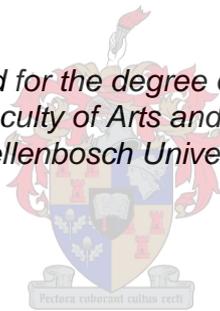


Ever Other: Unsettling Subjects in Contemporary Revisions of Fairy Tales

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DECLARATION

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This dissertation includes one original paper published in a peer-reviewed journal or book and no unpublished publications. The development and writing of the papers (published and unpublished) were the principal responsibility of myself and, for each of the cases where this is not the case, a declaration is included in the dissertation indicating the nature and extent of the contributions of co-authors.

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Abstract

Fairy tales create some of the first and most lasting impressions on young minds. In the formative years, they shape world-views, self-perceptions and opinions of ‘others’ in ways that persist into adulthood. Acknowledging that these presumably innocent stories are of greater social significance than is generally recognised, I am interested in contemporary revisions of the classic fairy tales widely critiqued by ‘second wave’ feminists for the restrictive gender expectations they prescribe. And yet, while it remains located in a larger area of scholarship that can be defined as revisionist feminist fiction, this dissertation focuses on revisions of classic fairy tales published after 1990 – effectively ‘after Angela Carter’ and her generation’s focus on voiceless and disempowered female characters during the sixties, seventies and eighties. My premise is that these post-1990 adaptations have moved beyond the white, middle-aged and heterosexual concerns of ‘second wave’ feminism, broadening their scope to include non-normative interests and counterhegemonic world views as reflected by ‘third wave’ feminism. As such, these texts have taken on the insights of postcolonial and queer theory as well as ageing studies in order to explore how race, age and sexual orientation or gender identity intersect with gender and sex to create marginal subjects or ‘others’. While I acknowledge all ten texts as feminist revisions, I also identify three new areas of difference that intersect with sex and/or gender to create marginalised and misrepresented black, ageing and queer ‘others’. I read Helen Oyeyemi’s *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014), Nalo Hopkinson’s “The Glass Bottle Trick” (2001) and Shaida Kazie Ali’s *Not a Fairytale* (2010) as post-colonial revisions critical of the white ideal and Eurocentric discourses implicit in certain classic fairy tales. Considering a second tale from Hopkinson’s *Skin Folk* anthology titled “Riding the Red”, together with Terry Pratchett’s *Witches Abroad* (1991) and Dubravka Ugresic’s *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* (2007), I explore how they both underscore and problematise the ageism inherent in these classics, unsettling the glib and tired generalisations that fairy tales make about older women. Finally, I consider Malinda Lo’s *Ash* (2009), Wesley Stace’s *Misfortune* (2006) and Emma Donoghue’s “The Tale of the Shoe” and “The Tale of the Witch”, both from the *Kissing the Witch* collection (1997), as queer retellings that centre around unconventional gender identities and non-normative sexuality which, by association, encourage readers to recognise the binary gender roles, compulsory heterosexuality and cisnormativity espoused by the most popularly read and repeated fairy tales. Although I primarily make use of the term ‘revision’, my study also employs synonyms like ‘rewriting’, ‘retelling’, ‘recasting’ and ‘counter-narrative’ to describe what it considers to be a literary act

of confrontation, disruption and reinvention. As I engage in their comparative close reading, I explore the ways in which these contemporary revisions of fairy tales unsettle and renew convention instead of simply reproducing it. Ultimately I consider how they build on and move beyond the feminist revisions of the previous century in order to confront new and different sites of othering that hold potential for literary liberation.

Opsomming

Feëverhale, of sprokies, laat van die eerste en mees blywende indrukke op jong gemoedere. In die vormingsjare gee dit gestalte aan wêreldsienings, persepsies van die self en opinies van ‘die ander’ op wyses wat ons tot in volwassenheid bybly. In ag genome dat hierdie oënskynlik onskuldige stories groter sosiale gewig dra as wat algemeen aanvaar word, is ek geïnteresseerd in kontemporêre hersienings van die klassieke feëverhale wat omvattend gekritiseer is deur ‘tweede golf’ feministe weens die beperkende geslagsrolle wat dit voorskryf. En tog, terwyl hierdie verhandeling steeds geleë is in ‘n wyer vakgebied wat as feministiese hersieningsfiksie gedefinieer kan word, fokus dit op hersienings van klassieke feëverhale wat na 1990 gepubliseer is – effektief ‘na Angela Carter’ en haar generasie se fokus op stemlose en ontmagtigde vroue karakters tydens die sestig-, sewentig- en tagtigerjare. My uitgangspunt is dat hierdie na-1990 wysigings aanbeweeg vanaf die wit, middeljarige en heteroseksuele Sorge van die ‘tweede feministiese golf’ om die nie-normatiewe belange en teen-hegemoniese wêreldbeskouings van die ‘derde feministiese’ golf te weerspieël. As sulks reflekteer hierdie tekste die insig van postkoloniale en queer-teorie sowel as veroudering-studies, ten einde te verken hoe ras, ouderdom en seksuele oriëntasie of gender-identiteit met geslag en geslagtelikheid ontmoet om marginale subjekte of nuwe gevalle van ‘die ander’ te skep. Alhoewel al tien tekste as feministiese hersienings beskou word, identifiseer ek ook drie nuwe areas van andersheid wat met geslag en/of geslagtelikheid sny om ‘n gemarginaliseerde en misverteengewordige swart, bejaarde en queer ‘ander’ te skep. Ek lees Helen Oyeyemi se *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014), Nalo Hopkinson se “The Glass Bottle Trick” (2001) and Shaida Kazie Ali se *Not a Fairytale* (2010) as postkoloniale hersienings wat krities is tot die wit ideaal en Eurosentriese diskoerse inherent aan sekere klassieke sprokies. Ek oorweeg ook ‘n tweede storie uit Hopkinson se *Skin Folk*-bundel, getiteld “Riding the Red”, saam met Terry Pratchett se *Witches Abroad* (1991) en Dubravka Ugresic se *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* (2007) en ondersoek hoe hierdie tekste die ouderdomsdiskriminasie in klassieke sprokies beide beklemtoon en problematiseer, sowel as die oppervlakkige en uitgeputte veralgemenings wat gemaak word oor ouer vrouens ontwig. Laastens behandel ek Malinda Lo se *Ash* (2009), Wesley Stace se *Misfortune* (2006) en Emma Donoghue se “The Tale of the Shoe” en “The Tale of the Witch”, beide uit die *Kissing the Witch*-versameling (1997), as queer hersienings wat wentel rondom onkonvensionele gender-identiteite en nie-normatiewe seksualiteit wat, deur assosiasie, lesers aanmoedig om die binêre geslagsrolle, verpligte heteroseksualiteit en cisnormatiewiteit, wat deur welgelese en

populêre sprokies bevorder word, raak te sien. Alhoewel ek hoofsaaklik die term ‘hersiening’ aanwend, maak my studie ook gebruik van sinonieme soos ‘herskrywing’, ‘hervertelling’, ‘hervorming’ en ‘teen-narratief’ om, wat ek verstaan as ’n literêre akte van konfrontasie, onderbreking en heruitvinding, te beskryf. Terwyl ek ’n vergelykende literatuurstudie aanpak, ondersoek ek maniere waarop hierdie kontemporêre hersienings van klassieke sprokies konvensie ontwig en hernu, eerder as om dit net te herhaal. Uiteindelik oorweeg ek hoe hulle beide voortbou op die feministiese hersiening van die vorige eeu en dit verbysteek, ten einde vars en verskillende areas van andersheid – wat potensiaal vir verdere literêre bevryding inhou – te konfronteer.

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First, I would like to thank *Hemingway's Bookshop*, the little second-hand treasure trove in Hermanus where I discovered the worn copy of Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch* that inspired this dissertation. Inspired as it might have been, the project would however not have made it from the realm of fantasy into reality without the support and guidance of my two wonderful supervisors, Prof. Tina Steiner and Prof. Shaun Viljoen. Thank you for your knowledge, advice and most endearingly, your friendship. One is fortunate to have not one, but two mentors who carry your interests at heart and face the stars from the same vantage point as you do. In that sense I must also acknowledge Prof. Louise Green, Dr. Tilla Slabbert and Dr. Kylie Thomas for the advice they gave on broadening the scope of my initial proposal – advice that proved most successful. Moreover, I express my gratitude to the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS) for the doctoral scholarship that financially enabled this dissertation as well as the University of Stellenbosch for the merit bursary they awarded at the same time.

Finally, I thank my family: My mother and father for their unwavering support throughout the years, from undergrad to the culmination of this PhD. Even though they have not always understood or agreed with the direction of my research, they have – without fail – proudly supported my desire to pursue an academic career. I thank my husband for being my pillar and for gracefully shouldering the many sacrifices he has had to make in order to enable me to pursue what I believe to be my calling. Likewise, I am thankful for the help of my mother-in-law and father-in-law and for the many hours of childcare that allowed me to claim the title of 'working mother'. I leave the tiniest member of my family till last. Thank you, little Fia.

Motherhood is a blessing I could not have conceived of before your arrival. Your joyful presence and the need to spend as much time with you as possible forced a renewed focus and dedication without which I might not have finished this dissertation in the allotted time.

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As psychoanalysts from Freud to Jung onwards have observed, myths and fairy tales often both state and enforce culture's sentences with greater accuracy than more sophisticated literary texts.

– Gilbert and Gubar, "The Queen's Looking Glass", 36

1

Introduction: Twenty-first Century Fairy Tale Revisions

To [...] schoolchildren [fairy] tales have become what mother's milk is for their bodies – the first nourishment for the spirit and the imagination.

– Carl Franke, *Die Brüder Grimm, Ihr Leben und Wirken*, 176¹

[A]bove all to demystify these sacred cultural texts, to show that we can break their magical spells and that social change is possible once we become aware of the stories that have guided our social, moral, and personal development.

– Maria Tatar, *The Classic Fairy Tales*, xvii

On Saturday, 20 February 2016, in that magic hour three minutes to midnight, a nameless Stellenbosch University student posted the following on *Stellies Confessions*, an anonymous Facebook page that allows you to give voice to “any secrets or regrets that you desperately want to get off your chest”:

Gay wees is ander[s] wees,

Want fokken Aspoesterjie het besluit om vir Prins Charming te gaan eerder as die fairy godmother ...

Gay wees is anders wees,

Want Edward het besluit om verlief te raak op Bella eerder as Jacob ...

Of moet ek eerder sê want Katniss het vir Peta gesoen in plaas van Annie of Rue of enige van die honderde waaruit sy kon kies ... want as jy mos gay is, is jy anders so may the odds be ever in your favour ...

Dalk sou gay wees nie so anders gewees het as Harry vir Ron gegaan het in plaas van sy sussie nie ... of dalk moes Romeo eerder verlief geraak het op Hamlet as Juliet, dalk sou almal nie gevrek het nie ... Dalk moes

¹ As quoted and translated in Snyder's “Nationalistic Aspects of the Grimm Brothers' Fairy Tales”, p. 221.

Shakespeare skryf oor homoseksuele liefde, dan sou dit dalk nie so anders wees nie, wel of dit of niemand sou van hom weet nie neh ...

But I guess Aspoesterjie het toe vir Prins Charming gegaan, Edward en Bella sal tot in alle ewigheid saam bloed drink, Katniss sal nooit kan kies tussen die twee mans in haar lewe nie, Harry het met Jenny getrou en Shakespeare het oor fokken heteroseksuele verhoudings geskryf ... so gay wees sal ook maar altyd anders wees ... (Anonymous n.pag.)

[To be gay is to be different,

Because fucking Cinderella decided to go for Prince Charming rather than the fairy godmother ...

To be gay is to be different,

Because Edward decided to fall in love with Bella instead of Jacob ...

Or should I rather say, because Katniss kissed Peta instead of Annie or Rue or anyone else of the hundreds she could choose from ... because if you're gay, you're different so may the odds be ever in your favour ...

Maybe being gay wouldn't have been so different if Harry had gone for Ron instead of his sister ... or maybe Romeo should have fallen in love with Hamlet instead of Juliet, maybe then everyone wouldn't have croaked ...

Maybe Shakespeare should have written about homosexual love, and then maybe it wouldn't have been so different, well either that or no one would have known about him, hey ...

But I guess Cinderella did go for Prince Charming in the end, Edward and Bella will drink blood together for eternity, Katniss will never be able to choose between the two men in her life, Harry did marry Jenny and Shakespeare did write about fucking heterosexual relationships ... so to be gay will simply always manifest as being different ...](Anonymous n.pag., translation my own)²

A tirade against canonical texts – both past and present – that shape heteronormative Western culture, this particular confession references the well-documented socialising power of both the classic English literature taught at school and such behemoths of contemporary popular

² The student is obviously ignorant of the many instances of gender-bending in Shakespeare's comedies.

culture as *Twilight*, *Hunger Games* and *Harry Potter*. More importantly, the above rant also includes and, in fact starts off, by acknowledging the often-overlooked and easily dismissed influence of the fairy tales we read and are read as children. By mentioning the manner in which Cinderella's normative heterosexuality will forevermore mark homosexuality as different and other, the anonymous Facebook confessor expresses a theory with which many contemporary social scientists agree. That is, that fairy tales create some of the first and most lasting impressions on young minds and that in our formative years, they shape our world-views, our self-perceptions and our opinions of 'others' in ways that persist into adulthood.

The idea that a fairy tale's influence extends beyond the nursery often proves a difficult one to swallow and according to Maria Tatar, one of the most prominent scholars in fairy tale studies today, the "[t]rivializ[ation]" of fairy tales "leads to the mistaken conclusion that we should suspend our critical faculties while reading these 'harmless' narratives" and prevents us from taking what she later calls "a good, hard look at stories that are so obviously instrumental in shaping our values, moral codes, and aspirations" (*The Classic* xi, xii). That these presumably innocent stories are of greater social significance than generally recognised is an issue also explored by Catherine Orenstein in her detailed study of "Little Red Riding Hood". In *Little Riding Hood Uncloaked: Sex, Morality and the Evolution of a Fairy Tale*, she writes that "[b]eneath the nursery veneer, or perhaps because of it, fairy tales are among our most powerful socializing narratives" (Orenstein 10). Carrying on to explain their influence, she asserts that fairy tales

contain enduring rules for understanding who we are and how we should behave. [...] Fairy tales are the first words read to us before we know the meaning of words, and the first models of society we encounter before we ever leave home. [T]hey teach us Right from Wrong. Under the guise of make-believe, they prepare us to join the real world and provide us with lessons that last a lifetime. [...] We think we outgrow them. In fact, we internalise them. (Orenstein 10-11)

Once we acknowledge the staying power of classic fairy tales – and by that I mean those widely and instantly recognisable storybook staples like "Cinderella", "Snow White", "Sleeping Beauty", "Beauty and the Beast" and "Little Red Riding Hood" – it becomes vital to question the kind of messages they send. This is exactly the question that propelled the

“gender-based scholarship” which, according to Donald Haase, defined much of the fairy tale research done in the latter half of the twentieth century (*Fairy Tales and Feminism* 2). For the purpose of my discussion here, I will consider such feminist scholarship as ‘second wave’. Although I am aware that the “concept of waves surging and receding cannot fully capture [the] multiple and overlapping movements, chronologies, issues and sites [of the complex history of feminism]”, as Nancy A. Hewitt suggests in *No Permanent Waves*, the metaphor remains useful in narrowing the very broad scope of the term feminism. I therefore use ‘second wave’ feminism to refer to the feminist movement/s between the 1960s and 1990s during which, in the words of Linda Nicolson, “a radical questioning of gender roles was being carried out not only by isolated scholars or marginalised groups, but in front of and with the attention of many national publics”; a movement that led to “major restructuring of institutions worldwide” and a way of “thinking about gender that continues to shape public and private life” (1).³

Focussed on the restrictive gender expectations that classic fairy tales prescribe for women, such ‘second wave’ fairy tale scholarship emphasised the overwhelming passivity, helplessness and submissiveness of female protagonists, the limited domestic sphere of their existence and the narrow portrayals of beauty as their most valuable asset and marriage as their only purpose in life. In “‘Some Day my Prince will Come’: Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale” (1972), an article often referenced as a forerunner of such scholarship, Marcia R. Lieberman writes that such overwhelmingly patriarchal fairy tales serve as “training manuals for girls” (395) and that

[m]illions of women must surely have formed their psycho-sexual self-concepts, and their ideas of what they could and could not accomplish, what sort of behaviour would be rewarded, and the nature of reward itself, in part from their favourite fairy tales. These stories have been made the repositories of the dreams, hopes, and fantasies of generations of girls. (385)⁴

³ This follows from ‘first wave’ feminism which “in most renditions remains fixed to suffrage and its white middle-class advocates” (Hewitt 3).

⁴ At this point it is important to note that many studies have also explored how ‘older’ or lesser-known versions of fairy tales do offer strong, intelligent and resourceful women as protagonists. However, as Lieberman so convincingly points out as early as 1972, this argument is “besides the point” seeing that “only the best-known stories, those that everyone has read or heard, indeed, those that Disney has popularised, have affected [...] our

Both fuelling and fuelled by such feminist critique were the creative endeavours of a group of women writers whom Stephen Benson refers to as the “Carter generation”,⁵ writers like Angela Carter, Anne Sexton, Olga Broumas, Fay Weldon, Margaret Atwood, Jane Yolen and Terri Windling, to name but a few (2). Engaged in a “rich creative-critical dialogue”, these writers produced texts which criticise, subvert and renew the classics, offering feminist alternatives to discourses which marginalise, disempower and other women (Benson 7). Part of a literary movement which seemed to have reached its heyday in the 60s, 70s and early 80s and which I retrospectively term ‘revisionist feminist fiction’, these counter-narratives have received no shortage of critical attention. As such, there is extensive scholarship dedicated to feminism, fairy tales and the women writers who revise them, chief among them Angela Carter whose “extensive work on the traditions of the fairy tale – as author, editor, and critic – was”, according to Benson, “preeminently influential in establishing the late-twentieth-century conception of [fairy] tales” (2). Some of the more well-known works in this area include Jack Zipes’s *Don’t Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England* (1986), Cristina Bacchilega’s *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies* (1997), Susan Sellers’s *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women’s Fiction* (2001), Elizabeth Wanning Harries’s *Twice Upon a Time: Women Writers and the History of Fairy Tale* (2003) and Donald Haase’s *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches* (2004).

As is apparent from the many works available on this subject, the relationship between revisionist fiction and fairy tales has been a popular area for literary research – especially with regard to women writers and feminist revision. And yet studies that continue in this field are by no means flogging a dead horse, for every year we see adaptations of familiar tales which emphasise what Orenstein calls the “remarkable mercurial properties” of classic fairy tales and the manner in which they continue to “express our collective truths, even as these truths

culture” (383-84).. Most other texts, she writes, are so “relatively unknown that they cannot be seriously considered” as having any effect (Lieberman 384).

⁵ In the “Preface to the Special Issue on Fairy Tale after Angela Carter”, Stephen Benson and Andrew Teverson note that Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* is a “story collection that has had a profound and pervasive impact on our understanding of and engagement with fairy tales” and that hers is a “legacy” that defines much of what comes after, a period which is, according to Haase, marked by “extraordinarily fruitful creative and critical engagement with the fairy tale” (13; *Fairy Tales and Feminism* 18).

change beneath our noses” (12).⁶ In the last 10 years alone, we have seen films like *Enchanted* (2007), *Tangled* (2010), *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012), *Frozen* (2013), *Jack the Giant Slayer* (2013) and *Maleficent* (2014) engage with the feminist debate on fairy tales, popularising its concerns as they offer viewers revised scripts for their newly empowered female protagonists.

Clearly the magic of the fairy tale, in its myriad forms and adaptations, persists. Its revisionist potential holds a continued fascination for creatives, academics and members of the general public alike. Inspired by this continued popularity, this dissertation engages in the comparative close reading of ten contemporary fairy tale revisions. However, in order to illuminate my research question, hypothesis and the rationale that led to the selection of these ten texts specifically, it will serve to clarify key concepts such as ‘revisionist’, ‘fairy tale’, ‘post-1990’ and ‘third wave’ feminism as well as the intellectual journey that brought them together in this dissertation.

My understanding of the term revision is originally inspired by Adrienne Rich’s famous assertion in “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” that revision is “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction” in order to “not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us” (35). I also rely on Alicia Ostriker’s definition of revisionist potential as the knowledge that a “figure or story previously accepted and defined by culture” can be “appropriated for altered ends” and fill an “old vessel [...] with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual [...] but ultimately making cultural change possible” (212-213). Although I therefore primarily make use of the term ‘revision’, my study also employs synonyms like ‘rewriting’, ‘retelling’, ‘recasting’ and ‘counter-narrative’ to describe texts that not only make intertextual reference to classic fairy tales, echoing their formulaic plot structures, language, characters and motifs, but ones that do so in a way that confronts, disrupts and reinvents these tales through a literary act of appropriation and/or adaptation.

My familiarity with both Rich and Ostriker’s definitions of revision stem from my master’s thesis which read contemporary novels like Anita Diamant’s *The Red Tent* as feminist revisions of the biblical tales that inspired, directly or indirectly, many of the patriarchal and

⁶ For more information on the changing nature of fairy tales and their cultural evolution, see Zipes’s “The Meaning of Fairy Tale within the Evolutions of Culture”.

phallogocentric values that govern Western society and religion. In it, I argue that such novels expose, subvert and revise the biblical narratives they are based on in order to offer readers new and gynocentric alternatives that reconceptualise women, their place in society and their relation to the divine.⁷ It is near the conclusion of my thesis that I stumbled upon Emma Donoghue's celebrated collection of fairy tales, *Kissing the Witch*. Driven by my continued fascination with the act of revision, my reading of Donoghue's collection inspired this dissertation's focus on the feminist revision of fairy tales. Initially, my scope was rather narrow and, in light of the studies listed above, unoriginal. However, through the process of research and proposal writing, as well as the guidance of my supervisors, I cast my net wider; I began to wonder what, if anything, was taking place in the wake of the newly woken, but still largely Caucasian and heterosexual princesses so thoroughly documented in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Taking note of the death of Angela Carter in 1993, and in keeping with a conception of 'third wave' feminism as emerging from the 1990s onwards, I therefore set the parameters of my study to consider texts published after 1990 – effectively “after Angela Carter” and the literary movement's well-documented 'second wave' emancipation of classic fairy tales' previously passive, silent or sleeping princesses (Haase, “Decolonizing” 18). My reconceptualised study therefore asked what relevance post-1990 fairy tale adaptations hold, how they differ from what had gone before and which normative and commonly accepted subjects, identities or behaviours they confront and reinvent. In *Fairy Tale as Myth, Myth as Fairy Tale*, Zipes writes that “the premise of a revision is that there is something wrong with an original work and that it needs to be changed for the better” (9). Consequently, I was interested to see what remained *wrong* enough with the classic fairy for it to persist as a site of reinvention, an avenue through which to break tradition and inspire cultural change even *after* the large-scale revisions of the previous century.

Since 'revisionist fiction' does not exist as a popularly recognised genre, sourcing texts proved quite difficult. Seemingly countless internet searches and a couple of recommendations did, however, eventually lead to a reasonable collection of texts that could be classified as contemporary fairy tale revisions. At this point it is useful to mention Kevin

⁷ This thesis titled, ““Stealing the Story, Salvaging the She’: Feminist Revisionist Fiction and the Bible”, is available under my maiden name, Adri Goosen.

Paul Smith's system of classification in *The Postmodern Fairytale*, in which he suggests that "there are eight identifiable ways in which the fairytale can operate as an intertext" in such a manner that it influences "our understanding" or "our reading" of a story (9-10).

Smith explains these eight "elements" of intertextuality as follows: ⁸ First and foremost, the fairy tale as an "authorised intertext" makes "[e]xplicit reference to a fairytale in the title" (Smith 10, 12, 10). As such "the use of a proper name of a fairytale in the title acts as an authorial sanction that the text is to be understood in its relevance to a prior, pre-existing fairy tale" (Smith 12). Using as a model Charles Perrault's "Bluebeard", a fairy tale I also explore in this dissertation⁹ and which Smith describes as "one of the most popular fairytale intertexts in contemporary fiction", he gives Margaret Atwood's "Bluebeard's Egg" as an example (10, 12). Smith's second element makes an implicit or "writerly" reference in the title of the story (14). The example here is John Fowles's *The Collector* which alludes to Bluebeard as a "collector of [dead] wives" (14). Through the use of the third element, "incorporation", a reader can also be "explicitly alerted to the existence and importance of a particular intertext" through the "technique of embedding a synopsis" (17). In such a case, the "synopsised" fairy tale "become[s] a model by which the reader can understand the text" (17). Again Smith turns to Atwood's "Bluebeard's Egg" as an example. Her short story lays not only an 'authorised' claim to the fairy tale through its title; it also includes a summary of "Fitcher's Bird", a variant of the "Bluebeard" tale, in the body of the text.

The fourth element Smith identifies is an "implicit reference to a fairytale within the text" (10). An "allusion", as he calls it, is "covert, implied [or] indirect" and can include any of a number of things such as quotations, character names, character descriptions and formulaic or recognisable patterns or motifs from the fairy tale. Such allusions are "hidden in plain sight, and obvious to anyone who has the foreknowledge necessary to decode [them]" (21). As his fifth element, Smith lists "re-vision" which he defines as a tale that "put[s] a new spin on an old tale" and intends "to replace, or conflict with" the earlier version (10, 37). However, whereas I use the term 'fairy tale revision' more broadly, he limits it to stories that "[draw] intensively from *one* pre-existing story" and "[approximate] the fairy tale in *comparative length*" (41, emphasis my own). Smith's next two elements are "Fabulation" and

⁸ Although Smith and some of the other writers that I quote write 'fairytale' as one word, in my own writing, I have chosen to follow the majority of sources I use and write it as two words.

⁹ Although a plot summary is not needed to comprehend the "Bluebeard" examples used here, one is available on pages 37-38.

“Metafictional” (10). Fabulation refers to the “crafting [of] original fairytale[s]” that nonetheless still display the recognisable “architextual features” or “motifs” of the fairy tale, such as “having three sisters” or “a happy ending connected with great wealth or marriage” (Smith 10, 42). Metafictional intertextuality occurs “when a fairytale is commented upon, or when the fairytale is analysed in a critical way” (45). The final and eighth “Architextual/Chronotopic” element refers to a “‘fairytale’ setting/environment” and is “evoked every time a critic remarks upon the ‘fairytale’ qualities of a work, whether they refer to its tone or to the type of world presented in a text” (10, 48).

I list Smith’s typology not because I make any great use of it in the body of this dissertation, but because, as one of the first books that I read at the outset of this study, it helped me come to terms with or comprehend the types of intertextuality that allowed me to read certain texts as revisions; the types of intertextuality that suggested to me that the authors wanted readers to read their texts in relation to or in conversation with fairy tale pre-texts. In deciding what counted as a fairy tale pre-text, I did not make use of a formal definition of fairy tale. And, although it might seem that I provide a rather narrow definition when I make reference to recognisable storybook staples like “Cinderella”, “Snow White”, “Sleeping Beauty”, “Beauty and the Beast” and “Little Red Riding Hood” above, my understanding of the term is not limited to these parameters. Rather, I acknowledge that it is in “itself [...] an ill-defined construction lacking any sort of stable definition”, as Smith points out, and that “[d]espite its currency and apparent simplicity, [it] resists a universally accepted or universally satisfying definition”, as is suggested by Haase in *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales* (2; “Fairy” 322). For this reason, I do not attempt to catch and pin down this illusive beast within the scope of this dissertation. Instead, I acknowledge both the diversity and the changeability of stories grouped under what Marina Warner calls the “catch-all name of fairy tale” and I align myself with Benson when, in *Contemporary Fiction and the Fairy Tale*, he suggests that the fairy tale is “defamiliarised in the very act of being singled out by literature” (*From the Beast* xii; 4).

Thus, in selecting my primary texts at the outset of this study, I sidestepped a formal definition of fairy tale. To borrow words from Benson, the concept of a fairy tale appeared “manifestly self-evident and self-explanatory” to me, a “found object that [was] instantly recognizable” (2). Retrospectively, I can say that, based on my own Eurocentric upbringing and reading practices as a child, I ‘recognised’ as fairy tales those tales that were recorded in

collections by Charles Perrault, Andrew Lang, Hans Christian Andersen and the Brothers Grimm; tales that were later reproduced and popularised by Walt Disney; specific tales like those listed above, but also ones that simply made reference to the fairy tale convention or, to make use of Smith's typology, ones that displayed the recognisable architextual features, formulaic elements or motifs of the classic fairy tale. These include the once-upon-a-times and happily-ever-afters that frame the narrative, but also the formulaic and fantastic transformations and the true love's kisses that determine their plot structure, as well as archetypal character types like the handsome prince, the damsel in distress and the fairy godmother who assists, or the wicked witch who thwarts their happy ending.

In working through the initial collection of post-1990 revisionist texts, my criteria of selection concentrated on ones which foregrounded power imbalances, stereotypes or transgressive desires *different* from those addressed by the 'Carter generation'. I certainly remained interested in the manner in which these contemporary revisions perpetuate and build on the 'second wave' concerns of the feminist revisions of the 60s, 70s and 80s. And yet, driven by the idea of an ever-changing zeitgeist as expressed through the mercurial fairy tale, I primarily asked how, in keeping with their temporal location, they *moved beyond* their forerunners in foregrounding a new or different 'other'. Certain patterns emerged in my reading. With them came the premise that post-1990 revisions follow a trajectory which mirrors the chronology of the feminist movement in having moved beyond what is often described as the white, middle-class and heterosexual concerns of 'second wave' feminism. This is certainly not true of all fairy tale revisions published after 1990. However, in making my selection, I favoured texts which had broadened their scope to include the non-normative interests and counterhegemonic world views associated with a 'third wave' feminism that is perceived as "broader in [its] vision, more global in [its] concerns, and more progressive in [its] sensitivities to transnational, multiracial, and sexual politics" (Hewitt 2).

Ultimately, I searched for and selected revisionist texts which seemed to have taken on the insights of postcolonial and queer theory in order to explore how race and sexual orientation or gender identity intersect with gender and sex to create marginal subjects or 'others'. At what now seems an indeterminate point, I also noticed the presence of an 'ageing other' in some of these texts and so included and searched for revisions that seemed to voice the concerns of ageing studies. From a wider selection I finally chose, in order of publication, Terry Pratchett's *Witches Abroad* (1991), Emma Donoghue's "The Tale of the Shoe" and

“The Tale of the Witch” from the *Kissing the Witch* collection (1997), Nalo Hopkinson’s “The Glass Bottle Trick” and “Riding the Red” from the *Skin Folk* anthology (2001), Wesley Stace’s *Misfortune* (2006), Dubravka Ugresic’s *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* (2007), Malinda Lo’s *Ash* (2009), Shaida Kazie Ali’s *Not a Fairytale* (2010) and Helen Oyeyemi’s *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014). While these texts differ greatly in length, genre and intended readership, and some make more overt references to classic fairy tales than others, my comparative close reading suggests that all of them signal the type of intertextual relationship that justifies their classification as fairy tale revisions. As such, this dissertation acknowledges and explores all ten texts as feminist fairy tale revisions, but in my main chapters I also group them under three new areas of difference that intersect with sex and/or gender to create marginalised and misrepresented black, ageing and queer ‘others’.

In exploring the above-mentioned avenues, this study addresses gaps in existing research and potential areas of growth as identified by prominent scholars in the field of fairy tale studies. Haase, for instance, demands that we “decolonize fairy-tale studies and promote instead a responsible form of transcultural fairy-tale research” (“Decolonizing” 29). Stephen Benson and Andrew Teverson similarly identify “the relationship between fairy tales and [...] colonialist theory” as one of the “common areas of dominant, emergent interests [...] that suggest future directions for research and writing in the field” of fairy tale studies (13). Using the term ‘postcolonial’ to denote revisions that come after and enter into conversation with Eurocentric and colonial discourses, while at the same time offering new perspectives or experiences, chapter two references studies that critically engage with classic fairy tales as a form of literary colonialism. Stressing what Dorothy Hurley calls the “almost all-White world” of such fairy tales, these studies consider the racially biased binary system of representation that portrays white as good, pure and beautiful and black as evil, corrupted and ugly (228). In so doing, they also highlight how fairy tales facilitate the internalisation of a racist value system that stresses white privilege, supremacy and beauty. Inspired by such critical works, chapter two explores contemporary fairy tales that foreground racial politics and ‘the black other’. It examines Oyeyemi’s novel, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, as a postcolonial revision of the Grimms’ “Little Snow White” set in the segregationist America of the 1950s; Hopkinson’s short story, “The Glass Bottle Trick”, as a rewriting of Charles Perrault’s “Bluebeard” from a black Caribbean perspective; and Ali’s novel, *Not a Fairytale*, as a post-apartheid counter-narrative confronting the Eurocentric fairy tale convention as a whole.

With regard to my second area of interest – the ageing female in fairy tales – much feminist critique has focussed on the negative portrayal of older women, particularly witches, in fairy tales. Yet, as Amelia DeFalco remarks in *Uncanny Subjects: Aging in Contemporary Narrative*, age remains a largely overlooked category of difference in cultural studies and literary theory alike. Chapter three therefore considers age as another potential site of discrimination and othering, much like race, class, gender and sexuality. It explores the manner in which feminist revisions foreground and trouble some of the ageist ideas instilled by classic fairy tales and focusses on revisions concerned with ‘the elderly other’ portrayed as either a little old lady or a wicked witch. Consequently, this third chapter reads Hopkinson’s “Riding the Red” as an age-conscious revision which reimagines the marginalised grandmother in “Little Red Riding Hood”; Pratchett’s *Witches Abroad* as a counter-narrative which comments on over a dozen recognisable fairy tales and the limiting binary roles they prescribe for ageing women; and Ugresic’s *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* as a retelling centred on that changeable and highly symbolic ur-witch of Slavic myth and fairy tale, Baba Yaga.

Finally, my fourth and longest chapter considers revisionist texts that offer readers queer alternatives to the dualistic gender roles, heteronormative sexualities and cisnormativity inherent in classic fairy tales. As such, it addresses the concerns of the anonymous student I quote at the beginning of this introduction. Inspired by Jennifer Orme’s declaration that queer theory “has yet to significantly influence fairy-tale studies” and her consequent “queer reading” of Donoghue’s *Kissing the Witch*, the first part of this chapter attempts similarly innovative readings of the novels *Ash* by Lo and *Misfortune* by Stace (121). Lo re-imagines the story of “Cinderella” from the perspective of a bisexual teenage protagonist and Stace makes reference to that classic tale of heteronormative female *bildung*, “Sleeping Beauty”, in his exploration of transgender identity development. Both texts foreground the type of gender-dissonance and sexual dissidence that is the concern of queer theory. By also employing queer theory as “a means [...] of opening up fairy-tale studies to new [...] and productively disruptive angles”, as Benson and Teverson suggest, the second part of chapter four explores the intersectionality of ageism, heteronormativity and conventionality in its reading of Donoghue’s short stories. Building on Orme’s and other critics’ readings of these tales in order to spin the term ‘queer’ in a new direction, it focuses on the intergenerational relationships of old(er) lesbians in “The Tale of the Shoe” and the “Tale of the Witch” in order to present a “queer other” of a different sort.

Although I have divided this dissertation into three tidy chapters focussed on the identity categories of race, age and sexual orientation/gender identity, I wish to both acknowledge the intersectionality of these categories with gender *and* with each other. As such, in spite of the fact that I organise them into three other areas difference, my reading of all ten texts as feminist revisions still emphasises the effects of gender politics as and when they overlap with the race, age and sexual orientation/gender identity of protagonists. There are also moments when the other categories overlap, most notably in the second part of chapter four where I discuss the intergenerational desires of elderly lesbians. At the outset of this study I hoped to find texts located at these junctures and although Donoghue's stories explore the intersectionality of lesbianism and old age, her characters seem racially neutral or 'white'. Similarly, Hopkinson's "Riding the Red" troubles notions of elderly asexuality from the perspective of the Caribbean grandmother, but does not overtly explore the intersectionality of her race with either her old age or her unconventional sexual desire. While this dissertation therefore explores the manner in which old age and sexuality/desire overlap in both chapter three and four, and I am definitely interested in the possibilities for revision that exist when queer and age-conscious retellings include racial politics, I have yet to find a revision located at these intersections. Consequently, although the question of this lack/absence is thought-provoking and important, it is not one I address within the scope of this study.

Because one's "own identity must often be reckoned with when one strays into territories of identity politics different from one's own" as DeFalco suggests, I acknowledge my own educated and privileged reading position as a white, heterosexual and cisnormative woman in my early thirties (xvi). This means that in exploring the above areas of research, I am pushing beyond the range of my own experiences and hope to avoid the "trap [...] of thinking oneself and one's [...] peers to be the centre of the universe" in doing so (Ball 232). I *have* limited my study to revisions of what are mostly canonical Euro-Western fairy tales (with the exception of Baba Yaga, a figure from East European myth and fairy tale) and I *do* make the assumption that readers are familiar with the basic plots of popular classics like "Snow White", "Cinderella", "Sleeping Beauty" and "Little Red Riding Hood". Although I therefore write as a critical thinker from South Africa, I do not consider any African fairy tales in this dissertation. This does not mean that I deny their existence or significance. I take note of the vibrant oral storytelling tradition on the African continent and recognise that the tales told sometimes "[bear] similar motifs and structures [to European fairy tales] despite their being by no means identical in form" (Van Straten 28). Similarly, in using terms like 'canonical'

and ‘classic’ to describe these fairy tales, I acknowledge that such classification is only possible *because* they hold a place of privilege at the expense of other stories and story-telling traditions.

Consequently, I realise that it is necessary to problematise claims regarding the universal and cross-cultural appeal of Euro-Western fairy tales – such as the one made by Tatar when she comments that tales by the Brothers Grimm have “become part of a global storytelling archive drawn upon by many cultures” – but that is not the aim of this study (“Why” 56-57). Rather, this is a literary investigation interested in a collection of contemporary revisions of classic Euro-Western fairy tales based on the premise that they *do* hold a socializing influence that stretches far wider than their European origins. How wide that influence stretches and which underprivileged communities have access to these tales are questions better answered by social scientists. My concern here is with the post-1990 revisions that I suggest are relevant because they offer previously marginalised voices that challenge, subvert and renew the Eurocentric, ageist and heteronormative world views and stereotypes propagated by canonical Euro-Western fairy tales.

2

The Black Other: Racial Politics and Multiculturalism in Contemporary Revisions of Fairy Tales

[I]mages of white, vulnerable girls [who] in some fairy tales become princesses remain fixed in the minds of female children regardless of their race. [...] [T]his dream, as unrealistic as it is, seems possible only for white girls, as most Disney movies have demonstrated [...]. This, nevertheless, has not deterred girls of colour to fantasise about a ‘happily-ever-after’ life just like their white peers.
 – Vivian Yenika-Agbaw, “Black Cinderella”, 238

It’s not whiteness itself that sets Them against Us, but the worship of whiteness [...]. [W]e beat Them (and spare ourselves a lot of tedium and terror) by declining to worship.
 – Helen Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, 275

In a 2005 article titled “Seeing White: Children of Color and the Disney Fairy Tale Princess”, Dorothy Hurley argues that since “the reign of the Disney fairy tale princess began with the production of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937”, Disney’s creations – with their “overwhelmingly white” characters – have become “the dominant source of children’s intertextual knowledge of fairy tales” (224-225). In keeping with contemporary research that theorises the cultural significance and developmental impact of fairy tales, she points out that “fairy tales have an important role to play in shaping the self-image and belief system of children” (221). Taking this as a starting point, she traces research by Elizabeth Yeoman and Alejandro Segura-Mora¹⁰ and highlights the disturbing fact that “most, if not all children”, including black children, “see ‘White’ as good, living happily ever after, and pretty” (Hurley 222). In conclusion, she writes that “the problem of pervasive, internalised privileging of Whiteness has been intensified by the Disney representation of fairy tale princesses which consistently reinforce an ideology of White supremacy” (Hurley 223). Almost 10 years later,

¹⁰ Yeoman’s “‘How Does it Get into My Imagination?’ Elementary School Children’s Intertextual Knowledge and Gender Storylines” and Segura-Mora’s “What Colour is Beautiful?”

in the introduction to a collection of essays about black adaptations of familiar fairy tales published in 2013, Vivian Yenika-Agbaw picks up on Hurley's research and argues that

[w]hile scholars [...] have studied the contents of [fairy tale] retellings with a gender spin, interrogating their socio-cultural significance, discussing their literary appropriateness, and commenting on their possible impact on children, there is limited research on race-based retellings. ("Intro" 2)

She carries on to assert that just because there is a dearth of research in this area, it does not mean that there are no counter-narratives or revisions "retold from a multi-ethnic or multiracial perspective" and makes an urgent call for scholars to conduct studies on "how race is used as a signifier in fairy tales" (Yenika-Agbaw, "Intro" 2).

Taking up that call, this chapter will consider three recent fairy tale revisions by black women authors. These are Helen Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014), Nalo Hopkinson's "The Glass Bottle Trick", from the *Skin Folk* anthology (2001), and Shaida Kazie Ali's, *Not a Fairytale* (2010). Evocative of the theories espoused by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Oyeyemi's dense and intricate novel reimagines that iconic fairy tale princess and paragon of whiteness, Snow White, as a fair-skinned black girl passing for white in racially segregated America. Similarly suggestive of Fanon's work, Hopkinson's short story revises a lesser-known fairy tale, "Bluebeard", from a Caribbean perspective that foregrounds the epistemic violence of colonialism on the black psyche of its male protagonist. Lastly, Shaida Kazie Ali's *Not a Fairytale* moves away from the Fanonian theory implied in both *Boy, Snow, Bird* and "The Glass Bottle Trick", but is equally conscious of the effects of colonial rule on the development of its black subjects as it explores the lives of two South African Muslim sisters living under Apartheid, portraying their lived reality as directly oppositional to the ideal created by classic fairy tales.

Given the fact that all three authors are black women from previously marginalised contexts¹¹, together with the manner in which their stories foreground issues of race and hegemonic white power, I will examine all three texts as postcolonial revisions. However, seeing that 'postcolonial' remains a contested and "slippery term" which is, according to

¹¹ Helen Oyeyemi is the British-born daughter of Nigerian immigrants, Nalo Hopkinson is of Caribbean descent and Shaida Kazie Ali is an Indian Muslim writing from a South African context.

Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge, “notoriously difficult to define” and, in the words of Ania Loomba, “riddled with contradictions and qualifications”, it serves to clarify what exactly I mean by it (377;12). My understanding and use of the term is two-pronged. Firstly, like Loomba I recognise postcolonialism as “the contestation of colonial domination and legacies of colonialism”, or to cite Peter Hulme, as “a process of disengagement from the whole colonial syndrome, which takes many forms” (12; as qtd. in Loomba 19). In this sense I understand postcolonial revisions as contesting and disengaging from the ‘colonial’ (and patriarchal) ideologies espoused by Eurocentric fairy tales; as “writ[ing] back”, to borrow the title of Bill Ashcroft Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin’s acclaimed work on postcolonial literature, to the ‘centre’ these tales represent.

While the prefix “post” in postcolonialism therefore literally indicates a period or ideology that comes ‘after’ colonialism, signifying the downfall of a Eurocentric, hegemonic centre, there is also more to it than that. Stuart Hall suggests that while postcolonial “is what it is because something else has happened before” and it therefore exists “in the wake of it, in the shadow of it, inflected by it”, the term also denotes “something *new*” (as qtd. in Mishra and Hodge 377). Thus secondly, I also recognise the postcolonial as ushering in something new, something different and even original from the vantage point of a Eurocentric centre. Such an understanding is captured in the definition provided by Mishra and Hodge in the article “What was Postcolonialism?”:

‘Postcolonialism’ is a neologism that grew out of older elements to capture a seemingly unique moment in world history, a configuration of experiences and insights, hopes and dreams arising from hitherto silenced part of the world, taking advantage of new conditions to ‘search for alternatives to the discourses of the colonial era’ creating an altogether different vantage point from which to review the past and the future. (378)

Accordingly, this chapter will critically engage with each of these revisionist texts as postcolonial counter-narratives ‘writing back’ to the Eurocentric fairy tales they deconstruct and subvert, but it also aims to recognise the newness of their creations. As “a counter-culture of the imagination”, each of these texts offer readers novel and previously marginalised voices, perspectives and worldviews, opening up classic fairy tales to a whole new postcolonial and multicultural audience (Michael Dash as qtd. in Widdowson 493).

Although these counter-narratives bring to fairy tales exactly the issue of race that Yenika-Agbaw identifies as missing from fairy tale scholarship, they also continue the tradition of feminist revisions that have put a “gender spin” on classic fairy tales through their strong focus on female identity, development and relationships (Yenika-Agbaw, “Intro” 2). While I therefore consider these novels as postcolonial revisions, I will also draw on the many ways in which each tale echoes and engages with earlier feminist critiques and revisions. For, as Barbara Smith reminds us in *Toward a Black Feminist Criticism*, “[t]he politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers” (10).

“The Worship of Whiteness”: Assimilation and Racial Passing in Helen Oyeyemi’s *Boy, Snow, Bird*

Helen Oyeyemi’s *Boy, Snow, Bird* is a multi-faceted revision of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the story that set Disney’s unequivocal fairy tale reign in motion in 1937. By literally reading ‘fair’ as ‘white’ and casting Snow White as Snow Whitman, a light-skinned black girl passing for white in the racially segregated America of the 1950s, the novel is a “race-based retelling” that cautions against the internalisation of a white ideal (Yenika-Agbaw, “Intro” 2). It is this twist in the tale, a twist that one reviewer aptly describes as “the rather un-fairytalesish subject of race in pre-civil rights America”, that I argue lies at the heart of Oyeyemi’s retelling (Donaldson 2). Drawing a parallel between *Boy, Snow, Bird* and Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, the following section will therefore read the novel not only as a feminist revision of the classic fairy tale of “Snow White” but also as a postcolonial one that foregrounds racial identity and skin colour.¹²

For decades now, feminist scholars have criticised Snow White as “the archetypal Disney heroine” and a “powerful conduit of [...] traditional values” who is “everything a good girl

¹² Although I refer to the ever-popular 1937 Disney movie *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* for intertextual comparison, I will also cite the Grimm version of the tale, “Little Snow White”, not only because, it is the “best known” and most often referenced by critics and scholars, as Bacchilega points out, but also because it is the source text for Disney’s revision (“Cracking” 3).

and homemaker should be” (Youngs 311-14). As such, the majority of feminist critiques¹³ of the tale centre on the notion that it dramatises the tension between passive and innocent young women and their active, experienced and evil female elders – two of the most powerful “arche(stereo)types” imposed on women by patriarchy as the “voice of the looking glass” who decides who is “the fairest of all” (Barzilai 519; Gilbert and Gubar 38). In a passage referenced so often that it has achieved an almost cult-status in “Snow White” scholarship, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar succinctly summarise these two “arche(stereo)types” by pointing out that the Brothers Grimm’s “Little Snow White”, which Walt Disney renamed *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, “should really be called *Snow White and Her Wicked Stepmother*”,

for the central action of the tale – indeed its only real action – arises from the relationship between these two women: the one fair, young, pale, the other just as fair, but older, fiercer; the one a daughter, the other a mother; the one sweet, ignorant, passive, the other both artful and active; the one a sort of angel, the other an undeniable witch. (“The Queen’s Looking Glass” 36)

A great number of contemporary feminist retellings of “Little Snow White” centre on this essential female conflict between younger and older women as outlined by Gilbert and Gubar. As such, we have seen writers like Angela Carter, Anne Sexton, Emma Donoghue, Jane Yolen and Garrison Keillor engage in feminist revision and feminist critique as they interrogate the dualisms identified above.¹⁴

And yet, as the arguably third wave feminist critics Hurley and Yenika-Agbaw remind us, there is a very important gap in what we can, in retrospect, call the second wave feminist critique and revision of this classic fairy tale: that is that they ignore how questions of race intertwine with questions of gender in the lives of black women. Scholarship on this topic is still limited and we do not have a wealth of race-based research on fairy tales in general or “Snow White” in particular. However, Hurley does broadly argue that the “Disnified

¹³ See for instance Bacchilega, Barzilai, Joosen and Gilbert and Gubar.

¹⁴ Carter’s “The Snow Child”, Sexton’s “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs”, Donoghue’s “The Tale of the Apple”, Yolen’s “Snow in Summer” and Keillor’s “My Stepmother, Myself”.

versions” of fairy tales “exaggerate the whiteness of both primary and secondary characters and thus subtly promote an ideology of White supremacy” (224-225).

In support of such a statement, Hurley’s analysis painstakingly chronicles the racially-biased, binary system of representation that characterises almost all Disney versions of fairy tales when they portray white as good, pure and beautiful and black as evil, corrupted and ugly. In this sense, her critique is strikingly similar to Fanon’s when he asserts that “in the collective unconscious, black = ugliness, sin, darkness, immorality” and that “symbolically, the black man stands for the bad side of character” whereas “on the other side” we find “the bright look of innocence, the white dove of peace, the magical, heavenly light” that is whiteness (192, 189). For Fanon, these are the “suppositions” that slowly find their way into the young colonial subject’s mind through books, magazines, comics and films and he warns that “since there is always identification with the victor” or the white hero in this case, the black child internalises this racist dualism, disassociating from and depreciating his own race in favour of what he perceives as the white ideal (Fanon 146-148).

True to feminist critics’ claims that *Black Skin, White Masks* “takes the male as the norm” and “reinforces existing gender hierarchies even as [he] challenges racial ones”, Fanon’s discussion of the black child focuses on only boy subjects and tales about male explorers, adventurers and missionaries (Loomba 148; Bergner 76; Fanon 146-148). Yet, as Hurley shows in her article, which analyses the effects of Disney’s “binary colour symbolism” on children of *both* sexes, the guiding principle remains the same regardless of the subject’s sex. As such, I draw inspiration from both scholars’ research in order to read “Snow White” – and here I refer to the formulaic plot structure, or stable chain of motifs, present in almost all the tale’s forms, not just the Disney version – as a tale that valorises a white ideal through the manner in which it associates female beauty with whiteness.

Central to this argument are two well-known, fundamental and formulaic elements of the classic Grimm version that have persisted into almost all adaptations of the tale. These are that Snow White is “as white as snow” and that ultimately she is “the fairest of all”. Although Snow White’s mother’s initial wish for a child “as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as [ebony]” is linked to a trio of physical attributes – all shades of colour in their superlative forms – it is the first of these that becomes her primary identifier when she is literally named “Snow White” after her birth (Grimm, “Little” 170). Such emphasis on her

whiteness as her most noteworthy attribute, together with the constant refrain which emphasises that she is the “fairest of all”, draws a sequential link between her white skin and her beauty (Grimm, “Little” 170-178). This relationship becomes even more prominent if we consider language as a Saussurean system of signs and English versions of the tale’s use of the word “fairest” to indicate “most beautiful”. As a dictionary entry, the word “fair” is a highly loaded term that not only denotes “beauty” or a “pleasing appearance”, but can also be understood to mean “just” or “equitable”, “unblemished; clean and pure; innocent” and most significantly “light in color, pale, particularly as regards skin tone” (“fair”). Consequently, by employing the word “fair” to denote beauty, the tale of “Snow White” authorises and perpetuates a Eurocentric world view that privileges whiteness by likening it to goodness, justice, purity and, most importantly, beauty. It is this implicit white female ideal that I suggest *Boy, Snow, Bird* questions and calls to our attention.

“A Little System Called Segregation”: the Institutionalised Worship of Whiteness

Told primarily from the perspective of the ironically-named female protagonist, “Boy”, the first section of *Boy, Snow, Bird* accounts for her childhood, her eventual escape from an abusive father¹⁵ and her flight to the artisan town of Flax Hill at the age of twenty. Once there, the beautiful but apparently talentless Boy goes through a string of odd jobs before she settles at the local bookstore and gets engaged to Arturo Whitman, a local widower. As in the tale of “Little Snow White”, Arturo has a daughter, a seven-year old whose mother “died a week after giving birth” to her, who has “clouds of dark hair” and answers to the name of “Snow” (Oyeyemi 19, 25, 18).

At first, Boy’s new family set-up seems idyllic and she adopts Snow as her own, claiming that what she “[feels] for the girl [is not] all that distinct from what [she feels] for the father” (Oyeyemi 109). However, tell-tale signs of what Gilbert and Gubar call the queen’s “mirror-madness” as well as other moments of foreboding mark Boy’s imminent characterisation as a fairy tale villain (38). When Arturo gives her a “white-gold snake” bracelet that “scream[s] ‘wicked stepmother’”, the story just seems to be waiting for the trigger that will set the classic trope of the evil queen in motion (Oyeyemi 103-5). This trigger appears soon after the wedding, when Boy falls pregnant and gives birth to her own daughter, Bird. In comparison to her “Grace Kelly look-alike” mother, Bird is clearly “a Negro” and it is with

¹⁵ Who later turns out to really be her mother, living as a transgender man.

this revelation that Boy finds out that Arturo is, in fact, colored¹⁶: “The doctor thought I’d gone to bed with a colored man, and I had. He was my husband” (Oyeyemi 42, 131-2). With Bird “accidentally [bringing] to light” the “truth” of the Whitmans’ colored ancestry, everything suddenly changes and Boy is caught between her love for her “dark” daughter and a family-in-law that is obsessed with whiteness (Oyeyemi 150, 216, 137). Painfully aware of the “contrast between” her two daughters – adopted Snow as “rose”-coloured “with a touch of dusk” and biological Bird, “born with a suntan” and only getting “darker every day” – Boy starts to resent the “abundantly beautiful” Snow with her perfect pretence at whiteness (Oyeyemi 141, 140, 131, 149-150). Thus, in a seemingly villainous act we only later recognise as meant to protect the younger sister from comparison in a family that “draw[s] strict distinctions between degrees of color” in their “worship of whiteness”, Boy sends Snow away to stay with her expelled aunt Clara – another “dark” face who “[rose] up to confront” the family’s white charade a generation earlier and was exiled because of it (Oyeyemi 216, 275, 137, 216, emphasis in original).

It is at this point in the tale that there is a clear shift in focus. Having cleverly introduced what reviewer Adrew Billen calls the “most exciting theme” of the book – “assimilation and gradation [...] by Dulux colour chart” – the story begins to transform (n.pag.). Hereto, *Boy*, *Snow*, *Bird* has appeared to be a straightforward feminist revision focussed on the plight of the wicked stepmother, but now the novel suddenly takes on another, postcolonial dimension as it confronts the issue of race and the white ideal. In an interview with Arun Rath, Oyeyemi admits to seeing both these topics as central to her reading of the classic “Snow White”:

Reading the fairy tale, the way it’s so explicit that Snow White’s beauty is tied to the whiteness of her skin, there seemed a very clear connection to me with the ‘50s and ‘60s in America when there was very much a debate over the rights of a human being based on the color of their skin. And so it was very interesting to me to place this very white-seeming girl in the middle of

¹⁶ While the term “colored” acts as a synonym for “black” in the American context, it holds a different meaning in South Africa. Here “coloured” implies individuals of mixed decent. Thus while I employ the UK spelling of “colour” as opposed to “color” to imply tone or shade, I have used the American spelling to denote black Americans in my discussion of *Boy*, *Snow*, *Bird*, as Oyeyemi does.

that historical context. (Oyeyemi, “‘Boy, Snow, Bird’ Takes a Closer Look” n.pag.)

Although the tale is set in 1950s America and we are told that “down South” there is “still a nice little system going [...] called segregation”, race only becomes a central theme in the novel after *Bird* is born. Given the context of the tale, there *are* a few fleeting mentions of racial prejudice and discrimination elsewhere in the story, but Oyeyemi chooses to explicitly confront the social realities of segregation only twice. The first reference occurs when, during their initial clash after the birth, Arturo’s mother, Olivia Whitman, confesses the following to Boy:

‘The last person who threatened to slap me was a white woman. Blonde, like you. No Southern belle, either. Just trash.’

‘I was working in a grocery store,’ Olivia said. ‘And I didn’t fetch a box of soap flakes fast enough for that woman’s liking, so she said: “I’ll slap you, girl.” “I’ll slap you, girl” to a grown woman. And I knew I’d lose my job if I went at her, so I just said: “I’m sure you’ve got a lot of things to do, ma’am, and I’m as stupid as they come. Please be patient with me.” That was the standard, that kind of cringing and crawling. I didn’t want it to be. She was not my better, I don’t care what anyone says, she wasn’t. None of them were. I thought: If I have a daughter, I don’t want anyone talking to her like that. I don’t ever want to hear my daughter wheedling at anyone the way I do every working day.’

[...]

‘What you don’t understand is that we’re being kept down out there. All the way down.’ (Oyeyemi 135)

A reference to the system of Jim Crow that demoted black people to second class citizens, this passage depicts the social subjugation and degradation that marked the daily lives of colored people during the era of segregation.¹⁷

¹⁷ Jim Crow refers to “the racial caste system” and “series of rigid anti-black laws” which “operated primarily, but not exclusively in southern and border states, between 1877 and the mid-1960s” and “which excluded blacks from public transport and facilities, juries, jobs, and neighbourhoods” etc. (Pilgrim n.pag.).

In addition to the portrayal of such everyday epistemic violence,¹⁸ readers are also privy to a later conversation that highlights the extreme physical violence of a lynching, a form of extrajudicial mob execution that is mentioned only in passing:

Emmet Till did what he did just one time. [...] [H]e whistled at a Mississippi white woman. She didn't like that so she fetched her gun. But she didn't have to use it; she had a husband and a brother-in-law, real men who weren't afraid to take on a fourteen-year-old boy. You saw what they did to Emmet Till. You saw the boy's face [...] But you [...] know that the men who killed Emmett Till didn't do a single second of jail time on account of the murder. (Oyeyemi 273)

Further references to “the face that [he] was left with” and “that picture of [his] remains lying in their casket” looking “melted” suggest the extreme brutality of the real life lynching of Emmet Till in 1955 (Oyeyemi 273-4). A 14-year-old colored boy who allegedly dared to flirt with a white woman, Till was beaten, mutilated and shot before being dumped in the Tallachatchie River by a group of white men. The “picture of [his] remains” Oyeyemi has her characters mention, refers to the infamous photo published by the *Chicago Defender* after his funeral, a picture that sparked public outrage internationally and ultimately helped fuel the civil rights movement (Oyeyemi 273; Anderson n.pag.).

In the above instances, Oyeyemi manages to capture both the degrading social injustices and the physical violence and abuse of segregationist society by allowing her characters to briefly narrate these two moments depicting historical reality. And yet, instead of making such instances the focus of her story, she only uses them as props to suggestively set the scene for us, to sketch a historical context or backdrop for the drama that is indeed her focus: a family of colored individuals obsessed with being white. Like Fanon, who according to Homi Bhabha “rarely historicizes the colonial experience” in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Oyeyemi seems not so much concerned with the ideologies or ideas that give rise to a social system which privileges and idealises whiteness as she is set on exploring the psychological consequences of such a system on the behaviour and development of her colored characters

¹⁸ I use the term epistemic violence in the sense that Spivak used it, to suggest an “attack on culture, ideas and value systems”, in other words, the distortion of ways of knowing and ways of perceiving oneself and one's place in the world (Loomba 54).

(119). It is within this context of institutionalised racism and white privileging then that Oyeyemi is able to rewrite the pure and beautiful Snow White as a product of first social, then familial and, finally, personal dysfunction driven by the worship of whiteness and racial passing as an act of assimilation.

“Generations of Calculated Breeding”: The White Ideal and the Ideal Whit[e]man

Our first indication that the Whitmans are anything other than their name purports, is when Bird is born black and Boy is forced to confront the reality of her husband’s colored ancestry. As such, their first conversation after the birth reveals the following:

In his mind [Arturo] was no more colored than I was; he never met his grandparents or cousins, his parents were the only ones from their families who’d decided to move north from Louisiana and see if anyone called them out on their ancestry. His father stood in line behind a colored man at the front desk of the Flax Hill County Club and eavesdropped as the colored man tried and failed to gain membership. [...] But Gerald liked golf and didn’t see why he shouldn’t play in those surroundings if he could get away with it. Gerald had thought: Well, what if I just don’t say... what if I never say? He’d passed that down to Arturo, the idea that there was no need to ever say, that if you knew who you were, then that was enough, that not saying was not the same as lying. He asked me a question that threw me into confusion because I couldn’t honestly answer yes or no. He asked if I’d have married him if I’d seen him as colored. (Oyeyemi 132-133)

This passage first introduces us to what I would like to suggest is one of the novel’s main concerns, namely the notion of racial “passing” (Oyeyemi 132-133). It is Arturo’s idea of “getting away” with their colored ancestry and that “not saying is not the same as lying”, together with a later admission by Olivia that she initially felt like she was “betraying” other colored folks through her pretence, that evokes the “commonsense understanding” of racial passing as identified by Steven J. Belluscio (Oyeyemi 132-133, 136; 9). In *To be Suddenly White: Literary Realism and Racial Passing*, he explains that according to this first notion,

passing means to conceal a unitary, essential, and inefaceable racial identity and substitute it with a purportedly artificial one, as in the oft-discussed case

of a light-skinned black person passing for white ‘for social, economic, or political reasons’. This conception is what Pamela Caughie refers to as passing ‘[i]n its literal or first cultural sense,’ which ‘carries certain pejorative connotations of deception, dishonesty, fraudulence, or betrayal’ and ‘designates an effort to disguise or suppress one’s racial heritage’.

(Belluscio 9)

For Belluscio, this first understanding of passing is also the one that is most prominent in the early twentieth century. It therefore comes as no surprise that, true to their historical setting, it is the view voiced by Oyeyemi’s characters. However, Belluscio also points out that “*any* passing narrative”, even one that relies on this first notion, “necessarily calls into question any notion of racial fixity” by highlighting how “a subject can so effortlessly exchange one racial identity for another” and so suggests a later, post-modern understanding of passing that is “linked to performativity” (Belluscio 9-10, emphasis in original). Such a post-modern notion of passing “refers not to an assumption of fraudulent identity” in the sense that identity is seen “as a unitary, essentialized entity” but rather sees passing as “a process-orientated performance drawing upon a seemingly infinite number of cultural texts, ‘ethnic’ or otherwise” (Belluscio 9).

Thus, even though Oyeyemi’s characters seem to be voicing the first cultural notion of passing and can therefore be understood as endorsing an essentialist notion of race, the very existence of the Whitman family who has successfully passed for white for years, alerts readers to what Belluscio calls the “artificiality of the colour line” (19). Just as Arturo asks Boy whether or not she would have married him if she had “*seen* him as colored” (as opposed to if she had *known* that he *was* colored), Oyeyemi seems to ask readers to consider race as merely a performance, something you are *perceived* as being, rather than something you essentially *are*. Even as it explores the damaging effects of a white ideal on the colored characters in its thrall, *Boy*, *Snow*, *Bird* also questions the essentialist notion of race on which white supremacy and privilege is based, undermining the legitimacy of the very concept of whiteness and engaging in its deconstruction.

Writing a whole family of individuals whose behaviour is reminiscent of the pathology described by Fanon in *White Skin, Black Masks*, Oyeyemi exposes the “worship of whiteness” for the social and psychological affliction it is. To this end, we are told that the Whitmans

are the product of generations of calculated breeding, whether they'll admit it or not. The Whitmans have married to refine a look, they keep a close eye on skin tone and hair texture. They draw strict distinctions between degrees of color – quadroon, octoroon – darkest to lightest. But they can't stop a [dark] face like Clara's or Effie's rising up every now and again to confront them. (Oyeyemi 216, emphasis in original)

It is such references to “calculated breeding” aimed at producing a certain exterior “look” which again reminds us of the artificial racial identity that according to the first notion of cultural passing gets substituted for the essential and inescapable one that the Whitman's cannot seem to prevent from “rising up” to “confront” them, like some inherent black leviathan (Oyeyemi 216). In fact, it is in instances where their coloured ancestry surfaces or threatens to surface that we begin to get a sense of the trauma and destruction caused by the family's pretence at whiteness. It is not only Clara and Effie – as mentioned in the above quote – who are sent away or hidden so that the charade can continue, but generations of Whitmans who face “unhappy endings” as sacrifices on the altar of the white ideal:

there was Addie Whitman, who spent her whole life playing servant in various cousins' houses because she was too dark and 'ugly' to be allowed to marry [...]. Or there's Cass Whitman, who hung herself to show her parents and her brothers exactly what she thought of their running her 'unsuitable' fiancé out of town, or Vince Whitman, who fell in love with a white woman and proposed to her in front of his closest friends, who were shocked and terrified. She said yes, and she also said she would've loved him if he were purple or green [...], and he said, 'I'm so happy. That's all I want to hear.' [...] At sunset, [they] went for a walk in the park and he shot her dead, then himself. One clean, accurate shot each, like he'd been practicing. Aunt Clara says he must have been out of his mind, but Effie says he was a realist. (Oyeyemi 215)

The above passage not only makes reference to the estrangement and mistreatment of darker family members – as with Addie or Cass Whitman – but in the case of Vince Whitman, his

behaviour is reminiscent of the inferiority complex or “existential deviation” that Fanon theorises as the result of the “juxtaposition of the white and black races” (14-16).

As Ania Loomba articulates in *Colonialism/Post-Colonialism*, for Fanon “psychic trauma results when the colonised subject realises that he can never attain the whiteness he has been taught to desire, or shed the blackness he has learnt to devalue” (176).¹⁹ In the case of Vince Whitman we might argue that he has indeed “attained the whiteness he has been taught to desire” when his white fiancé accepts his proposal and he looks forward to an interracial marriage. Fanon certainly seems to read the interracial marriage as holding a redemptive power for the black subject when he quotes from the Interracial Conferences of 1949 to say that

[i]nsofar as truly interracial marriage is concerned, one can legitimately wonder to what extent it may not represent for the colored spouse a kind of subjective consecration to wiping out in himself and in his own mind the colour prejudice from which he has suffered so long... Among certain people of colour, the fact that they are marrying someone of the white race seems to have overridden every other consideration. In this fact they find access to complete equality with that illustrious race, the master of the world, the ruler of the peoples of color. (71)

If interracial marriage therefore serves as a point of access to racial equality, why does Vince still kill himself and his bride? Oyeyemi seems to give two possible answers when she has Clara propose madness and Effie propose realism as the cause of this murder-suicide. Given the manner in which the novel echoes Fanon’s writing, I would like to suggest that these two apparently different reasons actually come down to the same thing. Vince must be aware of the social realities that will thwart their union and realise that in the context of institutionalised racism, he will never be able to truly shed *his own* blackness despite attaining *her* whiteness. As such, not even his bride’s acceptance can override the internalisation of his own inferiority. He might “grasp white civilization and dignity” in the privacy of their union,

¹⁹ Before we continue with this line of thought, it is important to acknowledge that although Fanon deals with the idea of assimilation and the black man’s attempt to “elevate himself to the white man’s level [...] to elevate himself in the range of colours to which he attributes a kind of hierarchy”, there is little or no reference to the idea of physically ‘passing’ for white as we understand it in *Boy, Snow, Bird* (81-82). For Fanon, the “burden” of the black man’s “corporeal malediction” – his very blackness – is inescapable and as such the white mask he theorises is more of a social performance than an actual physical pretence at whiteness (111).

but in the outside world, he remains a second class citizen, undeserving of basic dignity and respect (Fanon 63). The Fanonian psychic trauma or ‘madness’ that ensues is resolved in the only way possible, by forcefully removing both himself and his fiancé from circumstances he realistically has no power to change.

Oyeyemi’s writing seems particularly evocative of Fanon’s ideas in two further passages which deal with Snow’s paternal aunt, Vivian, and her grandmother, Olivia. However, while both passages definitely resonate with Fanon’s thinking, they also differ from it in the sense that they deal with the colored *woman* about whom Fanon famously admits to “know nothing” (180). In an article that deals with “the Role of Gender in Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*”, Gwen Bergner argues that Fanon ignores “feminine subjectivity” and considers women only “as subjects [...] in terms of their sexual relationships with men” (80, 77). In “transposing” Freud’s thinking “from gender to race”, she writes, “Fanon excludes women” and “whereas Freud opposes white women to white men, Fanon opposes black men to white men” (Bergner 78). This shift, she suggests, “reveals black women’s double oppression or exclusion” and forces us to consider how Fanon’s “account of normative, raced masculinity depends on the production or exclusion of femininities” (Bergner 78, 77). Such critique makes it all the more interesting to explore how Oyeyemi portrays her female characters in a way that might “broaden Fanon’s outline of black women’s subjectivity” as Bergner hopes to do in her own article (84).

Bird – who narrates the middle of three sections of the novel – describes Vivian as follows:

Something about Aunt Vivian is all curled up along the edges, like [...] a piece of old bread. [...] Her face when the Supremes come on ... she’ll try to be girlish and sing along but her eyes say *SOS SOS it’s an alien invasion*. Aunt Viv with her fingers patting away at her super-straight hair, like she is trying to wake it up or calm it down or show it off or hide it or who knows ... I guess she tries her best to look out for me, but I’ve got better things to do than be precious about my complexion. (Oyeyemi 148-9, emphasis in original)

For Vivian, who we by now recognise as a colored woman passing for white, there is some kind of threat inherent in identifying with the Supremes. In her mind, they are not human, but

entirely “alien” or ‘other’ in their broadcasted, even celebrated, blackness (Oyeyemi 148). Her obvious unease at seeing the Supremes resonates with Fanon’s description of the alienated Negro who is “for ever in combat with his own image” (194). Juxtaposed with the obsessive “patting” or checking of her “super-straight hair” and the reference to “being precious about [one’s] complexion”, this passage is therefore suggestive of an attempt at control or containment, lest the inherent blackness she has successfully concealed might rise up and expose her. As Kenneth B. Clark observes in *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power*: “The preoccupation of many Negroes with hair straighteners, skin bleachers, and the like illustrate this tragic aspect of American racial prejudice – Negroes have come to believe their own inferiority” (63-64). Vivian, it seems, has internalised the dominant white discourse on blackness to such an extent that she is completely unnerved by anything that contradicts it.

The female Whitman who has internalised the inferiority of her race the most, is Olivia Whitman, the family matriarch. During her first conversation with Boy after Bird’s birth, Olivia carries on to divulge the psychological effects of segregation:

You’d save up to go out for a nice night at a nice place, all right, fine. All the high class places we were allowed to go, they were imitations of the places we were kept out of – not mawkish copies, most of it was done with perfect taste, but sitting at the bar or at the candlelit table you’d try to imagine what dinnertime remarks real people were making... yes, the real people at the restaurant two blocks away, the white folks we were shadows of, and you’d try to talk about whatever you imagined they were talking about, and your food turned to sawdust in your mouth. (Oyeyemi 135-136)

It is this reference to black establishments as “imitations” and “copies” of white ones, together with a later reference to Olivia’s passing as a “masquerade” that perhaps draws the most explicit link between *Boy*, *Snow*, *Bird* and the title of Fanon’s *White Skins, Black Masks* (Oyeyemi 135-6, 138). Olivia’s further assertion in this passage that only white people are “real people” while the black people “kept out of” white establishments are their “mere shadows”, closely echoes some of the views expressed by Fanon when he writes about “the white world, the only honourable one”, barring him “from all participation” or the black man’s acquisition of the European language as an attempt to become “proportionately whiter” and thus “closer to being a real human being” (Oyeyemi 135-6; Fanon 114, 18). The

similarity in ideas is striking and ultimately Olivia's account evokes one of the central arguments made by Fanon in *White Skins, Black Masks* when he writes:

What am I getting at? Simply this: When the Negro makes contact with the white world, a certain sensitizing action takes place. If his psychic structure is weak, one observes a collapse of the ego. The black man stops behaving as an *actional* person. The goal of his behaviour will be The Other (in the guise of the white man), for The Other alone can give him worth. (Fanon 154)

Through her portrayal of the Whitmans, and particularly the Whitman women, Oyeyemi explores the dangers of internalising the white ideal that lies at the heart of "Little Snow White". Like the colonised black man in Fanon's writing for whom "the white other serves to define everything that is desirable, everything that the self desires", her female characters have internalised their own inferiority to such an extent that they see themselves – in their blackness – as being of value only in relation to their ability to mimic whiteness (Loomba 144).

"Perfectly Vague and Perfectly Tender": Snow Whitman as a Powerless Snow White

These then are the social and familial circumstances which Oyeyemi sketches for Snow Whitman. Signalling her as a revised Snow White not only through her name, but also through her character description,²⁰ Oyeyemi asks that we read Snow Whitman in relation to her pre-existing namesake (20, 9). However – and herein lies the crux of Oyeyemi's revision – whereas the original Snow White is the product of classic fairy tale wish fulfilment (her mother wishes and, voila! she appears), Oyeyemi's Snow Whitman is the product of her family's "*calculated breeding*", as discussed earlier, breeding aimed at producing a "*skin tone*" and "*hair texture*" that signals whiteness as clearly as their surname does (Oyeyemi 216; italics in original).

²⁰ She is described as "a medieval swan maiden, only with the darkest hair and the pinkest lips, every shade at its utmost" or a "girl in a Technicolor tapestry", both of which are evocative of Snow White, whose colouring is always described in the superlative form and who is famous for her role in Disney's first Technicolor animation (Oyeyemi 78).

Although there is never an explicit reference to her skin as white – other than her name – the fact that Snow Whitman passes for white is evidence enough. Significantly in the place of mentioning her whiteness, in sentences where we expect to see the adjective “white”, Oyeyemi does something very interesting. She writes, for instance, that despite the family’s fears that her colored ancestry would show, “Snow turned out to be... *Snow*” (Oyeyemi 133, emphasis my own). A couple of pages later, the tale stresses the “difference between being seen as colored and being seen as *Snow*” (Oyeyemi 139, emphasis my own). In both instances, Oyeyemi has replaced the adjective we expect to find, namely “white”, with the proper noun, “Snow”.

By purposefully employing Snow’s name in the place of the word “white”, I suggest Oyeyemi achieves two things. Firstly, she disrupts our colour-coded expectations. Essentialist notions of white-vs-black (or colored) are so deeply entrenched that the reader expects the word “white” in both instances. But by making “Snow” act as a stand-in for the word “white”, Oyeyemi confronts those expectations and asks us to consider exactly what it is that we expect. So she both signals and distinguishes Snow’s whiteness as white enough to not be colored but not entirely white enough to warrant the use of the adjective “white”. Secondly, by employing Snow’s name where we expect to see “white”, Oyeyemi stresses how her name is meant to signify whiteness just as much as the word white does. This idea is further supported in a passage where Boy considers the selective process Snow’s mother went through before choosing her name:

[She] left a list of all the names she’d considered giving Snow. There were hundreds of them.[...] The multitudes of names didn’t seem like indecision – Julia Whitman was trying to summon up a troop of fairy godmothers. Somewhere in among the names of all those mermaids, warriors, saints, goddesses, queens, scientists, and poets I could see a woman trying to cover all the bases, searching for things her daughter would need in order to make friends with life. (Oyeyemi 68)

On the surface level, we have just another eager parent who succumbs to the notion that a name is prophetic and so finds herself searching for the ‘right’ name that will bestow whatever qualities “her daughter would need in order to make friends with life” (Oyeyemi 68). What is not explicit in the passage but nonetheless implied is that, despite all the

alternatives she considers, Julia Whitman eventually settles on “Snow” – the name of a fairy tale princess that fits neatly into her list of “mermaids, warriors, saints, goddesses, queens, scientists, and poets” (Oyeyemi 68). Given the fact that we are told that she was “trying to summon up a troop of fairy godmothers” and “trying to cover all the bases”, we are left to wonder how exactly this choice of name would influence those variables (Oyeyemi 68).

Julia is summoning whiteness and all the privilege and status it bestows. Like her fairy tale double, it is Snow’s whiteness – often equated with her beauty – that therefore becomes her primary signifier. And, just like the classic “pure maiden” feminists have critiqued as a passive female ideal, Snow Whitman is almost unbelievably sweet, innocent and submissive (Youngs 311-314). “[P]oised and sympathetic”, she “smile[s] even when she [does not] feel like it” and is so accommodating that even a “unicorn would lay its head down on her lap” (Oyeyemi 71,166, 242). So “perfectly vague and perfectly tender” that she “cannot be for real”, Snow Whitman echoes Disney’s Snow White in behaviour as well appearance (Oyeyemi 287).

Thus it is that Snow, who is remembered primarily for being “so pretty” and “so well-behaved”, is both beautifully white and ideally docile (Oyeyemi 243). Especially to the Whitman women who have internalised their own inferiority and therefore watch her performance with “reverence [that is] over the top”, Snow has achieved the ultimate and ideal white femininity (Oyeyemi 78):

everybody adored Snow and her daintiness. Snow’s beauty is all the more precious to Olivia and Agnes because it’s a trick. When whites look at her, they don’t get whatever fleeting, ugly impressions so many of [them] get when [they] see a colored girl standing there. The joke’s on [them]. Olivia just laps up the reactions Snow gets. (Oyeyemi 139)

It is Oyeyemi’s reference to Snow’s beauty as “a trick” or a “joke” played on whites, however, which reminds us of the notion of mimicry as an avenue for subversion and protest in postcolonial writing (139). Having successfully crossed or (tres)passed the “racial line or boundary” that separates white from black, Snow “escap[es] the subordination and oppression accompanying one identity and access[es] the privilege and status of the other” (Ginsberg 3). Not only do whites not recognise Snow’s blackness, but instead of the “ugly impressions”

they normally get when they see “a colored girl”, they admire and adore her beauty (Oyeyemi 139). Unlike colored women, who are the victims of what Darlene Clark Hine calls the “derogatory images and negative stereotypes of [their] sexuality”, Snow is treated with “adoration” wherever she goes, spoken to in “gentle tone of voice” and “love[d]” by “everybody who crosses her path” (917; Oyeyemi 282). In Snow’s passing the family has therefore reached its ultimate goal: her ability to so perfectly replicate whiteness makes her a paragon of beauty, admired by whites and blacks alike, and signals their successful cheating and subversion of the essentialist racial discourse which “privileges whiteness as unadulterated, exclusive and rare” (Harris 1737).

And yet, while the Whitmans clearly revel in the success of their creation, their ‘trickster’, Oyeyemi stresses Snow’s emptiness, inauthenticity and lack of autonomy more than once. At one point we read that

[m]aybe there is no Snow, but only the work of smoke and mirrors. The Whitmans need someone to love and have found too much to hate in each other and so this lifelike little projection walks around on a reel, untouchable. (Oyeyemi 142)

In another instance, Snow is also described as “a pretty convincing replica of an all-round sweetie pie” and “an overpetted show pony” with “something about her that doesn’t quite add up” (Oyeyemi 196). Thus, instead of revelling in her successful subversion of the essentialist discourse that portrays whiteness as an “inherent and unalterable essence”, Snow is a broken puppet reminiscent of the colonial subject whose “very being, [her] very subjectivity” is “corroded” by her colonial reality (Ginsberg 4; Loomba 143). As a “show pony” or a “projection [...] on a reel”, Snow is a slave to the Whitmans’ ideal and references to her being a “phoney” and a “deceiver” combine with her own admission of powerlessness when, during a racist encounter, she finds herself unable to confront a white boy who insults her colored friend, Ephraim (Oyeyemi 306, 232):

I should have told that guy that when he called anybody that name in my hearing he was saying it directly to me. I should have told him never dare call anybody that name again. All I did was turn to Ephraim and whisper:

'Ephraim, let's go.' [...] I went with them. I am wondering if that's all I can do for them. I can't seem to speak up, but I can go with them silently.

(Oyeyemi 232-233, italics in original)

As if underscoring Snow's inability to speak up for herself, Oyeyemi also chooses not to give her the power of a narrative voice. Although she is one of the three title characters of *Boy, Snow, Bird*, it is the other two who narrate the tale in turns. In fact, the only sense we get of Snow as anything other than an "ornament [...] being passed around", "[n]ice to look at" but nothing more, is in the letters she writes to Bird in the middle section of the book – one of which is quoted above (Oyeyemi 243). In this sense, Oyeyemi – as if in conversation with postcolonial thinkers – seems to be critiquing the notion of mimicry as an "anti-colonial tool" and an empowering act of protest and subversion (Loomba 178, 89). Instead of presenting passing as an act of empowerment, Snow's story is a cautionary tale that warns against assimilation and the internalisation of the white ideal.

Reimagining Snow White as a black girl passing for white in racially segregated America, Oyeyemi's revision of "Little Snow White" is a literary act of disruption and reinvention that focusses on black female subjectivity. In this sense, *Boy, Snow, Bird* represents not only Oyeyemi's own reading of the classic western fairy tale – a reading that foregrounds the implicit white feminine ideal – but also her reinvention and critique thereof. Through her exploration of the psychological and developmental consequences of 'worshipping whiteness', she echoes, combines and enriches not only current debates in the feminist revision and postcolonial critique of fairy tales, but also the psychoanalytical musings of Fanon when he interrogates racial identity in *Black Skin, White Masks*.

Like Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird*, the next tale under consideration, Nalo Hopkinson's "The Glass Bottle Trick", retells a classic fairy tale from a postcolonial perspective that resonates with the work of Frantz Fanon. Although the fairy tale in question is slightly more grotesque than and not nearly as well-known as "Little Snow White", Hopkinson's race-based revision of Perrault's "Bluebeard" makes equally important strides in decolonising the fairy tale canon and making it more accessible to a multiracial and multicultural readership.

“Bad Luck, Love”: Colonial Pasts and Caribbean Presence in Nalo Hopkinson’s “The Glass Bottle Trick”

As an established black writer of fantasy or speculative fiction, much has been written about Nalo Hopkinson as a “non-White” voice – particularly with regard to her 1998 science fiction novel, *Brown Girl in the Ring* (Routledge 3). Privileging black characters, Afro-Caribbean perspectives and Caribbean creole, her writing is often hailed as postcolonial. Hopkinson might be adamant that she has “no idea what [scholars] are talking about” when they refer to her writing as such, but her own vision of her work speaks to the contrary (“A Conversation” 164):

I try to make sure that I don’t have to default to straight, white, middle-class values as the only good way to be. I try to throw in surprises. I think there are many types of black lives that don’t get talked about. We are as complex as any culture on this earth. We’re trying so hard to get the rest of the world – not even so much the rest of the world, but the white world – to recognise that we are respectable, deserving human beings. As a result, we only show a tiny part of ourselves. One of the many things I have learned from Samuel Delany is that we must have the courage to show more than that. (Hopkinson, “A Conversation” 169)²¹

Turning our attention to her collection of short stories in *Skin Folk* (2001), it is possible to trace the “many types of black lives” that Hopkinson foregrounds, giving readers intimate details and experiences often marginalised by mainstream fantasy and science fiction. While the whole collection seems to query white, middle-class, heterosexual normativity, the story that is of particular interest to this chapter is the “The Glass Bottle Trick”. Located somewhere near the middle of the collection, this tale, with its cast of female characters, is perhaps most obviously a feminist revision of Charles Perrault’s lesser-known classic fairy tale “Bluebeard”, first published in 1697 in *Contes du temps passé, ou Contes de ma mère*

²¹ Samuel Delany is a celebrated science fiction writer and literary critic who Nalo Hopkinson cites as one of her influences. See, for instance, her interview with Dianne D. Glave where she acknowledges his insights (Hopkinson, “An Interview” 148).

l'Oye (Tales of Olden Times, or Mother Goose Tales).²² However, unlike previous feminist revisions of the tale, Hopkinson also brings into play an Afro-Caribbean perspective characteristic of her earlier work, allowing us to read “The Glass Bottle Trick” as a distinctly postcolonial revision concerned with racial politics.

“Glints of Deepest Blue in his Trim Beard”: A Caribbean Bluebeard

Despite its apparent popularity in the Victorian era,²³ “Bluebeard” remains one of the most obscure stories in Perrault’s collection of fairy tales. The tale of a wealthy older man who wins a much younger bride despite his “terrifyingly ugly” blue beard, the plot of “Bluebeard” holds perhaps “the most deeply disturbing explicit adult material” of all Perrault’s tales and as such has not achieved the mainstream popularity of contemporaries like “Sleeping Beauty” and “Cinderella” (Perrault 27; Warner, “Bluebeard’s Brides” 123).

In Perrault’s tale, when Bluebeard initially makes his offer to a lady to marry one of her “two marvellously beautiful daughters”, neither daughter is interested (27). However, after a weeklong display of his wealth and good humour, the youngest of the two is no longer as revolted by his beard or by the fact that he has “been married several times already and no one [knows] what had become of his other wives” (Perrault 28). She agrees to marry him and shortly after the wedding, Bluebeard goes away on a business trip. He leaves his naïve young wife with the keys to his whole estate: “Unlock everything, go anywhere you like”, he says, except into the “little room at the end of the long gallery on the ground floor” (Perrault 29). That room he “forbid[s] [her] to enter [...] so absolutely that, if by any mischance [she] should do so, there [will] be no bounds to [his] anger” (Perrault 29).

As soon as Bluebeard is gone, the nameless young bride invites all her friends to stay, but takes “little pleasure” in their company because of her “curiosity” and “impatience to go and look” in the forbidden room (Perrault 30). Neglecting her duties as hostess, she rushes down the staircase and despite a momentary doubt, the “temptation [is] too great” to ignore (Perrault 30). She unlocks the little room and to her horror discovers “the bodies of several women who [are] hanging on the wall” (Perrault 30). Coming to the conclusion that these

²² Although similar stories with the forbidden chamber motif exist in earlier traditions, Perrault’s tale is the “earliest known text to specifically use the name ‘Bluebeard’” (Kim 406).

²³ For more information, see Katherine J. Kim’s “Corpse Hoarding: Control and the Female Body in ‘Bluebeard,’ ‘Schalken the Painter,’ and ‘Villette’”, p. 408.

must be the wives “whose throats [Bluebeard] had cut one after another”, she nearly faints and in her fumbling attempt to lock the door once again, drops the key into a pool of blood (Perrault 30).

Despite her best efforts to “recover from the experience”, the now petrified bride cannot clean the blood from the little “magic key” (Perrault 31). When Bluebeard returns and demands the keys to his house, she has little choice but to present him with the “bloodstained” item proclaiming her guilt (Perrault 31). As can be expected, Bluebeard is furious and despite her pleading, he promises that she “shall take [her] place with the ladies” she saw in the forbidden chamber (Perrault 32). She is given only enough time to say her prayers before her execution and yet, as she kneels to her fate, Bluebeard “seizing her hair with one hand and raising his sword with the other”, her brothers burst through the gate and slay her unsuspecting husband (Perrault 34). The liberated bride inherits all of Bluebeard’s wealth and eventually marries an “exceedingly pleasant” man who helps her “forget the bad time she had had with Bluebeard” (Perrault 35).

In structure, “The Glass Bottle Trick” closely echoes the tale of “Bluebeard”. Hopkinson’s tale is set in the “arid heat” of “the tropics”, her characters’ complexions range from “barely brown” to “molasses-dark” and her dialogue is peppered with the lilting poetry of Caribbean creole, but the story makes enough references to Perrault’s lesser-known classic to be read as a revision (Hopkinson 83, 93, 98, 93). We have a “lady of such tender years” agreeing to marry a wealthy suitor named Samuel, despite initially being put off by his “starchy behaviour” and the fact that he is “much older than all her other suitors” and has been married twice before (Hopkinson 84, 85, 90). After moving from her mother’s to her husband’s house, the young wife, Beatrice, is given “the keys to every room”, but is issued a “[request] that she never [open]” the door to the ill-omened “locked third bedroom” where “both his [previous] wives had died” (Hopkinson 97). However, shortly after their wedding, certain events transpire to make her enter the forbidden chamber and there she finds the “corpse[s]” of the wives Samuel has apparently “lost” so “tragically” before marrying her (Hopkinson 99, 85). In true Bluebeard fashion, the “gap[ing]” mouths and “guttled bellies” of these frozen wives attest to the “[murder] and corpse-hoarding” that Katherine Kim identifies as a central motif in Perrault’s tale (Hopkinson 98; 407).

In addition to such motifs as the forbidden chamber and corpse-hoarding, Hopkinson's characterisation of Samuel, the male protagonist of the "The Glass Bottle Trick", also makes explicit references to Bluebeard himself. During a moonlit love scene, for instance, Beatrice is captivated by the "bluish black cast the moonlight [lends]" her husband, and "the glints of deepest blue in his trim beard" (Hopkinson 93-94). In another instance, after admitting that "Samuel had just a bit of a temper", she describes how "[h]is dark face would flush almost blue-black as he [fought down] his rage" (Hopkinson 92, 97). Thus, even though he escapes the explicit name of "Bluebeard", Hopkinson creates a clear and purposeful association between Beatrice's husband and the Bluebeard character that Bruno Bettelheim defines as "the most monstrous and beastly of all fairy tale husbands" (299).

In addition to such overt references to Perrault's "Bluebeard", there are also certain elements of "The Glass Bottle Trick" that align with another of what Sherrill E. Grace calls "the 'Forbidden Chamber' cycle of folktales" (248). That is the Grimm Brother's "Fetcher's Fowl".²⁴ Often understood as a variant inspired by Perrault's tale, "Fetcher's Fowl" differs from "Bluebeard" in the sense that the villain is not a wealthy gentleman, but a sly old wizard who masquerades as a beggar in order to abduct young women. Unlike Bluebeard who has an unknown number of murdered wives, the wizard abducts three sisters in a row – killing the first two – and while the female protagonist of Perrault's tale is saved by her brothers, the clever youngest sister in the Grimm version not only liberates herself but also reassembles the bodies of her dead sisters and brings them back to life before saving them as well. Finally, the most noteworthy difference is perhaps that it is an egg and not a key that is dropped and remains blood-stained, functioning as the fundamental magical snitch that sets each murder in motion.²⁵

²⁴ Also sometimes referred to as "Fitcher's Bird".

²⁵ In "Fetcher's Fowl", the wizard kidnaps three beautiful sisters in a row and gives each the keys to his house, an egg and the same commands: "carry [the egg] with you always" and "you may go anywhere you like and look at everything, except the room which is unlocked by this little key: that room I forbid you to enter on pain of death" (Grimm, "Fetcher's Fowl" 362). As we've come to expect from this tale type, the first sister is overcome by curiosity and opens the forbidden chamber to discover "a huge basin full of blood" and "chopped-up dead people" (Grimm, "Fetcher's Fowl" 362-3). In her shock, she drops the egg into the basin of blood and once retrieved, the magical egg cannot be cleaned. The bloody egg serves as a tell-tale sign of her disobedience once the wizard returns from his journey and "by her hair", she is "dragged" to the "Room of Blood", where she is slaughtered and dismembered (Grimm, "Fetcher's Fowl" 363). The second sister is similarly "tempted by curiosity" and suffers the same fate (Grimm, "Fetcher's Fowl" 363). It is only when the wizard captures the "crafty" third sister that the routine is broken (Grimm, "Fetcher's Fowl" 363). This sister cleverly "put[s] the egg in a safe place" before she goes exploring and when she finally enters the "forbidden room", she reassembles her "chopped up" sisters and once they are "all complete, the limbs beg[i]n to stir and [join] themselves up, and the

The first and most obvious intertextual reference to “Fetcher’s Fowl” in Hopkinson’s story is when Beatrice finally enters the forbidden room and, reacting with shock, drops not a key, but an egg she has absentmindedly been carrying around. It is also interesting that she is the third of three wives, like the heroine in “Fetcher’s Fowl” and that her actions lead to the reanimation of her husband’s previous two victims – something I discuss in more detail later in this chapter. For Gina Wisker “[b]ringing the wives back to life is Hopkinson’s own invention”, but I argue that it is simply one of the ways in which “The Glass Bottle Trick” echoes the plot structure of “Fetcher’s Fowl” (143). However, as I will show, it remains an important editorial choice that allows Hopkinson to present not only a feminist revision of the ‘Forbidden Chamber’ tale type that is focussed on sisterhood instead of female infidelity, but also one that is postcolonial for the manner in which it foregrounds Caribbean culture and beliefs.

In *The Hard Facts of the Grimm’s Fairy Tales*, Maria Tatar points out that “nearly every nineteenth-century printed version of ‘Bluebeard’ singles out the heroine’s curiosity as an especially undesirable trait” (158). Starting with Perrault, she lists “one critic after another” – coincidentally all male – who seem to overlook or gloss over the extreme violence of Bluebeard’s multiple murders in favour of stressing “female curiosity and duplicity” as a perilous vice (Tatar, “The Hard Facts” 161). “Bluebeard’s command”, she writes, “(which stems from a murderer’s need to conceal the evidence of his crimes) is legitimised” while “his wife’s curiosity becomes an emblem of women’s weakness in the face of temptation” (Tatar, “The Hard Facts” 166). True to her claim, Bettelheim, who probably offers the most patriarchal and “influential modern interpretation of the story”, writes that “the blood on the egg and the key seems to symbolise that the woman has had sexual relations” and thus interprets “Bluebeard” as “a cautionary tale which warns” women not to “give in to [their] sexual curiosity” (Sheets 644; 301-302). Conversely, in “Feminism and Bluebeard”, Rose Lovell-Smith traces several revisions of the “Bluebeard” tale by women writers and

two girls [open] their eyes and c[o]me alive again” (Grimm, “Fetcher’s Fowl” 363). The wizard once again returns from his journey, but this time all seems well and he resolves to marry the youngest sister for seemingly passing his test. While preparations for the wedding are being made, the heroine first helps her sisters escape, and then, assisted by the distractions they create, she escapes disguised as a bird – the “Fetcher’s Fowl” from which the tale takes its name (Grimm, “Fetcher’s Fowl” 363). Unawares, the groom continues to prepare for his wedding feast, and when “he and his guests” are all in the house, the absconded bride’s “brothers and relations” return and burn them all alive (Grimm, “Fetcher’s Fowl” 364).

concludes that this “tradition of feminist Bluebeards” offers a “completely different set of Bluebeard readings to those described by Tatar” (47, 49). These “distinctly female” versions of the tale not only foreground the female subject, giving her power of narration, and “expand a female world round the figure of the heroine” but they also often stress the infidelity of the Bluebeard character (Lovell-Smith 45, 49).²⁶

Interestingly, Hopkinson’s revision undermines or bypasses traditional male interpretations of the tale as a warning against female curiosity, be it sexual or otherwise. Yes, there is a prohibition against entering the third bedroom and that prohibition is violated, but this trespass is not driven by the untameable “idle female curiosity” that male critics have emphasised in their reading of “Bluebeard” (Lovell-Smith 45). Instead, Beatrice acts in an attempt to please her controlling husband. We are told that Samuel – who is “not a man to cross” – “[does not] like the heat” and “[keeps] the air-conditioning on high, so cold that they could keep the butter in its dish on the kitchen counter” (Hopkinson 93). So, when the air-conditioner inside their home breaks, Beatrice finds herself afraid of his reaction and simply acts to keep the “interior [...] cool as Sammy like[s] it” (Hopkinson 97):

There was no whisper of cool air through the vents in the house. The air-conditioner wasn’t running.

Beatrice began to feel worried. Samuel liked it cold. She had planned tonight to be a special night for the two of them, but he wouldn’t react well if everything wasn’t to his liking. He’d raised his voice at her a few times. Once or twice he had stopped in the middle of an argument, one hand pulling back as if to strike [...]. What could be wrong with the air-conditioner? Maybe it had just come unplugged? Beatrice wasn’t even sure where the controls were. Gloria and Samuel took care of everything around the house. She made another circuit through her home, looking for the main controls. Nothing. [...] It was becoming thick and close as a womb inside their closed-up home.

There was only one room left to search. The locked third bedroom. Samuel had told her that both his wives had died in there, first one, then the other.

²⁶ She includes Anne Thackeray’s *Bluebeard’s Keys* (1908), Katherine Mansfield’s “Bliss” (1920), Angela Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber” (1979), Suniti Namjoshi’s *Feminist Fables* (1981), Margaret Atwood’s “Bluebeard’s Egg” (1987) and Joyce Carol Oates’ “Blue-Bearded Lover” (1992).

He had given her the keys to every room in the house, but requested that she never opened that particular door.

‘I feel like it’s bad luck, love. I know I’m just being superstitious, but I hope I can trust you to honour my wishes in this.’ She had, not wanting to cause him any anguish. But where else could the control panel be? It was getting so hot! [...] [S]he reached into her pocket for the keys she always carried with her [...]. (Hopkinson 97-98)

Thus it is that Beatrice’s trespass is driven by a much less selfish desire than the female protagonists of “Bluebeard” and “Fetcher’s Fowl”. Incidentally, the “special night” she has planned for herself and her husband also eliminates any claims of sexual curiosity or infidelity, since the whole point of the dinner is to announce her pregnancy – a pregnancy that “would show him how beautiful *their* children would be” (Hopkinson 96, emphasis my own).²⁷

Having therefore freed her protagonist from any claims of female curiosity or infidelity – the “traditional stereotypes about women as daughters of Eve” that the “Bluebeard” tale has historically been “used to confirm” – Hopkinson is able to move her revision in a new direction and focus exactly on that which has been previously ignored or excused: the misogynistic and murderous actions of Bluebeard himself (Renfroe as qtd. in Hennard Dutheil De La Rochère and Heidman 44). Whereas traditional interpretations of the tale have often blamed Bluebeard’s actions on his wives, justifying his murderous behaviour by condemning their mortal shortcomings and “innate wickedness”, Hopkinson’s revision places his deviance under a novel, postcolonial lens that is as evocative of Fanon’s work in *Black Skin, White Masks* as Oyeyemi’s *Boy, Snow, Bird* (Warner, *From the Beast* 244).

For Daniela Hempen “the corpses behind the forbidden door” in Bluebeard’s tale “serve as a mute but compelling indicator that something is dreadfully wrong with [the male protagonist] *and* his (sexual) relations with women” (45). This seems to also be the point of departure for Hopkinson’s reading and revision of the classic tale in “The Glass Bottle Trick”. However,

²⁷ It is also noteworthy that, as is stated earlier, Beatrice drops an egg and not a key and so Hopkinson avoids the phallic symbolism that Warner highlights when she points out that “in many illustrated tellings of the story, the key looms very large indeed, a gigantic forbidden fruit, so engorged and positioned that the allusion can hardly be missed” (*From the Beast* 244).

unlike previous women writers whose revisions have focussed on the violence of patriarchal control and male sexual power intrinsic to Perrault's tale, Hopkinson further complicates this issue by adding racial politics. In her version, Samuel's killing is driven not only by a paternalistic view of his wives as his property, but more importantly by a "massive psychoexistential complex" reminiscent of the one theorised by Fanon (14). Rewritten as one of those "colonized people [...] in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created" by white domination, Samuel's biggest problem is not his blue beard as much as his black skin (Fanon 18).

This connection between "The Glass Bottle Trick" and *Black Skin, White Masks* is also identified by Martine Hennard Dutheil De La Rochère in an insightful and eloquent article titled "Rattling Perrault's Dry Bones: Nalo Hopkinson's Literary Voodoo in Skinfolk". For her, "The Glass Bottle Trick" is a "direct tribute" to Fanon's seminal work "insofar as it rewrites "Bluebeard" as an allegory of racial self-hatred and explores the long-deferred consequences of slavery" (218-219). And yet, in spite of commenting on this link, she fails to provide any further evidence or close reading in support of her statement. In fact, even though she acknowledges that he "is made to embody the socio-cultural pathology analysed by Fanon", Hennard Dutheil De La Rochère argues that Hopkinson's "main interest lies" not in Samuel as much as "the women he has murdered" ("Rattling" 224).

"Black and Ugly as my Mother Made me": Self-Hatred and Racial Alienation as Bluebeard's Curse

The first time we meet Samuel, he is "wearing [a] black wool jacket and pants" despite it being the "[m]iddle of the sun-hot day" in "the tropics" (Hopkinson 84, 93). Later, Beatrice also comments on "the heavy imported furnishings" with which Samuel chooses to fill their house, even though she finds them "cold and stuffy" (Hopkinson 95). The fact that he is "cultured and well-spoken", has "been abroad" and "talk[s] of [...] sports" like "ice hockey" and "downhill skiing" also indicates a level of European sophistication that is magnified by Beatrice's classification of these sports as "exotic" and therefore outside the realm of the familiar in the "arid heat" of the tropics (Hopkinson 83).

Although such a portrayal might initially seem to serve only as an intertextual reference to Perrault's Bluebeard, who is often portrayed as a wealthy and well-travelled gentleman who owns "splendid town and country houses" full of "richly upholstered furniture", we cannot

overlook how closely Hopkinson's characterisation of Samuel echoes the description of the educated black man who for Fanon "conceives of European culture as a means of stripping himself of his race" (Perrault 27; 224). Quoting a Professor D. Westerman published in *The African Today*, Fanon writes that such men, in whom "the Negro's inferiority complex is particularly intensified", try to adopt the appearance of whiteness and gain a "feeling of equality with the European" by "wearing [...] European clothes [...]; using European furniture" and "adorning [their] Native language with European expressions" (25).

In this sense Samuel's character and behaviour, that which Hennard Dutheil De La Rochère terms his "white mask of bourgeois respectability", is but a symptom of self-hatred and racial alienation ("Rattling" 223). In addition to the "self-deprecating tone in which he [speaks] of himself", we also see Samuel outright reject his wife's admiration of what she perceives to be his beautiful black skin during a love scene (Hopkinson 91):

For her part, she loved to look at him, his molasses-dark skin, his broad chest, the way the planes of flat muscle slid across it. [...] She loved the bluish black cast the moonlight lent him [...].

'Black Beauty,' She had joked softly, reaching to pull his face closer for a kiss. At the words, he had lurched up off her to sit at the edge of the bed, pulling a sheet over him to hide his nakedness. [...]

'Never call me that, please, Beatrice,' he said softly. 'You don't have to draw attention to my colour. I'm not a handsome man, and I know it. Black and ugly as my mother made me.' (Hopkinson 93-94)

Samuel suffers from an inferiority complex directly related to a distorted perception of his own blackness. His self-hatred seems to be fuelled by what Fanon termed the "internalization – or better yet, the epidermalization – of [his] inferiority" (13).

What Gina Wisker aptly terms Samuel's "racialized self-loathing of his own black skin" is, however, nowhere more prominent than in his aversion to pregnancy and his refusal to procreate. In spite of his "joking that no woman should give birth to his ugly black babies", the pregnant Beatrice hopes to "show him how to love himself" in the beautiful "brown bodies" of their children (Hopkinson 96). And yet, with her trespass into the forbidden

chamber and her confrontation with the dead wives, she learns that Samuel was not joking when he said he didn't want children:

This is how Samuel punished the ones who had tried to bring his babies into the world, his beautiful black babies. For each woman had had the muscled sac of her womb removed and placed on her belly, hacked open to reveal the purplish mass of her placenta. Beatrice knew that if she were to dissect the thawing tissue, she'd find a tiny foetus in each one. The dead women had been pregnant too. (Hopkinson 98-99)

In conjunction with Samuel's abhorrence of his own blackness, Hopkinson also subtly stresses his veneration of whiteness. Like Samuel's two previous wives whose skins were "barely brown", Beatrice is a "light-skinned browning" and Samuel beseeches her not to "spend too much time in the sun" for fear that "cancer [might] mar her soft skin" (Hopkinson 98, 89, 93). Despite what might initially seem only the overbearing concern of a doting husband for the welfare of his wife, we soon learn that in truth, he "just didn't want her to get too brown" because then he could "no longer pretend she was white" (Hopkinson 93-94).

For Samuel, who has internalised his own inferiority, Beatrice's seemingly white skin holds redemptive power:

He loved her skin pale. 'Look how you gleam in the moonlight,' he'd say to her when he made gentle, almost supplicating love to her at night in the four-poster bed. His hands would slide over her flesh, cup her breasts with an air of reverence. The look in his eyes was so close to worship that sometimes it frightened her. To be loved so much! He would whisper to her, 'Beauty. Pale Beauty, to my Beast,' then blow a cool breath over the delicate membranes of her ear, making her shiver in delight. (Hopkinson 94)

Suggestive of religious ceremony, this passage serves to highlight Samuel's intense veneration of not Beatrice herself, but her "pale" skin "gleam[ing]" like some precious metal (Hopkinson 93-94). As a "suppl[icant]" that approaches her with "reverence" intent on "worship", there is a clear hierarchy in the way Samuel perceives his own skin, "[b]lack and ugly as [his] mother

made [him]”, in relation to Beatrice’s “Pale Beauty” (Hopkinson 93-94). The analogy of “Beauty and the Beast” also offers us further insight into Hopkinson’s portrayal of Samuel. Most obviously, it stresses his warped self-image and an internalised Fanonian colour prejudice that equates whiteness with all that is good and beautiful, and blackness with all that is not. But, on another level, it highlights his victimhood as much as his monstrousness. For isn’t the beastly nature of that other monstrous husband, the beast in “Beauty and the Beast”, the result of a curse? So through this comparison, Samuel’s racial self-hatred is located in the colonial history and white supremacist ideology responsible for it.

Hopkinson’s portrayal of Samuel also clearly resonates with Fanon’s black male subject and his desire to possess a white woman as an act of emancipation, a way to free himself from the curse of his blackness. Particularly her choice of words and images when she writes that “[h]is hands would slide over [Beatrice’s] flesh” and “cup her breasts with an air of reverence”, seems like a direct citation of Fanon when, in the chapter titled “The Man of Colour and the White Woman”, he writes that

[o]ut of the blackest part of my soul, [...] surges this desire to be suddenly white. I wish to be acknowledged not as black but as white [...] – who but a white woman can do this for me? By loving me she proves me worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man. [...] I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness. When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine. (63)

Unsurprisingly Hopkinson also has Beatrice wonder “why Samuel hadn’t married a white woman” only moments after revealing his adoration of her pale breasts (Hopkinson 94).

As much as Samuel pursues whiteness, it remains, however, outside his grasp. Once again evocative of Fanon who himself admits that, despite his many accomplishments, any “encounter with a white man *oppresses* him with the whole weight of his blackness”, Samuel’s warped self-image and racialised self-loathing restrict his ability to interact with white people to the extent that he becomes a capering clown incapable of meaningful communication (150, emphasis my own):

She thought she knew the reason [Samuel could never marry a white woman]. She had seen the way that Samuel behaved around white people. He smiled too broadly, he simpered, he made silly jokes. It pained her to see it, and she could tell from the desperate look in his eyes that it *hurt* him too. For all his love of creamy skin, Samuel probably couldn't have brought himself to approach a white woman the way he'd courted her. (Hopkinson 94, emphasis my own)

Ultimately Hopkinson writes a completely dysfunctional male protagonist much like the tradition of feminist Bluebeards that came before her. However, whereas previous feminist revisions have redeemed their female characters by exposing Bluebeard's misogynistic and patriarchal tendencies, Hopkinson gives the tale a postcolonial twist by writing him as a colonial subject that has internalised the racist discourse that dictates his inferiority. As such, she stresses that he himself is as much a victim as a monster, even as her revision foregrounds the doubly oppressed black women who fall prey to his monstrosity.

***“I’ll come back a Duppy and Haunt You”*: The Creolisation of the Classic Tale**

The inclusion of racial politics is, however, not the only feature of “The Glass Bottle Trick” that allows us to read it as a postcolonial revision. Two other aspects of Hopkinson's story also account for what Bacchilega calls “her creolization of the European literary fairy tale” and give it a distinctly Caribbean character (“Activist” 47). The first is language. Much has been written about Hopkinson's use of creole in her writing; in fact it is probably the most comprehensively covered aspect of her work. Although “The Glass Bottle Trick” employs but a fragment of the vernacular syntax and expressions that we can identify in some of her other stories, it remains a prominent and noteworthy aspect of her Caribbean-english prose.²⁸

Early in “The Glass Bottle Trick”, some of the other female characters refer to Beatrice as a “leggo beast” or “loose woman” because of her extensive dating history (Hopkinson 90). Although at this point Hopkinson incorporates the English translation right after the creole expression in a form of “double glossing” characteristic of Caribbean fiction, she chooses to

²⁸ In *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin distinguish between Standard English or just “English” with a capital “E” as “the standard code”, the “language of the imperial centre” and the “linguistic code, english, which has been transformed and subverted into several distinctive varieties throughout the world” (8).

leave other words untranslated (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 71). These include Gloria's assertion that a "*pickney* is a blessing to a family" and Beatrice's memory of her father "working like a dog sunup to sundown to put food in *oonah* belly" (Hopkinson 84, 88, emphasis my own). In these instances the reader is left to make their own assumption regarding the meaning of the words in the context of the story.

According to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin this is a "common [way] of installing cultural distinctiveness in [Caribbean] writing" (71). And while Hopkinson confesses that creole has an aesthetic value and that writing without it "can feel like cooking a meal without the spices", she also acknowledges its political power and agrees with Dianne D. Glave that such "code-switching" can be employed in "subversion of the dominant language" (Hopkinson, "Speaking" 601; Hopkinson, "An Interview..." 149).²⁹ In "Speaking in Tongues", an interview with Gregory E. Ruthledge, she writes that

[a] lot of Caribbean identity is bound up in language. We have used it as a tool of resistance and politicization (Rastafarian 'dread talk' being a clear example). We have hybridized the different languages that were in operation in the Caribbean into creoles. Each Caribbean country has its own [...]. And each creole has its sociolects [...]. [W]e've gone through years of our educators trying to shame this textured, complex, rich 'bad language' out of us and make us speak 'the Queen's English,' whatever that means to anyone who isn't actually the Queen of England. The vernaculars were seen as debased, and in many places are still so seen. (600)

Hopkinson's use of creole is therefore not only an attempt to add local 'colour' or 'flavour' to her work, but instead also an act of postcolonial revision, an act of "writing back" to the centre and an attempt to undermine the "Queen's English" as well as the European worldview and set of cultural assumptions it both represents and privileges. As Gregory E. Ruthledge writes in his analysis of Hopkinson's work, her use of creole

²⁹ In "Speaking in Tongues" Hopkinson defines "code-switching" as a shift "between and among dialects and sociolects" (71). Similarly Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, understand it as "the technique of switching between two or more codes", languages or dialects "particularly in literatures of the Caribbean" (600).

effectively situates the stories in the Afro-Caribbean perspective, for it validates the culture, expands the pluralistic possibilities for all readers, and undermines the privileged position the English language enjoys. (6)

The second aspect of “The Glass Bottle Trick” that lends a postcolonial dimension to Hopkinson’s writing is her inclusion of Caribbean folklore and culture in her revision of Bluebeard’s tale. These include Caribbean cuisine, expressions, a nursery rhyme and most notably, the “duppy” wives.³⁰ Although thus far I’ve not paid much attention to Samuel’s two dead wives, I do believe that they account for one of Hopkinson’s most noteworthy changes to the original plot. Early in the tale, we learn that Samuel keeps “two bottles [...] jammed onto branches of the guava tree” in memory of his dead wives. When asked about it, he responds as follows:

Is just my superstitiousness, darling, [...] [y]ou never heard the old people say that if someone dies, you must put a bottle in a tree to hold their spirit, otherwise it will come back a duppy and haunt you? A blue bottle. To keep the duppy cool, so it won’t come at you in hot anger for being dead.
(Hopkinson 86)

In spite of Samuel’s precautions, Beatrice accidentally breaks the bottles and liberates these malevolent “duppy” spirits while hunting for a snake in the guava tree’s branches. Once free, the duppies enter the house as a “gust of warm wind” and presumably it is their “hot anger” that heats up the house, overpowering the air-conditioner and so setting the forbidden chamber plot in motion (Hopkinson 95, 86). Later, when Beatrice finally enters the locked third bedroom, they “[sear] past her cheek” in a “current of hot air” and “[settle] over the head of each woman, beg[inning] to take on definition”:

Each misty column had a face, contorted in rage. The faces were those of the bodies on the bed. One of the duppy women leaned over her own corpse. She lapped like a cat at the blood thawing on its breast. She became a little more solid for having drunk of her own life blood. The other duppy stooped to do the same. The two duppy women each had a belly slightly swollen

³⁰ For an interesting reading of the “pretty basket” rhyme repeated throughout the story as another act of creolisation, see Bachillega in “Activist Responses” p. 46.

with the pregnancies for which Samuel had killed them. [...] She'd freed them. She'd let them into the house. Now there was nothing to cool their fury. [...] The duppy wives held their bellies and glared at her, anger flaring hot behind their eyes. Beatrice backed away from the beds. 'I didn't know,' she said to the wives. 'Don't vex with me. I didn't know what it is Samuel did to you.' Was that understanding on their faces, or were they beyond compassion? (Hopkinson 100)

Moments later Samuel arrives home and Beatrice leaves the room to welcome and “stall” her husband, hoping that enough of the wives’ blood would thaw for them to “drink until they were fully real” (Hopkinson 100). Thus the story ends and like Beatrice, the reader is left wondering if once “they had fed”, the duppy wives would “come and save her” or “take revenge on her, their usurper, as well as Samuel” (Hopkinson 100). For many critics, this reads as an open-ended or unresolved conclusion to “The Glass Bottle Trick”.

Contrary to popular opinion, I want to argue that Hopkinson’s inclusion of elements of the “Fetcher’s Fowl” tale offers us a clear way to read the ending. As mentioned earlier, it is not only the dropped egg instead of the key that echoes the plot of “Fetcher’s Fowl”, but also the fact that Beatrice’s actions are directly responsible for the reanimation of the two previous wives’ mutilated corpses. Although her initial action – the breaking of the bottles – might have been unintentional, there is clear intent near the end when she purposefully leaves the door “open slightly” and aims to “stall [her husband] as long as she could”, giving the wives’ bodies enough time to thaw and leaving them with the opportunity to “come out” and confront Samuel “when they [are] ready” (Hopkinson 100). The implication is clear: Beatrice aims to assist the wives in their resurrection and revenge and when the time comes they will return the favour much like the sisters in “Fetcher’s Fowl”. Consequently, “The Glass Bottle Trick” redeems a patriarchal and Eurocentric tale by not only offering women as each other’s potential sisters and saviours but also by invoking the Caribbean superstition of the duppy as the avenue through which that salvation becomes possible.

Hopkinson therefore enters the feminist debate that has exposed Bluebeard’s horrendous actions for the misogynistic crimes that they are. However, she does so from a distinctly postcolonial or third wave feminist perspective that brings to the forefront black women’s concerns and experiences, showing that their oppression and abuse stem not only from

patriarchal practice but also colonial and racist ideology. In her reading of “The Glass Bottle Trick”, Hennard Dutheil De La Rochère argues that Hopkinson submits the Bluebeard tale “to a process of cultural translation” and brings to the forefront the Caribbean’s haunting colonial past, “marked by the experience of colonialization and the trauma of slavery” (“Rattling” 214). For Bacchilega, the revision’s “creolization of genre, culture and language reaches out to different kinds of readers” and “opens up possibilities of intimacy for Eastern Caribbean readers, claiming a space for their realities and beliefs” and “cracking the delusion of universality that has [...] structured much thinking about archetypes” (“Reflections” 206). I agree with both critics. In her portrayal of Beatrice and also the two wives before her, Hopkinson highlights their subjugation by a patriarchal social system that gives their husband control over their future and body, but even more so their oppression and victimisation as a result of his Fanonian internalisation of a colonial ideology that paints their race as inferior. In this sense Hopkinson’s revision highlights the oppressive colonial history that still haunts the Caribbean present, while simultaneously opening up the classic tale and making it relevant to the lived experience of a whole new postcolonial female audience.

Like Oyeyemi’s *Boy, Snow, Bird*, Hopkinson’s “The Glass Bottle Trick” engages with the white ideal implicit in classic fairy tales from a complex theoretical framework evocative of the work of Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*. In comparison, the next tale under consideration, Shaida Kazie Ali’s *Not a Fairytale*, also offers readers a race-based fairy tale revision critical of a Eurocentric ideal, but one that is less distinctly concerned with whiteness as it foregrounds questions of culture, religion and their intersectionality with skin colour.

“In Real Life”: Fairy Tale Ideals and Non-white Reality in Shaida Kazie Ali’s *Not a Fairytale*

While Shaida Kazie Ali’s debut novel *Not a Fairytale* won the University of Johannesburg Debut Prize for Creative Writing in 2011 and was short listed for the Sunday Times Fiction Prize in the same year, there has been little to no critical engagement with it by the academic community at home or abroad (“Not a Fairytale” n.pag.). And yet, the novel makes a valuable contribution to this chapter as it tells what Ali calls a “pragmatic not-fairytale about two Muslim sisters” living in Cape Town during apartheid, in an interview with Romy Sommer (“Author Interviews” n.pag.). As a postcolonial revision from the South African context,

Ali's story draws a parallel between the sisters' lived reality and the fairy tale ideal, challenging aspects of the fairy tale convention as a whole, rather than one specific tale.

If the title of *Not a Fairytale* does not alert readers to the great discrepancy that exists between the lives of fairy tale princesses and middle-class Indian Muslim girls growing up in a patriarchal and institutionally racist South Africa, then the epigraph that sets the tale in motion definitely does:

Once upon a time there were two sisters, Salena and Zuhra. If this were a fairytale, there'd have been three: the older two ugly and avaricious, the younger one beautiful and kind. (She's the one who gets the prince.) But this is not a fairytale, so two is all you get. (Ali 8; italics in original)

Although the nameless narrator is adamant that "*this is not a fairytale*", the first half of the novel, narrated by the younger of the two sisters, Zuhra, is peppered with references to familiar fables. With a child's innocence, she "[i]magines having to kiss Faruk-Paruk, like that princess who had to kiss a frog. Yuk!" and makes sense of her father's great bulk by likening him to the "giant from *Jack and the Bean-stalk*" (Ali 15, 17). In a similar trend, her brother is seen as a "shorter and fatter" version of her father, "like he's been drinking from Alice's magic shrinking potion" and during the ritual slaughter of a goat at Eid, the "man in white robes with a large knife in his hand" makes her "think of the three blind mice" (Ali 117, 23).

As Zuhra grows into a teenager, these references become fewer and fewer, but we still see her employ the fairy tale script when she imagines herself adopted and starts referring to her "ma" as "my evil stepmother" (Ali 28). The inappropriate advances of "the revolting Mr. Ramphalsingh", one of the teachers at her secular high school, are likewise processed by christening him "Rumpelforeskin" – a lewd play on the name of the fairy tale dwarf Rumpelstiltskin – "because of his diminutive height, childish temper and perverted ways" (Ali 44). When Zuhra assures the reader that she would "rather deal with the crazy nuns" of her catholic primary school than be at "at the mercy of an evil dwarf" like "Rumpelforeskin" we can see that despite her budding maturity, she is still relying on fairy tales as a guiding structure or frame of reference (Ali 44-45).

In this sense, Ali's portrayal of Zuhra seems suggestive of the work of Bettelheim who advocated the importance of fairy tales as literary models for psychological childhood development. As Bettelheim writes in the controversial and contested³¹ *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*:

Nothing can be as enriching and satisfying to [the] child [...] as the folk fairy tale. True, on an overt level fairy tales teach little about the specific conditions of life in modern mass society; these tales were created long before it came into being. But [...] [b]y dealing with universal human problems, particularly those which preoccupy the child's mind, these stories speak to his budding ego and encourage its development while at the same time relieving preconscious and unconscious pressures. (5-6)

In spite of Zuhra's obsession with or even dependence on fairy tales to make sense of her changing world, Ali does write a clear difference between both Zuhra and Salena's domestic reality and the fairy tale ideal. For instance, in contrast to the Tom and Jerry Cartoons Zuhra enjoys so much – in which Tom's beatings result only in “pink bumps that grow and grow” – we read that that is not how things “happen in real life” and that the “marks on Salena's body after Papa has beaten her [are] purple and green” (Ali 12). Likewise, her fairy tale model hardly prepares her for the misogynistic cultural reality in which she is raised:

I used to think that Ma wished for Salena like Snow White's mother wished for her daughter. Then one day I overheard Ma tell Polla-the-Prune that there is only ten months between Salena and Faruk-Paruk because she had to have another baby quickly, as the first one was a girl. (Ali 17)

Much later in the tale, we learn that while her mother was “disappointed at the birth of a daughter” she “was glad that at least the girl looked white” (Ali 104). Thus the discrepancies between fairy tale and real life not only highlight the patriarchal practices of the girls' household and community, but also the racial politics of the time. As such, the same epigraph

³¹ In “On the Use and Abuse of Folk and Fairy Tales with Children: Bruno Bettelheim's Moralistic Magic Wand”, Jack Zipes describes Bettelheim as a “charlatan”, is critical of his “authoritarian tone and fallacious arguments” in *The Uses of Enchantment* and notes that in spite of the fact that his book “is still used and acclaimed as a great and perspicacious study of fairy tales”, it “disseminates false notions about the original intent of Freudian psychoanalytic theory and about the literary quality of fairy tales” (179, 18).

that assures us that the story is not a fairy tale also highlights the importance that skin colour will hold throughout the novel. While Salena is “*shy and silent*”, “*fair and malleable*”, the younger Zuhra is “*dark*”, “*wild-haired and resolute*” (Ali 9; emphasis in original). As such, the earlier mention of the trope of the two “*ugly*” older sisters and the much younger “*beautiful*” one, sets readers up to recognise in “*pale-skinned Salena*” the classic fair and sweet fairy tale damsel, while relegating the much darker Zuhra, who “*wields her tongue like a cheese grater*” to the realm of the undesirable and wilful other (Ali 9; emphasis in original).

It comes as little surprise then, that while Salena’s pale skin marks her as a beauty and a potential asset to the family – one that allows them to gain “WHITES ONLY” privileges in racially segregated South Africa – Zuhra is constantly berated for her dark complexion and her “bushy hair” (Ali 88, 17).³² Zuhra’s mother, who “buy[s] expensive foundation several shades too light” in an attempt to look white and has a “convoluted classification system [that] would rival the government’s own labelling categories”, is always unfavourably “comparing” her to Salena (Ali 44). Constantly reminding Zuhra “how fair Salena” is and “how dark” she is in contrast, Ma warns her that she “should stay out of the sun or [risk] end[ing] up as dark as [her] Hindu friends (Ali 28-29).

Although, as a child, Zuhra never draws an outright comparison between this idealisation of whiteness and the fairy tales she loves so much, the “the working title” of the dissertation for the “postgraduate degree” she attempts later in the novel, does in fact do so (Ali 76). Provisionally titled “Gold is the Fairest of All: Colour and Materialism in Fairytales”, her study is suggestive of the same race-based research I make reference to at the beginning of this chapter, research that is critical of classic fairy tales’ pervasive privileging of white skin and golden hair (Ali 76). While the critique of such a white ideal in *Not a Fairytale’s* might not be as overt as it is in the previous two texts, Ali has admitted her intent to address this issue in her writing. In an interview with Naomi Bruwer she answers the question of what inspired her to write the novel:

I was watching a procession of Disney’s villains, sandwiched between two women: to my left stood a woman in a black burqa surreptitiously wiping

³² We are told that Salena’s face “dooms her to playing white on family excursions, or whenever her parents demand it” and as such she is sent to buy “whites only” tour tickets at the Congo Caves or to “ask for the toilet key” at the garage so that the family is sure to “get the ones to the white toilets” (Ali, *Not a Fairytale* 107-108).

sweat off her hidden brow; to my right stood another woman with a ruby belly button winking in the sun – all of us equally mesmerised by the female villains on parade.[...] but I heard Zuhra muttering that the Magic Mirror was the criminal of the tale. Not only was he fixated with youth and beauty, but he was racist, always nagging about who was the fairest, ie whitest. [...] Zuhra began writing her not-fairy tale and dragged her reluctant sister, their stories, and their parallel fractured fairytales into existence. (Ali, “Mirror, Mirror” n.pag.)

It is Ali’s mention of three very distinct types of women witnessing the parade that also brings to the forefront another issue central to her revision, namely that all kinds of women, from different cultural backgrounds, find fairy tales “equally mesmeris[ing]”. Whether modern and sexually liberated enough to display a ruby belly-ring in public, burqa-clad and traditional Muslim, or somewhere in the middle like Ali herself, the fairy tales with their mostly European contexts hold a cross-cultural appeal even as they propagate very specific Eurocentric world view and ideals.

“Hair of Spun-gold, my Arse”: A Culturally Conscious Revision

In addition to Zuhra constantly making reference to fables as a reminder of their cross-cultural appeal, Ali also makes use the abovementioned “parallel fractured fairytales” to critique and rewrite classic fairy tales from both a feminist and postcolonial perspective. These “feminist retellings” as she calls them, are interspersed in the main narrative and offer “parallel interpretations of the sisters’ stories” as the novel progresses (Ali, “Mirror, Mirror” n.pag.). Even when Zuhra’s fairy tale references disappear and the power of narration switches to Salena in the second half of the novel, these fractured fairy tales remain to haunt the main narrative.

The first fairy tale, titled “Cinderella’s Wish”, is for instance clearly meant to reflect Zuhra as a reimagined Cinderella. Besides performing the same chores of “sweeping the shop, filling the paraffin bottles” and “packing the fridges” that make up Zuhra and Salena’s daily responsibilities in their father’s shop, Cinderella also has a cat named “Tommy Tiger”, just like Zuhra (Ali 31). And just like the stubborn, book-obsessed Zuhra who seems to reject all things traditional, Ali’s Cinderella, when offered a new life by the cat-turned-burqa-wearing “jinn”, responds that she “[does not] want to get married, and definitely not to a man [she’s]

never met, even if he is a prince” (Ali 32). Instead *this* liberated damsel wants “to study” and although the jinn finds this the “strangest wish [she has] heard in all the hundreds of years [she’s] been granting wishes”, she consents (Ali 32). She leaves Cinderella in the “middle of a gigantic library filled with books” and the girl “[weeps] for joy” (Ali 32).

On first consideration, this retelling, much like the ones that follow it, offers the reader a feminist alternative to the patriarchal fairy tale we’ve come to recognise. As Ronit Frenkel observes in her judge’s report on *Not a Fairytale*, these stories “draw attention to Zuhra and Salena’s options while simultaneously highlighting how women do not live happily ever after unless they redefine the very structure of the fairy tale” (as qtd. in Scherzinger n.pag.). However, in addition to the feminist revision clearly inspired by the “feminist theorists, including Marina Warner, Jack Zipes and Maria Tatar” that Ali admits to reading before writing the novel, there is also an element of the postcolonial to her stories (Ali, “Mirror, Mirror” n.pag.). As such, Ali replaces the Euro-Western fairy godmother we’ve come to expect in the “Cinderella” tale with a burqa-wearing woman “belong[ing] to the jinn race” (Ali 32). If this is not sufficient to alert readers to the cultural differences between the Euro-Western fairy tales and the daily realities of the Muslim girls who read them, she also paints Cinderella’s “stepmother” not as a dead mother’s replacement but instead as the “first wife” of a polygamous Muslim father (Ali 31).

In some of Ali’s later fairy tales, we see the same kind of ‘culturally-conscious’ revisioning. “After the Awakening”, for instance, explains that “Prince Charming [...] has to be Muslim” because “he’s married to Snow White, Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella” all at the same time (Ali 136); the wolf in “Yours Faithfully” spends “years studying Islam in the hope [to] impress” the Little Red Riding Hood whose “hair is always covered” and therefore must also be “Muslim” (Ali 95); and his counterpart, the wolf in “Lessons”, is “Muslim” to begin with and therefore declines the tender flesh of the three little pigs because he does not eat pork (Ali 72). “The Ties that Bind” is, however, the most obvious postcolonial revision in *Not a Fairytale* and openly critical of the light-skinned, golden-haired ideal that classic fairy tales “with their teeming population of blonde [...] heroines” propagate (Warner, *From the Beast* 362). In this tale, the revised Rapunzel complains about the stereotypical “blonde tresses” she is famous for in the classic fairy tale:

I haven't washed my hair in years. It stinks. I have split ends that reach from the bottom of the tower all the way up to my waist. As for blow-drying it straight? Impossible without an army of hairdressers. It's because of her that it's in such a state – the spiteful bitch-witch. She placed me under this enchantment, gave me this ludicrously long hair. (Of course it's not naturally long – hair grows about a centimetre a month. Do the maths. How old do you think I am?) The colour? No, it's not my own, either. I used to be dark-haired, but she preferred this hue. How do the Grimms describe it? 'Spun-gold'. Spun-gold, my arse. She gave me this length, this colour, but she never thought of the maintenance! And now she's old, she's forgotten her spells. Bitch. Witch. (Ali 59)

Both biting and comical, this particular fairy tale captures, in my opinion, what *Not a Fairytale* is all about. Yet, while Rapunzel is angered by the “bitch-witch” who gives her the impossible-to-maintain length and unrealistic colour of her hair, Ali's criticism is aimed at the fairy tale convention itself.

In *From the Beast to the Blonde*, Marina Warner writes that in fairy tales golden hair “fulfils a symbolic function” rather than “a practical or descriptive purpose” (364). Evocative of Hurley's and my own arguments regarding the privileging of whiteness earlier in this chapter, she explains this function as follows:

For fairness was a guarantee of quality. It was the imaginary opposite of 'foul', it connoted all that was pure, good, clean. Blondenness is less a descriptive term about hair pigmentation than a blazon in code, a piece of a value system that it is urgent to confront and analyse because its implications, in moral and social terms, are so dire and are still so unthinkingly embedded in the most ordinary, popular material of the imagination. (Warner, *From the Beast* 364)

Employing Warner's argument as a lens, I therefore read Ali as critical of classic fairy tales. She seems to suggest that like the witch who gives Rapunzel her presumably ideal hair of “spun-gold” but “never [thinks] of the maintenance”, fairy tales offer their contemporary multiracial and multicultural readership a singular European ideal that is more often than not foreign, unrealistic and impossible to achieve. And while the fairy tales might be old,

outdated and their original intent forgotten, like the ageing witch's enchantment, their magic remains to complicate the lives of all those who remain under their spell.

Ali's *Not a Fairytale* does not engage the issue of race and the consequences of colonial legacies as explicitly as Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird* or Hopkinson's "The Glass Bottle Trick", and yet, it does resonate with and enrich current debates on fairy tales "retold from a multi-ethnic or multiracial perspective" (Yenika-Agbaw, "Intro" 2). By raising not only questions of skin colour and culture but also religion and how these interlace to create realities starkly different from the Euro-Western fairy tale's ideal world, Ali creates a revision that is as postcolonial in its ambitions as it is feminist.

While continuing the feminist tradition of fairy tale revision, Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird*, Hopkinson's "The Glass Bottle Trick" and Ali's *Not a Fairytale* do so from a distinctly postcolonial context. Oyeyemi reimagines Snow White as Snow Whitman, a light-skinned black girl passing for white in racially segregated America. As the novel explores the psychological and developmental consequences of 'worshipping whiteness' on black subjects in a manner suggestive of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, the tale cautions against the internalisation of the white ideal implicit in classic fairy tales like "Little Snow White". Equally evocative of the existential dilemma theorised by Fanon, Nalo Hopkinson's "The Glass Bottle Trick" is a race-based retelling focussed on the homicidal husband of the lesser-known fairy tale, "Bluebeard". Recasting the black male protagonist as both a postcolonial 'monster' and victim, whose misogynistic and murderous impulses are driven by an internalisation of his own racial inferiority, Hopkinson's short story explores how colonial history is implicated in the Caribbean's present of black women *as well as* the men they love. Finally, *Not a Fairytale* differs from both Oyeyemi and Hopkinson's revisions in terms of theoretical departure but nonetheless offers a powerful critique of the Eurocentric ideal created by classic fairy tales. As Ali chronicles the not-so-fairytale-ish realities of two Muslim sisters growing up under apartheid, her novel presents readers with a revision that is conscious of the way in which culture and religion intersect with skin colour and gender to marginalise and disempower black female subjects.

Ultimately, as feminist revisions 'talking back' to the fairy tales they revisit, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, "The Glass Bottle Trick" and *Not a Fairytale* all seem to acknowledge the continued influence and cross-cultural appeal of such classic texts while simultaneously criticising and

undermining their perpetuation of not only patriarchal ideology but also a Eurocentric and white normativity. While all three revisions critically engage with classic fairy tales as a form of literary colonialism deserving of contestation and subversion, they also give new life to old stories, employing them as vessels for the type of re-inventive and multicultural storytelling that foregrounds the previously silenced and marginalised voices, beliefs and experiences of the postcolonial female subject.

3

**The Elderly Other: Old Bags and Terrible Hags in Contemporary
Revisions of Fairy Tale**

Nobody hears if old women say yes or no, nobody pays them sixty cents for anything. Old men run things. [...] But old women live in the cracks, between the walls, like roaches, like mice, a rustling sound, a squeaking. [...] It's terrible, you turn up a corner of civilization and there are all these old women running around on the wrong side –

– Ursula K. Le Guin, *Dancing at the Edge of the World*, 158

Hag [...]: *Archaic*: a Witch, Fury, Harpy who haunts the Hedges/Boundaries of patriarchy, frightening fools and summoning Weird Wandering Women in to the Wild.

– Mary Daly and Jane Caputi, *Websters' First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language*, 137

In her introduction to *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations* (1999), Kathleen Woodward writes that “research in cultural studies has been virtually dominated by studies of difference” and while we “have invented courses in colleges and universities that study gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and class”, one of the most “salient markers of social difference” – age – has been largely ignored (“Intro” x). Her critique is in no way unique and another critic writing in the nineties, Anne M. Wyatt-Brown, calls age the “missing category in current literary theory” (1). More recently, Amelia DeFalco argues that in 2010, a decade down the line, age remains “an undertheorized sign of difference in the humanities” (1). In addition to pointing out the broad absence of studies on age and ageism in literary and cultural theory, these theorists also highlight that while men do fall victim to ageism, “aging is distinctly gendered” and “casts its shadow earlier” and more prominently for women (DeFalco x; Woodward, “Intro” xiii). For them, “ageism is entrenched within

feminism itself” and old women remain some of the most overlooked subjects, victim to a “double marginality” at the least (Woodward, “Intro” xi; Wyatt-Brown 1).

Given the prominence of that unforgettable fairy tale stock figure, the wicked old witch, or her benevolent counterparts, the benign granny and compassionate fairy godmother, such theory translates well into a study of the feminist revision of fairy tales. For even though the previous century has seen feminist writers revise the damsel in distress as a problematic role model, such revision has largely overlooked her ageing nemesis or benefactor. Certainly, recent film adaptations like *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012) and *Maleficent* (2014) have humanised the witch by giving her a backstory, but together with the most recent version of *Cinderella* (2015), these remakes tend to perpetuate or completely overlook the problematic ageist stereotypes inherent in the classics they revise. In *Snow White and the Huntsman*, the young and beautiful ‘stepmother’ uses magic to ward off an ageing process that is portrayed as dreadful and grotesque; in *Maleficent* ageing is largely ignored by recasting the witch as a woman in her prime and in *Cinderella*, the silly fairy godmother masquerades as an old crone only briefly before revealing her beautiful and much younger true self. Therefore, in spite of their attempt to reinvent the witch or fairy godmother, not one of these films can be said to address the ageist stereotypes that are indicative of what scholars have recently begun to critique as old women’s negative portrayal in fairy tales.

As Sylvia Henneberg writes in “Moms do Badly, but Grandmas do Worse: The Nexus of Sexism and Ageism in Children’s Classics” (2010):

despite the emergence of age studies and literary gerontology, despite the considerable impact of feminist thought on culture and society, an all too large body of influential children’s literature continues to distort the reality of female old age, denying children the models they need to mature into senescence and to relate to elders now. (133)

Rebecca Sullivan critiques exactly such a distorted portrayal of female old age in “Falling Short of Feminism: Why Modern Retellings of Fairy Tales Perpetuate Negative Stereotypes of the Aging Woman” (2010), when she writes that “aging women are either [...] vilified” in fairy tales or they are “ignored” (3). She suggests that these tales “leave no place of importance to aging women” and that through them “children are being force-fed the

principles of our youth-driven, age fearing society” (Sullivan 3). Elizabeth Parsons raises the same critique when in an article on grandmothers in contemporary children’s films, she highlights that classic “texts for children” offer “preconceptions about the aged female body” as “either (frighteningly) grotesque, or sweet and gentle to the point of inconsequence” (221). This dualism, as Sullivan and Parsons identify it, brings to mind tropes of the “wicked witch” and “the little old lad[y]” – two “negative cultural stereotypes” that Kathleen Woodward suggests as the *only* options open to women as they approach old age (“Intro” xiii). Before I analyse the three revisionist texts to be discussed in this chapter, it is useful to pay closer attention to these two stereotypes, both of which present old women as marginal figures or ‘others’.

The first of the two, the witch, lives at the edge of the forest and the outskirts of humanity. Much has been written about the image of the older woman as a wicked witch and perhaps one of the most significant texts remains Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s “The Queen’s Looking Glass” in which they identify the two archetypes imposed on women by patriarchy as the “angel in the house” and the “monster-woman” or “witch” (17, 27-28). In contrast to her “angelic sister” who personifies a “submissive femininity” in the sense that she is “sweet, ignorant [and] passive”, the witch – as a “character who refuses to stay in her [...] ordained place” – “embodies intransigent female autonomy” and is “wickedly assertive” (Gilbert and Gubar 28-40). When they apply this dichotomy to the fairy tale convention in the form of the Grimm Brothers’ “Little Snow White”, Gilbert and Gubar include the difference marker of age and decisively identify the younger Snow White as the angelic figure and her “older [and] fiercer” stepmother as the witch (36). These two theorists therefore provide us with a useful model for reading the figure of the witch. And yet, in linking old age to that figure exclusively, they seem to overlook the equally problematic trope of the little old lady.

For the purpose of this chapter, I suggest we remove age as a marker of difference between Gilbert and Gubar’s angel- and monster-woman and instead read both as tropes within the category of old age. Consequently, we can read the little old lady as just another angel in the house, marked by the same disempowering passivity and compliant femininity as her younger counterpart. Like Woodward, I therefore theorise the angelic little old lady and the monstrously wicked old witch as the only two types open to ageing women who are pushed to

the margins by not only the patriarchal, but also the ageist ideology that dominates popular discourse.³³

In an attempt to further theorise these two negative stereotypes, I also read them in correspondence to two classifications identified by Woodward a little later in *Figuring Age* when she suggests that the “older female body” is always only one of two things in popular discourse: either “invisible *or* hypervisible” (“Intro” xvi, emphasis my own). DeFalco shares this opinion, but argues for a more complicated relationship between what might so far seem like a clear dichotomy. For her, “[o]ld age renders its subjects *both* invisible” and at the same time “unmistakable” – a paradox that defines ageist thinking (DeFalco 4, emphasis my own). Hence, reading the little old lady as invisible, both disempowered and negligible, and the wicked witch as spectacle, frighteningly grotesque in her otherness and exaggerated old age, this chapter will explore how contemporary fairy tale revisions play with and unsettle these two liminal figures. Before we move on, I would also like to broach the subject of sex, for although not explicitly obvious or a major focus of this chapter, I think it important to note that the witch is frequently marked as a spectacle by a hypervisible carnality or overstated sexuality and bawdiness while the little old lady remains a neutered and desexualised angel.

Addressing the ageism that scholars have identified as the missing category in difference studies and literary theory alike, this chapter considers three contemporary revisions of fairy tales that foreground female old age and bring old women to the centre stage. In addition to transforming old women from marginal characters into protagonists, each text also engages the negative cultural discourses responsible for their portrayal as helpless old bags, terrible hags or an uncanny combination of the two. The texts to be considered are Nalo Hopkinson’s “Riding the Red”, yet another short story from her *Skin Folk* collection (2001), Terry Pratchett’s comic novel, *Witches Abroad* (1991) and Dubravka Ugresic’s *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* (2007), a novel from Canongate’s myth series. While Hopkinson’s short story and

³³ There is a potential third category available to old women and that is the ‘wise old crone’, a trope that DeFalco identifies as popular and “far-reaching” (131). However, as Henneberg suggests in her article on the role of grandmothers in children’s classics, the “selfless godmother” or “fairy godmother” as “wise and respected elder” remains problematic in the sense that these “fictional benefactresses are ultimately self-sacrificial lambs in disguise” (128-129). They might initially “seem like important leaders, but upon consideration, they are also relegated to the margins, existing only to develop other characters and plot lines rather than their own” (Henneberg 129). Thus, should they remain within the bounds of this stereotype they are but another type of little old lady, slightly more significant and less overlooked, but ultimately just as marginal. And if they should step outside these bounds and pursue their own agenda, they of course transform into the selfish and wicked witch.

Prachett's novel offer clear-cut revisions of fairy tales, Ugresic's text might seem out of place given its apparent focus on myth as opposed to fairy tale. Yet, as a revision of the myth of Baba Yaga, that East European hag and prototypical ur-witch, Ugresic's novel confronts a figure that features in *both* Slavic myth and Russian fairy tale.³⁴ Thus, while Canongate styles the novel as a revisionist myth, I read *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* as a revisionist fairy tale.

“Once More Before I’m Gone”: Old Age and Transgressive Female Sexuality in Nalo Hopkinson’s “Riding the Red”

As the title suggests, Nalo Hopkinson's short story “Riding the Red” rewrites Perrault's “Little Red Riding Hood”, later reproduced by the Grimm Brothers as “Little Red Cap”, a tale so common and well-known that it needs little in the way of introduction. In addition to producing a version that not only foregrounds the sexual innuendos of the popular fairy tale, but also incorporates what Martine Hennard Dutheil De La Rochère calls “a gossipy, raucous, creolized mix of Trinidadian and Jamaican Creoles”, Hopkinson makes another revision: she casts the marginal character of the helpless grandmother as the protagonist and narrator (“Rattling” 222). Doubtlessly one of the most well-known of those little old ladies who are enshrined in fairy tales as benign, feeble, helpless, often infantilised and primarily pushed to the very boundaries of relevance, Red Riding Hood's sickly grandmother is a figure children become familiar with early on. A stock figure of the fairy tale convention, she falls “victim to [...] her own infirmity”, and is, in the words of Henneberg, “[t]oo weak to open the door or to show some measure of resistance before the wolf swallows her” (130).

Seeing that “[m]ost contemporary retellings” of “Little Red Riding Hood” “increase the importance of the elder woman in the story”, as Sandra. L Beckett points out, Hopkinson's decision to foreground the figure of grandma might not initially seem like a major act of revision (42). However, in addition to bringing the Jamaican grandmother to the “front and

³⁴ It is also noteworthy that in keeping with the many scholars that conflate myth and fairy tale into a single entity, Cannongate defines myths as the “universal and timeless stories that reflect and shape our lives”, a definition that can most certainly include the most enduring and popular of folk and fairy tales. As Marina Warner writes in her article on Ugresic's novel, Canongate's writers employs a “looser, secular conception of myth” which “doesn't discriminate [...] between high and low culture, between stories about gods, which are rooted in belief and enacted through ritual, and tales of goblins and fairies and witches, told to raise shivers of pleasurable fear on a dark winter night” (n.pag.).

centre” of this creolised tale and following in the footsteps of other feminist and postcolonial revisions, “Riding the Red” also unsettles the ageist stereotypes that portray old women as neutered and chaste (Hopkinson, “An Interview” 168).

“It’s the Old Wives Who Remember”: Knowledge and Authority from the Margins

With the opening passage of the short story, Hopkinson highlights the marginal position of the unnamed narrator soon identified as “Grandma” (1). Readers get a sense of the loss of power and significance suffered by Grandma with the onset of old age when in the very first line of story she confesses that “[her daughter] never listens to [her] *anymore*” (Hopkinson 1, emphasis my own). Recounting her futile attempts to convince her middle-aged daughter to teach her granddaughter “the facts of life before it’s too late”, Hopkinson’s grandmother stresses her perceived worthlessness by stating, “but no, I’m an old woman” as justification for her daughter’s newly developed disregard (1).

Despite the mother’s claim that she will raise her own daughter “as she sees fit” and that she is “too young yet” for the sexual knowledge Grandma wishes to impart, the old woman “trie[s] to tell the little girl [her]self”:

Listen dearie, listen to Grandma. You’re growing up, hmm; getting dreamy?
Pretty soon now, you’re going to be riding the red, and if you don’t look
smart, next stop is wolfie’s house, and wolfie, doesn’t he just love the smell
of that fresh blood. (Hopkinson 1)

Although the grandmother clearly has a cache of “memories” and initiatory knowledge she would like to bestow on her female descendant, her daughter refuses to listen and curtails her attempt to educate her granddaughter, reprimanding her for “filling the child’s head” with what she dismisses as “ghastly old wives’ tales” (1-2). It is this dismissal of the grandmother’s stories as “old wives’ tales”, a term synonymous with fabrications and fancies, but also the use of “ghastly” to describe the nature of her stories, that once again emphasises not only her perceived irrelevance and marginality, but also what DeFalco calls a “kind of pathologization and objectification”, a “pattern of othering” that “culture inflicts on old age” (x). For her this “can at least partly explain the antipathy felt by many at the prospect of being categorized as ‘old’” (DeFalco x).

Hopkinson's grandmother is, however, not one to back down and in spite of the marginality conferred by her daughter's dismissal and disrespect, she is adamant that it is "the old wives who best tell [...] tales" (2). Confiding in the reader as her only available listener, she therefore rejects the marginality thrust upon her and stresses that "[i]t's the old wives who remember" because they've "been there, and [they've] lived to tell [the tales]" (2). She even goes as far as to discredit mainstream versions of the "Red Riding Hood" tale when she states that "that's not the way *this* old wife remembers it" (2, emphasis my own). Bestowing herself with the authority of an embodied and lived experience rather than a purely didactic approach to the facts of life, the grandmother therefore challenges and discredits the derogatory notion of an old wife's tale as one based on fancy rather than fact when she asks: "Don't I remember being young once, and [...] didn't it make me feel all shivery and nice to see wolfie's nostril's flare" (Hopkinson 2).

Grandma's story, when she finally settles into telling it, makes reference not only to her dalliance with the wolf, but states that in her youth "the red hood was [hers], to catch his eye" and so "[conflates] 'the girl' and 'the grandmother' of the classic versions", as Hennard Dutheil De La Rochère points out in her analysis of the tale (Hopkinson 2; "Rattling" 219-220). This conflation transforms Grandma from the marginal character we have come to expect, to the title character of the classic fairy tale. In the process it confronts not only the ageist stereotype of the insignificant old other, but as I will come to show, also another "dominant cultural storyline" about older women and sexual activity (Jones 122).

"One Last Sweet Dance": Lingering Desire and the Ageing Female Subject

In *Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked*, Catherine Orenstein observes that "[o]ver the years scholars have piled an entire cosmos of meanings on this small girl's shoulders" (4). Yet today, most contemporary researchers understand "Little Red Riding Hood" as an appropriated folk tale and sexual parable. Citing famous psychoanalysts like Erich Fromm and Bruno Bettelheim,³⁵ critics more often than not read her red hood as signifying the onset of her menses and her encounter with the wolf as her entry into adult sexuality. According to both Terry Windling and Jack Zipes, the familiar versions of "Little Red Riding Hood" that

³⁵ Fromm reads the red cap as a "symbol of menstruation" and suggests that "the little girl of whose adventures we hear has become a mature woman [...] confronted with the problem of sex" (240). Similarly Bettelheim suggests that the cap symbolises a "transfer of sexual attractiveness" and that "Little Red Cap's danger is her budding sexuality, for which she is not yet emotionally mature enough" (173).

have survived as a cautionary tale about the dangers of a woman's promiscuity (Perrault) or disobedience (Grimm), transform what was initially a folktale about female initiation and sexual maturation into a sanitised children's story (n.pag.; "A Second Gaze" 78). And even though the red cloak endowed with so much archetypal significance by psychoanalysts is not a feature of "the original folk tradition" at all, but instead Perrault's own invention – as Orenstein points out – the "oral ancestor" of "Little Red Riding Hood", titled "The Grandmother's Tale", is without a doubt an initiatory tale about coming of age and sexual ripening (81, 71).³⁶

Following in the footsteps of earlier feminist revisions like those by Anne Sexton, Olga Broumas and Gwen Strauss that have taken the sanitised children's tale back to its much more 'adult' roots, playing with sexual imagery of reproduction and rape, Hopkinson's tale is equally suggestive in nature.³⁷ And yet, unlike these and other contemporary feminist revisions that tend to cast the encounter "in a far more sinister light", portraying the girl as either the innocent victim of a rapacious patriarchal society or an empowered feminist heroine fending off inappropriate and exploitative male advances, "Riding the Red" has a much more playful and raunchy approach to Red Riding Hood's sexual dalliance with "wolfie" (Orenstein 129).

Reminiscent of Tex Avery's 1943 cartoon "Red Hot Riding Hood" in which the title character, Red, "works in a night club" and is pursued by a debonair, tuxedo-clad playboy of a wolf, Hopkinson's story casts "wolfie" as a sleek and passionate seducer and Red Riding Hood as a flirtatious tease, wilfully participating in the "dance of riding the red":

I could make wolfie slaver, I could, and beg to come close, just feel the heat from me. And oh, the game I made of it, the dance I led him!
He caught me, of course [...]. Wolfie must have his turn after all. That's only fair. My turn was the dance, the approach and retreat, the graceful sway of my body past his nostrils, scented with my flesh. The red hood was mine, to catch his eye [...].

³⁶ For more information on "The Grandmother's Tale" see Terry Windling's "The Path of Needles or Pins" and Catherine Orenstein's chapter titled "The Grandmother's Tale" in *Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked*.

³⁷ I am referring to Sexton's "Red Riding Hood" in *Transformations*, Brouma's "Little Red Riding Hood" in *Beginning with O* and Strauss' "The Waiting Wolf" in *Trail of Stones*.

But wolfie has his own measure to tread too, he does. First slip past the old mother, so slick, and then, oh then, isn't wolfie a joy to see! His dance is all hot breath and leaping flank, piercing eyes to see with and strong hands to hold. And the teeth, ah yes. The biting and the tearing and the slipping down into the hot and wet. That measure we dance together, wolfie and I.

(Hopkinson 2)

Not only is Hopkinson's use of the affectionate epithet "wolfie" suggestive of Tex Avery's wolf character to whom Red sings alluringly "Oh Wolfie, you better get the best for me",³⁸ but Hopkinson's "slaver[ing]" libertine, with his "nostrils flar[ing]" and his "hot breath and leaping flank", also echoes the lustful performance of Avery's cartoon wolf who whistles, howls and bangs his hands on the table during Red's performance, panting obsessively with a red tongue dangling from his mouth like a salivating dog.

Hopkinson's Red Riding Hood is also not the helpless and innocent little girl we expect, but an active coquette, eagerly encouraging the wolf's advances. In presenting her "turn" as a "dance" in which she purposefully and "graceful[ly] sway[s]" her body "past his nostrils", one cannot help but think of Avery's Red Hot Riding Hood's gyrating performance when she engages her male spectator by "undulating her hips and shaking her fanny", to borrow Orenstein's provocative turn of phrase (Hopkinson 2; 113). "[D]runk on the smell of [her] own young blood flowing through [her] veins" and "feel[ing] all shivery and nice to see wolfie's nostril's flare as he scent[s] it", Hopkinson's Red Riding Hood offers no less of a performance than Avery's (2).

In Grandma's telling, "riding the red" is therefore a euphemism for more than just menstruation and initiation into the mundane realities of sexual reproduction. As she states later in the short story: "riding the red [is] more than a thing of soiled rags and squalling newborns and what little comfort you and your man can give each other" at night (Hopkinson 3). In her experience, riding the red is an exciting and gratifying "dance", a sensual experience to be enjoyed "together" by a man and woman and a "sweet" act of carnal

³⁸ Although Red only uses the term "Wolfy" once in the original "Red Hot Riding Hood" cartoon which sings predominantly to "Daddy", Ted Avery "repeatedly returned" to these two characters in "multiple episodes" of what became a "full-scale romance" (Orenstein 113). It is in two of these consequent episodes, "Swing Shift Cinderella" and "Wild and Wolfy", that we see Red sing repeatedly "Oh Wolfy, oh Wolfy, ain't you the one" and "Put your arms around me, Wolfy, hold me tight."

pleasure that “gives birth” to women and initiates them into what Hennard Dutheil De La Rochère aptly defines as “female desire, sexual freedom and erotic fulfilment” in her analysis of the story (Hopkinson 2, 4; “Rattling” 221-222). In a very eloquent and insightful piece, she suggests that Grandma “presents her initiation by a wolf-like lover as [the] painful but pleasurable climax” of a “woman’s sexual life” (220).

Although Hennard Dutheil De La Rochère therefore acknowledges the idea that Hopkinson’s Grandma “extols” an active and self-interested “transgressive female sexuality”, she imagines it in opposition to the “conventional morality” and “socially approved roles” of “marital life and maternity” (“Rattling” 220). Her analysis of Grandma’s sexuality focusses on the young woman she remembers being rather than the old woman she is at the moment of her telling. In this sense, even as it examines “Riding the Red” as a counter-narrative that challenges a conservative female sexuality, Hennard Dutheil De La Rochère’s analysis fails to notice what I consider the most transgressive form of female sexuality in the story – that of the desirous older woman.

In an article titled “Sex and Ageing: A Gendered Issue”, Merry Gott and Sharron Hinchliff point out that “although sex has assumed a greater importance within society than perhaps ever before, old age remains outside this ‘sexualised world’” and “the stereotype of an asexual old age pervad[es] not only popular culture, but also policy, practice and research” (63-64). In a similar vein, Sarah Arber, Kate Davidson and Jay Ginn observe in “Changing Approaches to Gender and Later Life” that the “tendency to desexualize ageing is apparent” at not only societal and policy levels, but also in academia (9). The dominant discourse on sex and old age therefore dictates that older people *are not* and *should not* be sexually active. Rebecca L. Jones calls this the “the asexual older people storyline” or master narrative and defines contradictory storylines as liberal counter-narratives (126). While Gott and Hinchliff acknowledge that “gender play[s] an important role in mediating the influence of ageing upon individual sexual identity”, and that “ageing is more likely to compromise female sexual identity through challenging conceptions of feminine sexual attractiveness”, their statements regarding “the belief that sex is either not important or not relevant in later life” refer to general misconceptions about the sexuality of older women *and* men (66, 67, 64). The same is true of the article by Arber, Davidson and Ginn. However, while both these articles make statements regarding old age and sexuality in general, Jones’s article deals exclusively with the sexuality of older women.

Given Hennard Dutheil De La Rochère and other critics' strong focus on female sexuality in "Riding the Red", one might argue that the overlooking of Grandma as an unconventionally sexual character perpetuates the ageist stereotype of the asexual or "sexually invisible" old woman, as Woodward defines her ("Inventing" 150). Christina Bacchilega does acknowledge Granny's story as "fantasizing about one last exciting measure with wolfie" and comments that "the first-person assertion of Grandma's desire for and memory of sexual pleasure" reminds readers of the "sexual subtexts of the tale" ("Activist" 40). However, she shows no attempt to further theorise the figure of Grandma as a sexually transgressive older character that unsettles not only gendered expectations but also ageist generalisations.

For this reason, the most shocking aspect of Grandma's steamy story is perhaps its overtly sexual nature. She recounts a tale rich in erotic imagery. From the way the "slaver[ing]" wolf's "nostrils flare as he scent[s]" the "smell of fresh blood" at an arousing first encounter, to the "hot breath and leaping flank" of his courtship dance and foreplay, and the final "biting" and "tearing" and "slipping down into the hot and wet" of consummation, Grandma's tale does not shy away from sexual and sensual imagery (Hopkinson 1-3). This stands in stark contrast to the conventional perceptions of prudish and abstinent old women that Jones discusses in the appropriately titled "'That's very Rude, I Shouldn't be Telling You That': Older Women Talking about Sex". Discussing her "interviews with [twenty-three] older women (aged 61-90) about their experiences of sex and intimate relationships in later life", Jones picks up on the general perception that older people should not talk about sexual experiences (121). Although her interviews mostly focus on their experiences as ageing subjects, Jones finds that even when willingly recounting past sexual experiences ranging as far back as childhood, the women are aware that they are telling "transgressive narratives" and frequently "invoke the notion of taboo, rule breaking or sanction" (129). Phrases like "I shouldn't be telling you that" and "am I shocking you?" pepper accounts that contradict the asexual older people storyline (Jones 130, 132).

Grandma's eager account of her sexually adventurous past therefore unsettles not only the assumption that old women are silent on the subject of sex, but her active desire for one last experience also counters culturally dominant perceptions of a "neutered old age" in which old people are presumed to have "lost interest in sex" (DeFalco 130; Jones 125). Even though Grandma admits that her husband is "long gone" and she is "done with all that", we see her yearning for one last sexual encounter with wolfie marked by female agency and know-how:

Ah, but wouldn't it be sweet to ride the red, just once more before I'm gone,
just one time when I can look wolfie in the eye, and match him grin for grin,
and show him that I know what he's good for? (Hopkinson 4)

As she waits for “the little one [who is] probably on her way right now with that pretty basket”, Grandma also eagerly awaits “one last measure”, “one last, sweet dance” with the wolf bound to follow in her footsteps (5). As the story closes, she asks: “Listen: is that a knock at the door?” and the reader is left wondering if it's the wolf or the granddaughter knocking, and if Grandma will in fact enjoy one last sexual encounter before her time is up.

Taking the sanitised children's tale back to its much more ‘adult’ roots, Hopkinson therefore rewrites the story of “Little Red Riding Hood” from the perspective of the grandmother looking back on her own life as an aged version of the iconic little girl. By conflating the figure of Little Red Riding Hood and her grandma, “Riding the Red” transforms the old woman from the powerless and marginal character we have come to expect into a commanding protagonist who confronts and highlights the restrictive storylines open to aged female characters. Rewriting the dominant cultural narrative about old women as insignificant and asexual others without transforming them into carnal and wicked witches, Hopkinson therefore offers a liberal and erotic counter-narrative that presents Grandma not only as a central and significant story-teller with valuable initiatory knowledge to share, but also as a transgressive and openly sexual character that questions our preconceived ideas about little old ladies as chaste.

While Hopkinson's tale revises the figure of the little old lady, the next text under consideration, Terry Pratchett's *Witches Abroad*, problematises both this disempowering ageist stereotype and its literary counterpart, the wicked witch. Toying with the tension that exists between these two conceptions of old women as either invisible or hypervisible, Pratchett's comic satire presents us with aged female characters that effortlessly navigate the waters between the two and, in so doing, highlights the constructed nature of the categories themselves.

“The Maiden, the Mother and the... Other One”: Unruly Old Women in Terry Pratchett’s *Witches Abroad*

As one of about forty novels in Terry Pratchett’s vastly popular and highly satirical Discworld collection, *Witches Abroad* is one of a subset of novels often referred to as the ‘witches series’. Playing with the archetypal trio of “the maiden, the mother and the crone” that one character describes as “one of the oldest stories of all”, this particular novel deals with the adventures of three witches named Magrat Garlick, Gytha ‘Nanny’ Ogg and Esmerelda ‘Granny’ Weatherwax (Pratchett 248, 63).

When the “Ramtops’ youngest witch” and “wet hen”, Magrat Garlick, is engaged as a “replaysment”³⁹ fairy godmother by the dying and partly illiterate Desiderata Hollow, it becomes her responsibility to “goe to the city of Genua” and make sure that “Ella Saturday [does] NOTTE marry the prins” – “contrary” as that might “sound” (Pratchett 22, 159, 34, 34, 39). Although Desiderata clearly expresses the wish that “those 2 Olde Biddys”, by which she means Nanny and Granny, are “Notte to come” on Magrat’s quest, because they will surely “onlie Ruine everythin”, she is secretly confident that both will indeed accompany and assist Magrat, purely because she tells them “not to” (Pratchett 16, 34).

While the quest that sets the plot in motion therefore belongs to the youngest witch and maiden, Magrat, this paper is more concerned with Pratchett’s comic portrayal of the two “senior witches” who tag along for the ride: Granny Weatherwax and her “best friend” and self-proclaimed “disgustin’ old baggage”, Nanny Ogg (Pratchett 32, 22, 285). While Granny’s nickname and her undeniable dominance mark her as the most senior of the three witches and therefore the ‘crone’, Nanny Ogg, who rules as the “undisputed matriarch” of the “extended” Ogg family, seemingly fulfils the role of the ‘mother’ despite being of the same age as Granny (Pratchett 35-36). And yet, as is often the case with Pratchett’s characters, these women refuse to fit neatly into their preordained roles. This is true of the novel in its entirety, but is particularly noticeable in an instance when another witch reads their threesome

³⁹ “Replacement” spelled as “replaysment” is but the first of many spelling mistakes and other stylistic idiosyncrasies in Desiderata’s note to Magrat. Such apparent illiteracy is however not limited to Desiderata and readers will note a constant stream of errors and irregularities as I quote other characters from the Discworld, particularly Nanny and Granny.

as a manifestation of the archetypal trio mentioned above and all three characters misread the persona they are meant to represent:

‘Look at the three of you,’ she said. ‘[...] The maiden, the mother and the crone.’

‘Who are you calling a maiden?’ said Nanny Ogg.

‘Who are you calling a mother?’ said Magrat.

Granny Weatherwax glowered briefly like the person who has discovered that there is only one straw left and everyone else has drawn a long one.

(Pratchett 248)

While Magrat also fails to fit into the place she is allotted, it is particularly the two older witches’ refusal to “behave” as they “should” and their consequent “crimes against narrative expectation” that are of interest to this chapter (Pratchett 75).

As an astoundingly rich metafictional tale, *Witches Abroad* is a self-proclaimed “story about stories” and countless intertextual references to popular fairy tales litter the narrative (Pratchett 10). From the “spinning wheel at the bottom” of an “overgrown castle” in which a princess sleeps “for a hundred years”, to the “the little girl in the red cloak” about to eaten by a wolf, the three witches encounter, mention or meddle in over a dozen recognisable fairy tale designs (Pratchett 113, 114, 119).⁴⁰ As we follow their haphazardous journey from Lancre to Genua, we watch Nanny and Granny brazenly disrupt and voice their critique of the fairy tale convention and its tendency to go “around inflicting happy endings on people whether they wants them or not” (Pratchett 118).

The novel’s intertextual references to fairy tales are, however, not limited to only well-known classics such as those by Perrault and the Brother Grimm. When, on the road to Genua, which is unsurprisingly paved with “yellow bricks”, “a farmhouse drop[s] on [Nanny’s] head” and a group of “singing” dwarfs demand her “ruby-coloured” boots, we recognise both subtle and

⁴⁰ In addition to “The Princess and the Frog” (Pratchett 64, 246-247) and “Cinderella” (200, 177), which are the two tales on which the plot of Ella Saturday’s story is based, other fairy and folktale references in the novel include: “Hansel and Gretel” (114), “Rapunzel” (114, 148), “Sleeping Beauty” (114), “Red Riding Hood” (119), “Goldilocks” (134), “The Three Little Pigs” (134), “The Wizard of Oz” (138-142), “Rumpelstiltskin” (148), “Snow White” (141, 270), “Bluebeard” (222) and even the Slavic fairy tales about Baba Yaga (150, 249) and the formulaic “dark and thirsty” story of Dracula (67).

overt references to L. Frank Baum's *Wizard of Oz* (Pratchett 138-142). This particular instance of intertextual reference is significant because even though the dwarfs are "a bit puzzled" as to why exactly they want Nanny's boots, they admit that they collectively "just got this ... feeling... that [they] ought to have [them]" (Pratchett 142):

'Er,' he said. 'Er. Boots?'

'What *for*?' said Granny.

The dwarf scratched its head. 'Damned if I know,' he said. 'We were just wondering about it ourselves, 's'matterofact. We were just coming off shift in the coal mine half an hour ago, we saw a farmhouse land... on the witch... an'... well...'

'You just knew you had to run up and steal her boots?' said Granny.

The dwarf's face widened into a relieved grin.

'That's right!' he said. 'And sing the Ding-dong song. Only she was supposed to be squashed. No offence meant,' he added quickly.

(Pratchett 144)

Up until this point in the tale, it has become increasingly obvious that Pratchett is using *Witches Abroad* to comment on "the power of stories" to shape reality (135). At this telling moment, however, we finally see in action the "theory of narrative causality" that he explains in the opening pages of the novel:

[S]tories are important. People think that stories are shaped by people. In fact, it's the other way around. [...]

Stories [...] have been blowing and uncoiling around the universe since the beginning of time. And they have evolved. The weakest have died and the strongest have survived and they have grown fat on the retelling ... stories, twisting and blowing through the darkness.

And their very existence overlays a faint but insistent pattern on the chaos that is history. Stories etch grooves deep enough for people to follow in the same way that water follows certain paths down a mountainside. And every time fresh actors tread the path of the story, the groove runs deeper.

This is called the theory of narrative causality and it means that a story, once started, *takes a shape*. [...]

This is why history keeps on repeating all the time.

So a thousand heroes have stolen fire from the gods. A thousand wolves have eaten grandmother, a thousand princesses have been kissed. A million actors have moved, unknowingly, through the pathways of story.

It takes a special kind of person to fight back and become the bicarbonate of history. (Pratchett 8-9; emphasis in original)

A popular topic among literary critics, Pratchett's intertextual use of fairy tales and his theory of narrative causality as outlined above, have often been employed to comment on the 'fable' of gender.

In his analysis of *Witches Abroad*, Kevin P. Smith, for instance, notes that "Pratchett's work is important [...] because it addresses the nature of the myths we live by and the fantasies that govern our daily existence" ("Battling" 133). Pratchett's revisions, he writes, "highlight the patriarchal assumptions underlying the classical fairy tale and change the stories in order to make them more equitable" (Smith, "Battling" 133). Lian Sinclair similarly writes that the novels that comprise the "[w]itches sub-series" are "largely concerned with the historical imagination of gender" and their "major theme" is the "protagonists' quests to balance performing the roles expected of them while still pursuing their own desires" (7). Sinclair suggests that through "interventions into our own (historical) imagination of gender", Pratchett "demonstrates to readers that gendered narratives play a constricting force in our lives and that freedom comes when we create the power to subvert or break from constructed narratives" (Sinclair 7).

What both Smith and Sinclair seem to overlook is that *Witches Abroad* is not only critical of the way in which fairy tales construct gender, but that it also actively engages with another site of difference – age – and its intersectionality with gender when Pratchett turns his attention to what Woodward calls the "virtually invisible subject of older women" ("Intro" x). Granted, Smith does briefly touch on this issue when he discusses Pratchett's tendency to "bring out the hidden voices" in fairy tales and so foreground the experiences of marginal characters like the witch, the wolf and the grandmother ("Battling" 142). However, with regard to the ageism inherent in the fairy tales Pratchett references, Smith goes no further than to comment that *Witches Abroad*'s intertextual reference to "Little Red Riding Hood" highlights "society's lack of respect for the old and infirm" ("Battling" 142).

Thus, while Granny Weatherwax and Nanny Ogg's intervention and commentary collapse several sexist fairy tale conventions during their journey to Genua – the gendered expectations of princes, princesses and happily-ever-afters chiefly among them – their biggest and most overlooked accomplishment in *Witches Abroad* seems to be the subversion and revision of the trope of old women as marginal others. Dealing specifically with both the trope of “the little old lad[y]” and the “wicked witch” – and I think it is important to note that he employs these exact formulaic phrases – Pratchett engages as much with notions of ageism in classic fairy tales as he does with sexism (Pratchett 120, 163).

Not Just “Another Old Biddy”: Little Old Ladies as Active Agents

Like Hopkinson in “Riding the Red”, Pratchett's most obvious revision of the fairy tale trope of the little old lady is to turn Nanny and Granny from the peripheral characters we expect into the main protagonists of *Witches Abroad*. As dynamic heroines, they not only save the day more than once, but their doings and interventions also drive the plot of the tale and the decisive actions of other characters. From the perspective of ageing studies, such a revision is significant because our literature on ageing has been dominated by what Margaret Gullette describes as a “decline narrative” (as qtd. in Wyatt-Brown 2). Regardless of the fact that such a narrative “does not accurately reflect real human experience”, society has “enshrined the notion that old age means decay” and readers “are likely to reject any other sort of interpretation” of old age “as romantic nonsense” (Wyatt-Brown 2). Consequently, by portraying Granny and Nanny as active protagonists “who *make* stories work their way” and whose unconventional behaviour “update[s]” the “definition” of “little old ladies” throughout a “string of villages across several thousand miles of continent”, Pratchett challenges the popular discourse of ageing as a “process of decline moving towards death” (Pratchett 16,163, emphasis my own; DeFalco 1). In its stead, *Witches Abroad* presents us with an ageing narrative marked by tenacity, action and an uncompromising refusal to pass silently into insignificance and old age.

In addition to transforming usually passive and marginal old women into active protagonists, Pratchett also openly calls out the fairy tale convention with regard to the prejudice it directs at such elderly characters. This is apparent when Granny and Nanny critically discuss the circumstances of the “grandmother” in the story of “Little Red Riding Hood”⁴¹:

⁴¹Although the story is never explicitly mentioned by its title, it is alluded to obviously enough.

‘Woodcutters!’ said Nanny. ‘It’s all right if there’s woodcutters! One of them rushes in –’

‘That’s only what children get told,’ said Granny [...]. ‘Anyway, that’s no good to the grandmother, is it? She’s already *been* et!’

‘I always hated that story,’ said Nanny. ‘No-one ever cares what happens to poor defenceless old women.’ (Pratchett 122)

Their conversation is fleeting and momentarily they shift their attention to helping out “the old woman” in question (Pratchett 122). And yet, it is this single statement from Nanny, namely that “[n]o-one ever cares what happens to poor defenceless old women” that speaks volumes about the preordained literary role of little old ladies and that I propose to read as Pratchett’s overt criticism of the ageism that defines classic fairy tales.

Although this is the only instance in which he explicitly calls out the fairy tale convention with regard to ageism, Pratchett uses comic irony to expose the ridiculousness of some of the commonly held assumptions about old women and old age throughout the text. Nanny, for example, employs the stereotype of the little old lady to her advantage and uses it to infiltrate the Genuan palace and gain information. Certain that her aged physical appearance will ensure her obscurity, Nanny Ogg heads for the backdoor of the “fairytale castle” in order to pick up some useful gossip: “Anyway, no-one took much notice of little old ladies. Little old ladies were by definition harmless [...] and people never noticed another old biddy around the place” (Pratchett 162,163). In a comparable incident a little later in the novel, Nanny and Granny again rely on the ageist stereotypes which, according to DeFalco, “render [old women] invisible or entirely absent” when they rush into a climactic scene to rescue Magrat (DeFalco x). Just as Magrat finds herself paralysed and unable to move “in the face of unblinking death”, the two witches sweep into the house, pretending to be “just a couple of old beggar women”:

‘Blessings be upon this house.’ [...]

Granny Weatherwax pushed open the door. ‘Oh deary me,’ she thundered, ‘and lawks.’

‘Yeah,’ said Nanny Ogg, crowding through the doorway behind her. ‘Lawks too.’

‘Were just a couple of old beggar women,’ said Granny, striding across the floor.

‘Begging from house to house,’ said Nanny Ogg. ‘Not coming directly here by any manner o’ means.’

They each caught one of Magrat’s elbows and lifted her off her feet. [...]

‘We’re just off,’ said Nanny Ogg, brightly. (Pratchett 192)

As always, Pratchett relies on a combination of humour and stereotype to alert readers to the scripts that shape our thinking and both incidents are clear references to the ageist stereotypes that push old women to the margin, rendering them insignificant.

The discrepancy between ageist expectations and reality is what makes these passages so funny: the perceptions created by the witches’ words and performances clearly being at odds with their actual deeds or intent. In the first passage, it benefits Nanny to be perceived as a “harmless [...] old biddy” because it allows her to go unnoticed and so glean information to which she might otherwise not be privy. The irony, of course, is that while Nanny offers a spotless performance of irrelevance and decrepit old age, she is anything but harmless and, like Granny, she is actually a formidable and powerful old witch. The same incongruity marks the second passage. In contrast to the easily-dismissed “old [...] women” both witches’ words and interjections clearly announce them to be, Pratchett purposefully employs powerful and masculine verbs to describe their actions. Granny “thunder[s]” the old-fashioned cry of “lawks”, she determinedly “strid[es]” across the room and both women proceed to “lift” Magrat “off her feet” with strength and determination atypical of the old and feeble women as whom they are masquerading.

In a strikingly similar scene, Granny Weatherwax schools a cocky young woodcutter by displaying physical strength uncharacteristic of the helpless old woman she pretends to be. After listening to him brag about winning the “silver belt two years running at the forest revels”, she proclaims herself “hardly able to lift” his heavy axe and then, grasping it “in one hand”, she swings it hard enough for the blade “[whir] past his face” and “burr[y] itself a quarter of an inch deep in a tree” (Pratchett 132). “Sorry about that”, Granny says, “Aren’t I a daft old woman?” (Pratchett 132). And yet, contrary to her words, her power and purpose are clear. After listening to him justify his neglect of the aforementioned grandmother in the woods by claiming that “she’s a witch” purely because she “lives by herself”, has a “hooked

nose” and is “always muttering”, Granny aims to educate the young man that looks can be deceiving and that stereotype is a dangerous playmate to the amateur.

What is interesting is that both Nanny and Granny therefore employ ageist scripts to their advantage as and when it suits them. As the tale informs readers at another point: “Granny Weatherwax was an old woman only when it suited her purposes” (Pratchett 98). Hence, while the grandma in Hopkinson’s “Riding the Red” refuses to accept her marginality and acts *in spite* of it, the two witches in Pratchett’s novel appropriate and redefine that same marginality, redirecting it to fit their own interests and agendas.

Following Sinclair, who compares Pratchett’s theory of narrative causality to Judith Butler’s performative theory of gender when he writes that “the repetition of stories are foundational to identity and give the appearance of truth, while giving no original or essential truth”, I suggest we can read age as performative in much the same way as Butler reads gender in *Gender Trouble* (16).⁴² Like Butler, who admits to “trac[ing] the way in which gender fables establish and circulate the misnomer of natural facts”, Pratchett presents old age as just another “regulatory fiction” (*Gender Trouble* xxxiv, 185). The fact that Nanny and Granny can perform their age “as a corporeal style” or “an ‘act’” exposes that it is, in many ways, a mere “fabrication”, a “fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of [the body]” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 190, 186). The two witches’ parodic performances as old ladies therefore expose the illusory nature of old age much like the conversation that ensues between them after they meet the grandmother in woods:

‘Funny, really,’ said Nanny, when the *old woman* has climbed the rickety stairs. ‘She’s younger than me. Mind you, I take exercise.’

‘You never took exercise in your life,’ said Granny Weatherwax, still watching the bushes. ‘You never did anything you didn’t want to do.’

‘That’s what I mean,’ said Nanny happily. (Pratchett 125, emphasis my own)

Nanny favourably compares herself to the grandmother who is ironically “younger” but marks herself as an “old woman” by her ineptitude, her “shuffling” and her “small and quavering

⁴² Judith Butler’s performative theory of gender is explained in more detail in chapter four.

voice” (Pratchett 122). By offering the fact that she “never did anything she didn’t want to” as the reason for her comparative ‘youth’, Pratchett exposes the “imitative structure” of old age and proposes that ageing women can choose to comply with ageist scripts or not (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 187).

The deliberate exploitation and manipulation of the ageist stereotypes that *should* limit their actions, but proffer agency instead, is, however, nowhere more prominent than when Granny takes revenge on the group of crooked gamblers. After finding out that Nanny has been swindled out of their travelling money ... and her broom, Granny goes to the saloon, bent on revenge. On the way there, she displays her “[usual]” purposeful “[stride]”, but the minute she enters the gambling area, it is as if she walks through a “magic doorway” and she “[is] suddenly a bent old woman, hobbling along” (Pratchett 100-101). Already “a sight to touch all but the wickedest heart”, Granny “hunches her back a little more” just as she approaches the barman and gets the desired ageist response (Pratchett 101):

‘What can I do for you, old crone?’ he said.

There was only the faintest suggestion of a flicker in Granny’s expression of elderly imbecility. [...]

‘[...] I was wondering if you could be so kind as to loan me a deck, I think it’s called, of cards,’ quavered Granny.

‘Going to play a game of Old Maid, are you?’ said the barman.

There was a chilly flicker across Granny’s eyes again as she said, ‘No. Just Patience. I’d like to try to get the hang of it.’ (Pratchett 101)

The barman tosses Granny the requested deck of cards and she continues her performance by “totter[ing]” off to a nearby table, where she just sits and stares at the seemingly alien playing cards (Pratchett 101). Moments later, she is approached by a crooked gambler who lays a “gentle hand” on her shoulder and invites her to join his table (Pratchett 101):

‘Excuse me, good mother,’ he said, ‘but my friends and I’ – he gestured to some welcoming faces at a nearby table – ‘would feel much more comfortable in ourselves if you were to join us. It can be dangerous for a woman traveling by herself.’

Granny Weatherwax smiled nicely at him, and then waved vaguely at her cards.

‘I can never remember whether the ones are worth more or less than the pictures,’ she said. ‘Forget my own head next, I expect!’

They all laughed. Granny hobbled to the other table. She took the vacant seat [...].

She smiled to herself and then leaned forward, all eagerness.

‘So tell me,’ she said ‘how do you play this game, then?’

(Pratchett 101-102).

Slipping into the persona of an old woman as if she is putting on a costume, the usually formidable Granny Weatherwax performs the role of decrepit and clueless old-timer with such flair that the gamblers have no idea that they are in fact the ones being conned. As a brilliant card player and expert in the craft of headology,⁴³ Granny proceeds to give the table of cheats the trashing of their life and wins back both her money and Nanny’s all-important broom.

What is interesting is that as long as Granny performs her assigned role as little old lady – harmless and gullible – she is treated with respect and called “good mother” or “dear lady” (Pratchett 101-103). As soon as the tables are turned and she steps outside of that role, no longer meeting their expectations of the elderly, she is berated and insulted. As Granny proceeds to win, the lead gambler’s internal dialogue marks her as “the old bag”, “the dreadful, terrible hag”, “the appalling old crone”, “the ghastly old creature”, “the old bitch” and “the daft old baggage” (Pratchett 105-106). Vocalised by a character that clearly trades in stereotypes, this segment of text employs the above string of derogatory epithets in such a persistent manner that it becomes comic. As such, Pratchett uses his characteristic satire to expose the ageist ideas that drive interaction with the elderly and holds up to ridicule not only the gambler’s preconceived ideas and expectations, but by extension also those of the reader.

⁴³ Headology is the art of “taking advantage of [people’s] gullibility”, “getting into [their] minds” and making them believe something, often that they have been charmed or bewitched, without actually ever really *doing* anything to them (134; 207).

The Not so “Dreadful, Terrible Hag”: Humanising the Wicked Witch

Granny’s transformation from “good mother” to “terrible hag” when she steps outside of society’s expectations of elderly women, introduces the stereotype of the wicked witch. In *Woman Hating*, in a chapter aptly titled “Once upon a time: the Roles”, Andrea Dworkin suggests that in the dualistic patriarchal ideology of the fairy tale, for a woman “not to be passive, innocent, and helpless is to be actively evil” (35). Dworkin therefore makes a very similar point to Gilbert and Gubar who, as quoted earlier, define the witch as a woman “who refuses to stay in her [...] ordained place” and the consequences of Granny’s behaviour in the saloon resonate with the writing of both (28). The minute Granny steps outside the passive and self-effacing role expected of a little old lady and displays agency, artifice and self-interest, all “unfeminine” characteristics associated with a “male life of ‘significant action’”, she is marked as a “hag”, a “crone”, a “creature” and “bitch” – all synonyms frequently employed for the grotesque and exaggerated figure of the witch (Gilbert and Gubar 28; Pratchett 105-106). That Granny is, in fact, a practising and respected witch from the Ramptops is beside the point. The gambler who is classifying her as a witch based on her behaviour has no idea of her true occupation. He is simply displaying the ageist prejudice that classifies old women as one of only two things: a helpless little old lady to be duped and exploited or an active and wicked witch to be avoided and berated.

In spite of casting his elderly female protagonists as actual witches, Pratchett actively resists the trope of the wicked witch and devotes much attention to discrediting the seemingly inescapable fairy tale archetype. Since quite a number of his novels feature witches, there is a significant amount of critical work available on the subject, particularly with regard to gender stereotyping.⁴⁴ Given the quality and quantity of such research, this chapter does not aim to read the witches in *Witches Abroad* as part of Pratchett’s larger body of work or in relation to the historical and cultural discourse on witchcraft. Instead, it is interested in the manner in which Pratchett satirises the image of the witch as an ageist stereotype in this particular text.

Employing the comic satire that has made him a best-selling author, Pratchett destabilises our narrative expectations of the wicked witch as spectacle – frighteningly grotesque in her otherness and carnality – quite early on. Writing that “[a]rtists and writers have always had a rather exaggerated idea about what goes on at a witches’ sabbat”, he carries on to suggest that

⁴⁴ See for instance, Sinclair’s “Magical Genders”, Croft’s “Nice, Good or Right”, Bent and Gavin’s “The Maids, Mother and ‘The Other One’ of the Discworld” and Anderson’s “Which Witch is Which?”

such misrepresentation “comes from spending too much time in small rooms with the curtains drawn, instead of getting out in the healthy fresh air” – something that Pratchett’s pastoral witches do “a lot” (18, 125). Thus instead of pathologizing the witches as we expect, Pratchett starts his discussion of the witches’ sabbat by presenting the writers responsible for its portrayal as the ones who engage in deviant and asocial behaviour – possibly the kind you need to keep the curtains closed for. He continues to discredit any stereotypical notions of witches hedonistically “dancing naked” and worshipping strange gods before moving on to common conceptions regarding their eating habits and use of mystic ointments:

And there’s the food and drink – the bits of reptile and so on. In fact, witches don’t go for that sort of thing. The worst you can say about the eating habits of the older type of witch is that they tend to like ginger biscuits dipped in tea with so much sugar in it that the spoon won’t move *and* will drink it out of the saucer if they think it’s too hot. And do so with appreciative noises more generally associated with the cheaper type of plumbing system. Legs of toad and so on might be better than this. Then there’s the mystic ointments. By sheer luck, the artists and writers are on firmer ground here. Most witches are elderly, which is when ointments start to have an attraction, and at least two of those present tonight were wearing Granny Weatherwax’s famous goose-grease-and-sage chest liniment. This didn’t make you fly and see visions, but it did prevent colds if only because the distressing smell that developed around about the second week kept everyone else so far away you couldn’t catch anything from them. (Pratchett 19)

As Pratchett admits in “Imaginary World, Real Stories”, his witches “tend to act like your granny” (160). On first consideration, particularly of the above passage, one might therefore be tempted to think that in the process of humanising witches by making them resemble grandmothers, he is writing these potentially powerful female figures back into a space of weakness and comic irrelevance. And yet, it is exactly in the comic space between expectation and reality that Pratchett is able to critique the ageist assumptions that restrict old womanhood. Janet Brennan Croft perfectly captures this idea in an essay on the witches sub-series when she writes that it is in “the dissonance between the archetypal roles and the real

people filling them” that “Pratchett again reinforces his message that stories cannot be allowed to dictate roles to people” (154).

That ‘the wicked witch’, like the ‘little old lady’, *is* a role, a stereotype and a changeable cultural script open to interpretation is apparent when Granny unsuccessfully attempts to intimidate a foreign innkeeper. Flaunting what she perceives to be the sure signs of her status as a witch, Granny insists on a room, in spite of the fact that the hotel clearly shows a sign for “[no vacancies]:

‘You see this hat?’ she demanded. ‘You see this broom?’

The man looked from her to the broom and back again.

‘Yes?’ he said. ‘What’s that mean?’

‘Means we want three rooms for the night,’ said Granny, looking smugly at the other two [witches]. [...]

The man looked at [...] them. Then he went over to the door.

‘You see this door? You see this sign?’ he said.

‘We don’t bother about signs,’ said Granny.

‘Well, then,’ said the man, ‘I give up. What’s a pointy hat and a broom really mean?’

‘That means I’m a witch,’ said Granny.

The man put his head on one side.

‘Yeah?’ he said. ‘Is that another word for daft old woman?’

(Pratchett 155-156)

To Granny, who is used to the fear, respect and special privileges that accompany being recognised as a witch back home, it seems unimaginable that the city they are in does not have witches or has witches of “a different kind” (157). “There is only one kind of witch,” she asserts after being ‘misread’ by the foreigner, “[a]nd we’re it” (157). That is, however, not true and in Genua, where witchcraft is “[called] voodoo”, witches look and act entirely different (Pratchett 172). In fact, Erzulie Gogol, Genua’s resident voodoo woman, is neither old nor ugly. And while Granny and Nanny are described by an onlooker as a “terrible old woman [...] all in black” and a “horrible dumpy [old woman]”, respectively, Mrs. Gogol is “a handsome middle-aged woman” sporting “heavy gold earrings” and “full red skirt with flounces” (Pratchett 94, 174). Granny’s failed performance as a witch *in Genua* therefore

once again confirms the external and constructed nature as well as the cultural variability of the category of old age.

Witches Abroad is a story about the stories that shape our thinking, particularly with regard to gender and old age. A comic satire, the novel actively critiques the fairy tale convention that portrays old women as either little old ladies or wicked witches. By foregrounding older female characters that not only refuse to fit neatly into these preordained binary roles, but also actively ridicule and exploit them, Pratchett highlights old age as a performance and a regulatory fiction that limits old womanhood. As readers watch Granny and Nanny slip in and out of their roles as helpless little old ladies and wicked and powerful witches, *Witches Abroad* both amalgamates and subverts what is effectively a limiting and highly polarised system of classification and challenges readers to take a good hard look at the narrative expectations that paint old women as one of only two restrictive stereotypes.

While Pratchett's characters jump between representing old bags and terrible hags and, in so doing, question the legitimacy of both stereotypes, the next text to be discussed, Dubravka Ugresic's *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg*, shows that the experience of old age and ageing is not always question of either/or but more frequently a combination of these two binary opposites.

“What is Left for [Ageing] Women?” A Typology of Old Age in Dubravka Ugresic's *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg*

Baba Yaga Laid an Egg by Dubravka Ugresic, is the eleventh book in Canongate's “myth series” which was launched in 2005. According to the publisher, this series, which includes books by other feminist writers like Margaret Atwood, AS Byatt and Jeanette Winterson, is a “long-term global publishing project where some of the world's most respected authors re-tell myths in a manner of their own choosing” (“About the Myths” n.pag.). As the title suggests, Ugresic's novel is a contemporary revision of the myth of Baba Yaga, that horrendous hag and prototypical ur-witch of East European myth and fairy tale who lives in a revolving hut on chicken legs. Flying around in an oversized mortar with a pestle as her oar, Baba Yaga kidnaps children and wields a broom to wipe out any traces of her going. She acts as either benefactor or adversary to the heroes of folktale and true to her status as hag of hags, she is a (for the most part) feminine monstrosity marked by the tell-tale deformities of a witch. Like

Baba Yaga, who sometimes appears as “three sisters, all called Baba Yaga”, Ugresic’s novel is made up of three seemingly unrelated parts: a memoir or travelogue, a fictional tale or fable and a mock academic essay (Davidson 118). This triad of stories under one mantle seems evocative of an unholy trio of witches, a literary design that is more than appropriate given the text’s self-proclaimed⁴⁵ focus on old women and the negative cultural stereotypes that define female ageing.

Following a two-page preface devoted to the old women “[y]ou don’t see [...] at first”, the first section of the novel, often labelled a biography, documents the decline of the writer’s elderly mother as she ages into an increasingly disempowered old age made all the more frightening by the onset of dementia and memory loss (1). The first-person narration of this first, realist section is set off by the fairy-tale structure of the second. Told from a third-person perspective and full of magical elements and fairy tale references, section two is clearly presented as a fiction, a modern fable about the adventures of three elderly women who make their way to a spa-cum-wellness-centre in the Czech Republic. Finally, in an act Alyssa McDonald has labelled “a hackneyed, unnecessary trick”, the novel concludes with a mock academic treatise on Baba Yaga (48). In response to an imagined letter from the editor of the first two sections, asking her to explain any intertextual links to the figure of Baba Yaga, Dr Aba Bagay – an “obscure Slavic scholar from eastern Europe” – presents him with a “Baba Yaga For Beginners” in section three (Ugresic 325).

Although all three sections therefore focus on the experience and definition of old womanhood, it is the middle section of the novel, so “lavish with improbable and ingenious fairy-tale plotting” that seems most relevant to the study at hand (Warner, “Witchiness” n.pag.). And yet, seeing that the novel is meant to be read as a whole and has certain narrative and thematic threads running between the different sections,⁴⁶ one cannot discuss the one without the other two, and it is the sections on either side of it that provide the lens through which I read the fairy tale wedged in the middle: if the first section presents a meticulous and

⁴⁵ Section three states that in the first two sections, the “author chose to foreground old age as the most relevant theme” (Ugresic 314).

⁴⁶ In section one, the writer’s mother has a best friend called “Pupa”, a minor character briefly mentioned here, but fleshed out into one of three protagonists in section two. In addition, the young “Slavic scholar” named Aba who declares herself “deep into folklore studies” and accompanies the writer on her trip to Varna in the first section reappears as the Dr Bagay who composes the third section (Ugresic 33, 47).

subjective look at the daily realities of a specific woman ageing into a little old lady, the last section offers a compilation of the fiendish folklore responsible for the image of the grotesque and wicked witch. Wedged between the two we find a modern fable about three old women who seem to navigate the waters between these two extremes. However, as individual close analysis but also a collective examination of these three ‘texts’ will show, Ugresic’s stories are more nuanced than they initially appear and all three sections actually unsettle the well-established binary opposition between the little old lady and the wicked witch.

“At First You Don’t See Them”: A Preface to Old Age

Made apparent in a preface titled “*At First You Don’t See Them ...*”, Ugresic’s novel interrogates the paradoxical ageist stereotypes that render old women invisible and at the same time unmistakable. As is indicated by the phrase “at first” that opens the title, as well as the ellipse that concludes it, old women’s apparent invisibility and the fact that “you don’t see them” is provisional and dependant on what inevitably follows – a state of being that is soon identified as an unavoidable conspicuousness. Highlighting what DeFalco identifies as the “paradox” that defines ageist thinking, namely the “collision of hyperbolic specularity – the old person as spectacle and specimen – and cultural invisibility”, the parodic introduction to the novel therefore exaggerates and mocks these coexisting and entangled ageist stereotypes as personified by the little old lady and the wicked witch (4).

Portrayed as “[shadows]” who move “past you” unnoticed, in “small mice-like steps”, the tragic old women in Ugresic’s preface initially echo the powerlessness and insignificance Ursula K. Le Guin’s portrays in the epigraph that opens this chapter (Ugresic 1). It is particularly Ugresic’s reference to them as “stray m[ice]” that evokes the passage in which Le Guin critically likens old women to “mice” or “roaches” who “live in the cracks, between walls” while “old men run things” (1; 156). Overstating the wretchedness of their status as “[s]weet *little old ladies*”, Ugresic depicts these “mumbling” others who haunt our public spaces, “rid[ing] buses, trams and the subway like abandoned luggage” in a manner that is both comic and disheartening (Ugresic 2, emphasis my own).

Disempowered and overlooked, these old women who “peck at the air in front of them”, “sleep with their heads drooping onto their chests” and “move their fingers over leftover crumbs as if moving across a page of braille” are however, primarily compared to another common pest – birds (Ugresic 1-2). As such, one woman’s fingers are “getting light and

hollow like bird bones”, another’s skin resembles a “turkey wattle” and when “three little hens” get together, two of them “[coo] with admiration” at the third’s embroidered collar (2). Given the claim later on, in section three, that “birds – ravens, black hens, crows, magpies swans, geese etc – are all linked to witches, female demons and ancient goddesses, Baba Yaga among them”, Ugresic’s descriptions jump between portraying old women as helpless and negligible little old ladies and associating them with grotesque and wicked, yet powerful witches (Ugresic 306). For this reason, it is hardly surprising that while the women are unheeded and remain in the shadows as mice, their comparison to birds quickly turn them into exhibits. A true public nuisance, these ‘old birds’ appear everywhere:

At first you don’t see them. And then, there they are, on the tram, at the post-office, in the shop, at the doctor’s surgery, on the street, there is one, there is another, there is a fourth over there, a fifth, a sixth, how could there be so many of them at once?! (Ugresic 2-3)

Like the birds who “are apparently out of control” in the first section of the novel and “have occupied whole cities, taken over parks, streets, bushes, benches, outdoor restaurants, subway stations, trains stations”, with “[n]o one seem[ing] to have noticed the invasion” until it is too late, the old women in Ugresic’s parodic prologue are at first overlooked and then zoomed in on with an disquieting clarity (8):

Your eyes inch from one detail to the next: the feet swelling like doughnuts in the tight shoes, the skin sagging from the inside of the elbows, the knobby fingernails, the capillaries that ridge the skin [...] At first they’re invisible. And then all at once you begin to spot them. (Ugresic 2-3)

Ugresic’s detailed and inflated description of the unsightly physical attributes of these women turn them from invisible to hypervisible. The consequent “hyperbolic specularity” of their ageing bodies, one with “noticeable bump of the back of her head” like an “old bulldog” and the other with “the skin on her neck hang[ing] like a turkey wattle”, portrays them as “spectacle or specimen” and yet again bear a clear connection to that physically grotesque female other, the witch (DeFalco 4; Ugresic 2; DeFalco 4).

When, moments later, she comically warns against the “pang of sympathy”, “the thrill of gallantry” and the apparent trap of doing “good deed[s]” for these “elderly angels”, urging the reader to “resist [their] siren call”, Ugresic employs humour to expose ageist stereotypes and exaggerate the image of old women as freakish and potentially dangerous in spite of their initially harmless appearance (Ugresic 3). It is particularly her statement that “their tears do not mean the same thing as yours do” that exposes their clichéd portrayal as completely other and mockingly develops the idea that they inhabit a world different from our own, a world we should wish to avoid at any and all cost:

because if you relent, give in, exchange a few words, you will be in their thrall. You will slide into a world that you had no intention of entering, because your time has not yet come, your hour, for God’s sake, has not yet come. (Ugresic 3)

References to old women’s “siren call” and their ability to “[en]thrall” onlookers, once more conflate the idea of the “old lady” in need of “sympathy” with the image of the wicked witch harbouring great might and malicious intent (Ugresic 3). Such a portrayal allows readers to “see the familiar defamiliarised, the ordinary made extraordinary” and according to Simon Critchley, such a “surrealization of the real” endows humour with a “critical function” (10). In playing with the “accepted practices of a given society” such humour “speak[s] against those structures”, and potentially brings about change (10). Ugresic’s conflation of the little old lady and the wicked witch in her preface therefore exposes the paradoxical nature of these two ageist stereotypes and provides readers with the critical lens through which to read the following three sections of the novel.

While the preface sets out to parody ageist stereotypes and commonly held assumptions about old women, it also introduces readers to three of the novel’s major themes or motifs, namely disempowered female old age (or little old ladies), birds and wicked witches as empowered representatives of a divine feminine. “Hover[ing] off stage” and “direct[ing] the action” in spite of the fact that she “doesn’t exactly appear in character here”, is the figure that links all three, Baba Yaga (Warner, “Witchiness” n.pag.). Given her central significance as the fairy tale figure under revision and her shadowy presence throughout *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg*, I skip ahead to first consider the mock academic treatise on Baba Yaga that makes up the third and final section of the novel. This section plainly tells readers that in spite of the absence of

“explicit references”, the author of the first two sections “undertook to provide a text based on the myth of Baba Yaga” (Ugresic 240, 239). Consequently, in presenting what Ugresic calls a “sort of fictionalized interpretation of the [rest of the] book” in an interview with Richard Byrne, the third section offers readers retrospective insights into the two sections that precede it (“Surprisingly” n.pag.).

“If You Know Too Much”: Unravelling the Myth of Baba Yaga in Section Three

Presented as a type of exegesis in response to an editor’s request to “explicate the correspondence between [the] author’s text and the myth of Baba Yaga”, the final section of *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* presents “a short glossary of themes, motifs and mythemes linked [...] to ‘babayagology’” (Ugresic 239). Fittingly titled “*If You Know Too Much, You Grow Old Too Soon*”, it is exhaustive in its detail and seems to do the work of literary scholars for them.

Since “the average non-slavic reader does not know much about Baba Yaga”, the fictional and anagrammatic researcher responsible for this section, Dr Aba Bagay, presents the editor with a “compilatory work” that tells him all he needs to know about Baba Yaga and her “changeable” role “in fairy tales” (Ugresic 238, 239, 241). Overwhelming in what often seems “unnecessary” detail, section three quickly becomes tiresome (Ugresic 241). However, warding off the scathing criticism that it was bound to evoke (and still did), Ugresic makes a pre-emptive strike when she has Bagay warn the imagined editor that the “too comprehensive” compilation might become “boring” near its start and admit that “there was too much of everything” at its end (Ugresic 241,322). Stating her awareness that her intended reader was given “an overdose”, that he must have “sighed with boredom”, “creased” his “forehead [...] in a frown” and feared that “[she] would never stop”, Ugresic confronts any criticism head-on. Making clear that she intended the section to be exhaustive and frustrating in its sweeping scope, she presumably takes a tongue-in-cheek stab at the actual academics who go about ‘unravelling’ and reading too much into folkloric figures, much like the zealous Dr Bagay (Ugresic 322).⁴⁷

⁴⁷ This seems all the more likely if one considers Ugresic’s claim in section one that “[f]olklorists [are] inane, [...] academic infants” and that “[i]f there [is] something [she] [cannot] abide, it [is] folklore and the people who stud[y] it” (47).

According to Bagay, Baba Yaga “is blind”, “about a hundred years old” and is marked by the “physical defect[s]” that signal a witch (Ugresic 254, 253). These defects include “one skeleton leg [...], dangling breasts that she dumps on the stove or hangs over a pole” and a “long sharp nose that knocks against the ceiling” as well as “long iron teeth” (Ugresic 247, 271). In addition to providing these “basic ‘facts’ about the mythical figure of Baba Yaga”, Dr Aba Bagay also offers short commentary sections or “remarks” in which she draws links between the mythical crone and the previous two sections of the novel (Ugresic 241). For example, she points out that one “half-blind” heroine’s “beak-like nose” and another’s “conspicuously large breasts” liken them to this East-European fairy tale hag (Ugresic 256).

The synopsis Dr Bagay gives and especially her remarks, allow the reader a retrospective understanding of the first two sections. However, it is not these “significant links”, as she establishes them, which I find of interest (Ugresic 241). They are self-explanatory in the way that they cast the female figures of section one and two as revised Baba Yagas. Rather it is her other ramblings – the ones that seem least relevant – that I aim to consider in more depth. Like Dr Bagay who berates the editor for thinking that he “has solved the problem” of the first two texts with the help of her remarks, I believe the real value of this section lies not in the exegesis Ugresic has her provide (Ugresic 324-5). Instead, it lies in the seemingly superfluous bits in between and the manner in which they portray Baba Yaga as not only a prosecuted and marginalised figure but also as one of great potential and power, once again evoking DeFalco’s paradox as explored above.

As a “solitary old woman who lives on the edge of the forest”, Baba Yaga “has been excommunicated from the human community” (Ugresic 326, 312). She is a powerful witch, yes, but also the victim of patriarchal and “profoundly misogynistic” thinking that has “st[u]ck skulls on [her] fence” and turned her into a child-stealing cannibal (Ugresic 322, 326):

Baba Yaga was (and remains) the object of frightful misogyny: they beat her, dunked her, threw her in the fire, shoed her like a horse, banged nails into her, cut off her head, pierced her with swords, forged her tongue on an anvil, roasted her in the oven, monstrously insulted her in fairytales, children’s jokes and epic poems. (Ugresic 312)

There is, however, more to Baba Yaga than her marginal status as “a dissident [...], a spinster, an old fright, a loser” and Ugresic makes sure to alert readers to Baba Yaga’s “origins” as “the Great Goddess, the Earth Mother herself” (313, 248):

Her biography begins in better times, when she was the Golden Baba, the Great Goddess, Earth Mother, Mokosh. With the transition to patriarchy, she lost her power and became an outlawed horror. (Ugresic 313)

Providing us with constant reminders that Baba Yaga is more than just an “ordinary [witch]”, Ugresic draws readers’ attention to her demonisation as “an old hag-cum-sorceress” and her consequent status as a mere “caricature of her former divinity” (Ugresic 250, 247, 281). She also highlights her function as “a collective mirror”, reflecting back the gerontophobic and sexist culture that has marginalised old women and turned female ageing and authority into something grotesque (Ugresic 313). As such, Ugresic has Dr. Bagay remind us that the “chief reason for Baba Yaga’s heresy is her great age”:

Her dissidence only takes place within the system of life-values that we ourselves have made; in other words, we forced her into heresy. Baba Yaga does not *live* her life; she *undergoes* it. She [...] serves as a screen for the projection of (castrating) male fantasies and (self-punishing) female fantasies. We have stripped away the mere possibility of accomplishment on any level and left her nothing but a few sticks to scare children with. We have pushed her to the very edge, in the forest, deep in our own subconscious [...]. Baba Yaga is a surrogate-woman, she is here to get old instead of us, to be punished instead of us. Hers is the drama of old age, hers the story of ex-communication, forced expulsion, invisibility, brutal marginalization. (Ugresic 313-314)

The implication is that Baba Yaga has been turned into a scapegoat. In suggesting that society has “project[ed]” unto her what Dr Bagay calls “(castrating) male” and “(self-punishing) female fantasies”, Ugresic gives voice not only to the idea that it is men who have

purposefully ‘castrated’ potentially powerful old women,⁴⁸ but also that, in the words of Woodward, “as women we have ourselves internalised [this] prejudice against aging and old age” (Ugresic 314; “Intro” xi). In addition, Dr Bagay’s reference to such behaviour as “self-punishing” corresponds with Woodward’s warning that “ageism can [...] be a horrible self-fulfilling prophesy” and that “as younger women turn these very prejudices against women older than themselves, they will in effect be turning against their very future selves as older women” (Ugresic 314; “Intro” xiii).

This warning takes on special meaning in light of Dr Bagay’s earlier “remarks”, when she points out “that in not-so-far-off times, all middle-aged women were bound to look like witches” while our “own time is characterised by panic over ageing” and “obsessive efforts to delay and disguise the onset of old age” (Ugresic 256). Ugresic seems to suggest that women’s ageist prejudices stem from a deep-seated fear of becoming old women themselves; in a youth-worshipping culture, they fear old age because they know that to be no longer young, is to be “pushed to the very edge” like Baba Yaga (Ugresic 314). Dr Bagay’s comments that “fear of aging is one of the strongest phobias among contemporary women” and her reference to the “cosmetics industry” that “feeds” on this fear as the “‘anti-Baba Yaga’ industry”, cements the idea that the loss of youth implies the beginning of what we can therefore define as a ‘Baba-Yaga-dom’ marked by “ex-communication, forced expulsion, invisibility [and] brutal marginalization” (Ugresic 256, 314).

Thus it is that Ugresic slowly develops the idea of Baba Yaga as not only a victim of a combined sexism and ageism in her own right but also as a symbol of women’s oppression and persecution in general. For, in spite of her reputation as a “dissident”, she is “neither alone nor lonely” (Ugresic 315). Dr Bagay informs us that “she has innumerable sisters” and goes on to define them as “all those monstrosities, malefactors, frights, freaks and demons, those ‘scum of the earth’, those ‘prisoners of want’” who are “united by the fact of female gender” (Ugresic 316, 322). Broadening her scope from mythical creatures and the “notorious female scourges of the ancient world”, she warns the editor that although she has given him what seems like “too much” information, “[she] opened the door just a crack” and only “let

⁴⁸ Consider also that earlier she asks us not to “forget that all these ugly, sexist notions, proverbs, sayings and beliefs involving old ‘grandmas’ were thought up by ‘grandpas’. Who naturally reserved the more heroic parts for themselves” (Ugresic 247).

[him] scratch the tip of this enormous iceberg” which is “formed of [...] millions and millions of women” (Ugresic 321, 325).

Dr Bagay goes on to link Baba Yaga to every manner of marginal and wronged woman – from prostitutes, to slaves, to victims of female circumcision and finally “the millions of women who pray to male gods and their [shameless male] representatives on earth” (Ugresic 326). She is careful to warn that “a painfully huge book of complaints exist somewhere, and that the bill will have to be paid” (Ugresic 325):

So let us imagine women (that hardly negligible half of humankind, after all), all those Baba Yagas, plucking the swords from beneath their heads and sallying forth to settle the accounts?! For every smack in the face, every rape, very affront, every hurt, every drop of spittle in their faces. [...] Let’s imagine an army of ‘madwomen’, homeless women, beggar women; [...] women whose lives are completely in the power of their husbands, fathers, brothers; women who were stoned and survived. And others who perished at the hands of male mobs. Let’s now imagine all those women lifting their robes and drawing their swords. (Ugresic 325-326)

Drawing on what she calls an easily overlooked yet “deep[ly] significan[t]” detail, namely that “Baba Yaga sleeps with a sword beneath her head”, Bagay reminds the editor of Baba Yaga’s ‘underlying’ power (Ugresic 325). She ends her tirade by asking him to imagine that “all these millions of women” will “finally stop bowing down to men” and will reject the churches, mosques, temples and shrines that “were never really theirs”, going instead “in quest of a temple of their own, the temple of the Golden Baba” (Ugresic 326).

Reminiscent of the feminist theology that has called for women’s return to a divine feminine, Ugresic transforms Baba Yaga from a witch and an “old women living by herself”, into the “Golden Baba” which is defined as “an archaic goddess from the age of matriarchy” (Ugresic 267, 326, 248). If, as Deborah Grenn argues in “Lilith’s Fire”, the “suppression of the Sacred Feminine [...] has kept women alienated” from their “own ‘original sources’” of power, wisdom and authority, then the retrieval and re-conception of such a feminine can have a corrective effect (37). In this sense, when Ugresic has Dr Aba Bagay call for women’s pursuit of “a temple of their own” and defines this temple as that of the Golden Baba, a prototypical

“Great Goddess” or “the Earth Mother herself”, while at the same time “lifting their robes and drawing [the] swords” that have been there all along, seemingly inborn, she is in effect calling for women’s reclamation of their own innate power, authority and divine potential as embodied by the wicked witch (Ugresic 248, 326).

As if in answer to her own call, Bagay herself begins a transformation at the end of section three, changing from merely a member of the “proletarians” – or “*she over there*” – into an anthropomorphic being suggestive of the “Great Goddess” described earlier as “half-woman and half-bird” (Ugresic 327, 280, italics in original). Claiming her association with the “hag’s International”, mentioned as “Baba Yaga’s International” and the “old crones’ International” only a couple of pages prior to this (Ugresic 327, 321, 322), she bids the editor farewell and claims that

[s]oon I shall change my human language for a bird’s. Only a few more human moments remain to me, then my mouth will stretch into a beak, my fingers will morph into claws, my skin will sprout a covering of glossy black feathers. As a sign of goodwill, I am leaving you a single feather. Take care of it. Not to remind you of me, but of that sword under Baba Yaga’s sleeping head. (Ugresic 327)

In light of her earlier assertion that “all the evidence suggests that Baba Yaga used to be a bird (the Great Goddess) before she turned herself into a humanoid of the female gender”, the anagrammatic Dr Aba Bagay reverses the process as she becomes the Baba Yaga her name suggests *in divine form* and sets in motion the transformative events she has foreseen for women the world over (Ugresic 281).

In the last section of her novel, Ugresic therefore presents us with the myth of the wicked witch as developed in fairy tales – a myth that has had far-reaching consequences for old women. For unlike the editor who perceives himself as living in a “de-ritualised and demythologised world where a person can relax [...] without fear of baleful consequences”, old women are very much still subject to the mythologies that mark them as either troublesome grotesques or negligible nonentities, or, as in the case of Baba Yaga, an uncanny combination of the two (323). If this third section therefore troubles the negative stereotype of the wicked witch, alerting readers to both her victimisation and her marginal status as well as her

liberatory potential and connection to empowered feminine divine, the first section of the novel unsettles the equally pervasive stereotype of the little old lady and by association also the conventional portrayal of ageing as a straightforward narrative of decline and decay.

“The Thing I Lack”: Realism and Disempowerment in Section One

The first section of the novel, titled “*Go There – I Know Not Where – and Bring Me Back a Thing I Lack*”, is a semi-autobiographical memoir that gives readers a window into what M.A Orthofer calls Ugresic’s mother’s “slow, final decline” into old age and dementia (Orthofer 4). In an interview with Richard Byrne, Ugresic herself classifies it as “sort of [...] ‘documentary’ description of [her] own mother’s aging and illness” (“Surprisingly” n.pag.). Despite the apparent realism of this section, Ugresic definitely takes creative licence in the manner of its telling in order draw thought-provoking associations with the figure of Baba Yaga and by association, the rest of the novel. The most obvious of these associations is the title of the section which is not only the “slightly changed” title of a well-known “Russian fairytale” featuring Baba Yaga but also “one of [her] most popular riddles” (Ugresic 315).⁴⁹

The section opens by making reference to the “droppings” and “hysterical chirruping” of highly symbolic “flocks” of “raucous” starlings who have invaded “the neighbourhood where [Ugresic’s] mother lives” (7). Reminiscent of the black bird into which Dr. Bagay transitions at the end of section three, their “feathers [...] waft in through the open windows” of the mother’s flat and create a scene evocative of the one in the final lines of the novel when Bagay leaves the editor “a single feather” to remind him of the “sword under Baba Yaga’s sleeping head” (Ugresic 7, 327). As Ugresic’s mother “takes up a duster” and “sweeps up the feathers” to “drop them into a bin”, seemingly ignorant of or disregarding their divine feminine potential, she is all the while “muttering” to herself (7). In spite of her disposal of the symbolic black feathers, this initial muttering, together with a later reference to the repetitive “hm-hm” and “uh-huh-uh” noises she makes “in regular rhythm” as she goes about

⁴⁹ The seemingly cryptic title also acts as a type of synopsis of the tale. The main action occurs when Ugresic’s mother sends her to Varna, “the city of her childhood and youth” as a “bedel” meant to “take photographs” and so present her mother with a vision of “a place she can no longer travel to on her own” (Ugresic 40-42). In this sense, the fact that her mother not only physically sends her on a journey but also becomes increasingly dependent on Ugresic’s help, presents us with the section of the title that calls for an unknown addressee to “go there” and “bring me back a thing I lack” (Ugresic 41). The interjection of “I know not where” and the reference to the indistinct “thing” she wants, speaks of course to her mother’s dementia and her increasing difficulty with finding the right words: “Often when she couldn’t remember a word, she would describe it: *Bring me that thingy I drink from*. I usually knew what her thingies were” (Ugresic 12).

her chores, associates Ugresic's mother with Baba Yaga who "uses repetitive phrases and can be recognised by her remarkable wheezing breath" which goes "[o]f ... oof ... oof" (Ugresic 13, 254). Thus, while section one chronicles her mother's apparent deterioration into an increasingly helpless and isolated old age and Ugresic admits that "observing" this process was a "painful and intimate confrontation" in an interview with Miriam Cosic, she also subtly endows the old woman with a potential link to Baba Yaga and presents readers with several instances of resistance and power (n.pag.).

After her husband's death, Ugresic's mother "withdraw[s] into her home" and the text makes several references to the realities of old age that render her life "diminished", "narrowed" and "monoton[ous]" (29, 18, 29):

She was left standing there, caught off guard by the fact that he was gone, at a loss for what to do with herself. Time passed, and she continued to stand there, like a forgotten traffic warden [...]. She despaired, often her life seemed a *living hell* to her, but she did not know how to help herself. [...]
Her list of refusals grew from one day to the next. (Ugresic 29)

While she therefore realistically describes the restrictions brought on by her mother's ageing and illness, emphasising her increasing irrelevance by choosing to keep her nameless, Ugresic also acknowledges her mother's fight against the invisibility and powerlessness that seems synonymous with old age. She, for instance, describes her mother's long "list of refusals", her "firmly held opinions", "pugnacity", "demands", "candour" and "lack of tact",

all [as] signals of an underlying anguish that has been smouldering for years, an ever present sense that no one noticed her, that she was invisible.
She did her level best to fend off this frightening invisibility with all the means at hand. (Ugresic 30-31)

In the face of looming loneliness and the "frequent loss of words" needed to communicate her needs, Ugresic's mother initially responds with "rage" at "her own helplessness" and refuses to be ignored or even classified as old (Ugresic 13, 11). She employs "all the means at hand" to retain relevance and control and so seemingly empowers herself, but the mother's rejection of "flat-heeled orthopaedic shoes for the elderly" as well as "incontinence pads" for fear that

they might classify her as a “*helpless little old lady*” speaks of her having internalised a youth-obsessed culture’s negative discourse on ageing (Ugresic 31,71, 30, emphasis in original).

Writing about such a fear of ageing in *Aging and Its Discontents*, Woodward comments: “We repress the subject of aging. We relegate aging to others. We do not recognise it in ourselves” (193). Reflective of such theory, Ugresic’s mother refers to her contemporaries as “old and ugly” and refuses to spend time with “people her own age”, claiming that she has no idea what she is “*supposed to do with those old biddies*” (30, emphasis in original). Her further references to old age being “*a terrible calamity*” and “*a living hell*” as well as her agreement with Betty Davis’s famous statement that it is “no place for sissies”, shows that Ugresic’s mother views ageing with the “fear and trepidation, even disgust” that DeFalco describes as the effects of cultural gerontophobia (Ugresic 18, 75, 29, emphasis in original; DeFalco xiii). Like Baba Yaga, Ugresic’s mother is therefore not only a victim of the misogyny that is ageism, but is also “party misogynistic herself” (Ugresic 312). As the text zooms in on her fight against ageing and illness, it simultaneously shines a critical light on the avenues of resistance open to older female subjects as well as the fear of ageing and ageism that hampers their ability to resist limiting generalisations as they themselves age.

While Ugresic does seem critical of ageist stereotypes in section one, she also does not shy away from using them. In a blatantly honest portrayal of her mother’s increasingly retracting world, she employs what Woodward critically terms a “destructive view of old age as a second childhood and [...] a period of dependency” (18; Introduction xviii):

And then, she began coming up with ways to help herself. She started adding diminutive words like ‘little’, ‘cute little’, ‘nice little’, ‘sweet’, which she had never used before.[...] They served like magnets, and sure enough, the words that had scattered settled back again in order. She was particularly pleased to use words like these for the things she felt fondest of (*my sweet pyjamas, my cute little towel, that nice pillow, my little bottle, those comfy little slippers*). [...] She cooed to the world that surrounded her and the cooing made the world seem less threatening and a little smaller. Along with the diminutives in her speech the occasional augmentative would jump out like a spring: a snake grew to be a big bad snake, a bird into

a fat old bird. People often seemed larger to her than they really were (*He was a huuuuuuuge man!*). She had shrunk, that is what it was, and the world was looming. (Ugresic 12-13)

Together with references to her mother's "shrink[ing]", her life "narrow[ing]" and her footsteps getting "smaller" in the face of a newly threatening world that is "looming", Ugresic likens her mother to a child more than once. The fact that she "giggles like a little girl" at swear words and responds to all attempts at cheer "with obstinate childish baulking" combines with her own use of diminutives to present an old female subject that is "rendered benign" and "innocuous" through the type of "infantilization" that DeFalco explores in an insightful personal discussion of her own grandmother's treatment by strangers (Ugresic 18, 72; x-xi).

And yet, the detailed lens with which Ugresic zooms in on her mother's life is in itself an act of resistance which subverts the negative cultural stereotype that render ageing subjects invisible and underserving of attention. In fact, the symbolic infantilisation of her mother in another, intensely moving, and rather puzzling scene speaks of her endearing love and respect for the older woman. In this scene, Ugresic breaks down while considering a picture of her mother "shoulder[ing] her way in[to]" a family photo from which she is initially excluded (30). In a moment of intense sorrow triggered by what seems like her mother's increasing loss of power and significance but simultaneous struggle against it, Ugresic "dissolves" into sobs and "spit[s] out a tiny breathing body, five or six inches across, no larger than the smallest toy doll" (31). In describing the presumably imagined, "fragile" and "tiny body" in her hand with its "shapely skull", "slight forward stoop" and "hint of a smile" on its lips, Ugresic employs the exact same phrases used to describe her mother earlier in the section⁵⁰ and the diminished doppelganger takes on symbolic value when, in a reversal of roles, the daughter studies her minute mother "as if [she] were [her] own small baby" (31).

Near the end of section one, Ugresic again describes her mother with the same detailed and moving attention; however, whereas the above description conforms to ageist convention by stressing her mother's diminished power and increasing lack of autonomy, the one that

⁵⁰ See page 10 of the novel in which a CAT scan shows her mother's "lovely, shapely skull planted on her spinal column, with a slight forwards stoop, the clear contours of her face, eyelids lowered as if she in asleep, [...] and, hovering on her lips, the hint of a smile".

follows breaks with popular stereotypes by recognising her unremitting beauty and remaining agency despite the fact that she is eighty-one and “sleeping more than she used to” (77). Rising from a nap, she “[s]huffl[es] around the house [...] wield[ing]” a duster and with “slow movements [...] wipe[s] the dust off walls, the furniture, the floor” (78). Then she stands “in the middle of the room”,

her hair cropped close to her shapely head, her pale face with slightly slanted light-brown eyes and her lips still surprisingly full, awash in the sun as if it were an abundance of gold coins. A million particles of dust [are] afloat in the air around her, shimmering. [She waves] the handle through the air to chase them away, but the golden particles [remain]. And then [she sits] in the chair again and sink[s] back into sleep. The golden dust [swims] around her. Sitting like that under an array of sun specks, surrendered to sleep, she look[s] like an ancient slumbering goddess. (Ugresic 78)

As is the case at the beginning of section one, Ugresic’s choice of words refers readers back to the novel’s closing imagery. Her references to “golden particles” and “an ancient slumbering goddess” are evocative of the “Golden Baba, an archaic goddess from the age of matriarchy” that Aba Bagay calls upon to empower women at the end of section three (Ugresic 248). That her mother wakes from this nap to make a “grogg[y]” reference to a story her own mother “once told” her about “three women standing by her bed” during her birth, “two dressed in white, and the third [...] in black” – women Ugresic presumes to read as the “the Fates who determine your destiny” – serves to strengthen her mother’s potential connection to Baba Yaga as divine feminine authority and power (Ugresic 78-79). And yet, much like the beginning of this section, when the mother sweeps up and throws away the symbolic black feathers, she rejects this potential connection by calling Ugresic’s idea “[n]onsense” and stating that her mother had “most likely” had an “hallucinat[ion]” (Ugresic 79).

Given her mother’s rejection, it is unsurprising that the conversation that brings the story to a close makes reference to the same starlings that framed the story’s opening. However, whereas these black birds associated with Baba Yaga were still causing a ruckus at the beginning, the story ends with a reference to these “pests being gone” (79). The closing phrase, “[a]s they came, so they went away”, seems representative of Ugresic nuanced

portrayal of her mother's experience of and attitude towards old age in section one. As she veers between resistance and acceptance, we see moments of power and agency suggestive of Baba Yaga, but ultimately watch her make her peace with a rather narrowed and monotonous, even disempowered version of her former life. Whereas "a year earlier she would have been insulted by a similar sentiment", she finally accepts a status as the "prettiest little old lady in the neighbourhood", uses it "as an apology for her clumsiness", "as a request to respect her 'exceptional' age" and is even pleased to identify herself as such "over and over" near the end of the story (Ugresic 71).

While section one unpacks the "fiendish folklore" responsible for the stereotype of the wicked witch, exposing her marginality as well as her great potential and might, section one presents the daily realities of ageing as a constant battle between acceptance and resistance of the loneliness and invisibility that define little old ladies (Ugresic 322). Wedged between these two sections and between these two extremes, is the adventurous story of three elderly women named Pupa, Beba and Kukla. Like the two narratives on either side of it, this middle section of *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* employs motifs of disempowerment, witchery and birds to examine the subject of what we might by now term 'Baba-Yaga-dom'. However, whereas section three takes a factual or academic approach to the subject and section one offers a subjective and autobiographic one, section two presents readers with modern fairy tale in order to give a third and slightly more playful understanding of the increasingly variable experience of female ageing and old womanhood.

"I'll Tell You No Lies": The Fairy Tale of a Happy Old Age in Section Two

At the start of section two, titled "Ask Me No Questions and I'll Tell You No Lies", we meet three very old ladies who – contrary to popular stereotypes – have "gone on holiday" on their own (Ugresic 90). The setting for their unconventional adventure is a wellness centre in the Czech Republic which caters to "those who have taken on the task of living as long as possible and looking as good as possible" while doing so (Ugresic 147). While the oldest two of the three elderly women, Pupa and Kukla, are completely "indifferent to the Wellness Centre's seductive offers", each for reasons of their own, they "warmly [encourage]" the third, Beba, to enjoy everything the spa has to offer (Ugresic 120,101). Consequently, as the tale unravels, it presents us with three very different women who experience their ageing in very different ways. As each of the three confront their own demons and ultimately win their own form of 'happily-ever-after', in spite of being "ladies of a certain age", Ugresic presents

readers with what Faircloth describes as “fully realised characters in a world that doesn’t want to recognise” old women as such (Ugresic 85; n.pag.).

True to Ugresic’s claim that section two “plays with the genre of fairytale”, the tale makes reference to several formulaic fairy tales elements, the most noticeable of these being perhaps in staging the burgeoning romance between two minor characters, Mevludin and Rosie (as qtd. in Cosic n.pag.). Rosie, as a helpless and slightly overweight princess, is set “to inherit [a] kingdom”, from her father, Mr. Shaker, who is described as the “king of an industry of magical powders and potions, bearing the label food-supplement” (Ugresic 94, 92). Like a magician of old, Mr. Shaker sells the “ideological hot air [...] of metamorphosis” and his “products [suggest] to frogs that they [will] turn into princesses” and to other “dreamer[s]” that they can be “transformed into a giant, vanquish a terrible dragon and win the heart of a beautiful princess” (Ugresic 92). Furthering the fairy tale association, Rosie’s struggling suitor, Mevludin, or Mevlo for short, considers himself under a “spell” (Ugresic 108). A Bosnian refugee and “war cripple” whose penis remains permanently “standing up like a flagpole” but “cold as an icicle” after a Serbian shell explodes “right beside him”, Mevlo wants nothing more than to find someone to “unwitch [him], the way the shell bewitched [him]” (Ugresic 107-109). The ‘someone’ he finds, is of course Rosie and he symbolically gives her “[his] heart on a silver platter” while handing her an actual egg to eat (Ugresic 164).

As Rosie eats the egg, Mevlo “[breaks] off a piece of bread” and uses it to “[pick] up [a] drop of yolk” that remains on her trembling lips (Ugresic 164). In that moment he feels “the tension eight inches below his navel [ease]” and readers learn that “just as that wretched shell had cast a spell on him, so this girl with the egg in her hand had broken it” (Ugresic 165). Thus their romance does not only make reference to generic fairy tale motifs like the spell, the princess and the kingdom, but the included egg also bears a connection to a specific “Russian fairytale” told a couple of pages earlier (Ugresic 128). In the tale, the hero “falls in love with a girl, but to make her fall in love” in return, he has to find her love which is “hidden” in an egg (Ugresic 128). The girl “has to eat the egg” before the “the flame of love [...] flares in her heart” (Ugresic 128).

As explained by the fictional Dr. Aba Bagay in section two, “Pupa, Kukla and Beba – like the three Baba Yagas in the fairy tales – indirectly help to make Mevludin’s dream come true, and it is exactly here that the correspondence between [the] literary exercise and the myth of

Baba Yaga is the strongest” (Ugresic 285). However, whereas the “elusive and capricious” Baba Yaga is normally a minor character in fairy tales and “appears as a helper, a donor, [...] an avenger, a villain, [...] a sentry between worlds” or a “mediator between the heroes in a story”, the reincarnated Baba Yagas of section three are the protagonists of this fable and the poor ‘hero’ they assist is merely a cipher that helps to develop *their* identities, stories and attempts at a happily-ever-after (Ugresic 249).

That each of the three women *is* meant to represent Baba Yaga in different incarnations is apparent right from the beginning.⁵¹ The tale starts off with “three female figures” of “picturesque appearance” approaching the receptionist of the “Grand Hotel”, Pavel Zuna (Ugresic 86, 83, 84). Upon “[catching] sight” of them, he “bec[omes] aware of a slight current running upwards from his left big toe and stopping somewhere in the small of his back” (Ugresic 83). During the encounter, the “slight” sensation increases to being “so [forceful] and [painful] that it [takes] his breath away” and finally strikes him “with such force that he simply collapse[s]” (Ugresic 84, 86). As they move away, the “unusual troika” is described as “glid[ing] towards the lift” and if this is not enough to give them an eerie feel, Pavel Zuna also “observe[s] a sudden breeze” in the wake of their presence before “his eyes [cloud] over” and he passes out (Ugresic 84, 86). Thus even before we learn anything more specific about each of these women, their trio is represented as somewhat magical – or at least as belonging to the same “mythological family of old [...] women with specific kinds of power” in which section three places Baba Yaga (Ugresic 249). Their individual depictions only serve to strengthen this link.

At “eighty-eight”, Pupa is oldest of the three and also makes an appearance in section one as Ugresic’s “mother’s oldest friend” (Ugresic 90, 19). In both section one and two she is described as “the old witch” on more than one occasion and her physical descriptions draw a connection to Baba Yaga as defined in section three (Ugresic 180, 207, 233). In addition to being “half-blind” and constantly seen “sniffing the air” with her “birdish, beak-like nose”, Pupa sits with “her legs tucked into a huge furry boot”, an “electric warmer” that has, “in time [...] merged with her and became a natural extension of her body” (Ugresic 19, 20). Hence, like Baba Yaga, who is also blind and has a long, sharp nose that “was once a bird’s beak” and with which she “identifies her ‘guests’” by smelling “their human scent”, Pupa is

⁵¹ Section three does make mention of some of these links. However, the discussion is very brief and limited, alerting us to only the most basic semblances.

furthermore “perceived as one-legged”, her fur boot creating the illusion of a single limb (Ugresic 280, 254, 278).

Pupa’s initial characterisation as a modern Baba Yaga is made all the more prominent when we read in section two that Mevludin is “enchanted ” by the old lady who “[reminds] him of a holy chicken” and “[feels] as though he [is] in the presence of some ancient divinity” when he is near her (Ugresic 172, 169). He also describes “her little, dry hand” as “resembl[ing] a bird’s claw” and when she reaches toward him it “seem[s] to him that instead of her hand she ha[s] spread her wing” (Ugresic 169, 172). In spite of her frequent identification as the “old witch”, Mevludin’s portrayal therefore paints Pupa as *more* than just a witch and instead evokes the birdlike, goddess qualities of Baba Yaga as explored in section three.

Beba and Kukla, who are seventy and eighty years old respectively, also have certain witch-like characteristics that link them to Baba Yaga, albeit in a less explicit manner. In addition to the odd association with birds,⁵² both also have certain bodily parts in excess. Like Baba Yaga whose “great dangling dugs” are so large that she can hang them over a pole or dump them on the stove, Beba has shockingly “huge” breasts, the weight of which “deform[s]” her shoulders (Ugresic 254, 247, 118). Kukla, on the other hand, has the “handicap” of such exceptionally “large feet” that she is forced to wear men’s shoes (Ugresic 149,135). Both women’s physical descriptions therefore identify them as witches because, as Dr Aba Bagay discusses in section three, “witches have some kind of physical defect, which may be expressed as a surplus, a deficiency or imbalance” (Ugresic 253). Both Kukla’s “men’s size” feet and her masculine “[stride]” like a “kind of female knight” as well as Beba’s “flat [behind] that could belong to an old woman or an old man” also portray them as androgynous and therefore like Baba Yaga who is “liberated from [...] the unrelenting laws of the sexes”, “makes use of both [male and female] organs” and thereby “*transvesties* [human sexuality]” (Ugresic 149, 118, 265).

Besides such tell-tale physical characteristics, Beba and Kukla also have certain extraordinary gifts or ‘skills’ that mark them as magical. Beba’s list of “unusual traits” or “quirks” include “linguistic lapses” similar to Freudian slips (Ugresic 100, 132, 100); the ability to make

⁵² While up to mischief, Kukla “[cannot] see” the “large rooks” in the trees, but instinctively “[knows] that they are there” and Beba imagines her pubic hair as “sleek, black feathers” with “a bird’s eye” in the middle – an interesting scene to be discussed in more detail shortly (Ugresic 195, 121).

alarmingly accurate “intellectual comparisons” with “no idea where [the] knowledge [comes] from” (Ugresic 104-105); the tendency to “blurt out something in languages she otherwise ha[s] no mastery of” (Ugresic 132); and finally an inclination to sometimes “[reel] off series” of lucky⁵³ numbers without being “aware of it” (Ugresic 157).

While Beba’s magical potential is subconscious and lies unrealised, Kukla – who is always “accompanied by” a “vague current of air, something like a gentle breeze” – has been utilising her unique abilities since childhood: “[w]hen she was a little girl, the sheer force of her intentions had sometimes made things happen: something would shift, scrape, collapse, fall unto the floor” (Ugresic 149, 136, 149). Although we are told that “[w]ith time she learned to walk cautiously through the world, as though on eggshells”, seemingly suppressing her unique talent, we see Kukla mischievously make use of it more than once (Ugresic 149, 81-86, 194-195). In addition to displaying an ability akin to telekinesis, Kukla’s self-proclaimed status as a “grave-digger” also marks her as a witch (Ugresic 160). The fact that she has been widowed thrice – her husbands all dying soon after tying the knot – brings to mind a segment of section three which states that “a witch [who] is not happy with her husband, [...] plucks out his heart as soon as she can” (Ugresic 158-159, 268).

In spite of their apparent “witchiness”⁵⁴ and supernatural powers, all three women also fall victim to ageism. Pupa is, for instance, described by the hotel receptionist as “the remains of a human being, a piece of humanoid crackling” and so she is subject to a pattern of othering that reads extreme old age and its physical signs as less than human (Ugresic 83). Beba and Kukla are also derided for their decision to come on holiday and “[drag] an old woman about with them” by two younger women (Ugresic 182). What is therefore implied is that because of their advanced years, both their and Pupa’s time for adventures should be over. Similarly, when Beba arranges an exclusive “little celebration” for the three women at the wellness centre’s pool – resplendent with champagne, “vases of flowers” and a “lavish selection of pastries” – the hotel staff find it comic to “imagine what fun the three aged nymphs would have in the pool” and give voice to an ageist view that finds little space for pleasure and indulgence in old age (167). Even the receptionist’s seemingly flattering remark in which he

⁵³ She once dated a “creep” who “hit her” and when she “responded to the shock by listing a series of numbers”, he wrote them down and won the lottery (Ugresic 157).

⁵⁴ I borrow the word from the title of Marina Warner’s review of *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg*.

notes Kukla's "astonishingly erect bearing for her advanced years", speaks of an internalised prejudice that equates old age with crooked backs, frailty and physical disability (Ugresic 84).

The most glaring example of ageism comes, however, from Beba herself when she lists the "variants" available in the "typology of old women" (Ugresic 119-120). After noting that her own efforts to "improve the situation" of her ageing exterior, are "gradually turning [her] into what she [finds] repellent", Beba asks an important question: "What is left for women when they stumble into old age?" (Ugresic 119). She answers her own question by remarking that "one rarely sees those few fortunate ones with *übermensch* genes" who "[live] to a hundred and one" and "[show] everyone the meaning of 'the triumph of the will'" (Ugresic 120). Consequently, most old women are stuck with one of four other options: The first is the "old-lady in good-health look" which marks "desexualised old hags with short, masculine haircuts": a "sex without sex" that cannot be "differentiated [...] from their male contemporaries" and are "noticed only when they are in a group" (Ugresic 120). The second option is to become one of those "dotty old creatures surrounded by cats, whose neighbours [...] find them dead, in a stench of cat pee" (Ugresic 120). The third option involves "greedy old hags of unquenched sexual appetite who each spring visit geographical zones in which the local young men prostitute themselves for money" and finally, the fourth consists of "wealthy old women who submit hysterically to treatments [...] just to delay by a little the inexorable onset of age" (Ugresic 120).

In Beba's mind, all old women who are not classified as *übermenschen*, and therefore inhuman themselves, are grotesque and less than human. Not only her repeated use of the word "hag" but also her choice of adjectives and other classifiers reveal an intensely negative view of ageing (Ugresic 120). The ones who give in to old age either become a sexless third gender or they lose all semblance of dignity and humanity by becoming "dotty old *creatures*", seemingly insane and lacking humanity (Ugresic 120, italics my own). The ones who fight the process are equally repellent as "greedy *hags*" still eager for sexual adventure or women who "*hysterically*" cling to the semblance of youth – mad old 'witches' either way (Ugresic 120, emphasis my own).

Even as Ugresic makes use of Beba to give voice to this typology of negative stereotypes, her portrayal of the three women around whom the story revolves defies and complicates such narrow and limiting depictions of female old age. Kukla, for instance, initially seems like one

of the “few *fortunate*” old women who classify as *übermenschen* (Ugresic 120, emphasis my own). Despite being nearly eighty, she seems largely unaffected by her age and at “nearly six foot three”, she is “slim, with an exceptionally straight back and an easy gait, all of which ma[k]e her seem younger than she [is]” (Ugresic 135). Her hair is still “dark”, despite being “streaked with grey” and “[u]nlike many of her contemporaries”, Kukla is also “not afraid of death” (Ugresic 135). Seeing that “all the women in her family [were] centenarians”, she has “the feeling that she [will] live a long time” (Ugresic 136). Nevertheless, in spite of being largely unconcerned by the physical effects of ageing, Kukla is neither *fortunate* nor happy.

Instead, Kukla’s life resembles “a very bad film” and she believes that “the fates [...] meted her out a destiny based on a ‘bad joke’” (Ugresic 158,160). During her first sexual encounter as a young girl, Kukla has a “vaginal spasm” which prevents entry into the vagina and consequently also intercourse (158). Kukla “burie[s]” and “forgets” the “disagreeable episode”, but it “continue[s] to disrupt and interfere with her life” (158). Not only does she marry the young man unable to consummate their first sexual encounter but he dies shortly after the wedding. Kukla marries twice more and while the second husband has a stroke “immediately after the wedding” and becomes a “demanding houseplant” for the “next ten years” before he dies, her third husband is an “invalid” to start with and “permanently confined to a wheelchair” (Ugresic 159). At the age of sixty, Kukla is widowed for the third time and although she “ha[s] married three husbands”, she “remain[s] a virgin” and has “no children” of her own (160). The only satisfactory success of her life seems to be her novel, *Desert Rose*, which is hailed as “*the greatest event on the Croatian literary scene for [...] fifteen years, if not longer*”, but for which she receives no credit because she pretends that it is her third husband, a published but mediocre writer, who wrote it while she merely transcribed it “just before [his] end” (Ugresic 124, 161). Thus, while Kukla’s youthful appearance seems to mark her as lucky, she has had worries of another kind. As the novel tells us: “[e]ach” of the three aged protagonists has “had her own life” and “dragged her own burden after her” (Ugresic 210).

Unlike Kukla, who is “an enviable physical state” despite being ten years her senior, Beba’s burden is her own ageing body, with which she lives “in mutual hostility” (Ugresic 101). Giving voice to what Antić calls “the misogyny directed against the aging female body”, she displays the type of ageist views that mark the visible signs of female ageing as undesirable, even grotesque (312). While this is made obvious in her typology of old women as cited

above, it is also particularly apparent in an earlier scene where “she [comes] face to face with her image in the mirror” (Ugresic 118):

[S]he was in a body that was not her own [...]. Her breasts, which had been neither large nor small, had become big and then too big, and then so huge [that] [h]er shoulders were deformed by [their] weight [...], and had acquired deep clefts; her upper arms were as bulky as a dock-worker’s and dragged her neck after them. She had always had a neck of a respectable length, and now all of a sudden it had disappeared. The upper part of her body had begun to swell, a thick layer of fat had built up around her waist, like an old-fashioned rubber ring, on the upper part of which big Beba was wedged, while the lower part of her body, from the waist down, had begun to taper off. Beba had also acquired a new behind, one of those sad, flat behinds that could belong to an old woman or an old man. [...] Beba’s face, which until a few years before had been appealing, oh, it too was taking its revenge. Fatty sacks had formed round her eyes, and her once lively blue eyes had sunk dully into subcutaneous fat. Jowls had appeared on her lower jaw, dragging her mouth downwards. Her hair has grown thin, her feet had grown two sizes larger. [...] Yes, her body was exacting cruel revenge, nothing belonged to her anymore. (Ugresic 118-119)

Reminiscent of Ugresic’s mother in the first section, who remarks that she has “changed so much” that “[she] barely recognise[s] [her]self”, Beba’s remark that “she [is] in a body that [is] not her own” serves as an example of what DeFalco calls “the uncanniness of aging” (Ugresic 72, 118; DeFalco xiv). In a theory that acknowledges Simone De Beauviour’s “characterization of old age as the ‘Other within’” and Freud’s account of the uncanny as “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (xvi), DeFalco suggests that

[i]n aging studies the uncanny most often describes the disconcerting newness of the old body and how the subject experiences the body’s image as strange, at odds with the familiarity and continuity of the psyche, termed variously the ‘core self,’ ‘ultimate self,’ ‘true self’ and so on. (DeFalco 10)

She carries on to define such an encounter as “the difficult acknowledgement of the other in the mirror as in fact part of the internally ‘young’ self” (DeFalco 10). Beba’s self-alienating view of her own body as “continuing to conspire against her” speaks of just such a split subjectivity and when she states that “everything was hanging out, everything was old, everything was distorted, and only that ‘little bush’ down below, sprinkled with grey, was still luxuriant”, we realise that she sees her older (bodily) self as a warped and even grotesque version of the younger (internal) self (Ugresic 118,120-121).

Given the ensuing description of Beba’s “little bush” as “her ‘treasure’ for many years” and her admission that “everything revolved around sex for a major part of her life”, the reference to her greying but “still luxuriant” pubic hair is symbolic of a continued sexuality and desire; evidence of a youthful inner ‘self’ running up against the deteriorating and old exterior she experiences as a grotesque corporeal reality that places her outside the realm of the sexual (Ugresic 121). As such, there is a clear connection here to the moment in which Beba finds herself aroused by the handsome and scantily clad Mevlo, but quickly denies herself the pleasure. When she goes for her “Suleiman the Magnificent Massage” administered by Mevlo – whose penis at this point still remains permanently “peaked like a tent” – Beba blushes after coming “face to face” with the “tentlike part” of his pants and “reproaches herself” for feeling desire (Ugresic 102,103). “Whatever is the old woman thinking of ...?”, she asks (Ugresic 102). But as Mevlo’s overt sexuality is literally staring her in the face, she is forced to acknowledge that she “[cannot] remember when [...] last [...] a young, attractive, half-naked male body had stood before her, in full battle readiness” and she responds with a “dreamy smile” (Ugresic 104). She “presse[s] herself into” the table, “lick[s] the aromatic soapy foam” and “[h]er body tingl[es] with expectation” (Ugresic 104). But again she “silently chastise[s] herself” with the phrase “Shame on you! You female Gustav von Aschenbach!” (Ugresic 103-104).

While she momentarily relishes the experience of arousal, the fact that Beba “reproaches” and “chastises” herself, and her assertion that she should feel “shame”, clearly indicates that she perceives her sexual desire as irregular in more ways than one. Firstly, when she asks herself what “the old woman [is] thinking?”, the implication is that she has internalised a discourse that marks older people as asexual and believes that as an “old woman” she should not be thinking of sex at all. Secondly, her reference to herself as a “female Gustav von

Aschenbach”, an aged literary character⁵⁵ who falls in love with a fifteen-year-old boy and is both revitalised and rendered ridiculous by his obsession, suggests her belief that as an older woman her desire for a younger man is absurd and even ‘deviant’.

Such perceived deviance is even more pronounced when Beba considers her above-mentioned, beloved black bush as devilish and “malicious”:

Beba plucked at her ‘little bush’ down below in a desultory fashion. But just as she was about to go into the bathroom, it seemed to her for an instant that instead of that dry, greyish ‘bush’, she saw sleek, black feathers. Beba went up to the mirror and – oh my! – now it seemed that a bird’s eye was observing her from that place and, what is more, that gleaming, malicious bird’s eye was winking at her. ‘Shoo, you fiend!’ muttered Beba, and, wrapping her robe tightly round her, made her way to the bathroom. (121)

It is particularly Beba’s reference to her vagina as a “fiend” that cements her perception of her own sexual desire as deviant. However, it is also interesting to note that the “sleek, black feathers” and the “gleaming, malicious bird’s eye” of her transformed bush, call to mind the image of a crow and therefore also the birdlike Baba Yaga. In fact, the phrase “sleek, black feathers” is strikingly similar to the “glossy black feathers” which sprout on Dr. Bagay’s skin at the end of the novel and signal her transformation into an empowered Baba-Yaga-ish figure (Ugresic 121, 327). Beba’s bush then, as the only part of her that is still lush and youthful, seems suggestive of a remaining strength and vitality. And yet, Beba denies it any life and labels it ‘fiend’ because she has internalised an ageist discourse that renders older women asexual and denies them any sexual adventure.

While Beba’s impoverished and “repellent” attempts to improve her physical appearance potentially align her with those “wealthy women who submit hysterically to treatments [...] just to delay by a little the inexorable onset of age”, and her sexual desire for Mevlo possibly links her to those “greedy old hags of unquenched sexual appetite” she lists in her topology, Ugresic’s portrayal of her inner struggles and desire presents readers with a much more

⁵⁵ in Thomas Mann’s *Death In Venice*.

nuanced and theoretical understanding of her experience of old age (Ugresic 119-120). In a similar way, Ugresic also complicates what initially seems like a clear association between Pupa as an old woman “with one foot in the grave” and those “dotty old creatures surrounded by cats, whose neighbours [...] find them dead, in a stench of cat pee” (Ugresic 90, 120). Like those lonesome and irrelevant old creatures in Beba’s typology of old women, Pupa *does* stink of urine, a “discreet smell [...] which came with old age and dragged after her like the train of her dress”, she *has* “reached a stage” where she is both blind and “unable to do anything anymore”, and near the end of the tale, she continues to die without anyone taking notice (Ugresic 179-180, 115). And yet, in spite of the fact that she “spen[ds] most of her time dozing in her wheelchair”, Ugresic endows her with considerable candour and agency, which often translates as a blatant disregard for what is appropriate, ‘correct’ or proper (Ugresic 95). Pupa is, for instance, particularly vocal in her controversial views that “[l]ife is shit” and that old age should not be prolonged (Ugresic 20). Her only desire is that “someone sensible” will have the “empathy” to “extinguish” or “[dispatch]” of her, without “tormenting [her] by dragging out [her] old age” (Ugresic 11, 99). It is a desire she frequently voices to the consternation of those around her.⁵⁶

While outspoken on the subject of old age, Pupa only pipes up and participates in conversation when it suits her. As such, when the rather insistent and tiresome Dr. Topolanek introduces himself and Beba is left listening to the “theory and practice” of longevity he espouses (99),

⁵⁶ While Pupa views old age as an extremely undesirable state of being and the sentiments she raises seem particularly ageist, Ugresic is careful to show the extent to which old age and physical “frail[ty]” has rendered her completely helpless (Ugresic 99). So, at one point, we read that “Pupa was like an ancient porcelain cup that had been shattered and stuck back together again repeatedly and now had to be stored in one place and ‘used’ as little as possible, in order to be kept whole” (Ugresic 101). In a comparable passage a little later in the novel, Pupa is also described as “a rubber plant [...] regularly watered and dusted” and “moved from place to place, carried out onto the balcony to have its fill of air” and “brought into the house” again so that it might not “freeze” (Ugresic 115). Both passages compare Pupa to inanimate objects that seem both useless and superfluous in spite of their aesthetic appeal. Like a “rubber plant” that is “carried out” to enjoy fresh air it cannot utilise or a “porcelain cup” that has to be “‘used’ as little as possible”, Pupa seems to have no value anymore and her apparent ageism begins to look all the more like realism (Ugresic 95). As such, it is likely that Ugresic is purposefully calling into question some of the more liberal premises of ageing studies which call for new and empowering narratives on ageing and critique any narrative that presents old age as a process of decline. For some, she seems to be saying, ageing *is* a disempowering process of deterioration and there comes a point where not even the most positive of outlooks can disguise or ignore infirmity.

Pupa simply smiles. She d[oes] not offer him her hand. She [knows] that she [is] so old that no one expect[s] anything of her any longer, and that everything [is] forgiven her in advance, like a child. So she relaxe[s] into her role, not saying ‘pleased to meet you’ and – drift[s] off [to sleep] again. (Ugresic 96)

Like the two witches in Pratchett’s *Witches Abroad*, Pupa appropriates the disempowering stereotype that renders her invisible and insignificant and occupies it as a space of resistance to and disregard for conventional courtesy.

Even in death, Pupa is defiant. In spite of her apparent frailty, vulnerability and infantilisation at the moment of her departure from the realm of the living, she dies ‘sticking it’ to the world she “like[s] less and less” as she ages (Ugresic 179). Dressed in a “child’s one-piece swimming suit” and “carefully” arranged on a “special [sun-lounger] for the elderly and less agile”, Pupa “drift[s] away” from the “warm, cheerful voices” of Beba’s poolside celebration without anyone noticing (Ugresic 167, 178). Kukla, Beba and Mevlo eventually take heed of her silence and find her dead in her lounger “at the other end of the pool” (177). Lying “with her hand slightly raised” and “her two fingers [...] clenched in an unambiguous gesture”, Pupa dies holding up an “unseemly message” to “the world, at once accusing and gleeful” (Ugresic 177, 180, 179).

Giving yet another nod to Pupa’s clear and constant association with Baba Yaga throughout the story, Ugresic notes that in death, Pupa “looked even more like a hen” with her “head [...] slumped onto her chest” (Ugresic 180). Her post-mortem exam also reveals toenails that are “so ossified and twisted that they [resemble] claws” and since she is unable to fit into a conventional coffin because of the odd and rigid posture her body retains after death, she is transported in an unorthodox, but expensive, giant imitation Fabergé egg that “open[s] up like a trunk” (180, 189). Not only is an egg “the beginning of all beginnings, the symbol of fertility, vitality, the renewal of life and resurrection” in Slavic mythology, as Bagay informs us in section three, but Baba Yaga is also sometimes seen riding in an eggshell instead of a mortar (Ugresic 298, 264). As such the last time Pupa physically appears in the text, her body is “flying in her egg from Prague to Zagreb” (Ugresic 231).

As the “old Polynesian proverb” referenced in the novel proclaims, its “old witches who lay golden eggs” and it is therefore hardly surprising that Pupa’s agency and power extends even beyond the grave, from which she dictates the direction of the remaining two women’s lives by leaving them “a significant sum of money” (Ugresic 206-207). “[T]rick[ing] [them] all” by not only her silent departure, but also the pre-arranged will that “guarantee[s] [them] a secure and peaceful old age”, Pupa – literally referenced as the “old witch” by both remaining women – is responsible for Beba’s and Kukla’s respective happy endings after finding her own (Ugresic 207). To this end, the same lawyer that brings news of the money also delivers to Beba an orphaned granddaughter of whose existence she had hereto been unaware. The adopted offspring of her estranged gay son, the eccentric and enigmatic four-year-old, Wawa, presents both Beba and Kukla with new purpose and energy.

Kukla, whose life has been devoid of any true affection despite three marriages, gains the child she never had and is rejuvenated by the thought that “she would be in the world a while yet, absorbed in a new, wonderful and unique task – Wawa” (Ugresic 232). Likewise, Beba, who was thinking it “best to kill herself” and admits to having “wasted [her] own life pointlessly”, being a “lousy mother” to boot, is given new resolve, a second chance at mothering and feels “immense gratitude to her son” for giving her the chance to open up “all those drawers in her that she had kept closed for years” (Ugresic 233, 222). Both women find a renewed purpose in life and start composing “list[s]” of all that needs to be done, lists which include errands like buying a new computer, getting physically fit and learning a new language (Ugresic 231, 232). As such, we can identify the signs of the type of “positive and expansive” *bildung* that Barbara Fey Waxman describes in her classification of the *Reifungsroman*, a literary work in which “aging women come alive” and

writers often portray their [elderly] heroines as forging new identities or reintegrating fragmented old ones and as acquiring the self-confidence, self-respect, and courage to live the remainder of their lives fully and joyously.

(320)

This seems particularly true of Beba, who studied art as a young woman, and suddenly envisions herself as not only “tak[ing] herself in hand and put[ting] her neglected body in motion” but also as “return[ing] to the dreams of her youth” and “finally start[ing]” to “paint real pictures” as she teaches Wawa and her friends to draw (Ugresic 232-233).

Given such *reifung* and rejuvenation, it is fitting that Beba and Kukla are waved off by “large black crows” jumping “between the shadows” when they leave the Wellness Centre with their foundling child tucked between them (Ugresic 230). It is, however, not only the jumping birds that draw a link between their rebirth and Baba Yaga. The magical little Wawa, with “dark eyebrows” resembling a “child’s drawing of a bird in flight” and mental abilities that far outshine her years is also hiding in Beba’s giant boot, suggestive of a mortar (Ugresic 213). If the fact that she considers herself to be “flying” while in the boot is not a clear enough link to Baba Yaga, who rows her mortar across the sky using a ladle as her oar, then the little hand which emerges from the boot, similarly “clutching [a] wooden ladle”, certainly is (Ugresic 212, 213, 234). The assumption is that just as “it was [Beba], the old witch, who [...] stirred this all up”, it will be Wawa, her re-embodiment or replacement, that keeps it in motion (Ugresic 233). As each of the three elderly women therefore embrace the respective happily-ever-afters that the unconventional fairy tale awards, shadowed by imagery of both birds and the birdlike Baba Yaga, Ugresic presents us with a nuanced and progressive portrait of ageing and old womanhood that defies ageist stereotypes and glib generalisations.

Ultimately, Ugresic seems to trouble the idea of old age as single unitary experience. Like Baba Yaga herself, who according to the third section of the novel changes “her status, function and authority [...] from tale to tale” and “is read, told, adapted, interpreted and reinterpreted differently at different times”, Ugresic’s *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* presents readers with diverse interpretations of the myth of female ageing (Ugresic 248). Whether she is offering us a realist look at the actualities of her own mother’s illness and old age, presenting a fictional treatise on the role of Baba Yaga, that hag of hags, in Slavic myth and Russian fairy tale, or telling a fantastic tale that seems to hover somewhere between the two, Ugresic asks readers to engage with the cultural scripts that shape our perceptions of elderly women and female ageing and to realise that the experience of old age and senescence is not always a question of either/or but more frequently a paradoxical amalgamation of disempowerment and agency, invisibility and hypervisibility, marginality and significance.

Given the corpus of critique that marks ageism as an overlooked category of difference and fairy tales’ undeniable role in shaping children’s negative perceptions of the elderly, this chapter has considered three contemporary revisions of fairy tales that foreground female old age and bring old women to the centre stage. Albeit very different in style and approach, all

three texts foreground female ageing and take as their protagonists the old women who have either been ignored or vilified; cast aside as nonentities and marginal others or magnified into frighteningly grotesque monstrosities; portrayed as little old ladies or depicted as wicked witches. The first text, “Riding the Red” by Hopkinson, conflates the figure of Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother in order to present readers with an erotic counter-narrative that challenges preconceived ideas about old women as not only marginal but also neutered and chaste little old ladies.

As the title suggests, the next text, Pratchett’s comic satire, *Witches Abroad*, actively critiques the fairy tale convention’s portrayal of old women as wicked witches while simultaneously also toying with the image of the disempowered and invisible little old lady that Hopkinson takes as her subject. Thus while Hopkinson troubles *one* of the two negative stereotypes open to ageing women, Pratchett’s unruly older female characters exploit, deviate from and question the legitimacy of both. As they jump between their roles as helpless old bags and terrible hags, able to effectively ‘perform’ both, the novel questions the narrative expectations that paint old women as *one* of only two restrictive and binary stereotypes. In the process, it exposes old age as a regulatory fiction that limits old womanhood.

The last text, Ugresic’s *Baba Yaga laid an Egg*, seems to take up where Pratchett leaves off and further complicates the relationship between these ageist scripts by suggesting that old age and ageing is not a unitary experience that can always be painted as either of two superficial binaries. To this end the novel offers readers not one, but a triad of stories, all different and focussed on different aspects and experiences of female old age and ageing. All three stories are, however, linked by the mythic figure of Baba Yaga – an old woman who is simultaneously little old lady and wicked witch, both persecuted outsider and symbol of divine female authority and might. As Ugresic transforms the changeable Baba Yaga into a representative of old women everywhere, she offers a dynamic and diverse revisionist text that stresses the paradoxical nature of female senescence.

Ultimately all three revisionist texts present us with old women as multifaceted and complex characters that do not conform to the negative and limiting cultural stereotypes propagated by classic fairy tales. They address the ageism inherent in the classics, often with comic consequences, while at the same time presenting readers with new, liberating and revitalising visions of female old age and the women defined by it. As such, these authors offer a

collective body of work that stresses old age not as a single, depressing narrative of decay but rather as one marked by nuance and idiosyncrasy, possibility and growth as well as restriction and decline.

4

The Queer Other: Gender-dissonance and Sexual Dissidents in Contemporary Revisions of Fairy Tales

Fairy tales are at their core about sexuality – about the codes and manners and qualities and behaviours that society deems desirable and thus which makes us desirable to each other. They are about defining and establishing our ideas about gender – what makes a man, what makes a woman – at the most basic level.

– Catherine Orenstein, *Red Riding Hood Uncloaked*, 211

[W]e pass these stories and ideas down through generations, in what many consider one of the dearest traditions of childhood. What more beautiful image is there than of a father reading to his son the same stories his father read to him as a boy? Little does he know that inside the sleepy-eyed head, his little man is dreaming of the prince who will take him in his arms.

– Michael Ford, *Happily Ever After: Erotic Fairy Tales for Men*, 2

In the 2008 edition of the *Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales* under the entry for “erotic tales”, Jeana Jorgensen writes that “although there has been a wealth of scholarship available on fairy tales, little of it pertains explicitly to sexual identities and relations” (306). And yet, in the same publication, under the entry for “Sex, Sexuality”, Lewis C. Seifert asserts that “[f]ew themes are more *central* to folktales and fairy tales than sex and sexuality” (849, emphasis my own). It is this apparent discrepancy that Christina Bacchilega clarifies in the “Special Issue on Erotic Tales” of *Marvels & Tales* (also published in 2008) when she suggests that the “disassociation” of the erotic and fairy tales “may very well be an effect of the infantilization of [the genre] in modern times, which has resulted in the censorship of images that conjure” what she terms “unwholesome thoughts” (“Preface” 13). Beautifully illustrating her point, Seifert relates elsewhere how, in May of 2014, the Lithuanian Office of the Inspector of Journalist Ethics “banned [...] a collection of fairy tales for children” because of “two tales depicting same-sex love, which according to the Office

amounted to ‘harmful, primitive, and purposeful propaganda of homosexuality’” (“Introduction” 15). For Seifert, this decision, although “appalling”, shows that the Lithuanian censors hold a “profound understating of how fairy tales work” and “fully [grasp] that the genre not only presents sexuality, and kinship but also plays a crucial role in defining those representations as normal, especially for children” (“Introduction” 15):

When confronted with fairy tales that dared present desires and relationships they deemed to be abnormal – because they did not conform to the heteronormative Constitution and Civil Code – they had little choice but to ban them. For the Lithuanian authorities, then, the magic of the fairy tales [...] was all too threatening and all too real because they had the power to reshape their readers’ understanding of what constituted sexual relations, marriage, and family. (Seifert, “Introduction” 15)

The Lithuanian authorities therefore grasp what many modern readers overlook, and that is that fairy tales play a vital role in establishing what is normal and acceptable with regard to gender, sexuality and desire. While they may not always “portray sexuality as monolith”, Bacchilega suggests that – when “taken en masse” – these tales, with their almost always exclusively heterosexual protagonists, “reproduce naturalised and limited gendered subjectivities and compulsory heterosexuality” (“Preface” 19). Seifert also asserts in another of his articles on queer identities and fairy tales that these tales have been used “to enforce [...] the cultural expectation that all individuals are innately and immutably heterosexual, and that same-sex object choice is ‘unnatural’” (“Gay and Lesbian Tales” 401). Bacchilega and Seifert’s comments therefore alert us to the vital but often overlooked connection between classic fairy tales, binary gender roles and institutionalised heterosexuality, or heteronormativity.⁵⁷

It is this relationship between fairy tales, gender roles and heteronormativity that Neal Lester defines rather eloquently when he points out that “[t]o live the proverbial ‘happily ever after,’ boys and girls must perform the omnipresent and omnipotent heterosexual script” (Lester 69).

⁵⁷ My understanding of heteronormativity makes use of a definition by Fin Cullen and Laura Sandy: “By heteronormativity [...], we mean the systems of discourses that position sex and gender as part of a binary system, that privilege and legitimize heterosexual desire and gender, at the expense of other gendered and sexual identities” (143).

Such a heteronormative fairy tale script, marked by male dominance and female submission, has been the subject of feminist critique for at least the last half-century. In her celebrated and aptly titled “Once upon a time: The Roles” (1974), Andrea Dworkin explains the oppositional relationship that fairy tales create between what it means to be ‘a boy’ and what it means to be ‘a girl’ as well as the cultural significance of such a clear dichotomy:

We ingested [the world of fairy tale] as children whole, had its values and consciousness imprinted on our minds as cultural absolutes long before we were in fact men and women. We have taken the fairy tales of our childhood with us into maturity [...] as real identity. Between Snow-white and her heroic prince, our two great fictions, we never did have a chance. At some point the great divide took place: they (the boys) dreamed of mounting the Great Steed and buying Snow-white from the dwarfs; we (the girls) aspired to become [...] the innocent, victimised Sleeping Beauty, beautiful lump of ultimate, sleeping good. Despite ourselves, sometimes unknowing, unwilling, unable to do otherwise, we act out the [gender] roles we were taught. (32-33)

Taken together with the heteronormativity espoused by classic fairy tales, such prescriptive and limiting gender roles legitimise only certain identities, excluding or “condemning to the closet” all other possibilities (Solis 115).

This is precisely why fairy tales serve as fertile ground for queer readings and revisions and why this chapter will consider four contemporary texts that foreground identities which Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick would define as both “gender-dissonant” and “sexually dissident” (“Queer” 3; “Foreword” xiii). Echoing, building on and surpassing earlier gender-based critiques and revisions, queer revisions trouble the masculine/feminine but also the male/female, heterosexual/homosexual and normal/abnormal binaries. In presenting a more fluid and complex interpretation of these categories and the relationships between them, such revisions have, as Seifert claims, “the potential to undo or at least unsettle the [fairy tale] genre’s seemingly self-evident connection with heteronormative desires and structures” (“Introduction” 18). Writing in 2014, he remarks that “queer fairy-tale studies” is a “small but growing” and “exciting (and long overdue) new subfield within fairy tales studies” (Seifert, “Introduction” 16). It is to this area of scholarship that this ‘double barrel’ chapter aims to

contribute as it first examines Malinda Lo's *Ash* (2009) and Wesley Stace's *Misfortune* (2006) and, thereafter, two stories from Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch* collection (1997). Collectively, I read these texts as not only LGBT-inclusive counter-narratives that foreground lesbian, bisexual, gay and transgender desires and identities, but more importantly, also as queer revisions which question monolithic, essentialist and normative notions of sex, gender and sexuality.

In spite of the fact that "some theorists are already suggesting that [queer theory's] moment has passed and that 'queer politics may, by now, have outlived its political usefulness'", I agree with Annemarie Jagose that the term remains valuable because of its continued ability to "challenge normative structures and discourses" (127, 129). And yet, because there are so many varied and contradictory understandings of the term, it serves to clearly define what I mean by queer theory when I suggest we apply it to contemporary fairy tale revisions.⁵⁸ In "True Love in Queer Times", an article which has been labelled "an excellent introduction to Queer studies",⁵⁹ Dawid Oswell argues that "a central element within the recent formation of 'queer politics'" is the "notion that identity is not fixed but can be played with and contested" (161). He quotes Ellis Hanson in defining queer as:

[T]hat no-man's land beyond the heterosexual norm, that categorical domain virtually synonymous with homosexuality and yet wonderfully suggestive of a whole range of sexual possibilities (deemed perverse or deviant in classical psychology) that challenge familiar distinctions between normal and pathological, straight and gay, masculine men and feminine women. (162)

Oswell furthermore writes that queer politics "foreground the ambivalence of sexual identity" and "[disrupt] both normative heterosexual identity formation and the notion of a fixed and essential lesbian and gay community" (Oswell 163). It has "come to define a wider articulation of 'perverse' sexual identities, communities and practices" which include "[s]ex-

⁵⁸ I am well aware that writers like Jagose and Butler argue that queer cannot and should not be assimilated; that it is a "necessarily unfixed site of engagement and contestation" or can "never [be] fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage" (129; "Critically" 173). And yet, I agree with Alan McKee that queer should not be allowed to "retain the right to declare [itself] ultimately unknowable" for "[i]f there is no 'centre' to Queer, then the uninitiated cannot discover it" (236-237).

⁵⁹ By Jeremy Hawthorn's *A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory*, p. 286.

workers, lesbian and gay identified men and women, practitioners of S&M, body piercers and so on” (Oswell 163).

Similarly stressing both the “incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire” and the term’s association with ‘abnormal’ sexualities and gender-identities, Jagose suggests that

queer focusses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire.

Institutionally, queer has been associated most prominently with lesbian and gay subjects, but its analytic framework also includes such topics as cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity and gender-corrective surgery.

Whether as a transvestite performance or academic deconstruction, queer locates and exploits the incoherencies in those three terms which stabilize heterosexuality. Demonstrating the impossibility of any ‘natural’ sexuality, it calls into question even such apparently unproblematic terms as ‘man’ and ‘woman’. (Jagose 3)

Jagose’s definition therefore highlights queer theory’s battle with not only heteronormativity but also cisnormativity – the assumption that all individuals are cisgender, meaning that their biological sex matches their psychological gender. In this sense, her definition of queer corresponds with that of Kosofsky Sedgwick when she defines queer as “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” (“Queer” 8).

Given the above definitions of queer, this chapter considers queer revisions of fairy tales as ones that challenge and unsettle the hegemonic hetero- and cisnormative discourses that structure our understanding of sex, gender and sexuality – the three categories that make up an individual’s sexual and gender identity. However, just as the term queer denotes a whole range of acts and identities, some more transgressive than others, the four texts examined in this chapter differ vastly in their concerns, complexity and approach. For this reason, I split this chapter into two shorter sections.

Exploring the types of gender trouble and non-normative sexuality that queer theory takes as its subject, part one focusses on the bisexual and transgender identities in Malinda Lo's *Ash* and Wesley Stace's *Misfortune*. First I examine *Ash* as unsettling heteronormative understandings of gender and sexuality as it recasts Cinderella as a bisexual teenager coming to grips with her unconventional desires and gender identity. Thereafter, I turn to *Misfortune*, which also deals with questions of gender and sexuality, but adds the dimension of biological sex in order to question cisnormativity and the seemingly causal and mimetic relationship between all three categories. As it retells the tale of "Sleeping Beauty" from the perspective of the transgendered protagonist, Rose, Stace's novel enters into conversation with some of the most complex and misunderstood premises of queer theory.

While *Ash* and *Misfortune* trouble categories and theories frequently associated with the term 'queer', my analysis of Emma Donoghue's "The Tale of the Shoe" and "The Tale of the Witch" spins the term in a new direction. Thus, in part two, I focus on the intersectionality of sexuality, age and convention by considering how these two tales transform the formulaic heteronormative affairs of classic fairy tales into *intergenerational* lesbian relationships between young and old(er) women. While my analysis in this second part explores gender-dissonant and sexually dissident identities that classify as queer for reasons other their homosexuality, I have chosen to analyse all four texts as a queer collective because ultimately, all of them present readers with gender and sexual identities that we might term "norm-disruptive", "outside the boundaries of 'normalcy'" or simply 'other' to those portrayed by the hetero- and cisnormative fairy tale canon (Helmer 37; Lester 61).

PART ONE:

BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER IDENTITY IN MALINDA LO'S *ASH* AND WESLEY STACE'S *MISFORTUNE*

"By Definition a Queer One": Crossing Boundaries in Malinda Lo's *Ash*

As the title suggests, Malinda Lo's first novel, *Ash*, is a contemporary revision of the classic fairy tale "Cinderella". In addition to the allusion to the title character's name to this most archetypal ash-girl, the novel also mirrors the classic plot in several ways, most notably

with the untimely death of Ash's mother soon followed by the arrival of "a stepmother, and two stepsisters" (Lo 19). Shortly after her merchant father's second marriage, he also dies and like Cinderella, Ash (short for Aishling), becomes a domestic servant in her stepmother's house. Much like Perrault's "poor girl" who "[bears] everything with patience", Lo's Ash manages her workload "without complaint" and remains in servitude even though she "is the daughter of a gentleman" (53-54; 59, 171). Despite her dire circumstances, the intervention of a fairy who "grant[s] her wish[es]" accounts for Ash's presence at two royal celebrations, one of which is a "grand ball" held in honour of the prince's decision to "cho[ose] a bride" from "among all the eligible girls in the country" just as in the classic fairy tale (Lo 172, 194, 170).

While "structural similarities exist" between *Ash* and the classic "Cinderella", as Jennifer Miskec points out in her review of the novel, Lo's revision "ideologically [...] takes the story to a new place" (165). Popularly recognised as a "landmark text in LGBT and queer young adult literature", Lo has Ash fall in love not with the prince, but the king's huntress (Wargo 44). Given this adaptation, Lo admits in her author's note that "[w]hen [she] first tell[s] people what *Ash* is about" she "usually" describes it as "a lesbian retelling of Cinderella". However, moments later, she is careful to point out that this "basic truth [...] strip[s] away the complexities of the story" ("Author's Note"). It is exactly these complexities and the manner in which Lo's novel unsettles essentialist notions of gender and sexuality which this chapter explores, for although her female protagonist ultimately falls in love with another woman, I do not read *Ash* as a straight-forward 'lesbian' revision.

Instead of offering us a fixed and essential lesbian identity in binary opposition to a straight one, as is often the case with anti-assimilationist gay and lesbian identity politics, Lo's novel presents sexual and gender identity as fluid and complex. Thus, in contrast to Jon Michael Wargo who claims that Lo's novel fails as a queer revision and ultimately "reinscribes institutional heteronormativity" (50), I will argue for the novel's queer success and show how it unsettles several of the neat binary distinctions we often employ to make sense of sexuality and gender identity – including masculine/feminine, gay/straight, normal/abnormal and interestingly also human/non-human (fairy). As the only critical article currently available on Lo's *Ash* and because it offers a reading vastly different to my own, I think it important to enter into conversation with Wargo's critique and will therefore devote a section of this discussion to refuting his claims.

In order to do so, my reading of *Ash* employs not only the definition of queer provided above, but to a lesser extent also draws on a definition provided by Roderick McGillis in his article “‘A Fairytale is Just a Fairytale’: George MacDonald and the Queering of Fairy”. Although McGillis is adamant that he neither “wish[es] to suggest that ‘queer’ cannot or does not refer to same-sex sexual expression” or “to diminish the word’s political force” (90), he employs an older definition of the word in his reading of MacDonald’s fairy tales:

By queer, I mean [...] that which is puzzling or confusing, that which confuses. Synonyms are ‘strange,’ ‘odd,’ ‘peculiar,’ even ‘different.’ [...] [S]omething that has attained the condition of ‘queerness’ is something ‘that cannot finally be understood’. That which is queer is that which is mysterious. We might say that queer connotes a border condition, neither one thing not the other, neither one place nor the other. (McGillis 88)

In his reading of MacDonald’s stories, McGillis also writes that “that which is queer is strange and provocative, out of the ordinary, even against the grain” (90). As such, his definition develops an interesting extension of the term queer and one that opens up not only Lo’s revision, as will be discussed in this section, but also the two stories by Donoghue discussed in the second section, to a much broader ‘queering’ than might initially seem possible.⁶⁰

***“You’re People and Mine”:* Border Conditions and the Human/Fairy Dichotomy**

Right from the beginning of the tale, before the question of sexuality is ever raised, Ash’s liminality or unconventionality marks her as queer in the sense defined by McGillis. Set in a country that “once upon a time” was not only “thick with magic” but also fairies, sorcerers and witches and where “magic still lurk[s] in half-forgotten places,” the tale gives special significance to fairy tales as more than simply “stories told to children at bedtime” (Lo 7-10). That is, to a small minority. For while the country as a whole at first “[clings] to the memory of magic with a deep and hungry nostalgia”, the arrival of foreign male “philosophers” trading in rational “facts” and tangible “truths” four generations before Ash’s story takes

⁶⁰ According to Carrie Sandahl, “[q]ueering describes the practice of putting a spin on mainstream representations to reveal latent queer subtexts; of appropriating a representation for one’s own purpose, forcing it to signify differently; or of deconstructing a representation’s heterosexism” (as qtd. in Solis 115).

place, marks a shift in the majority's belief in fairy tales until "gradually the idea [takes] root that magic [is] merely an old country superstition" (7-11). And yet

[t]he people of Rook Hill [...], the small northern village where Aishling lived with her father, kept to the old ways. It was far enough from the Royal City to make the philosophy being preached by the King's many advisors seem stranger than the fairy tales most mothers told their children. Ash remembered playing in her mother's herb garden while listening to tales about brownies or picts or selkies. Sometimes the greenwitch Maire Solanya joined them, and she too told tales, though hers were darker. (Lo 12)

From the outset, Ash is aligned with an unconventional or minority belief system that resists the influence of a hegemonic centre. Particularly her mother's role as an apprentice greenwitch and her close ties to Maire Solanya sets them up in clear opposition to the male philosophers favoured by the King in the capital. As we are told earlier, the philosophers originally "argued passionately with the village greenwitches" who are the only characters to question and contest their 'new' and foreign philosophies (Lo 10). This antagonism is portrayed clearly in an argument between Ash's parents, when her mother berates her father for "dar[ing]" to "dismiss [their] traditions as superstition" (Lo 13). She vows that she "won't abandon the truth" in spite of his claim that "it will do [her] and [their] daughter no good to align [themselves] with the past" (Lo 13). Particularly the father's reference to the King's rejection of these beliefs and that his wife's insistence on "keeping to [these] traditions" will "harm [his] standing in court" solidifies their position as marginal and against the grain (Lo 13).

In addition to presenting Ash as an out-of-the-ordinary character by virtue of her mother's legacy as an apprentice greenwitch, her consequent alignment with the "old rituals" and an unusual love of, even obsession with, fairy tales, Lo also marks Ash as queer by instilling in her with the desire for and ability to cross into the fairy realm despite the many "cautionary tale[s]" that warn against it (Lo 3, 80). As McGillis argues in his reading of MacDonald's stories, "those characters that can perceive (or even inhabit) both [the human and fairy realm] are queer" (89). Accordingly, in the first section of the novel, titled "The Fairy", after her parents die and she becomes a servant in her stepmother's house, Ash frequently wanders alone in the King's Forrest and finds an "enchanted path" that takes her back to Rook Hill and

her mother's grave. It is here that she meets Sidhean, the male fairy who replaces the familiar figure of the fairy godmother. In spite of her explicit desire to visit Tanili – the fairy kingdom – she is, at first, afraid of Sidhean. However, as they meet again and again, he becomes the “only companionship she [has]” and eventually the relationship begins to resemble a romance marked by “long[ing]” and “desire” from both sides (Lo 90, 102, 131). As the first section comes to an end, Sidhean saves Ash from the glamour of a fairy ring and the threatening “[loss] of [...] [her] humanity”, openly pronouncing her to be “[his]” in the face of the fairy woman about to claim and enchant her (Lo 128, 133).

It is this friendship and eventual romance with the fairy Sidhean that also undeniably marks Ash as a borderline and queer character. A liminal character himself, Sidhean fits into McGillis' definition of queer when he is first described as having “something odd” about him (Lo 68):

[T]he man did not look exactly human [...]. He was dressed like a man, but a very exotic one. [...] [T]he fabric of his clothes gleamed as if there were light trapped within its threads. And then there was his face, which at first glance was just like a man's face, except that his skin was as white as his clothes, and his cheekbones were sharp as blades. Though his hair was pale as snow, he did not look old; he looked, in fact, like he had no age at all. His eyes glowed unnaturally blue, and when he opened his mouth to speak, she saw his skin sliding over the bones of his skull. (Lo 68)

At their first encounter, Ash therefore picks up on what we can define as both Sidhean's unnaturalness and his “border condition”, to cite from McGillis' definition of queer: he is dressed like man, but is not exactly human; his face looks like that of a man's at first glance, but reveals strange features at closer inspection; he seems grey, but is ageless. Even the sound of his name, when Ash first hears it, is “foreign and exotic to her”, she becomes accustomed to his “cold strangeness” and in his presence “everything look[s] different” and “[n]othing seem[s] solid” (Lo 87, 102, 89). The unfixed nature of Sidhean's identity is not only indicative of his own border condition or queerness, but in his company Ash's world also seems permeable and she feels as if “she would be able to walk through walls” and cross over into “the other side” – which of course, she eventually does (Lo 90, 102).

While it occurs to Ash early on that “her friendship [...] with this fairy [is] a little strange” and she later defines it as an “unusual companionship”, near the close of the narrative she blatantly classifies the relationship between her and Sidhean as queer, stating that “such a friendship is by definition a queer one, for your people and mine are not meant to love one another” (Lo 90, 102, 280). Hence, even though Sidhean is male and therefore meets the major heteronormative requirement to partner Ash, his nature as fairy complicates the union and marks it as unnatural and out of the norm. Writing about such “decidedly strange and unusual pairings” in fantasy novels such as JK Rowling’s *Harry Potter*, Lydia Kokkola observes that couplings which “cross the human/other” border “queer the ways in which desire is perceived” (135). Thus while at first Ash’s relationship with Sidhean might seem the more natural, heteronormative choice, it is queer in the sense that it deviates from a different norm about ‘interspecies’ desire.

Section two of the novel, titled “The Huntress”, introduces readers to Ash’s other love interest and the third leg of the unconventional love triangle that drives the rest of the novel. In this section, Ash meets the King’s Huntress, Kaisa, who invites her to attend the King’s Hunt followed by the King’s Ball. Taking on the traditional role of the fairy godmother, Sidhean “grant[s] her wish[e]s” to go to both events “without [her stepmother] knowing” and even though he warns her that there is “a price to pay” and that in exchange for these gifts “[she] will be [his]”, Ash accepts his magical assistance (Lo 172-174). It is her fixation on both Sidhean and the fairy kingdom he comes from that drives her assertion that “the price [is] not so high” and that “[even] an eternity serving him – especially him – seem[s] like no worse, and possibly much better, than a mere human lifetime serving” her stepmother (Lo 174, 102). So, Ash attends both events where she meets and is noticed by Prince Aidan. Thwarting reader expectations, she finds herself uninterested in the prospect of becoming a princess and instead spends more and more time with the huntress until their encounters begin to resemble a courtship marked by burgeoning desire.

What is interesting is that, like Sidhean, the huntress is also marked as a borderline character by more than her homosexuality. Primarily it is her role as the King’s Huntress that establishes her as an intermediary between this world and the fairy realm for “it is said that many hundreds of years ago, when fairies still walked the land [...] the King’s Huntress was appointed to go between” the fairy and human realms and was summoned to the fairy court annually (Lo 219). Although this liminal status is set in the distant past, the huntress “speak[s]

of the fairy court as if [she] believe[s] in it” and asserts that “she will not discount anything that has endured in [their] traditions for so long” (Lo 218-219). Despite her official alignment with the centre as the king’s chosen huntress, she therefore finds herself “free to do as [she] must to tend the King’s Forest”, implying that she “hold[s] [...] with the old ways” even if the king and his court “[do] not” (Lo 218-219).

True to this claim, we see her and her hunters follow “tradition” and at Yule, they sing the ancient “spell” originally believed to “ensure the huntress’s safe return” after her visit to the fairy court (Lo 218). While at this time it is purely part of the celebration, the hunters’ costumes with “the heads of their horses plumed with feathered headdresses that made them look like fantastic beasts, half horse, half eagle” give them an unsettling, hybrid appearance (Lo 110). Coupled with the fact that the huntress’s face is described as eerily “glowing in the red-gold light”, this endows her with an otherworldly quality that combines with her unconventional belief and role as intermediary to establish her liminality (Lo 111).

Thus before we even address the question of gender and sexuality, Ash as well as her love interests, Sidhean and Kaisa, are portrayed as odd and out of the ordinary characters that occupy border positions which enable them to slip between the human world and the fairy realm. As such, they meet McGillis’ definition of queer. However, in the sense that “queer connotes a border condition, neither one thing nor the other, neither one place nor the other”, McGillis’s definition also meets up with the more current political definition I provide in the introduction to this chapter – particularly Hanson’s reference to queer as the “no-man’s land beyond the heterosexual norm” and Jagose’s reference to “cross-dressing, hermaphroditism [and] gender ambiguity” (88; as qtd. in Oswell 162; 3). It is such a perception of gender and sexuality as fluid and unfixed, a moving point on a continuum rather than one of two opposing binaries that I propose Lo’s novel presents to the reader. As she admits in an interview focussed on one of her other novels:

I believe that sexuality exists on a spectrum, and at one end you have people who identify as 100% straight, while on the other end are people who identify as 100% gay. I believe that the majority of people fall somewhere in the middle. (Lo, “Inheritance” n.pag.)

“At the Same Time”: Bisexuality and the Homo/Hetero Dichotomy

Displaying just such an unfixed and shifting sexuality, Ash’s growing infatuation with Kaisa eventually starts to overshadow her bond with Sidhean, “quiet[ing]” the “part of her that had once been always aware of him” (Lo 172). When it is finally suggested by a third party that Ash might be interested in being the huntress’s lover, she is left harbouring “a new awareness in her[self]” as “something as yet unnamed [comes] into focus” (Lo 199 -202). At the King’s Ball, Ash finally admits her feelings for Kaisa as well as the “consequences” of her “choice” to bargain with Sidhean (Lo 237). Setting up a clear opposition between the two love interests, Lo has her realise that “fulfilling her contract with [the fairy] mean[s] that she will never see [the huntress] again” (Lo 237). Echoing the classic plot, Ash’s stepmother uncovers her secret activities upon her return from the ball and she is abused and locked up.

At this point, Ash comes to the realisation that she no longer desires to exchange the human world for the fairy realm and at the first available opportunity, she escapes, making her way to the city to see Kaisa for what she believes to be “the last time” before “settling [her] debt” with Sidhean (Lo 265, 277). However, when the huntress finally kisses Ash, she understands “what it [is] to be in love” for the first time and realises that there is a way out of her bargain with Sidhean (Lo 277, 280). She sets out to find him and knowing that “he [will] do” as she asks because he truly loves her, she offers to “be [his] for [...] one night” before bringing their relationship to an “end” (Lo 280). The next morning, Ash wakes up rested and content and returns to the city, finally “free to love [the huntress]” (Lo 291). At the closing of the novel, the two women kiss and Ash “kn[ows] at last, that she [is] home” (291).

It is Ash’s final meeting with Sidhean that Wargo finds problematic and that he reads as a “quasi-masochistic” sexual encounter which presents “the price of freedom and female eros” as an act of “heterosexual consummation” (49). Claiming that “the queer approach [Lo] deploys” fails because it “is haunted by heteronormative rebounds”, he suggests that she offers a “transition into queer sexuality” only after Aishling has performed this act of “compulsory heterosexuality” (46). For Wargo then, Ash’s one night with Sidhean is a forced act of “[hetero]sexualised payment” that “brands” her, “anchors shame onto” her body and “acts as a necessary entrée to lesbian experience” (46, 49). Much of Wargo’s argument is based on the fact that he reads Lo’s novel as “constructing a distinct binary between homo and hetero”, with Sidhean and the fairy kingdom portrayed as “uniquely heterosexual” while

the human world accepts “same-sex companionship as ordinary” (46-47). For him the two worlds are “strict binaries of one another”, “juxtaposing mirror images” and when Ash finally chooses Kaisa and the human world over Sidhean and the fairy realm, she chooses between two distinct sexual orientations rather than two individuals (46-47). In contrast to Wargo’s opinion, I suggest that Lo unsettles the binary distinction between hetero and homosexuality and that through her portrayal of Ash and the two worlds she negotiates, readers are given a much more fluid understanding of desire. In order to prove the novel’s success as a queer revision, I will therefore refute several of Wargo’s claims, starting with his reading of the fairy realm as “a rooted tradition of compulsory heterosexuality” marked by “increased homophobia and sexual surveillance” (Wargo 47).

To begin with, let’s consider the tale Kaisa tells Ash about Niamh, “one of the earliest huntresses in the kingdom” who first falls in love with a human princess and then the fairy queen (Lo 153). After spending ten years in the fairy kingdom as the Fairy Queen’s huntress, Niamh learns to “love the Queen” and after she confesses her love, “the Queen [takes] her in her arms and kisse[s] her, and Niamh spen[ds] the rest of her days in Tanili, happily at the side of the Fairy Queen” (155).⁶¹ This tale is not only indicative of a homosexual relationship between a human and fairy, but the fact that the fairy in question is the Queen and therefore a public figure of ultimate authority that openly engages in a same-sex relationship by keeping Niamh “at her side” problematises Wargo’s claims that the fairy realm is marred by homophobia.

This is not an anomalous incident, rooted merely in legend, for when Sidhean saves Ash from the fairy ring, he pulls her from the grasp of a “fairy woman” (Lo 129, emphasis my own). Later, when Ash asks him what he told the woman, he responds as follows: “I told her that you were mine; that I had given you this cloak; that she could not have you” (133). The fact that Sidhean has to assert his ownership of Ash in the face of the fairy woman who wants to “have” her for herself, implies same-sex desire on the part of the fairy. And if Wargo *insists* on a rigid reading of Ash’s one night in the fairy kingdom with Sidean at the end of the novel as an act of “heterosexual consummation”, then it seems equally justifiable to suggest that

⁶¹ One can of course also not overlook the presence of a solitary reigning Fairy Queen in each of these tales. The fact that she appears to rule in her own right and there is never any mention of a Fairy King further problematises any claim of heteronormativity as it is usually marked by male dominance and female submission.

Ash's night-time encounter with the fairy woman would have led to a homosexual experience had Sidhean not interrupted it (46).

Just as the fairy realm cannot be read as "uniquely heterosexual", so the human world fails to exist as its distinct homosexual binary (47). The fact that "Lo constructs the [human world] as the environment where same-sex companionship, bisexuality, and polygamy are common practice", simply means that queer sexualities are accepted, not that they are the norm (Wargo 47). As we see, tales representing same-sex relationships are widely told and accepted and at the Yule celebrations Ash watches the antics of a same-sex couple without shock or condemnation:

A young couple stumbled away from the dance hand in hand, one woman dressed in gold, the other in green and Ash saw the smiles on their faces before they kissed. Another reveller, a laughing boy wearing a joker's cap, came and pulled them back towards the dancers. (Lo 112)

This is just one of several moments where same-sex relationships and homosexuality are indeed presented as completely ordinary. And yet, as often, characters like Ash's parents and stepsisters are marked as distinctly heterosexual and one of Ash's fellow housemaids, Gwen, even gives voice to opinions that are nothing if not heteronormative.

When Gwen, for instance, asks whether Ash has "fallen in love with one of [the hunters]" during Yule celebrations, her assumption that it is one of the *male* hunters is clarified by her suggestion that they "find [Ash] a handsome young lord for [the night]" seeing that the hunters have already left the celebration (Lo 112). A couple of pages later, Gwen asks Ash whether she too "yearn[s] for someone [...] to take care of [her], and hold [her]" and then answers her own question by stating that she "can't wait until [she] find[s] her husband" (116). From Gwen's heteronormative perspective, Ash's desired partner can have any of a list of physical attributes and hold any of a number of positions: "I mean, do you want him to be tall, dark, fair, a butler, a merchant?" (Lo 116). And yet, her interrogation leaves no space for homosexuality as a legitimate form of desire. Later, when she gives Ash a charm to help her "dream of [her] future *husband*" so that she might "recognize *him* when [she] see[s] *him*", she again makes no allowance for the fact that the future partner Ash desires might be a woman (Lo 121, emphasis my own).

Although Gwen's heteronormative opinions might at first seem problematic, they belong to one individual among many and the fact that they exist alongside more liberal and accepting views simply serves to show that Ash lives in a sexually diverse culture, tolerant of both queer *and* heteronormative desires and relationships. Thus, while Wargo claims that in her portrayal of the fairy and human worlds, Lo sets up strict binaries and "create[s] dichotomies of heterosexuality and homosexuality", I offer a different reading (47).⁶² By presenting both realms as equally accepting of homo and heterosexuality, Lo presents desire as something that remains open to discovery, unmarred by questions of what is natural and what is not.

In this sense, I am particularly interested in the fact that Lo avoids both giving Ash a coming out scene as well as the explicit naming of sexuality with those characters that do display same-sex desire. According to Mollie Blackburn, who reviews recent tendencies in LGBT literature for young adolescents, the absence of such a scene, wherein "a character typically rejects the imposed straight identity and 'comes out' to accept a gay identity" means that the text has "moved beyond essentialist understandings of sexual and gender identities", "paralleling queer theory" and portraying "characters who understand their sexual and gender identities as multiple and variable" (536). Accordingly, in spite of Wargo's claim that "Lo allows [the] reader to render her character, ultimately, as Ash the lesbian", Ash never classifies her desire except to say that "something as yet unnamed was coming into focus" and Lo never actually employs the term "lesbian" or any other term denoting sexual orientation, for that matter (50; Lo 202). Desire simply is – irrelevant of the gender of its subjects. By freeing Ash from the need to name and publically announce her sexuality, Lo does away with heteronormativity and the assumption that one is straight by default unless announced gay, and instead presents sexuality as much more complex than the hetero/homo binary would allow.

In fact, Wargo's claim that Lo's portrayal of Ash marks her as "the lesbian" suggests to me that it is Wargo and not Lo who employs an outdated and fundamentally un-queer understanding of an essential, core lesbian identity that stands in binary opposition to a

⁶² I would also like to point out that even if these two worlds did align with a hetero/homo binary as Wargo suggests, the three main characters' ability to traverse the boundaries between these worlds would be indicative of sexualities that are much more fluid than his reading allows.

straight one (46). This is particularly true of his dualistic reading of Ash's final encounter with Sidhean and his claim that her "seemingly [...] 'lesbian' happy ending" comes at the cost of compulsory heterosexuality:

What Lo shows her readership in this quasi-masochistic scene of consummation is that to attain same-sex companionship, one must be branded by and bargain with the larger political institution known as compulsory heterosexuality to save oneself from the label 'lesbian'.
(Wargo 49)

Having already established that Sidhean and the fairy realm do not represent a heteronormative tradition, and that Ash's unconventional desire for the fairy can in fact be read as queer, I turn my attention to Wargo's claim that her one night with Sidhean is compulsory in nature and that it leaves her branded and shamed; a "disruption to lesbian existence" (49). Based on a close-reading of the scene, I do not believe that one can interpret Ash's night with Sidhean as an obligatory sexual act, regardless of the fact that she performs it as part of a bargain struck earlier. Firstly, Ash's intense physical response to Sidhean's presence suggests her continued desire for him and although Lo's word choice definitely implies that he 'compels' her in some way, Ash does not "bargain" with Sidhean as Wargo suggests (49). Rather she demands, she asserts and Sidhean obeys:

He put his arms around her [...] As they stood together, she began to hear the steady rhythm of his heartbeat, and her breathing slowed to match his, until she felt as though they were nearly one being.

[...]

Dragging herself away from him took every ounce of courage she had, and when at last she was free and had put a hand's breadth of cold night air between them, she looked up at his shadowy eyes and said, 'Sidhean, [...] you said that you have been cursed to love me, and I have realised that if the curse is strong – and you truly love me – then you will set me free.' She paused, drawing a ragged breath, and took the moonstone ring [he had given her] out of her pocket and put it into the palm of his hand. She said: 'It will end here tonight. I will be yours for this one night, and then the curse will be broken.' (Lo 279-280)

Even though the dialogue suggests that Sidhean is the one in control when Ash tells him that “[*he*] will set [*her*] free” if “[*he*] truly love[s] [*her*]”, her later assentation that “it will end here tonight” gives her the power of decision (280, emphasis my own). Furthermore when Sidhean “bow[s] his head” in agreement, it shows his submission to *her* will and she realises that she is the one with the influence:

She saw him, then, as clearly as she might ever see him. He was more powerful and more seductive than any human she would ever know, but faced with her, he would do her bidding. She felt as though she were a lion uncurling from a long nap, and she wanted to flex her claws. (Lo 280)

Consequently, when Ash “put[s] her hand in [Sidhean’s]” and “she [feels] the ring between their palms burning like a brand”, the moment that Wargo reads as “an act of sexual consummation”, she has not been forced to do anything against her will (Lo 281; 49). Rather, we see a clear indication that this moment fulfils her own queer desire to enter the fairy realm when she mentions that it seemed like “a veil [was] being lifted and she [was] finally allowed to see what was behind it” (80). Furthermore, the fact that she wakes up the following morning “feeling as though she has slept so well” that “she might never have to sleep again” and continues to devour a magnificent breakfast without any signs of regret or revulsion for either the night she remembers “blurr[ily]” or the “pale, circular scar” that remains in her palm, does not support a reading of this presumed consummation as either compulsory or as a “bargain” resulting in “shame” (Lo 283; Wargo 49).

Instead of dichotomising Ash’s final encounter with Sidhean as a heterosexual payment for her homosexual relationship with Kaisa, I read it as evidence that her desire remains fluid. This is all the more apparent when we consider that when Ash becomes infatuated with Kaisa, she

realise[s] that the part of her that had once been always aware of Sidhean had quieted. And yet, seeing him again, she felt something within her bending towards him as though drawn on threads pulled taut by his hands. (Lo 172)

Her fluctuating consciousness of Sidhean as well as the fact that she recognises “a new awareness in her[self]” (as opposed to let’s say a concrete ‘change’) once she starts to recognise her feelings for Kaisa, in addition to her admission that it does not feel “right to think of Sidhean and Kaisa at the same time” suggests her coexisting and shifting desire for both (Lo 201, 205). Furthermore, when she is finally kissed by Kaisa, she feels “her entire body move towards her, as if every aspect of her being was reorienting itself towards this woman” (Lo 277). That her being can “reorient[ate]” itself and shift from “long[ing]” and “ach[ing]” for Sidhean to feeling desire for Kaisa only to once again “feel one” with Sidhean during their last encounter, indicates a sexuality that is fluid, unfixed and shifting (Lo 277, 102, 224, 279). Negating the essential and fixed lesbian identity Wargo proposes when he suggest that Ash discovers “her *true* sexual desires for same-sex companionship” when she forms “a union with Kaisa”, I suggest that Lo’s portrayal of Ash unsettles the hetero/homo binary, presents romantic interest and sexuality as fluid and shifting and marks her as a bisexual character choosing between two individuals, not two opposing sexualities (46).

“Entirely Different Creatures”: Unusual Gender Roles and the Masculine/Feminine Dichotomy

In addition to queering human/fairy and homo/hetero distinctions by offering us characters that traverse the borders between these binaries, Lo’s revision also unsettles the division between femininity and masculinity in a manner evocative of the feminist revisions of the previous century. Both her portrayal of Ash and the huntress questions the essentialist notions of femininity and heteronormative gender roles we’ve come to expect from classic fairy tales. Although such dichotomised gender roles have been the topic of feminist fairy tale scholarship since at least the 1970s, it might serve to provide a summary of the main ideas as provided in what I consider three of the most influential ‘second-wave’ critiques in this field, namely Marcia R Lieberman’s “Some Day My Prince Will Come: Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale” (1972), which I will discuss here, as well as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s “The Queen’s Looking Glass” (1979) and Dworkin’s “Onceuponatime: The Roles” (1974), both of which I refer to in unison with Lieberman as the discussion continues.

According to Lieberman, “an examination of the best-known stories shows that active and resourceful girls are [...] rare” and “most [...] heroines are passive, submissive and helpless” while their male counterparts are “bold” and “active” (387, 385). And while “boys play an active role in winning”, “victimised” girls “are chosen by princes because they have been

seen” or “described to [them]” (Lieberman 386-389). As such, Lieberman suggests that “the sexes of the rescuer and the person in danger are [...] constantly predictable” and “men come along to rescue women” (391). Furthermore, the same activity, ambition and strength of will that “is praiseworthy in men [...] is rejected in women” and women who are “more active and powerful than men”, are portrayed as “either partially or thoroughly evil” (Lieberman 392).

In creating the ‘the huntress’ character, Lo transforms the classic figure of the huntsman by having a woman fill what is conventionally an ultra-masculine and active role. And seeing that in Lo’s universe “hunts ha[ve] *always* been led by women”, Kaisa and the huntress we meet before her are certainly not anomalous figures (Lo 47, emphasis my own). Together with generations of huntresses figured in the stories Ash loves so much, these women fill a role typically reserved for men while also displaying masculine qualities. The first time Ash sees a huntress, for instance, she finds herself “transfixed” by what she identifies as her and her hunting party’s *difference*. For “[these] women”, we read, “with their casual camaraderie and easy grace, seemed like entirely different creatures” to “her stepmother and stepsisters” (Lo 48). While reference to their “grace” maintains what is a seemingly feminine quality, the use of adjectives like “casual” and “easy” to describe the hunting party contrasts with the highly stylised appearance and contrived behaviour displayed by the women in Ash’s household in their attempts to “look like a queen” and “make [the prince] notice [them]” (Lo 95).

Employing a term usually reserved for male interaction, the “camaraderie” Ash mentions is also strikingly dissimilar to the rivalry displayed by her sisters in their single-minded “pursuit of [husbands]” (Lo 96). An almost formulaic aspect of the classic “Cinderella”, such sisterly competition serves as a textbook example of the feminine conflict theorised by Gilbert and Gubar. In their reading of “Snow White”, these two theorists suggest that “female bonding is extraordinarily difficult in patriarchy” and that “women almost inevitably turn against women” as they are set “against each other” by the male gaze that decides who is “the fairest of all” (38). Seemingly free of such stereotypical female competition for male attention, the women in the hunting party seem different because they are driven by a different ‘purpose’ – an idea I will return to shortly.

In addition to displaying other qualities that are usually perceived as masculine, the older huntress,⁶³ as the leader of the hunt, is also in possession of a decidedly ‘unfeminine’ authority over men because, as Lieberman observes, “[b]eing powerful is mainly associated with being unwomanly” for fairy tale women (392). When the band of hunters enter Lady Isobel’s house, she “recoil[s] at the unexpected ferocity” of the “half a dozen men”, “all bloody and fresh from the kill” as can be expected of a refined aristocratic lady, but the huntress simply “pushe[s] the men aside” and smilingly tells Lady Isobel “[not to] mind [her] men” as “she bows” instead of offering the feminine alternative, the curtsy (Lo 50). Moments later, she effortlessly exerts her authority over a misbehaving hunter as she “[catches] his arm” and reprimands him “in a curt, low tone of voice” (Lo 50). He responds by looking “sheepish” and she tells Ash that she is “sorry if [her] boys frightened her” (Lo 50). In her portrayal of the huntress, Lo therefore overturns what Cullen and Sandy call “the enduring hierarchical nature of fixed binary sex-gender systems” which manifest as male dominance and female submission (143). In addition, references to the male hunters as first “[the *huntress*’s] men” and later “[her] *boys*” offer the reader an interesting reversal of patriarchal gender roles where women are not only portrayed as possessions to be owned, bought and bartered by men,⁶⁴ but also likened to children: innocent, naïve and in need of male guidance⁶⁵ (Lo 50, emphasis my own).

While huntresses fill masculine roles and display masculine qualities in general, Kaisa also exhibits the activity and purpose specifically associated with the stock figure of the fairy tale prince. Echoing Lieberman’s main arguments, Dworkin comments on the active role of the “heroic” fairy tale prince in contrast to his passive female counterpart, the princess (43). Compared to that “beauteous lump of ultimate, sleeping good” who “never [...] act[s], initiate[s], confront[s]” and ultimately “do[es] nothing” to warrant the adoration she receives, the prince “rides a horse”, “travels far and wide” and has “a mission, a purpose” which he “inevitably [...] fulfils” (Dworkin 43). “What matters”, she writes, “is that he matters, acts [and] succeeds” (Dworkin 43). Such a description of the prince is significant because it emphasises not only his purpose and general activity, but also particularly his equestrian activity. For as Dworkin observes in the famous passage quoted in the introduction to this chapter, boys who dream of becoming the prince, dream of “mounting the Great Steed” (33).

⁶³ In this case, the huntress that serves before Kaisa.

⁶⁴ See Gilbert and Gubar p. 41 and Dworkin p. 37.

⁶⁵ See Gilbert and Gubar p. 39.

The prince who swoops in *on his horse* to save the damsel in distress is a stock fairy tale figure and an archetypal symbol of masculinity. For this reason, I find it interesting that as the mistress of the hunt, the huntress is not only given a clear and active purpose – to plan and execute the hunting of a stag – which she of course achieves, but she is also frequently portrayed on a horse. As such, the first couple of times Ash sees Kaisa, she is tracking a deer in the forest in active pursuit of her mission as huntress and when Ash initially recognises her in her role as “the King’s Huntress” she is portrayed as follows:

behind the pennant-bearer a woman rode a bay mare with a black forelock, one hand resting on the pommel of her saddle and the other holding the reins, the hood of her deep blue cloak was flung back and she was laughing with the rider next to her. (Lo 97)

Kaisa’s clear skill and ease as a *horseman* is shown at several other moments in the novel and her close association with her horse and repeated characterisation as simply “a rider” or “the rider” defines her through this particular ‘princely’ activity (Lo 149,156). One also cannot overlook that a major part of Kaisa and Ash’s courtship takes place as Kaisa teaches Ash to “[ride] a hunting horse” (Lo 159). This is an action she later describes as something you “can’t” do “in a dress”, making reference to the limitations of both feminine apparel and the behaviour associated with it (157). Thus like Dworkin’s prince, the huntress leads what Gilbert and Gubar would define as a “life of significant action” – “unfeminine” at its core – and in her courtship of Ash, she offers her the same role-reversing opportunity (39, 42).

At this point, I think it is important to note that Lo’s portrayal of these ‘unfeminine’ women does not mark them all as lesbian. While Kaisa is portrayed as homosexual not only by her interest in Ash, but also an earlier interaction with a seductive “black-haired woman in a red dress” and her apprentice’s concurrent statement that “there are many who would cast themselves as the huntress’s lover”, the sexual orientation of the older huntress is never remarked upon (Lo 199). We are simply told that she left her post because “her lover asked her to” (Lo 165). Also, Lo makes no explicit statements regarding the sexuality of Kaisa’s apprentice, Lore. While she is the one that makes Ash rethink the nature of her relationship with the huntress, she herself does not seem to have homosexual desires. This is apparent when a male hunter interrupts their conversation to request a dance, “unless she has other

designs”, suggesting a potential liaison with Ash (Lo 199). Lore laughs off the suggestion and responds that “[she] will dance with [him]”, indicating her denial of such intentions (Lo 199). Consequently, Lo avoids conflating masculine women and lesbianism not only by denying every huntress the label of homosexual, but also by occasionally associating femininity with female homosexuality. Her portrayal of the “black-haired woman” who approaches Kaisa in an attempt to become her lover, for example, also emphasises the femininity of this particular homosexual, with her “red dress”, her full lips and the fact that she allows herself to be “led” to one of the benches by the huntress (Lo 199).

While the figure of the huntress is initially established in contrast to the highborn ladies of Ash’s house, Ash’s norm-disruptive sexuality and gender are constructed in comparison to Gwen, who clearly represents heteronormative femininity. Gwen is “sweet, prone to fits of giggles, [...] blushe[s] every time any young man [says] a word to her” and, “even dressed as a boy” for the Yule masquerade, “[her] figure [remains] unmistakably feminine” (Lo 105, 108). “In comparison” to the overly feminine Gwen, “Ash [feels] clumsy and shy” and when she dresses in “old liveries” for the Yule celebrations just like Gwen, Ash loses any outward trace of her gender and becomes “unrecognizable”:

[L]ook[ing] in the mirror, Ash saw someone else – a boy with a proud profile and dark, long-lashed eyes. Although Gwen had looked like the same girl wearing her brother’s clothes, Ash looked like a stranger. (Lo 105-109)

Besides lacking an essential femininity that aligns with her biological sex and remains apparent once stripped of the external trappings of her gender, Ash also falls short of the conventionally feminine desires espoused by classic fairy tales and voiced by both Gwen and her stepsisters. This is particularly true with regard to courting and marriage, two events that Lieberman critically identifies as “the most important and exciting part of a girl’s life” and “the fulcrum and major event of nearly every fairy tale”, respectively (394, 386).

Gwen, for instance, cannot hide her shock at Ash’s admission that she “[doesn’t] have a trousseau” while Gwen and her mother “have been embroidering linens for [her] trousseau for ages”:

‘You don’t?’ Gwen said, shocked. ‘Goodness, you must begin at once. You’re so pretty, Ash, you can’t expect to be a maid for ever. Whom do you wish you to marry?’

‘I don’t know,’ Ash said. Gwen’s questions made her uncomfortable.

(Lo 116)

Just as Ash finds the idea of becoming the huntress’s lover “unsettling”, her discomfort at Gwen’s mention of marriage and possibly also marital relations⁶⁶ suggests that unlike Gwen and the stepsisters, who seem to think of little else, she has not given much thought to matrimony or what accompanies it.⁶⁷ Instead, her clear disdain for what can only be described as her stepsisters’ husband-hunting is made apparent when one stepsister rebukes her for “scoff[ing]” at their dreams just because it is “not [her] dream” to marry a prince (Lo 171). True to such a claim, Ash fails to see the appeal of Prince Aiden when she meets him, feels “surprised that her stepsisters [find] him handsome” and rejects his attention at the ball (Lo 186). In spite of his command to “rest a moment” and “wait for his return”, she behaves in a way completely uncharacteristic of the helpless and passive fairy tales heroines we’ve come to know and acts in her own interest, “[leaving] her seat rather than” acceding to his request (Lo 232).⁶⁸

What is therefore a pivotal scene in the classic tale – prescriptive of heteronormative desires and gender roles – becomes a major area of revision for Lo. Having clearly noticed Ash, the prince acts and asserts his desire by taking her for refreshments in an area reserved for “[his] special guests” (Lo 231). Ash is, however, unaware of his identity and rejects his attention once she realises who he is. “Thoroughly discomforted” not only by the attention of those who “[stare] at her” but also by her magical gown, Ash is not driven by the same desires as the classic fairy tale princesses whose sole purpose is to be noticed (Lo 232). Unlike Cinderella who seems to have reached the summit of female purpose and potential as she

⁶⁶ Gwen’s reference to remaining “a maid forever” can of course simply be a reference to staying ‘in service’ but the concurrent mention of marriage makes it all the more likely that she is referring to sexual intercourse and the loss of virginity. Either way, the two will go hand in hand here.

⁶⁷ Although Ash has clearly experienced desire for Sidhean at this point, I suggest that their relationship or ‘courting’ is driven by her queer desire to leave her own world behind rather than conform to its dating conventions.

⁶⁸ While the classic Cinderella also runs away from the prince in what might seem like an act of independence, it is important to note that she absconds not because she *wants* to but because she has a curfew and fears the moment her enchantment will end and her ordinary self be revealed.

basks in the attention afforded by her magical appearance and royal companion, the stares of those around her make Ash “[feel] awkward and ungainly and grateful for the mask that [hides] her face” (Lo 232).

Having achieved the attention of the prince and dressed in what is later described as a gown that “puts all [others] to shame”, Ash fails to live up to narrative expectation and slot effortlessly into the role of princess with all its trappings and glory (Lo 36). Instead, as when she compares herself to the ultra-feminine Gwen, Ash feels “awkward and ungainly” and her confession that she feels as if “she had slipped into someone else’s skin and it did not quite fit”, suggests a failed performance of that ultimate feminine archetype – the fairy tale princess. The huntress’s further assertion that “the dress does not suit [Ash]” and “looks like it’s suffocating [her]” in spite of the fact that she “look[s] beautiful” in it establishes her femininity as unconventional and ill-suited to the sartorial signifiers of her gender (Lo 236).

Lo’s portrayal of both Ash and the huntress therefore unsettles the conventional gender norms espoused by classic fairy tales and critiqued by feminists like Lieberman, Dworkin, and Gilbert and Gubar, norms that can be defined as “dimorphism, heterosexual complementarity of bodies [and] proper and improper masculinity and femininity” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* xxiv-xxv). However, building on and moving beyond such critique, the novel also questions heteronormativity and the seemingly natural and mimetic link between sex and sexuality, offering alternative visions of sexual and gender identity to the teenage readers who are themselves in the very throes of identity development. Ultimately, *Ash* is representative of a queer approach that presents sexuality and gender identity as fluid, unfixed and shifting and Lo troubles the neat and normative binary distinctions between normal/abnormal, human/fairy, homosexual/heterosexual and masculine/feminine in a manner that is accessible to the teenage audience at which the novel is aimed.

In contrast to *Ash*, which offers teenage readers an introduction to the types of gender trouble and non-normative sexuality that queer theory takes as its subject, the next text under consideration, Wesley Stace’s *Misfortune*, is an intricate and multi-layered conversation with some of the most complex queer theories. Seemingly both citing and refuting some of the most difficult and misunderstood theories by Judith Butler – who according to Rosemary Hennessy is “cited more persistently and pervasively than any other queer theorist” and whose “dense and imposing” work, *Gender Trouble*, is claimed as the “single most important

intellectual source” for queer theory – Stace’s novel explores transgender identity as well as other instances of gender bending and cross-dressing to ultimately suggest the fluidity of the seemingly binary and oppositional categories of man/woman (as qtd. in Jagose 7).

“Girls Shaved After All”: Gender Bending, Cross-Dressing and Transgender Identity in Wesley Stace’s *Misfortune*

The debut novel of singer/songwriter Wesley Stace (also known as John Wesley Harding), *Misfortune* is a picaresque and intricate Neo-Victorian romp which playfully and subtly references that classic fairy tale of female *bildung*, “Sleeping Beauty”. As a fleshed-out version of “The Ballad of Miss Fortune”, written by Stace in 1997 about an abandoned baby boy who is “found by the richest man in the world” and “brought [...] up as a girl”, the novel is, according to Emily Jeremiah, an unconventional *bildungsroman* “concerned with [...] queerness” (Stace, “Interview” n.pag.; 132). True to Jeremiah’s claim, Stace himself calls *Misfortune* a “coming-of-age novel” in which the feminine protagonist, Rose, experiences “normal” feelings of adolescent angst, except in her case there is “this extra level” because the “secret” of her anatomical sex “is being kept from [her]” (Stace, “Interview” n.pag.). Thus as we watch Rose go from being born a boy, to being raised as a girl, to finding out she’s ‘really’ a boy and finally, after much turmoil and confusion, to settling into a self-accepting transgender identity, readers experience the “numerous instances of [...] ‘gender trouble’” which, according to Jeremiah, allow the novel to “echo Butlerian thought” (132).

That the novel toys with the causal and mimetic relationship between sex, gender and sexuality in a manner evocative of the queer theories made popular by Butler in *Gender Trouble* is undeniable and while I agree with Michael DiSchiavi that Stace “raises a host of serious issues in the guise of fiction”, I do not exactly agree with his assertion that “[i]f Judith Butler were to write a novel, this would be it” (43). Instead, I suggest that Stace disrupts and challenges Butler’s ideas even as he references them and that ultimately he presents us with a nuanced and shifting understanding of gender (and its relationship to sex and sexuality) that is as much social constructionist as it is essentialist. However, before I carry on to offer such a reading of *Misfortune*, it is necessary to clarify certain terms as well as address the matter of pronouns, for as the aged Rose observes in her retrospective telling: “Pronouns are problematic” (Stace 82).

Stace does not employ the term transgender to describe Rose. In fact, even though Rose explicitly advertises both her femininity and masculinity by the end of the story, her gendered identity remains largely undefined by a single term. As such I would like to clarify my decision to employ the term ‘transgender’ as two-pronged: firstly, because of the ambiguous nature of the gender identity Rose ultimately assumes, I use it in the sense that Virginia Prince initially used it to “refer to individuals [...] somewhere on the spectrum between ‘transvestite’ [...] and ‘transsexual’” (as qtd. in Stryker 4):

If a *transvestite* [is] someone who episodically changes[s] into the clothes of the so-called ‘other-sex,’ and a *transsexual* [is] somebody who permanently change[s] genitals in order to claim membership in a gender other than the one assigned at birth, then *transgender* [is] somebody who permanently change[s] social gender through the public presentation of self, without recourse to genital transformation. (Stryker 4; emphasis in original)

Secondly, quite a few theorists have used ‘transgender’ as an umbrella term for gender-dissonant and sexually dissident identities and behaviours and because I will make use of Butler’s theories of performativity and particularly her reference to drag, the term transgender proves useful because of the relationship it establishes between Rose’s gender identity and that very specific mode of theatrical performance. In *Trans Liberation* Leslie Feinberg, for instance, defines transgender as “a movement of masculine females and feminine males, cross-dressers, transsexual men and women, intersexuals born on the anatomical sweep between female and male, gender-blenders [and] many other sex and gender-variant people” (5). Similarly, in *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People*, Vivian Namaste uses the word to “refer to all individuals who live outside of normative sex/gender relations – that is, individuals whose gendered self-presentation (evidenced through dress, mannerisms and even physiology) does not correspond to the behaviours habitually associated with the members of their biological sex” (1). Although Namaste states that a “variety of identities are included” under this term, she lists cross-dressers, drag queens and transsexuals as examples (1). Thus, in my reading of *Misfortune*, I ultimately employ the term ‘transgender’ in the “infinitely elastic” sense that David Valentine identifies in *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* when he suggests that the term “can

stand both as a description of individual identity and simultaneously as a general term for gendered transgressions of many kinds” (39).

Given my choice to identify Rose as transgender and the novel’s own admission that pronouns are problematic when it comes to individuals of indeterminate gender, I will selectively make use of what Feinberg calls the “gender-neutral” pronoun “s/he” and its possessive form, “hir” (71).⁶⁹ I say selectively, because I think it important to note that Rose does *not* identify as transgendered throughout the story and as such I choose to only employ gender neutral pronouns in instances where I am discussing her as conscious and accepting of her trans-gender. Because Rose never really identifies as a man, I never employ masculine pronouns and keep referring to her in the feminine even when she is in her period of attempted ‘manhood’.

Finally, I would like to address my decision to employ Butler in reading Rose’s transgendered identity as well as the editorial choice to include such a reading in a chapter focussed on queer theory when some theorists argue for a disjunction between these two areas of study. Namaste, for instance, makes claims regarding queer theory’s “erasure of transgendered subjectivity”, arguing that the “presentation of transgendered issues within queer theory does not account for the quotidian conditions of transgendered people” (9, 16). She also suggests that Butler “negat[es] transgendered identity” in *Gender Trouble* (Namaste 14). Nonetheless, my reading of *Misfortune* is inspired by Susan Stryker’s assertion that *Gender Trouble* “offered an early map of the terrain transgender studies” now claims “as its own” and that Butler’s work on performativity “has been tremendously influential within transgender studies” (5, 10). Additionally, I also cite Stryker’s definition of transgender studies and the manner in which it parallels the understanding of ‘queer’ that serves as a foundation for this chapter in support:

Most broadly conceived, the field of transgender studies is concerned with anything that disrupts, denaturalizes, rearticulates, and makes visible the normative linages we generally assume to exist between the biological specificity of the sexually differentiated human body, the social roles and statues that a particular form of body is expected to occupy, the subjectively

⁶⁹ S/he is “pronounced ‘sea,’ like the ocean” and hir is pronounced “like here and now” (Feinberg 71).

experienced relationship between a gendered self and social expectations of gender-role performance, and the cultural mechanisms that work to sustain or thwart specific configurations of gendered personhood. (Stryker 3)

The following section will therefore read *Misfortune* as a queer revision of the classic “Sleeping Beauty” focussed on a transgendered protagonist and the manner in which hir development troubles normative and oppositional identity categories as well as the trajectory of heteronormative sexual development. Told from the perspective of an elderly Rose looking back on hir life, *Misfortune* starts by tracing how s/he was born with “less than nothing” and within “a few hours” gained “everything” as the adopted heir to the “Loveall legacy” (Stace 518, 79). “That,” s/he explains, is “why they called me Miss Fortune” (Stace 79). However, as this play on the word ‘misfortune’ and the title of the novel suggests, baby Rose’s rescue by the wealthiest man in England, Lord Geoffroy Loveall, is also the origin of the misery s/he is set to suffer as a transgendered subject.

“Wake Me from a Century’s Sleep”: Queering the “Sleeping Beauty” Fairy Tale

Rose’s tale starts with a discarded baby on a London rubbish heap, “a bundle of rags” saved from “the mouth of a stray dog” (Stace 40). The effeminate and unmarried Lord Loveall who rescues and calls her Rose Old in memory of his dead sister, Dolores,⁷⁰ adopts her as the heir to his fortune and “present[s]” her to his dying mother, claiming her to be the “next Lady Loveall” (Stace 38). However, this rose has an expected thorn, and the young lady Loveall is in fact a biological boy, something that the troubled Lord, devastated by the early loss of his sister – his “*raison d’être*”, “his favourite plaything and his preferred companion” – cannot accept in spite of the fact that he is “made *aware* of it” (Stace 26, 91; emphasis in original). Confident that the Loveall fortune is safe from scheming relatives, regardless of the gender of the foundling heir, Lord Geoffroy’s mother dies and in order to ensure the seeming legitimacy of Rose’s claim to the Loveall fortune, Geoffroy hastily marries Anonyma Wood, the resident librarian and “Dolores’s ex-tutor”, and they pass the young Rose off as their own child (Stace 48). Sure that the young Lord – with his nerves “severely weakened” by the death of his mother – cannot presently face the truth, it is decided to keep the baby’s birth sex a secret “for the time being”, “until the appropriate moment” when “[h]is lordship will doubtless be able to receive [such] intelligence with more equanimity” (Stace 91-92). It is argued that it “is a good

⁷⁰ Rose Old is an anagram for Dolores.

while before a boy need be breeched” and that there would “surely [be] no harm in keeping one in skirts for short while”; in fact at the time, “there would be nothing unusual about it” at all (Stace 91).⁷¹ One thing leads to another and the moment of revelation is postponed time and time again until a pubescent and ungainly Rose begins to explore questions of sex, gender and what exactly it is that “separate[s] boys and girls” (Stace 189). Readers amusingly learn that “[t]hings g[e]t [bad] the year [she] learn[s] to shave” and as Rose blossoms into a bearded puberty, her father becomes desperately ill and “the date of revelation, which had already been deferred so much longer than [...] imagined” is “pushed back further still”, this time with disastrous consequences (Stace 185, 181).

While there is very little that separates Rose from Stephen, the first of the two servants’ children that are her “schoolmates and [her] constant companions”, it is a different story altogether with Sarah (Stace 119). Rose is aware that she is not “growing up as quickly as [Sarah]” and that if they wear “the same clothes, they h[a]ng differently” (Stace 186). While Sarah is soft, Rose “bristle[s] under [her] clothes” and in contrast to Sarah’s developing curves, her body “growing all round”, Rose is “growing straight up” and feels “angular and bony”, made of “straight, simple lines” (Stace 186). She, however, soon discovers that this is not the only difference and during a night of fumbling exploration that has become part of a “comfortable routine” in which Rose sneaks off to Sarah’s room each night, she discovers that while she has a penis – something that she assumes is completely normal for the girl she believes herself to be – Sarah has “only damp warm absence” between her legs (Stace 216, 219). In shock and horror, Rose flees from the room and her life and self begin to fall apart. She discovers both her male sex and foundling blood and after her father’s death, it is decided that she will “reveal the truth” of her birth sex “as soon as possible” (Stace 237).

From here on, Rose’s story turns to tragedy: greedy relatives move in to question her sanity as well as her right to inheritance and in the face of their abuse and her own confusion, she “[sinks] into inertia”, unable to “[protest] even the most offensive of invasions” until she finally decides to flee Love Hall and put an end to her misery by killing herself. The place she chooses for her suicide holds special significance as a site from Ovid’s *Transformations*: the mythical spring where the female sprite, Salamcis, falls in love with and accosts the man,

⁷¹ As Majorie B. Garber notes, “infants and small children ha[d] for hundreds of years been dressed alike, in frocks” and “breeching” acted as “a rite of passage”, a “sartorial definition of maleness and incipient adulthood, as, in later periods, was the all-important move from short pants to long” (“Introduction” 1).

Hermaphroditus, pulling him under while “begging the heavens that the two of them [will] never part” (Stace 131). Salmacis’ prayer is answered and man and woman “become a single body”, mythology’s first hermaphrodite (Stace 131). As the story goes, “Hermaphroditus curse[s] the pool” and it is at this cursed, yet highly symbolic spot that Rose plans to drown herself when she absconds. Months later she arrives in Bodrum, bruised and much abused, and with the help of a girl named Franny, she finds the spring only to be rescued from suicide by Stephen who arrives in the nick of time. Whilst in the water with Stephen, a cathartic scene reminiscent of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus’ transformation ensues and a tired and hallucinating Rose finally makes peace with her transgender identity, later to confess that “[s]omething had happened at the spring, but the metamorphosis was nothing to do with [her] body” (Stace 373).

When Rose wakes from her ordeal, s/he is a new being, much like Hermaphroditus himself. Claiming and even accentuating hir transgender identity, s/he returns home to hir ‘family’ – a bunch of “fugitives, exiles, and nonconformists” now living in the house of a London relative. She enters into a romantic and sexual relationship with Sarah, who accepts hir for who and what s/he is. With the help of a ballad telling the story of an “abandoned baby saved from the hounds” and the stunted songwriter who wrote it after witnessing hir rescue all those years ago, Rose also discovers hir true heritage and in a marvellous turn of events, s/he turns out to be the true and legitimate heir to Love Hall and the Loveall fortune. Eighteen months later, Rose, accompanied by Sarah, their new-born babe and the rest of their household, sets off to reclaim Love Hall and a fairy-tale-esque happy ending. The story concludes with an aged and dying Rose looking back on hir life, happily reminiscing on the day they “returned to Love Hall” and conscious of the fact that s/he “had been put on earth to challenge convention” (Stace 515, 518).

While several reviewers have picked up on the intertextual nature of *Misfortune*, with Julie Wittes Schlack, for instance, describing the novel as “a tongue-in-cheek homage to Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, Dickens’s *Bleak House* and Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*”, I have yet to read a review conscious of its references to the classic fairy tale, “Sleeping Beauty” or its German counterpart, “Briar Rose”.⁷² As one of the most well-known and enduring fairy tales of our

⁷² *Misfortune* is a weighty and intricate novel with many detours and only scattered references to “Sleeping Beauty” – references which together would probably fill only one of the 528 pages – and yet as I will show, enough to support my reading of the story as a revisionist fairy tale.

time, there exists many different versions of this tale and as Maria Tatar notes in “Show and Tell: Sleeping Beauty as Verbal Icon and Seductive Story”, it “continue[s] to turn up in locations both unlikely and obvious” (142). A novel about gender bending at first seems an unlikely location for such an intertextual fairy tale appearance, but as Jack Zipes notes, “Sleeping Beauty” is “about female and male stereotypes”, an assertion which Tatar explores in more detail when she notes that the tale “so patently creates a gender divide between the comatose slumbering princess and the adventurous prince” (“Fairy Tale as Myth” 153; “Show” 144). With “the spectacle of a passive princess waiting to be awakened by her prince”, “Sleeping Beauty” therefore has “all the markings of a classically normative heterosexual fairy-tale plot” and as such, it makes for fertile ground from which to attempt a queer revision concerned with gender-bending and non-normative sexuality (Seifert, “Queer Time” 21).

While the details vary between versions of the tale, the basic plot of “Briar Rose” remains constant. It is the story of a princess born to royal parents desperate to conceive. Already privileged and “of such beauty” that the king orders a celebration in her honour, she is “bestowed magical gifts” and traditional feminine virtues by twelve good fairies – and here the numbers vary between versions – but cursed by the slighted thirteenth fairy or witch who is not invited (Grimm 70). In a curse made unforgettable by the 1959 Disney version of the tale, *Sleeping Beauty*, and spun afresh for a whole new generation in the more recent film revision *Maleficent* (2014), it is proclaimed that the “princess shall indeed grow in grace and beauty, loved by all who meet her” as her benefactresses promise, but that “before the sun sets on her sixteenth birthday, she will prick her finger on the spindle of spinning wheel and fall into a sleep like death, a sleep from which she will never awaken” (*Maleficent*). In the Grimm Brothers’ and Perrault’s versions, the impassable curse is quickly tempered by a waiting good fairy who states that it will only last “a hundred years” before she wakes, and in the Disney versions, the curse becomes traversable by “true love’s kiss” (70; 84). Despite the king’s best efforts to rid the kingdom of spinning wheels and so save his daughter from her fate, the young princess finds a secluded tower and an old woman spinning, pricks her finger as foretold and falls into a hundred-year slumber. At the end of the hundred years, she awakes to the kiss of a prince who has braved the thicket of thorns which grew around the palace

while she slept. Hasty nuptials, and by association also the classic heterosexual happily-ever-after, ensue soon after.⁷³

Having not only chosen to name the main protagonist of his tale Rose, but also titling the ballad of her salvation “The Rose and the Briar” for the “the Loveall coat of arms” emblazoned on the carriage that rescues her, Stace makes a direct (if inverted) reference to the Grimm brothers’ version of the classic tale, “Briar Rose” named for the “lovely sleeping [...] princess” who “came to be called” by that name during her hundred-year slumber (Stace 366, 28; Grimm 71). The fact that Stace’s protagonist’s “first memory proper finds [her] sitting [...] on a rose-patterned mat” with a “small white fence around [her]”, suggestive of the wall of roses that protects the sleeping girl in the classic, as well as the many references to her wealthy, privileged and sheltered life further likens her to the fairy tale princess (Stace 105). Particularly Rose’s assertion that her father “would not fail in his protection of [her]” and that she “would be shielded entirely, the whole house arranged for [her] comfort and safe passage through life” reminds one of the fairy tale king’s attempt to “protect his beloved child from”, interestingly enough “*misfortune*”, and the all-enveloping sleep that “spread[s] over the entire palace” as Briar Rose herself slumbers behind a guarding “thorn thicket” (Grimm 71; Stace 108, emphasis my own).

If the intertextual use of the rose and briar is not obvious enough, Stace also gives Rose more than one sobriquet to herald her status as a revised Sleeping Beauty. While her full name, Rose Old is an anagram for Dolores, the sister Lord Geoffrey loses, the addition of “Old” to “Rose” is also a reference to Sleeping Beauty’s hundred year slumber and subsequent ‘age’, regardless of the fact that her body does not seem to mature while she sleeps. Seifert notes in his reading of the classic fairy tale that “the princess, thanks to her hundred-year sleep, is a living anachronism – the past living in the present” (“Queer Time” 25). As such, a further reference to Rose as “the young ancient” by a relative and the fact that “[she] earn[s] the nickname ‘Maiden Century’” after the annual cricket match both bring to mind the adolescent centenarian that is woken by her first kiss in the classic fairy tale (Stace 139, 180).

Stace also incorporates certain formulaic elements of the “Sleeping Beauty” storyline into the plot of the novel and as Rose grows we watch her life follow the trajectory of that of her

⁷³ Albeit in the lesser-known second half of Perrault’s version of the tale, the happily-ever-after is postponed for a while when Sleeping Beauty discovers that her new mother-in-law is an ogress.

classic namesake. It starts with Lord Geoffroy presenting Rose to his bed-ridden mother in a staged ceremony meant to correspond to the fated celebration in the classic. Rose is presented in a “beautiful christening dress” and a “baby carriage of astonishing splendour” and as she is announced to be the “next Lady Loveall” with the immediate promise of “a great marriage”, it is suggested that she will enjoy every privilege (and possibly beauty and grace) that befits the station bestowed upon her by the loving father who claims her as “[his] daughter” (Stace 42, 41, 38). These gifts are, however, soon thwarted by his mother’s discovery of the child’s “small but unmistakable pink twig” and, “laughing hysterically”, she breaks the spell he has spun and counters his announcement by “introducing him to the new *Lord Loveall*”, shouting “[i]t’s a boy!” more than once (Stace 42, emphasis my own).

This truth then, the truth of the baby’s biological sex, is the curse Lady Loveall, who resembles a witch in all but name,⁷⁴ utters; the ‘prick’ fated to interrupt Rose’s charmed life at a later date. In turning the spindle into a metaphor for a penis, Stace therefore echoes popular psychoanalytic readings of “Sleeping Beauty” as for instance made by Bruno Bettelheim.⁷⁵ Reading what he calls the “Freudian symbolism” of the tale, Bettelheim notes that “it does not take much imagination to see the possible sexual connotations of the distaff” for “as soon as the girl touches it, she pricks her finger” (Bettelheim 232- 233). Thus, when Geoffroy chooses to ignore this pronouncement, he – like the king in the classic – does everything in his power to rid his kingdom of spindles, distaffs and anything else representing male sexuality. His accomplices play along, trying to save the foundling child from the ‘misfortune’ of being born a boy when all her adoptive father wants is a “baby girl” to be “[his] Dolores” (Stace 71, 42). So they carry on avoiding “the truth”, the spindle if you will, the impending prick that keeps drawing “attention to itself” beneath Rose’s dress, for the next fifteen years, until Rose’s first heterosexual encounter and another prick – or in this case the absence of one – sends her into a spiral of despair and a crisis of identity⁷⁶ (Stace 186, 237).

⁷⁴ As an intensely unpleasant woman with a “gnarled” face, who defies death in spite of the fact that she is “near death” for years, she is “dressed entirely in black” and flanked by “two black terriers” likened to Cerberus, the many-headed hound of hell that guards the underworld in Greek mythology (Stace 24 -32).

⁷⁵ Although Bruno Bettelheim and his psychoanalytic interpretations of classic fairy tales have been discredited and critiqued in many areas of fairy tale studies, most notably by Zipes in “On the Use and Abuse of Folk and Fairy Tales with Children”, I think this aspect of his reading remains useful, particularly with regards to Stace’s novel.

⁷⁶ I say ‘heterosexual’ because Rose is biologically male and Sarah is biologically female, and it is their corporeal differences that are responsible for Rose’s discovery, but as I will discuss later, the fact that both of them still identify as girls at this point complicates such a reading and really makes it a lesbian encounter.

Like Sleeping Beauty who falls into a hundred-year slumber after pricking her finger, Rose enters an apathetic and dreamlike state after her discovery. She spends the “next days, weeks, months [...] in bed”, her “body lay[ing] limp and useless” claiming that: “[i]nside it was a strange dream that hadn’t yet stopped, like the dream you have in which you wake up and you’re still asleep and then you wake up again. My whole life wasn’t real. Wake me up” (Stace 227, 224, 227). We also see reference to her as a “female somnambule”, French for somnambulist or sleepwalker, and we read that she “[sinks] into inertia” and feels both “prematurely old” and “like a corpse” (Stace 242, 282 -283). These descriptions are a clear reference to the classic Briar Rose whom Tatar describes as the “the most passive [...] fairy tale heroine of all” and whom Dworkin cites when she argues that most fairy tale princesses are as good as “dead”; “catatonia” being their “most winning quality” (“Show” 142; 42).

Such a dream state even continues after Rose flees Love Hall and the third section of the novel is called “Land of Dreams”, a reference to the location of the spring she travels to in “Bodrum”, which “Homer called [...] The Land of Dreams”, but also indicative of her mental and sexual ennui (Stace 297; 325). Here she once again states: “I felt as though I had slept in a nightmare and woken into a dream. I felt that no matter how many times I opened my eyes, I would never properly wake” (Stace 324). Finally, in what is perhaps the most overt reference to the Sleeping Beauty tale, Sarah calls out to Rose at their reunion and Rose notes that she spoke in wonder, “as though my name might bring me back to life from stone, wake me from a century’s sleep” (Stace 418).

That there is a sexual element to Rose’s inertia and apathy, her dream state unmistakably related to her uncertain sexual and gendered identity, is clear early on. She admits that:

I had used to pleasure myself in bed with thoughts of Sarah and Stephen, but now I was unable, wanting no part of the filth and the heavy breathing. I knew where it led. I had no urges, no physical needs. (Stace 283)

Later, in Bodrum, when Franny tries to seduce Rose dressed as a man, we see a similar aversion and apathy when she states that she had “forgotten [her] own sexual needs” and tries to make Franny understand “how much [she does not] want to” have sex, “[her] cock, remorseful and impenetrable, lay[ing] twisted underneath [her] hand” (Stace 344-345).

In this sense, Stace's intertextual use of the "Sleeping Beauty" fairy tale once again resonates with the psychoanalytic interpretation offered by Bettelheim when he makes an explicitly sexual reading of the tale and argues that "[h]owever great the variations in detail, the central theme of all versions of 'Sleeping Beauty' is that, despite all attempts on the part of parents to prevent their child's sexual awakening, it will take place nonetheless" (Bettelheim 231). For Bettelheim then, the pricking of the finger suggests a moment of early sexual experience or a premature "sexual awakening" after which the female protagonist "withdraws[s] into [herself]" represented by the long sleep (231, 225). During this time of introspection she is "protected against all suitors – i.e. premature sexual encounters – by an impenetrable wall of thorns", but when she "has finally gained both physical and emotional maturity and is ready for love, and with it for [presumably heterosexual] sex and marriage, that which is impenetrable gives away" (Bettelheim 233). Her "awakening from a long sleep" and the "arrival of the prince" therefore represents a "sexual fulfilment" when "the time is ripe" and "an awakening to [...] selfhood", the "birth of a higher ego" (234). Stace's retelling, however, complicates this straightforward tale of heteronormative sexual and gender development. And while *Misfortune* remains "a story of sexual awakening and self-discovery" as the *Kirkus Review* suggests, it is also "disconcertingly effective in its challenge to conventional sexual identity", as is argued by Julie Wittes Schlack (19; n.pag.). As Rose veers between femininity and masculinity and experiences bisexuality, lesbianism and even moments of gay homosexuality, both knowingly and unknowingly, Stace presents a narrative that is anything but conventional in its portrayal of sex, gender and sexuality as well as the apparently causal and mimetic relationship between the three.

"Girls were [...] Made Not Born": Lady Rose Loveall, Femininity and Gender as Socially Constructed

Although biologically male, Rose's feminine gender identity comes into being after what she identifies as "[her] second beginning, [her] rebirth" as Rose Old Loveall (Stace 79). She pragmatically observes: "I was male? Yes. I would be brought up as a girl? Yes" (Stace 98). This unconventional upbringing might initially be commanded by the adoptive father she later identifies as "a madman" needing to "satisfy a deluded impulse of his own", but it is made possible through the "connivance" of her adopted mother, who "believe[s] above else that this [is] the right course of action [...] for the baby she h[olds] in her arms" (Stace 340, 92). Spurred on by her readings of the fictional poetess, Mary Day, Rose's mother "believe[s]"

that every human being is part male and part female and that the truly poetic mind should harness both these forces” (Stace 97):

In Mary Day’s notebooks [...] she had read: ‘God created man male and female. Adam, the only parturient male, was created both man and woman. Until we deny any distinction, we shall not feel the pure poetry of the eternal in our lungs with its breath.’ [...] To Day, the separation of these two sexes represented deterioration from the original perfection and fruitfulness of the imagined undivided sexuality. [...] My mother thought of all of this in much more practical terms: no person was either completely masculine or completely feminine. When men were too manly, they were as inept as women who were too feminine. [...] It seemed obvious to her [...] that the idea of the androgyne had practical and useful applications for the potential of humanity here on earth.

And with me [...] she had literally in her hands, in her arms, a chance to test her theories. A baby’s inner sense of self was neither male nor female, until society told it which role it was to assume. (Has this been entirely discredited yet? If not, it will be.) Boys and girls were therefore made not born, and I would be made. I would without a doubt be the most adorable and original child ever born, and an even more successful adult. Perhaps I would be the most perfect person in the world, a symbolic challenge to every assumption on heaven or earth. My mother was giving me the greatest gift that she could offer. (Stace 97-98)

Thus, while it “[isn’t] her idea to bring [Rose] up in dresses”, Rose’s mother conspires because it allows her to put her theories to the test (Stace 171). As Rose observes: “I had been everyone’s victim: my father’s replacement for Dolores, my mother’s experiment, Mary’s theory made flesh” (Stace 228). It is Mary’s theories, and particularly the reference to “[b]oys and girls [being] made not born”, later clarified by the assertion that “[w]e c[o]me into the world neutral and it [is] society that nurture[s] us into our roles” that give voice to a social constructionist view of gender and echo Simone de Beauvoir’s most famous statement from *The Second Sex*, namely that “[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Stace 98, 241; 295). According to Butler, this “distinguished contribution” by de Beauvoir

“distinguishes sex from gender” in a way that is “crucial to the longstanding feminist effort to debunk the claim that anatomy is destiny” (“Sex and Gender” 35). In “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*”, Butler writes:

With [this] distinction intact, it is no longer possible to attribute the values or social functions of women to biological necessity, and neither can we refer meaningfully to natural or unnatural gendered behaviour: all gender is by definition unnatural. Moreover, if the distinction [between sex and gender] is consistently applied, it becomes unclear whether being a given sex has any necessary consequence for becoming a given gender. The presumption of a causal or mimetic relation between sex and gender is undermined. (Butler, “Sex and Gender” 35)

She later asserts that the fact that “one ‘becomes’ one’s gender seems [...] to imply” that “not only is gender no longer dictated by anatomy, but anatomy does not seem to pose any necessary limits to the possibilities of gender” (Butler, “Sex and Gender” 45). This is certainly true for Rose in the “earliest years” of her life when “dresses [seem] completely ordinary” because she “[knows] no different” (Stace 119). Stating that a child knows only what “he (or she) is told”, Rose *becomes* the girl she is taught to be by those around her (119):

Everybody, particularly my father, treated me as the epitome of a perfect, beautiful young girl. Even with my heavier eyebrows, my aquiline nose, the depression in my chin (which in a girl might well have been called a dimple, but was clearly a cleft) and my long legged gait, I felt entirely feminine. (Stace 173)

In spite of being born male, Rose subjectively identifies as feminine and “take[s] on” – in the words of Butler – the feminine gender so successfully that even later, after she discovers “the secret of [her] sex”, she confesses that “[she] may have been male but [her] *self*”, her essence or core identity, “was female: [her] voice, [her] way of drinking tea, [her] way of sitting – nothing was properly masculine, nor could [she] handle the props in a manly manner” (Butler, “Sex and Gender” 42; Stace 109, 240, emphasis my own).

It is such a mention of ‘props’ which of course brings to mind Butler’s frequently misinterpreted theory of gender as performative – as constructed through a repeated set of “acts, gestures, enactments” which “produce” or “create the illusion of an interior and organising gender core”, but does so “*on the surface of the body*” (*Gender Trouble* 185-186; emphasis in original). As Butler explains in *Gender Trouble*, the text which pioneered this theory: “the view that gender is performative [seeks] to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body” (xv). Thus reference to Rose’s “voice, [her] way of drinking tea” and “[her] way of sitting” as not being properly masculine but by association, feminine, like the gender core she assigns her true “self”, are all references to a feminine performativity of gender which she finds herself incapable of unlearning. This gives credence to Butler’s explanation that although gender is performative and produced through repetition, it is not something one can put on and take off at will (Stace 173).

In Butler’s reading of De Beauvoir, which is dated before the publication of *Gender Trouble*, she asserts that “being female and being a woman are two very different sorts of being” and that “to be a woman is to become a woman” through “an active process of appropriating, interpreting, and reinterpreting received cultural possibilities” (“Sex and Gender” 35- 36). Anticipating what she later calls “the imitative strategies” through which “the naturalistic effects of heterosexualised genders are produced” in an article titled “Imitation and Gender Insubordination”, Butler carries on to assert that “the verb ‘become’ contains a consequential ambiguity” which suggests that “gender is not only a cultural construction imposed upon identity, but in some sense [also] a process of constructing ourselves”, a purposeful and “self-reflective process” or “project” (127; “Sex and Gender” 36).

As Rose grows and becomes more aware of the physical difference between Sarah’s rounding body and her own “boyish shape”, she “spen[ds] as much time [...] as possible” in the older girl’s company and “trie[s] to *imitate* her” in an attempt to be more feminine (Stace 187, emphasis my own). Similarly, when confronted by the “enviable languor of movement” and overt femininity of her cousin Prudence, who “[is] beautiful” and “at seventeen [...] boast[s] a more advanced version of the shape that Sarah’s [body is] inching toward”, Rose – in a scene particularly evocative of the “volitional and appropriative set of acts” through which Butler suggests “we become our genders” – tries to do an “*impression*” of Prudence who “sway[s] from side to side” in a way that “complement[s] her body” (Stace 189, emphasis my own;

“Sex and Gender” 37). While Rose perceives herself as “look[ing] like a monkey” when she tries, a supposition “confirmed” by Stephen, “Sarah [is] immediately able to adapt her own walk to the sway” (Stace 189). Thus it seems that Stace employs a social constructionist view of gender evocative of de Beauvoir’s and Butler’s theories regarding gender as a performative and imitative project taken on by the gendered subject. And yet, the fact that Rose fails in this imitation of femininity while Sarah succeeds is but one of many moments in which Stace complicates such theories by implying that Rose fails in her a performance because of her male anatomy.

Unsurprisingly, “the rules [become] more complicated for [Rose]” as she leaves childhood behind and she receives “extra tuition” in what she terms “knowledge of genteel *ladylike* behaviour” from her parents (Stace 128). In the “privacy of [her] bedroom” Rose’s mother teaches her “[her] own code of personal conduct” which includes the imperatives to “never disrobe in front of others”, to always “keep [her] bod[y] as well covered as possible” and to “never perform any of [her] toilet in front of others” (Stace 128-129). This is of course done to ensure that Rose’s male sex remains a secret. Such measures prove successful at first, but as Rose nears puberty, matters prove a little more thorny (in both a literal and figurative sense) and Stace once again seems to challenge the Butlerian assertion that “anatomy does not seem to pose any necessary limits to the possibilities of gender” (“Sex and Gender” 45).

“[T]all for [her] age”, with a “boyish shape”, “a small cleft in [her] chin”, a voice “alternating between rasping tremble and yodelling alto” and a puzzling member that “[brings] attention to itself” beneath her dress “in humiliating ways”, Rose also begins to grow a beard at the age of thirteen and finds herself “more in need of the razor” than Stephen who “receive[s] a cutthroat razor” at the same age (Stace 143, 187, 143, 189, 186, 185). Together with references to her “tomboy” nature and her “body long[ing]” to “join in” the rough play enjoyed by boys, such “signs of [male] virility” complicate Rose’s performance of femininity to such an extent that “[f]or the first time in [her] life, [she] notice[s] a look of something other than love in [her] father’s eyes” (Stace 123, 173, 271, 189). Recognising a “look” of “distaste”, Rose notes that “most fathers can feel flickerings of unease when their daughters bloom into womanhood: it summons conflicting feelings within them. Not my father. He shunned me when I didn’t bloom at all” (Stace 190).

Stace's portrayal of Rose's *bildung* therefore clearly also references essentialist views of gender in which Rose cannot escape the corporeal reality of her male body and the physical signs of her masculinity, which complicate her performance of femininity. And yet, unwilling or unable to reveal the truth on account of her husband's failing mental and physical health, Anonyma continues to maintain what she now begins to term the "the artifice" of it all while assuring a confused Rose of her "rightness":

‘All children worry about whether they are right or not, darling, and the truth is that you are all right,’ she said as she nevertheless worked on my rightness, showing me new ways to take care of myself, to look more beautiful. First tweezers, then razor. [...] Our toilet took longer and methods became more complex, ever more elaborate combinations of face powder, mascara, and rouge. Girls shaved after all. (Stace 190)

This is a beautiful moment in the text, representative of the constructed and performative nature of all gender. From an anatomical point of view, yes, Rose is a man trying to impersonate a woman. Such a reading and any references to cross-dressing is, however, complicated by the fact that her subjective gender identity is feminine and at this stage she truly believes herself to be a girl simply doing what *all* girls do. In the process, she shows how gender is just "a surface sign, a signification on and with the public body that produces [the] illusion of an inner depth" (Butler, "Imitation" 134). By making reference to them "work[ing] on [her] rightness" and applying "elaborate" makeup to make her "look more beautiful", Stace zooms in on what Butler calls the "mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn and done", particularly femininity with its props and costumes and 'stage' makeup ("Imitation" 127).

As Rose is simply participating in a more complicated form of the toilet that many women perform, I suggest Stace uses her to expose "how all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation" (Butler, "Imitation" 127). As such, he brings to life the Butlerian assertion that all "gender is drag" in the sense that "it is an imitation that regularly produces the ideal it attempts to approximate", "a performance that produces the illusion of an inner sex or essence [...] on the skin, through the gesture, the move, the gait" – "that array of corporeal theatrics understood as gender presentation" ("Imitation" 134). Furthermore, Rose's assertion that "[g]irls shave after all" in the face of her earlier declaration that "[she] knew that girls didn't

shave” shows how “to be a gender, whether man, woman or, otherwise, is to be engaged in an ongoing cultural interpretation of bodies” that involves a constant interpreting and reinterpreting of ever-changing scripts and signals (Stace 190, 185; “Sex and Gender” 36).

“It isn’t Just the Clothes that Maketh the Man”: Lord Ose Loveall, Masculinity and the Question of Gender Essentialism

While there are definite moments in *Misfortune* where Stace seems to employ an essentialist view of gender and presents Rose’s male body as an obstacle to her femininity, he also doubtlessly questions what Butler calls the “causal lines” between sex and gender, challenging “any claim to the origin, the inner, the true, and the real” gender of an individual as based on their biological sex (Butler, “Imitation” 131). This is particularly true of his portrayal of Rose after she discovers her male birth sex. Finding herself “unable to be what [her] body designate[s]”, in other words, *a man*, Rose constantly refers to the masculinity she assumes as a play, a ploy and a self-conscious performance without any truth or substance to it (Stace 359). After her initial decision to ‘become a man’, we read that

I would remain Lady Rose throughout the short but respectful mourning period, during which I would continue to wear the dresses appropriate to my name. Meanwhile, with my mother’s help, I would ready myself so that I could for the first time meet the world *in character*. (Stace 237, emphasis my own)

Rose begins to “dress the part”, but seems to have been acculturated to her feminine identity so successfully that she finds her male wardrobe unbearable⁷⁷ and concludes that “[i]t isn’t just the clothes that maketh the man, whatever they say – and so I [am] no more a man by disguising myself in men’s clothes” (Stace 237, 240). Consequently, after her initial failure to abruptly take on a male identity and a male wardrobe without “slipping back into [the] long

⁷⁷ In spite of the fact that Rose starts her life as ‘a girl’ feeling that a skirt is a “disadvantage” with prevents her from “get[ting] the required speed or distance” in a stone skipping contest with Stephen, already breeched at this point, she later expresses the exact opposite feelings with regards to her masculine clothing and goes as far as likening it to a “two-legged cage” and an “instrument of torture” (Stace 167, 195, 241, 240, 239). Having clearly been acculturated to her skirts, she now complains that she is “uncomfortable in everything [her] alternate wardrobe offer[s]” and that in contrast to the male suit that “chafe[s], burn[s] and abrade[s]” from all sides, “squeeze[s] and trap[s]” her and “immobilizes her both mentally and physically”, “a large skirt is the most convenient and comfortable thing in the world” (Stace 238 -240).

dresses and stockings” she finds so comfortable “as often as [she] [can]”, Rose decides to “try another strategy” and “play [her]self in a little more gently” (Stace 240). However, even after “cultivating” a “deeper voice” with “some effort” and “rehears[ing] her new life” by “learning to walk and speak, to hold [her]self and to dance, when to bow and when not to” and thereby making a reference to the cultural scripts that dictate masculinity as much as femininity, Rose remarks that while she “became well-practised in [her] new role”, it remained a “male disguise”, a surface masculinity written on her skin, while “[be]neath” she remained “plain old [feminine] Rose” (Stace 293, 292, 242). While she finds herself “willing to be Lord Rose”, Rose feels as if she is “still pretending to be a man, acting a part that [feels] entirely unnatural to [her]” (Stace 256). Thus in spite of the fact that she is biologically a man, Rose neither perceives herself as male or manages to successfully perform masculinity. As long as her gendered identity remains feminine, it seems that Rose’s performance can be little more than an impersonation of masculinity.

And yet, the fact that Rose’s gender identity remains feminine also does not allow her to live as a woman. This becomes apparent when she dons her feminine attire in order to appear as woman for the first time after she discovers her male sex. After much effort and in spite of the fact that she allows herself to be “pampered with pleasure”, “luxuriate[s] in [her] satins” and even “feel[s] sentimental about [the] facial preparations [she] had previously disliked” – “delight[ing]” in the application of plaster, carmine and powder, Rose “nearly crie[s]” when she “beh[olds] the finished product” (Stace 243):

I barely looked human, let alone female, and I reminded myself of nothing so much as Mrs. Manly. I could be a low comedian from now on, but nothing truly feminine, however thick my mask. I saw myself as a monstrous caricature [...]. Since that fatal reflection, I have worn women’s clothes to draw attention to my true sex, to advertise the forbidden pleasures beneath, but never pretended to be female or thought I could fool anyone into believing I was. (Stace 143)

Raising more questions regarding the relationship between sex and gender than he answers, Stace offers us several other instances of cross-dressing and gender impersonation and a whole host of characters engaged in some or other form of gender-bending. Out of such an overwhelming selection of queer characters, there are two transvestite performances or cross-

dressed identities I would like to consider in more detail, the first being the Mrs. Manly Rose mentions above and the second, her own pretend-play identity as Lord Ose.

The first performance, by an actor with the “stage name” of “Mrs. Manly”, takes place during a show by a “troupe of strolling players” who have come to Love Hall and shows one of the “male actors appear[ing] as a woman” (Stace 169). He “[does] not make an attractive female”, nor is he supposed to, with “his bosom absurdly inflated, his cheeks daubed with the bright red circles, and his wig a bird’s nest of blond curls” (Stace 169). While Mrs. Manly displays all the outer trappings of a woman, they are exaggerated and purposefully counterfeit, allowing him to still signal the unmistakably male body and identity beneath. As such, even Rose “at [her] young age and with [her] weak grasp of facts” finds the performance “silly”, likening it “to Stephen wearing Sarah’s clothes” (Stace 169). Mrs. Manly amuses all, eliciting “gales of laughter” from everyone except Lord Loveall and after a brief consultation with the stage manager, “the ‘usurper of the skirt’ [is] ushered behind the scenery” and replaced by the “attractive young lady” (Stace 169, 170). A “cross-dressing [farce]” marked by what Stryker calls the “deliberate misrepresentation of the relationship between representation/gender and referent/sex”, Mrs. Manly’s performance has “ostensibly comic consequences” that seem to veer towards an essentialist view which suggests that anatomical sex defines gender in a way that cannot be negated (9).

In truth, Mrs. Manly and the masculine Rose’s performances question more than just the relationship between sex and gender and while neither would necessarily be read as acts of drag specifically, Butler offers a reading of this parodic cultural practice in *Gender Trouble* that serves useful in understanding both performances a little better:

The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed. But we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance. (Butler 187)

Thus, when Rose acts like a man, we have a match between sex and gender performance but a mismatch between gender performance and gender identity since Rose does not feel like the man she acting as, even though she is anatomically male and offers a convincing performance that succeeds in fooling uniformed spectators like Prudence. When Rose pretends to be a woman, her sex is male, her gender identity feminine, and her gender performance feminine, but once again the fact that she is aware of her male sex makes her feminine performance feel false, like a “mask” and “nothing truly feminine” (Stace 143). Mrs. Manly also offers a mismatch between sex and gendered performance, since he is a man acting like a woman, but because his gender identity matches his sex and not the gender performance he offers, the performance is “silly” and obviously false even to Rose, who clearly has limited knowledge of these matters. No matter how one reads and compares these performances, Stace is making no single definitive point about the relationship between anatomical sex, gender identity and gender performance. In fact, his portrayals seem to be purposefully worrying the relationship between these three “dimensions of significant corporeality” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 187).

If such performances are not already unsettling enough, Stace next introduces us to the figure of Lord Ose, the pre-pubescent Rose’s “male persona” (Stace 174). As the narrating Rose comments shortly after the performance by Mrs. Manly, “the play planted ideas in us, some deeper than others” and the most perceptible of these is Rose’s ‘pretend-play’ identity as Lord Ose (Stace 170). Clearly inspired by Mrs. Manly, Stephen suggests that Rose dress up as a pirate in order to help him “kidnap Sarah” and soon their “pirate play [takes] on a more concrete form” as they “[invent] an entirely male character for [her]” (Stace 170; 174):

He may have been Stephen’s idea, but I had made Lord Ose flesh: it was a role I was born to play. Lord Ose always wore exactly what I was wearing, with the addition of a handsome brown tunic tied on by a large belt, the buckle of which dug into Sarah’s midriff. I tried always to do what I thought Ose would do, and this enabled me to save the heroine, and then kiss her, on a number of occasions. (Stace 175)

In the figure of Ose we once again find a discrepancy between Rose’s biological sex, which is male, gendered identity which is female and gendered performance, which is male. And yet, it is not that ‘straightforward’, for Rose is also performing her feminine identity as a girl

pretending to be a boy. For this reason I suggest we add the dimension of performativity here, which is different from a conscious gender performance which is “a piece of theatre staged by a knowing actor” as in the case of Rose pretending to be Ose, or Mrs. Manly pretending to be a woman (Salih 91). When Rose is, however, just ‘being herself’, gender is performative in the sense that it “is not a performance that the prior subject elects to do” and “there is no volitional subject behind the mime who decides which gender it [is]” (Butler, “Imitation” 130). Rather, gender is a “compulsive and compulsory repetition” of the “array of corporeal theatrics understood as gender presentation” and is therefore performative because it “constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express” (Butler, “Imitation” 128,134,130). Thus in this troubling scene, Rose’s biological sex is male, her gendered identity is feminine and her gender performance is masculine while her performative gender remains feminine.

That the name ‘Ose’ effectively fits into ‘R[ose]’ is therefore no coincidence but rather a tongue-in-cheek reference to the many ‘layers’ of Rose, as Ose, that enables Stace to challenge and disrupt any one understanding of gender. And while at first it might seem that he employs Ose to give credit to essentialist understandings of gender, it is more complicated than that. Making use of dramatic irony, Stace has Rose comment that she makes the figure of Ose “flesh” because it is a “role [she] was born to play” (175). Rose of course is ignorant of how very true her statement is while the informed reader knows that both the mention of flesh and birth are meant to make reference to the secret of her biological sex, the ‘true nature’ of her flesh, if you will, and the fact that she is born male. In a similar moment of irony later on, Rose’s parents stumble onto the Stephen and Rose in pirate costume, and Lord Loveall responds with shock. While Lord Geoffroy is incapacitated by the vision of Rose as Ose, Anyonyma “prompts him” to make the “appropriate paternal response” with a “reassuringly dismissive laugh” and the comment: “Children will play dress-up. Rose, you look adorable! Doesn’t she, Geoffroy?” (Stace 170). This seems to break the spell, his “mood change[s] instantly” and we see him reply: “Yes. A lovely boy. She makes a lovely boy. A handsome boy!” (Stace 171). Rose, completely “pleased” by his comments, responds:

It all seemed most natural to me at the time. I did make a good boy. Stephen and I were about the same height and roughly the same build. There were more similarities between us than between Sarah and me, and we shared many of the same interests, to boot. Of course I made a lovely boy! My

father clapped his hands together, and as they disappeared down the corridor, we heard him say: So droll! Such a good little boy she makes. [...] ‘You do make a good boy,’ said Stephen as we went about our evil business of abduction. ‘Better than I’d make a girl.’ (Stace 171)

Again, the reader knows that Rose really *is* a boy and so from an essentialist perspective, it makes sense that she would therefore “make a good boy” (171). The causal relationship between sex and gender seems even more apparent when, in a moment that seems to make a reference to Rose’s earlier likening of Mrs. Manly to Stephen dressed in Sarah’s clothes, Stephen remarks that she makes a “better” boy than he would “make a girl” (Stace 169, 171). The implication is that Stephen could not make as good a girl as Rose makes a boy because he is not really a girl, whereas she really *is* a boy. And yet, the fact that Rose, as a biological boy, has made such a convincing girl that she needs to dress up to be perceived as a boy completely undermines such an argument.

In his portrayal of Rose, Stace not only questions the causal lines between sex and gender, but also between sex, gender, desire and sexuality and so troubles what Butler calls “the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence” or “compulsory heterosexuality” (*Gender Trouble* 185; “Imitation” 134). Such a compulsory heterosexuality not only “presumes that there is first a sex that is expressed through a gender”, whether that be gender identity, gender performance or performative gender, but also that these presumably contingent categories are then expressed through a ‘matching’ sexuality (Butler, “Imitation” 134). Such a “false stabilization of gender” writes Butler, “conceals the gender discontinuities that run rampant within [non-normative] contexts in which gender does not follow from sex, and desire, or sexuality generally, does not seem to follow from gender – indeed, where none of these dimensions of significant corporeality express or reflect one another” (*Gender Trouble* 184-185).

Rose ultimately ends up with Sarah, a relationship that will be explored in more detail shortly, but we cannot overlook her initial bisexuality as she calls Stephen and Sarah “[her] first beau” *and* “[her] first belle”, “pleas[es] [her]self in bed with thoughts of [both]” and cites an erotic dream in which both “[emerge] from the water [...] naked”, “beckon[ing]” her to join them (Stace 119, 283, 229). In the dream, they “[lift] [her] dress over [her] head and [embrace] [her]” and she “feel[s] [her]self getting hard” while Stephen “rubs himself against

[her] and she reache[s] down and [feels]” his equally engorged penis only to then wake to find “[her] hands on [her]self in the same way” (Stace 229-230).

While Rose’s dream of Stephen and Sarah is suggestive of bisexuality, it is also one of several moments of what Jeremiah calls “unwitting queer desire” since Rose is a biological male sexually aroused by another male (139). Rose’s encounters with her uncle Edwig and her cousin Esmond also serve as such, since in both instances the men are aroused by what they perceive to be a girl but still climax after being made aware of her male genitalia. In the first of the two encounters, Edwig fumbles beneath her dress and asks to “touch [her] at the very moment that [he]” climaxes: “Let me inside you,” he begs, “scrabbling around desperately between [her] legs”, seemingly “look[ing] for something that had been misplaced” (Stace 204). Unsure what he means by ‘inside’, Rose, at this point still blissfully unaware of her birth sex, “helpfully [...] push[es] him in the right direction” (Stace 204). He finally “grab[s] hold of [her], groan[s], stiffen[s]” and “chokes”, in an epic climax from which there is no return (Stace 204). The fact that Rose interprets this moment as one that “could have been” induced by “pleasure” but also “could have been pain”, only serves to confirm that while Edwig might die from the shock of the discovery, it might also serve to induce a climax so pleasurable and powerful that his heart gives in from excitement (Stace 204). Such a reading is made all the more plausible by Rose’s later encounter with the hyper masculine Edmund. During this scene, in which she is now conscious of her male sex, Rose teases Edmund until “his passion ha[s] reached such a pitch that he [will] have to give himself over to sensation” and then “lift[s] up [her] dress entirely” to reveal her own penis (Stace 253, 254):

And there we were, exposed, he sticking out of his unbuttoned [pants], obscenely thrusting from his nest of hair, hard up against his stomach. And there was I, too. [...] I looked down at the two of us together: grown men of similar standing.

There was no room for doubt. He started to whimper like a beaten dog. [...] His cock started to spasm involuntarily. I reached down and held my dress back with one hand, while, with the other, I grabbed hold of him. The head bulged purple and, as if in slow motion, he disgorged over his jacket and shirt. He gasped. It had either been unavoidable or, stranger, he liked what he saw. Well, why not? During his passion, he looked away and then swiftly

back again. He moaned and threw his head back as far as he could, stretching his neck muscles to their extreme. He grunted loudly as he finished, and I let go of him. (Stace 254-255)

The fact that Edmund potentially “like[s] what he sees” is made all the more likely by the fact that he “look[s] [...] back” at Rose’s equally engorged member at the moment of climax while it is perfectly possible for him to keep looking away and so spare himself the sight of her maleness. Once again the apparent vigour of his orgasm with his “[loud]” grunt, his “head [thrown] back as far as he could” manage and his “neck muscles [stretching] to their extreme” indicates a powerfully erotic experience and a moment of queer sexual pleasure, unsolicited but nonetheless relished.

Stace’s most confounding disruption of the apparently mimetic relationship between sex, gender and sexuality is, however, through his portrayal of the romantic and sexual relationship that blossoms between Sarah and Rose during the Ose years. Whereas Stephen always plays the villain, Rose, or Lord Ose, remains “the upright hero” who “always rescue[s] Sarah”, their scripted scenarios “often end[ing] with [Rose] carrying Sarah off to [her] bedroom, where, still in character and as dictated not only by [their] scripts but by romance itself, [she/he]⁷⁸ claim[s] her with a victorious kiss” (Stace 174-175). As such, the “first time [they] [kiss]”, Rose’s “lips [feel] awkward” and she “turn[s] away, frustrated” by her ineptness (Stace 175). Sarah, however, “d[raws] her back” and “kisses [her] again” and soon, the “kissing bec[omes] less self-conscious”, Rose’s “technique [being] immeasurably improved by practice and adventurous manoeuvre” (Stace 175). We read that

[f]or Sarah, it grew into quite a habit. The rush of victory always preceded the meeting of lips: the climax of the game. [...] Sometimes at night, often after such triumphant kisses, I tiptoed to her bedroom [...] where we’d lie next to each other on our backs in the dark and giggle. [...] I didn’t know precisely which rules we were breaking, but we had the thrilling feeling of doing wrong. (Stace 176)

⁷⁸ I use “she/he” here instead of “s/he” because although I wish to acknowledge that Rose kisses Sarah as a girl, pretending to be a man, she is not yet conscious of her transgendered identity.

Such “thrilling” episodes soon become “ritual” and it is during one of these nights of fumbling exploration that Rose discovers that there is “nothing” between Sarah’s legs and that they have been different all along (Stace 219). She flees, her crisis of identity ensues and later in the novel, a self-accepting transgender Rose returns to take up the relationship with Sarah exactly where they left off.

It is thoughts of Sarah’s “soft skin, her hair, her body” that rouse Rose from her sexual apathy, her “century’s sleep” and send “blood [...] rushing” to those “parts of [hir] body” she has been “deliberate[ly] den[ying]” and ignoring throughout her journey (Stace 424, 418, 424-425). Thus while Rose is previously “unable to experience pleasure” because she is “alienated from [her] own body” during the journey, as Jeremiah claims, her metamorphosis at the spring, her reunion with Sarah and the new sensations she experiences, allow her to recognise that “[hir] body [is] returning to [hir]”(138; Stace 427). During their first scene of intimacy after her return, Rose and Sarah’s lips therefore “[seal] the agreement” of their love and a naked Rose “collapse[s]” on top of Sarah, crying, unable to yet physically “love [her]” but conscious of the fact that she feels “delirious” and “wide-awake” for the first time in years (Stace 479). They do not consummate their love at this point, but the presence of their baby, a boy named Adam Loveall, later in the text, confirms their union (Stace 509).

At first glance the truth of Rose’s biological sex makes the relationship with Sarah appear heteronormative, establishing a causal relationship between Rose’s sex and her sexuality (the same being true of Sarah) and “ultimately returns” the text to “straight ideals” (Jeremiah 139). And yet, if a girl falls in love with a person who not only perceives herself as a girl but is also perceived as one, then surely the relationship can be defined as lesbian, regardless of the anatomical sex of either? As with every other instance of gender trouble in the novel, Stace gives no definitive answers and complicates any one reading of the relationship between Rose and Sarah. While Sarah therefore undoubtedly identifies Rose as “Rose” and not Ose during their experimentation, asking *her* “[not to] stop” her exploration and enthusiastically “mov[ing] into [her] hand” in what is described as “a constant to-and-fro, an undulation”, it is earlier also made clear that Sarah is attracted to the masculinity Rose exhibits as Ose (Stace 218). This is apparent when, after their first pretend kiss, she notes with “breathless enthusiasm” that Rose “make[s] a very good lord” (Stace 175). Ultimately, DiSchiavi asks the right questions and comes to an agreeable conclusion when he ponders:

If Sarah is attracted to a person who thinks she is a girl, does that make her a lesbian? If Rose thinks she's a girl, even if she's not one from an anatomical standpoint, what does that make her? Eve Sedgwick and Judith Butler have argued that sex and gender are separate issues (sex being anatomical, gender being socially constructed). Which, then, the novel seems to ask, is paramount when it comes to defining one's sexual orientation? (DiSchiavi 43)

DiSchiavi's reading of *Misfortune* therefore echoes my own, not only with the assertion that Stace offers us questions instead of answers but also in the sense that Stace can be understood as engaging with Butler's ideas in his writing. And yet while Stace seems to give no definitive answers to the question of which is more important in defining sexual orientation – sex or gender – I do believe that in his final presentation of Rose as a self-accepting transgender individual, he offers readers some type of 'conclusion' to a tale that questions the origins of gender.

***“Betwixt and Between”*: Rose Loveall, Transgender**

Earlier (on p. 151), I make reference to the psychoanalytic reading of “Sleeping Beauty” that interprets the princess' slumber as a time of sexual dormancy and introspection and her felicitous arousal as an awakening into sexual maturity and selfhood. However, whereas the classic Sleeping Beauty is “the incarnation of perfect femininity” and her “return to the ‘real’ world marks an entrance into heterosexuality”, as is suggested by Bettelheim and Seifert respectively, Stace's revised Briar Rose follows a much less straightforward path (236; “Queer Time” 38). She wakes from her slumber not into heteronormative femininity, but a self-accepting transgender identity that prioritises neither an essentialist nor a social constructionist understanding of gender.

After her ordeal and the crisis of identity that leaves her confused and apathetic, Rose ‘wakes’ to a decision between the male body she is born with or the feminine identity that has been socially constructed during her upbringing. As Stephen “la[ys] out, side by side” a suit and a dress for her to decide between, evidence of his earlier declaration that there would be “[n]o more lying”, no more pretending and that it was “time for [hir] to choose for [hir]self”, Rose is faced by a choice between masculine and feminine signifiers (365). That she ultimately chooses what Helen Davies calls a “conspicuous blurring” of the two is made

apparent by the transgender identity she presents at her homecoming and the sartorial display of gender ambiguity she carefully constructs (170):

As I looked at myself, I licked my fingers and tugged on the short ends of my moustache to gather and twirl them as best I could. I had precisely shaven the middle to reveal the whole philtrum and balanced this absence on my upper lip with a square inch of hair below the centre of my lower. [...] [It] looked most debonair, particularly in the context of my dress. [...] I had made my choice. [...] I stood on the steps in my favourite morning dress, an elegant silk chameleon of mignonette green beneath a mantelet of tarlatan trimmed with darker green ribbon. I closed my eyes and gathered my hands into my muff, like an ingenue before her first season. (Stace 374-375)

Rose's purposefully ambiguous presentation of hir gender identity reminds me of Garber's discussion of Quentin Crisp, a gay icon and "self-advertising effeminate homosexual", who, she writes, was not interested in "passing as a woman" but instead "wanted to be seen and read as who and what he was" and as such "made dress a statement of his difference" ("Breaking" 137-138). That Rose wants to signal hir difference and is not trying to impersonate or pass as a woman is made all the more apparent in the scene in which she is invited to "The Inslip Club" (Stace 383). The invitation comes from a man who initially responds to hir troubling display of both "whiskers" and a "dress" with "shock", and after calling him an "admirer" or rather a "sympathiz[er]", Victoria notes that Rose is "not the only person doing the empress" a word apparently used to describe transvestism (Stace 383-384). Rose responds as follows:

I am not *doing* anything, Victoria. The members of the Inslip Club have nothing in common with me, nor shall I seek their society. Theirs is a hobby: I presume that they impersonate women. I am not doing an impersonation. You cannot imitate that which you really are [...] and what you see now is me. [...] I may present a challenge to others, but I am perfectly happy with who I am. (Stace 384, emphasis in original)

While Rose's assertion that "you cannot impersonate that which you really are" suggests that s/he is claiming a feminine identity, given that moments earlier s/he references "men

impersonating women”, his further statement that what “you see” is what s/he “is” complicates such a reading because what you *see* is both a moustache, a biological signifier of masculinity *and* a dress, a sartorial sign of femininity.

In a sense, this moment and the transgender identity which “may present a challenge to others” but with which Rose confesses to being “perfectly happy” himself, references an earlier, highly symbolic scene in which Lord Geoffroy commissions a custom seesaw for a five-year-old Rose “on the condition that [she] not sit on either end [...] but ride only in the middle” (Stace 136). When Rose, after much anticipation, finally “climb[s] aboard”, we see “Stephen on one end, Sarah on the other, and [Rose], sitting in state, strapped to a small throne in the middle” (Stace 137). As they “[rock] up and down on either side of [Rose], Stephen astride the seesaw, his legs able to give him tremendous lift when he land[s], and Sarah, sidesaddle, pushing back as best she [can]”, the scene seems symbolic of the transgender identity Rose ultimately assumes, unable to prioritise either the male biology she is born with or the feminine gender she is taught (Stace 137). Rose therefore “both reiterates and subverts” the “performative dictations of masculinity and femininity” as Davies suggests, and “reveal[s] that gender identity is a multi-faceted construction which cannot be fixed to an origin” while “simultaneously acknowledging that she cannot transcend the [social and biological] scripts which have shaped her present identity” (170). Thus, Stace’s portrayal of the self-accepting transgender Rose at the end of the novel privileges neither a social constructionist view of gender nor an essentialist one. Rose’s decision to simultaneously be both masculine and feminine instead suggests that gendered identity is shaped by a dialectic combination of both.

At the same time, the very existence of Rose as a transgendered individual and the manner in which she troubles masculine/feminine and homosexual/heterosexual binaries, “transgress[es] and threaten[s]” what Mary K. Bloodsworth-Lugo, in her study of *In-between Bodies*, calls “compartmentalised dichotomous/dualistic borders” and reveals that “many presumed polarities are never quite polar and that identity itself is always a matter of bleeding and extension” (62). The “very existence of trans-people”, writes Bloodsworth-Lugo, “forces a rethinking of concepts such as the meaning and function of gender, the normative nature of sex/gender mappings, and the various complexities of sexual/social identities” (62). Through his portrayal of Rose as a transgender Sleeping Beauty, Stace therefore disrupts a straightforward tale of feminine *bildung* and female sexual development marked by hetero- and

cisnormativity. By offering us a tale littered with gender benders and cross-dressers, hermaphrodites and transvestites, he emphasises not only the fluidity and unfixed nature of oppositional categories like man/woman, femininity/masculinity and heterosexual/homosexual but also unsettles the apparently causal and mimetic relationship between sex, gender and sexuality in a manner that raises more questions than it answers.

While Lo's *Ash* introduces readers to the fluidity synonymous with queer identity categories and Stace's *Misfortune* toys with theories and categories which are unquestionably and potentially even canonically queer, contradictory as that might sound, the two texts under consideration in the next section spin the term in a new and unusual direction. Considering the first and the last stories from Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch* collection, the analysis that follows will focus on intergenerational lesbian love and ageing female identities as gender-dissonant, sexually dissident and queer because they disrupt and challenge the boundaries between young and old, sexual and asexual as well as between the acceptable and the taboo.

**PART TWO:
THE INTERSECTIONALITY OF SEXUALITY, AGE AND CONVENTION IN TWO
STORIES FROM EMMA DONNAGHUE'S *KISSING THE WITCH***

Emma Donoghue has been hailed as “the most prolific Irish writer who takes as her subject women loving women” and as such it is hardly surprising that her collection of revisionist fairy tales, titled *Kissing the Witch*, has been widely recognised for its queer potential and the manner in which it “endeavour[s] to rewrite the heterosexual love plot so central to the fairy tale tradition” (Bensyl in Donoghue, “Swings” 75; Seifert, “Sex, Sexuality” 852). The collection is broken up into thirteen revisionist fairy-tales and, at the end of each tale, the protagonist invites her often older and wiser female antagonist, helper or companion to “tell [her] [her] own story” in response to the repeated question “[w]ho were you before [...]?” (Donoghue 9). As each woman tells her story to the next, Donoghue not only validates in her writing what Adrienne Rich would term “lesbian existence”, but also a wider “lesbian continuum” which includes “a range [...] of woman-identified experience” and “expand[s]” lesbian homosexuality to “embrace many more forms of primary intimacy between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life” (“Compulsory” 648). The success of

this collection as a whole as well as the brilliance of individual tales have been explored by writers like Jennifer Orme, Christina Bacchilega and Martine Hennard Dutheil De La Rochère and collectively they argue that Donoghue’s revisions challenge the patriarchal ideology and heteronormativity implicit in classic fairy tales, offering readers a whole range of norm-disruptive female desires and relationships in its stead.

Despite the immense detail and success with which these critics analyse Donoghue’s collection, there is a queer element that I believe has been largely overlooked and therefore wish to analyse in this chapter. That is the intergenerational desire and love of old(er) lesbians – something I propose we read as a further example of the queer and gender-dissident female desires Orme and Hennard Dutheil De La Rochère identify in their articles. For Hennard Dutheil De La Rochère

[Donoghue] uncovers the underlying assumptions of the classical versions as she explores ‘deviant’ or ‘perverse’ alternatives which challenge stereotypical representations of gender roles and sexual desire and derail the straight path of female destiny encoded in [classic fairy tales]. (“Queering” 14)

Similarly, Orme writes that “*Kissing the Witch* unmasks naturalised constructions of gender and sexuality through tales of nonnormative subjects and desires that actively resist heteropatriarchal ideologies” (121). Although these writers recognise the presence of older women in Donoghue’s tales, with Orme commenting on the help offered by “usually older” female characters and Bacchilega observing that, in the “Tale of the Shoe”, the “Cinderella-like girl rejects the prince for the older and wondrous woman”, they focus on the desires, transformations and coming-of-age of the younger protagonists (116; “Activist” 59). In so doing, they overlook the longings of the elderly female characters that in their readings seem to exist only as helpers and mentors to younger women and fail to analyse the significance of such an older, desirous female presence as transgressive and queer⁷⁹ or, to make use of the above quotes, “deviant”, “perverse”, “nonnormative” and “resisting heteropatriarchal

⁷⁹ In this sense, their readings of the younger protagonists also focus on their ‘deviance’ in rejecting the prince in favour of an older *woman* as opposed to an *older* woman. As a result they ignore that such behaviour is doubly deviant in the sense that these younger women are not only rejecting the heteronormative marriage plot to engage in a lesbian relationship, but also a lesbian relationship with an older woman who ‘should’ exist outside the realm of the sexual.

ideology” that dictates that older woman are asexual and completely devoid of desire (“Compulsory” 632).

To be fair, there are moments in these articles when the writers acknowledge that Donoghue also revises the role of the older woman in her writing. Bacchilega, for instance, acknowledges that the “powers of the thirteen [narrators] are not simply instrumental to the transformation of the chosen heroine” of the classic, but also transform the “witches, crones and wicked stepmothers” normally responsible for her victimisation by giving them the power of narration (“Activist” 65). In a similar vein, Hennard Dutheil De La Rochère observes that

Kissing the Witch conflates the fairy godmother with the prince charming, fairy tale heroines fall in love with their stepmother, witches are rehabilitated [...]. In this way, class and age divisions, fixed gender identifications and single sexual preferences are undermined. (“Queering” 16)

While clearly conscious of the fact that Donoghue’s collection as a whole revises ageist stereotypes as well as patriarchal ones, Orme, Bacchilega and Hennard Dutheil De La Rochère do not incorporate those observations into their close-reading of the stories themselves. By failing to examine the intergenerational romances and intimacies between women that feature in several of Donoghue’s stories, these critics therefore miss a vital aspect of the queerness of her collection as it unsettles the taboo of the intergenerational relationship and portrays old women as both desirable and desirous of lesbian love and sex.

As explained in the previous chapter which deals with female old age and ageing, older women are limited by negative cultural stereotypes that dictate that they are not and should not be sexually active or desirous of sexual activity. Rebecca L Jones calls this the “dominant cultural storyline” of the “asexual older [person]” (125). As such, a sexually active or desirous older woman is *already* norm-disruptive, but if we make that woman a lesbian, whose experience is, according to Rich, perceived “on a scale ranging from deviant to abhorrent” through the “bias of compulsory heterosexuality”, we enter a whole new area of non-normative sexuality and desire (“Compulsory” 632).

However, as Rich further notes, the lesbian experience is not only perceived as deviant by heteronormative ideology, it is also “rendered invisible” and this is surely doubly true of older lesbians who are already marginalised by their age (“Compulsory” 632).⁸⁰ In “Diversity with a Difference: On Being Old and Lesbian”, Shevy Healey offers readers a discourse on “who [older lesbians] are” and “what [they] want” (110). She starts the piece by asserting her “so-called devian[ce]” as a “70 year old radical Jewish Lesbian” and later confesses that “old lesbians have much to get [angry] about” because “[n]ot only are [they] mostly invisible, [they] are considered so weird – so ‘*queer*’ if you will – that all sorts of people, [...] stand ready to interpret [...] and define [them]” (109-110, emphasis my own). Alerting us to their status as “multiply oppressed” she writes that not only has “every lesbian paid a price for being different just because she is a woman and a lesbian”, but “now, finally having grown to be old” they also experience the “insidiousness of ageism” (111):

Being old and lesbian presents the very special lethal synergy of ageism and heterosexism. Both come from assumptions that lead to repressive attitudes and repressive behavior. Ageism has the underlying assumption that youth is desirable, old age is bad; heterosexism comes from the presumption that everyone is heterosexual and that only heterosexual love is moral, fulfilling and superior. These presumptions render me and every other lesbian [...] invisible and operate to invalidate us and our lives. (Healey 114)

Healey’s reference to the heteronormativity that renders her and her partner invisible as older lesbians further gives credence to the findings of several researchers working in the fields of old age and sexuality: Jones notes that “older women are not generally expected to be lesbian” and Antionette M. Zeis and Julia Kasl-Godly highlight the common “assumption” that “all older adults are heterosexual” (139, 18). In *Lesbians Over 60 Speak for Themselves*, Monika Kehoe also notes that the “preoccupation with youth in our [heteronormative] culture underscores the presumption that [old lesbians] have died or been converted in their maturity to heterosexuality” and consequently defines “lesbians over 60” as “a deeply hidden segment of [the] population” (1-2).

⁸⁰ See pages 60-62 of the previous chapter for a more detailed discussion of such marginalisation.

In spite of her findings that “[lesbian] women of advanced age [...] are everywhere” (already in 1989), Kehoe carries on to highlight the paucity of research on this marginal group of women, stating that while “studies of the sexuality of older women are few”, “those of lesbians over 60 years old [are] almost nil” (Kehoe 76, 44). A decade later, two more research articles on old age and sexuality note the dearth of “research into non-heterosexual ageing and sexuality” and the lack of studies on “self-identified gay, lesbian, and bisexual [older] adults” (Gott and Hinchliff 76; Zeis and Kasl-Godly 18). In one of the few studies actually available on the topic, “Twice Hidden: Older Gay and Lesbian Couples, Friends, and Intimacy”, John A. Blando argues that “older adult gay men and lesbians may be said to constitute the most invisible of an already invisible minority” and that “little is known about this group relative to what is known about other groups of older adults” (87).

Thus, the older lesbian, on account of her age and her sexual orientation, is marked as twice as deviant and doubly marginalised. But what about the older lesbian who takes a younger lover, further crossing the generational line so fraught with cultural taboo? In her study of older lesbians, Kehoe notes that in research on sexual relations between the elderly which acknowledges people’s discomfort at the idea of both sex between the elderly and homosexual sex in general, the “idea of homosexual relationships between the young and old” is so “incredible” that it is not even mentioned (1). And yet, out of a sample of a hundred lesbians over sixty interviewed for her study, twenty-nine “have had relationships with women more than 10 years younger” and “some” with women “as much as half their age” (43).⁸¹

These numbers match a more recent survey performed by the Williams Institute in 2014. Referenced by Shannon Keating in the online article “What It’s Like To Be A Lesbian Couple With A 20-Plus-Year Age Difference”, the survey shows that “31% of married same-sex female couples have a 5- to 10-year age difference” and that “intergenerational romantic relationships” between lesbians “isn’t a new, or rare, phenomenon” (n.pag). And yet, “even though significant age differences are more common among queers than they are among straight people”, Keating notes that “they’re still outside of the norm” (n.pag). As such, she

⁸¹ In spite of such numbers, showing that intergenerational lesbian relationships are by no means rare, I have found almost no research on the matter. It seems that most research on intergenerational homosexual relationships focus on gay men and their relationship to teenagers or children, dealing with questions of consent as well as morality, paedophilia and pederasty.

quotes Eileen Myles, a writer and poet interviewed in her article in order to argue that “[d]ating much younger women has led to the experience of ‘being treated as doubly queer’” (n.pag).

What is interesting is that both Healey, the self-proclaimed “deviant” older lesbian I cite earlier, and Myles, the older lesbian engaged in an intergenerational relationship with a younger woman referenced directly above, self-identify as “queer”. Both women also identify themselves as doubly marginalised or oppressed: Healey because she is old and lesbian, Myles because she is lesbian and engaged in an intergenerational relationship. For this reason, I suggest that an older lesbian engaged in an intergenerational relationship finds herself the victim of a triple marginality: first, because she is lesbian and therefore deviates from the heteronormative norm, second, because she in a sexually active or desirous older woman and therefore digresses from the ageist cultural script of the asexual older woman, and lastly, because she transgresses the generational barrier that prohibits relationships between the young and old. As Keating notes

significant age differences between lesbians aren’t actually divorced from their queerness at all – these differences are a nontraditional aspect of coupledness borne from queerness itself. Women who date significantly up or significantly down radically subvert heteronormative standards for what’s appropriate when it comes to sex and love. (n.pag.)

Thus, while two of the areas of ‘deviance’ displayed by Donoghue’s older female characters do not normally feature in queer theory, I suggest that the *intergenerational* desire and love of *old(er)* lesbians marks them as ‘deviant’ or queer characters three times over.

In “Queer and Now”, Sedgwick argues that “a lot of the most recent work around “queer” spins the term outward along dimensions that can’t be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all” (8-9). She notes “the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these and other identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses” and that “[i]ntellectuals and artists of color [...] are using the leverage of ‘queer’ to do a new kind of justice to the fractal intricacies of language, skin, migration, state”, thereby “deepen[ing] and shift[ing]” the “meaning” of the term ‘queer’ (Sedgwick 9). Sedgwick does not mention age, but as a category of difference (like gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or class), it also

overlaps with gender and sexuality, as discussed above, to create marginalised constituencies of transgressive identities. For this reason, as well as the manner in which they challenge the binaries of young/old, sexual/asexual, normal/abnormal, I propose to read the lesbian characters in “The Tale of the Shoe” and the “Tale of the Witch”, the first and last stories in the collection respectively, as transgressive and queer for more reasons than just their homosexuality.⁸² When Hennard Dutheil De La Rochère therefore argues that *Kissing the Witch* “[enacts] ‘queerness’” as “the systematic challenge of binary oppositions” like “male and female, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, normal and abnormal”, I suggest she overlooks the binary of young and old, failing to recognise the manner in which it interacts and overlaps with ideas of gender, goodness, beauty, normality and especially sexuality in Donoghue’s portrayal of older women *and* the younger women they love/desire (“Queering” 18).

“But She was Old Enough to be My Mother”: Ageist Scripts and Lesbian Love in “The Tale of the Shoe”

“The Tale of the Shoe” is the first story in Donoghue’s collection and revises the classic “Cinderella”, broadly echoing its plot until the young female protagonist rejects marriage to the prince in favour of a lesbian relationship with the older woman performing the role of fairy godmother. The story has been a popular choice with critics and particularly Hennard Dutheil De La Rochère’s provides us with an in-depth and enlightening analysis which leaves very little uncharted territory. However, as is true of other critics, her reading of the tale as “a coming-of-age and a coming-out narrative which traces the emancipation of the central character from pre-written scripts”, ignores both the significance of the older and desirous female figure who drives the younger woman’s transformation and the manner in which she too is liberated from the ‘pre-written scripts’ that dictate older women’s asexual and marginal roles (Hennard Dutheil De La Rochère, “Queering” 17).

⁸² Both “The Tale of the Rose” and “The Tale of the Hair” also explore intergenerational relationships between women who choose to stay at each other’s side in spite of the fact that convention dictates otherwise. However, because both of these tales have more ambiguous conclusions that leave the nature of the intergenerational relationships that ensue at the end open to interpretation, my discussion will focus solely on “The Tale of the Shoe” and the “Tale of the Kiss”, which respectively make reference to the sexual nature of the intergenerational relationship or the intergenerational desire experienced by the older characters at the end of the tale.

At the beginning of the story, we meet an unnamed, isolated and depressed young woman who “scrub[s] and swe[eps]” not because she is forced to, but because, in the absence of a strong maternal influence, she has internalised “the shrill voices” of patriarchy telling her to “[do] this” and “do that, you lazy heap of dirt” (Donoghue 3). The arrival of a magical “stranger” with “flames in [the] centre” of her eyes and “eyebrows [...] silvered with ash” soon brings about significant “transformations” and the protagonist acknowledges that her “old dusty self [is] spun new” in the presence of this older woman (Donoghue 4-5). On three different occasions the stranger enables the protagonist’s attendance of the royal ball “because [she] ask[s]” her to and each time we see the younger woman state an awareness of the heteronormative and patriarchal scripts that are driving her requests and behaviour (Donoghue 5). This is apparent when, for instance, she interrogates her own need to attend the ball with the question: “Isn’t that what girls are meant to ask for?” (Donoghue 5). However, contrary to expectations, the protagonist rejects these scripts by the third night and when “the prince comes to propose”, “the voices shrieking yes yes yes say yes”, she rejects his proposal and runs towards the older woman waiting in the dark, losing her shoe in the process (Donoghue 7). After clearly stating that the symbolic shoe was “digging into her heel” and that the prince would find “someone” that was a better “fit”, the protagonist throws the remaining shoe into the brambles and the two women escape into what is popularly read as a lesbian happy ending (Donoghue 8).

The presence of an internalised ageist ideology which dictates both the asexuality of an older woman and the taboo of an intergenerational relationship becomes apparent as the story progresses. Indeed, I would suggest that for both women the age gap presents a larger obstacle to their romance than the fact that as two *women* they are breaking with heteronormative expectations. We see for instance that during her first ball, the protagonist “kn[ows] just how [she] is meant to behave” and performs the restrictive heteronormative gender role she is assigned as a woman by “smil[ing] ever so prettily”, “refus[ing]” food, “[keeping] her belly pulled in” and being agreeable toward the “ten elderly gentlemen who ha[ve] nothing to say but [do] not let that stop them” (Donoghue 5). As the clock strikes twelve, she “[comes] down the steps” and is “swept” away by the waiting stranger who suggestively asks if she has “had enough” of what we can only read as a heteronormative performance of femininity (Donoghue 5). Then, in an almost intimate gesture, she “lift[s] a hair off [the protagonist’s] long glove” and the younger woman responds as follows (Donoghue 5):

But she was old enough to be my mother, and I was a girl with my fortune to make. The voices were beginning to jabber. They each told me something different. Take me back tomorrow night, I said. (Donoghue 5, emphasis my own)

The statement “[b]ut she was old enough to be my mother” suggests that the protagonist has clearly recognised the moment of intimacy and the offer inherent in both it and the question of whether she has “had enough?” She potentially wishes to reciprocate the gesture, “but” stops herself not because the stranger is a *woman*, but because she is an older woman, so much so that she could have been “[her] mother”. Her further assertion that she is “a *girl* with [her] fortune to make” suggests her youth in comparison to the other woman’s age – presumably indicative of an age gap of fifteen to twenty years⁸³ and perhaps even more if we read the reference to the older woman’s “eyebrows being silvered with ash” as evidence that she has already gone grey (Donoghue 4). Her statement raises a further objection to this potential intergenerational lesbian union based on the presumption that such a relationship will not lead to the wealth or good fortune she might win at the side of a younger partner, giving voice to what I identified in the previous chapter as the ageist tendency to present old age as barren of growth or opportunity, essentially a process of decline leading to death. The “jabber[ing]” voices that critics usually read as the heteropatriarchal scripts dictating her actions, can therefore also be read as overwhelmingly ageist and the things they tell her, leading to her decision to try her luck elsewhere, doubtlessly have something to do with the other woman’s age and consequent unsuitability as a suitor.

The performance continues the following night and this time the protagonist shows an eagerness to exchange the presence of the prince for that of the older woman by leaving the ball “[a]t five to midnight” and “wait[ing]” for the stranger to “c[o]me for [her]” (Donoghue 6). The intimacy between the two women intensifies as “on the way home”, the protagonist “lean[s] [her] head on [the stranger’s] narrow shoulder” and she, in turn, “put[s] her hand over [the younger woman’s] ear”, asking once more if she has “had enough” (Donoghue 6). Again, the protagonist’s internal dialogue states her awareness of the heteronormative and ageist scripts that drive classic fairy tales when she thinks “[b]ut I didn’t have to listen to the

⁸³ This estimate is based on the assumption that Donoghue’s characters exist in the same context as classic fairy tales where girls are normally under the age of 20 when they enter the marriage market and become mothers.

barking voices to know how the story went” (Donoghue 6). Specifically her recurring use of the word “but” implies that the response we read again comes in opposition to an unspoken inner recognition of the potential lesbian relationship on offer and her matching desire. However, in keeping with my reading of the first scene, I suggest that the ‘story’ she references is not simply one that dictates that a girl marry the prince, but also that older women are barren of desire and sexuality. As Elizabeth Bell observes of Disney’s fairy tale formula: old women past “the middle-aged peak of [female] sexuality and authority” are drawn in the “postmenopausal script of asexuality” with “bountiful arms and torsos that cradle, bathe, and dress the heroines of the tales”, being “consistently helpful and protective of their charges”, but “never *needful* in their own right” (118-119, emphasis my own). As post-menopausal and “pear-shaped or apple-shaped”, these women serve as symbols of “feminine nurturing and sacrifice” and act as “protectors and guides”, “caretakers and healers” but certainly not as potential suitors or lovers harbouring their own desires (Bell 118-119).

During a third stilted evening likened to “clockwork”, the protagonist “swallows a little of everything she is offered” at the ball, only to “thr[o]w it all up again” in a physical act symbolic of her inner rejection of the ball and the heteronormativity and fortune-seeking it represents (Donoghue 7). Moments later she refuses the prince’s proposal, echoing this earlier expulsion as, this time, she physically “leap[s] backward” from the proposing prince even though she realises that he is “harmless” and the future he offers is “soft” and “comfortable” (7). At this point, the “waiting” stranger “d[oes]n’t ask” if she has “had enough” because there is no need to (8). Echoing the structure of the previous two episodes, the protagonist nonetheless responds to the unspoken question, but this time it is without the opening “but” as she claims that “she has had the story all wrong” and asks herself how she “could [...] not have noticed that [the older woman] [is] beautiful” (8). Her rejection of the binary oppositions that liken youth to beauty and old age to its opposite, shows that she is moving beyond the ageist ideology, script or ‘story’ that has previously made her deny her feelings for the older woman.

And yet, while she is ready to let go of these inhibitions, her act of “reach[ing] out” to the older woman is met by “surprise” and a trio of questions regarding the shoe, the prince and, finally, the age gap follows:

What about the shoe? she asked.

It was digging into my heel, I told her.

What about the prince? she asked.

He'll find someone to fit, if he looks long enough.

What about me? she asked very low. I am old enough to be your mother.

Her finger was spelling on the back of my neck.

You're not my mother, I said. I'm old enough to know that. (Donoghue 8)

What is significant about the older woman's questions is that she, like the protagonist after her first ball, does not mention the same-sex nature of their relationship as a potential obstacle, but is instead concerned by the age gap, showing that she too has internalised an ageist ideology that dictates the impossibility of a younger person's desire for an aged female body.

It is true that the question regarding the prince might be read as one that is concerned with sex or sexuality and by asking it, the older woman offers her one last opportunity to choose a male partner. However, in line with my reading of the rest of the story, I suggest another interpretation. First, the question of the shoe interrogates the heteronormative gender role the protagonist is choosing (or not choosing) to perform. One is reminded of the saying, "if the shoe fits" as a statement regarding the social roles to which we are suited. As such, the protagonist's admission that the shoe "was digging into [her] heel" refers back to her second night at the ball and the assertion that "her feet were starting to ache" before it was time to go, presumably because she had already "danced three times with the prince" (Donoghue 6). This suggests that she is ill-suited to or uncomfortable with the performance of femininity she rejects when she throws up everything she eats at the ball during her last night. The motif of a perfect or comfortable "fit" is further developed when, in response to the question regarding the prince, she replies that "he will find someone [else] to fit" (Donoghue 8). In making this statement she simultaneously emphasises her own incompatibility as his partner and makes a claim regarding the role such a partner will need to perform when she, as Hennard Dutheil De La Rochère claims, "uses the shoe metaphorically to designate his future bride as both object and function" (25).

In fact, the young woman never rejects the prince on the basis of his sex but instead seems to be put off by the nature of the relationship he offers and the restrictive role she will have to

play in it. We see, for instance, that on the last night – the night of her final rejection – she references the monotony and scripted nature of their interaction more than once. While they dance, the musicians are “play[ing] the same tune over and over” in the background and she, herself, “dance[s] like a clockwork ballerina”, “smil[ing] till her face twist[s]” with the effort of maintaining what seems a mask of contentment (Donoghue 7). Moments later, the proposing prince is likened to “an actor on a creaking stage” presumably worn out by the many repeated performances of heteronormative masculinity it has supported, and his offer of marriage plays out in her head as “long procession of years, palatial day by moonless night” (Donoghue 7). The imagery of “palatial” and therefore rigid, formal and regimented “days”, followed by “moonless nights” which seem void of the romance, magic or impulse a shining moon normally suggests, coming together in a “long” monotonous “procession”, a word in itself suggestive of pageantry and performance, present a scripted and very dull future indeed.

It is particularly dull and restrictive in comparison to the unscripted nature of her relationship with the older woman. On her first visit, for instance, the woman breaks the protagonist’s self-punishing routine in more ways than one. On this particular day, the younger woman, who usually “kept running to the door” only to find that “there was no one there”, turns to find “the stranger [...] behind [her]” (Donoghue 4). After telling her that “the sweeping [can] wait”, the older woman forces the overworked protagonist to take a break from her monotonous housework, to go outside and look at “the hazel tree [she] had never seen before”, clearly breaking the pattern of her depressing and isolated existence (Donoghue 4). The second time she appears “just when the soup [is] boiling over” and again substitutes the protagonist’s ordinary daily chores with acts of beauty, creativity and introspection (Donoghue 5):

[She] took a silver spoon out of her pocket to feed me. Our fingers drew pictures in the ashes on the hearth, vague shapes of birds and islands. She showed me the sparkle in my eyes, how wide my skirt could spread.

(Donoghue 5-6)

Without overlooking the intimacy inherent in the older woman’s act of “feed[ing]” the younger, the fact that she uses a “silver spoon” is suggestive of her bestowing privilege and honour while simultaneously showing the younger woman the “sparkle in [her own] eyes” and therefore her own self-worth and passion. This contrasts quite drastically to the

protagonist's loss of identity during her second night with the prince when "he ask[s]" her "[her] name" and "[her] favourite colour" and she "c[a]n't remember" either (Donoghue 6). Similarly, the "act of show[ing] [her] how wide [her] skirt could spread" stands in stark opposition to the "[pulled-in] belly" she sports during her first night at the ball (Donoghue 5). The creative act of drawing and particularly the images of birds, symbolic of flight and freedom, and islands, isolated places unhindered by the rules and regulations of mainstream society, suggest their joint rejection of convention and normativity.

The woman's last visit and the protagonist's reference to "magic" and the fact that "she could always make [her] laugh" further creates the impression of a spontaneity quite different from the prince's unexciting offer (Donoghue 7). At this point it might also serve to address the issue of sexual pleasure. As such the earlier reference to the older woman having "flames in [the] centre" of her eyes speaks of passion and erotic desire while her showing the younger "how wide [her] skirt could spread" later in the text and her "[claim]" that "her little finger [is] a magic wand" which "[can] do spectacular things" hint at moments of sexual exploration, intimacy and fulfilment (Donoghue 4-6). This offers us quite a different scenario to the "moonless nights" with the "trembling" prince, unnerved by merely the idea of the marriage he proposes and presumably also what comes after (Donoghue 7).

Together with the impulsive nature of their three visits, the open-ended conclusion also suggests that the intergenerational lesbian relationship between the two women at the end of the story is completely unhindered by scripts or stereotypes. In the final lines of "The Tale of the Shoe", the younger woman "thr[ows] the [remaining] shoe" representative of prescriptive gender roles "into the brambles" and concludes: "So she took me home, or I took her home, or we were both somehow taken to the closest thing" (Donoghue 8). The refusal to assign either one of them the active and therefore dominant masculine role of 'taker' offers an egalitarian model for the relationship that follows, one that Hennard Dutheil De La Rochère reads as "blurring agency and celebrating equality in love and language" ("Queering" 25). However, when she argues that "there is no pre-existing narrative" to guide "the story of their love", Hennard Dutheil De La Rochère is referring to the same-sex nature of their "lesbian relationship" and the manner in which it breaks with the "constraining discourses of social advancement and compulsory heterosexuality" ("Queering" 24). In keeping with my overall focus on age and the intergenerational nature of the lesbian relationship in question, I suggest a wider reading.

In his article on doubly marginalised older homosexual couples, Blando references research by Kehoe in order to argue that “freedom from gender role stereotyping in relationships [between older lesbians] contributes to a more equitable distribution of power and responsibilities” (88). For the “oldest cohort of lesbians and gays” he writes, “there have been few role models of successful relationships” and as such, “in general the relationships and loves of older gays and lesbians are less ‘scripted’ and less structured” (Blando 88). This seems to also ring true for the budding relationship between the two women in Donoghue’s story.

The lack of prewritten scripts for intergenerational lesbian relationships is certainly something that merits discussion more than once in Keating’s article about lesbian couples with a significant age difference. While “queer people” in general are already “freed from certain heteronormative restrictions”, she notes that the “dearth of mainstream [...] representation” of intergenerational lesbian relationships before 2015 – “when a number of films” suddenly “pushed the phenomenon into the mainstream spotlight” – acts as a “backward kind of blessing” for women engaged in such relationships (n.pag.). One of her interviewees notes that as such a couple, she and her partner “don’t have so many years of media telling [them] what [their] relationships should look like” (n.pag.). For another source, the “19-year age difference between her and her partner [...] serves as its own kind of deliverance”, for as she confesses, “[they] don’t have to look”, and presumably behave in, “a certain way, because [they] already don’t fit a certain box” (n.pag.). Keating clarifies this statement by suggesting that “even though significant age differences are more common among queers than they are among straight people — they’re still outside of the norm” and therefore lacking in prescriptive models (n.pag.).

Thus I agree with Hennard Dutheil De La Rochère when she suggests that ultimately

the magic of the tale [...] lies with the lesbian relationship. The heroine’s transgressive desire for the female ‘stranger’ thus enables her to radically depart from the traditional plot and explore an alternative to the pre-written scripts while rebelling against the socially approved attitudes propounded by the dominant discourse. (“Queering” 24)

However, whereas her reading of the lesbian relationship as transgressive focusses solely on homosexuality as an “alternative script to dominant discourse”, I suggest that Donoghue’s revision “departs from the traditional plot” in more ways than just this one (Hennard Dutheil De La Rochère, “Queering” 24). By re-imagining Cinderella as engaging in a relationship with a desirous older woman separated from her by a significant age gap, “The Tale of the Shoe” offers *various types* of “transgressive desire” (Hennard Dutheil De La Rochère, “Queering” 24). It gives us two women who desire each other; a younger woman who desires an older woman (and therefore presumably an unattractive and asexual woman) and an older woman who *desires*. The magic of the tale therefore not only lies with the lesbian relationship as Hennard Dutheil De La Rochère suggests, but with the *intergenerational* lesbian relationship. While the heroine’s desire certainly is transgressive because it rejects the heteronormative marriage plot to engage in lesbian relationship, it is even more so because the lesbian in question is an older woman. In this sense, not only is the heroine’s desire for the female stranger transgressive but the female stranger’s desire for the heroine is equally as transgressive if not more so. While her desire is also homosexual and intergenerational, that seems secondary to the fact that as an older woman, she dares to desire at all. Consequently, *both women* “radically depart from the traditional plot and explore [alternatives] to the prewritten scripts while rebelling against the socially approved attitudes propounded by the dominant discourse” which is not only heteronormative but also overwhelmingly ageist (Hennard Dutheil De La Rochère, “Queering” 24).

“A Witch should Not Kiss”: The Desirous Older Lesbian in “The Tale of the Kiss”

While the sexual desire of the older woman in “The Tale of the Shoe” is implicit in the tale and never spoken out loud, that of the older woman in “The Tale of the Kiss” is more overt. The thirteenth tale in Donoghue’s *Kissing the Witch* and presumably the one from which she takes the collection’s title, this revision gives power of narration to a witch who ultimately falls in love with a petitioner’s daughter and asks the girl for a kiss in payment for the service she performs. The tale has been recognised as an original work which, unlike those that precede it, does not revise or speak to a specific classic fairy tale. And yet, as Bacchilega observes in her reading of the collection, both “[the] kiss and the witch [...] are popular fairy-tale icons, though hardly associated with each other” (“Activist” 50).

Thus while the final story in Donoghue's collection might not have one specific "fictional pre-ext", it does make reference to and bring together two of the fairy tale convention's most recognisable and recurring, yet disassociated motifs: true love's kiss and the wicked witch (Bacchilega, "Activist" 56). If the former is a fundamental display of normative sexuality or an expression of romance and sexual interest while the latter is a manifestation of the ageism that reads an empowered and old female body as grotesque, then my reading suggests that by bringing these two together in a new and provocative way, Donoghue breaks with the ageist and heteronormative scripts of classic fairy tales. Ultimately she provides us with an alternative vision of romance and old womanhood that not only sheds light on the book's title but the collection of stories as a whole.

Making reference the ageist and sexist discourses which present the witch as a monster-woman, frighteningly grotesque in her otherness and exaggerated old age,⁸⁴ the protagonist we meet at the beginning of the tale warns readers early on that "contrary to what [we] might half believe, [she is] no monster under [her] skirts" (Donoghue 195). Rather, she was once just "a girl" like any other, but her "bleeding was meagre, when it came" at all and stopped completely while she was still in her prime, "every hair" on her head "still red as a lobster in the pot" (Donoghue 196). Fully aware that a "wom[a]n like [her]" would "have no future", she refuses both to trick a man into marrying her under false pretences or to accept the status of "old rag tossed in the corner" – one especially reserved for young women who are "barren" or old women who are childless and "past childbearing" (Donoghue 195-196). Instead she packs her belongings when her mother dies and leaves her home, "[finding] [her]self a cave" that overlooks another village, some distance "away" from her own, and shows signs of being previously occupied (Donoghue 196).

Before she ever earns the title of witch, the woman's rejection of the cards she is dealt as well as her deliberate isolation and newfound liberty establish her as a deviant and unconventional female character. With "time to wonder" and "no one to nurse, no one to feed, no one to listen to but [her]self", she "tastes freedom" for the first time and we see her revel in her escape from the prescribed feminine role of maternal, self-sacrificing and submissive caregiver (Donoghue 196). However, as is often the case with women "who refuse to conform to its conventions", patriarchal culture soon "project[s]" upon her what Pauline Palmer calls the

⁸⁴ Something I discuss in more detail on pages 60-62 of chapter three.

“cultural construct” of the witch figure and without intending to, she is mistaken for an old hag (144).⁸⁵ So she stumbles into “power” she “never sought”, becoming exactly “what [is] needed” by the villagers below as she drapes a “black scarf over [her] head to hide the fact of [her] youth” and distributes remedy, reward or punishment as she sees fit (197).

As she learns to wield this power, “how to shape it and conceal it and flaunt it and use it”, the years pass and she eventually becomes accustomed to and even desirous of her isolation and loneliness:

All that was different about me was that every year my needs were fewer.
My bones grew hard as iron. I tried out every herb I found, till nothing could surprise my stomach. I got so used to sleeping on stone that it no longer seemed hard to me. I rolled up in half a dozen blankets and wrapped my arms round my ribs like pet snakes. Nothing touched me in the night except the occasional spider. I was complete. (Donoghue 200-201)

This, however, soon changes when the witch meets a carefree and unconventional young woman who is a “trial and tribulation” to her parents and, “for the first time in [...] years”, she “let[s] another human being step across [her] threshold” and into her heart (Donoghue 201, 204).

The young woman who is “not child enough for [the] mother” who wants her to stay at her side and “no[t] woman enough for [the] father” who desires to marry her off, is clearly on the cusp of marriageable womanhood (Donoghue 201-205). She is furthermore described by the witch as a “girl” more than once and her innocence is emphasised by her hiding “behind her mother’s skirts” when her father’s friend “comes courting” and her own claims that she does not “yet” know what she is “good at” and “needs time” to think about what she wants from life (Donoghue 204, 203, 205). All of this sketches her as an inexperienced youth in contrast to the “wise [...] witch” showing the “first grey fingerprints” of old age on her once “bright head” (Donoghue 206, 200). Thus, when the older woman’s “heart [begins] to thud” and “[pull] on [her] ribs” in the presence of the younger woman, we see the first signs of the

⁸⁵ Although Palmer also discusses Donoghue’s collection in this article, the section I quote from focusses on the work of Ellen Galford, who according to Palmer helped initiate the tradition of “lesbian Gothic and the reworking of fairy-tale conventions” that Donoghue perpetuates in her writing (139).

intergenerational lesbian desire I suggest not only drives this particular story but also gives the collection its provocative title (Donoghue 206).

When the young woman leaves after their first encounter, the witch's earlier autonomy and contentment disappears and whereas she once revelled in her aloneness, she suddenly realises that in the event of her death, "no one would ever know" (Donoghue 206). She struggles to sleep and as she "goes about [her] business" for the next couple of days, she recognises that "something is wrong" (Donoghue 208). In comparison to her earlier statement of "complete[ness]", she experiences a newfound lack that manifests as dissatisfaction, boredom and disorientation:

Everything I cooked tasted bitter. My daily tasks seemed long, and yet when I sat by the fire to rest in the evenings, the time hung heavy on my hands. I could make no sense of what the gulls were saying. (Donoghue 208)

It is only when "the girl [comes] back" that the witch begins to understand this 'want' and realises that she is in love and that she has been "waiting for" the younger woman (Donoghue 208). Thus, when the young woman asks the witch what she would have in return for the "spell" she has cast on her parents, she responds by asking for "a kiss" (Donoghue 209). Initially, she does this out of spite and "just to shame [the girl]", wishing to break her composure and "see [her] clam face furrow up for a moment", but when the girl "laugh[s]" off the request instead, the older woman feels affronted and "[a]nger beg[ins] to clamp [her] teeth shut" (Donoghue 209). Although not explicitly stated, the implication is that the witch feels insulted because the girl's response not only makes light of her request but potentially also laughs at her person for daring to make it – mocking both the notion of kissing an old woman and the idea of an old woman wanting a kiss.

When she asserts that she "didn't believe [the girl] would do it" because "everyone knows" that "kissing a witch is perilous business", the witch gives us an inkling of the taboo she believes she is breaking. At this point it seems to have little to do with their age gap but rather their respective roles in society. While the kiss is definitely already a transgressive act because it is indicative of intergenerational, lesbian and therefore queer desire, it also transgresses the boundary that demarcates the monstrous other, the subaltern or the abject. By asking the young woman as an epitome of human beauty, innocence and youth to kiss the

older woman as witch, one of those “stereotypical grotesques” which contemporary culture associates with “female ugliness, defilement, monstrosity, maliciousness and depravity” according to Angela Stukator, the request seems to hinge on what Seifert calls the “moral binary so frequent in traditional folktales and fairytales” (52-53; “Gay and Lesbian Tales” 402). However, as I explored in my previous chapter, one cannot isolate the apparent monstrosity of the witch from her gender and her old age. As Joanna Frueh observes in “Visible Difference: Women Artists and Aging”, “[o]ld lady, granny, witch, and hag are permutations of the larger stereotype that pictures post-menopausal women as ugly and obscene” (276). When Donoghue’s story therefore transforms the “old and ‘evil’ wom[a]n” into a potential “[object] of love” or desire for the younger woman, as Seifert suggests, she does more than “disrupt the predictable plots of heterosexual desire” – she also unsettles the notion of the witch as harbinger of a monstrous feminine old age outside the realm of desirability and desire (Seifert, “Gay and Lesbian Tales” 402).

In this sense, when the witch warns the girl earlier on that “[t]here is not a creature under the sky that does not want” it seems a kind of self-fulfilling prophesy regarding her own humanity and need for love and companionship – a controversial need that does not ‘fit’ in with the common perception of a witch (205). For as the older woman states:

On the whole I am inclined to think that a witch should not kiss. Perhaps it is not being kissed that makes her a witch; perhaps the source of her power is the breath of loneliness around her. (Donoghue 210)

The older woman’s further assertion that the witch “who takes a kiss can [...] die of it” and “wake into something unimaginable, having turned herself into a new species” emphasises how such an act of love, desire or intimacy might unsettle her prescribed role as old and monstrous other and rebirth her into a new and unimaginably ‘queer’ character, one that complicates all kinds of binary classifications, chief among them that of the desirable and the grotesque.

That the younger woman’s laughter has little to do with what she perceives to be the unnaturalness or impossibility of the request only serves to reinforce this point. Instead of indicting her rejection of the prospect of kissing the older woman, her laughter signals her relief at the simplicity of the task. When she therefore asks if “that [is] all” and claims a kiss

to be an “easy” price “to pay”, stepping in to bestow it, she effortlessly disregards several boundaries at once. ‘Kissing the witch’ consequently becomes a queer act, signalling the revision of the heteronormative and ageist discourses that remove her from the realm of the sexual in the first place. As such, this transgressive moment is vital in giving readers a deeper understanding of the collection’s title: in combining the witch, that archetypal symbol of monstrous and aged femininity, with the kiss, that single act of desire and love that breaks spells and heralds happily-ever-afters, the tale disrupts normative and intersectional codes of gender, desire and sexuality in a manner that is representative of the collection as a whole.

After the kiss, the witch attempts to “get on with her life”, but soon admits that “the kiss she asked for” was in fact “a bad idea” (Donoghue 209-210). For in its wake the older woman finds herself questioning her very existence, unsure “why” she is doing the things she has always done or “what had brought [her there] to live alone in a cave like a wild animal” in the first place (Donoghue 210). For Orme, the kiss “b[reaks]” the witch’s “solitude and self-containment”, it “shatters [her] equilibrium and shakes her self-knowlegde” (Donoghue 127). Her attempts to avoid thinking of the girl prove futile as “one night”, she wakes “[knowing]” that “[she] need[s] [the] girl like meat needs salt” (Donoghue 210). The witch wonders if she “could [...] bring [her]self to follow the girl” but promises herself that if she does, she “[will] not let pride stop up [her] mouth” (Donoghue 210). Instead, she “[will] ask [the younger woman] to come live” with her, “give her [her] heart in a bag and let her do with it what she pleases” (Donoghue 210). Ultimately, she “[swears]” that if she follows and finds the girl, she “[will] say the word love” to the younger woman (Donoghue 210). As such she gives unquestionable voice to the same intergenerational lesbian love I identify as innately queer in my reading of “The Tale of the Shoe”. Orme seems to offer the same reading, albeit less explicitly, when in a single, isolated reference to ageism, she interprets the witch’s reluctance to follow the girl as resulting from her understanding that

[j]ust as the only thing more useless than a woman past childbearing is a barren woman, the only thing more queer than a solitary woman is an older woman in love with a younger one. (127)

We never find out whether or not the witch follows, finds or declares her love to the girl. However, when she states that “after years and travels, [her] secrets are all [she] has left to chew on in the night”, we get a sense of her current solitude and imagine that she remains

alone (Donoghue 211). The reason for her loneliness, whether of her own volition or as the result of a failed romantic endeavour seems beside the point, for as the witch cautions the reader:

And what happened next, you ask? Never you mind. There are some tales not for telling, whether because they are too long, too precious, too laughable, too painful, too easy to need telling or too hard to explain. (Donoghue 210-211)

What therefore seems important about the story is not its conclusion, but its nature; not the question of whether the witch finds her love in the end, but the fact that she dares to love at all. When Donoghue therefore closes the tale, and the collection as a whole, with the words “[t]his is the story you asked for. I leave it in your mouth”, we cannot help but recognise the queerness of the tale as well as the challenge to tell our own unconventional stories in its wake – continuing the chain of narration that makes the collection so unique.

In her reading of Donoghue’s collection, Bacchilega observes that “one of [her] responses as a reader of the [“The Tale of the Kiss”] is that kissing the witch can unmake her witchification” (“Activist” 61). Since *Kissing the Witch* is the title of the collection as a whole and not only a reference to a single moment in the concluding story, the act she references also holds true for all thirteen tales and the manner in which they redeem, renegotiate and revise queer desires and transgressive female subjects. And yet, if we read the witch as but one manifestation of the stereotype that marks older women as monstrous, ugly and without sexual or romantic needs, and the kiss as an act of love and desire, then the act of kissing the witch also wrestles the figure of the older women from that asexual and lonely limbo into which heteronormative ageist ideology inscribes her. By presenting us with stories that not only portray old women as both desirable and desirous of love and sex, but lesbian love and sex, while simultaneously also unsettling the taboo of the intergenerational relationship by making their love interests much younger women, Donoghue breaks with the ageist and heteronormative script of classic fairy tales. Ultimately she provides us with alternative visions of romance, sexuality and old womanhood that are transgressive and queer not once, not twice, but three times over.

If fairy tales “are at their core about sexuality” and “about defining and establishing our ideas about gender – what makes a man, what makes a woman – at the most basic level”, then it comes as little surprise that contemporary writers are revising these classic tales from

queer perspectives that question monolithic and essentialist notions of sex, gender and sexuality as well as the apparently causal and mimetic relationship between all three (Orenstein 211). While irrefutably different in their approach to the act of queer revision, Lo's *Ash*, Stace's *Misfortune* and Donoghue's two short stories all unsettle, in one way or another, the dichotomous and oppositional identities inherent in classic fairy tales like "Cinderella" and "Sleeping Beauty" as well as the ageist structures and ideologies of compulsory heterosexuality and cisnormativity within which they seem natural.

Lo's *Ash* retells the story of "Cinderella", portraying the bisexual and unconventionally gendered protagonist's struggle between the desire she feels for both the male fairy who assists her and the female huntress who befriends her during her quest for personal freedom and self-acceptance. While *Ash* troubles heteronormative understandings of gender and sexuality by presenting both as rather more fluid and unfixed than essentialist theories dictate, it does not really engage with the question of sex and its relationship to the other two categories. Stace's *Misfortune*, on the other hand, deals quite explicitly with gender, sexuality and biological sex, as well as the causal lines between the three, as it retells the tale of "Sleeping Beauty". By presenting readers with an unusual *bildungsroman* focussed on the transgendered identity development of Rose, the foundling heir to great fortune who is born a biological boy but raised to be a girl, *Misfortune* engages with some of the most pressing concerns of queer theory. Challenging and unsettling Butler's theories even as he references them, Stace presents us with a nuanced revision which reads sexual and gendered identity as neither social constructionist nor essentialist, but rather as a dialectic combination of the two.

Finally, Donoghue's "The Tale of the Shoe" and the "Tale of the Witch" encourage a much broader and novel interpretation of the term 'queer'. In their retellings of classic fairy tales, these two stories not only focus on lesbian relationships, but more importantly, on *intergenerational* lesbian relationships. As such, they engage age as a category of difference that overlaps with gender and sexuality to create transgressive desires that classify as queer for more reasons than just their homosexuality. By collectively foregrounding and legitimising a whole selection of gender-dissonant and sexually dissident identities and behaviours that have been 'condemned to the closet' by classic fairy tales, Lo, Stace and Donoghue ask their readers to rethink heteronormative plots and to reconsider the stereotypically gendered characters with which they are familiar. Ultimately the challenge is

to reassess what exactly it is that constitutes normal when it comes to gender, sex, sexuality and desire.

5

Conclusion: More of the Same, More of the Other

Whether sad or seminal, then, this essay seeks to define and promote [re-visionary fiction as] a relatively recent sub-genre of contemporary fiction whose nominal adjective deploys a tactical slippage between the verb *to revise* (from the Latin ‘revisere’: ‘to look again’) – ‘to examine and correct; to make a new, improved version of; to study anew’; and the verb *to re-vision* – to see in another light; to re-envision or perceive differently; and thus potentially recast and re-evaluate (‘the original’).

– Peter Widdowson, “Writing Back”, 496

I start the final chapter of this study with a definition of revisionary fiction that might seem more at home in an introduction. And yet, Widdowson’s classification of re-visionary fiction serves to introduce a dualism that helps to recapitulate the influence of the fairy tale revisions examined in this study. The dualism I speak of is the tension between the old and the new, between re-evaluating something already existing and producing something novel, between time-honoured tales and fresh perspectives – something that I suggest lies at the heart of an effective revision. In a similar line of argument, Linda Hutcheon writes in *A Theory of Adaptation* that what is “particularly appealing about adaptations *as adaptations*”⁸⁶ is “the comfort of ritual and recognition” combined “with the delight of surprise and novelty” (4, 173). “Remembrance” she clarifies, is “part of the pleasure [...] of experiencing an adaptation”, but so “too is change” and as much as an adaptation involves “memory and [...] persistence”, it must also contain “variation” (4,173).

“Ritual”, “recognition”, “memory” and “persistence” are the words that Hutcheon uses to refer to the fact that a revision (or adaptation) is at its core an intertextual work that takes as its source or ‘hypotext’, something which is already familiar and established in the mind of

⁸⁶Thus far, I have avoided employing the term ‘adaptation’ as a synonym for ‘revision’ because it is popularly understood as meaning something else (see for instance Widdowson, 500). However, for Hutcheon “‘retellings’ of familiar tales and ‘revisions’ of popular ones” fall in “the realm of adaptation proper” and so here I apply her writing on adaptation to my discussion of revision (171).

the reader, something that is previously ‘known’. For us, that means the classic fairy tales that have been replicated so frequently and “entered into cultural discursive practice” so effectively that they become what Jack Zipes calls “second nature” to a global readership (“Toward” 1). So, for instance, when Ali unambiguously titles her novel *Not a Fairytale*, readers are immediately asked to draw upon pre-existing knowledge of what constitutes a fairy tale and by association the ‘happily-ever-after’ that stands as its most recognisable feature. Similarly, in characterising its protagonist as a potentially “wicked stepmother” to a “[nearly] seven”-year-old girl whose mother “died a week after giving birth” to her – a child who has the “darkest hair and the pinkest lips, every shade at its utmost” and answers to the name of “Snow” – Oyeyemi’s *Boy, Snow, Bird* explicitly announces its relationship to the classic fairy tale, “Snow White” (Oyeyemi 105, 71, 19, 78, 18).

In addition to drawing on the familiarity of the ritual of having read and heard (largely) unchanged ‘once-upon-a-times’ and ‘happily-ever-afters’ time and again, and the recognition of recurring characters, plots, motifs and catch phrases like ‘the big bad wolf’, ‘the wicked witch’, ‘true love’s kiss’ or even ‘white as snow, red as blood, black as ebony’, revisionist narratives also unsettle and defamiliarise the familiar. As they retell canonical fairy tales, each text engages in a process of deconstruction that undermines the legitimacy and authority of the hypotext, highlighting its biases and preconceptions. All ten of the revisions explored in this study can be regarded as feminist for the manner in which they explore gendered power relations, women’s relationships and female subjectivity, exposing the patriarchal ideology that marginalises, misrepresents and disempowers women in classic fairy tales.

However, I have also identified three other areas of difference in these contemporary adaptations that intersect with sex and/or gender to create marginalised and misrepresented black, ageing and queer ‘others’. As such, revisions by Oyeyemi, Hopkinson and Ali expose the colonial and racist discourses in certain classic fairy tales, drawing readers’ attention to the white ideal and Eurocentrism implicit in these narratives. In a different tale, Hopkinson also questions the glib and tired generalisations that fairy tales make about older women and together with Pratchett and Ugresic, she underscores and problematises the ageism inherent in these classics. Finally Lo, Stace and Donoghue present readers with queer retellings that centre on unconventional gender identities and non-normative sexuality which, by association, push readers to recognise the binary gender roles, compulsory heterosexuality and cisnormativity espoused by the most popularly read and repeated fairy tales.

In the process of unsettling familiar tales, these post-1990 counter-narratives also offer readers new perspectives on tales that sometimes seem “as old as time” itself, to borrow the expression from the singing teapot in Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), and fill “old vessel[s] with new wine” in true revisionist fashion (Ostriker 212). Widdowson eloquently explains this process when he writes that

revisionary fictions [...] denaturalise the original by exposing the discourses [we do not] see because we have perhaps learned to read it in restricted and conventional ways. That is, they recast the pre-text as itself a ‘new’ text to be read newly – enabling us to ‘see’ a different one to the one we thought we knew [...]. (503)

This is certainly true of Hopkinson’s “Riding the Red”. By re-envisioning the red hood of the classic “Little Red Riding Hood” as a reference to menstruation and sexual maturity, the short story alerts readers to earlier versions and interpretations that shed an entirely new light on the underlying metaphors of the now sanitised children’s tale. Additionally, by refocusing the tale and turning the previously marginalised grandmother into the protagonist and narrator as an aged but still desirous Red Riding Hood, Hopkinson also asks readers to reconsider the classic – seeing it not simply as recounting the adventures and experiences of the younger protagonist, but by association also as denying those same adventures and experiences to the older one.

By no means are these revisionist texts marked by only a negative process of deconstruction and subversion. Their novelty also extends beyond the new visions they offer of old tales. As they bend the classic fairy tales to their wishes, constructing innovative alternatives that can be read as postcolonial, queer or focussed on ageing and old age, these texts also create *new stories* that can be read and enjoyed independently of the hypotexts leaning over their shoulders. This is perhaps most evident in the case of Stace’s *Misfortune*, which has been widely celebrated without so much as a single critic picking up on the intertextual references it makes to the “Sleeping Beauty” tale. While Stace’s retelling therefore encourages a re-examination of the classic “Briar Rose” as a heteronormative and cisnormative tale of female *bildung* focussed on producing an ideally passive and heterosexual femininity – *if* the reader is conscious of its intersexuality – his novel also stands alone as a queer and modern

bildungsroman centred on transgender identity development. Such autonomy and originality is summarised rather eloquently by Hutcheon when she states that “an adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative – a work that is second without being secondary. It is its own palimpsestic thing” (9).

It is this idea of a palimpsest, defined as “a manuscript written over a partly erased older manuscript in such a way that the old words can be read beneath the new” that offers both a useful metaphor for the dualism discussed above and links to the idea of transformation and boundary-crossing that I want to stress in my final statements regarding revisionary fairy tales of the twenty-first century (“palimpsest”). In the introduction to this study, I quoted Catherine Orenstein in saying that fairy tales offer us “enduring rules for understanding who we are and how we should behave”, that they provide “the first models of society we encounter” and that they teach us “Right from Wrong” (10). I believe what Orenstein stresses here and elsewhere is that fairy tales provide us with boundaries – boundaries that separate right from wrong, good from evil, beauty from beast, desirable and ideal self from undeniably and irrevocably ‘other’. At the same time, these tales are also about metamorphosis and, in the words of Maria Tatar, they “[show] us figures endlessly shifting their shapes, crossing borders, and undergoing change” (“Why” 55). The “transformative magic” of fairy tales lies not only in the tales they tell, tales filled with “spells, curses and charms”, but also in the very content and nature of those tales as “the stories themselves function as shape-shifters, morphing into new versions of themselves as they are retold and as they migrate into other media” (Tatar, “Why” 56).

The contradictory nature of classic fairy tales – that they are at once about strict boundaries *and* about border crossings – is what I suggest makes them such fertile ground for contemporary revisions centred on identity politics and the categories of difference that separate self from other, leading to marginalization, discrimination and other forms of both privilege and prejudice. Much like the clear opposition drawn between black and white, darkness and light that I explored in chapter two, a ‘boundary’ that lent itself to the transformation enacted on the classics by both Oyeyemi and Hopkinson in their exploration of racial passing and the idealisation of whiteness, classic fairy tales also offer other boundaries and by association other ‘others’ for transformation by future revisions.

Chief among these is the disabled other often perceived in fairy tales as cursed, enchanted or simply non-human. Drawing on the insights of both disability studies and queer theory, Santiago Solis, for instance, is able to address what he terms the “ableist assumptions” inherent in classic fairy tales “which rest on the beliefs that [...] disability [is a] personal [misfortune] and traged[y]” (117). Employing what he terms “queercrip” to read the dwarfs in a picture book version of “Cinderella and the Seven Dwarfs” as physically disabled, Solis attempts “to challenge[s] the social construction of [...] disabled bodies as defiantly shameful, abnormal, and pathological” (117). One need only think of the 1937 Disney version of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and the scene in which Snow White laughs off the childlike and potentially mentally disabled Dopey’s obsessive efforts to win another kiss, to see a concrete example of the manner in which the dwarf body is “desexualiz[ed] and infantali[zed]” as Solis suggests (117). Having identified the relationship between disability studies and fairy tale studies as a potential area for future research, I am particularly interested in furthering an emergent online ‘laymen’s discussion’ that reads the block-buster fairy tale film revision *Frozen* (2014) as “a disability narrative” (Orsborn n.pag.). Interpreting the protagonist’s “unusual magic ability” as a “social disability” or a “condition” worthy of concern and isolation, such posts explore and trouble the boundary between the fairy tale curse and its binary opposite, the special gift or magic power, in a manner that seems deserving of closer analysis (Zare n.pag; Shelley n.pag). This is a topic I hope to explore in the future.

The mention of the animated film *Frozen* as being loosely based on Hans Christian Andersen’s classic fairy tale “The Snow Queen”, also brings me to a second area of interest I have identified for future research – that is the intersection of fairy tale and film. There has been an inundation of fairy tale films that can be considered as remakes or revisions that have made it onto the silver screen in the last decade – films like *The Brothers Grim* (2005), *Hoodwinked* (2005), *Stardust* (2007), *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), *Tangled* (2010), *Brave* (2012), *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012), *Mirror, Mirror* (2012), *Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters* (2013), *Frozen* (2013), *Jack the Giant Slayer* (2013), *Into the Woods* (2014) and *Maleficent* (2014) as well as upcoming Disney remakes like *Beauty and the Beast* (2017). Given this inundation, I am not only interested to explore how such films reflect and popularise the feminist revisionist tendencies of the previous century but also how and *if* they in any way engage with postcolonial and queer theory as well as ageing studies in a manner evocative of the revisionist fiction discussed in this study.

At the very end of her book, Hutcheon writes that an “adaptation is not vampiric: it does not draw the life-blood from its source and leave it dying or dead”, instead, it may “keep that prior work alive, giving it an afterlife it would never have had otherwise” (176). This too is my reading of the twenty-first century adaptations analysed in this study. As they engage in the creation of revisionist fairy tales that are at once old *and* new, they offer fresh perspectives that enliven and reinvent time-honoured but outdated tales for inclusive and global audiences in current and generations to come. In so doing, these revisionist fairy tales present readers with new ideologies and contemporary mythologies centred on what might initially be unsettling subjects but will eventually, with enough repetition, settle into a re-imagined ever-after which includes ‘the other’.

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