CLOSED DOORS: GENDERED POWER RELATIONS AND THE USE OF MATURE THEMES IN EUROCENTRIC FAIRYTALES

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Abstract

Established critics, such as Jack Zipes, assert that the subject matter of fairytales shows evidence that the Westernised 'classics' (by authors such as Charles Perrault or the Grimm brothers) were influenced by the cultural norms of their contemporary society and served as a pedagogical tool for mass socialisation. Often authors writing for younger audiences deliberately inserted a moralising function into these tales, in order to normalise and further disseminate certain gender ideals. Their presentation of adult or mature themes (such as sexuality) is often problematic, with some references presented quite naturally and others excluded entirely. This paper investigates modern retellings of Eurocentric fairytales, and speculates on the significance of the perpetuation or complete elision of such themes, and what their selective invocation might intimate about the culture in which the story is produced. It argues that the way in which the fairytale narrative engages with mature themes is demonstrative of its contemporary ethos and its associated cultural bias, which is conveyed unconsciously through the vehicle of the text. Through a critical analysis of relevant literature, the paper explores the maintenance of socio-cultural norms in fairytales as being emblematic in their establishment as cultural relics.

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Introduction

> If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales.
>
> Attributed to Albert Einstein
> (Winick, 2013)

The intention behind my research is to investigate the relevance of the fairytale genre to a contemporary audience who may not necessarily relate to the archaic references and history of the trope. Focusing primarily on sexuality and gendered power relations, my thesis argues that fairytales both exemplify and perpetuate the maintenance of the socio-cultural norms which emanate from the eras in which they were written, and this establishes them as cultural relics and records. I examine how the genre has been utilised in order to socialise young children, inculcating values which they then carry with them into adulthood. I have chosen to focus on Eurocentric stories, due to their familiarity to most Westernised children and adults, and to investigate the ideological intentions of these popular tales, paying particular attention to the socio-political objectives underpinning archaic and modern versions of the same or similar tales. I also discuss what such intentions reveal about the culture from which these disparate versions derive.

Concurrently with the written portion of my Masters in Fine Arts, the practical aspect is expressed in the body of work “Bedtime Stories,” a series of artist’s books entailing draughtsmanship that visually explores the conceptual fabric of the thesis. The collection comprises twelve artist’s books that take Western fairytales as a point of departure for a visual ‘discussion’ of what I feel are the most enduring motifs of the various narratives. Consequently, the works are not direct illustrations of the stories themselves, but allusive meditations on their thematic elements and how these are still prevalent in contemporary culture.

Chapter One

The Beginnings of a Genre

> … [F]airy tales are supposed to depict or prescribe for us what is true, as well as what forms of behaviour are typical, normal, and acceptable. […] From these perspectives, fairy tales own us, we don't own them.
>
> Donald Haase (1993, p. 393)

In order to understand the relevance of fairytales to contemporary adults, one must first engage with the historical context that influenced their evolution and public perceptions of these stories. This discussion provides a broad overview of the most prominent influences in the development of what those with a predominantly Western upbringing would view as 'classic' fairytales – moving from their murky origins as oral fiction to their cementation in literary culture by iconic writers such as Charles Perrault and the Grimm brothers. Although narrow, this scope has been chosen as a result of the tales' familiarity to the majority of Westernised children and adults. Moreover, due to widespread homogenisation and propagation by the Disney film industry and other myriad retellings, the now-definitive versions of these tales are rooted in Western cultural consciousness and function as a wellspring of material to draw from and adapt. Such fairytale narratives have thus become a kind of universal and unconscious 'cultural capital,' buried in the foundations of our formative years like relics to be excavated and polished and presented to our own children without questioning their purchase on our collective imaginations.

The genre Western readers now classify as 'the fairytale' began as European folklore that was disseminated orally in peasant settlements. In a setting that largely excluded literacy, the only way to be exposed to these stories was to hear them in a communal space. Naturally, written records of such tales are scarce, as they were invented and told/retold in small groups. They comprised short, conversational narratives that explained natural phenomena, such as the change of the seasons, or celebratory rites, such as the harvest, coming of age or marriage (Zipes, 1994, p. 10).

These stories varied from teller to teller; they were revised and adapted as was seen fit, and passed from mouth to mouth in an intimate chain that created a reservoir and diaspora of tales featuring similar themes or motifs, but that resist attempts to retrace them, as one might a thread, to any single source.

Inspiration for fairytales was initially appropriated from myth, and resulted in a blend of idiosyncratic local lore and elements of a more spiritual nature (1994, p. 3). Jack Zipes argues that mythic stories detailing the actions of supernatural beings acted as models for humankind (1994, p. 1), and that the amalgam of myth and folklore may have functioned in a similarly exemplary way. He continues by noting that the emphasis of most folklore was on a kind of communal harmony (1994, p. 10), an attempt to make sense of the world through fictional allegory. This trend became increasingly more pronounced as the tales developed and inspiration began to be sourced from more immediate everyday contexts. Thus the stories acted as a mirror of society at the time. We can see a particular way of living reflected back to us in older transcriptions of the oral-based fables; we see the customs, what was accepted, and what was not. We get a sense of the time: a slice of life in (more or less) the people's own words. Women – for it was mostly women, trapped in endlessly monotonous cycles of 'women's work' and the knitting and spinning and weaving of thread that took up so much of their time in the pre-industrial era – tapped into their personal creativity to tell stories that kept boredom at bay while they applied themselves to dreary tasks. As Catherine Orenstein observes, it is difficult for the contemporary reader to understand quite how much effort was put into fabricating clothing prior to the seventeenth century, let alone the thread from which such clothing was made. Demand for textiles was so great that spinning rooms were incorporated into orphanages and even prostitutes were expected to produce yarn (2002, pp. 82-83). Given the social hierarchy, the slavish labour force that was the peasant community bore the brunt of the ever-increasing need for cloth. Seeking distraction from this repetitive work, peasant women wove tales and spun yarns in which the Sleeping Beauty pricks her finger on a spindle, Rumplestiltskin spins straw into gold, a young girl is made to choose between opposing paths of needles and pins on the

way to her grandmother's house, while another spins nettles into flax to make the shirts that will save her brothers.

The emphasis on handicrafts in the tales was no coincidence or accident. Due to the enormous importance of this work to the community at the time, being apprenticed to a seamstress had greater significance than merely learning a necessary skill. Yvonne Verdier's reflections on oral tales collected near the end of the nineteenth century in provincial France also detail her personal study of a small Châtillonnais village and its intriguing emphasis on what might be called 'seamstress lore.' Verdier relates the custom of sending pubertal girls to spend a winter with a seamstress – an experience that acted as a joint apprenticeship and finishing school. During this time they learnt how to work, and to how best to polish their manners and eligibility, with an emphasis on personal refinement and adornment (1997, p. 106). In this context, even the tools of the trade had a kind of emblematic significance. For example, Verdier explains that the pin was symbol of maidenhood or puberty: it connoted budding romance, and was presented by boys to their sweethearts or tossed into fountains by girls hoping to find a romantic partner. She goes on to state that the pin was associated with the arrival of menses, and observes that:

> the properties of pins (they attach and are thus instruments of amorous attachment, but they prick and are then weapons of defence against too enterprising boys) are in accord with those attributed to menstrual blood, an ingredient in love potions but also an obstacle to any sexual relation. In this context the pubescent girl could be defined as the carrier of pins.
>
> (Verdier, 1997, p. 106)

Conversely, the needle signified sexual maturity, due to the connotations invoked by its ability to be threaded through the eye. Thus, tales that incorporate prominent elements of needlework can be said to embody a type of social codification that determines whether a girl can handle a needle – or the opposite sex (Reide, 2012, p. 7). From this one might surmise that stories emanating from a communal, very female setting were influenced, and indeed informed by, the experience of the tellers themselves.

It is noteworthy, then, that Marina Warner claims that it is storytelling that makes women thrive (Warner, 1995, p. xi), intimating a kind of power in the expression of female wit and self-expression. Indeed, women's stories not only served as a mirror of their environment and daily lives, but embodied agency, self-representation, and the ability to use their voices constructively. Many old folktales are narratives of maturation, coming of age or married life – or of loss, hardship, starvation and exploitation. As much as they were told for the amusement of adults, the stories also acted as parables for the younger generation, serving an educational as well as an entertainment function. References to elements of a more prosaic nature are evident in transcriptions of older folktales, such as "The Grandmother's Tale," a precursor to what we are now more familiar with as "Little Red Riding-Hood." An example was collected in about 1870, by folklorist Achille Millien, in the French province of Nivernais. In this account, the girl escapes a *bzou*/werewolf by saying she needs to relieve herself. The *bzou* tells her to do so in the bed but, when the girl refuses, he ties a string around her ankle and allows her to step outside. She escapes by tying the string to a tree – or, depending on the version, cutting it (with sewing scissors, of course) and running away. Thinking she has been too long outside, the *bzou* becomes impatient and asks, "Are you doing a load? Are you doing a load?" (Ashliman, 2015). Some variations are even more blatant: Catherine Orenstein's translation of the same source uses the coarser expletive "shitting" (2002, p. 66), by which one might assume that the French text is more raw than other translators might feel comfortable transcribing accurately. In any event, such earthy references are unheard of in today's equivalent, sanitised account.

Moreover, the realities of close living quarters, in addition to the lack of the relatively modern concept of privacy, are intimated within the original text, and the narrative can be interpreted as a lesson in cleanliness as well as a testimony to the ingenuity and resourcefulness of young girls. Thus, as much as the oral folktales emphasised the importance of women's work and the symbolic significance of its associated paraphernalia, they did not always depict women as housebound or passive – in this case, the female protagonist is saved from the wolf by virtue of her

own quick thinking. Undoubtedly, she learns from the experience – which makes "The Grandmother's Tale" a perfect vehicle for the expression of female maturation and strength.

Continuing the focus on French regions, due to their later significance in the formation of influential texts, the folktales they produced, while firmly established in the rustic cultural consciousness, were essentially ignored as a genre by the upper classes, perhaps due to the fact that their very substance was so thoroughly entrenched in country lore. The hierarchal organisation of French society up to the end of the sixteenth century was structured in such a way that one's position in society was perceived as analogous to one's function, thus determining one's value and providing a basis for social identity (Duggan, 2005, p. 26). This obviously contributed to the static nature of the social structure, which decreed that one was forced to remain in the position into which one was born. However, Anne Duggan argues that, despite its innate misogyny, religion provided an equalising force in its promise of salvation or sainthood for all classes and genders (2005, p. 27). Unsurprisingly, this equalising effect was rendered less relevant by the rise of Humanism and scientific or rationalist thinking. Humanism was a regressive ideology in the sense that it pointedly excluded women and the lower classes, based on a perception of their lack of reason (2005, p. 32) – reason being a quality that was seen to be embodied by the educated and thus elite European man. As a result, the intellectual potential of women – even those inhabiting the same upper-class circles as aforementioned 'rational' men – was marginalised.

With the development of salon culture at the beginning of the seventeenth century, however, this began to change. Salons functioned in the same way as academies, in that they provided a space which facilitated lucid and rational discourse and encouraged critical thought, but with the crucial difference that they did not exclude elite females from joining the conversation. Furthermore, the introduction of parlour games acted as a leveller between the sexes, as these games were played in a mixed environment and relied heavily on the wit of those involved. Zipes suggests that, having been exposed to folktales via peasant nurses or servants, upper-class women began gravitating towards these stories as a basis for various conversational games which involved

the imagination and the telling of a story for amusement (1983, p. 4). Fictional narratives provided a neutral space and an opportunity for women to demonstrate their education and intelligence in a society that severely restricted their potential in other respects (Reide, 2012, p. 11). As a result of their malleability and orality, these stories provided a medium that became the perfect vehicle for reckless talk and anti-establishment ideas, and could freely oppose the contemporary patriarchal *status quo* – all under the convenient guise of idle games. Perhaps this is why women, particularly, were drawn to folktales with pre-established heroines and proto-feminist values that validated and promoted rather than excluded the drudgery of women's work. Though not particularly relevant to the average aristocratic woman, this work was emblematic, perhaps, of general female concerns. Moreover, these tales, mutable in their ubiquity, were adjusted and refined in this elite setting to reflect women's own relationships to their environment – that is, in ways that represented their interests and that of the aristocracy (Zipes, 1994, p. 21). And, again, the cultural atmosphere in which the stories were (re)produced had a profound effect on their content. Tales were refined from the comparatively coarse subject matter of the earlier raw, unpretentious folktales that were relevant only to country life, and adapted to norms applicable to courtly circles – creating the precursors of what we recognise today as the 'classic fairytales.'

Once folktale-derived stories became assimilated into upper-class society, they were published (by both men and women) for the consumption of children (Zipes, 1994, pp. 22-24) – possibly due to the idea that their sometimes whimsical subject matter might appeal to a younger audience. The shift from oral folktale to printed fairytale, however, is described by Zipes as "violent" (1994, p. 12), as it necessitated a severance from the oral tradition. Because the act of reading is more private than that of telling or listening to a story in a shared environment, the inclusive community audience that was so important to constructing the folktale was excluded (1994, pp. 12-13). The listener became the reader, and crept inwards, experiencing the tale in a private, internalised way that excluded the communal context and the idiosyncratic storytelling flair of particular individuals. By fixing the narrative in blocks of text, the author ensures that the story is

weighted by archival imprisonment, and creates a definitive narrative as opposed to many versions of the same theme. The notion of the 'correct' version is insidiously implanted in the child's mind, motivating the demand for the adult to "tell it right." Shifting to a primarily printed medium also served to divorce the fairytale from its folk origins; sequestering and anchoring it firmly within the realms of the educated, literate middle- and upper-classes. In the process, the cultural hierarchy established between the elite bourgeoisie and lower-class peasants was reinforced and solidified (Zipes, 1994, p. 13). Arguably, this was tantamount to an insult, for elements of the original rustic motifs were retained during their assimilation into wealthy and literate circles, yet rendered inaccessible to the gentry – a development analogous to the inclusion of obsolete and archaic referents (such as spinning wheels) in contemporary retellings.

In addition to this, the subtext of the stories was altered to reflect French *civilité*, that is, a refining, enlightening process that was emphasised in the seventeenth century. The freedom of self-expression experienced in the salon parlour games was continued in the autonomy that French women writers enjoyed in presenting their work. However, this development was also insidiously curtailed by a perceived requirement to ensure that the stories were appropriate for young audiences, thus neatly replacing gendered societal restrictions with child-appropriate ones. Previously, children had been viewed as not dissimilar to diminutive adults, and were more or less treated as such. As the state of childhood became increasingly perceived as a separate developmental phase to adulthood, the issue of what contributes to the appropriate education of a responsible future contributor to society gathered prominence and was linked to the concept of maintaining social order. Childhood experience was now viewed as crucial in establishing one's eventual character (Zipes, 1983, p. 21), and thus any external influences had to be constructive as well as appropriate. Instruction was required in order to socialise the child into the modes of behaviour desired in the upper-class French environment. For example, education in manners, such as using a knife and fork, sitting upright when at the dinner table, and repressing one's bodily functions, was a legacy of the seventeenth-century upper classes that filtered down the hierarchal

channels until such behaviour became *de rigueur.* This demonstrates the efficacy of the propagandistic efforts exerted by French high society to inculcate new modes of behaviour – which have endured to this day (1983, p. 25). To facilitate this process, in a way that was viewed by the elite as palatable for young children, the entire ethos of the original peasant folklore was rewritten so as to reflect established patriarchal ideals, inculcate contemporary morals, and imbue the stories with pedagogical value.

Zipes claims that Charles Perrault, an influential figure in establishing the contemporary genre, wrote his fairytales (adapted from oral traces and first published in 1697, only six years before his death) in order to prepare children for the roles they were to play in society (1983, p. 14) – an aspiration that reflected fashionable Humanist ideals. Even the most casual reading of his works immediately reveals particularly gendered values, verging on didactic indoctrination, as is evident in the pedantic inclusion of a moral (sometimes two!) at the culmination of each tale. In Perrault's portrayal of role models for women and girls, certain recurrent themes emerge. His positive female characters are passive and obliging, soft-spoken and hard-working – perfect clockwork automatons whose utter lack of force or personality allows the will of those stronger than them to render them malleable and obedient. Even when they are the focus, they are rendered almost secondary to their own story. As Marina Warner astutely observes, despite not being desirable in men, silence was viewed as the chief virtue to cultivate as a woman (1995, p. 31), thus stripping them of autonomy and independence. By contrast, exemplary males in the stories are intrepid and intelligent, able to use their cunning to extricate themselves from difficult situations. The binaries created by this model oppose and undermine the female-centred values of the genre's origins, simplifying character traits to the point of producing reductive stereotypes and masculine and feminine caricatures. In addition to widening the polarisation of male and female qualities, the substance of the stories was altered to better convey desired patriarchal subject matter. For example, maternal family ties became paternal, the active heroine became a hero, and particularly female themes of maturation were changed to reflect a male emphasis on domination, wealth and power (Zipes, 1983, pp. 7-8). This

might explain why we continue to view Perrault's evil stepmother as the villain in "Cinderella," despite the latter's being very much present yet apparently incapable of preventing the forced subjugation of his own child. It may be why our sympathies lie with the father in the Grimms' "Hansel and Gretel," regardless of his passive adherence to his wife's plan that they abandon their children in the forest to starve. After all, the latter story appears to wheedle, is not a token show of resistance enough?[1] It seems that, in fairytale, it is. As Andrea Dworkin acidly observes in her reflection on the latent cultural influence of fairytales, "All malice originated with the woman" (1974, p. 46). The very presentation of plot has been skewed towards male interests in ways which seem natural to the unquestioning reader, persuading him/her of the veracity of this 'normality.'

Furthermore, cautionary character examples, such as in "The Fairies," create a sense of shame and anxiety in order to assist children to understand what parts of their personalities they are required to suppress in order to be model representatives of societal mores. In this story by Perrault, a young girl who is beautiful, industrious and compliant draws water for a fairy who has disguised herself as a poor country-woman, and who then bestows upon the girl the dubious reward of having a flower or jewel fall from her lips with every word she speaks. Once she returns home, her mother, hearing the story and seeing the glittering evidence, sends her other daughter (whom she favours more, despite her entirely disagreeable nature) in the hope that she will receive similar gifts. Predictably, the second daughter's deviant rudeness is not tolerated by the fairy, and she is cursed to spew toads and snakes instead. Thus the first daughter is rewarded for her adherence to desirable social codes by marrying a prince and enjoying perpetual wealth of her own making, while the second is shunned by her family and community and dies alone in the forest (Perrault, 1922, pp. 30-35). As blatant as this reward-based ideology is to the adult reader, the unsophisticated and immature consumer will not interrogate its premises or the quiet indoctrination underlying

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[1] After the children's initial abandonment and return home, he "rejoice[s], for it had cut him to the heart to leave them behind alone" (Grimm & Grimm, 1948, p. 156). Of course, this heartfelt regret does not prevent him from deserting them a second time!

children's 'entertainment.' Such vehicles are therefore more insidious (and perhaps more effective) than overt commands or correctives.

Zipes maintains that even female authors were not immune to reflecting societal norms as models for children in their work. He uses Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy as an illustration, arguing that her stories create a world in which women are able to authentically forge their own destinies, while paradoxically maintaining a degree of "active submission" to patriarchal codes (1994, p. 28). By contrast, Duggan's extensive analysis of d'Aulnoy's oeuvre posits that she created various characters that do not, in fact, conform to specific gender-prescribed roles or to any universal maxims of 'right' and 'wrong.' Rather, Duggan argues that the characters and, indeed, the reader must gauge the moral impact of the situation itself (2005, p. 201), and deviate from the prescribed character formulas esatblished by Perrault. Duggan continues by claiming that d'Aulnoy incorporated elements of Perrault's tales in her own work to produce subversive satire, thereby undermining Perrault's notions of class and gender (2005, p. 204). This outlook substantiates Zipes's thesis that authors working within the genre either incorporated values deemed important for the young reader to emulate, or parodied the literary genre entirely in an effort to subvert it. Nevertheless, these trends only serve to confirm that authors were contributing to an ongoing discussion about manners and norms in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Zipes, 1983, p. 16), whether they were conscious of doing so or not.

As part of the widespread sanitisation of fairytales and the eradication of the depiction of certain bodily functions from the original stories, sexual activity was more or less expunged from the texts. The German brothers, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, claimed to have collected and simplified the material for their texts from stories told by authentic peasant women during interviews. These fairytales were then published in the influential *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* in 1812, with multiple 'revised' editions appearing in following years. The Grimm brothers' versions bring to mind wistful images of *hausfrau* in harsh yet quaint settings in the German countryside. They are tellers of gritty tales that reek of the realities of rustic life, but still contain an element of hopeful whimsy. In reality,

however, the Grimms sourced their stories mainly from middle-class tellers (Zipes, 1983, p. 47), among whom a strong bourgeois French influence can be detected. The upper classes had been astonishingly successful in dispersing their ideals of *civilité* across Europe, as exemplified by the legacy of the scarlet cape from Perrault's "Little Red Riding Hood." To the reader, clear correlations exist between the Grimms' "Little Red Cap" and Perrault's version, with its similarly-coloured *chaperon* (a hood-like capelet) – a story first collected over a hundred years previously. Significantly, there is no mention of a red garment or accessory in transcriptions of earlier oral or folk versions, a discrepancy which leads commentators to presume that the item is entirely of Perrault's invention. Moreover, the Grimms happened across this version of the story via a lady-in-waiting to a duchess, Marie Hassenpflug, who was of French Huguenot descent. Evidently she was familiar with a Perrault-inspired variant, as it is clear that the version transcribed by the Grimms was alien to the German folklore they purportedly aimed to collect (Dundes, 1989, p. 8).

In addition to further disseminating folklore already corrupted by upper-class French influences, the Grimms adapted, refined and rewrote the stories in order to create a more simplified, easily-read collection containing themes that would appeal to nineteenth-century bourgeois sensibilities (Zipes, 2001, p. 68) – that is, by incorporating Christian references and by emphasising models of behaviour for both men and women to emulate. When confronted with many stories containing comparable elements, as a result of the mobility of oral retellings, they combined these inter-related narratives into a single story (2001, p. 70), deftly side-stepping the opportunity to record genuine oral variants of the tales. They also edited the stories with the express edification of children in mind – as is evident even in the very title of their anthology, which translates as *Children's and Household Tales*. In order to render adult-oriented tales more suitable for youthful readers, Wilhelm Grimm, the more conformist of the two siblings, attempted to expunge explicit references to sexuality – although, interestingly, he left violent themes untouched and still very much in evidence. This might indicate that physical violence was considered child-

appropriate, while physical intimacy was not – an attitude not dissimilar to that propagated by contemporary children's cartoon shows.

Due to the success of the collection and its many subsequent editions, Wilhelm Grimm, as a personal example of what Zipes terms a "moral sanitation man" (1983, p. 48), was succeeded by others imitating his educational quest to transcribe stories as he thought they should be read or heard by a youthful audience. The employment of child protagonists became increasingly more established in the genre (Warner, 1994, p. 40), helping younger readers to relate to and feel empathy towards the plight of the stories' protagonists and further fixing the genre as childhood entertainment. As Warner notes, the duration of the stage of development known as childhood had been significantly extended in the Victorian era, thus affecting the period of time a child was expected to remain 'innocent' (1994, p. 45) and no doubt justifying concerted efforts to maintain this purity. As a result of their efforts, the Grimms contributed dramatically to the socialisation of children via bastardised folktales, and turned the stories into homogenised encapsulations of desirability and reward.

From this generalised overview one might be led to believe that the fairytale genre was moulded by predominantly masculine authors who penned stories reflecting personal agendas that reflected by those of greater society as a whole. Writers such as Charles Perrault and the Grimm brothers have been canonised as 'fathers' of the fairytale, their published texts becoming fixed in public consciousness to the extent that subsequent variants are stamped as 'retellings of a classic story' and relegated to the outermost boundaries of the genre. It is this notion of fairytales' culturally-created and inflected significance that will inform the remainder of this paper, serving as the basis for an examination of how the genre serves as a deceptive mirror of society – a mirror in which the reflection appears to co-create the reflected.

Chapter Two

Sexuality in Fairytales

> Though [eroticised fairy tales] are sexually explicit, much of their content simply makes manifest the power relations that are already expressed in nonerotic fairy tales.
>
> (Jorgensen, 2008, p. 35)

Considering the enduring popularity of fairytales amongst both young and older adults returning to the genre, it is not surprising that they have once more undergone a transmutation to appeal to this audience. After having been so rigorously sanitised in order to reduce them to a child-appropriate level, familiar or 'traditional' stories are now being re-injected with mature themes in order to fulfil the demand for edgy, gritty narratives that appeal to older readers. While the irony of this shift back to incorporating the very violent or sexually explicit thematic elements that were once so meticulously expunged is self-evident, it is interesting to note how these elements have been differently employed by more contemporary writers. There are instances in which plot devices have been utilised cleverly, with authors crafting layered and subtle allusions which guide the reader towards a certain realisation. Combined with sophisticated writing styles, these stories lead the reader on a journey that is both thought-provoking and enjoyable. Alternatively, one comes across texts that are more sow's ear than silk purse, as a result of their inept and gratuitous manipulation of thematic concerns or clumsy style of writing. To gain a better contextual understanding of the expression of mature themes in fairytales, it is useful to initially examine cases from oral literature and contrast them with the canonised and sanitised examples, before turning one's attention to more contemporary examples.

Once again, the transcribed version of "The Grandmother's Tale" is an excellent model of the complex utilisation of thematic devices. In short, the storyline follows a young girl tasked to take a bottle of milk and a loaf of warm bread to her ill grandmother. At the point where two forest paths

cross she meets a *bzou* or werewolf, who asks her if she will be taking the path of needles or that of pins. They take opposite routes and the *bzou* arrives at the destination first. After killing the grandmother and putting her flesh and a bottle of her blood in the pantry, he gets into her bed to wait for the young girl's arrival. When she enters her grandmother's cottage he invites her to eat the meat and drink the wine in the pantry, which she does. The *bzou* then tells her to undress and get into bed with him. She complies, disrobing slowly, and asking where to place each item of clothing once it has been removed. The *bzou* advises her to throw each one into the fire, rationalising this by saying she will not need them any longer. Thereafter follows the now-classic "what big [...] you have" exchange familiar to every contemporary child; but the girl then cannily asks to relieve herself outside, escapes, and is home safely before the *bzou* catches up with her (Ashliman, 2015).

Even with the most superficial reading, the tale contains substantial sexual significance. The symbolism of the sewing implements has already been explained in the previous chapter, but it is additionally noteworthy that the girl meets her antagonist at the liminal space of the crossroads. In this story the wolf is emblematic of a raw kind of sexuality that can only be expressed allegorically – that is, by utilising the binaries established between supposedly rational humans and the animalistic nature of beasts. This rawness is transferred into a symbolic vehicle that does not destabilise humankind's self-perception as a pinnacle of sagacity and natural superiority. Of course, carnivores are conventionally perceived as manifesting desires of the flesh, with their uncontrollable natures, ravenous appetites and violent pursuit of prey. Echoes of these associations are present even today when one remembers that a lascivious means of calling attention to a woman's more desirable attributes is known as the wolf-whistle. The *bzou*'s significant placement on the crossroads thus renders the story's message transparent: the girl has reached an important moment in her *bildung*, and she must make a choice – the path of chastity, of maidenhood, or that of sexual maturity and womanliness. She may remain childlike, innocent and inviolable, or progress towards adulthood and its connotations of experience. The crossroads seems to signify that the girl herself is at a liminal point in her development – the cusp of puberty, perhaps; the period in which a child has a degree of

freedom to engage in various experimental acts that assist in forming her/his burgeoning personality. Like the werewolf at the crossroads, the protagonist is in a state of in-betweeness, both girl and woman, and, with regards to her sexuality, she is also perpetually caught between lust and abstinence, beastlike desire and human prudence. In this version, collected via oral transcription by Achille Millien around 1885, the girl is depicted as choosing the path of needles – expressive of her nascent sexuality. This is reinforced by the reference to her unwitting consumption of the flesh and blood of her dead grandmother, a sign that she is ready to abandon childhood in favour of fulfilling another role in her family – or perhaps even community and society as a whole. By unintentionally cannibalising the matriarch of her family unit, she is participating in a ceaseless generational movement in which maidens become mothers, then grandmothers, and die in order for the cycle to continually perpetuate itself. Cannibalism has a variety of powerful significances in different cultures, but one could generalise by categorising the practice as aiming to symbolically assimilate the vitality or purpose of that which is ingested. In the case of this pubertal girl, who is beginning to experiment with her sexuality, Verdier argues that the story could be interpreted as the protagonist imbibing the fertility of mature womanhood via conquest of the older generation (1997, p. 110); her blossoming rendering the older generation infertile and redundant. This, Verdier reasons, takes place in a larger societal context in which women view each other with rivalry and competition (1997, p. 114), the young competing with the old for reproductive dominance and eventually, inevitably, replacing them. Or, as Catherine Orenstein contends, “[T]he old will be reborn in the young […] we are flesh of their flesh, blood of their blood. Children are born and come of age as grandparents die” (2002, p. 82).

As for the slow strip-tease, the immolation of clothing, and the strange and intimate bedroom cohabitation, these elements are overt in their erotic nature. The werewolf appears to stand in for a male seducer, approaching the young girl first and then setting the scene for her ‘consumption’ – both her flesh and her maidenhood, for his appetites are portrayed as twofold. One might wonder why he would still be ravenous directly after eating, but it seems that he also hungers

for something other than food. The grandmother, his initial meal, was not required to remove her clothes or cuddle up close enough to feel his fur. Her consumption was entirely due to physiological necessity. But the girl senses that something is amiss and, after politely humouring the werewolf's advances, rescinds her consent to the whole affair. She slips the *bzou*'s leash to escape to freedom – successfully evading his control and employing her own cunning to reach a place of safety.

In this reading, the tale reveals itself to be a parable of female maturation and growth; an account detailing the successful navigation of pubertal dangers. The girl actively takes charge of her destiny in making her own choices, establishes herself as the future matriarch of her family, and embarks on her journey to adulthood. In this sense the tale is constructive in normalising female sexuality, intuition and rites of passage. It provides valuable lessons for younger generations through its allegorical journey tracing the process of growing up and the mutability of that transitional period. Upon critical reflection, the reader understands that the story's representation of burgeoning sexuality warns of potential dangers, while also exploring the beneficial consequences of facing this reality – and emerging safely on the other side, wiser but nevertheless intact. Unfortunately, in Perrault's later rewriting of the tale, the now red-cloaked girl is devoured by the wolf, her consumption containing ominous allusions to sexual violence. By disempowering the heroine and marking her with a scarlet signifier, the colour of passion and sin, Perrault's narrative symbolically punishes her for 'talking to strange men' and seems to imply that her consumption comes as a result of her *own* transgression. In effect, Perrault victim-blames his own character and refutes the valuable lesson of the initial source. His tale excludes the subtlety inherent in the folktale in order to focus on the one aspect relevant to his context – the purity of young women being dependent on their relations with men. By concentrating attention on the wolf, Perrault condenses the relevant elements of the tale to coincide with patriarchal interests. Consequently, the tale is masculinised, with the reader's gaze shifting from the complexities of female agency and relationships to the story's emphasis on the sole male role and its function in dominating the female body.

It becomes evident that mature themes have the potential to be employed in insidious ways that negate female agency or emphasise male dominance. In some instances, this is not damaging in itself – not all stories in life end happily, not all actions have favourable consequences, and the fictions we create reflect this reality in order for us to work through such understandings and learn from them. Nonetheless, if thematic components such as the gratuitous use of violent plot devices, like rape or violence perpetuated by men against women, exist within a greater context of a toxic ideology of gender roles, the story will obviously be problematic in terms of its perpetuation of a harmful patriarchal system. In a cultural context that ceaselessly replicates a norm that translates to restrictive modes of being, artistic ventures are commodities branded with that norm, which remains uncontested. The cerebral products of that society grapple with their own inherent biases and either replicate them or attempt to question them in protest. By creating stories that reproduce violent or otherwise detrimental themes without critically engaging with the material or offering some form of social commentary, authors ensure that such themes existing within the larger societal context remain similarly uncontested.

With the seventeenth-century sanitisation of fairytales, libidinous themes were adjusted to reflect the morals of the rigid upper class. Scatological references and bodily functions, in general, were excised from narratives, to be replaced with oblique allusions or an implausible and very telling complete absence of corporal abjection. Take Giambattista Basile's 1634 rendition of the story we now know as "Sleeping Beauty," which he entitled "Sun, Moon, and Talia." Basile drew on oral sources collected across Italy as inspiration for his *Lo Cunto de li Cunti* (*The Tale of Tales,* or *Entertainment for Little Ones*), also known as *Il Pentamerone*, but, as the original versions of his sources are lost, the reader is left to read this work as the only accessible rendition of the stories. Basile's telling of the "Sleeping Beauty" narrative involves a married king happening upon a castle in which the beautiful Talia, who fell "dead upon the ground" after a splinter of flax was lodged under her fingernail, has been lying alone (Ashliman, 2013). The king perceptively deduces that she is in an enchanted sleep and, after trying fruitlessly to wake her, he

> beheld her charms and felt his blood course hotly through his veins. He lifted her in his arms, and carried her to a bed, where he gathered the first fruits of love. Leaving her on the bed, he returned to his own kingdom, where, in the pressing business of his realm, he for a time thought no more about this incident.
>
> (Basile 1634, cited in Ashliman, 2013)

Only after Talia has given birth to twins and awoken from her enchanted sleep, as a result of one of the infants sucking the splinter of flax out from under her fingernail, does the king remember her and introduce himself to both her and his newly-discovered family, before returning to his wife. Observing the king's suspicious behaviour, the queen compels his secretary to relate the truth about her husband's infidelity and, incensed, she sends for the illicit family with the intention of cooking and feeding the children to their father. Talia she means to burn alive, but is immolated in the fire herself, once the king discovers what has taken place. He then marries his 'mistress' and they enjoy a long life together.

Naturally, there are problematic elements to this tale that are especially evident in the gender and power dynamics amongst the characters. Asleep, Talia cannot give consent to intercourse, and thus has her agency removed. The story depicts her as subsequently being quite pleased that she has been violated, however, as she has gained "two priceless gems" (2013) and, in addition, the ability to honestly deny culpability when faced with the queen's vengeful recriminations. Nevertheless, rape as the premise for the villainess-queen's hatred is a horrifying plot device in a story intended for children. Paradoxically, too, Talia's very passivity is portrayed as her only source of power, and is itself exposed as ineffectual and shallow. Yet, despite the inherent dangers of passivity illustrated in this tale, Talia is rewarded for this 'virtue' by her marriage to the king and a happily-ever-after conclusion. This felicitous outcome is rationalised as the result of sheer 'good luck' in the proverb that culminates the tale, reinforcing the idea that the heroine could have done almost nothing and still would have triumphed:

> Those whom fortune favours
> Find good luck even in their sleep.
>
> (Basile 1634, cited in Ashliman, 2013)

Talia is juxtaposed with the king, who does as he likes without consequence thanks to his political position and privileged gender. Moreover, the inherent comparison between the two characters solidifies the desired gendered polarity between performing male and receiving female. Interestingly, this polarisation is emphasised in Perrault's 1697 variant, entitled *"La Belle au Bois Dormant"* or "The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood." Conforming to the sensibilities of the time, Perrault removes all sexual contact between the two main characters and replaces this with the now younger and unattached prince falling to his knees beside the princess's bed, his very presence breaking the spell (it was the Grimms that later introduced the chaste and now-iconic kiss). But, most tellingly, Perrault marries his protagonists only hours after their first meeting, writing that "They had but very little sleep – the princess had no occasion" (1922, p. 59). Accordingly, Perrault manages to reference sexual activity via the most discreet allusion, neatly excising this activity from the main action of the narrative and leaving a gap or silence in the text just large enough for the body to fit. This excision of normal bodily desires encourages the intended youthful audience to feel a disconnection from their own physicality, while it contributes to the shame involved in the negative reinforcement of desire. By making scant and almost secretive reference to sexuality, the act is perceived as something that is – or should be – furtive and disgraceful. Of course, the couple must be married first in order for any sexual contact to take place, which emphasises the inherent 'sinfulness' of premarital fornication whilst also exerting tight control over the body. The feelings of discomfort which are created over the morality of sexuality and desire support Perrault's intention to socialise children according to contemporary codes. Despite this, however, the author's somewhat catty moral at the end of the story attends to the impracticality of abstinence:

> [...] Yet this good advice, I fear,
> Helps us neither there nor here.
> Though philosophers may prate
> How much wiser 'tis to wait,
> Maids will be a sighing still --
> Young blood must when young blood will!
>
> (Perrault 1697, cited in Ashliman, 2013)

Unfortunately, it is the censored versions canonised by authors such as the Grimm brothers and Charles Perrault that have become accepted in the contemporary era – albeit with the now-expected happy ending mandated by continued 'Disneyfication.' Developing the trend initiated by the rigid editing of Wilhelm Grimm, overt references to sexual activity have been entirely removed, but much of the violence has been retained in the form of retributive justice (Warner, 1994, p. 39) – again reinforcing the boundaries of acceptability and the consequences of not reaching those standards. As a result of the way in which fairytales have been marketed exclusively for a youthful audience, their gravity and veracity has been diluted and they are no longer given much consideration by adults, unless revised specifically for that audience. This may be due to the fact that, by reproducing different retellings of the same limited formulas, the stories have been disempowered and rendered sterile or impotent in their ability to affect useful growth and change in readers, and are consequently perceived as too puerile for more sophisticated tastes. Even children fail to invest much long-term attentiveness to the genre, though it is interesting to note that some might return to it later in life – perhaps as a kind of symbolic return to a state of childhood.

From the late seventies, second-wave feminist writers attempted to rewrite the inherently positive thematic concerns of the initial oral narratives for an adult audience by reimagining them with some of the female-centred concerns present in the original folktales intact, thereby reclaiming these concerns and refuting the established patriarchal values that inform the commonly accepted versions of the stories told to children. One example of this feminist revisionism is Angela Carter's volume of short stories entitled *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (first published in 1979), an anthology whose aggressively subversive texts have been described as having an "active eroticism" (Makinen, 1992, p. 3) that embraces the transgressive nature of female sexuality. Carter herself described her collection as a "book of stories about fairy stories," rather than fairytales themselves (1992, p. 5), since she has rewritten the latter with an active awareness both of the established classics and their sources. All her stories have an inherent and unmistakable thread of sexuality

running boldly through them, from the bawdy observations of human frivolity in “Puss in Boots” to the passive sublimation of the vampiric Sleeping Beauty’s desire in “The Lady of the House of Love.”

Interestingly, Carter was reading fairytales in preparation for *The Bloody Chamber* concurrently with the work of the Marquis de Sade, releasing her ruminations on the latter in *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* in the same year. The link between fairytales and pornography in forming our collective idea of sexual ‘normality’ is not quite as abstract as it may seem, however. In her discussion of literary pornography, Carter claims that the construction of masculine and feminine gender differences is based on culturally-defined variables that are given the false status of universals (1979, p. 7). In effect, she argues that pornography serves as a similar cultural mirror to fairytales, since both represent certain norms or ideals, are based in fantasy, and act as representations of how the dominant culture views gender politics.

Zipes presents a similar argument about fairytales, maintaining that classical tales are a “male creation and projection” reflecting “men’s fear of women’s sexuality – and of their own as well” (1983, cited in Haase, 2000, p. 23). This demonstrates the cultural sway of media in serving as a vehicle for communicating societal values. With regards to Sade and classic fairytales, one can only imagine that Carter’s reading of each informed the other; indeed, the sexuality she depicts could be described as both deviant and occasionally bestial (including blatant references to sadomasochistic practices in the eponymous opening tale of *The Bloody Chamber*). Sarah Gamble quotes Margaret Atwood’s assertion that the latter is best read as a fictional companion to *The Sadeian Woman*, due to the fact that each expresses identical predator/prey dynamics (1997, p. 132) – dynamics which might reflect the author’s interest in power relations and the societal structures which maintain them. To better facilitate her interest in transgression, Carter’s writing abstains from prescriptiveness and moralism, leaving space for the reader to draw her/his own conclusions (Makinen, 1992, p. 6) and she therefore circumvents the didactic use of fairytales as a pedagogical tool. In her intention to destabilise the patriarchal influence integral to the genre, and thereby re-establish the latter’s domestic and personal female origins, Carter purposefully adapts work by male

authors, such as Perrault, the Grimms, and Hans Christian Andersen (Gamble, 1997, p. 130), so as to create nuanced and complex stories that ignore or utterly refute the polarised archetype of women as either passive or evil, angel or whore, and to project a femininity that can be active as well as virtuous.

For example, her retelling of Perrault's "Little Red Riding-Hood," in "The Company of Wolves," returns to the proto-feminist origins of "The Grandmother's Tale" and its folkloric opening references to old wives' tales of werewolves. Carter establishes the theme of her narrative in the second line: "The wolf is carnivore incarnate [...] once he's had a taste of flesh then nothing else will do" (Carter, 1993, p. 110), and immediately foregrounds the violence and threat of consumption inherent in subconscious associations surrounding the wolf. Even in the educational moral that concludes Perrault's "Little Red Riding-Hood," there is a strong connection between the wolf-man and sexuality. Perrault describes "mild and gentle-humour'd" wolves that "ogle and leer [...], follow[ing] young ladies as they walk the street/ Ev'n to their very houses, nay, bedside," thereby warning young girls that it is these simpering, smooth-skinned wolves that are the most dangerous of all (Perrault, 1901, p. 29). Carter plays with this notion in her heroine's encounter with a hunter who appears to fulfill the role of the archetypal male protector – harking back to the Grimms' rescuer huntsman, who pulls both Little Red Cap and her grandmother alive from the wolf's belly in a hideous parody of birth (Grimm & Grimm, 1948, p. 184). Initially, the reader of Carter's narrative is encouraged to fall back on these established tropes of the male saviour and the insipid, dependent heroine: Carter's protagonist gives the huntsman her basket, in which lies the long, sharp knife she uses for self-defence, thereby exchanging her self-sufficiency for his robust masculinity. By exploiting familiar narrative patterns, the author deliberately engages with what we recognise as the classic fairytale formula in order to draw a contrast between it and the ominous anecdotes of werewolves that introduced a darker tone to the opening sections of her plot. But, of course, the hunter *is* a werewolf, and inevitably he arrives at grandmother's house first. He makes short work of the her, and all appears to be proceeding according to the prescribed fairytale recipe.

That is, until the girl voluntarily strips off her scarlet shawl and, indeed, all her clothes. Naked, she approaches the werewolf and begins to unbutton his shirt, ignoring the lice moving in his matted hair and kissing him without coercion. She laughs when he threatens to devour her, for "she knew she was nobody's meat" (Carter, 1993, p. 118) – not for eating, in any case. In contrast to her grandmother, she is alive, fleshly; her body meant for sensation, as opposed to lifeless meat which is edible but lacks erotic substance. As Carter herself says, "if flesh plus skin equals sensuality, then flesh minus skin equals meat" (1979, p. 162) – the delights of the latter tend towards dissection and dismemberment rather than amatory exploration. So the girl literally joins the 'company of wolves' and tames the wolf-huntsman through her sexual self-expression, asserting her agency in order to establish her place both in the generational hierarchy and as his equal. At the end of the story, she is depicted as blissfully "sleep[ing] in granny's bed, between the paws of the tender wolf" (Carter, 1993, p. 118). By recognising and accepting her inherent sexual desire as a natural aspect of her selfhood, she is able to shamelessly and wholeheartedly instigate her own sexual initiation, thus ignoring the virgin/whore complex perpetuated as a conflictual model of femininity by patriarchal culture. By deliberately choosing to act, rather than to be passively acted upon, her character can be read as a subject rather than an object.

Carter's version of the tale acknowledges both the 'accepted' classic, and echoes itsfolkloric origins in its navigation of the potential dangers of sexuality – a central theme in Perrault's narrative. She also explores the concepts of growing up and finding one's place in society that were intrinsic to the folk original. Importantly, she does this in a manner which could be described as re-empowering the fairytale heroine, and providing a much needed corrective to the established male-oriented praxis within the genre.

This is not to say that all revisions of fairytales by cotemporary female authors explore female sexuality in affirmative ways, however writing under the pseudonym A. N. Roquelaure, Anne Rice's Sleeping Beauty trilogy uses the eponymous fairytale as a backdrop to a fantastical, sadomasochistic and fetishist erotic series. The series comprises *The Claiming of Sleeping Beauty*

(1983), *Beauty's Punishment* (1984) and *Beauty's Release* (1985). Recently these books have been reprinted in response to growing public interest in their subject matter, their covers proudly announcing, "If you liked *Fifty Shades of Grey*, you'll love the Sleeping Beauty trilogy." The trilogy follows Beauty's journey into bondage, discipline/domination, submission/sadism, and masochism – abbreviated as BDSM for short – and the activities described therein are fairly repetitive, but a basic outline of the three volumes is provided below.

After a century of Beauty's enchanted sleep, one prince manages to forge a path through the thorny vines and princely remains surrounding the legendary Sleeping Beauty's castle. Upon discovering her, all of fifteen years' old when she slipped into unconsciousness, he cuts her clothes off with his sword and penetrates her (on page three!). She awakens only when he kisses her at the point of his orgasm, and seems confused but not outraged by her non-consensual sexual initiation. The reader discovers that Beauty's rescuer hails from an extremely powerful kingdom that has the authority to demand a tribute of 'service' from neighbouring realms. This entails those territories giving up the young monarchs to serve as sexual slaves in the court of the so-called Pleasure Kingdom for a temporary but unspecified period, an experience which is normalised and explained as ultimately beneficial to its tributes. After waking Beauty, the Prince in Rice's narrative claims her as his own and demands her service, telling her parents that she will be "greatly enhanced in wisdom and beauty" (Rice, 2012, p. 17) through her servitude. After depriving Beauty of her clothing, the Prince and his guards depart on horseback, with her naked body slung over the Prince's shoulder. Various scenes of public humiliation occur along the journey, but the nature of Beauty's enforced servitude is only fully realised once she arrives in the Pleasure Kingdom. Here princes and princesses alike are trained to act as obsequious slaves to the court, submitting to the humiliation of public bodily examination, the performance of impossible tasks, gratuitous 'punishment,' and acting as objects of erotic desire and fulfilment – all the while remaining in a state of permanent, unquenchable sexual frustration. Each slave is ministered to by a groom, who cares for and adorns him/her, and each undergoes 'training' in order to respond positively to BDSM practices – that is,

maintain the proper level of arousal while performing assigned tasks or undergoing varying degrees of pain at the hands of the domineering Lords and Ladies. The slaves are punished (usually with vigorous spanking, although bondage, orgasm denial, and sodomy often occur) for minor infringements of 'manners,' ranging from the dropping of a hairbrush while styling a Lady's hair, to outright insubordination and disobedience. Various inventive and fetishist scenes take place, including group sex, forced homosexuality, rape, torture, and pony play – all of which are utterly customary in terms of the setting.

The first volume of the series focuses on Beauty's experience in the castle, familiarising the reader with the context of the storyline, while the following two books relay similar narratives of dominance, submission and conditioning via punishment, but in different locales. Throughout the duration of the series, Beauty and the other slaves are portrayed as craving their subservience, and even their punishment, as much as they fear both. In the third instalment, Beauty's service is prematurely ended, much to her horror and sadness, and she is forced by her parents to begin to search for a husband. After a year of pining for the Pleasure Kingdom and turning potential suitors away due to their inability to fully control her, Laurent, a former slave-turned-dominant demands her hand in marriage – to which she eagerly acquiesces. Although her first sexual experiences are rape and BDSM, Beauty is portrayed as being satisfied with her helplessness and fulfilled by her masochism. She seems to only truly exist in these moments in which she is fully and completely possessed by another. The perfect slave, it seems she will submit to any indecency or depravity, and, indeed, offer herself up for such treatment.

Rice's prose, though explicit, is lush, voluptuous and surprisingly 'clean' for erotica so profligate in graphic material. Despite refraining from outright profanity, the sheer overflow of sexuality in the books can be overwhelming for the reader. Rice explains her intention behind this strategy by claiming:

> Before these books, a lot of women read what were called "women's romances" where they had to mark the few "hot pages" in the book. I said, well, look, try this. Maybe this is what you really want, and you

> don't have to mark the hot pages because every page is hot. Every page is about sexual fulfilment. Every page is meant to give you pleasure.
>
> (Rice, 2012)

She transparently describes her motivation behind the series – to provide the kind of erotica she herself wished was available – and believes that fantasies of being forced by an attractive partner to enjoy oneself are fairly common (2012). Although some investigative literature posits that this may indeed be the case (Solot & Miller, 2007, p. 73), critics such as Sarah Lash have questioned Rice's choice in using the Sleeping Beauty tale as the basis for a story dealing so extensively with a total power exchange. She argues that the trilogy only makes explicit what is already inherent in the fairytale itself – the idea of male sexual dominance and female submission (2008, p. 67), and that Rice's narrative is less about sex than it is about power. As she succinctly states, "[Beauty's] long period of passive sleep is to be followed by another trial of passivity" (2008, p. 70). It seems, then, that, during both sleep and slavery, Beauty remains physically attractive and receptive to any demands made of her; and this inert submission in itself is perhaps the source of her desirability. Nevertheless, this is ultimately the fate chosen by Beauty herself, as the culmination of the final volume intimates.

Perhaps another reason as to why Rice chose a fairytale as the basis for her erotica is the public perception of the genre as having unrealistic elements or being set in a fantastical world. This affords the writer choosing to appropriate fairytale elements license to do the same – in this case, to create a world in which prolific, promiscuous sexual relations are engaged in without the repercussions of pregnancy or sexually-transmitted infections. The slave characters are therefore not convincing, as a result of their insulated make-believe land, their perpetual arousal, and their apparent inability to menstruate. Sterile and immutable, Beauty's body is fixed in fantasy. Reproductive faculties have been set aside in favour of sensuality; her body does not function for a biological purpose and does not show evidence of the ability to bear life. Rather, her life's purpose is physical pleasure – for herself, her partner and the reader.

While Rice's tale seems to be premised on the internalisation of a very male fantasy, it must be emphasised that she, E. L. James, author of *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011), and even Pauline Réage of the iconic French novel, *The Story of O*, are all female writers penning stories of female depravity and abasement. Amber Jamilla Musser's exploration of BDSM fiction compares the latter two novels, and she comments that *The Story of O* created immediate controversy upon its publication in 1954, sparking feminist debate over the idea of female agency and the relationship between sexual submission and patriarchy (2015, p. 122). By comparison, *Fifty Shades* has been embraced by contemporary culture, functioning as a marital aid and achieving a degree of mainstream success that has led to it being described as "mommy porn" due to the demographics of its primary fanbase (2015, p. 122). Interestingly, Musser describes how the cultural shift in attitudes towards the acceptance of such subject matter has led to a decrease in critical investigation of the motivations behind these books. She contends that critical assessment of the *Shades* series has been limited to questioning the liberation of its female protagonist and the 'normalcy' of the two main characters' intimate relationship, revealing a shift in focus from examining overarching societal structures that might contribute to the characters' (and, indeed, the author's) decisions, to whether the female protagonist is being true to herself or bowing to the influence of her partner. In effect, then, the focus has shifted to the intrapersonal sphere, the female protagonist being held accountable and wholly responsible for her actions. This ideological shift towards the responsibility of the individual is constructive, in that it acknowledges the potential of each character to effect change within their own personal reality, yet it also excludes the cultural context that presupposes (or conditions) those choices. As in the earlier analysis of Perrault's "Little Red Riding-Hood," the representation of the female character approximates victim-shaming if the consequences of her actions are destructive, for the issue is framed so as to exclude the insidious external influence of her patriarchal environment and socialisation. For this reason, the emphasis on the individual is reductive and limits critical engagement. Implicitly, the current cultural climate is ideal for BDSM-themed fiction, as the present emphasis lies on the satisfaction of the individual and their supposed sexual 'liberation'

(apparently based on the act of abandoning inhibitions), rather than on an interrogation of the societal environment that might have led to the production and consumption of these notions, and, therefore, the material itself.

Although Rice's series began over thirty years ago and thus cannot strictly be called 'contemporary,' its recent revival in a popular culture currently besotted with BDSM-themed fiction created the perfect environment for the publication of a fourth instalment in 2015, with rumours of a possible HBO television series to follow. The current fascination with this particular genre of fiction could be attributed to the continued 'pornification' of mainstream media, the products of which both mimic and propagate the media itself. The continued relevance of the trilogy and its timely expansion to a quartet exposes a cultural fascination with domination and submission, established gender roles, and power dynamics that seem at odds with contemporary ideas of gender equality. However, the books' depiction of both male and female slaves being submissive to the Lords and Ladies, ruled over by an all-dominating Queen, leads to a deeper discussion of power relations that are not restricted to gender alone. Thus, although Rice appropriates the fairytale as a basis for her fantasy Pleasure Kingdom, her work also references the structures which maintain the classist order of social stratification, as well as the continued compliance of those who appear to be disadvantaged by this system. While Beauty is depicted as manipulating the system in ways that fulfil her desires, this is always to incur additional subjugation. In one instance, for example, she deliberately creates a scene in which her disobedience is blatantly performed so that she might be banished to the Village, an environment involving even more degradation and humiliation than the court setting, and one in which she flourishes.

Although underlying sexual content has always been present in fairytales, the focus of Rice's graphic erotica is arguably not explicit sexuality, but the motivations behind it. Her series is both transgressive and not: scandalous in detail but not in content. For example, the third book culminates with a marriage proposal – a highly conventional end to an apparently controversial tale. Unable to maintain an independent life, Beauty must resort to traditional marriage to a man who

fulfils her masochistic needs outside of the entirely deviant context of the Pleasure Kingdom. Again, the Sleeping Beauty paradoxically finds personal power in her passivity, defying orthodox norms by discovering happiness in her acquiescence to masochistic acts. In an interesting echo of Basile's story, her lack of choice in her sexual initiation and subsequent servitude has resulted in a positive and empowering experience through sheer good fortune. Unlike other slaves, she is not required to undergo extensive training in order to ensure that the Lords and Ladies can do as they like without incurring resistance. In other words, the slaves must be conditioned into the powerlessness that comes so naturally to Beauty after her long period of sleep.

Despite the self-affirming intention behind Rice's focus on fleshly delights, one cannot help but interrogate the effect of appropriating a tale dealing so extensively with passivity and rewriting it in order for the heroine to *choose* that passivity. Although the trilogy's subject matter has been perceived as generally contentious, this conclusion seems shallow upon further probing. By revising the fairytale to include gratuitous sex and violence, while excluding the complications that give these themes importance and relevance, and concluding her story with a heteronormative marriage, the author appears to be exploiting the fairytale genre without fully challenging the established ideological implications inherent in classical versions. Although Beauty's subservience is a choice, her story becomes increasingly mediated by the narrating voices of her fellow male slaves and lovers, Tristan and Laurent – both of whom relate their experience in the first person, in contrast to Beauty's third-person perspective. Almost insultingly, it is Laurent's narration of the couple's satisfying union that closes the final chapter of the trilogy. As Jeana Jorgensen observes, "[F]airy tales belong to women, fairy tales are about women, and yet fairy tales disempower women by granting them superficial pleasure while denying them any real agency" (2008, p. 35). Beauty's fading voice as a result of her 'happily ever after' ending seems to support this claim.

In the final section of this paper, I outline how the content hitherto described informs the practical aspect of my MFA.

Chapter Three

"Bedtime Stories"

> The point is that we have not formed that ancient world —it has formed us. We ingested it as children whole, had its values and consciousness imprinted on our minds as cultural absolutes long before we were in fact men and women. We have taken the fairy tales of childhood with us into maturity, chewed but still lying in the stomach, as real identity.
>
> (Dworkin, 1974, pp. 32-33)

The practical portion of my MFA is based on various Eurocentric fairytales which I have used as a framing device for artworks that interrogate what I felt were the key themes of the stories, specifically those core elements that are still relevant to contemporary experience. In an attempt to visually resolve the disparity between the archaic references inherent in the fairytales and the stories' relevance to modern readers, the intention behind the artworks is that they should be able to stand independently – their literary origins present as an additional intertextual layer – rather than as overt illustrations of specific plots. Ideally, this practical research should mitigate against the didactic and patriarchal historical utilisation of classical tales, whilst attempting to reinstate the presence of the predominantly feminist-centred thematic concerns in the folkloric precursors of the tales.

The pieces themselves are realised in the medium of book arts, each a customised artist's book entailing the graphic alteration of plain notebooks. The fine ballpoint pen drawings and intrusion of paper cut-outs into the books lend the works an exploratory quality, and encourage the viewer to participate in actively co-creating new narratives whilst paging through the artworks, rather than passively consuming them as they lie static against a wall. In this way, the viewer also becomes a 'reader' and is actively involved in the co-creation of an interactive dialogue between viewer, artwork and the original story itself. The intentional absence of a pedagogical message or even a prescribed method of interaction allows for flexibility of interpretation on the part of the

viewer. By alluding to the stories only obliquely, rather than presenting illustrative or ekphrastic work with a strict adherence to narrative, each piece should appear both familiar and strange to the viewer, but may not immediately be identified as a version of a fairytale. In this sense, my work is dissimilar to that of book artists such as Su Blackwell and Justin Rowe, whose intricate and sculptural pieces adhere to the fairytale narrative and thus function merely as illustrations that visually reproduce the events of the plot without interrogating the stories themselves. Conversely, my objective is that my body of work uses the fairytale medium subversively, in order that it may be read on multiple levels – for example, as a commentary on contemporary society, as well as a layered but elusive allusion to folkloric tropes.

Despite this, I found Blackwell's work particularly useful as visual research, as she also tends to depict primarily female characters – most often young girls – in what she describes as "haunting, fragile settings, expressing the vulnerability of childhood, while also conveying a sense of childhood anxiety and wonder" (2016), a tendency that I found analogous to my own intentions. Her work utilises subtle, glowing lighting, set into three-dimensional book sculptures, and creating a warmth and dreaminess which negates the accessibility and traditional format of the story. This problematizes the appearance of the art object, transforming it from something easily recognisable into a more liminal work which does not easily fall into the proscribed categories of either sculpture or book art. By introducing interventions, such as papercut and sculpture, into the delicate paper of her found books, she intends to "use irreversible, destructive processes to reflect on the precariousness of the world we inhabit and the fragility of our life, dreams and ambitions" (2016). As many of her pieces are based on fairytale and folklore, often associated with warmth, comfort and childhood stories, this delicacy reflects a more adult perspective on the literature. Blackwell's use of glowing yellow light adds a soft ambience to her pieces – reminiscent, perhaps, of a bedside lamp in a darkened room and again referring back to a sense of childhood safety and warmth. My intention is to utilise a similar lighting palette of contrasting warmth and shadow in my final exhibition, in order for the environment to reflect a similar ambience. This decision informed the title of the

exhibition, “Bedtime Stories,” and reproduces the context in which Westernised children hear these fairytales for the first time, but also alludes to the thread of sexuality present which is present throughout the body of work. “Bedtime Stories” is thus emblematic of the real and fictional tales we tell ourselves.

Accordingly, the first works created constituted a triptych engaging with the theme of female sexuality and coming of age inherent in “The Grandmother’s Tale” and associated versions of “Little Red Riding-Hood.” Entitled *Bitten*, the triptych comprises *Carnivore Incarnate* (14 x 9 x 0.4cm), *The Path of Needles* and *The Path of Pins* (10.5 x 6.5 x 0.4cm). The werewolf narrative which underpins the series was employed as a rough framework to explore lycanthropy as a metaphor for female puberty, due to the similarities I detected between the two. For instance, puberty heralds the growth of androgenic hair as well as the commencement of menses, which is traditionally linked with the cycles of the moon. Furthermore, menstruation is associated with ‘madness,’ hysteria or inexplicable changes in mood – similar to the werewolf’s lunar-induced episodes. The triptych therefore not only investigates the development and maturation of young girls, raising questions of choice and consent, moratorium and foreclosure, but also delves into the mind of the wolf itself.

In *Carnivore Incarnate*, the viewer/reader is symbolically ‘bitten’ by a wolf’s mouth constructed from cut-outs on the cover and first few pages. Consequently, the viewer/reader is able to explore the psyche of the wolf, past the surface layer of sheer hunger and into the deeper levels of its consciousness as the ‘curse’ begins to take hold. The latter can be understood both as the curse of the werewolf, as well as the colloquial term often used to describe menstruation. Heavily influenced by Angela Carter’s short story “The Company of Wolves,” this work was intended to deal with the theme of consumption – both of meat and flesh, physical hunger and carnal lust – illustrating the baser animal instincts that supposedly contrast with human rationality. The work opens with the detritus of kills, into which sexual imagery intrudes and begins to dominate as the viewer/reader pages through the work, weaving a narrative that creates an immersive experience of the insatiable and ravenous ‘curse.’

The two smaller pieces, *The Path of Needles* and *The Path of Pins*, allude to the seamstress-lore discussed in Chapter One. Smaller and more delicate than *Carnivore Incarnate*, they visually reference the painstaking intricacy of so-called 'women's work' in their tiny but detailed drawings. The artworks represent a choice between embracing one's sexuality or remaining chaste, while recognising that either path is complicated by the social consequences of those decisions. *The Path of Needles* opens from the centre to reveal that the book is divided into a 'wolf side' and a 'girl side,' each of which appear to have been ripped from the book and physically sewn together, the pages alternating like panels. The narrative is manually unfurled from either side of the book, with each character enacting identical positions and slowly intruding into the other's space until each side culminates in union. In this instance, the wolf is symbolic of sexual desire, both on the part of the girl and of potential partners, with the shift in role of seducer and seduced being emblematic of the choice involved in consciously managing one's own sexuality, or merely becoming a victim of another's.

Conversely, *The Path of Pins* interrogates the idea of self-imposed sexual restraint. With each turn of the page, the viewer/reader discovers that the wolves prowling through the book are circling a female figure with increasing ferocity, eventually lunging at her in the centre of the book. The wolves could be interpreted as the girl's own carnal desires or those of others, and act as a meditation on the fallibility of self-control in that the efficacy of the latter is limited only to the individual. The reality is that pubescent young girls are still required to contend with the predatory intentions of the smooth-skinned wolves Perrault warned his young readers against – in addition to their own developing urges. As a triptych, the works describe a process of female maturation, and the dangers inherent in growing up female and finding oneself confronting different paths and choices. The path of needles or that of pins? How does one decide when one is on the cusp of adulthood?

This concept is further explored in *White as Snow* (15 x 10 x 1cm), an animated flipbook that is based on the "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" story. Expanding on the theme of the potential

harmfulness involved in of rigid self-restriction, the book is preoccupied with the period of child development known as 'foreclosure,' a refusal to enter the experimental phase most often associated with adolescence. The natural threshold represented by adolescence and young adulthood creates an experimental space in which individuals are able to try out various different and often rebellious experiences as a fundamental part of forming their eventual sense of selfhood. Adolescents' comparative lack of responsibility render the consequences of their actions negligible in comparison to those in adulthood. Children who foreclose upon this period of freedom are unwilling to step outside their knowledge of themselves, choosing instead to remain 'frozen' in order to preserve a single self-image or conception of their own limits. This state of arrested being then precludes new experiences, preserving the child in an almost cryogenic stasis which necessitates the maintenance of and adherence to rigid perceptions constructed earlier in childhood.

In the "Snow White" story, the cunning Queen is viewed as transgressive and is punished for her active and creative enactment of plans meant to improve her quality of life, while the passive and personality-deficient Snow White is lauded as the 'good' character, a model for young girls to emulate. As evidenced by classical fairytales, stepping outside the rigid and restricted definition of what amounts to a positive female role model is to be irrevocably tainted as 'bad.' Anne Sexton's poem "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" depicts the protagonist as a fragile doll, ever virginal, and ever trapped within the limits of her self-imposed and immobilising purity. The character is revealed to be 'good' only because of the absence of what is 'bad,' defined more by absence than presence. Sexton's poem expresses the tenuousness of the status of being 'good,' for she describes Snow White as a virgin with

> cheeks as fragile as cigarette paper,
> arms and legs made of Limoges,
> lips like Vin Du Rhone,
> rolling her china-blue doll eyes
> open and shut.
> Open to say,
> Good Day Mama,
> and shut for the thrust

> of the unicorn.
> She is unsoiled.
> She is as white as a bonefish.
>
> (1999, p. 224)

Because Snow White is rendered an inert object to be possessed by men and is rewarded with a life of luxury and status for this compliance, with her obvious foil being the shrewd Queen who is punished and marginalised, the Snow White story could be read as yet another tale extolling the virtues of the submissive, restricted woman. As Andrea Dworkin so astutely observes,

> The moral of the story is the happy ending. It tells us that happiness for a woman is to be passive, victimized, destroyed, or asleep. It tells us that happiness is for the woman who is good —inert, passive, victimized— and that a good woman is a happy woman. It tells us that the happy ending is when we are ended, when we live without our lives or not at all.
>
> (1974, p. 49)

My artwork references the commonly accepted version of the Snow White fable as a metaphor for foreclosure, and hints at the consequences involved in maintaining purity and goodness as defined by the fairytale genre itself. The piece depicts a young girl (the model used was a twelve-year-old cousin) frozen in ice. The pages animate as the viewer/reader quickly flips through the work, and the ice slowly melts away, allowing the girl to partially emerge from her entombment. She blinks at the viewer, but does not fully surface from the surrounding ice, and eventually she sinks back into stasis and immobility (incidentally, the model for the work was chosen not only for her convenient age, but also due to her own very real self-imposed foreclosure, with the work acting as a meditation on the latter).

Another comment on the dangers inherent in passivity is presented in the *Go Back to Sleep* diptych (10.5 x 6.5 x 0.4cm), which engages with the “Sleeping Beauty” narrative in a manner that attempts to destabilise the boundary between artwork and observer by drawing the latter into an active participation in the work. The pieces are intentionally very small, almost palm-sized, in order to create an intimate, bodily association and to emphasise their fragility in the hands of the

viewer/reader. The first book depicts a female subject undergoing slow shifts in her position as she sleeps. Like a voyeur, the viewer/reader can watch her in a moment of vulnerability and, defenceless, she is unable to return or even respond to this gaze. In book two, this inequality is exacerbated by the viewer/reader's active participation in paging through the collection of intimate close-ups contained therein. By leisurely perusing the girl's body, viewers/readers are implicated as voyeurs who exploit this moment of fragility to satisfy their own curiosity. Because the positions of the subject and the state of her apparel are different to those in the first book, one is led to believe that the girl's body has been moved or manipulated, while she herself remains unaware of the very presence of an onlooker or controlling agent. Together, the diptych creates a space in which to question whether an observer would take advantage of such a situation, if it resulted in little to no personal consequences. The intention is for the viewer/reader to feel involved in this power imbalance and guilty for compromising the subject's privacy – and therefore to question themselves and their motives in perusing the piece.

The triptych entitled *The Tiger's Bride* (21 x 13 x 0.6cm) makes direct reference to the Angela Carter short story of the same name, and is based primarily on quotes from the story. The narrative itself follows a young woman's personal development during her time with the Beast, who is revealed to be a tiger simulating human form. The girl allows the Beast to lick her skin away, freeing her from the limits of the human form and allowing her to assume a similarly predatory cat shape. In the triptych, the books are arranged in order of increasing personal control on the part of the girl, and, when laid out together, they speak of individual development. The first book depicts the ghosts of drawings: a girl rehearses the act of undressing but can only be seen as a shadowy hint of a figure through the pages. This disrobing becomes reality in the second book, and she leaves a pile of discarded clothing in her wake. In the final piece, she drops to her knees and becomes increasingly feral, until the viewer/reader can literally peel off her layers and reveal the tiger beneath.

The triptych draws heavily on three quotes from Carter's story:

> The tiger will never lie down with the lamb; he acknowledges no pact that is not reciprocal. The lamb must learn to run with the tigers. [...] I was so unused to my own skin that to take off all my clothes involved a kind of flaying. [...] And each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of shining hairs.
>
> (1993, pp. 64, 66, 67)

Each artwork uses a quote as a starting point for a narrative that connects and unites over the course of the triptych to explore change and the development of personal agency in the life of a young woman.

Let Down Your Hair (14 x 9 x 0.4cm) uses the cutting of female hair as an idiosyncratic metaphor for loss and moving on. I wanted to use the Rapunzel story as a framing device for an exploration of a tendency I had noticed both in myself and among female friends – that is, to dramatically alter the appearance of our hair after an emotional or traumatic event, either by dyeing it a different or unnatural colour or by cutting it off entirely. This symbolic break with the past, and a kind of commitment to what will hopefully be a new start, interested me in its prevalence in my friend group – especially, perhaps, due to the heteronormative gender mores that favour long hair as a marker of female beauty. Interestingly, the proportion of marked change in hair appearance was weighted towards girls who had recently experienced the difficult termination of a relationship, which led me to correlate physical appearance with heartbreak. Consequently, the piece refers to the Grimm's retelling of the Rapunzel story, which depicts the character's long hair being cut off entirely before she is set free by her captor, the witch. The focus of the artwork was consequently on the notion of letting go in order to progress, of sacrificing this valued personal attribute as a way of processing emotional trauma. The subject in the artwork is shown being progressively dragged by masculine hands into the picture plane, by her long hair, which she must cut in order to escape. She is left bereft, covering her eyes before lying motionless in the final few pages. Unlike the Grimm's story, this piece does not culminate on an uplifting note, however, but leaves the emotional fate of the subject more ambiguous. The viewer understands that she has experienced the loss of more than simply her hair.

Alternatively, the subject in *Someday My Prince Will Come* (14 x 9 x 0.4cm) is unable to exert similar agency in her life, preferring to remain inactive and thus not responsible for her situation. The piece came about after reading Colette Dowling's *The Cinderella Complex*, which examines the secret lack of autonomy in the apparently independent modern woman. In her research, Dowling found an unconscious desire, even in motivated, career-oriented women such as herself, to relinquish control of their lives to a male partner, due to the archaic patriarchal trends still present in the contemporary socialisation of young girls. She writes,

> It is the thesis of this book that personal, psychological dependency – the deep wish to be taken care of by others – is the chief force holding women down today. I call this 'The Cinderella Complex' – a network of largely repressed attitudes and fears that keeps women in a kind of half-light, retreating from the full use of their minds and creativity. Like Cinderella, women today are still waiting for something external to transform their lives.
>
> (1994, p. 19)

The Cinderella figure in the artwork is a cut-out paper doll, patiently waiting to be placed in an agreeable situation. The viewer/reader is able to choose her clothing and position her in different environments, while she herself stands in a hipshot, passive pose, as if waiting for her life to happen to her and seemingly unaware of her surroundings. The work also makes allusions to Sexton's "Cinderella" poem, which places the main character and her prince in a glass museum case, two dolls unaffected by time or circumstance (1999, p. 258).

The twelfth and final piece is based on the Bluebeard fable, and engages primarily with the 'staining' aspect of the narrative. In the story, the young protagonist marries a wealthy, blue-bearded suitor with a worrying history of disappearing wives. She is told she may open any room in his vast castle, save for one which is accessed with a small, golden key. Naturally, the wife's curiosity gets the better of her, and she opens the room to be horrified at the sight of the bodies of his previous wives, all creatively and enthusiastically murdered at his hand. The most recent bride drops the key in a pool of blood, and the key itself retains an incriminatory stain which is evidence of her betrayal. I was most intrigued at the idea of a stain that cannot be washed away – the 'damnable

spot' of Lady Macbeth, the mark on one's conscience or memory that indelibly persists even after repeated attempts to excise it.

Consequently, *Behind Closed Doors* (14 x 9 x 0.4cm) is a meditation on the perceived 'uncleanliness' of sexuality and the idea that each partner leaves a stain on a sexually active person. The viewer is once again implicated in a page-by-page 'seduction,' in which the reverse sides of pages are marked with graphite powder that leaves the pages of the artwork dirty and smudged with the visible evidence of every person who has leafed through the piece. By allowing the marring the formerly pristine quality of its pages, the work implicitly comments on the perceived 'dirtiness' of sexuality and the associations of impurity that follow. However, sexuality cannot be reduced to one person, and the artwork addresses this by leaving its viewers visibly stained as well. While the subject of the book is marked and stained by viewers/readers, they, too, are marked by her.

Viewed in isolation, each piece tells an allusive story of what I felt was the primary concern of a particular narrative in such a manner as to express the ideological relevance of traditional 'children's literature' to a contemporary audience. Collectively, the body of work speaks of feminine sexuality and experience through the lens of the European fairytale. The pieces are intimate in size and content, and they demand personal attention and time on the part of each viewer/reader. In investigating the maintenance of normative culture through its perpetuation in fairytale literature, it is hoped that the pieces will encourage the interrogation of media that are perceived as lacking any significance for reality, as well as revitalising adult interest in the fairytale genre.

Conclusion

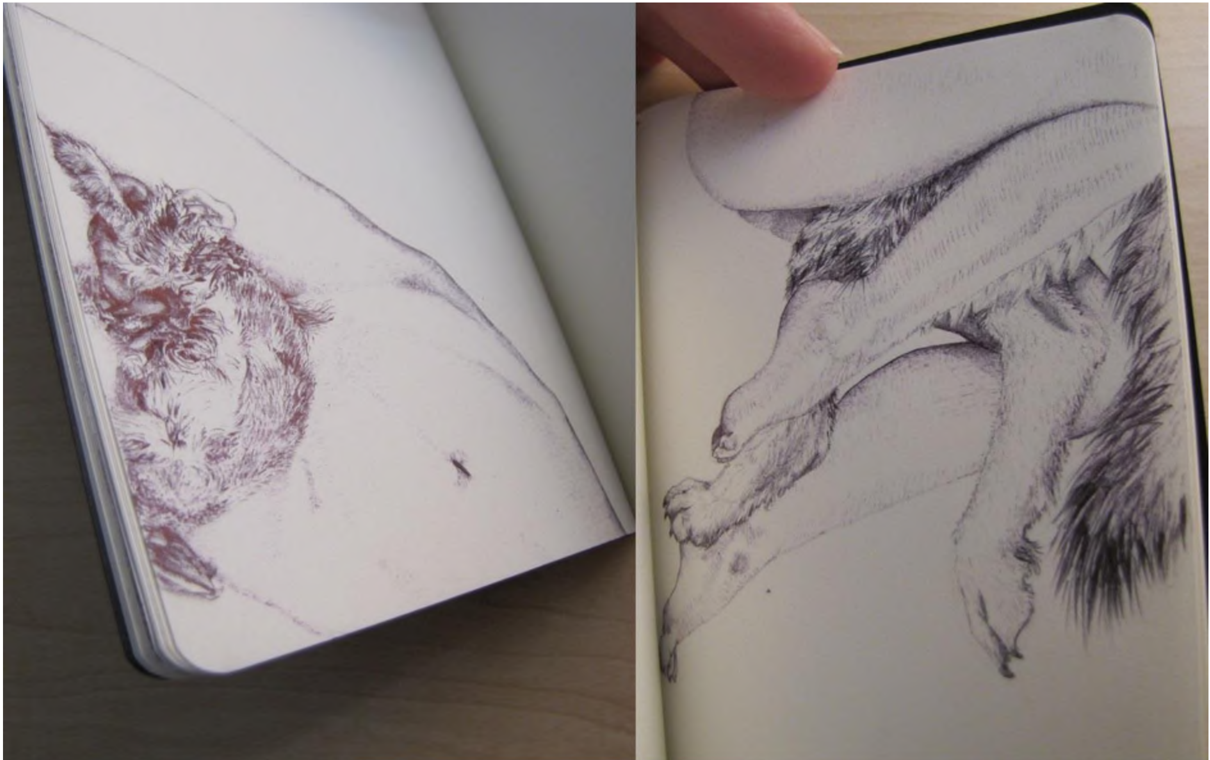
> The culture predetermines who we are, how we behave, what we are willing to know, what we are able to feel. [...] Fairy tales are the primary information of the culture. They delineate the roles, interactions, and values which are available to us. They are our childhood models ...
>
> (Dworkin, 1974, pp. 34-35)

Psychological and social attitudes are mirrored by the art we create, and this includes the apparently archaic fairytale genre. The prevailing cultural atmosphere is co-created by those that live in it and the media they produce, which contributes to the socialisation of future generations. In Chapter Two, it was speculated that this environment may be linked to the frequency of female writers penning tales of female subjugation, as they are responding to the underlying messages disseminated by their common environment. The writings and the cultural contexts that influence these writers are each unable to be read without the framework of the other, for to do so would be to reduce the subject matter to the actions of individuals solely and remove their work from any broader perspective. While the fairytale genre contains narrative elements that we might perceive to be outdated and difficult for modern readers to relate to, they contain truths pertinent to the manner in which we make sense of our world. Although often thought of as a childish medium, the critical reader may realise that the stories we enjoyed as children retain very deliberate subtexts, often carefully selected by parents in order to provide the desired influence over their offspring. One might choose the Grimms' happier version of "Little Red Riding Hood," for example, over Perrault's more doleful ending. Few contemporary parents would approve of Basile's "Sleeping Beauty," and even Hans Christian Andersen's moralistic content in "The Snow-Queen" has been subject to softening in the 2013 Disney film *Frozen.* Our perspectives on matters of gender relations, heteronormativity and conventional sexuality can be shaped by the interaction between a girl and a wolf, a peasant and a prince, or a bunch of keys and an absent husband. By turning our gaze on the art we produce – in this case, fairytales – and interrogating it from as objective a standpoint as we

can muster, we may have the ability to isolate cultural elements that might otherwise be invisible to us.

Each tale contributes a fragment of society's mirror, reflecting the stories told to us and the ones we recreate through the auspices of a familiar medium. In this way, we discover that we only echo what has come before us, cycling through the same repetitive motions like a weaver making cloth. The yarns we spin are based on our cultural capital and reflective of our inherent biases, norms, and mores; they are self-perpetuating and almost self-sustaining. We understand that the motifs they contain function as vehicles for the actual content of the story, or the underlying message which the narrative was intended to communicate. Thus, the old-fashioned spindles and spinning wheels in "Sleeping Beauty" are not ultimately relevant in our understanding of the basic message of the story, nor is the dubious veracity of witchy stepmothers, glass footwear or lupine grandmothers reflective of the stories' inherent truth and relevance.

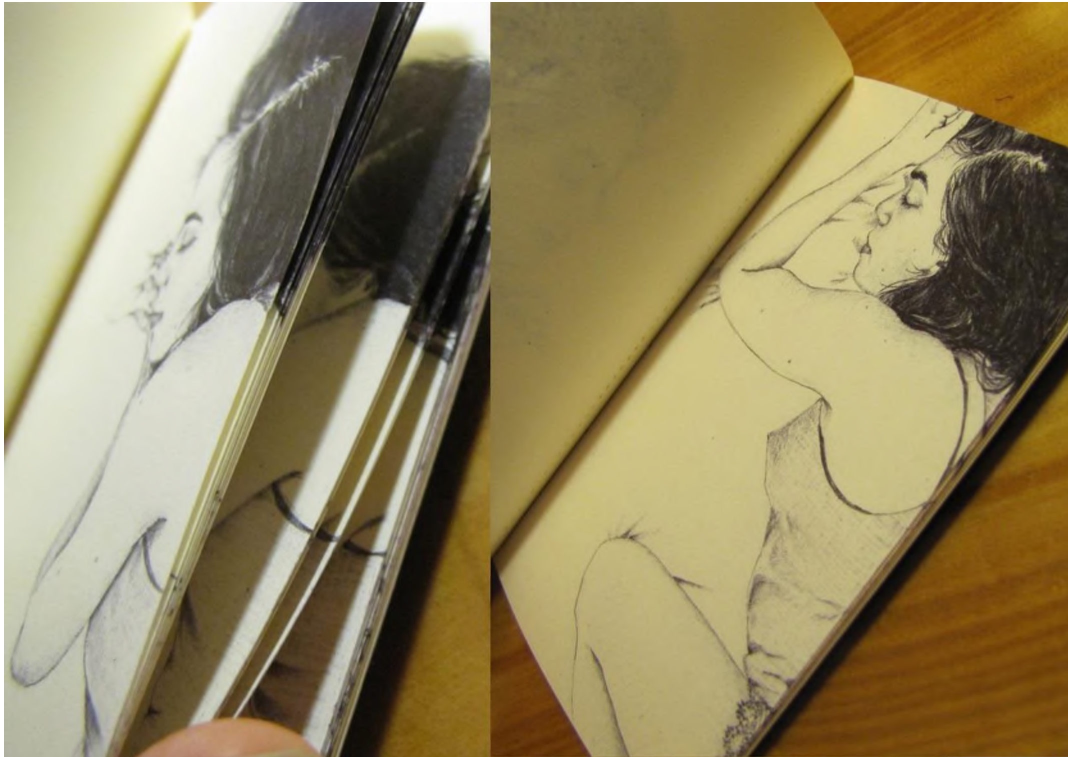
Kathleen Sawyer, 2014. *Carnivore Incarnate.* 14 x 9 x 0.4cm.

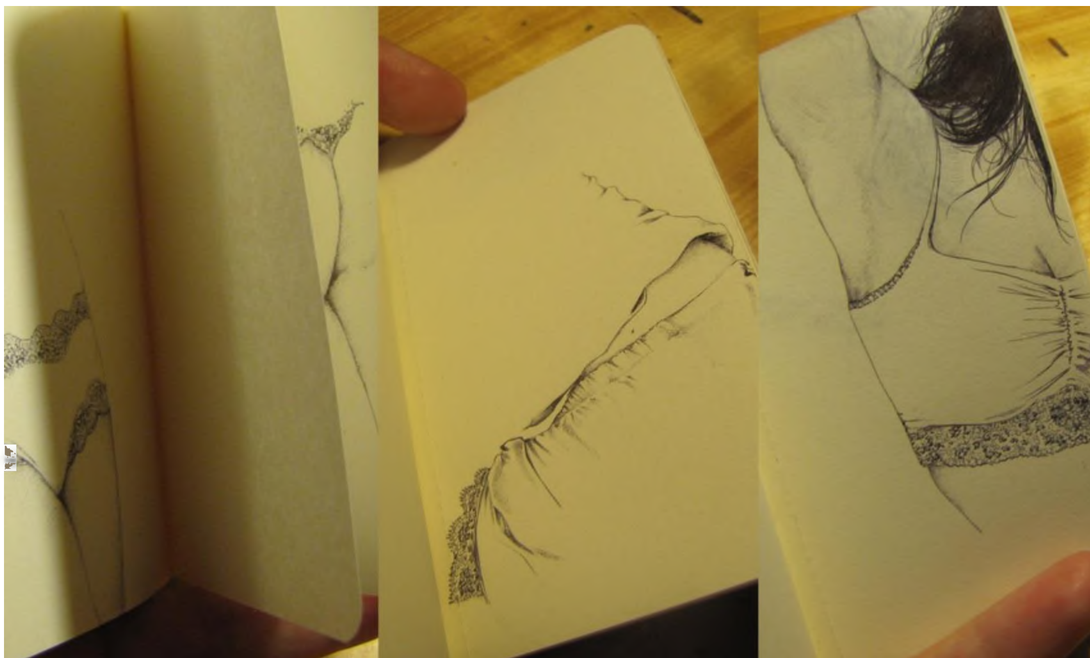


Kathleen Sawyer, 2014. *The Path of Needles.* 1.5 x 6.5 x 0.4cm.

Kathleen Sawyer, 2014. *The Path of Pins.* 1.5 x 6.5 x 0.4cm.

Kathleen Sawyer, 2016. *Go Back To Sleep.* 1.5 x 6.5 x 0.4cm.





Kathleen Sawyer, 2015. *The Tiger's Bride.* 21 x 13 x 0.6cm.

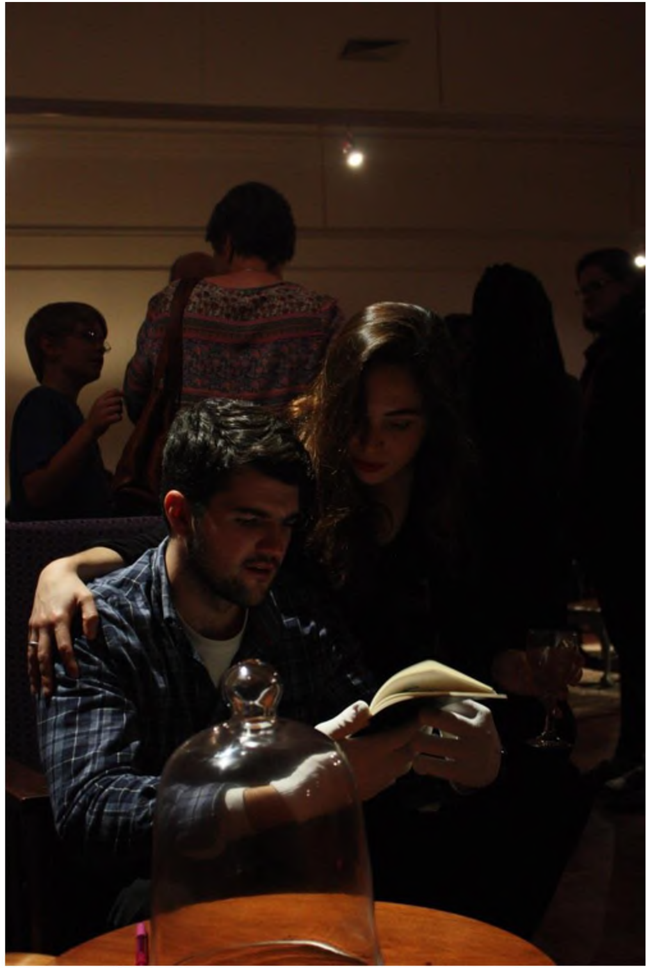
Kathleen Sawyer, 2016. *Let Down Your Hair.* 14 x 9 x 0.4cm.

Kathleen Sawyer, 2016. *Someday My Prince Will Come.* 14 x 9 x 0.4cm.

Kathleen Sawyer, 2016. *Behind Closed Doors.* 14 x 9 x 0.4cm.

Kathleen Sawyer, 2015. *White as Snow.* 15 x 10 x 1cm.

Bedtime Stories exhibition. Photography by Timothy Smith, 2016.



Bedtime Stories exhibition. Photography by Lara Salomon, 2016.

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