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In a Land Where Kingdoms Lay: Gender and Sexuality in European Fairy Tales through Analysis and Poetry

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The stories begin as fairy tales, at least for us.
They become threaded into our lives day by day
until we become one of them too.

But what will happen
when the tale twists into a nightmare
as easily as day breaks into night

and suddenly the princess is simply a mask
for the horror that lies beneath?

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Part One

An Analysis of Gender and Sexuality in European Fairy Tales

"When I looked up through the clerestories

the night sky spread into a fairy-tale wood

where I heard myself whispering a new language

that almost led me home"

(Whitaker, 27).

Introduction

Stories are the blood of life; we carefully cultivate them, deliver them to the masses, and feast on the feelings we gather from their words. Fairy tales and folktales, alongside mythology, prevail as some of the oldest genres of storytelling, prevalent through cultures around the world for millennia. When we think about fairy tales and what they mean, an image of Walt Disney princesses likely comes to mind–beautiful and sweet young maidens whisked away to "happily ever after" by their Prince Charming. But these European fairy tales have coursed through the minds of children, told fireside on long winter nights, centuries before Walt Disney came to be.

Classical European fairy tales have a long tradition of mixing humor, and sometimes horror, with lessons in morality and behavior that aim to instill in children the beliefs and expectations that their culture expects them to uphold. In her anthology of different fairy tale types, *The Classic Fairy Tales*, Maria Tatar, a leading scholar in the field of European fairy tales, writes, "'That's nothing but a fairy tale.' Dismissive phrases like this one ignore just how powerfully the world of make-believe is implicated in the making of beliefs" (Tatar, *The Classic Fairy Tales* xi). With this quote, Tatar brings to light just how richly the content of stories, even fantastical ones, are grounded in the beliefs of their place of origin. To dismiss these tales as simple stories is to ignore all the intricate ways that their lessons are consumed. So what does it mean if the lessons being taught through the subtext of these tales drastically differ depending on the gender of the listener or reader and bear the potential to manipulate feelings about sexuality?

The fairy tales that we read today in children's books or watch play out in animated Walt Disney movies have been shaped from more retellings and compiled by more storytellers than we could ever know; yet, aspects of the story, such as the gender and sexual roles of the

characters, remain steady through each retelling. Through my research of multiple different European fairy tale types, I have aimed to gather an understanding of the lessons concerning gender and sexuality that are being delivered through these tales, as well as generate my own body of poetry that works to manipulate these represented "ideals" of gender and sexuality by changing or exposing them. My research consisted in part of reading fairy tales of different types by classical European fairy tale authors of Germanic, French, Italian, Danish, and English origins. In addition to reading the classic versions of these fairy tales, I also read and watched twentieth and twenty-first-century retellings of these tales by authors and poets such as Neil Gaiman, Angela Carter, Anne Sexton, and Nikita Gill, as well as the animated film adaptations of some of these tales by Walt Disney–all with a focus on how they played with (or didn't play with) gender and sexuality tropes. Additionally, I also read critical pieces by fairy tale scholars such as Maria Tatar, Jack Zipes, and Ruth B. Bottigheimer to inform my own readings of the fairy tales I encountered.

In reading and researching different retellings of these tales through the lenses of gender and sexuality, these were the main themes that I found: the stability or mobility of heroines, aspects of masculinity and what it means, how different genders are expected to behave, and the roles of maternal or parental figures. I also kept these themes in mind as I explored different fairy tale types through poetry–working to morph these classical tales to alter their messages and to dive into the psyches of these oftentimes two-dimensional characters. With my analysis of these tales, as well as with my body of poetry, I do not aim to dismiss these classical tales but to contribute to a larger conversation surrounding their effects and implications. I also aim to expand on the tales themselves in ways that offer new retellings and open doors and possibilities into the many ways that fairy tales can be delivered and valued by those who encounter them.

Damsels in Distress and Women of Action

The "damsel in distress" may be one of the most familiar fairy tale character tropes, and although this trope does frequently play a role in classical European tales, it would be wrong to say that *all* tales follow this path for their heroine or that this trope is not an important one. Jack Zipes, a crucial presence in the realm of fairy tale scholarship, in his book, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale*, describes how the idea of innocent and helpless maidens predominantly comes from "the hands of male tellers, writers, and collectors" (Zipes, 80) and that these girls "tend to be depicted as helpless, if not passive. To be good, they must be obedient and industrious" (Zipes, 80). While many male fairy tale writers do follow this trope for their heroines, making them "obedient" and silently submissive, numerous other European fairy tales feature clever and action-oriented heroines–heroines whom I've come to refer to as "women of action."

It can be easy to overlook the importance of the antagonists and the minor characters in these tales–the fairies and godmothers who aid runaway girls, and of course, the female villains–the witches and old hags who, despite their representation, are oftentimes more complex and compelling characters than their sweet, maidenly counterparts. These multifaceted female fairy tale characters–both damsels in distress and women of action alike–all carry lessons, waiting to be told. By listening to the lessons that these centuries-old fantastical tales have to share, we can carry them with us into our own time and place, gathering lessons that have surely evolved over time as they've been passed between storytellers, writers, artists, and of course, those of us who have grown up reading and listening to them with minds yearning for an *other* world.

Hunted Damsels: Little Red Riding Hood and Snow White

During my research, two tale types that continued to interact with each other in strange and unpredictable ways were Little Red Riding Hood and Snow White. Each of these tales feature heroines who are at times, in Jack Zipes' terms, "obedient" and "industrious." Each of these fairy tale heroines is also described as being the epitome of a beautiful, young, virginal girl, and each is hunted by a male character in a forest. The girl known as "Little Red Cap" by the Germanic fairy tale collectors, the Brothers Grimm, and as "Little Red Riding Hood" by the French fairy tale writer, Charles Perrault, is sent to her grandmother's house through the woods by her mother. Before she begins her journey, Little Red Cap's mother warns her "when you're out in the woods, walk properly and don't stray from the path" (Tatar, Grimm, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 18). Little Red Cap obeys her mother's instructions until she is met by the wolf and she "had no idea what a wicked beast he was, and so she wasn't in the least afraid of him" (Tatar, Grimm, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 18). After the wolf asks her where she is going, he then suggests that Little Red Cap stray from the path to pick flowers for her grandmother. Little Red Cap, not remembering her mother's warning, listens to the wolf's suggestion, giving him time to run along and beat her to Grandmother's house.

Similarly, in Perrault's version of the tale, although never warned by her mother to not stray from the path, nor enticed by the wolf to do so, Little Red Riding Hood wanders through the woods, "gathering nuts, chasing butterflies, and picking bunches of flowers" (Tatar, Perrault, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 16) while the wolf races on to Grandmother's house. When looking at these two versions of the tale alone, Maria Tatar, in her introduction to the tale type, observes, "Both their tales make the heroine responsible for the violence inflicted on her. By speaking to

strangers (as Perrault has it) and by disobeying her mother and straying from the path (as the Grimms tell it), the girl in red courts her own downfall" (Tatar, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 10). Indeed, the "girl in red," as Tatar calls her, lacks the means to take on the wolf on her own, and is thus literally "thrown to the wolves," especially in Perrault's tale, which ends with the ending that is perhaps the most remembered–with her being eaten by the wolf. By having his tale end this way, Perrault offers us a version of a "damsel in distress," with the lovely young girl entering and exiting the tale completely defenseless against the wolf. This is, however, one of the only versions of this tale to end this way. The anonymous "The Story of Grandmother," has "the little girl" enact her own escape after the wolf tells her to join him in bed and toss all her clothes into the fire. Upon hearing that he wants to eat her, the girl exclaims how she "need[s] to go badly" (Tatar, Anonymous, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 15), and when the wolf lets her outside with a rope around her leg, she unties the rope, tying it to a plum tree instead, and runs back home on her own. The heroine of this anonymous and rarely mentioned version of the tale embodies the type of female character whom I think of as a "woman of action"–displaying an alternative to the "damsel in distress" by creating forward momentum for herself, rather than being a passive figure in her tale.

Alternatively to Perrault's damsel in distress and to the anonymous tale's woman of action, the Brothers Grimm offer a different ending for their "Little Red Cap" by having her be rescued by a "huntsman." This huntsman, upon walking by Grandmother's house and hearing loud snoring, enters, and seeing the wolf lying in Grandmother's bed, aims his musket to shoot at the wolf. The huntsman then realizes that the wolf has likely eaten Grandmother and proceeds to cut the wolf's belly open and free Little Red Cap and Grandmother. This version of the tale illustrates the epitome of a damsel in distress as she is not saved by her own wit or consumed by

the wolf but is *saved* by a male character who easily defeats the monster or villain–a task that the damsel was unable to fulfill on her own. The Grimm's tale ends with Little Red Cap, upon being rescued, thinking to herself how "'Never again will [I] stray from the path and go into the woods'" (Tatar, Grimm, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 20). By having Little Red Cap explicitly state this, the tale gives voice to one of the morals that the Grimms are aiming to deliver. This moral, however, casts the blame on Little Red Cap, the victim, rather than on the wolf, the character who should be blamed for his actions more so than the girl straying from the path to chase butterflies and pick flowers.

The huntsman who frees Little Red Cap and Grandmother isn't the only huntsman who appears in classical European fairy tales. In the Brothers Grimm's "Snow White," the queen, after hearing her mirror say that Snow White is fairer than she, sends a huntsman to kill Snow White and to bring her Snow White's lungs and liver as evidence of her death. However, when the huntsman brings Snow White into the woods "to take aim at her innocent heart, she began weeping and pleading with him…Snow White was so beautiful that the huntsman took pity on her" (Tatar, Grimm, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 96). When Snow White tells him that she will run off into the woods and never be seen again, the huntsman, grateful that he won't have to kill her, instead kills a wild boar so he will have a set of lungs and a liver to deliver to the queen. This encounter between heroine and huntsman in the woods offers a very different story for Snow White than for Little Red Riding Hood. Instead of being passively tricked into her downfall, Snow White uses her voice to momentarily become a woman of action, enacting her escape from the huntsman and the queen. Snow White's huntsman also reacts to her beauty and innocence very differently than the wolf does to Little Red Riding Hood's (although the wolf and the huntsman are two different characters in the tale, the wolf is also a male character who is literally

hunting Little Red Riding Hood). While the wolf is not swayed by the girl's beauty and wants to consume her for himself, Snow White's huntsman takes pity on her and wants to protect her–like the actual huntsman with Little Red Cap.

In the Grimms' "Snow White," we also see the queen take on the role of hunter and woman of action after realizing that the huntsman failed at his job in killing Snow White. By the queen taking on this active villainous role, she both plays into certain character tropes, while also disrupting others. A major character trope in European fairy tales is the role of the jealous woman who is most often a married woman and who becomes jealous of the beauty of a younger girl. Authors tend to limit this woman to this one role, such as Giambattista Basile does to the baroness in his version of the Snow White tale, "The Young Slave." In this Italian rendering of the Snow White tale type, the Snow White character, named Lisa, is the niece of a baron, born in secret to his sister who died in childbirth. After the young girl falls into a charmed comatose state (notably akin to the Sleeping Beauty tales), she is kept in a seven-layered crystal casket within a locked room of the baron's home. One day, when the baron goes out on a hunting party, he tells his wife to not enter the secret room (akin to the Bluebeard tales), yet "she began to feel suspicious, and impelled by jealousy and consumed by curiosity, which is woman's first attribute, took the key and went to open the room" (Tatar, Basile, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 93). With this, Basile not only places the baroness into the role of the jealous woman but also claims that all women, if given the opportunity, will fall prey to jealousy and curiosity as is their nature. While Basile never gives his baroness any other noteworthy qualities or actions, the Brothers Grimms' queen, although also driven by the jealousy trope, takes on the huntsman's job–the job he failed to do.

By taking on a man's job, the queen's character bursts with multidimensionality as she uses the challenge of killing her stepdaughter to exhibit her cunning and creativity, while simultaneously exposing the dangers of Snow White's innocence. After learning that Snow White is living with the seven dwarfs, the queen disguises herself as an old hag and knocks at Snow White's door to attempt to sell her corset laces. Snow White opens the door and falls down dead when the old hag tightens the new laces too tight. However, as fairy tale logic would have it, the dwarfs bring Snow White back to life by cutting the laces, thus causing the queen to return again as she perseveres in her quest to kill Snow White. The queen's creativity emerges stronger with a poisoned comb to sell to Snow White, who once again, without realizing that she's in danger, opens the door and is killed yet again; and yet again, the dwarfs bring her back to the world of the living. Truly a woman of action, the queen tries a third time, and this time her creativity leads to an apple that is white but with poisonous red cheeks, so when Snow White inevitably opens the door again, but this time with enough thought to question the hag, the hag can prove her good intentions by biting into the white part of the apple, leading Snow White to bite into the poisoned red part.

This multidimensionality of the queen and the flatness of Snow White have not gone unnoticed by modern fairy tale authors and poets such as Anne Sexton and Neil Gaiman, each of whom has been captivated by this enchanting tale. In Anne Sexton's poem "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," she emphasizes the dwarfs' constant warnings to Snow White to watch out for her stepmother and not to open the door; yet, each time the queen arrives, Snow White forgets the dwarfs' warnings as if she has no thoughts in her brain; "Snow White, the dumb bunny, / opened the door / and she bit into a poison apple / and fell down for the final time" (Tatar, Sexton, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 105). While Sexton's memorable poem focuses on Snow White

as a “dumb bunny,” Neil Gaiman’s short story “Snow, Glass, Apples” re-envisions the Snow White tale with a focus on the queen, even writing his story in the first person from the queen’s perspective–something rarely done is fairy tale writing. Gaiman flips his version of the tale around, casting the queen as the hero and victim to Snow White, while Snow White is cast as a monster, lurking in the woods. While he follows the plot of a first wife dying in childbirth, followed by a remarriage to another woman, and tension between the stepmother and stepdaughter, Gaiman turns the iconic beautiful young maiden of Snow White into a vampiric and sexually active girl who lies with her father before killing him.

Like her former husband, the queen is also attacked by her stepdaughter, leading her to decree that the girl’s heart be cut out–this time not out of jealousy, but because Snow White is a true monster. With her husband dead, the queen now rules on her own for a while before murmurs of Snow White seep through the castle. In Gaiman’s tale, the queen’s creativity emerges again as she soaks apples in blood, which she knows her stepdaughter to love. However, as in the other Snow White tales, no matter how cunning the queen may be, when a prince emerges as the savior to a beautiful, glass-like girl, anyone who stands in his way will fall. Thus, it’s inevitable that, even in Gaiman’s dramatically altered tale, a prince will arrive and his damsel in distress will whisper in his ear about her evil stepmother, who they will erase from their lives once and for all. But Gaiman won’t let his queen vanish that easily, for as she’s dying, she thinks to herself, “They will have my body, but my soul and my story are my own” (Tatar, Gaiman, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 116). The queen’s final thought echoes the strength in taking action for what you know to be right, even in the face of lies and deceit.

Women of Action and Learning: The Little Mermaid and Beauty

The tales of Little Red Riding Hood and Snow White offer tales of girls who are never given something to *want*–they exist in the present, unable to dream of their futures beyond hoping to survive. Conversely, the character of the little mermaid in Hans Christian Andersen's Danish tale, "The Little Mermaid," offers a very different kind of fairy tale heroine than Little Red Riding Hood and Snow White. The little mermaid discovers something that she desperately wants and is able to enact her own plan to achieve it. She lives in her father's palace with her five older sisters and her father's mother, but unlike any of them, she is drawn to the human world up above from a very young age. Her curiosity moves her to ask her grandmother about the humans and their world above, wanting to learn everything she can until she can experience it for herself. As she learns about the world above, year after year, her sisters turn fifteen, and as they do so, are allowed to rise above the surface while she must wait below in excitement to hear about everything that they saw. At last, once she turns fifteen, the little mermaid is finally allowed to venture outside of her father's aquatic domain, leading her to discover that fateful ship with the handsome young prince.

Upon seeing this ship, the little mermaid starts to move toward becoming a woman of action. All of her curiosity and excitement that had been churning for years is finally set free as she literally enters a new world, a world out of reach from her family, and one that she feels that she belongs to. The little mermaid's autonomy is short-lived, however, for no sooner does she leave her father's domain than she enters the prince's. The little mermaid's relationship with this prince is drastically different from the relationships between Snow White and Sleeping Beauty with their princes, or even between Little Red Riding Hood and her wolf. These fairy tale

heroines are subjected to the male gaze by being seen by their princes before they are able to see their princes for themselves. The little mermaid, however, sees her prince first and is given the choice to choose him for herself. Shortly after the little mermaid sees him dancing with his crew on board, a thunderstorm reaches across the ocean for his ship, leading to a devastating wreck, one in which "he would surely have drowned if the little mermaid had not come to his rescue" (Tatar, Andersen, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 288). While other fairy tale heroines are left to play the role of the damsel in distress before being rescued by their prince, the little mermaid defies that trope by not only rescuing her prince but also by risking her own death to do so. As she dives back under the waves to rescue this unknown prince, the little mermaid "darted in among the drifting beams and planks" (Tatar, Andersen, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 288) which could have crushed her. She then drags the prince back above water and swims him all the way to safety on shore.

After the little mermaid's journey to the world above the surface where she encountered the prince, her fascination with the human world shifts into a desire to *belong* to that world. The little mermaid then begins to actively move toward her dream by seeking out the Sea Witch on her own to form a bargain for a human body. In Walt Disney's 1989 animated film adaptation of Andersen's tale, this decisive moment for the little mermaid (who is named Ariel in the film), is taken away from her. Instead of Ariel having authority in seeking out the Sea Witch (who is named Ursula in the film) on her own, Ursula rather sends her eels to fetch Ariel and bring the mermaid to her. This change also erases the moments of courage that the little mermaid shows in Andersen's tale as she travels to the Sea Witch's frightening domain on her own.

The little mermaid faces another moment of deciding her fate for herself at the end of Andersen's tale, an ending and plot line that is completely erased in Disney's film: that of the

little mermaid's dream of obtaining an immortal soul. While much of Ariel's character focuses on obtaining and then keeping a human body, Andersen's little mermaid dreams of winning an immortal soul, meaning that when she dies, she can go to Heaven instead of turning to sea foam as merfolk do. The little mermaid dreams of this not only so she can be with her prince, but so that she can achieve her dream of belonging to the human world; yet in order to win an immortal soul, she must be loved by a human, a task that seems impossible without a voice. Although she rescued the prince and returns to his world in a human form, she cannot tell him that it was she who saved him, not the anonymous maid he mistook for her. After the prince marries the maid, and the little mermaid's time in her human body is up, her sisters rise above the surface, offering her a knife that they bargained with the Sea Witch for. Her sisters intend for her to use this knife on the prince in exchange for his life for her own continued life as a mermaid. However, the little mermaid is not about to start following the paths that others think she should, for she knows she must do what she feels to be right until her very last breath. The little mermaid, as her final action in life, throws the knife back into the sea. Miraculously, instead of turning to seafoam upon her death, she is greeted by a group of female spirits called "the daughters of the air," a group of girls without immortal souls, but who can earn one by doing good deeds for three hundred years. The little mermaid then bends down to kiss the forehead of the maid who is now married to the prince, once again choosing peace for herself instead of jealousy and violence and joins her new sisterhood to continue pursuing a life she can say is her own.

Similar to Andersen's little mermaid, Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont's character called Beauty, in her French tale, "Beauty and the Beast," stands out amongst European fairy tale women as one who defies gender expectations as she embarks on her own journey of self-education and discovery. Madame de Beaumont's tale begins by describing Beauty's family–

her merchant father, three older brothers, and two older sisters–with descriptions of her sisters' vanity in how they dress, spend money, and seek a marriage above their station. Beauty, however, "spent most of her time reading good books" (Tatar, de Beaumont, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 40) and "thanked all those who proposed to her, but told them that she was still too young for marriage and that she planned to keep her father company for some years to come" (Tatar, de Beaumont, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 40). By reading this text one way, Madame de Beaumont does seem to be asserting what respectable behavior for a young maid should look like by contrasting the quiet and loving Beauty against her vain and unloving sisters, but she is also giving Beauty a voice (if not a name) of her own as she asserts her independence by embarking on her own educational pursuits with books while also turning down men who she knows she doesn't want. After her father is forced into a pact with the Beast, Madame de Beaumont places Beauty into another situation where she can be read as either the exemplary maiden or as a self-driven woman as she is given the opportunity to die before the Beast in her father's place. When her father tells his children that he must die if none of his children take his place–something he is ready to do–without a second thought Beauty says, "I feel fortunate to be able to sacrifice myself for him, since I will have the pleasure of saving my father and proving my feelings of tenderness for him" (Tatar, de Beaumont, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 43). In this moment, Madame de Beaumont writes a female character who seems to be both damsel in distress and woman of action as she states her willingness to be sacrificed by the Beast but is also choosing this path that she believes to be honorable, for after all, her father did bring this fate upon them by plucking a rose from the Beast's garden for his Beauty.

Beauty continues to move in and out of the roles of damsel in distress and woman of action as she goes to the Beast's castle with her father and takes his place. Beauty is left in the

castle alone with the Beast, having to dine with him each night despite her fearfulness of him, and is never allowed to venture from the castle grounds. The relationship between Beauty and her Beast is not so simple though, for despite the fact that she is his prisoner, he tells her time and time again that the castle is *her* house, not his as he says "Your wish is your command. Here you are queen and mistress" (Tatar, de Beaumont, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 45) and "your house, for everything here is yours" (Tatar, de Beaumont, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 46). He not only essentially gives all his property and land over to her, but also makes it a point to make Beauty not only feel at home, but to also continue her education as he provides her with "a huge bookcase, a harpsichord, and various music books" (Tatar, de Beaumont, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 45). Although reading and playing music were not inconceivable activities for a young maid, for they were seen as very respectable pastimes, the reader knows that Beauty's sisters never would've dreamed of doing any such thing, thus separating Beauty from her sisters in relation to educational drives. By the end of Madame de Beaumont's tale, Beauty and her Beast seem to truly be equals as the roles of prisoner and guard, even though not very present to begin with, are erased as Beauty *chooses* to return to the Beast and marry him at the end of the tale. By choosing to marry the Beast, and by falling in love with him, Beauty thus becomes the powerful force that breaks the spell that was placed upon him, freeing him from his beast hide as he had earlier freed her from her pact with him. In the end "Beauty offered her hand to the handsome prince to help him get up" (Tatar, de Beaumont, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 49), turning the trope of the prince saving the princess on its head as she rather lifts him to his feet after saving him from his curse through her own love and will.

Madame de Beaumont's "Beauty and the Beast" has become the most well-known story of this tale type after Walt Disney based their 1991 animated film, *Beauty and the Beast*, on her

story. Madame de Beaumont's tale, however, is hardly the only one that follows the plot of a beautiful maiden marrying a beast who's turned into a prince. The Italian fairy tale writer Giovan Francesco Straparola's tale, "The Pig King," follows the story of a king and queen whose child takes the form of a pig, and although no girl wants to marry this pig prince, arranged marriages are forced as the prince lusts for a wife. After the prince sets his sights on a girl and she is forced into marrying him, she aims to take action for herself by deciding to kill him before she must lay with him, yet her act of self-defense fails as he beats her to it and tramples her to death upon their marriage bed. This disturbing chain of events unfolds again as the pig prince marries the girl's younger sister, who again devises to kill him so she won't have to lie with him and remain married, and who, like her sister, faces a horrible death by her new husband. The pig prince finally marries the third sister, the youngest, and as fairy tale tropes would have it, the most lovely, gentle, and gracious compared to her older sisters. Although her new husband murdered her sisters, Straparola has the young new bride welcome her husband to her bed with love and warmth. After a few days of their marriage, the pig prince then reveals himself to be a handsome prince and they live happily ever after.

The ending of Straparola's tale is then completely turned around in the Brothers Grimm's Beauty and the Beast tale, "The Frog King, or Iron Heinrich." In this tale, after a young princess, who is playing with a ball, loses it down a well, a frog retrieves it for her upon her promise that he can join her at her table and in her bed. The princess, with no intention of keeping her promise, agrees and then after getting her ball back, flees to her father's palace. When the frog appears at the palace, the princess's father tells her that she must keep her promise, so the frog joins her at the table, and later, enters her bedroom. Unlike other female protagonists of this tale type, this girl inflicts violence on her beast by throwing the fog against a wall instead of letting

him into her bed; it is from this violence that his curse is lifted and he turns into a prince. So what are we to learn from these vastly different Beauty and the Beast tales? That girls should always marry who they're told or risk facing violent deaths, or that it's okay to fight back and by doing so free your prince?

The Princess on Display: Sleeping Beauty

While the character of Beauty from the Beauty and the Beast tales is able to claim her prince for herself after enacting the action necessary (whether it be through love or violence) to save him, the character of Beauty from the Sleeping Beauty tales is not given nearly as much control over her life. In her introduction to the Sleeping Beauty tale type, Maria Tatar describes fairy tale women as being "frozen, immobile, and comatose" (Tatar, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 117). When looking at characters, such as Sleeping Beauty and Snow White, this description does not seem at all wrong; yet as we have seen, not *all* European fairy tale heroines fail to rise to action, such as the little mermaid, Beauty from "Beauty and the Beast," and in some cases Little Red Riding Hood. However, even though Sleeping Beauty and Snow White fall into the categories of "comatose," "immobile," and damsel in distress, their tales have important stories to tell in the realms of gender and sexuality.

One of the ways to view the Sleeping Beauty tales is through the perspective in which they are written–the male gaze. Sleeping Beauty lying in her bed as her body is viewed by the prince conveys a striking image, and perhaps one that is immediately brought to mind when one thinks of fairy tales. At this moment in the story, it is the prince who provides the necessary momentum for this scene to be deemed important. In this scene, Tatar describes how "Our gaze

is aligned with that of a prince stunned by the exquisite beauty of a woman who remains inert and puts herself on display for the enjoyment of a male viewer" (Tatar, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 118). Questions arise when looking at the scene in this way: she didn't put herself on display, did she? Was she displayed in order to be viewed and then saved, or was she placed there for some other reason we cannot know? From the very beginning of her tale, this princess holds no control over herself. First, as a baby, she is left to the whims of whatever blessings or curses the fairies thrust down on her, and then after she inevitably falls into a prophesied sleep, she is left to become the *objet petit a*, or the object of desire to any who hear whispers about the beautiful maiden left asleep and defenseless in her castle. Giambattista Basile's Sleeping Beauty tale, "Sun, Moon, and Talia," is one that is left out of many European fairy tale anthologies despite the fact that Basile was a crucial Italian writer and collector of fairy tales. Basile's Sleeping Beauty tale, unlike others, tells of the princess's rape and the successive pregnancy and birth of her twin babies, all while she remains in her enchanted sleep. This disturbing version of the tale is vastly different from Charles Perrault's "The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood," whose princess awakes not from a baby of hers (as in Basile's) or from a prince's kiss (as in the Brothers Grimm's "Briar Rose"), but from the prince simply kneeling down beside her and admiring her beauty. In this way, Perrault's tale brings the power of the male gaze to life as it is the literal gaze of the prince that holds the power to awaken the princess.

Sleeping Beauty's lack of power over her life doesn't simply end after she awakens, for in Perrault's and Basile's tales, the prince's female family members become jealous of his new beloved. In Perrault's tale, the prince's mother is not a human woman, but an ogress who wants to eat the princess and the two children she bore her son. Similarly, in Basile's tale, the king's (instead of prince's) wife sends one of her men to kill the two babies and serve them up to her

husband to eat and then goes on to attempt to do the same with the sleeping beauty. The princess's status as a damsel in distress is heightened even further in these sections that appear after she is awakened, as Tatar describes how "Sleeping Beauty stands at the center of the tale, flanked on either side by monstrous appetites that seek to possess her, either through carnal knowledge or through physical incorporation" (Tatar, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 120). Yet despite hunters and cooks setting out for her and her children's flesh, as happened with Snow White, these men are unable to go through with their violent quests when met by such forces of beauty and innocence. Thus, by doing nothing but standing still and looking pretty, the sleeping beauty is able to live another day in a world where she lives on behalf of the male gaze and is threatened by jealous women in her new lover's life.

Forgotten Fairy Tales: The Cinderella Left Behind and Bluebeard's Victims

Tales such as Snow White's and Sleeping Beauty's are not always as they seem at first sight, as is also the case for Cinderella–a tale about a girl left beaten and bruised by her family, only to be whisked away to happily ever after by her prince. That sounds quite familiar, doesn't it? The heroine of this well-known version of the Cinderella tale is, as Maria Tatar writes, "a shrinking violet by comparison with some of her folkloric ancestors, who refuse to stay at home suffering in silence and who become adept at engineering their own rescues" (Tatar, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 140-141). While the Brothers Grimm's "Cinderella" and Charles Perrault's "Cinderella" both show this one side of the tale, Cinderella also has a flip side, a side whose story is much darker than its sibling, yet one whose heroine takes hold of all the forward momentum that Cinderella lets slip through her fingers as she lets her family trap her in the role

of damsel in distress. These two fairy tale writers and collectors, the Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault, each acknowledged both sides to this tale as the Brothers Grimm also collected "Thousand Furs" (or "All-kinds-of-fur" or "Allerleirauh") and Charles Perrault wrote "Donkeyskin." In these tales, rather than the heroine finding abuse in her home at the hands of a stepmother and stepsisters, this heroine escapes home after she finds out about her father's intentions to marry her.

In these tales, the king's dying wife's last wish of him is that if he is to remarry, it must be to someone who is more beautiful and gifted than she is. After the queen dies, the king comes to realize that the only girl who is more beautiful and gifted than his wife was, is their daughter. In Perrault's "Donkeyskin," after this young girl learns of her father's intention to marry her, she takes it upon herself to ask her fairy godmother for help in escaping her father. After the plan that her godmother comes up with fails, she then helps her goddaughter run away wearing the hide of the king's magic donkey so as to disguise herself as an ugly peasant in the country for some time. The decision that these writers made to have this girl disguise herself in this specific way–by covering her body with the repellent hide of a slain animal, can be read as having a meaning that goes beyond her goal to disguise herself as a peasant.

The English historian and critic Marina Warner looks at the history of the Cinderella tale in her article, "The Wronged Daughter: Aspects of Cinderella," in which she also works to unpack the disguise of the animal-skin coat. Warner describes how "After Adam and Eve had eaten of the fruit of knowledge, they covered their nakedness and marked their fallen condition with coats of skins" (Warner, 146). The imagery Warner evokes of a naked Eve covering herself in an animal-skin coat after being exiled from Paradise looks very similar to the image of this Cinderella figure fleeing her father's palace under the safety of a similar animal-skin coat.

Warner doesn't just leave it at that though but continues her discussion of the coat to explore its correlation with the young girl's sexuality: "their father's unlawful demand has opened their eyes to the choice they must make now that they are nubile women. The animal skins they put on and the insults they bear anticipate the pollution of virginity's loss" (Warner, 148). Indeed, even though the girl bore this pelt as a way to protect her body from her father's "unlawful demand," it will ultimately lead her to a marriage nonetheless, but to a marriage that she actively seeks out and secures for herself–a marriage to a worthy prince. This will not be the only instance, though, when we see a fairy tale heroine walk a similar path to that of Eve. Other European fairy tale girls will be tempted by a forbidden fruit unique to their story and will be pushed onto paths that test their creativity and virtue as they become women of action.

The story of this Cinderella character, a version of this tale that is rarely known, is notably created solely from the girl's own ambition to avoid a life she knows she doesn't want. This type of ambition is rare for fairy tale protagonists, as this girl not only enacts a plan to escape her father but then works to find a husband who she wants, rather than simply be saved by one. In Perrault's "Donkeyskin," he, makes the narrator abundantly aware of the girl's ambition and cleverness as he says,

> I am sure that when the prince stopped at her door and saw her through the keyhole, she knew exactly what was happening. In these matters, women are so discerning and their eyes are so sharp that you can't look at them for a moment without their knowing it (Tatar, Perrault, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 160).

At this moment in the story, the girl reveals her true and lovely form to a prince, and then later on in the tale, uses a ring, slipped into a cake for the prince, to enable him to track her down. In this tale, the protagonist known as Donkeyskin not only enacts her own escape from her troubles but

also creates a plan to give the prince her ring so that she can ultimately marry him. Conversely, the character of Cinderella in the more commonly known versions of this tale, submits herself to abuse and *accidentally* leaves her little slipper behind for the prince to find so he can come to her rescue.

Much like the flip side of the Cinderella tales, the Bluebeard tales are another tale type that is often absent from anthologies of European fairy tales–for with their self-driven heroines come dark and bloody events. The Bluebeard tales present heroines who, when thrust into situations that pose danger, lurch into the role of a woman of action. In Charles Perrault's "Bluebeard," the Brothers Grimm's "Fitcher's Bird" and "The Robber Bridegroom," Joseph Jacobs' English rendering of the tale, "Mr. Fox," and Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber," a girl enters the house of a mysterious man either as his new wife or as his victim and, although warned not to, enters his room of dark secrets. In her introduction to the tale type, Maria Tatar describes how this brave and action-oriented heroine is often rather seen as being disobedient to her husband and letting her curiosity get the best of her, bringing about the possibility of her own downfall. She says, "From Perrault's time onward, the tale has been framed as a story about transgressive desire, as a text that enunciates the dire consequences of curiosity and disobedience" (Tatar, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 183). In Perrault's and Carter's versions of the tale, upon being left alone in her new husband's house for the first time, this female protagonist is given a key to everything in the house, including a key to a secret room that her husband forbids her to enter. The act of giving her the key with the order to not enter sets a test for the young wife–whether or not she can leave her curiosity aside, or if she will fall prey to her woman's instincts and enter the room. When the girl inevitably turns the key and enters, she finds the bodies of all her husband's past wives strung up amongst a mess of blood. In each of these tales

as well, after her husband promises to kill her for her transgression, the girl is rescued by her family–by her brothers in Perrault's tale, and by her mother in Carter's.

Although each girl goes against her husband's or captor's orders, not every girl is a damsel in distress, for in the Grimm's "Fitcher's Bird," when the captor tells the girl to carry an egg with her everywhere she goes (the telltale sign of her upcoming transgression), the girl is clever enough to put it somewhere safe while she wanders the house and is thus not discovered even though she entered his forbidden chamber. This girl also, upon seeing the bodies in the chamber, the bodies that belong to her sisters, puts the bodies back together and is able to escape her captor with her sisters. In "The Robber Bridegroom" and "Mr. Fox," the girl also finds a clever way to save herself, for as she is in his house after finding out his bloody secret, she has the opportunity to take evidence of his bloodlust in the form of a ring which she will later show to a mass of people as she reiterates a horrible "dream" she had the previous night. With the ring she is able to show that her story was not actually a dream, but a reality, causing the mass of people to take her seriously and kill the murderous man. It is also impossible not to talk about the presence of sexuality in these tales, for the bloody key or egg that provides evidence of the girl's disobedience beams a scarlet sign of sexual activity, whether before or during her marriage, with or not with her new husband. It is also impossible not to see this girl as akin to other curious female figures such as Eve, Pandora, and Psyche–women who defy the orders given to them by men and who are always punished for their curiosity-driven actions.

In the vast array of popular European fairy tales, all kinds of female heroines and villains alike show varying degrees of taking on the roles of damsel in distress and woman of action. While characters such as Snow White and Sleeping Beauty seem to always remain inert, the female villains of their stories come to life with creativity and action, such as Snow White's

stepmother and, as we will see later on, one of Sleeping Beauty's fairies. Other fairy tale female protagonists seem to slip in and out of different roles of power, such as Little Red Riding Hood and the girl in the Bluebeard tales, who in different versions of their stories work to reclaim their sexuality by defying orders and expectations, while in other versions, are left as figures to be saved by huntsmen or brothers. Some other fairy tale heroines reach for knowledge and a love which they choose, as does Andersen's little mermaid and Beauty from "Beauty and the Beast." Each of these iconic female figures that center in these centuries-old tales has important messages to tell us, whether of their bravery or their pain, messages that can be told over and over again.

Men and Masculinity Within Fairy Tales

As we have seen with the women of fairy tales who take on the roles of damsel in distress and woman of action, the men who appear in these fairy tales are also cast into a binary of hero (such as the trope of a "prince in shining armor") or of a villain or a monster. These male characters can slay monsters and save a princess with a kiss that will immediately lead to a marriage, or they can be the very monster that other princes slay as they take on the skins of fearful creatures such as wolves and lions, or, on the other hand, the skins of repulsive creatures such as pigs and frogs. But also like the women who can walk along the lines of gender roles, these men have the ability to take on feminine-coded behaviors and blur the lines of gender distinction, changing the way we can see and the messages we can gather from these heroic and monstrous characters.

Gender Representation as Monster or Sweet Savior: The Beast

One male fairy tale character who notoriously blurs the lines between being a charming prince and a frightening monster is the so-called Beast in the Beauty and the Beast tales. In these tales, the Beast, whether he wears the form of a lion, a tiger, a pig, or a frog, takes on the roles of both prince and monster as he begins as a feared creature, but ends in a metamorphosis into the prince that we learn he has always been. In Madame de Beaumont's "Beauty and the Beast," the Beast only appears before Beauty's father after he plucks a beautiful rose from the Beast's garden to give to his daughter. The Beast then comes bounding and roaring into the tale, an entrance that seems to greatly contrast with his first words; "'You are very ungrateful…I have saved your life by sheltering you in my castle, and you repay me by stealing my roses, which I love more than anything in the world'" (Tatar, de Beaumont, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 42). Not only are the Beast's first words to tell us how much he loves his roses, but his first words also show how *hurt* he is by the man's ungratefulness to his generous hospitality. This emotional hurt that the Beast exhibits shows that he is not just any monster, but a creature with *feelings*, something that is completely absent in other male fairy tale monsters such as Little Red Riding Hood's wolf, who is driven solely by physical urges, not emotional ones as the Beast is. This monster also greatly differs from the traditional monstrous figure since he, as previously mentioned, verbally hands over his home and all his possessions to Beauty so he can make her feel more comfortable and show her that he can be loved instead of just feared. When Madame de Beaumont's Beast hands over his possessions, he does so with feelings of compassion and love for Beauty, something that is vastly different from when, for instance, the character of Bluebeard hands over his keys to his new wife–not to show his love for her but to discreetly test her loyalty to him.

One of the final images that is conjured in Madame de Beaumont's tale is that of Beauty offering her hand to her prince right after his transformation and pulling him to his feet. This simple movement of the prince being pulled upwards by a girl seems shocking after feeling so familiar with the imagery of Snow White and Sleeping Beauty sitting up after being awakened by their prince and of Cinderella being helped to her feet by her prince after trying on her little slipper. Again, Beauty and the little mermaid follow similar character arcs, as the little mermaid also acts as a savior to her prince, pulling him up out of the water and to shore. These reversed gender roles not only work to empower the women in these moments but also to liberate the male characters from always having to fulfill the role of savior by themselves. The image of transformation that takes place at the end of this tale type is also imagined differently in Angela Carter's "The Tiger's Bride" where at the end of her story, rather than the human girl returning the male beast to his former, human state, the beast rather turns the girl into a creature like himself.

> 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. My earrings turned back to water and trickled down my shoulders; I shrugged the drops off my beautiful fur (Carter, 81).

No matter how other Beauty and the Beast tales differ from each other, they each end with both female and male main characters as human (with the exception of the anonymous Scandinavian tale *The Swan Maiden*). Angela Carter changes this traditional ending by not only having the girl metamorphose into a creature like her beast but also having that metamorphosis feel *natural* and *beautiful*. Not only does her skin return to its supposed natural and liberated state, but her earrings turn back into water under the beast's tongue. In this version of the Beauty and the Beast

tale, it is the male character's body that holds a natural form, while the female character undergoes the transformation necessary to become natural and complete.

The problems that arise in gender representation in these classic tales oftentimes can come to light when looking at the retellings of these tales and how they are changed over time. One of the most dramatic changes that Walt Disney made to Madame de Beaumont's "Beauty and the Beast" as they adapted it into an animated film is the addition of Gaston as a character. In Madame de Beaumont's tale, Beauty returns from her father's home to the Beast because she remembers him saying to her that he will die if she doesn't return, leading her to return out of love for him. In Disney's film, however, Gaston is used as a way to inflict violence upon the Beast, thus giving Beauty, or Belle as Disney names her, a clear reason to return to him and save him as soon as she does. This use of Gaston as a character also works to position the Beast as less of a villain since Gaston takes on the role of a greater and more unlikeable villain.

Although the Beast is a very masculine figure physically, he is not afraid to show a more feminine-coded side with his love of roses, openness about his feelings toward Beauty, and thoughtfulness with Beauty continuing to read and play music. The character of Gaston, on the other hand, shows both incredibly masculine physical and emotional attributes in Disney's film with his love of hunting and superiority complex toward women (especially his disapproval of educated women). In *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, a co-authored book that dives into fairy tale representation, Susan Jeffords focuses on the physical aspects of masculinity in Disney's film in the book's tenth chapter, "The Curse of Masculinity: Disney's Beauty and the Beast."

> Masculinity has been betrayed by its own cultural imagery: what men thought they were supposed to be–strong, protective, powerful, commanding–has

> somehow backfired and become their own evil curse. But whose fault is this? Presumably, men brought this curse on themselves by acting so self-centeredly and deriving pleasure from the power it gave them (Jeffords, 171).

In this passage, Jeffords is explaining how the Beast, although portrayed as a monster, actually has a very ideally masculine body. In the end, it is his body, however, not his personality, that has brought about the name "Beast," and that causes fear and assumptions about who he is. The "curse of masculinity" also seems to be poignantly felt by Gaston, whose masculinity, although attractive to all the other women in town, fails to draw the affection of the one woman whom he wants. It is also characters such as Gaston that lead us to more closely examine fairy tale villains and ask questions such as how did they become this way? Surely there must be things in Gaston's past that made him the way that he is, just like the evil queens and cruel stepmothers of other fairy tale protagonists must have layers to them that we might not see at first glance.

Sexual Expectations in a Retold Tale: Sleeping Beauty's Prince

In Angela Carter's dramatic twisting of the Sleeping Beauty tale, "The Lady of the House of Love," gender roles continue to be turned around as the female character takes on the primary role of the monster, and the male character becomes the gentle one who is in danger. In Carter's tale, this male figure sheds many of the masculine attributes that fairy tale men tend to hold, while he takes on more inherently feminine fairy tale characteristics such as beauty and innocence. In this gothic Romanian setting with its vampiric female main character, Carter introduces "a young officer in the British army, blond, blue-eyed, heavy-muscled" (Carter, 122), who "laughing…sets out on his adventure" (Carter, 122), his adventure being into the lands of

the vampires. This introductory scene to the male character resurrects images of Little Red Riding Hood, innocently venturing into the unknown wilderness, aware of the monsters lurking in the dark, but not believing that they can be hurt by those monsters, for they remain, mentally, in their sphere of youth and innocence. Carter goes on to describe how, "he has the special quality of virginity" (Carter, 122)–virginity which is a crucial part of the characters of fairy tale heroines but is never mentioned in terms of fairy tale men for it is not deemed to be important for them.

This Sleeping Beauty tale twists into more of a Beauty and the Beast tale as this male character seeks refuge in a house filled with the scent of roses, a house whose owner takes the form of a monster. This monster, however, is not a male character wearing the hide of an animal, but an alluring yet terrifying waif-like vampire Countess (this countess, who echoes the vampiric Snow White of Gaiman's tale). The potent presence of the male gaze shines prominently in this tale as it does in other Sleeping Beauty tales as he fulfills his character task of observing her and wondering how he can save her. His male gaze is altered though, as it is not one that we are immediately accustomed to, for Carter never veers away from the stark presence of his virginity.

> Since he himself is immune to shadow, due to his virginity–he does not yet know what there is to be afraid of–and due to his heroism, which makes him like the sun, he sees before him, first and foremost, an inbred, highly strung girl child, fatherless, motherless, kept in the dark too long … And though he feels unease, he cannot feel terror; so he is like the boy in the fairy tale, who does not know how to shudder (Carter, 131).

In this passage, Carter illuminates how this boy, whether aware of it or not, is trapped in his virginity while in the presence of a girl unlike any he has ever known and who holds more

experience and mystery about her than any girl should. Carter also invokes the male gaze as this boy perceives this girl as a "girl child, fatherless, motherless, kept in the dark too long." After spending the night with her in her bed, this boy begins to think of the ways that he can change her, and by changing her, save her. He thinks to himself how he will bring her away from here and into civilization where he will take her to a clinic, an eye specialist, a dentist, and a manicurist, and "We shall turn her into the lovely girl she is; I shall cure her of all these nightmares" (Carter, 134). Although, despite his best intentions in his imagination of transforming her from the monster she is into a lovely human girl, he is never given the chance to strip her of her nature and fulfill his dreams, for he finds her dead in the morning–dead and appearing human for the very first time.

Although these classic fairy tales tend to focus their perspective on their female main characters by moving the reader's eye onto the bodies of the beautiful girls, the men who play pivotal roles in these tales can offer far more complex narratives than what tends to be thought of them. As we have seen in Madame de Beaumont's tale, Beasts are not all that they appear to be on the surface for they can defy gender expectations with just as much grace as their female counterparts do. Similarly, in Carter's tale, we see that sometimes princes can stand in their beauty and virginity before a well-practiced girl, unashamed to be the softer of the two. There are also the men such as Gaston, who are absent until their tale is rewritten to include them. Other male protagonists have been essentially completely erased from fairy tale anthologies, such as the male version of Cinderella, which Maria Tatar, in her introduction to the Cinderella tales, explains have vanished from fairy tale anthologies after falling out of favor. Stories such as this–of fairy tales that have been slowly erased–bring many questions to the surface, such as why tales featuring male protagonists have been deemed unimportant or unsatisfactory? What are we

to derive from this message–that it is more acceptable for a young girl to be victimized by a parent than it would be for a young boy? The place of men and masculinity within these fairy tales is a complex one, not only for the disappearance of male protagonists but also for the strict binaries that existing fairy tale male characters are restricted by–binaries that can be manipulated and blurred in retellings of these classical tales.

Gender and Sexual Behaviors and Expectations

As I read tale upon tale during my research, one of the biggest messages that I saw woven into tales of all different types were messages concerning gender and sexual behaviors and expectations. Some of these messages lie in the descriptions that authors write about their protagonist's physical appearances and personality traits, while other messages work as exegesis either embedded in the story or as literal "morals" at the end of the story as is very common with Perrault's tales. However these messages are delivered within the fairy tales, they bring to light one of the purposes that authors intended their stories to be used for: to teach children the "correct" values they should believe and the "correct" ways they should behave. When looking at how these gender roles and expectations appear in these tales, it's important to remember and take note of the fact that as Jack Zipes describes in his book, "our notion of female protagonists in fairy tales has been greatly informed by male collectors and writers who often domesticated the heroines and made them more passive than they actually were" (Zipes, 95). Often, it's easy to forget that these tales and their characters had a long oral history before being written down or collected, usually by men, and that, as Zipes notes, these tales that we read today are written with the biases, and thus with the beliefs, of their writers and collectors. It is also because of this

history of recording fairy tales, though, that we can start to see the patterns of gender roles and expectations that were important to the origins of the tales that we have today.

One of the most crucial character tropes that we frequently see in European fairy tales is that of the beautiful and innocent maiden who embodies the submissiveness of femininity through the eyes of her author. This trope is brought to life in heroines such as Little Red Riding Hood, Snow White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and at some points Beauty from Madame de Beaumont's "Beauty and the Beast." When simply looking at the names, or rather, the lack of names, of these fairy tale girls, we can already start to see these gendered expectations form in how the reader or listener imagines these characters. Little Red Riding Hood, for instance, is a little girl, very young, very lovely, and because of her youth, very naïve to the world around her. The Red Riding Hood aspect of her name is also vitally important to the story, for there's a reason that multiple authors of this tale type give her some type of red hood, including Perrault and the Grimms (who call her Little Red Cap), for the color red, especially in Renaissance-era paintings, signifies the loss of virginity. When we realize this, this seemingly harmless tale of a girl and a wolf turns into a tale of a girl entering the woods, meeting a wolf, and never being the same again–whether she is consumed by the wolf or not, she will never be that little innocent girl again.

Other fairy tale girl's names work similarly, such as both Beauties–Beauty from "Beauty and the Beast," and Sleeping Beauty–both only called by something that is perceived by others about them. Sleeping Beauty's name takes this even further by including the fact that she is unable to take action for herself, for her defining trait aside from her physical beauty, is her immobility. Andersen's little mermaid is also only ever referred to this way, with the inclusion of "little" as in Little Red Riding Hood, signifying her youth. Similarly, Snow White, like both

Beauties, has a name that alludes to her much-loved physical appearance. Cinderella, on the other hand, has a name that works very differently by not alluding to her physical appearance, but to the position she is put into in the household–that of a girl whose work lies in the cinders. These girls are left as shallow cutouts formed of what they're expected to be, left with little, if any room to become autonomous for themselves.

The Queen Who Refused to be Frozen: Snow White's Stepmother

Fairy tale villains tend to take on very different character traits than the protagonists they stand against, and as we have seen earlier, Snow White's stepmother comes to embody everything that Snow White isn't as she is filled with magic, creativity, and driven by action to fight for what she wants (even if what she wants isn't exactly a good thing). Just because she's the villain though, doesn't mean that she's free from all of the expectations that her stepdaughter is experiencing. In Neil Gaiman's "Snow, Glass, Apples," the sexual expectations for the queen rise to the surface after her husband, the king, dies, and with Snow White living in the forest, she is alone in her castle when a prince comes to visit. In her bedroom, this prince tells her everything to do, such as "'You must neither move, nor speak. Just lie there on the stones, so cold and so fair'" (Tatar, Gaiman, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 114). Right after this encounter, Gaiman describes how the prince leaves the next morning, and in the forest finds Snow White's corpse, describing how the queen imagines that he is overtaken with lust when he sees her since Snow White is everything that he desires–a frozen girl who is only there to submit to his fantasies. In classic fairy tales, we essentially never get scenes as explicit as Gaiman writes in his Snow White tale, but what his explicitness offers us is a view into some very real sexual

expectations that lie hidden in tales such as Snow White's and for sure in tales such as Sleeping Beauty's.

The expectations and roles that are assigned to Snow White have great implications as well as she is never taught to be anything different than what she's told she is. This girl is inherently pure, a perfect beautiful virgin who is, as Lisa Appignanesi describes in her introduction to Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's book *The Madwoman in the Attic*, "pure as snow, who escapes various attempts at death, only, like Eve, to taste of the forbidden apple and find herself encased in a glass coffin" (Appignanesi, xiii). Just as we were able to draw a connection between the protagonist of the Bluebeard tales with Eve, Pandora, and Psyche, we can also see a connection between Snow White and Eve–each girls who were essentially blank slates until they reached for their fatal fruit which led them to their downfall and entrapment or exile. These girls who began their tales clothed in innocence became changed for better or for worse in the aftermath of trying to defend themselves against the monsters and the expectations that they never asked to face and were never taught to stand against. This is something we see time and time again with female fairy tale characters–the gentle girls who know no better than to follow the roles assigned to them and reach for that fruit, as well as the witches and fairies who are turned away by society and are left to become monsters because, in the end, they do not fit into the roles that are expected of them. Even a rare female fairy tale character such as Snow White's stepmother in Gaiman's tale, even though she refuses to be frozen, falls at the hands of her submissive stepdaughter.

Mutilation for Fulfillment: The Little Mermaid and Cinderella's Stepsisters

While some fairy tale characters become villains and monsters by opposing the expectations that are pushed onto them, others will do anything they can, even self-mutilation, to fit into the boxes that they either believe they should be in, or that they desperately want to be in. One of the biggest examples of this happening in European fairy tales is Hans Christian Andersen's little mermaid who wants to be human more than anything else. In Chapter Eleven, "'Where Do the Mermaids Stand?': Voice and Body in The Little Mermaid" in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, Laura Sells heavily discusses the little mermaid's transformation from mermaid to human in Andersen's tale as well as in Disney's film. Sells describes how "The Disney version … invites a reading of this film as a parable of bourgeois feminism. Ariel's ascent to the 'real world' easily becomes metonymic of women's access to the white male system" (Sells, 177). Sells carries this idea through her essay as she talks about the "muted" versus "dominant" cultures that appear in this fairy tale world where the muted one is the under-the-sea fictitious world that the little mermaid grows up in, while the dominant culture is the on land "real" world that she yearns to belong to. Another very interesting idea that Sells mentions is how she sees the seascapes and images of the under-the-sea world "resemble Georgia O'Keeffe paintings, rich with the female imagery of seashells and cave openings" (Sells, 178). By seeing the little mermaid's world as having similar imagery to Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings, Sells draws a connection between the muted under-the-sea culture and the feminine to act as a parallel to the dominant culture which she sees as containing the "white male system."

This difference between the two worlds ultimately leads to the dramatic physical transformation that the little mermaid undergoes so that she can access the male-oriented world above, the world where her prince awaits. Perhaps one of the most striking aspects of reading Andersen's tale is the pain that accompanies this transformation–a pain that is eliminated in Disney's film. Before she undergoes her transformation, the Sea Witch warns the little mermaid, saying,

> It will hurt. It will feel like a sharp sword passing through you. Everyone who sees you will say that you are the loveliest human child they have ever encountered. You will keep your graceful movements–no dancer will ever glide so lightly–but every step you take will make you feel as if you are treading on a sharp knife, enough to make your feet bleed (Tatar, Andersen, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 293).

Even after hearing the Sea Witch describe how painful it will be to have a human body, the little mermaid affirms that she wants to do this. The Sea Witch then tells her that the price that must be paid is her voice. At this, the little mermaid asks the Sea Witch "'But if you take my voice away…what will I have left?'" (Tatar, Andersen, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 294). The Sea Witch then responds, "'Your lovely figure…your graceful movements, and your expressive eyes. With all that you can easily enchant a human heart'" (Tatar, Andersen, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 294). When the Sea Witch assures the little mermaid that she doesn't need to have a voice while she's in the human world as long as she is beautiful and graceful, we can see the true values of the human world where the little mermaid longs to be–a world that doesn't care if a girl has a voice so long as she is physically perfect and attractive. Sells also talks about this tradeoff between giving up having a voice in order to gain access to a male-dominated world. Sells says that a

woman can possess only one or the other at a single time, forcing her to choose between having a voice in a suppressed world or gaining silent access to the dominant sphere.

When the little mermaid enters the human world without a voice and with a body that, although it's beautiful and human, causes her immense pain, she refuses to let her pain and suffering show but keeps her courage close as she smiles through the pain. Andersen describes how "She climbed with the prince to the tops of high mountains and, although her delicate feet began to bleed and everyone could see the blood, she just laughed and followed the prince" (Tatar, Andersen, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 296). Despite the pain that she feels with every single step she takes in this new world, the little mermaid knows that she's expected to be perfect and above such things as bleeding feet, so she chooses to laugh the blood and the pain away so that she can preserve her chance of loving and being loved by her prince. Shockingly similar images of bleeding feet and prince charming's also arise in the Brothers Grimm's "Cinderella" when Cinderella's stepsisters try to squeeze their feet into Cinderella's golden slipper. Desperate to be the one to win the prince, the first stepsister "sliced off her toe, forced her foot into the shoe, gritted her teeth, and went out to meet the prince" (Tatar, Grimm, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 152). Noticing the blood coming out of the slipper, the prince brings it to the second stepsister to try on, who then "sliced off a piece of her heel, forced her foot into the shoe, gritted her teeth, and went out to meet the prince" (Tatar, Grimm, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 152). In both of these tales, girls willingly mutilate or give up parts of their bodies so they can fit the expectations that they think they must conform to, expectations that are nearly impossible for most to achieve. Despite each of their attempts, though, Andersen's little mermaid and Cinderella's stepsisters do not win the prince in the end but rather watch as a different girl wins him with ease.

Familial Servitude: Beauty and Cinderella

The girls who win the fairy tale's prince are essentially always known for their devotion to silent servitude and keeping house–as is the expectation for girls and women in these tales (and in the cultures of these tales' origins as well). This expectation is heavily prominent in Madame de Beaumont's "Beauty and the Beast" when Beauty's family loses all their money and social status. Madame de Beaumont describes how "Beauty got up every day at four in the morning and started cleaning the house and preparing breakfast for the family" (Tatar, de Beaumont, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 40) while her two sisters "got up at ten in the morning, took walks all day long, and talked endlessly about the beautiful clothes they used to wear" (Tatar, de Beaumont, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 40). Madame de Beaumont uses examples such as this to cast Beauty in the light of a perfect maid, devoted to her role of housekeeping and cooking while her sisters are cast as being vain and ignorant to the realities surrounding them.

This contrast between Beauty and her two sisters rings remarkably similar to Cinderella and her two stepsisters–Cinderella, who, in Perrault's "Cinderella," "endured everything patiently, not daring to complain to her father" (Perrault, 46). Both Beauty and Cinderella not only submit themselves to servitude and don't complain but ask for very little as well. When Beauty's father goes into town, her sisters beg him to buy them beautiful and expensive clothes, but when their father asks Beauty what she would like from town, all she asks for is a rose–not because she wants one, but because she's afraid of appearing *too* good by asking for nothing in comparison to her sisters. Very similarly, in the Brothers Grimm's "Cinderella," when their father goes to the fair, her stepsisters ask for expensive dresses, while Cinderella, upon being asked what she wants, asks for a tree branch. For both Beauty and the Grimm's Cinderella, it is these

small things they modestly ask for that ultimately lead them to their happily ever after. For Beauty, the rose that her father plucks brings about the deal with the Beast who we will later learn is a prince. For the Grimm's Cinderella, she will plant this tree branch at her mother's grave and it will become home to a small bird who will shake down from the tree's branches the beautiful dress and slippers that will allow her to go to the ball and meet her prince.

Both Beauty and Cinderella silently submit themselves to the role of housekeeper and servant because they recognize that it is what is expected of them and that even though their sisters dress in nice dresses and go to balls, they will be rewarded for conforming to these gender roles. Indeed, in Madame de Beaumont's tale, when Beauty heroically fulfills her duty as a daughter and sacrifices herself to the Beast to save her father, an angelic woman appears to Beauty and tells her "The good deed you have done in saving your father's life will not go unrewarded" (Tatar, de Beaumont, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 44). Although the act of sacrificing herself for her father is a heroic action that Beauty chooses for herself, it is impossible not to see the pattern of these expectations surrounding servitude and sacrifice as only applying to girls and women rather than to boys and men, for we see a similar idea appear in Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" with the daughters of the air. As previously mentioned, the daughters of the air are an all-female group of spirits who, after spending three hundred years doing good deeds, win an immortal soul. By joining the daughters of the air, the little mermaid falls into her perceived place as a virtuous maid who will be rewarded for conforming to this gender expectation not by winning her prince as Beauty and Cinderella did, but by winning the thing that she truly wanted all along–an immortal soul.

Marital Expectations: Beauty and Bluebeard's Wives

These gender roles and expectations are used in part to prepare girls for marriage by instilling these behaviors in them from an early age. Whether or not they want a husband and children, it is the future that is expected of them and that they are pushed toward each day. Marriage appears at the end of nearly every one of these fairy tales, setting forth the "happily ever after" for their protagonist. In nearly all of these tales though, the future husband and wife hardly know each other before being married–reflecting a very real practice grounded in these cultures. In her introduction to the Beauty and the Beast tale type, Maria Tatar explains how "Madame de Beaumont's tale attempted to steady the fears of young women, to reconcile them to the custom of arranged marriages, and to brace them for an alliance that required them to efface their own desires and to submit to the will of a 'monster'" (Tatar, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 34). Madame de Beaumont's tale, however, does not give us what we would traditionally think of as an arranged marriage, reminding us that Madame de Beaumont is one of the very few classical female fairy tale writers.

Madame de Beaumont's heroine willingly becomes part of a deal that her father made with the Beast as she takes her father's place in the Beast's castle. In this tale, when the young girl goes to live with a seemingly terrifying man whom she doesn't know–as many arranged marriages would have it–she ends up learning about him over time and each of them warm up to and begin to love the other. In other Beauty and Beast tales, those notably written by men, the arranged marriage takes on a very different look, especially in Straparola's "The Pig King." As we've previously seen, in Straparola's tale, the marriage between the pig prince and each of the three daughters was literally arranged between the queen and the mother of the three girls. In this

tale as well, Straparola highlights how a new bride should submit to her husband on their wedding night, for as we see in his tale, the first two daughters, after refusing their husband in bed, are quickly killed. The third daughter, however, lovingly submits to her pig husband and is thus rewarded a few days later when he reveals himself to be a handsome prince.

In Angela Carter's Beauty and the Beast tale, "The Tiger's Bride," she dives into the inner workings of an arranged situation between a girl and a beast, exposing some of the sexual expectations placed on the girl. After her father loses a game of cards to "The Beast" in which his daughter is at stake, she is given to The Beast, without a say of her own, as his new bride. When the girl is brought to The Beast's palace, she tells him outright exactly what he will get from her and in what way.

> I will pull my skirt up to my waist, ready for you. But there must be a sheet over my face, to hide it; though the sheet must be laid over me so lightly that it will not choke me. So I shall be covered completely from the waist upwards, and no lights. There you can visit me once, sir, and only the once (Carter, 71).

When Carter's protagonist tells this to her new master, she walks between the lines of submitting to and disregarding sexual expectations as she does tell him how she will allow him to have sex with her, but she tells him that it will only be once, and not only that but also how exactly it will happen with detailed specifics of what she would be more comfortable with. Carter's protagonist uses her own voice in other ways in this tale as well as she navigates her new life in The Beast's palace, for she tells us at one point that "I could scarcely believe my ears. I let out a raucous guffaw; no young lady laughs like that! my old nurse used to remonstrate. But I did. And do" (Carter, 70). This girl not only uses her voice to assert how her body will be used but also uses

her voice to laugh in a way that is natural to her, despite the fact that she is told by others that it is not maidenly of her to do so.

In addition to the Beauty and the Beast tales, another tale type that heavily portrays ideas of arranged marriages are the Bluebeard tales. In this tale type, a young girl is either married to or kidnapped by a man who everyone finds to be off-putting, and while in his house, finds his bloody secret of killing all his past wives or victims. The historical and cultural origins of this tale type are so prominent in the realm of European fairy tales that Jack Zipes devoted an entire chapter of his short, seven-chapter book, *The Irresistible Fairy Tales*, to discussing this tale type with a focus on Charles Perrault. Zipes discusses how, as mentioned before, Perrault's "Bluebeard" echoes the story of Adam and Eve, as well as the story of Pandora's box–all of which are "tales about women's curiosity, indicating that they might endanger themselves if they were too curious and disobeyed an autocratic husband" (Zipes, 53). In the most famous version of this tale by Charles Perrault, "Bluebeard," as well as in Angela Carter's retelling of the story, "The Bloody Chamber," the expectation of a faithful and trusting wife rises to the forefront of this narrative.

In each of these tales, after being married to the character of Bluebeard for a short while, Bluebeard tells his wife that he must leave the house on some business and proceeds to hand over all the keys of his house to his wife. In Perrault's tale, upon handing over the keychain and telling his wife which key goes to one particular small room in the house, he tells her "Go anywhere you wish. But I absolutely forbid you to enter that little room, and if you so much as open it a crack, there will be no limit to my anger" (Tatar, Perrault, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 189). Later on in the tale, we learn that Bluebeard did not truly have business to attend to that drew him away from the house, but that he set this plan in motion as a way to test his wife's fidelity to

him. However, as we know is inevitable, the girl cannot help but use that key that he specifically showed her and open the door to the little room. In that room, she finds a bloody mess of all the mutilated bodies of his past wives, and in her shock, drops the key in the blood. The key later acts as the telltale sign of her infidelity as its bloodstain is magicked to remain.

In the Brothers Grimm's Bluebeard tale, "Fitcher's Bird," the character of Bluebeard (although not called so in this tale) gives his new victim an egg to hold in addition to the keys to the house, and tells her to carry the egg with her everywhere she goes. As Perrault's heroine drops the key, the sisters of the heroine in the Grimm's tale drop the egg in the blood within the secret room, and although the egg doesn't break, it shows the same telltale blood stain. In Margaret Atwood's short story, "Bluebeard's Egg," she focuses on the Grimm's Bluebeard tale and questions the use of the egg. Atwood's main character in this short story, Sally, is taking a night course in which she has to write a modern retelling of this Bluebeard story. As Sally is thinking about the story and what she should write, she thinks to herself about the egg, "Maybe in this story it's a symbol of virginity, and that is why the wizard requires it unbloodied. Women with dirty eggs get murdered, those with clean ones get married. But this isn't useful either. The concept is so outmoded" (Tatar, Atwood, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 223). By having her main character think about the Bluebeard tale in this way, Atwood brings light to the expectation inherent in this tale for the girl to not only be a virgin when she is married to him but to also remain faithful to him both sexually and by obeying his orders without question. By reading the blood in this tale in this way, the sexual expectations for the female characters who marry the Bluebeard character become abundantly clear as a tale about sexual and marital obedience.

The gender and sexual behaviors and expectations that fairy tale characters are expected to uphold as examples for those reading and listening to these stories do not go unnoticed, nor

the fact that they are primarily written for the girls and women in these stories as opposed to the boys and men. Although fairy tale girls such as Beauty, Cinderella, Snow White, and the little mermaid win the thing that they want the most at the end of their tale after silently suffering servitude, self-mutilation, or sacrifice, is this really the message that we want to be conveying? That the only way to win a "happily ever after" is through conforming to the gender-specific behaviors and expectations that are pushed upon you? What would happen if more fairy tale heroines laughed in the face of these expectations as Carter's heroine does? In a study conducted to examine the impacts of fairy tale princess media on children in terms of gender expression, the results, as one would expect, pointed to a danger in the continuation of stories such as these being told and read.

> Although there is nothing inherently wrong with expressing femininity or behaving in a gendered manner, stereotypical female behavior may potentially be problematic if girls believe that their opportunities in life are limited because of preconceived notions regarding gender or if they avoid the types of exploration and activities that are important to children learning about the world in order to conform to stereotypical notions about femininity (Coyne, 1921).

This quote from the study encapsulates a vital message when looking at women in fairy tales: there is nothing wrong with being feminine and expressing your gender how you wish, so long as you are not *confined* to acting a certain way because of perceived expectations and limits surrounding gender roles. All of these questions of identity are complex and do not have one answer, but perhaps through continuing to explore these classical tales and rewriting them into our own time and place, we can further question the lessons being taught and find ways to change them that can set us free in our own individual stories.

Mothers and Maternal Figures Within Fairy Tales

Although the interior depths of family dynamics do not tend to play a large role in European fairy tales, the mothers and maternal figures that are sometimes featured in these tales stand out prominently, as well as the relationships they have with those around them, such as their children and husbands. These older women span an array of traditional feminine fairy tale tropes such as being seen as jealous, vain, and cruel, or on the other hand, as gentle, elegant, and as caretakers. Depending on their characterization, they can be portrayed as an "evil queen," "cruel stepmother," or even a "fairy godmother," but no matter their role, all these maternal figures tend to hold pivotal roles in their tales by either standing in the way of or supporting the fairy tale's young heroine.

Cast into Cruel Roles: The Stepmothers of Snow White and Cinderella

Two of the most well-known mothers in the landscape of European fairy tales are the iconic evil stepmothers in the Snow White and Cinderella stories. Each of these women stands against their young and lovely stepdaughter for whom their fairy tales are named. Something that is often overlooked about Snow White and Cinderella, as well as the little mermaid, is that their biological mothers are not present in their tales, for as the authors usually tell us, they passed away before the events of the story take place. In Maria Tatar's introduction to the Snow White tale type, she states,

> Although the early versions of the Grimms' "Little Snow White" pit a biological mother against her daughter, later iterations of the tale feature a stepmother,

> reminding us that mortality rates for child-bearing women were exceptionally high in earlier eras and that their children were socially vulnerable and not necessarily protected by a father's second wife (Tatar, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 84).

By bringing attention to this, Tatar reminds us that these fairy tales are not simply whimsical stories told for entertainment, but stories grounded in the reality of the lives of the storytellers, stories that can offer hope and connections for those who hear or read these tales. Maria Tatar also comes back to this idea in her introduction to the Cinderella tale type, as she says that these tales "captured the hard facts of everyday life, staging domestic arrangements that led to the physical and sexual abuse of girls, with cruel parents and stepparents who exploit rather than protect the young … domestic violence does not belong exclusively to the 'long ago and far away'" (Tatar, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 141-142). In addition to Snow White's stepmother being a poignant parental character, Snow White herself also takes on interesting maternal characterization when she steps away from her stepmother's home and into the forest where the seven male dwarfs live without a mother. In the Grimm's "Snow White," upon Snow White waking up in the dwarfs' cottage and telling them that her stepmother wants her killed, they tell her "'If you will keep house for us, cook, make the beds, wash, sew, knit, and keep everything neat and tidy, then you can stay with us'" (Tatar, Grimm, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 97). Immediately, upon seeing this young girl, they assign her to the role of motherly caretaker, and Snow White, although we have never known her to have a positive motherly presence in her life, agrees happily without a moment's hesitation and never tries to do anything that would set her out of that role they placed her in.

The image of a young maiden submitting to the role of motherly caretaker and housekeeper without any complaint appears time and time again as Cinderella takes up this role as Snow White did, but this time through the exploitation of her stepmother. While Snow White's stepmother wants to kill her out of vanity, Cinderella's stepmother doesn't want to kill her but sees her as an opportunity to hand off her obligations as the woman of the household and force this young, motherless girl, to cook and clean in her place. As mentioned previously, Cinderella suffers under the demands of her stepmother without a single complaint, only asking for one night at the ball–something that is given to her stepsisters without any thought. It is when the ball arrives as a plot point in the story, that the figure of the "good" motherly figure enters the tale.

In the beginning of the Brothers Grimm's "Cinderella," the tale actually begins with a rare piece of dialogue from Cinderella's biological mother who can feel herself dying, and so calls her daughter over to her to tell her that she will always be with her. Cinderella's mother delivering this message to her daughter may seem like an insignificant moment in the whole of the story, but in Ruth B. Bottigheimer's journal article, "Silenced Women in the Grimms' Tales: The 'Fit' Between Fairy Tales and Society in Their Historical Context," Bottigheimer brings to light how incredible it is for women's voices to emerge in this tale. Bottigheimer describes how "powerful verbalizing women represented something Germans in general and Wilhelm Grimm in particular were not at all comfortable with in the nineteenth century" (Bottigheimer, 119). The "silenced women" in the Grimm's fairy tales are the focus of Bottigheimer's article, but she also describes the women whose voices do appear in these tales, such as Cinderella's in addition to her mother's. When, later on in the tale, Cinderella's hopes of attending the ball are all dashed away by her stepmother, Cinderella goes to a hazel tree that she planted at her mother's grave. In

this tree, she can always find a little bird (personified as being her mother's soul watching over her) who will provide her with anything she needs if she only asks for it. To ask for help from the bird in the tree, Cinderella sings "'Shake your branches, little tree, / Toss gold and silver down to me" (Tatar, Grimm, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 150). Bottigheimer brings special attention to Cinderella's song and her power over nature as she describes the "Germanic folk belief in women's inherent power over nature expressed through words. It exists in certain of these tales as an integral part of the plot and cannot be removed without gross distortion of the tale itself" (Bottigheimer, 119). In a narrative realm that Bottigheimer characterizes for its muteness, the inclusion of Cinderella's mother's voice–even if only for one line–as well as Cinderella's singing to the tree, show a crucial moment in a fairy tale when women's voices *drive* the plot forward and move the protagonist toward her happily ever after.

Magical Women: The Fairy Godmothers of Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty

In other versions of the Cinderella tale, the tree and bird as Cinderella's mother is changed into a different kind of maternal figure, that of a fairy godmother. In addition to the trope of the evil stepmother or queen, the trope of the fairy godmother is another notorious character when we think of European fairy tales. In both of Charles Perrault's Cinderella tales, "Cinderella" and "Donkeyskin," the girl seeks out the help of her godmother, who just happens to be a fairy, and who can help her overcome the situation she's in with a very creative solution. In Perrault's "Cinderella," the girl tells her fairy godmother how she wishes to go to the ball, so her godmother uses her magic to turn plants and creatures into the very things that her goddaughter needs to attend the ball, and even though it's not in their plan, to ultimately win the

prince. Similarly, in Perrault's other version of the Cinderella tale, "Donkeyskin," upon hearing that her father wants to marry her, the young girl runs to her fairy godmother to ask for help. With a very similar creativity to Perrault's other fairy godmother figure, and also very similar to the creativity we saw Snow White's stepmother use, this godmother uses her mind to conjure up the plan that the girl will follow of requesting her father to have a dress the color of each season made for her before she will marry him. This seemingly impossible task is fulfilled though, and even when the godmother tells the girl to ask for the skin of her father's much-valued gold-generating donkey, he gives it to her, ultimately leading the godmother to have to advise the girl to run away wearing the hideous donkey skin.

Perrault does not limit the prominence of fairy godmothers to his Cinderella tales though, but also has fairies play a pivotal role in his Sleeping Beauty tale, "The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood." Although these fairies are not necessarily godmothers to the new princess, the creativity with which they use their magic to help the girl in a maternal fashion rings similar to the role of Cinderella's fairy godmother. During the baby girl's christening, the seven fairies of the kingdom are invited to bestow a magical gift upon the baby, but after the seventh (the oldest) fairy bestows her curse saying that she will die of a spindle's prick, the first (the youngest) fairy recognizes that she cannot take away that curse but can alter it into being a hundred-year sleep, ending with the kiss of a prince. A very similar curse and resolution occurs in the Brothers Grimm's "Briar Rose" as well. Alternatively, in Giambattista Basile's "Sun, Moon, and Talia," it is not the magical creativity of a maternal figure who sets in motion Talia's (the sleeping beauty's) rescue, but rather one of her children who rescues her. In this Italian version of the tale, Talia does not fall into a comatose state due to the prick of a spindle, but due to a piece of flax that got stuck under her fingernail. This tale, as previously mentioned, differs vastly from its siblings as Talia does

not awaken to a kiss, but is raped, gets pregnant, and delivers twin babies all while asleep. Fairies do appear in this tale as well, as two fairies appear to take care of the twins (another example of motherly fairies) since their mother is still asleep. The fairies place the twins at their mother's breast so that they can nurse, but one of the babies, unable to find the nipple, ends up sucking on their mother's finger instead and by doing so, sucks out the piece of flax. In this way, Basile's tale turns the Sleeping Beauty tale around in many ways, but with one of the differences having the role of mother as savior switched to a child saving their mother.

Daring Matriarchs: The Little Mermaid's Grandmother and Venus

One of the most interesting older women in these classic tales, although rarely discussed, is the mother of the Sea King in Andersen's "The Little Mermaid." This figure is introduced in the very beginning of Andersen's tale as he describes how,

> The Sea King had been a widower for many years, and his aged mother kept house for him. She was a wise lady, but also very proud of her noble birth. And that's why she wore twelve oysters on her tail, while everyone else of high rank had to settle for six. In every other way she deserved great praise (Tatar, Andersen, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 283).

With this introduction to the King's mother, the reader can immediately see how she is placed into different boxes that align with the common tropes for fairy tale women–she keeps house for her son and deserves praise for everything except her pride, a pride that she shows through the many oysters on her tale. These oysters may seem rather insignificant, but Andersen brings them back into his tale on the little mermaid's fifteenth birthday as this woman helps her

granddaughter prepare to rise to the surface by fastening eight large oysters onto the little mermaid's tail as a sign of her high rank as a princess, thus more oysters than other high ranking ladies, but still, as her grandmother makes sure of, less than herself as the King's mother. In response to the eight oysters being fastened onto her tail, the little mermaid cries out in pain and wants to remove them, but her grandmother tells her, "beauty has its price" (Tatar, Andersen, *The Classic Fairy Tales* 287). At this moment, we see an elderly woman teaching her young granddaughter about gender roles–gender roles taught through lessons about their world and the relationships between beauty, status, and power.

While the fairies featured in Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty tales hold great power through not only their magic but also through their minds and status as well-respected women, not all powerful fairy tale women use their power in the same way. As we have seen, Snow White's stepmother uses her magic and her status as a queen to attempt to kill her stepdaughter, and Cinderella's stepmother abuses her power over her new stepdaughter by taking advantage of an absent father to make the young girl do all the hard housework. Another, incredibly powerful fairy tale woman who uses her power in cruel ways, is the goddess Venus, in Apuleius' "The Tale of Cupid and Psyche," which is one of seven fairy tales in Apuleius' *The Golden Ass* from the second century AD. In this tale, we can see pieces of different tale types emerge, with the most prominent being Beauty and the Beast as the story follows a young girl, Psyche, who is married to Cupid, but not knowing that her husband is Cupid, her sisters convince her into thinking he is a monster.

In the tale, problems arise when Venus, Cupid's mother, finds out about her son's marriage, and outraged, submits Psyche to a set of seemingly impossible trials so she can prove her worthiness of being Cupid's wife. Venus' trials for Psyche are very similar to those that

Cinderella's stepmother puts forth to her in the Grimm's tale. In the Grimm's "Cinderella," the stepmother tells Cinderella she must sort a bowlful of lentils out of ashes within two hours if she wants to go to the ball, which Cinderella then receives help with from a bunch of little birds. Similarly, Venus's first trial for Psyche is to sort an array of seeds until each one is in a pile with its kind, and Psyche, like Cinderella, receives the kind help of small critters–in her case, ants. After presenting the bowl of sorted lentils to her stepmother, Cinderella then must pick up *two* bowls of lentils from the ashes, and again receives help from the friendly birds. Psyche, however, is given a second trial that is vastly different from her first–to collect the golden fleece from a herd of violent sheep. A reed from a riverbank then comes to Psyche's rescue and tells her how to get the fleece safely. Again, and again, Psyche is given seemingly impossible and meaningless tasks from her mother-in-law, and again and again, she receives help from kind strangers to achieve the tasks.

The embodiment of mothers and maternal figures in characters that fit into an array of different female-oriented tropes appear in many fairy tales as deeply influential characters. Some of these loving and creative figures work as protectors to those they think of as their kin and will do anything to make sure they are safe and earn their happily ever after. Other fairy tale mother figures, however, use the power they have over their stepdaughter or daughter-in-law in abusive ways that set woman against woman. A common theme, though, that arises amongst this array of vastly different motherly figures is that many of them seem to possess an otherworldly magic, leaving us to wonder at this implication of mothers possessing a magic or a power that other characters in their stories are devoid of.

Conclusion

The worlds and cultures that birthed these fairy tales, giving them a life of their own, have long vanished into our past, leaving behind histories, art, and stories that continue to survive and evolve into new forms. The European fairy tale types explored in this body of work represent just a handful of the many fairy tales that have traveled across Europe, shifting as they've been passed from the mouths of different storytellers, into the hands of various writers, and chosen to be included or excluded, edited and revised in the anthologies of collectors. There are undoubtedly many reasons as to why these tales remain so prominent and continue to be told and rewritten time and time again–whether it be the fantastical realms of royalty and fairies in which they take place or the haunting beauty of their heroes and villains.

By looking at these tales together, as the pieces of a timeless genre, we can see the plot and character tropes that have persisted to be followed–tropes that we might realize no longer reflect the beliefs we uphold. Ruth B. Bottigheimer, in her article, describes how "Fairy tales and their plots achieve validity in their own cultures by alluding to generally held beliefs, even if these beliefs themselves are an illusion, an illusion which provides for its own survival by functioning as a paradigm for subsequent generations" (Bottigheimer, 119). When looking back at some of the gender dynamics at work in these tales, we can see how Bottigheimer's idea of beliefs as "an illusion" becomes apparent, allowing us to begin to question the messages being told to us through these illusions. Does Sleeping Beauty have to depend on a heroic prince to wake her up? Is marriage the only escape for Beauty and Cinderella from being abused at home? Are all men inherently filled with violence and a savior complex, or are they made that way

because of gender expectations? Are all older women inherently jealous of and cruel toward younger girls, or are they made that way because of how they are treated?

These questions are just some of the many that I carried with me after reading these tales and researching how folklorists explored them, allowing me to dive into analyzing how these tales interacted with each other in terms of gender and sexuality representations. These are also the questions that allowed me to consider how these tales could be translated into poetry that would target the gender and sexuality themes at play by manipulating and exposing them. After reading all of these fairy tales, both classical and retold iterations of them, I knew that by further exploring them beyond analysis, through poetry, I would be able to immerse myself and my readers into the psyches of these oftentimes impenetrable characters.

In a land where kingdoms lay is a land ruled over by patriarchal structures–by kingdoms filled with hunted damsels in distress and silenced women, with princes who wear masks that make them seem charming and strong until the marriage ceremony is over. But in a land where kingdoms lay, there are also girls who form sisterhoods to last a lifetime, daring matriarchs who defy gender expectations, and beasts who will rest their heads in your lap as you read aloud to them. With this body of analysis and poetry surrounding gender and sexuality in European fairy tales, I hope to bring this make-believe realm of stories closer to the hearts of anyone who wishes to challenge their beliefs.

Part Two

Exploring Fairy Tales through Poetry

"Each new telling recharges the narrative,

making it crackle and hiss with cultural energy"

(Tatar, *The Classic Fairy Tales* xiii).

Note: The footnotes show sources of information and inspiration in correspondence with the poems.

Little Red Riding Hood

The Riding Hood They Want You to Know

Her mother sent her into the wood,
so into the wood she went.
With a basket in hand
and her hood pulled tight,
beaming scarlet amongst the leaves,
she was unaware that she wasn't alone.

He watched her from afar,
this lovely girl straying from the path to collect
daisies & clovers, nuts & seeds,
chasing butterflies & fairies[1]
as the hood that her grandmother made for her
slipped away for only him to see.

Not knowing he was there, that wolf in the woods,
she didn't know how she appeared to him–
how he imagined pulling
her hood from her back,
and her bodice, her dress, her chemise
following close behind.

She didn't know that he dreamt of how she would feel–
this girl fresh as the rubiest apple upon a bough,
with skin never grazed,
a heart never hardened,
she had yet to know
how deeply he desired to know her taste.

Red Riding Hood laughed & danced under green leaves
with butterfly wings strung on her back,
a beacon drawing the wolf to her–
she never did see him coming
until he crept behind her
to ask where she was going.

[1] Charles Perrault, "Little Red Riding Hood" in *The Classic Fairy Tales*

The Riding Hood They Keep From You

She had heard stories, as all girls have,
whispered by their mothers,
hushed by their fathers,
of the girls who go missing,
the girls who knew too little
when they were met by the wolves in the woods.

When her turn had come
to venture through the forest
she entered prepared with the knowledge of what she wanted.[2]
With his eyes on her as she tread the path,
she kept her pace steady, her breathing even
as she heard him racing, hidden, in the wood alongside her.

When she arrived at Granny's where the door was ajar
she did not tremble or take a step back
for curled upon the sheets of Granny's bed
lay her wolf from the woods, jaws dripping red,
eyes reflecting firelight, he watched her to see
what she would do first.

He expects me to scream, to run away in tears
like all the other girls he has tracked
through the years. No.
With only a slight pang for Granny
who never did learn to stand up to the wolves,
the girl peeled off her clothes before crawling into bed.

With the moon shining bright over Granny's home
and no one to know of the deed that was done,
Riding Hood lay in the warmth with her wolf
watching the remnants of her hood turn to ash
as she listened to the baying of the wolves outside–
the pack she now called her own.[3]

---

[2] Nikita Gill, "Girls of the Wild" in *Wild Embers*
[3] Angela Carter, "The Company of Wolves" in *The Bloody Chamber*

Snow White

I. Snow White, Snow Child

I and my body
were someone else's
idea.

My creator, my father,
a king of the land,
wished for me to be

white as the snow
that fell quiet
through the forest,

red as the speckled blood
which ran thick
from his kill,

& black as the velvet
that endlessly seeps
between the stars.

I was sired by his desire,
wrought in winter's womb,
& birthed on the glass of a frozen world.[4]

He made me cold as the kingdom
he so leisurely ruled,
a girl nothing like

the queen he was bound to.
She saw me and made me prey
to her every belief,

hunting me 'till
I became the monster
they always believed me to be.

[4] Angela Carter, "The Snow Child" in *The Bloody Chamber*

II. Queen, Mother

Years younger than us, still a mere child,
stood the girl he lusted for
as he forgot about me.

He took the snow child,
atop the frozen glass of the world
he created her from.

I watched as the ice that made up their bed
cracked & fissured with each thrust
he took into her still body.

Her skin must've been cold as the ice,
her eyes, doll blue,[5] fluttering open and shut,
and her mouth, blood-red, slipping into an 'o'.

Her hands lay at her side, legs so still–
frozen he preferred her
so frozen he would have her.[6]

A spell of my own, I drew from my heart,
oozing blood and menace, surging with devotion,
I plucked an apple & painted it red.

The snow child never could've concocted
what I so crafted among the trees–
a gift so sweet for when he's finished with her

would finish *her* off,
when she bites into what I made,
falling like an icicle

onto a blanket of snow.
Their glass bed will become her casket,
returning the king to the one true woman of his thawing heart.

---

[5] Anne Sexton, "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" in *The Classic Fairy Tales*
[6] Neil Gaiman, "Snow, Glass, Apples" in *The Classic Fairy Tales*

III. Prince Shining Bright

He rode into the wood that lay between kingdoms
high on his horse, sword in his belt,
unafraid of what lurked in the underbrush.

He never listened to his nursemaid in his boyhood,
with her tales of fairies and wolves in the woods
or else he might've remembered

to be afraid upon entering that night.
For if had listened to Old Nan's tales
he would've turned heel when he saw her there.

She shimmered in her casket,
drawing him to her light,
innocently alluring, how could she hurt him?

Dismounting his horse, who knew a bit better
& fled when given the chance,
he stepped onto the ice in hope of seeing

his desires turn to flesh.
He swept a gloved hand across the casket,
revealing snow-white skin framed by nightshade hair.

With no eyes on him or shame to swallow
he lifted the crystal lid, slid his hand behind her head,
drawing her to him, he kissed her cold lips.

The child came to life at the spark of his touch
and opened her mouth to draw him in,
biting and sucking until she had fed[7]

on all the blood that remained in him
& her lips & her cheeks
burned rosy red.

---

[7] Neil Gaiman, "Snow, Glass, Apples" in *The Classic Fairy Tales*

The Little Mermaid

They Say I'm the Mermaid Who Dreamt the Most

I

I've learned that the stories usually begin by saying
"Once upon a time, in a land far away,"
yet how am I to begin my tale in this way
when I am not from that far away land,
but I dream of and search for it every day?

The truth is that mine cannot be a tale
of a heroine who stumbles into a world of magic,
being forever and irreversibly changed
by what she saw–my world is the one they call
"magic," "fairyland," and "make-believe."

Crustaceans peep out from under my bed
and luminous algae glow overhead.
The saltwater, so deceptively clear, catches me dreaming
it is the sky all around me, not the ocean
I have known my whole fourteen years of life.

I am not like the girls who I read about
in the pages of books that have fallen
from the world up above down into my hands.
I will not stumble upon that other world–
I will come crashing into it overflowing with hope and desire.

Unlike them, I am not confined to a tower, an attic,
or a cottage in the woods–I have the entire width
and the lowest depth of this ocean filled with

all I have ever known to call home,
and yet…I dream of more.

My sisters live in a world of love
with mermen whom my father embraces
as his own. I hear their laughter
and see their peace echoing across the waves
cast from their new lives as brides and mothers,
fulfilling every wish they ever dreamt to conceive.

Yet no matter how many underwater balls
and feasts my father holds in my name, no matter
all the mermen and gleaming sapphires that are pushed
before me, I cannot turn my eyes from what I know
in the depths of my heart waits for me above the surface

where
I
long
to
be.

II

My sisters and I are six in all,[8] each birthed a year apart
by our now long gone mother, the Queen of the Sea.
I never knew her for she was swept
away until she was nothing but seafoam–
everyone says, even then, she dazzled the most.

[8] Hans Christian Andersen, "The Little Mermaid" in *The Classic Fairy Tales*

Sometimes I remember that she's still here,
churning amongst the waters where we swim,
forever a part of this realm we call home–
perhaps this loss is the only thing I can share
with the girls in the books that have drifted down to me.

Those in our kingdom shrink from the surface
they do not care to know, yet there it remains,
a beckoning presence, whose ships,
bones, and trinkets drift down to us,
where we shy from them. But not I, for you see,

they call to me, just as the girls who were drawn
into the woods that I have never seen,
I am drawn to them, over and over again.
From the dark shadows of fallen ships that loom
overhead, books have fallen down to me,

their pages filled with those whom I love,
the ones I dream of and tell no one about.
My sisters will never know how I long to feel
Cinderella's golden hair and Snow White's silken skin.
How I wish my lips could be the ones to awaken

Sleeping Beauty from her spell and how I see
myself dancing with Beauty through the night.
But these girls are just images conjured up
by the names of the men scrawled
on the covers of the books that rest in my hands.

My true love is up there, in the world where beauty lies,
yet I must wait like my sisters 'till fifteen years of age.[9]
Each evening on their birthday they rise to the surface
and each year they came back swearing
to stay close to Father's kingdom for the rest of their days.

But when my turn came at last, I rose to the surface
with arms extended, finished with waiting
for that rush of empty air, for the pressure I have worn
for my fifteen years of life to disappear the moment
I break through the surface.

The water scattered and broke, the sun pierced my heart,
I thought my eyes would go blind in that living light,
as I blinked at the new world surrounding me.
No water dipped to darkness, or fish swam about,
but clear skies and the ocean reaching endlessly out.

Rumbling noises reached me from afar,
drifting from a ship close to where I had risen.
With my heart leaping fast, I knew from my sister's tales
that people were aboard, and before knowing what I was doing
I began swimming their way.

The waves carried me high as if they desired to aid me
in seeing over the side of the ship rising above.
My eyes slid over men churning about,
to the being who held the wheel, a girl standing strong
as she guided her ship home.

[9] Hans Christian Andersen, "The Little Mermaid" in *The Classic Fairy Tales*

I knew she was no golden Cinderella
or quiet Snow White, she was not a fairy tale girl,
but someone *real* who emanated *life*.
I was drawn to her then, knowing my dreams were coming true
even though I had yet to know how our worlds would collide.

When the wave carrying me rose too high,
scattering its contents over the ship's haul,
I shrunk too late, and her eyes flashed as they
made contact with mine–
I'll remember that moment for all my nights to come.

Breath held still, the wave carried me back under,
her eyes slid away as she stumbled and the world shuddered–
thunder cracking overhead, she turned away.
She shook her head as if dismissing a dream,
turning back to her men, to the storm on its way.

The ocean turned to match the sky as it roiled and spit,
reflecting the steel gray of the girl's piercing eyes.
I heard her voice for the first time, rough and urging,
as she shouted to her men to prepare for the storm which lay ahead–
the type I had only ever known from safe beneath the surface.

The waves began to pull me too high for my comfort,
drawing me up towards the lightning-thick clouds.
The sky broke in white light with wind whistling about
and for the first time in my life, the air stirred my hair
as the water once did.

I struggled to keep the girl in my sight,
catching glimpses of her arms beginning to shake,
her slender legs trembling on deck
as she held tight to her wheel, not daring
to remove a hand to push her dark hair from her face.

Overwhelmed by the desire to help her hold on,
I fought my own war, remembering my sisters' cautions
of the fear shown by humans when they behold our mer-bodies.
My heart twisted as I imagined her eyes alighted with fear
when she sees me again amidst the center of the storm.

“So be it,” I tell myself, “Let her think me the monster,
so long as I can save her, that is all the happiness I need.”
Light arched from the sky, alighting her ship
as the sky surely did as the sun fell from the sky,
and one by one her crew jumped into the sea churning below.

Flames danced across wood bobbing on the water,
their light playing against my eyes as I dove down to find her.
Among the things my sisters and my grandmother told me
when I asked them about the people who walk on two legs,
is that they live in their world, and we live in ours,

that is the way things are,
and the way they will always be.
From this I know that she cannot
enter my world and live
to be with me.

I find her down there, drifting amongst the wreck,
and reach out to pull her back up to the surface
we had left. In all my dreams from girlhood
I never could've imagined the solidity of her
in my arms at last, heart against heart,

dark hair twisting with mine, lips so close
as I pulled us to where I knew shore to be.
I lay her down on the sand, unsure what to do next,
when I saw her chest move,
and knew she would be alright.

Voices then echoed from cliffs in the distance,
people coming our way, surely having seen
commotion from afar. I looked down at her to see
her staring up at me, fierce eyes opened wide,
unsure of this savior bent over her.

She let out a small gasp and pleaded with her eyes,
in a way that made me unsure if she was asking me to stay
or go far far away. As the voices drew near,
I slid out of her grasp, slipping back under the surface
of the place I call home.

On the beach that day,
with a storm raging in the heavens
was the closest I've been to her since,
watching from afar as she's come and gone
from that land hoping

one
day
we'll
meet
again.

III

Two years later and I'm seventeen years old.
My father no longer pushes mermen upon me,
my hand in marriage is now mine to give
or keep as I wish. For two years I have watched
from a safe distance as my pirate girl

with her thunder-dark hair and lightning-quick eyes
wanders down from the castle of the land
with its beach where I left her that fateful day.
She sits on the sand staring out at the water,
sometimes wading in to just below her knees.

I come to the surface whenever I can
and watch her while hidden so as not to spark fear,
and during the times when she sets back out to sea,
I follow her still, afraid even if she's not
of another storm reaching for her.

Since that first storm, two years ago I've practiced
magic with the Sea Witch, unbeknownst by my family
who shunned her long long ago.
I found her in her cave, out past Shipwreck Alley,

bestowing myself as her apprentice.

As the Sea Witch teaches me, I imagine steel-gray eyes
with not a trace of fear as she sees a girl just like herself,
a girl with no tale but two legs to stand on–
a dream I sink into the hopes of a potion to turn me human
so I can walk amongst her kind, and maybe, maybe be with her.

The Sea Witch never did harm me,
but taught me what she knew and warned me
of what my undertaking would mean–
no reversals, no pause, I could never
ever be a mermaid again.

My family would never be close, only seen from afar,
I would be giving up everything, all for an unknown girl.
But dreams are a persistent thing, and dreams of desire,
I've learned are entirely inescapable,
they are with you always, unrelenting in their devotion.

The time finally came when my power was strong,
I took a last look at my shimmering tale before
my dreams took shape as my magic transformed me
into someone I had only known in sleep
as my mind left my body to be what it may.

The Sea Witch beheld my new form and I think
salt tears glistened in her eyes as she hugged me goodbye
and helped me to the surface before my new breath gave out.
I collapsed to the shore, naked in my new skin,
when a shadow bent over me, and her hands lifted me up

just as I had with her years ago.
I knew it was her before I even looked up and saw
those lightning-quick eyes watching me in disbelief.
“You’re here,” she gasped as she held onto me. “I’m here,” I smiled,
“You’re not afraid?” “Afraid,” she laughs, “I was never afraid of you,” she says

as
her
lips
meet
mine.

Ever After

Years and years later they would write our tale
into the very books that once drifted down to me
in my girlhood, sparking the dreams that lifted me
through a life of marriage proposals and requests
I never could fulfill.

They have changed our tale though
to one they think suitable, but I will remember
that mine is one of desire at its heart,
and of a girl whose dreams consumed her until
she reached up and snatched them for herself. It is

possible
to
rewrite
your
stars.

Beauty and the Beast

Beauty Bound as Wife

It's in September that dreams
are left behind–

forgotten in footprints pressed
upon velvet cushions of grass.

That's how I remember my last summer–
barefoot, hair loose to my waist,

chasing butterflies[10] with dirt
carelessly smudged across my skin–

before my sun-kissed hand
was passed–a token–

from my father
to the Beast.

My father, too, was careless[11]
that season, betting on herds

that never stood for anything
but my youth lost.

My father's gloveless fingers,
which once held my mother,

let go as the Beast's rough paws
held fast to his prize.

Girlhood was never meant to end
like this–kissed away

by the wind on a
bartered marriage.

---

[10] Charles Perrault, "Little Red Riding Hood" in *The Classic Fairy Tales*
[11] Angela Carter, "The Tiger's Bride" in *The Bloody Chamber*

Beauty of Words

Blooming when no one is watching,
few flowers are meant for plucking.

She doesn't notice their eyes on her skin,
petal-smooth, for her own eyes,

blade-green, follow the whisper
of words meant only for her.

Pages flutter under her fingers,
images sweep through her mind–

she never hears her sisters calling
her odd,[12] she is never forced to change–

to put down her books and pull up her dress
for a Beast who'd take her away.

[12] Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont, "Beauty and the Beast" in *The Classic Fairy Tales*

Which Beast Will You Be?

Your power was spilt from generation
to generation, churning and gathering strength
until it came to rest in your young hands–

those hands that dealt hard blows
and cracked fissures that spider-webbed
across the walls & the skin of your castle & its people.

Your power went unchecked, a storm
left to thunder, until she knelt at your door,
begging for safety, which you denied her at once.

The hag that you saw, was an enchantress in truth,
a woman whose beauty you never would've denied–
but she knew that, didn't she?[13] Just as she knows

what she must do as she enchants your freedom away
as easily as your power was handed down as a birthright,
binding you to the hide of a beast.

The Enchantress who you so carelessly scorned
now tells you your options, said in sweet words,
of the paths you can take to win your power back.

You know you will pay any price for your past,
whether it be true love which burns a hole in your tongue
or through inspiring the violence all girls hold within.

Now I ask you the question:
Which Beast will you be?
Which Beauty will you inspire?

The gentle girl who calms the Beast,
or the girl with no choice but to hurl her Beast[14]
to the void below, freeing him at last?

---

[13] Walt Disney, *Beauty and the Beast*
[14] Brothers Grimm, "The Frog King, or Iron Heinrich" in *The Classic Fairy Tales*

The Man They Made of You

The man your father made you
is the man your father's father made him–
the strongest one around.[15]

Your boyhood forever hidden,
thrown into a chasm the day
you made your first kill.

Your father's arm was strong,
thrice as big as your own,
as he pushed your family's blade
into shaking hands.

"Here, Gaston. Five generations of our family's men
have wielded this sword in honor,"
as he coaxes your sight to the shepherd dog
you've known your whole life.

"Kill the beast," he demands,
so kill the beast you do.

Now, years later, your father long gone,
you wear the skins of the creatures
met by the blade of your family's men

hung around your shoulders, covering your back,
shielding your skin so they won't see
the scars he left on you.

And now, with your cloak drawn tight
when the townspeople ask you to kill the Beast
your skin will tingle with the remembrance of your father's lash–

so you kill the boy[16]
to kill the Beast.

---

[15] Nikita Gill, "How a Hero Becomes a Villain" in *Fierce Fairytales*
[16] George R. R. Martin, *A Dance with Dragons*

Sleeping Beauty

The Beauty Who Awakened Herself

In the woods at night when fairy hour rings,
mist parts way for thorns to feign innocence,
as whispers escape of the princess beyond–
dead asleep, theirs for the taking.

They should've known, those brave men
to push their hands against their ears,
block out the fairies' spell
so much like siren-song.

Perhaps if they had listened to their mother's warnings
they never would've let the whispers reach their ears,
yet each man in the village donned silver and iron
only to end up bone-white, strung on the thorns.[17]

The girl within, hidden and protected
by sweet fairy spell, never saw the skeletons
now adorning her palace, nor felt her dress lifted, pulled away,
her skin left bare to the whims of a stranger.

The spell the fairy cast let the sleeping beauty awake,
separate from her body[18] so her soul could undergo
the quest that would restore harmony to her kingdom,
the quest that would release her lost mother's soul to peace.

For a century the girl rode on dragon back,
crossing foreign oceans & lands, taking up sword & shield
in search of the one who caused ruin to her queendom,
the one who held her mother's bones.

After years of travels and seeing the world,
she came at last to the place where her mother would be,
& carefully gathered her body after erasing the king who took her,
& brought her mother's bones to rest in the soil of their home.

---

[17] Brothers Grimm, "Briar Rose" in *The Classic Fairy Tales*
[18] Nikita Gill, "Waking Beauty" in *Fierce Fairytales*

With the press of a kiss on the petal of a rose,
placed atop the covered grave of her kin,
Sleeping Beauty–as the whispers had come to call her–
was reunited with her undesecrated body.

No gentleman's kiss, no baby's lips,[19]
but the kiss of a petal drifting onto the soil
of a loved one at rest would break the spell & make the beauty
the kind of queen the fairy always knew she would be.

[19] Giambattista Basile, "Fifth Diversion–Sun, Moon, and Talia" in *Il Pentamerone, or The Tale of Tales*

A Message from the Fairy Who "Cursed" Sleeping Beauty

Seven fairies to gift the lovely baby girl[20]
with foolish little tricks
of beauty, and grace,
a soft heart, a full womb,

all to please their king & queen–
but not I, you see,
I would not let the girl go forever
trapped in the world that ruined her mother

and so many women before.
So a spell I crafted, without my brethren,
to release the girl's soul, to let her go free
and fight, fight she must,

for her own destiny.
A hero she shall be,
if she recovers her mother's peace,
recovering her own power as she does.

She will face a deep sleep,
but it will not be her doom,
if she can learn to not wait
for a prince to come and save her

but learn to
save
herself
instead.

[20] Charles Perrault, "The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood" in *The Classic Fairy Tales*

Cinderella

A Letter to My Daughter's New Mother

I wonder at your girlhood–
who were you before
they made you like this?[21]

Were you gentle & quiet,
used to being talked over,
& never really heard?

At what point did you dream
of the daughters you would have–
of the ones you could mold,

could sculpt into being
everything you always wanted
to be?

Who broke you so terribly
that you buried the girl
you had always been

& became the kind of woman
you knew did the pushing
rather than being pushed?

I know you weren't always
the way you are now–
carefully weakening anyone,

even a stepdaughter
you promised to care for,
who could possibly outshine

the daughters you dreamed of–
the ones you sculpted
just so.

[21] Nikita Gill, "The Stepmother's Tale" in *Fierce Fairytales*

Sisters

Some sisters spend hours braiding flowers into each other's hair.
Some sisters jump in leaf piles chasing butterfly wings.

These are the sisters who clutch each other's hands
as they're beckoned to the woods when the moon shines high.

Maybe my sisters would do these things for each other,
but not for me, their bonds do not seem to be for a sister

who didn't grow up beside them, pampered on their mother's knee,
but whose mother's womb lies cold within the earth's cradle.

I'm the sister dressed in mouse-eaten clothes
with cinder-stained fingers who's banished to the attic

and whose family becomes the flies, the bats, & the bees
who cannot understand when my sister's voices ring out,

> *Cinder-slut! Cinder-slut!*[22]
> *Sleeping with the beasts*
> *Rolling in the cinders*
> *No mother, no sisters*
> *No prince for her!*

and who know me as their familiar,
humming me to sleep with their wings

until I am strong enough to grow my own
and fly to a world where "Cinder-slut" is only a thing of the past.

[22] Charles Perrault, "Cinderella" in *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault*

There, Hope Remained

Hope never rang from the palace bells,
wisped in by the wind to echo through my room
from that place where princes live.

My hope never lay in the
spires' silhouettes cast through
the window, darkening my room.

Hope drifted down, a lost feather,
carrying my mother's voice
& the press of her palm, gentle on my cheek.

No one in that house knew of the spell that hope
could carry disguised as these things, always hidden
under the wafting scent of flowers in May.

No one knew how this hope
fed me through the years as I licked & sucked
every crumb–every memory–from the air.[23]

When the tide of peace went shrinking back
in cascades of smacks and cruel laughter
that dashed out dreams, there, hope remained.

[23] Nikita Gill, "Lessons in Surviving Long-term Abuse" in *Fierce Fairytales*

Bluebeard

Hearts & Blood

The forest swallowed you hours ago–
midnight a blanket across your shoulders
as you, a sacrificial girl,
gleam clean and fresh, his for the taking.

Wind in the boughs seems to echo the stories
you heard by the fire in your youth
of village boys turned wolves,
girls gone missing, Bluebeard under the moon.

Those stories seem distant, disconnected
from the trees and the stars that blink
down on you, leaving you too trusting
when their howls unleash your fears.

They found your scent
and they will not rest
until your knees hit the earth
and your breath gives out,

but you run and run,
anything but stay still–
you will not play the lamb
or the naïve girl in the red hood.

With wolves on your tail,
a nightgown torn to shreds,
you do not question when the forest alights
blue, a path, guiding you through.

It shimmers in the air,
beckoning you to follow
all the way to a house
you never knew was there.

You fall upon the door
as the wolves leap at your heels,

teeth gathering your hem,
you gasp, twisting to get in.

You push their noses away
with the force of the door
when you're wrapped in the arms
of the man of the house.

Unsure if it's only a trick of the light,
all you can see is his beard, a strange blue,
until he offers you a smile,
invites you into his warmth.

Stories of your youth pushed aside,
all you know is that for the moment
you are safe, so you return his smile–
Bluebeard is now all the refuge you have.

•••

When night comes you're alone
in a bed he offered you,
lying stiff, sleep still far,
unsure who it is you're sharing a house with.

When sleep finally settles, it's the color of the sky,
filled with whispers pleading to be heard–
Help us, come find us, we once were like you.
Down in the cellar, come heal us, before he gets you.

You awake with a start, heart so loud,
& don't understand if it was real at all,
but your curiosity returns of the man across the hall,
so you slide out of bed, light a candle in the dark.

You go gently through the halls
each footstep inquisitive,
in search of a doorway,
a path that will lead down.

You find yourself in the den
where you were around midnight
as he served you chamomile
before showing you to bed

and you swear you see the pulsing blue
emanating from under a door by the hearth
where a heart-shaped key[24] hangs,
begging to be used.

The key's handle radiates warmth
into your trembling hands as you twist
it into place, the door swinging open
with a creek that rushes through the house.

You hold your breath, listening,
before letting it out, only for your next breath
to bring with it copper air, stale and thin,
oozing from the chamber you just had to unlock.

You cast your candlelight forward,
lighting the descent taken step by step
until you pause on the last one
taking in what's before you–his bloody chamber.

A gasp slips past your lips & the key is dropped,
falling silently to the bloody floor, mere inches from you.
You kneel down, carefully, reaching for the small heart,
& get ready to run when the blue light floods forth.

Your blood turns cold as the chamber
lights up, blue light on cold stone,
revealing all the girls
who have come before you.

Torsos hang from the ceiling,
limbs splayed on the red floor,[25]
their once beautiful young faces

[24] Angela Carter, "The Bloody Chamber" in *The Bloody Chamber*
[25] Brothers Grimm, "Fitcher's Bird" in *The Classic Fairy Tales*

hidden by curtains of tangled hair.

All you want to do is run, run
far, far away, but something about
the light makes you stay as it pulses
& begs you to listen.

We were once like you, cast away from our homes
given to the wolves who chased us here.
There are enough of us now, that we can be heard,
help us, restore us to how we used to be.

You fear you will collapse right into the blood,
but instead you take a breath, taking in everything
they have endured to ask for your help.
You hang the key 'round your neck,

heart against heart & step into the blood.
You gather each girl, one by one,
unraveling her hair, collecting her limbs,
gently, like the dolls you cared for in your youth,

and just like your dolls when your brothers
snapped their limbs, the girls go back together,[26]
blue light slipping into them
as they open their eyes.

Each girl is naked, her clothes taken long ago,
but you don't care, they're your sisters now.
You tell them they are free, and together
all of you can conquer the wolves in the woods.

But no, they whisper, *not without his key,*
the one round his neck, paired with that one, is the only way out.
They point at your chest to the key resting there
& you remember its sibling that you can take from him now.

•••

[26] Brothers Grimm, "Fitcher's Bird" in *The Classic Fairy Tales*

Deep in the forest underneath the moon,
seven girls, hand in hand with bloodied feet
step through the halls of a wicked house,
ascending stairs, leaving horrors behind.

The six girls who were broken, now each carry
the weapon that he used against her
to hack her to bits. The seventh girl, never harmed,
clutches the heart-shaped key, ready to reunite it with its twin.

Somewhere in the house a clock strikes four,
as seven girls enter Bluebeard's room.
His first victim from many years ago
raises her weapon first, separating his hand.

Bluebeard awakes with a scream
as his dreams twist into a nightmare
& each girl lunges with a vengeance
claiming a piece of him as her prize as he had done to them.

When Bluebeard lays in blood as the girls once did,
it's finally the last girl's turn. She kneels in front of him
and smells chamomile with the blood.
She looks him in his dead eyes & pulls the key from his neck.

As the string breaks loose a silence fills the house
before his head falls from his shoulders,
thudding to the floor,
rolling at her feet.

She looks at her new sisters
with their bond born in blood
and feels a smile on her lips,
sees a new light in their eyes.

Hand in hand they leave his room,
grabbing candles along the way,
they find the heart-shaped lock,
& twist both keys into place.

When the door swings open the seventh girl places
the new key ’round her neck, settling into place next to
the bloody one. Seven girls step into cool
morning air, releasing candles as they go.

With flames behind them & a world ahead,
wolves turn back to village boys
& a sisterhood is born
of hearts & blood.

The Past You Bear

Fourteen years,
one marriage,
three children–one boy, two girls–

later & sometimes you find myself there again,
lying in a stiff bed wondering,

Do you know the man beside you?
–of course, he's your husband
with his promise to you
to shave every day–not a beard in sight.

Sally,[27] what's on your feet?
Nothing, Mama, just pomegranate[28] juice,
come read me a story, tuck me into bed!
Yes, of course, Darling, just wash up first!

Your youngest falls asleep,
you envy how easily,
& now it's just you–

you and your secret checking every door,
every cupboard,
every chamber

knowing you will find nothing,
yet checking still, before crawling into bed
beside your baby-faced husband.

All good, Honey? What took you so long?
Oh nothing, Dear, Sally wanted two bedtime stories, what could I say?

He nods, never knowing
the past you bear,
the lies you tell.

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[27] Margaret Atwood, "Bluebeard's Egg" in *The Classic Fairy Tales*
[28] Oscar Wilde, *A House of Pomegranates* mentioned in *The Classic Fairy Tales*

Cupid and Psyche

The Marriage Heaven Dreams for You

I

Once upon a time, in a land where kingdoms lay
a princess, the youngest of three,[29]
whose name was whispered on the winds
by everyone far and wide,
hated the very beauty by which her name was known.

Psyche, Psyche, the most beautiful of all!

Her sisters were married to kings in different realms,
now Psyche was the last one and with so beautiful a presence
how could anyone resist?
Yet her figure was divine, and with divinity comes the weight
of the crown placed atop the brow.

Venus, Venus, she must surely be!

They whispered in the streets, collecting flowers to lay at her feet.
From the Heavens above, Venus herself did hear these whispers,
but who were they for? Surely not for herself, no,
what dishonor was being done
praising a false god.

Cupid, Cupid, come to me, my son!

So Venus called her boy, the one with angel wings,
"I demand you to make her, this poor girl Psyche
fall in love with a man, a treacherous one at that."
But Cupid paid his mother no heed,
yet rather longed for this mortal–this divine girl.

Galatea, Galatea, is what they think her to be!

Although they worshiped her beauty
as though it were divine,

[29] Apuleius, "The Tale of Cupid and Psyche" in *The Golden Ass*

they dared not come close or put forth a proposal,
for her countenance was statuesque–
she could never be a bride.

Apollo, Apollo, I seek a prophecy for my daughter!

The king cried at the oracle
which he sought in desperation.
So the sun god responded,
"She will marry, she will, a bride of Death she shall be."
Though they wept and wept, a procession to the crag began.

Zephyrus, Zephyrus, obey me now!

"I, Cupid, ask of you to save this girl, this mortal named Psyche!"
So as the procession left in a river of tears,
Psyche stepped off that crag in her bridal gown,
but the king had heard the oracle wrong–
she would be not a bride of Death, but a bride of Love.

Pan, O Pan, guide this girl through the copse!

For Zephyrus carried her down in his soft embrace,
releasing her to the bed of flowers below.
A stream whispered here, and trees over there
where fauns danced with flutes
and a palace of gold lay beyond.

Fates, O Fates, what have you done?

For when Psyche approached this gleaming gold palace
no watchmen, no guards intercepted her way.
The door was open so in she walked
where voices met her whisked in by the wind–
"Take a bath, sip wine, slip into something comfortable."

Handmaidens, handmaidens, with your disembodied voice, show me the way!

So Psyche stepped out of her bridal gown
into a bath filled with oils and flower petals.

She drank fine wine and ate splendidly
as lyres and soft voices
swam around her.

Hypnos, sweet Hypnos, how you call to me!

For after the procession to the crag
and her step into the unknown, Psyche's lids grew heavy
as she was shown to her bed, her bridal bed
where she lay her head in sudden virgin fright
as in the dark she heard his voice, then the press of his body right beside hers.

Diana, Diana, be the only light tonight!

Cupid prays as he beds his new wife in the dark.
"She mustn't see me, not ever, 'tis part of the pact,"
the pact, made with Fortune,
for as the yarn foretold
this marriage, this love, may not yet last.

II

Days went by for the two newlyweds–
oblivious to time each night in their bed
'til dawn rose again to banish her husband
from her longing arms. She never saw him, only felt him,
and her handmaidens were her only companions 'til his return.

Fortune, miserable Fortune, you've found us at last!

For soon enough, Psyche's sisters heard tell
of her wedding with Death and rushed to the crag to throw themselves off.
Yet Zephyrus once more delivered mortal life to the earth
and with her husband banished by cruel Aurora,
Psyche's loneliness fled when her beloved sisters found her.

Sisters, my sisters, you've come at last!

"Oh Psyche we heard you're a bride of Death, yet here you are!"
"Indeed I'm here, not a bride of Death, but a bride of…"

and Psyche trailed off as she remembered her husband's warning:
no one must know of our love
and you must never ever see me.

By Heaven, O Heaven, you must tell us of your husband!

So her sisters cried, yet poor Psyche did not know
the color of his hair, his eyes, or where he was from, not even his name.
But her sisters saw their younger sister now mistress of this golden palace
whose coffers never emptied and whose jewels were endless
while they each were stuck with an elderly mean king.

Envy, horrible Envy, how sweet you seem at first sight!

For Psyche's sisters grew suspicious
of this man with such land, such a home, and such jewels,
yet their sweet, sweet sister seemed not to know
anything about this king
whom she was married to.

Minerva, Minerva, help us craft a plan!

So Psyche's sisters, with greed in their heart,
disguised their jealousy in sisterly love
to force her hand in unveiling her mystery groom
and break his one demand–What if he's a monster?
A horrible snake hiding in the shade when he's in your bed?

Vesta, Vesta, your flame will save me now!

So Psyche thought as her sisters told her the way
to reveal his true form one night
after satisfying sweet Venus in their wedding bed–
with a knife and a flame
she could reveal his form.

Hecate, Hecate, what magic this must be!

For her knife slipped in her hand and oil was spilt
when the light settled on his skin–

his skin milky white, his cheeks ruddy red,
his hair golden curls against soft feathers on his back,
and when she saw his quiver she knew at last.

Cupid, O Cupid, my dear husband is!

No snake as her sisters foretold, but a cherub boy–
the most beautiful there ever was, all hers, just hers.
But spilt oil would betray her as it landed on his skin
and he awoke to see his form revealed.
On wings of feather, he took flight to the Heavens, leaving his Psyche behind.

III

Psyche, now alone, no husband, no love,
only regret and guilt stirring in her heart,
was left to wander where her feet took her
to the kingdoms of her hateful sisters
where Psyche told a false tale:

Grief, Grief, is what I feel!

"I have lost my one love, my beautiful husband.
He was no snake, but a god from above,
yet he loved another–you my dear sister, you."
So Psyche, clever Psyche lay her plans in the hands of Envy,
who carried each sister over the edge of the fabled crag.

Pluto, dark Pluto would be the final resting place of these dark queens!

Now Psyche left utterly alone, would only learn to despair more,
for with her son lying wounded in Olympus,
Venus heard tell of her son's marriage to the girl–
the girl whom she hated for she was honored above herself.
So Venus called upon her sister goddesses:

Ceres, O Ceres, Goddess of the Grain I seek your aid!

"What for, dear sister?"
"To find this girl, this prideful mortal!"

So when wandering Psyche sought shelter at the temple
of this great goddess and carefully tended to the neglected alter
Ceres had no choice but to turn her away.

Juno, Queen Juno, wife of King Jupiter!

"I seek your aid now in finding this girl!"
Yet Juno, like Ceres, pitied young Psyche
as she sought shelter again at the temple of a god
yet due Venus' order could only turn her away
if only to not arrest her so.

Mercury, Mercury, carry a message for me!

Venus begged of her brother, the messenger of the gods,
who did his job well and through word spread wide
Psyche delivered herself at last to the doorstep of this mother.
When Psyche arrived she was beaten and bruised
by Venus and handmaidens alike.

Clementia, Clementia, was nowhere to be found!

For Venus, still writhing with hatred for this mortal,
now bloodied and kneeling,
put forth three tasks that the girl must complete.
"Once you've done all three and then a final task
perhaps then, and only then you will have my blessing at last."

Critters, small critters, scurry to her aid!

All of nature could see Psyche in despair with three tasks to do–
three impossible feats, so help came her way:
"Separate these seeds," which the ants aided her with,
"Collect the gold fleece," which the reed instructed how,
"Collect this water," which the eagle swept to aid in.

Proserpine, Proserpine, will be your final test!

Venus hissed to poor Psyche after seeing her prevail
over these last three tasks. This one, surely, she could never do:

“Gather beauty from the dead queen, and place it in this bottle,”
a test that led Psyche to a tower
ready to step off when the tower so spoke:

Charon, he Charon, will get you there!

“Take two coins and two cakes, never stop along the way.
Pay the ferryman to cross, and feed Cerberus to continue,
and most important of all, when you collect from the queen
don’t open and don’t look into the bottle where her beauty is captured.”
Yet Psyche, with her light soul, having completed all tasks, submits to the test–

Pandora, Pandora, she should’ve listened to your tale!

As it was not beauty in the bottle, but a death-like sleep
which Proserpine placed there at the plea of Venus
so she would know if poor Psyche failed the final test.
But her plan wouldn’t come to fruit
as Cupid, now healed from his burn, flew to the rescue of his damsel in distress.

Princess, my princess, how naïve you are!

“How light of soul, light of heart,
to not think twice when you looked
inside that cursed bottle,”
he murmured to himself as he brushed her clean
of any magical residue.

Jupiter, resounding Jupiter, up there in the clouds!

“You have met my arrows not once, not twice, but a great many times–
you who know of the trouble I have caused
to many a maiden and now to this Psyche,
how will you punish me?
By chaining me to her forever?”

Clever, so clever, this young couple seem to be!

For this King of the Gods fell for the trap
by sentencing Cupid to a heavenly marriage with his Psyche.

Venus could not object
for the King's word is final–
to stop this boy from further trouble, he will be the groom of this mortal.

IV

What Psyche now knew was that she was with child–
the child of a god, who would be one too.
So it only seemed fit to have her drink from the cup,
have ambrosia flood her veins
so she could join her family in the pantheon of the gods.

Pleasure, Pleasure, shall be her name!

The name of the baby girl born to Cupid & Psyche
from the marriage Heaven dreamt for her–
that they dream for you–
where fauns and nymphs sang and danced,
as the two lovers embraced each other at last.

The End

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