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Marvellous Geometry:
narrative and metafiction in modern fairy tale.

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Abstract

Despite the age of the fairy-tale tradition, and its focus on fairly primitive aspects of human experience, fairy tale is able to adapt itself to a range of cultures and contexts, including numerous examples in the twentieth century. Various authors and film-makers are reasserting the power and value of the fairy tale as a response even to the uncertain and ironic experience of contemporary culture. The suitability of fairy tale to modern texts rests partially in its qualities of inherent metafictionality, the extent to which it self-consciously denies mimesis. This gives it particular relevance to postmodernism, as does the structuredness which facilitates self-aware play with genre. At the same time, the status of oral fairy tale as a folk form connects interestingly with postmodernism's blurring of the boundaries between high and low culture. This has particular implications for the presence of fairy tale within texts traditionally considered as popular culture, here the fantasy/science fiction ghetto, and the Hollywood film. This thesis chooses to focus on texts which attempt to write actual fairy tale, rather than those which use fairy-tale motifs thematically. In making this distinction, attention is paid to particular aspects of recognisable fairy-tale texture, that is, overall *effect*, which relies on elements of pattern, structure, simplification, symbolism, ahistoricism, the construction of a removed and marvellous world, and a tone of certainty which necessitates a response of accepting wonder in the reader.

Serious literary play with fairy-tale forms is represented by fairy-tale works from James Thurber, Angela Carter and A. S. Byatt. Thurber's interest in fairy-tale structure can be linked to his characteristic linguistic play, which employs the breakdown of meaning and signification to comic effect. Linguistic breakdown acts as a microcosm to the breakdown of meaning and signification in fairy-tale narrative structures themselves, but the utopian impulse of the form inevitably reasserts itself to offer resolution and closure. In addition, fairy tale enables Thurber to celebrate heterosexual union in a fashion denied to him in his other, more cynical writings. Angela Carter's narrative interest in fairy tale is generally subordinated to her feminist project, which re-investigates the patriarchal assumptions behind fairy-tale structures. Her tales overturn traditional fairy-tale symbolic functioning and employ considerable generic overlapping which enables her to emphasise metafictionality by play with language and voice. Her focus on female sexuality results in fairy-tale retellings which denote a progression across the collection of tales as female subjectivity is developed. A. S. Byatt's interest in fairy tale is largely narrative, although some feminist re-workings result; her extreme self-consciousness about literature as art, and hence as constructed artefact rather than mimesis, is particularly pronounced when she deals with fairy-tale forms. She tends to employ narrative embedding in presenting her original or re-told fairy tales, thereby also highlighting the tale's status as artwork rather than reality, a tendency exaggerated by her recurring interest in fairy-tale symbols (ice, glass) which suggest pattern and artefact.

The fantasy/science fiction 'popular ghetto' is intrinsically suited to fairy-tale explorations in its status as marvellous narrative, but radical play with familiar fairy-tale structures runs the risk of alienating a popular readership. The intersection of fairy tale with other popular formulae (horror, fantasy, the erotic) contains and cushions this effect, allowing for sophisticated play with fairy-tale forms. While numerous examples of fairy tale as fantasy romance abound, Tanith Lee's collection offers particularly interesting inversions and re-tellings, often to shocking effect. Her use of fairy-tale form to expose issues of female power is at times simplistic, but she projects familiar structures into new contexts with style and innovation. Terry Pratchett's self-conscious interest in the processes of narrative, and specifically of fairy-tale narrative, are leavened by their inclusion within the popular Discworld series. Like Thurber, he employs fairy-tale

inversions to comic effect, but his self-conscious play with narrative is always in service to his humanist agendas.

In the case of film, fairy tale has moved into an entirely new medium whose realist representation tends to run counter to fairy tale's interest in the marvellous and unrealistic. In live-action film this is alleviated by film's use of visual symbol and a strong fairy-tale flavour in costume and setting, as well as its ability to re-create some aspects of the oral voice. The popular Hollywood film tends to employ fairy tale as a form of romance or horror narrative, and the popular format ultimately compromises narrative play. In the case of animation, the convention itself problematises representation by its lack of realism, which accounts for the long-term association between fairy-tale film and the Disney studio. Disney's sense of fairy tale as artefact, however, is subordinated entirely to their need to present tale as commodity within the Disney consumer culture.

The recent fairy-tale film Shrek serves as a paradigm for the development of fairy tale in the twentieth century, continuing the form's function as adaptable folk narrative which self-consciously and affectionately reflects the form's structures and assumptions as well as those of contemporary culture. The enormous range of media in which fairy tale has found expression covers the whole spectrum from intellectual exploration to commercial reworking, confirming fairy tale's continuing power as a folk form which can be self-consciously employed in a variety of contexts.

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Contents

Chapter I	Telling theoretical tales	1
Chapter II	Nice and Neat and Formal: James Thurber	28
Chapter III	The Bloodied Text: Angela Carter.....	60
Chapter IV	Caught in a Story: A. S. Byatt.....	94
Chapter V	Structured Sword & Sorcery: Popular Fairy tale	122
Chapter VI	Marvellous Illusion: Fairy-tale film	148
Chapter VII	Happily Ever After.....	182
Bibliography		190

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The fairy tale prefers to speak of clothing and golden or silver armour rather than of bodies, not just because they are made of exquisite, shining materials, but because clothing and armour are artificial creations, because the structure, the geometry, of the raiment is further from nature, nearer the spirit, more abstract than the plasticity of the body.
(Max Lüthi).

I like the geometrically patterned flowers best...More than the ones that aim at realism, at looking real ...
(A. S. Byatt)

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Chapter I:

Telling Theoretical Tales

There exists, finally, a form of the marvellous in the pure state which ... has no distinct frontiers We note, in passing, how arbitrary the old distinction was between form and content: the event, which traditionally belonged to "content", here becomes a "formal" element. The fairy tale is only one of the varieties of the marvellous. What distinguishes the fairy tale is a certain kind of writing (Todorov, 1973: 53-54)

Tale-telling is probably as old as humanity itself; the urge to communicate via some form of narrative seems to be a basic human impulse, common to all cultures and times. The operative word here, though, is "form". An intrinsic part of the process of communication via narrative rests in the form of the narrative itself, since the deliberate structuring of experience in space and time is perhaps the central characteristic which separates narrative from other ways in which language can be used. The production of narrative rests in a reciprocal relationship between the producer and the receiver of the tale, between the tale-teller and audience: a shared understanding of the parameters and characteristics of the narrative, the form it will take. In accepting how a narrative is to be framed or structured, storyteller and audience mutually contribute to the meaning of the narrative. Fairy tale and folklore represent perhaps the oldest form of secular narrative, only one step removed from myth. It is possible that its strength is in its identity as a kind of domestic myth: a reflection of the lives and doings of gods and heroes, re-figured at a level where it is accessible and recognisable. The settings and stereotypes which it employs are those of peasant agricultural existence - the fields and forests, the merchant and his three sons, the goose or cow taken to market. Other elements are those of peasant wish-fulfilment, in the youngest son who marries the princess, the clever lad who wins a fortune, the honest tailor who earns a noble bride.

With these essentially primitive elements, fairy tale is able to adapt itself to a range of eras, cultures and philosophies, not the least of which is the resurgence of interest in fairy tale in the twentieth century. Perhaps the most important literary and cultural movement of the late twentieth century has been postmodernism, which has swept wholesale over the intellectual landscape, dissolving all in its path. The current resurgence of interest in the narratives of fairy tale is particularly interesting in the context of postmodern theory. The tendency towards the dissolution, uncertainty and collapse of narrative authority under the postmodern gaze forms a sharp contrast to the highly structured, formalised and patterned conventions of the fairy tale form, the “marvellous geometry” of my title. Writers such as Angela Carter and A.S. Byatt are reasserting the power and value of the fairy tale as a response to human experience - even the uncertain and ironic experience of contemporary culture. Fairy tale itself, apart from modern re-writes, exhibits a self-awareness about narrative and a specifically problematised relationship with reality which seems peculiarly suited to the reflexiveness and self-interrogation of postmodernism, as well as to postmodernism’s fascination with narrative structure. Even in the nineteenth century, Victorian writers could use fairy tale to interrogate linguistic meaning, writing original tales which continually deconstruct their own expectations. In this thesis, however, I will be more interested in a quality of inherent metafictional awareness which I identify in fairy-tale narrative, than in situating fairy-tale rewrites within the broader debates of postmodernism.

Along with this inherent metafictionality, fairy tale may also be seen as occurring within a tradition of fantastic or marvellous literature which has strengthened dramatically in the last century. In a post-Tolkien cultural setting, magical narrative has found a huge following – one which, however, tends towards the popular rather than the literary. The intersections between fairy tale and popular literature hearken back to the roots of fairy tale itself, in the oral folk narrative of the common people. Thus, in tandem with the literary use of fairy tale as a response to some aspects of postmodernism, there is a movement to reassert and recapture the power of the fairy-tale narrative as a tool which reflects the experience of society at large, in a context of mass literature rather than elitist intellectual literature. Science fiction and fantasy writers such as Terry Pratchett, Robin McKinley and Tanith Lee have seized upon the fairy tale as a popular medium, one which offers the consolation and fulfilment of desire which characterises fantasy romance writing, or one which allows the interrogation of culture within a familiar and recognisable matrix. Even further along the scale, the consumer-orientated productions of Disney also offer a radical rewriting of fairy tale as folklore, an appropriation of a

communal and non-written medium to present tale as commodity in a purely commercial sense.

I have made some sweeping claims here, and obviously various questions are immediately raised. For a start, what is fairy tale? In this multiplicity of narratives, is there any firm basis for identifying fairy tale as a distinct and discrete form in itself? The identification of “fairy tale” may seem at first glance obvious, but the characteristics of the form are in some ways slippery - over centuries of development, the term has shifted. In the plethora of texts and definitions, it will be necessary for me to find a specific definition of fairy tale which will both suit my theoretical purposes and will rationalise my choice of twentieth-century texts. The important interface between folklore and fairy tale, between an oral and a literary form, will also be addressed in this chapter, as well as the development of the literary fairy tale prior to the twentieth century. A detailed analysis of the structural and formal characteristics of fairy tale will particularly be required in dealing with contemporary narratives which invoke, interrogate and play with the form, often radically. Likewise, both postmodernism and popular culture are value-laden and ambiguous theoretical areas, and the functioning of fairy tale in relation to these theories needs to be defined for the purposes of this thesis. The range of critics addressing fairy tale from various angles is enormous; I shall make some use of structuralist critics such as Vladimir Propp, together with Tzvetan Todorov and Rosemary Jackson’s definitions of the pertinent differences between modes of the fantastic and the marvellous. Specific fairy-tale analysis will rely on discussions by seminal figures whose theories cover a wide range of approaches and opinions. J.R.R. Tolkien, in his essay “On Fairy Stories,” deals with fantasy generally, as do other critics I have used (Ursula le Guin, George MacDonald, etc); Max Lüthi, Roger Sale and Jack Zipes write specifically on fairy tale, from rather different perspectives. Patrica Waugh’s definition of metafiction will largely inform my exploration of this aspect of fairy tale.

I shall deal in some detail with the transition of folkloric narrative from oral to written forms; for the moment, however, I am using the term “folklore” to apply to oral narratives or to specifically oral narratives collected and transcribed into written form. The term “fairy tale” I am using to indicate a definitively literary form which often includes folkloric elements, but which constitutes a specific and unchanging written artefact that is adapted for a more educated readership, and that lacks the collective aspect of folklore. While written fairy tale may continually retell familiar tales (Cinderella, Snow White, etc), the fairy tale also has potential for the original creation of tales within familiar and understood structures.

A certain kind of writing: some notes on the definition of fairy tale.

... fairy tales have been defined in so many ways that it boggles the mind to think that they can be categorised as a genre.
(Jack Zipes, 2000: xv)

I wish to begin with Todorov's apparently vague assertion that "What distinguishes the fairy tale is a certain kind of writing ..." (1973: 54). This is not as vague as it appears: he argues that the form depends for its identity not on the status of the marvellous within it, but on a clearly recognisable overall effect which is constructed through a number of characteristics, including tone, form, structure, pattern and motif. Any fairy tale, from Madame d'Aulnoy to Disney, signals itself clearly as fairy tale through attributes which are ultimately a matter of *texture* rather than simple form and pattern. Tolkien says that it is "precisely the colouring, the atmosphere, the unclassifiable individual details of a story, and above all the general purport that informs with life the undissected bones of the plot, that really count" (1966: 18). Both Tolkien and Todorov seem decided on this point, but a little vague on how this identification is made; the truth is that the means by which fairy tale identifies itself to the reader are strangely complex, despite the simplicity of the response which makes it obvious that a particular narrative is or is not a fairy tale. In identifying fairy tale by texture, I am invoking a range of characteristics which rely heavily on structure and patterning, but also include style, voice and some aspects of content. The geometry of structure and motif, the clean lines and deliberate patterning, is one half of fairy tale, but the marvellous, the unreal, the magical, form the other half. This attribute of texture, rather than motif, renders a fairy tale intrinsically familiar and identifiable, and it is precisely this quality of familiarity which allows the form to provide such a rich ground for metafictional play.

The identification of fairy tale by "a certain kind of writing" is in some ways problematical, since it presupposes that, beyond a certain point, inclusion of other, non-fairy-tale elements pushes the narrative over into another form. Roger Sale notes that "everyone seems instinctively agreed on what the term includes and excludes, even though fairy tales blend easily into related kinds, like myths, legends, romances, realistic folk fables, and cautionary tales" (1978: 23). Within the numerous treatments of fairy tale themes, I would argue that, from the point of view of narrative texture, there are comparatively few narratives which function wholly as fairy tale within what I regard to be the most definitive characteristics of the genre. Propp, while discussing at length the kinds of modifications which an oral teller may make to a tale, concludes that literary substitutions are not easily accepted: "the fairy tale possesses such resistance that other genres shatter against it: they do not readily blend. If a clash takes place, the fairy tale

wins" (1971: 107). I would tend to disagree. While agreeing with Sale that fairy tale has a certain affinity for romance, legend and myth, such generic mixings risk being too heavily weighted towards the non-fairy-tale form. However recognisable the elements of the narrative, if it is not textured as a fairy tale - as I shall argue below, a question of tone, simplicity of writing, a sense of acceptance, ahistoricity, pattern - it is not fairy tale. The genre does *not*, as Propp argues, resist the other forms. Sheri S. Tepper's popular fairy-tale novel Beauty is a good example here: while showing a strong awareness of fairy tale, and employing the Sleeping Beauty story as the perfectly recognisable meta-narrative, the novel's wholesale mixing of science fiction, folklore, magical realism and Christian mythology tends to outweigh the fairy-tale elements. The novel is *about* fairy tale, and embeds fairy tales within it, but it is not in itself *a* fairy tale - it functions as a novel with a fairy-tale theme. A.S. Byatt's "Cold" and "The Story of the Eldest Princess" are perhaps the most strongly marked examples of the true modern fairy tale, possibly because her narrative style is naturally sparse and she has a strong sense of pattern and motif. Carter, while using the familiar forms with a suitably vague sense of historical setting, in some cases is close to writing what I would identify as short stories with fairy-tale elements and themes, mostly as a result of her excesses of language, which operate directly against fairy tale's characteristic sparseness. ("The Erl-King" and "The Lady of the House of Love" are good examples here). Thus my selection of texts for this thesis has been motivated by an awareness of the textual effect of a particular text, not just by its use of fairy-tale motifs. While some texts shade into other forms, by and large the writers I have chosen are trying specifically to write fairy tale, not any other form of text.

In trying to arrive at a general definition of the form, I am taking my examples from the best-known collected fairy tales of Western culture - the Brothers Grimm, Charles Perrault and other eighteenth-century French writers, etc. Within these different cultural expressions of the tale, there are undoubtedly differences in tone and expression. The intensely mannered and courtly tales of Madame D'Aulnoy or Madame Leprince de Beaumont, for example, introduce a certain specificity of context, in that the tales mirror court life; protagonists are princes and princesses, and a great deal of rather historically familiar political infighting goes on between powerful fairy kingdoms. Nonetheless, it is the essential bones of the tales which are remembered, rather than the French frills: within the extraneous matter of the court setting, the fairy tale remains a fairy tale, its essentials intact.

In terms of what makes a fairy tale a *fairy tale*, then, as opposed to any other kind of narrative with fairy-tale elements, I would define the essential textural features as follows:

1. **Geometry: pattern and structure.**

Pattern, of course, is central to fairy tale – elements of repetition are common, and carefully-arranged motifs abound. Things come in threes, and the old woman who talks to the eldest son as he sets out on his quest will be there to say exactly the same thing to the second and third. Fairy-tale narratives follow clearly defined paths of character, event and device which impose upon the tale a regular structure and form. Common patterns include the definition of protagonists (the third son or daughter is significant, the first two are foolish, evil or ugly while the third is beautiful and good); the incidence of repetition (tests failed by the first two protagonists and completed successfully by the third); or the occurrence of magical artefacts as essential and completely unexplained plot devices (a comb thrown behind you always turns into a hedge, or a mirror into a lake). Such elements are clichés of fairy-tale form - any child could tell you what should be present in a fairy tale, and even how such things should be arranged.

The presence of such patterns in fairy tale and folklore is the key focus in the work of theorists such as the structuralist Vladimir Propp¹ and the Finnish folklorist Antti Aarne, whose system of classification (the Aarne-Thompson index) allows tales to be identified by a type number which describes the tale's elements and functions. Italo Calvino dismisses the Finnish school represented by Aarne as simply one more in a long list of partial attempts to understand the fairy tale: “a system similar to that used for the classification of coleoptera, which, in their cataloguing process, reduced findings to algebraic sigla of the Type-Index and Motif-Index” (1956: xvii). Despite the flurry of critical bickering over the nature and legitimacy of such classifications (Propp et al), Aarne's system no doubt provides a useful tool for the anthropological and sociological study of folklore. The literary student is perhaps better off simply accepting these technical treatments of pattern as evidence of the essential fact: the existence of pattern. Tolkien, typically, has no time for the folklorists:

... such studies are... scientific (at least in intent); they are the pursuit of folklorists or anthropologists: that is of people using the stories not as they were meant to be used, but as a quarry from which to dig evidence, or information... ignorance or forgetfulness of the nature of a story (as a thing told in its entirety) has often led such inquiries into strange judgements. (1966: 18)

¹ Vladimir Propp: “Fairy tales exhibit thirty-one functions... Thirty-one functions do not exhaust the system... In all, the fairy tale knows about one hundred and fifty elements or constituents. Each of these elements can be labelled according to its bearing on the sequence of action” (1971: 95). Etc.

Tolkien's distinction seems to be between the mechanics of the tale - its structure and pattern in the purely descriptive sense - and its meaning or significance. While the modern fairy tale writers show a strong awareness of pattern, their manipulations are certainly directed more at meaning than at mechanics.

It is perhaps in its insistence on pattern that fairy tale comes closest to its mythological roots: critics such as Mircea Eliade link the repetitive motifs of fairy tale to primitive religious expression, "ritual motifs which still survive in the religious institutions of primitive peoples" (1961: 196). Propp follows the same process of identification, stating that "we can establish several types of relationship between the fairy tale and religion. The first is a direct genetic dependency" (1971: 99)². Conceptually, Eliade argues that myth and fairy tale exist on different planes of meaning, differentiated by varying levels of "man's behaviour to the sacred":

Now, it is not always true that the tale shows a 'desacralisation' of the mythical world. It would be more correct to speak of a camouflage of mythical motifs and characters; instead of 'desacralisation' it would be better to say 'rank-loss of the sacred'. (1961: 200)

The patterns of fairy tale, then, are akin to the patterns of religious myth, holding that extra sense of magical or mystical significance despite their expression in a domesticated format. They are also patterns which reflect, in an expression charged with significance, the patterns of daily existence, the essential human experiences. Eliade states:

Though in the West the tale has long since become a literature of diversion or of escape, it still presents the structure of an infinitely serious and responsible adventure, for in the last analysis, it is reducible to an initiatory scenario: again and again we find initiatory ordeals (battles with the monster, apparently insurmountable obstacles, riddles to be solved, impossible tasks, etc)..., marrying the princess. But its content proper refers to a terrifyingly serious reality: initiation, that is, passing, by way of a symbolic death and resurrection, from ignorance and immaturity to the spiritual age of the adult. (1971: 201)

The recognition of fairy-tale pattern thus becomes not only a structural recognition or an evocation of primitive ritual repetitions, but a psychological one: the patterns evoked by fairy tale are profoundly linked to human development and consciousness. This perhaps goes some way towards explaining the continuing appeal of fairy tale, its use again and again in varying types of literature.³ Bruno Bettelheim's well-known analysis of fairy tale

² The emphasis here, however, is on primitive religion, and Propp cautions that "Modern religion does not create the fairy tale, but merely changes its material" (1971:99).

³ The popular appeal of the Star Wars films could perhaps be seen to be a function of their deliberate and self-conscious use of fairy tale motifs and scenarios. I have dealt with this elsewhere: see "Digitally Remythicalised: Star Wars, modern popular mythology and Madam and Eve." Journal of Literary Studies 15: 1/2, June 1999, pp 66-80.

makes use of precisely this quality, in his insistence on fairy tale's importance for the psychological development of children. Again, this application depends on structure:

A child needs to understand what is going on within his conscious self so that he can also cope with that which goes on in his unconscious... It is here that fairy tales have unequalled value, because they offer new dimensions to the child's imagination which would be impossible for him to discover as truly on his own. Even more important, the form and structure of fairy tales suggest images to the child by which he can structure his daydreams and with them give better direction to his life. (1975: 7)

While many critics find Bettelheim's approach somewhat extreme (see Sale, 1978: 39ff, for the argument that Bettelheim is "distorting the [fairy tale] and partially rewriting it"), nonetheless his arguments are persuasive for the fairy tale as a particularly structured version of human experience. It is this structuredness which makes the tale easily accessible for the reader's identification with the processes depicted.

Various critics have sought to reduce the recurring structure or pattern of fairy tale to one, core pattern, which is that of the quest. Both Eliade and Bettelheim, with their concept of fairy tale as rite-of-passage, touch on the importance of the classic quest motif as a psychological or social journey of discovery, but other critics find a more fundamental pattern at play here. Propp identifies an element of "basic harm" which he says "usually serves as the start of the plot" in fairy tale (1971: 111); Lüthi summarises Propp's approach as one which finds "a lack (or a villainy which causes a lack) and its liquidation" as "the basic structural pattern of the fairytale" (1975: 54), but refines this to insist that fairy tale represents "the general human pattern Need/Fulfilment of need. This Lack/Remedy is in fact the basic pattern of the fairy tale" (1975: 55). This provides a "slim, goal-oriented plotline" (Lüthi, 1975: 56) which contributes materially to fairy tale's characteristic texture and feel as well as to its sense of pattern. Fairy tale is characterised by linearity of plot; diversions and jumps in time (such as the retrospective tale embedded in Grimms' "The Glass Coffin") are rare. At the same time, structuredness works together with other elements to increase accessibility: namely, the tale's simplicity, and its employment of symbol.

2. The marvellous: simplicity and symbol

Fairy tale resists detail. It is sufficient to know that a man has three sons: whether he is a farmer or a merchant may not even be important. Bettelheim has noted how "the fairy-tale simplifies all situations, its figures are clearly drawn, and details, unless very important, are eliminated" (1976: 8). Lüthi also observes that "The fairy tale delights not just in the line as such, but above all in the simple, clearly drawn line" (1975: 40). The

effect of this simplification, which contributes very materially to the fairy tale's characteristic texture, is one also of intensified significance. Where such details are given – the mirror and comb carried by the girl as she flees Baba Yaga's hut, for example – they attain a precise, heightened and powerful symbolic force. Tolkien insists that “fairy stories deal largely... with simple or fundamental things... made luminous by their setting” (1966: 59). Lüthi discusses this in terms of the characteristic symbolic clarity and polarised value of fairy tale: “the tendency to the extreme, which is at work in every nook and cranny of the fairy tale, not just in the contrastive juxtapositions of beautiful and ugly, contributes to this clarity and sharpness: great riches, half a kingdom, the hand of a princess... death” (1975: 43). While fairy tale may deal with simple objects and people, the setting of fairy tale allows such motifs to become resonant, holding a marvellous meaning above and beyond their basic shapes.

Lack of physical or circumstantial detail in the fairy tale thus goes hand-in-hand with a more profound effect, the simplification of morals and principles to the point where any conflict is dealt with in terms of absolutes - the hero, heroine, magical helper opposed to the villain, monster or competing hero. Again, the effect is to heighten the significance of the issues, so that a fairy tale becomes the arena in which unequivocally-defined forces confront each other before proceeding to an unambiguous resolution, an artificial and often perfect closure. The Disneyfication of fairy tale in the twentieth century has perhaps clouded the issue a little, in that a modern readership may expect such a closure to be the vaunted “fairy-tale happy ending”. This is not necessarily the case: while many fairy tales do end in marriage or reconciliation, others offer retribution (the fisherman and his wife restored to their pigsty) or simply the definitive closing of an episode (the Three Fools sitting in their cellar with the ale running onto the floor, while the visitor leaves in disgust). The point is that closure is offered, an artificial over-simplification imposed on events so that they have a neatness and self-containment rather different to the messy, ongoing matters of real life.

Simplification extends to the protagonists of the tale: unlike other forms of prose narrative, the fairy tale has no real interest in human subjectivity or characterisation of the individual. Like the events of fairy-tale narrative, characters are rendered down to essentials, described in terms of one or two defining characteristics - foolish, brave, courteous, discourteous, good, evil. Bettelheim notes that in fairy tale “All characters are typical rather than unique” (1976: 8). Lüthi extends this to encompass an element of *isolation*: “figures are also isolated, they wander individually out into the world. Their psychological processes are not illuminated: only their line of progress is in focus, only

that which is relevant to the action” (1975: 42). Fairy tale is concerned not so much with personality as with the fact of the quest, and, with it, the illustration of moral absolutes. Le Guin’s discussion of Jungian archetype in fantasy is particularly interesting here: she argues that “In the fairy tale... there is no ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, there is a different standard, which is perhaps best called ‘appropriateness.’ ... Under the conditions of fairy tale, in the language of archetypes, we can say with perfect conviction that it may be *appropriate* to [push an old lady into an oven]” (1989: 56). This is perhaps one reason why fairy tale has survived over time and through a wide variety of cultures: it carries within it its own structures of right and wrong, which are clear and obvious even when they diverge from the morality of the society in which they are told. In themselves, such structures are satisfying and coherent because they are clear-cut and obvious.

At the same time, however, fairy tale, while structured with clear-cut relationships, cannot be read symbolically – it is a marvellous narrative, not allegory. Motifs have resonance rather than meaning: the bread thrown to the dragon is a simple object resonant with all the attributes of home, hearth, life, creation, kindness, the ritual act of providing food to a dependant creature. It does not “stand for” anything. Le Guin, writing on myth and archetype in science fiction, puts this particularly well:

In many college English courses the words ‘myth’ and ‘symbol’ are given a tremendous charge of significance. You just ain’t no good unless you can see a symbol hiding, like a scared gerbil, under every page... What does this Mean? What does that Symbolize? What is the Underlying Mythos? ... a symbol is not a sign of something known, but an indicator of something not known and not expressible other than symbolically. [Students] mistake symbol (living meaning) for allegory (dead equivalences). (1989: 63)

In this, Le Guin echoes the writing of George Macdonald, a century earlier: “A fairy tale is not an allegory. There may be allegory in it, but it is not an allegory. He must be an artist indeed who can, in any mode, produce a strict allegory that is not a weariness to the spirit” (in Zahorsky and Boyer, 1983: 14). Allegory is an impoverished form when compared to fairy tale, in that its strict one-on-one equivalences deny the complex working of symbol. As Macdonald says, “A genuine work of art must mean many things; the truer its art, the more things it will mean” (1989: 64)⁴. While allegory is a far more sophisticated form than Macdonald gives it credit for, however, it still operates in a manner rather different to fairy tale in my definition; most importantly, it is a literature which seeks to address ideas before story, or to subordinate story to ideas. In Gay

⁴ This is perhaps an outdated view of allegory, what Gay Clifford calls “the legacy of much Romantic and post-Romantic criticism, in which the didacticism and intellectuality of allegory are seen as crude and wilful limitations upon emotional and archetypal significance” (1974: 3-4); however, in comparison with fairy tale I believe the distinctions made by Macdonald are valid.

Clifford's words, "the allegorist wants to communicate certain generalized formulations about the nature of human experience... and shapes his narrative so as to reveal these" (1974: 7). Thus the similarities between the clean geometry and symbolic motifs of fairy tale and allegory is deceptive: despite the simplicity of its lines, fairy-tale meaning is contained *within* the narrative, so that the narrative does not "stand for" anything outside the tale. Fairy-tale symbols function resonantly rather than illustratively, to suggest multiple meanings rather than to illustrate one aspect of reality.

3. The marvellous: unreality

Fairy tale has no history - a king rules, not a particular king. The countries of fairyland require no maps, its protagonists simply follow the road, or walk through the forests. Decontextualisation, lack of historicity, are integral to the effect of fairy-tale narrative, and help to create its characteristic universality. "Once upon a time," "long ago and far away," deny the relevance of historical time and place. Again, the Star Wars films use this distancing technique: "A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away..." is a precise and evocative use of the fairy-tale convention. Lüthi suggests that the 'Once upon a time' formula "immediately sets the beginning narrative off from the present, from the everyday world of teller and listener (or reader)... They create distance from the present and, with it, from reality, and offer an invitation to enter another world, a world past, thus one that does not exist" (1975: 49). Likewise, the "happily ever after" or other formulaic closure is the evocation by which "the narrator conducts himself and the listeners back into the real world" (Lüthi, 1979: 50). Thus, for the duration of the tale, the reader or listener is effectively removed from the everyday world: as Tolkien says, fairy tales "open a door on Other Time, and if we pass through, though only for a moment, we stand outside our own time, outside Time itself, maybe" (1966: 32).

In its calm acceptance of the marvellous, fairy tale effectively problematises its relationship with reality. Propp comments that "Obviously, the fairy tale is born out of life; however, the fairy tale reflects reality only weakly" (1971: 96). Thus, while its basic principles - life, death, love, hate, quest, challenge, reward, punishment - are those of human existence, the world in which such principles are enacted is significantly different from the real, so that normal expectations are completely transcended. "Once upon a time" signals a transition to a different reality from our own. Jackson has suggested that "Movement into a marvellous realm transports the reader... into an absolutely different, alternative world.... This secondary, duplicated cosmos, is relatively autonomous, relating to the 'real' only through metaphorical reflection and never, or rarely, intruding into or interrogating it" (1981: 42). The process of "metaphorical

reflection” identified by Jackson is, in fact, a function of fairy tale’s self-awareness, its presentation of itself as story rather than mimesis, as artefact rather than reality. Fairy tale shows an awareness and encoding of itself as text, the classic opening “Once upon a time” signalling a precise relationship with reality which makes no pretence at reality, but which is continually aware of its own status *as story*, as ritualised narrative enactment. Such encoded unreality requires a particular kind of response from the receiver of the tale. In order to properly enjoy and understand a fairy tale, it is necessary to refrain from attempting to connect the fairy-tale realm with a particular historical reality. Tolkien identifies this as “the enchanted state: Secondary Belief;” significantly, “the moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, *or rather art*, has failed” (1966: 36, emphasis mine). Participation in the marvellous universe of fairy tale – the enjoyment of the wonder which fairy tale can evoke – depends entirely on recognition of the artificiality of that universe, the fact that it is a work of art. The shared author/reader awareness of how the genre works is based on a mutual recognition of the text *as text*, a created object rather than any attempt to reconstruct reality.

The unreality of non-historicism, together with the reception of story as text rather than mimesis, is closely related to a different kind of unreality: the physical and scientific unreality of magic. Not all fairy tales contain magical motifs, but most assume the existence of some aspect of the marvellous: enchanters, witches or fairies, items with specific powers (the knapsack, the sack and the horn, or the ever-full pot or purse), or people able to use mundane items in a magical fashion (the nuts which break open to reveal beautiful dresses, the mortar and pestle in which Baba Yaga flies). In this sense, fairy tale is structurally similar to the functioning of romance, a genre with which it overlaps in many ways, not only in its use of formula, but in its provision of a marvellous realm consciously removed from the real world. Northrop Frye’s characterisation of the marvellous in romance could equally be a characterisation of fairy tale:

... the hero of romance moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended: prodigies of courage and endurance, unnatural to us, are natural to him, and enchanted weapons, talking animals, terrifying ogres and witches, and talismans of miraculous power violate no rules of probability once the postulates of romance have been established. (1971: 33)

In fact, in The Secular Scripture (1976) he usefully defines actual fairy tale or folk tale as “naïve romance” (1976: 3). His discussion of romance in The Secular Scripture is particularly interesting in that he identifies in romance, and in the related forms of myth and folklore, precisely the kind of religious thinking which Eliade discovers in fairy tale. Where Eliade is interested in rites of passage, however, Frye sees the vast body of “secular literature” – including myth, folklore and romance – as providing a “mythological

universe” which functions similarly to the biblical universe as a “vision of reality” rather than reality itself. He states, “Romance is the structural core of all fiction: being directly descended from folktale, it brings us closer than any other aspect of literature to the sense of fiction ... as the epic of the creature, man’s vision of his own life as a quest” (1976: 15). Unlike other forms of literature, romance and fairy tale are thus *essentially* non-mimetic.

4. The marvellous: certainty, wonder and joy

If the circumstantial elements of ahistoricity and unreality are central to fairy tale, they go hand-in-hand with the response they demand to such unreality. Fairy tale, as a form of magical narrative, shares with other genres its element of the fantastical or marvellous, but it requires an unquestioning acceptance of such marvels which is alien to most other magical narratives. Fantasy romance, for example, attempts to rationalise its magical element within some kind of logical framework, and requires consistent rules within that framework. George Macdonald insists that “To be able to live for a moment in an imagined world, we must see the laws of its existence obeyed. Those broken, we fall out of it” (in Boyer and Zahorski, 1984: 15). Likewise, the fantastic and the uncanny (in the definitions of Todorov and Jackson) allow unrealistic manifestations to cause a clash of discourses, and hence disruption and disquiet. Jackson argues that, in fantastic narratives, “The narrator is no clearer than the protagonist about what is going on... the status of what is being seen and recorded as ‘real’ is constantly in question. This instability of narrative is at the centre of the fantastic as a mode” (1981: 34). This is a sharp contrast to fairy tale, which presents a stable and unquestioned narrative whose correct mode of reception is accepting wonder. This, of course, is a direct result of fairy tale’s self-consciousness about its own fictive status: the narrative can be taken for granted, unquestioningly, because it does not require the reader or listener to relate the narrative to reality; it is a self-contained artefact.

Fairy tale, then, is characterised by its complete lack of question; Todorov suggests that in narratives of the marvellous, “supernatural elements provoke no particular reaction either in the characters or in the implicit reader... the supernatural events in fairy tales provoke no surprise; neither a hundred years’ sleep, nor a talking wolf, nor the magical gifts of the fairies” (1973: 54). “Once upon a time” is a flat statement of fact. This typical feature of fairy tale is exploited notably in tales by Barthelme (“The Glass Mountain”) and Coover (“The Gingerbread House”). Both of these tales employ a textual device of listing the events of the tale in a series of numbered paragraphs, effectively highlighting the flat, factual aspect of the fairy-tale voice. The marvels described by the

factual register of fairy tale require wonder as a response because they move the reader or listener into a different world, as I have discussed above. At the same time, the abdication of critical response is an integral part of the pleasure of the fairy-tale narrative, on which rests its ability to satisfy desire. Tolkien comments that fairy tale is “plainly not primarily concerned with possibility, but with desirability. If they awakened *desire*, satisfying it while often whetting it unbearably, they succeeded” (1966: 40). This is desire for the marvellous, the pleasure of the narrative illusion, shared between teller/writer and listener/reader, that brings the magical into being, to be celebrated without question. Not only the creation of the marvellous causes pleasure, however: the repetition of familiar patterns and structures is itself pleasurable. Lüthi suggests:

that which has some technical purpose can, in the sense of an esthetics of the functional, be pleasing at the same time. Formulas are memory props and transition aids for the narrator. They are useful to him and comfortable, but they are additionally agreeable to him – just as the hearer is also delighted – when they turn up time and again, because he feels the organising effect they have. (1975: 44)

The pleasure of accepting wonder in experiencing the fairy tale is thus complex, based both in the enjoyment of the marvellous and in the geometric pleasures of pattern. But, if fairy tale’s authority must simply be accepted for enjoyment of the form, much of the authority of fairy tale rests in the status of the narrator. “Once upon a time” may only function as a flat statement of fact if the authority of the narrator is not problematised. Fairy tale’s narrator is omniscient and far less present than the oral voice of the folkloric narrator, but the structures and patterns of fairy tale dictate that the reader can never quite forget that behind this unrealistic artefact must be an artist. Scholes comments that “the structure, by its very shapeliness, asserts the authority of the shaper, the fabulator behind the fable” (1979: 2). Thus the enjoyment of fairy tale’s marvellous structures requires not only unquestioning enjoyment of its marvellous world and unrealistic structures, but the power of the tale-teller whose words make possible the fairy tale itself.

Metafictional fairy tale and the postmodern problem.

... a principal activity of postmodernist critics... consists in disagreeing about what postmodernism is or ought to be, and thus about who should be admitted to the club – or clubbed into admission. (John Barth, 1992: 172)

I shall be concerned, in this thesis, with the development of fairy tale as a metafictional form in the work of various modern writers. While several of the authors whom I have considered in this thesis may be identified as postmodernists (notably Carter and Byatt), the fact remains that I am interested in the use of metafiction by these writers, not in their adherence (or not) to various definitions of postmodern writing. I do not thus

intend to offer an extended analysis of the parameters of postmodernism, which, as the quote from Barth suggests, is a thorny and contentious issue and mostly outside the interests of this thesis. Instead, I propose to look at the intersections between postmodern theory and the writing of metafictional fairy tale, and to investigate only such aspects of postmodern theory which are relevant and illuminating to my argument.

As I have begun to argue, it may be possible that fairy tale demonstrates some properties which are in themselves inherently metafictional; that the use of the form by postmodern writers simply exploits tendencies inherent within the form itself. Jackson suggests: "By offering a problematic re-presentation of an empirically 'real' world, the fantastic raises questions of the nature of the real and unreal, foregrounding the relation between them as its central concern" (1981: 37). Jackson declines to define fairy tale as a fantastic form, preferring to define it as a separate genre, the marvellous (1981: 42), which she describes as being characterised by certainty rather than hesitation. While I have argued that the marvellous is centrally concerned with confidence rather than doubt, and generally provides no such clash of reality and unreality as do the uncanny or fantastic modes, nonetheless there is space within the marvellous for a rather different awareness of unreality and reality. Within the functioning of the fairy-tale form can be found the same foregrounding of the relationship between real and unreal which Jackson attributes to the fantastic, in fairy tale's deliberate construction of itself as non-reality. This is a non-reality even further removed than the usual conceptual gap between the world of the reader and the created world of the text. Where realist fiction plays the textual game which requires the reader's complicity in a constructed reality, fairy tale denies its own realism from the start – as I have suggested, the classic opening "Once upon a time" signals unreality in unequivocal terms.

Patricia Waugh's definition is useful in this context:

Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. (1984: 2)

In its insistence on fictionality, fairy tale certainly "self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact": the carry-over of the oral voice of folktale continually constructs the tale as *tale*, as a created text rather than any attempt at reproducing reality. The unashamed presentation of the marvellous, as well as the unrealistic use of pattern and repetition in describing events, similarly draw attention to a non-realist form of representation – to tale as crafted object, artefact. In this sense, then, fairy tale has some elements which could be said to be inherently metafictional.

While such deliberate non-realism draws attention to the gap between reality and the constructed world, however, fairy tale by my definition specifically refuses to fulfil Waugh's criteria of "posing questions" about the unreal world it represents. Although the fictional nature of the fairy tale world is highlighted, we are not encouraged to question it at all: rather than an unstable relationship, we are presented with one whose terms of interaction between reality and fiction are a *fait accompli*.

Metafiction is a favoured technique of the postmodernist writer, and it becomes clear that fairy tale will lend itself particularly well to metafiction owing to its inherent structure and assumptions. In this, fairy tale's inherent metafictionality parallels the way in which postmodern writing's extreme self-consciousness about the act of writing leads to an ongoing fascination with structure. Robert Scholes's work Fabulation and Metafiction deals with a number of postmodern narratives in terms of the same interests in structure and unreality as are shown by fairy tale. His examples include works by Fowles, Borges and Barth, and he notes that they have in common "... an extraordinary delight in design... A sense of pleasure in form is one characteristic of fabulation" (1979: 2). Postmodern writers such as Barthes, Calvino, Barthelme and Coover make explicit this convergence of interests by playing specifically with fairy-tale forms in their writing. The interest in structure is underlined by other games with genre, such as Umberto Eco's equally self-aware play with the structures of detective fiction in The Name of the Rose (1980).

Fairy tale's inherent structuredness makes it ideally suited to postmodern play, which, as Waugh notes, "is facilitated by rules and roles... The most important feature shared by fiction and play is the construction of an alternative reality by manipulating the relation between a set of signs... as 'message' and the context or frame of that message" (1984: 35). Awareness of the essential non-reality of fairy tale, together with its existence as a particularly coherent "set of signs", allows it to be playfully manipulated within the context of writer and reader's shared awareness of the form as both structure and fiction. At the same time, play with form – ringing the changes on fairy tale – works particularly well because the form is familiar and highly recognisable to the reader. (Angela Carter is a good example in this context: her feminist rewrites are shocking and effective precisely because we all know what to expect, and are consequently surprised when it fails to materialise). The continual and ongoing presence of feminist re-writing in modern fairy tale underlines this particular awareness: political reassessment of structure depends primarily on the existence and shared understanding of such structures. Fairy tale becomes a fertile ground for feminist re-structuring because its terms, particularly when

their reception in Western culture is filtered through the influential works of Perrault and the Brothers Grimm, are inherently patriarchal. Patriarchy becomes entrenched not only in content, but in the recurring heterosexual ending to the structure itself.

The postmodern use of fairy-tale narrative is interesting in that the form itself actually appears to resist some potential effects of postmodern writing. Waugh notes how some varieties of postmodern text approach breakdown of structure: "contexts shift so continuously and unsystematically that the metalingual commentary is not adequate to 'place' or to interpret such shifts. The reader is *deliberately* disoriented" (1984: 37). She cites the work of William Burroughs as an example of this extreme effect, which can be seen as a result of the characteristic postmodern impulse to disrupt and reveal the codes of language, taken to its logical extreme. The invocation of fairy tale as a motif in postmodern play effectively resists such an extreme process, since the nature and effect of fairy tale are inherent more in its form than in its content. Thus, while structure offers writers fertile ground on which to rewrite, rework, invert, investigate and play with the fairy-tale form to their hearts' content, the final dissolution of the narrative is denied them. If that ultimate structure dissolves, what they are writing is no longer recognisable as fairy tale at all, and there is not much point in invoking it. The fairy tale works flatly against Baudrillard's concept of the simulacra in modern culture, which he defines as creating "a hyperreal henceforth sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and the simulated generation of difference" (1988: 167). Far from having an existence divorced from any original form, postmodern fairy tale continually invokes the original form which it is reflecting, however distorted the reflection⁵. Likewise, in its own strong sense of its status as imaginary, as fictional artefact, it avoids the failure of distinction between the real and the imaginary which Baudrillard posits. Thus fairy tale functions in postmodern writing simultaneously to enable and to limit the operations of postmodern writers upon the form: while structured, its narrative certainty in some ways resists breakdown under the postmodern gaze. At the same time, its inherent self-consciousness enables particularly complex metafictional play. On a completely different level, postmodernism's interest in the collapse of boundaries between low and high art is significant for fairy tale, itself a folk form appropriated into a literary mode; I shall discuss this in detail below.

⁵ This is one sense in which the functioning of fairy-tale narrative bears out Propp's assertion (above) that fairy tale resists other genres.

Fairy tale and the community voice: some notes on popular culture

There is an underground connection between fairy tales and modern fiction – between one of the oldest forms of literature and one of the most recent. More often than we realise, the stock situations and stock characters ... of the classic fairy tale reappear in the novel we read today. (Alison Lurie, 1990: 29)

The patterns of fairy tale tend towards closure, and often demonstrate an inherent utopianism: the youngest of the poor man's sons will succeed in his quest and marry the princess. In its reassuring patterns of closure and consolation, as well as its reliance on pattern and formula, fairy tale conforms to many of the attributes of modern popular or mass culture. This link makes sense, since in its earliest, oral form fairy tale was an expression of a communal folk culture, offering a removed and symbolic version of peasant experience as well as an escape into fantasy and wish-fulfilment. Historically, fairy tale has been appropriated by the processes of written narrative, removing the genre from the realm of the common folk into the elite world of the educated. In this context, it is interesting to see the re-emergence of fairy tale in the late twentieth century as a popular phenomenon: in the versions offered by pulp fantasy romance as well as a more communal expression through the medium of film. The animated fairy tales of Disney or recent films such as *Ever After* or *The Grimm Brothers' Snow White* may have a commercial, market-related dimension which is alien to fairy tale in its original form, but their situation within a tradition of popular narrative could be seen to represent, in a fairly limited fashion, a partial re-empowerment of the folkloric voice. This ability rests in film's power as a popular and communal experience, of a different order entirely to the solitary and often intellectual enjoyment of reading. However, the gloss of communality over film in modern culture is mostly that, a misleading illusion which disguises the issues of ownership at the heart of cinema production. I have dealt with the implications of this when looking specifically at film texts (see Chapter VI).

In considering narrative as taking part in a process of structural invocation or genre recognition, I have chosen to focus on fairy tale as a highly encoded narrative form employing the most simple and primitive motifs, deployed in relationships which are both rigid and predictable. In the case of popular writing, however, a slightly different set of technical parameters is imposed. The process of recognition and mutual understanding of narrative conventions remains unchanged, since fairy tale, in itself a popular or folk narrative which is common to a wide audience, is very much a given of Western culture. At the same time, the reflexive nature of popular fairy-tale narratives seems to go directly against some formulations of popular, or particularly, mass culture. Noël Carroll summarises Clement Greenberg's analysis of mass art, which he defines as

kitsch, as the antithesis of reflexivity: “Avant-garde art is introverted – it is about itself (it is about its medium). Kitsch is extroverted; it is about the world” (Carroll, 1998: 33). My identification of fairy tale as inherently metafictional, and my choice of several kinds of popular narrative which employ fairy-tale motifs reflexively, follows Carroll in tending to deny Greenberg’s characterisation. However, while popular formulations of fairy tale (e.g. Disney and other fairy-tale films, fantasy and sci fi authors) may manipulate narrative convention in a similar manner to “literary” writers, it could be argued that such manipulations have a very different purpose. In the latter half of the twentieth century, the definition of a popular narrative has become, in many formulations, one appealing to a mass market, therefore one structured to sell rather than to explore the intellectual possibilities of narrative.⁶

Such a differentiation, of course, immediately embroils itself in the debate around the highly problematical notion of the “popular”, particularly in the context of postmodernism. Zipes has suggested that the term itself is misleading and illegitimate: “Popular culture is a myth because we cannot assume that what emanates from “the people” is theirs, that is, an expression of their authentic desires and wishes” (1997: 8). On the level of culture, “popular” culture, it has been forcefully argued, represents the impositions of a capitalist cultural monolith. This follows the formulation of popular culture by theorists such as Adorno and Horkheimer, to whom it represents the domination of capitalist culture via technology. In the context of this study, however, I am more interested in the categorisation of “popular” on the level of narrative pitch, where it presupposes some kind of notional relationship with an opposing category of “canon” or “literary” production – high versus low culture, “real” literature versus mere entertainment. “Popular” becomes a pejorative label, associating literature with a purely commercial process, texts written to sell rather than to offer any innovative or intellectual investigation of ideas.

This theoretical polarisation immediately invokes particular aspects of the debate around postmodernism and theories of postmodern literature. Jameson comments on postmodernism’s perception of and fascination with a “‘degraded’ landscape of schlock

⁶ This commercial aspect is hardly new to fairytale: in the nineteenth century, the brothers Grimm produced multiple editions of their *Nursery and Household tales*, editing later editions with an eye to the market, and removing elements of sexuality which might offend a bourgeois readership. Maria Tatar reports a letter from Jacob to Wilhelm on the new 1815 edition: “I do not think we can print it as it was; there is much to be improved and added - something that will also prove favourable for sales...” (in Tatar, 1987: 12). Fairytale is thus identified with a process of revision towards commercial rather than artistic ends, long before twentieth century consumerism.

and kitsch... of so-called paraliterature, with its airport paperback categories of the gothic and the romance, the popular biography, the murder mystery, and the science fiction or fantasy novel" (1991: 2-3). However, to re-invoke Adorno and Horkheimer, Jameson has also noted the dependence of such theories of popular culture on "a whole new type of society, most famously baptised 'postindustrial society' (Daniel Bell), but often also designated consumer society, media society, information society, electronic society or high tech, and the like" (1999: 3). Such mass technological transmission of culture, in Adorno and Horkheimer's characterisation, dehumanises and manipulates the individuals who make up the mass market, in order to create an environment of passive consumption. This discourages reason and imagination in favour of submission to the totalitarian domination of the "culture industry" (in Zipes, 1979: 97-99), and thus returns us to the implications of narrative intention – intellectual stimulation versus entertainment of an essentially passive reader. The intersection of this axis with that of metafiction's intellectual play with notions of recognition, becomes somewhat complex in the context of my discussion.

The operation of mass market demands in the case of popular narrative is evident in texts such as Disney's fairy-tale films, and to a slightly lesser extent, in the popular ghetto⁷ of the science fiction and fantasy paperback. However, a formulation which insists on the characterisation of popular texts solely in commercial terms, refusing to admit any intellectual or investigative intention, is badly flawed. Jameson has noted postmodernism's characteristic "effacement... of key boundaries or separations... the erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture" (1983: 112). He argues that this has led to "the emergence of new kinds of texts infused with the forms, categories and contents of that very culture industry so passionately denounced by all the ideologues of the modern" (1991:2). A text categorised as "popular" may, in the postmodern environment, also partake of the serious intellectual intention more usually attached to "high" forms of literary production; likewise, there is an extent to which any "literary" text imposes on the writer the constraints of publication; like a popular text, it cannot escape the inherent nature of books as commodities. Thus, as postmodernism's collapse of categories tends to demonstrate, all texts exist on a continuum between the commercial and the intellectual, and there may be a space for genuine innovation and exploration within the most crassly commercial text.

⁷ The phrase is Ursula le Guin's; see Chapter V for a discussion of its implications.

Given the problematical nature of the “popular” category in these contexts, perhaps the most useful theoretical approach to the intersection of popular narrative with metafictional fairy tale, is in the structural or generic formulation rather than the cultural. Such an analysis potentially remains abstract and objective, bypassing the inherent political and value judgements in a cultural approach. In addition, I would argue that the structural similarities between fairy tale or folktale and the formulaic nature of many so-called popular narratives, are in fact the most interesting facet of the intersection. In this investigation I have used John Cawelti’s seminal work on formula narrative. Cawelti’s discussion hinges on “the different pleasures and uses of novelty and familiarity” in literature (1979: 1). In his introduction to Adventure, Mystery and Romance he explicitly links the childhood experience of the familiar story at bedtime, to adult formula literature: “an interest in certain types of stories which have highly predictable structures that guarantee the fulfilment of conventional expectations” and that are associated with “relaxation, entertainment and escape” (1979: 1). The intersection of fairy-tale narrative with adult formula fiction becomes clear in this definition, and enables us to identify, as have critics such as Propp⁸, fairy tale as itself a formula narrative, one which works on recognition and familiarity in precisely the same way as modern formulas such as the detective novel, romance or science fiction novel. There are also clear links with Adorno and Horkheimer’s definition of mass culture: familiarity becomes a powerful tool of commercialism, in that a consumer relaxing into a familiar, safe and comfortable narrative is more likely to enter the passive, receptive state required by the culture industry intent on selling products.

At the same time, while recognition is central to popular formula narratives and to fairy tale, it must be balanced with sufficient novelty to ensure reader interest and engagement: as Cawelti states, “To be a work of any quality or interest, the individual version of a formula must have some unique or special characteristics of its own” (1979: 10). Le Guin, discussing the trivialisation of science fiction in the popular market, puts it more trenchantly:

... novelty, regardless of quality, is a marketable value, a publicizable value. It is, of course, a very limited form of novelty.... Genuine newness, genuine originality, is suspect. Unless it’s something familiar rewarmed, or something experimental in form but clearly trivial or cynical in content, it is unsafe. And it must be safe. It mustn’t hurt the consumers. It mustn’t *change* the consumers.... Shock them, jolt

⁸ “The recurrence of functions is astounding... it is possible to establish that the characters of a tale, however varied they may be, often perform the same action... This explains the two-fold quality of a tale: its amazing multiformity, picturesqueness, and colour, and on the other hand, its no less striking uniformity, its repetition” (Propp, 1968: 21).

them, titillate them, make them writhe and squeal – but do not make them think. If they think, they may not come back to buy the next can of soup. (1989: 190)

The tension between novelty and familiarity is characteristic of popular and formula fiction; again, to relate this to consumerism, an audience presented with too much novelty will be alienated and will lose the passive, receptive state induced by familiarity, while an audience given insufficient novelty will fail to be engaged by the popular text. (The Disney fairy-tale formula presents a highly adept negotiation of this textual tension). The process of genre recognition in metafictional fairy tale thus takes on a slightly different shape in the context of popular literature. While the formula remains central, its invocation makes somewhat different use of the familiarity of the narrative, adding to the pleasure of structure a particular complacency around that familiarity, as well as a recognition of novelty which is more self-congratulatory than intellectual.

A brief history of tale-telling: fairy-tale adaptations

Popular and literary forms of metafictional fairy tale alike assume the familiarity of the Western reader or consumer with traditional fairy-tale forms. It becomes necessary to trace the development of that awareness, over the fascinating and contested grounds of folk and literary cultures, class issues and the ownership of the form. Within fairy tale as a historical process I shall also attempt to locate the development and adaptation of metafictional awareness within the form. In this analysis I have relied quite heavily on the writings of Jack Zipes, whose sociological approach is particularly useful for this kind of historical survey.

I have largely taken for granted in this discussion the distinction between folklore, as an oral form either transmitted through the community by retelling or collected verbatim into a literary version, and fairy tale, which I have used to describe the literary genre which is based on, and has many aspects in common with, oral folklore. Zipes, in his introduction to The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales, notes the existence of a critical approach which argues that “we might as well label any text or narrative that calls itself or is called a fairy tale as such since the average reader is not aware of the distinction between the oral and literary traditions.” In rebuttal, he argues that the distinction “preserves the unique socio-historical nature of genres” (2000: xv). Certainly I agree that the distinction is important historically and culturally, but I would also argue that much of the structural and non-realist character of the written fairy tale is directly attributable to the oral nature of the original form. Examples are formula and repetition, which were aids to memory in oral retelling; adaptability, which reflects the nature of a

communal re-telling; the status of the narrator, whose presence and oral voice has helped to shape the self-consciousness of the literary fairy tale; and the presence of the marvellous, which reflects the non-realist thought of a pre-literate, agrarian community. The oral status of folktale is possibly also partly responsible for its rich intertextuality, in its ability to reflect and integrate the narratives important to the community – not just folktale, but, as Zipes notes, “the chronicle, myth, legend, anecdote, and other oral forms.... If there is one ‘constant’ in the structure and theme of the wonder tale that was also passed on to the literary fairy tale, it is *transformation* – to be sure, miraculous transformation” (2000: xvii). Thus the oral folktale informs the literary fairy tale both structurally and in its awareness of wonder and the magical.

The process by which the oral folktale was written down over time is endlessly fascinating. Sale reminds us that “In our reverence for fairy tales of the oral tradition, we must not think that written fairy tales are any less old. A written version of ‘Sleeping Beauty’ can be found in the Twentieth Dynasty in Egypt...” (1978: 49). This is perhaps a little naïve, in that oral forms must have been prevalent until the great rush of collection and writing down in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries; his point is valid, however, in that the relationship between written and oral forms is at times mutual rather than one-directional. Tales collected in Europe after the seventeenth century may well have been influenced, one way or another, by written forms from various sources. Before the seventeenth century – that is, in the medieval period and the Renaissance – written versions of folkloric tales seem mostly to have been embedded in larger narratives, connected by a framing narrative. Good examples here are Chaucer’s fourteenth-century *Canterbury Tales*, many of which have folkloric themes, or Straparola’s mid-sixteenth century collection *Le Piacevoli Notti*, which influenced later collections such as that of Giambattista Basile (1634-6). For my purposes, this is interesting in that the convention of the framing tale works to preserve some aspects of the oral narrative – the reality of the narrator, the tale as a constructed rather than a mimetic process – and hence the inherent metafictional qualities of the oral form. Framing narratives in these examples tend to emphasise the process of tale-telling as entertainment or competition among a specific group – pilgrims, nobles escaping persecution or plague, or the collected elderly tale-tellers of Basile’s framing fairy tale. Early written versions thus emphasise tale as artistry, and consequently as artefact.

The increasing presence of fairy-tale elements in literature rather than oral tradition found its most powerful expression from the late 17th century onwards, when the French aristocracy discovered and adapted oral tales into intellectual and artistic productions for

their high-society gatherings. Before this, tales had been the province of the peasant class, and the upper classes had accessed them only via nursery interactions with servants. Zipes writes that fairy tale was “disdained as a literary form by the aristocratic and bourgeois classes until it received courtly approval through Madame de Maintenon and Fénelon; that is, until it could be codified and used to reinforce an accepted discursive mode of social conventions advantageous to the interests of the intelligentsia and *ancien régime*” (1983: 3). Again, the process of self-consciousness continues: the tale is once more treated as a self-consciously artistic production, a glittering artefact whose purpose is to dazzle its audience with its beauty and wit. At the same time, the universality of fairy-tale motifs and structures is such that the tale can be easily adapted to a very different social setting from that in which it was created. For the first time, we begin to see the process of literary ownership associated with the tale: rather than an oral production, or a mock-oral production distanced from the author by the narrators of the frame tale, French fairy tale was integrally attached to a specific artist whose mark on the tale was claimed as unique. As a corollary to the process of appropriation by the individual, various critics (Lurie, 1990; Zipes, 1991; Warner, 1995) note the gradual erasure of a specifically female oral voice in the tale, as the works of more powerful male writers such as Perrault took precedence over their more prolific female contemporaries.

While the French adaptations of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were vital in the process by which oral tale became written literature, it is the nineteenth century which is central to the development of the modern fairy tale, certainly the modern fairy tale in English. In addition to the anthropological folklore project of the Brothers Grimm in Germany, the translation of Perrault and the Arabian Nights into English seems to have prompted what Zipes has identified as “the flowering of the literary fairy tale” in England (1987: xiii). With the sudden availability of English fairy tale translations to the rising and increasingly educated middle class, together with the development of a special branch of literature devoted to children, fairy tale in England burgeoned merrily in the nineteenth century. Most interestingly, the production of the literary fairy tale in England at this time was not simply a process of adapting and retelling well-known and familiar formulae. Instead, writers began to develop original literary tales, whose awareness and deliberate use of familiar structures and motifs did not preclude the creation of tales that were innovative, witty and self-aware⁹. Various tales from this time have subsequently been adopted into Western tradition, as exemplified by retellings for

⁹ Such innovations were not restricted to England: this is the period which gave us, among other things, the tales of Hans Christian Andersen.

children's editions, in a way which blurs and disguises their status as original works of art rather than folkloric expressions. Southey's "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" and Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" are good examples of this process.

Once again, the inherent metafictionality of the form is highlighted in many examples of Victorian fairy tale: perhaps exaggerated by the new freedom of writing especially for children, Victorian tales are often playful and parodic, satirising as well as celebrating the conventions on which they draw. Despite the label of children's literature, such tales demonstrate considerable sophistication, their playfulness operating at a level which would not be entirely accessible to children¹⁰. Motifs from familiar tales are inverted or exaggerated, and the tale's conventions are self-consciously displayed for the amusement of the reader. George Macdonald's "The Light Princess" is a case in point: the inversion of the familiar princess who cannot laugh into the more morally pointed motif of the princess who cannot cry creates an amusing and thought-provoking variation on an old formula. "Little Daylight," on the other hand, plays self-consciously with the motif of the spurned fairy at a royal christening, elaborating on the traditions to humorous effect. A similar play with convention is seen in the work of E. Nesbit, whose fairly formulaic fairy tales become fresh and original in their updating to contemporary Victorian society – the Princess's romance with the Lift Man in "The Charmed Life", the rifle-wielding hero of "Billy the King", or the wonderful satire on Darwinism and Victorian industry's mass production in "The Deliverers of their Country." Likewise, Kenneth Grahame's "The Reluctant Dragon" shows a strong sense of fairy-tale predestination in its comic re-analysis of St George's dragon. The combination of generic play and children's fairy tale continues into the early twentieth century, with works such as A. A. Milne's Once on a Time (1917). Again, self-aware use of form is central to the effects of these tales: the reader's awareness of how fairy tale functions is integral to the playful conspiracy between writer and reader, and to the innovative structural games which result. Among other effects of this self-awareness, Victorian fairy tale begins the play with fairy-tale structure to feminist ends, in the strong female heroines and inverted plotlines of tales such as Evelyn Sharpe's "The Spell of the Magician's Daughter" or Mrs Ewing's "The Ogre Courting."

¹⁰ Certainly, literate children's fairy tale seems to have been a sanctioned pastime of many well-known Victorian literary figures: among famous writers who dabbled in original metafictional fairy tale ostensibly for children were Dickens ("The Magic Fishbone"), Ruskin ("The King of the Golden River"), Southey ("Goldilocks and the Three Bears"), Oscar Wilde (The Happy Prince and other tales), William Makepeace Thackeray (The Rose and the Ring) and George Macdonald (numerous tales).

The strong tradition of fairy-tale writing in Britain in the Victorian age is possibly the reason for the slightly skewed representation of authors in this thesis. Among the literary texts I have chosen to investigate, only those by Thurber are American: all other authors are British. In the film chapter, American films predominate, but Britain and Europe are well-represented in the works of Neil Jordan and Jean Cocteau. While I did not make a conscious decision to favour British authors when planning the thesis, nonetheless I do not think the predominance of British texts is arbitrary or accidental. It is not the case that British writers simply produce more fairy tale than American writers; I have chosen not to include tales by writers such as Robert Coover, for example. I would suggest, however, that the strong tradition of children's fairy tale in Britain has partially shaped the awareness of form in British writers, tending to produce a stronger adherence to the classic texture of fairy tale than in American works. American magical narrative in the nineteenth century tends towards the works of romance writers such as Hawthorne and Poe, and lacks the influence from the self-conscious writers of fairy tale common in England and Europe. The result seems to have been a tendency for British works to correspond more closely to my requirements of fairy-tale texture, to the purpose of actually writing fairy tale, rather than writing experimental texts which use fairy-tale motifs. Thus, while I am generalising in discerning such tendencies, I believe it is valid to see the importance of the Victorian writers in determining the shape and direction of metafictional fairy tale in the twentieth century, certainly in its tendency for the purer expressions of fairy tale to be located in Britain.

It can be seen that twentieth-century metafictional fairy tale has a wide tradition from which to draw for its play with structure and the marvellous: not only the well-known folkloric forms, but the adaptation of such forms into written literature over a long period of time. The geometry of the written tale is not simply that of folklore, but is a more literary awareness that incorporates aspects of the oral voice, building upon them to complex and sophisticated effect. Most interestingly, the specific trends of literary fairy tale at various times in its history have in the twentieth century given way to a particularly wide range of contexts and media for adaptation. Where the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw aristocratic and theatrical versions, and the nineteenth focused on children's literature and the nationalistic collection of folklore, the twentieth century has been the site of a proliferation of forms. Within the parameters I have imposed in terms of texture, by selecting texts that *are* fairy tale rather than *using* it, I have had to omit twentieth-century forms such as fairy-tale poetry, women's romance, experimental postmodern narratives, advertising, television series and a large number of Hollywood films. However, even with these restrictions I am able to explore not only

literary versions in both short story and novel form, but popular stories and novels within the science fiction and fantasy frameworks, as well as a wide range of film adaptations, both live action and animated. The marvellous geometry of fairy tale has found a significant space in contemporary culture, where it is alive and well.

University of Cape Town

Chapter II:

Nice and Neat and Formal: James Thurber

“...The record and report of maidens changed to deer and back again, all nice and neat and normal, all nice and neat and formal.” (White Deer 39)

It seems a little strange to identify in James Thurber, New Yorker humorist, essayist and cartoonist, a fairy tale writer with a cogent and particularly self-conscious awareness of the genre. Thurber is very much an American institution, best known for his essays and drawings. Although he is responsible for a vast body of essays, short stories, fables, plays, cartoons and illustrated poetry produced between 1920 and his death in 1961, he is less celebrated for his two short fairytale novels, written ostensibly for children – The White Deer (1945) and The Thirteen Clocks (1950). A third, The Wonderful O (1957) is not strictly a fairy tale within my definition, and I will not deal with it in detail here, but it shows similar structural and generic play. Other fairy tales are shorter pieces, including “The Great Quillow” (1944) and the illustrated children’s book, Many Moons (1943), written in the same decade as the two children’s novels. In addition to these pure versions of the form, many of his essays, fables and short stories shade into play with fairy tale at some point or another.

As an often-cynical humorist, Thurber seems an unlikely producer of fairy tale, and in fact the closure and happy ending of the fairy-tale form in many ways operate directly against his trademark tendency towards a kind of melancholy chaos. Nevertheless, in the magical narrative of fairy tale Thurber most strongly expresses his manifesto for the power of the imagination and fantasy against an increasingly mundane and bewildering world. At the same time, his fairy tales have in common with his other writings a

¹ Parts of this chapter were originally published as “‘Nice and neat and formal:’ entrapment, transformation and narrative convention in Thurber’s fairy tales,” in Fissions and Fusions: Proceedings of the First Conference of the Cape American Studies Association, July 1996. Ed. Lesley Marx, Loes Nas and Lara Dunwell. Cape Town: UWC Press, pp. 124-130.

continuing interest in linguistic structure, play and nonsense, which are dependent upon his awareness of the essentially arbitrary rules and structures of language itself. From here, it is a short step to the play with structure on the level of genre and form.

Fairy tale is a genre not usually associated with comedy. If fairy tale represents, as Eliade insists, an "infinitely serious and responsible adventure" (1964: 201), then its basic gravity might be expected to cause a conflict of structure and expectation when mixed with the comic: laughter is not entirely a compatible response with wonder. While comic versions of fairy tale do exist, they tend to be satirical in nature, possibly owing to the distinctive structuredness of the narrative, which is easy to parody for comic purposes. Tolkien admits the perfect compatibility of fairy tale and satire, commenting that "there is satire, sustained or intermittent, in undoubted fairy stories" (1964: 12). The pantomime is perhaps the best example of satirical fairy tale, but other examples can be found in British writers contemporary to Thurber himself – in Osbert Sitwell's Fee, Fi, Fo, Fum (1959), Anthony Armstrong's The Naughty Princess (1945) or Carol Brahms and S. J. Simon's savvy Disney- and ballet-conscious satire, Titania Has A Mother (1944). All these works to some extent update fairy tale to contemporary settings, gaining their humour from the resulting clash of discourses, a tendency which reaches a climax in James Finn Garner's more recent Politically Correct Bedtime Stories (1994) and Once Upon a More Enlightened Time (1995). In this process, however, some of the essential texture and feel of the fairy tale is lost; the tale becomes jaded, cynical and knowing rather than reflecting the innocence and wonder which seems intrinsic to the pure form. Terry Pratchett's Discworld versions of fairy tale (Witches Abroad and The Amazing Maurice and his Educated Rodents) are perhaps the most successful of recent comic versions, betraying a profound respect for the form which sustains the re-workings even through the updating in realism and social comment to which they are subjected.

A certain cynicism is certainly true of large parts of Thurber's work, in his essays, stories and most notably his fables, which show, as Catherine McGehee Kenney suggests, an "angry insistence upon correcting life rather than accepting it" (1984: 6). His writing is marked by a striving against the inherent chaos of modern life and human relationships, in a search for coherence and benevolent order². In his essays, short stories and fables, Thurber focuses most characteristically on the "little man" of the middle class, bewildered by existence, and continually dominated, terrorised and humiliated by the world around

² Nora Sayre comments that "the Thurber man's feelings of helplessness when faced with ... falling ceilings, marriages, ghosts in the attic and global war had to seem hilarious because of the author's perceptions of chaos" (1993).

him. Yates argues that most often the humour in the situations Thurber depicts – domestic dramas, humiliating cocktail parties, marital squabbles – is "the humour of despair" (1964 p. 287). A certain ambiguity around the issue of chaos is also reflected in Thurber's dislike of institutional formality and pointless structures, which are the site of breakdown in meaning³. It is in the use of the fairy-tale form, however, that Thurber's dynamic sense of structure versus chaos is most strongly expressed. In his fairy tales, his tragicomic despair is constrained to find its potential salvation through the demands of the form itself, employing in this context a rather different kind of comedy. His relish for the extreme and illogical situations best exemplified by essays such as "The Night the Bed Fell" (1933), becomes a chaotic breakdown which acts against the framework of the tale itself to provide both comedy and a whimsical delight in the unexpected.

Thurber generally avoids cynicism and satire in his fairy tales; their comedy is a gentler, more innocent kind that celebrates rather than parodying the form. E.B. White underlines this element of unstudied play in Thurber's writing: "During his happiest years, Thurber did not write the way a surgeon operates, he wrote the way a child skips rope, the way a mouse waltzes" (1961: 17). While there are comic elements in many of these tales – the Golux and his nonsense rhymes, the buffoonery of King Clode and his eldest sons – and frequent attacks on institutionalised stupidity which reflects modern society, fairy tale works in his hands because his comedy always has an underlying seriousness. Comic elements are mostly peripheral to the stories: what is central is the most basic of fairy-tale values – love, hope, valour, honour, freedom and, as Thurber says in the dedication to The Wonderful O, "other good O words" (1958). Kenney identifies precisely this "figure of seriousness in the carpet of Thurber's humor," and concludes that "he is usually funny for the same reasons that he is a serious artist: because he probes the foibles and failures of human experience with delicacy and insight" (1984: 3). Fairy tale, as a form which deals intrinsically with the most basic aspects of human experience, is similarly both gently comic and deeply meaningful, and is thus not an illogical arena for the writer's explorations. It also facilitates the investigation of Thurber's characteristic "little man", since the fairy-tale form tends to deal with disempowered and marginalised figures – the youngest son or daughter, the idiot, the deformed or half-animal individual. In the perfect structures of fairytale, the misfit third son is usually triumphant, conforming to fairy tale's utopian impulse towards empowering the under-dog. In the fairy tales, Thurber's confused "little man" attains,

³ See essays such as "The Vengeance of 30902090" (1942), "File and Forget" and "*Joyeux Noël* Mr. Durning" (1953).

more strongly than anywhere else in Thurber's writing, a measure of serenity and achievement.

Despite its celebratory aspects, Thurber's use of the marvellous is allied with a strong awareness of fantasy as potentially escapist. "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" (1942) offers dream-escapes undermined by a realistic framing tale which renders Mitty's romancing illegitimate in terms of his dysfunctional life. Morsberger insists on the function of "comic catharsis" in this tale (1964: 46), but cites numerous instances to support his point that "Thurber recognized the dangers of carrying the imagination to extremes... For all of his fantasy, Thurber satirized those who mistook illusion for reality" (1964: 56). Stephen Black makes the same point, discussing particularly the parable of escape provided in "A Box to Hide In" (Black, 1970: 96-97). Thurber's fairy tales, on the other hand, lack the realistic frame and function essentially on their own terms, in a fantastic space legitimised both by the nod to the children's market, and by fairy tale's status as magical narrative. Like Mitty himself, Thurber is able to escape from an oppressive reality into the construction of a narrative with its own rules and expectations, where the place of the hero is assured. At the same time, the fairy tales simply underline Thurber's recurring point: that the imagination is valid and necessary and fantasy is what keeps us sane. This validation is perhaps seen most strongly in the fable "The Unicorn in the Garden," which celebrates the power of gentle acceptance over aggression and manipulation, and which ultimately stands for the triumph of fantasy over reality, or of imaginative beauty and wonder over the mundane.⁴

Holmes finds biographical impetus behind the escapist aspect to fantasy in Thurber's work; he suggests, "It is no accident that he begins to write his fairy tales in the period just after the painful series of eye operations which cut him off from everyday life and forced him into seclusion. The fairy tales are in part an escape from an uncomfortable and threatening present, and in part a disguise for a good deal of introspection and self-examination" (1973: 230-31). Given that the major fairy tales – White Deer, Thirteen Clocks, Many Moons and "The Great Quillow" were all written in the period from 1943-1950, it is also possible to see the escape into fantasy as being related, as it was for Tolkien, to the experiences of the Second World War. Richard C. Tobias finds parallels between Thurber's fairy tales and the romances of Malory in "the violent times in which

⁴ Not to mention the triumph of male over female, one of the few in Thurber's work: Holmes notes that the tale allows the triumph of the "fantasy principle (male, loving, peaceable) ... over the reality principle (female, cold, hostile" (1965: 19). I have discussed Thurber's view of heterosexual relationships below.

both writers lived... The Romance is, in fact, a kind of narrative that men write when they are overwhelmed by a world of brute force" (1969, in Holmes, 1974: 117-118). In many ways, the medieval regression of the fairy-tale form exemplifies nostalgia for a lost feudal and symbolic order, which contrasts sharply to the chaos and alienation experienced by Thurber's "little man."

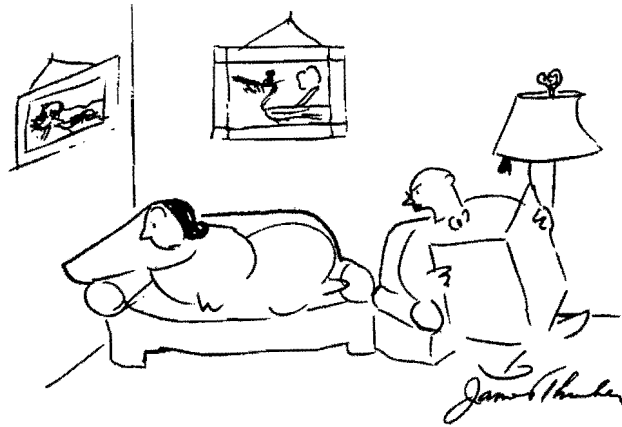
The War Between the Sexes

E. B. White, in his Afterword to Is Sex Necessary? characterises Thurber's art as being partly concerned with "the melancholy of sex" (1960: 135); he is also on record as saying that "James had it in for women" (in Maddocks, 1985: 599). In the investigations into the melancholy and comic chaos of modern life, Thurber is interested, above all, in the failure of human relationships, and particularly the relationships between men and women. His cartoons and stories continually depict the little man cowed or devoured by woman; occasionally, as in "The Catbird Seat" (1945) or "The Unicorn in the Garden" (1940), the little man triumphs over womankind. We are seldom or never shown any happy sense of togetherness, or any positive depictions of women. The "little man" of his writings is continually dominated by the female, to his humiliation, terror and despair. Most notably, the series of drawings called "The War Between Men and Women" (1943) presents a serio-comic vision of epic and inevitable conflict.

Thurber's first published work, the collaboration with E.B. White called Is Sex Necessary? (1929), established the rather cynical mode in which much of Thurber's work presents love and romance. Is Sex Necessary? pillories the popular Freudian psychology of its time, insisting instead on human relationships which function on misunderstanding, illogic and confusion, all made particularly surreal by Thurber's formless illustrations. Thurber's subsequent cartoons also offer images of woman as devouring and monstrous ("House and Woman" shows the "little man" as very small indeed in comparison) and of bitter, accusatory relationships ("Well, Who *Made* the Magic Go Out Of Our Marriage - You or Me?").



"House and Woman"
(1943: 118)

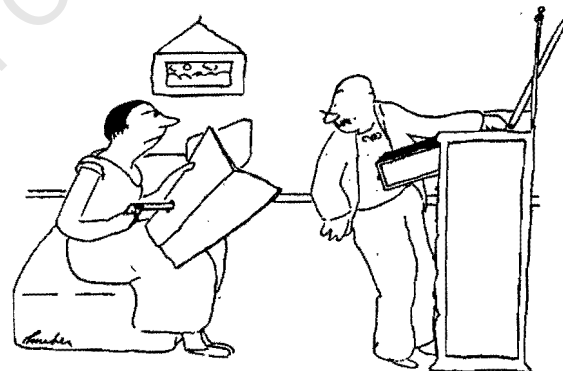


"Well, Who *Made* the Magic Go Out Of
Our Marriage - You or Me?" (1943: 103).

Thurber's denial of the possibility of the couple in these images, to insist instead on isolation results in a rather bizarre quality, as the "little man" is forced to endure a confusing and alienating world without support (note the woman's expression in "Darling, I Seem To Have This Rabbit.") Ultimately, mutual understanding is denied to the point where human interaction becomes downright threatening, as in "Have You Seen My Pistol, Honey-bun?"



Darling, I Seem To Have This Rabbit
(1943: 64)



Have You Seen My Pistol, Honey-Bun?
(1943: 79)

Dissonant heterosexual relationships thus tend to be used to comic effect in Thurber's writing, and his fairy tales are possibly the only legitimate space he finds in which to establish a utopian sense of closure which celebrates the happy heterosexual couple. The tendency towards reconciliation and closure in fairy-tale offers Thurber the potential not only for the triumph of innocence over cynicism (seen most notably in his two children's tales, "The Great Quillow" and Many Moons), but for the eventual unity of the male/female couple which more realistic settings deny him. Romantic union, to the point of white horses and sunsets, concludes Thurber's three novel-length fairy tales -

The Wonderful O, The Thirteen Clocks and The White Deer. This is a use of the form's structural predisposition which foreshadows the feminist explorations of later writers such as Angela Carter. Like Carter, Thurber recognises in the fairy tale an inevitable heterosexual utopianism which he claims and celebrates rather than, like Carter, exploring and deconstructing.

At the same time, the fairy tale seems to offer Thurber a space in which to present female characters who are not only attractive and powerful, but actively idealised. Rosanore in The White Deer is a dreamy, disconnected presence, but Saralinda in The Thirteen Clocks has a warmth and beauty that are integral to the solution of the puzzle, while Andrea in The Wonderful O is a locus of wisdom and insight. Here, the idealised woman becomes legitimate and desirable, retaining practicality while still providing inspiration and a locus of the stereotypically "feminine" virtues such as love and wisdom.⁵ This is in some ways a romanticised and slightly adolescent vision, as Holmes suggests in his analysis of Thurber's adolescent passions for idealised and absent women (1976: 40). Inevitable disappointment with the reality is sharply delineated in Is Sex Necessary?, which specifically sets out to ridicule the idealisation of the female while presenting the American male as a hapless victim of feminine distance and misguided female self-approval.⁶ In both The White Deer and The Thirteen Clocks, however, Thurber permits himself idealism, structuring the tales to invoke both fairy-tale structures and the high-flown parameters of the courtly love tradition. Thus, Thurber's intrinsically structural fairy-tale finds considerable consolation in that structure's ability to impose heterosexual reconciliation: the writer driven to a happy ending almost in spite of himself.

Language, Structure and Meaning

A significant proportion of Thurber's writing involves short, highly-defined forms which allow him to playfully unwrap and invert their structural functioning; his best-known short story, "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," is an acute play with genre as much as an investigation into the nature of fantasy and escape. A similar impulse can be traced in the minimalism of his cartoons, which employ a sparse, concise drawing style which invokes structures and relationships only in as much detail as is needed for recognition of

⁵ Angela Carter would mutter "consolatory nonsense", and it is true that Thurber here resorts to the pedestalism he himself deplores; however, stringent feminist analysis of Thurber's rather problematical female figures is somewhat beside the point of this analysis.

⁶ Particularly in Chapter 1, on "Pedestalism," in which the woman assumes "the proportions of an unattainable deity, something too precious to be touched," creating in men a "sort of divine discontent" (29).

the absurd inversions involved. The drawings themselves mirror a kind of structural breakdown in their radical over-simplification and reductionism, what Dorothy Parker has identified as “the outer resemblance of unbaked cookies” (1932; in Holmes, 1974: 57); they invoke structure by overturning it. Thurber’s reliance on form in certain of his stories is something of a contrast to the essay-style pieces which he wrote for the New Yorker and other periodicals over a long period, which, while operating in the equally confined space of the non-fiction article, tend more towards indeterminate narrative. The frustration and fragmentation which his essays depict, however comically, are at the opposite extreme to the order-affirming structures of fairy tale, in which heroism is ultimately reasserted and the form’s mechanisms of closure and reconciliation are celebrated.

Somewhere between the two extremes lie the fables, whose cynicism relies on sustained parody of Aesop’s traditional moral narrative, and whose play with structure serves rather to reinforce their cynical message. In this process, narrative convention is utilised in cynical fabulation rather than in nostalgic celebration. “The little girl and the wolf” is a particularly good illustration of this process, self-consciously contrasting the paradigms of fairy tale and those of fable. In this rather modernised re-telling of Little Red Riding Hood, the girl, mistrusting the wolf who “even in a nightcap” looks “no more like your grandmother than the Metro-Goldwyn lion looks like Calvin Coolidge”, takes an automatic out of her basket and shoots the wolf dead (1940: 5). Thurber’s moral is that “*It is not as easy to fool little girls nowadays as it used to be.*” The fable cuts through the willing suspension of disbelief required by the Red Riding Hood original, to point out its essentially sentimental and idealised failure of realism.⁷ Instead, the fable pulls into place a rather different structure of moral certainty, that of a cynical modern awareness which insists on loss of innocence. A similar paradigm informs “The Princess and the Tin Box” (1949), in which the classic pattern of choice between valuable gifts and one poor one is resolved with the Princess’s practical choice of wealth. The moral states, “*All those who thought the princess was going to select the tin box filled with worthless stones instead of one of the other gifts, will kindly stay after class and write one hundred times on the blackboard ‘I would rather have a hunk of aluminium silicate than a diamond necklace’*” (1949: 43). Clearly, in the context of the fables the obvious and well-worn paths of

⁷ I am reminded irresistibly of Terry Pratchett’s tough-minded child in the Red Riding Hood sequence in Witches Abroad, and in Pratchett’s own impatience with the woolly-minded idealism of the fairy tale form. Tellingly, both Thurber and Pratchett are comic writers with a profound sense of literature as social comment.

fairy-tale structure are somewhat inadequate in the real world, in sharp contrast to the celebration of tradition found in the fairy tales themselves.

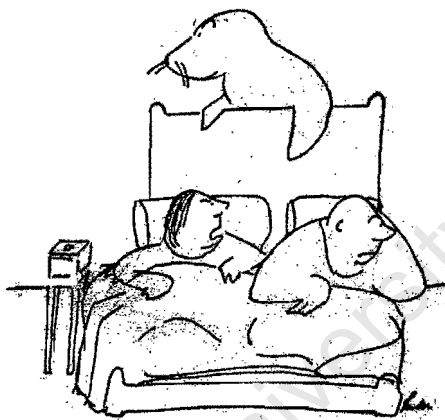
Even outside the concrete parameters of fairy tale or fable, Thurber's work is characterised by extreme self-awareness as a writer. The fables highlight the constructedness of narrative in their provision of a moral, reducing the story to the status of conscious exemplar. Such linguistic self-awareness is also illustrated in the fairy tales, which use techniques such as alliteration, repetition and rhyme to draw continual attention to the artificiality and constructedness of language itself. Thurber is thus continually aware of structure on the micro-level of language as well as on the macro-level of form. If language and story are both artificial constructs, then ultimately what is constructed is meaning itself. This is perhaps at the heart of Thurber's writing: what are always under investigation are the underlying structures which make sense of our lives. In many of the essays and short stories, such structures continually fail, slide and are lost, as Thurber's protagonists – particularly the 'little men' – simply cannot find sense or meaning in their interactions.

In many cases, however, meaning can be imposed; most tellingly, it can be imposed through fantasy which is conceived of in terms of strong, harmonious structures. Thus Walter Mitty engages in the self-conscious construction of meaning through introverted tale-telling; the heroic outcomes of his fantasies provide a meaning that is more important than the cynical truth of real life and the failure of his relationship with his wife. Holmes notes that "Mitty's daydreams are the veriest claptrap, made up of the clichés of popular fiction and movies" (1973: 218) – the submarine commander, the great surgeon, the flying ace. These popular narratives are particularly highly structured, and ultimately consolatory; they enable Mitty to use random and arbitrary details of his life to transcend the ordinary and access a kind of imaginative meaning which offers him both self-worth and escape. Their clichéd, even puerile, encodings of meaning are those of romance, constructing a hero whose abilities are above the level of the normal human. Holmes traces this generic influence in "Mitty" to Thurber's childhood fondness for the "popular melodramas of the time" – Westerns, Sherlock Holmes, dime novels and the stories of O Henry (1973: 13)⁸. While this influence is obviously lost in the essays and most of the short stories, it surfaces in "Walter Mitty," in the series of essays on soap opera which demonstrate Thurber's interest in this essentially

⁸ Juvenile Thurber works which survive are Westerns, and one is science fiction; Holmes comments that "Thurber's juvenile pieces are interesting only because they show the extent to which his imagination was shaped by the clichés of the popular adventure story" (17).

clichéd form (1949), and, of course, most strongly, in the fairy tales. In all these cases, the generic coding looks towards a kind of lost innocence, a naivety which is perhaps the result of Thurber's associations of popular genre with childhood.

The imposition of genre structures on meaning signals meaning as essentially an artificial construct and, despite the embracing structures of genre, Thurber is continually aware of the way in which meaning is created from moment to moment, in ways that may be entirely arbitrary⁹. The most exaggerated illustration of the arbitrary development of meaning is probably in Thurber's drawings, which, as Dorothy Parker has noted, "deal solely in culminations.... You may figure for yourself, and good luck to you, what under heaven could have gone before" (1932, in Holmes, 1974: 66). This construction apparently denies logic, or insists on the diverse and possibly random nature of causation. Among the best examples is "Have it your way, you heard a seal bark," in which the presence of a seal on the headboard of a couple's bed is, quite simply, inexplicable. A similar suspension of the normal flow of meaning¹⁰ occurs in "That's my first wife up there, and this is the *present* Mrs. Harris."



All Right, Have It Your Way, You Heard A Seal Bark (1945: 261)



That's My First Wife Up There, And This Is The *Present* Mrs. Harris (1943: 129)

The process recalls the theorising of Elizabeth Sewall on the Victorian genre of nonsense writing, as exemplified in the works of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll¹¹. Sewall argues that nonsense writing is concerned with the breakdown and rearrangements of "certain

⁹ Thus Walter Mitty's fantasies are sparked by completely random aspects of the world around him – the dashboard of the car, his wife's mention of the doctor, the purchase of puppy biscuits.

¹⁰ The logic becomes even more random when one reads Thurber's own account of the genesis of these two drawings: both started out as something different, but a failure of representation or perspective suggested the new, wilder meanings as he was drawing. Thus a seal on a rock became a seal on the headboard of a bed; a woman crouching on top of the stairs (itself a slightly bizarre image, but one which fits more easily into Thurber's rather feral concept of marital relationships) became a woman on top of a book-case ("The lady on the bookcase", 1949: 72 ff).

¹¹ Thurber continually uses *Alice in Wonderland* as a reference point in his writing; in his use of falsely naïve drawings in interaction with text, he is also very much akin to Lear and his illustrated limericks.

sets of mental relationships" (1978: 3), offering the reader a "subtle and insubstantial pleasure" (4). Dorothy Parker's response to Thurber's cartoons suggests that this is, indeed, the case: the pleasure of the process is in trying to come up with the possible logical sequence which could cause this particular moment¹². Most tellingly for Thurber, and particularly for his fairy tales, however, Sewell insists that the play of nonsense is above all self-consciously linguistic – "this world of Nonsense is not a universe of things but of words and ways of using them, plus a certain amount of pictorial illustration... In Nonsense all the world is paper and all the seas are ink" (1978: 17). In fact, the removal of meaning from the realm of the concrete to that of the abstract allows a new freedom, where ideas can be juxtaposed without reference to the realistic limitations on such ideas being brought together. This is *precisely* what Thurber achieves with "Have it your way, you heard a seal bark" and, in fact "That's my first wife up there" – the unrealistic parameters of his drawing style, plus the abstract conventions of cartoon itself, allow us to bring more easily into contact ideas which in reality could not be juxtaposed.

While the cartoons offer a vivid pictorial illustration of Thurber's nonsense relationships, in fact it is in his writing that his most self-conscious and complex rearrangements occur. Numerous Thurber essays play with the confusion and rich suggestiveness of language, in several different ways. One is the play with meaning in substituting arbitrary structures (sound, collections of letters, alliteration) for normal linguistic meaning, notably in the word games of "Here Come the Tigers" (1949), "The Tyranny of Trivia" (1961) and "Do you want to make something out of it" (1953). Another is the breakdown of sense, and the fantastic realms conjured by the resulting nonsense, when mispronunciation and misuse of words are allowed to run rampant: the language of Delia in "What do you mean, it was brillig" (1945) and the hired man Barney in "The black magic of Barney Haller" (1945) are good examples¹³. This kind of linguistic play is completely central to Thurber's fairy tales, and in part gives them their distinctive charm. Indeed, the central premise of The Wonderful O is linguistic, the loss of a letter becoming the central quest motif for the tale as well as an exploration of arbitrary meaning and the power of assonance.

¹² Likewise, much of the pleasure in Lear's limericks and drawings is to find the strange associations – often simply of sound, shape or subversively taboo subject rendered metaphorically – which the ideas represented actually suggest. See Thomas Dilworth, "Society and the self in the limericks of Lear" (The Review of English Studies, XLV (177), February 1994) for a more detailed exposition of this process.

¹³ The satirical treatment of linguistic breakdown and the failure of meaning is also seen in "A Final Note on Chandra Bell" (1953), in which the presentation of nonsense as sense is ridiculed, incidentally parodying certain of the more incomprehensible flights of the modernists.

In many ways, Thurber's linguistic disruption relies heavily on the use of sound¹⁴. Breakdown may inhere in the disruption of words themselves to change their sound, through mispronunciation or loss of meaning such as that which occurs through the loss of a letter in The Wonderful O. Alternatively, new meanings may be constructed by constructing words which are meaningless in normal English, but highly significant in the tales themselves. Good examples are Jorn, Thag and Gallow, Quillow and his use of "woddly", the Golux and the Todal. While many of these new coinages are names, and thus purport to convey a straightforward relationship between the word and the individual so named, at the same time the words themselves hover suggestively on the brink of meaning simply through the sound of the word itself. In linguistic terms, these inventions provide a fascinating exploration of the process of Saussurian signification, in which the orderly relationship of signifier with signified becomes disrupted. Saussure posits that "the linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image... The two elements are intimately united and each recalls the other" (1959: 66). He labels the concept the "signified", and the sound-image the "signifier." Thurber's word-games rely heavily on the sound of a word, the notion of the word as an abstract rather than a concrete thing, divorced from its signified in precisely the way that Sewell requires for the free play of nonsense.

Most significantly for Thurber, Saussure points out that "the bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary" (1959: 67), and it is this arbitrary relationship that Thurber's word-games most cogently explore. New words are coded and used as signifiers, sound-images which purport to convey meaning; however, such meaning must be entirely arbitrary since the reader has no knowledge of the system which contains them. At the same time, the reader's familiarity with the understood processes of normal linguistic signification lead to an ongoing attempt to fit these words into familiar structures. This is successful, in that meaning is generated, but such meanings are far from definitive and endlessly ramify. In this process, meaning comes to inhere in the signifier itself, in the sound of the word and the associations it invokes. Thus Prince Jorn and Prince Zorn of Zorna are the heroes: in the absence of more concrete meaning, their names evoke the rhymes born (birthright), torn, thorn, lovelorn, (the romantic suffering of the youngest son or the disguised hero), horn (as in the horns of Elfland), or forlorn (as in faerie lands forlorn). Thag, Gallow and Jorn are an endlessly suggestive

¹⁴ This may well have something to do with Thurber's increasing blindness in his later years. Holmes notes Malcom Cowley's comment that Thurber's blindness intensified sound effects in his prose, "as if one sense had been developed at the cost of another" to produce "a completely verbalised universe" (in Holmes, 1974: 12)

triumvirate: Thag is a thug, Gallow is both callow and worthy of being hanged, but the three names also sound spoonerised, encouraging the reader to continually rearrange them in an attempt to restore normal signification. No rearrangement is definitively meaningful, all are suggestive, and meaning tends to accrete rather than replacing any interpretation with any one more appropriate.

It is in the fairy tales that the linguistic play with order and chaos becomes most complex, since the imaginative space of fairy-tale structure allows for a creativity that is at times almost magical in its effects. At the same time, Thurber is able to break down and reassemble meaning not only on the linguistic level, but on the level of form itself. Like language, fairy tale offers a clearly-defined and recognisable system whose parameters are perfectly understood by the reader, supplying the necessary basis for play. On a higher level, a similar disruption of signification occurs: throughout Thurber's fairy tales, the harmonious structures of the form continually fail to mean what we believe they should mean. As in his linguistic play, meaning slides and shifts: the princess is not a princess, the jewels are not jewels, the quest is not a quest. The interesting aspect of the breakdown of signification on this meta-level is that fairy-tale narrative employs symbolic meaning, and a symbol is not the same as a signifier. Saussure insists that "one characteristic of the symbol is that it is never wholly arbitrary; it is not empty, for there is the rudiment of a natural bond between the signifier and the signified" (1959: 68). Thurber's treatment of fairy tale, however, allows for precisely the same breakdown in the relationship between symbol and meaning as in the breakdown of signification itself. It is not only fairy-tale symbols that function as signifiers: patterns of narrative themselves become detached from their proper relationship with the whole, and their significance undergoes radical change. Participants in the fairy story continually grope for the shape of the story, which continually eludes them, fragmenting and re-assembling around them. Thus the deer-princess cannot complete her narrative once she is restored, nor can Zorn of Zorna be granted the nine and ninety days necessary to complete his quest. However, unlike the ongoing suggestiveness of the linguistic play, order is eventually re-asserted in the fairy tales: the one clear signifier that Thurber declines to deconstruct is the happy ending. More importantly, this suggests that while he may play with meaning in fairy-tale structure, he continually re-affirms that such structure *has* meaning and value. I shall attempt to unwrap his various plays with structure in analysing the different fairy tales, below.

Children's tales? – "The Great Quillow" and Many Moons

Many Moons (1943) and "The Great Quillow" (1944) could be seen as the start of Thurber's real play with fairy-tale forms. Both are aimed at children, being shorter and less sophisticated than The White Deer or The Thirteen Clocks, and it could be argued that in them he was simply gearing up for his real effort. The writing of apparently frivolous children's stories as a sideline to a more serious literary career could be seen as a feature of the time: parallels can be found in E.B. White's Charlotte's Web (1952) and T.S. Eliot's Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats (1939). Like Thurber's fairy tales, these represent a relaxation into a simpler and more innocent form, without in any way detracting from the writers' seriousness of purpose. While ostensibly aimed at children, all these works actually offer considerable depth, complexity and thoughtfulness¹⁵. At the same time, the focus on writing for children underlines, for White and Eliot as much as Thurber, the author's interest in a lost naïveté which serves as an antidote to the cynicism of modern life.

Both Many Moons and "The Great Quillow" are interesting in that they find space within the classic symbols of fairy tale for the autobiographical presence of the author himself. In the persona of the humorist, the classic archetype of the Wise Fool, Thurber projects himself into both tales: as the Jester in "Many Moons," and as the figure of Quillow, a "droll and gentle fellow" whose toy-making is considered by the town worthies to be "a rather pretty waste of time" (204). Thurber's revenge for the low status of the comic writer is to situate in both comic figures the wisdom and thoughtfulness which enable the solution of the classic fairy-tale quest or problem. This obvious identification with the under-dog figure of the fairy-tale hero is significant in the chronological context of Thurber's fairy tales. By the time he comes to write The Thirteen Clocks in 1950, there is a rather more cynical inclusion of the author in the one-eyed Duke of Coffin Castle¹⁶, the villain rather than the hero. While later fairy tales retain the value placed on innocence and wholeness, it is possible to see a development across the tales which parallels a gradual darkening in Thurber's work as a whole. Holmes notes the development from the comic "little man" of Thurber's early work into a bleaker and angrier vision of man "given over to folly and self-destruction" (1965: 18). While Many Moons and "The Great Quillow" contain a certain amount of gentle satire, particularly of bureaucracy

¹⁵ Alison Lurie notes Charlotte's Web as a "breakthrough book" in terms of children's fiction which deals seriously and boldly with the theme of death (1990: xiv).

¹⁶ Thurber's blindness in later life resulted from the gradual deterioration of his sight after an injury when he was a child: his brother accidentally shot out one of Thurber's eyes with an arrow, and he wore a glass eye for the rest of his life (Holmes, 1973).

and mindless system, they almost entirely lack the later uncertainty and bleakness of vision which has started to creep into The Thirteen Clocks.

Many Moons is a simple fairy tale which makes clever use of the ritualistic repetition inherent in the fairy-tale structure, in the King's request to three different ministers for a solution to the princess's illness, and in the ministers' ritualistic listing of their achievements – "ivory, apes and peacocks, rubies, opals, and emeralds, black orchids, pink elephants, and blue poodles, gold bugs, scarabs, and flies in amber"¹⁷. Such repetition is both celebrated and gently satirised – the lists of achievements are exaggerated to the point of being ridiculous, and are neatly undercut by the minister's accidental addition of his wife's shopping list, and by the king's doubt – "I don't remember any blue poodles". This comic exaggeration serves to underline the tale's moral lesson – or, more accurately, like many tales, its lesson in simple wisdom, in rendering redundant the so-called wisdom and achievements of the ministers. Rather like the tales of George Macdonald or E. Nesbit, the overlay of a modern bureaucratic system onto fairy-tale structure is used to effect a comic clash of discourses¹⁸. More importantly, it highlights the difference between meaningful structure (the ritual repetition and quest resolution of the fairy tale itself) and that which is meaningless. In their endless lists and provision of absurd solutions to the princess's illness, the ministers take on the mantle of the ill-mannered and arrogant elder sons of fairy tale, while the Jester becomes the despised but ultimately triumphant youngest-son figure. Thus the basic structures of fairy tale are affirmed, while structure for its own sake – that is, adherence to meaningless systems of precedent – is satirised.

Many Moons is akin to most of Thurber's fairy-tale writing in its concern with meaning, and with the disconcerting slippage which meaning undergoes. The tale uses the standard fairy-tale format – a king, a palace, a princess, a problem and the quest for its resolution – but the structures are playfully undercut. The king himself is an impotent figure, obviously concerned but curiously inept; the quest is trivialised, the princess's illness the result of "a surfeit of raspberry tarts". In true Thurber fashion, the quest itself is based on word-play, here the concrete realisation of idiom¹⁹ – Princess Lenore is quite

¹⁷ I am unable to provide page references for this text as my Harcourt Brace edition is printed without page numbers.

¹⁸ This is also very similar to A.S. Byatt's parody of government in "The Story of the Eldest Princess," which, interestingly, also trivialises the actual purpose of quest itself – a surfeit of raspberry tarts has the same arbitrary element as the sky turning green. The point is the process, not the object, of the quest.

¹⁹ This is a process akin to Thurber's fondness for the images invoked by the literal understanding of idiom, described in "The Secret Life of James Thurber." His "enchanted private world" contains

literally crying for the moon, but her desire is treated as reality rather than idiom. The interesting aspect of this tale is the status of truth, the way in which reality shifts to conform to whatever narrative is currently being asserted. The King's dissatisfaction with the cloak of invisibility procured for him by the Royal Wizard is a microcosmic illustration of this process: while it definitely made him invisible, the King complains that he "kept bumping into things, the same as ever." Evidently the signifier "invisible cloak" is, for him, attached to a different signified from that of the Royal Wizard.

In the central concern with the nature and accessibility of the moon, the narrative conflicts are even stronger. The Lord High Chamberlain insists that the moon is "35,000 miles away and it is bigger than the room the Princess lies in. Furthermore, it is made of molten copper." The Royal Wizard states categorically that it is "150 000 miles away, and it is made of green cheese, and it is twice as big as this palace"; the Royal Mathematician believes it to be 300 000 miles away, "round and flat like a coin... made of asbestos... and pasted on the sky." The assertions of each apparently wise man are alike in that they insist on the impossibility of the quest, while simultaneously attempting to aggrandise the speaker, his authoritative knowledge and his particular skills. It requires the gentle intervention of the Jester to supply the meta-narrative which will make sense of these conflicting narratives by removing the whole issue from the realm of fact, into which each man is trying to pin it by spurious detail, and into its proper realm of myth. In mythic terms – that is, the translating of the issue into a system of symbolic belief rather than a system of fact – each narrative is perfectly valid at the moment of its assertion. The Jester, who is quite happy to accept the three ministers as "wise men," reasons, "If they are all right, then the moon must be just as large and far away as each person thinks it is. The thing to do is find out how big the Princess Lenore thinks it is, and how far away." The fairy-tale quest thus becomes one for personal meaning; the literal moon is shown to be inextricable in meaning from the symbolic moon which Lenore can wear as a piece of jewellery.

The Jester, with his coherent meta-narrative, is thus one point of wisdom in the tale, offering an interpretative approach which shows considerable sensitivity to individual myth structures. The Princess, on the other hand, becomes the other point of validated wisdom largely because she is a child. Her assertions about the moon are as absolute as those of the ministers – it is "a little smaller than my thumbnail" and "not as high as the

skeletons which let him and his wife into a house, businessmen tied up at work and the man who left town under a cloud (1945: 22-23).

big tree outside my window.” Unlike the ministers, however, she can offer some reasoning behind her statements – the moon must be smaller than her thumbnail since “when I hold my thumbnail up to the moon, it just covers it”; likewise, it must be lower than the tree “for sometimes it gets caught in the top branches.” The reasoning is childlike, but realistic within a child’s belief structures; she certainly offers a more meaningful and supported concept of the moon than do the spurious details of the ministers. The Jester may accept the three ministers as “wise men,” but it is really only Lenore’s reasoning which is completely valid since she is a child, her acceptance and wonder strongly affirmed by the tale while the absolutist or materialist statements of the ministers are shown to be meaningless. Part of this failure of meaning is in the ministers’ inability to recognise true narrative structures. Their elaborate ideas to prevent Lenore seeing the moon – dark glasses, tents of black silk and all-night fireworks – are absurd not only because they seek to disguise the truth rather than re-defining it, but because they *are* elaborate. In this tale, the defining feature of genuine narrative is its childlike simplicity. Thus the tale inverts itself: despite the mad rushing around of the king and ministers, and even the intervention of the Jester to have the symbolic moon constructed, the person who eventually solves the fairy-tale dilemma of the princess’s illness is the princess herself.

“The Great Quillow” is a tale similarly based on narrative and the recognition of narrative; again, repetitive formula establishes the tale’s identity even while repetition is undercut and used to show the dangers of adherence to inadequate systems of thought. The story sets up the endearing figure of Quillow himself, the toymaker who takes in good part his colleague’s ridicule, and who plays along with their game of pretending to wind him up like a clockwork toy. Where the other characters in the tale are defined by their profession – tailor, butcher, blacksmith – Quillow is the only one who has a name, signalling individuality instead of adherence to a symbolic system. His name works similarly to other Thurber constructs in the associations it evokes – pillow, quill, mallow, willow, all concepts with qualities of gentleness or softness, in the same way that the giant’s name, Hunder, evokes thunder, blunder, plunder or hunger. Quillow has a childlike and innocent simplicity and is associated strongly with children throughout, qualities which are set up against the bureaucratic impotence of the town councillors. As in Many Moons, repetition and formula signal lack of achievement, here the repetition of the giant’s demands – the daily provision of “three sheep, a pie made out of a thousand apples, and a chocolate as high and wide as a spinning wheel” (203). The ritualised and repetitive complaints of the councillors, forced to create the items demanded by the giant, illustrate the danger of becoming trapped into a system. As long as the giant’s demands

have the quality of ritual, it is impossible not to supply them, and the town is effectively enslaved.

In many ways the tale signifies the clash of competing narratives. Hunder attempts to impose on the town his personal narrative of conquest and ritualised robbery, repeating in village after village the same pattern of “I, Hunder, must have...” (206). His demands have the power of inevitability: he is not commanding goods to be provided, so much as stating what will inevitably happen, pre-ordained by narrative precedent. Against this is set Quillow’s narrative of the apocryphal giant whose malady, with its strange symptoms alleviated only by bathing in “the yellow waters in the middle of the sea” (213), is equally patterned and repetitive. Quillow’s cunning lies in his appropriation of precisely the narrative tactics employed by the giant himself: as long as the villagers do as other villagers have done, they are trapped in the tale’s pattern and must serve the giant. As soon as the giant does as the previous giant has done, he, too, is doomed. The fact that the word “woddly”, the black chimneys and the little blue men are all faked, does not in any way restrict their symbolic power in the story. Quillow thus recognises and appropriates a central power of fairy-tale narrative, that of inevitability through pattern; the tale equally recognises the entrapping qualities of structure, and celebrates the empowering potential of structure in the hands of a self-aware storyteller. The reader’s attention is drawn to this in the middle of the story, when the other artisans ridicule Quillow’s tale, suggesting that his work cannot be as hard as theirs, “hammering out your tale... twisting it... levelling it... rolling it out ... stitching it up ... fitting it together...” (212). They are ironically unaware that his craft entails precisely this – it is equally as constructed, as creative as their own, more concrete crafts, and ultimately far more powerful.

“The Great Quillow” marks, in its subtle elements of word-play, the start of the linguistic games which are most fully realised in The White Deer and The Thirteen Clocks. The central theme here is intrinsically Thurber – the breakdown of meaning on a verbal level which mirrors and draws attention to the breakdown of narrative as the giant’s imposition of story is disrupted. We are given clues to the centrality of this process at various points in the tale: the blacksmith’s horses are called Lobo, Bolo, Olob and Obol, and Quillow’s second day’s tale involves characters named by incomprehensible strings of syllables such as Anderblusdaferan and Ufrabrodoborobe²⁰. The circular repetition of

²⁰ The tale which Quillow has neglected to invent is in fact about a king and his three sons who are riding through a magical forest – that is, apart from the ridiculous names it is the tale of The White Deer, interrupted by “woddly”s only to be told later, in full, by Thurber himself.

the horse's names, and the meaningless names of the tale's protagonists, are simply heralding the far more important breakdown in the giant's inability to hear anything except the word "woddly." This is once again a clear exploration of the process of signification: suddenly, for the giant all signifiers are one, despite the clear proliferation of signifieds which surround him, and that signifier, all at once compelled to mean everything, of course ends up meaning nothing. More significantly, this breakdown is essentially a breakdown of *narrative*, since Quillow has omitted to invent a story to tell the giant, and has simply filled in the time with meaningless rubbish. The breakdown signals clearly the moment at which the giant's own narrative starts to break down, as he is too afraid to eat and thus disrupts the process of his demands on the village. At the same time, Thurber sneakily employs the same process of meta-narrative he used in the Jester's explanations in Many Moons, and will use again in The White Deer. Breakdown is terrifying and anxiety-provoking, but in fact the shifting narratives are safely held within a larger meta-narrative which ultimately explains and structures them – here, the false symptoms carefully created in the service of Quillow's plot to deceive the giant and chase him away. Narrative is never deconstructed so far that its ultimate sense and purpose cannot be eventually re-asserted.

Thurber's complex linguistic and narrative purposes in this story are neatly concealed behind a deceptively simple and childlike surface. The tale abounds in detail which continually appropriates the traditionally sing-song, repetitive voice of the oral story – the orderly comments of the village artisans, the neat triads of superstition with which Quillow purports to explain the giant's malady, the ritualistic repetition of the malady's symptoms, the blue men popping up from behind every part of the landscape. The domestic nature of the story, its emphasis on eating and drinking and children's toys, and the enjoyably subversive nature of Quillow's tricks, conspire with the language to admirably fit the tale for children's consumption. The same is true of Many Moons, whose more simplistic language belies the tale's textual complexities. Both stories mine the clash between the domestic and the fantastic for a gentle, whimsical comedy which is deepened by "The Great Quillow"'s more complex language. Appropriately, given that he is writing largely for children, Thurber here omits the romantic outcome of fairy tale – narrative closure is affirmed, but it is only in later tales that the happy heterosexual couple is established. At the same time, the narrative games in both these stories are sophisticated and entertaining at a level beyond the grasp of a child reader – a tendency recognised in many of the contemporary reviews of the two tales (Toombs, 122-126). In both The White Deer and The Thirteen Clocks Thurber repeats the concealing layer of

naïve whimsy, so that the fairy tales are always entertaining for children; however, in future tales the adult message is both more complex, and considerably darker.

Marvellous, Mortifying and Meaningless: The White Deer

Sorceries ... run in cycles... spells are set in sets and systems. What's true of one peculiar case is true of all peculiar cases of the same peculiar sort. (The White Deer, 42)

Written the year after "The Great Quillow", The White Deer is Thurber's first foray into book-length fairy tale, and, while approvingly received by critics, is noted in several reviews as being more suitable for adults than for children (Toombs, 132-134). This is perhaps a recognition of its linguistic and narrative complexity, despite the apparent simplicity of the story which would still remain accessible to children²¹. The plot makes full use of classic fairy-tale patterns – three brothers, each with his separate quest, and the triumph of the youngest in winning the love of the enchanted princess. Like the two shorter fairy tales, The White Deer deals satirically with authority figures, here King Clode himself and his various ministers, including the Royal Recorder, the Royal Physician, and the rather clueless Royal Wizard. As before, the efforts of the official functionaries are comic and futile, and it is the efforts of the marginal younger son, despised by his elder brothers, which actually succeed.

Numerous reviewers note The White Deer's beautiful and poetic prose (Toombs, 1987: 132-133), and it is this which most separates the novel from the earlier children's stories. Black suggests that "in The White Deer Thurber employs a style which is at once elevated, poetic and comic, to suggest the 'medieval' world of the story" (1970: 108). The medieval feel, or otherwise, of the story, does not seem to be the issue, however. Most strikingly, Thurber's language in the novel employs word-play, rhyme, repetition, alliteration and assonance to strongly highlight the notion of language itself – as the constructor of fairy tale, and hence as constructed, but also as the difficult medium in which the characters must enact their fairy-tale narratives. Language in the novel comes to reflect and to stand for magic itself, the power of the marvellous or numinous to affect the lives of the characters, often despite their resistance to it. Language both enables and makes inevitable; in its inevitability, it is entrapping.

The conflation between language and magic is signalled from the start of the tale, with the gentle, far-away tone of the narrator:

²¹ I know I personally loved this novel as a child, at any rate.

If you should walk and wind and wander far enough on one of those afternoons in April when smoke goes down instead of up, and nearby things sound far away and far things near, you are more than likely to come at last to the enchanted forest that lies between the Moonstone Mines and Centaurs Mountain... If you pluck one of the ten thousand toadstools that grow in the emerald grass at the edge of the wonderful woods, it will feel as heavy as a hammer in your hand, but if you let it go it will sail away over the trees like a tiny parachute, trailing black and purple stars. (White Deer, 1946: 3-4)

Aside from numerous examples of Thurber's ongoing love affair with alliteration, the passage is constructed in terms of contradictions, opposites and paradoxes, a recurring feature of the story – up, down, far, near, heavy, light. The indeterminacy of these images reinforces the “if you should wander” opening, which performs the classic “long ago and far away” function of fairy tale. In Thurber's terms, however, the magical space of fairy tale is not geographical, but mental – it is a mood, a tone, which the reader must accept before the magic of the tale can work. At the same time, the linguistic paradox signals and encodes the similar patterns of contradiction and tension which will characterise the shape of the tale itself. Things, the narrator warns, will not be as you expect; nonetheless, prepare simply to accept them with wonder, as is proper to the tale.

Language separates out characters in this novel: far more than the perilous tasks set before the princes, it is a testing ground which selects for worth in terms of imagination and verbal ability. The two elder sons, Thag and Gallow, are non-verbal, physical in nature, their only interest the chase and a certain kind of rough, physical bullying (such as tossing the dwarf Quondo). While their names suggest some kind of orality, via the processes of almost-signification discussed above, it is the orality of eating (gag, swallow). Jorn, on the other hand, is associated firmly with the verbal, a manipulator of language who sings and tells stories “of a faraway Princess who would one day set a perilous labor for each of the Princes to perform” (5). In thus accurately foreshadowing the actual structure of the tale, he takes the position of narrator, enabling him to shape the tale in the same way that the Jester provides meta-narration to the conflicting narratives of the ministers, or Quillow overcomes the giant's narrative with his own. To be a narrator is to have power, not only to engage in word-play, but to impose one's own narrative on others.

In The White Deer, word-play is the symbol of narrative power. King Clode's bluff, hearty manner attempts to reject convoluted language, to have events “without a lot of this tarradiddle and tiraddle” (36). As his encounter with the woods wizard proves, resistance is futile: his own utterances slide between the plain and the playful throughout the tale, dropping continually into alliteration. With his words twisted by the woods

wizard, he acquires momentarily the “great dignity” appropriate to a king, negating his buffoonery elsewhere: “Try twice that trick on Tlode... my mousy man of magic, and we will wid this wids of woozards” (16). This verges on nonsense, but the word-play allies him with both the wizard and with Jorn, and reminds us that, in his day, when as a young man he rode after a deer who became a princess, Clode was the youngest son who fulfilled his quest and won her hand. He is also himself a tale-teller: his story of the quest which won him his wife operates as the first authoritative narrative within the story, reinforcing Jorn’s idealised desire for a quest with a pattern to which the story could be expected to conform.

The opening scenario of the story, with Clode and his three sons in search of the white deer despite their misgivings about the magic of the Enchanted Forest, is a fairly straightforward fairy-tale narrative. Clode’s dislike of the forest’s magic – and its language – is overcome by an unambiguous appeal to his physical courage, which re-aligns him with his oafish older sons. From the moment the deer appears, however, an uncomplicated physical outcome is impossible: the deer runs through a forest of alliteration, “through a fiery fen and over a misty moor ...climbed a ruby ridge, flung across a valley of violets, and sped along the pearly path leading to the myriad mazes of the Moonstone Mines” (18-19). The moment of transformation when deer becomes princess is inevitable, dictated not only by the precedent of Clode’s tale and by Jorn’s romancing, but by the magical language which has defined the deer. Clode’s attempt to reduce her transformation to known parameters – his own experience, and his mundane hope that “her father has a decent taste in wines” (20) – is thwarted as the narrative begins to go seriously off track, denying easy resolution: she cannot remember her name. The clear narrative progression, from transformation to heroic quests in competition, to the marriage resolution experienced by Clode, is disrupted, despite Clode’s attempts to re-assert it later on by forcing her to set quests for his sons.

The namelessness of the princess is a central trope in the story, anchoring Thurber’s interest in narrative symbol and its implications for identity as well as his playful deconstruction of the expectation engendered by fairy-tale narrative. As the structures of the tale slip away from expectation, so too do the identities of the characters involved. The princess lacks a name and thus a signifier – she is a signified but not a sign, denied not only a place in the tale, but identity and meaning. Her namelessness already begins to eject her from the simple narrative supplied by Clode, Jorn or the precedents found by the Royal Recorder, “maidens changed to deer and back again, all nice and neat and normal, all nice and neat and formal,” (43). Tocko’s tale, of the ordinary deer given the

power to assume the form of a princess, takes this process further in that it provides a competing narrative that inverts and denies her identity, providing a clear signifier (“deer”) that insists that the clear meanings of Clode’s and Jorn’s tales are simply wrong. The princess is not alone in this slippage: the uncertainties of her identity are mirrored in the dual personalities of the Royal Physician, both doctor and patient, and in the struggle for identity of the three princes on their quests.

The quests of the three princes are bedevilled by a similar quality of chaotic insecurity: the princes must continually fight to identify themselves as heroes rather than the victims of elaborate jests. Thag’s “perilous labour” struggles to define itself as hero-quest (prince kills boar) against the confusing, dreamy world of the Valley of Euphoria, where “a sticky thickish liquid dripped and oozed and gave or rather lent the air a heavy sweetish fragrance” (50). This is the language of word-play and thus of magic, its strange strings of signifiers continually suggesting meaning without actually defining it: “a lozy moon globbers in the pipe trees... High up in a tree, a chock climbed slowly” (51-52). For Thag, this almost-signification is the language of seduction, attempting to lure him from his simple, physical investment in the quest into the confusing world of linguistic slippage. Thurber’s dense, alliterative and involuted prose not only affects Thag himself (“I distrust this stickish thicky stuff... Hag’s thad enough” [50]), but circles back to re-infect the narratorial voice with the same breakdown (“thaggravated Had”). The round man in the tree is merely an agent of the same process of dissolution, wantonly playing with language to confuse and delay Thag. In true heroic style, however, he declines to be seduced: “he closed his mouth and held his breath and shut his eyes and galloped on” (53). Against the willpower required to resist the blandishments of word-play, the actual fight with the Blue Boar itself is an anti-climax, laughably simple.

A similar process of re-definition is experienced by Gallow: however, where peril for Thag signifies the seductions of language, for Gallow it is a process of trivialisation rather than beguilement. In Gallow’s quest, Thurber once more revisits his ongoing satirisation of the bureaucratic system, in the little men who demand meaningless parchments from Gallow at every turn, and in the prevalence of a kind of commercialised corruption of the system²². The common signifiers of fairy tale – dragons, giants, sleeping beauties – are here re-defined as commercial opportunity: “Lost Babes Found ... Giants Killed While

²² The system is political as well as commercial: two of the monsters mentioned, the Tarcomed and the Nacilbuper (69), are simply “Democrat” and “Republican” spelled backwards. This is a far more obvious and satirical form of word-play than is usual for Thurber, and lacks both complexity and resonance in comparison to his usual efforts.

You Wait... 7 League Boots Now 6.98" (63). Rather than the loss of meaning experienced by Thag, Gallow must face a slippage of meaning, a series of signs whose construction is completely alien and whose meaning obviously ramifies beyond that which he knows; his quest is, in his particular terms of reference, meaningless. The transactions with the little men continually signal the breakdown of familiar narratives, denying the meaning Gallow has hitherto found. His ultimate quest, facing the Seven-headed Dragon of Dragore, is a corrupt carnival sideshow, "meaningless but marvelous" (71), as is his whole journey. The mechanical process of throwing balls into the open mouths of the dragon replicates the mechanical process of his quest, and of the narrative itself. The process underlines the lack of value in Gallow himself, the absence of some kind of essential love of romance which defines the hero, and which only Jorn has. The unfolding of the tale suggests that Thag and Gallow experience bankrupt narratives not only because they are doomed to failure by the meta-narrative (both the three-sons structure of fairy tale, and the Wizard Ro's manipulations), but because they themselves are shallow thugs.

Despite his status as the younger son and the narrator/word-user who is destined to succeed, Jorn's quest suffers from a similar failure of meaning to that of his two brothers. Ironically, it is his fairy-tale predestination as the youngest son which actually disrupts the signification of his quest: because the princess favours him, she sends him on an errand which is less dangerous and testing than Thag's or Gallow's. While the signifiers in the quest seem meaningful – a monster to vanquish, an object to bring back – the meaning they hold is almost immediately re-defined as something very different, the monster a scarecrow and the object hence valueless. Despite his reluctance to undertake a rigged contest, Jorn is held to the quest by the tale's structure – and by the precedent of his father, who similarly fought a "clay and boxwood" creature (9) – and departs as his brothers do. In this case, absolute signification, the structure which insists Jorn's success is the ultimate signifier in the fairy-tale plot, itself causes breakdown in meaning, as if to suggest that only the chaos of disrupted signification is generative.

In fact, the quest narrative experienced by Jorn suffers from particularly complex narrative conflicts, with his personal, heroic vision struggling against the witch's attempt to derail him, and the Wizard Ro's virtuoso meta-narrative which ultimately makes sense of the conflict. Meaning shifts continually and bewilderingly throughout these structures. Jorn's dissatisfaction with his paltry quest renders the clay and sandalwood Mok-Mok and the cherry orchard meaningless in terms of his heroic structures, which the Mok-Mok literally mocks, and he desires instead "a difficult riddle to do, a terrible task to

undergo, a valiant knight to overthrow” (77). The witch’s intervention seems momentarily to restore meaning, but that meaning is deconstructed in its turn. The riddle is difficult only in the sense that it is difficult for the Sphinx to say without moving its jaws, the terrible task is merely lengthy and terribly tedious, and the Black Knight is an aged and unworthy opponent. By the time that Jorn has collected his chalice full of cherries, the symbol acts as signifier to a complex layer of narrative meanings – the princess’s romantic hopes, Jorn’s own aspirations to heroism, the witch’s revenge and Ro’s manipulations.

As with “The Great Quillow” and Many Moons, the tale relies on the development of the meta-narrative to make sense of the confusing conflicts. While the meta-narrative is not precisely the tale envisaged by Clode or Jorn, its essential structure (princess rescued from her deer form to marry the worthiest prince) remains the same, with the addition of elements from Tocko’s tale despite the fact that his deer-into-woman scenario is basically irrelevant. The meta-narrative hinges, as does Tocko’s tale, on the concept of love: both Rosanore and the nameless deer are doomed if love fails them. The central aspect of the tale’s resolution is thus not, in fact, the quests, which are revealed as so much heroic posturing, but the moment of declaration when Jorn professes his love for the princess. This highlights the failure of meaning at the heart of Clode’s deer tale, which imposes heterosexual union without love, revealed by Clode’s characterisation of his far-from-romantic relationship with his wife. Their marriage displays the essential failure of empathy which characterises so many of Thurber’s other depictions of heterosexual relationships: Clode speaks of his wife as “a pretty enough gray-eyed minx... with no stomach for the chase, and a way of fluttering up behind a man before he knew it, moving like a cat on velvet” (8)²³. The White Deer comes to re-write Clode’s tale and improve upon it, replacing the mechanical structure of fairy-tale marriage with one that insists on love as an essential part of the fairy-tale union.

Thurber’s sense of closure and reconciliation is thus completely bound up in the concept of love, a romantic development of the heterosexual couple common to so many fairy tales. The motivation for the whole story is the failure of love (the thwarted passion of Nagrom Yaf), and her vengeance is played out, not on King Thorg who spurned her love, but on the result of Thorg’s union with a princess he, presumably, loved – their children, Tel and Rosanore. Denied a place in the happy heterosexual union of the fairy tale,

²³ The description here recalls Thurber’s more cynical view of women in “My Senegalese birds and Siamese cats” (1961), in which female cat-like qualities are seen as mysterious and threatening.

Nagrom Yaf (a far more sinister-sounding reversal of Morgan Fay), chooses to avenge herself by similarly denying that place to Rosanore. The witch's spell condemns Rosanore to namelessness and loss of identity; like Nagrom Yaf's own experience, the possibility of romantic union breaks down. Denied love, Nagrom Yaf presumably expects it to be equally denied to Rosanore by the three princes convinced she is a deer. The involuted structures of the tale thus work continually on precedent and repetition, but the central theme they repeat is that of love. This reverses the bitterness and lack of mutuality inherent in many of the relationships Thurber depicts in his other writings: while there is bitterness here, in Nagrom Yaf's disappointment and revenge, it is both condemned and punished. Rosanore and Jorn are both slightly two-dimensional characters, the stereotypical fairy-tale lovers, and it is the tale's structuring rather than their actual interactions that insists their love is nonetheless real.

The ultimate narrative manipulator of this tale is, unlike earlier tales, an unseen presence rather than a central character. The woods-wizard Ro is obviously an inheritor of the linguistic play and genuine magic associated with the enchanted forest, the power of the marvellous expressed as narrative. He exists in opposition not only to the fake magic of the Royal Wizard, but to the purveyors of powerless narrative, Tocko with his vagueness and the Royal Recorder's overly legal fondness for forcing reality to conform to precedent. The final revelation of Ro's presence behind the scenes gives coherence and unity to the plot, explaining a large number of enigmatic figures who emerge, in true fairy-tale fashion, to mysteriously advise Prince Jorn. The tale's apparent proliferation of characters and confusing multiplicity of potential meanings is thus neatly resolved into the coherent and satisfying happy ending, including the destruction of Nagrom Yaf in an epilogue which plays gently with the tale's interest in authoritative narrative. In many ways, the complexities of Thurber's narrative games simply serve to reinforce the pleasure of fairy-tale closure, allowing the reader to emerge from the enchanted forests of language into a simpler, plainer country, but refreshed and satisfied by the quest.

Very like a witch's spell: The Thirteen Clocks

What manner of prince is this you speak of, and what manner of maiden does he love, to use a word that makes no sense and has no point? (The Thirteen Clocks 38)

Fewer critics seem to deal with The Thirteen Clocks than with The White Deer, possibly as a result of its comparatively sparse linguistic texture. The tale is simpler, its narratives interlocking and largely co-operative in contrast to the convoluted competing narratives of The White Deer. While Thurber slips occasionally into the dense play with alliteration, assonance and rhyme he uses in The White Deer (the end of Chapter III is a striking example, with a “ticking thicket of bickering crickets” where “bonged the gongs of a throng of frogs” [73]), generally The Thirteen Clocks is more restrained. Nonetheless, its treatment of fairy-tale elements and its comic inventiveness, while somewhat darker than any of Thurber's other tales, remain fresh and innovative. Like The White Deer, the story is concerned with the classic fairy-tale pattern of the prince sent to undertake a quest to earn the hand of the princess; like The White Deer, the meaning and structure of that quest shifts in signification, its meaning continually under question. The narrative games Thurber plays are less complex here, but the underlying message of value is more thoughtful, and he seems as concerned with the idea of evil as with the idea of love. Significantly, and rather paradoxically given the darker tone, the tale adds laughter to its central value structures, which parallels Thurber's belief in the power of humour expressed elsewhere in his writings, and which is thrown into strong relief by the tale's qualities of darkness.

While the prince's quest is quintessentially that of fairy tale, some of the darkness of the tale's vision can be attributed to its equal reliance on the symbols and structures of a rather different formulaic genre, that of the Gothic. The brooding castle on the hill, the melodramatically gloved and cold-blooded villain, signal the Gothic as clearly as the wandering minstrel-prince signals the fairy tale, and the conditions of the quest – forests, storms, darkness – are common to both, allowing the journey to switch between genres or invoke them simultaneously. Thurber's interest in Gothic literature is a marginal presence in his other writing, but it conforms to his interest in formulaic and popular forms, discussed above. Burton R. Pollin, noting in exhaustive detail the influence on Thurber of Edgar Allan Poe, explores the tension between Thurber's purposes as a writer of comedy, and those of Poe as the ultimate “melancholic” (1999: 139). Melancholy acts as an integral aspect of Thurber's humour, and certainly in The Thirteen Clocks the melancholic Gothic vision co-exists surprisingly peaceably with both fairy tale and

comedy. However, the Gothic genre influences do account for the underlying darkness of vision in the tale, the sense (ultimately denied) that the quest is doomed and the characters struggle against impossible odds. The Jack-o'-lent encountered by the Golux and the Prince sums this up precisely: "The way is dark and getting darker. The hut is high and even higher. I wish you luck. There is none" (73).

Gothic melodrama in the story serves to underline fairy tale's aspects of stereotype and archetype: not only the prince and princess, but the villain himself, are absolutely correct and necessary for the purposes they fulfil in the narrative. The Duke of Coffin Castle takes centre stage in a way denied to Nagrom Yaf, and I have suggested above that he partially represents Thurber himself, linked by the loss of one eye. He is a wonderful villain, "six foot four, and forty-six, and even colder than he thought he was" (17), in many ways more colourful and more central to the story than either Zorn of Zorna or Saralinda. Both prince and princess are, like Jorn and Rosanore, ideal figures rather lacking in character, as is both necessary and perfectly appropriate to fairy tale. The development of the Duke, whose viewpoint we are given on an equal footing to Zorn's in all his interactions with Hark and Listen, is perhaps what adds depth and complexity to Thurber's inventive use of the structure. After all, as Thurber reminds us, it is necessary and right that evildoers *should* do evil, since their evil is what provides the challenge of the quest. He underlines this with the invention of the Todal, a marvellous monster whose purpose is "to punish evil-doers for having done less evil than they should" (51). This recognition of structural and symbolic purpose allows the Duke to spill over the boundaries of his villain character, to become an attractive figure in his melodramatic excesses, limping, cackling, tinkering with the clocks, and devising impossible tasks for suitors. He is attractive precisely for his whole-heartedness, his level of commitment to his role, and hence to the engine of the story, summed up nicely in his unashamed claim that "We all have flaws... and mine is being wicked" (114).

While the Duke is the fairy-tale challenge rounded out into Gothic villain, his power lies partially in the fact that, like Quillow or Jorn, he is a manipulator of narrative, using language and story as dextrously as Thurber does himself to enmesh the suitors for Saralinda's hand. They are instructed to "cut a slice of moon, or change the ocean into wine. They were set to finding things that never were, and building things that could not be" (22). The Duke's impossible narratives construct a reality which is powerfully imposed on the suitors, and which work in the service of his meta-narrative, to fulfil the terms of the witch's spell and keep Saralinda for himself. As a user of narrative, he also recognises it at work, and the Golux knows that "The Duke has awe of witch's spells"

(36), which in the context of the story are precisely no more or no less than narrative itself. Witch's spells state, with neatness and inevitability, the shape and detail of what will happen: where word-play is magic in The White Deer, tale itself is magic here. The shape of the witch's spell which hedges about the Duke's abduction of Saralinda, sets out precisely the shape of the tale – the suitors, the quests, the loophole by which the villain may be thwarted. The Duke's respect for witch's spells marks his recognition that they inevitably entrap him in the expected downfall of the villain. As the story progresses, the Duke displays increasing rage as Zorn of Zorna reveals more and more of the characteristics of the hero. The more Zorn is the hero, the more the Duke is inevitably the villain, and doomed to defeat. "Never tell me what I always am!" he snarls at Hark (93). In addition, the Duke also recognises the specifics of the particular narrative which entraps him – the prince whose name begins with X and doesn't, the nameless champion who defeated the Duke's strongest man, the discovery that the Golux is his invisible spy. The Duke echoes this structuredness in the quest he sets out for Zorn, the object which must be obtained within a certain time and under certain conditions: a demanding structure which confirms the Duke's status as a powerful narrator. It also underlines the novel's interest in paradox, impossibility, the arbitrary – all central aspects of the chaotic breakdown of meaning with which Thurber is continually concerned. The status of the Duke as villain allows play with meaning which centres on the arbitrary, not only in his impossible quests, but in his eccentric villainies – suitors are slain for "trampling the Duke's camellias, failing to praise his wines, staring too long at his gloves, gazing too long at his niece" (22). It is as if, by constructing meaningless narratives and illogical causal links, the Duke seeks to evade the rigorous logic of the spell or narrative which will signal his downfall.

For a tale so hedged about with inevitable witches' spells and inflexible outcomes, The Thirteen Clocks has an unlikely interest in the indeterminate – perhaps, in another expression of Thurber's ambiguous relationship with order and chaos, *because* of that inflexibility. The Duke's downfall is in paradox, a prince whose "name begins with X, and doesn't" (102), and his castle is repeatedly the site of the indescribable, most notably in the inhabitants of the dungeon and the "something very much like nothing anyone had seen before" (96) which trots across the room. The Duke's final nemesis, the Todal, is likewise curiously indeterminate, described by characteristics which somehow fail to define it at all clearly – it is a "blob of glup" that "makes a sound like rabbits screaming,

and smells of old, unopened rooms” (50)²⁴. For the Duke, the indeterminate is threatening, undermining the rigid grip he has on his identity as villain, and hence on the narrative itself. He may well be worried: indeterminacy, jewels that are not tears but “slish” and “thlup” (123), prove his downfall, and his fate is the indescribable blob of the Todal.

The figure of the Golux is at the core of this interest in uncertainty and failure of definition, operating not only as the natural opposite to the Duke and his iron grip on narrative, but as a manipulator of story no less powerful for being uncertain. Where the Duke is defined completely by his place in the narrative, the Golux resists definition and description, an indeterminacy signalled most strongly by his “indescribable hat” (31). He has no clear fairy-tale precedent, suggesting perhaps the enigmatic helper who often appears to assist the hero of fairy tale, but, like the Duke, spilling out of that definition to establish himself as a compelling character in his own right. Like the Duke, he is associated with a breakdown in meaning, but an inversion rather than an absence (“I came upon a firefly burning in a spider’s web. I saved the victim’s life... The spider’s. The blinking arsonist had set the web on fire” [34]); he insists that “I am a man of logic, in my way” (84). Again, this recalls Sewell’s theories of nonsense as being a rearrangement of ideas into new relationships, a different kind of meaning rather than an absence. His quasi-logical games certainly work to save the quest, in his recognition of how Saralinda can re-start the clocks. While being associated throughout with uncertainty and lack of definition, he is nonetheless a powerful catalyst to narrative behind the scenes, a meta-narrator in opposition to the Duke. His power over the Duke is signalled by a complex symbolic network centring on notions of visibility – where the Duke cannot see properly, lacking an eye, the Golux cannot be seen. The Duke, half-blind, cannot recognise the Golux’s structures until it is too late; the Golux, invisible, can conceal his structures until he is revealed as the “Golux ex machina” the Duke fears (116). His invisibility and his function as one of the Duke’s invisible spies place his identity in further uncertainty, but one which remains flexible and generative, thus defeating the locked narrative identity of the Duke.

As an aspect, and perhaps a symbol, of its interest in narrative, The Thirteen Clocks centres on the idea of time, a concept whose importance is signalled by the thirteen clocks of the title. This is a recurring theme for Thurber, who deals with it elsewhere in

²⁴ Parallels can be drawn with Lewis Carroll’s Snark, defined by flavour and habits but not by any concrete attribute.

his fable “The Last Clock,” where time becomes equated with meaning. Time, of course, is central to narrative, which after all is simply the orderly description of the progression of events. In slaying Time, as he believes, the Duke has both controlled narrative, and doomed himself to inhumanity and stasis; however, the stoppage of time stops the inexorable advance of the *tale*, the structures of which will ultimately doom the villain. The Duke’s fascination with clocks is in fact a fascination with the active place in tale-telling which he has relinquished. Time is also central to fairy tale, as Zorn recognises: “in spells and labors a certain time is always set” (46), and the Duke’s quest set for Zorn, by deliberately allowing him insufficient time, dooms him to failure. However, the mechanical view of time is revealed as being inadequate in the tale’s value structures – the Golux insists that “Time is for dragonflies and angels” (46), and that the Duke’s imposition of mechanical limits on the quest is meaningless. This is demonstrated by the success of the quest, which sets up mechanical time as something associated with the Duke, cold, hateful and rigid, and trapped in a lifeless stasis. Against this is placed the “clockwork in a maiden’s heart, that strikes the hours of youth and love, and knows the southward swan from winter snow, and summer afternoons from tulip time” (110). Time, in the Duke’s sense of it, is revealed as being akin to the meaningless structures Thurber pillories continually in his writing – the fact that the Duke’s clocks have stopped is irrelevant, since real time, human time, continues regardless.

The same interest in time is seen in the encounter with Hagg, who is introduced by the Golux’s failure to accurately remember her age – “The Golux had missed her age by fifty years, as old men often do” (78). Hagg, however, while standing for a similar inhuman removal from time to that of the Duke, is the unlikely locus in the tale for Thurber’s introduction of the theme of laughter and its importance. Hagg represents the standard fairy-tale element of the girl who is rewarded for her virtue and courtesy by being given the power to weep jewels. However, her story is given added dimension and reality by Thurber’s investigation of what this actually means to her – she has simply become the victim of tragic tales inflicted on her by the greedy. While the meaning of the gift slides away from the normal value assigned to it, the most important inversion is that of weeping to laughter: tears, as a signifier, can have more than one meaning, and Thurber insists on the validity of interpreting them as laughter rather than sorrow. While the jewels produced by laughter are ephemeral, this both rescues the gift from the same over-use that her weeping was subject to, and gives them an essentially comic meaning in the structure of the quest as a whole. Zorn fulfils the Duke’s requirement, but in the eventual dissolution of the jewels, the joke is on the Duke: their meaning changes to reflect his failure and downfall rather than his greedy acquisitiveness. While giving

Thurber some excuse for word-play, in the Golux's insane, linguistically self-aware limericks, Hagga's laughter is also interestingly free from causal logic, happening "without a rhyme or reason, out of time and out of season" (86). This re-introduces the theme of indeterminate time which has been associated with her, underlining the sadness of her timeless existence despite her laughter. However, her continual laughter, as the Golux and prince leave, also signals the happy ending of the tale, the affirmation of Zorn and Saralinda's successful love even if such human happiness is denied to Hagga.

Thurber's essay "The Case For Comedy" (1961) is a manifesto for the power of laughter, which is, he insists, quoting Lord Boothby, "the only solvent of terror and tension" (119). Interestingly, he also suggests that "form ... is the heart of humour and the salvation of comedy" (123): true humour is structured, working on recognition and the satisfaction of closure. Thus the presence of an explicit call for humour is not out of place in the fairy-tale structures of The Thirteen Clocks, which has its fair share of terror and tension, resolved by Hagga's laughter as much as the happy ending for the lovers and the downfall of the Duke. Thurber writes, "The true balance of life and art, the saving of the human mind ... lies in what has long been known as tragicomedy, for humour and pathos, tears and laughter are, in the highest expression of human character and achievement, inseparable" (1961: 120). The Golux's invocation to Zorn and Saralinda is "Remember laughter. You'll need it even in the blessed isles of Ever After" (120). For Thurber, fairy-tale closure does not promise an inhuman freedom from sorrow; however, he embraces the form for its power to provide both the structure and the inherent sense of value on which his comic vision depends.

Chapter III:

The bloodied text: Angela Carter

Arguably, no other modern author has made the metafictional arena of fairy tale and folktale as much her own as Angela Carter. While only The Bloody Chamber, her 1979 collection of short stories, offers sustained and explicit fairy tale reworking, an awareness of tales and folklore weaves through most of her quirky, individualistic output, as fragments of tales in her novels, and in the folkloric roots of many of her short stories. As a writer she is intrinsically concerned with magical and symbolic narrative, an anti-realist trend which at times verges on magical realism (most notably in Nights at the Circus). She is also, like many postmodern writers, fascinated with genre and structure, exemplified most strongly in her use of gothic and horror conventions in her writing.

Carter's most defining feature is probably her writing style, which is lush, self-indulgent, expressive and at times pyrotechnic. She invokes textuality through language as much as form, since there is no chance for the reader, continually jolted by excesses of language, to immerse him or herself in the absorbing reality created by prose. For this reason, Carter is possibly stronger as a writer of short stories and tales than as a novelist; the limitations of the short tale in some ways serve to control and contain the fireworks of her narrative style, which in longer works can become exhausting.¹ Perhaps the most interesting aspect of a narratological analysis of Carter is in attempting to reconcile her vivid, abundant prose with the characteristic sparseness of the traditional fairy-tale narrative. Her writing is almost anti-fairy tale in texture, yet her tales paradoxically

¹ Salmon Rushdie notes the same effect in his introduction to Burning your Boats, her collected short stories (1995: x). Carter herself comments, "The limited trajectory of the short narrative concentrates its meaning. Sign and sense can fuse to an extent impossible to achieve among the multiplying ambiguities of an extended narrative" (Afterword to Fireworks, reprinted in Burning your Boats, 1995).

retain their fairy-tale identity despite linguistic profusion and its associated invocation of other genres – perhaps because her representation of symbol is so strongly phrased. The mutability and possibility of fairy tale in Carter's hands also relies heavily on the notion of fairy tale as originally an oral voice – the self-consciousness of the act of tale-telling as craft highlights the possibilities inherent in the notion of *re*-telling. More importantly, as Mary Kaiser has noted, the notion of oral re-telling emphasises the importance of specifically cultural intertext as “the politics, economics, fashions, and prejudices of a sophisticated culture [replace] the values of rural culture that form the context of oral folklore” (1994: 30). In exploring the narrative function of Carter's fairy-tale writing I shall focus almost exclusively on the richly intertextual tales in The Bloody Chamber, which often repeat the same tale in a different cultural context, to completely different ideological effect (Kaiser, 1994: 31).

Intertextuality is inevitable in exploring Carter, not only because of her own interest in genre and text, but because there is simply so much written about her. Stephen Benson's review essay on Carter criticism describes “the Carter effect” in postgraduate studies, where she is the subject of innumerable dissertations (Benson, 1998:30). This seems to be due mostly to her interest in female sexuality and the position of women in classic fairy-tale structures, which has made her work happy hunting grounds for legions of feminists with attitudes varying from adoration to outrage. To engage with Carter on almost any level is effectively to engage with her feminist critics. Many of the more vocal of these, particularly those rooted in the radical feminism of the 1970s exemplified by anti-porn critics such as Andrea Dworkin, take issue with Carter's unabashed interest in heterosexual sexuality. Her rather uneasy intersection with the feminist impulse is at least partly because of her full-blooded approach – she is gleeful, disruptive, iconoclastic and deliberately excessive. She is at her most extreme in The Sadeian Woman, her polemical work written in the same year as The Bloody Chamber. This explores the difficult ground of pornography and attempts to theorise it in the service of women, a project which runs foul of 70s feminist ideals, but which is central, thematically as well as contextually, to the fairy tale reworkings of The Bloody Chamber. The tales in The Bloody Chamber include in their metafictional play not only classic fairy-tale forms and other generic references, but a new kind of metafictional category in which feminism *itself* is invoked as text. The anti-patriarchal rewrite has become such a cliché of twentieth-century literature that it can be invoked in terms of structure, form, expectation and entrapment in exactly the same way that fairy tale itself can. Thus, any exploration of metafictional awareness in Carter cannot avoid engagement with her feminist agendas.

In the light of this, the major difficulty in undertaking any analysis of Carter seems to be the impossibility of actually saying anything *new* about her. The huge body of feminist Carter criticism covers a multiplicity of approaches, many of which deal with the importance of fairy-tale narrative in her writing. Fairy tale as a central interest is covered in the recent Marvels and Tales special edition on “Angela Carter and the Fairy Tale”, which neatly fills in any existing folkloric gap in the body of critical work (Marvels and Tales 12 no. 1, 1998, reprinted 2001). I shall attempt to find a space in which to examine Carter by focusing more on her narrative concerns than her feminist concerns, although obviously the two are entwined. Her awareness of fairy tale and feminism both hinge on her use of self-aware narrative technique, more particularly language, intertextuality and the re-deployment of symbol, in precise and innovative relationships. Her metafictional awareness of tale as text draws on the reader’s expectations not only of the functioning of fairy-tale narrative, but of the workings of feminist fairy tale rewriting. In both cases, she reserves the right to disrupt expectations radically.

Carter’s interest in fairy-tale *narrative*, particularly, can be examined under two main headings. The first is language itself. I have discussed earlier the tendency of fairy-tale narrative to exhibit a characteristic textual sparseness, where detail is minimal and there is no attempt to build atmosphere (see Chapter I). Carter’s strength as a fairy tale writer is her ability to disrupt this without compromising the essentially fairy-tale nature of her tales. This is a powerful metafictional strategy: the reader’s attention is perpetually drawn to the nature of writing as artefact because of the elaboration and excesses of the writing style. The tales continually highlight their own constructedness through their refusal to elide the writing itself in any realist illusion. Carter thus achieves a back-door route to the inherent metafictionality signalled by fairy tale’s “Once upon a time,” dextrously juggling the difficult tensions between metafictional excess of style, and the necessary timelessness and lack of detail which fairy tale requires. Her language also signals the intersection of fairy-tale narrative with other genres and styles, which at different points in The Bloody Chamber include Gothic, women’s romance, de Sade, erotica, opera, comedy and the oral folkloric voice. Her rewrites thus rely heavily on a quality of intertextuality which re-energises the classic fairy-tale forms by complex cross-pollination with other literary traditions.

In addition to the functioning of language, The Bloody Chamber offers an ongoing investigation into the functioning of symbol, as Carter reviews and re-positions the complex set of symbolic relationships which makes up the fairy tale form. Her early tale

“The Loves of Lady Purple” (Fireworks: Nine Profane Pieces, 1974) provides an interesting context to this investigation, since the tale explores the power of narrative symbol to confer identity. The legend of Lady Purple, nymphomaniac and devouring feminine, achieves in its ritualistic repetition the ability to bring to horrible, vampiric life the wooden doll who enacts the myth. The Bloody Chamber likewise investigates fairy tale as a set of symbols which define the 20th century’s attitude to heterosexual relations, and which both confine women and continually create them through the symbolic roles set out in the tales. In many tales Carter effectively appropriates the animal figures of fairy tale, displacing them from their accepted narrative roles to recreate them as alternative icons of sexuality. She reworks and updates many of the textual details of Perrault’s tales to offer a postmodern jolt as the contemporary world is rendered into fairy-tale terms. However, she maintains the delicate balance where modern symbol – nineteenth century erotica, opera, a car breaking down, a bicycle – is allowed to operate *as symbol* rather than as realistic detail, without materially disrupting the timelessness and traditional functioning of the tale².

Perhaps the concept most central to Carter’s writing – certainly to her narrative rewritings – is that of *play*. She insists on disrupting structure without replacing it with any definitive structure of her own. Anny Crunelle-Vanrigh comments that Carter “takes her reader along the paths of indeterminacy, revelling in a state of never-ending metamorphosis” (2001: 129). This partially explains the contradictory insights of critics, but it also contributes to the metafictional quality of her writing, since playful disruption of structures serves to highlight the notion of structure itself – constructed, crafted, re-crafted and essentially non-realist. The playful – often mischievous – nature of Carter’s writing allows her continually to explore possibilities, declining to give a definitive text so that her works are always capable of multiple readings³. The Bloody Chamber is a striking example of this: each tale in the collection offers a different response to the difficulties of patriarchy encoded within fairy-tale structures, Carter ringing the changes in approaches to female sexual subjectivity through fairy-tale symbol and expectation. It is not difficult to see why the feminist movement, collectively possessed of the conviction of its own seriousness, has difficulty with her open-ended writing. At the same time, she is often a deliberately provocative writer; in her introduction to Expletives Deleted, a collection of her essays, she admits that there is “a strong irascibility factor in some of

² Leopold Schmidt discusses the updating of symbol in modern oral re-telling, using the phrase “prop shift” to define the modernising of a motif without disrupting its narrative function (in Lüthi, 1975: 69)

³ Nicole Ward Jouve comments that “if the word [postmodernism] hadn’t been around, someone would have had to invent it for Angela Carter” (1994: 149).

these pieces. A day without an argument is like an egg without salt" (1993: 4). However, there is more than a simple desire to be contrary in her fiction, which in its complex non-realist vigour cannot be dismissed simply as combative. Carter's narratives become magical in intent as well as content: she deals not in the simple one-to-one transformations of allegory, but in the complex invocations of the master magician, simultaneously enacting, celebrating and reworking the stuff of the imagination.

Carter and feminist criticism

The Bloody Chamber is a problematical document for many feminists mostly because of its interest in de Sade, and because of Carter's tendency towards what Jacques Barchilon has identified as "unabashed eroticism" (2001: 26). Any exploration of the heterosexual relationships of fairy tale through what Carter calls "moral pornography" (1979: 19) is both brave and complicated. It is interesting to note, however, that Carter is perfectly capable of a more straightforward, less multivalent feminist investigation of the traditional fairy-tale narrative. Her 1993 collection American Ghosts and Old World Wonders contains the three-part tale "Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost", which offers a fairly unambiguous feminist document which deconstructs the complicity of women themselves in the processes of patriarchy via a self-conscious rewrite of the Grimms' version of the Cinderella formula. In its three versions of the story, "Ashputtle" explores the competition between women for male attention, "the drama between two female families in opposition to one another because of their rivalry over men" (390). The tale's discursive, analytic narrative voice offers precisely what The Bloody Chamber refuses to provide: an explicit and authoritative feminist interpretation of the traditional Cinderella tale. This is metafiction in yet another guise, tale as political artefact self-consciously explored. Carter seems to abandon the richer possibilities of The Bloody Chamber's complex symbols in this tale, offering instead the kind of radical feminist rewrite which echoes the anti-fairy-tale rhetoric of Andrea Dworkin – "fairy tale mothers ... [have] one real function ... characterised by overwhelming malice, devouring greed, uncontainable avarice" (1974: 41). It is tempting to see the change in style between The Bloody Chamber and "Ashputtle" not only as a reflection of a more mature, less exuberant or radical writer fifteen years later, but as a response to the kind of acrimonious critical attack the earlier work engendered⁴. As always, Carter's own work is a powerful intertext to her writing.

⁴ I discuss this in more detail below, see pp. 66-67.

The Bloody Chamber represents Carter's response to her own translation of the tales of Charles Perrault, published two years earlier in 1977. Jack Zipes has commented on the origins of Perrault's tales in "the conversation and games developed by highly educated aristocratic women in the salons ... Their goal was to gain more independence for women of their class and to be treated more seriously as intellectuals" (1989: 2). Certainly the French fairy tale pioneers the figure of the Fairy Godmother, the powerful, knowing female figure who stands completely apart from the expectations of normal patriarchal society. Danielle Roemer and Cristina Bacchilega note the extent to which the authentic female voice of the French fairy tale was suppressed by contemporary critics: "by the mid-1800s the French women's work had been overlooked in the developing fairy-tale canon in favour of the more acceptable male author Charles Perrault." Most importantly, the fairy tale had offered a disguised but powerful medium for women "to critique social conditions of the day, particularly the social institution of forced marriage and the general lot of women in a predominantly male-controlled world" (Roemer and Bacchilega, 2001: 11). The Bloody Chamber offers Carter's own re-investigation of Perrault's text in terms which restore the original social intentions of the female writers, but move them into the twentieth century with a complex, multi-faceted interest in the development of female heterosexual identity rather than a simple attempt to reconcile women to marriage. This very specific project entails exploring and combating the tales essentially on their own terms, which is one source of feminist concern.

The other aspect of Carter's feminist use of fairy tale stems from her reading of de Sade at the same time that she was writing The Bloody Chamber, and is echoed in her polemical statements in The Sadeian Woman. De Sade, Carter argues, "is of particular significance to women because of his refusal to see female sexuality in relation to its reproductive function," and his work is thus essentially concerned with "the nature of sexual freedom" (1979: 1). She finds structural parallels between pornography and fairy tale in that pornography, like fairy tale, "involves an abstraction of human intercourse in which the self is reduced to its formal elements" (1979: 4). Tellingly, Carter insists that pornography relies on "the process of false universalising. Its excesses belong to the timeless, locationless area outside history, outside geography, where fascist art is born" (1979: 12). This is exactly the ahistorical and universalising space in which fairy tale itself operates (see Chapter I), and the identification of this as a potentially fascist process is essential in understanding Carter's reworking of the "consolatory myths" provided by mythic versions of women in fairy tale (1979: 5-6). Both fairy tale and pornography represent methods of communication in which meaning inheres entirely in the structural

relationship of symbols. In fairy tale this is a wide variety of motifs and patterns, while in pornography, symbolism reduces to “the probe and the fringed hole ... a universal pictorial language of lust” (1979: 4). Thus Carter’s investigation of sexuality in The Bloody Chamber shares a basic metafictional awareness with her investigation of fairy tale itself – both are structures whose form and meaning are related to reality, but do not attempt to mirror it directly. Like fairy tale, pornography offers a set of symbols whose crafted arrangement must be decoded and consciously linked to reality.

The effect of The Bloody Chamber is often erotic, but essentially Carter admits no difference between the erotic and the pornographic: “eroticism [is] the pornography of the elite” (1979: 17)⁵. She quarrels most fiercely with the idea that pornography as a form of expression must be rejected – as many feminists reject it – simply because it reflects the nature of the patriarchal society which produces it. The Sadeian Woman attempts to reclaim pornographic representation as a neutral form of formalist expression which, while it has almost invariably been used in the service of men to denigrate women, does not necessarily need to do so. She argues:

Since sexuality is as much a social fact as it is a human one, it will therefore change its nature according to changes in social conditions. If we could restore the context of the world to the embraces of these shadows then, perhaps, we could utilise their activities to obtain a fresh perception of the world and, in some senses, transform it. (1979: 17).

Thus, for Carter, self-consciousness of text is equated with self-consciousness of culture, both of which are constructions and thus vulnerable to re-construction. The Bloody Chamber echoes this manifesto in that it explicitly uses sexual relations – reduced to their basic, symbolic function through the familiar structures both of fairy tale and of the erotic – as a means of critique on contemporary social relations. Effectively, the metafictional use of fairy tale and other literary or linguistic structures is subordinated entirely to Carter’s feminist project.

The negative response of feminist critics to Carter’s fairy tales is based, at least partially, on the radical feminist interpretations of traditional fairy tale, as exemplified by Andrea Dworkin in Women Hating (1974) and Gilbert and Gubar’s chapter on “Snow White” in The Madwoman in the Attic (1979). Both these texts represent a particular culture of feminism contemporary with the decade of The Bloody Chamber; Dworkin’s work is particularly interesting in that its chapter on fairy tale is followed by a chapter offering

⁵ It is hardly necessary to point to Amanda Sebestyen’s characterisation of Carter as “the high priestess of post-graduate porn” (quoted in Bruhl and Gamer, 1995: 147), a judgement which invokes precisely the mythic dehumanisation of women which The Sadeian Woman tries to debunk.

an extreme version of the standard radical feminist stance on pornography. Subsequent critical responses have tended to see Carter's rewrites as failed works which do not adequately escape the "straitjacket" (Duncker, 1984) of patriarchal fairy tale as defined by Dworkin or Gilbert and Gubar⁶. Such readings are unable to accept that Carter's tales are partially a dramatisation of patriarchal structures, partly a utilisation of our own complex, acculturated responses to fairy tale itself.

In looking at the tales in The Bloody Chamber, I have found their sequence to be integral to their meaning, and will argue throughout that they represent a development or progression in the exploration of female sexual subjectivity. Within this trajectory, some natural groupings occur, linked more to Carter's political ends than to the rather hodgepodge occurrence of specific fairy-tale originals. "The Bloody Chamber" stands alone as a manifesto, but the two "Beauty and the Beast" variants which follow it are a natural pair. "Puss in Boots" is also unique, but the next three tales, "Erl-King", "Snow-Child" and "Lady of the House of Love" all seem to me to offer variations on the theme of the devouring female. The three final tales are alike both in their wolf-themes and in their representation of developed female subjectivity. This view of the text as sequence echoes critics such as Jordan who emphasise the importance of development across the tales. I find that the development of the female protagonist across the tales inversely parallels the gradual weakening of intertextual reference throughout the collection, providing a specific kind of metafictional awareness in each tale's relationship with the whole.

Desire and loathing: "The Bloody Chamber" as manifesto

"The Bloody Chamber" is deliberately placed as the opening story to Carter's fairy tale collection, at once a set piece and a manifesto – a conclusion reached by both Jordan (1992) and Lewallen (1988). "Bluebeard" is perhaps the most misogynistic fairy tale in Western tradition, its cautionary brutality providing a graphic illustration of the potential horrors of marriage despite the trappings of wealth and security. "The Bloody Chamber" introduces the reader to the aggressively sexual terms of Carter's investigation, at their most extreme and provocative, and effectively provides a framework through which the other tales may be read. The tale invokes and emphasises the sadistic patriarchy of the Bluebeard story through the use of erotic language and

⁶ See Patricia Duncker (1984) and Avis Lewallen (1988); responses and defenses come from Elaine Jordan (1992) Ellen Cronan Rose (1983), Cristina Bacchilega (1997) and the large body of theoretical feminist analyses offered by the recent Marvels and Tales anthology (2001) – Lorna Sage, Anny Crunelle-Vanrigh and others.

through Carter's awareness of the potential for the complicity of women with the patriarchal processes which objectify and disempower them. The Bluebeard text is interleaved with various other textual awarenesses: pornography, the erotic tradition, women's romance and, centrally, the structures we expect from radical 1970s feminism. Interestingly, it is probably the most intertextual of the stories, as the closing piece, "Wolf Alice", is probably the least. Carter's vision of a developing, autonomous feminine sexuality thus represents a process of escape from the patriarchal texts of our culture – the opening tale relies on self-aware use not only of fairy tale, but of a range of highly patriarchal texts.

Initially the tale is not coded explicitly as fairy tale, but as a curious mix of women's romance and the erotic: the standard wedding-night peepshow, focusing on the virgin bride. The linguistic coding – "delicious ecstasy of excitement", "great pistons ceaselessly thrusting", the night-dress that "teasingly caressed me... nudging between my thighs" (7-8) – signals the titillation of the straightforwardly erotic. However, the poor and virgin bride marrying into wealth and nobility is a motif familiar not only from fairy tale, but from its derivatives: the Barbara Cartland romance, the Gothic plot or the society comedy of Colette, a specific intertext acknowledged by Carter (Jordan, 1994:197). More complex intertext almost overcomes fairy tale: the bride's initial awareness is not so much of the fairy-tale structure which defines her situation, as of the erotic structure, the inevitable seduction which awaits her at the hands of the Count. The fairy-tale narrative is asserted only gradually as the previous wives are enumerated and the forbidden room scenario is set up. Despite the excesses of the writing, fairy-tale motifs are recognisable throughout the story: the castle is from the first the "sea-girt, pinnacled domain" of fairy tale, "that magic place, the fairy castle whose walls were made of foam, that legendary habitation..." (8). The modern motifs of the tale – the train, the telephone – are subsumed into the fairy-tale narrative as symbols, the train becoming an explicitly sexual evocation, the telephone serving, through its failure, to entrap the bride completely in an essentially fairy-tale imprisonment.

As the least developed version of female sexual identity, and the most shocking piece of the collection, "The Bloody Chamber" also relies heavily on a sensuality of expression which draws the reader into identifying with the protagonist's arousal. Jordan quotes Carter as explicitly echoing Colette, using "the heightened diction of the novelette, to half-seduce the reader into this wicked, glamorous, fatal world" (1994: 197). Again, the extremism of the language signals fiction rather than reality, a self-conscious play with romantic convention: where fairy tale underlines its own constructedness through

sparseness of detail, the erotic romance plays with linguistic excess. The most interesting aspect of the tale is the change in this textual awareness as the erotic text gradually gives way to the fairy tale, the seduction of the bride becoming, more and more sinisterly, simply a disguise for the immolation of the victim in the “Bluebeard” plot. Blinded by her own desire, her participation in the seduction of luxury and sexual initiation, the bride fails to realise the fairy-tale plot until it has closed around her like a trap⁷. It is not an avoidable trap: her fall in all three structures – the fairy-tale, the erotic, the sadistic – is completely predetermined. In the pornographic narrative, the existence of innocence presupposes corruption in exactly the same way that the prohibitions of fairy tale presuppose transgression, or the identification of the victim presupposes her death. The Count’s perfectly self-aware issuing of the challenge to his bride’s curiosity is carried strongly through from the original fairy tale. However, it also functions here as a kind of sex-game: the Count plays self-consciously with sex-roles, revelling in their excessive fulfilment, in very much the same way that Carter plays with textual structure and expectation; however, her awareness of fatedness has very different ideological implications. The Count’s power in the sex-game only underlines his essential fascism – the quality he shares with pornography as well as fairy tale itself.

Carter’s language in this story is its strength, her ability to pull the reader into the perverse desire and loathing of the protagonist, to acknowledge our own complicity in the texts she presents, as much as the complicity of the protagonist. Fairy tale is powerful in our culture because it is utopian; it offers a kind of wish-fulfilment. For women, it can be a classic rescue fantasy – the arrival of the wealthy prince who offers a kind of life which has the perfect security of perfect objectification. The tale is thus rife with luxurious and sensual detail – food, perfume, the texture of furs, the outrageous camp of jewels and gold bath taps. At the same time, Carter acknowledges the powerful symbolism of the “happy ever after” as an image of sexual reciprocity, flawed by the social circumstances of patriarchy, but nonetheless a compelling ideal⁸. This also comes to reflect the inadequacies of the reader in their acquiescence in the bride’s ultimately masochistic submission. Elaine Jordan comments on her own recognition of herself in the archetypes explored by Carter in *The Sadeian Woman*: “I was astonished to find some aspects of myself in both Justine and Juliette, which provoked me to question my ways of

⁷ Bacchilega’s analysis of this tale notes the same effect: “The narrator’s sensual style both uses and exposes seduction as a trap” (1997: 121).

⁸ Marina Warner has noted the importance of Carter’s utopian “quest for eros” in her use of the fairy tale form, specifically its “bestly metamorphoses... improbable encounters, magical rediscoveries and happy endings” (1994: 243).

relating myself as I never had done before" (1992: 121). This is really the point of "The Bloody Chamber," which articulates both the desire for sexual experience exemplified in the fairy-tale plot and in the Count's strong sexual presence, and complicity with its masochistic continuation once the utopian dream of sexual equality has been shattered. The protagonist describes her own ambiguous responses, her "queasy craving ... for the renewal of his caresses... I lay in our wide bed accompanied by my dark, newborn curiosity. I longed for him. And he disgusted me." (22).

The narrative plots a complex path between the various texts of sexuality – fairy tale, romance, pornography – but what closes "The Bloody Chamber" is the intrusion of an entirely different kind of text with equally strong conventions. Carter's tale has significant departures from the original "Bluebeard" in the characters of the bride's "eagle-featured, indomitable mother" (7), and the blind piano-tuner, Jean-Yves, who replaces Sister Anne as the bride's only ally in the castle. In response to the exaggerated pornographic/fairy-tale text which she has established, Carter ironically inserts an equally exaggerated feminist text, with every cliché you might expect: the strong woman appropriating phallic power, and the castrated and powerless male figure. The blind lover playfully invokes the feminist issues around the male gaze in pornography, removing it without really affecting the subjectivity of the woman. It is as if Carter insists that if you must see the erotic as pornographic and illegitimate, the only possible response is an equally exaggerated feminist disruption of the scenario.

This disruption, while providing a satisfying conclusion in the complete discomfiture of the Count – "the puppet master, open-mouthed, wide-eyed, impotent at the last" (39) – is another parody of vindictive feminist revenge. Invoked as an intertext which is flawed and inadequate, it achieves very little in terms of the motivations and identity of the protagonist. The girl is aware of her mother's strength and uses it for inspiration at several points, but the awareness is insufficient to allow her to actually act against the patriarchal structures which dictate her death. Carter's wonderful picture of the bride's mother, "her hat seized by the winds... her skirts tucked round her waist ... [clasping] my father's service revolver" (39-40) replaces the rescuing brothers to provide a stereotype of the rampaging feminist heroine in the classic mould. However, the figure of the mother is as deliberately melodramatic as the Count himself, and the tale's conclusion is self-consciously – almost comically – ironic. Like the original "Bluebeard", it continues to offer the phallic rescue ("a single, irreproachable bullet" [40]) of the passive heroine, who makes only the faintest attempts to develop beyond that passivity. The key to Carter's intention with the tale is in the symbolic: the appropriation of the

tale's central symbol, the stain on her forehead, the "mark of Cain" (36). In the original this is the "Reproof of curiosity" (17) which marks patriarchal control over women's impulses. In Carter's version, it becomes a token of a different kind of inadequacy, a judgement which the girl ultimately makes on herself. The last word of the story is "shame". The shame is in the bride's complete failure to make use of her sexual initiation in any way that empowers her. While her ultimate relationship with Jean-Yves is equal, it achieves equality by disempowering the male partner rather than empowering the female. The tale's melodramatic terms deny the heroine the enjoyment of her heterosexual desire, implying that desire itself is illegitimate. This in some ways functions as a dramatisation and exaggeration of the radical feminist stance on heterosexuality as intrinsically disempowering to women; Carter seems to suggest that, taken to its logical extremes, radical feminism forbids women to desire men at all. The classic "Bluebeard" tale offers a potentially initiatory scenario in which the virgin bride moves into the ambit of the experienced, multiply-married Count. Carter's version attempts to deal with the fascination this classic structure might hold for the inexperienced girl, the sexual undercurrent to the "happily ever after" of marrying the prince. This is the opening tale of the collection, however: the bride's response is complicated by her own inadequacy, her seduction by the trappings of wealth, and a certain kind of feminist implication that heterosexual desire is shameful. The tale's structures are examined, but their disruption is playful rather than radical. If Carter's female protagonists are to negotiate the inequalities of power in these marvellous structures, it is not like this.

Beautiful Beasts: "Mr. Lyon", "The Tiger's Bride" and "Puss-in-Boots"

The same female failure as seen in "Bloody Chamber" is sketched, although in less melodramatic terms, in "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon," a rather pastel piece in which the prevailing mood is a sort of genteel sadness. Here, Carter's explicitly sexual focus is almost in photographic negative, eradicating all but the most tentative and innocent expressions of desire ("It was in her heart to drop a kiss on his shaggy mane" [48]) to offer instead a sort of social, drawing-room study of manners. Structurally, the tale barely disrupts its French original; the modern touches – the car, the mechanic, the telephone – do not rupture the vague, timeless space of the Beast's gentlemanly house, but rather serve to emphasise its reticent magic as a "place of privilege" (42). The winter landscape serves to wrap the whole tale in the slightly muffled purity of snow which, while echoing the muting of fairy-tale motif, also stands for Beauty herself. The literary tradition invoked is Victorian, polite, restrained: the genteel romance.

As the successor to “The Bloody Chamber”, the tale offers one response to the problem of desire by swinging the pendulum deliberately the other way, again with a slightly vindictive edge. If some kinds of feminism seem to require women to be ashamed of desiring men, the tale insists we face the consequences of obediently eradicating heterosexual desire. Rather than the initiation of the virgin, this is the passing of the resolutely asexual girl from the protection of her father to that of her husband. Again, Carter’s approach relies on a wholesale appropriation and re-invention of the tale’s traditional symbolic motifs. Whether Daddy’s girl or the Beast’s, Beauty is Miss Lamb (45), a virginal innocent, constructed entirely in terms of purity – “you would have thought she, too, was made all of snow ... white and unmarked as a spilled bolt of bridal satin,” her selected gift the white rose (41). Carter’s return to the traditional third-person voice of fairy tale signals very clearly the lack of subjectivity of the protagonist. Re-construction of the tale’s symbolism ensures that sexuality is eradicated so that archetypes are all domestic - daughter, nurse, Mrs Lyon, even at her most wilful she has only “the invincible prettiness that characterises certain pampered, exquisite, expensive cats” (49). At any point where animal sexuality is hinted at, Beauty resists and re-classifies it: the lion-figure seems to her haloed like “the great beast of the Apocalypse... with his paw upon the Gospel” (46). The classic threatening demand of the Beast – the sacrifice of a daughter in the father’s place – becomes the banal injunction “bring her to dinner” (45). Thus, although the tale marks the opening shot in Carter’s campaign with sexualised beast-symbols, the animal here is very tame indeed; like his spaniel or his future wife, the animal wears a jewelled collar. The Beast is tamed, not only by his smoking-jacket (44), but by the innocence and beauty of the girl, in the classically patriarchal, very Victorian process that idealises virginal girlhood as a sort of talisman against unbridled masculine lust.⁹

Apart from her transference of father-love, the central point of the tale is in Beauty’s interaction with the essential otherness of the male/beast – “How strange he was. She found his bewildering difference from herself almost intolerable...” (45). This deliberately invokes and re-investigates the original purposes of the French tales, as noted by Zipes (above): to somehow reconcile young girls to arranged marriages with much older strangers. The underlying note in Carter’s deliberately pallid version is of contempt for that process of reconciliation. Beauty’s final acceptance of Mr. Lyon is

⁹ Interestingly, this is exactly the process adopted by Disney in their animated *Beauty and the Beast*, which rather underlines Carter’s point: safe, desexualised beasts and Daddy’s girls are for children.

presaged and contextualised by the house's air of "a cheap conjuring trick" when she returns (50); the Beast's transformation is almost psychological, the recognition that the alien other is in fact "a man with an unkempt mane of hair and ... a broken nose ... that gave him a distant, heroic resemblance to the handsomest of the beasts" (51). The tale's end, entirely undisrupted from the original, is deliberately saccharine, the ideological failure underlined by the story's betrayal of fairy tale's marvellous space in insisting on the mundane reality of the match. The complete erasure of "The Bloody Chamber"'s eroticism, as well as the marvellous elements of the original, has distilled the fairy-tale structures into a polite, social process entirely denuded of magic or passion. The French fairy tale's social context is a strong metafictional undercurrent to this tale, its embroidery-and-pretty-gowns terminology subtly exaggerated to underline their essential inauthenticity as substitutes for female desire.

Deliberately, "The Tiger's Bride" provides the Technicolor denial of "Mr Lyon"'s oppressive virtue. Like the first two tales – and, in fact, "Puss-in-Boots" which follows it – its structures are rooted in the sharp contrasts between poverty and wealth, and the entrapment of the female protagonist within those structures. Again, Carter's language simply serves to draw attention to her exaggeration of economic contexts. One is struck by the extent to which the early tales in this collection move in an arc which represents their self-conscious and highly dramatised struggle to free themselves from the seductions of wealth. The language, in its vivid awareness of luxury, mires the reader in a process which perfectly parallels the extent to which the development of female sexuality is entangled in economic necessity and unequal economic power. "Tiger's Bride" delivers its message neatly encapsulated in the punchy opening sentence: "My father lost me to The Beast at cards" (51). This is classic Carter: the sentence itself is a manifesto, an explicit statement of textual tradition and the problem of objectification to which the tale will attempt to find an iconoclastic and contentious solution. Again, the tale's metafictional power is in its exaggeration, its insistence on the terms of the original tale strengthened and dramatised by Carter's prose to the point where they – and the implications of the original text – cannot be ignored.

"Tiger's Bride" is something of a paean to excess, recouping the deliberate restraint of "Mr Lyon" and flaunting the condition of its own non-realist textuality in flamboyant images of the marvellous – a mirror which has "magic fits" (61), tears which become jewels, a maid who is a clockwork doll, a valet who is a monkey, a sable fur that is a pack of rats. The tale trembles continually on the brink of a dozen fairy tale texts, invoking and then abandoning each to give a sense of intense but fractured significance to each

moment, and to underline continually the artifice of both narrative and acculturated sexuality. In this context, and against the Beast himself, “a carnival figure made of papier mâché and crêpe hair” (53), Beauty herself is the only authentic human, distinguished from Miss Lamb of the previous story by her furious awareness of her entrapment within the tale. Certainly her father, profligate drunkard, is merely another one of the iconic patriarchal villains of radical feminism. The return to first-person narrative signals the girl’s genuine impulse towards a mature sexual identity in the midst of her economic entrapment. In that sense the masked icon of the Beast is another astute comment on yet another patriarchal villain – he is given the trappings of bestial power as much by feminism’s view as by patriarchy. The upshot of the tale is to set up the Beast and Beauty as the only authentic *subjectivities* in the story, although at the expense of their humanity.

Despite his paper-doll nature, the Beast’s interactions with the girl make explicitly sexual the symbolic aspect of the tale’s structure – not only the female victim given to the devouring male, but the potential for sexual initiation behind the patriarchal mask. The tale’s intertexts are the “Old wives’ tales, nursery fears” (56) of sexuality, man as beast, but the girl’s attitude transcends this, fascinated and refusing to be frightened. Her awareness of “my own skin ... my sole capital in the world” (56) recognises that desire itself must negotiate the tricky balance between valid expression and the refusal to become an object of the male gaze; it looks forward to the Beast’s request to see her naked. However, in a sense she has already been ravished: in her description of her experiences travelling in the South with her father – “God, how they fleeced us” (53) – she has lost one layer of symbolic fur. Keenly aware of her economic entrapment in male-dominated structures, she is no longer the innocent Miss Lamb, and will not come as a passive victim to his hungry gaze. The tale signals the necessity for self-awareness, for control of cultural narrative, which Carter develops gradually across the collection, reaching its culmination in the “wise child” of “Company of Wolves.”

The tiger’s physical presence is one of the most compelling in Carter’s collection – “a great, feline, tawny shape whose pelt was barred with a savage geometry of bars the colour of burned wood... How subtle the muscles, how profound the tread... I felt my breast ripped apart as if I suffered a marvellous wound” (64). Like the Count, he is a figure of sexual – and masculine – power, against which the virginal girl is a “frail little article of human upholstery” – her femininity as much a construct of culture, an artefact, a fake, as the Beast’s masculine humanity. Only the bestial is real in this universe, necessitating the pact towards which the tale moves – “a peaceable kingdom in which his

appetite need not be my extinction” (67). The moment of transformation, beautifully inverted, achieves equality by legitimating female desire rather than civilising and denying the male, and necessitates the complete loss of acculturation – “his tongue ripped off... all the skins of a life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of shining hairs. My earrings turned back to water and trickled down my shoulders” (67). The tale thus triumphantly denies both the patriarchal solution (virginal self-sacrifice tames male sexuality) of the French original, *and* a particular feminist denial of female heterosexual desire which has plagued the two preceding tales.

The story has enormous appeal in its representation of a symbolic equality and togetherness – mutual fur, acculturated jewels turning to water, all celebrated in Carter’s characteristically rich and emotive language. This is the ending borrowed by the Carter/Neil Jordan script for the film The Company of Wolves, a hugely attractive vision of equal sexuality through animal symbolism (see Chapter VI). If The Bloody Chamber represents, as I have argued, a trajectory of female development, why does “The Tiger’s Bride” not occur at the end of the book, instead of near the beginning? I would argue that, despite its powerful symbolic resolution, this is not entirely a utopian vision of heterosexual reconciliation. As critics such as Duncker are quick to point out, one problem is that the tale is about accommodation under crisis, response to male desire, and not the development of autonomous sexual subjectivity for the female protagonist¹⁰. The Beauty figure makes the best of the situation, but her choices are limited by her circumstances and by the demands made on her by the Beast’s desire. This recalls Marina Warner’s comment that Carter’s “transformations ... represent what a girl has to do to stay alive” (1995: 195) under the pressures of patriarchal demand. Autonomous sexual identity may be a by-product of this story, but more probably it is not.

In addition, the tale, possibly because of its joyously magical-realist camp, represents an escape more than a resolution - what Tolkien would have called “the Flight of the Deserter” (1964: 60), fantasy used as a distraction and substitute for action rather than a means to a solution. Beauty’s clockwork maid is sent back to her father to fulfil her assigned role as a mechanically dutiful daughter, the beautiful object totally lacking in subjectivity. This suggests that the role *must* be fulfilled, that there is no possibility of

¹⁰ “Carter envisages women’s sensuality simply as a response to male arousal. She has no conception of women’s sexuality as autonomous desire” (Duncker, 1984: 7). This is very much the problem in “The Tiger’s Bride”, but I would argue that the placement of the tale in the collection underlines Carter’s own awareness of the difficulty; I believe one cannot, as Duncker does, make the same claim for “Wolf Alice.” I have dealt in Chapter VI with the problems inherent in using this conclusion to The Company of Wolves.

restructuring the girl's relationship with her father, regardless of the accommodation she makes with the Beast. The tale's repeated insistence on culture as construct does not legitimate what is basically a side-stepping of the issues, that it is within culture that we must live, rather than outside it in a magical-realist animal paradise – or in the marvellous spaces of fairy tale. Carter's awareness of culture is part of her self-conscious demythologising process, which insists that one cannot simply console oneself with a vision of animal sexuality, since that is beside the structural point – the structures being equally those of fairy tale, patriarchy or culture itself¹¹. In "The Tiger's Bride", the tigers escape into equality in a liminal, idealised space; they do not find equality within the context which has created that inequality. The tale, therefore, is something of a cop-out, placed early in the sequence for precisely that reason. It may dazzle, inspire and charm, but its solutions are self-consciously unrealistic, and hence, while providing seductive fairy-tale narrative, fail on political grounds.

The same problem dogs "Puss-in-Boots", which follows the two "Beauty and the Beast" tales. The most exuberant, earthy and engaging of the tales in The Bloody Chamber, "Puss-in-Boots" represents something of a Baroque cadenza on its basic theme: utopian, completely reciprocal heterosexuality where the act of fucking is both end and means. Following on from "The Tiger's Bride", it enacts in a more socialised and traditionally human context the perfect sexual mutuality achieved by the tigers. However, it uses that equality as a springboard from which to gleefully attack, appropriate and undermine, rather than reject entirely, the economic structures which dictate female sexual choice. This necessarily invokes Carter's polemic in The Sadeian Woman – "relationships between the sexes are determined by history and by the historical fact of the economic dependence of women upon men" (Carter, 1979: 6-7)¹². The tale's apparent simplicity in fact relies on a complex three-way awareness of the economic and gender issues encoded in the original fairy tale, the Sadeian framework of Sadeian Woman, and the other literary intertexts invoked by language and setting.

Textually, the tale plays with the sexual conventions of comic opera ("once you know how, Rococo's no problem" [69]) and theatrical bedroom farce generally, the situation comedy of the cuckolded older man. The cat's name, Figaro, most obviously underlines the operatic and sexual subtext. The tale plays entertainingly with the trickster

¹¹ This is possibly one reason why the Erl King gets his come-uppance in the later tale – he's a consolatory nature myth if ever there was one.

¹² Economic structures are, of course, central to Perrault's original story, which opens with the division of "worldly goods" (Zipes, 1989: 21) and ends with a moral emphasising "prosperity" (Zipes, 1989: 24).

archetype, re-casting the original fairy tale's social climbing as equally opportunistic sexual philandering. Like "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon," it also provides a self-conscious rendition of the original story in terms that are strangely mundane, underplaying the magical, but here without sacrificing fairy tale's unreal space. Figaro's reality as a character is reinforced by the fact that other magical elements from Perrault's original – most notably the ogre and the mouse transformation – are abandoned. He operates in the text as a motif which emphasises the marvellous, paradoxically, in glossing over it. His boots fit his master one moment and himself the next, and his cat-identity shifts continually into the human – the old woman "doesn't see the doctor's apprentice is most colourfully and completely furred and whiskered" (82). This exposes and exaggerates the attitude of wondering acceptance which classic fairy tale requires in its reader. The fairy-tale basis is given added emphasis by the first-person oral voice: this is Figaro's naughty after-dinner tale told to a complicitly prurient audience. It functions as the folk-narrative of the all-male smoking-room story, its point to exhibit the ultimate victory and prowess of the teller. The metaphorical functioning of the tomcat as the quintessence of the philanderer and trickster contributes as powerfully to the tale's metafictional effect as does the self-conscious oral voice – this is tale, exaggeration, self-aggrandisement, not reality.

Atwood's analysis sees "Puss-in-Boots" as "a hymn to here-and-now common sensual pleasure, to ordinary human love, to slap-and-tickle delight ... Carter thumbing her nose at de Sade and telling him to lighten up" (1994: 126-127). The self-conscious swashbuckling enjoyment in the tale is undeniable, but it is a mistake to see the tale only in terms of celebration; as always, Carter's very acute political awareness is at work, and the most powerful intertext to her self-aware re-casting is again that of feminism itself. Rather like the "probe and the fringed hole" of pornography (Carter, 1979: 4), the tale is reducible to the most primitive symbolic elements – sexual encounter despite all obstacles and regardless of who is involved. The tale thus dramatises the point Carter makes in Sadeian Woman, that in the pornographic encounter – as in the fairy tale – the participants are defined by the fact that "their personalities are far less important to their copulation than the mere fact of their genders" (1979: 7). Whatever the idealisation Figaro's master may engage in, the heightened significance of the relationship between him and his adored object is predicated, on both sides, entirely by the fact that they are denied sexual access to each other. The operatic and comedic frameworks both contribute to this reductionism, playing upon the essential unrealistic clichés of love at first sight or – equally tellingly – ecstatic orgasm at first sexual encounter.

To invoke once more the continual intertext of the Bloody Chamber collection itself, the development of female selfhood has very little to do with this kind of sexual relationship. Like the previous tales, the conditions of encounter are exaggerated beyond acceptable reality to insist on their own textuality, exploration of sexual circumstances at yet another extreme. Apparently, Carter has paused for breath in the middle of her analysis and encouraged her reader to pretend for an instant that it is, in fact, this simple; that ecstatic enjoyment of one's sexuality is simply a matter of stealing the keys, picking a reasonably personable partner, and having at it. So much for love, character and actual human interaction. The tale ultimately leaves us with only one compelling and powerful sense of selfhood – that of Figaro himself, male and removed from human society. As in “The Tiger’s Bride”, sexual utopia is not allowed to reside in anything with compelling cultural reality. If this is an ideal of sexual equality, it is an ideal presented in an entirely masculine idiom, that of the unemotional philanderer, and in terms of a highly conventionalised and unrealistic textual framework, that of comic opera. With half of the collection still to go, it is obviously not that simple.

Feminine monsters: “Erl-King”, “Snow Child” and “Lady of the House of Love”

The next three tales in the collection all revolve around a potentially devouring feminine, a dramatisation of Carter's statement, in Sadeian Woman, that “a free woman in an unfree society will be a monster” (1979: 27). The protagonist of “Erl-King”, strangling the entrapper with her own hair, the dominatrix Countess of “Snow Child” and the vampiric sleeping beauty of “Lady of the House of Love” all exemplify the symbolic restructuring of sexually powerful woman into monstrous feminine. This is a dramatisation of the kind of response to fairy tale by radical critics such as Dworkin: “[women] know that not to be passive, innocent and helpless is to be actively evil” (1974:35). Carter, however, while perfectly aware of the patriarchal textualising of the powerful woman, employs various other intertexts to problematise and complicate the female symbols in these tales. Both “Erl-King” and “Lady of the House of Love” are particularly strong exercises in intertextuality, respectively exploring the Romantic nature-myth and the Gothic vampire tale. “Snow-Child”, on the other hand, is a misleadingly slight piece whose restrained and biting prose strips the interactions down to a terrifying essentialism conveyed entirely in symbol whose intertexts are mainly de Sade and Freud.

Harriet Kramer Linkin's complex and allusive analysis of “The Erl-King” suggests that it “reshapes the Romantic myth of creation to restore speech to the subordinated or

silenced female voice" (1994: 307). Her article demonstrates in detail the tale's deliberate inversion of the fate of the traditional Romantic woman, "the silence, containment, absence, or death awaiting such figures as Wordsworth's Lucy, Shelley's high-born maiden, Keats's Belle Dame, or Browning's Porphyria" (1994: 307-308). Certainly, the tale's association of nature with the male motivating and controlling spirit can be linked to the Romantic poets' appropriation of nature as the domain of a male poetic voice. The tale is interesting in the context of The Bloody Chamber as a whole precisely because of its rhapsodical evocation of natural beauty, an impulse at odds with Carter's more characteristic interest in the artefacts of culture. Nicole Ward Jouvé has commented on Carter's firm rootedness within the acculturated community rather than any idealised natural space – "Carter is city through and through. No time for twilights, identifying birds or plants by name..." (1994: 146). In the context of Carter's overall concerns in The Bloody Chamber, the linguistic and descriptive excesses of "Erl-King"'s autumnal landscape are thus immediately suspicious. Romantic clichés of the individual's investment in the environment abound: "The two notes of the song of a bird rose on the still air, as if my girlish and delicious loneliness had been made into a sound" (85). Carter's invocation of Romantic tropes requires that we read the tale *as text* in particularly inescapable terms which rely on Romanticism's self-consciousness about its own poetic project. At the same time, the beauties of the forest are decaying rather than vital – "withered blackberries" like "dour spooks", "the russet slime of dead bracken", "a sickroom hush" (84). While the tale immerses itself in nature, nature is coded as a threat whose construction directly opposes the 'natural beauty' so dear to the Romantics.

"The Erl-King" is possibly one of the most heavily intertextual of Carter's tales, refusing to retell any one recognisable folktale, and thus drifting through a large number of structures and myths. The title and the figure of the Erl-King himself recalls Goethe's poem, which describes the attempted seduction of a human boy by faerie powers which do him "a cruel harm" – the result of his resistance, or perhaps his father's resistance, to seduction, is his death. The other folkloric intertext to Carter's version seems to be the Brothers Grimms' "Jorinda and Joringel." The image of innumerable caged birds in "The Erl-King" directly invokes this tale, whose villainess is an old witch using her powers maliciously to change maidens into birds. Carter's autumnal forests draw on imagery and tone from both these intertexts. The witch figure of the Grimm version, with its subtext of female sexual competition, is abandoned by Carter, however, and, in the motif of the maiden subject to a *male* devouring figure functions as yet another of Carter's re-workings of Perrault's "Little Red Riding Hood." The central figure of the innocent girl walking through the wood is reinforced by Carter's direct invocation of the Red Riding

Hood tale – “A young girl would go into the wood as trustingly as Red Riding Hood to her granny’s house” (85). In addition, despite his housewifely skills and homely vegetarian diet, the Erl-King’s physical presence characterises him as carnivore, with “white, pointed teeth” (87) and green eyes which remind the protagonist that, like Granny-Wolf’s, “There are some eyes can eat you” (86).

The key to the functioning of these various intertexts in Carter’s version is in the rewriting of gender roles. She adopts the symbology of Goethe’s original in conflating desire and sexuality with a faerie, otherworldly figure whose power is expressed through and inheres in the natural landscape; however, in “Erl-King” this nature-spirit figure is revealed to be a spurious and entrapping construct of patriarchal culture, Romantic or otherwise. Carter also inverts the gender roles of the Grimm version, in which the tale’s denouement allows the rescue of the caged Jorinda by her lover Joringel, rather than permitting avoidance of the usual maiden’s fate through the woman’s own recognition and intervention. Carter’s protagonist has already progressed a long way from the passivity of “Bloody Chamber”’s seduced maiden. Invoking yet another set of intertexts, the tale’s notions of death ultimately rely on the motif of strangling hair. In the Romantic framework, as Linkin notes, this recalls the similar winter landscape and isolated cottage setting of Browning’s “Porphyria’s Lover,” in which a male speaker strangles his female lover in order to keep her both pure and eternally his. The inversion of the circumstances in Carter’s version re-figures the tale as a reworking of Samson and Delilah, in which hair stands for masculine power which is stolen or appropriated by a castrating female figure, the devouring feminine with which these three tales seem to be concerned.

The complex intertextual functioning of “The Erl-King” entails a formless shifting between tale structures on an ongoing basis. This heightens Carter’s metafictional effect: the reader is forced to read the tale as a continual textual process, given the lack of any central structure by which it can be safely identified. This self-conscious textuality is emphasised by Carter’s flexible use of voice, which changes confusingly between first, second and third person – “A young girl would go”.... “It is easy to lose yourself”... “I thought nobody was in the wood but me” (85). While mirroring the struggle for subjectivity, this grammatical drift allows the use of a “You” form which signals an almost proverbial universal, an enactment of inevitability through cultural repetition – “Erl-King will do you grievous harm” (85). However, the proverbial voice slides continually out from narrative certainty as it is replaced by the changing and uncertain voice of the protagonist. Even in her triumph at the end of the tale, we are unsure

whether the denouement is planned, present or past as tenses drift: "When I realised what the Erl-King meant to do to me... Sometimes he lays his head on my lap... She will carve off his great mane" (90-91). Linkin argues that this change in voice, the drift between description, anticipation and re-telling, functions as a re-enactment of the tale's various possibilities (1994: 316-317)¹³. This culminates in a version in which she entraps the Erl-King in her own net of language, a "pastiche of nineteenth century poetry and poetics... In her struggle for control... she turns him into an image of nature, encasing him in her language just as she believes he would have entrapped her" (317). Certainly the reader emerges from the end of the tale claustrophobic and stifled, shaking off language as the Erl-King shakes leaves from his hair.

In the trajectory of female sexual subjectivity developing over the course of the collection, "Erl-King"'s ultimately devouring woman represents a new textual technique. Passing through and beyond the problematical mutuality of "The Tiger's Bride", Carter explores the notion of female self-empowerment to an extent which requires the destruction of the threatening male sexual power by the female. The Romantic archetype of male sexual and narrative power is revealed as a particularly inescapable construction; in many ways, the protagonist's response takes place within the framework of the Romantic narrative tradition, rather than finding any alternative to it. While this is an improvement on phallic rescue by a matriarchal figure as seen in "Bloody Chamber", it still represents a response which falls firmly into the patriarchal construct of the devouring female. In essence, this protagonist is no different to the female monsters of the Romantics, Keats's Belle Dame or Christabel.

The title of "The Snow Child" is misleading, since the tale's most memorable figure is not the virginal snow-maiden herself, but the dominatrix Countess and her "high, black shining boots with scarlet heels and spurs" (91). Through this image the tale evokes, more explicitly than does any other in the collection, the structures and symbols of the Sadeian erotic. Like Carter's "Ashputtle", although with a more dreadful economy, the tale explores the notion of female sexual power through recognition and legitimisation by the male. Kaiser notes that it also makes explicit the Freudian subtext of "Snow White", "reducing the tale to its skeletal outlines as a fable of incest" (1994: 33). However, as Duncker has commented, the Countess's boots "[reveal] the Mother as a

¹³ Interestingly, Carter uses exactly the same tense-shifts in "Lady of the House of Love," and to similar purposes; like "Erl-King", the tale enacts several possible structures through its shifting tenses before settling, slightly more obviously than does "Erl-King", on a single denouement.

sister to Sade's Juliette, the sexual terrorist" (1984: 7), and it is this mechanistic view of female sexuality, together with Carter's own exploration of it in The Sadeian Woman, which centrally informs the tale. Carter's view of Juliette is as "rationality personified ... Her mind functions like a computer programmed to produce two results for herself: financial profit and libidinal gratification" (1979: 79). In "The Snow Child", sexual gratification, power as sexual adjunct and economic power are entwined and explicitly encoded as symbol. Furs, boots and jewels externalise in economic terms the power of the Countess, conflating the "financial profit and libidinal gratification" (this last suggested by the Count's "virile member" [92]) sought by Juliette.

In the collection as a whole, "Snow Child" perhaps comes closest in tone and language to the characteristic sparseness of classic fairy tale; its intertextual invocations are symbolic rather than linguistic, in sharp contrast to the stylistic excesses of Carter's other tales. While the tale picks up on the familiar folkloric moment of desire for a child who will be white as snow, red as blood, black as ebony (or here, the raven's feather), Carter's version is more complexly intertextual. As well as the female sexual jealousy of "Snow White", the tale makes use of the Slavic tale of the Snow Maiden, which invokes the motif of the melting snow-child created as a response to desire. In the Slavic version (Lang, 1897: 143), this is the innocent desire of an old man and woman for a child, whom they craft out of snow and who subsequently comes to life. The echo of this version in Carter's tale underlines the incest motif (the Count desires both daughter and sexual partner), as well as externalising sexuality as inherently destructive – heat melts snow. The contrast of virginity with desire is underlined by the tale's opening ("Midwinter – invincible, immaculate" [91])" and by the intrusion of the familiar folkloric motif of "Snow White," that of the maiden pricking her finger. Loss of virginity is death, specifically the death of desirability. With the accomplished sexual figure of the Countess beside him, the only value in the snow-maiden for the Count is, in fact, her virginity, and the symbolic rape by the rose – and the Countess – debars him from enjoyment of that. Thus, while he has her, "weeping", this is a transitory possession which does not prevent her from fading into non-existence, leaving the Countess triumphant in her sexual maturity. The symbolic transfer of sexual experience from the Countess to the snow-girl via the rose is a compact and resonant symbol, confirming both the predatory power of the sexually confident woman, and the central theme of female jealousy which underpins the "Snow White" tale.

The same motif of virginal blood, the symbolic deflowering in the pricked finger, also provides the moment of fairy-tale recognition in "The Lady of the House of Love," in

which Carter re-writes the devouring feminine as tragic figure. The Sleeping Beauty narrative gains considerable symbolic and stylistic force from Carter's intersection of the tale with the clichés and tropes of the classic nineteenth-century vampire story. At the same time, the Sleeping Beauty's thorn-surrounded castle is re-interpreted in a less concrete fashion, a cultural and patriarchal entrapment which dooms the Lady to an unfulfilling existence. Pattern is central to this tale, not only the fairy-tale pattern and the predictable narrative of the innocent young man encountering and being seduced by the beautiful female vampire, but the patterning of the Lady's life as the last in a long and patriarchal line of vampires. The tale's language continually signals repetition – "sonorities," "reverberations," "echoes," "a system of repetitions," "destiny," (93-95). If this is a devouring feminine, it is one characterised by entrapment within a role for which she has a "horrible reluctance" (95).

Carter's use of language and motif to invoke particular textual patterns is particularly striking in this tale. "Lady of the House of Love" is encoded as vampire horror story, a self-conscious exercise in both atmosphere and cliché. The tale's insistence on shadows, "a sense of unease" (93), the cat arching and spitting, insists on the presence of the supernatural, but it is a supernatural of "disintegration," "Rot and fungus everywhere" (93). Structured textual detail continually deconstructs itself, the clichés revealed as spurious, artistic sham, disintegrating even as they are developed. The tale's metafictional element is thus particularly strong, approaching the self-awareness of Byatt in its depiction of narrative as both constructed and entrapping. Interestingly, it is the vampire narrative which predominates. The fairy-tale Sleeping Beauty structures are inherent at first in details such as the roses, and obvious only when the prince arrives and the Countess pricks her finger. The tale's narrator is particularly evident in the story, a dispassionate and knowing presence whose fairy-tale authority is somewhat undermined by Carter's use of tense. As in several other tales in the collection, tense signals both narrative self-awareness and the breaking of structures, since the Countess's timeless present tense – ongoing, eternal, inescapable – is disrupted and moves into normal fairy-tale narrative past tense with the intrusion of the young British cyclist.

The cyclist functions as the pivot of the narrative, his rationalism making obvious the problematic nature of both vampire and fairy-tale structures. Carter's particular historical identification – "the pubescent years of the present century... a young officer in the British army" (97) – would normally serve to deconstruct the ahistoricity of more traditional fairy tale; in Carter's hands it tends to emphasise it by contrast. From the moment he enters the village, and despite his characterisation both in heroic motif and

active, masculine past tense, the cyclist's historical nature is subsumed into the unreal space of fairy tale and the Gothic. Carter's investment in this clash is, as usual, gleeful and perfectly self-conscious: she defines explicitly, with obvious enjoyment, the narrative discord where "This being, rooted in change and time, is about to collide with the timeless Gothic eternity of the vampire" (97). Fairy-tale ahistoricity is thus perfectly emphasised in this tale, both in its melodramatic exaggeration via the Gothic framework, and in its disruption by a hero whose modernity is exaggerated to the point of being ridiculous. More powerfully, the fairy-tale potential for death inherent in the various narratives is continually held up against the grim reality of death in the trenches, problematising the symbolic deaths of fairy tale's unreal space.

Exaggeration functions partially as a form of comic undercutting in this tale, which is consequently rescued from the heaviness of the Gothic setting and, like much of Carter's writing, ultimately refuses to take itself too seriously. The tragic Gothic intensity of the heroine is undermined both by her association with the animal – "Delicious crunch of the fragile bones of rabbits and small, furry things she pursues with fleet, four-footed speed" (95) – but also with another fairy-tale association, the ogre of "Jack and the Beanstalk" – "I smell the blood of an Englishman" (96). The cutting of threat with comedy has been extensively treated by Marina Warner in her 1998 work No Go the Bogeyman: Scaring, Lulling and Making Mock, whose title suggests precisely this need to dispel unease with laughter in representing the devouring other. Warner suggests that "mockery perhaps defends against the painful potential [of the medieval grotesque]" which "though [it] does not claim to represent the reality of phantasms at a deep level, continues lightfootedly, capriciously, safely contained in the abstract realm of representations" (1998: 247). Carter re-writes the romantic female vampire as the ogre, somehow clumsy, pathetic and comic as well as terrifying, and perhaps best exemplified by the crone attendant, who will "tidy the remains into a neat pile and wrap it in its own discarded clothes" which she then "discreetly buries in the garden" (96). Warner's comments also serve to explain Carter's play with the bicycle motif and the supremely rationalist cyclist set against a Gothic grotesque, as an antidote to the aspect of "the grotesque's fancifulness [which] strikes observers as horrible: it indulges in inconsequential whimsy but its very detachment from logic and biology can take a disturbing turn" (1998: 247). We may find the bicycle amusing as a symbol, but it provides a rational sanctuary from the disturbing illogic of the vampire at the same time that its comic exaggeration offers relief from the unease of the grotesque.

Of course, part of this unease is inherent in that cliché of Gothic eroticism, the female vampire herself. On the most obvious level, the re-energising of the Sleeping Beauty as vampire negates and reverses the patriarchal construction of the symbol – the ultimate passive woman, asleep and awaiting the kiss of the prince, becomes a powerful devouring feminine. The effectiveness of Carter's use of this conflation rests in its ability to expose the devouring feminine as yet another entrapping patriarchal technique. Part of the unease of "Lady of the House of Love" picks up on the erotic anxiety expressed in the figure of the female vampire, whose possession of fangs appropriates in particularly obvious symbolic terms the phallic authority of the male. She is highly disturbing in that those fangs empower her with the ability to make any victim – male or female – into a female symbol. This is not simply in the emasculation of the male through his helpless seduction by the beautiful vampire, but in the vampire's physical power to literally create the female symbolic – the hole, the wound, the absence filled by the phallic instrument of the vampire – in the victim. Any vampire figure becomes the site of erotic anxiety in patriarchal discourse precisely because of its power to appropriate the identity of the male victim, and this is perhaps why so much Victorian Gothic insists on the virginal female as prey. In Carter's hands, erotic anxiety is redoubled and emphasised by the disturbing image of a Sleeping Beauty whose apparent passivity is a delusion and a snare. Moreover, it is a particularly erotic entrapment, a quality emphasised by Carter's play with the trappings of what she defines quite explicitly as the perverse bordello where, "amidst all the perfumes of the embalming parlour, the customer took his necrophiliac pleasure of a pretended corpse" (105). Above all else, the tale's continual emphasis on tawdry trappings reveals the Gothic narrative as a male erotic construct, spurious and invalid, and underlines the entrapment of the Countess within it.

"Lady of the House of Love" is thus something of a blind alley in the intertext of the tales as a whole – Carter's investigation of female sexual identity rather comprehensively rejects the devouring feminine as a response to the problem of heterosexual equality. Like the protagonists of "Erl-King" and "Snow-Child," the Countess is revealed as being trapped by yet another patriarchal version of woman. Unlike them, however, she manages to escape, to some extent, by her refusal to enact the role set out for her. The tale is notable in the collection for its wholesale rejection of narrative structures, none of which are admitted as valid – in the clash of narratives, Gothic, fairy-tale and historical/rational, all narratives fail. Despite obvious sleep/death parallels, the Sleeping Beauty's finger-prick operates as a symbolic reversal in which the Countess wakes up into reality rather than being cast into sleep; the symbolic deflowering marks an initiation into real world rather than constructed, although it is one in which her only

option is death. The fragments of her dark glasses, on which she wounds herself, signal a restoration of vision, but they also deny the possibility of reflection and thus of identity in the same way as does the vampire's traditional lack of a mirror image. Carter will pick up on this idea of reflection later in the mirror of "Wolf Alice," but for now the devouring feminine rebounds primarily on itself – the price of escape from a destructive symbol is destruction.

However, the tale's historical grounding works interestingly here, in that it insists that death is inevitable in any narrative – the boy escapes the doomed patterns dictated by his identity as the vampire's victim, but he will nonetheless die in the trenches. The shared death of the Countess and the soldier suggests a strange kind of mutuality, an enactment of the familiar motif of orgasm as death which is reinforced by the symbol of the rose, the traditional metaphor for the female sexual organ. Denial of narrative becomes both an escape and a kind of fulfilment. His denial of the Gothic narrative makes it possible for her, too, to reject it, and that rejection makes possible a symbolic inversion of the Sleeping Beauty's fate, despite the boy's too-ready desire to serve as prince to her sleeping maiden. Certain feminist responses to this outcome are, of course, annoyed: Duncker argues that "what the Countess longs for is the *grande finale* of all 'snuff' movies in which the woman is sexually used and ritually killed, the oldest cliché of them all, sex and death" (1984: 9). Certainly this impulse is present in the tale, but, as usual, Carter's self-conscious use of these and other narrative tropes is far more complex than Duncker's comments would suggest. Like any other tale in this collection, "Lady of the House of Love" investigates a situation rather than enacting a solution; here, the power of the various patriarchal narratives is such that the only possible escape is death. In many ways, the exaggerated, rationally irresistible sun-god figure of the young soldier playfully underlines this, and one cannot help but feel that there is a certain justice in Carter's vindictive enjoyment as she consigns him to the same fate as her doomed, vampiric Sleeping Beauty.

Wolves in the mirror: "Werewolf," "Company of Wolves" and "Wolf Alice"

In the trio of wolf tales which concludes The Bloody Chamber, Carter in many ways reaches the culmination of the feminist project which has occupied her since the first story, with profound consequences for her narrative style, intertextuality and metafictional awareness. All three tales are significantly different to the preceding stories in that they are constructed around an oral, folkloric voice rather than the literary fairy

tales – and other literary intertexts – which characterise the remainder of the collection. Bacchilega has suggested that the tales represent Carter’s “dialogue with the folkloric traditions and social history of ‘Red Riding Hood’” (1997: 59). While Red Riding Hood is an inherent presence in all three tales, Perrault’s fairy-tale narrative is in many ways secondary to the folkloric element which provides traditions about wolves and werewolves.¹⁴ The animals in these tales are strong and resonant symbols of sexuality, but ultimately what they signify is *power*. The peasant, agricultural setting of folklore appears to be largely restored, allowing the wolf symbols to gain a superstitious resonance – “There is no winter’s night the cottager does not fear to see a lean, grey, famished snout questing under the door” (111). Carter is, for once, playing no particularly specific literary or cultural games with fairy-tale setting; the comparative lack of intertexts, certainly in contrast to literary pastiches such as “Bloody Chamber” or “Erl-King”, suggests that she has worked through different textualities and now returns to a more basic, stripped-down version. This return to folkloric roots allows a flavour of medievalism which is inherent in traditional versions of fairy tale, and which serves her feminist project in that its terms are very obviously patriarchal. The theme of female self-sufficiency and sexual identity, flawed and incomplete through the preceding tales, is here thrown into sharp relief; if Carter ever attains a vision of complete female autonomy, it is in these tales.

“The Werewolf” is a disconcerting revision of the Red Riding Hood formula, its compressed narrative producing disorienting shifts in pattern and symbol; the conflation of grandmother and wolf is hardly more shocking than Red Riding Hood’s self-serving pragmatism. The story is constructed around folk wisdom, the oral narratives that shape both culture and individual, and which are altogether cruder and less polite than the literary posturings of the more familiar fairy tales. The tale’s opening establishes not only the harshness of the peasant lifestyle, but the framework of value and superstition which upholds that lifestyle – the Devil, vampires, second sight, witchcraft. Carter’s tone in this tale is interesting: compared to her usual linguistic fireworks, it is restrained, angry and harsh, focusing disturbingly on macabre detail such as the severed wolf’s paw or grandmother’s warty hand and bloody stump. The tale’s effect is in its stripping away of literary pretension to play instead with an authentically earthy oral voice. Again, Carter’s use of tense signals the presence of both a universal, proverbial present and the

¹⁴ This oral voice and fragmented folkloric element is explored very powerfully in Neil Jordan’s film In the Company of Wolves, which combines elements from all three stories. I have discussed this elsewhere – see Chapter VI on fairy tale film.

more familiar past tense of ordinary storytelling, so that action is framed and contextualised by the proverbial. The Red Riding Hood story becomes enacted *as* folk myth rather than fairy tale, with particular elements of the tale highlighted by its positioning within the particular discourse of folk superstition.

It is significant that it is women who are largely victimised by the folk narratives embedded in the tale. A witch is simply “some old woman whose cheeses ripen when her neighbours’ do not, another old woman whose black cat, oh, sinister! *follows her about all the time*” (108). Marina Warner has noted the association of fairy tale with old wives’ tales, the power of women as holders of narrative (1995: 16 ff.), but here the reverse is true – no one in particular seems to hold these narratives, and powerful women are effectively demonised by their representations. In many ways the tale follows on from the three preceding tales, offering within this folkloric framework yet another version of the devouring feminine. Here, Granny-Werewolf as the demonic woman passes wisdom on to the next generation, but involuntarily; this is no comforting version of female solidarity, and the lessons of power carry within them their own destruction. The tale, focusing on the girl and her grandmother, displays a curious absence of men, but they are present in minor but telling detail – the girl is “armed with her father’s hunting knife” (109), so that any power she has is phallic, on loan. Likewise, the narrative power by which she destroys her grandmother – she “cried out so loud the neighbours heard her and came rushing in,” to recognise and stone the witch (109-110) – is that of patriarchal culture.

The tale thus sets out to problematise folk narrative, like fairy tale itself, as a constructed, artificial thing that imposes an illegitimate shape on reality. However, its artificiality allows it to be both recognised and used: ironically, the narratives which forbid women power can be turned against themselves to allow their user to seize power despite the prohibitions. Thus the curiously self-possessed and rather worrying girl-child can calmly destroy the old woman and then take on her mantle – “the child lived in her grandmother’s house; she prospered” (110). The suggestion is that the demonic, inherently female power is inherited through violence and usurpation, and ultimately through a rather cold-blooded appropriation and use of encoded and superstitious cultural narrative. Unlike the protagonist of “Erl-King” or the virgin bride of “Bloody Chamber”, the child transcends her own identity as Red Riding Hood to stand outside narrative, using it for her own purposes. This is fairly terrifying stuff, but becomes even more so as the tale takes on a curiously circular resonance: the child may triumph, appropriating her grandmother’s power, but in that act she also appropriates her

grandmother's fate¹⁵. Carter is simply exploring the limited power in the demonic female archetype: if embraced, it is indeed empowering, but because of the cultural narratives encoding that power, it will eventually be destroyed on the same terms on which it was created.

"Company of Wolves" is somewhat difficult to discuss, as Jordan's film tends to usurp reading of the literary version with its powerful visual interpretation. As a fairly faithful rendering of the Red Riding Hood tale, Carter's tale is also curiously flat in comparison to earlier tales: while offering considerable textual detail, it does not deviate from Red Riding Hood's structures until the pivotal moment where the girl refuses to be devoured. Like "Werewolf," the tale places the wolf symbol within a peasant agricultural context, but provides a more self-consciously Gothic and rather rhapsodic celebration of the wolf's power and control over its own world. In its exploration of the wolf-symbol the tale seems to offer a sense partially of envy – that symbolic place in the world, self-contained, terrible and desirable, is perhaps what the tale wants for women. The wolves have beauty and power, their eyes "luminous, terrible sequins stitched suddenly on the black thickets" (110), but also sadness, their howl a "mourning for their own, irremediable appetites" (112). Wolves are trapped in folkloric narrative that defines them just as firmly as women, and, like women, they are feared and reviled for their predatory power. If wolves are a sexual symbol in these tales, this makes a strange equivalence between desire and predestination, a kind of punishment inherent in a sexuality which is by nature both powerful and transgressive. The celebratory edge to Carter's description of the wolves seems to point towards some kind of desire for freedom from acculturation, but the tale refuses such simplistic readings by characterising the wolf-seducer as the highly cultured hunter, a "fine fellow" who is entirely the opposite of rustic (114). Culture is both the denial of desire, and the potential for its fulfilment; it is also a veneer, a seductive surface of city clothes which hide the beast beneath – "He strips off his trousers and she can see how hairy his legs are. His genitals, huge" (116). Through the maze of acculturated responses, the tale struggles to find a true heterosexual engagement.

The tale revolves around the motif of being devoured as sexual initiation through the image of man as wolf, and offers a careful and sensual deconstruction of the erotic potential in the tale's traditional strip tease – "What shall I do with my blouse? Throw it

¹⁵ Comparisons with Tanith Lee's "Wolfland" are inevitable here: the tale makes precisely the same equivalence between grandmother and wolf, although Lee's investigation of female power is infinitely less subtle. See Chapter V.

on the fire, dear one. You won't need it again" (117). There are strong and deliberate echoes of "Bloody Chamber" here, as the tale reiterates the classic, erotic scene of a woman disrobed by a clothed man, the essential power difference that makes for the "most pornographic of all confrontations" (15). The difference, here, is that Carter revisits a basically identical structure only to transform it. Bluebeard's child-bride acquiesces helplessly in her own seduction and ultimate destruction, and must be rescued by an outside force; here, at the point where the female victim should be devoured by the male (sexual) predator, the passive woman instead wakes up to take her own action in the scene. In Carter's version the inevitable moment of ravishment by the wolf is re-figured as participatory, mutual. The child brings a strong sense of self and a clear-eyed recognition of reality to the situation: "Since her fear did her no good, she ceased to be afraid" (117). At the moment of destruction, she laughs, in control: "She knew she was nobody's meat" (118). The tale's moment of structural transformation thus revolves around the *girl's* desire as well as the man's. The desire for sexual experience which is present so problematically in "Bloody Chamber" is here given more legitimate expression in the girl's fascination with the urbane Hunter. Her instinct is proved correct, too: urbane or not, the hunter provides access to an untamed version of sexuality which the tale's natural imagery – wolves, winter – ultimately celebrates. Unlike Jordan's film, the tale's closing image offers the almost biblical reconciliation of child and beast, rather than the perfect unity of transformation which the film celebrates. The image is not of bestial sexuality tamed, but of a wild and natural sexuality which is embraced and understood. Self-conscious to the last, the tale's closure provides a kind of perfect structural stillness in which the conflicting demands of society, culture, body and nature have been balanced and reconciled into a poetic and celebratory calm.

The blizzard will die down...

Snowlight, moonlight, a confusion of paw-prints.

All silent, all still.

Midnight; and the clock strikes. It is Christmas Day, the werewolves' birthday, the door of the solstice stands wide open; let them all sink through.

See! sweet and sound she sleeps in granny's bed, between the paws of the tender wolf. (118)

"Wolf-Alice" completes Bloody Chamber's process of exploring and shrugging off the literary and fairy-tale intertexts of Western culture. A particularly complex and interesting exploration of wolf-nature with echoes of Lacan and Lewis Carroll, it has no real folkloric or fairy-tale root, but bases itself on various medieval, eighteenth and nineteenth century accounts of abandoned children rescued and brought up by wild animals such as wolves or bears. The tale thus picks up from the point of celebratory calm on which "Company of Wolves" ends, allowing us to discover, as Bacchilega has

noted, “the female protagonists not in her granny’s home, but unexpectedly safe in the lair of the wolf” (1997:65). This motif of girl-as-animal, however, exemplifies the same unrealistic denial of culture which plagues earlier tales such as “Tiger’s Bride”; in her final tale, Carter moves through that metaphorical safety once more to reconcile the animal-girl with her human context. As another variation on Carter’s own Sadeian discovery, that “a free woman in an unfree society will be a monster” (1979: 27), the tale offers a woman perfectly in tune with her animal self, but marginalised completely by her human society. The tale gropes towards equality in that her restoration to full humanity comes only in interaction with the Duke, a human as bestial and marginalised as she is herself.

In the interaction between Wolf-Alice and the Duke, Carter brings together the almost scientific exploration of girl as animal, and the completely folkloristic construction of the werewolf. Textually, however, the tale continually undermines and denies its own magical narrative: we are never permitted to be sure if the Duke’s werewolf ghoulishness is an actual transformation, or mere insanity. Metaphorical and literal language become confused in the construction of the Duke: “Nothing can hurt him since he ceased to cast an image in the mirror” (120); he leaves “paw-prints”, but ignores garlic, the cross and holy water (121), but at the same time he wears a “fictive pelt” (125). The reader is left to thread the confusing maze in which the patterns of the marvellous, perfectly literal in earlier tales, are problematised by the presence of the metaphorical: animalism as social marginalisation, mirrors as metaphors of identity, the ghoul as madman. Textuality is breaking down almost completely, leaving only fragmentary invocations of narratives which fail to provide any underlying structure to the tale. This is familiar territory for Carter; a characteristic refusal to engage in any reductionist process which denies the complexity of heterosexuality under culture. Even the invocation of Lewis Carroll’s Alice through the Looking Glass, which is suggested by the combination of the girl’s name and the mirror motif, is not explored in any detail. Rather, it operates as a pointer towards the tale’s interests, the maturation and empowerment of the female child through the symbol of the mirror, and through exploration of a culture which is presented as inverted and alienating.

Within the arc of narratives across the collection, “Wolf-Alice” is the most realistic story, in that it is the least introvertedly intertextual; it also explores most profoundly the problem of the sexual alienation of man as well as woman in the culture of patriarchy. Wolf-Alice may originate outside the accepted bounds of culture, but even the Duke “came shrieking into the world with all his teeth, to bite his mother’s nipple off and

weep" (122). Acculturation means tragedy, the imposition of impossible structures of relationship for both men and women. Existing outside those structures, the Duke and Wolf-Alice are given the chance to discover their actual identities through interaction with each other. This is a functional reversal of the tendency of earlier tales, which is towards the abandonment of culture by those who have experienced and rejected its constructions of sexuality. More importantly, it is the girl who comes to an awareness of her own identity in isolation, and who then restores the man to his humanity, not the pattern of sexual initiation we have seen in earlier tales. In many ways, the focus is on the notion of identity which is not necessarily linked inextricably to the sexual. Wolf-Alice's process of maturation is a vivid and poignant illustration of the theories of Jacques Lacan in its reliance on the mirror as symbol for the process of development whereby the individual recognises the self as object. Rosemary Jackson's useful summary of the psychoanalytic in fantasy identifies Lacan's mirror phase as "a shift ... to the ideal of a whole body with a unified (constructed) subjectivity" as well as a theory which relies centrally on an "understanding of the ego as a *cultural construction*" (Jackson, 1981: 89). Thus, while Wolf-Alice's sense of time is accessed via her awareness of her own menstrual flow, it is her discovery of the "friend" in the mirror which leads to the moment of discovery of herself; "her relation with the mirror was now far more intimate since she knew she saw herself within it" (124). While she vaguely associates the mirror-Alice with her own menstrual flow, this recognition is not inherently sexualised. Heterosexual desire is formulated only later, when she recognises the Duke as both an object of pity and, in his mirror image, as a being akin to herself. Her process of constructing an identity for herself is only complete when she finds a place within the structures of culture, in interaction with another of her own kind.

While a highly individualistic narrative, "Wolf-Alice" is thus ultimately not out of place in a collection based on Perrault. Neither fairy-tale nor really folkloric in its roots, it nonetheless follows fairy-tale patterns in its presentation of a profound human scenario, stripped down to archetypal participants and symbolic challenges. Critics such as Mircea Eliade have noted the importance of fairy tale as offering an essentially initiatory scenario, "passing, by way of a symbolic death and resurrection, from ignorance and immaturity to the spiritual age of the adult" (1963: 201). In its presentation of a profoundly satisfying symbolic resolution, "Wolf-Alice" partakes of an essential aspect of fairy-tale narrative which remains unobscured by psychoanalytic complexities of characterisation (Lacan's theories are expressed in symbolic terms, and thus do not break fairy tale's rules) or by Carter's excessive language. In this, it achieves, more fully than any other tale in the collection, the resolution towards which every tale is groping: how

women may exist fully and as heterosexually sexualised individuals under the conditions of our culture. The games of language, symbol and structure Carter plays in earlier tales are here seen at their most effective in that they do not overwhelm the essential rite-of-passage with which the tale is concerned. The collection's conclusion thus finds a balance lacking in earlier tales, whose intertexts and linguistic games become part of the cultural problem. Here, while other texts are evoked in order to add complexity and subtlety, they are very much a subtext, perfectly controlled at last. Paradoxically, in rewriting fairy tale Carter finally finds the structural space she requires; having demonstrated her mastery of language, symbol and patterning, in the end she must move through the classic tales of Perrault and others into a less culturally determined space. "Wolf-Alice" is not strictly a fairy tale, but perhaps it is an expression of what fairy tale could and should be.

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Chapter IV: Caught in a Story: A.S. Byatt

Everybody knows it's fiction, but then everybody knows the whole thing is fiction.
(A.S. Byatt, in Wachtel, 1993: 88)

The award of the Booker Prize to A.S. Byatt's novel Possession: A Romance in 1990, cemented Byatt's position as a literary figure and sparked the steady stream of academic attention which has greeted both Possession itself and Byatt's other works. An intensely intellectual and literary writer, Byatt betrays in all her works an interest in the presence and repercussions of literature itself. Her recurring interest in fairy tale and folk forms is thus subsidiary to her far larger interest in form, writing and narrative tradition as a whole. This literariness is perhaps due in part to her identity as an academic and critic as well as a writer of fiction; her academic career has included postgraduate study at Oxford and in America, and teaching at London University, with published criticism on Iris Murdoch and the Victorian poets, among other texts (Todd, 1997: x-xi). Much of her work is highly self-aware and self-reflexive, her protagonists tending to reflect her own identity as academic, writer or narratologist. This gives her writing an intelligence which James Wood has identified as "Byatt's greatest problem as a writer"; he argues that "while part of her imagination yearns for a visual immediacy, the other part constantly peels away into analogy, allegory, metaphor, and relations with other texts" (in Sturrock, 1996: 121-22). As a result, she continuously explores and deconstructs the nature and workings of her own narratives, and the problematical relationship between narrative and reality. Her essay on "Old Tales, New Forms" (2000) makes this explicit in admitting her fascination with the European Prize entries which were "threaded through with brilliant and knotty reflections on the relations of myth, story, language and reality" (2000: 123).

Byatt is thus a recurrently and integrally metafictional writer, whose self-consciousness is linked to narrative in her awareness of the novel and short story forms. She discusses the relationship between mimesis and metafiction in her essay “‘Sugar’/‘Le Sucre’”, recounting her delight in the discovery of Proust and the possibility for a text to be realist and “at the same time to think about form, its own form, its own formation, about perceiving and inventing the world” (1991: 22-23). Throughout her texts, realist as well as fairy tale, art and literature both reflect and create the world. Reality in her texts is very much a construct of art: of literature, as in *Possession* or *The Biographer’s Tale*, or of storytelling, as in her fairy tales. This is extended to include painting, seen in her interest in van Gogh, whose works pervade *Still Life* (1978) and, to some extent, *The Shadow of the Sun* (1964), and in the artistic focus to *The Matisse Stories* (1993) and many of the tales in *Elementals* (1998). Her keen sympathy for the aesthetic and creative value of art is rendered complex by its reflective and refractive capacities in her novels, and by the relationship between the structures of art (visual or literary) and her ongoing interest in realist depiction. Julian Gitzen notes the tendency for Byatt’s characters to “remain tirelessly alive to both the bond and the gap between words and their referents and between art and its subject. Her fiction persistently dramatises this distinction by making it either a significant feature of the narrative or the very focus of action” (1995: 84). Thus the lives of the protagonists in *Possession* are both reflected in, and come to reflect, their literary productions – Christabel’s fairy tales, Ash’s poetry, or the Freudian criticism of Roland or Maud. Reality, or rather the fictional representation of reality, becomes structured in literary or fairy-tale terms, emphasising Byatt’s interest in fairy tale as simply the most extreme example of literature’s ability to re-figure reality in terms of structured text. This is particularly striking in the case of Byatt’s realist tales which slide into classic fairy-tale forms – the middle-aged narratologist given three wishes by a genie, the artist in France whose swimming pool becomes inhabited by a potential fairy bride in “A Lamia in the Cévennes.” The story shape and the realist setting are co-equal, mutually influential, inextricably involved.

Byatt’s recurring interest in realist narratives such as history and biography, or even science, is more difficult to integrate with her self-aware explorations of narrative. However, historical and biographical writing encapsulates in itself precisely the intersection between reality and narrative with which she is most concerned: both deal with reality in the strongest possible form, events which actually happened. The presence of etymological science in “Morpho Eugenia” (*Angels and Insects*, 1992) is another example of this tendency, offering the most realistic scientific explorations couched as allegorical fairy tale. In Byatt’s stories, historical or scientific detail is embedded in the

lives of the protagonists at the same time that the lives of the characters are articulated via such detail. Examples include the Victorian context of Possession and The Biographer's Tale, the history of Nimes in "Crocodile Tears", or the lives of moths in "Morpho Eugenia." These stories set out to self-consciously transform reality *into* narrative, not only the narrative experienced by the characters, but the narrative created by them in the unfolding of their experiences. A similar process is at work in The Virgin in the Garden (1978), where the life of Elizabeth I resonates both with the coronation of Elizabeth II and with Frederica herself, creating modern events as historical narrative at the same time that historical event is recreated as modern narrative. Fairy tale becomes simply one strand in Byatt's storytelling, another example of the same impulse that underlies her use of history, biography or any other genre – an exploration of the processes used by humanity in reflecting its experience as narrative, reflected over again in Byatt's own narratives in an act of ongoing creation. History and biography are both exposed as artefact, story, the artificial creation which mimics reality in much the same way as does Byatt's creation of fictional reality through her fiercely physical and detailed prose. The process recalls Waugh's definition of metafiction, in the tendency of metafictional texts to "explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text" (1984: 2).

Byatt's interest in this relationship between reality and storytelling accounts for her characteristic use of embedded tale, most explicitly in Possession and "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye," although turning up even in short stories such as "Crocodile Tears." Embedded narratives are the perfect site for the interaction of reality and art: the realist frame text highlights the constructedness of the embedded tale, while meaning is able to resonate continually and richly between story and frame narrative. Embedded stories signal themselves unavoidably as tale rather than mimesis, and highlight their own structured narrative voice through the existence of the narrator as a character in the frame narrative. It becomes easy to see why Byatt's fascination with folktale and fairy tale becomes partially subordinate to her writing of novels and novellas. Actual stand-alone fairy tales are rare in her literary output: most of her tales are called into service to develop thematic and structural aspects of longer texts. Even the tales in The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye (1994) include two of the embedded stories from Possession: in terms of individual fairy tales Byatt has produced only "The Story of the Eldest Princess" and

“Cold,” unless you wish to count her translation of Madame D’Aulnoy’s “The Great Green Worm” from the French.¹

If Byatt’s fairy tales are often embedded, the texts in which they are embedded themselves also tend towards explicit structure, invoking and exploring genre narratives such as romance in a way similar to some of Thurber’s non-fairy-tale writing. Towards the end of Possession Roland thinks through the problem that “Coherence and closure are deep human desires that are presently unfashionable. But they are always both frightening and enchantingly desirable” (422). Later, he muses that “the expectations of Romance control almost everyone in the Western world, for better or worse, at some point or another” (425). Coherence and closure are very much the characteristics of fairy tale and romance, but also have interesting implications for biography: even history offers a finite and coherent narrative of reality, defined by date and place, in the same way that biography defines reality by the life of one individual. In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, Byatt admits the “intense pleasure” with which she uses the definition offered by a romance or Shakespearean comedy plot: “I love those Victorian novels in which, when you come to the end, you’re told the whole history of every character... it makes me very happy” (in Wachtel, 1993: 88). Far more so than history or biography, romance offers one of the strongest examples of coherence, its patterns and symbols both recognisable and predictable. Byatt’s interest in romance is ongoing from her first novel, The Game (1967), which uses Arthurian and medieval elements to explore the relationship between the two sisters. Possession obviously offers her most overt use of romance; André Brink comments that “the peculiar shape [Possession] assumes is inspired by the way in which it inserts itself, as a Postmodernist novel, into a tradition of romance” (1998: 288). Parts of the Frederica series also play with romance in their references to Tolkien-style narrative (Babel Tower, 1996) and in some of the heterosexual relationships explored symbolically throughout the series². Romance, however, is not the only form in which Byatt explores coherence and closure: Babel Tower’s embedded narrative is pornographic, invoking a genre whose symbolic narrative I have earlier compared to fairy tale (see Chapter II). “Jael” and “Christ in the House of Martha and Mary” are also interesting in their use of the Bible as intertext: the realist

¹ I have not included “Dragon’s Breath” in this assessment, since by my definition it is not fairy tale at all; written as part of an anthology in commemoration of Sarajevo, it is more allegory than anything else.

² Byatt’s interest in romance forms is also expressed in her empathic and approving essay on the historical romances of Georgette Heyer, in which she argues for Heyer’s novels as “an honourable escape” which “provide[s] simple release from strain – the story with simple streamlined rules of conduct and a guaranteed happy ending” (1991: 258).

story is infused with the symbolic force of biblical narrative, itself a highly defined form offering familiar symbolic relationships and moral closure.

The danger of Byatt's intricate intertwining of reality with narrative, particularly with embedded tales, is that the embedded tales may come to have too immediate and obvious a relationship with the fictional reality to which they relate. Fairy tale, while a symbolic form, is not allegory, as I have suggested elsewhere (see Chapter I); too strict a reading of symbol as equivalence impoverishes the possibilities of the narrative. Recent criticism on *Possession* suggests there is a problem in too rigorous a reading of Christabel's fairy tales, for example, as allegorical representations of her relationship with Ash and Blanche. Flegel spends some time analysing "fairy tale references" associated with various characters (1998: 416ff), and Sanchez also works to establish allegorical elements in the tales [1995: 42ff]). This is a valid response to Byatt's complex use of intertext, but at the same time it risks losing the integrity of the tale itself in favour of focusing on what it "means". The point of a fairy tale is never to "stand for" anything but itself. To be fair, most of Byatt's critics offer complex readings of embedded tales, only at times approaching the dangerous ground that Byatt herself warns against in *Possession*: to read a tale only as Freudian analogy, historical event or feminist manifesto is false. Leonora exemplifies this when she realises that "LaMotte has always been cited as a lesbian-feminist poet. Which she was, but not exclusively, it appears" (485).

Byatt herself began a doctoral dissertation on religious allegory in seventeenth-century texts, but, interestingly, justifies the choice of "the allegory bit of it ... because I wanted to write novels, and was interested in narrative" (1991: 3). In her view allegory, like fairy tale, exemplifies the mechanics of narrative in particularly strong and obvious forms. Many of Byatt's tales have allegorical elements, most notably Matty's scientific parable in "Morpho Eugenia" and the war fable "Dragon's Breath," but to see them exclusively in terms of message is problematical. Richard Todd's insistence on the term "wonder tales" for Byatt's stories highlights precisely this issue, and he argues that "the true wonder tale must somehow manage to hover suspensefully between "message" and "thickening mystery" (1997: 43) – polarities which are defined in a discussion of Matty's fairy tale in "Morpho Eugenia." Todd's definition of Byatt's tales as "wonder tales" focuses on the relationship with meaning, where the essence of the fairy tale is the sense of wonder, and explanation or overt intention are unnecessary to the tale's function - if too much is explained, the power of the tale is lost. Byatt's own critical writing insists on this when she identifies fairy tale as a "form in which stories are not about *inner* psychological subtleties, and truths are not connected immediately to contemporary

circumstances” (2000: 124). This is partially problematical, because “Dragon’s Breath” and Matty’s tale *are* allegorical and their truths *are* connected directly to contemporary reality (Sarajevo and science, respectively). At the same time, however, the use of symbol in Matty’s tale, and the paradoxical uncertainty around the identity of the dragons, renders the effect of the tale complex beyond the simple allegorical relationship. This slippage towards allegory is perhaps another manifestation of the “problem of intelligence” which Todd identifies in Byatt (see above).

Byatt’s own dislike of strongly polemical or allegorical writing is seen in her attitude to feminism. While she undoubtedly has feminist purposes in much of her writing, these are much simpler to investigate than in the writing of someone like Carter: unlike Carter, Byatt explores her feminist interests through her narrative investigations, and subordinates political concerns to those of narrative. Todd defines her feminist impulse as one which “operates as *an augmentation of a total discourse*, rather than as a simplistic replacement of what has been traditionally privileged by what has been traditionally marginalised” (1994: 99). Byatt herself supports this: “I am much less happy about a great many resolute feminist rewritings of fairy tales, making wilful changes to plots and forms to show messages of female power (often written under the enthusiastic misapprehension that fairy tales in general show powerless females)” (2000: 143). Tales by and about women pervade Byatt’s stories; she explores not only feminine symbols such as Melusina, but the patterns of story which predetermine female roles. In Byatt’s terms, female empowerment is the result of narrative empowerment: narratives can equally entrap women into limited roles, warn them about such potential entrapments, or allow them to seize control of the narrative itself and write themselves into a position of control. I shall deal with the feminist aspects of Byatt’s tales in discussing narrative entrapment, below.

While structure and intertext are essential to Byatt’s use of fairy-tale forms, it is also interesting to note the affinities between her writing style and the stylistic tendencies of fairy-tale and folk forms. In the sparseness of Byatt’s own writing, its controlled lucidity and misleading simplicity, it is very close to the language of fairy tale itself. She shares with fairy-tale writing the quality pointed out by Max Luthi, “the beauty of the clear, the definite, the orderly - the beauty of precision” (1975: 40). Byatt writes:

By the time I wrote *Possession* ... I felt a need to *feel* and *analyse* less, to tell more flatly, which is sometimes more mysteriously. The real interest of this to a writer is partly in the intricacies of the choice of words from line to line. I found myself crossing out psychological descriptions, or invitations to the reader to enter the characters’ thought-processes. I found myself using stories within stories, rather than shape-shifting recurrent metaphors, to make the meanings. (2000: 131)

This is precisely how fairy tale works: its complexity and subtlety comes from the interaction of symbols and the expectations of narrative, rather than from psychological or emotional detail. Interestingly, Byatt manages to sustain this apparently flat effect in her writing despite her commitment, noted above, to realistic description. Her tales provide infinite depth of physical detail (the effects of the green sky in “Eldest Princess”, the crystal cave in “Cold”) without losing the effect of stripped-down texture which is integral to fairy tale.

Given the consistency of Byatt’s interests across the various texts I am interested in, it has proved more useful to structure this chapter thematically rather than by looking at the texts individually. In discussing issues of narrative, narrative entrapment, narrative embedding and the folkloric voice, I shall focus largely on the tales in The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye and Possession, in addition to the story “Cold” from the collection Elementals. While fairy-tale fragments occur in the Frederica series (The Virgin in the Garden [1978], Still Life [1985], Babel Tower [1993] and The Whistling Woman [2002]), these are minor and seem to function largely as metaphor; I will not address them here. Likewise, comparatively few of Byatt’s short stories employ fairy-tale elements. Tales in The Matisse Stories use painting rather than fairy tale as intertext, and stories in Sugar (1987) seem to have an almost biographical function. Elementals comes closest to folklore in its interest in the magical creatures of the title, and, in addition to “Cold,” several (notably “Crocodile Tears” and “A Lamia in the Cévennes”) have strong folkloric or embedded fairy-tale elements which I shall examine in passing.

¶ pattern I know: structurę and intertext

The awareness of fairy-tale structure is present in Byatt’s work in two main forms. More rarely, she undertakes direct intertextual retelling of actual folk or fairy tales such as the Fairy Melusina or Grimms’ “The Glass Coffin”, but mostly her tales are original variations on fairy-tale themes, and offer a sustained and investigative sense of the recurring patterns and expectations of classic fairy tales. Re-worked tales will characteristically be infused with awareness of a far broader range of texts: “The Threshold,” for example, invokes Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night, and “Gode’s Tale” contains echoes of Andersen in addition to a more generalised play with folkloric elements. This focus on known exemplae of pattern and structure is integral to Byatt’s self-consciousness as a writer: not only the writer and reader, but Byatt’s characters

themselves need to be wholly aware of the fact that they are “caught in a story”³ which is, above all, familiar. The Eldest Princess herself exemplifies both structure and realisation when she says “I am in a pattern I know, and I suspect I have no power to break it” (Djinn, 48).

“The Glass Coffin” is perhaps the best example of Byatt’s playful investigation of the potential in a postmodern reworking that is held up continually against the original from which it derives. The story is a reasonably faithful adaptation of the Grimm original, achieving individuality as much through insertions of new detail and the conceptual weighting created by Byatt’s language, as from the resonance of the tale with the frame narrative of Possession. The effect of reading Byatt’s “Glass Coffin” even as a stand-alone tale is one of increased richness in comparison to the original, a proliferation of narrative possibility despite the tale’s familiar shape. The tailor encounters not only the little man, but his animals, and his quest is guided, not by a mysterious voice, but by a careful delineation of the narrative potentials and the requirement for him to make a conscious choice. The presence of the dog, the cockerel and his wife, and the cat, goat and cow, invoke the familiar test of courtesy common in fairy tale, but they also invoke the beast-fable style of folklore, the odd assortment of domestic animals recalling, perhaps, “The Musicians of Bremen.” Thus, while Byatt’s version deviates structurally and in detail from the original, the new elements remain instantly recognisable. Another addition is the element of choice added to the narrative: arising from his successful negotiation of the test, the tailor is offered a choice between three items, a purse, a pot and a key. While each item is essentially simple and mundane, in the manner of fairy tales, it is also highly symbolic: each object encapsulates and recalls a familiar fairy-tale narrative in itself. The tailor reflects, “I know about such gifts ... it may be that the first is a purse which is never empty, and the second a pot which provides a wholesome meal whenever you demand it ... I have heard of such things...” (Djinn 6). In his choice of the third item, the glass key, he chooses a narrative which is less obviously defined, since “he did not have any idea about what it was or might do” (GC 7). The key is an interesting addition to the tale, providing a more direct sense of the narrative potential which needs to be unlocked by the tailor’s actions. In the original, the glass coffin needs no unlocking, but opens at the tailor’s touch. The emblem of the key perhaps signals, as much as anything else, the intellectual demands of Byatt’s reworked version, the layering of

³ This is the title of the anthology for which “The Story of the Eldest Princess” was written (see Acknowledgements to The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye, 1995: 280).

meaning which the reader must unlock⁴. At the same time, however Byatt's version may deviate in detail, the pattern of the Grimms' original defines the outcome of the tale: the tailor's attempt to resist the fairy-tale bride is self-consciously futile.

A similar density characterises Byatt's use of the Melusina legend in Possession. While this story is folkloric in its treatment within Possession (it is retold orally by Fergus in addition to its adaptation into Christabel LaMotte's poem), its actual literary intertexts are firmly signalled. Fergus's characteristic reference to Rabelais's Gargantua and Pantagruel (Possession 33) serves to configure and mock Melusina's monstrous tail as female appropriation of the Freudian emblem, a sausage as well as a snake. Similar Freudian intertexts are applied to folklore and fairy tale throughout Possession, complicating fairy tale's symbolic functioning by reference to a whole new system of symbol. Aside from Freud, the details of the tale in the novel seem to derive from the medieval French version of Jean D'Arras, with its mythology of the Lusignan ruling family. More strongly, however, Christabel LaMotte's name signals a different intertext, that of Friedrich de la Motte's nineteenth-century prose romance "Undine", another tale of a female water-creature betrayed by her husband. The lack of direct reference to Jean D'Arras in the novel suggests that the thematic concerns of LaMotte's "Undine" (jealousy, love betrayed) are more central to Byatt's purposes than the fairly straightforward fairy bride betrayal of the Melusina tale. While fragmentary in terms of actual narrative, the Melusina tale in Possession exemplifies the complex layering of Byatt's intertextuality and the importance of the tale's investigation as *tale*; its literary antecedents are central to the construction of meaning in the novel.

Recognisable patterns and shape, rather than narrative voice, thus define Byatt's sense of the fairy tale, a tendency seen even more strongly in "The Story of the Eldest Princess," which, while not actually retelling a known tale, works around the classic pattern of three siblings. Vladimir Propp has noted how the fairy tale adheres to rules of structural similarity: "the actors in the fairy tale perform essentially the same actions as the tale progresses, no matter how different from one another in shape, size, sex and occupation, in nomenclature and other static attributes... The functions of the actors are a constant:

⁴ The key is a fascinating symbol in itself. Another Grimm tale, "The Golden Key," is a strange fragment which peters out suggestively: the young lad who finds the key is abandoned by the tale before he has finished turning it in the lock. The tale concludes, "and now we must wait until he has quite unlocked it and opened the lid, and then we shall learn what wonderful things were lying in that box." George Macdonald's story of the same title similarly refuses to apportion definite meaning to the key itself, rather using it in a diffuse fashion to suggest the unlocking of understanding of the self. If Byatt's appropriation of the key as a symbol of narrative meaning is curiously indefinite, it is in good company.

everything else is a variable" (1971: 94). Thus, Byatt's *Eldest Princess* sets out to attempt the quest which will save her country, only to realise that she is doomed to failure. In fairy tales, the eldest two siblings always set out, only to be "turned to stone, or imprisoned in vaults, or cast into magic sleep, until rescued by the third royal person, who did everything well, restored the first and the second, and fulfilled the quest" (EP 47). In that moment of essentially postmodern realisation, the *Eldest Princess* becomes aware of her place in a narrative which imposes pattern and thus predictability on her actions. It is interesting to note the frequent recurrence of words such as "fate" and "destiny" in Byatt's tales, offering a sense not only of the magical predestinations of fairy tale, but of their power to illustrate the equally powerful predestinations of narrative itself.

In terms of Byatt's metafictional project, this awareness of pattern is central to the awareness of narrative as story, artefact, construction. Fairy tale offers a convention of narrative which is stripped down to an essence of representation - once upon a time, three princes, a magical horse, a princess in a tower, three wishes - and which thus exposes the artifice and constructedness of narrative. Gillian Perholt comments, of her paperweights, "I like the geometrically patterned flowers best ... More than the ones that aim at realism, at looking real..." (DNE 275). The conventions of fairy tale problematise their own relationship with reality as much by the artificialities of pattern and repetition as anything else. "The Glass Coffin" underlines this aspect of narrative continually in its recurring insistence on craftsmanship, the little tailor as "a fine craftsman" whose pie is "decorated... with beautifully formed pastry leaves and flowers, for he was a craftsman, even if he could not exercise his own craft" (*Djinn* 3-5). Likewise, his eventual choice of the glass key is because he is himself an artisan "and could see that it had taken masterly skill to blow all these delicate wards and barrels" (*Djinn* 7). Similar issues of artistry inform the glass sculptures of "Cold", which are very much akin to Gillian's paperweights.

Central to this structuredness of narrative shape is the notion of narrative closure, which twentieth-century readers have come to associate unavoidably with fairy tale, despite the more ambiguous shape of some folkloric narratives. Byatt's strong awareness of this relates once again to her sense of the two-way transformations of reality into narrative and narrative into reality. Roland's thoughts on closure as a "deep human desire," discussed above, reflects the human need to impose shape onto our experience of reality. Byatt comments, "I stumbled ... across the idea that stories and tales, unlike novels, were intimately to do with death... Whether we like it or not, our lives have beginnings,

middles and ends. We narrate ourselves to each other in bars and beds” (2000: 132). This tendency to experience reality as narratively shaped is, however, ambiguous, not least because of the postmodern context in which Byatt is writing. While admitting the existence of a “genuine narrative hunger” in readers, Byatt suggests that such an interest is only valid “as a technical experiment” (in Wachtel, 1993: 88). More importantly, as Jane L. Campbell notes, narrative structure and coherence gives rise to a problem of over-control: “[Byatt] is especially concerned with the life-denying consequences of attempting to control another’s life by becoming its author, and explores this subject in an early novel, *The Game*” (1997: 106). The omniscient narrator of realist fiction cannot be allowed to impose absolute structure on the tale, precisely because its author is interested in metafiction, and metafiction, in Waugh’s terms, relies on the instability of the text. Any novel has dialogic aspects, a “conflict of language and voices” which realistic fiction resolves “through their subordination to the dominant ‘voice’ of the omniscient, godlike author... Metafiction *displays and rejoices in* the impossibility of such a resolution” (Waugh, 1984: 6).

The effect of this in Byatt’s writing is a paradoxical awareness of fairy-tale structure and a tendency to examine and hence disrupt that structure, denying the authority of its narrator or narrators. Byatt’s narratives largely refuse fairy-tale closure, remaining open-ended. In “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye,” the djinn comments to Gillian that her tales are “strange, glancing things. They peter out, they have no shape” (*Djinn* 242). The delays and refusals of closure in “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” are thematically interesting, in that they serve to explore and reflect the issues which confront Gillian – old age, a decaying body, and ultimately, her own, inevitable death. As the narrative delays closure, so is Gillian’s death delayed indefinitely by the wish granted by the genie. Even “The Glass Coffin,” which faithfully reproduces the Grimm fairy-tale ending (marriage and happiness), tries to disrupt it with the tailor’s offer to allow the rescued princess her freedom (*Djinn* 21). The tailor’s failure to escape narrative predestination could perhaps be attributed to the tale’s place in *Possession*, as a tale told by Christabel LaMotte, and thus part of a Victorian realist narrative tradition which renders her capable of accepting closure more easily than her twentieth-century descendants. The more postmodern Eldest Princess, having resisted and rejected the narrative closure of her fairy-tale identity, arrives at the end of her story without achieving any closure at all. Instead, she finds a place where she can be both free and content, telling stories in the forest with the old woman and her creatures: it is “a good place to go to sleep, and stop telling stories until the morning, which will bring its own changes” (EP 72). Her youngest sister is left with a thread of narrative (another parallel

to George Macdonald's writing, here The Princess and the Goblin) which leads into an undefined – because untold - future. Likewise, Gillian Perholt, having released the djinn, continues uneventfully with her life, the tale ending with the djinn's return to see her, briefly, and with the possibility of future visits left ambiguously open-ended. Byatt thus tries to escape the closure and hence the intrinsic entrapment of narrative, in an essentially postmodern reinterpretation of the structure of fairy tale. This awareness of the potential for entrapment in the shape of narrative is integral to her writing, and provides one of its strongest recurring themes.

Glass, ice and narrative entrapment

Images of glass and ice pervade A.S. Byatt's fairy tales - Gillian Perholt's glass paperweights, the glass bottle in which the djinn is imprisoned, the glass key and box in her retelling of the Grimm Brothers' "The Glass Coffin," the ice of "Cold." The most sustained example of this is perhaps Gillian Perholt's glass paperweights in "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye":

Gillian collected glass paperweights: she liked glass in general, for its paradoxical nature, translucent as water, heavy as stone, invisible as air, solid as earth. Blown with human breath in a furnace of fire. As a child she had loved to read of glass balls containing castles and snowstorms, though in reality she had always found these disappointing and had transferred her magical attachment to the weights in which coloured forms and carpets of geometric flowers shone perpetually and could be made to expand and contract as the sphere of glass turned in her fingers in the light. (Djinn 182)

Glass and ice similarly illustrate an essential aspect of Byatt's narratives, which, like Gillian's paperweights, have a "paradoxical nature": like a glass bottle, they both enclose and reveal, they are simultaneously transparent and containing, invisible yet entrapping. Like the djinn's bottle or the glass paperweight, these substances appear to be solid, to hold meanings which seem to offer themselves transparently to our view; yet, like Gillian's paperweight, they shift and change as they are tilted, to offer multiplicity of meaning within their apparently simple stasis. Both ice and glass are thus images of art itself, of artefact and the creation of artefacts. In her essay on "Ice, Snow, Glass" Byatt notes that ice and glass stories all "have images of art. The queen in Snow White is entranced by a black frame round a window... Snow White ... becomes an object of aesthetic perception, framed in her glass coffin" (2000: 156). Later, she comments on her own enjoyment of the Grimms' tale "The Glass Coffin": "A fabricated world in a glass case gives a delight an ordinary castle doesn't" (2000: 157). Glass and ice are often structured in her works: geometrically patterned paperweights, or the snowflakes and the plethora of shaped glass creations of "Snow." As in "The Glass Coffin," the

glassworks of “Snow” often enclose miniature realities – the glass castle, the glass beehive full of bees (*Elementals*, 141-144). In this enclosure or entrapment glass and ice operate not only like art itself, but like narrative. Meaning is thus captured in stasis within the work of art – another aspect of fairy tale’s particularly transparent structure which perhaps accounts for Byatt’s tendency towards allegory, and for her ongoing awareness of entrapment within allegory, or narrative, or art itself.

The glass metaphor continues to be appropriate to the sense in which meaning shifts, is opaque, even in something as transparent as a fairy tale, but is ultimately subordinate to form, to the nature of the tale itself as tale rather than embedded message. The fairy tale is a form of narrative which is complete in itself, independent of message, and in which message is always subordinate to form. The glass key in “The Glass Coffin” operates as a powerful metaphorical motif in this context. In the paradoxical manner of glass, the meaning that the key offers is both obvious and hidden: while transparent, it also contains nothing, so that its clearly-offered meaning is actually invisible. Like fairy tale itself, the key is transparent, apparently empty, its meaning contained entirely in its shape rather than its content. Both pot and purse are, like bottles and paperweights, containers; the key is just a key, an object that presupposes a container to be unlocked, but which will unlock rather than contain, and offers release rather than enclosure. Like a glass paperweight, the tale’s function is simply to exist as an artefact, a construct which is complete and legitimate in and of itself. As in Gillian’s description of glass, the fairy tale “... is not possible, it is only a solid metaphor, a medium for seeing and a thing seen at once. It is what art is...” (274).

It is easy to see how Byatt finds fairy tale a particularly powerful medium for exploration in this context, since, as Zipes comments, fairy-tale form and content are effectively the same thing - form is meaning, meaning is integral to structure: “it is through the structure or composition of the tale that we can gain an understanding of its meaning or enunciation, what it is trying to communicate” (1983: 5). Here, of course, the expectations and ritualised repetitions of the fairy-tale form itself are central.

Recognisable and recurring patterns entrap the protagonists of the tale into making choices which are dictated by the conventions of the tale itself. Certainly many of the tales in *Possession* repeat the entrapment images: the choice made by the Childe in “The Threshold”, for example, when the protagonist, faced with the choice between gold, silver and lead, knows that the correct choice is always lead, despite his personal preferences - or, indeed, the preferences of the writer. Likewise, the tailor in “The Glass Coffin” is entrapped by the narrative which comes into play at the moment of his choice

of the glass key, which leads him into an adventure described and thus predestined by the little grey man. It is easy to account for Byatt's interest in this particular tale, which repeats many of the elements of the original story in the Brothers Grimm. The young woman in her glass coffin, and the miniature castle under its glass dome, contain and enclose not only the woman and the place, but the narratives which explain them, and which are released when the glass is broken and the woman tells her story.

Within the narrative of "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye", the predicament of the djinn himself illustrates most powerfully this process of entrapment. Imprisoned in his bottle by the actions of a jealous King Solomon, the djinn is doomed to allow three wishes to any person who releases him. The whole mechanism of the Arabian Nights tales thus sets up the expectation of the djinn as servant to the bottle, as obliged to grant the wishes of the bottle's owner, thus neatly conflating elements of "The Fisherman and the Jinni" with the lamp-genie of "Aladdin". At the same time, since the djinn reveals his history in the form of narratives told to Gillian Perholt, the effect is that of the djinn imprisoned in his own narratives, in the history he relates. These narratives are constructed in the manner of fairy tales: each story is framed by the opening of the bottle, and the exhausting of the three wishes, and thus achieves a ritualised and repetitive effect. Gillian's encounter with the djinn invokes the series of narratives which each entrap him neatly in the fate of his bottle curse, and which appear to predestine him to another cycle of release, three wishes, and return to imprisonment. However, it is also this process of tale-telling which finally frees him, in that his stories both reveal and endear him to Gillian, and, in revealing his imprisonment, lead her to desire his freedom. Gillian's own comment on this is interesting: "The emotion we feel in fairy tales in which the characters are granted their wishes is a strange one. We feel the possible leap of freedom – I can have what I want – and the perverse certainty that this will change nothing; that Fate is fixed" (*Djinn* 259). This brings us, then, to the opposite aspect of narrative in Byatt's work: paradoxically, like the glass of a paperweight, narrative both encloses and empowers, its patterns entrap at the same time as they offer the potential for release. Above all, narrative empowers when careful choice is employed: while containing, enclosing and defining through its inherent structure and nature, it also offers, through that structure and nature, the potential for release, freedom and choice. Perhaps this is one of the issues articulated by Byatt's tale "Cold," which remains consistently aware of the paradox at the heart of glass – cold and transparent, like ice, but created by fire.

Again, we are brought to the essential paradoxes of narrative, the need for tale-telling to enclose and define at the same time that it must, in Byatt's view, liberate and empower.

But the paradox is really several paradoxes - narrative entraps and frees, but narrative is also paradoxical in its search for meaning, the way in which it relates to reality - like glass, it must both mirror and reveal, it is at once reflective and transparent. One of Gillian's papers in "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye" refers to the manner of tale-telling in Turkey, where stories are introduced "perhaps it happened, perhaps it didn't, and have paradox as their inception" (259). Meaning and reality, like the protagonists in the tales themselves, are both enclosed and released through the structure of narrative. Ultimately, power lies in the act of telling tales, of taking control of the narrative. Gillian shies away from telling her own story, the story of her life thus far, to the djinn, refusing to enshrine in narrative the disempowerment she suffered while married to her faithless husband. The stories of her own life which she does tell him - her experience at a friend's wedding, for example - directly motivate and inform her subsequent use of her wishes. Similarly, it is the Djinn's tales of entrapment, together with his story of the diminishing wishing-ape, which motivate Gillian to release him. Narrative thus, above all, empowers choice.

One of the main mechanisms by which narrative empowers is that of recognition. Byatt's *Eldest Princess* recognises the fact that she is caught in a story because "she was by nature a reader, not a travelling princess... she had read a great many stories in her spare time, including several stories about princes and princesses who set out on Quests" (47). It is this familiarity which enables her to identify the pattern in which she is participating - as Propp's definition suggests, her identity as the eldest, rather than the youngest princess, predetermines her function in the story. Similarly, Gillian Perholt's narratologist background allows her to use her three wishes intelligently: she immediately identifies the aspect of pattern and structure to the wishes ("Are there limits to what I may wish for?" [195]) and her reactions are circumscribed by her knowledge of the Grimms' fairy tale about three wishes, in which the old man ends up wasting his wishes in attaching a sausage to his wife's nose. This essentially cautionary tale motivates her careful exactitude and forethought in choosing her wishes - "I have three wishes... I do not want to expend one of them on the possession of a tennis-player" (197).

At the same time, the numerous sub-narratives embedded in the framing tale offer their own form of caution which is strongly linked to Byatt's feminist awareness. Narrative empowers, she seems to suggest, but it particularly empowers women. I have noted, above, Marina Warner's comments on the origins of fairy tale itself as a form of women's narrative, the tradition of the "old wives' tale" presupposing a female storyteller (1994: 14). Thus the tales told in critical papers - Gillian on Chaucer's "Patient

Griselda”, Orhan on the Arabian Nights - offer versions of women’s disempowerment or empowerment through their varying degrees of ownership and manipulation of the tale. As Gillian comments, the unease of Patient Griselda’s tale lies in the part played by her husband - “The story is terrible because Walter has assumed too many positions in the narration; he is hero, villain, destiny, God and narrator” (120). The frame tale for the whole Arabian Nights deals with misogyny, the belief in women’s essentially carnal nature, which leads to the need for Scheherazade to preserve her own life through the manipulation of narrative. These tales link unavoidably with Gillian’s own life as a divorced woman whose husband has left her for a younger woman, and whose ability to identify that loss with release and empowerment stands in sharp contrast to the powerless Patient Griselda. She can also be linked with Scheherazade’s ability to free herself from male domination through tale-telling - much of Gillian’s freedom and self-reliance is centred on her identity as a successful and independent critic, a narratologist and teller of tales. This mirrors Byatt’s own identity and purposes as a writer, providing a meta-level to the notion of control of narrative and its importance for women. However, this is simply the most obvious level on which Byatt’s investigation of narrative, particularly fairy-tale narrative, operates in the service of a gendered awareness of power.

Glass, i.e.g. intellectualism and passion

Christien Franken’s critical volume on Byatt makes some interesting claims for Byatt’s problematical status as a feminist writer, noting her ambivalence towards the popular post-structuralist tools of modern feminist criticism (2001: 4). Franken’s tone is disapproving, as she cites Byatt’s influence by Leavisite criticism and artistic notions of quality in writing: “As a consequence of her identification of female identity with limitation, the critic A. S. Byatt is unable to understand why young feminist writers and feminist literary theorists would want to hold on to the concept” (Franken, 2001: 29). The satirically-drawn figure of Leonora Stern in Possession exemplifies the problem Byatt has with exclusivist feminist viewpoints: “The truth is I can’t bear Leonora’s style because she reduces everything to sex and gender as though there is nothing else in the world” (in Franken, 2001: 90). The problem for Byatt in the eyes of modern feminism, however, is not that she lacks a feminist sense of literature: it is that her sense of feminism is entirely subordinate to her sense of literature as art. She finds herself “returning to Virginia Woolf’s elegant dictum ‘it is fatal for anyone who writes to think about their sex’ ... I think myself, if you’re interested in art rather than propaganda, this is a crucial

thing to remember” (in Franken, 2001: 29)⁵. Byatt’s use of fairy-tale narrative, in particular, is thus largely free of the particular kinds of radical sexual and gender exploration common to writers such as Angela Carter, or even Tanith Lee. However, I think Franken’s tone of slightly pained reproach at Byatt’s lack of wholesale feminist commitment in the popular mould, badly undervalues the depth and complexity of female identity, and particularly the identity of the female *artist*, in Byatt’s writing.

While images of ice and glass illumine Byatt’s interest in narrative entrapment and empowerment, there is a sense in which they are also symbolic in a particularly gendered sense, one highlighted by Byatt herself in her essay “Ice, Snow, Glass” (2000). Here, she discusses her sense of “... the conflict between a female destiny, the kiss, the marriage, the child-bearing, the death, and the frightening loneliness of cleverness, the cold distance of seeing the world through art, of putting a frame round things” (2001: 156). Ice and glass become a metaphor both for art itself, “putting a frame round things,” and for intellectual distance. Both of these are held up in contrast to the demands on women made by marriage and child-bearing, and to the warmer, more emotional qualities of sexuality itself. Byatt addresses this in an interview with Nicholas Tredell, in which she articulates the desire to be “both at once, a passionate woman and a passionate intellectual” (in Franken, 2001: 28). Franken later refers to Byatt’s “use of the word ‘lamination’ to explain her desire to keep these layers of identity – the passionate woman and the intellectual – apart” (in Franken, 2001: 28). Intellectualism and sexuality are thus, to Byatt, separate rather than integrated, in sharp contrast to the Leonora Stern school of sex-in-everything; they thus translate rather well to the symbolic and metafictional exploration in which Byatt engages.

The symbolic potential in ice or glass is exemplified most strongly in the story “Cold,” which uses warmth and cold to polarise male and female in a way curiously similar to the light/dark imagery of George Macdonald’s story “The Day Boy and the Night Girl”. Where Macdonald’s Victorian sensibilities lead to a simplistic rendering of sexual difference, however, Byatt’s apparently obvious allegory is complex and, ultimately, both paradoxical and compromising. In “Cold,” cold and heat (ice and desert) are contrasted to illustrate female coolness and intellectualism threatened by the male through emotional warmth and sexual love. Fiammarosa, the icewoman princess, is both an artist and an intellectual in her cold solitude – “She studied snow-crystals and ice formations

⁵ Christien Franken has evidently had access to a vast range of Byatt articles and interviews which have been unavailable to me; I have hence raided her essay rather wholesale.

under a magnifying glass” and “produced shimmering, intricate tapestries that were much more than ‘good enough’” (*Elementals* 134). In love with her desert prince, she loses something of that hard, self-contained identity, becoming aware that “Inside her a little melted pool of water slopped and swayed where she had been solid and shining” (157). At the same time, however, the point of intersection between herself and Prince Sasan is glass, which brings together the hard, transparent beauty of ice, but also the sand and heat of Sasan’s desert kingdom. Fiammarosa’s icewoman nature is likewise two-edged, and Byatt resists the over-simplified equation of physical cold with sexual coolness: Fiammarosa’s experience of cold is intensely sexual. “All along her body, in her knees, her thighs, her small, round belly, her pointed breasts... she felt an intense version of that paradoxical burn... Snow pricked and hummed and brought her, intensely, to life” (126). Her feelings are strong enough that she chooses to marry Sasan and live in his desert kingdom although the climate threatens her with dissolution and death. Byatt thus seems to be making a fairly straightforward feminist point about the subordination of women to marriage, and the loss of female identity created by the overwhelming feelings of sexual love. It is, after all, Fiammarosa who makes the sacrifices, in keeping with her own cynical realisation that princesses are “gifts and rewards, handed over by their loving fathers... princesses are commodities” (135). The symbolic poles of the tale are in this sense similar to more obviously feminist rewrites such as those of Angela Carter, although infused with Byatt’s own intellectualism, her feeling that there is “something secretly good, illicitly desirable, about ice-hills and glass barriers... something which was lost with human love, with the descent to be kissed and given away” (2001: 155).

“Cold” is rescued from feminist allegory by its complexity and compromise, the fact that what saves this apparently doomed union is, in fact, art. If glass and ice are akin in texture despite their very opposed origins in heat and cold, they are also alike in that Byatt associates both mediums throughout with artistry, creativity and artefact. Ice is the stuff of snowflakes and Fiammarosa’s geometric tapestries; glass enables Sasan to create marvellous images and the incredible glass caverns which eventually provide Fiammarosa with a home in which she can survive. Art thus not only bonds the polar oppositions of gender, but, more importantly, creates the medium in which sexual love can exist and be expressed. As with any Byatt work, this functions at yet another level of meaning: the love story is made possible not only by art/glass, but through and within the artistic creation of narrative itself, particularly the highly structured and patterned narrative of fairy tale. Recurring elements of patterning and structure relate back to fairy tale, its structure of repetition and expectation paralleled in the geometric precision of

the snowflake or the lovingly-crafted fantastic worlds of Sasan's glass sculptures. In a sense, Fiammarosa and Sasan exist only because of story itself, because fairy-tale narrative supposes the existence of princes and princesses, and provides such strong symbols in which to encapsulate and enshrine their lives. Ultimately, this is yet another manifestation of Byatt's interest in romance, the structured and self-consciously unrealistic narrative which insists on the artefact of the happy heterosexual resolution. However, both romance and feminist exploration are transcended, characteristically for Byatt, by the affirmation of fairy tale as metafiction, the validity of art itself.

The woman as artist becomes a recurring figure in these symbolic representations of sexual difference, and is seen again, very strongly, in the Melusina figure of Possession. Here, the recurring glass/ice images of Byatt's writing are figured slightly differently, in the related images of water – the watery Melusina herself, but also her fountain in LaMotte's poem, the physical watery landscapes of Yorkshire, and, rather more mundanely, bathrooms. Bathrooms seem to recur in Byatt's fiction generally – not only the numerous and idiosyncratic spaces of Possession, but as the site of epiphany in The Shadow of the Sun, or a moment of enjoyment for Gillian in "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye."⁶ Bathrooms are watery places, and water has similar properties to glass – both are marvellous and ambiguous liquids, reflective, transparent, malleable. Bathrooms are also places of shining tile, mirrors, semi-transparent shower curtains and panes of glass, not to mention extremes of hot and cold. In Possession bathrooms not only re-figure the discovery scene of the Melusine story (in the perfect folkloric moment of Roland caught peering through the keyhole at Maud in her dragon dressing-gown), but literally reflect the personalities of their owners. In Maud's bathroom, "a chill green glass place" with "glass tiles into whose brief and illusory depths one might peer, a shimmering shower curtain like a glass waterfall" (Possession 56), one finds not only a marvellous, fairy-tale realm, but the perfect symbolic expression of Byatt's desire for cool, clean intellectual dispassion⁷. This withdrawn privacy is integral to Byatt's sense of the female artist figure, and the folkloric Melusina is constructed in precisely these terms, as a builder of castles and cities. Franken argues for LaMotte's obvious fascination with

⁶ A rather tongue-in-cheek, but nonetheless entertaining and literate account of bathrooms in Possession is given by Patrick Wynn in an article written for the Tolkien fan journal Butterbur's Woodshed, which identifies Melusina as "a Bathroom Myth, pure and simple ... this story is just another example of that age-old question posed by every man who has ever been forced to pace for hours outside a locked bathroom door, namely 'What the hell is she doing in there?!'" (1996).

⁷ In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, she identifies this desire (also articulated by the academics in Possession) for "being able to be alone in a white room, with a white bed, and just think things out" (Wachtel, 1993: 86). The same impulse is seen in "The Threshold", where the cool, watery silver lady offers "a closed casement in a high turret, and a private curtained bed where he would be most himself" (Possession 154). As well as being watery and glassy, bathrooms are intensely *private* spaces.

“a concept of autonomy and creativity and a relationship between the two. The fact that Melusina owns her own space on Saturdays in which she is left alone and the fact that she creates madly and is applauded for it is attractive to LaMotte” (2001: 100). The perverse feminine is thus marginalised in favour of a redefinition of the folkloric motif in essentially artistic terms: Melusina is not only a “tragic portrait of motherhood,” echoing LaMotte’s own experience (Franken, 2001: 97), but a threatened artist, as LaMotte is, and as Byatt, presumably, fears to be herself. Images of water are thus integral to art, but the stereotyped feminist interpretation of water as feminine, sexual and generative, as in Leonora’s analysis of “hidden holes and openings through which life-giving waters bubble and enter reciprocally” (244), are invoked only to be undercut by the novel’s gentle ridicule of Leonora. Byatt’s actual interest in water is not in its sexually creative symbolism, but in its relationship to glass and its more abstract ability to mirror and reflect the demands of art.

Ultimately, the strongest intersection of the woman as artist with the motif of glass comes with the invocation of yet another folkloric, or perhaps romance, pattern, that of the Lady of Shalott. Byatt’s writing continually betrays, both explicitly and implicitly, her affection for the Victorian romances of Tennyson and pre-Raphaelite art, which provide familiar patterns of narrative in a way very similar to fairy tale itself. The cracked mirror of the Lady is yet another incarnation of the glass surface, expressing most strongly the betrayal of female artistry at the heart of LaMotte’s story, the perfect, creative solitude destroyed violently by the intrusion of a male figure and sexual passion. Byatt writes:

The Lady has things in common with the frozen death-in-life states of Snow White and of the lady and her castle in the glass coffins. She is enclosed in her tower, and sees the world not even through the window, but in a mirror, which reflects the outside life, which she, the artist, then weaves into ‘a magic web with colours gay’... Preserving solitude and distance, staying cold and frozen, may, for women as well as artists, be a way of preserving life.” (2000: 157-58)

In some ways the complexity of glass and water in Byatt’s work attempts to redeem and re-think the too-perfect structures of the Lady’s doom, to refigure the relationship between men, women and art in more ambiguous terms that allow the possibility of freedom rather than insisting on the certainty of destruction.

Gems in bottles, jewels in toad's heads: narrative embedding⁸

Perhaps one of the most notable aspects of Byatt's exploration of fairy tale is her tendency to embed her fairy tales in longer, often realist narratives. This is significantly different from the practice of most other contemporary fairy tale writers, who, like Angela Carter, tend to publish collections of stand-alone tales, as Byatt herself does in The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye. Even that, however, is misleading in Byatt's case, since two of the five tales in the volume were previously embedded in Possession, and "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye," the longest tale in the collection, itself makes sustained use of embedded narrative. It is as though Byatt's hyper-awareness of the constructed nature of fairy-tale narrative, and hence of its intrinsic need for a narrator, cannot conceive of such narratives as separate from the frame which gives the narrator concrete identity. Even "The Story of the Eldest Princess," which, with "Cold", is Byatt's closest approach to the stand-alone fairy-tale narrative, embeds multiple mini-narratives within its relatively simple fairy-tale frame, as does "The Glass Coffin," providing another reason for Byatt's interest in this particular tale from Grimm. Embedding, of course, is about fictionality; it is central to Byatt's metafictional project. Italo Calvino's essay on "Levels of Reality in Literature" discusses the extent to which *any* form of literature embeds levels of narrative within the text, using the Decameron and the Arabian Nights as examples of explicit embedding. Either way, his conclusion is that "literature does not recognise Reality as such, but only *levels*. Whether there is such a thing as Reality, of which the various levels are only partial aspects, or whether there are only the levels, is something that literature cannot decide. Literature recognizes *the reality of the levels*" (1987: 120-121). Embedded texts problematise reality and thus signal fiction as metafiction, reality as constructed artefact.

The embedding process works to emphasise Byatt's notions of reality and narrative, creating in effect two levels of operation in which the artificial (the marvellous, patterned and familiar form of the fairy tale) highlights the "real" of the frame narrative. This is similar to the effect Calvino notes in Boccaccio's Decameron: "between the tales and the framework there is a clean stylistic split that highlights the distance between the two planes" (1987: 117). In Byatt's work, the effect is particularly obvious in the novel form of Possession, which contrasts the omniscient narrator's modern account of Roland and Maud with the very distinctive voice and texture of LaMotte's fairy tales, both entire

⁸ I am grateful to Colette Gordon for introducing me to Calvino, Bal and theories of narrative embedding during my supervision of her Honours dissertation on the Arabian Nights.

and fragmentary, included within the narrative. A similar, but more complex effect can be seen in the detailed contemporary setting of "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye," which is textured largely as realist novella despite the obvious fairy-tale nature of its djinn and three wishes. A fascinating process of overlap occurs, however: the frame tale in both these texts slides continually between marvellous and realist, as slippage from the embedded tales infects the frame narrative. The mock-fantastic opening of "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye" characterises our own time as one when "men and women hurtled through the air on metal wings... when pearly-fleshed and jewelled apparitions of Texan herdsmen and houris shimmered in the dusk on Nicaraguan hillsides" (*Djinn* 95); this renders the mundane vividly magical while simultaneously denying the possibility of the marvellous. The playful anti-realism alerts the reader to the forthcoming embedded tales as well as to the frame narrative's ultimately fairy-tale shape.

In its detail and complexity, the frame narrative's account of Gillian's life lacks the recognisable sparseness of fairy-tale texture: its psychological insights and meticulously-described mundane settings at least partially contradict the narrative's fantastic structure. The familiar fairy-tale texture which would legitimate the marvellous and which is obviously lacking in the frame narrative, is restored in the tales Gillian and her colleagues explore in critical re-tellings, and in the oral tales told by the Djinn. In *Possession*, slippage from the embedded tales affects Roland and Maud, whose life begins to resemble the romances of LaMotte in its sexual inevitability and in the lost-descendant revelations which conclude the novel. The interactions of frame narrative with embedded tale act to elide and overwrite the contrast in textures: resonating structures simply highlight the fact that the frame tale is fairy tale as much as the embedded narratives. The realist illusion of the frame narrative is thus disrupted in true metafictional fashion, once again highlighting constructedness, artifice and the fiction of realism. Embedding, and the resulting contrast and slippage between fairy tale and realist frame, permits Byatt to explicitly brandish the self-conscious artifice of the tale in a way which a stand-alone tale can do only implicitly.

The same self-consciousness is true even when the frame tale is far from realist, an effect seen most strongly in "The Story of the Eldest Princess" and "The Glass Coffin", which effectively offer fairy tales embedded in fairy tales. In "Princess", the fairy-tale frame is host to a series of oral, folk-style narratives (the stories of the Scorpion, the Toad and the Cockroach) which both invoke popular folk beliefs and provide cautionary exempla to the Princess. It also includes brief fairy tales which are embedded as literary fragments rather than represented orally, as the old woman tells the Princess the tales of her two

sisters. "Princess" is particularly effective in that its embedded narratives are the only site of closure in the tale, whose open-ended conclusion proposes to continue indefinitely with the process of embedding stories in the frame. The old woman actually claims the process of embedding as liberation from the need for the frame tale itself to accede to the demands of story:

... we collect stories and spin stories and mend what we can and investigate what we can't, and live quietly without striving to change the world. We have no story of our own here, we are free, as old women are free, who don't have to worry about princes or kingdoms, but dance alone and take an interest in the creatures. (Djinn 66).

Embedding, then, allows the ultimate demonstration of narrative power, which rests, not in the tales themselves, but in those who tell them and are thus free of them and in control. Similarly, "The Glass Coffin" conflates embedding with issues of power: the old man's narration of what the tailor will experience functions as an embedded narrative with strong predictive power, since things simply *will* happen as the old man describes. The lady's embedded story works in the opposite direction, to give the history of her entrapment: paradoxically, the telling of the narrative both re-creates that entrapment and signals her freedom from it. The embedded tales play continually with the flow of time in the story, allowing jumps forward and back in a way very different to the usual placid flow of fairy tale. However, through this process Byatt is able to re-affirm the identity of the tale as a whole, created object which can be accessed at any point without disrupting its integrity.

Whether fairy tale within fairy tale, or fairy tale within realist frame, perhaps the most important result of the recurring presence of embedded narratives in Byatt's work is the way in which they continually encourage the reader to draw parallels between the frame tale and the embedded narratives. Mieke Bal points out the extent to which the embedding of obviously discrete texts in a frame text allows texts to partake of the characteristics both of discrete and subordinate discourses – a kind of literary having your cake and eating it, too. The result of this is increased signification:

An embedded unit is by definition subordinate to the unit which embeds it; but it can acquire relative independence. This is the case when it can be defined as a specimen of a more or less well-delimited genre. It then has more or less complete signification. This is enriched, set off, even radically transformed by its relation with the embedding unit, but it has absolutely no need of it to be coherent. (Bal, 1981: 48)

In remaining separate yet related, embedded texts endow meaning and signification with added depth and complexity; fairy tale is perhaps the most extreme example of Bal's "well-delimited" genre, and hence contributes particularly strong forms of signification to the frame narrative. This, more than textural contrast, is perhaps the greatest

implication for Byatt's practice of embedding. Byatt herself writes, "I have myself become increasingly interested in quickness and lightness of narrative – in small discrete stories rather than pervasive and metamorphic metaphors as a way of thinking out a text" (2000: 130).

Embedded tales are able to function as warning, and thus empowerment to potentially entrapped characters, because they are simultaneously independent of and involved with the frame narrative; they retain their shape even while their events resonate across to the frame narrative. In "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye", the folkloric and fairy-tale traditions invoked are largely those of the East rather than the Western tradition from which Byatt most often draws. The Djinn's tale-swapping with Gillian, and particularly his status as an entrapped individual within the bottle curse, identifies him as well as Gillian with the figure of Scheherazade, the strategic tale-teller from the frame narrative of The Arabian Nights. In the tradition of Scheherazade, the tales told gain additional importance and urgency because of their implications for the frame narrative. At the most obvious level, Scheherazade will survive another night, the Djinn may persuade his owner to free him. In addition, however, "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye" parallels the way in which the actual *content* of the Arabian Nights tales tends to invoke and revisit the theme of the frame narrative – feminine infidelity, the justice of Sultans, the survival of fairy-tale protagonists against all odds. At one point the Djinn tells Gillian, "in harems the study of apparently uneventful personal histories is a matter of extreme personal importance" (206), thus firmly placing the tale within a tradition of tales whose telling is strategic rather than simply pleasurable. Other peoples' tales are important because the patterns of narrative they offer function as warnings, and thus potentially as empowerment, to the characters of the frame narrative; they are also expressions of power on the part of the teller. The tales of Patient Griselda and the wishing-monkey, as well as the Djinn's stories of harem life, codify and display the knowledge Gillian needs to make sense of her wishes.

At times this causes Byatt's use of fairy tale form to approach the moral pointedness of the fable. A striking example occurs in "Crocodile Tears" from the Elementals collection, where the story of the Companion, a classic fairy tale of the magical helper to the fairy-tale hero, provides an emotional warning to the tale's protagonist. This, again, is in the image of ice, but here ice and death, the undesirable extreme of the process of withdrawal from the world which Byatt sees as necessary to the artist. Resonating with the frame tale, the story of the Companion allows Patricia, the protagonist, to re-evaluate death as both closure and obligation, and to re-enter the world she has left. Its

presentation, orally re-told in a partially fragmentary fashion, allows focus on those elements of the tale which are most appropriate to the frame narrative, while nonetheless retaining a sense of the tale's overall structure and coherence.

In terms of the functioning of the fairy tales themselves, their embedding in various texts naturally changes their meaning and implication; it is no longer possible to sink into the comforting mimesis of narrative, the illusionary world created by the tale's omniscient narrator. Instead, the reader is forced to confront the tale's structured status, and to acknowledge the reciprocal influences of frame narrative and embedded artefact. Richard Todd points out that "The Glass Coffin" and "Gode's Story" are absolutely transformed by their existence within the narrative matrix of Possession, even though the wording of the tales may be identical outside that context in The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye" (1997: 43). The resonance of LaMotte's "The Glass Coffin" and the oral Breton narrative of "Gode's Tale" with the life of LaMotte herself, adds new layers of meaning to the apparently bland surface of the tales' incarnation in The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye. "The Glass Coffin" becomes, in addition to its emphasis on art and entrapment, a parable for the happy, sequestered co-existence of Christabel and Blanche, disrupted by the "black artist" (Possession 66) who stands for Ash. The tale's gender distributions are interesting: the apparently sexless sibling relationship of the lady and her brother both recaptures the intensity of Christabel's life with Blanche, and hints at a transgressively sexual partnership in the re-gendering of one of them, presumably standing for Blanche against Christabel's lady-behind-glass. At the same time, the tale could be re-read with Blanche as "black artist" (she is a painter), attempting to deny Christabel the happy heterosexual union offered by the tailor (Ash). The tale is hence rescued from parable or allegory by the wide possibilities offered by its symbols in play with the frame narrative, so that the reader must engage in continual re-interpretation as both tale and novel unfold.

"Gode's Tale" is an even stronger example of this process: my experiences teaching The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye at third-year level suggest that the story is, in fact, almost completely opaque when extracted from the frame of Possession. Students were unable to account for the "little dancing feet" of the story, or the moment of "an owl cry, or a cat miawl" in the barn, and "blood on the straw" (Djinn 31), until learning of the frame circumstances of Christabel's illicit pregnancy and the ambiguity around the possible death of her child. Alone, "Gode's Tale" provides a particularly folkloric and emotionally compelling ghost story which operates with a great deal of the "thickening mystery" attributed to Matty's tale (discussed above). Within the frame of Possession it contributes

materially to the unravelling of Christabel's story, providing slanting references to pregnancy and transgression which resonate particularly strongly with the later significance of the séance in the Victorian narrative.

Another consequence of Byatt's use of frame narrative is seen in her ability to embed what are no more than fairy-tale fragments in the wider narrative. This results in a process almost of invocation rather than reproduction: it is unnecessary to complete the partial tale since we know the shape and can extrapolate the whole structure from the suggestive fragments. In this process, the fragmentary tales are ultimately given coherence and completion through their resonance with frame events. This is seen strikingly in "The Threshold", which forms the threshold of Possession itself, signalling the moment of revelation and choice of future path experienced by Roland and Maud as well as the Childe within the tale. The three ladies, gold, silver and dark, need no explanation: they exemplify fairy-tale choice in familiar, classic symbols whose outcome, as Byatt notes, is inevitable: "he must always choose this last, and the leaden casket, for wisdom in all tales tells us this, and the last sister is always the true choice" (Possession 155). At the same time, however, the embedding of the fragment in the frame tale of Possession means that the tale only becomes fully meaningful when we realise its implications for the choice made by Christabel LaMotte. In choosing the dark lady, LaMotte has rejected sexual passion (gold and sunlight) and artistic seclusion (silver, associated with cool and water, and hence intellect in Byatt's system); what she is left with is neither, but a kind of abdication, the "Herb of Rest" (154). Other fragments of Tales for Innocents are equally recognisable tale openings (51-52), but their meaning is only decodable with reference to LaMotte and other frame characters; they variously signal artistic longing (the queen who desires the silent bird) or rejection of Victorian domesticity (the clumsy third daughter). Perhaps the most extreme example of this fragmented embedding is in the frequent references to Christabel as a princess in a tower; together with images of Maud's long blonde hair, these fragmentary evocations implicitly construct an embedded Rapunzel tale despite the fact that such a tale is never actually re-told.

Fragments of fairy tale in Possession share with retold tales in "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye" a meaning peculiar to the frame tale's circumstances: such fragments are rendered meaningful not only in their resonance with events of the frame, but through their analysis by characters in the frame tale. Thus the feminist import of Gillian and Orhan's various stories is deconstructed for us by the academic characters of the frame narrative, rounding out the fragmentary nature of their retelling. The effect is

one of increased richness of texture while the flow of the frame narrative is only momentarily disrupted, rather than the full switching of reading mode required by a fully recounted tale. Once again, the range of effects possible in the use of fairy-tale forms is materially increased by the fact of their embedding, and Byatt's considerable sophistication and layering is both enabled and emphasised.

Byatt's focus in general is literary in the extreme, referring continually to books and the process of writing. However, her use of embedding, in particular, provides a logical and fruitful site for play with the oral voice; as I have noted above, embedded oral narratives have the potential to embody the narrator in the frame narrative. While this is obviously an artificial emulation of the oral tale, the frame tale's apparent mimesis enables the illusion of spoken tale rather than the literary, written re-telling which it is in fact⁹. However, a literary re-creation of an oral tale can only gain strength and legitimacy from its insistence on the reality of the narrator, whose character not only infuses the tale with personality absent from the flatter surface of a literary tale, but who is present in person in the frame narrative. The oral illusion also places emphasis on the metafictional nature of the tale as artificial, a told construct within the larger context whose assumption of reality highlights the lack of reality in fairy tale. In keeping with the resonance of frame tale with embedded tale, the site and circumstances of the retelling become vital for the tale's meaning. "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye" provides ample evidence of this, in the sharp contrasts between tales retold as conference papers, or tales told in more vital and immediate surroundings – the museum guide's retelling of the Gilgamesh tale, or the Djinn's stories given erotic and immediate circumstance by his presence on Gillian's hotel bed. "Gode's Story", too, offers a village folk tale whose immediacy rests largely in the character of Gode herself, repository of folk wisdom; her distinctive voice and status as perceptive wise woman lend authority to the tale's moral symbolism. Likewise, the setting of the Breton coast during the midwinter storytelling festival legitimates the mythic setting of Toussaint, ghosts and hauntings within the story.

⁹ Neil Jordan's film *In the Company of Wolves* creates a similar effect, although he is working with the considerable advantages of film, already an aural and visual medium, and the immediacy of actors retelling tales in voice-over, rather than the flatness of words on a page.

Geometrically patterned flowers: literature as structure

The pleasure of writing ... was in handling the old, worn counters of the characterless persons, the Fate of the consecutive events, including the helpless commentary of the writer on the unavoidable grip of the story, and a sense that I was myself partaking in the continuity of the tales by retelling them in a new context in a way old and new. (Byatt, 2000: 131)

In some ways it is perhaps misleading to analyse Byatt entirely as a writer of fairy tale. Like Thurber and Carter – or, indeed, like many other modern fairy tale writers – she employs fairy tale as one aspect of her varied literary output. Unlike Carter or Thurber, her interest in fairy tale is not, in fact, for its own sake; fairy-tale and folkloric techniques are simply one item in the formidable toolbox with which she approaches the mechanisms of literature as a whole. What she is interested in is, as she says above, “the grip of the story” and “the continuity of the tales”. In some ways, she perhaps best exemplifies the particular awareness for which I argue in my introductory chapter: that of fairy tale as the most inherently self-conscious literary form, one whose strong patterning is ideally suited not only to the deconstruction of its own conventions, but those of literature itself. Like Carter, Byatt provides a particularly complex and playful response to the essentially symbolic aspects of fairy tale, the “old, worn counters of the characterless persons,” but her dense systems of symbol are absolutely unlike Carter’s feminist symbolism in that they are endlessly recursive. The apparent resonance of glass or ice, heat or cold, enclosure and entrapment in Byatt’s work is only peripherally a feminist project, or any other sort of project at all. What her fairy-tale symbols do is to reflect, not ideas, but themselves – the nature of fairy tale, and hence the nature of narrative, literature and art itself. Such an awareness of art is, however, unavoidably linked to the awareness of reality, unable to exist except in a relationship with reality. She concludes that “‘Happy every after’ is, as Nooteboom said, a lie, a look in a mirror. Ordinary happiness is to be outside a story, full of curiosity, looking before and after” (2000: 150). Exploring the “happy ever after” of fairy tale is to be aware of it as tale, to be able to explore and expose, with happy curiosity, the artifice of the literary.

Chapter V: Structured Sword & Sorcery: popular fairy tale

I have dealt with the intersections of fairy tale with the popular in my introductory chapter, tracing parallels between folk forms and contemporary popular expressions, and the corresponding problems with corporate ownership of popular forms in the twentieth century. Central to the common workings of fairy tale and popular narrative is the encoding of genre as formula, the complex process of structural familiarity and recognition, combined with elements of peripheral novelty in each repetition. The common feature of the marvellous means that many of these alternative popular formulae are found within the specific generic codes of fantasy, sf and horror. Because of the non-realist encodings of these genres, fairy-tale elements are able to operate relatively undisrupted, thus fulfilling my criteria for selection. While Pratchett's novel format problematises my requirements of texture, I have felt that the self-conscious thematic exploration of fairy tale in his writing is sufficient to overcome the more novelistic framing. On the other hand, I have chosen not to explore any examples drawn from the enormous popular sub-genre of women's romance, since the realist, anti-magical framing and texturing of these novels characteristically reduces fairy-tale elements to the status of motif rather than theme.

Before looking at individual and more complex authors, however, it is as well to make a more general survey of the place of the fairy-tale within the particular generic framework of the science fiction/fantasy novel or short story; most often, it is fantasy romance which hosts fairy-tale play. I use this term to define the novels, most often multi-volume, which have flooded a post-Tolkien market with sword-and-sorcery epics unashamedly in the Middle-Earth mould, allowing hundreds of heroes to complete epic quests with the aid of swords, dragons, magic, beautiful women, talking animals, non-human races and the like. The structural parameters of fantasy romance, following the

definitions of Northrop Frye and others, are in themselves very similar to those of fairy tale (see Chapter I). Like fairy tale itself, sf and fantasy have a particularly strong generic marking which both identifies the formula and, as Derrida has noted, dictates how the text is to be read:

The generic mark ... is a mark always outside the text, not a part of it – such as the designations “science fiction” or “fantasy” on the book spine or cover – a mark that codifies the text on bookstore shelf or under hand, calling into play the codes and reading protocols by which the texts become readable. (1987: 65)

Within the context of science fiction and fantasy, that generic mark operates to create what Ursula le Guin has identified as “the SF ghetto,” characterised by “...brush-offs from literary snobs, and... blasts of praise and condemnation from jealous, loyal, in-group devotees” (1989: 176-177). Within popular literature, the cult following of sf and fantasy removes it one step further from the literary on the scale of value – it is perceived by the mainstream not only as popular entertainment, but as popular entertainment read only by weirdos. In this process, writers producing fiction within those categories become identified with the category, and no work they produce can escape the generic encoding produced by previous works, and the reaction of the readership to those works.

To return to my initial definitions of fairy tale, many of the aspects I note there are reproduced, to a greater or lesser extent, in the modern fantasy romance. The central motif of pattern, carrying with it structures of inevitability and fatedness, is often seen in fantasy romance. One knows, in Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings, that the hobbits, the equivalent of the miller’s third son in being small, domestic heroes, will triumph; that the king will return to be united to his princess, that the evil sorcerer will be destroyed, the heart of his power simultaneously the seed of his destruction, like the hidden heart of the giant. The otherworldly settings of the fantasy novel to some extent reproduce fairy tale’s sense of a different landscape, far away if not necessarily long ago, and that necessary condition of unreality, or of a tangential relationship with reality. Like fairy tale, fantasy romance is about symbol, its significance in resonant stereotype rather than realistic psychological exploration. There is more space for character in fantasy romance than there is in fairy tale, but often characterisation is superficial and true development is enacted on the landscape and the quest itself.¹

¹ A correlation which, to my mind, goes a long way towards explaining the irritation value of Stephen Donaldson’s Thomas Covenant series I have explored this more fully elsewhere, see Magical Land: Ecological Consciousness in Fantasy Romance, unpublished Masters thesis, University of Cape Town, 1995.

The other recurring theme in fairy tale within the fantasy ghetto, is its occasional intersection with the science fiction genre. While science fiction and fairy tale may seem, at first glance, unlikely bedfellows, Tolkien's discussion is notable in that it refers to one of the great works of science fiction, H. G. Wells's The Time Machine, in the same breath as Macdonald's fantasies or the Edda (Tolkien, 1964: 45). This is significant: it suggests that, despite the apparent differences in technological concept, there are elements – I'd suggest those of quest, adventure and wonder - which are common to both genres. Eric S. Rabkin's article on "Fairy Tales and Science Fiction" identifies the miraculous and the distancing of time, either past or future, as the common theme; he argues that "the coincidence of wish fulfilment and temporal domains in both science fictions and fairy tales is no accident" (1980: 80). He also isolates "the reliance on clarity, elemental colours and cleanliness" as a fairy-tale trait, quoting Max Lüthi's comment on fairy tale's "imperishable world... this explains its partiality for everything metallic and mineral, for gold and crystal" (Lüthi in Rabkin, 1980: 82). The parallel is clear with the characteristically clean lines and artificial environments of much futuristic fiction.

Perhaps the most striking parallel, however, is that between fairy tale's repetitive patterns and the tendency in science fiction towards formulaic narrative. Fairy tale probably has the most in common with the early days of science fiction this century, the forties and fifties, when the genre tended to operate as a highly stereotypical folk narrative. In common with fairy tale, sf was often simplistic, offering no real characterisation, and focusing on the completion of a quest in an environment of challenge and wonder. Parallels with fairy tale are obvious, as Rabkin comments: "Two of the most persistent stylistic traits of fairy tales are the propensity to externalise all inner states and to deal in extremes" (1980: 80). The success of George Lucas's Star Wars series of films, with their rescued princesses, heroes with swords and talking animals, trade at least partially on the audience's recognition of and identification with folk elements; an aspect reflected in Time magazine's feature article on Return of the Jedi, which it identifies as "George Lucas' marvellous rocket-propelled fairy tale" (Time, May 23 1983).

While fantasy/sf and fairy tale are strongly-linked genres, however, it is not inevitably the case that fantasy writers will make self-conscious and metafictional use of fairy tale genres; speculative fiction is, after all, an industry. Bruce Sterling notes his horror at the extent to which the pressures of commercialism have occluded fantasy and sf's genuinely exploratory aspects: "...as Robert E. Howard spins in his grave, the Chryslers of publishing attach rotors to his head and feet and use him to power the presses" (Cheap

Truth 1, 1983). Thus, numerous examples abound of tales retold and elaborated simply for the pleasure of the romance form and the familiar narrative; the best example of this in modern fantasy is probably Robin McKinley, whose novel Beauty provides an attractive and essentially undisturbed version of “Beauty and the Beast”. Her other collection, The Door in the Hedge, includes retellings of “The Frog Prince” and a rather charming “Twelve Dancing Princesses”. While these stories are more richly textured than the classic originals, providing both situational and psychological detail, they stop short of realism, and retain an essential element of timelessness. Unlike Lee and Carter, or many of the other short-story writers from the fantasy stable who use fairy-tale forms, McKinley’s tales tend to avoid the horror emphasis of much modern fairy tale, choosing instead to focus on fairy tale’s romance aspects - nostalgia, wonder, utopian wish-fulfilment². The same is largely true of Jane Yolen, another high-profile fairy-tale fantasist, whose tales, collected in works such as Tales of Wonder, are mostly original tales in fairy-tale form. While she uses stronger elements of sadness and loss than McKinley, Yolen’s short stories are likewise romance-based rather than horror-based, and also tend to drift further from classic exemplars than McKinley’s – Tales of Wonder includes several stories which have a science fiction framework, as well as some contemporary tales which embed loose fairy-tale references (Baba Yaga, the selkie, a magical ribbon given by a dead mother to her daughter, a brother and sister transformed to geese). Like McKinley, however, Yolen tends to explore and rework fairy-tale elements without real self-consciousness, and without disrupting the constraints of the form.

The same is not true of Patricia C. Wrede’s rather entertaining Enchanted Forest series, Dealing With Dragons, Searching for Dragons et al; these are straightforward comic parodies of fairy-tale form very much in the Pratchett mode, updating clichés and formulae with a certain down-to-earth practicality, although without Pratchett’s biting social comment. Wrede’s tongue-in-cheek and playful series provides a complete contrast to Sheri S. Tepper’s one excursion into fairy tale, Beauty, a complex novel which interleaves the sf format with an almost magical-realist narrative dealing variously with fairy tale, fairyland, time travel, magical dream-worlds and Hell. Tepper conflates the folkloric world of faërie with the structures of fairy-tale narrative, but her use of narrative pattern to impel, inform and energise her story and themes, is strong and self-

² The exception here is Deerskin, McKinley’s shockingly explicit exploration of the incest/rape motifs in the “Donkeyskin” tale; here again, however, a more standard fantasy framework reasserts itself to consolatory effect. The novel would repay detailed analysis for which I, alas, do not have the space here.

aware. The Sleeping Beauty tale acts as meta-narrative to the complexities of her novel, allowing her to conflate the motif of beauty itself with her characteristic ecological concerns for the vanishing natural beauties of the environment. Like Carter and Lee, she is a feminist writer alert to the nuances of sexuality in the tales she uses; unlike them, she sees little hope for a happy heterosexual ending within the confines of the traditional tales, presenting failed partnerships considerably more frequently than any happy ending. As I have earlier suggested, however, despite her strong awareness of structure and expectation Tepper is not writing fairy tale, but rather a novel heavily dependent on fairy-tale motifs.

The tendency towards romance narratives in fantasy fairy tale is exemplified more strongly in Terri Windling's "Fairy Tale" novels, a series published by Tor Fantasy, and including Pamela Dean's Tam Lin, Charles de Lint's Jack the Giant Killer, and Patricia C. Wrede's Snow White and Rose Red. With the exception of Snow White and Rose Red, which is set in Elizabethan England, these novels use a fairy-tale framework for a contemporary setting, and in terms of texture are not really fairy tale at all. Like most of de Lint's work, Jack the Giant Killer, and its sequel Drink Down the Moon, are set in a contemporary Canada populated by a hidden faerie community which colonised America along with its human settlers. Tam Lin is effectively a tale of campus life in the seventies, the faerie framework of the Tam Lin ballad realised slowly amidst the contemporary detail. Both of these novels are interesting in that their so-called "fairy-tale" nature is more accurately that of folklore and ballad; both, like Ellen Kushner's successful fantasy novel Thomas the Rhymer, are more interested in the intersection of human life with what Tolkien has called the "perilous land" of faerie itself (1947: 3) than in any serious exploration of classic fairy-tale narrative. In this they conform structurally to the traditional fantasy romance, with its emphasis on a removed and magical other world more than on fairy tale's set of simplistic relationships. Such awareness of pattern, predictability and narrative structure as occurs in these novels, tends to be firmly subordinated to the fantasy quest of the protagonists, occurring more as fragmented glimpses than as a driving force. (Tam Lin is perhaps an exception here). However, the use of the realm of faerie as a magical element in a contemporary novel is vivid and often compelling³.

³ In particular, Pamela Dean's version of the Queen of Faerie entering the mortal world as the charismatic head of an academic department, with all the power-plays, allegiances, entrapments and seductions of faerie neatly overlaid on departmental politics, is compelling and satisfying as well as being amusingly irreverent.

As a further example of the fantasy/sf ghetto's embrace of the fairy-tale form, numerous collections of modern fairy tale, or at least short stories with fairy-tale themes, exist. Lester Del Rey, a longtime and well-known writer and editorial figure in modern speculative fiction, has edited a collection called Once Upon a Time, which includes commissioned fairy tales by such fantasy and sci fi luminaries as Isaac Asimov, C. J. Cherryh, Katherine Kurtz and Anne McCaffrey. Many of these tales, unfortunately, degenerate into sentimentality; few show any genuine respect for or interest in the form itself. (Isaac Asimov's satirical "Prince Delightful and the Flameless Dragon" perhaps comes closest). Where Once Upon a Time conforms to the romance expectations of fairy tale – and of the readership of the fantasy and sf authors represented – Ellen Datlow's Snow White, Blood Red lives up to its dedication to Angela Carter in providing both a more thoughtful series of tales, and one with a darker edge. Datlow, as the fiction editor of Omni magazine, is firmly in the fantasy/sf mainstream; her co-editor is Terri Windling, who edits the Fairy Tale Series discussed above. In addition to introductions by both editors, Snow White, Blood Red supplies a five-page bibliography of modern fairy tales, including many dealt with in this thesis (Datlow and Windling, 1993:407ff). The tales in the collection are, however, largely what I would define as short stories with fairy-tale themes, rather than actual fairy tales – few retain the characteristic texture, simplicity and timelessness which I have defined as being central to fairy tale in its pure form. Nonetheless, many of these tales are provocative, innovative and self-aware, including motifs such as Rapunzel's witch as an embittered rape victim, a Red Riding Hood whose wolf is a womanising stepfather with his eye on his new stepdaughter, an alien shapechanging Puss in Boots, and a Snow Queen effectively superimposed onto the emotional coldness of a fashionable city crowd.

The large sub-category of fantasy using fairy-tale motifs makes it particularly difficult to choose texts for detailed analysis. Throughout this sub-genre, innovative play with structure tends to be subsumed into the popular format, so that familiarity is not disrupted too disturbingly. This, of course, reflects mass culture's need to create an unquestioning audience base whose state of passive pleasure makes them receptive to acquiring more of the product. While many of the more interesting fantasy and sf writers resist this effect, none are entirely free from market forces. The result is that texts in this section are somewhat thinner than elsewhere in my discussion, their use of fairy-tale motif inevitably curtailed by the popular formula within which they write. Both Lee and Pratchett represent more complex popular texts, particularly interesting for my purposes in their self-conscious awareness of narrative. At the same time, the use of fairy tale within the fantasy or sf framework means that more than one structural

convention is present in these texts, which to an extent liberates these authors from the need to keep their structural encodings intact. I shall argue that the two generic codings, sf/fantasy and fairy tale, work off each other, allowing for a certain amount of genuinely innovative fairy-tale exploration, encased and cushioned within the known and undisturbed parameters of the popular formula. Tanith Lee's often radical inversions of fairy-tale form are coupled with a straightforward and undisrupted use of popular erotic, horror and fantasy narratives, whose familiar terms prevail over the often shocking distortions of familiar fairy tales. Likewise, Pratchett's tongue-in-cheek invocation of the clichéd fantasy landscape, together with the powerful formulaic framework of the Discworld itself, allows him to site his mischievous disruptions of fairy-tale and generic expectation within a reassuringly familiar environment. Despite the effect of market forces, sophisticated structural play results.

Inversions: Tanith Lee

Tanith Lee's works place her firmly within the confines of fantasy/science fiction writing. A prolific and popular writer who has produced over forty novels since the 70s, she has written both fantasy and science fiction novels, adult and young adult fiction, and a wide range of short stories and collections. She has won the World Fantasy Award several times, and commands a cult following which possibly justifies the hyperbole of the Village Voice quotes reprinted on the cover of Red as Blood: "Princess Royal of Heroic Fantasy" and "Goddess-Empress of the Hot Read." Sarah Lefanu has commented that Tanith Lee "goes in for [sword-and-sorcery] in as full-blooded a way as any devotee of the literature could hope for" (1988: 123). Lee's work sits firmly and certainly profitably within the generic ghetto, covering various kinds of formulae – classic fantasy romance, or sword-and-sorcery; science fiction; and, most importantly for this discussion, fantasy which invokes both erotic and horror fiction. These genres rely on a very highly structured and encoded narrative formula – either titillation/release in the case of erotic fiction, or the threat/ fear/ revelation/ resolution tropes on which horror writing is built. The formulae intersect specifically with fairy-tale narrative in many of Lee's works, but most specifically in her 1983 collection Red As Blood: Tales from the Sisters Grimm. This retells a selection of fairy tales largely originating with the Brothers Grimm (with the exception of a version of the "Pied Piper of Hamelin" and a tale apparently based on Hoffman's "The Sandman"), but with various narrative inversions which play effectively with the reader's expectation of the original tale.

Fairy tale is intrinsically not too far distant from elements of horror and the erotic; as critics such as Tatar⁴ have pointed out, the original oral forms of fairy tale were a manifestation of peasant culture, rooted in an agricultural lifestyle, and dealing with the more primitive aspects of human life – sex, violence, death. Not unlike Carter’s tales, many of Lee’s rewritings restore erotic elements which were expunged from the Grimms’ fairy-tale collection when it was translated into English for a conventional Victorian readership, as well as aspects of graphic violence which more modern retellings have tended to remove. Lee’s use of the reader’s recognition of fairy tale relies on the gap between the known, cleaned-up version of the tale, and the primitive horror elements in her rewrite. At the same time, while the inversions are often deliberately shocking, they are contained within the intersecting horror genre, whose formulaic basis and highly recognisable use of narrative motif – the vampire, the werewolf, the monster, black magic, death – allows for radical inversions of fairy tale while still retaining some motifs of familiarity. A slightly different but parallel process takes place in her final story of the anthology, “Beauty”, which employs a similar intersection of inverted fairy-tale motifs with undisrupted and recognisable science fiction elements. Lee is thus able to develop genuinely innovative explorations of the fairy-tale genre, while remaining within the parameters of popular narrative, and neatly avoids the problem of alienating her readership – and thus reducing her sales - with too much novelty.

Lefanu notes that Lee “has a wit and a subtlety that is brought to bear on the modes within which she writes with a result that is subversive both of readers’ expectations and traditionally narrative methods” (1988: 123). Inversions and revisions characterise Lee’s retellings, together with a deft ability to see beyond the familiar motifs into their more uncomfortable implications. Bruce Sterling has commented approvingly on Red as Blood as “a very punk book – all red and black,” and comments, “These stories are TWISTED – tales of bloodlust, sexual frustration, schoolgirl nastiness, world-devouring ennui, and a detailed obsession with Satanism that truly makes one wonder” (Cheap Truth 1, 1983). Lee’s Cinderella version, “When the Clock Strikes”, rewrites the Cinderella figure as a manipulative and vengeful witch, whose traditional fairy-tale ability to bewitch the prince in a few hours becomes considerably more sinister. Likewise, “Thorns” plays with the inherent horror in the idea of someone who has been asleep for a hundred years, the awakened princess and her court “sad, weird figures” who were “so old, and yet they

⁴ “As much as some readers may be shocked by the cruelty and violence of the Grimms’ tales, they would find many of the stories tame by comparison with their corresponding peasant versions” (Tatar, 1987: 24). Tatar cites as an example the early peasant versions of Red Riding Hood, which have graphic and explicit cannibalistic elements as well as erotic motifs.

had hardly lived at all" (48). Probably the most successful of Lee's tales, however, is her rewrite of the Snow White tale. Called "Red As Blood", Lee's version was a Nebula award nominee, and presents a severely inverted version of the familiar story.⁵

It is possible to see "Red As Blood" as Lee's mischievous re-definition of the classic moment from "Snow White":

... a Queen sat at her palace window, which had an ebony black frame, stitching her husband's shirts. While she was thus engaged and looking out at the snow she pricked her finger, and three drops of blood fell upon the snow. Because the red looked so well upon the white, she thought to herself, "Had I now but a child as white as this snow, as red as this blood, and as black as the wood on this frame."
(The Complete Illustrated Tales of the Brothers Grimm, 1984:251)

In Lee's retelling, the Queen is considerably more sinister – she "smiled, and licked at her finger," and "She never came to the window before the dusk: she did not like the day" (27). The familiar moment is redefined in terms of horror, not fairy tale – white skin, black hair, red lips are clichés of the fairy tale, but they operate equally as clichés of the horror genre, where they define the accepted visual encoding of the vampire. Lee's story thus operates from that point of intersection between horror and fairy tale where the physical tropes are identical, and proceeds to use that intersection to invert the expectations of the tale – Bianca, the Snow White figure, is a vampire, a curse on the land like her mother before her. Lee's use of the magical mirror is also a clever intersection of vampire cliché with fairy-tale item – its power is to reflect all in the land, except, of course, Bianca, who, true to classical vampire mythology, shows no reflection in a mirror. The power of Lee's writing, rather than actually disrupting the well-known structures, is in forcing the reader to accept that they could hold a meaning which is disturbingly different from the one that has always been taken for granted.

In a similar inversion, the stepmother is the "beautiful Witch Queen" (26), golden-haired and wielding white magic associated with the Catholic church – she invokes her mirror in religious Latin ("*Speculum, speculum... Dei gratia*" [26]), and tries to give her stepdaughter a crucifix. The introduction of Christian symbolism to the very different symbol structures of fairy tale can often jar, but Lee's use of religious imagery is effective.

⁵ Her short-story version of this fairy tale is considerably more successful than her recent novel-length work in Terri Windling's *Fairy Tale Series*. In *White as Snow* (2000), Lee uses an intersection of the Snow White story with the Persephone myth, Snow White's dwarves taking her literally underground. Lee also relocates the central jealousy motif of the folkloric versions onto a mother/daughter relationship rather than the Grimms' sanitised stepmother/stepdaughter, but posits the mother's jealousy and rejection of her daughter on the fact that the child is a product of rape in a war scenario. The novel's intersections work uneasily and overall the effect is scattered, slightly shapeless and prone to fantasy cliché – Christian/pagan conflicts, dodgy pagan sexual encounters and all.

Catholicism is itself a strongly ritualised and symbolic practice which resonates well both with the fairy-tale setting and with the self-conscious Gothicism of its horror elements. The conclusion of the tale is particularly daring. Bianca, trapped in an ice-coffin after being fed consecrated Host by her stepmother, is rescued by a Prince who is presented as a mythologised Christ-figure, and whose presence changes and redeems her:

... she seemed to walk into a shadow, into a purple room; then into a crimson room whose emanations lanced her like knives. Next she walked into a yellow room where she heard the sound of crying which tore her ears. All her body seemed stripped away; she was a beating heart. The beats of her heart became two wings. She flew. She was a raven, then an owl. She flew into a sparkling pane. It scorched her white. Snow white. She was a dove. (Red As Blood, 35)

The Christ-figure is a fairly characteristic intrusion: Lee is not scared to invest her tales with figures who transcend the more normal domestic parameters of the tale. In her frequent use of gods (“Paid Piper” and “Red as Blood”) and Satan (“When the Clock Strikes” and “The Golden Rope”) she recalls the Grimms’ fascination with Christian rather than pagan versions of the folktales (Tatar, 1987: 10) but also jars the expectations of readers more accustomed to the non-religious resonances of the modern versions.

Despite the presence of the Christ-figure, the climax of “Red as Blood” offers a conclusion structured in essentially fairy-tale terms – transformation, a central trope of fairy tale, together with symbolic colour, traditional fairy-tale repetition (three rooms, three birds), and the presence of animals. However, Lee is able to blend fairy-tale elements successfully with Christian symbols; the colours are those of the ecclesiastical year, the raven, owl and dove are all biblical birds who enact Bianca’s transformation from Old Testament evil to New Testament purity, and her experiences in the three rooms seem linked to the sufferings of Christ. The strong moral polarity of the horror narrative – vampires as demonic, un-Christian entities susceptible to holy water and the Host – provides a familiar generic basis for the tale’s inversions, to some extent undercutting the unease both of the Christian/fairy-tale overlay, and of the deliberate attack on the reader’s assumptions about the tale.

Other tales in Red As Blood offer like inversions of fairy-tale expectation. “The Princess and her Future” is similarly a clever and deliberately shocking inversion of the Frog Prince tale, employed for sheer chill effect. As with the identification of the “red as blood, black as ebony” cliché in the Snow White story, Lee here seizes on the disturbing element in the Frog Prince story: how pleasant could it possibly be to marry a man who

was once something as cold, slimy and unattractive as a frog?⁶ The rakshasha, a demon “which could take any form it chose: lovely, to entice; fearsome, to terrify” (97), squats at the bottom of his cistern infusing the whole story with a nicely-judged sense of latent, inexorable threat. When the princess, Jarasmi, loses her golden ball in the pond, she reaches in to retrieve it and has her hand grabbed, in the classic horror mould, by something “cold and glutinous” (100). This dramatises the unpleasant implications of the original tale’s slimy rescuer, a dramatisation made more effective by Lee’s writing. As the demon arrives to claim his bride:

A river of quiet was in the gardens, rolling toward the lighted palace. And as it came, the leaves grew still on the bushes, and the night-flying insects lay heavy as drops of moisture in the bowls of flowers. The fountains fell spent and did not rise again.

Quite suddenly, the birds in the cages about the room stopped twittering. The musicians’ hands slid from their instruments.

Something smote upon the palace door. (Red as Blood 101)

The entire landscape of the palace and gardens comes to reflect the threat which the demon represents, and to increase the sense of inexorable power with which he is identified. What this is actually doing is to exaggerate the strong structural implications of the original, its sense of fairy-tale obligation: having had her ball returned to her, the princess is bound by her promise and cannot escape. Here, although the princess makes no promise, she is equally trapped, an entrapment highlighted and made menacing by Lee’s clever use of traditional horror elements.

The potentially erotic appearance of the creature, transformed into a prince in the princess’s chamber, is infused with the same menace, which Lee reinforces with similar touches of horror: “his touch was delightful, and all her strength seemed to flow away... he kissed her, and every lamp in the chamber died.” (103). The disruption of the familiar parameters of the tale is disturbing, but at the same time the flavour of erotic horror – the familiar clichés of sex with demons, titillating as well as horrifying – move the tale into another, equally recognisable realm. The tale’s denouement, with Jarasmi and her new husband alone in their carriage, has a certain stark inevitability: “He assumes, very quickly, and with a degree of simple pleasure, his other form.... Jarasmi’s frenzied shrieks are muffled and, in any case, do not continue long” (105). The ending recalls Perrault’s version of Red Riding Hood, which ends with the wolf pouncing on the girl and eating her up. In some ways, this also reflects Lee’s recurring feminist interests, which, at times overstated and rather simplistic, are perhaps another expression of the

⁶ Terry Pratchett picks up on the same unease in *Witches Abroad*, where the ex-frog Duc of Genua still has frog eyes and keeps a large pond and a supply of flies in his bedroom.

popular nature of her writing. Her interest in the power, or powerlessness, of women is often dramatised in extreme form by her writing; in works other than her fairy-tale rewrites, Lee's heroines frequently change gender, undergo rape, experience sexual encounter with animals or robots, and other expressions of her interest in gender identity and othering⁷. In "The Princess and her Future," Jarasmi's fate highlights the patriarchal nature of fairy-tale structure, becoming a graphic metaphor for the fate of women in marriage: entrapped, helpless and, ultimately, devoured. While dramatic, this is a simplistic characterisation, and demonstrates another of the flaws in her depiction of women: they tend to be characterised at the traditional fairy-tale extremes of complete passivity (Jarasmi, Jaspre, the girl in "Black as Ink"), or demonic power (Bianca, Ashella, the witch woman in "The Golden Rope", Anna). Again, however, these feminist concerns work both within and outside of familiar frameworks; the unease engendered by a feminist awareness of women graphically demonstrated to be victims, is soothed by the equal incidence of familiar patriarchal and fairy-tale stereotypes – the witch, the glamorous temptress, the manipulative sorceress. Lee is ultimately limited in her feminist awareness by the commercial and structural demands of the kind of popular narrative she is writing.

"Wolfland", Lee's version of Red Riding Hood, is perhaps the best illustration of her use of fairy tale to explore notions of female power. The story has more in common with Angela Carter than any other in this collection, following Carter's pattern of mixing fairy-tale structure with the style and setting of another genre – here, nineteenth-century gothic. Motifs in "Wolfland" are similar to those in Carter's "The Werewolf": both authors explore the possibilities of conflating the figures of the grandmother and the werewolf while exploring the growth to individual power of the Red Riding Hood figure. In Lee's case, however, the inversion of grandmother as werewolf is not as shocking, buffered as it is by nineteenth-century formality in both setting and tone. "Wolfland" self-consciously uses both fairy-tale motifs such as Lisel's opulent red velvet cloak, and the clichés of nineteenth-century Gothic – the journey is simultaneously Red Riding Hood's innocent foray into the primitive desires of the forest, and Jonathan Harker's journey to the castle of the vampire. The story also explores implications inherent in Perrault's "Red Riding Hood" – the complicity of the child with the ravishment of the

⁷ The motifs I have described are illustrated in, among others, *The Book of the Damned* and *The Book of the Beast* (1988), *Heroine of the World* (1989), *Heart-Beast* (1992), *The Silver Metal Lover* (1981), and numerous short stories from various collections.

wolf. Rather than straying from the path, however, Liesl is complicit in her kinship with her terrifying grandmother.

The tale's issues, however, tend to reduce to an unambiguous polarity of gender roles rather than Carter's complex relationships. The figure of Anna, a powerful woman who represents triumph and vengeance over a patriarchal past, is offset by her granddaughter Lisel, a spoiled beauty in whom Anna's self-assuredness and strength are echoed only as a self-absorbed wilfulness. Again, Lee shows a tendency to degenerate into patriarchal and mythical stereotypes in her representation of female figures – the spoiled beauty is as much a cliché as the devouring feminine of Anna's werewolf and the wolf-woman goddess who gives Anna her werewolf powers. This comes perilously close to Angela Carter's robust statement that "All the mythic versions of women... are consolatory nonsense... Mother goddesses are just as silly a notion as father gods" (1979: 5). Idealised or brutal, myths of empowerment are ultimately only another kind of entrapment. "Wolfland" functions rather like "The Princess and her Future" in offering a raw representation of the power or powerlessness of women, overstated in the enormous presence of the wolf-goddess and the brutal images which characterise Anna's stereotypical relationship with her husband– "he got his pleasure another way, and the poor lady's body gave evidence of how" (129). In keeping with Cawelti's framework of familiarity, this is a structure as perfectly recognisable and unambiguous as fairy tale itself: the disturbing inversion of the Red Riding Hood tale is softened by the reader's recognition of an undisrupted cultural trope (the abused woman) as much as by the equally undisrupted nineteenth-century Gothic setting. Lee's generic intersection of fairy tale and horror thus picks up another element, the genre of a kind of popular feminism whose relationships are as simply stated as those of any other popular formula. Thus, while Lee's affirmation of female power is strong and evocative, the combination of horror and fairy-tale structures within the popular context tends inevitably towards a simplistic and melodramatic overstatement of her obviously very real interest in issues of gender and otherness.

The final story in Red as Blood, the science-fiction fable "Beauty", is perhaps Lee's most innovative adaptation of fairy-tale structure into a completely different setting, but it retains the texture and feel of the tale itself. While using the basic structures of the French "Beauty and the Beast" tales, the story plays with notions of wonder and the marvellous, in its translocation into the far future rather than the far past. In its overlay of the Beast motif with the equally familiar science fiction notion of the alien, it also explores the concept of the other. In keeping with Rabkin's claim of the basic structural

similarities between science fiction and fairy tale (1980), the generic mixing is surprisingly effective. Arthur C. Clarke's famous statement, that "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic," has passed into science fiction folklore; Lee's tale creatively plays on this possibility. The magical aspects of de Beaumont's or de Villeneuve's tale are replaced with equally wonder-filled technology – extended lifespans, obedient machines, a world of comfort and convenience whose agents, while mechanical, fill the same niche as the invisible servants of fairy tale. The story shows an acute awareness of the importance of wonder and the marvellous as intrinsic to fairy tale, while intensifying the French originals' sense of threatening otherness through the sf motif of the alien.

Lee's use of science fiction is not only technological, but imposes some rather different social circumstances on the familiar patterns of the tale. Where the "Beauty and the Beast" original places Beauty in a motherless family whose father is a failed merchant, and with elder sisters who are spiteful and jealous, Lee chooses to make use of science fiction's social aspect to develop a feminist angle to the tale. The classic fairy-tale absence of the mother becomes a celebration of technology's power to rewrite social circumstances: two of Levin's daughters are artificially conceived and produced, "his seed... mixed with the particles of unknown women in crystal tubes"⁸ (Red as Blood 168). Estár herself is the daughter of a woman "from whom he had long since parted". The setting thus denies conventional fairy-tale notions of family structure, substituting instead a utopian ideal of sexual freedom which triumphantly overrides the missing maternal figure, affirming a family warmth and stability despite her absence. This futuristic insistence on alternative and un-fairy-tale family relations is continued in Estár's sisters: Joya is black and bisexual, pregnant with a child whose father is unknown and immaterial, Lyra's lover is Asiatic – not a husband in sight. Both sisters are attractive individuals and affectionate to Estár, an aspect of Lee's feminist interests which removes fairy tale's traditional sexual jealousy between women, to focus instead on the tale's central relationship, the girl and the beast.

In dealing with the original tale's structures of otherness, Lee has made use of the mythic versions of the narrative – Estár is "ill-named for a distant planet, meaning the same as the Greek word *psyche*" (Red as Blood 168). The tale thus explicitly invokes Apuleius's tale of Cupid and Psyche, embedded within The Golden Ass (another tale of man conflated with beast), which employs the same patterns as the French tales – a beautiful

⁸ The phrase is also a lovely example of the language of fairy tale (seed, crystal) used to describe science.

young woman alone in the power of a terrifying and potentially monstrous male figure. Lee's use of the Latin narrative structure allows her to emphasise certain aspects of the tale – the explicitly sexual aspect to the relationship (Cupid and Psyche are lovers), the dependence of the motif of monstrous otherness on an act of perception, and a pivotal point of realisation and revelation rather than transformation. Significantly for Lee's purposes in this tale, Marina Warner has identified the Cupid and Psyche tale as “a founding myth of sexual difference... Such a divine erotic beast [is] a figure of masculine desire, and the plot in which he moves presents a blueprint for the channelling of erotic energy – both male and female – in society at any one time” (1995: 274).

As in many of Lee's other tales, “Beauty” focuses on a point of inversion: rather than Beauty having to overcome her revulsion at the Beast's physical experience in order to agree to marry him, Estár has to overcome her feelings of inferiority. As in the Greek version, the other is kept hidden from her because he is a god, not because he is monstrous. Lee's interest in sexual relationships perhaps impels this inversion – at one point Estár “wondered if one always loved, then, what was unlike, incompatible” (191). This motif sets out to examine the dichotomy at the heart of a heterosexual relationship – how to apprehend, comprehend or connect with the other when the attraction is based on difference. Here, of course, Lee's version comes to parallel exactly the intentions of de Beaumont's original tale, to provide a parable for young women terrified by marriage with an unknown man. Sadly for Lee's feminist purposes, the rewriting of the male as godlike other rather than the brutal or animalistic other explored by Carter, is even more disempowering to women. The alien is “compelling, radiant of intellect and intelligence... he was beautiful. Utterly and dreadfully beautiful. Coming to the Earth in the eras of its savagery, he would have been worshipped in terror as a god” (202). Estár's humiliation is that of the mortal woman loved by a god: “the lightning bolt, the solar flame... she had been scorched, humiliated and made nothing, and she had run away, ashamed to love him” (202). Warner suggests that “When women tell fairy tales, they ... contest fear; they turn their eyes on the phantasm of the male Other and recognise it, either rendering it transparent and safe, the self reflected as good, or ridding themselves of it (him) by destruction or transformation” (1995: 276). Lee has both recognised and transformed the other, but in doing so she glamorises it to the point where she badly disempowers Estár - the attempt to raise Estár to equality in the scientific explanation for her difference never overcomes that moment of lightning-bolt revelation.

Even worse, Lee's attempt to rationalise the instantaneous, helpless love that Estár feels for the alien, is to provide another quasi-scientific explanation – she and the alien are

not paired randomly, but by design. “You came to me, as all our kind return, to one with whom you would be entirely compatible” (207). While recognising and using the structured fatedness of fairy tale, this creates a kind of Mills-and-Boon cliché of lovers who were “meant for each other”. As the crowning problem, the point of the union is that of the standard, fairy-tale marriage – children. Estár is ultimately no more than a brood mare; the alien race are sterile, but their children implanted in human wombs can reproduce with the full aliens to produce alien offspring. Lee’s innovative rejection of fairy-tale family structures in the first part of the tale, is negated by the tale’s ending: however much the futuristic setting allows for social innovation, really girls and boys are meant for each other, and for happy families, all along. The more liberal, less stereotyped structures of Levin and his daughters are those of inferior humans, after all, who simply fail to understand; Estár’s relations with them in future will be distant and slightly patronising of their helpless, human incomprehension. The reversal of poles of beauty in the original narrative simply replaces one form of disempowerment with another, even worse one.

“Beauty” is frustrating because its effects are so diverse – on one hand, Lee’s innovations are interesting and fruitful, and she manages to transform the tale into effective science fiction fairy tale. On the other hand, she succumbs to the problem critics like Patricia Duncker have found in writers such as Carter – “the infernal trap inherent in the fairy tale, which fits the form to its purpose, to be the carrier of ideology, proves too complex and pervasive to avoid” (Duncker, 1984: 6). The romance structures of the fairy tale are strong enough to wrench back into conventional shape any attempt to update them. Bruce Sterling’s review of *Red as Blood* points to exactly this failure, identifying Lee’s “apparent awkwardness” as “the result of a refusal to compromise. It is the sign of an artist struggling to explain her visions in what amounts to a private dialect. Even the failures are a left-handed tribute to her integrity” (in *Cheap Truth*, 1983). In Sterling’s view, the unease in Lee’s political expressions marks her faithfulness to her ideas even when the pressures of the popular form would seem to require a smoother, less jarring finish; she sacrifices popular gloss to her principles, but cannot entirely throw off the popular in order to fully explore her visions. Lee’s inversion of the classic “Beauty and the Beast” is both brave and striking, and her use of the tale to explore notions of otherness is impressive indeed. However, as with others of her tales, she ultimately fails to control the effects of the popular prototypes which provide comforting familiarity in the midst of her inversions.

Divisions: Terry Pratchett⁹

The Discworld novels invoke something slightly more than the usual sf/fantasy genre label. Terry Pratchett has made the British best-seller lists with all twenty-eight of his novels about the Discworld, a world which is "as round and flat as a geological pizza, although without the anchovies" (Equal Rites 8), and which travels through space on a giant turtle. The Discworld's peculiar blend of tongue-in-cheek fantasy, cultural collage, parody, humanism and incredibly bad puns is firmly situated in the consumer culture, and has far wider appeal than one would expect given the novels' roots in Tolkienesque fantasy. This is perhaps an index of their quality and intelligence, their very acute response to the multiplicity and complexity of modern consumer society and its attendant cultures. At the same time, they provide a particularly interesting example of the workings of familiarity as defined by Cawelti: the continuing and ever more detailed Discworld becomes a comfortable and highly recognisable arena for the Discworld's many readers, ensuring the continued popular success of the series despite the potential discomfort of Pratchett's often biting deconstruction of modern society.

Pratchett's use of parody, literary reference and cultural iconography is the basis of the series' comedy; the presence of fairy tale in Witches Abroad (1991) is simply one example in a long list of generic and textual games. The Discworld operates obviously as a fantasy landscape, with the wizards, heroes, trolls, dwarves, elves and witches of typical pulp fantasy, but its construction parodies and questions the fantasy basis. Pratchett himself comments that his adaptation of the "Tolkien-type imagery" involves a deliberate attempt "to treat it as if the characters are real," in defiance of the numerous "bad copies of Tolkien" which are saturating the popular market (Interview on Loose Ends, 1993).¹⁰ The novels are interesting as popular culture because they are themselves popular, but simultaneously comment self-consciously on the popular genre of fantasy from a position *within* the generic ghetto defined by Le Guin (above). Pratchett situates himself self-consciously within the fantasy/science fiction framework: "It pisses me off that fantasy is unregarded as a literary form. When you think about it, fantasy is the oldest form of fiction. What were the storytellers of old doing when they talked about the beginnings of the world? They were weaving fantasies." (January Magazine, 2000).

⁹ Some of the material in this section first appeared as a conference paper given to the UCT postgraduate conference, Interaction, in 1996, and was subsequently published in the conference proceedings. See "All the World's a Pizza: Postmodernism, popular culture and Shakespeare in Terry Pratchett's Discworld," Inter Action 5, 1997. Cape Town: University of the Western Cape Press, pp. 194-202.

¹⁰ Pratchett's dislike of the excessive nobility of Tolkien's creatures is indexed, not only in the cruelty and superficiality of the Elves of Lords and Ladies, but in his antidote to Thorin Oakenshield – dwarves with names such as Timkin Rumbleguts and Cheery Littlebottom.

Thus an awareness of the working of classic fantasy – very notably in Witches Abroad with the Tolkien references¹¹ - continually and ironically weaves throughout the Discworld, but as a facet of the author's awareness of the far older traditions of the marvellous. More importantly, this awareness is metafictional in Pratchett's obvious sense of genre, and of the problematical interface between the marvellous and the real.

Pratchett's literary comment is not confined to the texts of the ghetto; the novels are energised with a wealth of reference which makes the fantasy Discworld no more than a framework for Pratchett's often cynically acute comments on modern consumer society. Pratchett's introduction to the official Harper Collins website admits, "the Discworld ... started out as a parody of all the fantasy that was around in the big boom of the early '80s, then turned into a satire on just about everything, and even I don't know what it is now." (<http://www.terrypratchettbooks.com/>, 2001). In addition, as Elizabeth Young comments in The Guardian, "One of the pleasures of [Pratchett's] books is the way in which literary classics... float through them in a way that would be pounced on as inter-textual in another author..." (1993: 45)¹². As well as fairy tale, Witches Abroad's passing references invoke, in a random sample, Chaos theory, voodoo, the Goon Show, the stereotypical British tourist, Tolkien's dwarves, Victorian vampire Gothic, airline companies, the Pamplona bull festival, Mississippi river-boats, DEFCON, the film of The Wizard of Oz, Cluedo and Casanova¹³. The postmodern implication of such references is clear: the novel relies equally for its comic effect on the reader recognition not only of classic texts, fairy tale among them, but on popular elements such as modern consumer culture and the sword-and-sorcery framework of the world. The equation of canonical and popular texts within the arena of reader familiarity exemplifies postmodernism's classic erosion of boundaries between high and low culture. In its exploration of textual and cultural multiplicity, the Discworld comes to correspond to Jameson's description of

¹¹ Apart from the invisible runes on the door into the dwarf stronghold, the witches encounter a "small grey creature, vaguely froglike," on an underground river; it hisses "It'ssss my birthday." Nanny Ogg hits it on the head with a paddle (Witches Abroad 59). So much for Gollum and cosmic evil.

¹² I'm pouncing.

¹³ "chaos... made really good patterns that you could put on a T-shirt" (7); "She had called upon Mister Safe Way, Lady Bon Anna, Hotaloga Andrews and Stride Wide Man" (10); "You can't get the wood" (30); "The last thing we want is foreign parts up close" (39) and throughout; "It's really expensive, getting proper invisible runes done" (50 and ff); "Vampires have risen from the dead, the grave and the crypt, but have never managed it from the cat" (83); "Three Witches Airborne... Pan Air... We could call it Vir - " (87); "the time of the Thing with the Bulls" (93); "the Vieux River... Old (Masculine) River" (95); "Asking someone to repeat a phrase you'd not only heard very clearly but were also exceedingly angry about was around Defcon II in the lexicon of squabble" (136); "You know, Greebo, I don't think we're in Lancre" (140); "my name is Colonel Moutarde" (228); "Casanunda... I'm reputed to be the world's greatest lover" (229).

"speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture" (1991: 18).

Pratchett's narrative structures are ultimately neat, relying more on the narrative conventions of romance and popular fiction, and consistently delivering "a resolution which, if not your traditional happy ending, at least has some kind of symmetry" (The Weekend Independent, 1994). Significantly for his use of fairy tale, his insistence on a moral framework is strong; while often cynical, the Discworld operates on a principle of basic human decency, or at worst, the predictability of basic human nature. In this sense, the popular framing of the novels outweighs their use of postmodern strategy: they reflect, comment on and reproduce the multiplicity of modern culture in a way which offers the judgement, resolution and closure which postmodern texts characteristically refuse. It becomes clear that the use of fairy tale in his novels is inevitable; like Byatt, he appears to be drawn to structured narrative which to some extent counteracts the fragmentary nature of the modern culture he parodies. To return to Cawelti's theories of formula narrative, the Discworld's narrative structures – both in traditional form and in the consistent and carefully built-up environment of the Discworld itself – provide the necessary element of familiarity which enables the popular audience comfortably to consume the disrupted view of modern culture which the novels present.

As an intensely self-conscious writer, Pratchett offers an explicit and thoughtful awareness of the power of narrative – as he says in the opening pages of Witches Abroad, as well as the more recent The Amazing Maurice and his Educated Rodents, this is "a story about stories" (Witches Abroad 10, Amazing Maurice 9). A.S. Byatt gives Pratchett an approving nod from the literary establishment, calling him "one of the great modern storytellers" and identifying Witches Abroad as "one of the best stories I know about the dangerous aspect of the network of tales" (2000: 148-49)¹⁴. Like Byatt herself, Pratchett has an awareness of narrative which runs through all his work, seen most explicitly as a recurring and somewhat satirical sense of the nature and importance of fairy tale. Reacting against the Disneyfication and general cuteness of fairy tale in the twentieth century, his awareness of narrative is folkloric, returning to a more earthy and brutal pattern which denies idealism in favour of a certain bloodiness. The Hogfather, the Discworld's version of Father Christmas, leaves a bag of bloody bones for bad children;

¹⁴ The recent publication of a volume of criticism including essays by such luminaries as John Clute suggests that the complexities and sophistication of Pratchett's writing are worth serious attention. See Terry Pratchett: Guilty of Literature, edited by Andrew M. Butler, Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, 2000, published by The Science Fiction Foundation.

Pratchett, alert to the artificial processes which have consigned fairy tale to the nursery, comments, “it’s these little details which tell you it’s a tale for the little folks” (Hogfather, 1995: 69). Similarly, the “Grim Fairy Tales” which appear as a running gag in the Discworld series are ironically glossed as “happy tales for little folk”. As well as being “about wicked people dying in horrible ways”, the Grim Fairy Tales provide the folkloric knowledge which enables the reconstruction of the glass clock in Thief of Time (106). The Amazing Maurice expands on this to specify the authors as Agoniza and Eviscera, the Sisters Grim, who are “not big on tinkling little people. They wrote ... *real* fairy tales. Ones with lots of blood and bones and bats and rats in” (Amazing Maurice 77). Pratchett shows a wry awareness of the intersections between fantasy’s marvellous universe and the demands of real life, re-figuring fairy tale as a vital and essential tradition whose patterns of human behaviour encapsulate important knowledge; however, he is also aware how far such knowledge has been concealed by the trivial and over-pretified thing fairy tale has become.

Witches Abroad thus functions partially as an investigation of the particular wealth of shared cultural knowledge offered by fairy tales. As an integral part of this awareness, however, Pratchett is also investigating the extent to which such narratives hold the power to shape, rather than simply reflect, the lives of people.

... 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. It picks up all the vibrations of all the other workings of that story that have ever been.

This is why history keeps repeating all the time.

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

It is now *impossible* for the third and youngest son of any king, if he should embark on a quest which has so far claimed his elder brothers, *not* to succeed.

(Witches Abroad 8-9)

In his sense of the power of narrative, Pratchett comes remarkably close to elements present in the writings of A S Byatt; however, where she focuses on the causal entrapment of the protagonist within fairy-tale narrative inevitability, Pratchett is more interested in the dehumanising effect of narrative which is alienated from the actual reality of the characters. In his awareness, narrative is a political act, a powerful and dominant discourse, and its potential for entrapment is more than limiting on action, it is profoundly dehumanising. Stories thus have a darker side, a sinister power which cannot be avoided simply by realising that it is there.

Stories, great flapping ribbons of shaped space-time, 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. (Witches Abroad 8)

To see real life entirely through the structures of story is thus problematical, as is underlined by the character of Malicia Grim in The Amazing Maurice; her attempt to wrench her experience continually into the expectations and structures of fairy tale is dangerously unrealistic. The lesson she must learn is that “real life isn’t a story. There isn’t some kind of ... magic that keeps you safe” (Amazing Maurice 147). Pratchett’s awareness of narrative is thus inherently metafictional, his writing infused with a clear sense of the *moral* imperative to keep narrative in its proper place, never to confuse the marvellous with mimesis. This is, of course, the central point of the Discworld itself, its insistence on restoring a lost logic and realism to fantasy’s marvellous spaces – Ankh Morpork as a fantasy city with a sewer system, Rincewind as a wizard with a realistic attitude to adventure¹⁵.

An awareness of the real is thus integral to Pratchett’s investigation of narrative: more specifically, it becomes a moral duty to recognise the difference between the fictional and the real, the story and the individual. Lilith de Tempscire, the mirror-wielding villainess of Witches Abroad, is powerful because of her recognition that “Stories exist independently of their players. If you know that, the knowledge is power” (Witches Abroad 8). In her narrative manipulations she commits the greatest crime possible in the Discworld’s moral structures, one which recurs time and again in Pratchett’s novels – objectification. Granny Weatherwax tells Lilith, in their final confrontation, “You shouldn’t treat people like they was *characters*, like they was *things*” (270)¹⁶. Narrative and reality *must* be kept separate; all use of story must be metafictional, it cannot be conflated with, or allowed to spill over into, the real world. By focusing on the needs of the narrative rather than the needs of the individual, Lilith dehumanises the people over whom the stories give her power. The novel thus sets up stories, particularly fairy-tale, as a potentially totalitarian discourse with a strongly self-justifying ideological framework. There are interesting parallels here with the kind of cultural process

¹⁵ Matthew Hills’s fascinating article on narrative spaces in the Discworld presents a particularly good analysis of the ways in which the Discworld shades in and out of reality across the series and, more particularly, its maps (in Butler, James and Mendlesohn, 2000: 128-114).

¹⁶ This idea is developed more fully and very dramatically in a later Discworld novel, Carpe Jugulum, in which a “modern” vampire arrangement with a subject village has the villagers lined up like cattle to be drained in a civilised fashion. (223ff). Granny’s manifesto is explicitly stated: “There’s no greys, only white that’s got grubby ... And sin ... is when you treat people as things. Including yourself. That’s what sin is.” (210).

identified by Adorno and Horkheimer – the manipulation of a passive mass market by a kind of cultural monolith, whose power lies in recognition, and manipulation, of the patterns within which people prefer to see the world. As Zipes has noted, the processes of capitalisation are essentially dehumanising (1979: 97), strengthening the parallels with Pratchett’s view. “The power of the capitalist system to dominate and manipulate humanity and nature” is in itself a narrative as compelling as any fairy tale; in its victims, “both reason and imagination have atrophied” (Zipes, 1979: 97).

Granny Weatherwax, the most powerful of the three witches, is an interesting figure in this context. She functions very much as Lilith’s opposing double, a twin sister whose allegiance to the cause of humanity rather than narrative makes her the theoretical “good” to Lilith’s “evil.” Pratchett, however, never resorts to unambiguous melodrama, and his depiction of the various shadings and temptations of the “good” in this novel, in itself functions as a powerful subversion of fairy-tale narrative’s classically unambiguous polarities – and of the *deus ex machina* figure of the godmother herself, the ultimate totalitarian despot to the heroine’s destiny. (The figure of Black Aliss, the witch who fulfils the gingerbread house/christening curse niche in the Discworld fairy tales, exemplifies this ambiguity: an ancestress of Granny herself, Aliss was “not *bad*, but so powerful it was sometimes hard to tell the difference” [*Witches Abroad* 114]). Granny Weatherwax is able to disrupt Lilith’s tales for precisely the same reason that Lilith can manipulate them – she recognises the power inherent in them. This means that, while exerting her abilities to combat Lilith, she must fight continually against *becoming* Lilith by interfering with people “for their own good”. The novel thus doubly underlines the power of an accepted cultural discourse to dehumanise both the victim and the oppressor. In a telling point, Pratchett’s wicked godmother bases her power in mirrors, her image multiplied endlessly and soullessly. As the novel comments, “mirrors and images... steal a bit of a person’s soul and there’s only so much of a person to go round... people who spend their lives appearing in images of one sort or another seem to develop a *thin* quality” (WA 10). The implication, in an interesting extension of Adorno and Horkheimer’s analysis, is that modern mass culture (endlessly multiplied images such as film and television) equally dehumanises the producer and the consumer – narrative power applied powerfully but resulting in a loss of humanity all round. The apparently random inclusion of a form of voodoo magic in *Witches Abroad* is, in fact, a precise continuation of theme, its notions of possession by voodoo gods paralleling exactly the notion of role and the power of role in fairy-tale narrative.

Lilith's grip on the "fairytale city" of Genua is another example of this process; similarly to the Disney view of fairy tale, her ideal is all cleanliness and sparkling colours, no room for anything shabby, ugly or individual. "Genua was a fairytale city. People smiled and were joyful the livelong day. Especially if they wanted to see another livelong day." (74). The inhabitants of the city are savagely punished for what Lilith calls "crimes against narrative expectation" (75). Thus the toymaker is punished because he fails to sing songs or whistle while he works, or tell stories to the children; his defence, "I just make toys... that's all I'm good at. I make good toys. I'm just a toymaker," is inadequate before Lilith's vision of the stereotypical toymaker of legend. Her sense of narrative deals only in cliché, and has no room for individuality or humanity. More frighteningly, her understanding of the tales which employ such structures gives her the power to enforce them in a terrifyingly totalitarian fashion. This conforms to Adorno and Horkheimer's identification of "the determination of ... executive authorities not to produce or sanction anything that in any way differs from their own rules, their own ideas about consumers, or above all themselves" (1944 (1993): 32). The difference between indoctrinated passive consumption and the complexities of actual human needs is neatly summed up in Granny Weatherwax's ballroom speech: although the three witches are godmother figures, they are "the kind that gives people what they know they really need, not what we think they ought to want" (260).

While the novel's overt concern is obviously with narrative, particularly fairy-tale narrative, on a wider cultural and moral level, Pratchett's use of more obvious fairy-tale structures and references recurs throughout Witches Abroad. In invoking and disrupting various fairy-tale forms, he uses reader recognition of traditional and contemporary narratives for comic effect as well as for the furtherance of his ideological agendas. On the broader level, the journey of the three witches to Genua is based on the Cinderella story: Emberella is destined by her one godmother, Lilith, to marry the Prince, but regards the idea with horror. The reason for this is the entwining of the Cinderella narrative with that of the Frog Prince story – the prince is, in fact, a frog, changed to man form by Lilith's enchantments, but needing the traditional marriage with a princess to make the change permanent. As does Lee in a very different retelling of the story, Pratchett picks up on the unease in the Frog Prince story – how attractive can a man be who was once a frog? As Emberella says, "He looks slimy. He makes my flesh crawl... They say he's got funny eyes" (178). Where Lee seizes on the horror elements of the concept, however, Pratchett uses it almost entirely to comic effect, in a process which echoes the parameters of the Discworld itself – to inject a little down-to-earth reality into fantasy concepts, and to follow them to their logical – and often comical – conclusion. At

the same time, the dehumanisation implied by the process is chilling. He speaks of Witches Abroad as giving him “the opportunity for retelling the Cinderella myth as if it were real and as if real people were involved, because unfortunately the problem with Cinderella is that it's only delightful as a story if all the people involved are tailors' dummies with no emotional lives of their own. As soon as you start thinking about real people being involved in a fairy-tale context these are all horror stories” (Wignal, 1991).

Within the Cinderella/Frog Prince meta-tale are frequent passing references to other fairy tales, which offer a microcosm of the rewriting process which the three witches exert on the main tales. The Sleeping Beauty sequence which opens the series of fairy tales is a particularly good example of the fairy-tale narrative's attempt to reassert control after the incursions of the three witches into its structures, and is incidentally a wonderfully comic piece of writing:

There was never any noise in the sleeping castle... It had been like this for ten years. There was no sound in the –
 ‘Open up there!’
 ‘Bony fide travellers seeking sucker!’
 - no sound in the –
 ‘Here, give us a leg up, Magrat. Right. Now...’
 There was a tinkle of broken glass.
 ‘You’ve broken their window!’
 - *not a sound* in the –
 (Witches Abroad 113)

The tale's desperate attempt to retain its atmosphere is comically juxtaposed to the earthy, hearty and above all human voices of the witches as they disrupt Sleeping Beauty's enchanted castle¹⁷. Granny's distaste for cliché (“‘Ah. A chamber,’ she said sourly. ‘Could even be a bower’” [114]) is coupled with her first statement of her manifesto against the inhumanities of narrative manipulation: “Cutting your way through a bit of bramble is how you can tell he's going to be a good husband, is it? That's fairy godmotherly thinking, that is! Goin' around inflicting happy endings on people whether they wants them or not, eh?” (118). Her sense of the basic wrongness, in human terms, of the structures and patterns imposed by the fairy-tale stereotypes, is reinforced even more strongly in the second fairy-tale encounter, that of Red Riding Hood. Here, Pratchett points out the inherent brutality of the child being sent to visit her grandmother when the wood is known to be wolf-infested. Society's similar callousness to the old woman within the parameters of the tale, is underlined by the witches' own

¹⁷ In another of Pratchett's well-judged comic moments, in the sequence which plays with the film version of The Wizard of Oz rather than actual fairy tale, the hardness of Nanny Ogg's new, willow-reinforced witch's hat resists the descending farmhouse in a perfect symbolisation of the extent to which the more metaphorically hard-headed witches resist the power of the tale.

status as elderly women on the edge of society, although the identification of witches with victims is entirely ironic: “‘I always hated that story,’ said Nanny. ‘No-one ever cares what happens to poor defenceless old women’ (Witches Abroad 122). Red Riding Hood herself, far from being a featureless, stereotyped child, has a particularly realistic childish bloody-mindedness (“Bet you a trillion dollars you can’t turn that stump into a pumpkin” [121]. Pratchett’s children are always remarkably unsentimentalised little horrors).

It is, however, in the depiction of the wolf that Pratchett makes his most telling point about the dehumanising effect of a totalitarian narrative. In the transformation of the wolf into something that can meet the requirements of the tale – “Real wolves don’t walk on their hind legs and open doors” (127) – the novel deals intrinsically with notions of identity which, in fact, transcend the human. Lilith requires the wolf to be able to think in order to perform as expected, but Pratchett has strong views on the imposition of human mental complexities on the animal – an ideology which works directly against the sentimental tendency to anthropomorphise animals in many fantasy and fairy-tale contexts. (This point is made equally strongly in Amazing Maurice, in which the chapter head-quotes from “Mr Bunnsy Has A Big Adventure” ruthlessly satirise the twee child’s story-book creatures). Lilith’s interference with the wolf has left “cracked and crippled attempts at cognition peeling away from the sleek arrowhead of predatory intent... No wonder it was going mad.” (Witches Abroad 128). Far more than in the case of humans warped to the purposes of the tale, the warping of animals to fit human narrative patterns is presented as an unforgivable cruelty. The same logic is inherent in the passing reference to the Three Little Pigs – changed by Lilith to live in a house, they are “the only animals stupid enough to let the wolf get near them,” and are eaten by the wolf. Faint resonances in these tragically humanised animals offer a trenchantly realistic version of the sentimentalised animals of Disney animated fairy tale, a reference made pointedly explicit in Granny Weatherwax’s angry comment – “It’s all wishing on stars and fairy dust, is it?” (Witches Abroad 137). In fact, the Disney style of fairy tale is anathema to Pratchett not only because it is unrealistically idealised, but because it is *unthinking*.

Fantasy has always been the poor cousin in the speculative fiction ghetto: Bruce Sterling refers trenchantly to fantasy as sf’s “small, squishy cousin” which “creeps gecko-like across the bookstands”, taking advantage of sf’s “reptilian torpor” (Cheap Truth 1, 1983). The tendency to cliché and formula fantasy romance does, perhaps, prejudice its functioning when compared to sf’s potential for genuine thought experiment. However,

the achievements of writers such as Pratchett (and, to a lesser extent, Lee) demonstrate that awareness of the fantasy formula, and of the older fairy-tale structures which underlie the fantasy genre, can be a strength rather than a weakness. Pratchett's use of fairy tale in Witches Abroad is highly sophisticated, the novel seamlessly integrating fairy-tale motifs, both traditional and modern, with those of the familiar Discworld setting. His understanding of the structures and power of narrative is assured. His complex exploration of narrative and his strong humanist polemic are evident, but his awareness of the clash between fairy-tale expectation and human nature never completely disrupts the functioning of the Discworld's popular form. This is a careful balancing act: similarly, despite the obvious presence of the Discworld's more overt agendas of comedy, parody and entertainment, narrative explorations are never quite subordinated to the demands of the popular market. In this, Pratchett represents the more accomplished and thoughtful end of the fantasy/sf spectrum, as well as the more self-aware. The Discworld is perhaps so appealing because Pratchett retains throughout a joyful sense of the status of his own writing *as writing*, as the playful fictional act which comments continually on reality, but consistently problematises its own ability to represent that reality. His knowing awareness of narrative, and its continual postmodern invocation throughout the Discworld novels, makes his use of fairy tale inevitable, but he extends that narrative awareness to offer a profound sense of the form in both its literary and its folkloric implications.

Chapter VI:

Magical Illusion: fairy-tale film

The development of film versions of fairy tale in the twentieth century is inevitable, given the profound adaptability shown by fairy-tale structures across the centuries. The ability of fairy tale to adapt itself to a variety of voices, settings and ideologies has been manifest throughout its history, and, as with the adaptation of oral folktale into written literature, the adaptation of written literature into film brings with it both the possibilities and the constraints of the new medium. Similarly, a slightly different set of ideological and cultural functions is imposed on the tale. In the late twentieth century, this stems to a large extent from film's dual nature, as a form of artistic expression as well as a powerful visual medium operating within the consumerist paradigm of modern mass culture.

Fairy tale has a long history of successful interaction with theatrical as well as literary forms. Following the adaptation of folklore into the French aristocratic pursuits of the eighteenth century, fairy-tale motifs seem to have spread rapidly to forms of expression such as the theatre, ballet and opera. The heyday of fairy-tale ballet in the nineteenth century saw the creation of such classics as Sleeping Beauty (1890), Swan Lake (1890 and 1895) and The Nutcracker (1892), all with recognisable fairy-tale themes. In the twentieth century, John Cranko's The Prince and the Pagodas (1957) is based on a French fairy tale by Mme D'Aulnoy. In opera, fairy-tale awareness, although expanded into a more complex narrative, informs operas such as Mozart's The Magic Flute, Verdi's Vakula the Smith and Puccini's Turandot. As a symbolic genre, fairy tale has strong visual and dramatic potential. It is also obvious that the simple, ritualistic formulae of fairy tale would work well in traditions which are themselves ritualistic, most notably ballet and opera, which are artistic productions whose meaning is expressed via a powerful system of structural codes (song, movement) rather than a process of realistic

mimesis. Suzanne Rahn writes, “Like fairy tales, ballets are constructed as highly formalized narratives which make extensive use of repetition and tell their stories primarily through the physical actions of their characters” (in Zipes, 2000: 34). In the twentieth century, the successful use of fairy tale in the Broadway musical follows a similar pattern: Stephen Sondheim’s 1986 musical Into the Woods, which explores the dangerous gap between fairy tale and real life in a manner similar to Pratchett’s Witches Abroad (see Chapter V). Again, the musical is an artificial form whose encodings – the stock romantic characters, the likelihood of any character to break into song or dance at any moment – have very little to do with reality¹.

However, theatre, ballet and other live art forms face an inherent logical problem in visually representing the marvellous, relying on stylisation or unconvincing mechanisms to pretend to the magical; Tolkien, typically, claims that “Fantasy ... hardly ever succeeds in Drama... Fantastic forms are not to be counterfeited” (1966: 49). Cinema’s tricky camera is able to overcome this, harnessing fairy tale’s symbolic function to provide a rich visual texture. This is seen below most strikingly in Neil Jordan’s The Company of Wolves, but explored equally well in Jean Cocteau’s La Belle et la Bête and other, more recent films. From film’s earliest roots it has been associated with fairy-tale narratives, most notably in the experimental fairy-tale films of Georges Méliès (in Zipes, 1997: 67). Fairy-tale film offers an obvious articulation of the classic Hollywood “fairy-tale” plot, which relies heavily on the comedic marriage resolution and on wish fulfilment and utopian impulses which empower the underdog. Most interestingly, however, fairy-tale film has become strongly associated with the particular film medium of animation, a pairing which has clear thematic implications as well as making the idea of fairy tale practically synonymous with Disney to wide sections of the film-going public.

Cinema, of course, has always been the site of magic. While apparently offering the real, it is a fertile ground for trickery, in which apparently real objects may disappear, reappear, change size or orientation, change shape – in fact, the whole of the special effects man’s box-of-tricks². The authority of the camera is such that the impossible takes on the same status as the realistic, which is in any case a good working definition of magic. But on a more fundamental level, the magical paradigm of fairy tale finds echoes

¹ Disney’s characteristic blending of the fairy tale and the musical is a good illustration of these similarities: films such as Beauty and the Beast not only use the musical format, but refer constantly to the Hollywood musical. See below.

² David Galef’s 1984 discussion of Cocteau’s La Belle et la Bête offers a detailed and interesting analysis of this kind of magical cinematic function.

in the magic of the film experience even without special effects, in film's ability to create the apparent three-dimensionality of the real on a flat, unmoving screen, through the trickery of light and image. Film powerfully realises the transcendence over reality with which magical narrative is intrinsically concerned³. In addition to this, the absorbing effect of the film experience – the immersion of the viewer in a constructed reality – parallels the more traditional folk storytelling experience. Jack Zipes, in putting forward a theory of fairy-tale film, comments on the importance of the storyteller's ability to create a new, removed and absorbing reality for his or her audience. He suggests:

A magic folk tale concerned not only the miraculous turn of events in the story, but also the magical play of words by the teller as performer ... Telling a magic folk tale was and is not unlike performing a magic trick, and depending on the art of the storyteller, listeners are placed under a spell. They are ... transcending reality for a brief moment, to be transported to extraordinary realms of experience.
(1997: 63)

In this characterisation, cinema, like fairy tale, is a form of illusion, its viewers willingly suspending disbelief in order to surpass reality and experience the magical. Zipes notes the association between early filmmakers and stage magic – “magic lantern shows, magician's tricks, shadow theatres, animation devices...” (1997: 68) – the filmmaker becomes the magician, the showman with the power of technological marvels, exerting the same spell as the storyteller, but with new, flashy special effects.

The interaction of film and fairy tale does not, however, constitute an unproblematical romance. While the magic of film may parallel some aspects of fairy tale, at the same time a visual medium can be crippling to the kind of imaginative exercise usually required of the reader by almost any magical narrative⁴. In this context, film's presentation of realism is a problem as well as a strength. The recording eye of the camera intrinsically designates its objects as real, and the effect of watching a film is that of immersion in a highly detailed reality. In contrast, most forms of fantasy, fairy tale included, work on evocation, rather than being explicit; the process of imaginative interaction with the fantasy requires a tailoring of the fantasy world to the psychological

³ This is, of course, another aspect of the debate which André Bazin has called “the quarrel over realism in art” which arises from ongoing technical refinement: he suggests that the eye of the camera has the power to satisfy both “our obsession with realism” and “our appetite for illusion” (1967: 12). Photography and film are particularly suited to the depiction of the fantastic because they are able to produce “a hallucination that is also a fact” (1967: 16).

⁴ Tolkien's essay “On Fairy Stories” goes as far as to deny the validity of illustrated literary fairy tale: “The radical distinction between all art (including drama) that offers a *visible* presentation and true literature is that it imposes one visible form. Literature works from mind to mind and is thus more progenitive” (1966: 80).

reality of the individual.⁵ Film, in its extreme visuality, operates directly against this: a fairy-tale medium is specifically not realistic, and it may be jarring to have realistic representation on screen. On the other hand, however, film paradoxically offers the potential for sending strong signals through visual details of setting and costume – the presence of self-conscious medievalism in a fairy-tale film, together with details of fairy-tale landscapes (forests, mountains, castles) may effectively signal the unreality of long ago and far away. Thus The Company of Wolves and The Grimm Brothers' Snow White feature particularly vast and Gothic stretches of forest, while Ever After makes effective use of medieval castles, sweeping landscapes and beautiful costumes. Cocteau's unexplained surrealist images in the Beast's castle, and Jordan's dense use of apparently disconnected symbol (animals, roses, etc) fulfil the same function.

Despite various thematic matches between film and fairy-tale narrative, cinematic versions of fairy tale offer their own pitfalls and drawbacks. While the power of the film medium in modern society has provided a fertile new ground for fairy-tale cultural and ideological production, the medium of film itself offers problems as well as possibilities for fairy tale. One of the most insidious tendencies has been that of the powerful new visual medium, rooted firmly in modern technological popular culture, to supplant all other versions, and in so doing, to claim the folk voice originally excluded by the adaptation of fairy tale into a literary form. While parallel in many ways to the process by which oral folktale became written fairy tale, the adaptation from written fairy tale into fairy-tale film is more problematical precisely because of the power of the film medium, and the striking fit between some narrative aspects of fairy tale, and the narrative function of film. To unwrap the dangers of this process will require examination of the uneasy, contested spaces of folk culture, popular culture, and mass culture.

⁵ Within the science fiction/fantasy community, for example, film versions of fantasy classics such as Tolkien's Lord of the Rings are generally greeted with contempt and outrage. The problem is that no film-maker's vision will ever match the internal vision, often dearly held, of the reader. This is true of any film adaptation, but with fantasy texts the process of imaginative re-creation is stronger and more personal because of its distance from actual models. The success of Peter Jackson's recent film versions of the first two books of Lord of the Rings suggests that his personal vision of the marvellous has sufficient richness and integrity to content even die-hard fans. However, a certain amount of fan outrage has greeted the second film's deviations from the book, and in fact much of the box-office success of the two movies reflects the approval of an audience who has not read Tolkien and simply appreciates a well-made action film.

Film and the folk voice

A real fairy tale, a tale in its true function, is a tale within a circle of listeners.
(Karel Capek, in Warner, 1995: 17)

As one of the more powerful and pervasive forms of popular culture in the twentieth century, film offers an interesting context for the folk voice of fairy tale. Although the folk tale has been replaced gradually with the literary fairy tale in the last few centuries, film versions of fairy tale tend to flirt superficially with the folk voice. As the most prevalent cinematic experience in Western culture, Hollywood film caters to a popular market, offering both entertainment and the opportunity to participate in a popular awareness of actors and film which centres on the Hollywood star system. Although a form of mass culture in its reliance on the budgets of wealthy studios, and the resulting need to commodify film in order to fill cinema seats, film functions in modern Western culture as a group and social activity whose audience participate in an essentially non-literary popular culture. The cinema experience offers far more of group participation than reading a written text. This inheres not only in the simultaneous experience of the film text, with shared reactions such as laughter, but in the social activity around a common interest in film genres or specific stars, meeting to view a film, the discussion which often takes place either before or afterwards over drinks or a meal. The experience of a home viewing of the video or DVD version of a film is an even more pronounced version of this communality. This is in many ways a superficial restoration of the communal folk experience of storytelling, in some senses reversing the historical translation of the oral folk voice into a written form experienced only by the individual. However, while a film is certainly more communal than a single individual reading a book, it is not a true folk culture. The experience may be shared by the group, but it is not *produced* from within the group, nor does the production come from a source which has the same status – here defined economically – as group members. Likewise, interaction with the film narrative cannot equal the folk experience since film is a one-way process. The film modifies the experience of the viewer, but the film is not a genuine oral voice and cannot in its turn be modified in response to the audience, other than on the macro level represented by the research done by a studio's marketing arm before the next film is made. Film imitates but cannot claim to be folk culture.⁶

⁶ In the terms discussed above, possibly the closest that twentieth century popular culture comes to the original oral folk voice is the experience of reading aloud to a child. This is a more genuinely communal and interactive process despite its almost invariable reliance on a written text; it is also an oral tradition of which Disney, certainly, is highly aware.

In keeping with film's apparently transparent offer of itself as a substitute oral and folk tradition, many fairy-tale films rely heavily on an explicit evocation of the folk voice in order to frame and contextualise their narratives. In apparently receiving the story from the physical presence or voice of an on-screen narrator, the viewer is able to participate in the removal of the tale from literary capture, placing him or herself in the position of audience to an oral storyteller. Thus many Disney films begin with a voice-over giving the initial scenario of the tale in traditional fairy-tale form: "Once upon a time." This is usually accompanied by static images which characterise tale as artefact – Sleeping Beauty's medieval stills, Beauty and the Beast's stained-glass windows, the Grecian vases of Hercules. At the same time, Disney's films characteristically hedge their bets: the voice-over may well be associated with stills which strongly associate the tale with the written tradition, in the form of a beautifully calligraphed and illuminated book whose pages are turned as the voice-over progresses (Sleeping Beauty, Snow White). As well as invoking the nostalgic memory of the parent-to-child oral voice and the familiar form of the literary fairy tale, this also claims the historical status of literature for the film. The use of this motif in Dreamworks' Shrek (2001) was notable for its acute and cynical insight into the actual status of the original tale as written narrative – Shrek's voice reads out the dragon-slaying fairy tale, after which the camera pulls back to reveal that the book is being used as toilet paper. This nods ironically to the fact that film versions of fairy tale have all but replaced the written.

The result of the superficial representation of both oral and written narrative in cinematic fairy tales is effectively to overwrite the literary and oral with the cinematic. Jack Zipes argues that film has "silenced the personal and communal voice of the oral magic tales and obfuscated the personal voice of literary fairy-tale narratives" (1997: 69). This is certainly true of Disney and, despite their more ironic stance, Dreamworks. However, a more genuine and less obfuscatory use of film's potential to re-instate the folk voice can be seen in Jordan's The Company of Wolves, where frame narratives and tale-within-tale provide a more sustained effort to reproduce the folk voice. This is strengthened by the film's attention to the character of the oral storytellers (unlike Disney's disembodied voices), and their association of that oral voice with the readily identifiable grandmother archetype. This follows Marina Warner's typifying of the folk voice as a female voice: she comments that "the connection of old women's speech and the consolatory, erotic, often fanciful fable appears deeply entwined in language itself, and with women's speaking roles" (1995: 14). The fact that Disney's voice-overs are characteristically *male* underlines in yet another fashion the degree to which Disney films are alienated from any genuine folk expression.

Despite Jordan's innovative use of the folk voice in film, the bulk of contemporary fairy-tale films represent an appropriation rather than an exploration or celebration of folk narrative, in a process that exemplifies the uneasy and problematical intersections between popular or folk cultures, and the mass culture of consumerism. Given the domination of film narrative by Hollywood, and the domination of animated fairy-tale narrative by Disney, the most common use of the folk aspects of fairy tale is manipulative in the extreme. Zipes notes the process whereby folk culture is re-defined as "feudal artwork": rather as the upper classes appropriated folk narrative in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the folk voice in the twentieth century is colonised by a ruling monolith, although one which is commercial rather than aristocratic. Zipes' characterization of fairy tale as "secular instructive narratives" offering "strategies of intervention within the civilising process" (1997: 65) becomes more sinister when, rather than reflecting the mores and beliefs of the folk culture, fairy tales are used to reflect the conservative and market-driven ideologies of large companies marketing consumer culture. The alarming thing about such mass cultural productions is the way in which they seek to duplicate and usurp the popular or folk voice.

I have already discussed at some length the functioning of consumer culture and its effect on popular literary cultures (see Chapter I). Theories of the mass market, based on the ideas of Adorno and Horkheimer, suggest that modern consumer culture is a process of the deliberate discouragement of imaginative or intellectual response to the cultural products of the mass market; instead, the receiver of such artifacts is lulled, via strategies such as nostalgia, familiarity and superficial novelty, into the passive acceptance of a standardised cultural product (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1945; Zipes, 1979)⁷. The essentially reciprocal functioning of a folk culture is thus completely erased. Adorno and Horkheimer stress the absolute lack of true participation by the public in mass cultural production:

The attitude of the public, which ostensibly and actually favours the system of the culture industry, is a part of the system and not an excuse for it. If one branch of art follows the same formula as one with a very different medium and content ... if a movement from a Beethoven symphony is crudely 'adapted' for a film soundtrack in the same way that a Tolstoy novel is garbled in a film script; then the claim

⁷ While a strong body of criticism exists along these lines, there are, of course, opposing schools of thought; Carroll, for example, maintains that numerous examples of popular art demonstrate clearly that "there is no necessary connection between accessibility and a passive audience response", and that indeed, "in some cases, the very success of the mass artwork presupposes active spectatorship" (1998: 38-39). This line of thought, however, is more appropriate to the *sf/fantasy ghetto* I have already discussed, in which the highly specific readership may, indeed, require active participation in the text – or, indeed, to written narratives generally, as Carroll demonstrates (1998: 40-41). In the case of popular film, however, and particularly Disney animation, I feel that the texts represent the particular end of the spectrum which most sets out to create a passive audience response, and which is thus most appropriate to the Adorno/Horkheimer school of theory I am employing.

that this is done to satisfy the spontaneous wishes of the public is no more than hot air. We are closer to the facts if we explain these phenomena as inherent in the technical and personnel apparatus which, down to its last cog, itself forms part of the economic mechanism of selection.... In our age the objective social tendency is incarnate in the hidden subjective purposes of company directors.... (1945 [1993]: 32)

By this definition, mass culture and folk culture are mutually exclusive: there can be no true "objective social tendency", in Adorno and Horkheimer's words, because original and spontaneous cultural impulses are modified by the purposes of mass cultural monoliths. There can therefore be no folk voice in mass culture. This means that the pretensions to the folk voice in many fairy-tale films are, as suggested above, "hot air" – their purpose is solely to conceal their commercial manipulations.

In looking at the fairy-tale productions of cinema over the last century, it is thus necessary to separate, as far as possible given film's intrinsic functioning as mass culture, the use of fairy-tale motifs as artistic explorations in the tradition of intellectual literature, from the use of folkloric motifs in the service of consumer culture. In my analysis, I shall further separate live action film from animation, noting that there is an interesting tendency for serious fairy-tale exploration to be associated with the former rather than the latter. Live action categories, however, also include the standard Hollywood film which uses, to a greater or lesser extent, fairy-tale motifs in the pursuit of the romantic movie.

Live action fairy-tale film: narrative explorations

An early and particularly interesting exploration of fairy tale in the film medium is offered by Jean Cocteau's self-consciously artistic use of Mme Le Prince de Beaumont's "Beauty and the Beast" in his 1946 film, *La Belle et La Bête*. Rebecca Pauley has commented on Cocteau's film as a nostalgic and utopian use of the fairy tale as a response to the horrors of the war years: "his wish to return to the world of creative freedom and vitality which had been so crushed by World War Two and the German occupation" (1989: 86). On another, more individual level, the film provides a site for the exploration of Cocteau's sense of the filmmaker as artist or poet, which is possible through his status as *auteur* and his complete artistic control over the production, direction and script (Susan Hayward, 1996:47). Most strikingly, however, the film offers a particularly individual response to the problem of fairy-tale narrative in live-action cinema, in Cocteau's use of near-Surrealist visual and narrative effects which echo and re-invent fairy tale's problematical relationship with reality.

To identify Cocteau with the Surrealist movement is a thorny issue, but a link which is useful for my investigation of fairy-tale film's strategies to overcome the clash between the unreality of fairy tale and the realism of the camera. Critical responses to Cocteau's works often invoke surrealism; Pauley, for example, comments on the film as "an illustration of the dangerous yet necessary sexual journey into the realm of the surreal" (1989: 89), and Arthur Evans comments that Cocteau's films are "strangely reminiscent of the surrealists' dreamworlds" (1977: 87). Evans also notes that Cocteau was invited to join the "highly exclusive" surrealist movement, but declined, possibly because he did not hold with the revolutionary aspects of the group (1977: 85). Breton's definitions of surrealism include an awareness of "interior reality and exterior reality as two elements in process of unification, of finally becoming *one*" (1978: 116). Cocteau shares with the surrealists an interest in the unconscious, in dreams and images which are an end in themselves, and which do not need to be connected by reason or logic; what Breton has called "the omnipotence of the dream and ... the disinterested play of thought" (1978: 122). Where Cocteau diverges from this, however, is in his awareness of aesthetics, structure, system: Breton calls for "thought in the absence of all control exercised by reason and outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations" (1978: 122), while Cocteau freely uses the strong structures and systems of fairy tale and myth, and has a dedication to beauty which has led to his films being described as "painterly" and "picturesque" (Hayward, 1996: 47).

Where Cocteau's common concerns with surrealism are interesting is in precisely this clash between structure and the free play of thought. Both fairy tale and surrealism reject the conventional, realist representations of most art and literature, but they also have different attitudes to realism, related but distinct. Surrealism entails a process of disconnection between elements, whereas fairy tale presupposes some kind of intrinsic connection, even if it is a magical connection which is never explained: picking a rose has the direct causal effect of angering the Beast and leading to his demand for the merchant's daughter, even if you never know why the rose is so important. In Cocteau's film, the presence of living statues is never explained; the statues and living human arms of the Beast's castle provide a surreal interpretation of Mme de Beaumont's invisible, magical servants, in a similar fashion to Disney's transformation of invisible servants into animated domestic items⁸. Essentially, fairy tale depends on the familiar, where surrealism insists on the unfamiliarity of the familiar. Nonetheless, they share the

⁸ Invisible servants are a terrible idea for film; a visual medium makes heavy work of the unseen, a fact which optimistic filmmakers might do well to consider before making any more unsuccessful versions of The Invisible Man.

metafictional quality of problematising the real, a tendency which Cocteau develops in various ways in the film, and which serves to create and intensify the atmosphere of otherworldly strangeness which pervades La Belle et La Bête: the visual representation of the magical as a dislocation of the real. Thus gates open invisibly, statues have living eyes, living arms hold candlesticks or serve a meal, and Belle drifts down the corridor in a magical, dreamlike glide which gives, in Hayward's words, "the illusion that she [is] floating into her unconscious" (1996: 45). The film's conclusion, shorn of the French tale's triumphal journey to a restored kingdom, and the celebratory presence of the families of both Belle and the transformed prince, offers a similar sense of dislocation. The couple rises into the air in a vivid symbolic gesture which removes them from narrative causation as much as visually celebrating the happy conclusion to the tale.

Not all aspects of the film counteract film realism by surreal elements; Cocteau's techniques are more varied than this. One of the best examples is the extreme stylisation of acting technique in the film. The actors' exaggerated gestures, carefully posed static quality and choreographed movements operate similarly to the frame narrative in other fairy-tale films - to heighten, highlight and draw attention to the fairy tale's essential unreality. The film offers a system of encoding similar to that of ballet or opera, one of ritualised gesture rather than realistic emotion. This, together with the film's framing by blackboard messages which insist on its imaginative and constructed nature, goes some way towards counteracting the visual realism of the film genre. In addition, like more recent films such as Ever After, the film makes use of the visual in its careful seventeenth-century costuming, which explicitly invokes the distant unreality of the original French tale. This is paralleled by the film's recurring interest in artefact: the rose of the original tale is expanded by Cocteau into a series of magical symbols – rose, key, glove, mirror and horse – all of which invoke fairy-tale traditions as well as rendering visual and concrete the Beast's magical power.

The choice of the "Beauty and the Beast" tale itself is interesting for Cocteau's surrealist quality. Many versions of Beauty and the Beast suffer from a strange moment of regret at the transformation of Beast into handsome prince. Both Beauty and the audience find themselves mourning the loss of the Beast, with whom they have identified during the course of the film⁹. In Cocteau's version, the transformation of Beast into prince is

⁹ Michael Popkin reports the classic response of Greta Garbo to the film – "Give me back my Beast" (1982: 101, quoting Pauline Kael's study). Popkin draws interesting parallels with King Kong, finding a similar process of audience identification with the Beast (1982: 101 ff). The Disney version has the same problem (see below).

utilised and highlighted as another moment of surrealist dislocation – the causal process of Belle’s attraction to the Beast is disrupted, replaced by the necessary fairy-tale denouement which overturns the causal relationship already set up. This is complicated by the adaptations Cocteau has made to the original tale, in the form of Avenant, Belle’s rejected suitor, played by Jean Marais, the same actor who plays Beast and Prince. There is no real reason why the Prince should be physically identical to Avenant, who is identified as a complete cad despite his handsome exterior, and who brings about his own downfall by desecrating the Temple of Diana. The transformation attempts to render neatly symmetrical the theme of exterior versus interior value – the Beast looks ugly but is good, Avenant looks good but is worthless, and the transformation relocates all value in a strictly binary sense, with interior worth mirrored absolutely by exterior appearance. The stylised structures of fairy tale are here exaggerated, motifs of reflection and repetition taken to self-conscious extremes; however, this over-neatness is partially undercut by the processes through which the audience becomes identified with the visual presence of the Beast.

It is possible to see Cocteau’s inclusion of Avenant in his adaptation as another concession to the demands of a visual medium: it is interesting that Disney’s Beauty and the Beast makes a similar addition, in the figure of Gaston. It is almost as though the visual nature of film requires a concrete, externalised representation of the film’s moral message: it is not appearance that is important, but inner worth that counts. Mme de Beaumont’s French original makes the point that “It is neither handsome looks nor intelligence that makes a woman happy. It is good character, virtue and kindness...” (in Zipes, 1989: 243); Cocteau’s film tends to blur the issue of intelligence in order to focus on the problem of exterior appearance. Like invisible servants, the moral of de Beaumont’s tale almost directly denies the functioning of film; in a visual medium, it is *entirely* appearance that counts. The dislocated, nebulous idea of exterior beauty and inner worthlessness needs to be dramatised and made concrete, if it is to have any significance in the visual structures of the film. This also accounts for the exaggerated tendency, in film versions of the tale, for the audience to regret the loss of the Beast at the moment of transformation. The visual function of film allows for strong audience identification with the figure of the Beast, far more compelling as a visual icon than as a literary monster.

Cocteau’s script calls for the Beast to have “the appearance of a werewolf, with long fangs and grotesque features” (1972: 209). This makes for interesting parallels with the other twentieth-century film offering serious treatment of fairy-tale motifs, Neil Jordan’s

The Company of Wolves (1984). This is a particularly interesting work given that the film was based on elements from Angela Carter's Bloody Chamber collection, and Carter herself co-wrote the script with Jordan. While following Carter's interest in the development of female sexuality under patriarchy through the self-conscious re-writing of fairy tales, the film offers a stunning visual re-interpretation of Carter's Gothic-flavoured tales, as well as a creative use of framing narrative, embedded tales and the oral voice. Given that Jordan uses the framing narrative of the dream to justify his use of disconnected and nightmarish visual images (unlike Cocteau, who simply includes them and leaves his viewers to deal with the resulting illogic), the self-possessed heroine Rosaleen could be seen as a twentieth-century Alice, moving through the potential threat of the dreamworld with unimpaired calm¹⁰. She evokes beautifully the child in Carter's tale "The Company of Wolves," who "stands and moves within the invisible pentacle of her own virginity... she is a closed system, she does not know how to shiver" (1979: 114). The closed systems are also those of fairy tale, each self-contained narrative an investigation not only of narrative, but of sexual subjectivity.

Carter seems to have been aware of the problems of film for fairy tale: Susannah Clapp's introduction to a collection of Carter's radio scripts and screenplays quotes her as saying, in an echo of Tolkien, that radio is "the most visual of mediums because you cannot see it" (in Carter, 1996: ix). Company of Wolves, however, rises triumphantly above the dangers of the visual, since its visual texture is ambiguously symbolic enough to offer even more imaginative potential than it does imaginative realisation. Like Cocteau, Jordan's techniques are many and various, but he is able to make use of more developed cinematic technology – special effects, colour, a larger cast and budget, an audience more familiar with cinema and Freud – to achieve an absorbing and visually compelling film¹¹. Frame tale and embedded narrative allow for a powerful and authentic sense of the folk voice, with numerous folktales – the wedding night werewolf, the wronged village witch, the young man meeting the devil in the forest – told in voice-over by Rosaleen's grandmother or Rosaleen herself, and given added impact by their rather sumptuous visual realisation. (The aristocratic wedding banquet, interrupted by

¹⁰ Carter's original script has Rosaleen's older sister as the frame dreamer, not Rosaleen herself (1997: 186). Significantly, the older sister (later eaten by wolves) is called Alice. If this deliberately recalls Carroll's Alice, it is as a warning: Victorian ideals of childhood innocence are doomed in this film narrative.

¹¹ The film plays continually with the "seeing is believing" motif, undercutting the power of the visual in various ways – "What about touching?", with the severed human hand; "I don't believe it, even though I see it", in the interchange with the Hunter. At one point Rosaleen herself comments that "They say seeing is believing, but I'd never swear to it." More than seeing, magical narrative requires imaginative engagement which transcends the visual.

witchcraft and general werewolf mayhem, is a visual tour de force). Such folktales give depth and significance to the fairly straightforward tale of Rosaleen and her village, the site of the Red Riding Hood story; the folk voice, together with the use of visual symbol, diversify the narratives so that their visual realisation is not restrictive.

Jordan's Gothic forest and the village itself, a peasant seventeenth-century setting, are another example of the power of live-action film to create the "long ago and far away" feel of fairy tale, an essential unreality despite the realism of the setting. Carter's script interestingly describes the forest as both "the mysterious forest of the European imagination" and "a brooding, Disney forest" (1997: 187): the film invokes modern visual intertexts as well as traditional, to add depth and texture. In addition, the film is packed with images of nightmare and the unconscious, which operate with Freudian implication – animated childhood toys, a forest filled with snakes, toads and ravens, and apparently random cuts to, for example, white roses turning slowly red. Jordan manages the seemingly impossible feat of translating into visual terms the richness of Carter's Gothic prose. His special effects also access the element of brutal violence which critics such as Maria Tatar (1984) have found in fairy tale – the werewolf transformations in *Company of Wolves* are horrific even by the standards of the modern horror film, with heaving, warping bodies and splitting flesh. In Carter's exploration, this comes to represent the fear the inexperienced adolescent has for the purely physical – and potentially painful – aspects of the physical sexual act. The film invokes something of the violence of the horror film, but its images, while being the standard forests, wolves and transformation scenes of horror and the Gothic, are more aware of symbolism. The bloody severed head of a werewolf lands in a bucket of milk, inviting comparisons with the film's running use of white and red to suggest innocence and sexual experience, or virginity and deflowerment. Violence is never gratuitous, always carefully judged within the film's symbolic structures.

The dream-sequence framing of the film obviously allows Jordan free play with the kind of unreality necessary to overcome live action film's reproduction of realistic scenes, although in some ways its formless, nightmare qualities work against the structuredness of tale¹². At the same time, it greatly empowers Carter's feminist explorations in

¹² Tolkien denies narratives framed as dream the status of fairy tale: he argues, "If a waking writer tells you that his tale is only a thing imagined in his sleep, he cheats deliberately on the primal desire at the heart of Faërie: the realisation, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder" (1966: 14). Jordan's film seems to avoid this trap because of the substantial reality of Rosaleen's fairy-tale village setting, which allows the dream narrative to access the "long ago and far away" of fairy tale as a vivid *psychological* reality.

psychological terms: while we obviously explore Rosaleen's adolescent dream, we are encouraged to move more deeply into her unconscious, away from normal reality. Jordan's awareness of the marvellous apparently conflates the unconscious and dream with fairy-tale symbol. Unstructured dream narrative (Rosaleen's sister attacked by toys/wolves) gives way to a deeper, more structured dream (Red Riding Hood's village), which in turn moves deeper into embedded narratives (Granny's tales, and later Rosaleen's own). While, paradoxically, structure intensifies the deeper we go, so too does psychological significance, as Jordan tempers the fairly standard revenge fantasies of a younger sibling with a more complex interaction between desire and social conditioning. As is appropriate to any reworking of Carter, the film explores the effect of social structures – the village, the folktales of the grandmother – on the adolescent sexual development of Rosaleen. Like Carter's other heroines, she must escape the narratives imposed by her society if she is to function autonomously as a woman and a sexual being in her own right.

Women are the tellers of tales in the film, a characterisation which is appropriate for Carter's feminist intentions, but which also recalls, as mentioned above, Marina Warner's identification of the female voice as the original purveyor of folklore. She argues that women's folktale narratives "reveal possibilities ... map out a different way and a new perception of love, marriage, women's skills, thus advocating a means of escaping imposed limits and prescribed destiny" (1995: 24). Both Carter and Jordan would argue otherwise. Rosaleen's Granny is an archetypal tale-telling figure, the repository of experience and social wisdom, yet in Jordan's film she is the most reactionary figure. Her strictures ("Don't stray from the path!") and her social awareness are constructed entirely around warning and threat, the awareness of male sexuality as violence, and any female sexual impulse as transgressive and inviting disaster. Thus men are "nice as pie until they've had their way with you. But once the bloom is gone, the beast comes out." Her narratives, which are repeated either to or by Rosaleen in the film, are cautionary tales which insist on the dangers of untrammelled sexuality, of the woman who chooses a "travelling man" whose eyebrows meet, rather than the known safety of a village man "not too shy to piss in a pot." This parallels the tension between Rosaleen's suitors, the Amorous Boy who stands for socially-sanctioned sexuality ("A walk... in the woods, on Sunday, after service ... Tell your mother I'll be with you"), and the more powerful and dangerous sexual presence of the Hunter.

Granny is a strangely ambiguous figure, though – she is at once protective and threatening, reassuring Rosaleen of her safety within the web of Granny's knowledge and

experience, even while the old woman's spectacles catch the light to silver over eerily, like a wolf's eyes. Her animated fox-fur is another association between the old woman and the life of the wild predator. While Rosaleen's experiences with the werewolf Hunter ultimately deny everything Granny has told her, Granny is nonetheless a figure of female power in the text, and presumably, since she is Rosaleen's father's mother, one of sexual experience. In some ways she seems to represent a form of female power through tale-telling, apart from the male, denying any possible alliance on equal terms – she has moved through the processes of socially sanctioned sexuality and now stands outside them, isolated in her hut in the forest. The female patterns she offers Rosaleen are those of patriarchy, either the submissive woman of the wedding-night werewolf tale, or the demonised witch-figure of the aristocratic banquet. In Carter's original tale, "The Werewolf", the grandmother *is* the werewolf; the girl-child, besting the wolf, is also heir to her grandmother's house and, presumably, demonic female powers. Jordan's film chooses rather to play on the grandmother figure as a reactionary social force, attempting to indoctrinate successive generations into a limited rather than a powerful female sexuality, competing with her daughter-in-law for the attentions of her son in the classic patriarchal pattern. Ultimately she is reduced to a china doll, her strictures (and her tales) empty and worthless; but the sense of unease remains.

Whatever Granny's intentions in the warning folklore she imparts to Rosaleen, the effect on Rosaleen herself is empowering; the lessons Rosaleen learns from the folktales are not those intended by their teller. Rather than being warned, Rosaleen's response to the tales is one of aroused curiosity. The folk patterns of wolf/man/woman are re-interpreted, not only through the lens of Rosaleen's adolescent sexual curiosity, but through the weakening of the patriarchal bonds with each succeeding generation. Rosaleen's mother offers an antidote to the superstitious fears of the grandmother: where Granny believes that men are beasts and girls who stray will be eaten, the mother has a strong sense of Carter-esque equality: "your granny ... knows a lot, but she doesn't know everything. If there's a beast in men it meets its match in women too." This, and the conclusion to Rosaleen's Red Riding Hood tale, parallels the conclusion to Carter's "The Tiger's Bride", where, at the moment of transformation, Beauty becomes Beast rather than Beast becoming Prince. In her analysis of the film, Carole Zucker notes that "it is only [Rosaleen's] mother, the character closest to the natural world, who recognises the wolf as her daughter and implores the group of gathered hunters not to shoot" (2000: 69). Like Carter's progression of stories in The Bloody Chamber, the film offers a successive sense of female sexual identity, each generation less entrapped than the one before.

In this investigation of female sexuality, the Red Riding Hood story is at the heart of the film. The tale is one which has always seemed inherently concerned with sexual relations, even before Carter's feminist rewrites. Carter's script for the film specifically invokes the Gustav Doré illustrations to the Red Riding Hood story (1996: 187); Doré gives an essentially sexualised interpretation which tends to focus on the girl's horrified fascination with the wolf, depicted as a dark, voracious presence considerably larger than the child. Doré's illustrations pick up on essential undercurrents in the tale. The familiar Perrault elements - forest, animal, innocently straying girl, bedroom strip-tease and symbolic rape - cast woman both as victim and as transgressor who invites her own destruction. Zipes, in his introduction to a collection of Red Riding Hood retellings (1993), argues that this is a distortion of the tale's original import. He traces the development of the tale from the original folk form, an adolescent initiatory scenario where the girl outwits the beast and escapes, through Perrault's adaptations into a patriarchal fable which transforms the girl into an object of sadistic exploitation (Zipes, 1993: 23-27). Carter and Jordan's self-aware heroine is in some ways an antidote to this patriarchal retelling; with a knife in her basket, she is unafraid of the forests, and even in the confrontation with the werewolf, uses the Hunter's own shotgun against him rather than passively awaiting rescue.

At the same time, Rosaleen's own interpretation of her granny's tales makes her perfectly aware of the sexual initiation she is being offered. This also echoes aspects of Red Riding Hood in popular culture, as noted by Zipes: "Almost all the commodified forms of Little Red Riding Hood as sex object portray her as thoroughly grown-up and desirous of some kind of sexual assignation with the wolf" (1993: 8-9). Thus, while the film attempts to address Red Riding Hood as victim, it perhaps fails to elude the process of film itself, both patriarchal and commodifying: the camera's association with a male gaze, and the female's inevitable designation as object. In fact, this also reflects entrapment within the structures of fairy tale itself. The picnic scene is an extended flirtation between Rosaleen and the Hunter, with what Carter's script describes as a "terrific erotic charge between them" (1997: 234); they tussle, exchange suggestive quips about the magic object the Hunter has in his trousers, and part with Rosaleen's suggestion that her reward for winning their bet should be the compass itself, the phallic object they have been discussing. Jordan's Hunter, urbane, foreign and definitely upper-class, is an icon of male sexual experience, set up in contrast to the callow village lad who most resembles the sailor doll of the frame narrative - "They're clowns, the village boys." The figure of Rosaleen thus becomes ambiguous, moving between the two competing narratives. On the one hand, the objectifying male gaze of the camera highlights the tale's inherent

interest in a transgressive female figure who responds to a promise of male skill that is also symbolised as male power – as Zipes has noted, this “reinforces the notion that ‘women want to be raped.’” (1993: 11). On the other, Carter attempts to revive the passive girl of Perrault’s tale and to give her both an awareness of her choices, and access to genuine desire, although, like “The Tiger’s Bride”, at the price of rejecting her society completely.

It is possible to see some of this ambiguity and unease around the film’s sexual politics as a direct result of film narrative itself as a process of multiple authorship. The film operates firmly within the modern film production system, which entails potentially enormous divisions between the script on one hand, and the interpretations of the director on the other. Unlike Cocteau’s *La Belle et la Bête*, where the hand of Cocteau the *auteur* is discernible in the film’s artistic integrity, *The Company of Wolves* represents Carter’s script under Jordan’s direction, and the differences between the original script and the final film product are striking. While Carter may be a feminist scriptwriter rewriting fairy tale, Jordan is a male director, and the gaze of the camera is his, not Carter’s. The changes are most apparent in the ending of both Red Riding Hood narrative and frame narrative. Carter’s script reproduces the strong female assertion of the child faced with the male monster: “I’m nobody’s meat, not I!” Jordan’s film omits this, and Rosaleen’s admonishing tone as she instructs the transformed Hunter, “You must be a wolf for good and all ... Not a gentleman or a prince of darkness. But an honest, good wolf...” (1996: 241). Her scripted words acknowledge the dangers of the Hunter’s seductive human identity; unlike the film version of Rosaleen, she can see through the façade of sexual experience. Rosaleen’s concluding story, from the same scene in the script, is of “love between wolves”, not of a naked wolf-girl; the objectifying gaze of the camera is particularly evident in the largely pointless fragment of wolf-girl narrative and her problematical association with “the world below” and the demonic female.

The clash between Jordan and Carter’s approaches here is possibly more extreme because of the tradition of horror film in which *The Company of Wolves* operates – fairy tale is not the only structural tradition at work. The classic horror movie is a particularly male tradition, based on the stereotype of a passive female victim under threat from forces that often represent exaggerated male sexuality (the vampire, the monster, the stalker of films such as *Friday 13th* and *Nightmare on Elm Street*). Thus, despite Rosaleen’s triumphant transformation at the end of the Red Riding Hood narrative, the ending of the actual film is far from upbeat from a feminist point of view. In the frame narrative of Rosaleen

dreaming, her dream is interrupted by the intrusion of wolves into her bedroom, to crash first through a portrait of a girl in the passage outside her bedroom, and then in through the bedroom window itself. This blurring of dream and reality effectively undoes all the resolution of the dream narrative: despite having come to terms with adult sexuality through the wolf-symbols of the dream, Rosaleen still undergoes metaphorical rape as she awakens to the sound of shattering glass. The voice-over which concludes the film is a Perrault-style and patriarchalist warning not to stray, since “sweetest tongue has sharpest tooth”. Zucker comments, “The sweet tongue is Rosaleen’s dream of a mellifluous fusion of nature and culture, of powerful femininity and desire without reproach. The sharp tooth must then surely be the more painful reality into which Rosaleen must grow up. It is not a happy ending.” (2000: 70). The film’s ending thus extends fairy tale’s classic problematisation of the borders between fantasy and reality, here blurring them to anxiety-causing effect. I would argue that the ending has as much to do with the expectations of the horror film, which tend towards one last, unexpected scream from the passive female, one last resurgence of the evil (male) threat. Many horror films similarly refuse to completely destroy the monster, leaving an ambiguous and open-ended sense of menace, one last intrusion of the fantasy into the mundane.¹³ In Carter’s original script, the concluding image is very different:

ALICE is sitting on her bed ... The door is still open and the tangle of the forest can be seen sprouting through it.

ALICE suddenly springs off the bed, up into the air, as if off a diving board. She curls, in a graceful jack-knife and plummets towards the floor. The floor parts. It is in fact water. She vanishes beneath it.

The floor ripples, with the aftermath of her dive. Gradually it settles back into plain floor again.

We see the room, for a beat, half-forest, half-girl’s bedroom. There is a whining at the door. It opens, under the pressure of one wolf’s snout. First the he-wolf enters, then the she-wolf. They nose their way around ALICE’s things.

(1996: 244)

This beautifully-reversed image of female rather than male penetration provides a triumphant and transcendent moment in which the adolescent girl is transformed into the sexually mature adult, equal to the male, and in which the girl chooses to abdicate her innocence in an act which celebrates as well as relinquishes it. It is a great pity that Jordan could not have used this final image, since his choice of conclusion plunges Carter’s script back into the darkness and male threat of Perrault’s version, while also succumbing to the pressures of the horror film genre. Thus, although offering a powerful and complex use of film’s visual capacity, Company of Wolves is ultimately a

¹³ And the potential for a sequel.

flawed artwork, its cinematic format the site of tension, and its treatment of fairy-tale narrative reactionary as well as innovative.

Live action fairy tale: the Hollywood movie

Quite apart from the narrative explorations of filmmakers such as Cocteau and Jordan, the fairy tale occupies a fairly prominent place in the commodity arsenal of the popular Hollywood movie. As I suggested above, the classic happy-ever-after conclusion of the fairy tale, together with its recurring theme of the rise to success and happiness of a disadvantaged protagonist, is a fertile ground for commercial cinema. The American Dream so beloved by Hollywood is itself a fairy-tale narrative – hard work and obeying the rules is all that is needed for wealth and the happily-ever-after of marriage and a family. The use of fairy tale also provides an interesting counterpoint to the decline of the importance of story or script in popular Hollywood film. Fairy tale provides strong and recognisable narrative which is not too demanding or complex, and which fills the painful gap left in commercial film by the diminishing importance of the actual script against big-name stars, high production values and special effects.

The recent run of fairy-tale films, most notably Ever After (1998) and Snow White (1997), but also productions such as Freeway (1996), in some senses looks back to Gary Marshall's 1990 production, Pretty Woman¹⁴. This self-conscious use of the Cinderella tale was highly successful; the structure of the Hollywood romantic comedy merged seamlessly with the rags-to-riches tale of Cinderella, rendered contemporary by the modern setting and innovative use of recognisable modern archetypes – the whore-with-the-heart-of-gold, the soulless big businessman redeemed by the interaction. While successful, the film's use of fairy tale was also intrinsically uncritical, relying on an audience response of nostalgia for the familiar fairy-tale motifs, and ignoring their more unpleasant patriarchalist implications. This, together with the film's modern setting, allowed Pretty Woman to negotiate the familiarity/novelty tension which I have discussed already as a central aspect of popular cultural productions (see Chapter I). Later films such as Freeway and Ever After followed the same, highly successful formula, although Freeway explored a far darker aspect of Red Riding Hood than Ever After does with Cinderella. For my purposes, however, neither Freeway nor Pretty Woman correspond to my definition of fairy tale: they are contemporary films which use fairy-

¹⁴ And, before that, the Richard Chamberlain vehicle The Slipper and the Rose (1976), which retold the Cinderella tale as romanticised social comedy.

tale motifs, rather than being fairy-tale films. In this sense, both Ever After, despite its quasi-historical feel, and The Grimm Brothers' Snow White, are more interesting examples of the Hollywood fairy-tale film.

Andy Tennant, the director of Ever After, insists that the film “is not a cartoon or fairy tale – it’s an adventure with completely unexpected attitude” (Fox Movie production notes, <http://www.foxmovies.com/everafter/themovie.html>). This is not entirely true. While the film’s approach to the Cinderella story is in some ways innovative, its basic structure – the despised stepdaughter, unpleasant stepmother, prince in search of a wife, and grand denouement at a glittering ball – remain intact. Where Ever After is interesting is in its use of realism - fairy-tale story and setting are completely denuded of their magical elements, so that the film attempts to present some kind of historical narrative. The “long ago and far away” narrative of fairy tale is anchored more firmly than usual, in the specific figures of French royalty, and in definite historical realities such as Thomas More’s Utopia and Leonardo da Vinci. The use of Prince Henry and King Francis suggests the prince is in fact the historical figure of Henry II, and the film uses some historical details: problems with Spain, Francis’s fascination with Italian artists, including da Vinci (Duru, 479), and the establishment of the College of France, although historically this was by Francis, not Henry (Duru, 522). At the same time, the film’s haziness on historical detail, the conglomeration of medieval styles in its costuming, and the sweeping grandeur of its landscapes - mountains, woods and castles - explicitly invoke a timeless and essentially fairy-tale experience. In addition, the imposition of the Cinderella narrative onto actual history moves the entire story into ahistorical space: in reality, marriages of the time were political, not personal, and Henry II married Catherine de Medici, not a commoner. The film thus uses a superficial gloss of historical accuracy to lend credence to its attempt at realism, but historical elements in no way disrupt the workings of the fairy-tale plot.¹⁵

Ever After is quite deliberate in its invocation of fairy tale, whatever its director might claim. Like many fairy-tale films it makes use of the frame narrative and oral voice, in the nineteenth century frame which presents the tale as oral history told by the ageing Grande Dame of France to the Brothers Grimm – interestingly for Warner’s thesis, an ageing female oral voice. In a process similar to that followed by Disney’s fairy-tale features, the film in effect claims *higher* status than the literary or folk narrative: the old

¹⁵ Something similar is seen in Disney’s Sleeping Beauty, where the costumes and visual feel are medieval, and the Prince admonishes his father with a reminder that “This is the fourteenth century!” In fact, the film’s costuming and sense of medieval pageantry are largely fifteenth-century.

woman maintains that she intends “to set the record straight,” thus characterising the Grimms’ Cinderella story as a distortion of the reality, rather than the film as a distortion of the story. Nonetheless, the fairy-tale narrative of the film itself is explicitly that: apart from the film’s title, the old woman begins “Once upon a time,” and the Cinderella tale ends on an interchange between Danielle and the Prince in which they play in a particularly self-aware fashion with the fairy-tale stereotypes and the idea of “living happily ever after”:

DANIELLE: You, sir, are supposed to be charming!

PRINCE: And we, princess, are supposed to live happily ever after.

DANIELLE: Says who?

PRINCE: Do you know... I don't know?

Despite the director’s desire to repudiate it, the invocation of the fairy-tale narrative is perfectly explicit, although less accomplished than similar occurrences in Byatt or Pratchett, and problematised by the fact that they do not know *what* dictates the pattern. It is also self-aware, but lacks instrumentality: the characters, while aware of pattern, choose to leave it uninterrupted, to simply conform.

As well as attempting to make fairy tale into history, *Ever After* approaches fairy tale from a realistic perspective which strives both to give psychological credibility to the classic patterns of the tale, and to counteract the passivity of the original Cinderella herself. The stepmother and at least one of the two stepsisters are certainly unpleasant, but their nastiness is rounded out both by psychological victimisation of Danielle and by their own motivations (lack of money and hopeless social climbing) in addition to the standard sleep-in-the-kitchen and do-the-dirty-housework routine. The casting of Angelica Huston, a noted character actress, as Baroness Rodmilla assists materially with the three-dimensionality of the character¹⁶. The film thus takes advantage of the star system and the popular medium to access a kind of character depth by association, relating the character to other, equally recognisable stereotypes and to a certain kind of cinema entertainment – off-beat, amusing and slightly dark¹⁷. Rather like Disney’s Belle or Byatt’s Eldest Princess, Danielle is a heroine who reads – a recurring archetype in the modern fairy tale which underlines the self-aware sense of narrative in both characters and creators. She is also far from the gentle sweetness of Cinderella’s acceptance of her

¹⁶ Huston is a noted character actress who lends to the role the same quirky individualism that she did to Morticia in *The Addams Family* or Roald Dahl’s Chief Witch, as well as sufficient lightness of touch that the very real cruelty she offers Danielle does not outweigh the feel-good aspects of the film.

¹⁷ Marguerite, the older sister, is thoroughly unpleasant; she is also an unknown actress (Megan Dodds) making her debut in the film. The other sister, Jacqueline, is played by Melanie Lynskey, who starred in *Heavenly Creatures*. She is well-disposed towards the Cinderella-figure, in contrast to the inspired bitchiness of Marguerite. Here, audience identification with known or unknown actresses may play a part in the rewriting of the “Ugly Sister” stereotype.

role. As well as giving the odious Marguerite a black eye, Danielle, once she has triumphed and wed the prince, punishes her stepmother and sister with the antithesis of meek forgiveness. Perhaps the most effective scene in the film is Danielle's rescue of the stunned and unresisting Prince by picking him up and slinging him over her shoulder. The film thus takes a kind of naïve delight in oversetting the traditional fairy-tale stereotypes. The fact remains, however, that this is Hollywood romance and, despite its play with fairy-tale expectation, it ultimately celebrates a fairy-tale romance which ends in the heroine's acquisition of wealth and social position through marriage. Tennant may argue that he "did not want [his daughters] growing up believing you have to marry a rich guy with a big house in order to live happily ever after" (Fox Movie production notes, <http://www.foxmovies.com/everafter/themovie.html>), but in the end this is exactly what Danielle does. The play with archetypes is superficial, and fairy tale's basically reactionary principles remain undisturbed.

The film's focus on psychological motivation gives added dimension to Prince Henry as a character who, while "supposed to be charming", is humanly flawed and uncertain. The contrast between the apathetic prince and Danielle's passionate engagement in her life, reinforces the feminist subtext (worthless man made acceptable by spirited woman), but also speaks to the film's nascent awareness of structure as confinement, its insistence on itself as reality rather than fairy tale. Trapped in his social role as prince, Henry's life is robbed of meaning and zest. Danielle, who might be expected to be passive under the daily grind of her truly awful life, has the character to rise above the role (abused stepdaughter) which defines her. The message, while less explicitly developed, is curiously similar to that of Pratchett in Witches Abroad: to define anyone by their function is dehumanising. The film comes closest to articulating this metafictional awareness of fairy-tale function in the closing comments of the Grande Dame, when she insists that "while Cinderella and her prince did live happily ever after, the point, gentlemen, is that they *lived*." The point of recasting fairy tale as history is to insist that the figures in the tale should be real human beings, not simply symbols in the narrative. However, this message is largely masked by the overwhelming feel-good effect of the film: while the play with fairy tale is a valiant attempt at innovation, in the end the characters escape fairy-tale stereotype only to become equally predestined symbols in the powerful romantic narrative of the Hollywood film.

As a complete contrast to the somewhat saccharine Hollywood romance of Ever After, Michael Cohn's The Grimm Brothers' Snow White is in many ways a deliberately nasty piece of cinema. Where Ever After plays with the perfect, fated romance of fairy tale,

Snow White is an exercise in self-conscious Gothic, a return to the dark, sexy and violent roots of fairy tale, à la Angela Carter, Tanith Lee or Maria Tatar. Like Ever After, the film is motivated by psychological undercurrents, but here they represent a rediscovery of the metaphorical power of fairy tale to depict an explicitly post-Freudian awareness of individuality and desire. At the same time, it partakes wholeheartedly of the trappings of the modern horror film, to a far greater extent than does In the Company of Wolves; as well as bloody violence, Snow White flirts with black magic, sex magic, mass murder and psychosis. The “Grimm Brothers” rider on the title is entirely necessary in order to distance the film from the sugary sweetness of Disney’s more famous Snow White.¹⁸ While the film is aware of the Disney version, it invokes it ironically (Lily’s terrified dash through a threatening forest, the fact that the “dwarves” call her “Princess”), or sets out to invert it completely (sexualised dwarves rather than childlike little old men).

The film is very aware of fairy-tale narrative, not only in its title, but in the Gothic forests and castle of its setting, and in its deliberate invocation of Grimm through use of German names – Baron Hoffman, Dr. Gutenberg, Lady Claudia. The symbolic import of the Snow White figure is carried through not only in Lily’s name – constructed similarly to Lee’s Bianca – but in the motif of snow itself, the snowy woods into which Lily is born, and the film’s climax with Lily, her lover and her father reunited as snow begins to fall. The standard associations of snow with chill purity are a sharp and ironic contrast to the bloody sexuality with which the film is actually concerned. The film also plays rather vaguely with the folk voice, in the child Lily asking for the tale of her birth from her nurse, the standard old woman figure of folklore. The tale she is told is almost word for word from the Grimm version.

The film makes full use of the visual medium to dramatise the classic elements of the story, but in a manner that takes symbol to excess. Thus the blood-on-the-snow motif from the Grimm original, where “three drops of blood fell upon the snow”, becomes a disturbing flood of red on white as the Baron uses a dagger to deliver his daughter from the body of his dying wife. The pig’s heart which represents Snow White’s, seen as a discreet box with a dagger and heart motif in the Disney version, is here a rather disgusting raw lump of meat, eventually eaten by Lily’s dog after a bloodstained Claudia has been gloating over it. No cheerful popular feminism motivates this production: the tale revolves, simply and uncomplicatedly, around the very primitive roots of the Snow

¹⁸ One website review of the film (<http://www.happening.com.sg/film/picks/snow-white/>) claims that Disney blocked distribution in the United States, wanting *their* Snow White to be the only version.

White tale in incestuous sexuality and jealousy between women. Sigourney Weaver as Lady Claudia is the film's central figure, her tormented awareness of her own fading beauty providing the impetus for events. Her black magic is deliberately stagy and self-indulgent, a creative-re-interpretation of the three attempts the classic stepmother makes on Snow White's life. The magic mirror¹⁹ is a legacy from her mother, in the classic fairy-tale motif of a dead mother assisting her daughter seen in tales such as "Cinderella" and "The Juniper Tree". Lady Claudia's interactions with her idealised self in the mirror provide an effective visual metaphor for female beauty as power in fairy tale's patriarchal system. In the final scenes of the film, Lady Claudia's existence is seen to be intrinsically and narcissistically bound up with her beauty – when Lily stabs the image in the mirror, Claudia dies.

While both films are enjoyable artefacts of popular cinema, one cannot help feeling that both are essentially self-indulgent responses to fairy-tale narrative: Ever After in the sense of fairy-tale romance, Snow White in its use of horror. While the films are aware of the structures of fairy-tale narrative, their explorations and re-writings are limited by the popular arena in which they play: as I have discussed in a previous chapter, popular narratives cannot disrupt their popular genres, however much they may play with fairy tales. Thus the films are essentially using fairy tale as a basis for creating undisturbed genre films, either romance or horror; social comment, particularly around issues of gender, becomes subordinate to the expectations of the popular form, either marriage, or the demonic female. While the films are visually clever and appealing, the visual encodings speak more to the modern popular genre than to the fairy tale itself, and thus tend to obscure rather than illuminate fairy-tale structures.

Animated fairy tale

Animation and fairy tale have had a long and distinguished association. Charles Solomons's History of Animation gives recurring examples of fairy-tale themes in early animated works: Disney's series of fairy-tale films in the 1930s, including Three Little Pigs, Red Riding Hood and The Four Musicians of Bremen; the Fleischer studio's Betty Boop version of "Snow White" and Popeye shorts with Sinbad the Sailor, Ali Baba and Aladdin; and the Mintz studio's Little Match Girl (Solomon, 1989: 37-98). More recently, Disney animated fairy tales have come to replace most other kinds of fairy-tale

¹⁹ The enormous, carved and dark-wooded cupboard containing the mirror is an interesting motif, relating more to childhood fears of the monster in the cupboard than to adult horror. Pratchett makes equally powerful use of the haunted wardrobe idea in the context of children in Hogfather (1996).

narrative in the twentieth century; there are other studios which produce animated features, most notably the recent rise of Dreamworks, but to the bulk of the public, animation and fairy tale are both synonymous with Disney.

While this conflation is partially a result of the power of the Disney marketing machine, there are also some sound structural reasons for the successful alliance of fairy tale with the animated form. In the case of fairy tale, the potential of film to offer a dizzyingly full visual canvas in some ways works directly against the characteristic textual sparseness of the fairy-tale narrative. However, in the marrying of the fairy tale to the animated feature form, these problems have been at least partially overcome. Animation as a medium shadows the features of metafictional writing as defined by Waugh (see above), and thus those metafictional features I have attributed to fairy tale: like fairy tale, animation continually signals its own problematised relationship with reality, offering no attempt at a realistic mirror, but rather a ritualised, simplified and anti-realist process. Animation signals *constructedness* as strongly as fairy tale's classic opening of "once upon a time." Like fairy tale, it operates in a framework composed of smooth, simple lines and bright colours which visually echo the characteristic symbolic compression of fairy-tale narrative. Both fairy tale and animation deal in stereotypes, archetypes and clichés, the stock characters of metaphorical writing, magical narrative – and, most importantly, of the formula fiction which makes up the bulk of the popular market.

In addition, the animated feature film has come to have a somewhat problematic association with children. Like fairy tale, which Tolkien characterises as having been relegated to the nursery along with other worn-out and unwanted furniture (1966: 34), animation is seen as a children's medium, an identification broken only by a fringe of serious films. In both fairy tale and animation, an initial artistic seriousness – oral folktale, the experimental films of Georges Méliès – has given way to a mainstream non-adult intention from the time of the Victorians until the present. The tendency has been exaggerated by the prevalence of animated series on children's daytime television, many of them distinguished by poor technical animation, violence and lack of innovation (Solomon, 1989: 285). This has been alleviated only in the late 20th century with the reclamation of the form in both mediums – fairy tale's adaptation to adult concerns such as erotic, feminist or self-aware narrative, and animation's development into the adult sex and violence of manga, adult films such as Ralph Bakshi's Fritz the Cat or Heavy Traffic, or the self-conscious artistry of experimental forms. However, it is possible to identify a mutual unease around the status of animated and fairy-tale narratives, a

feeling that both animation and fairy tale ought really to be clean, innocent, suitable for children.²⁰

Disney's animated fairy tales play straight into this awareness of animation as a children's medium, but they mine the form equally for its sheer fantasy, its ability to produce screen magic on a level far above that of the live-action film. This offers an intensification of the idea discussed above, of filmmaker as magician: more than any other filmmaker, the animator is an enchanter manipulating a magical medium (Zipes 1997: 68). This is underlined by the tendency of the Disney studios to focus on the technical rather than the artistic aspects of the animation process: Disney films continually pushed the boundaries of new techniques and effects (Schickel, 1985; Solomon, 1989), focusing on this far more than on the requirements of script or story. The power of animation is to represent figures that can *change* completely outside the bounds of reality, in precisely the same way that magical transformations occur in fairy tales. Paul Wells discusses the overlap of fairy tale and animation in this context, quoting Marina Warner – “metamorphosis defines the fairy tale” (1994: xvi) and continuing:

Clearly, here ‘metamorphosis’ is about changes in characters and situations that may be termed ‘magical’ or impossible within the concept of a real world served by physiological, gravitational, or functionalist norms. Virtually all animated films play out this definition of metamorphosis as a technical and narrational orthodoxy, thus rendering the adaptation of fairy tale on this basis, a matter of relative ease. (1999: 201)

The plasticity of the animated figure – its ability to stretch, compress, fragment, transform, defy gravity – is in itself magical, and a prime site for magical narrative.

In negotiating the tension between the novelty and colour of the animated format, and the familiarity of the fairy-tale forms, Disney fairy-tale films have developed their own, distinctive and instantly recognisable formula. From the early success of Snow White, the Disney formula has refined its original components – the musical format, the presence of cute animals in interaction with the main characters, the elements of slapstick comedy, the romantic conclusion – but has not materially changed them. The Disney formula intersects with and overwrites any kind of narrative its films use, whether popular children's literature (101 Dalmatians, Peter Pan), folklore (Robin Hood), history (Pocahontas), or fairy tale itself. More than the tales themselves, the familiar Disney format is reassuring to children as well as to their parents, who can send

²⁰ The recent furore around the apparent discovery of obscene motifs in various Disney films is a good example of this protective instinct – see Ronald E. Ostman's summary in his 1996 article, “Disney and its Conservative Critics”.

children to see Disney films secure in the knowledge that sex and realistic violence will not be on the menu. The forms which the Disney formula invokes - the musical, romantic comedy, fairy tale - are both innocent and nostalgic, which partially explains their appeal to adult as well as child audiences. The function of the animated film in Disney's hands has thus been to turn fairy-tale narrative into a mass cultural form that is consumed uncritically as a legitimate childhood tradition.

The history of Disney fairy-tale features occupies a trajectory from the initial success of Snow White (1937), one of the earliest animated features, through similar adaptations of Cinderella (1950), and Sleeping Beauty (1959). After a break of some 30 years, during which adaptations were made from literature rather than fairy tale, Disney moved back into fairy tale with their rather mutilated version of Anderson's "Little Mermaid" in 1989. The peak of their fairy-tale production is with the two great successes of the early 1990s, Beauty and the Beast (1991) and Aladdin (1992), which represent a pinnacle of Disney achievement both in terms of commercial success, and in successful adaptation and technical innovation. It would appear that the combination of fairy-tale narrative with Disney formula is a winning one which has not been equalled since by other generic frameworks used by the studio²¹. Made in successive years, Beauty and the Beast and Aladdin are nonetheless very different films, at least partially because of the divergent nature of their sources; the feel and texture of Mme Leprince de Beaumont's "Beauty and the Beast" are very different to the Arabian Nights's "Aladdin", a difference exaggerated by Disney's disparate approaches in the two films. However, both films rely centrally on the familiarity of the tales they re-work; "Beauty and the Beast" is a staple of the child's fairy-tale collection, while "Aladdin", although Eastern in origin, has been long adopted into the corpus of Western fairy tale²². The films thus reflect the standard Disney fairy-tale practice, following Snow White, Cinderella and The Sleeping Beauty in the tradition which self-consciously assumes the mantle of storyteller, inheritor of fairy tale itself.

Both films re-tell their original story only in the loosest sense, retaining sufficient features for recognition while adapting continually to the demands of formula and

²¹ The Emperor's New Groove and Atlantis were fairly damp squibs, but Disney in fact seem to be rethinking their formula to good effect in recent films such as Lilo and Stitch.

²² This began in the eighteenth century, approximately contemporary to the rise of French fairy tale; the Nights were first translated from the Arabic into French, by Antoine Galland, a secretary to the French Ambassador in the Levant. There were English translations in the early 1800s which predated the famous, complete translation by Sir Richard Burton, which was published in 1885-86 (P.H. Newby, 1950: 7-9), and from which I have worked.

contemporary culture. The reassuring predictability of the action – the self-conscious investment of the audience in the structures of fairy tale – provides a firm base for technical innovation, formula characters and peripheral disturbances of the familiar plot. Beauty and the Beast focuses on the figure of Belle, another Byatt-style “reading princess” who yearns for “more than this provincial life”, but the film uses only the barest bones of de Beaumont’s tale. The overall visual feel of the film is textured and slightly cluttered, achieving in its best moments an effective Gothic atmosphere; the muted colours and heavy shadows are a strong contrast to Aladdin’s clean lines and bright, rich colours just a year later. Beauty and the Beast appears to be nostalgic rather than contemporary in tone, accessing the same “old European storybook” feel of Snow White (Solomon, 1989: 59) and, to a lesser extent, Sleeping Beauty. This is underlined by its particularly self-conscious use of the musical format, another popular formula which is packaged for easy consumption. Sequences in the village invoke the ensemble vocals of operetta such as Lehar’s Merry Widow, enhanced by the opera-trained voices of the villagers and, particularly, Gaston. Other intertextual references include Belle doing a Sound of Music routine in the golden fields around her house, and of course the rousing Busby Berkeley-style “Be Our Guest” routine headed by Lumière. Despite this, the film lays claim to the status of authentic fairy tale, through the opening voice-overs and reverential stained-glass windows as much as through the song lyrics which proclaim the film a “Tale as old as time/ True as it can be...”. Overall, the film plays self-consciously with its own identity as fairy tale, with particular emphasis, through use of other formulas, on its unrealistic qualities of naïve romance.

Aladdin is, by contrast, a more superficial film, its prevailing mode the comic rather than the Gothic or melodramatic. Its adaptation of the Arabian Nights story offers a notable departure from Disney’s hitherto unvarying use of Western cultural classics. Disney’s use of Middle Eastern culture in Aladdin is very similar to the use of French culture in Beauty and the Beast – that is to say, it presents an essentially superficial and patronising view of a culture effectively defined in terms of being non-American, and therefore exotic and interesting, if not to be taken seriously.²³ Aladdin’s fairy-tale structure – poor boy, evil magician, lamp, genie, princess - is familiar, but is rendered even more familiar by the imposition of Western fairy-tale motifs onto the Eastern tale. Thus the limitless

²³ The film’s view of Eastern culture is basically Orientalist in Said’s sense of the word. The outcry among the Islamic community when Aladdin was released was sufficient for Disney to recall the prints and excise an offending lyric in the opening song: “Where they cut off your nose if they don’t like your face / It’s barbaric, but hey, it’s home.” The Islamic point of view is summarised by Timothy White and J. E. Winn in their Kinema article (Spring 1995).

power of the Genie is reduced to three wishes, in the style of the Grimm tale, adding narrative impetus and closure. Aladdin himself is a trickster archetype in the Puss-in-Boots mould, using cunning to persuade the villain to his own destruction through the use of his power. Jafar being persuaded to wish himself a genie is a pattern found in many fairy tales, most notably "Puss in Boots", where the ogre turns himself into a mouse, only to be pounced on and destroyed.

Aladdin offers a particularly interesting example of Disney's adaptation of fairy-tale narrative to the rather different demands of film; as well as limiting the wishes, the film makes various changes to the details of the original, which is in many ways a sprawling narrative unsuited to a dramatic or visual medium. Thus the Moorish magician, the Wazir and the Wazir's son become one in the figure of Jafar, who neatly encapsulates the magician's sorcerous power and abuse of Aladdin, the Wazir's scheming, and the Wazir's son's lust for the Sultan's daughter. This gives the necessary single villain figure of the Disney formula, and a visual focus for the dangers besetting the hero²⁴. Likewise, the two genies are conflated in the Robin Williams character while the ring, a boring object offering little scope for animation, becomes the carpet, a familiar visual icon of the East and a fertile ground for the computer animations which distinguish this film. The carpet's computer animation is ground-breaking and innovative, a superb creation of character and emotion for an essentially two-dimensional object. Other elements of the tale – the Cave of Wonders, and Aladdin's grand processional entrance – are simply elaborate visual renditions of elements already in the tale. This is not unlike the changes made to Beauty and the Beast; again, narrative impetus is gained by imposition of a time-limit (the re-writing of the rose). The addition of Gaston as the villain serves a similar function as Avenant in Cocteau's La Belle et la Bête: the film medium seems to require some visual realisation of the Beast's antithesis, all surface looks and character flaw.

Both films engage in the classic Disney oral invocation at their opening. Beauty and the Beast's stained-glass windows invoke tale as artefact as well as claiming oral status through the initial voice-over which gives background to the Beast's curse. This is a novel re-arrangement of de Beaumont's use of flashback; here, the audience has events explained unambiguously from the start. Belle's interest in reading fairy tales also confirms the film's claim to story-book authenticity. However, these techniques pale to insignificance besides Aladdin's adept framing of film as oral narrative. The disembodied

²⁴ In fact, the structure of the film seems to owe as much to the plot of Alexander Korda's 1939 film The Thief of Bagdad, as to the Arabian Nights original: similarities include a villain named Jafar, a thief called Abu, a djinn of personality, and a flying carpet.

voice-over gives way to an actual figure, whose direct interaction with the film audience parallels the realisation of the folk voice through Granny in Company of Wolves. The figure of the Middle Eastern salesman, together with his camel, the “Arabian Nights” song and the magnificent sweeping deserts of the opening sequence, sets the cultural tone, allowing the film to lay (thoroughly false) claim to the status of a genuine Middle Eastern oral voice. The oral voice is more cleverly counterfeited than usual: the salesman’s interaction with us, the audience, evokes an involuntary response as the camera, losing interest, starts to slide away from the speaker – we are, the film intimates, too discerning an audience to be taken in by spurious junk. The salesman must run after us to regain our attention, and our illusion of power and control in the oral interaction is further reinforced when his invitation to come a little closer – and thus partake in the intimate relationship between storyteller and audience – is taken too literally, plastering the camera against his face. The sequence plays equally on our awareness of the oral storytelling tradition, and on the audience familiarity with film conventions, once more equating the film version with the original, and effectively replacing and erasing the original.

Again, this is heavily metafictional: tale as film, with the viewer’s self-conscious participation in the conventions of the film medium continually highlighted. At the same time, the storyteller’s status as *salesman* rather than actual storyteller, underlines that aspect of Disney narrative which goes right through metafiction and out the other side – awareness of the tale’s nature as artefact, certainly (Waugh, 1984: 2), but artefact as *product*. Having attempted to sell us spurious merchandise (a combination hookah and coffee grinder that also slices and dices, and an example of the Dead Sea Tupperware), he moves on to the genuine product, the tale itself – and, by extension, the Disney film. The encapsulation of tale in static artefact parallels similar Disney characterisations of tale as book (Snow White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty) or stained-glass window (Beauty and the Beast); as in these cases, the point is the dramatic juxtaposition of the lively, dynamic Disney film version with the static original. It becomes evident that Disney’s Aladdin is firmly rooted in contemporary culture, far more so than in the Eastern culture it professes to depict. The film assumes the audience’s familiarity with cinematographic conventions such as the camera’s point of view, but it also takes for granted the viewer’s essential situation within modern commodity culture. Beauty and the Beast contained its fair share of consumer reference – Belle’s “I want much more”, the voice-over’s regret that the Prince, before his transformation, “although he had everything his heart could desire, was spoiled and selfish” - but it is in Aladdin, and in subsequent productions such as Lion King, that this becomes overt. Aladdin presents us with both film and fairy tale as

commodity, secure in the knowledge that we will consume it as dictated – because the film encourages such consumption, but also because our whole popular environment encourages such consumption. The choice of “Aladdin” as a basis for Disney fairy-tale film is thus relevant, since the original tale is more than a little preoccupied with the desire for wealth, and with fabulous riches in the form of the cave of the lamp, the sumptuous processions with which Aladdin dazzles the Sultan, and Aladdin’s miraculously-constructed and glittering palace. Robin Williams’s Genie is literally a genie of commodity culture, able to offer a dizzying array of consumer artefact to the stunned Aladdin, and to flaunt his own power as synonymous with Disney’s: “You ain’t never had a friend like me!” Thus, to Aladdin and the consumer, “Life is your restaurant/ And I’m your maitre d’... Say what you wish / It’s yours!” As with many forms of cultural commodification, the product is presented as a matter of choice, and the consumer as an empowered individual who chooses with discernment and is above the blandishments of the commercial process. Aladdin presents the consumerist approach – the desire for wealth, a palace, a trophy woman – as natural and inevitable; Aladdin claims “I only steal what I can’t afford – and that’s everything,” suggesting that the consumer has some kind of a *right* to everything he or she desires. The classic empowerment process of fairy tale – the poor boy, youngest son or despised stepdaughter making good to marry the wealthy prince or princess – is close enough to the consumer process to make for a strong message.

If Aladdin offers tale as commodity artefact, it extends this even further to conflate the tale with the experience of Disney, and thus to claim to sell experience itself as commodity. The lamp stands for the Disney experience of the tale, complete with music, image and colour. By extension, what Aladdin (and Beauty and the Beast) offers to the viewer is also culture as commodity. In packaging and selling story, the film also packages and sells the idea of a foreign culture, presenting it to a gaze that is essentially that of the American tourist. This is seen in the opening sequence of Aladdin, where Aladdin leads the city guard a merry chase through the streets of Agrabah, passing sword-swallowers, fakirs on beds of nails, fire-walkers, rope tricks and snake charmers – all the unthinking stereotypes of a generalised “Eastern” culture which does not care to distinguish Indian from Arabian traditions. Disney claims, “I can show you the world,” and proceeds to do so. Later, momentary vignettes of Grecian temples and Chinese dragon dances encapsulate the tourist viewpoint, equating the Disney experience itself with Aladdin’s “magic carpet ride.” This develops the very similar view of French culture seen in Beauty and the Beast, where caricatures of provincial French life include baguettes, berets and the salacious womanising of Lumière.

On a rather different political note, it is significant that, like more intellectually-motivated writers such as Carter or Byatt, Disney is unable to use the structures of fairy tale without some awareness of the implication of those structures for women. From The Little Mermaid onwards, Disney offers a series of apparently independent heroines, in what Warner has identified as “Hollywood’s cunning domestication of feminism itself” (1994: 313). Where other texts are genuinely interested in feminist issues, Disney’s lip-service to feminism is very much a market-related decision, reassuring viewers with their moral awareness without, in fact, sacrificing the comfortably reactionary structures their films invoke. Thus any political import in their rewritings is blunted or reversed by the ultimately marketable heterosexual happy ending. Despite her longing to escape “this provincial life”, Belle ends up marrying, in the trenchant phrase of one of my students, “the guy down the road”. Jasmine wishes to make her own decisions, but cheerfully abdicates that power in order to marry Aladdin; her most significant action in the film (distracting Jafar at the critical moment) is a parody of manipulative female sexuality. Gaston likewise operates as a marvellous caricature of anti-feminist masculinity, but his comic exaggeration only disguises the fact that the fate he takes for granted for women, marriage, is in fact exactly the same fate that the film offers them.

While Disney films are undeniably flawed in the political sense, they also often fail in an artistic sense: there are ways in which the constraints of the animated format work directly against inherent aspects of fairy tale – most strongly, its elements of wonder, beauty, seriousness. What sinks the otherwise interesting potential of these films is, ultimately, Disneyfication itself – the problem so pilloried by Pratchett, the paralysing of the narrative by sheer cuteness. Aladdin is perhaps a more successful film because, paradoxically, it most completely loses sight of the elements of beauty and threat in the original tale. Its comic framing cheerfully accommodates anachronistic references and slapstick interactions, but Beauty and the Beast’s story-book Gothic runs rather foul of the animated formula. The accomplished craft of the animators gives perky character to the castle’s furniture and utensils, emphasising both the marvellous unreality of animation and the absolute awareness of artefact which characterises both fairy tale and consumer text. However, the potentially real Gothic threat of the Beast’s castle is effectively undercut – no-one can take seriously the looming gargoyles, shadows and marks of violence when ridiculous cultural caricatures of a French candlestick and British clock are conducting the tour. In the competing frameworks of the real and the unreal, the film also succumbs even more completely than Cocteau’s does to the lure of visual identification, here exaggerated by the essential unreality of the animated format.

The moment of the Beast's transformation is a complete anticlimax despite its excessive effects, partially because of the cardboard cut-out prince²⁵, but mainly because of the visual cues attached to the Beast himself – his animated figure is simultaneously masculine and comic, idealised and endearing.

In discussing Disney as an example of metafictional fairy tale, it becomes evident that self-awareness in this context functions somewhat differently to other texts I have discussed: self-consciousness about tale as artefact is manipulative rather than investigative, designed to be playful in the sense of entertaining rather than innovative. The result is to trivialise fairy tale, to lose the potential depth of the form, while simultaneously exaggerating that part of its oral function which allows it to adapt itself to the culture within which it is retold. Disney's cultural reflections are superficial because they are aimed to sell the artefact, and only secondarily to highlight its nature. The films, however, remain sufficiently acute, relevant and entertaining to have almost usurped the role of fairy tale in the lives of many Western children.

Perhaps the most telling index to the familiarity and strength of Disney's appropriation of fairy tale is demonstrated in another film entirely: Dreamworks's *Shrek* (2001) both acknowledges the Disney institution, and mercilessly pillories its weaknesses. *Shrek's* success hinges on its ability to recognisably and successfully send up the Disney tradition, and to insist on more robust and primitive awareness of the animated fairy-tale genre which Disney has traditionally claimed as its own. *Shrek's* body humour, structural inversions, cultural satire and insistent rejection of modern consumer culture's beauty trope demonstrates a postmodern awareness not only of the functioning of fairy tale, but of Disney and the Hollywood utopian impulse itself. The interesting aspect of *Shrek's* parody is not that it parodies fairy tale, but that it parodies the institution of animated fairy-tale film. Thus the cheerful ugliness of the ogre Shrek himself is aimed, not at the notional idealisation of the "handsome prince", but at the *visual* idealisation of the Disney animated hero in all his cardboard glory. Duloc, the impossibly sanitised fairy-tale realm of Lord Farquaad, is a sly dig at Disney's squeaky-clean image and

²⁵ Disney animated heroes tend to be problematical, their visual construction struggling equally against the unreality of the fairy-tale stereotype, and the qualities of caricature in animation. Solomon comments that "The creation of a hero who was masculine without being wooden, flexible without seeming effeminate, remained a vexing problem for the Disney artists for many years" (1989: 59). One wonders how far the problem stems from the unease of an all-male group of animators around the concept of idealised masculine beauty and the consequent implications of the homo-erotic. Certainly the equally idealised Disney heroines have no parallel problems, while the craggy, blonde perfection of the transformed Prince is so de-sexualised as to be difficult to swallow

conservative values²⁶. I shall return to Shrek in my concluding chapter, but for now will simply conclude that, while Disney's version of fairy tale has captured the market for the better part of the century, it seems that its reign is over. The popular custodianship of contemporary fairy tale has passed to other hands; interestingly, however, the new owners are perhaps more successful because they are more genuinely *aware* of the structures and powers of the fairy-tale form, in every incarnation from oral to Disney itself.

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²⁶ So, for that matter, is Pratchett's cruelly perfect fairy-tale realm of Genua in Witches Abroad.

Chapter VII: Happily Ever After

Now that the book is finished, I know that this was not a hallucination, a sort of professional malady, but the confirmation of something I already suspected – folktales are real. (Italo Calvino, 1956: xviii)

I hope that this survey across the marvellous geometry of modern fairy tale has served to demonstrate both the vitality and the proliferation of fairy-tale forms in twentieth-century literature and film. The huge range of contexts in which fairy-tale structures are self-consciously employed suggests that in recent expressions the form retains its power and profundity as a narrative whose encoded structures are widely meaningful. In this sense, despite the translation of fairy tale into different mediums, fairy tale retains some aspects of its original identity as a folk expression, endlessly adaptable and continually mutating as it is reflected across cultures and time. The twentieth century's tendency towards commercial appropriation of fairy tale has perhaps blunted its aspect of communal *ownership*, but it has simultaneously ensured that the process of communal *experience* is enabled by the new technologies of mass culture and mass production.

At the same time, the popularity of fairy tale in contemporary literature is interesting in terms of the central focus of this thesis, the nature of fairy tale as a form which is both highly structured and non-realist. In a technological age, the increasing popularity of magical narratives – not only popular narratives such as fantasy romance, but the flourishing presence of the unreal in postmodern and experimental texts – surely represents some strong cultural imperative. This is perhaps a response to the increasing complexity of our society, and the stresses and demands of a fast-moving technological existence. As Ursula Le Guin suggests, “Sophisticated readers are accepting the fact that an improbable and unmanageable world is going to produce an improbable and hypothetical art” (Le Guin, 1989: 47). More than this, the magical structures of fairy tale

are beguilingly simple, a symbolic and essentially unrealist access to a lost feudal age. If our century is bewilderingly complex, then fantasy is, as Tolkien suggests, a consolation and an escape. At the same time, in a century whose most recent and defining intellectual movement is the indeterminacy of postmodernism, the ongoing fascination with fairy-tale structuredness is particularly interesting. Structure offers security and predictability, both increasingly rare in our complex modern times. Through these structures fairy tale has the potential to reflect, in an encapsulated and simplified form, the key issues of human existence. As Byatt suggests, "stories and tales [are] intimately to do with death," (2000:132) not only enacting for us the realities of birth and death, but imposing a structured narrative on the chaos of existence. In its very explicit structuring, fairy tale illustrates and emphasises the essence of literature itself and the terms on which we interact with it, the extent to which structure, as much as the self-consciousness of fiction, is intrinsic to our literary expressions.

As a further exploitation of the internal structures of fairy tale, twentieth-century versions go out of their way to exploit the self-conscious unreality of the narrative. Applying modern metafictional awareness to the already implicit fictionality of fairy tale is no great leap, and allows the enormous range of re-writes in the service of feminism, comedy, self-conscious fiction or consumer artefact. More than any other development of the form, modern fairy tales function as a celebration of mutual understanding, not only in reiteration of the tales themselves as in their original, oral retelling, but in development and play based on that shared awareness of what the form is and how it works. Whether for fun, profit or intellectual exercise, contemporary metafictional fairy tale exposes as well as developing the form. In this, of course, fairy tale is particularly appropriate to the postmodern sense of irony: effectively, modern versions cannot simply accept the geometry of the marvellous, but must highlight their self-conscious use of it in a way that suggests their celebration is not naïve. The intrinsic metafictional elements thus hover on the edge of parody, their self-consciousness simultaneously celebrating and undercutting the functioning of the form. The process is similar to that noted by Umberto Eco as the defining feature of the postmodern age:

The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently. I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her, "I love you madly," because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say, "As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly."
(1983: 19)

In the same way that Eco's lover cannot say "I love you", the modern fairy tale cannot say "happily ever after"; the *only* possible way to express that structured and unrealistic closure is in the metafictional mode, to stress that this fairy tale is, after all, an artefact, and that both writer and reader are ironically complicit in this awareness. This awareness also informs political re-writing such as feminist fairy tale, where the pitfalls of acculturation inherent in the form can only be acceptable if they are accessed and re-used parodically or investigatively. Self-awareness of structure and unreality allows for profound social comment in fairy-tale adaptations.

Social comment, of course, is not always the point. The difference between parody and investigation of fairy-tale forms tends to point to a key distinction between the different kinds of texts achieved by literary and popular cultural forms. While writers such as Terry Pratchett can do both at once, in general the parody of fairy tale is in the service of entertainment, a rather different process to the intellectual investigation of fairy tale's functioning. As a comparison between texts existing at the two extremes of this spectrum, consider the different use of Arabian Nights motifs in Byatt's "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye", and Disney's Aladdin. The two texts have in common their assumption of Arabian Nights tales – "Aladdin" and "The Fisherman and the Jinni" – as texts familiar in the Western fairy-tale corpus, and their readers' or viewers' awareness, not only of that specific text, but of the tradition of fairy-tale texts as a whole. Byatt, however, seems to draw on the Arabian Nights structure to highlight the notion of narrative embedding and the strategic use of tale-telling. Disney, one feels, is drawn to "Aladdin" simply because it focuses on the desire for wealth and includes very visual treasures which speak both to Disney's visual nature, and to their commodity function. Both works employ familiar Western fairy-tale motifs to render the Eastern original more familiar; both are fascinated by the changes wrought in the tale when the possible wishes are limited to three. It is also striking how both Byatt and Disney insist on the notion of freedom as integral to the choice of the third wish, a rather more concentrated version of fairy-tale's classic insistence on the need for courtesy to chance-met magical helpers. Byatt, however, uses this limitation as the basis for a profound investigation of human values, where Disney's rather facile moral point in fact masks the use of the motif for narrative tension and impetus. At the same time, Disney's re-telling of a complete and recognisable Aladdin tale, despite its adaptation to formula and to visual narrative, speaks to the necessity for familiarity and acceptance in its audiences. Byatt, on the other hand, is able to use motifs from the familiar tale in a completely different context, invoking without actually re-telling the original story, and challenging her readers to make the necessary intertextual connections.

Perhaps the strongest contrast is in the two texts' very different treatment of the genie, which functions as a paradigm for the different attitudes Byatt and Disney have to the tradition on which they draw. Disney's genie is a (visually necessary) compression of two figures from the original "Aladdin", and abandons all sense of an awe-inspiring, other-worldly power in favour of a cuddly commodity impresario. The genie is cleansed of all possible otherness both through his very obvious Robin Williams characteristics, and through his safe appropriation by Western consumer motifs in his bewildering and ongoing comic transformations. This is a sharp contrast to Byatt's genie, whose otherness is explored and emphasised by his placing within the context of a Western-style hotel, his visible difference in terms of size and culture also underlined by Gillian's fascination with his exoticism. Byatt thus insists on the existence and importance of a non-Western tradition of tale-telling; Disney instead marginalises the other culture, claiming through motifs of familiarity and the Americanisation of key characters, that all fairy-tale traditions are, in fact, the Western tradition. Where Byatt's tale requires that the reader consider both the universality of fairy tales and their specific cultural natures, Disney's film largely discourages thought, instead encouraging viewers to simply accept Disney's version of fairy-tale functioning. Both texts offer a version of self-awareness about their fairy-tale project, but the framing of *Aladdin* as both oral narrative and commodity, while clever, points to a very different form of self-awareness from Byatt's sophisticated and sensitive use of embedded tale and a simulated oral voice.

I have suggested that writers such as Pratchett offer thoughtful popular versions of modern fairy tale; this is particularly encouraging, since it suggests that fairy tale's folk functioning can perhaps be rediscovered in popular literary and post-literary forms, without necessarily selling out to the mass market. The future of fairy tale in modern culture is perhaps less limited than Disney's versions would suggest. The recent animated film *Shrek* (2001) is a paradigm for this kind of functioning, a highly successful fairy-tale work which exemplifies both popular narrative, in the sense of popular film, and postmodern investigation of form. The most recent of the fairy-tale works which I have considered, it seems to me to reflect the culmination of fairy-tale awareness over the last century; its terms are entirely revealing about the state of the art. Its animated format suggests, as I have argued earlier, the same self-aware accessing of unreality and the magical as we see in Disney animations: the apparent fit between the terms of animation and those of fairy tale is significantly high. Unlike Disney, and rather like the best of Victorian children's fairy tale (or A.S. Byatt), this is not fairy-tale retelling, but the creation of a new artefact firmly rooted in the traditions of the form. The narrative, based on a children's book by William Steig, wanders waywardly through dragon-killing

in the style of Saint George, the traditional christening curse, a Snow-White-style magic mirror and the Sleeping Beauty motif. References are not only to well-known fairy tales in the sense of children's story-book retellings, but to film versions such as Disney's, and to other films with fairy-tale elements (The Princess Bride, Ladyhawke).

As in many of the works I have studied, Shrek's fairy-tale format becomes the flexible vehicle for contemporary cultural awareness, in this reflecting the fluid social adaptability of the original oral form. The film's cheerful hodgepodge of fairytale narrative elements is reinforced by its employment of popular cultural collage, in the style of Disney's genie, but with a more acute and sensitive awareness of genre and the animated film itself. Thus Shrek's happy, ogreish isolation is invaded by the combined cast of Mother Goose, Perrault and Grimm – “three blind mice in his food and a big, bad wolf in his bed” (Shrek production notes, http://www.spielberg-dreamworks.com/shrek/production_notes.php). Where Disney's Genie morphs rapidly into various pop cultural icons, however, Shrek's comic effect comes in the updating of classic fairytale and nursery rhyme stereotypes with a shrewd and comic modern awareness which, unlike the Genie, avoids breaking the generic frame¹. The landscape of Shrek's world is peopled with the familiar icons of magical narrative, who may refer to the contemporary tropes of consumer culture, but are not replaced by them; it thus retains a more affectionate and respectful attitude to the genre than does Disney's wholesale appropriation and mixing. In many ways, Shrek's world is akin to Pratchett's Discworld, a comic but humane attempt to put a sense of realism into the fantasy stereotypes.

Shrek's narrative employs the same appropriation of fairy-tale structures for social comment as do many of the works I have investigated; here, the unreality of the animated format takes some of the sting from the satire. The film demonstrates a Carter-esque take on the Beauty and the Beast motif which achieves equality and the happy ending through a beastly rather than a beautiful couple. The romance between an ugly ogre and a beautiful princess cursed to be ugly at night also manages to work simultaneously against the Disney cleanliness and the beauty myth of modern consumer culture. The message is curiously similar to that of any version of “Beauty and the Beast” – it is not appearance that counts, but internal worth. Here, however, it is presented with a subversive conviction that is far more convincing than Disney's lip-service to inner

¹ The torture scene where Farquaad threatens the Gingerbread Man with “crumbling” is noteworthy, but the point where the film finally dissolved me into hysterical giggling was the breakdancing Three Blind Mice in the film's final celebration scene.

worth while pushing the power and value of the visual with both hands. Shrek is not only ugly, he is crude, earthy and occasionally gross. Zipes (1997: 67) has characterised fairytale as a narrative designed to “reinforce patriarchal notions of civilisation” – a notion which Shrek wholeheartedly and self-consciously overturns. The film opens with a bathing scene which satirises the acculturated cleanliness norms of modern consumer culture – Shrek baths in a mudhole and cleans his teeth by squeezing a caterpillar onto his toothbrush. Later he illuminates his candlelit dinner for one with a candle made from his own earwax in a rather gross satire on the romantic myth.

While retaining its essential unreality, the computer-animated format is well ahead of Disney in sheer animation technique. The film’s production notes make much of the PDI/Dreamworks Shapers technology to capture nuances of muscle tone and skin lighting, and the realism of their Fluid Animation System (Shrek production notes, http://www.spielberg-dreamworks.com/shrek/production_notes.php). The upshot is a far more realistic idea of body shape for Princess Fiona, who actually looks like a person rather than one of Disney’s wasp-waisted physical impossibilities. The computer animation gives the film a rich, almost sensuous texture that has slightly more depth than the usual animated landscape; it also allows for nuances of expression and reaction in the characters themselves, so that the film’s expression of emotion feels more genuine than a Disney equivalent, or the idealised lines of the average children’s illustration. The Dreamworks studio does not, however, forget the value of the animation format for their comic and satirical purposes: apart from the rich, fairytale landscapes, the film makes shrewd use of classic animated distortion, most notably in the three-foot-high Lord Farquaad. John Lithgow, who provided Farquaad’s voice, describes the character as “the walking embodiment of over-compensation” (Shrek production notes, http://www.spielberg-dreamworks.com/shrek/production_notes.php). The film relies not only on the ability of animation to present broad variation in bodily form and size, but on the audience’s awareness of popular Freudian interpretation, a subtext which is underlined by the enormous, phallic block of Farquaad’s castle. The power of animation similarly glosses over the essential unreality of the romance between Eddie Murphy’s tiny Donkey and the enormous, *very* feminine Dragon. The difference in size is a comic visual realisation of the film’s moral subtext, that appearance is not important, but most importantly, only the assumptions behind animated caricature, in tandem with the beast-fable unreality of the fairy-tale format, make the relationship possible at all.

Shrek makes infinitely more use of its animation than Disney ever did; its unashamed invocation of Disney films, while affectionate, is often irresistibly comic precisely because it overlays its more daring effects onto the often saccharine idealisations of Disney and the children's storybook. The metafictional assumptions of the film thus embrace not only fairy tale in its traditional format, but fairy tale in the twentieth-century mould; self-awareness is centred not only in the pure structures of fairy tale, but in the most recent versions of the form. Perhaps the film's most effective scene is one involving Princess Fiona singing, Snow White style, with a random bluebird; her high notes cause the bird to swell up to the point where it simply explodes. The interchange underlines the fact that, mercifully, Shrek is not a musical and its characters do not otherwise sing, the attractive soundtrack occurring only in voice-over. It also emphasises Fiona's essential difference from saccharine Disney heroines given to trilling with the birds, particularly when Fiona's response to the bluebird explosion is to rob its nest for breakfast eggs. Shrek thus offers a rather different understanding of unreality to that presented by Disney: the parody of the musical format suggests that, above all, Shrek's awareness of genre is anything but naïve. Other highly recognisably visual parodies include the story-book beginning, which I have analysed above, and Farquaad's magic mirror, which has a mask-like face almost identical to the witch-queen's mirror in Snow White. Interestingly, the transformation scene in the cathedral invokes the denouements of both The Princess Bride and Ladyhawke, well-known romantic fantasies whose beauty myth is pilloried by the film, but who add live-action fairytale to Shrek's assumption of cultural capital². However, the film's most obvious parody is of the Beast's transformation in Beauty and the Beast – floating, rotating body, shafts of light and all. The Disney-style hype is subverted by the nature of the transformation, princess into ogress rather than the other way round, but also serves to emphasise the film's message: that princess into ogress *is* a happy ending, after all.

Shrek represents the achievements not only of a fairy-tale animation industry but of the institution of fairy tale itself, as one that has developed to the point where it is secure in its powers, confident in its genre, and can afford to be both nostalgic and satirical. The film's producer argues that "These characters are ripe for parody because they're part of the cosmic consciousness, so to speak" (Shrek production notes, http://www.spielberg-dreamworks.com/shrek/production_notes.php); the consciousness of which they are part is that of the genre of fairytale as a whole, not simply of fairytale *film*. While the focus of

² To this could also be added the Robin Hood characters, who owe more to the Mel Brooks Men in Tights version than to anything folkloric.

Shrek's parody is Disney, it nonetheless embraces live-action fairytale film as well as animation in its affectionate inversions, not to mention the familiar figures of original fairy tale and folklore – Red Riding Hood, Snow White and the rest. This, more than anything achieved by Disney, suggests that there is, in fact, hope for the fairytale film as an inheritor of the folk voice, as simply one more step in the ongoing process by which fairytale narratives are transformed in our culture to reflect that culture's concerns.

Shrek moves through and beyond Disney consumerism, suggesting that metafiction is not only the province of the intellectual writer; that popular fairytale can be intelligently aware of its own postmodern status, while simultaneously celebrating rather than exploiting its generic roots. Above all, this demonstrates the strength of fairy tale's marvellous geometry as self-aware artefact as much as magical form.

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Note to the reader: given that I have undertaken chronological analysis at several points, I have in places felt it important to differentiate between the original publication date and the date of the actual reprint I am using, and to which page references apply.

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