories Josef tells Becca and Magda. In Josef's story, most of the women he encounters are identified either as mothers or as being in a motherly role. His fellow partisans tell a story at one point of a mother who "fought like a lioness" (181). When an S.S. officer demands her child, she refuses to give the baby up. The officer

takes the baby and throws it out of a window, but the partisans find the mother's refusal

to acquiesce courageous—"*she did not turn the baby over to them on her own*" (182).

Josef does not respond in the same way, thinking "a dead child is a dead child" (182).

This story of female bravery is noteworthy because it identifies for the partisans a way

that women can be brave; and for the female partisans who have lost their children, as

Mutter Holle who participates in the telling of this anecdote exemplifies, it offers hope. In

her essay "Gender and Holocaust Representation," Sara R. Horowitz suggests that

narratives of the Holocaust that emphasize motherhood and pregnancy do so because

"pregnancy becomes a biological inner resistance that triumphs over external evil" (166).

In contrast to Gemma's experience, the embedded story of the mother who "fought like a

lioness" accentuates how rare it was for a child to survive the Holocaust. The importance

of a new generation is emphasized by the fairy tale as well, as Gemma's happily-ever-

after ending highlights the birth of a beautiful child (238). That Gemma has a child is

something to be celebrated as it emphasizes the value of human life in a context of

dehumanization and mass execution. Nothing is mentioned of the prince, husband, or

princess at the conclusion, but the baby's girl's beauty is commented on, calling attention

to that character and elevating her above the others. Horowitz indicates that the emphasis

of traditional gender roles in Holocaust narratives "may serve to restore a sense of

manhood or womanhood shattered by atrocity" (116). However because motherhood

replaces marriage as the ultimate goal for women, the novel reinforces these roles rather

than dismantling them as it does for marriage.

The happily-ever-after conclusion—that is, a woman survived extermination to

have a child—is, however, undone by the novel's Author's Note. The note is presented as

part of the text; it comes after a formal chapter break and is formatted like the even-numbered chapters. The resulting blank directs the reader to connect the note to the previous sections of text. Yolen writes, "This is a book of fiction. All the characters are made up. Happy-ever-after is a fairy tale notion, not history. I know of no woman who escaped from Chelmno alive" (241). A tension ensues between these two thematic constructs of fairy tale and history throughout the novel, but the reader is encouraged to elevate the fairy-tale metaphor as the privileged narrative because it begins and ends the novel and is the impetus for the novel's plot. Here, Yolen explicitly tells the reader that the fairy tale she has written is constructed. Kertzer pays special attention to the Author's Note, which she argues "deliberately takes [. . .] away" the hopeful happy ending: "The lesson that emerges in this sophisticated interplay between text and peritext is not the consoling lesson of spiritual triumph but a much harder one in the reality of historical facts" (252). The negation of the fairy tale by the peritext, in light of the novel's structure and plot—which emphasize the value of fairy tales as metaphor—forces the reader to link the different styles of discourse and consider how they complicate each other. The negation creates what Kertzer's terms "a double narrative" (253). Iser defines negation as the introduction of what would be familiar to the reader, which is then canceled by the following text. However, the negated material still exists on a textual level, requiring the reader to "adopt a position in *relation* to the text" (Iser 169). The double narrative suggests that one style of discourse is not sufficient when dealing with such complex subject matter.

Yolen's use of fairy-tale intertexts depends on familiarity with the tale through popular cultural memory. Even a reader who has not read popular versions by Charles

Perrault and the Brother Grimm or seen the Disney film will be familiar with the fragments of a sleeping princess, a briar hedge, and a kiss of life. Without knowledge of the "Sleeping Beauty" in popular cultural memory, Becca would not be able to make the inferences about gender, sexuality, and romantic relationships that she does, and the reader would not be compelled to make similar inferences. Yolen does not provide any other versions of "Sleeping Beauty" in the novel but refers to the fact that there are others by having characters take exception to some of the differences between Gemma's telling and others they know. Twice in the retelling chapters, friends of Becca dispute Gemma's version of "Sleeping Beauty" saying, "*That's not how it goes. You've got it wrong*" (34) and "*There aren't any kidnappers in Sleeping Beauty*" (99). These interruptions call attention to other versions of "Sleeping Beauty" and further mark Gemma's version as *metaphor*. This means that part of the mystery of the novel relies on the intertextual play of the embedded tale with other versions of "Sleeping Beauty."

By depicting Becca's assumptions about the prince's sexuality and relationship to Gemma as constructed, the novel demonstrates that *other* assumptions about gender and sexuality are also constructed. Even though the plot treats gendered relationships fairly traditionally and emphasizes heteronormative reproduction, the blanks are a space to dwell on the questions negated by the plot, and they call attention to the possibility for other configurations. They offer the reader the possibility of dissociating heteronormativity from the fairy-tale structure. The implications of how connected narrative structure and the conceptualizing of gender and sexuality are unfold throughout my chapters, pointing to different possibilities for addressing that relationship. In this

case, as in Coover's novel, the narrative blanks offer anti-hegemonic possibilities to the reader and the genre.

Robert Coover's *Briar Rose* (1996)

Unlike Yolen's novel, which destabilizes fairy-tale narrative as part of a larger educational and historical project, Coover's *Briar Rose* is a self-reflexive tale of destabilized fairy-tale narrative that turns the timeless quality of many traditional fairy tales (in that they are relevant across time) into the stagnation of a story that does not progress in time. It is composed of forty-two separate sections narrated by an external narrator and focalized through three different characters—a fairy, a princess, and a prince. As in his novel *Stepmother*, these characters are trapped in fairy-tale roles they no longer want to inhabit, and they perform repeatedly the many variants of the "Sleeping Beauty" tale invoked in the novel. The fragmented structure denies a clear, linear narrative, progression of plot, and closure, thus supporting the thematic questioning of identity, reality, and controlling narratives. However, the blanks created by moving between discordant sections also direct readers to reconstruct meaning by making connections between disconnected sections and ordering them. These blanks also create a space in the text for possibilities not directly addressed in the plot. As with Yolen's *Briar Rose*, and even Coover's *Stepmother*, destabilizing and questioning fairy-tale narrative patterns effectively disrupts those patterns so that issues of gender can be interrogated as well. Coover does not directly address gendered identity or gender as a concept, but his fragmenting of the concepts of identity and reality, as well as the resulting gaps, invite readers to imagine possibilities not present in the source fairy tales.

The plot of Coover's novel is suspended in time with no story arc to guide a reader through the action (which is constantly negated), suggesting that the scenes could be rearranged without changing the overall thematic content. It is centered on the sleeping beauty waiting to be woken, the fairy who entertains her and cares for her during her sleep, and the prince who is present to rescue her. Each section is focused on and focalized through one of these characters. While the sections do seemingly bleed into each other, each is self-contained without clear plot connections among them. The sections repeat the iconic part of the plot—prince wakes princess—drawing on the multiple variants of the "Sleeping Beauty" tale. The sleeping princess wakes up in multiple sections, to different princes with different results each time. The prince fights his way to the castle only to be returned to the briars in the next section centered on him. The fairy tells the princess multiple stories and must repeat herself to the princess. The unstable structure prevents the reader from reconstructing a linear plot for the novel as a whole. Instead the reader is prompted to make connections between scenes by bridging the blanks between them. This *Briar Rose* is also available online in a hypertext version constructed by Robert Scholes that encourages readers to read the sections in any order they choose, further clouding the ability to detect a single, consistent narrative thread.[7]

This instability of structure itself raises questions about fairy tales, identity, reality, discourse, and desire. Sünje Redies, in her article "Return with New Complexities: Robert Coover's *Briar Rose*," lists the common thematic elements of Coover's fiction as "the organization of communities and their discourses, the relationship of the real and the fantastic in fiction, the role of storytelling in human discourse, and the significance of myth and fairy tales in society" (11). Redies describes

Briar Rose as a "metafictional deconstruction" (12) that both celebrates and repudiates the fairy tale (13). She argues that the ways in which Coover breaks traditional fairy-tale structures and narration, particularly the lack of chronological order to the tale, allows all possibilities for the plot to exist simultaneously. I agree with Redies, but would argue further that possibilities not present in Coover's plot are also enabled by reader negotiation of the gaps and blanks. In Coover's *Briar Rose*, blanks occur when the focalization shifts from one character to another. This transition is marked visually by a literal blank on the page. The text connecting one fragment of text to the next is not there, resulting in the need for the reader to make the connection. Redies refers to these sections as "scenes, similar to film cuts" (14). These scenes, however, do not necessarily offer a conclusion to the plot elements of the sections.

There is much questioning in Coover's novel, but the sex and gender of the main characters remain stable. Class is questioned in some scenes, as ruffians, thieves, the king, etc., wake Sleeping Beauty. In scene 25 the prince is replaced by a monkey. But the one who wakes the princess is always male, and the sleeping beauty is always female, and the gender of the characters is not destabilized. Rather the romance of the story or the idealized parts that are romanticized in other versions are subverted. There is no "true love's first kiss," to quote the Disney version. At times, the prince imagines the princess or dreams her to be dead and decaying, or not the object of beauty he expects. Once he is a vampire (57). The princess is surprised, and questions the fairy's stories in which the prince is married or the princess has babies. She does not like the less-idealized versions of the story. The fairy is frustrated with how Rose (the princess) cannot learn or will not listen (32-35). The fairy tells Rose versions of the story that hinge on suffering to prepare

Rose for the "reality" that awaits her (60). The fairy's stories are practical, not idealized, in contrast to the variants with which readers will be familiar. The fairy's frustration with the princess's inability to change mimics the narrative's inability to move forward. Coover's characters are constrained by the plots he is retelling.

Coover does not resolve any of the questions he raises, nor does he offer a new stable "Sleeping Beauty" story in place of the variants he destabilizes through negation. But his unsettling of the narrative is not limited to issues of narration and the possibilities printed on the page. Frustration permeates every aspect of the text so that even elements not directly questioned by the plot are destabilized simply by virtue of being in the story. Gender, which as I stated earlier is not explicitly questioned in the plot, is destabilized by the unraveling of fairy-tale patterns that rely on specific configurations of gender. While the use of the narrative blanks and degree of self-referentiality are quite different from this in Yolen's novel, their function is analogous.

In this retelling, the blanks direct the reader to connect scenes despite it being clear from character speech and focalization that the scenes are not related, which results in emphasizing the multiplicity of fairy tale variants over a single "Sleeping Beauty" tale. Of the forty-two scenes, seven end with questions and five end with a sentence or sentence fragment punctuated by an ellipsis. These concluding punctuation marks direct the reader as to how to fill the gap. The first scene that ends with a question is the fourteenth one,[8] asking, "Does she ever dream of her disenchantment? Does she ever dream of him?" (26). Scene 14 is focalized through the prince as the character of the prince is meditating on his position stuck in the briar hedge. The questions supplied by the narrator reflect the character's "musing[s]" (26). Scene 15 offers an answer:

"Certainly she dreamt of her sweetlipped prince all the time, says the fairy, in reply to Rose's question" (26). The two sections are not connected chronologically. The fairy in scene 15 is not answering the question at the end of section 14. But the placement of the question and seeming answer suggests that the two sections are simultaneous or at least overlap. The reader bridges the blank space on the page by reading the first line of scene 15, focalized through the fairy, as an answer to the last line of scene 14, creating a chronological connection not supported by the plot. The characters of the prince and princess have no knowledge of each other and can only imagine the other. The prince-character expects there to be a sleeping princess, and the princess-character expects there to be a prince-rescuer because they are both familiar with the fairy tale. The reader of Coover's novel is also familiar with the fairy-tale pattern and expects a connection between the sections, thus providing the chronological one suggested by the text.

The reader is not just negotiating the space of the single text, but she is also negotiating the spaces between the retelling and the source texts and this destabilizes both. *Briar Rose*, both Coover's and Yolen's, has a reciprocal relationship with its intertexts, creating yet another virtual text through reader involvement in the process of narrative construction. Intertextuality is not a one-way transmission where only one story informs the other. A mutual relationship exists where the source tales influences the new one and the new ones influences the intertexts. When a reader goes back to the "Sleeping Beauty" stories by Perrault and Grimm, the reading experience will be different as a new virtual text will be created when the reader interacts with the story. Jaroslav Kusnír, in his article "Subversion of Myths: High and Low Cultures in Donald Barthelme's *Snow White* and Robert Coover's *Briar Rose*," characterizes Coover's story of *Briar Rose* as an

"invasion" of the "Sleeping Beauty" fairy tale (43). The questions raised by the

characters, for example "But why does he have to *kiss* her" (Coover, *Briar Rose* 57),

challenge the source text as well as other retellings, which makes Kusnír's choice of

wording, *invasion*, so suitable. Kusnír explains that Coover uses "two basic strategies:

these characters' self-reflexive contemplation and the alteration of the meaning of these

characters' roles. [. . .] Through these strategies, Coover offers a variety of possibilities

which alter not only the meaning of the original fairy tale, but also its impact on the

contemporary reading audience" (42-3). Coover is changing the "Sleeping Beauty" tale

by challenging not only the individual variations, but the idea that there is a single

"Sleeping Beauty" tale. The fairy's different stories—the ones that she tells Rose—

reference multiple versions of "Sleeping Beauty" (such as Giambattista Basile's "Sun,

Moon, and Talia," in which the sleeping princess is raped and wakes after giving birth to

twins, and Perrault's tale in which the princess says she has been dreaming of the prince),

which validates the different stories and denies an original "Sleeping Beauty." Marie C.

Bouchet identifies this "repetition with variations" as the central feature of the novel in

her essay "Between Wake and Sleep: Robert Coover's *Briar Rose*, A Playful

Reawakening of *The Sleeping Beauty*" (99).

Much of Coover's commentary on the source tales is explicitly about sexuality

and desire, which challenges popular culture understanding of fairy tales as children's

literature. Though clearly part of the "Sleeping Beauty" tradition, as seen in Basile's

seventeenth-century version, for example, sex and desire are not explicit in popular

versions but rather implied through beauty, chaste kisses, and weddings. In Coover's

Briar Rose sexual imagery and desire are explicit. Bouchet suggests that Coover is not

just destabilizing popular conceptions of fairy tales and "Sleeping Beauty" by "laying bare the sexual symbolism encoded in [the tale]," but that the novel also challenges psychoanalytic interpretations of fairy tales that reduce them to stories of repressed sexual desire (102). She points to the humor in the novel as part of the multiplicity that undermines single interpretation. Desire is the focus of many sections, though not all of the desire is sexual. There is the desire for closure, which is disrupted and questioned, desire to be awake, desire for heroism, etc. There is "longing" that is "fragmented" (2). The princess longs for integrity and wholeness, but is denied that through the constant negation of scenes.

The fragmentation of identity and self in the characters is complemented and amplified by the fragmentation of the expected linear fairy-tale plot, which is never represented in full and is visually broken by blank space on the page between scenes. Pain gives a center for the characters, a focus in the fragmented desire. For the princess, physical pain "locates a self when all else in sleep unbinds and scatters it" (5). While the physical anchors the princess to reality, there is no "real" story to bring her back to. The one stability for the princess in the plot of this novel is sleep. She *is* the sleeping princess because that is her role in any version of the story and the one to which she always returns. The princess is stuck in her role as the sleeping princess, waiting to awake. She desires to be awoken, and many of her sections are concerned with her waking. That this awakening, which is usually more sexual than a kiss and is often violent, has an audience calls attention to sexual desire as socially regulated. Though the pain and desire to wake provide some sense of stability for the princess, the multiplicity of princesses and desires prevents the construction of an integrated, stable character. The princess always sleeps

and always wants to awaken, but other characterizations differ from scene to scene. The fragmentation of the princess as a character reinforces the fragmented structure of the novel.

The characterization of the prince as a man on a quest unable to move forward likewise mirrors and reinforces the inability of the plot to progress due to the repetition of the core scene in the tale. The prince is produced by his quest; his identity is contingent upon his role in the story as a rescuer: "It is almost as though his questing [. . .] were inventing him" (15). Social scripts determine one's role, which in turn determines one's identity. The brand of masculinity that the prince inhabits is determined by his princely/quest role just as the princess's passivity is inevitable because of her role as the sleeping princess. In a different story, he would be a different man. The prince is the product of social (and narrative) construction, and his type of masculinity is determined by his role in the fairy tale. In one scene, the prince no longer wants to find Beauty, but he is "compelled by vocation" to move forward (58). He is the hero (38) and trapped by that role, unable to move on. Once he succeeds in his quest, there is no role left for him in the fairy tale unless he begins again. This is represented in scene 38, when, after the awakening, the princess and prince marry and the bored prince decides to rescue another princess. Structurally, the story too never progresses. Closure—the happy ending—is denied. An ironic instability is created by the repetition of the tale as the three characters stay in place from one scene to the next despite the suggestion of movement and progress, but they and the readers are never clear about which variant they inhabit. It varies in each scene, and though many different variants of the tale are referenced, the princess never awakens and the prince never leaves the briars. Even when they do, they

return to the same place in the next scene. The ending is negated, and even the possibility of an ending is questioned. This deferment and denial of closure is played out through the different scenes.

Thematically, the novel demonstrates the lack of a singular identity by offering multiple variations of the rescue of the princess in which the prince and princess are characterized differently and enact the rescue differently. Scene 26 ends with Rose saying, "Real stories aren't like that. Real princes aren't" (51). The twenty-seventh scene begins with, "Her prince has come. The real one" (51). Focalization shifts from the fairy in scene 26 to the princess in scene 27. In this case, the not-real prince of the twenty-sixth scene is married, as is common in versions of "Sleeping Beauty" such as Basile's. He is contrasted with the prince in the twenty-seventh scene, who is shown to be more interested in the items of value in the castle and his own handsome appearance than in waking the sleeping woman. In addition, he did not have to go through an "ordeal" to reach the castle (53). He has come for what is his, not to rescue anyone. Comparison between these two princes—one modeled after a traditional fairy-tale prince and one modeled after the vain and materialistic stereotype of the modern-day playboy—is invited by the blank between scenes that directs readers to see the scenes as connected. The paired wording suggests a thematic relationship: both scenes are about "real" princes who are disappointments compared to the princess's (and the reader's) idealized expectations. The pairing of the words "real" and "prince" on either side of the blank encourages the reader to see a thematic relationship between the two scenes and to read one in consideration of the other.

While a connection between scenes is encouraged by the blanks, the creation of a comprehensible, linear narrative is impossible. Regardless of thematic connections, the difference between dream, memory, desire, fear, and story in the various scenes remains unclear, and a stable reality of the storyworld is denied. Readers are able to recreate a semblance of order by making links between sections; this new order, however, is also destabilized as one set of connections between scenes is undermined by the next. Blanks compel readers to link scenes, but those connections cannot be maintained throughout the novel as subsequent blanks direct readers to make new connections, negating the previous ones. Any order the reader creates is temporary and cannot be sustained. The disappointment of the reader who cannot achieve comprehension is mirrored within the novel by the disappointment of the characters with each new awakening. The prince is also depicted as a rapist, thief, monkey, and vampire, as well as other unsavory types. The princess is shown to disappoint the prince by not meeting his expectations in different ways, the most dramatic being when she is dead. She is raped and humiliated in some scenes, or rather *a* Sleeping Beauty is. In some cases, these are dreams of the princess, in others the fairy's stories. As with the whole piece, the reality of the story is denied, and all of the sleeping princesses are one, interchangeable.

Redies claims that there is "no clear 'highest' diegetic level" in the text, one story in which the variations are all embedded (18). She allows for a reading of the text in which all events are part of the princess's dreams; however, she argues that this is a problematic reading due to the multiple focalizers and "illusion of a number of diegetic levels" (Redies 18). Redies points to references to the fairy controlling time and the princess's dreams as elements that undercut the possibility of the princess's dreams being

the first diegetic level of the text. But those details also make it possible that the sections focalized through the fairy are the frame, as she repeatedly retells the many versions of "Sleeping Beauty." Though the plot does not privilege one focalizer's sections over another and multiple scenes can be interpreted as dreams of the princess, daydreams of the prince, or stories told by the fairy, within the process of reading the book the reader is encouraged to make thematic and chronological connections between scenes, thus creating a privileged diegetic level in her construction of the text. The diegetic phrases that introduce the fairy's stories ("the fairy relates"), the princess's dreams ("she dreams"), and the prince's daydreams ("he has, in his imagination") within each scene delineate the embedded stories, suggesting that there is a frame story between scenes as there must be an external narrator to utter these phrases. It is, however, a frame that is constantly being reshaped and is never stable.

Some blanks encourage the reader to fix two scenes as part of one storytelling episode; however, using a traditional fairy-tale opening gesture keeps the time frame vague, thus destabilizing it. The use of opening gestures ("There once was" and "Once upon a time") directs the reader to impose fairy-tale genre expectations on the story that follows. One major element of these expectations, as identified by Elizabeth Wanning Harries in her discussion of framing gestures in *Twice Upon a Time: Women Writers and the History of the Fairy Tale*, is that fairy tales often occur in ambiguous settings where time is unfixed (104). Scene 10 ends with the fairy saying to the princess, "Let me tell you a story . . ." (17). Scene 11 begins, "There once was a beautiful young princess, relates the fairy [. . .]" (18). Though not chronologically connected, the first of these two scenes supports the setting for the second. The reader is induced by the blank to connect

the two scenes and read them seamlessly with scene 11 as an embedded fairy-tale told by the fairy to the princess. This particular pairing is repeated once more with scene 25 ("Let me tell you a story") and scene 26 ("Once upon a time, the fairy relates [. . .]") (49). Unlike the sections that end with questions, the ellipses suggest one narrative moment, the fairy telling a story to the princess, where the focalization shifts from narratee to narrator at the onset of the embedded story. The external narration is maintained by diegetic tags, such as "the fairy relates" or "says" that denote dialogue despite the lack of quotation marks around spoken text.

The layering and disconnecting of plots in Coover's *Briar Rose* erode the structure of the fairy tale and novel. The distinction between the embedded level of narration told by the fairy and the frame story is diminished as the story progresses so that the reader is left, at times, unsure of which story she is reading. The characters themselves are often unaware of which story they are in as the "reality" of the story world breaks down with each new layer of narration. By destabilizing narrative order in such a confusing way, the concept of a "real" or original story is denied. Each is just as valid as the others. Thematically this suggests that the world is made up of multiple stories without an anchoring reality. Discourse is all there is, and multiple contradictory stories can all be true. The final section ends with an ellipsis, instead of a period, suggesting that the end is no end at all. The sections, while seemingly offering plot progression, are interchangeable in terms of the time frame of the story: the prince remains in the briars, the princess remains in her bed, and the fairy remains in her tower room. There is no progression because the characters are trapped by their roles.

The happily-ever-after is, thus, certainly questioned in both print and hypertext versions of *Briar Rose*. It is clear in the plot that marriage will not satisfy these characters because of variants that are told in which the marriages that ensue are unhappy. Presenting these unhappy endings, followed by a gap, and then a scene with a different possibility disrupts the reader's narrative expectations, constantly negating closure in a method similar to the serials analyzed by Robyn Warhol. One cannot help but ask, why should they get married? and why does Coover not allow for other possibilities? For the characters, the possibility of doing something else does not exist because the plot of "Sleeping Beauty" is a marriage plot. Coover's point is not so much to provide an alternative, but to unhinge the expected components of a well-made narrative and heteronormative plot. The constant repetition of the kiss/awakening scene and the deferment of marriage effectively ruptures the pairing of the two elements, so that the awakening of the sleeping beauty is broken off from the happily-ever-after marriage. As heterosexual marriage is the expected end to fairy tales, denying that closure disrupts the sexuality ingrained in the plot. The plot-level representation of unhappy ending after unhappy ending questions the expectations about gender and sexuality in the sources. The negation of closure aids that disruption on a structural level by denying the possibility of a single happy ending with marriage. Though Coover does not offer other configurations of sexuality or gender, the gaps and blanks provide a space in which the reader can explore other possibilities. Complicating sexuality and gender becomes inevitable, as Coover exhausts the options available within normative gender and sexual patterns. Coover represents the characters as stuck in particular roles, unable to act outside of the

normative fairy-tale script, but the script, as the multiple iterations of the "Sleeping

Beauty" tale demonstrate, does not lead to a happy ending.

Yolen's *Briar Rose* and Coover's *Briar Rose* seem to be making different

arguments about narrative if one only reads for story, particularly due to their very

different thematic focuses. However, if we examine how the novels destabilize fairy-tale

narratives, they are structurally very much alike. Gaps are created in both texts through

suspension of the narrative, multiple focalization, embedded stories, competing narrative

threads, and suspension and negation of closure. Blanks occur in the text when a new

section is started and when the fairy-tale narrative is suspended by an interruption from

an alternative narrative, enticing the readers to relate the text to the overall story arc of

the "Sleeping Beauty" tale. The interruption of fairy-tale and novel narrative patterns that

results from these interwoven and fragmented narratives additionally destabilizes the

ideologies of gender of the source tales. In terms of gender theory, this destabilization

suggests that gender, like narrative, is a construct. It is, as Teresa de Lauretis explains in

The Technology of Gender, "the product of various social technologies, such as cinema,

and of institutionalized discourses, epistemologies, and critical practices, as well as

practices of daily life" (2). I would add fairy tales to her list of social and narrative

technologies.

Though interventions in the production of gender are not at issue in the plots of

either novel, calling attention to how gender is constructed is. As de Lauretis further

argues, "The representation of gender *is* its construction" (3). While not particularly

groundbreaking for today, this concept is foundational to poststructuralist feminist theory

and the gender theory I have engaged, and it leads me to believe that Yolen's and

Coover's kind of secondary, side-effect destabilization can be just as or even more

subversive than a direct challenge to constructions of gender, such as offering different

possibilities for femininity, *because* it is secondary and deconstructive. The blanks and

deconstructive mode here set more reflection and unease in motion in readers and

audiences than the "new" role models in films such as *Ever After*. These two novels

undermine not just specific representations of gender, but the very stability of normative

gender constructs.

<center>NOTES</center>

Introduction

    1. See Frus and Williams (2010), "Introduction: Making Case the for Transformation," for a full discussion of *transformation*.

Chapter 1: Who's Wicked Now? The Stepmother as Fairy-Tale Heroine

    1. See Salman Rushdie's *The Wizard of Oz* and Alissa Burger's "Wicked and Wonderful Witches: Narrative and Gender Negotiations from *The Wizard of Oz* to *Wicked*" for a deconstruction of the good/evil binary in *The Wizard of Oz* film.

    2. Propp analyzed one hundred tales to develop his functions, which primarily feature male protagonists, as his examples demonstrate. In his dramatis personae, the *hero* is identified as male, and the *princess* (a sought-for person) and *her father* are identified as another, combined persona. The functions feature male heroes, and Propp only accounts for female heroes in the case of the victimized hero (he parenthetically allows for male victimized heroes but not female seeker heroes). Propp says that character sex is not tied to function (87); however, *hero* is not a gender-neutral term in his analysis despite his intentions.

    3. Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* identifies several motifs associated with stepmothers, and while most of the motifs are worded to suggest that the stepmother acts in opposition to the desires of the hero(ine), clearly aligning her with Propp's *villain*, only one is identified as "cruel" (S31). However, "Cruel stepmother" is a large entry with sixteen tale types associated with it.

4.   While Coover certainly tackles Propp's functions and Thompson's motifs in his novel, he is also working with the popularized conception of the stepmother figure as wicked, and it is this popular understanding of the character that I examine in this chapter. I refer to the stepmother figure throughout as "wicked," rather than "cruel," to avoid confusing the popularized wicked stepmother with the cruel stepmother motif that is specific to folklore studies.

5.   For an analysis of *Briar Rose*, see Sünje Redies, "Return with New Complexities: Robert Coover's *Briar Rose*," Jaroslav Kusnír, "Subversion of Myths: High and Low Cultures in Donald Barthelme's *Snow White* and Robert Coover's *Briar Rose*," and Marie C. Bouchet, "Between Wake and Sleep: Robert Coover's *Briar Rose*, A Playful Reawakening of *The Sleeping Beauty*."

6.   Fairy tales are of course much more diverse than the popular canon, and there are a variety of female heroes and complex female characters in tales from around the world. See Angela Carter's *The Old Wives Fairy Tale Book* and Kathleen Ragan's *Fearless Girls, Wise Women, and Beloved Sisters: Heroines in Folktales from Around the World* for a sampling.

Chapter 2: The Shoe Still Fits: *Ever After* and the Pursuit of a Feminist Cinderella

1.   For a sampling of reviews that use "feminist" to describe the film, see *The New York Times* (Holden) and *People* (Rozen); for "post-feminist," see *Los Angeles Times* (Turan) and *Chicago Tribune* (Wilmington).

2.   Linda Pershing and Lisa Gablehouse aptly refer to this idea as "faux feminism" in their analysis of *Enchanted*.

3. For a discussion of the marketing of *Ever After* to teenage girls, see Moira McCormick.

4. See Cristina Bacchilega and John Rieder's essay for a discussion of the "generic complexity" of films like *Ever After*.

5. In *The Enchanted Screen*, Jack Zipes argues that I "misinterpret" the frame of the narrative, which he says "raises important questions of authenticity and narrative appropriation" (188). Zipes is responding to an earlier version of this chapter published in a collection of essays on fairy-tale films. I agree with Zipes that the frame "raises questions of authenticity and narrative appropriation," which I explain above. I also agree with his argument that "who gets to tell his or her story" is important (Zipes, *Enchanted* 188). The film most certainly raises the question and suggests that the Grand Dame holds the power in the scene because it is *her* story to tell. But her authority is undercut by the visual narrative of the film. Zipes suggests that the Grimms "do not protest" the Grand Dame's version of the story and that they are "apparently jostled by the 'truth'" (Zipes, *Enchanted* 188). This is true, but the Grimms are still the most important people in the scene; that is why the camera follows them after they have been dismissed by the Grand Dame. She holds the power in the plot of the film's frame—summoning the Grimms, correcting their mistake, and dismissing them. But film is also a visual medium, and the visual narrative does not end with the Grand Dame and her authority; it ends with the Grimms leaving the realm of her authority and going back into the space where their version of "Cinderella" is the one that matters.

6. Danielle's performances of class reflect American ideology rather than the historical truth the frame implies. The American myth of a classless society,

demonstrated by Danielle's ease in moving from merchant's daughter to servant to courtier to princess, is further enacted by Prince Henry's desire to open a free university, suggesting the possibility of upward mobility through education.

7. Though she is not originally of the servant class, this is the most common class-descriptor used in reference to Danielle.

8. Kim Snowden discusses both antifeminist postfeminism and girl power as understood in the undergraduate classroom in her consideration of literary and film versions of Angela Carter's retold fairy tales.

9. See Cristina Bacchilega and Steven Swann Jones for a discussion of the innocent persecuted heroine genre.

10. Many of the fairy-tale princess/heroine stereotypes that *Ever After* engages are described at length in Ming-Hsun Lin's discussion of "the princess's role."

11. See Pauline Greenhill and Emilie Anderson-Gregoire for a discussion of these tales as explorations of androgyny and transgender.

12. Danielle's demonstrations of strength (the girl power and feminist moments cited by reviewers) are enacted out of a greater understanding of morality, formed by her schooling in socialism at the foot of her father and Thomas More. She dresses above her station and lies to the prince about her identity to save a servant sold into slavery. Despite her selfless motivation, she does not take any action to better society (other than chastise the prince).

13. Both Leonardo and Gustave hint at a different kind of masculinity: neither is presented as sexualized—one is a father-figure and both are queered—and both are

artists, a feminized career-path in present day. While powerful, they are no threat to the prince.

14. In *Legally Blonde*, a stereotypical blonde airhead who is only interested in clothes and makeup goes to Harvard Law School to win back a boy, only to discover she is actually smart. Her interest in fashion gives her a legal edge over the other more serious students.

Chapter 3: Ambivalence and Ambiguity in the Fragmented Fairy Tales of Kelly Link

1. See my article "The Silent Struggle: Autonomy for the Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers" for how "Swans" fits in with other retellings of this tale type.

2. The Grimms have two other stories of this tale type, ''The Twelve Brothers'' and ''The Seven Ravens," which feature tasks for the heroine different from the ones described here. Their "The Six Swans" and Andersen's "The Wild Swans" are, however, very similar and better well-known today.

3. There is an adaptation that blends the Grimms' "Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers" tales as part of Jim Henson's *The StoryTeller* series, titled "The Three Ravens," which is much more likely to be familiar to adolescents now that it is available on DVD.

4. See for example Juliet Marillier's *Daughter of the Forest*.

5. "Magic for Beginners" was first published in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* (2005).

6. See Cristina Bacchilega and Steven Swann Jones for a discussion of the innocent persecuted heroine genre.

7. My thanks to Stephanie Nakamura for suggesting that Darcy is a fairy-godmother figure.

Chapter 4: Gaps in the Briar Hedge: The Reader's Role in Awakening *Briar Rose*

1. There is a variety of literature and scholarship about fairy tales and trauma, particularly trauma from sexual abuse; however, here I only draw on work about fairy tales and trauma that specifically discusses the Holocaust, including Kidd.

2. The novels that Landwehr analyzes by Yolen and Murphy are not texts written by Holocaust survivors, whereas Haase focuses on narratives from adults who were children that experienced trauma during World War II, Corinna Sargood and Magdna Denes, in addition to *Dear Mili*, a story written by Wilhelm Grimm about a girl displaced by war and illustrated by Maurice Sendak who alludes to the Holocaust and World War II in his illustrations but is not a child survivor himself. Haase also discusses the testimony of Dinah Babbitt Gottlieb, an adult survivor of Auschwitz who recalls children in the camp wanting her to paint images from Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Haase calls attention to the differences between narratives by trauma survivors and those about trauma survivors, but argues that both utilize the fairy tale for the same reasons. Both scholars draw on research about trauma and the Holocaust.

3. See Doris L. Bergan's essay "The Barbarity of Footnotes: History and the Holocaust" for a discussion of "who belongs inside the category 'victims of the Holocaust'" and an overview of the debate in this area (45).

4. There are other references to homosexuality in the novel as well—one of Becca's mentors is a lesbian (50), Becca assumes a possible rival for her love interest's

affection is a lesbian (76, 77), and a colleague misunderstands Becca's statement that she is working on a "fairy story" as an article about gay rights (110).

5. This detail is also noted by Hennard Dutheil de la Rochére and Viret in their essay (418).

6. Gemma is called many names in the novel—Gitl Rose Mandlestein, Genevieve, Dawna, Księźniczka, Princess Briar Rose, Eve, Eva Potocki—but none are given as her "real" name. All are names given to her by other people after she awakens from the gas poisoning. She is identified by her role in the story and the role she occupies in the "Sleeping Beauty" plot. Each name is symbolically linked to her role at the time it is given, a common pattern in fairy tales.

7. Scholes's hypertext option creates a different virtual text from the one created by a reader interacting with a book version of the novel. In the hypertext version, the reader is encouraged to navigate the scenes in whichever order she arbitrarily chooses. And yet, the breaks between scenes are still blanks that invite a reader to see scenes in relation to other scenes. Because the text uses the same patterns repeatedly, rearranging the sections, while resulting in a different order, the blanks still induce a reader familiar with fairy-tale and narrative structure to make connections not necessarily supported by the plot. However, because the scenes are interchangeable, themes of multiplicity and the power of discourse to shape reality will remain.

8. The scenes are not numbered or in any way titled in the text. I refer to numbers only for convenience. My numbers match those of the hypertext version.

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