

Southern New Hampshire University

Feminist Fractured Fairy Tales:

Angela Carter, Emma Donoghue, and Heroines Who Embrace Their Desires

A Capstone Project Submitted to the College of Online and Continuing Education in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Master of Arts in English

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July 2021

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## Abstract

Among the earliest tales told to children are fairy tales; these stories stick with us into adulthood, and we pass them on to the next generation because they speak to the human experience as well as provide guidance for moving through the world. However, while the themes of fairy tales comprise so-called universal truths of the human experience, further examination of these tales reveals antiquated social views whose dissemination may be harmful. Many fairy tales, for instance, silence their female characters while promoting patriarchal, heterosexual family structures as being necessary to a happy ending. To challenge such outdated perspectives, feminist writers have taken to rewriting fairy tales through a woman-centric lens. Such retellings are known as fractured fairy tales. Two such collections are *The Bloody Chamber* by Angela Carter and *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* by Emma Donoghue. Carter's retellings of "Beauty and the Beast" and "Little Red Riding Hood," "The Courtship of Mr Lyon" and "The Company of Wolves" respectively, give voice to the heroines, allowing them to narrate their own stories as well as throw off traditional gender roles to embrace their sexuality and desires, thus becoming three-dimensional people. Meanwhile, Donoghue's retellings of "Beauty and the Beast" and "The Little Mermaid," "The Tale of the Rose" and "The Tale of the Voice" respectively, play with the very structure of the tales by providing new endings, often with a queer twist, as well as providing an outlet for all these women to express their own desires and exercise their agency, something they are unable to do when they are silenced and forced into heterosexual boxes. However, though fractured tales like those of Carter and Donoghue have power, they cannot be the only way to challenge the shortcomings of traditional tales; they should not be the end of the process—but rather the beginning.

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## Introduction

Among the earliest tales told to children are fairy tales; these stories stick with us into adulthood, and we pass them on to the next generation. Few other types of entertainment take root in us so thoroughly and deeply. Indeed, Steven Swann Jones notes, “One of the most well-known, most lived, and most influential genres of literature is the fairy tale. Since it was originally a product of oral tradition, this genre dates back, not just to the Middle Ages or biblical times, but to well before recorded history itself” (1). But why have they persisted for thousands of years? What is it about fairy tales that have caused their longevity? Jones argues that fairy tales endure because they “address basic problems that confront their audiences” in three main categories: “the psychology of the individual, the sociology of the community, and the cosmology of the community” (19). However, while these categories may comprise so-called universal truths of the human experience, further examination of these tales reveals antiquated social views whose dissemination may be harmful. For example, focusing on the second category, many fairy tales “promote marriage and the patriarchal family structure as dominant cultural institutions” (20). To challenge such outdated perspectives in these ubiquitous tales, feminist thinkers have taken both creative and critical approaches to challenging the patriarchal status quo promoted by fairy tales. One creative approach feminist writers have taken is to rewrite fairy tales through a woman-centric lens. Such retellings are known as fractured fairy tales. Two such collections are *The Bloody Chamber* by Angela Carter and *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* by Emma Donoghue. Carter’s and Donoghue’s fractured fairy tales promote feminist perspectives by allowing their heroines to explore and engage with their own desires and sexualities, which, in turn, allows them to exercise their agency as fully realized people rather than as extensions of men.

## The Roots of Fairy Tales in Culture

To understand the importance of feminist retellings of fairy tales, we must first address the function of fairy tales in our culture. And to reckon with that function, it is necessary to first look at where these stories come from. According to Jack Zipes, “Though it is impossible to trace the historical origins and evolution of fairy tales to a particular time and place, we do know that humans began telling tales as soon as they developed the capacity of speech,” and perhaps even before using sign language (*Irresistible* 16). Fairy tales would have been part of humans’ evolving communication. Indeed, these tales were functional; humans told one another tales to “communicate vital information for adapting to their environment” as well as to “mark an occasion, set an example, warn about danger, procure food, or explain what seemed inexplicable. People told stories to communicate knowledge and experience in social contexts” (16). The practical applications of storytelling gradually evolved, “form[ing] the basis of narratives that enabled humans to learn about themselves and the worlds they inhabited” (16). In other words, the practical concerns of survival evolved into existential concerns about humans’ place in the world. Much as modern-day religions tell stories that help followers understand their place in the world around them, these ancient tales “communicate[d] knowledge and experience in social contexts” (16), though fairy tales are secular in nature. Thus, though an exact origin cannot be identified, “[m]ost folklorists and literary critics have...largely agreed that the fairy tale emanated from oral traditions” (9). The significance of coming from the oral tradition is that fairy tales have

no exact and established versions, no identifiable authors, and no fixed titles. In oral tradition, fairy tales circulate over hundreds and, in some cases, thousands of years in multiple versions, adapted by different narrators in a style or manner specific to each

narrator, often in very different historical circumstances. What we have are many versions of the same story coming not only from different narrators, but from different societies and cultures. There are collections of fairy tales from almost every culture. In short, fairy tales are a variegated and ever-varying phenomenon. (Jones 3)

Though the fairy tale as we know it today, also known as the literary fairy tale, has its roots in the oral tradition, the modern iteration is no longer simply told by word-of-mouth; the modern fairy tale is shared through various media, such as books and films, while oral tales are categorized as their own genre. Zipes explains, “Folklorists generally make a distinction between wonder folk tales, which originated in oral traditions throughout the world and still exist, and literary fairy tales, which emanated from the oral traditions through the mediation of manuscripts and print, and continue to be created today in various mediated forms around the world”

(*Irresistible* 16). Wonder folk tales, or folklore, encompass “all the forms of cultural learning passed on by word of mouth or personal example in any group” (Jones 2). Such cultural learning “includes all the traditional forms of expression that circulate without the aid of books—the art, speech, and literature created through personal interaction rather than through the printed medium” (2). However, the distinction between folklore and fairy tales is not a simple one. Indeed, the oral and literary traditions are closely entwined: “The majority of the world’s best-known and most loved fairy tales, including ‘Snow White,’ ‘Jack and the Beanstalk,’ ‘Sleeping Beauty,’ and ‘Cinderella,’ were all initially the product of folklore” (Jones 2). As such, the two traditions “form one immense and complex genre because they are inextricably dependent on one another” (Zipes, *Irresistible* 16). We, therefore, cannot study one tradition without considering the other.



## Variations on Tales

Due to this interdependence between folklore and fairy tale, it should come as no surprise that many variations of the tales exist among and across cultures. Many tale types, such as the basis for “Cinderella,” recur across the world with a surprising amount of consistency. Jones explains that “while individual versions may *vary their motifs* (the stylistic details used to relate the events), they are quite consistent in their *adherence to the plot outline* (that is, the sequence of basic episodes) of the tale type. It is as if they have an underlying narrative backbone or outline that they follow” (7). For instance, the popular “Cinderella” tale features five main motifs: a persecuted heroine, magical helpers, a meeting with a prince in disguise, the penetration of the disguise, and a marriage to the prince (Heiner, *Cinderella* 4). These five motifs serve as the common features for “well over 1,000 variants” of this tale (1). In categorizing the innumerable variations of tales like “Cinderella” as a single tale, tales are organized by what is known as their tale types, which is a term that “describe[s] a basic story...that is told in different ways in oral tradition” (Jones 3). What we might consider the so-called definitive version of a fairy tale, then,

is defined as the sum of its versions. *From the coinciding events or episodes in texts that apparently tell the same basic story, a plot outline for that tale is deduced.* That plot outline is used to define that fairy tale, which is considered a discrete tale type. Other collected texts that follow the same specified sequence of episodes typical of that tale type are considered versions of it. (4)

Due to the sheer number of variations on tales, folklorists utilize a number of indices to catalog the most common tale types, though the most widely utilized is the Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index (ATU). The ATU Index is the culmination of multiple revisions by multiple folklorists: In

1910, “Antti Aarne used the Grimms’ collection as the basis for a preliminary catalog for folktales: he expanded the list of known variants for the Grimms’ tales and identified other fairy tales as well” (6) into an index titled *Verzeichnis der Märchentypen (Index of Types of Folktales)* (Stein). Aarne’s catalog was expanded and revised by Stith Thompson “to produce a jointly-authored work entitled *The Types of the Folktale*” (Jones 6). This new index, commonly known as the Aarne-Thompson Index, was first published in 1928 and revised in 1961 under the title *The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography*. In 2004, the index was revised yet again; Hans-Jörg Uther’s three-volume revision was titled *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography*. Uther’s system “changed many of the titles and descriptions of the original index that tended to have a gender bias, and he broadened the coverage to include tale types beyond the Indo-European range” (Stein). The index organizes the tales by type and “assign[s] a title and number and/or letter” (Stein). For example, the most familiar “Cinderella” tale is categorized as ATU 510A, though the variations of the story are kept “together in a grouping of 510 and 511 numbers with the additional 923” number for variations that do not fit in the 510 and 511 categories (Heiner, *Cinderella* 3). Once the tale has a number category, the entry for the tale summarizes the key traits of the tale type then lists motifs that appear in variants. The entry may also include where the story has been found and how many variations have been identified (Stein). It is important to have a catalog like the ATU Index because it provides “a single classification system by which cultural distinct variants are grouped together according to a common reference number” (Stein), allowing for more organization and commonality in the study of fairy and folktales.

## Endurance of Fairy Tales

With this background in mind, we can now consider why fairy tales have endured over thousands of years and across cultural and physical boundaries. What is it about this type of story that is “appealing and popular enough to encourage storytellers to repeat it over centuries and across national boundaries in a recognizably similar form” (Jones 4)? What aspect of fairy tales “has touched people’s lives” to deem them “worthy of repetition” (5)? Jones argues that fairy tales have endured because they “tell[] us something about ourselves that we want and need to know,” which is “a distillation of human experience” (5). Indeed, fairy tales “tell[] us about our own feelings and psyches, as instructing us how to conform to society’s expectations, and as offering spiritual guidance about how to see our place in the cosmos” (20). In other words, fairy tales serve as teachers and guides, instructing audiences in both macro- and micro-level concerns. Moreover, Zipes argues, “Fairy tales are informed by a human disposition to action—to transform the world and make it more adaptable to human needs, while we also try to change and make ourselves fit for the world” (*Irresistible* 15-16). The beauty of fairy tales, however, is that such transformation can occur through supernatural means—as often the issues we face feel so daunting that only the supernatural could provide a solution. Zipes explains that “the focus of fairy tales...has always been on finding magical instruments, extraordinary technologies, or powerful people and animals that will enable protagonists to transform themselves along with their environment, making it more suitable for living in peace and contentment” (*Irresistible* 16). Though the protagonists in these tales make their changes via supernatural means, such instruments or technologies have symbolic significance that we can apply to our own lives. Indeed, “fairy tales use the poetic and exaggerated symbolism of fantasy to represent the deep-seated feelings of ordinary individuals in facing the typical challenges of life” (Jones 11). For

instance, though we may be unable to rely on a fairy godmother like Cinderella, the fairy godmother's core purpose is to help Cinderella improve her confidence, which has been eroded under the influence of her abusive family. The magical and supernatural elements of these tales not only provide solutions to problems, but they also "may be seen as metaphoric dramatizations of the thoughts and feelings audience members may harbor about their daily lives and the problems they face" as, Jones argues, "fairy tales speak the language of the unconscious mind" (11). As a result, fairy tales not only teach us how to live in the world and think about our place in the cosmos but also explore human emotion, "giv[ing] expression to unconscious fears and desires" (11). Fairy tales provide audiences with a means of going on vicarious "journeys of self-discovery, recognition and confrontation of internal anxieties and desires" (16-17) that they cannot do in their everyday lives. They also provide safe environments in which to explore and face those anxieties and desires.

Another way fairy tales provide guidance to audiences, and therefore endure, is through their firm belief in "a moral propriety in the universe" (Jones 13). Fairy tales provide not only pragmatic guidance for getting through the world but also moral instruction. As Zipes says, "Fundamental to the feel of a fairy tale is its moral pulse" (*Irresistible* 26). To this end, fairy tales explore "what we lack and how the world has to be organized different so that we receive what we need" (26). One way a fairy tale's moral imperative is made apparent is in the characterization of the protagonist. The hero or heroine of a fairy tale is "represented as being a good and deserving, albeit modest and somewhat ordinary, person, who is being unfairly afflicted by a problem" (Jones 17). This makes sense, as the audience is meant to see themselves in the story's protagonist; audience members are more likely to relate to a morally upright person who is struggling to get along in the world than to a privileged, amoral figure. Moreover, if a

fairy tale is teaching about what we lack, as Zipes says, then the protagonist of a fairy tale becomes a character for the audience to aspire to be; the characteristics of these protagonists are ones we should strive to have ourselves.

Fairy tales also promote morality through their use of magic and the supernatural. According to Jones, the inclusion of magical forces helps uphold the moral imperative of the fairy tale world: “When the magical agents come to the rescue or assistance of the protagonist...we are seeing the affirmation of the cosmic morality. These protagonists are rewarded because they are inherently good and deserve to be rewarded, and the supernatural help serves as confirmation that the world is indeed a moral one” (13). As a result, the ending of a fairy tale frequently “serves to justify a reassessment of the protagonist, who turns out to be a princess or a prince, or at least be worthy of marrying a princess or a prince” (17). Thus, the magical agents in the stories serve to, as Zipes would argue, perform the reorganization necessary for the world to be as it should from a moral standpoint. The world is not just before the magical intervention; the supernatural influence then creates the conditions necessary for the required change to occur. For instance, Cinderella is aided by a fairy godmother and, through this intervention, comes to the attention of the prince. It is her inherently good qualities that appeal to him, and thus, she marries him and escapes her downtrodden life. In other words, the magical intervention affirms the protagonist’s morality, leading to a righting of the wrongs done against the protagonist—and therefore correcting injustice. The opposite is also true, as these magical agents “frequently serve to punish the evil characters” (13). The many versions of the Cinderella story feature varying punishments for Cinderella’s cruel family, including maiming and even death, but the common denominator is that Cinderella is rewarded due to her moral rectitude while those who oppressed her are punished due to their wickedness. As such, the tale teaches

that those who are inherently good and moral will be rewarded while those who are not will be punished. As Jones states, “The happy ending, which affirms the moral propriety of the universe, is a clear and definite characteristic of the fairy tale genre” (17). It is clear, then, that fairy tales endure, at least in part, due to their strict adherence to strict morality in their outcomes and the comfort such outcomes provide.

In addition to the emotional and moral beats that fairy tales strike, their structure also provides clues about the genre’s longevity. According to Zipes, “Fairy tales begin with conflict because we all begin our lives with conflict. We are all misfit for the world, and somehow we must fit in, fit in with other people, and thus we must invent or find the means through communication to satisfy as well as resolve conflicting desires and instincts” (*Irresistible* 16). And since the fairy tale is meant to provide guidance for the audience to successfully navigate the world and the obstacles, both internal and external, we face, the tale must feature “the confronting and resolving of a problem, frequently by the undertaking of a quest” (Jones 14). The quest may be a literal journey the protagonist must take or a more figurative confrontation and overcoming of obstacles. For instance, Cinderella does not undertake a literal quest; she attends a ball at the palace in disguise and must confront the consequences of her deception afterward. Jones explains that the objective of the quest in a fairy tale “is personal happiness, measured as a rule by domestic satisfaction and tranquility. The emphasis is on personal relationships to family members and mates, and the initiation is into a greater awareness of one’s own desires and fears” (16). Cinderella, of course, marries the prince to fulfill this requirement of domestic tranquility. She is pulled from her oppressed state in her stepmother’s household and elevated to the station she deserves due to her moral standing. And because the fairy tale strictly adheres to a view of cosmic morality, the objective of personal happiness will always be met by

the end of the tale. Indeed, “[t]he successful solving of a dilemma facing the protagonist is essential to the plot of the fairy tale” (17). In other words, these tales are structurally designed to reward their protagonists’ morality while punishing the villains who lack moral fiber. In addition to meeting the audience’s emotional needs, these stories meet our needs for order in the world. The story structures are familiar, and familiarity breeds comfort. This comfort, then, is another reason fairy tales have continued to endure over the years.

### **Problematic Messages**

However, though fairy tales are thought to teach their audience about morality, it has, in recent years, become clear that not all lessons that fairy tales teach are unambiguously positive. That is because the tales that have become canon “reflect the ideology of those in power” (Crawford 41). One such ideology is that of gender roles. A look at the literary fairy tale canon through a feminist lens shows a patriarchal bias in the tales that are widely disseminated. Amy S. Crawford notes that the “social constructs that are embedded and reinforced in the moral tale include demarcations of gendered behaviour” (41). In other words, fairy tales rely on traditional gender roles as part of their moral view of the world—but this is a problematic perspective. Traditional gender roles are reductive and limiting to women, yet fairy tales depict such gender roles as part of the moral fabric of the universe, causing critics to view “the classical fairy tale as a mirror of the forces limiting women” (Haase 21). As a result, many feminist critics have taken a critical look at fairy tales’ portrayal of gender. Indeed, Ellen Cronan Rose writes, “Women have come to recognize that neither in fairy tales nor in other patriarchal texts can we find true images of ourselves” (qtd. in Crawford 41). Rose thus argues that fairy tales promote the morals of a patriarchal society, which privileges men over women. Elizabeth Wanning Harries further explains that second wave feminist criticism “fixed on fairy tales as condensed expressions of

social expectations for women and as dangerous myths that determined their lives and hopes” (*Twice Upon a Time* 13). Harries elaborates on examples of such “dangerous” portrayals of women in these tales:

The “sleep” of Sleeping Beauty or of Snow White in her glass coffin, the uncomplaining self-abnegation of Cinderella, the patience and silence of the sisters who work to save their seven or twelve brothers, the princesses who must be rescued from towers or briar hedges or forests or servitude—all these seem to provide the patterns for feminine passivity and martyrdom. The wicked stepmothers, witches, and fairies have come to represent the dangers older, powerful women seem to pose in our culture. (13)

In other words, the moral characters who are rewarded in the fairy tale context are passive while women who embrace their power are wicked and dangerous and, as a result, are punished. Due to the black and white morality of the fairy tale, the lesson is clearly that there are good and bad types of women. Harries notes that “the dominant tradition” of fairy tales “prescribed harmful roles for women that little girls could not help but imitate” (137). These harmful roles include “wait[ing] for male rescue, or at least for something to happen” while “half-consciously submit[ting] to being male property, handed from father to suitor or husband without complaint or volition” (137). Indeed, the female mind and body are “programmed by the male power” to believe that “[i]f you rebel, you will be punished, if you want to act freely, you will be socially castrated, if you want to choose your partner, you cannot be happy, if you do not obey the choice of the father, you will lose, if you want to live in a different world, you will be isolated. The only world that a woman can live is the world of the father and the husband” (Kumlu 128-9). As such, fairy tales limit the roles available to women, leaving no options independent of men—an unfortunate message to send girls and young women reading these tales.



Another example of this patriarchal view of gender roles is in the depiction of happy endings in fairy tales: they are typically portrayed through “domestic satisfaction,” which typically includes marriage, as in “Cinderella.” For Cinderella, marriage to the prince is a reward for her goodness; she takes the place in his household of which she is deserving. As Esin Kumlu explains, the heroine’s goodness, which is equated with passivity, leads to her fulfillment of a “hidden social contract with the female body and unconscious mind” in which heroines who “obey and remain passive” will find happiness in the form of “salvation by a handsome partner and a life-long happiness in marriage” (129). In this way, the heroine receives benefits for adhering to the patriarchal limitations of her society. There is no happy ending for women who dare exercise their power or place themselves on equal par with men—these are the women who become witches and spinsters, outcast by society and condemned by the narrative. Of course, the happy ending is exclusively in the form of a heterosexual pairing as well, allowing no room for queer romances. Such a perspective of what constitutes a happy ending limits audiences, young women in particular, from envisioning their own happy ending, instead proscribing a very specific one and condemning—or ignoring—all other paths.

Domesticity is not the only area in which fairy tales are male dominated, however. The very voices of female characters in fairy tales are often drowned out by male characters, implicitly declaring that women should be seen and not heard. Folklorist Ruth Bottigheimer conducted a study of female characters’ speech in the Grimms’ fairy tales and made a number of troubling findings, including that

the speech of ‘good’ female characters is more frequently expressed in indirect discourse, while men speak in direct quotation, that when silence is imposed as a task, men have an average of one to three days of silence, while women’s ban is often seven years, and loss

of the female voice occurs involuntarily, while men characters take it on voluntarily, usually in order to free a princess for eventual marriage. (Blackwell 164)

Such notations about speech are particularly important, as having a voice is, in literature, a form of power. Female characters speaking so much less than their male counterparts is a strong indicator of who holds the power in the tale—and in the culture that promulgates the tale.

Additionally, heroines are discouraged from asking questions and instead “lexically encouraged to give appropriate responses by answering questions when they are asked” (164). In other words, they are to speak when spoken to. Women who speak on their own terms tend to be portrayed negatively, such as in the form of old crones and witches. According to Bottigheimer’s findings, “Witches and boys speak by far the most, and they speak to men; good women speak to men about each other” (Blackwell 164), indicating that women who speak on equal terms with men are immoral or inhuman while moral women stay in their lane. As such, Bottigheimer concludes that “we should look at the issue of female voice and voicelessness in the fairy tale as deprivation and transformation of power” (Blackwell 164). Thus, the persistence of a patriarchal canon of literary fairy tales promotes an ideology that should not be encouraged.

And because fairy tales serve as educational texts, their portrayal of gender is concerning due to the influence these views may have on those who hear them, especially children. Marcia R. Lieberman writes, “Only the best-known stories, those that everyone has read or heard, indeed, those that Disney has popularized, have affected masses of children in our culture. Cinderella, the Sleeping Beauty, and Snow White are mythic figures who have replaced the old Greek and Norse gods, goddesses, and heroes for most children” (qtd. in Haase 15). In other words, fairy tales are among the most influential texts children encounter during their formative years, “offer[ing] symbolically powerful scenarios and options, in which seemingly unpromising

heroes succeed in solving some problems for modern children. These narratives set the socially acceptable boundaries for such scenarios and options, thus serving, more often than not, the civilizing aspirations of adults” (Bacchilega 5). In general terms, fairy tales provide guidance for children to interact with the wider world. And one aspect fairy tales help children grapple with is gender. As Leslee Farish Kuykendal and Brian W. Sturm explain, literature “help[s] children to determine what it means to be male or female as it applies to behavior, traits, or occupation within a child’s culture. In this capacity, fairy tales can be powerful cultural agents, telling the child who reads them how they should behave with regard to gender” (38). A specific example of this concern may be seen in Zipes’s study of the history of “Little Red Riding Hood,” *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, which “demonstrated how the folktale had been appropriated and reappropriated by European and American writers as a special discourse on sociocultural values, and how that fairy-tale discourse was intended to function in the socialization of children—especially in its modeling of gender-specific identity and behavior” (Haase 24). In this study, Zipes establishes that the most well-known versions of the tale, produced by Charles Perrault and the Grimms respectively, were “dramatically altered” from “the oral folktale, erasing its positive references to sexuality and female power,” thus “expos[ing] how the classical tale came to be a ‘male creation and projection’ that ‘reflects men’s fear of women’s sexuality—and of their own as well’” (Haase 23). In other words, the most widely disseminated version of this tale warns female audiences that to disobey one’s mother and society’s dictates on appropriate gender expression leads to disastrous consequences. This is unsurprising, as “[i]t has long been recognized that the traditional European canon of fairy tales, those that have survived to the present day, are tales that reflect and reproduce the patriarchal values of the society that crafted them” (Kuykendal and Sturm 39). “Little Red

Riding Hood” is just one example of a popular fairy tale in which “repressive female models were idealized and elevated to mythic images for middle-class readers” (Haase 25-6). Because children see themselves in these stories, they will internalize the messages the stories send to the characters about the appropriate expression of their gender. Thus, the gender roles portrayed in fairy tales are, in fact, harmful to children, especially female children. Kumlu explains,

The child who reads the tale will...unconsciously think that they are the daughters of a king, as this is a natural process of life, and they should be either captivated or forced to sleep in order to be protected from the dangers of social life. Therefore, the hidden social contract with the unconscious mind is: you should be submissive, passive and loyal in order to be alive. The hidden social contract with the psychosexual identity is: being a woman means suppressing your body, the ways you entertain and being captivated, becoming the silent daughter of your father and giving the control of your life to the hands of the male authority. The unconscious mind will immediately codes this as ‘being a woman is equal to passivity.’ (125)

In other words, fairy tales perpetuate “the story of women’s subjugation and disenfranchisement under patriarchy” because they “acculturate girls to believe that passivity, placidity, and morbidity, along with physical beauty, will make them the ‘best’ kind of girl to be” (Jarvis). This is evidenced by a 1993 study by Ella Westland that recorded children’s perceptions of fairy tales. Westland found that “the boys appeared to have little incentive to alter the standard fairy-tale structure...because they had more to lose than to gain from the changes” while “the girls argued they would not want to be a princess because it was simply too boring and restrictive” (Jarvis). The changes the girls suggested included “independent, plain, and active heroines” (Jarvis). Thus, while the boys saw strong male characters like princes and knights who fought to rescue

damsels in distress and slayed dragons, the girls lacked such active and empowered figures to which they could relate. This lack of relatable characters can subtly imply to audiences that such female characters simply do not exist, suggesting that female audiences should seek only to emulate the characters they encounter, not the ones that do not exist.

Such frustrations with fairy tales' portrayal of women has been documented to extend outside of childhood as well; Kay Stone interviewed a number of adult women about their perceptions of fairy tales, and her "initial studies confirmed that in North America a woman's experience of fairy tales relied on Grimm and Disney, whose tales did evince a paucity of active heroines," as "many of Stone's respondents admitted to being influenced by the passive heroines they had encountered" (Haase 37). The lack of solid representation of female characters in media is thus more impactful than we may have initially thought. In a follow-up study, Stone "confirmed the feminist view that fairy tales generate problems of identity by presenting readers with unrealizable romantic myths" while also "not[ing] that men and women respond differently to the idealized gender roles they counter, and that women in particular do not stop 'struggling with the problem of female roles as they are presented in fairy tales'" (37). Much like with the children in the 1993 study, Stone found that men have no issues with the portrayal of male characters, likely due to the roles the characters play and the power they wield. On the other hand, women "perceive fairy tales not as helpful but as problematic because of the discrepancies between their own life circumstances and those described for the fairy-tale heroine" (38). Indeed, Rita J. Comtois picked up where Stone's work left off, and in her own work, she "noted in particular the negative responses among those women whose personal lives and social views contradicted the fairy tale's traditional depiction of women" (Haase 38). However, Stone does not simply "reject fairy tales as inherently sexist narratives which offer 'narrow and damaging

role-models for young readers” (Bacchilega 9); rather, she takes a more nuanced perspective, echoing Cristina Bacchilega’s opinion that “[f]eminists can view the fairy tale as a powerful discourse which produces representations of gender” (9-10). Just because fairy tales may fall short in their portrayal of women does not mean they should simply be discarded; such shortfalls can, in fact, be a starting point for further discussion and exploration. In this way, Stone’s later work argues that a woman could have “ongoing and potentially liberating engagement with fairy tales over the course of her lifetime” because “many females find in fairy tales an echo of their own struggles to become human beings” (qtd. in Haase 37). Donald Haase summarizes, “In other words, while the romantic myths idealized in fairy tales may negatively affect a woman’s self-perception, Stone’s evidence shows that the dissonance that eventually emerges, the struggle that ensues, can provoke a critical and creative engagement” (37). Such critical engagement can be seen in a range of engagements with fairy tales, from feminist criticism of fairy tales to the girls in Westland’s 1993 study who suggested progressive changes to fairy tales to make them more female friendly. Interestingly, the girls of that study were, without realizing it, crafting fractured fairy tales to better promote gender equity—and fractured fairy tales provide an excellent form of critical and creative engagement with the genre.

### **Fractured Fairy Tales**

Fractured fairy tales are a form of retelling or revision of classical fairy tales—or a form of what Zipes terms “contamination” of classic fairy tales. Zipes explains, “Contamination is a phrase often used by folklorists to point to foreign (or alien) elements that may have been added to or have seeped into what appears to be a pure, homogenous narrative tradition” (“Contamination” 79). Though the descriptor “contamination” has a clearly negative connotation—indeed, “[t]he verb contaminate means to render impure by contact or mixture.

Synonyms are to defile, corrupt, pollute, taint, infect” (79)—Zipes believes “[c]ontamination can be an enrichment process” that “can lead to the birth of something unique and genuine in its own right” (79). When a homogenous body takes in something new, the original body has been tainted, but the new body may be stronger due to the addition of the new material in the way the human body encounters an illness and develops antibodies in response, making it more able to respond to future infections. Literature is comparable. Contamination may take many forms, and retellings are common one because “stories are constructed, told and retold in different settings and at different times; they are created, adapted, translated, referenced, echoed and reinvented for new audiences in unrelenting proliferation” (Crawford 1). In other words, fairy tales are molded to shape the culture and time in which they are told, constantly evolving with their audiences and serving new purposes with each telling. Feminist retellings are politically motivated contaminations of tales that seek to promote gender equality. Author and critic Adrienne Rich promoted retellings of traditional tales to critique outdated ideologies, calling such works “Re-visions.” Rich defines the term Re-vision as “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction” and calls it “an act of survival” for women (qtd. in Crawford 3). Rich argues that “women have been misrepresented in literature, that language has both trapped and liberated women, and that a new identity and a feminist future can be created through revision,” and therefore her “call for survival is not a physical survival, but a survival within cultural history. Revision allows readers to see how ‘we have been led to imagine ourselves’ and how to shift that vision to something more liberating” (Crawford 4). When it comes to fairy tales, women are inundated with patriarchal perceptions of what it means to be a woman—either the passive princess or the wicked witch, “a bipolar image of women” that feminist critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar consider “a reflection of the

self-destructive roles imposed by patriarchy, which reifies females as powerless aesthetic objects and subverts their creative powers” (Haase 26). As a result of this powerless portrayed in fairy tales, Carolyn G. Heilbrun argues, “What woman must learn to assume is that she is not confined to the role of the princess; that the hero, who awakens Sleeping Beauty with a kiss, is that part of herself that awakens conventional girlhood to the possibility of life and action” (qtd. in Haase 20). This can occur through Rich’s concept of revision, which “moves beyond rewriting a story—it identifies how women have been represented and shifts representation, allowing for women to be *seen* differently. By constructing alternative representations of women in literature, feminist revisionists seek to change how women live” (Crawford 4). Fractured fairy tales, then, are a form of revision—or contamination—that, per Rich’s method, “seek[] to interrogate old texts, atomize the canon, and enable the survival of women in cultural history” (6). With revisions fairy tales can provide positive messages for women.

Fractured fairy tales work by “rearrang[ing]” traditional fairy tales “with a reforming intent, seek[ing] to impart updated social and moral messages” (Bottigheimer, “Fractured Fairy Tales”). Fairy tales “are constantly being reworked and adapted to reveal new facets of a culture or the creativity of an author or storyteller” (Kuykendal and Sturm 39). As the society that tells the tales changes, so too do the tales themselves. This change happens when tellers “decod[e] a tale’s words, motifs, and plot, and encod[e] them in a new pattern,” resulting in “plots with fundamentally different meanings or messages” (Bottigheimer, “Fractured Fairy Tales”). These changes may be large or small, but they are done with a revisionist intent. Jeannine Blackwell notes that fractured fairy tales “use the folk tale form for unraveling political and social malaise, for laughing at hurt and unfairness,” creating “a hairline seam of pain and fear in the content of many tales” (162). One seam of pain and fear in these traditional tales is the submissive role to



which women are relegated, and feminist retellings seek to “sew[] up the seams” (162) through which women’s submission and passivity seep, using their own “temporal interpretations” (163) as thread. To this end, “[f]eminist rewriters of fairy tales have reworked the conventions of the genre so as to encode discourses that contradict or challenge patriarchal ideologies that are increasingly viewed as anachronistic in today’s society” (qtd. in Kuykendal and Sturm 39).

Another way to think of feminist fractured fairy tales is that these writers are “reclaiming” fairy tales (Kuykendal and Sturm 39) from the patriarchal traditions from which they derive and do so by “turn[ing] the plot around, giv[ing] the voice to the wronged woman, and let[ting] her tell her story” (Blackwell 171). These tales no longer silence their heroines or demand their passivity.

Blackwell wonders, “Is there an equivalent of the boy who left home to learn about fear? Is there a girl who left home to learn about power? Such a tale, with a female authorial voice, would break the spell of silence for mediating female voice, would unite teller with the told, and would reinstate the wise woman as a character of positive, rather than merely negative, strengths” (165). Were they to exist, these stories would be considered fractured fairy tales because they take a traditional tale and transform it—thus enabling women’s cultural survival through literature.

### **Angela Carter**

Angela Carter is one feminist writer who challenged the misogynistic messages promoted by traditional fairy tales like “Beauty and the Beast.” Her famous collection of feminist fractured fairy tales, *The Bloody Chamber* (1978), “deconstructs the underlying assumptions of the ‘official’ fairy tale: that fairy tales are universal, timeless myths, that fairy tales are meant exclusively for an audience of children, and that fairy tales present an idealized, fantastic world unrelated to the contingencies of real life” (Kaiser 35). For Carter, her fractured fairy tales

provide an opportunity to deconstruct the traditional fairy tale and its portrayal of women, calling out what Patricia Brooke terms “the false universalizing inherent in many so-called master narratives of the Western literary tradition” (67). In other words, through a series of retellings of tales including “Bluebeard,” “Beauty and the Beast,” “Puss in Boots,” and “Little Red Riding Hood,” Carter gives voice to her heroines, allowing them to narrate their own stories as well as throw off traditional gender roles to embrace their sexuality and desires, thus becoming three-dimensional people rather than stock characters supporting a man’s story. Seda Arian elaborates, “By challenging the archetypal characters and stereotypical female and male figures, Carter re-examines the themes of marriage, sexuality, power relations between females and males, gender roles, and female liberty. Standing against the oppression by males, she announces the liberation of females in fairy tales (118). Carter’s women are powerful, sexual, and fully realized people. Indeed, Haase notes that Carter “had no interest in presenting a one-dimensional view of women—let alone heroines without sexuality” (22), as they appeared in most traditional fairy tales. And that is because “[f]or Carter, sexuality and political life are inseparable” (Crawford 49)—and Carter’s writings, feminist as they are, are inherently political. One way Carter’s works are political is through her willingness to “critique the inscribed restrictive ideology that denies that such impulses—perverse, violent, liberatory—exist in women” (Brooke 69). Carter’s protagonists do not have to be the moral center of their stories as they do in traditional fairy tales; indeed, Carter challenges the very idea that a fairy tale must have a moral lesson—a reward for the good and a punishment for the wicked. Because her characters are human, they are flawed rather than placed on a pedestal. Thus, Carter’s “revisionary fairy tales move incrementally away from their source materials, grounding the heroine’s knowledge and expression within her own sexuality” to challenge traditional gender norms (69). In the vein of

Rich's concept of cultural survival for women through literary re-vision, "Carter's fairy tale heroines survive both within their narratives and our collective cultural experience, enduring mental abuse, physical violence, and humiliation by refusing to be intimidated by, and even at times prevailing over social stereotypes and sexist ideologies that limit their subjectivity" (68). Indeed, the survival of Carter's women is made apparent by the fact her works are read widely and studied at high levels more than four decades after the publication of *The Bloody Chamber*.

### **Emma Donoghue**

Another author recognized for her fractured fairy tales is Emma Donoghue. Her *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* (1997) is a "series of linked retellings of twelve well-known fairy tales" plus one original tale in which "[o]ne character in each tale becomes the narrator of the next" (Harries, "Donoghue"). Donoghue's collection "creates thirteen distinct female characters who, apart from the witch figure in the last tale, are also familiar figures in canonical fairy tales. The stories they each tell reveal that they grow up with classical fairy tales and that they strive to take a path different from the one prescribed by the classical tales" (Xiaoqing 110). Donoghue retells stories including "Cinderella," "Beauty and the Beast," "Bluebeard," "Thumbelina," and "The Little Mermaid," fracturing them by "disrupt[ing] the usual patterns of heterosexual desire; in these tales princesses often ignore princes to fall in love with fairy godmothers, stepmothers, and even with witches—older, powerful women usually portrayed as threatening or evil in the fairy-tale canon" (Harries, "Donoghue"). As such, Donoghue's work is not just feminist; she also "open[s] fairy tales up to interpretations from lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) perspectives" (Martin 6). By writing about characters who "resist the gender and sexual norms of their societies" (6), Donoghue, like Carter, is "giving new life to old stories, recasting them to question old paradigms" (Harries, "Donoghue"). Unlike

Carter, Donoghue plays with the very structure of the tales, mostly by providing new endings, often with a queer twist, such as Cinderella falling in love with her fairy godmother rather than the prince. Though not all of Donoghue's tales feature queer pairings, the core relationship in each tale is between an older and younger woman with the older woman taking the younger woman under her wing and the younger woman requesting to hear the older woman's story.

Moreover, intertextuality is essential to reading Donoghue's collection. *Kissing the Witch*, like *The Bloody Chamber*, "is a book that both depends on an intimate acquaintance with the Grimms' and Andersen's tales and calls all the old stereotypes into question" (Harries, *Twice Upon a Time* 129-30). Much of the audience's delight at the fracturing comes from knowing the traditional plot of the fairy tale and seeing the new direction the retelling will take. Intertextuality is essential to the tales within the collection as well; indeed, Harries explains, "Perhaps the most startling innovation of Donoghue's book, however, is the way she frames and links the tales. A character in each tale becomes the narrator of the following tale" (*Twice Upon a Time* 131). In doing so, the fairy tales themselves become connected. For example, the collection opens with "The Tale of the Shoe," in which Cinderella falls in love with her fairy godmother. At the end of the tale, Cinderella asks about the fairy godmother's backstory. The fairy godmother replies, "Will I tell you my own story? It is a tale of a bird" (Donoghue 9). The following story, "The Tale of the Bird," is then told by the fairy godmother—and it is a retelling of "Thumbelina," meaning Cinderella's fairy godmother was once Thumbelina. Thus, "Donoghue uses one tale to frame the next, in part to stress continuities of behavior, in part to undermine the gender stereotypes we tend to bring to fairy tales" (Harries, *Twice Upon a Time* 132). Each story connects to the next in this way, creating a tapestry of connection among these fairy tale women as well as providing an outlet for all these women to voice their own stories—to express their

own desires and exercise their agency, something they are unable to do when they are regularly silenced and forced into heterosexual boxes in the traditional versions of their tales.

### **“Beauty and the Beast”**

One tale that has been frequently fractured by feminist writers is “Beauty and the Beast.” This tale is categorized as an Animal Bridegroom tale, in which “the heroine lives with or marries an enchanted hero who sets a taboo upon her, usually restricting when she can see him or tell others about his true nature. When she breaks the taboo, he departs and she passes through various trials to regain him” (Heiner, *Beauty and the Beast* viii-ix). The variations on trials faced by the heroine comprise the different subtypes of the ATU categorization for this type of tale. “Beauty and the Beast” falls into the ATU 425 category, known as the “Search for the Lost Husband” tales. However, there is no lost husband in “Beauty and the Beast,” which sets it apart from other Animal Bridegroom tales, thus giving it the subtype ATU 425C. Unlike many fairy tales that come from a hazy oral tradition, this tale “has a discernible birth and history, beginning in 1740 with Madame Gabrielle-Suzanne de Villeneuve, a French writer influenced by the fairy tales written by women and men, such as Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy and Charles Perrault, in the French salons during the earlier part of the century” (i-ii). Villeneuve’s version is much longer than the well-known version. For instance, after the Beast becomes a man, her tale does not end; rather, it delves into the backstories of both protagonists, including the introduction of the Beast’s mother and the revelation that Beauty is, in fact, a princess in disguise (ii). Indeed, “Villeneuve imagined new material, uniquely her own, while incorporating traditional folklore elements, many of which exist in the version we are most familiar with today” (ii). Villeneuve’s tale is primarily aimed at adults and explores themes like “romantic love and marriage” as well as “women’s marital rights” (ii).

The history of this tale does not end there, however. In 1756, Madame Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont published a significantly shorter version of “Beauty and the Beast” primarily aimed at young women that featured “didactic messages about physical beauty and refined comportment. Beaumont, as teacher and author, is less interested in marital rights and more concerned with teaching fine manners to young women, so she changes the narrative emphasis and removes most of Villeneuve’s elaborate descriptions and backstories” (iv). Though there are many other versions of the stories, including by Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm, Beaumont’s version of “Beauty and the Beast” is the version most audiences are familiar with today:

A rich merchant who has lost his fortune wanders onto the grounds of an enchanted palace where he plucks a flower to take home to his youngest daughter. His act enrages the palace's owner, the Beast of the title, who as retribution exacts a promise that the merchant will surrender one of his daughters. The youngest willingly redeems her father's promise, and, expecting death, enters the enchanted palace. Instead, she enjoys luxury and elevated conversation with her monstrous partner, whom, however, she is unable to love. Released to visit her family, she overstays the time allotted for her absence, but when a sick and dying Beast appears in her dreams she hastily returns, declaring not only that she will marry him, but that she cannot live without him. Indeed, her tender sentiments restore the Beast to his princely appearance. The statues into which her wicked sisters are turned warn viewers against personal vanity and sisterly jealousy.

(Bottigheimer, “Beauty and the Beast”)

Beaumont first published her version of “Beauty and the Beast” while she was working in London as a governess; she sought a means to impart lessons upon her students in a palatable

form and was inspired by fairy tales; with the action of the story taking place in fairy tale worlds, Beaumont drew her mostly female audience in to “guid[e] them through the conduct of courtship, marriage, and family relationships” (Korneeva 234). Beaumont hoped to “educate the daughters of the elite and numerous aspiring social groups” by “instruct[ing] them about how to attract a prospective husband and keep him happy. Such educational treatises taught young ladies how to become desirable to men of superior social rank” (235). As such, conduct-oriented works like Beaumont’s were “clearly designed to produce and maintain specific forms of sexual desire” (235), specifically for a woman to appeal to her husband’s sexual desires while ignoring her own.

Though Beaumont’s tale was more sanitized than Villeneuve’s due to its younger audience, both were “understood as a means of harnessing female sexuality, of describing female destiny, of coming to terms with sexual aspects of love, or of providing a ‘philosophical allegory of the progression of the rational soul towards intellectual love’” (Bottigheimer, “Beauty and the Beast”). While this could have been an opportunity to provide young women with an empowering message about their sexuality and desires, “Beauty and the Beast” does the opposite. It teaches young women that men are beasts, and women are victims to be devoured, either literally or sexually, once they reach adulthood. To this end, this tale “deals with the violence of male sexuality, which the heroine must learn to tame—and accept—and which marks the main stage of her education into womanhood” (Talairach-Vielmas, “Beautiful Maidens” 275). Beaumont’s tale teaches young women to emulate Beauty, who is “a self-abnegating, submissive, and hard-working heroine, who prefers virtue to looks and is soon rewarded by marriage and happiness—that is, wealth” (274-5). As with many fairy tales, the reward for the passive, and therefore moral, heroine is material. As such, the “Beauty and the Beast” tale

“constitutes a parable of social climbing with a happy resolution” in which Beauty “marr[ies] a prince and live[s] happily ever after” (Korneeva 236). But can a woman live happily ever after if she must be submissive to her husband in all areas? Though traditional fairy tales preach the virtue of the passive heroine, such lessons are problematic; it is cruel to push women to subjugate themselves and their desires to receive material rewards, and this is a message young women should not continue receiving today.

### **“The Courtship of Mr Lyon”**

*The Bloody Chamber* features a retelling of “Beauty and the Beast” titled “The Courtship of Mr Lyon.” Carter’s version does not change the basic plot structure of the fairy tale by Villeneuve and Beaumont as “Beauty’s father, still a ruined merchant, spends the night in the Beast’s castle (after his ancient car breaks down), steals a rose to bring back to his daughter, and is forced to promise her to the Beast in exchange for his release. The Beast is as usual transformed into a man through Beauty’s faithfulness and love” (Harries, *Twice Upon a Time* 153). Carter plays with some details, including some modern inventions like a car, a photograph, and a telephone, “but most of the tale takes place in an enchanted landscape, nearly frozen in time: ‘a miniature, perfect, Palladian house that seemed to hide itself shyly behind snow-laden skirts of an antique cypress’” (153). As such, some have criticized Carter for not subverting the overall structure of the traditional tale, arguing that the tale cannot be challenged if its foundation remains intact. For example, Kuykendal and Sturm argue that fractured fairy tales that retain the structure of the original tale “challenge gender stereotypes and patriarchal ideologies only at the story level of the text” through a flawed “straightforward reversal of gender roles and the substitution of strong female characters for more passive female characters” (40). For them, this is a superficial fracturing of the story that cannot truly provide a feminist message because it



does not address the root issues of the misogyny of the original tale. Brooke, in defending Carter, acknowledges that Carter's "work does not always successfully disrupt the stereotypes of sexual predator (active, male culprit) or prey (passive, female victim)" but argues that "it plays with presumptions about, assumptions of, and identifications with either side" (68). Though the entire structure of the story has not been transformed, Beauty will not, by the end of the tale, be a victim rewarded for her passivity, while the Beast will not be a sexual predator whose desires are foregrounded over Beauty's.

Instead of changing the structure of the tale, Carter upends the reader's expectations for the roles of the protagonists through a heavy dose of irony. Indeed, Carter's tale is an "ironic rewriting that draws parallels to the domestic marriage plot" (Brooke 76), and the irony is apparent from the start: "From its title, this Carter revision discloses its ironic affiliations with the marriage or domestic plot. However here it is not the innocent daughter who is being wooed, but rather, it is she who implicitly seduces the Beast, who 'courts' (and indeed actually creates) 'Mr. Lyon'" (70). From the moment the Beast sees a picture of Beauty, his enrapture is apparent: "The Beast rudely snatched the photograph her father drew from his wallet and inspected it, first brusquely, then with a strange kind of wonder, almost the dawning of sunrise" (Carter 44). He is already being tamed by Beauty, his manners improving at the very sight of her—already an exaggerated response to a mere image of a person. The hyperbole only continues throughout the tale. Once Beauty comes to live with him, the Beast continues acting on his best behavior due to his favor of the girl: "But he, hesitantly, as if himself were in awe of a young girl who looked as if she had been carved out of a single pearl, asked after her father's law case; and her dead mother; and how they, who had been so rich, had come to be so poor. He forced himself to master his shyness, which was that of a wild creature" (47). Indeed, Brooke notes that "[h]is

reaction belongs more to a smitten suitor than a threatening Beast: he is weak, shy, and easily manipulated by his beloved's whims. The dominant conventions of the Beast's character-type are reversed and amplified" (73). Rather than the young woman falling in love with the rich man and acting lovesick, as is the stereotype, it is the Beast who behaves in this way—truly ironic and an upset of the status quo of the passive, pining heroine. Indeed, he “helplessly fell before her to kiss her hands” each night before bed (Carter 47) and literally becomes lovesick when she leaves to visit her family. She returns—and it is important to note that Beauty does not return out of a duty to her father (another man) but because she wishes to; she is exercising her agency by making this choice—to find him dying. Of course, such an over-the-top reaction to loneliness by the male hero is heavily ironic and meant to poke fun at the stereotypes the Beauty and Beast embody in the original tale. The Beast tells Beauty, “Since you left me, I have been sick. I could not go hunting, I found I had not the stomach to kill the gentle beasts, I could not eat. I am sick and I must die; but I shall die happy because you have come to say good-bye to me” (50). Beauty, in an exaggerated reaction of her own, is so moved “that he should care for her so” (48) that she kisses him and begs him to live. Her kiss triggers his transformation into a man: “And then it was no longer a lion in her arms but a man, a man with an unkempt mane of hair and, how strange, a broken nose, such as the noses of retired boxers, that gave him a distant, heroic resemblance to the handsomest of all the beasts” (51). The transformation itself takes up a very small part of the story, and Beauty reacts with minimal surprise when it occurs—yet further evidence of the heavy-handed irony weighing down the story, as readers would expect her to be shocked by such a magical moment. Moreover, though usually it is the woman whose situation is transformed into a socially beneficial one by the end of a fairy tale, there is no greater social benefit for the Beast than becoming a man and marrying. Once more, the Beast (or Mr Lyon)

takes on the traditionally feminine role in the tale, exposing the ridiculousness with which women are often characterized.

Additionally, while it is true that Beauty “puts herself, whether by desire, habit, or necessity, into the role of virtuous, dutiful daughter, and through these qualities, wins herself marriage and wealth,” Brooke points out “Carter’s parodic exaggeration of gender stereotypes, drawing attention to the precarious distinction between appearing and being” (74). Thus, as “Mr and Mrs Lyon walk in the garden” (Carter 51), we return to the irony of the tale’s title: “Tamed and remade (if only in her eye) from fierce predator who threatened her purity and convention to her betrothed eating porridge and walking in the garden, the Beast has lost the mating game, and has instead been successfully courted, captured, and domesticated” (Brooke 75-6). Thus, Carter effectively fractures the original “Beauty and the Beast” tale into a feminist story that gives its heroine agency by allowing her to act on her own desires by returning to the Beast. The Beast, instead, plays the part of the passive party who is rewarded for his devotion to the more active party in the tale—Beauty. And though it is true that Carter does not fracture the very structure of the tale, Carter’s telling arguably works *because* of the familiar structure. Lee McLain argues, “It’s that familiarity with the original that makes reading or listening to a parody so satisfying—that feeling of being in on a joke” as the audience “know[s] how this story is supposed to go, which makes it” more affecting “when it goes off in a different direction” (70). Thus, it is the audience’s familiarity with Beaumont’s version of “Beauty and the Beast” that makes Carter’s fractured tale work; Carter’s retelling depends on intertextuality. In other words, reading Carter’s telling with Beaumont’s in mind allows for surprise and delight when Beauty is the one to realize and act on her desires while the Beast pines.

### **“The Tale of the Rose”**

Carter is not the only author to fracture “Beauty and the Beast” with a feminist bent. Donoghue’s collection also features a retelling of “Beauty and the Beast,” titled “The Tale of the Rose.” Like Carter’s fractured tale, Donoghue’s features Beauty as the first-person narrator, giving a voice to the heroine. The plot of “The Tale of the Rose” also hits many of the same beats as the well-known Villeneuve and Beaumont versions, in which Beauty “is promised by her father to a beast in a castle who has offered him shelter after his fleet of ships is lost at sea” (Orme 125). However, borrowing much of the structure of the story, as seen with Carter’s retelling of “Beauty and the Beast,” does not mean the tale fails to successfully fracture the tale. Priyanka Banerjee and Rajni Singh argue, “While the surface level realistic narrative upholds patriarchal, normative and heterosexual ideals, elements of fantasy in the deep structure of the tales provide a space for going beyond conventional morality and gender norms, more so to represent queer sexuality, gender and desire” (190). One new element Donoghue provides is that her beast (also, notably, not capitalized as in other versions of the tale, indicating it is not a name) wears a mask. Additionally, this beast asks a noteworthy question: “Did you come consenting?” (Donoghue 33), which addresses a major feminist critique of the original fairy tale in the form of Beauty’s ability—or lack thereof—to exercise any form of agency. By introducing the question of Beauty’s consent, the beast foreshadows an understanding of Beauty’s situation and a respect for her as a person with her own wants and needs. Additionally, in the castle, Beauty is provided every material comfort: there is

a door with [her] name on it and the walls of [her] room were white satin. There were a hundred dresses cut to [her] shape. The great mirror showed [her] whatever [she] wanted to see. [She] had keys to every room in the castle except the one where the beast slept.

The first book [she] opened said in gold letters: You are the mistress: ask for whatever you wish. (33-4)

In addition, she has “so many books on so many shelves, [she] knew [she] could live to be old without coming to the end of them” (36). Beauty notes, “I had everything I could want except the key to the story” (34). Of Beauty’s confusion at how to react to her new circumstances, Jennifer Orme writes, “The desires and relations of her new life are not accessible to either heteropatriarchal or heteronormative feminist discourses, and their logics lead her to misread her situation” (125). Indeed, Beauty will obtain the key by the end of the tale, when the beast is no longer masked—but first, she must return home, as in the original tale, before making the decision to return to the beast. As Beauty departs, the beast tells her, “I must tell you before you go: I am not a man” (Donoghue 37). Beauty, naturally, thinks the beast is inhuman: “I knew it. Every tale I had ever heard of trolls, ogres, goblins, rose to my lips. The beast said, You do not understand” (37). She is mistaken, however. When she returns to the palace—like in Carter’s version, she does so of her own volition rather than because she is forced—she finds “the beast, a crumpled bundle eaten by frost” (39). She unmask the beast to discover a description that echoes the classic description of Snow White (which will become important for the next tale in the collection): “hair black as rocks under water,” “a face white as old linen,” and “lips red as a rose just opening” (39). And, like Snow White, “the beast was a woman” (39). Upon this revelation, it is worth noting the beast is never gendered before the unmasking; Beauty may assume the beast is male, but she is incorrect, and the narrative’s diction reflects that. Beauty realizes that she loves the beast, prompting her to “acknowledge and struggle with the queer desires of her relationship with the beast” (Orme 125). This is entirely new ground for a fairy tale heroine, who is expected to fall into a heterosexual relationship, as Beauty notes, “This was a

strange story, one I would have to learn a new language to read, a language I could not learn except by trying to read the story” (Donoghue 39). At first, Beauty was missing the key to the story. Now, knowing the beast is a woman, Beauty has the key but no language for what she is feeling, as same sex desires have found no place in traditional fairy tales. Any such desires would be suppressed in favor of either a heterosexual coupling or a life lived alone, aging into a spinster.

However, Donoghue’s tale provides Beauty the opportunity to not only open the door to a previously locked room but also to learn this new language through experience. Orme states, “The queer moment of the discovery of the woman behind the mask disrupts Beauty’s reading of her own desires and leads her to try to continue to unmask other normative discourses she has never before questioned” (125). If she could be wrong about this, what else could she be wrong about? Her world has been upended. Indeed, the longer she spends with the beast, Beauty discovers “there was nothing monstrous about this woman who had lived alone in a castle, setting all her suitors riddles they could make no sense of, refusing to do the things queens are supposed to do, until the day when, knowing no one who could see her true face, she made a mask and from then on showed her face to no one” (Donoghue 39-40). As Orme says, “this new language is not an easy one to acquire” (125) for the narrator. Calling herself a “slow learner but a stubborn one” (Donoghue 39), Beauty comes to understand over time “why the faceless mask and the name of a beast might be chosen over all the great world had to offer” (40)—the realization that her lover could not be happy in the role the world of her fairy tale had prescribed for her. Additionally, “[a]fter months of looking, I saw that beauty was infinitely various, and found it behind her white face” (40). According to Orme,

This learning process becomes an extended queer moment that awakens the narrator to the subversion of not only heteronormative desire and naturalized feminine behavioral codes that insist on the search for happiness in a husband, but also of a reading practice that takes these discourses of desire as natural, normal, and inevitable. The narrator understands that it takes a concerted effort to resist hegemonic discourses, and further, that learning to read queerly does not ensure that others will be able or willing to participate in the same process. (125-6)

Donoghue thus not only gives “Beauty and the Beast” a feminist twist by giving her heroine agency and a voice with which to share her take but also by allowing her to discover and explore her desires that would not have been acceptable in the traditional version of her story. Moreover, she is provided a safe space to undergo the learning she must do—to learn the language, as it were, of loving another woman in a world that demands women submit themselves to men’s desires. Indeed, Beauty proves to be an adept student, living many years with her lover: “And as the years flowed by, some villagers told travelers of a beast and a beauty who lived in the cast and could be seen walking on the battlements, and others told of two beauties, and others, of two beasts” (Donoghue 40). Though this might sound lonely, two women living in isolation in order to have a safe haven for their relationship, they Orme argues they are not truly isolated, as “their story is not told, read, or interpreted by them alone” (126). Moreover, that others see them walking together evokes “the larger social community and other possible readings of their tale” (126). Thus, Orme argues, “In looking outside of her own story and recognizing the divergent interpretations, the narrator further destabilizes ‘The Tale of the Rose’ and reminds the reader of the multiple possible readings of any story, including one’s own” (126). We also have an alternate interpretation for the symbol in the story’s title: “While in Beaumont’s tale the rose

signifies the Beast's declaration of love, youth or virginity, in Donoghue's tale it becomes a symbol of feminine sexuality and lesbian desire" (Banerjee and Singh 194), creating even more destabilization of the original tale—and thus providing an empowering feminist message the original tale failed to provide. Finally, in the nature of the interconnected tales of Donoghue's collection, when Beauty asks her lover to share her story, the beast replies, "Will I tell you my story? It is the tale of an apple" (41). Like the narrator's description of the beast foreshadowed, the beast was, in fact, once Snow White, another character whose background is heavily influenced by an older woman.

### **"Little Red Riding Hood"**

Like "Beauty and the Beast," another tale that is frequently fractured by feminist writers is "Little Red Riding Hood." This tale is categorized as ATU 333 "The Glutton" or "Little Red Riding Hood," and "it is with the remembering and writing down of some oral version by Charles Perrault in 1696/97 and the publication of this tale with the en-gendered and loaded title, *Le Petit Chaperon Rouge*, that the history and destiny of the narrativized girl is conceived" (Zipes, *Trials* 7). Furthermore, it is generally accepted that

there was indeed a separate oral tradition, controlled by peasants and most likely by women, before Perrault adapted the story of the girl who went into the woods to visit her grandmother for an upper-class audience in France at the end of the 17th century. But once he appropriated it as his own, and in the name of a particular sex and social class, it became practically impossible for either oral storytellers or writers not to take into account his version, and thus storytellers and writers became the conveyers of both the oral and literary tradition of this particular tale. (7)



Zipes notes that this history is essential to understanding the discourse surrounding the tale because “Perrault fixed the ground rules and sexual regulations for the debate, and these were extended by the Brothers Grimm and largely accepted by most writers and story-tellers in the Western world” (7). Indeed, Bacchilega elaborates on Perrault’s influence on the spread of the tale: “‘Little Red Riding Hood’ began to circulate in the British literary and folkloric context only after Robert Samber’s 1729 translation of Perrault” while “[i]n Germany, the tale was not well known until the Grimms collected their ‘Little Red Cap’ from a teller familiar with Perrault, and in France itself many subsequently collected oral tales derive such significant details as the red hood and the moral from Perrault’s text” (54). In other words, Perrault’s version of the tale is impossible to escape in our modern familiarity of the tale.

With the propagation of the tale in popular culture in the West, “Little Red Riding Hood” became known as a *Warnmärchen*, or a warning tale (Bacchilega 55) in which “a young woman [is] fatally punished for stepping off the tracks of proper femininity” (Talairach-Vielmas, “Rewriting Little Red” 260). Despite the sanitization of the children’s versions of this tale, it cannot be separated from its connection to sexuality and maturation. In the oral tradition of “Little Red Riding Hood,” the tale

depicts an unnamed peasant girl who meets a werewolf on her way to visit her grandmother. The wolf asks her whether she is taking the path of pins or needles. She indicates that she is on her way to becoming a seamstress by taking the path of the needles. The werewolf quickly departs and arrives at the grandmother’s house, where he devours the old lady and places some of her flesh in a bowl and some of her blood in a bottle. After the peasant girl arrives, the werewolf invites her to eat some meat and drink some wine before getting into bed with him. Once in bed, she asks several questions until

the werewolf is about to eat her. At this point she insists that she must go outside to relieve herself. The werewolf ties a rope around her leg and sends her through a window. In the garden, the girl unties the rope and wraps it around a fruit tree. Then she escapes and leaves the werewolf holding the rope. In some versions of this folk tale, the werewolf manages to eat the girl. But for the most part the girl proves that she can fend for herself. (Zipes, "Little Red Riding Hood")

This version of the tale includes aspects of cannibalism and eroticism, which Perrault removed from his sanitized version. Through Perrault's numerous revisions to the oral tale, Zipes argues that "Perrault transformed a hopeful oral tale about the initiation of a young girl into a tragic one of violence in which the girl is blamed for her own violation" (*Trials* 7), and he does so by "making the girl appear spoiled and naïve" while wearing "a red cap indicating her 'sinful' nature" and "mak[ing] a wager with the wolf to see who will arrive at grandmother's house first" ("Little Red Riding Hood"). Moreover, Little Red Riding Hood "dawdl[es] in the woods" before "find[ing] the wolf disguised as the grandmother in bed" when she arrives at her grandmother's house ("Little Red Riding Hood"). Because Perrault's Little Red Riding Hood is a sinful girl, "[s]he gets into bed with [the wolf] and, after posing several questions about the wolf's strange appearance, she is devoured just as her grandmother was" ("Little Red Riding Hood"). Though sexual innuendos and other erotic components may be removed from the children's versions of the tale like Perrault's, these versions "always imply that, if Red Riding Hood herself had not strayed off the straight path to her grandmother's house, to domesticity, she would not have brought about the trouble she experiences" (*Trials* 9). As such, Little Red Riding Hood has become, in Perrault's and the Grimms' version, a victim of rape culture, which blames victims of sexual assault and rape for their violations while letting the perpetrators off the hook. Rather than

celebrated for her ingenuity and bravery, Little Red Riding Hood is victimized *and* held responsible for her victimization at the hands—or claws—of the wolf.

“Little Red Riding Hood,” based on the oral tradition, is about the maturation of young women into adulthood, symbolized by her travel from her home to her grandmother’s home. As evidence for this interpretation, Zipes cites a study by Yvonne Verdier that argues “the references to the pins and needles were related to the needlework apprenticeship undergone by young peasant girls, and designated the arrival of puberty and initiation into society in specific regions of France where the oral tale was common” (*Trials* 23). Thus, the oral version of Little Red Riding Hood is on the path to becoming a woman—and a sexual being. Perrault’s Red Riding Hood, on the other hand, “is petty, spoiled, gullible, and helpless” (25) rather than a young woman on the verge of maturity. Zipes notes that Perrault’s revision “contribute[s] to the portrait of a pretty, defenseless girl, who moreover may have been slightly vain because of her red hood” (25), which fits better with traditional fairy tale heroines who do not always exercise their agency as well as with the stories promoting passivity and waiting for male intervention than the independent girl in the oral tale. Perrault also added the red hood to the folktale, and Zipes reasons that it was because “red was generally associated at the time with sin, sensuality, and the devil” (25). Talairach-Vielmas, on the other hand, suggests the addition “codifies the heroine and constructs her as an object” due to the hood’s status as “an upper-class marker” (“Rewriting” 260). Moreover, the red cap “underscores the importance of physical appearance. The riding hood acts as evidence that the more the little girl’s outer appearance is in keeping with the fashion standards of the day, the more the young girl should be able to regulate her nature—or, at least, to cloak it beneath gaudy material” (261). Whether the hood was added as a sign of Red Riding’s Hood sinfulness or to commodify her, it is clear Perrault’s intention was

misogynistic and should not be accepted by modern audiences. Additional revisions made by Perrault include the removal of sexuality and cannibalism; in the oral version, the heroine “symbolically replaces the grandmother by eating her flesh and drinking her blood. It is a matter of self-assertion through learning and conflict,” so the grandmother’s “death in the folk tale signifies the continuity and reinvigoration of custom, which was important for the preservation of society” (Zipes, *Trials* 23). Thus, despite the seemingly grisly nature of certain aspects of the oral tradition, it is clearly meant to be celebratory—especially because the girl usually defeats the wolf, meaning the tale “celebrates the self-reliance of a young peasant girl” (24). Because the most well-known version of the story undermines the oral folk tale’s message, feminist retellings are needed to reclaim the tale’s original celebratory and empowering theme.

### **“The Company of Wolves”**

*The Bloody Chamber* also includes a retelling of “Little Red Riding Hood,” titled “The Company of Wolves.” Carter, who, prior to writing *The Bloody Chamber*, had completed a translation of Perrault’s tales, considers Perrault’s version “spare and reductionist, writing, ‘The wolf consumes Red Riding Hood; what else can you expect if you talk to strange men, comments Perrault briskly. Let’s not bother our heads with the mysteries of sado-masochistic attraction. We must learn to cope with the world before we can interpret it’” (Crawford 52). As such, Carter addresses her views of Perrault’s shortcomings and his sanitization of the tale through her own retelling. Much like “The Courtship of Mr Lyon,” “The Company of Wolves” “is not read as a story read for the first time, with a positively imaged heroine. It is read, with the original story encoded within it, so that one reads of both texts, aware of how the new one refers back to and implicitly critiques the old” (Makinen 5). The power of the retelling comes from its juxtaposition with the fairy tale it critiques. The tale “begins with popular beliefs, proscriptions and

exhortations” (Bacchilega 62) about wolves, such as “One beast and only one howls in the woods at night” and “The wolf is carnivore incarnate and he’s as cunning as he is ferocious; once he’s had a taste of flesh then nothing else will do” (Carter 110). The audience is “addressed as ‘you’: like the child who was told cautionary tales in the Alps centuries ago, ‘you’ must listen to the reasons humans have for fearing the wolf, and since ‘you are always in danger in the forest, where no people are,’ you must also identify with the potential victim” (Bacchilega 62). For instance, the narrator warns, “But those eyes are all you will be able to glimpse of the forest assassins as they cluster invisibly round your smell of meat as you go through the wood unwisely late. They will be like shadows, they will be like wraiths, grey members of a congregation of nightmare hark! His long, wavering howl . . . an aria of fear made audible” (Carter 110). Like Perrault’s version of the tale, Carter’s begins as a warning tale, but Carter’s narrator provides balance to the danger promised by the presence of wolves; according to the tale, “werewolves are not simply devilish creatures devoted to witchcraft and cannibalism, but also sad creatures” (Bacchilega 62) whose howls have “some inherent sadness in [them], as if the beasts would love to be less beastly if only they knew how and never cease to mourn their own condition” (Carter 112). Indeed, “the canticles of wolves” hold “a vast melancholy” and “ghastly sadness” that is “infinite as the forest, endless as these long nights of winter” (112). Bacchilega notes, “Fear and sympathy are common and traditional attitudes toward the damned” (62), which the werewolves in Carter’s tale are. Thus, through a nuanced portrayal of wolves—who, in Carter’s tale, are exclusively male—Carter has already fractured Perrault’s version of the tale. However, as with her retelling of “Beauty and the Beast,” Carter borrows much of the structure of the original tale. Carter’s heroine is described as “so pretty and the youngest of her family, a little late-comer” who wears a red shawl with “the ominous if brilliant look of blood on snow” (113). Such a

description is already ominous, but then, unlike Perrault and the Grimms, “Carter depicts her Little Red Riding Hood as a sexually attractive girl” (Bhatt and Pareek 75). Indeed, the girl’s “breasts have just begun to swell; her hair is like lint, so fair it hardly makes a shadow on her pale forehead; her cheeks are an emblematic scarlet and white and she has just started her woman’s bleeding, the clock inside her that will strike, henceforward, once a month” (Carter 113). Thus, Carter’s description harkens back to the oral version of the tale that celebrates the initiation of young women.

If Carter’s story emulates the celebration of initiation of young women, will it also celebrate the young woman’s self-reliance, as the pre-Perrault tale did? Yes. Because Carter’s heroine has become sexually mature, Merja Makinen argues we can “[r]ead the beasts as the projections of a feminine libido, and they become exactly that autonomous desire which the female characters need to recognize and reappropriate as a part of themselves (denied by the phallogocentric culture)” (12). Rather than acting as a passive victim like in the Perrault version, Carter’s heroine embraces her sexuality. On her way to her grandmother’s house, Red Riding Hood encounters an attractive man wearing “the green coat and wideawake hat of a hunter, laden with a carcass of game birds” (Carter 114). Not realizing he is a werewolf, she walks through the woods with him and eventually agrees to race him to her grandmother’s house. The wolf arrives at the grandmother’s house first and devours the grandmother, but not before he strips himself of his human guise because a werewolf must be naked to become a wolf (113). The wolf’s nakedness also foreshadows the sexual encounter that will occur with Red Riding Hood once she arrives. Indeed, upon her arrival, Red Riding Hood realizes what has happened: “No trace at all of the old woman except for a tuft of white hair that had caught in the bark of an unburned log. When the girl saw that, she knew she was in danger of death” (117). However, rather than

succumb to the wolf's carnivorous instincts, she utilizes her own weapon—and not her knife: “In the male-dominated world, the girl's sexuality is her weapon, which helps her to counter danger. Thus, from a passive being who is seduced, she is transformed into an active being who seduces” (Bhatt and Pareek 75). She voluntarily strips herself of her own clothes, mimicking the bawdy oral version of the tale, and, when the wolf threatens to eat her, “[t]he girl burst out laughing; she knew she was nobody's meat” (Carter 118). Unlike the women of her village—and even her grandmother—who adhered to repressive social norms and lived in fear of the wolves as a result, Red Riding Hood empowers herself by embracing her own awakening desires as a sexual being. No longer afraid, she will not be victimized in Carter's telling. Rather than become the meal of the wolf, “[s]he will lay his fearful head on her lap and she will pick out the life from his pelt and perhaps she will put the lice into her mouth and eat them, as he will bid her, as she would do in a savage marriage ceremony” (118). She also burns his clothing alongside her own because “if you burn his human clothing you condemn him to wolfishness for the rest of his life” (113). In this way, she has devoured *him*, turning the tables on the power dynamics in Perrault's telling. As such, Carter, like the oral version of the tale, celebrates her heroine's self-reliance because she, like the pre-Perrault heroine, “is more than a match for her werewolf” (Makinen 4).

Additionally, much as “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” parodies courtship and marriage, “The Company of Wolves” also sees the joining of two characters who are completely unlike their fairy tale counterparts. Little Red Riding Hood is no foolish waif who will cower in fear while she is devoured. The wolf is not simply a “carnivore incarnate,” but a damned creature seeking grace he has been denied as a werewolf—which he seems to find in his new lover. As such, “Carter empowers her woman character by giving her the discretion and the ability to save herself and to choose the life and the partner she wants. Carter attempts to deconstruct the

binaries of masculinity and femininity in her stories as she portrays masochistic men who reveal a soft loving core and strong, determined women who have the power to control men” (Bhatt and Pareek 76), as seen by the final line of the story: “See! sweet and sound she sleeps in granny’s bed, between the paws of the tender wolf” (Carter 118). Like the oral tale’s version of Little Red Riding Hood, the narrator has taken her grandmother’s place by sleeping in her bed, and like Mr Lyon, the wolf has been tamed by an empowered heroine who embraces, rather than suppresses, her sexuality.

### **“The Little Mermaid”**

A final tale that calls for feminist fractured retellings due to its troubling messages about gender and sexuality is “The Little Mermaid.” Unlike “Beauty and the Beast” and “Little Red Riding Hood,” “The Little Mermaid” does not come from the oral tradition; rather, it was written and published by Hans Christian Andersen in 1837. As such, it does not have an ATU categorization. According to Niels Ingwersen, “The tale is based on the Christian-inspired folk belief that supernatural beings are not endowed with a soul but will vanish into nothingness when they die.” As such, these creatures are “incomplete and not whole” (El Shoura 566). In Andersen’s tale, the heroine “is a beautiful mermaid who is entrapped under the sea world” (Kumlu 118) and is described as “a strange child, quiet and thoughtful” who “cared for nothing but her pretty red flowers, like the sun, excepting a beautiful marble statue. It was the representation of a handsome boy, carved out of pure white stone, which had fallen to the bottom of the sea from a wreck” (Andersen). In addition, the little mermaid is enthralled by tales about the “world above the sea. She made her old grandmother tell her all she knew of the ships and of the towns, the people and the animals” (Andersen). The little mermaid must wait until she is 15 to visit the world above the sea, and she feels trapped below the surface while she waits to come



of age. Of course, confinement and repression are common themes among fairy tale heroines, and the little mermaid is no different. When she finally gets the opportunity to do so, she saves a handsome prince from drowning and falls in love with him—as fairy tale heroines are wont to do. As she pines for him, she learns that, as a mermaid, she does not have an immortal soul. She asks her grandmother whether it is possible for a mermaid to obtain a soul; her grandmother replies that she can get a soul if

a man were to love you so much that you were more to him than his father or mother; and if all his thoughts and all his love were fixed upon you, and the priest placed his right hand in yours, and he promised to be true to you here and hereafter, then his soul would glide into your body and you would obtain a share in the future happiness of mankind. He would give a soul to you and retain his own as well. (Andersen)

In other words, this fairy tale places the mermaid's hope for "a soul, which lives forever, lives after the body has been turned to dust. It rises up through the clear, pure air beyond the glittering stars" (Andersen) in a potential romantic relationship with a man. This is a troubling message to send to an audience, as it indicates the heroine, in whom young women may see themselves when reading this tale, is incomplete without the love of a man. On her own, she is not whole.

The little mermaid's attempts to accomplish this troubling task are equally problematic. Indeed, the little mermaid visits the sea witch, who attempts to warn her against her path before offering her a draught that will give her legs at the cost of immense pain when she walks. She will be incredibly graceful, but every step she takes will hurt. Moreover, if she does not win the love of the prince and he marries another, she will die of heartbreak and become sea foam. The cost to attempt her mission to woo the prince and gain a soul will be her beautiful singing voice. The mermaid's desire to return to the world above the sea is arguably a form of "rebel[lion]

against the patriarchal order and societal norms which are tried to be imposed on them. The Little Mermaid wants to rebel against the limitations of her life and wants to act like a real woman” (Kumlu 126). However, her attempt to rebel against the world into which she was born earns her punishment in the form of pain, powerlessness, and potential death. According to Harries, in accepting the sea witch’s offer, “[t]he Little Mermaid removes herself from the world of her sisters, who are at home in the water, but is never at home in the human world on the land. The tale becomes a metaphor for emotional dead ends and repetitions, the mermaid’s voicelessness a sign of inability to speak in way that might change things” (*Twice Upon a Time* 146). Indeed, the voice is often thought to symbolize identity or even power—neither of which the little mermaid has as a result of her choice. She cannot be her full self because “[s]he can either walk and dance or talk and sing. It can be assumed that women are not permitted to use their body and mind freely at the same time. Using the body means the sacrifice of the freedom of speech. There is only one way for her to reach the prince: ‘silence’” (Kumlu 127). This falls into the troubling pattern of other fairy tales in which passive heroines are rewarded because they are considered good by the moral standards of the tales. And because the little mermaid lacks an identity and any form of power without her voice, “the sea witch robs her of her wholeness. Lacking wholeness, the little mermaid lives on land, in great pain” (El Shoura 571). But the pain is portrayed as necessary for the little mermaid to achieve wholeness in the form of a soul. In other words, her wholeness is dependent on the love of a man, which implies young women cannot be whole on their own. This is incredibly disempowering for young women reading this tale. At no time should a disempowered figure be promoted as ideal. But this is the case for the little mermaid. Eventually, the prince falls in love with another, so the mermaid “fails in her quest, but when given the chance of returning to her former element—by killing the prince—she

refuses” (Ingwersen) and “essentially sacrifices herself in the name of love” (El Shoura 572).

Her sacrifice provides her the opportunity to earn an immortal soul, indicating that the tale “glorifies suffering and self-denial” (Ingwersen) particularly in young women. This is truly a tale in need of a feminist fracturing.

### **“The Tale of the Voice”**

Donoghue does just this in *Kissing the Witch*, retelling “The Little Mermaid” in a tale titled “The Tale of the Voice.” Donoghue’s little mermaid, in her later years, will go on to become the witch in “Sleeping Beauty,” locked away in a tower with a spinning wheel in “The Tale of the Needle.” Donoghue’s heroine is also not a mermaid, but a woman living in a fishing village who had “already ripped out [her] first gray hair and refused two neighbors’ sons who thought they could have [her] for the asking. [She’d] learned every song [her] mother could teach [her]” (Donoghue 185). In other words, she is a grown woman rather than the young woman typical as heroines in fairy tales. But, much like in “The Little Mermaid,” “[t]he feminine voice in singing is at the core of *The Tale of the Voice*...in which vocal emissions and omissions alternate in a narrative of the voice, about the voice” (Cutolo 222). One day, the narrator sees a man at the market and falls in love with him at first sight, considering him “like an angel come down to earth” (Donoghue 186). Much like the little mermaid of Andersen’s tale, Donoghue’s heroine withdraws from her life as she pines. Most importantly, however, the narrator realizes, “I couldn’t sing a note. My throat seemed stopped up with thought of him” (Donoghue 187). Thus, her means of expressing herself and her creativity is lost in her obsession with this man she has fallen in love with. In an echo of Andersen’s tale, the narrator visits a witch for help, and, like Andersen’s witch, she tries to talk the heroine out of her folly: “She sighed. No point my telling you he’s not worth it, I suppose” (Donoghue 190). The narrator is incensed by the dismissal, to

which the witch replies, “I’ve seen enough men in my time. Whoever he is, he’s not worth the price you’ll pay” (191). In fact, she has already begun to pay a price through her inability to sing. Unlike the little mermaid, who literally cannot live on land due to her tail, Donoghue’s heroine wants the witch to “make [her] better. Make [her] right. Make [her] like a woman he could love” (192). Both women want to change for the sake of a man in whom they believe will make them whole. Donoghue’s witch, in an echo of the audience, finds such an assertion troubling, demanding, “What’s wrong with you, girl, that you would make yourself over again?” and advising, “Change for your own sake, if you must, not for what you imagine another will ask of you” (192). While the witches in both tales try to talk the heroine out of her desire to change for the sake of a man, the witch in Andersen’s tale is portrayed in a negative light. However, though the witch in Donoghue’s version is also physically unappealing—“She was everything I half expected: a stoop, a stick, a wart on her nose, a whisker on her chin. Her white hair had a trace of red like old blood on sheep’s wool. Her nails curled like roots. Her eyes were oysters in their shells, and her voice had the crackle of old nets” (Donoghue 189)—the witches in this collection receive more sympathy because Donoghue “is also interested in ‘rehabilitating the witch,’ speaking in the voice of a witch who is both human and vulnerable, contesting the ways the witch has been represented in generations of tale-telling” (Harries, *Twice Upon a Time* 130). The traditional portrayal of women who dared speak their minds and exercise agency as evil witches is misogynistic and reductive, which is why, when it comes to “the witch in feminist fairy tales,” writes Lisa Rettl, “very often negative attributes and stereotypes are transformed into positive values” (190). Donoghue transforms her witch into a positive figure by putting her audience’s very thoughts in the witch’s mouth. She does not *want* to change this young woman—or any of the other young women who have come to her—for the sake of a man. She sees these women as

capable of being whole on their own, even when they do not. However, she also recognizes their agency and respects their choices, noting that the cost of such a change will be the narrator's voice: "You won't be able to laugh or answer a question, to shout when something spills on you or cry out with delight at the full moon. You will neither be able to speak your love nor sing it with that famous voice of yours" (Donoghue 193). The narrator will lose the very thing that gives her identity and power: her voice. Moreover, "there will be pain...[l]ike a sword cutting you in half. You will bleed for this man" (193-4). Indeed, she will be powerless and suffering for the sake of a man's good opinion. Unlike Andersen's tale, in which such actions are not implicitly condemned, Donoghue's tale will show why the heroine's actions are, in fact, a mistake. Indeed, in such dynamics in which older women who seek to help the younger women grow, "the older woman requires the younger woman to make her own decisions and her own mistakes" (Martin 21). Here, the witch allows the narrator to make her mistake—the lesson will be learned by the end of the tale.

At this time, however, the narrator agrees, and though the witch performs no ritual other than to touch her throat, the narrator believes "the change had happened" (Donoghue 195). She prepares to leave to find her love and "found [her] throat was sealed tight as a drum" as the witch had warned (195). Now voiceless and therefore powerless, she finds him and the two enter a sexual relationship. However, the narrator is surprised to find that she is not the only silent woman in society; she discovers that "[a]t the balls he took me to there were many beautiful young women who didn't say a word. They answered every question with a shrug or a smile...I could not understand it. Had they sold their voices too? Even their bodies were silent, always upright, never loosening their lines" (198). Though she does not realize it at the time, what she has discovered is the status of most fairy tale heroines: beautiful, passive, and wealthy as a

reward for submitting to the restrictions of the patriarchal society in which they live. The narrator quickly learns that such a price is not worth it, as she finds her beloved having sex with another woman. Yet she is unable to express her displeasure without her voice: “Without a word from me or even a shake in my voice, how could he tell my heart was cracking apart?” (199).

Eventually, she leaves him but must resort to prostitution to feed herself on her journey home. She has become jaded at this point, declaring, “The men were not as gentle as he had been, but they could do me no further damage” (200). At this point, the narrator has embraced her sexuality to the point of using it for business transactions and, sadly, shows signs of trauma from the heartbreak she suffered—much as Andersen’s mermaid was to die of heartbreak if she failed to woo the prince.

Eventually, the mermaid returns to the witch’s cave, and the witch makes a shocking revelation: “I don’t have your voice, you know... You do” (202). She elaborates that the narrator has had her own agency all along, telling her, “Your songs are still out there on the cliff top, hanging in the air for you when you want them... Wish to speak and you will speak, girl. Wish to die and you can do it. Wish to live and here you are” (202). Indeed, the witch declares, “Your silence was the cost of what you sought” (203). This, the narrator can confirm by the other silent women she encountered at balls and in society. To be the type of woman such a man would love, the narrator could not be a woman with power, creativity, and agency; she must be silent and passive. But the narrator is not such a woman, and she has learned a valuable lesson from the witch. Indeed, “the experience eventually allows her to find what she wants and, more importantly, to redefine her vision of the woman who has encouraged her to learn life for herself” (Martin 21). As such, she returns home to her family, heals her body, and eventually heals her soul as well. She reveals her happy ending: “I married a fisherman with green eyes who

liked to hear me sing, but preferred to hear me talk” (Donoghue 204). This ending is particularly empowering because “[t]he two different manifestations of vocal emission, *singing* versus *talking*, identify two different levels of the feminine connotation; the second considering the woman a thinking being, in contrast with the first, a phallocratic view which has long kept the woman silent” (Cutolo 223). In other words, the narrator’s husband sees her as a full person with a mind and thoughts that deserve expression, unlike the men who silenced their women at the balls. The narrator has found someone who prizes her for who she is as a person rather than just her femininity. Thus, what Donoghue’s heroine comes into, rather than an immortal soul like in Andersen’s version, is “an establishment of her individual identity as a woman” (Cutolo 222). She is a fully realized person by the end of the tale, and her marriage is secondary to this self-actualization. Rather than finding wholeness through submission, “the protagonist has found a more progressive form of ‘true love’” and “her choices have been validated” (Martin 12). Indeed, the ending of this tale declares that the views of classic fairy tales are outdated: love “is non-possessing and not self-sacrificing. It rejects the traditional concept with its implicit idea that love hurts, but propagates happiness based on self-realisation without giving up one’s identity” (Rettl 194). The heroine does not have to give up her identity; we are left with the assurance that her husband loves her *because* of her identity. And while “The Tale of the Voice” does end with a heterosexual coupling, Martin argues that this does not detract from Donoghue’s queering of other tales in the collection: “Donoghue’s tale does not remain within a primarily heterosexual or patriarchal order; indeed, courtship is a secondary issue even in this story, which ends in male-female union, and the focus remains the protagonist’s exploration of her own desires” (12). In fact, the key relationship in this story is not between the narrator and her eventual husband but that between the narrator and the witch, as it is the witch who helps the narrator learn about the

importance of her voice in “signal[ing] a speaker in control of her own story” (12). It will, at the end of the story, be the narrator who asks the witch to share her story, which will be the basis for the final tale in the collection, “The Tale of the Kiss.” Thus, while Andersen’s tale takes the little mermaid’s voice as a means of causing her suffering, Donoghue’s tale never truly took the heroine’s voice at all; she only needed to learn to use it to empower herself and embrace her own desires.

### **Conclusion**

Despite their shortcomings, fairy tales remain “a basic part of the intricate layering of stories and influences that perpetuate and inform the cultural norms surrounding the world” in which we live (Kuykendal and Sturm 38). As some of the most influential and memorable texts we encounter during our formative years, fairy tales will continue to exist as instructional texts for children that are passed down from generation to generation. From “Cinderella” and “Beauty and the Beast” to “Little Red Riding Hood” and “The Little Mermaid,” fairy tales will help children grow their imaginations as well as navigate their ever-expanding worlds. But because these stories reflect the morals of the times in which they were written, we must be careful of the messages we share with future generations. One way to do this is to see more fractured fairy tales, retelling traditional tales through progressive lenses such as feminist and queer. However, though fractured tales like those of Carter and Donoghue have power, they cannot be the only way to challenge the shortcomings of traditional tales. Kuykendal and Sturm argue that simply swapping a powerful woman for a powerful man in a tale is not enough: “in order to truly revision a fairy tale, thereby creating a work that is artistically new and rings true to a child, feminist authors must cease attempting to simply reverse gender roles. Rather, they must revision the entire work and create something from the ground up” (40). Children will grow up



with more equal perspectives on gender when the tales to which they are exposed feature “fully realized, complicated characters” who “play roles beyond the traditional gender-defined positions depicted in canonical fairy tales” (40). Fractured fairy tales have their place in feminist reclaiming of the patriarchal canon, but they should not be the end of the process—but rather the beginning.

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