

Telling Our Own Stories: Women, Desire, and Narrative in Fairy Tales
(with Special Reference to the Works of Angela Carter and A. S. Byatt)

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Abstract

This thesis explores the implication of desire in the fairy-tale narrative and investigates the ways in which the works of Angela Carter and A. S. Byatt deal with this issue. Using a methodology which combines Freud's psychoanalytic theory with theories of narrative, this study argues that the desire which traditionally drives the fairy-tale plot is masculine, whether the protagonist be male or female. Whereas canonical fairy tales stage an Oedipal drama in which the masculine subject penetrates the feminine space in order to establish himself as Man, Carter's and Byatt's rewritings of fairy tales illustrate creatively different ways of offering alternatives to this masculine plot. This study concludes that a truly effective feminist critique of the fairy tale must take into account the desire at work in the traditional fairy-tale narrative and its inherently masculine nature, and that a truly challenging—feminist and otherwise—rewriting of fairy tales must engage in reworking this universal/masculine conception of narrative desire.

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Introduction

This thesis proposes to explore the aspect of the fairy tale which concerns narrative desire. Using a methodology which combines Freud's psychoanalytic theory with theories of narrative, this study analyses the desire at work in the narrative of fairy tales and demonstrates that the desire which drives the traditional fairy-tale plot is masculine, whether the protagonist be male or female. The notion of narrative desire is explored in two articles which not only bear similar titles but also use similar methods of investigation. Peter Brooks's 'Narrative Desire' and Teresa de Lauretis's 'Desire in Narrative', both published in 1984, engage in exploring the dynamics of narrative, especially how narrative functions in the process of its structuration. There is, however, a significant difference between their perspectives; this has led them to follow different lines of investigation. Whereas the former purports to offer a universal model of narrative which underlines the workings of desire as what drives the narrative forward, the latter throws doubt on just such 'universality' assumed by the existing theories of narrative and addresses the question: *whose* desire is at work?.

In her exploration of desire in narrative, de Lauretis reveals the masculine desire inherent in all narrative movement. The point is clearly expressed in her interpretation of the stories of two female 'monsters': 'Medusa and the Sphinx, like the other ancient monsters, have survived inscribed in hero narratives, in someone else's story, not their own; so they are figures or markers of positions—places and topoi—through which the hero and his story move to their destination and to accomplish meaning'.¹ In de

¹ Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington:

Lauretis's view, stories of women, be it the story of Snow White or that of Sleeping Beauty, are not their own stories but are embedded in masculine desire. In my own exploration of the desire which drives the fairy-tale plot, I will follow the line of investigation proposed by de Lauretis's essay which foregrounds the implication of the sexual difference in narrative structuration.

But why read for the plot? First of all, because fairy tales urge us to read for the plot since the fairy tale is a genre which, above all, privileges the linear movement of plot. Secondly, because plot is directly implicated in desire with which fairy tales, as stories of wish-fulfilment, are particularly concerned. The masculine narrative desire suppresses and obliterates a desire which is different, a desire which may be called 'feminine'. What, then, is feminine desire?

Towards the end of his career, Freud confessed in his letter to Marie Bonaparte, his friend and benefactor, that, despite his endeavour, he still could not solve the enigma of femininity:

The great question that has never been answered and which I have not been able to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, is 'What does a woman want?'.²

Freud, who sought to reveal the nature of our desires, could imagine only one desire, which is masculine. 'What might it mean', Shoshana Felman asks,

for a woman to reclaim (reread, rewrite, appropriate) Freud's question? The answer, Freud acknowledged, was not available to him. It is not certain that the question has an answer. It is not certain that the answer—if it exists—can become available to any man, or, for that

Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 109.

² Cited in Ernest Jones, *Sigmund Freud: Life and Work*, II (London: Hogarth, 1967), p. 468.

matter, to any woman in our culture. But the question can be truly opened up and radically displaced, I would suggest, by being repossessed, reclaimed by women.³

Freud's question, 'What does a woman want?', will resonate throughout my discussions of desire in the fairy-tale narrative. I will not, of course, attempt to find a single, definitive answer to the question; instead, my objective here is to explore the possibilities which women's reclaiming of the question about femininity may open up for women *and* for men in imagining different desires which would enable them to tell different stories.

This study will attempt to argue that a truly effective feminist critique of the fairy tale must take into account the desire at work in the traditional fairy-tale narrative and its inherently masculine nature, and that a truly challenging—feminist and otherwise—rewriting of fairy tales must engage in reworking this universal/masculine narrative desire. Chapter 1 considers the nature of the fairy tale and gives a historical overview of women's creative and critical contribution to the genre. Chapter 2 investigates the basic plot pattern of fairy tales delineated by Vladimir Propp, and points out the problem in his formulation, i.e., its male-centred assumptions which obliterate sexual difference. Chapter 3 goes on to scrutinise whose desire it is that drives the narrative of both the male and the female plots. The following four chapters (Chapter 4-7) examine how my analysis illuminates, and is illuminated by, the creative writings of Angela Carter and A. S. Byatt.

³ Shoshana Felman, *What Does a Woman Want? Reading and Sexual Difference* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 2-3.

Chapter 1

Women Rewriting and Reinterpreting Fairy Tales

The fairy tales with which we are most familiar, the so-called ‘classic’ fairy tales, are *literary* fairy tales, which means that these ‘original’ stories are already *re*-writings of older ones, either oral or literary. The nature of the literary fairy tale, above all, is characterised by its multiple hybridity. Its reworking of the communal past to create the new involves literary/textual crossbreeding; it uses archaic language to express the present, and evokes old themes and motifs to envision new ideas. The literary fairy tale is also hybrid in its juxtaposition of the magical and everyday reality.

The fairy tale as a genre may seem to be tied so strongly to the past that there is apparently no room for innovation; however, as I will show in this chapter, this has not been the case. A brief look at its history makes it clear that the fairy tale is a form which allows individual tellers a space for artistic creation. Contrary to the common impression given by a cluster of texts which form its standard canon, the fairy tale is a versatile genre which contains a great variety of differences within itself. My interest throughout this thesis lies less in finding the universal principles in different tales than in focusing on the differences each writer makes in retelling the same old tales, particularly in terms of plot.

This chapter will examine how women have contributed towards giving shape to the fairy tale as a literary genre. Women’s contribution to the fairy tale falls into two categories, (re)writing and (re)interpretation, although these are in essence inseparable from each other in the sense that every rewriting is a reinterpretation and every

reinterpretation is a rewriting. But first, what is a fairy tale?

Defining the Fairy Tale

Although it sounds tautological, fairy tales are those tales which incorporate certain conventions of the genre recognised by all as such. This direct and immediate referential function is crucial to the fairy tale. One of the most distinctive features of the genre is that it takes a form so familiar as to make us immediately refer back to the old well-known tales kept in our memory. This means that any individual tale must rely on the genre's conventions even when it purports to subvert such conventions. I will consider the conventions of the fairy tale in terms of content, style, and plot.

First of all, what exactly do we mean by 'fairy tale' today? The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the following definitions: 'a) A tale about fairies. Also *gen.*, fairy legend, faerie. b) An unreal or incredible story. c) A falsehood'. This thesis is concerned only with the first definition; however, I need to extend the first definition since my material includes stories which are not about a 'fairy', which is itself defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as 'one of a class of supernatural beings of diminutive size, in popular belief supposed to possess magical powers and to have great influence for good or evil over the affairs of man'. The definition, a 'tale about fairies', is too narrow for me since the tales I discuss here are not 'about' fairies and often do not even feature one; they are more about ordinary human beings who undergo magical adventures.

Words such as wonder, magic, enchantment and supernatural have been used to describe what characterises the fairy tale in its broad sense. In their introduction to *The Classic Fairy Tales* (1974), Iona and Peter Opie define the fairy tale as 'contain[ing] an

enchantment or other supernatural element that is clearly imaginary'.¹ For J. R. R. Tolkien, who prefers the word 'fairy story' to 'fairy tale', 'fairy stories are not in normal English usage stories *about* fairies or elves, but stories about Fairy, that is *Faërie*, the realm or state in which fairies have their being', and '*Faërie* itself may perhaps most nearly be translated by Magic'.² More recently, Jack Zipes has argued that a sense of '*wonder*' is what distinguishes the literary fairy tale from other modern short literary genres such as the moral story and novella.³ Looking thus at some of its definitions, we may want to ask how this particular genre has come to be called the 'fairy tale' in the first place.

'Fairy tale' is a translation of the French word '*conte de fées*'. The term '*conte de fées*' was first used in seventeenth-century France by Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy, one of the pioneers in establishing the fairy tale as a literary genre in Europe. Madame d'Aulnoy gave a name to the genre by calling her four volumes of fairy tales *Les Contes des fées* (1696-98). Rendered in English as 'tales of fairies' by her early translators, the term 'fairy tales' first appeared in one of her title-pages in 1752.⁴ By that time, the term seems to have been well established in English; the *Oxford English Dictionary* knows its earliest use in 1749.

If fairy tales are defined as the tales which contain wonder, it may seem more appropriate to call them 'wonder tales', a translation from the German word *Wundermärchen* and the French *contes merveilleux*, which is the term Marina Warner

¹ Iona and Peter Opie, *The Classic Fairy Tales* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 15.

² J. R. R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories', in *Tree and Leaf* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1964), pp. 11-70 (pp. 15-16).

³ *Spells of Enchantment: The Wondrous Fairy Tales of Western Culture*, ed. by Jack Zipes (New York: Viking, 1991), p. xiv.

⁴ Opie and Opie, p. 15.

prefers in her *Wonder Tales: Six Stories of Enchantment* (1994), a collection of French fairy tales in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Wonder tale, states Warner, 'is a useful term, it frees this kind of story from the miniaturised whimsy of fairyland to breathe the wilder air of the marvellous'.⁵ Despite its usefulness, however, I chose not to use the term wonder tale because it is not the word generally used to refer to the tales I will discuss here. Other alternatives for the term are: 'tales of magic' (German *Zaubermärchen*), 'tales of enchantment' (Portuguese *contos de encantamento*), and 'art tales' (German *Kunstmärchen*), the last of which is associated with the literary fairy tales of the German Romantics and is used by Angela Carter to describe her own tales in *The Bloody Chamber*.⁶

There are, of course, other kinds of literary genres which invoke a sense of wonder such as myth, legend, and other religious tales. While myth tells about gods and demigods who have supernatural powers, fairy tales are about ordinary human beings who happen to encounter supernatural beings, objects or events. Unlike legends, fairy tales are usually not attached to any particular individuals or places which are supposed to have existed in reality. Miraculous events in fairy tales are not associated with a particular religion, and, most importantly, fairy tales do not ask the reader to believe that what they tell actually happened in the past. These tales are adjacent to the fairy tale and may contain similar motifs, but they function differently. Fairy tales, however miraculous they may be, are primarily concerned with human beings in general and do not intend to

⁵ *Wonder Tales: Six Stories of Enchantment*, ed. by Marina Warner (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 3.

⁶ Referring to the classic fairy tale 'Beauty and the Beast', Carter states: 'It seems to me important that "Beauty and the Beast" does not come out of oral tradition: it's an art story, written for children—just as my stories are art stories'. See John Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 83.

solicit faith from the reader.

Magic in fairy tales is never explained, nor do characters express surprise or suspicion as if they take it for granted. A princess may continue to sleep for a hundred years without ageing, and a cat may wear boots and speak to the king. Suspension of disbelief, therefore, is the law of the fairy tale. It is useful here to turn to Tzvetan Todorov's notion of the marvellous. In *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1970), Todorov defines literature of the fantastic as located between the uncanny and the marvellous. In the tales of the uncanny, the supernatural is explained; in those of the marvellous, the supernatural is accepted. The fairy tale belongs to the genre of the marvellous when it does not come too close to allegory. Todorov defines allegory as consisting of at least two meanings which are indicated explicitly rather than derived from the reader's interpretation. He points out that some of Perrault's tales approach fable, which is the closest genre to pure allegory. He takes as an example 'Riquet à la Houppe', in which Perrault encourages the reader to take the physical transformation of the intelligent but ugly hero into a handsome one in an allegorical sense both in the body of the text ('Some say it was not at all the fairy's charms that had been at work, but that love alone produced this transformation') and in the moral added at the end of the text ('All is beauty in one we love').⁷ After such indications, claims Todorov, 'nothing supernatural is left'.⁸ However, he also observes that the reader of the fairy tale 'is entitled not to concern himself with the allegorical meaning suggested by the author, and

⁷ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. by Richard Howard (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1975), pp. 64-65. For Perrault's 'Riquet à la Houppe', see 'Riquet with the Tuft', in *Beauty and the Beast and Other Classic French Fairy Tales*, ed. and trans. by Jack Zipes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997), pp. 43-50.

⁸ *The Fantastic*, p. 65.

to discover an entirely different meaning in the text if he chooses to do so'.⁹ It is clear that, despite the explicit morals added by the author, people have continued to read Perrault's tales for reasons other than edification alone.

Fairy tales contain magical elements which are to be contested neither by characters nor by readers, and this seems to be a quality common to both oral and literary fairy tales. As Todorov notes, however, 'what distinguishes the fairy tale is a certain kind of writing, not the status of the supernatural'.¹⁰ I will now consider the fairy tale from another perspective, which is to do with style.

When we think of a fairy tale, we always recall its beginning, 'Once upon a time', and its ending, 'And they lived happily ever after'. In *The European Folktale: Form and Nature* (1947), Max Lüthi attempts to 'identify what makes the folktale a folktale' by describing the stylistic traits of the folktale of Europe.¹¹ Although Lüthi's propositions cannot be applied to all fairy tales since they exclude most of literary fairy tales, it is useful to look at the descriptive categories he designates for folktales to the extent that literary fairy tales have developed from folk fairy tales and that many of the tales Lüthi discusses are taken from the Grimms' collection, which we now regard as a literary, rather than purely folkloric, accomplishment.¹²

⁹ *The Fantastic*, p. 65.

¹⁰ *The Fantastic*, p. 54.

¹¹ Max Lüthi, *The European Folktale: Form and Nature*, trans. by John D. Niles (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 3.

¹² As recent studies have shown, the Grimm Brothers' collection, despite its authors' claim that they have accurately transcribed the genuine folklore passed on by the mouth of rustic peasants, should be recognised as bearing literary aspects and to no small extent. It is now known that the Grimms not only collected many of their tales from the educated young women of the middle class or aristocracy, who were certainly familiar with both oral and literary tradition, but also took tales directly from printed literature. Their collection was far from purely German as the Grimms claimed and might even

According to Lüthi, the stylistic properties specific to the European folktale are:

1) 'one-dimensionality', 2) 'depthlessness', 3) 'abstract style', 4) 'isolation and universal interconnection', and 5) 'sublimation and all-inclusiveness'. 1) One-dimensionality means the unquestioned coexistence of human and supernatural characters in the same dimension, the quality which, as I mentioned above, is essential to the fairy tale as a sub-genre of the marvellous. 2) Depthlessness refers to the lack of depiction of characters' physical and psychological life, their environment, and their relationship to time. Depthlessness or flatness of fairy-tale characters is related to the genre's privileging of the movement of plot over the representation of three-dimensional reality. 3) Abstract style is used in the European folktale to emphasise the 'sharp contours' of its figures and the linear progress of its story line by simply naming only what is essential to the plot and electing not to pause for detailed description.¹³ For Lüthi, even the Grimms' tales sometimes fail to satisfy this rule of abstract stylisation when they succumb to amplifying description such as 'the red eyes and wagging head of the witch and her long bespectacled nose', instead of speaking simply of an 'old witch' or an 'old woman'.¹⁴ The repetition of three (characters, objects, events, etc.) is a stylistic formula of the fairy tale which is related to abstract style. Lüthi attributes the fairy tale's triple repetition to its aspiration for 'abstract certainty'.¹⁵ There is no randomness in the fairy tale; it only

themselves have believed; one of their main informants was of French ancestry, and some of the tales were undoubtedly derived from other European countries. What is more, they edited and revised the tales according to their taste as well as to the taste of their time: a comparison of the same stories between the first and the second editions gives enough evidence that their tales underwent significant literary manipulations. For a brief account of the Grimms' ideological manipulations of their material, see Zipes's introduction to *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, 2nd edn, ed. and trans. by Jack Zipes (New York: Bantam, 1992), pp. xvii-xxxi.

¹³ Lüthi, p. 24.

¹⁴ Lüthi, pp. 25-26.

¹⁵ Lüthi, p. 33.

follows its own stylistic demands. Lüthi claims that, although originally a number of mythical, spiritual, and magical significance, in fairy tales three functions as a stylistic device to maintain the clarity and stability of design. The triad, as in a trebled repetition of the same event as well as in a choice of three, is generally a predominant formula in both folk and literary fairy tales, although literary tales and some oral versions tend to avoid strict word-for-word repetition, preferring variation and reformulation. 4) Isolation and universal interconnection are ‘two correlates’;¹⁶ because of their isolation from contexts, folktale characters can freely establish the ties which are required by the situations. In the folktale, all figures, episodes, and motifs are isolated from each other and at the same time interrelated to each other as part of a meaningful whole. The protagonists of fairy tales go out into the world as isolated individuals, and, even when they stay in their own houses as is often the case with female protagonists, they have no real relationship with other characters. The most deprived—the poor, the persecuted, the abandoned, the orphan, the youngest child—are often the protagonists of fairy tales because ‘they are isolated and are thus freer than anyone else to engage in what is truly essential’.¹⁷ 5) Sublimation and all-inclusiveness are also correlated. All folktale elements are emptied of their usual substance and sublimated in such a way that they become ‘pure, light, and transparent and join in an effortless interplay that includes all the important themes of human existence’.¹⁸ They not only represent literal images but also have general significance; a princess, for example, is not simply a princess in realistic terms but also signifies human beings in general. The fairy tale, because of its crystallised form, resists any specific interpretation and calls for multiple interpretations; as Lüthi

¹⁶ Lüthi, p. 54.

¹⁷ Lüthi, p. 65.

¹⁸ Lüthi, p. 73.

claims, 'any single interpretation will impoverish [a tale] and will miss what is essential'.¹⁹ Even in the case of literary fairy tales which are often invested with specific messages by their writers, their symbolic form allows the reader to read them differently, as I considered above in Perrault's example.

Apart from the magical content and the stylistic features discussed above, the fairy tale has a certain pattern of plot characteristic of the genre. Fairy tales are often associated both with rites of passage in primitive societies (which enact processes of human development) and with the modern fictional genre of the *Bildungsroman* (which represents these processes in fictional form), because they all depict the process of human development. The fairy tale crystallises a complicated process of socialisation by reducing it to its essential form. The state of enchantment which heroes and heroines undergo is fraught with perils which they must overcome primarily with their own inner resources such as courage, intelligence and patience. After undergoing magical adventures, the protagonist returns to reality with a deeper, matured consciousness. The plot pattern common to fairy tales can be summed up as the movement in and out of enchantment;²⁰ it generally proceeds from everyday reality through the state of enchantment to disenchantment. Vladimir Propp, whose work I will discuss in the next chapter, defines the fairy tale as a tale which begins with a lack and ends with its resolution.

The happy ending is generally regarded as the hallmark of the fairy tale.²¹ After

¹⁹ Lüthi, p. 94.

²⁰ I borrow the definition of the fairy tale as 'in and out of enchantment' from Isabel Cardigos Brennan's 'In and Out of Enchantment: Blood Symbolism and Gender in Portuguese Fairytales' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, 1993), p. 23.

²¹ The happy ending, although dominant, is not necessarily essential to the fairy-tale plot

a series of trials and tribulations, the protagonist accomplishes the given tasks, marries a royal figure, and ascends the throne: 'And they lived happily ever after'. Tolkien stresses the importance of 'the Consolation of the Happy Ending', investing the fairy-tale happy ending with religious significance.²² Bruno Bettelheim, who advocates the use of the fairy tale in the psychoanalytic treatment of children, also places great significance on the happy ending of the fairy tale. For Bettelheim, the happy ending, especially the permanent union of a prince and a princess, has meaning on two levels: the integration of the personality (the id, ego and superego as well as the male and the female principles), and the establishment of a permanent relation which for ever transcends separation anxiety. Consolation of the happy ending, he claims, is 'the greatest service the fairy tale can offer a child'.²³ He, therefore, does not approve of modern fairy tales which do not lead to 'the ultimate form of human existence', by which he means 'the prince and princess getting married and inheriting the kingdom, ruling it in peace and happiness'.²⁴ In Bettelheim's view, this is all a child should desire in real life. However, as I will argue, the possession of power, wealth and a partner may not be what we—children and adults alike—most desire as the happy ending of the stories we read as well as of our own life-stories.

Re-Writings

even in the case of folk fairy tales. There are tale types which do not end happily but are still regarded as fairy tales, such as 'The Fisher and His Wife' and 'Godfather Death'. Some of the most popular literary fairy tales do not have a happy ending. D'Aulnoy's 'The Yellow Dwarf', Andersen's 'The Little Mermaid' and Oscar Wilde's 'The Happy Prince' all end unhappily.

²² Tolkien, p. 68.

²³ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. 147.

²⁴ Bettelheim, p. 147.

The literary fairy tale is a genre of literature which is particularly characterised by its conscious reworking of other, older materials. Fairy tales by women writers are at once a *response* to the canon of the genre which, as I will show below, has been largely dominated by male writers and editors, and a *continuation* of the female fairy-tale tradition.

The first production of literary fairy tales by female writers coincides with the establishment of the genre in European literary tradition. Around the middle of the seventeenth century in Paris, aristocratic women began to form literary salons to discuss literature, art and mores with other women, and gradually with men (including Charles Perrault). The literary inclination of the members of salons allowed them to borrow freely from earlier narratives, especially the folktale and the romance. These so-called salon fairy tales drew on various literary sources such as Greek romances, medieval legends like that of Melusine, the Arthurian romances, the lays of Marie de France, the fables of their contemporary La Fontaine, and Italian story collections like Boccaccio's *Il Decamerone* (1353), Giovan Francesco Straparola's *Le Piacevoli Notti* (1550-53) and Giambattista Basile's *Il Pentamerone* (1634-36). It was Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy, not Perrault as might be expected, who gave a name to the genre and who also set a vogue for fairy tales with the 1690 publication of her literary fairy tale 'L'Île de la félicité' embedded in her novel, *Histoire d'Hypolite, comte de Douglas*.

D'Aulnoy and her contemporary women writers such as Henriette-Julie de Murat, Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier, Gabrielle-Suzanne de Villeneuve, Charlotte-Rose Caumont de la Force and others, used a style which is overtly literary; its frequent digressions from the main story line (it delights in describing characters, objects and feelings in a way which is both realistic and fantastic, as well as in making explicit

references to other stories and to its own narrative) deviate from Lüthi's formula. However, it also owes much to the traditional art of storytelling in its reworking of familiar, well-worn patterns and motifs in folklore as well as in its use of the fairy-tale device of patterning through repetition. Their declared affinity to the oral tradition was both political and aesthetic. In the last quarter of the seventeenth century, the so-called '*Querelle des anciens et des modernes*' (The Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns) took place between classicists and modernists. The Ancients, arguing that France had to imitate the classical arts of Greece and Rome, disdained the newly emerging genre of the literary fairy tale, thereby politically marginalising its women writers, who allied themselves with the Moderns. Aesthetically, the oral tradition allowed these writers to break free from the rigid rules of classicism. In her introduction to *Wonder Tales*, a collection of French salon fairy tales, Warner states that these women writers broke 'all the rules of classicism, of the unities, of linguistic purity, of decorum' and opted for 'the pleasure in the grotesque, the unlikely and the incongruous, the mixture of tragedy and comedy, the frank eroticism, the casual cruelty and the topsy-turvy bizarreries in these tales of wonder'.²⁵ For the most part, the happy endings of salon fairy tales by women writers such as d'Aulnoy are the result of severe and extended testing of both lovers; they do not simply come about at the moment the princess opens her eyes and beholds a handsome prince. These tales especially prize love, or *tendresse*, which signifies the true affections between a man and a woman, and, when the protagonists fail to fight against those forces undermining their love, the tales end tragically. The fairy-tale form cultivated by women writers differed from that of Perrault, who also took sides with the Moderns but who alone was within the literary

²⁵ *Wonder Tales*, pp. 14-15.

establishment as a member of the *Académie française*.

It may not be a coincidence that the wonder or magic in the salon fairy tale is generally performed by female figures, usually fairy godmothers who are wise, benevolent and fearful. If we consider the fact that most of the fairy-tale writers at that time were women and that they were concerned about the marginal status of women in society especially concerning marriage, we may begin to discern the subversive potential of such celebration of female power in fairy tales. The miraculous power of these fairies is never explained nor is it associated with a particular religion; female writers of seventeenth-century France entrusted the hopes of emancipation to the power of female fairies rather than to the Christian or other male authorities. The coining of the term 'fairy tale' during this time, therefore, is significant; it reveals the centrality of women as storytellers and as powerful figures in stories, the quality which has become increasingly obscured in the course of the development of the genre.

Charles Perrault published his collection of fairy tales entitled *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* in 1697 with an inscription 'CONTES DE MA MERE LOYE' on its frontispiece. The collection contains eight tales, seven of which except the last are among the best-known fairy tales today: 'La Belle au bois dormant' (Sleeping Beauty), 'Le petit chaperon rouge' (Little Red Riding Hood), 'La Barbe bleüe' (Bluebeard), 'Le Maistre Chat, ou le Chat Botté' (Puss in Boots), 'Les Fées' (Diamonds and Toads), 'Cendrillon, ou la petite pantoufle de verre' (Cinderella), 'Le Petit Poucet' (Little Thumbling), and 'Riquet à la Houppe'. Although drawing heavily on the oral tradition of *contes de vieilles* or what was commonly known at that time as *contes de ma mère l'oye*, Perrault reshaped the popular folk tales into moralistic tales that would appeal to both adults and children by adding detailed description of upper-class manners, neutralising violent aspects with sprightly humour, and ending each tale with a rhymed *moralité*. His

collection was translated into English by Robert Samber in 1729 as *Histories, or Tales of Past Times*, which initiated the retellings of the Mother Goose legend in English-speaking homes. Under the nineteenth-century reformation of the genre, only his tales from the vogue of salon fairy tales made its way into the canon. Significantly, as Elizabeth W. Harries points out, the Grimms, in their introduction to the first edition of their collection, praised Perrault's work as conveying the purity of the true folktale but denounced Perrault's contemporary women writers as 'inferior imitators': 'France must surely have more [tales] than those given us by Charles Perrault, who alone treated them as children's tales (not so his inferior imitators, d'Aulnoy, Murat); he gives us nine, certainly the best known and also among the most beautiful'.²⁶

Literary fairy tales, as we saw above, were first created for adults. It was during the latter half of the eighteenth century that the fairy tale became conventionalised enough to suit the child audience. This was the period when fairy tales became gradually accepted as a suitable means of socialisation for children, teaching them the norms and manners of society. The most influential writer in this move was Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont, who published a series of pedagogic fairy tales directed explicitly at the young. Her *Magasin des enfans, ou dialogues entre une sage Gouvernante et plusieurs de ses Élèves* (1756), translated into English as *The Young Misses Magazine* (1761), was published in London, where she earned her living as a governess. Mme de Beaumont's tales, including her recasting of Mme de Villeneuve's 1740 version of 'Beauty and the Beast', preach self-sacrifice, modesty and domesticity as the virtues which young girls have to possess to attain happiness in their real lives. De Beaumont's narrative, which

²⁶ Cited in Elizabeth W. Harries, 'Fairy Tales about Fairy Tales: Notes on Canon Formation', in *Out of the Woods: The Origin of the Literary Fairy Tale in Italy and France*, ed. by Nancy L. Canepa and Antonella Ansani (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), pp. 152-175 (p. 152).

blended the magical art of salon fairy tales with pedagogic moralising, became a model for nineteenth-century stories for children.

Having reached its climax with the publication by Charles Mayer of the massive forty-one volume set of the best-known fairy tales of the preceding century, *Cabinet des fées*, between 1785 and 1789, the interest in the fairy tale as a literary genre began to diminish in France. At this time in Germany, on the other hand, the interest in the fairy tale was about to flourish.

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm published the first edition of *Kinder- und Haus-Märchen* (*Children's and Household Tales*) in 1812. The Grimms' collection was part of the classicists' project to find unifying truths for the German people and to create pride in their folk tradition. However, as I mentioned earlier, their claim that their collection is a true work of folklore has now been disproved. Although heavily imbued with nineteenth-century German social and moral values, the Grimms' tales surely added a new charm to the genre. They took fairy tales out of the court and into the German forests which, dark, gloomy, and full of wonders, are places where magic and reality coexist. In their tales, all flowery expressions were eliminated in favour of rustic tone. Each tale was made short and its structure simple, the better to express the purity of folk narratives. The magic was no longer placed in the hands of elegantly dressed fairy godmothers as it was in French salon fairy tales, but appeared in various forms of supernatural, Christian as well as pre-Christian, motifs. Most significantly, through the process of selecting, editing, and rewriting the tales, the Grimms' collection systematically endorsed the gender-biased moralities which have become the standard of the genre (I will return to this point later). Their tales were translated into English as *German Popular Stories* by Edward Taylor in 1823 and had a great influence on the cultivation of the literary fairy tale in Britain. Now the term 'fairy tale' came to include

the Grimms' *Märchen*.

Kunstmärchen is the term used by the Romantics for their literary fairy tale. Distinguished from *Volksmärchen* (folk tale), *Kunstmärchen* is an art form which has its own modern literary tradition. At the end of the eighteenth century, the Romantic writers turned to the fairy tale in order to envisage, in Ronald Taylor's words, 'a life in which the values of art should absorb and transfigure the values of materiality'.²⁷ Romantic writers such as Ludwig Tieck, Novalis, E. T. A. Hoffmann and Friedrich Freiherr de la Motte Fouqué used the form of the fairy tale to creatively challenge the ideologies of both the old aristocracy and the emerging bourgeoisie. The Romantic tales tend towards the fantastic, a genre which, according to Todorov, hovers between the uncanny and the marvellous, between the real and the imaginary. Their affinity with the fairy tale is mainly on a stylistic level, and for the most part they do not follow the convention of the fairy-tale happy ending. The Romantics combined the archaic narrative of folktales with new forms and ideas in their attempt to envision a possible way of living which is based on the communal past but which is yet to be invented anew. With the rise of the Romantics, the literary fairy tale became less about *divertissement* (as it had been in the case of the French salon fairy tale) and began to concern itself consciously with philosophical and aesthetic issues.

It must be noted that few women appear to have been involved with the rise of the fairy tale in Germany in the late Enlightenment and the Romantic periods. However, recent studies have shown that female writers of fairy tales in nineteenth-century Germany mostly wrote outside the standard canons formed by the Grimms and the Romantics, and dealt with issues which would anticipate late-twentieth-century feminist

²⁷ *Six German Romantic Tales: Heinrich von Kleist, Ludwig Tieck, E. T. A. Hoffman*, ed. and trans. by Ronald Taylor (London: Angel, 1985), p. 9.

concerns about gender inequalities in society.²⁸

In Denmark, Hans Christian Andersen published a small booklet in 1835, which contained 'The Tinder Box' and 'The Princess on the Pea'. Andersen's tales were written for children but allowed a different level of understanding for the adult readers, which was the effect Perrault tried to create more than a hundred years previously. Andersen's fairy tales, which combine fairy-tale magic with Christian sentiments, do not always follow the traditional fairy-tale plot; they sometimes end tragically as is the case with 'The Little Mermaid'. His tales tend to appeal more to feelings than to morals. Andersen's tales greatly helped the genre to come into its own for children; by the middle of the nineteenth century, parents and educators gradually accepted that good fantasy literature, which can at once amuse and instruct, may not necessarily be harmful to children. Andersen's tales soon became extremely popular throughout Europe and America; they arrived in Britain in 1846 in more than five translations.

In nineteenth-century England, fairy tales appeared concealed in the plots of novels. Jane Austen incorporated the plot of 'Cinderella' into her novel *Mansfield Park* (1814), which may be seen as a critique of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), a novel also based on the plot of 'Cinderella', that archetypal tale of feminine virtues rewarded. Fanny, the excessively passive and virtuous heroine of *Mansfield Park*, separated from her own impoverished family, is maltreated by her aunt (evil stepmother) and scorned by her two female cousins (evil stepsisters) in her new home, but eventually marries her rich

²⁸ See Shawn Jarvis, 'The Vanished Woman of Great Influence: Benedikte Naubert's Legacy and German Women's Fairy Tales', in *In the Shadow of Olympus: German Women Writers around 1800*, ed. by Katherine R. Goodman and Edith Waldstein (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 189-209; and Jarvis, 'Trivial Pursuit?: Women Deconstructing the Grimmian Model in the "Kaffeterkreis"', in *The Reception of Grimms' Fairy Tales: Responses, Reactions, Revisions*, ed. by Donald Haase (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), pp. 102-126.

and handsome cousin Edmund. This apparently perfect fairy-tale ending, however, is presented by the narrator in such a way that the reader is made to feel dubious of the happily-ever-after which it should promise.²⁹ Charlotte Brontë also re-formulated the fairy-tale paradigm of female development in *Jane Eyre* (1847). Not only does the novel make allusions to popular fairy tales such as 'Sleeping Beauty' and 'Bluebeard', but it follows the plot line first of 'Cinderella' and then of 'Beauty and the Beast', only to thwart such romantic fairy-tale paradigms in the end. The marriage is not presented as a dutiful daughter's acquiescence but as an independent woman's choice; and it does not transform the Beast into a handsome prince.³⁰

It was in the latter half of the nineteenth century that the fairy tale flourished as a proper literary genre in Britain. The importation of the Grimms', the Romantics' and Andersen's tales served to secure the legitimacy of the fairy tale as an independent literary genre. From this point on, various attempts to compose modern fairy tales began.

Women writers such as Anne Thackeray Ritchie, Maria Louisa Moleworth and Harriet Childe-Pemberton began to refashion the traditional European fairy tales to suit the taste of Victorian England. Their fairy tales, like de Beaumont's, opted to inculcate in young girls the proper manners and conventional female virtues promoted in patriarchal society. George Cruickshank, the Grimms' first English illustrator, rewrote

²⁹ A. S. Byatt points out Brontë's ironic re-formulation of the fairy-tale happy ending in *Mansfield Park*. See A. S. Byatt and Ignês Sodr , *Imagining Characters: Six Conversations about Women Writers*, ed. by Rebecca Swift (London: Vintage, 1995), particularly pp. 32-34.

³⁰ Karen E. Rowe argues that *Jane Eyre* shows Brontë's disillusionment with the romantic fantasies bred by fairy tales. See Karen E. Rowe, "'Fairy-Born and Human-Bred': Jane Eyre's Education in Romance", in *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*, ed. by Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1983), pp. 69-89.

popular traditional tales such as ‘Cinderella’, ‘Jack and the Beanstalk’ and ‘Puss in Boots’ to preach the evils of drinking with such overt didacticism that Dickens publicly took issue with such abuse of fairy tales for moralising purposes.³¹ Andrew Lang, whose twelve-coloured *Fairy Books* of collected traditional fairy tales (1889-1910) was a tremendous success, also created some original fairy tales which were intended to amuse children in a much more sweetened tone than Perrault’s and the Grimms’.

Meanwhile, other writers were beginning to use the fairy tale to challenge the status quo of Victorian society. As Zipes points out, there was another factor that helped to induce the vogue of the fairy tale during this period.³² In the 1840s, many writers began to be concerned with the negative effects of the industrial revolution, and some of them such as John Ruskin and Charles Kingsley expressed their social, moral and religious concerns in the form of fairy tales. It seems that they turned to the fairy tale partly because its symbolic form allowed them to crystallise in their art the actual social problems which had become increasingly complex, and also because its evocation of wonder and imaginative power was in tune with their project to repudiate the material values in favour of spiritual values.

On the other hand, Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871) discarded altogether the moralising aspect of the fairy tale. Carroll’s *Alice* books, undoubtedly the most influential works of fantasy from this period, derive not from traditional European fairy tales, but from the nonsense and violence of English nursery rhymes which became

³¹ Charles Dickens, ‘Frauds on the Fairies’, *Household Words*, 184, 1 October 1853, 97-100.

³² See Zipes, *Victorian Fairy Tales: The Revolt of the Fairies and Elves* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. xix.

popular after the publication of John Newbery's *Mother Goose's Melody* around 1765. The *Alice* books, which combine magic with nonsensical logic, parody all the absurd conventions of the adult world. However, it has been pointed out that, from women's point of view, Alice's adventures into Wonderland both liberate and frustrate women's yearning for autonomy.³³ Although it ends with a girl's triumphant dismissal of adult authorities ('Who cares for you [...] You're nothing but a pack of cards!'), a little girl's fantastic journey is ultimately contained in the male author's dream of detaining the growing girl by insisting that it is better for her to 'leave off at seven' (Humpty-Dumpty tells Looking-Glass Alice, who is 'seven years and six months', that it is 'an uncomfortable sort of age').³⁴

Significantly, in contrast to the writing base of nineteenth-century German fairy tales, a large number of women writers were involved in the production of Victorian literary fairy tales. Besides the women writers mentioned above who refashioned the fairy tale in line with the conventional values of the time, there were others like Christina Rossetti and Mary De Morgan, both of whom were close to the Pre-Raphaelites, who wrote fairy tales which undermined the ideological and literary assumptions of the Victorian period. It seems that these female writers exploited the traditional common assumption that women are good storytellers for children, and, although restricted by the ideas of their time, they told genuinely good subversive stories.

Christina Rossetti (the most likely model for Christabel LaMotte, the fictional

³³ For a brief discussion on *Alice's* ambivalent influence on Victorian female writers, see *Forbidden Journeys: Fairy Tales and Fantasies by Victorian Women Writers*, ed. by Nina Auerbach and U. C. Knoepfelmacher (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 6.

³⁴ *The Annotated Alice: Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass by Lewis Carroll*, ed. by Martin Gardner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), pp. 161, 266.

Victorian poet in A. S. Byatt's *Possession*³⁵) published her collection of three fairy tales entitled *Speaking Likenesses* in 1874. Although it employs the conventionalised form of a governess/aunt giving lessons to her pupils, *Speaking Likenesses* is anything but conventional (Auerbach and Knoepfmacher's anthology of Victorian fairy tales by women writers reprints the work under the heading 'A Trio of Antifantasies').³⁶ *Speaking Likenesses* undermines the benevolent image of a female educator who tells moralistic stories; her fictional storyteller is an angry, tyrannical aunt who delights to force the girls to hear her descriptions of violence and misery. Rossetti's work is also a critical commentary upon such classic Victorian fantasies as Carroll's *Alice*, which was ostensibly written for girls but was in fact driven by a male fantasy of enclosing a female in a state of perpetual innocence (Rossetti's heroine is celebrating her 'eighth' birthday). Her fairy-tale poem *Goblin Market* (1862), which drew upon stories about humans who become lost in fairyland after eating enchanted food, invites varied interpretations as a fairy tale for girls and also as an adult erotic fantasy. Her novel, *Maude: Prose and Verse*, written in 1850 and published in 1897 three years after her death, depicts a morbid heroine, a poetess like Rossetti herself, who chooses death as her happiness. Most significantly, Rossetti's works subvert the convention of the fairy-tale happily-ever-after; not only do they feature no romance, but they also resist integrated closure, whether moral or sentimental.

Mary De Morgan's first collection of fairy tales, *On a Pincushion and Other Tales*, illustrated by her brother William, was published in 1877. Her tales are mostly a feminist and socialist attack on the conventional values of Victorian England. In her 'A

³⁵ The resemblance between the two writers has been pointed out by several critics including the fictional critic Roland Mitchell in Byatt's novel itself.

³⁶ See Auerbach and Knoepfmacher, pp. 317-60.

Toy Princess', the princess chooses to live in a fishing village by letting a life-size doll replace her role in the court.³⁷ Late-Victorian and Edwardian female writers such as Edith Nesbit and Evelyn Sharp, who were politically active as feminists and socialists, composed fairy tales which featured clever and active heroines (and often effeminate or unimpressive heroes).

It must be noted that it was not only women who were concerned with the issue of gender at this time. In 'The Day Boy and the Night Girl' (1879), George MacDonald exposes the arbitrariness of the binary oppositions based on sex and envisages the union of two qualities, masculinity and femininity, as an ultimate goal of self-discovery. It may be argued, however, that this is a case of masculine appropriation of femininity. Such uncritical attempts (by MacDonald as well as by some of his contemporaries, both male and female) to move towards some kind of androgyny or role reversals cannot bring about a real change to the existing gender inequality because any 'equality' which blurs sexual difference before thinking through its implications inevitably falls back to the liberal humanist tradition whose universal subject has always been male.

The most significant experimentation with the fairy tale in the twentieth century began in response to the Women's Movement, beginning in the 1960s in America. It is important here to recognise that fairy tales which concern gender inequality, the central issue of feminism, were not invented for the first time in the late twentieth century. Not only can we find wise and strong female protagonists in folk fairy tales of olden times, but there were precedents of 'feminist' literary fairy tales as far back as three hundred years ago. But it was during the last three decades of the twentieth century that the

³⁷ This uncanny motif of a female automaton, which evokes E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Kunstmärchen* 'Sand Man', was taken up by Angela Carter in 'The Tiger's Bride', her rewriting of 'Beauty and the Beast', which will be discussed in Chapter 4.

feminist fairy tale became fully established within the genre. The feminist fairy tale has come to its own alongside the major social movement which has rapidly developed during the last quarter of this century. We are now experiencing a flowering of the female fairy-tale tradition unmatched before, perhaps even in excess of that of late-seventeenth-century France.

One of the first writers to revise 'classic' fairy tales from women's point of view was Anne Sexton. *Transformations*, her collection of verse fairy tales published in 1971, consists of seventeen stories adapted from the Grimms' collection. Sexton's retellings of fairy tales express the anguish of convention-ridden women in the traditional fairy-tale situation which was still found in the everyday life of her time. In her version of 'Snow White', Snow White's excessive passivity and innocence are represented by her almost literal doll-likeness, 'rolling her china-blue doll eyes/ open and shut'.³⁸ Her doll-like beauty, however, is to be 'eaten, of course, by age' like her stepmother's beauty: 'but, oh my friends, in the end/ you will dance the fire dance in iron shoes'.³⁹ The Queen's mirror will soon become Snow White's, and so will her burning jealousy towards her virgin daughter. Sexton depicts women as being eternally trapped in the mirror which, 'like the weather forecast', voices the standards of female beauty according to male desire, and eventually kills those who are no longer fit.⁴⁰ Sexton, who never regarded herself as a feminist, makes a powerful point in demonstrating the way in which patriarchal society circumscribes women's self-image and desire within the prescribed frame, which is the frame of the magic mirror to which the Queen compulsively comes back again and again.

Another feminist response to the fairy tale is to explore the significance of

³⁸ Anne Sexton, *Transformations* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), p. 3.

³⁹ Sexton, p. 5.

⁴⁰ Sexton, p. 5.

female bonds. This was already indicated in Sexton's rewriting of 'Rapunzel', which opens:

A woman
 who loves a woman
 is forever young.
 The mentor
 and the student
 feed off each other.
 Many a girl
 had an old aunt
 Who locked her in the study
 to keep the boys away.
 They would play rummy
 or lie on the couch
 and touch and touch.
 Old breast against young breast.⁴¹

In Sexton's 'Rapunzel', the intergenerational bond between women is eroticised and celebrated as mutually nurturing and empowering. This blissful relationship is superimposed on the relationship between the old witch and Rapunzel, only to be destroyed later by the invasion of a prince who marries the heroine—as seems inevitable not only in the traditional fairy tale but also in the reality of mid-twentieth-century America. Although tragic in its tone, Sexton's *Transformations* opened up a space for feminist transformations of the fairy tale.

Sexton's evocation of the nurturing bonds between women became an inspiration for Olga Broumas, whose rewriting of 'Rapunzel' takes up the opening line of Sexton's tale, 'A woman/ who loves a woman/ is forever young', and develops this notion fully in her collection of revised myths and fairy tales entitled *Beginning with O*,

⁴¹ Sexton, p. 35.

published in 1977.⁴² Broumas's 'Rapunzel' celebrates the loving relationship between the old witch and the young heroine, which need not be ended by Rapunzel's marriage to a prince. Female fluid, i.e., blood in menstruation and childbirth as well as mother's milk, is especially evoked throughout her collection as creating the nurturing bonds amongst women. Broumas, a self-professed lesbian-feminist, was more affirmative in her conviction that the female bonds are the basis for women's liberation than Sexton, who evoked but did not envision it as a real possibility.⁴³

The publication in 1979 of Angela Carter's collection of revised fairy tales *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* broke new ground in the feminist revision of the fairy tale, proposing a possible new use of the genre for adults in their exploration of sexual politics. Carter's fairy tales, which combine the practical and worldly tone of Perrault with the sensuous and imaginative style of de Beaumont, re-appropriate the old form to explore ways in which women's subjectivity and sexuality can be expressed in the fairy-tale narrative of psycho-sexual development. The stories in *The Bloody Chamber*, which rewrite classic tales such as 'Bluebeard', 'Beauty and the Beast', 'Puss-in-Boots', 'Snow White', 'Sleeping Beauty' and 'Little Red Riding Hood', are centred on the sexual encounter between a woman (Beauty) and a man (the Beast). The title story 'The Bloody Chamber' follows the story of 'Bluebeard' almost to its end while exposing the seductive power such a patriarchal plot holds over the young heroine; Carter's tale, however, changes the traditional ending so as to affirm the empowering

⁴² Olga Broumas, *Beginning with O* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 59.

⁴³ Ellen Cronan Rose gives a more detailed comparative reading of Sexton's *Transformations* and Broumas's *Beginning with O* in 'Through the Looking Glass: When Women Tell Fairy Tales', to which I owe my discussion of these tales. See Ellen Cronan Rose, 'Through the Looking Glass: When Women Tell Fairy Tales', in Abel and others, *The Voyage In*, pp. 209-27.

nature of the mother-daughter relationship based on strong female ties. Carter's novels also show her consistent concern with the fairy tale. In her early novel *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), the orphaned heroine, a beautiful girl whom we find fantasising about a fairy-tale wedding at the beginning of the novel, enters the house of a Bluebeard-like tyrant, but eventually survives to begin again with her smelly, dancing prince. In *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), the picaresque hero is turned into a (female) Cinderella and then rescues his/her Sleeping Beauty, who turns out to be a man in disguise. Carter's reworking of the fairy tale has become an inspiration for many contemporary fairy tales to come. Chapter 4 and 5 will consider how Carter's re-directing of the fairy-tale narrative in her rewritings of 'Beauty and the Beast' in *The Bloody Chamber* and in her novel *Nights at the Circus* (1984) opens up a space in which women's desire may become representable.

Contemporary writers have continued the work began by such writers as Sexton, Broumas and Carter. For instance, the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood's works, from her first novel *Edible Woman* (1969) onwards, have re-evaluated the resourcefulness of the heroines in the Grimms' less well-known fairy tales who bravely and intelligently overcome difficulties. Her reworking of fairy tales also foregrounds the empowering aspect of female bonding which has been explored by the previous feminist revisions of fairy tales. The Irish writer Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* (1997) pursues the lesbian-feminist re-formulation of the fairy tale developed by Broumas, and reworks the old sexist and heterosexist paradigms in the interests of creating new stories for women who love women. Donoghue's tales are also concerned with the language of the fairy tale and experiment with the possibilities of its expressive power.

A. S. Byatt's writings have added a significant new perspective in feminist re-

formulation of the fairy tale. Her works have played with various kinds of fairy tales: the salon fairy tales of seventeenth-century French ladies, the Grimms' *Märchen*, the German Romantics' *Kunstmärchen*, Andersen's fairy tales, Victorian fairy tales, Breton folk fairy tales, the *Arabian Nights*, and many more. Byatt's reworking of the fairy tale especially concerns the ways in which the traditional patterns of fairy tales function as a compelling principle in the interaction between life and art. Her novel *Possession: A Romance* (1990) reworks fairy-tale plots and motifs and also interposes fairy tales written by a fictional Victorian female writer. Interestingly, Byatt uses the fairy tale, which is a form inimical to digressions, as digressions in the novel. Two of the fairy tales embedded in *Possession* were reprinted in her story collection *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye: Five Fairy Stories* (1994). Unlike other tales in the collection which were initially either embedded in a larger realist narrative ('The Glass Coffin' and 'Gode's Story') or commissioned ('The Story of the Eldest Princess' and 'Dragon's Breath'), the eponymous story 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye' was written as an autonomous fairy story. As Stephen Benson points out, its 'length and interweaving of motifs suggests parallels with the extended salon fairy tales' of the seventeenth-century women writers.⁴⁴ Byatt's fairy story seems to suggest that the fairy tale can have digressions in itself. The point is important since Byatt's rewritings challenge the narrow narrative line of traditional fairy tales which single-mindedly moves towards its predetermined end. Also included in the collection is 'The Eldest Princess' (1992), originally published in an anthology of fairy tales by contemporary writers. There, the young heroine steps out of the conventional fairy-tale plot to start telling her own story. The story plays off the

⁴⁴ Stephen Benson, 'Byatt, A. S.', in *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, ed. by Jack Zipes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 81. It must be also noted that Byatt translated Madame d'Aulnoy's 'Le Serpentin vert' as 'The Great Green Worm' for Warner's *Wonder Tales*.

fairy-tale convention of the triad (the heroine, who is the first of three sisters, complains: 'I am not the princess who succeeds, but one of the two who fail').⁴⁵ It also subverts the traditional fairy-tale happy ending; the Eldest Princess chooses not to follow the story of quest (which imposes the acquisition of a particular object on her) or the story of romance (she passes three young men by in a forest), and finds her own happiness in telling and sharing stories. Byatt's reworking of fairy tales suggests that a single, definitive closure (possession of wealth, power, and a partner) may not be what we all desire most, and that there may be other forms of endings that remain open and are still felt to be happy. Her latest story collection *Elementals: Stories of Ice and Fire* (1998) shows her more involved interest in the fairy tale as a powerful narrative which shapes our mind; in these stories (all the stories in this collection are written as self-contained stories), individuals reshape generic conventions to create their own stories. It seems that Byatt's involvement with the fairy tale, which began as an intellectual interest in its textuality,⁴⁶ has led her to explore the potential of the literary fairy tale as an autonomous genre which she can use to explore her literary concerns. My discussions of *Possession* (Chapter 6) and 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye' (Chapter 7) will show how Byatt's reworking of the fairy tale subverts the teleology of narrative closure which is presupposed in the analysis of narrative by such critics as Peter Brooks. Her reformulation of the fairy-tale plot points towards a different conception of narrative, what we may call feminist narratology.

⁴⁵ A. S. Byatt, 'The Eldest Princess', in *Caught in a Story: Contemporary Fairytales and Fables*, ed. by Christine Park and Caroline Heaton (London: Vintage, 1992), pp. 12-28 (p. 17).

⁴⁶ Byatt also wrote a fairy tale entitled 'Things Are Not What They Seem' embedded in her novella 'Morpho Eugenia' (1992), which uses the nineteenth-century register and evokes such classic fantasies as Alice and Kingsley's *The Water-Babies*, as well as other Victorian literary fairy tales by women writers.

Re-Interpretations

In the 1960s, feminist discussion began to underline the negative social and cultural effects traditional fairy tales had on women. As Kay F. Stone in 'Feminist Approaches to the Interpretation of Fairy Tales' (1986) observes, early feminist criticism during 1950s and 1960s tended to regard fairy tales as 'an unfortunate source of negative female stereotypes'.⁴⁷ Stone points out that both Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan made reference to the generalised fairy-tale images of women typified by such heroines as Cinderella, Snow White and Sleeping Beauty, who passively wait for Prince Charming to come and rescue them.⁴⁸

More focused criticism of the fairy tale was made in the 1970s. Marcia K. Lieberman's "'Some Day My Prince Will Come": Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale' (1972), based on a close analyses of the traditional fairy tales included in Andrew Lang's *The Blue Fairy Book*, argues that fairy tales 'serve to acculturate women to traditional social roles', which are to be passive and submissive.⁴⁹ In 'Feminism and Fairy Tales' (1979), Karen E. Rowe regards fairy tales as 'powerful transmitters of romantic myths' which are, in effect, 'more deluding than problem-solving'.⁵⁰ It must be noted that the Freudian psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim's highly influential and widely

⁴⁷ Kay F. Stone, 'Feminist Approaches to the Interpretation of Fairy Tales', in *Fairy Tales and Society: Illusion, Allusion, and Paradigm*, ed. by Ruth B. Bottigheimer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), pp. 229-36 (p. 229).

⁴⁸ See Stone, 'Feminist Approaches to the Interpretation of Fairy Tales', pp. 229-30, 234n.

⁴⁹ Marcia K. Lieberman, "'Some Day My Prince Will Come": Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale', in *Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England*, ed. by Jack Zipes (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 185-200 (p. 185).

⁵⁰ Karen E. Rowe, 'Feminism and Fairy Tales', in Zipes, *Don't Bet on the Prince*, pp. 209-26 (p. 211).

disputed *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976) engendered much controversy especially amongst feminists. Bettelheim's main argument is that fairy tales reflect the universal truths about the human psyche which, he assumes, conform to the orthodox Freudian paradigm of male and female development. However, feminist critics maintained, and still maintain, that these tales tell not the universal *truths* but the *stories* of women's subjugation under patriarchy.

Such feminist attacks on the traditional fairy-tale romance as a source of negative female stereotyping culminated in 'The Queen's Looking Glass: Female Creativity, Male Images of Women, and the Metaphor of Literary Paternity', the opening chapter of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Mad Woman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination* (1979), an investigation into recurrent motifs and patterns in the works of the nineteenth-century women writers from Jane Austen to Emily Dickinson. For Gilbert and Gubar, the wicked Queen and Snow White serve as a paradigmatic instance of male-generated twin images of monster-woman and angel-woman, which continually appear in nineteenth-century women's writings. For them as for Sexton, the Queen's mirror, which represents the voice of the King internalised in her mind, sets the two women against each other. Even given the psychoanalytic account of sexual rivalry between mother and daughter, maintain Gilbert and Gubar, 'the depth and the ferocity of the Queen's rage' cannot be explained away.⁵¹ They argue that the Queen's hatred of Snow White is more deeply rooted in her desire for a life of 'significant action':

For the Queen [...] is a plotter, a plot-maker, a schemer, a witch, an

⁵¹ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 38.

artist, an impersonator, a woman of almost infinite creative energy, witty, wily, and self-absorbed as all artists traditionally are. On the other hand, in her absolute chastity, her frozen innocence, her sweet nullity, Snow White represents precisely the ideal of 'contemplative purity' [...], an ideal that could quite literally kill the Queen. An angel in the house of myth, Snow White is not only a child but (as female angels always are) childlike, docile, submissive, the heroine of a life that *has no story*. But the Queen, adult and demonic, plainly wants a life of 'significant action', by definition an 'unfeminine' life of stories and story-telling. And therefore, to the extent that Snow White, as her daughter, is a part of herself, she wants to kill the Snow White *in herself*, the angel who would keep deeds and dramas out of her own house.⁵²

The passivity of Snow White is literally a threat to the life of the Queen, who seeks autonomy. The wicked Queen, however, must die so that Snow White, patriarchy's ideal woman, can become a new Queen, who in turn perpetuates the same murderous cycle.

However, as has been pointed out by Toril Moi, Gilbert and Gubar's attempt to see a kind of stifled revolutionary female power in the figure of the mad/bad woman inevitably leads to a theoretical impasse.⁵³ The female monster, found in myth and fairy tales and evoked in women's writings as the authors' double, is, as they also see, first of all a patriarchal construct grounded in binary thought. It may be argued that, taking sides with the textual figure of the raging madwoman deeply imbued with patriarchal ideology, they, like the wicked Queen, eventually end up perpetuating the system of hierarchical binarism they set out to subvert.

On the other hand, some feminists began to interpret apparently passive and submissive fairy-tale heroines as demonstrating inner strength in undergoing developmental stages which are specific to women. 'Cinderella', for instance, came to

⁵² Gilbert and Gubar, pp. 38-39.

⁵³ See Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 57-69.

be interpreted as expressing the young heroine's initiation into adult womanhood aided by the positive image of her mother.⁵⁴ The work of the French feminist anthropologist Yvonne Verdier on 'Little Red Riding Hood' has been influential in this vein.⁵⁵ Verdier argues that 'Little Red Riding Hood' was originally a story about the female rite of passage in the French peasant tradition. According to Verdier, the most frequently recorded form revealed that central to the tale is the exchange between the grandmother and the girl,⁵⁶ in which the latter partakes of the flesh and the blood of the former. There, the wolf only functions as the mediator of the grandmother, who asks the girl whether she will take the path of needles or the path of pins. This choice between pins and needles, in Verdier's view, is related to the girl's apprenticeship in female skills, as is her cooking of the grandmother's flesh. In oral versions of the tale, the young heroine survives by her own ingenuity and sometimes with the help of other women. Verdier's re-interpretation of 'Little Red Riding Hood' points towards a re-construction of woman-centred genealogy which may articulate the specificity of the feminine order.⁵⁷

During the 1980s, more substantial work was done on the analysis of canonical fairy tales. By this time, feminist critics, no longer concentrated exclusively on the theme

⁵⁴ Angela Carter's three-tiered reworking of 'Cinderella' in 'Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost' (1987) foregrounds the role of Cinderella's dead mother. The ghost of the mother in the third story tells her daughter to step into her coffin, which turns into a coach with horses: 'Go and seek your fortune, darling', says the mother. See Angela Carter, 'Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost', in *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders* (London: Vintage, 1994), pp. 110-20 (p. 120).

⁵⁵ See Yvonne Verdier, 'Le petit chaperon rouge dans la traditions orale', in *Le Débat* 3 (1980) 31-56.

⁵⁶ This is also evident from the fact that the tale used to be called 'The Story of Grandmother', which is included in *The Borzoi Book of French Folk Tales*, ed. by Paul Delarue, trans. by Austin Fife (New York: Knopf, 1956), pp. 230-32.

⁵⁷ For a detailed discussion of Verdier's work on 'Little Red Riding Hood', see Mary Douglas, 'Red Riding Hood: An Interpretation from Anthropology', *Folklore*, 106 (1995), 1-7.

and content of fairy tales, began to look into diverse aspects of the fairy tale. In *The Grimms' Bad Girls and Bold Boys: The Moral and Social Vision of the Tales* (1987), Ruth B. Bottigheimer analyses the Grimms' entire collection and finds coherent patterns of plot, motif, image and speech which reveal the ideological premises underlying the collection. Bottigheimer concludes that the Grimms' collection systematically endorses gender distinctions through its narrative manipulation. For my purpose here, Bottigheimer's analysis of plot is particularly significant. In the chapter entitled 'Prohibitions, Transgression, and Punishments', Bottigheimer focuses on the act of transgression which plays a pivotal function in the fairy tale as what creates the movement of plot, and draws the following conclusion:

Plots routinely circumscribe girls' and women's sphere of activity by laying prohibitions on them, and the language of the text exhibits an effort to avoid laying prohibitions on boys and men. Obedience is necessary for females but not for males. Girls and women are regularly punished in *Grimms' Tales*, and the punishment itself often seems to take precedence over the transgression that is supposed to have occasioned it, as does an apparent inner drive to incriminate females. At the same time, the text systematically exonerates males from guilt and repeatedly returns them to customary and acceptable paths.

One essential image might account for the skewed values which inhere in the gender-specific consequences of the prohibition/transgression/punishment paradigm: Eve herself.⁵⁸

This is the point Maria Tatar also makes in her discussion of 'Bluebeard' in *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales* (1987),⁵⁹ a work which reveals the Grimms' editorial intent to suppress sexual elements but to amplify violence, especially when it took the

⁵⁸ Ruth B. Bottigheimer, *The Grimms' Bad Girls and Bold Boys: The Moral and Social Vision of the Tales* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 94.

⁵⁹ Maria Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 156-78.

form of revenge. Although her work includes analysis of the fairy tale on a structural level, Tatar's discussion of structuralist theories of narrative does not question the masculine assumptions underlying their notions.

Not only the primary texts but also the critical apparatus for the research on the fairy tale began to be revealed as male-centred at this time. In 'Gender-Related Biases in the Type and Motif Indexes of Aarne and Thompson' (1986), Torborg Lundell argues that Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson's *the Types of the Folktale* and Thompson's *Motif Index of Folk Literature*, reference works so fundamental in folklore and fairy-tale research, have an inherent gender bias, overlooking gender identity in its male-centred labelling and ignoring female activity in its male-centred plot summaries. Feminist fairy-tale criticism, as Lundell argues, must take account of the sexist bias of such analytical tools that equate 'Man' with 'Person' and 'Woman' with 'Wife'.⁶⁰

While criticising the gender bias in traditional fairy tales as well as in the research apparatus for discussing them, feminist literary criticism has also begun to look to a new female fairy-tale tradition which was beginning to take form. Ellen Cronan Rose's pioneering essay 'Through the Looking Glass: When Women Tell Fairy Tales' (1983) examines the feminist implications of the works of Sexton, Broumas, and Carter. The most effective and challenging of the feminist fairy tales for Rose is a tale which is optimistic but complicated, which combines analysis with improvisation, a model of which she finds in Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*. Christina Bacchilega's *Postmodern Fairy Tales* (1997), a recent book-length study on contemporary fairy tales, particularly those of Angela Carter, approaches the fairy tale from multiple theoretical perspectives informed by feminist theory, deconstructive criticism, performance theory, folkloristic

⁶⁰ Torborg Lundell, 'Gender-Related Biases in the Type and Motif Indexes of Aarne and Thompson', in Bottigheimer, *Fairy Tales and Society*, pp. 149-63 (p. 162).

research and narratology.

Other critics began to retrace the long tradition of women's storytelling which has been marginalised by the process of canon formation. Karen E. Rowe's 'To Spin a Yarn: The Female Voice in Folklore and Fairy Tale' (1986) reveals the history of male appropriation of women's storytelling power and attempts to trace the lineage of female tale spinners from Philomela and Scheherazade to the raconteurs of French salon fairy tales and the Grimms' informants.⁶¹ In *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (1994), Marina Warner retraces the social history of female storytelling tradition in order to recuperate the role women have played in the production of fairy tales.

Besides female storytellers, certain types of women in stories have also become marginalised in the process of canon formation. Some attempts have been made to re-define the fairy-tale images of women by re-discovering 'forgotten' heroines amongst traditional fairy tales. Alison Lurie's *Clever Gretchen and Other Forgotten Folktales* (1980) retells traditional European fairy tales which feature heroines who are 'not only beautiful and good, but also strong, brave, clever, and resourceful'.⁶² Lurie's collection includes little known tales about such heroines as Molly Whuppie, the Scottish female giant killer, and Mizilca, the Romanian warrior princess; it also recasts the Grimms' tales such as 'The Peasant's Clever Daughter', 'Maid Maleen' and 'Mother Holle', which have seldom been included in later selections from their works. In *The Maid of the North: Feminist Folktales from Around the World* (1981), Ethel Johnston Phelps,

⁶¹ See Karen E. Rowe, 'To Spin a Yarn: The Female Voice in Folklore and Fairy Tale', in Bottigheimer, *Fairy Tales and Society*, pp. 53-74.

⁶² Alison Lurie, *Clever Gretchen and Other Forgotten Folktales* (London: Mammoth, 1991), p. xii.

repelled by the 'meekness' of traditional fairy-tale heroines who 'conform in many ways to the sentimental ideal of women in the nineteenth century', collects and retells folk fairy tales about heroines who have self-confidence, courage, and intelligence.⁶³ Phelps chooses heroines who exercise their right to freedom of will and choice, and who take their initiative in plotting their own lives; this is the theme related to the fatal riddle in the story of 'Gawain and the Lady Ragnell' included in the collection. King Arthur is obliged to obey the Lady Ragnell, who alone can give him the answer to the riddle: 'What is it that women most desire, above all else?'.⁶⁴ And this is the question I will be asking throughout this thesis in relation to Freud's question: What does a woman want?.

In her introduction to *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (1990), a collection of traditional fairy tales, Angela Carter writes:

The stories in this book, with scarcely an exception, have their roots in the pre-industrialized past, and unreconstructed theories of human nature. In this world, milk comes from the cow, water from the well, and only the intervention of the supernatural can change the relations of women to men, and, above all, of women to their own fertility. I don't offer these stories in a spirit of nostalgia; that past was hard, cruel and especially inimical to women, whatever desperate stratagems we employed to get a little bit of our own way. But I *do* offer them in a valedictory spirit, as a reminder of how wise, clever, perceptive, occasionally lyrical, eccentric, sometimes downright crazy our great-grandmothers were, and their great-grandmothers; and of the contributions to literature of Mother Goose and her goslings.⁶⁵

Carter makes clear that her editing of the fairy tales handed down from the past should not be regarded as an uncritical celebration of bygone days; these tales have been called

⁶³ Ethel Johnston Phelps, *The Maid of the North: Feminist Folktales from Around the World* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1981), pp. ix-x.

⁶⁴ Phelps, p. 36.

⁶⁵ *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, ed. by Angela Carter (London: Virago, 1991), p. xxii.

‘old wives’ tales’, the term which denotes ‘worthless stories, untruths, trivial gossip, a derisive label that allots the art of storytelling to women at the exact same time as it takes all value from it’.⁶⁶ Stories about women who ‘get a little bit of [their] own way’ have generally been treated as jokes in folktale tradition. Yet when they are edited and framed by a woman for other women (the stories are grouped under headings such as ‘Clever Women, Resourceful Girls and Desperate Stratagems’ and ‘Good Girls and Where It Gets Them’) to bid farewell to their wise and brave ancestresses, the same old tales begin to solicit a different kind of laughter, laughter which is no longer derisive but empowering and triumphant. The collection was followed by *The Second Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, completed just before her death in 1992.

Jack Zipes’s work has been an inspiration for recent feminist fairy-tale criticism. His *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood* (1983) investigates previous versions and discussions of ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ and demonstrates how the initially clever heroine has become subsumed under the image of a girl who is innocent *and* seductive, the image which Zipes regards as a projection of male desire. In *Don’t Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England* (1987), Zipes presents the rewritings and reinterpretations of fairy tales by contemporary feminists including some of the works mentioned in my discussion above. His recent editing of *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales: The Western Fairy Tale Tradition from Medieval to Modern* (2000) incorporates feminist viewpoints in its selection and presentation of fairy tales and their authors, as well as in its tracing of multifarious fairy-tale traditions. The *Companion* plays a significant role in the feminist re-creation of a fairy-tale tradition and serves to re-evaluate such women’s contribution to the genre as I

⁶⁶ *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, p. xi.

have considered in this chapter.

Conclusion

The fairy tale has its rules and conventions; however, it is a versatile genre which has kept changing its shape, allowing individual writers to express their own consciousness of human nature and the world. The literary fairy tale blends the old with the new, real with magic, and the communal with the individual. Because of its multiple hybridity, the literary fairy tale can be used to represent new visions of the world which are felt to be familiar and different at the same time. Far from being an essentially oppressive form, the literary fairy tale can serve, and has served, the purpose of criticising the dominant ideology.

Feminist criticism has offered complex and diverse views of the fairy tale. However, it must be agreed, as Shawn Jarvis observes in *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, that 'feminist literary criticism has failed to keep pace with contemporary feminist fairy tales'.⁶⁷ This thesis works from the assumption that feminist fairy-tale criticism needs to investigate the implication of desire in narrative, the very issue which some of the recent feminist rewritings of fairy tales have begun to address, but which has not yet been sufficiently examined by the critics of fairy tales. Theory, after all, must take account of texts.

⁶⁷ Shawn Jarvis, 'Feminism and fairy tales', in Zipes, *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, pp. 155-59 (p. 158).

Chapter 2

The Plot Patterns of Fairy Tales: The Male Plot and the Female Plot

Fairy tales, especially those which have become ‘classic’, are stories of development and maturation, this being a universal theme of narratives in all cultures in all ages. In traditional fairy tales, young protagonists are first put into an undesirable position, overcome dangers aided by supernatural helpers or objects, and marry into royalty. The movement is characterised by the alternation between enchantment and disenchantment; the initial state of everyday reality is broken by magic, only to be restored at the end of the tale. My concerns here lie in the fact that this common movement of the fairy-tale plot manifests itself in different ways according to the gender of the protagonist. In other words, there are different paradigms for the development of the male child and that of the female child in the traditional fairy tales of Western culture. This chapter will consider the basic plot patterns which underlie traditional hero and heroine fairy tales.

Hero Tales: Propp and the Dragon Slayer

Vladimir Propp’s pioneering work on the structural analysis of the fairy tale, *Morphology of the Folktale*, was published in 1928 and translated into English in 1958. Despite the word ‘folktale’ in its title, *Morphology of the Folktale* is concerned with only one type of folktale, the ‘fairy’ tale.¹ Propp in his later essay explains the starting point of his work

¹ Propp later complained that the Russian publisher had changed the original title *Morfologija volšebnoj skazki* (*Morphology of the Fairy Tale*) into *Morfologija skazki* (*Morphology of the Tale*) by leaving out the word *volšebnoj* (fairy) in order to appeal to the wider audience of students of folklore studies and thereby had caused much confusion to its readers including, as I shall show below, Lévi-Strauss. See Propp, ‘The

on morphology of the fairy tale (here rendered as 'wondertales' by the translator) as follows:

In a series of wondertales about the persecuted daughter I noted an interesting fact: in 'Morozko' ['Frost'] [...] the stepmother sends her stepdaughter into the woods to Morozko. He tries to freeze her to death, but she speaks to him so sweetly and so humbly that he spares her, gives her a reward, and lets her go. The old woman's daughter, however, fails the test and perishes. In another tale the stepdaughter encounters not Morozko but a *lešij* [a wood goblin], in still another, a bear. But surely it is the same tale! Morozko, the *lešij*, and the bear test the stepdaughter and reward her each in his own way, but the plot does not change. Was it possible that no one should ever have noticed this before? Why did Afanas'ev and others think that they were dealing with different tales? It is obvious that Morozko, the *lešij*, and the bear performed the same action. To Afanas'ev these were different tales because of different characters in them. To me they were identical because the actions of the characters were the same. The idea seemed interesting, and I began to examine other wondertales from the point of view of the actions performed by the characters. As a result of studying the material (and not through abstract reasoning), I devised a very simple method of analyzing wondertales in accordance with the characters' actions—regardless of their concrete form. To designate these actions I adopted the term 'functions'. My observations of the tale of the persecuted stepdaughter allowed me to get hold of the end of the thread and unravel the entire spool. It turned out that the other plots were also based on the recurrence of functions and that all wondertale plots consisted of identical functions and had identical structure.²

Put in these simple terms, we may also wonder why 'no one should ever have noticed this before'. As Propp claims, however, before the publication of his *Morphology of the Folktale*, no systematic method of investigation had existed in the study of the tale which had been concerned mainly with the question of the origin of the tale. He argues that the

Structural and Historical Study of the Wondertale', in *Theory and History of Folklore*, trans. by Ariadna Y. Martin and Richard P. Martin, ed. by Anatoly Liberman, *Theory and History of Literature*, V (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), pp. 67-81 (p. 70).

² Propp, 'The Structural and Historical Study of the Wondertale', pp. 69-70.

existing methods of classification, without any completely objective criteria for the division, attempt to classify tales according to categories or themes. The most common classification that divides tales into three categories, i.e., tales with fantastic content, tales of everyday life, tales about animals, does not work since animals often play a significant role in fantastic tales. For instance, should one classify the tale about the fisherman and the fish as a fantastic tale or as an animal tale? In *The Types of Folktale* (1911), Antti Aarne classifies tales according to themes which he calls ‘types’ and numbers each type. Propp claims that Aarne’s basic categories, ‘(1) animal tales, (2) tales proper, (3) anecdotes’, makes the same mistake: ‘It is a bit strange that animal tales are apparently not recognized as tales proper’.³ Aarne then introduces subclasses: ‘(1) a supernatural adversary; (2) a supernatural husband (wife); (3) a supernatural task; (4) a supernatural helper; (5) a magic object; (6) supernatural power or knowledge; (7) other supernatural motifs’ (p. 10). For Propp, these categories are not scientific: ‘What, for instance, of those tales in which a *supernatural task* is resolved by a *supernatural helper* (which occurs very often), or those in which a *supernatural spouse* is also a *supernatural helper*?’ (p. 10). Another flaw in Aarne’s index of tale types, according to Propp, is its notion of type itself which is defined in terms of significant events or motifs and which ignores the ‘law of transference’, meaning that ‘components of one tale can, without any alteration whatsoever, be transferred to another’ (p. 7). The result is that one tale may be related to several types at once. Propp claims that Aarne’s taxonomical approach, although it has ‘a tremendous significance’ as ‘a *practical reference*’, is inconsistent in its method of classification (p. 11). Unsatisfied with such non-scientific, or what he calls

³ Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 2nd edn, trans. by Laurence Scott, rev. and ed. by Louis A. Wagner (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), p. 10. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

‘pre-Linnaen’, methods of analysis of folktales, Propp proposes to demonstrate a ‘correct method of investigation’ based on the description of ‘the structural features of similar tales’ (p. 11). Propp, in other words, aimed to become the Linnaeus of fairy tales. Taking his cue from Goethe, who suggested the idea of botanical morphology which presupposed an *Ur*-plant of which all later plants were degenerate descendants, Propp proposes the idea of literary morphology according to which all tales are the degenerate descendants of an *Ur*-story which can be found in earlier myths and rites. In this sense, Propp’s project in *Morphology of the Folktale* is also a quest for the origin of tales.

Propp first hypothetically defines fairy tales as the tales classified by the Aarne-Thompson folktale types under numbers 300 to 749, and takes one hundred of such tales as his basic corpus from A. N. Afanas’ev’s Russian folktale collection, the first major transcription of the rich tradition of storytelling in Russia. Propp’s method here seems tautological (to define fairy tales already classified as fairy tales by Aarne), but his aim is to re-define fairy tales by finding a ‘morphology’ specific to them, i.e., ‘a description of the tale according to its component parts and the relationship of these components to each other and to the whole’ (p. 19). By defining the morphology of tales, Propp attempts to find the ‘grammar’ of fairy tales, the ‘abstract stratum’ which lies at the basis of fairy tales (p.15).

Propp first compares the following four events:

1. A tsar gives an eagle to a hero. The eagle carries the hero away to another kingdom.
2. An old man gives Sucenko a horse. The horse carries Sucenko away to another kingdom.
3. A sorcerer gives Ivan a little boat. The Boat takes Ivan to another kingdom.
4. A princess gives Ivan a ring. Young men appearing from out of the ring carry Ivan away into another kingdom, and so forth. (p. 20)

From these instances, Propp observes that the names of characters change whereas their actions remain the same. He calls a recurrent constant of the tale 'function', by which he means '*an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of action*' (p. 21). Characters, on the other hand, are variables and their attributes are not important for his analysis: 'The question of *what* a tale's dramatis personae do is an important one for the study of the tale, but the questions of *who* does it and *how* it is done already fall within the province of accessory study' (p. 20). These constants and variables explain 'the two-fold quality of a tale': the extremely rich variety of characters gives the tale 'amazing multiformity, picturesqueness, and color' whereas the extremely limited number of functions contributes to its 'no less striking uniformity, its repetition' (pp. 20-21). The sequence of functions, he then observes, has its own laws and is uniform. In other words, all fairy tales share a single structure which he formulates as follows:

1. *Functions of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. They constitute the fundamental components of a tale.*
2. *The number of functions known to the fairy tale is limited.*
3. *The sequence of functions is always identical.*
4. *All fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure.* (pp. 21-23)

Having presented the basic theses of his work, he then goes on to demonstrate how he has reached these conclusions. It must be noted here that the examples of tales he takes above are the tales about 'seeker-heroes' (p. 39), and it is these tales that he has primarily in mind throughout his analysis.

Propp outlines thirty-one functions which constitute the fundamental components of the fairy tale. Functions are defined in terms not of theme or character,

but of the actions performed by characters. Before the actions start, there is an *initial situation* (α) in which the members of a family are enumerated, or the name or the status of the hero is indicated. After the initial situation there follow functions:

- I. *absentation* (β): One of the members of a family absents himself from home.
- II. *interdiction* (χ): An interdiction is addressed to the hero.
- III. *violation* (δ): The interdiction is violated. (pp. 26-28)

The *interdiction* and the *violation* form a paired element, and the latter sometimes exists without the former. At this point, the *villain* (a dragon, a devil, a witch, a stepmother, etc.) enters the tale.

- VI. *reconnaissance* (ϵ): The villain attempts to discover the location of the intended victim or of some precious objects.
- V. *delivery* (ϕ): The villain receives an answer to his question. (pp. 28-29)

Functions VI and V form a pair, often forming a dialogue such as the one between the wicked queen and the mirror in 'Snow White'.

- VI. *trickery* (η): The villain assumes a disguise and attempts to deceive his victim in order to take possession of him or of his belongings.
- VII. *complicity* (θ): The victim submits to deception and thereby unwittingly helps his enemy. Sometimes the villain causes a difficult situation to compel the victim's assent, which is defined as *preliminary misfortune* (λ).
- VIII. *villainy* (A): The villain causes harm or injury to a member of a family. Or *lack* (a): One member of a family either lacks something or desires to have something. (pp. 29-36)

The actual movement of the tale is created by the eighth function, an act of *villainy*, for which the first seven functions prepare the way. There follows the hero's entrance into

the tale:

IX. *mediation, the connective incident* (B): Misfortune or lack is made known; the hero is approached with a request or command; he is allowed to go or he is dispatched. (pp. 36-38)

If there is a seeker for a kidnapped victim, the hero of the tale is the seeker, not the victim. If narrative follows the victim's fate, the hero is the victim, and these heroes are called 'victim-heroes' in contrast to the other type, seeker-heroes (p. 39).

X. *beginning counteraction* (C): The seeker agrees to or decides upon counteraction.

XI. *departure* (↑): The hero leaves home. (pp. 38-39)

Function X exists only in the tales of seeker-heroes. The sign ↑ designates the route of the hero of both types. Sometimes there is no spatial transference of the hero. Now a new character, whom Propp calls the *donor*, enters the tale. Usually the hero encounters the donor accidentally in the forest, along the roadway, etc. The donor is the one who, after testing the hero, gives him a certain magical agent (a magic horse, a magic sword, the power of transformation into animals, etc.) which causes the eventual liquidation of misfortune.

XII. *the first function of the donor* (D): The hero is tested, interrogated, attacked, etc., which prepares the way for his receiving either a magical agent or helper.

XIII. *the hero's reaction* (E): The hero reacts to the actions of the future donor.

XIV. *provision or receipt of a magical agent* (F): The hero acquires the use of a magical agent.

XV. *spatial transference between two kingdoms, guidance* (G): The hero is transferred, delivered, or led to the whereabouts of an object of search.

XVI. *struggle* (H): The hero and the villain join in direct combat.

XVII. *branding, marking* (J): The hero is branded.

XVIII. *victory* (I): The villain is defeated.

XIX. *the liquidation of misfortune or lack* (K): The initial misfortune or lack is liquidated. (pp. 39-56)

Function K, together with *villainy* (A) or *lack* (a), constitutes a pair, and 'narrative reaches its peak in this function' (p. 53).

XX. *return* (↓): The hero returns.

XXI. *pursuit, chase* (Pr): The hero is pursued.

XXII. *rescue* (Rs): Rescue of the hero from pursuit. (pp. 56-59)

Some tales lack the repetition of the initial villainy as described below, but in many tales there are two series of functions, a new form of villainy being taken up usually by the hero's elder brothers.

XXIII. *unrecognised arrival* (o): The hero, unrecognised, arrives home or in another country.

XXIV. *unfounded claims* (L): A false hero presents unfounded claims.

XXV. *difficult task* (M): A difficult task is proposed to the hero. (pp. 60-61)

This function, *difficult task*, 'is one of the tale's favourite elements' (p. 60). The tasks are greatly varied in such forms as ordeal by food, riddle guessing, test of strength, test of endurance, acquisition or manufacture of some objects, and so forth.

XXVI. *solution* (N): The task is resolved.

XXVII. *recognition* (Q): The hero is recognised. (p. 62)

Function Q corresponds to *branding* (J); the hero is recognised by a mark such as a wound or a ring given to him. This leads to the next function, the exposure of the villain.

XXVIII. *exposure* (Ex): The false hero or villain is exposed.

XXIX. *transfiguration* (T): The hero is given a new appearance.

XXX. *punishment* (U): The villain is punished.

XXXI. *wedding* (W): The hero is married and ascends the throne. (pp. 62-64)

In many tales, a 'bride and a kingdom are awarded at once' (p. 63). Otherwise, the hero either obtains only one or the other, or receives a monetary or some other form of reward 'in place of the princess's hand' (p. 64). These thirty-one functions belong to a single axis and therefore do not exclude one another. Although not all of them coexist in each tale and some are repeated, the functions always appear in the above order: 'one function develops out of another with logical and artistic necessity' (p. 64). 'Morphologically', declares Propp, 'a tale (*skázka*) may be termed any development proceeding from villainy (A) or a lack (a), through intermediary functions to marriage (W*), or to other functions employed as a dénouement' (p. 92). In other words, a fairy tale is a tale in which a misfortune created either by an act of villainy or by a lack is liquidated at the end.

Significantly, Propp's idea of the laws of the fairy tale does away with the part played by motivations. He states that motivations, i.e., 'the reasons and the aims of personages which cause them to commit various acts', are 'the most inconstant and unstable elements of the tale' (p. 75). In his view, it is the 'logical and artistic necessity' of the tale that determines the motivations of characters, and not vice versa: 'the majority of characters' acts in the middle of a tale are naturally motivated by the course of the action' (p. 75). Propp's prototype of the tale is motivated not by human psychology (or desire) but by impersonal forces which demand balance, that is to say, the disruption of the initial stasis followed by the final stasis. However, as I will be arguing throughout my thesis, the ostensibly 'natural' sequence of events is, in effect, motivated by a certain intention: in other words, the tale has a specific teleological drive which Propp

naturalises in his discourse on the universal morphology of the tale.

For Propp, what matters in the analysis of the morphology of the tale is not the attributes of characters, i.e., the qualities such as age, sex, status, appearance, etc., but their acts which he calls functions. The acts of characters are the constants of the tale, whereas one character can be easily replaced by another. Thirty-one functions of the tale logically combine into what he calls 'spheres of action' which correspond to their respective characters, although there are cases in which one character covers several spheres of action and one sphere of action is distributed amongst several characters (p. 79). Spheres of action are defined by Propp as follows:

1. the *villain*: villainy (A), struggle (H), pursuit (Pr)
2. the *donor*: preparation for the transmission of a magical agent (D), provision of a magical agent (F)
3. the *helper*: spatial transference of the hero (G), liquidation of misfortune or lack (K), rescue from pursuit (Rs), solution of difficult tasks (N), transfiguration of the hero (T)
4. a *princess* (a sought-after person) and *her father*: assignment of difficult tasks (M), branding (J), exposure (Ex), recognition (Q), punishment of a second villain (U), marriage (W)
5. the *dispatcher*: dispatch (B)
6. the *hero*: departure ($C\uparrow$), reaction to the donor's actions (E), wedding (W^*)
7. the *false hero*: departure ($C\uparrow$), reaction (E), unfounded claims (L) (pp. 79-80)

Although the attributes of characters vary infinitely, there are only seven spheres of action in fairy tales. The sphere of action of the villain may be distributed to a witch, a dragon, a stepmother, and so forth, all of these characters being mutually replaceable as long as they perform the same function that is the act of villainy. According to Propp, therefore, fairy tales are 'tales subordinated to a seven-personage scheme' (p. 100). It follows from this that an infinite number of fairy tales can be generated from Propp's scheme with limited sequence and combinations of events and unlimited attributes of

characters. He again emphasises that 'the will of personages, their intentions, cannot be considered as an essential motif for their definition', and that 'the important thing is not what they want to do, not how they feel, but their deeds as such, evaluated and defined from the viewpoint of their meaning for the hero and for the course of the action' (p. 81). In fairy tales, all the characters exist for the functions they perform to carry the plot forward. The fairy tale, therefore, is what characters do; what characters do is the fairy tale. When characters completely merge with their acts in this way, we have what Todorov calls 'narrative-men'. In his essay entitled 'Narrative-Men' (1967), Todorov observes that in the *Arabian Nights* a 'character trait is not simply the cause of an action, nor simply its effect: it is both at once'.⁴ That Sindbad likes to travel (character trait) because he takes a trip (action) means at the same time that Sindbad takes a trip because he likes to travel. In the *Arabian Nights* tales, Todorov claims, characters exist because they act and produce narrative: 'a character is a potential story that is the story of his life. Every new character signifies a new plot. We are in the realm of narrative-men'.⁵ In fairy tales, the plot, which is what characters do, corresponds to what characters are.

By looking also at the attributes of characters, Propp claims, one can construct 'the archetype of the fairy tale', i.e., 'one tale with respect to which all fairy tales will appear as variants' (p. 89). He then suggests that this paradigmatic fairy tale, 'a special canon', is the tale in which the seeker-hero slays the dragon and marries a princess (p. 113). In fact, Propp's analysis reduces all fairy tales into one structure which is represented by what Aarne and Thompson call the 'Dragon Slayer' tale type (AT 300),⁶

⁴ Tzvetan Todorov, 'Narrative-Men', in *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. by Richard Howard (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977), pp. 66-79 (p. 68).

⁵ 'Narrative-Men', p. 70.

⁶ The abbreviation 'AT' stands for the Aarne-Thompson tale type index in Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale*, Folklore Fellows Communications, 184, 2nd rev. (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1961).

which is the fairy tale equivalent of the Perseus myth. Historically speaking, states Propp, ‘the fairy tale in its morphological bases represents a *myth*’ (p. 90). He notes that the morphology of the fairy tale he describes is also shared by ‘a number of very archaic myths [...] [which are] the realm back to which the tale may be traced’, whereas ‘the very same structure is exhibited, for example, by certain novels of chivalry [...] [which are] a realm which itself may be traced back to the tale’ (p. 100). Here lies the problem with Propp’s model: while it includes stories belonging to genres other than the fairy tale (such as myth and romance), it excludes the most popular of the traditional fairy tales today that are the stories of young girls who do *not* slay dragons, ogres or giants. Besides, even the Russian fairy tale collection he chose to analyse contains heroine tales which are not about slaying dragons and therefore do not conform comfortably to Propp’s description of the morphology of the fairy tale. Why did Propp single out the dragon slayer tale as the primal fairy tale?

Clearly, Propp had in mind as the *Ur*-tale the heroic myths and legends, rather than actual fairy tales, and this in spite of his objection to Lévi-Strauss, who blamed Propp for analysing not the myth but the fairy tale which, in Lévi-Strauss’s view, is a weakened form of myth.⁷ Propp’s repeated reference to the myth as the archetype of the tale and his description of the ‘epic’ fairy tale which strongly recalls the Oedipus myth confirm this view (he talks about ‘a prophecy concerning [the hero’s] destiny’) (p. 85). In Propp’s analysis, Oedipus implicitly figures as the paradigmatic hero of the fairy tale. The material on which his analysis is based, i.e., the first hundred fairy tales in Afanas’ev’s collection, undoubtedly coloured his view since the collection begins with heroic fairy tales, which turn out to be the only ones his morphological model strictly fits.

⁷ Lévi-Strauss, ‘Structure and Form: Reflections on a Work by Vladimir Propp’, trans. by Monique Layton, in Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore*, pp. 167-88.

Later in 'Oedipus in the Light of Folklore' (1944), Propp attempts to combine his morphological study of the composition of the fairy tale with a historical analysis of its transformations by examining the folkloric character of the story of Oedipus. He argues that the story of Oedipus represents the historical clash of two conflicting social orders: the earlier one in which succession to the throne is achieved by the son-in-law who kills the old king and marries his daughter, and the later one in which power is transferred directly from the king to his own son. In his view, these two forms of succession, rather than one replacing the other, coexist in the Oedipus story, which emerged with the rise of a 'patriarchal' system.⁸ According to Propp, 'the tale does not arise as a direct reflection of a social order; rather, it arises from a conflict, from the contradictions that occur as one order replaces another'.⁹ Oedipus, the hero who kills his father and marries his mother, is a hybrid figure born out of such a conflict. 'Originally', argues Propp, 'the hero kills the king and receives the entire kingdom, a situation considerably modified in folklore, where the old king remains alive and shares his kingdom with the hero'.¹⁰ The motif of patricide, which is not necessarily involved in the inheritance through the son, persists in folklore as a remnant of the hostility between the king and his son-in-law in the earlier order. Propp also points out that the king's daughter still leaves the trace of her former role in the hybrid figure of 'the Sphinx-woman', a combination of the dragon with the princess, who sets difficult tasks for the

⁸ Propp, 'Oedipus in the Light of Folklore', trans. by Polly Coote in *Oedipus: A Folklore Casebook*, ed. by Lowell Edmunds and Alan Dundes (New York: Garland, 1983), pp. 76-121 (p. 87). It must be noted here that the old form of inheritance described by Propp is not exactly matrilineal or matriarchal as Lowell Edmunds, Alan Dundes, and Teresa de Lauretis suggest, since Propp makes clear that it is the male who possesses power whether it descends in the female line or in the male line. See Edmunds and Dundes, pp. 76-77, and de Lauretis, p. 115. Propp's use of the term 'patriarchal' to denote the new order as opposed to the former system is misleading, and it seems that the confusion is his own, rather than his interpreters.

⁹ 'Oedipus in the Light of Folklore', p. 81.

hero.¹¹ Seen in this light, *Oedipus* is not a tragedy 'in historical terms': 'In origin the tale is one of winning the throne through murder and marriage'.¹² For Propp, the Oedipus story is 'a typical fairy tale' in its structure; it shares the same 'compositional scheme' of the hero's slaying of the dragon which is rewarded by the hand of the princess, but it departs from the fairy tale in one crucial aspect: as a hero of the new patriarchal order, Oedipus does not head for the country of his future wife but, unwittingly, returns to the home of his own father.¹³ In this context, we can see why in *Morphology of the Folktale* Propp assigns one sphere of action to a princess *and* her father: 'The princess and her father cannot be exactly delineated from each other according to functions. Most often it is the father who assigns difficult tasks due to hostile feeling toward the suitor and punishes (or orders punished) the false hero' (pp. 79-80). In fairy tales, according to this view, the princess serves as a mediator of succession of power from her father to his son-in-law.

Here, we may ask whether the princess-dragon serves not merely as a mediator of power but rather as the *object* of mediation, for she does not have access to any kind of power. The riddle which the Sphinx-woman puts to the hero as a difficult task (whose content Propp decides to ignore) functions as what confers power of which she herself is devoid *from the beginning*. Claude Lévi-Strauss has argued that women function as the object of mediation which enables men to establish both language and social laws: 'the mediating factor [is] the *women of the group*, who are *circulated* between clans, lineages, or families, in place of the *words of the group*, which are *circulated* between

¹⁰ 'Oedipus in the Light of Folklore', p. 85.

¹¹ 'Oedipus in the Light of Folklore', p. 109.

¹² 'Oedipus in the Light of Folklore', p. 111.

¹³ 'Oedipus in the Light of Folklore', pp. 81, 108.

individuals'.¹⁴ In the story of Oedipus, the solution of the riddle, which is the suppression of woman, brings about the final resolution which enables the hero to establish himself as a ruler. Propp's following statement is revealing in this respect: 'The Sphinx clearly has the attributes of a woman, and in some versions Oedipus deprives her of her power just as the princess-sorceress in fairy tales is deprived of hers—by sexual intercourse'.¹⁵ Here, we also recall the figure of Medusa, the female monster who functions as the object of mediation in order for Perseus to possess power and establish himself as a hero.

But is this all that can be said about the plot patterns of the fairy tale? We know that the Grimms' collection includes a much larger number of victim-hero tales, especially those about suffering heroines, than the corpus of fairy tales Propp has taken from Afanas'ev's collection. We may well wonder what has happened to the heroine fairy tale, with which we are now most familiar but which is rendered almost invisible in Propp's analysis.

Heroine Tales 1: The Search for the Lost Husband

The best-known fairy tales today feature female protagonists who are marked invariably by their exceptional beauty as well as by such virtues as patience, obedience and industriousness. The heroes, on the other hand, are most often described as numskulls or lazybones whose only virtue is boldness. Heroines' lives are full of trials and tribulations whereas heroes are endowed with extraordinary luck throughout their adventures. It seems that, despite Propp's proposition, not all characters are interchangeable when it comes to the sphere of action of the protagonist (to whom he constantly refers as the

¹⁴ Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'Language and the Analysis of Social Laws', in *Structural Anthropology*, I, trans. by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), pp. 55-66 (p. 61).

¹⁵ 'Oedipus in the Light of Folklore', p. 109.

hero). I now turn to the heroine fairy tale which has a different plot pattern from the one that Propp outlines for the heroic tale.

In 'On the Morphological Study of Folklore' (1927), Aleksandr Isaakovich Nikiforov recognises that there is more than just one kind of fairy tale, that there are different plot patterns for hero and heroine fairy tales. In this brief but seminal essay which predates Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*, Nikiforov divides the fairy tale into three groups: 1) 'Epic' or 'male' fairy tales, 2) female fairy tales about 'winning (mainly of a groom, but with a completely different morphological composition of episodes than in the [male] fairy tale about winning)', and 3) female fairy tales about 'the sufferings of the innocently persecuted (maiden or woman)'.¹⁶ Following Nikiforov's categorisation, I will examine the two types of female fairy tales, first the tale about winning and then the tale about suffering.

One of the best-known fairy tales that belong to the first type of female tale, i.e., tales about heroines' winning, is the tale type called 'The Search for the Lost Husband' (AT 425), of which 'Cupid and Psyche' and 'Beauty and the Beast' are variants. In this tale, the heroine who violates the interdiction—do not look at your husband—sets out for a quest to recover her husband. This tale type may be seen as a hybrid form combining the male fairy tale of quest with the female tale about suffering. The heroine solves difficult tasks during her adventures which may involve a great deal of activity, but never slays the villain herself since, unlike the hero who seeks after a princess whose misfortune is caused independently of his act, she herself seems to be the villain who causes the banishment of her husband. The husband, who is often a beast-bridegroom, punishes the heroine for her curiosity when she steals a look at him while he is asleep.

¹⁶ Aleksandr Isaakovich Nikiforov, 'On the Morphological Study of Folklore', trans. by Heda Jason, in *Linguistica Biblica* 27/28 (1973), 25-35 (p. 32).

That the plot pattern of the female tale about winning differs from that of the male tale about winning is largely due to the different standards applied to the act of transgression. Whereas the heroine is heavily punished for her transgression, the hero often goes without any punishment or with much lighter punishment and sometimes even finds it to his benefit to violate an interdiction. In *Morphology of the Folktale*, Propp states that a 'command often plays the role of an interdiction' (p. 27), meaning that the fulfilment of a command to go into the forest performs the same function as the violation of an interdiction *not* to go into the forest. This proposition, however, bears a different implication when one takes into account the question of gender. In the Search for the Lost Husband tale, the heroine's adventure, although it eventually leads to her recovery of her beloved husband, follows a pattern different from that of the male adventure. This is one of the points at which the plot pattern of the female fairy tale departs from Propp's scheme in which the violation of an interdiction is not coupled with punishment.

Take, for example, the Italian folktale 'King Crin', which belongs to the Search for the Lost Husband tale type. The heroine, the third daughter of the baker, marries a pig prince King Crin, who not only looks like a pig but also behaves like a pig, wallowing in the mud. Her two elder sisters were killed for rejecting his caress on their wedding night, but she responds lovingly to her pig husband's embrace and gets through the first night. On the second night, however, she becomes curious and decides to look at her husband's true appearance while he is asleep. She then beholds, instead of a pig, 'a youth handsome beyond all stretches of imagination'.¹⁷ King Crin, furious, wakes up and vanishes after saying, 'You broke the spell and will never see me again, or only when you have wept seven bottles of tears and worn out seven pairs of iron shoes, seven iron

¹⁷ 'King Crin', in Italo Calvino, *Italian Folktales*, trans. by George Martin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), pp. 57-60 (p. 58).

mantles, and seven iron hats looking for me'.¹⁸ She then sets out on a search for her husband, during which she gains three magic objects from three *donors* and wears out all of her iron outfits, and arrives at a foreign city where the princess is about to marry her husband. With the magic objects, she tempts the princess into letting her stay overnight in her husband's bedchamber, but she finds him drugged to sleep on the first and the second night. On the third night, he recognises his wife, and together they return home.

In 'King Crin', the heroine's adventure begins as a punishment for her curiosity although, unlike Psyche, she is not given the interdiction against looking beforehand; she is punished even without consciously breaking the interdiction. The moment she falls in love, she loses her husband: 'So deep was her distress that the bride had no choice but to go in search of her husband'.¹⁹ By demonstrating her patience and cunning, she eventually wins back her husband. Here, it is precisely because of her curiosity that the heroine's passionate love for her husband is awoken and her story begins; as Propp observes, the interdiction is there to be broken. However, the crucial difference from the heroic fairy tale lies in the fact that the heroine is *punished* for her unwitting transgression. If one reads the tale according to Propp's model, it is the heroine who commits the act of *villainy* for which she is punished and then forgiven *by her husband*. It must be noted that Propp attaches great importance to the function of villainy with which the actual movement of the story begins. The false bride is not the real villain in the Proppian sense since she does not initiate the plot movement, and the evil female figure who is sometimes mentioned at the end of the story as the one who has caused the husband's transformation plays a marginal role and usually does not even appear in the

¹⁸ Calvino, p. 58.

¹⁹ Calvino, p. 59.

story.²⁰ In this female tale about winning a husband, therefore, it is none other than the heroine who plays the part of the *villain* whose act initiates the movement of the tale and, most significantly, the husband plays an extraordinarily powerful role as the one who commands, punishes, and forgives the heroine.

The Search for the Lost Husband tale moves from the disappearance of the husband (which can be seen both as villainy and a lack) to the heroine's recovery of him (which is a reward); in this sense, it conforms to the most basic rule of Propp's scheme. The preparatory part of the tale, the heroine's marriage to a beast husband, deserves special attention. Clearly, it is a misfortune for a young girl to be married off to a pig who, although he is a king's son, is not only muddy but also murderous. One may want to regard this as an act of *villainy* committed either by the heroine's coercing parents or by other figures of authority, but one is prevented from doing so by what follows this event: the heroine falls in love with her husband. It is easy to see this tale type as representing the fear which daughters may feel when they are married off to total strangers who may well appear beast-like to young girls. That all the husbands in this tale type have wealth and/or power indicates the supposedly ideal form of arranged marriage for daughters. The heroine's objection to the marriage, therefore, would be nonsense and unthinkable. That her discovery of the true beauty of her husband happens in bed at night unmistakably carries sexual connotations. Her discovery of sexual pleasure, however, is not the end of the story since this only initiates the actual complication of the plot. Her husband punishes her for the curiosity stirred on her side

²⁰ In some variants of the tale such as the Norwegian tale 'East o'the Sun and West o'the Moon' and Madame de Villeneuve's version of *Beauty and the Beast*, the husband's disappearance is explained by his enchantment by an evil female figure which can be undone only when his true appearance remains hidden from his wife for a certain length of time.

by his leaving her. The heroine now has to prove her love by performing difficult tasks which require both mental and physical strength. Her husband eventually forgives her and rewards her with his return to her. The basic plot of this tale proceeds from the failing of the test through the atonement to the recovery. The moral testing of the heroine's ability to curb her curiosity can be seen as that which drives the plot of the Search for the Lost Husband tale. Morality works as a kind of motivation in this story, determining the sequence of events in such a way that it justifies and endorses particular moral values. Motivation, although Propp minimises its significance in his structural analysis, operates as the motor force of narrative.

It is interesting to consider what happens when the hero commits an act of transgression. The Grimms' 'The Golden Bird', a male tale about winning, offers a telling contrast to its female counterpart. The three sons of the king go on a quest for the golden bird which steals golden apples from the king's orchard. The two elder brothers fail because they are unkind to the fox, the *helper* of the tale, but the youngest prince is kind and succeeds in obtaining the bird aided by the fox. The hero, however, violates the interdiction given by the fox not to take the golden cage with the bird, and is threatened to be executed by the king of the castle unless he obtains the golden horse. The fox again helps him, and he receives the horse. The hero again disobeys the fox's interdiction not to put the golden saddle on the horse, and is sentenced to death unless he returns with the beautiful princess from the golden castle. The fox still assists him and he fetches the princess, again violating the interdiction not to let her say farewell to her parents. The hero is again given an impossible task which is to remove a mountain within eight days. The fox performs the task for him, and the hero is rewarded with the princess. Taking back the golden horse and the golden bird, the hero sets out home, but he disregards the fox's advice and is robbed and thrown into a well by his brothers. His

‘faithful’ fox helps him, saying ‘But I won’t abandon you’.²¹ The hero, disguised as a poor man, reaches the king’s court and is recognised by the princess. He then exposes the villainy of his brothers, who are duly executed. He receives the princess and becomes the heir to the king. Many years later, he encounters and disenchants the fox, who turns into the brother of the princess.

In ‘The Golden Bird’, the hero is never punished for his repeated transgressions against his helper, but is rewarded with one object after another. His violation of prohibition out of greed, sentimentality and carelessness is followed by his acquisition of yet another reward. In this tale, as in Propp’s model, the violation of interdiction has the same function as the fulfilment of command, leading the hero towards his acquisition of the object of his quest. What can the moral of this story be? Moral motivation, which operates in the heroine fairy tale, does not strictly govern the male fairy tale about the protagonist’s quest for marriage, wealth, and power.

Female curiosity as the pivotal *villainy* becomes even more foregrounded in another set of fairy tales about the heroine who weds a beast(-like)-bridegroom, of which ‘Bluebeard’, Charles Perrault’s literary fairy tale, is the best-known version today. The preparatory stage of the tale consists in the heroine’s marriage to a fabulously rich but ugly man with a blue beard who has already married several times and whose wives have all disappeared. A month after their marriage, Bluebeard tells his wife that he has to go away for at least six weeks and leaves her the keys to all his apartments, which, he tells her, she can enter except for one specific room. After his departure, she goes into the forbidden chamber and finds the dead bodies of his former wives laid on the floor covered with clotted blood. Terrified at this sight, she drops the key on the floor,

²¹ ‘The Golden Bird’, in Zipes, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, pp. 216-22 (p. 221).

thereby staining the key with blood, which would not come off. Bluebeard returns on the same evening and finds out about his wife's disobedience from the telltale key. In tears, she pleads with him to give her time to say her prayers and then asks her sister to make their approaching brothers a sign to make haste. When Bluebeard is about to behead her, her brothers arrive to save her. The heroine, now a young widow, inherits all his wealth and marries 'a very honest gentleman, who made her forget the ill time she had pass'd with the *Blue Beard*'.²²

In 'Bluebeard', the heroine's violation of an interdiction leads to her husband's attempt to punish her by death; she is nearly murdered for her single act of disobeying her husband's order. It is evident that Bluebeard prohibits his wife from entering some specific room *in order to* find her doing precisely that; the interdiction plays the same role as the command. The way in which he delivers the interdiction lays down the sequence of events which follows: 'But for this little one here, it is the key of the closet at the end of the great gallery on the ground floor. Open them all, go into all and every one except that little closet, which I forbid you, and forbid you in such a manner, that if you happen to open it, there is nothing but what you may expect from my just anger and resentment'.²³ After his departure, the heroine 'was so much pressed by her curiosity, that [...] she went down a black pair of stairs, and with such an excessive haste, that she had like to have broken her neck two or three times'.²⁴ The violation of interdiction, in effect, appears to be a device for the plot which the husband designs for himself. When he returns, he already knows what he will find: 'I know very well, you were resolv'd to go into the closet, were you not?'.²⁵ He also knows how he should punish her: 'You

²² 'The Blue Beard', trans. by Robert Samber, in Opie and Opie, pp. 103-109 (p. 109).

²³ Opie and Opie, p. 107.

²⁴ Opie and Opie, p. 107.

²⁵ Opie and Opie, p. 108.

must die, Madam'.²⁶

Perrault's 'Bluebeard' makes clear that the heroine's disobedience to her husband's order is the direct cause of her punishment, which is death at his hands. At the centre of the story is the evil of female curiosity which inevitably brings dire consequences in its train. The moral of the story, which is already made explicit in the narrative itself, is spelled out by Perrault in a coda:

MORAL

Curiosity, in spite of its charm,
Too often causes a great deal of harm.
A thousand new cases arise each day.
With due respect, ladies, the thrill is slight,
For as soon as you're satisfied, it goes away,
And the price one pays is never right.

ANOTHER MORAL

Provided one has common sense
And learns to study complex texts,
It's easy to trace the evidence
Of long ago in this tale's events.

No longer are husbands so terrible,
Or insist on having the impossible.
Though he may be jealous and dissatisfied,
He tries to do as he's obliged.
And whatever color his beard may be,
It's difficult to know who the master be.²⁷

²⁶ Opie and Opie, p. 108.

²⁷ 'Blue Beard', in *Beauty and the Beast and Other Classic French Fairy Tales*, ed. and trans. by Jack Zipes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997), pp. 17-22 (p. 22). For the translation of Perrault's morals, I use Zipes's rather than Robert Samber's 1729 translation because of the former's literalness. Angela Carter's tongue-in-cheek translation reads as follows:

Moral

Curiosity is a charming passion but may only be satisfied at the price of a thousand regrets; one sees around one a thousand examples of this sad truth every day. Curiosity is the most fleeting of pleasures; the

Here, the emphasis is clearly on female curiosity that is evil but universal, and, significantly, the sexual nature of this curiosity (the husband's 'jealousy' and 'dissatisfaction') is made explicit. Bluebeard's cruelty, by contrast, is made into a kind of nostalgic joke about the good old days when husbands could be 'so terrible'.

But why should the heroine deserve such a monstrous fate only for disobeying her husband's order not to open some specific door? What should we make of *his* transgression? Behind various renditions of 'Bluebeard' which generally stress the vice of female curiosity and tone down the atrocity of Bluebeard's crimes, Maria Tatar sees the likening of the heroine's curiosity to Eve's original sin depicted in Genesis. In the biblical story of Eve, woman functions almost as a mere plot device in the story of the struggle between God and Satan, which is the struggle between Good and Evil in man. The first woman,²⁸ subservient to all three male characters (God, Satan and Man), commits an act of villainy which, as if for man's convenience, creates the movement of the plot; woman serves as the ground on which man's story unfolds. Pandora, the first

moment it is satisfied, it ceases to exist and it always proves very, very expensive.

Another moral

It is easy to see that the events described in this story took place many years ago. No modern husband would dare to be half so terrible, nor to demand of his wife such an impossible thing as to stifle her curiosity. Be he never so quarrelsome or jealous, he'll toe the line as soon as she tells him to. And whatever colour his beard might be, it's easy to see which of the two is the master.

See *Sleeping Beauty and Other Favourite Fairy Tales*, ed. and trans. by Angela Carter (Boston: Otter, 1991), p. 40.

²⁸ Significantly, the story of Lilith, the first woman in Judaic tradition, is expelled from the later Christian canon because her rejection of submission to her husband is not in *his* story.

woman in Greek mythology, also opens the forbidden box out of curiosity and spreads all the evils over the world. Female curiosity as the pivotal plot device has become such a naturalised plot convention in Western tradition that the act of real villainy, even Bluebeard's atrocious serial wife-murders, may go unnoticed.

Ruth B. Bottigheimer's *Grimms' Bad Girls and Bold Boys* investigates the double standard regarding the prohibition/transgression/punishment paradigm which operates in the Grimms' collection. Bottigheimer, taking as examples the two tales whose plots pivot on the protagonists' transgression, one female 'Our Lady's Child' and the other male 'Brother Lustig', demonstrates how in the Grimms' tales girls are judged to be 'bad' and boys 'bold' when they violate interdictions. The heroine of 'Our Lady's Child' is repeatedly punished for her violation of interdiction—don't open that door—over many years and is nearly burned at the stake before she is saved by confessing her transgression, whereas Brother Lustig is not only not punished but is rewarded with the entrance into heaven for transgressing one prohibition after another. Bottigheimer argues that the 'inner drive to incriminate females' which operates in the story of Eve also operates in the plot patterns of the Grimms' entire collection.²⁹ The moral values work as a motivation which underlies the plot pattern of the female fairy tale but not necessarily that of the male fairy tale. Bottigheimer also observes that in the Grimms' tales orders do not have to be obeyed by the heroine when they are issued by a malevolent figure. In 'Fichter's Bird', the Grimms' version of 'Bluebeard', the heroine also transgresses prohibition; although her two older sisters are dismembered for their transgression out of curiosity, the heroine escapes, saves her sisters, and gains a basket full of gold, all because of her disobedience to her husband's order. Unlike Perrault's

²⁹ Bottigheimer, *Grimms' Bad Girls and Bold Boys*, p. 94.

'Bluebeard', 'Fichter's Bird' makes the heroine's disobedience prerequisite for her victory.

Nevertheless, Perrault's version has had a decisive influence on the subsequent retellings and interpretations of the tale group which centres on the motif which is identified by E. Sidney Hartland as 'The Forbidden Chamber'.³⁰ Tatar points out that nearly every nineteenth-century rewriting of 'Bluebeard' stressed the evil of female sexual curiosity,³¹ and that Perrault's illustrators also made the same connection, charging the scenes with sexual overtones as in Gustave Doré's 1862 illustration (figure 1) and in John Austen's 1922 illustration (figure 2).

Recent critics have also followed Perrault's lead and are equally adamant in condemning the fatal curiosity of the heroine. In discussing Perrault's 'Bluebeard' together with 'Fichter's Bird', in the latter of which it is not a key but an egg that reveals the bride's disobedience, Bruno Bettelheim recognises in these tales the message that 'as a test of trustworthiness, the female must not inquire into the secrets of the male'.³² For Bettelheim, the heroine's betrayal is unmistakably 'sexual infidelity'; the blood on the egg ('a symbol of female sexuality') and the key ('the male sexual organ') symbolise that 'the woman had sexual relations'.³³ 'On hearing any of these stories', he contends, 'it immediately becomes obvious that the female is strongly tempted to do what is forbidden

³⁰ See Sidney E. Hartland, 'The Forbidden Chamber', in *Folk-Lore Journal*, 3 (1885), 193-242.

³¹ For instance, Ludwig Tieck's dramatic rendition of 'Bluebeard' makes an explicit connection between Bluebeard's wife and Eve, and blames the woman for the crimes of the villain: 'Cursed curiosity! Because of it sin entered the innocent world, and even now it leads to crime. Ever since Eve was curious, every single one of her worthless daughters has been curious.... The woman who is curious cannot be faithful to her husband. The husband who has a curious wife is never for one moment of his life secure.... Curiosity has provoked the most horrifying murderous deeds'. Cited in Tatar, p. 159.

³² Bettelheim, p. 300.

³³ Bettelheim, pp. 300-01.



Figure 1



Figure 2

to her'.³⁴ He goes on: 'Therefore we can understand her anxious fantasy which depicts corpses of women who had been killed for having been similarly unfaithful'.³⁵ The actual crime has never happened; it is all in her imagination stirred up by her own sense of guilt. Alan Dundes also regards the key as a symbol of defloration which reveals the heroine's adultery during her husband's absence.³⁶

'It is easy,' argues Tatar,

to take fairy tales that rely on the prohibition/violation sequence and turn them into cautionary tales. The prohibition is simply translated from the specific to the general ('Don't look into this room!' becomes 'Don't be curious!'). What originally functioned as a motor of the plot and as a means of introducing villainy becomes a general behavioral guideline. That many prohibitions are issued by villains has not discouraged critics from revering them as universal truths. Bluebeard's command (which stems from a murderer's need to conceal the evidence of his crimes) is legitimized; his wife's curiosity becomes an emblem of women's weakness in the face of temptation. It is doubtful that anyone would, on careful reflection, advocate blind obedience to Bluebeard's command.³⁷

Considering the prohibition/violation tales which have male protagonists such as the Grimms' 'The Golden Bird' and 'Faithful Johannes', Tatar observes that in these hero tales the violation of prohibition leads not to punishment but to wealth and marriage. Seen in this light, the cautionary reading of 'Bluebeard' which focuses on the blood-

³⁴ Bettelheim, p. 301.

³⁵ Bettelheim, p. 301.

³⁶ Alan Dundes, 'Projection in Folklore: A Plea for Psychoanalytic Semiotics', in *Interpreting Folklore* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), pp. 33-61.

³⁷ Tatar, p. 166. Tatar is critical of Margaret Atwood's 'Bluebeard's Egg' (1983) in terms of its conventional employment of the symbolism of the blood-stained egg: 'Even the heroine of a "feminist" short story sees the egg as a "symbol of virginity, [...] that is why the wizard requires it unbloodied"'. See Tatar, p. 263. Tatar's view, however, ignores the fact that symbols do not remain the same when put in a different context; Atwood's reworking of 'Bluebeard' seeks to transform just such conventionalised symbolism of the egg by impregnating it with several meanings.

stained key as the sign of the heroine's disobedience appears limited and even misleading; instead, as Christina Bacchilega suggests, the Forbidden Chamber tale can be better understood when we focus on the themes of 'initiation and survival' of the heroine.³⁸

Although rendered obscure in the course of its development, the Forbidden Chamber tale has also been told as a female fairy tale about winning, which is the heroine's winning of her own life, as my following discussion of its related tale types will show. The common element in the folkloric versions of the Forbidden Chamber tale is the emphasis on the heroine's adventurous escape from her husband whose murder, as the tale makes clear, is not caused by, but precedes the heroine's violation of the prohibition. This means that the heroine's violation of interdiction serves only to introduce the scene of villainy in which not the heroine but her husband is unequivocally identified as the villain. In the English folktale 'Mr Fox', Lady Mary, curious about the castle of her betrothed, Mr Fox, sets out alone for his castle, to which she has never been invited. On the gateway, she reads: '*Be bold, be bold*', and then on the doorway: '*Be bold, be bold, but not too bold*'.³⁹ Finally over the door in the gallery: '*Be bold, be bold, but not too bold, / Lest that your heart's blood should run cold*'.⁴⁰ Since 'Lady Mary was a brave one, she was', she opens the door to 'the Bloody Chamber' where bodies and skeletons of young women lie all stained with blood.⁴¹ She then hides herself behind a cask and sees Mr Fox dragging a fainted young woman. To take her diamond ring, he cuts off her hand, which jumps into Lady Mary's lap. On the next day when all sit at a breakfast table for the signing of their marriage contract, Lady Mary relates the whole

³⁸ Christina Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), p. 107.

³⁹ 'Mr Fox', in Carter, *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, pp. 8-10 (p. 8).

⁴⁰ *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, p. 8.

⁴¹ *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, p. 9.

story as a dream she has had, to which Mr Fox replies: 'But it is not so, nor it was not so'.⁴² When Lady Mary finally produces the severed hand from her dress and points it straight at Mr Fox, her brothers and her friends kill Mr Fox.

In 'Mr Fox', it is the heroine's knowledge of the 'Bloody Chamber' that brings about the exposure of villainy and the punishment of the villain; curiosity saves her life. Transgression here is coupled not with punishment but with the discovery of the danger of death which prompts the heroine to act bravely and cleverly in order to save her own life. The Grimms' 'The Robber Bridegroom' relates the similar tale in which the heroine reveals her bridegroom's villainy, exclaiming 'And here's the finger with the ring!'.⁴³ Even in the Grimms' 'Fichter's Bird' and the Italian folktale 'Silver Nose', the latter of which uses the same motif of an object which reveals their disobedience as Perrault's blood-stained key, the heroines exhibit boldness and intelligence in escaping, rescuing their sisters and acquiring the murderer's money. This tale type, called 'Rescue by the Sister' (AT 311), is structurally distinguished from the 'Bluebeard' tale (AT 312), because in the former tale 'the Sister' who *rescues* is the protagonist of the tale whereas in the latter the heroine *is rescued* by her brothers (it must be noted that the Aarne-Thompson index groups together both tale types as 'Three Sisters Rescued', thereby blurring the question of whether the heroine is a saviour or a victim). In 'Fichter's Bird', the heroine, 'smart and cunning',⁴⁴ not only outwits the sorcerer by not taking the egg which she was told to carry all the time to the bloody chamber (he believes that the unbroken egg shows her obedience), but also resurrects her two murdered sisters by

⁴² *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, p. 9.

⁴³ 'The Robber Bridegroom', in Zipes, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, pp. 153-57 (p. 156).

⁴⁴ 'Fichter's Bird', in Zipes, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, 167-171 (p. 169).

reassembling their dismembered parts and then tricks him into carrying her sisters and gold to their home. Leaving a decorated skull by the window as her substitute, she escapes the house in a bird-like disguise, and her brothers and relatives set fire to the house. The heroine of 'Silver Nose', 'sly' and 'the most cunning' of the three sisters,⁴⁵ notices that the Devil puts a jasmine flower in her hair to disclose her obedience when it is burned by the flames of the forbidden chamber, leaves it behind, and deceives him into carrying her sisters, herself and his money to her mother. In these versions of the Forbidden Chamber tale, as Tatar claims, 'curiosity', when 'paired with intelligence', proves 'lifesaving' rather than 'self-defeating'.⁴⁶ In this female fairy tale about winning, the heroine shows courage and intelligence to save her life when her male master turns out to be a villain. In fact, she is not a passive victim waiting to be rescued; rather, she herself devises a way to save her own life as well as her sisters' and, in addition, to reward herself with money. Traditional female fairy tales, even the most adventurous ones, tend not to involve the slaying of the villain by the heroine herself,⁴⁷ but depict her victory over the villain in terms of her wise judgement and courageous action in escaping and revealing the act of villainy. As I have shown, however, the fact that the Forbidden Chamber tale is a female adventure tale about winning—winning over death—is obscured in Perrault's text, the best-known version of the tale, in which the heroine remains a victim who makes no attempt to escape but rather waits to be rescued. Interestingly, in this type of tale, the standard fairy-tale object of search, i.e., a husband, a rich one at that, is soon revealed to be a wrong one, and the escape from his violence

⁴⁵ 'Silver Nose', in Calvino, pp. 26-30 (pp. 29, 27).

⁴⁶ Tatar, p. 170.

⁴⁷ There is a group of tales in which the heroine kills the robbers one by one as they enter into her house. Although widespread, this tale type called 'The Clever Maiden Alone at Home Kills the Robbers' (AT 956B) remains outside the Western canon.

becomes the real object of quest. This perhaps shows that to survive the perils of married life itself has been considered as a difficult task to be achieved in women's lives.

As considered above, the plot pattern of the first type of the female fairy tale, the tale about winning, differs from the male fairy tale in the function of *villainy* which creates the actual movement of the plot. In the Search for the Lost Husband tale, there is no villain to be slain since it is the heroine's violation of prohibition against looking that causes the misfortune both to herself and to her husband. The evil, in other words, is internalised, and the heroine has to undergo hardships as the atonement for the wrong she has done in order to recover her husband. The Forbidden Chamber tale avoids the direct struggle with the villain; the liquidation of misfortune is brought about by the heroine's cunning escape and exposure of the villain. Although it follows a different pattern from the heroic male tale, the female fairy tale about winning features a heroine who exhibits a great deal of activity to achieve her own purpose. However, in the course of the canon formation of this tale type, *her* actions have come to be subsumed in *his* plot which is driven by the male's drive to incriminate women.

Heroine Tales 2: The Innocent Persecuted Heroine

Another group of female fairy tales, tales about suffering, has a structure even more distinct from the Propp's scheme. This sub-genre called the 'Innocent Persecuted Heroine' fairy tale includes such tales as 'Rapunzel', 'Sleeping Beauty', 'Cinderella' and 'Snow White', which are among the best-known fairy tales today (in fact, the most popular of the three tale groups I am discussing here, i.e., the male tale, the female tale about winning, and the female tale about suffering). When we think of classic fairy tales, the first tales that come to our mind would be those with virtuous and persevering

heroines who are eventually rescued by princes who then marry them. Why are the Innocent Persecuted Heroine tales so popular?

Referring to the group of tales such as 'Cinderella', 'Snow White' and 'Sleeping Beauty', the Opies write: 'in the stories that are central to the fairy-tale tradition, the tales of royal romance and magical transformation—tales which are mostly of great age, and all of which are in one way or another related to each other—we find ourselves closely identifying with the principal characters'.⁴⁸ The heroines of these tales became popular because, as the Opies suggest, they succeed in winning our closest identification. On the other hand, the heroes in what the Opies call 'simple adventure stories' such as 'Tom Thumb' and 'Jack the Giant-Killer' do not solicit sympathy as deep as that felt for the heroines who repeatedly face unreasonable persecution and suffer for a long time (up to a hundred years in the case of Sleeping Beauty) under a magic spell.⁴⁹ These hero fairy tales are described by the Opies as simply 'pleasant' at best: 'In fact it will be appreciated that in the domain of folklore the bamboozling of giants, ogres, ghouls, griffins, dragons, the minotaur, and other fearsome creatures, is so pleasant to the youthful imagination as to be of universal expression, particularly if the gratitude of a well-endowed maiden is to be the reward'.⁵⁰ Such hero tales are much smaller in number in the Grimms' collection, which contains more tales about suffering heroines and suffering, although less severely, heroes. The most popular tales from the Grimms' collection such as 'Snow White', 'Brier Rose', 'Cinderella', 'Rapunzel', 'Rumpelstiltskin' and 'Little Red Cap' are all heroine tales, whereas hero tales which would conform to Propp's scheme such as 'The Two Brothers' and 'The Golden Bird' are fewer and less well-known. There are

⁴⁸ Opie and Opie, p. 12.

⁴⁹ Opie and Opie, p. 12.

⁵⁰ Opie and Opie, p. 47.

undoubtedly various social, historical and cultural reasons for the difference between the Grimms' collection and Afanas'ev's Russian collection which include more heroic tales, but the reason which concerns me here is that the majority of the Grimms' tales are told by female informants who are middle-class and educated. It is likely that these women tellers remembered the tales about suffering heroines best amongst the tales which they had heard or read, because they identified themselves most strongly with these heroines. The woman's voice, although modified and suppressed by the male editors of the tales, can be heard in heroine tales and sometimes even affects male tales, rendering their form less heroic. At the same time, it seems to me that both men and women can identify with such persecuted heroines as Cinderella and Rapunzel. The issue which I want to explore first, however, is that in canonical fairy tales it is always female protagonists who silently suffer unjust persecution and passively wait to be rescued by their future partners. Do the Innocent Persecuted Heroine tales speak about something specifically female? And how is the plot pattern common to these tales related to female experience?

In 'The Innocent Persecuted Heroine: An Attempt at a Model for the Surface Level of the Narrative Structure of the Female Fairy Tales' (1977), Ilana Dan identifies the common trait amongst four tale types, 'The Black and the White Bride', 'The Maiden Without Hands', 'Crescentia' and 'The Innocent Slandered Maiden', as 'double persecution of the heroine, both in her parental home and in her husband's house'.⁵¹ The heroine, who does not violate the interdiction and who therefore is 'innocent', repeatedly endures persecution. Dan's analysis shows that the heroine's persecution is coupled with her rescue either by a supernatural helper or by her future husband; the heroine is

⁵¹ Ilana Dan, 'The Innocent Persecuted Heroine: An Attempt at a Model for the Surface Level of the Narrative Structure of the Female Fairy Tale', in *Patterns in Oral Literature*, ed. by Heda Jason and Dimitri Segal (The Hague: Mouton, 1977), pp. 13-30 (p. 13).

depicted as a passive victim who depends on others' acts, whether benevolent or malicious. The Innocent Persecuted Heroine tale progresses through the repetition of the persecution/rescue, instead of the struggle/victory, sequence towards the heroine's (re)union with her husband. Dan also points out that in this tale group 'the heroine and villains work and are judged in the framework of the society's religious and ethical value systems'; the heroine, therefore, does not trick or steal, but is 'depicted as particularly virtuous'.⁵² Here again, we find the moral motivation which governs and drives the female fairy tale. Dan's attempt to apply Propp's structural analysis of the heroic fairy tale to the female fairy tale about suffering, in effect, reveals how fundamentally the latter deviates from the former. What makes this sub-genre of fairy tales difficult to fit into Propp's model is precisely what Dan identifies as its characteristic, which is the repeated persecutions of the heroine. If the plot of the fairy tale is made up of the protagonist's reaction to a lack as it arises, the Innocent Persecuted Heroine tale cannot be said to have a plot at all, for the heroine does not *do* any deed, but *is* virtuous. In other words, her story is *plot-less* according to the Proppian framework.

Steven Swann Jones in 'The Innocent Persecuted Heroine Genre: An Analysis of Its Structure and Themes' (1993) proposes a model for analysing the structure of the Innocent Persecuted Heroine genre. Following Nikiforov's notion of three groups of fairy tales, Jones argues that a plot pattern shared by the third group, i.e., the Innocent Persecuted Heroine tale, involves three major 'acts', that is, 'basic actions or plot subjects shared by different tale types'.⁵³ He describes the outline of this tale type as follows:

⁵² Dan, p. 14.

⁵³ Steven Swann Jones, 'The Innocent Persecuted Heroine Genre: An Analysis of Its Structure and Themes', *Western Folklore*, 52 (1993), 13-41 (p. 16).

Act One concerns the heroine's initial family situation and her life at home, where she is frequently the victim of various jealous, ambitious, overprotective, or generally hostile family members. Act Two concerns the heroine's meeting and acquiring a mate. It dramatizes various obstacles that interfere with the desired union and concludes with the heroine's marriage to her husband. And Act Three concerns the heroine's difficulties in her husband's home, where she is the victim of persecution, generally after giving birth to one or more children.⁵⁴

The three acts of the tale correspond to the three acts of woman's life-drama, that is, puberty, marriage, and childbirth, which are the transitions between childhood, young adulthood, and motherhood. The tales belonging to this genre, according to Jones, generally represent at least two of these three acts, and the persecution is presented in at least one act. Tales such as 'Cinderella', 'Snow White', 'Sleeping Beauty' and 'Rapunzel' present Act One and Act Two; the heroines are first persecuted in childhood home and then interfered with their marriage. 'Rumpelstiltskin' shows all three acts, the heroine being threatened to give her child away.

The Innocent Persecuted Heroine tale moves through the repetition of the persecution/rescue pattern with the increasing tensions between the heroine and the villain. In 'The Structure of "Snow White"' (1983), Jones identifies 'the generic pattern of Threat, Hostility, and Escape' which underlies over one hundred versions of 'Snow White'.⁵⁵ In the Grimms' 'Snow White', the heroine is first expelled from home by her jealous stepmother and is rescued by the dwarfs who adopt her; she is then poisoned by her ever more jealous stepmother and is rescued by the prince who marries her. Snow White moves from her parents' home through her companions' home to her husband's

⁵⁴ Jones, 'The Innocent Persecuted Heroine Genre', p. 16.

⁵⁵ Jones, 'The Structure of "Snow White"', in Bottigheimer, *Fairy Tales and Society*, pp. 165-86 (p. 176).

home, each sphere marking the transition from the former stage of development in the heroine's life. When she reaches puberty and her stepmother becomes jealous of her beauty, the heroine is forced to leave her home which is the sphere of childhood. In the magical house in the forest, she learns various domestic skills and thereby prepares herself for entering the next home as a competent wife. Jones points out that this generic pattern of Threat, Hostility, and Escape also underlies the action in other persecuted heroine tales. That the heroine is put to an apparent state of death suggests the connection between initiation rites and the Innocent Persecuted Heroine tale in which the heroine invariably undergoes a period of forced inactivity such as death, sleep, confinement and silence. The common structure of this tale type described by Jones depicts the female rite of passage, a girl's maturation into an adult woman.

Referring to Arnold van Gennep's study on the rites of passage, Jones argues that socially enacted rituals such as puberty rituals and marriage rituals 'dramatize the participants as going through the steps of separation, liminality, and reincorporation as a means of facilitating their transition from one social status to another', and that the pattern found in these rituals is duplicated by the plot pattern of the Innocent Persecuted Heroine tales.⁵⁶ The 'motivation' for the transition, Jones argues, is 'inherently accepted and understood by the actors of the ritual', whereas the narrative 'finds it necessary to dramatize the motivation' by explaining the persecutor's hostility towards the heroine.⁵⁷ It follows from this that the motivation which is prompted by the society's needs operates in a concealed manner in this female fairy tale.

The structural pattern of the Innocent Persecuted Heroine tale corresponds to

⁵⁶ 'The Structure of "Snow White"', p. 179.

⁵⁷ 'The Structure of "Snow White"', pp. 179-80.

the tale's thematic message which has, to use Jones's term, a certain 'goal'.⁵⁸ The three acts of the tale dramatise a predetermined course of development prescribed for women in a certain society; a woman has to change 'first from an asexual to a sexual individual, from an unattached and unmarried woman to a married one, and finally from a childless woman to a child-rearing mother'.⁵⁹ For a young woman, Jones suggests, the tale serves not only as a model to be followed but also as a guide to assist her by anticipating the trials and tribulations which will await her in the course of development.

Female development depicted in the Innocent Persecuted Heroine tale seems to be less straightforward and more tortuous than male development in the heroic tale which follows the struggle/victory pattern. Jones observes that the three roles of woman, daughter, wife, and mother, are all 'fraught with peril, strife, and anxiety' and centred on 'intra-family relationships'.⁶⁰ The heroine's reward for enduring persecution is another tie with another family which causes yet another persecution. One reason why heroines are constantly persecuted in the three stages of their lives is the moral sanction which operates generally and powerfully in this female fairy tale, as we also saw in the case of the female fairy tale about winning. The Innocent Persecuted Heroine tale has a socialising function of instructing young girls to conform to the existing social system of patriarchy; at the same time, they offer a voice for women in which they can express experiences specific to women in passing through developmental stages into adulthood in a patriarchal society. Traditional heroine tales offer very limited options to women's life whose sphere is strictly confined within intra-family relationships. As I considered in Chapter 1, feminist attacks on the traditional fairy tale have tended to focus their

⁵⁸ 'The Structure of "Snow White"', p. 179.

⁵⁹ 'The Structure of "Snow White"', p. 179.

⁶⁰ 'The Innocent Persecuted Heroine Genre', p. 21.

attention on the tales belonging to the Innocent Persecuted Heroine genre, arguing that these fairy tales inculcate patriarchal values in order to put women in their place; in other words, they serve to naturalise women's subordinate status in a male-dominated society as either daughter, wife or mother. However, Jones claims, these tales also represent the celebration of woman's inner strength to resist the hostile forces which try to alienate her from family which is her only tie with society.

Yet we must resist lapsing into normative discourse à la Bettelheim. Despite his recognition of the changing social conditions which re-create the same but different tales, Jones tends, in the manner of Max Lüthi, to crystallise the persecution pattern of the female fairy tale into a mirror. Jones closes 'The Structure of "Snow White"' with the following passage:

Like crystals that have been formed by years of pressure, folktales have an intricate beauty that is simultaneously the product of their exceptional longevity as well as an explanation for it. Given their history of being continually recreated by individual narrators in different social settings, under changing political conditions, with varying psychological concerns, it is no wonder that, under these pressures, they have become like diamonds, precisely structured and elegantly arranged gems of human expression.⁶¹

This, of course, is true; to recognise familiar patterns expressed in crystallised form, to identify with heroes and heroines in their universal perils and sufferings—this is what gives us pleasure in reading fairy tales. Reading traditional fairy tales which, like crystals, have stood a great many years of pressure helps us to find order and balance in the overwhelming complexity of our lives. The popularity of the Innocent Persecuted Heroine tale amongst both women and men seems to owe much to its sympathetic

⁶¹ 'The Structure of "Snow White"', p. 181.

depiction of the sufferings of those who are dominated in their lives. Yet not all of the social and political conditions which motivated the creation of some specific patterns have persisted to this day, and sexual politics is one of those systems which have undergone a drastic change. Women, for instance, no longer have to be ‘innocently persecuted’ in the way in which Perrault’s and the Grimms’ heroines are, because they have become more independent, economically, socially and psychologically, from their parents and, if they *choose* to be married, from their partners. Today, both women and men are given different choices in their lives from those offered in traditional fairy tales. We need to rework the old patterns to express our own experiences, which have changed greatly from the times when these tales were told by the hearth, and which still keep changing at this very moment into something different, into something we cannot yet imagine.

Conclusion

Propp’s study has revealed the basic structure specific to the fairy tale. His morphological model is useful for recognising plot patterns in various narratives including those which may not at first look like fairy tales; it is especially useful for my purpose, which is to foreground the structural relations between plot and desire. The objectivity of Propp’s theory, however, is not to be taken for granted, for, as I have shown, there is a blind spot in its premises. That Propp ignored and suppressed the female plot in his analysis of fairy tales is important, for my following analysis of the male plot and the female plot throws doubt as to whether there really is any difference between these two plots. The next chapter intends to disclose the same motivation, the same *desire*, that drives the narratives of the male plot *and* the female plot.

Chapter 3

The Master's Plot: Narrative, Desire, Gender

This chapter will analyse the implication of desire in narrative by using a methodology which combines Freud's psychoanalytic theory with theories of narrative whose development owes much to Propp's work. My perspective is feminist; however, instead of always thinking *against* the male theoretical text as has been done in the traditional antagonistic feminist approach, I will also try to think *with* it. In other words, I will try, as Felman suggests, to 'account *at the same time* for the text's *male blindness* and for the text's *male insight* (its very textual otherness to its blindness)', to 'engage in a dialogue at once with the blindness *and* with the insight' of the male texts.¹ This chapter considers Peter Brooks's male-centred conception of narrative based on his male-centred reading of Freud, in a way which is critical but which would open up new ways of reading and discussing narrative.

The Master's Plot I: The Masculine Narrative Desire

In *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (1984), Peter Brooks sets out to re-define the notion of plot, which he claims has been slighted by modernist criticism mainly as a counteraction to the overvaluation of plots in the nineteenth century, and which has been rendered static by structuralist narratology with its emphasis on paradigmatic structures of narrative. In his preface, Brooks defines plot as 'the design and intention of narrative, what shapes a story and gives it a certain direction or intent of

¹ Felman, *What Does a Woman Want?*, p. 89.

meaning', as 'the logic or perhaps the syntax of a certain kind of discourse, one that develops its propositions only through temporal sequence and progression'.² The term 'plotting' perhaps better expresses his notion of plot; by plotting, he means 'the activity of shaping, with the dynamic aspect of narrative—that which makes a plot “move forward”, and makes us read forward, seeking in the unfolding of the narrative a line of intention and a potent of design that hold the promise of progress toward meaning' (p. xiii). The dynamics of plotting is activated by what Roland Barthes calls '*la passion*' *du sens*,³ which Brooks translates as passion of/for meaning, the desire to find meaning in the story as the narrative progresses (p. 19). Desire in this view can be seen to correspond to Freud's notion of Eros, which seeks, Brooks reminds us, 'to combine organic substances into ever greater unities' (p. 37). Implicit here is a theory of narrative which necessarily—if unconsciously—subscribes to a teleological view of narrative.

Brooks's notion of plot, moving beyond the static models of structuralist narratology, offers a dynamic model of narrative which underlines the presence of desire as the motor force of narrative. He finds a 'rock-bottom paradigm of the dynamic of desire' in the picaresque novel, which is one of the earliest forms of novel. Brooks identifies 'Jack the Giant Killer' as the most basic model of plot in the early development of the novel: 'As in a great many folktales—the example of 'Jack the Giant Killer' and its permutations comes to mind—the specifically human faculty of ingenuity and trickery, the capacity to use the mind to devise schemes to overcome superior force, becomes a basic dynamic of plot' (p. 38). In 'Jack the Giant Killer', Jack, a farmer's son, has great

² Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. xi. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

³ Roland Barthes, 'Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits', *Communications*, 8 (1966) 1-27 (p. 27).

success in the world by slaying one giant after another with his ‘ingenious Wit and Policy’ and his ‘cunning and sharp ready Inventions’.⁴ This basic model of narrative desire appears in a much more elaborated form in the modern novel since the nineteenth century. It is worth quoting in full the following passage in which Brooks’s narrative itself enacts the compelling narrative of the ambitious nineteenth-century novels which he discusses:

By the nineteenth century, the *pícaro*’s scheming to stay alive has typically taken a more elaborated and socially defined form: it has become ambition. [...] [The modern novel] makes ambition the vehicle and emblem of Eros, that which *totalizes* the world as *possession* and *progress*. Ambition provides not only a typical novelistic theme, but also a dominant dynamic of plot: a force that drives the protagonist forward, assuring that no incident or action is final or closed in itself until such a moment as the ends of ambition have been clarified, through success or else renunciation. Somewhat in the manner of the traditional sequence of functions in the folktale analyzed by Propp, ambition provides an armature of plot which the reader recognizes, and which constitutes the very ‘readability’ of the narrative text, what enables the reader to go about the construction of the text’s specific meanings. Ambition is inherently *totalizing*, figuring the self’s tendency to *appropriation* and *aggrandizement*, moving forward through the *encompassment of more*, striving *to have, to do, and to be more*. The ambitious hero thus stands as a figure of the reader’s efforts to construct meanings in ever-larger *wholes*, to *totalize* his experience of human existence in time, to grasp past, present, and future in a significant shape. (p. 39; my emphasis)

In the passage above, repeated words such as ‘possession’, ‘progress’, ‘appropriation’ and ‘totalization’ enhance the sense that plot is what makes narrative a battlefield through which the hero single-mindedly marches ahead towards the final possession of all. Therefore, it is appropriate that Brooks calls these ambitious heroes as “desiring machines” whose presence in the text creates and sustains narrative movement through

⁴ ‘The History of Jack and the Giants’, in Opie and Opie, pp. 51-65 (p. 51).

the forward march of desire, projecting the self onto the world through scenarios of desire imagined and then acted upon' (pp. 39-40). It must be noted here that Brooks includes those novels which end in the 'renunciation' of such ambition for possession in his model of narrative, thereby (implicitly) including those with double endings which leave the possibility of either success or renunciation.

Brooks, like Propp albeit in a more explicit manner, excludes women, both as protagonists and as readers (note '*his* experience' meaning the reader's), from this universal plot which, he claims, applies only to male protagonists. In describing what he calls the 'female plot', he changes his tone:

The female plot is not unrelated, but it takes a more complex stance toward ambition, the formation of an inner drive toward the assertion of selfhood in resistance to the overt and violating male plots of ambition, a counter-dynamic which, from the prototype *Clarissa* on to *Jane Eyre* and *To the Lighthouse*, is only superficially passive, and in fact a reinterpretation of the vectors of plot (p. 39).

To lump these three narratives together, first of all, is nothing but reductive; it ignores significant differences between these male and female texts covering almost three hundred years.⁵ Moreover, implicit in Brooks's theory of narrative is his assumption that the female plot is not only 'not unrelated' but *subordinate* to the male plot which he automatically considers to be the universal norm.

Brooks's argument seems to be better testified in the simple narrative of the fairy tale. He finds the basic model of the female plot in the Grimms' fairy tale 'All-Kinds-of-Fur', which for him 'represents the female plot, a resistance and what we might

⁵ In *To the Lighthouse*, for instance, there are two stories of women, Mrs Ramsay and Lily Briscoe, which follow different plots. See Marianne Hirsch's discussion of the novel in connection to Brooks's narrative model in *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana university Press, 1989), pp. 108-118.

call an “endurance”: a waiting (and suffering) until the woman’s desire can be a permitted response to the expression of male desire’ (p. 330n). In ‘All-Kinds-of-Fur’, which belongs to the same tale type as ‘Cinderella’, the princess of extraordinary beauty is forced to leave her home disguised in a strange cloak made from all kinds of fur and with her face and hands blackened, because her father, the king, insists on marrying his own daughter. She has to endure living amongst the ashes like Cinderella as a kitchen maid in a foreign castle for a long time. By patiently dropping hints one by one, she, or rather her beauty, is eventually discovered by the king of the castle. They marry and live happily ever after.

In ‘All-Kinds-of-Fur’, there is no ‘forward march of desire’ or ‘projection of the self onto the world’. The heroine is forced to run away from her home and patiently endures misery until she is picked up by a male saviour who marries her. She is more like a fixed point which is crossed by the two male characters, her father and her future husband. Sandra M. Gilbert’s analysis of ‘All-Kinds-of-Fur’ suggests that the king who saves and marries her *is* the king who is her father and her persecutor.⁶ ‘All-Kinds-of-Fur’, then, can be read as a male tale seen through the eyes of a female character who, at the end of the story, is conquered by the hero whose possession of her she has resisted.⁷

Apparently, Brooks believes that there are two kinds of plots, male and female. In his description of plot, however, there is only one vector of plot, the one that belongs to the male protagonist. He states that the female plot is ‘in resistance’ and ‘counter-dynamic’ to the male plot, and that the desire of the heroine is to ‘wait’ to be a

⁶ See Sandra M. Gilbert, ‘Life’s Empty Pack: Notes Toward a Literary Daughteronomy’, *Critical Inquiry*, 11 (1985), 355-84.

⁷ Jean Cocteau’s film version of ‘Beauty and the Beast’ makes the heroine marry the man whom she has once refused, revealing even more clearly that the tale is about the male subject’s conquest of a woman who is the object of his desire.

‘permitted response’ to the male desire. Here lies the contradiction in his theorisation, for it is difficult to associate heroines’ acts of ‘waiting’ until ‘permitted’ and of ‘resisting’ male violence, with the notion of desire as it is described by Brooks. In Brooks’s view, heroines’ such ‘superficial passivity’ never amounts to real activity which he assumes to be a male prerogative. His overtly masculine conception of plot—he speaks of narrative desire as ‘erection’ and as ‘tumescence’ (pp. 51, 103)—incorporates the notion of the female plot into the logic of the male plot, positing the former as the counter-dynamic of the latter which, as his argument proceeds, nonetheless presents its universality. The female plot, then, is inevitably defined and shaped by the male plot, working inside the logic of the male plot. It has no vector of its own, itself a static point only to be passed through, ‘enduring’, ‘waiting’, and ‘suffering’. We may call both these plots—the male and the female plots as described by Brooks—*masculine*, for they both work according to the same masculine conception of narrative desire.

Brooks’s understanding of (masculine) plot is confirmed by Jurij Lotman’s essay entitled ‘The Origin of Plot in the Light of Typology’ (1973). In primordial myths, according to Lotman, there are only two characters, a hero and an obstacle. In the later development which he defines as ‘linear’ unfolding of ‘cyclical’ texts, characters are multiplied as doubles, so that they ‘can be divided into those who are *mobile*, who enjoy freedom with regard to plot-space, who can change their place in the structure of the artistic world and cross the frontier, the basic topological feature of this space, and those who are *immobile*, who represent, in fact, a function of this space’.⁸ Lotman’s following passage on the movement of plot makes explicit that these *mobile* and *immobile* characters are gendered:

⁸ Jurij Lotman, ‘The Origin of Plot in the Light of Typology’, trans. by Julian Graffy, *Poetics Today*, 1 (1979), 161-84 (p. 167; my emphasis).

The elementary sequence of events in myth can be reduced to a chain: entry into closed space—emergence from it (this chain is open at both ends and can be endlessly multiplied). Inasmuch as closed space can be interpreted as ‘a cave’, ‘the grave’, ‘a house’, ‘*woman*’, (and, correspondingly, be allotted the features of *darkness*, *warmth*, *dampness*), entry into it is interpreted on various levels as ‘*death*’, ‘conception’, ‘return home’ and so on; moreover all these acts are thought of as mutually identical.⁹

Here, the pattern male/hero/mover and female/obstacle/space is considered as universal, defining the structural organisation of the original plot. Within this topological scheme, the obstacles, regardless of their gender, invariably represent the womb—‘dark’, ‘warm’, and ‘damp’—and its equivalent, woman. The masculine notion of plot, therefore, is a staging of a two-character drama in which the male subject penetrates woman-space to overcome death.

Referring to Lotman’s passage cited above, Teresa de Lauretis argues that sexual difference is what drives narrative forward:

The implication here is not inconsequential. For if the work of the mythical structuration is to establish distinctions, the primary distinction on which all others depend is not, say, life and death, but rather sexual difference. In other words, the picture of the world produced in mythical thought since the very beginning of culture would rest, first and foremost, on what we call biology. Opposite pairs such as inside/outside, the raw/the cooked, or life/death appear to be merely derivatives of the fundamental opposition between boundary and passage; and if passage may be in either direction, from inside to outside or vice versa, from life to death or vice versa, nonetheless all these terms are predicated on the *single* figure of the hero who crosses the boundary and penetrates the other space. In so doing the hero, the mythical subject, is constructed as human being and as male; he is the active principle of culture, the establisher of distinction, the creator of differences. Female is what is not susceptible to transformation, to life or death; she (it) is an element of plot-space, a topos, a resistance,

⁹ Lotman, p. 168; my emphasis.

matrix and matter.¹⁰

Here, one can recognise the full implication of Brooks's use of the term 'resistance' to describe the female plot. Brooks's definition of narrative desire as possession and appropriation confirms de Lauretis's view on the implication of *sadistic* desire in narrative. Reversing Laura Mulvey's phrase beginning with 'sadism demands a story',¹¹ de Lauretis defines narrative as follows: 'story demands sadism, depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat, all occurring in a linear time with a beginning and an end'.¹² For both Brooks and de Lauretis, desire plays a significant role in narrative structuration; both underline the dynamics of narrative, how narrative functions and engages the reader in the process of its progress. However, de Lauretis reminds us that we need to ask not only what drives the narrative, but also *whose* desire is at work in its structuration. The female character represents 'obstacles' whose function is to 'resist' the male penetrator who, in his quest to possess all, re-creates the fundamental distinction which makes possible this universal drama between the two sexes. The result is always the same, for, in this scheme, there is only *one* desire, the desire of the masculine subject.

'There is only one libido', says Freud.¹³ In his lecture on 'Femininity' (1933), Freud claims that libido, 'the motive force of sexual life', is 'dominated by the polarity of masculine-feminine'; however, he goes on to argue that 'there is only one libido, which

¹⁰ De Lauretis, p. 119.

¹¹ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* 16 (1975), 6-18 (p. 14).

¹² De Lauretis, pp. 132-33.

¹³ Freud, 'Femininity', in *The Penguin Freud Library* (hereafter abbreviated to *PFL*), 15 vols, trans. by James Strachey, ed. by Angela Richards and Albert Dickson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990-93), II, pp. 145-69 (p. 165).

serves both the masculine and the feminine sexual functions'.¹⁴ To understand what Freud means here, I will first examine his definition of masculinity and femininity.

Freud defines femininity as 'giving preference to passive aims', which is not, he stresses, 'the same thing as passivity', for 'to achieve a passive aim may call for a large amount of activity'.¹⁵ The preference either of an active aim (= masculinity) or of a passive aim (= femininity) is determined on the model of the sexual life:

The male sex-cell is actively *mobile* and searches out the female one, and the latter, the ovum, is *immobile* and waits passively. This behaviour of the elementary sexual organisms is indeed a model for the conduct of sexual individuals during intercourse. The male pursues the female for the purpose of sexual union, seizes hold of her and *penetrates* into her.¹⁶

Freud's notion of masculinity and femininity, derived from the biological metaphors of the *mobile* sperm and the *immobile* ovum, bears a remarkable resemblance to Lotman's topological idea of the original plot in which the male mover *penetrates* the female topos.

Although he claims that 'we cannot assign any sex' to the libido itself, Freud is nonetheless 'inclined to describe it as masculine'.¹⁷ Moreover, it becomes clear that, in his view, it is only men who actually have access to the libido when one reads his following account of biological teleology:

Furthermore, it is our impression that more constraint has been applied to the libido when it is pressed into the service of the feminine function, and that—to speak teleologically—Nature takes less careful account of its [that function's] demands than in the case of masculinity. And the reason for this may lie—thinking once again teleologically—in the fact that the accomplishment of the aim of biology has been entrusted to the

¹⁴ 'Femininity', p. 165.

¹⁵ 'Femininity', p. 149.

¹⁶ 'Femininity', p. 148; my emphasis.

¹⁷ 'Femininity', p. 165.

aggressiveness of men and has been made to some extent independent of women's consent.¹⁸

In this passage, sadism looms large as that which drives the story of Nature towards its end; male sadism becomes biological necessity. Again, story *demand*s sadism. Nature's disregard of the feminine function, continues Freud, is confirmed by the 'sexual frigidity' frequently found in women.¹⁹ It seems that *his* story not only demands sadism on his side but, to complement his purpose, masochism in his object, woman, and this is forcibly justified by Freud. He maintains that masochism is 'truly feminine' since the suppression of aggressiveness thus required of the female in her sexual life leads to 'the development of powerful masochistic impulses' in women.²⁰ The logic of Freud's argument here is, as I remarked, forcible; women *must not* desire anything since 'the aim of biology' requires so. Freud denies the juxtaposition 'feminine libido' outright,²¹ thereby denying the possibility that there may be a libido in women which does not conform to the only libido he can imagine, which is masculine and sadistic. Freud's story of sexual life demands women to identify with the feminine position, i.e., that of an immobile object waiting to be penetrated, so that the story can go on 'independent of women's consent'. But it is here that Freud seems to undermine what he has just stated, for does the expression 'independent of women's consent' not suggest the fact that Freud *knew* that women might not, and would not, consent? It is as if he needed to disavow the knowledge that women, in fact, desire something other than waiting to be penetrated. Following his narrative, we may understand why he claims that he cannot, or pretends not to be able to, answer the question: What does a woman want?

¹⁸ 'Femininity', p. 166.

¹⁹ 'Femininity', p. 166.

²⁰ 'Femininity', p. 149.

²¹ 'Femininity', p. 166.

It was to answer this question that Freud wrote 'Femininity', a paper prepared as part of a series of introductory lectures he was to give at the University of Vienna: 'Throughout history people have knocked their head against the riddle of the nature of femininity [...]. Nor will *you* have escaped worrying over this problem—those of you who are men; those of you who are women this will not apply—you are yourselves the problem'.²² In 'Rereading Femininity' (1981), Shoshana Felman argues that in Freud's formulation of the question: what is femininity?, women as the speaking subjects are excluded from the question: 'Women [...] are considered merely as the *objects* of desire, and as the *objects* of the question. To the extent that women "*are* the question", they cannot *enunciate* the question; they cannot be the speaking *subjects* of the knowledge or the science which the question seeks'.²³ Freud's question, therefore, 'in reality asks: "what is femininity—*for* men?"'.²⁴ The question Felman, a woman *and* a speaking subject, asks is: 'what does the question—"what is femininity—*for* men?" mean *for* women?'.²⁵ Following Felman, I will consider what Freud's story of femininity—*his* version of *her* story—means for women.

To begin with, Freud's story of femininity is derived from the story of Oedipus, which, it must be remembered, Propp implicitly regarded as paradigmatic of all fairy tales. The Oedipus complex, the 'nucleus' of the Freudian theory, is inspired by Sophocles' play, *Oedipus Rex*. In Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus, the king of Thebes, progressively discovers his unwitting sins which have brought a plague upon his kingdom. He realises that the old man he murdered at a crossroads was his father Laius, who had abandoned his new-born son on the mountain-side because, according to

²² 'Femininity', p. 146.

²³ Felman, 'Rereading Femininity', *Yale French Studies*, 62 (1981), 19-44 (p. 21).

²⁴ 'Rereading Femininity', p. 21.

²⁵ 'Rereading Femininity', p. 21.

Apollo's oracle, his son was destined to kill his father and marry his mother. His wife Jocasta, with whom Oedipus has sons and daughters, turns out to be his own mother. At this discovery, Oedipus blinds himself and flees the kingdom.

Freud first discovered the Oedipus complex during his self-analysis. In his letter to his friend Wilhelm Fliess on 15 October 1897, Freud wrote: 'A single idea of general value dawned on me. I have found, in my own case too, [the phenomenon of] being in love with my mother and jealous of my father, and I now consider it a universal event in early childhood'.²⁶ Later in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), he affirms the universality of the story of Oedipus: '[Oedipus'] destiny moves us only because it might have been ours—because the oracle laid the same curse upon us before our birth as upon him. It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father'.²⁷ Clearly, the expression 'all of us' here does not include women; Freud at this point thought of the Oedipus complex only in terms of the male.

Oedipus' destiny 'could have been ours' but is not, for Freud transforms the tragedy of Oedipus into a story with a happy ending in which the male child comes to establish himself as a man. The Oedipal journey of a little boy begins when he feels an intense sexual desire for his mother and, as a consequence, a wish for the death of his father, who is his rival. While passing through the Oedipal phase, the little boy establishes the super-ego by internalising his father as the law which prohibits incest. At the end of his journey, the little boy becomes a man, identifying himself with his father and renouncing his incestuous desire for his mother through substitution.

²⁶ *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess 1887-1904*, trans. and ed. by Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap, 1985), p. 272.

²⁷ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in *PFL*, IV, p. 364.

At an earlier stage, Freud supposed that the Oedipus complex in a little girl is ‘precisely analogous’ to that in a little boy.²⁸ Soon later, however, he came to realise the fundamental asymmetry between the sexes when he discovered the significant role which the castration complex plays in the dissolution of the Oedipus complex; if the destruction of the Oedipus complex is brought about by the threat of castration which is seen by the little boy as a paternal threat to his sexual activities, the motive for the demolition of the Oedipus complex is lacking in the case of the little girl, who finds herself already castrated. Moreover, there is another complication for the little girl: why does the girl abandon the mother, who is also her original object of love before she enters the Oedipal phase?

Freud set out to answer this problem fully in ‘Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes’ (1925). There, Freud explains the girl’s turning away from her mother in terms of his notion of ‘penis-envy’; when she notices that the boy’s penis is ‘the superior counterpart of their own small and inconspicuous organ’, the little girl blames her mother for having sent her into the world ‘so insufficiently equipped’ and turns away from her mother to her father, from whom she first expects a penis for herself and with whom she then wishes to have a baby which ‘slips’ into the place of a penis.²⁹

As to the lack of motive for the destruction of the Oedipus complex in girls, Freud states that the effects of the Oedipus complex ‘may persist far into women’s normal mental life’, which means that women may remain fixated in penis-envy throughout their life. Freud’s conclusion as to the Oedipus complex in the male and the

²⁸ Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, in *PFL*, XI, pp. 339-407 (p. 371).

²⁹ ‘Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes’, in *PFL*, VII, pp. 323-43 (pp. 335-340).

female children is: '*Whereas in boys the Oedipus complex is destroyed by the castration complex, in girls it is made possible and led up to by the castration complex*'.³⁰ This idea is repeated in 'Femininity', where he summarises his story of femininity in the following manner. The little girl is first 'driven out' of her original attachment to her mother, because of her great envy for the penis and of her subsequent intense and everlasting hatred towards her mother who did not give her a penis and who, she also discovers to her great disappointment, does not have one herself.³¹ Unlike the little boy who 'naturally' moves onto the Oedipal phase, the already exhausted little girl then enters the Oedipal phase 'as though into a haven of refuge', which, however, turns out to be as difficult as the pre-Oedipal situation.³² Without the fear of castration which leads boys to surmount the Oedipus complex, girls 'remain in it for an indeterminate length of time; they demolish it late and, even so, incompletely'.³³ In Freud's story of masculinity and femininity, the boy's journey is straightforward, feasible and rewarding, whereas the girl's journey appears to be much more tortuous and simply interminable. But why should Freud stick to Oedipus, the male model, when it becomes clear to him that it does not really work with women?

Here, it is important to re-examine Freud's rejection of the term the 'Electra complex' introduced by Jung in his *The Theory of Psycho-Analysis* (1913) to designate the feminine equivalent of the Oedipus complex.³⁴ Freud dismisses this term on the grounds considered above, that is, the differing effects of the castration complex in the

³⁰ 'Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes', pp. 341-42.

³¹ 'Femininity', p. 163.

³² 'Femininity', p. 163.

³³ 'Femininity', p. 163.

³⁴ C. G. Jung, 'Theory of Psychoanalysis', in *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, IV, ed. by Herbert Read, Michael Fordman, and Gerhard Adler, trans. by R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), pp. 83-226 (p. 154).

boy and the girl as well as the girl's attachment to the parent of the same sex in the pre-Oedipal phase. In 'Female Sexuality' (1931), Freud states that the Oedipus complex 'applies with complete strictness to the male child only and that we are right in rejecting the term "Electra complex" which seeks to emphasise the analogy between the attitude of the two sexes'.³⁵ It does not apply 'with complete strictness', but we must be careful in assessing his following categorical statement: 'it is only in the male child that we find the fateful combination of love for the one parent and simultaneous hatred for the other as a rival'.³⁶ For, as is obvious to Jung and to us all, Electra loves her father and hates her mother, which seems to be the very phenomenon Freud describes as characteristic of the female Oedipal complex. Why not call it the Electra complex, then?

It is not only Jung who cannot help reading the story of Electra as a parallel to that of Oedipus; it does appear on first sight to represent a feminine model, or what Brooks calls the female plot, which is supposedly driven by a woman's desire. In Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, Electra wishes to take revenge on her mother Clytemnestra, who has murdered her husband Agamemnon with the help of her lover, whom she has taken during her husband's long absence. Although it is Orestes, Electra's brother, who eventually kills their mother and her lover, Electra's mourning for her dead father and her hatred towards her mother are excessively violent, surpassing those of her brother. Can one conclude, then, that the story of Electra is driven by her desire for her father?

In 'Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/ Forays' (1975), Hélène Cixous argues that in *Oresteia* it is Agamemnon, the dead father, who 'secretly leads the final, toppling revolution'.³⁷ Cixous claims that the story of Electra signals the 'dawn of

³⁵ 'Female Sexuality', *PFL*, VII, pp. 367-92 (p. 375).

³⁶ 'Female Sexuality', p. 375.

³⁷ Hélène Cixous, 'Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/ Forays', in *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. by Betsy Wing, *Theory and History of Literature*, XXIV (Manchester:

phallocentrism'.³⁸ Her reading of the story of Electra is triggered by Freud's following interpretation of the same story given in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939):

Under the influence of external conditions—which we need not follow up here and which in part are also not sufficiently known—it happened that the matriarchal structure of society was replaced by a patriarchal one. This naturally brought with it a revolution in the existing state of the law. An echo of this revolution can still be heard, I think, in the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus. This turning from the mother to the father, however, signifies above all a victory of spirituality over the senses—that is to say, a step forward in culture, since maternity is proved by the senses whereas paternity is a surmise based on a deduction and a premiss. This declaration in favour of the thought-process, thereby raising it above sense perception, has proved to be a step with serious consequences.³⁹

For Freud, *Oresteia* marks the end of the reign of mothers who represent the senses and the beginning of the patriarchy which is based on intellect. Cixous states that Electra, unlike her sister who hesitates between 'the law of blood and the law of sperm', abandons the matriarchal ties ('mother's daughter') which do not require any 'surmise', for the patriarchal ones ('father's daughter') which can be only uncertain and always need to be affirmed by the child.⁴⁰ The revenge is taken on the mother in order for the father to rise up again more powerful than before, for his 'name' is now 'recognized' by his children.⁴¹ And Aeschylus' text makes sure that it is not his daughter but his son who commits the inevitable crime so as not to perpetuate the maternal powers which could have been passed down from Clytemnestra—Cixous calls her 'only one last Great

Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. 61-132 (p. 104).

³⁸ 'Sorties', p. 105.

³⁹ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism: Three Essays*, in *PFL*, XIII, pp. 237-386 (pp. 360-61).

⁴⁰ 'Sorties', p. 109.

⁴¹ 'Sorties', p. 111.

Woman', 'the age-less eloper', 'inalterable Helen'⁴²—to Electra. Orestes' crime is not wrong but justified because it is committed in the name of the father, which is man's Law. Cixous, following Nietzsche's observation on tragedy, compares the opposition between crime and sin with the hierarchical opposition between the masculine and the feminine: 'Crime: active, the male bond, the noble, Promethean deed./ Sin: the feminine, step by step, no by no. Ant's pace. The succession of wrongs is the origin of evil'.⁴³ The crime cannot be committed by the daughter because the 'deed' is masculine by definition. Cixous maintains that Electra, who has condemned her mother's desire, her sin, is not the one who receives the father's love at the end: 'And now the reign of the paternal brother. Recognized by the sister, therefore without the fight to the death that sexual difference always risks triggering, having been careful to rule out the incestuous complications that a raving Electra might have awakened, Orestes, tranquilizing and anesthetic, imposes the law'.⁴⁴ The ostensibly feminine story of Electra, then, is driven by the same masculine desire that operates in the story of Oedipus, and the girl, as in Freud's story of femininity, is for ever immobilised in the midst of her everlasting hatred towards her mother and her unrequited love for her father.

Freud finds in both stories, the story of Oedipus and that of Electra, the erection of the law of the father as a universal and normative principle, and the suppression of the mother as a site for regression. There is only one model that determines psycho-sexual development of both men and women, and this model is based on the primacy of the masculine over the feminine. The Sphinx in the legend of Oedipus, the figure already defeated by Oedipus before Sophocles' play starts, may be recalled here. The Sphinx is a

⁴² 'Sorties', p. 105.

⁴³ 'Sorties', p. 110.

⁴⁴ 'Sorties', p. 112.

female monster who is said to devour all those who fail to answer her riddle: 'What walks on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening?'. To this, Oedipus gives the right answer 'Man', thereby destroying her power, and is welcomed by Thebans as their king. The Sphinx, who represents the pre-historic matriarchal power and knowledge, is defeated by the intelligence of Oedipus, i.e., Man. Feminists now agree that Oedipus' answer to the Sphinx, 'Man', did not include women.⁴⁵

The Oedipus myth, according to Lévi-Strauss, engages in solving the riddle of human origin:

The myth has to do with the inability, for a culture which holds the belief that mankind is autochthonous [...], to find a satisfactory transition between this theory and the knowledge that human beings are actually born from the union of man and woman. Although the problem obviously cannot be solved, the Oedipus myth provides a kind of logical tool which relates the original problem—born from one or born from two?—to the derivative problems: born from different or born from same?⁴⁶

Significantly, Lévi-Strauss proposes that we should consider Freud's use of the Oedipus

⁴⁵ Muriel Rukeyser's poem 'Myth' has been inspirational in this respect:

Long afterward, Oedipus, old and blinded, walked the roads. He smelled a familiar smell. It was the Sphinx. Oedipus said, 'I want to ask one question. Why didn't I recognize my mother?' 'You gave the wrong answer', said the Sphinx. 'But that was what made everything possible', said Oedipus. 'No', she said. 'When I asked, What walks on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening, you answered, Man. You didn't say anything about woman'. 'When you say Man', said Oedipus, 'you include women too. Everyone knows that'. She said, 'That's what you think'.

See Muriel Rukeyser, *The Collected Poems* (New York: MacGraw-Hill, 1978), p. 498. De Lauretis closes 'Desire in Narrative' with Rukeyser's 'Myth', which she regards as an instance of the most 'exciting' feminist work that is 'narrative and Oedipal with a vengeance'. See de Lauretis, p. 157.

⁴⁶ Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'The Structural Study of Myth', in *Structural Anthropology*, I, pp. 206-31 (p. 216).

myth as one variant of the myth, for the Freudian version still concerns ‘the problem of understanding how *one* can be born from *two*’.⁴⁷ The phallic mother, like the Sphinx, is made into a bad monster whose power has to be removed for the erection of the law of the same. But, as Lévi-Strauss admits, the problem of sexual difference has not yet been solved; the Sphinx is still wandering somewhere in the margins of the Oedipal drama.

Let us now return to Freud’s ‘Femininity’. The answer Freud gives to the riddle of femininity is his idea of penis-envy; the wish for a penis, he claims, is ‘*par excellence* a feminine one’.⁴⁸ All through her life, Freud claims, a woman is tormented by this impossible wish to have a penis for herself. In a ‘normal’ woman, ‘the wave of passivity’ transforms the wish for a penis into the wish for a child, especially for ‘a little boy who brings the longed-for penis with him’.⁴⁹ If this transference is not achieved, a girl ‘is driven to regress into her early masculinity complex’: ‘the girl refuses, as it were, to recognize the unwelcome fact and, defiantly rebellious, even exaggerates her previous masculinity, clings to her clitoridal activity and takes refuge in an identification with her phallic mother or her father’.⁵⁰ What causes this outcome, Freud explains, is ‘a constitutional factor, a greater amount of activity, such as is ordinarily characteristic of a male’.⁵¹ In other words, a girl ‘regresses’ into her masculinity complex when there is too much masculinity in her constitution. Interestingly, Freud suggests that the unusual amount of masculinity is found in ‘normal’ women as well and that this is what complicates their nature:

the development of femininity remains exposed to disturbance by the

⁴⁷ ‘The Structural Study of Myth’, p. 217.

⁴⁸ ‘Femininity’, p. 162.

⁴⁹ ‘Femininity’, pp. 164, 162.

⁵⁰ ‘Femininity’, p. 164.

⁵¹ ‘Femininity’, p. 164.

residual phenomena of the early masculine period. Regressions to the fixations of the pre-Oedipus phases very frequently occur; in the course of some women's lives there is a repeated alternation between periods in which masculinity or femininity gains the upper hand. Some portion of what we men call 'the enigma of women' may perhaps be derived from this expression of bisexuality in women's lives.⁵²

In Freud's story of femininity, a woman, because of her impossible position of being a passive object prescribed for her, necessarily alternates between two positions, passive (= feminine) and active (= masculine). The 'enigma of femininity', then, is *produced* by Freud's formulation of femininity itself; the enigma represents the contradiction in his story of femininity or, to use Luce Irigaray's words, 'the blind spot of an old dream of symmetry'.

What a woman wants, for Freud, is to have a penis. In a 'normal' woman, a penis is replaced by a child, the former being biologically impossible and the latter her biological destiny. But is there not something which cannot be represented within Freud's plotting of the development of femininity based on a phallic standard? This is the question Irigaray raises in 'The Blind Spot of an Old Dream of Symmetry', the first section in her *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974), where she re-reads Freud's 'Femininity'.

'Penis-envy', writes Irigaray, 'would represent, would be the only effective representative of woman's desire to enter into symbolic exchange as a "subject" and raise woman from her status as a mere "commodity"'.⁵³ With the notion of penis-envy, woman can *want* something, can be given the status of a subject *desiring* something for herself. But, then again, penis-envy is said to be insurmountable. Although it may make her

⁵² 'Femininity', p. 165.

⁵³ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. by Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 56.

desire somehow representable within the symbolic system, Irigaray argues, the notion of penis-envy does not free woman from sexual and social repression. Why should women desire a penis and for whom? Irigaray asks:

Is the primitive, or most primitive, character of 'penis-envy' not an essential factor in establishing the *primacy of the male organ*? In making the phallus necessarily the archetype for sex? The primal sex? And making the penis the best representational equivalent of the Idea of sex? There can only be one desire: the desire to ensure dominion by greed, by appetite for appropriation.⁵⁴

It is only in terms of masculine desire—to have, to do, and to be more—that Freud can answer the question about women's desire. Indeed, for Freud, 'the little girl is a little man'.⁵⁵

As in Brooks's and Lotman's understandings of the working of the universal plot, there is only *one* desire in Freud's story of the sexual development of both boys and girls. Irigaray claims: 'There will be only *one* tropism, then, and *one* object of desire or pleasure at stake, not a relation, an interplay, between *two* desires'.⁵⁶ A little girl is a little man, only permanently less endowed. In the following passage, Irigaray reveals the paradox inherent in Freud's conception of 'sexual difference':

Thus Freud discovers—in a sort of blind reversal of repressions—certain variously disguised cards that are kept preserved or stored away and that lie beneath the hierarchy of values of the game, of all the games: the desire for the same, for the self-identical, the self (as) same, and again of the similar, the alter ego and, to put it in a nutshell, the desire for the auto ... the homo ... the male, dominates the representational economy. 'Sexual difference' is a derivation of the problematics of sameness, it is, now and forever, determined within the project, the projection, the sphere of representation, of the same. The

⁵⁴ *Speculum of the Other Woman*, p. 58.

⁵⁵ 'Femininity', p. 151.

⁵⁶ *Speculum of the Other Woman*, p. 32.

‘differentiation’ into two sexes derives from the a priori assumption of the same, since the little man that the little girl is, must become a man minus certain attributes whose paradigm is morphological—attributes capable of determining, of assuring, the reproduction-specularization of the same. A man minus the possibility of (re)presenting oneself as a man = a normal woman. In this proliferating desire of the same, death will be the only representative of an outside, of a heterogeneity, of an other: woman will assume the function of representing death (of sex/organ), castration, and man will be sure as far as possible of achieving mastery, subjugation, by triumphing over the anguish (of death) through intercourse, by sustaining sexual pleasure despite, or thanks to, the horror of closeness to that absence of sex/penis, that mortification of sex that is evoked by woman.⁵⁷

There is no real otherness in Freud’s story of femininity since the male desire posits woman as its other in relation to its own sameness to itself. Like Lotman’s two-character drama between the male mover and the female obstacle, the latter of which, it must be noted, he also equates with death, Freud’s plotting of the development to masculinity and femininity is a story designed to establish the male as the universal Man and the female as his Other. The female plot can be seen as the other of the male plot, that which complements the latter’s desire for the self-same.

This masculine desire for the self-same, moreover, is sadistic. In Freudian theory, Irigaray observes, libido is related to the sexual instincts of the sadistic-anal stage, which is characterised as being ‘possessive, narcissistic, constantly reacting offensively to the demands of other’ and ‘always at war in order to accumulate and build up capital, losing nothing’.⁵⁸ In this libidinal battlefield, women, who do not have access to libido, must ‘always already have been conquered’ so as to guarantee ‘repose, security, self-preservation’ in ‘this relentless, exhausting, anxious “activity” in this merciless struggle for appropriation, for property, for the promotion and defense of

⁵⁷ *Speculum of the Other Woman*, pp. 26-27.

⁵⁸ *Speculum of the Other Woman*, p. 94.

territory'.⁵⁹ Woman, therefore, is not only man's other but also his mother.

What happens after the happy ending of the Oedipal story, in which one marries a substitute for one's parent of the opposite sex, is different between a man and a woman according to Freud's following impression he receives during analytic practice:

A man of about thirty strikes us as a youthful, somewhat unformed individual, whom we expect to make powerful use of the possibilities for development opened up to him by analysis. A woman of the same age, however, offends [*sic*] frightens us by her psychical rigidity and unchangeability. Her libido has taken up final positions and seems incapable of exchanging them for others. There are no paths open to further development; it is as though the whole process had already run its course and remains thenceforward unsusceptible to influence—as though, indeed, the difficult development to femininity had exhausted the possibilities of the person concerned.⁶⁰

It is no wonder that an 'exhausted' woman of about thirty refuses to listen to *his* account of her story which describes the journey to become a woman as almost impossible, so 'difficult' as to drive them into either hysteria or neurosis. Freud adds: 'As therapists we lament this state of things, even if we succeed in putting an end to our patient's ailment by doing away with her neurotic conflict'.⁶¹ Even when her 'ailment' is over thanks to the analytic practice, such a 'rigid' and 'unchangeable' state of a woman of about thirty is to be 'lamented' by therapists. However, the 'final positions' of '*her libido*'—whatever Freud means by this juxtaposition which he himself repudiates—seem to be the very outcome of 'the *difficult* development to femininity' which psychoanalysis designs for her. Referring to Freud's above observation on a 'woman of thirty', for whom he believes there are 'no paths open to further development', Irigaray asks: 'As though the

⁵⁹ *Speculum of the Other Woman*, p. 94.

⁶⁰ 'Femininity', p. 169.

⁶¹ 'Femininity', p. 169.

story was over?'.⁶²

As far as Freud is concerned, the story is over. Yet *her* life-story goes on, not always in the track prescribed for her in *his* plotting. In the last paragraph of his lecture on 'Femininity', Freud reminds us: 'But do not forget that I have only been describing women in so far as their nature is determined by their sexual function. It is true that that influence extends very far; but we do not overlook the fact that an individual woman may be a human being in other respects as well'.⁶³ Indeed. But Freud continues: 'If you want to know more about femininity, inquire from your own experiences of life, or turn to the poets, or wait until science can give you deeper and more coherent information'.⁶⁴ '*Your own experiences*' here, of course, means *men's*, since, as considered earlier, women are deprived of subject status in this lecture on femininity. We need not, however, wait for *his* literary or scientific discourses on women to 'know more about femininity', for women have already started telling their own stories, stories which lie *in the margins of* his story, if not *outside* since 'that influence extends very far', at least under the present conditions where Oedipus seems ubiquitous.

The Master's Plot II: Teleology of Closure

All criticism which speaks, as Brooks's does, in terms of 'moving forward' a plot necessarily subscribes to a teleological view of narrative. At the end of the narrative, the male subject reaches the place where he fulfils the promise made to him as a little boy, which is his final conquest of woman-mother-death. Within this framework, woman as the plot-space represents, above all, the space of narrative closure towards which the

⁶² *Speculum of the Other Woman*, p. 128.

⁶³ 'Femininity', p. 169.

⁶⁴ 'Femininity', p. 169.

hero progresses according to a certain 'teleology', to use Freud's own term. De Lauretis rereads Freud's story of femininity, using, as Brooks does, fairy tales as the basic model of narrative:

The end of the girl's journey, if successful, will bring her to the place where the boy will find her, like Sleeping Beauty, awaiting him, Prince Charming. For the boy has been promised, by the social contract he has entered into at his Oedipal phase, that he will find woman waiting at the end of *his* journey. Thus the itinerary of the female's journey, mapped from the very start on the territory of her own body [...] is guided by a compass pointing not to reproduction as the fulfillment of *her* biological destiny, but more exactly to the fulfillment of the promise made to 'the little man', of his social contract, *his* biological and affective destiny—and to the fulfillment of his desire. This is what predetermines the positions she must occupy in her journey. The myth of which she is presumed to be the subject, generated by the same mechanism that generated the myth of Oedipus, in fact works to construct *her* as a 'personified obstacle'; similarly the narrative transforms a human child into a womb, 'a cave', 'the grave', 'a house', 'a woman'. The story of femininity, Freud's question, and the riddle of the Sphinx all have a single answer, one and the same meaning, one term of reference and address: man, Oedipus, the human male person. And so her story, like any other story, is a question of his desire; as is the teleology that Freud imputes to Nature, that primordial 'obstacle' of civilized man.⁶⁵

If the teleology of narrative closure is a question of *his* desire, 'Sleeping Beauty' is not her story but his, taking him through the narrative to the place where he will fulfil his desire which is also his destiny.

Brooks describes narrative closure in exclusively masculine terms. In 'Freud's Masterplot', first published in *Literature and Psychoanalysis* (1977), a special issue of *Yale French Studies*, and reprinted in his *Reading for the Plot*, Brooks relates narrative desire to Freud's notion of the death drive. He compares narrative to 'obituary' in that 'the retrospective knowledge that it seeks, the knowledge that comes after, stands on the

⁶⁵ De Lauretis, p. 133.

far side of the end, in human terms on the far side of death'.⁶⁶ In other words, it is only at, and through, the end that the narrative acquires definable meaning. Finding a parallel between the end of narrative and the end of human life, i.e., death, Brooks turns to Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which he reads as 'Freud's own masterplot, the essay where he lays out most fully a total scheme of how each individual life in its own manner repeats the masterplot and confronts the question of whether the closure of an individual life is contingent or necessary'.⁶⁷ Before examining Brooks's idea, I will first consider how Freud designs his masterplot for life.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud introduces the notion of the death drive, the tendency of any organism 'to return to the quiescence of the inorganic world'.⁶⁸ It is through his discovery of the compulsion to repeat unpleasurable experiences that he comes to the conclusion that there are instincts which operate *beyond* the pleasure principle.

Observing a child repeating a game in which he throws away a toy saying '*fort*' (gone) and retrieves it with '*da*' (there), Freud concludes that through this play a child is staging the disappearance and return of his mother.⁶⁹ But why, asks Freud, does the child repeat this unpleasurable experience, his mother's disappearance, as a game? How does it fit in with the pleasure principle? Freud suggests that children's play, although the experience it repeats may be distressing, yields a certain kind of pleasure in actively mastering the situation experienced passively in the past; a child can feel that he is mastering the difficult reality of his mother's leaving by enacting the banishment of her himself. Freud interprets the *fort-da* game as an act of changing a passive situation into

⁶⁶ Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, p. 95.

⁶⁷ Brooks, pp. 96-97.

⁶⁸ *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in *PFL*, XI, pp. 269-338 (p. 336).

⁶⁹ *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 284.

an active one in order to claim the mastery of reality. He also considers the possible pleasure felt by a child in taking revenge on his mother for leaving him.

Here, we return to literature, for Freud reminds us that the phenomenon of mastery over unpleasurable reality through repetition is not only found in children's play but also in 'the artistic play and artistic imitation carried out by adults'.⁷⁰ Tragedy, he claims, repeats the most painful experiences and yet yields us pleasure. This observation may be related to his view on the literary theme of a man's choice between three women in 'The Theme of the Three Caskets' (1913). This essay, published seven years before *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, seems to prefigure his views on the phenomenon of compulsive repetition of which there are two kinds. In the repeated theme of a man's choice between three women in myth, fairy tales and literature, Freud finds a man's desire to master the most painful of reality that is death.

Freud begins his discussion with Shakespeare's comedy *The Merchant of Venice*. The three suitors to Portia, a rich heiress, have to choose the right one that contains her portrait from the three caskets made respectively of gold, silver and lead. Bassanio chooses the third and wins the bride. Freud contends that, since in dreams caskets are symbols of women like any other container such as boxes and baskets, the theme of this play is '*a man's choice between three women*'.⁷¹ He finds the same theme in Shakespeare's tragedy *King Lear*, in which the old king chooses between his three daughters, the youngest being the most loyal. In myth, Freud observes, the shepherd Paris chooses Aphrodite, the third of three goddesses, who is the most beautiful. The theme of the third being the best is also found in fairy tales; Freud refers to Psyche and Cinderella, who are both the youngest and the fairest of three sisters.

⁷⁰ *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 287.

⁷¹ 'The Theme of the Three Caskets', in *PFL*, XIV, pp. 233-47 (p. 237).

The question Freud asks here is: 'who are these three sisters and why must the choice fall on the third?'.⁷² He observes that the youngest, like lead, is 'dumb', compared with the other two who are 'loud', and 'in dreams dumbness is a common representation of death'.⁷³ Freud also identifies dumbness as the peculiar quality of the youngest sister in the Grimms' 'The Twelve Brothers' and 'The Six Swans', in which the youngest sister risks her own life by remaining dumb as a condition for saving her brothers.⁷⁴ In fairy tales, he claims, dumbness represents death. His conclusion is that the third of the sisters is 'Death itself, the Goddess of Death', which also reminds him of Atropos, the third sister of the Fates or the Moerae, who cuts the thread of life and whose name stands for 'the ineluctable', namely, death.⁷⁵

Why is the third sister always the fairest and the best of all, if she is Death itself? This, according to Freud, is due to 'reaction-formation' of man struggling against his fate, i.e., his subjugation to death: 'So his imagination rebelled against the recognition of the truth embodied in the myth of the Moerae, and constructed instead the myth derived from it, in which the Goddess of Death was replaced by the Goddess of Love and by what was equivalent to her in human shape. The third of the sisters was no longer Death; she was the fairest, best, most desirable and most lovable of women'.⁷⁶ Man's wishful imagination has created an opposite figure, replacing Death by Love.

The same kind of wishful reversal is involved when man is given a choice, instead of fate or necessity. As is evident in *King Lear*, Freud argues, 'the free choice

⁷² 'The Theme of the Three Caskets', p. 238.

⁷³ 'The Theme of the Three Caskets', p. 239.

⁷⁴ Bottigheimer argues that such dumbness of women is a result of the Grimms' textual manipulation of the tales; their tales deprive women of speech and, with it, power. See Bottigheimer, *The Grimms' Bad Girls and Bold Boys*, pp. 71-80.

⁷⁵ 'The Theme of the Three Caskets', p. 243.

⁷⁶ 'The Theme of the Three Caskets', p. 244.

between the three sisters is, properly speaking, no free choice, for it must necessarily fall on the third if every kind of evil is not to come about'.⁷⁷ Cordelia, whose silence angers her father at the beginning of the play and whose dead body Lear carries at the end, is the Death-Goddess who 'bids the old man renounce love, choose death and make friends with the necessity of dying'.⁷⁸ Freud closes his essay with the following observation:

We might argue that what is presented here are the three inevitable relations that a man has with a woman—the woman who bears him, the woman who is his mate and the woman who destroys him; or that they are the three forms taken by the figure of the mother in the course of a man's life—the mother herself, the beloved one who is chosen after her pattern, and lastly the Mother Earth who receives him once more. But it is in vain that an old man yearns for the love of woman as he had it first from his mother; the third of the Fates alone, the silent Goddess of Death, will take him into her arms.⁷⁹

All three manifestations of woman *for* man are now identified: his mother, his wife, and his death or the Mother Earth. Here again, perhaps not so surprisingly, we encounter the equation *woman = mother = death*; we saw earlier that in narrative woman figures as closure, the end of a story as well as the end of life.⁸⁰ Although tragedy, a work of art, is created in a more complicated manner than the *fort-da* game, the theme of the three caskets is related to an act of mastery over unpleasurable reality through repetition as it is found in children's play.

The manifestation of a compulsion to repeat found in children's play and in the works of narrative art does not entirely contradict the pleasure principle, for 'repetition,

⁷⁷ 'The Theme of the Three Caskets', p. 245.

⁷⁸ 'The Theme of the Three Caskets', p. 246.

⁷⁹ 'The Theme of the Three Caskets', p. 247.

⁸⁰ It must be noted that Freud chooses not to talk about the inverted case in which it is a woman who chooses between three. He mentions but swiftly dismisses two tales which depict a girl who chooses the third of three men, a tale from *Gesta Romanorum*, on which *The Merchant of Venice* draws, and the Estonian folk epic 'Kalewipoeg'.

the re-experiencing of something identical, is clearly a source of pleasure' in that it strengthens the sense of mastery.⁸¹ Freud also observes a child's insistence on hearing the same story over and over again without any alterations. And not only children but also adults reread the same stories—myth, fairy tales and *King Lear*—over and over again. This aspect of a compulsion to repeat exhibits successful—and indeed pleasurable—binding of powerful external stimuli which yield the sense of mastery.

Repetition, however, reveals another aspect when Freud discovers in the dreams of patients of traumatic neurosis the compulsion to repeat the traumatic event over and over again, a 'compulsion with its hint of possession by some "daemonic" power'.⁸² The dreams which occur in traumatic neuroses, unlike children's play, do not accompany the immediate yield of pleasure caused by the sense of *actively* mastering the situation experienced *passively* in the past; instead, the patient of traumatic neurosis 'appears to have a *passive* experience, over which he has no influence, but in which he meets with a repetition of the same fatality'.⁸³ Here, Freud has to 'admit for the first time an exception to the proposition that dreams are fulfilments of wishes'.⁸⁴ The compulsion to repeat in this case works independently of the pleasure principle, for it is caused by a failure to effect the binding of instinctual excitations which is to precede the domination of the pleasure principle. This 'daemonic' aspect of the compulsion to repeat is perhaps better presented in his 'The "Uncanny"' (1919), a paper published one year earlier than *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. There, he discusses E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Kunstmärchen*, 'The Sand Man', in which Nathaniel, the protagonist, repeatedly encounters the Sand Man who, according to Freud, represents his dead father, the one who castrates. This

⁸¹ *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 308.

⁸² *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 308.

⁸³ *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 293.

⁸⁴ *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 304.

‘constant recurrence of the same thing’ drives the hero into madness and finally into a violent death.⁸⁵

The discovery of a ‘beyond the pleasure principle’ leads Freud to recognise instincts as ‘an expression of the *conservative* nature of living substance’.⁸⁶ If all the organic instincts are conservative, he assumes, the goal of life is to restore ‘an earlier state of things’, which is the state before life.⁸⁷ Hence his famous statement: ‘*the aim of all life is death*’.⁸⁸ The living entity makes ‘ever more complicated *détours* before reaching its aim of death’, and it is these ‘circuitous paths to death’ that ‘present us to-day with the picture of the phenomena of life’.⁸⁹ Since it ‘wishes to die only in its own fashion’, states Freud, ‘the living organism struggles most energetically against events (dangers, in fact) which might help it to attain its life’s aim rapidly—by a kind of short-circuit’.⁹⁰ This paradoxical situation is an effect of two oppositional instincts, the death instincts (Thanatos) and the life or sexual instincts (Eros). Life moves with ‘a vacillating rhythm’ between these two instincts: ‘One group of instincts rushes forward so as to reach the final aim of life as swiftly as possible; but when a particular stage in the advance has been reached, the other group jerks back to a certain point to make a fresh start and so prolong the journey’.⁹¹ Life, in this view, is a *détour* which lies between the two states of quiescence, the states before and after its existence.

Narrative, Brooks suggests, begins as an ‘irritation’ at the moment when story, or what he calls ‘the narratable’, is stimulated from quiescence (p. 103). Applying

⁸⁵ Freud, ‘The “Uncanny”’, in *PFL*, XIV, pp. 335-76 (p. 356).

⁸⁶ *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 309.

⁸⁷ *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 310.

⁸⁸ *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 311.

⁸⁹ *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 311.

⁹⁰ *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 312.

⁹¹ *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 313.

Freud's model of life to narrative, Brooks considers narrative as what stands between the two states of quiescence, a time before the beginning and a time after the end, as what postpones the premature fulfilment of its aim. Brooks describes narrative desire as 'the arousal that creates the narratable as a condition of tumescence, appetency, ambition, quest, and gives narrative a forward-looking intention' (p. 103). It is only 'forward-looking', for, in fact, its goal leads back to the original quiescence. In this view, narrative progresses forward *and* backward; the end will bring the narrative back to the state before it began. In the light of Freud's statement, Brooks's idea of narrative can be formulated as: *the aim of all narrative is death*.

Narrative desire, once aroused, demands narration and its termination, the final discharge. But the end should not come too quickly; it has to wait until it can be meaningfully connected to the beginning and the middle, that is, the origin and the field of desire. Narrative, like life, can be seen as a *détour* which prolongs the route towards the end. If the desire stirred at the beginning is fulfilled immediately, there is no narrative, no story. Brooks mentions incest as an example for such dangerous short-circuits; the incestuous union is so perfect that it ends the story prematurely. Again, 'All-Kinds-of-Fur' serves as an example which exemplifies a narrative made possible by *détour*, which in this case is the postponement of the incestuous union between the heroine and her father. Substitution is one of the ways in which narrative is made narratable, avoiding what Brooks calls 'over-sameness', which would immediately fulfil the aroused desire and end the narrative prematurely (p. 109). To reach the right end, to 'die in its own way', is what narrative is concerned with. It is in this sense that he recognises in narrative the drive for death.

Repetition in narrative works as what binds elements of narrative into larger entities. Repetitions takes the protagonist and the reader back to earlier events and make

one find a pattern or a form, that is, some kind of coherence or meaning, in one's life or in the text one reads. This formalisation is what is needed to make the ending more effective, more pleasurable. Repetition, an act of binding, both progresses towards and delays the end. The sexual or, to use his own expression, 'erotic' connotation of Brooks's description of narrative desire, as it must by now be obvious, reaches its peak:

What operates in the text through repetition is the death instinct, the drive toward the end. Beyond and under the domination of the pleasure principle is this baseline of plot, its basic 'pulsation', sensible or audible through the repetitions that take us back in the text. Yet repetition also retards the pleasure principle's search for the gratification of discharge, which is another forward-moving drive of the text. We have a curious situation in which two principles of forward movement operate upon one another so as to create retard, a dilatory space in which pleasure can come from postponement in the knowledge that this—in the manner of forepleasure?—is a necessary approach to the true end. Both principles can indeed become dilatory, a pleasuring in and from delay, though both also in their different ways recall to us the need for end. (pp. 102-03)

Evidently, Brooks's masterplot for narrative presupposes the inherent masculine nature of desire at work in all narrative. Here, the analogy between narrative and sexual intercourse is seen from the viewpoint of the male subject who tries to prolong the state of tumescence in order to avoid premature discharge and to reach 'the true end'.⁹²

⁹² Robert Scholes's following account of what he calls 'the orgasmic pattern of fiction' also draws an explicit analogy between narrative and sex from the male's point of view:

The archetype of all fiction is the sexual act. [...] What connects fiction—and music—with sex is the fundamental orgasmic rhythm of tumescence and detumescence, of tension and resolution, of intensification to the point of climax and consummation. In the sophisticated forms of fiction, as in the sophisticated practice of sex, much of the art consists of delaying climax within the framework of desire in order to prolong the pleasurable act itself. When we look at fiction with respect to its form alone, we see a pattern of events designed to move toward climax and resolution, balanced by a counter-pattern of events designed to delay this very climax and resolution.

Described in this manner, the narrative middle becomes a field where one is in constant fear of 'premature discharge'. However, those of us—women as well as men—who do not wish to grant such supreme status to the final discharge which is the death of desire, may not necessarily feel such fear; there may be no distinct division between 'forepleasure' as the middle and pleasure as the true end.

It is revealing that in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud's revision of his own idea of the pleasure principle, sadism is re-defined as an externalisation of the death drive, the self's secret desire for death, rather than as the manifestation of the self-preservative instincts. In a woman, in his view, the death drive remains masochistic since sadism is denied in her. Hence Irigaray's claim: '*the death drive can be worked out only by man*'.⁹³ Woman, she argues, serves as an 'outlet' for the death drive of man so that he can ward off death until the right time comes.⁹⁴ Sadism in narrative indicates the *masculine* desire for self-annihilation inherent in narrative, the desire for the termination of narration which is the life of narrative. The aim of all narrative is death. However, is this the only way to see the relationship between narrative and desire? Does narrative have to be closed by death? Is 'open ending' really an oxymoron?

The 'Consolation of the Happy Ending', Tolkien claims, is essential in fairy tales.⁹⁵ The happily-ever-after of the fairy tale freezes the story in a picture frame, a peaceful family scene at home. Homecoming, a return to the (imagined) home, may define the fairy-tale happily-ever-after. 'Most of the great nineteenth-century novels',

Scholes, pushing the analogy further, claims that 'the full fictional act' is achieved 'when writer and reader make a "marriage of true minds"'. See Robert Scholes, *Fabulation and Metafiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), pp. 26-27.

⁹³ *Speculum of the Other Woman*, p. 53.

⁹⁴ *Speculum of the Other Woman*, p. 54.

⁹⁵ Tolkien, p. 68.

suggests Brooks, 'while ostensibly a striving forward and upward, a progress, may also be, perhaps more profoundly, the narrative of an attempted homecoming: of the effort to reach an assertion of origin through ending, to find the same in the different, the time before in the time after' (p. 110). Here, we cannot help recalling Freud's notion of the uncanny, *unheimlich*, dread and horror which are aroused when one finds the same (the homely) in the different (the unhomely). Drawing on Schilling's definition of the uncanny as something which ought to have remained hidden and secret but has come to light, Freud argues that the *unheimlich* is the return of the repressed which is the *heimlich*, the prefix '*un*' being 'the token of repression'.⁹⁶ Referring to the uncanny feeling felt by neurotic male patients towards the female genitals, an instance which he regards as 'a beautiful confirmation' of his theory of the uncanny, Freud suggests that this *unheimlich* place is the mother's body or, more precisely, the womb, which he calls 'the former *Heim* [home] of all human beings'.⁹⁷ It seems that what is repressed in Freud's notion of the uncanny is the womb which is both homely and unhomely because it subverts the familiar borderline between life and death, a place in the living body where death lurks as the repressed Other of life, what should not and cannot be represented.⁹⁸ Here, we again find the equation woman-womb-death, the narrative space which represents not only an obstacle to be conquered but also the home to return to at the end.

In the case history of Dora published in 1905, despite the abrupt ending put by

⁹⁶ 'The "Uncanny"', p. 368.

⁹⁷ 'The "Uncanny"', p. 368.

⁹⁸ 'The "Uncanny"' has been subjected to various post-structuralist and feminist scrutinies which seek to open up its implications. I owe my interpretation of the womb as a radical duplicity particularly to Cixous's reading which focuses on Freud's overlooking of the figure of the doll which, she argues, exposes a gap in the unity of reality where death enters as the Other of life. See Hélène Cixous, 'Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche* (The "uncanny")', *New Literary History*, 7 (1976) 525-48.

the patient, Freud does not forget to close his 'story' by telling us about her marriage to the young man for whom she once refused to recognise her love. Interestingly, this happy ending, as he admits in the footnote which he is to drop later in the 1924 revised edition, turns out to be a mistake on his part. The happy ending Freud adds to the story of Dora reads as follows:

In the mean time the girl has married, and indeed [...] she has married the young man who came into her associations at the beginning of the analysis of the second dream. Just as the first dream represented her turning away from the man she loved to her father—that is to say, her flight from life into disease—so the second dream announced that she was about to tear herself from her father and had been reclaimed once more by the realities of life.⁹⁹

This, if it were true, would have been a perfect ending of a story in which psychoanalysis 'cures' a girl and puts her back into the normal course of development to femininity. This happy ending made up by Freud recalls the heroine's transferring of her love from her father to his substitute in 'Beauty and the Beast', which, as I will consider in the next chapter, is the element particularly important for Bettelheim. But, alas, it was a mistake on his part. Nevertheless, Freud at this point still pretends that Dora lived happily ever after.

Analysis, Freud eventually discovers in 'Analysis Terminable and Interminable' (1937) published two years before his death, is inherently interminable; to put a definitive end to a case history is impossible. Freud reached this conclusion after he had tried and failed in his analysis of the Wolf Man. The most troublesome of resistances, Freud states, comes from what he calls the 'repudiation of femininity' held in common by both

⁹⁹ 'Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria ('Dora'), in *PFL*, VIII, pp. 31-164 (p. 164).

sexes:

At no other point in one's analytic work does one suffer more from an oppressive feeling that all one's repeated efforts have been in vain, and from a suspicion that one has been 'preaching to the winds', than when one is trying to persuade a woman to abandon her wish for a penis on the ground of its being unrealizable or when one is seeking to convince a man that a passive attitude to men does not always signify castration and that it is indispensable in many relationships in life.¹⁰⁰

Freud's story of both femininity and masculinity does not work; the happy ending he assigns to it does not always come true. Is there anything wrong with the teleology he imputes to Nature? Or is it the teleology of closure itself that needs to be re-considered? In other words, is it the case that to impose a definitive end may not necessarily be the role of all narrative as Brooks claims?

Irigaray's re-consideration of the notion of telos is suggestive. In a chapter called 'Volume-Fluidity' in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray argues that the teleology which is centred upon the phallus solidifies the fluidity of woman's 'morphology', freezing her sex into 'phallomorphism'.¹⁰¹ For Irigaray, woman's sexuality, her jouissance, exceeds a masculine formalisation of fluid: 'It is indefinite flood in which all manner of developments can be inscribed. The fullness of their coming into being is hinted, is proclaimed as possible, but within an extension swelling outward without discernible limits. *Without telos or arche*'.¹⁰² Woman's sex, her two lips which incessantly touch each other without ever becoming one, does not obey the principle of

¹⁰⁰ 'Analysis Terminable and Interminable', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols, trans. and ed. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1953-74), XXIII, pp. 209-53 (pp. 250, 252).

¹⁰¹ *Speculum of the Other Woman*, p. 229.

¹⁰² *Speculum of the Other Woman*, p. 229; my emphasis.

self-identity which, 'in its telos, turns to his ends the cause of his desire'.¹⁰³ The desire for the self as same, following its circular logic, drives the masculine narrative towards its telos to (re)produce sameness for which woman figures as a receptacle. Yet when 'the/a woman touches herself', writes Irigaray, 'metamorphoses occur in which there is no complete set, where no set theory of the One is established. Transmutations occur, always unexpectedly, since they do not conspire to accomplish any telos'.¹⁰⁴ A telos, Irigaray suggests, can be diffused and opened up for multiple possibilities which are never fixed into a single configuration. If there is no single telos, there is no single form of closure. Brooks's model, which presupposes a single end up to which the whole narrative inevitably leads, is not the only way of thinking about narrative.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined two aspects of what I call 'the master's plot' (Brooks's term 'masterplot' does not specify *whose*) which is supposed to design all narratives: one aspect concerning gender—narrative is gendered—and the other about the teleology of closure which is also related to the issue of gender in that woman invariably represents a space where narrative closes. The fairy tale presents the desire at work in narrative—what drives narrative as well as who drives narrative—in the most basic manner, for it is a genre which, first and foremost, depends on the linear movement of plot. The traditional fairy-tale narrative, whether the protagonist be male or female, is driven by a masculine desire. The heroine tale is the other of the hero tale; at the end of her journey, the heroine reaches the place where she finds herself to be the promised reward in *his* journey.

¹⁰³ *Speculum of the Other Woman*, p. 240.

¹⁰⁴ *Speculum of the Other Woman*, p. 233.

The question we now ask is: can we imagine a different model of narrative? And how? There are at least two ways of creatively subverting the master's plot. One is to retain the narrative drive towards integration, the drive especially dominant in fairy tales, in order, as it were, to make its logic turn against itself and to create a space where woman ceases to be a passive receptacle of the male's desire and becomes a desiring agent herself. The other way is to change the conception of narrative desire itself by not siding with the master's teleology and by imagining other forms of desires than the Oedipal one. The following chapters will consider the reworking of the master's plot in the works of Angela Carter (who uses the former strategy) and of A. S. Byatt (the latter strategy).

Chapter 4

Beauty's Desire?:

Angela Carter's Rewritings of 'Beauty and the Beast'

Angela Carter reworks 'Beauty and the Beast' in two tales, 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon' and 'The Tiger's Bride', both included in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*. The feminist strategy Carter employs in her retellings of 'Beauty and the Beast' is to take the master's plot to its extreme, that is to say, to deliberately assume the feminine position assigned to women to reveal its underlying assumptions. Whereas 'The Courtship of Lyon' renders explicit the seductive magic of the patriarchal plot, 'The Tiger's' Bride' goes further than analysis and attempts at envisaging a different vision of the fairy-tale happy ending where a woman can embrace her own sexuality. I will first consider how Carter's influential fairy tale collection has been received by Anglo-American feminist literary critics.

The Reception of *The Bloody Chamber*

The publication of *The Bloody Chamber* in 1979 met with two opposite receptions; while enthusiastically welcomed by some feminists as liberating, it was equally fiercely attacked by others mainly for two reasons: its form, the fairy tale, which they assume is inherently reactionary, and its representation of female sexuality which, in their view, ultimately reinforces patriarchal values. In 'Re-imagining the Fairy Tales: Angela Carter's *Bloody Chambers*' (1984), while acknowledging 'the success of [Carter's] enterprise, re-shaping and re-imagining the archetypes of imagination, re-casting the

bricks of our inner worlds', Patricia Duncker accuses Carter of falling into 'the infernal trap inherent in the fairy tale'.¹ Providing her own analysis of the history of fairy tales in Europe,² Duncker concludes that the fairy tale is essentially reactionary in which 'the hierarchies themselves remain resolutely intact'.³ Ultimately, for Duncker, 'the tale, especially the fairy tale, is the vessel of false knowledge, or more bluntly, interested propaganda'.⁴ This position, the one which focuses on the pedagogic aspect of fairy tales, regards the process of socialisation of children through popular fairy tales as harmful to women's emancipation. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, Marcia K. Lieberman's 1972 essay "'Some Day My Prince Will Come'" raises a question as to whether children should be encouraged to read fairy tales which 'serve to acculturate women to traditional social roles'.⁵ Lieberman argues that fairy tales, even when they depict apparently active heroines, inevitably imprint the traditional attributes of femininity such as passivity and submissiveness in girls. It is along these lines that Duncker argues that 'Carter is rewriting the tales within the strait-jacket of their original structures'.⁶

However, the limitations of such a view lie in its assumptions that all fairy tales are essentially the same, conveying the same messages, and that all readers inevitably receive tales in the same way. It ignores not only the historical changes and cultural variations which fairy tales undergo, but also the complex reception of fairy tales by children and adults on various levels of understanding. Historically, as I illustrated in

¹ Patricia Duncker, 'Re-imagining the Fairy Tales: Angela Carter's Bloody Chambers', *Literature and History*, 1 (1984), 3-14 (p. 6).

² Duncker's historical overview of the fairy tale is much biased and selective in limiting the material to those which conform to her definition of the fairy tale as a genre which invariably reinforces the dominant ideology of gender. She completely ignores women's rewritings of fairy tales since the eighteenth century.

³ Duncker, p. 5.

⁴ Duncker, p. 4.

⁵ Lieberman, p. 185.

⁶ Duncker, p. 6.

Chapter 1, the fairy tale, far from being monolithic, is a versatile genre, shifting its shape and changing its nature as time goes on. Duncker's restrictive definition of the fairy tale as a form of 'educational propaganda for children' misses the whole point of Carter's attempt to write fairy tales *about* fairy tales for adults, especially for those informed by feminism.⁷ Against such a deterministic view on the unchangeable nature of a certain form of representation, Merja Makinen in 'Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* and the Decolonization of Feminine Sexuality' (1992) argues that 'when the form is used to critique the inscribed ideology [...] then the form is subtly adapted to inscribe a new set of assumptions'.⁸

Duncker also criticises Carter's fairy tales for their 'explicitly erotic currents' which use 'the language of male sexuality', and 'male sexuality', for Duncker, 'has too long, too tenaciously been linked with power and possession, the capture, breaking and ownership of women'.⁹ She concludes: 'We cannot fit neatly into patterns or models as Cinderellas, ugly sisters, wicked step-mothers, fairy God-mothers, and still acknowledge our several existences, experienced or imagined. We need the space to carve out our own erotic identities, as free women'.¹⁰ There are, indeed, dangers in appropriating the form which has long been used to reinforce the dominant system; however, we can only begin to create a critical space from where we are, the world full of such 'patterns or models' formed by our cultural inheritance including traditional fairy tales and pornography. In 'The Dangers of Angela Carter' (1992), Elaine Jordan argues that Carter's way of criticising current sexual relations is to 'face the fascination—to spring

⁷ Duncker, p. 4.

⁸ Merja Makinen, 'Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* and the Decolonization of Feminine Sexuality', *Feminist Review*, 42 (1992), 2-15 (p. 5).

⁹ Duncker, p. 7.

¹⁰ Duncker, p. 12.

forward *from* recoil, from wincing at an acknowledged desire'.¹¹ My reading of 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon' and 'The Tiger's Bride' will show that Carter's feminist strategy in her rewritings of the fairy tale is to re-appropriate the master's plot by following it with a vengeance.

The 'Original' 'Beauty and the Beast'

The classic text of 'Beauty and the Beast' was written by Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont and published in 1756 in her story collection *Magasin des enfants, ou dialogues entre une sage Gouvernante et plusieurs de ses Élèves*. As its title indicates, the intended audience of de Beaumont's collection is age-, gender- and class-specific, and its intention, as its frame of dialogues between a governess and her students makes it clear, is pedagogic. Madame de Beaumont actually used the tales in her lessons when she worked as a governess in London. Amongst many other fairy tales using the motif of beast-marriage produced before and after, de Beaumont's text has remained the best-known version until today, enjoyed by both adults and children in such varied forms as films, musicals, television programmes and picture books, and most of these reproductions, however updated they may appear on the surface, keep intact the plot and the message of its 'original'. One may wonder, however, what it is that makes the eighteenth-century didactic tale for upper-class young girls still so attractive. Before considering Carter's retellings, I will first examine the tale's patriarchal appeal by concentrating on the Oedipal aspect in de Beaumont's text and also by comparing it with other stories of the same tale type classified as 'The Search for the Lost Husband'.

¹¹ Elaine Jordan, 'The Dangers of Angela Carter', in *New Feminist Discourses: Critical Essays on Theories and Texts*, ed. by Isobel Armstrong (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 119-31 (p. 124).

In de Beaumont's 'Beauty and the Beast', Beauty is the youngest daughter of a rich merchant. Her two elder sisters are pretty but arrogant, boasting that they would marry only 'a duke, or an earl at least', whereas the good-natured Beauty insists that she wishes to 'stay with her father a few years longer'.¹² The father suddenly loses all his fortune except for a small country house, where he and his three sons begin farming the land and all the housework is left to Beauty. When the father departs for the city with the hope of regaining his fortune, his two elder daughters ask him to bring them back dresses and other sorts of finery, but Beauty, when pressed by her father, requests only a rose. Losing the lawsuit about his merchandise, however, the merchant finds himself poorer than before. On his return journey through a forest, he loses his way in a snowstorm and comes upon a huge palace, where he is served by invisible servants and stays a night. Upon leaving the palace, he plucks a rose from the garden for his youngest daughter. The enraged Beast then appears before him and threatens to kill him. When the merchant reveals the reason for his theft, the Beast proposes that he will forgive him if one of his daughters comes voluntarily and dies in his place. Beauty, hearing her father's account, willingly goes to the Beast's palace, and, being reassured by a fairy in her dream, decides to stay with the Beast, who, to her surprise, treats her like a queen. She gradually grows fond of the kind Beast, but continues to refuse his nightly marriage proposal. When she sees, in a magic looking-glass provided by the Beast, her father pining away for her at home, she asks the Beast to allow her to return home for a week, which the Beast concedes. At home, her envious sisters, feigning affection for her, make her stay longer so that the angered Beast may devour her. Alarmed in a dream, Beauty returns to the Beast to find him lying in the garden on the verge of death. The moment she promises to marry him, declaring that 'I cannot live without you', the Beast turns

¹² 'Beauty and the Beast', in Opie and Opie, pp. 137-50 (p. 139).

into a handsome prince.¹³ They marry and live happily ever after.

In the last section of *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim discusses 'The Animal-Groom Cycle of Fairy Tales', which includes such tales as the Grimms' 'The Frog Prince', Apuleius' 'Cupid and Psyche', Perrault's and the Grimms' 'Bluebeard' tales, and de Beaumont's 'Beauty and the Beast', the last of which he calls 'the final apotheosis of this cycle'.¹⁴ Common to the animal-bridegroom tales, according to Bettelheim, is that the heroine first sees her sexual partner as an animal. The transformation of a beast into a handsome prince depicted in these tales, he claims, 'teach[es] that for love, a radical change in previously held attitudes about sex is absolutely necessary'.¹⁵ Bettelheim argues that it is marriage, and marriage alone, that can undo sexual repression brought about by mothers and nurses, our earliest educators, who, in the first place, have turned sex into 'something animal-like': 'Only marriage made sex permissible, changed it from something animal-like into a bond sanctified by the sacrament of marriage'.¹⁶ Here, he is not simply advocating marriage in general as something which sanctifies the act of sex for both men and women; he argues that these animal-bridegroom tales prescribe to *girls* how to proceed to marriage, the goal of their life, *along the Oedipal track*. Significantly, Bettelheim, who generally insists throughout his book on the neuter sex of protagonists in fairy tales, admits the gender-specificity of this particular tale, observing that 'in most Western fairy tales the beast is male and can be disenchanted only by the love of a female', and that 'only the male aspects of sex are beastly'.¹⁷ 'Beauty and the Beast', therefore, is regarded as a specifically female fairy tale

¹³ Opie and Opie, p. 149.

¹⁴ Bettelheim, p. 303.

¹⁵ Bettelheim, p. 282.

¹⁶ Bettelheim, p. 283.

¹⁷ Bettelheim, p. 285.

in which, 'to achieve a happy union, it is the female who has to overcome her view of sex as loathsome and animal-like'.¹⁸

Bettelheim reads 'Beauty and the Beast' as a story which exemplifies an ideal development of a girl into a 'normal' woman who can truly love her husband as she has loved her father. Its happy ending, he argues, is brought about by the successful transference of the Oedipal love of the heroine for her father to her future husband. Seen in this light, 'Beauty and the Beast' becomes a story less about the Beast's transformation than about Beauty's, her transferring and transforming of the Oedipal love to the mature one, for the Beast in this view is not a beast in its realistic sense but only a projection of the girl's sexual anxieties. Moreover, Bettelheim claims, 'Beauty and the Beast', despite its title, is not only about love between the two central characters; there is another character who plays an important role. Bettelheim remarks: 'all is gentleness and loving devotion to one another on the part of the three main characters: Beauty, *her father*, and the Beast'.¹⁹

Bettelheim maintains that what brings about such a harmonious resolution of the Oedipus complex is the girl's absolute devotion to her father. In contrast to her sisters who enjoy moving in society and having lovers, Beauty prefers to stay beside her father at home. She always declines proposals of marriage by telling her suitors that she still wants to stay with her father. Even when her father has lost all his fortune, she refuses several proposals and chooses to stay with her father 'to comfort and attend him' in his misfortunes.²⁰ In the country house, Beauty takes on all the household chores to support her family: 'Beauty rose at four in the morning, and made haste to have the house clean,

¹⁸ Bettelheim, p. 285.

¹⁹ Bettelheim, p. 303; my emphasis.

²⁰ Bettelheim, p. 139.

and dinner ready for the family'.²¹ Her father admires the industriousness of his daughter, who now plays the role of his wife.

It is the incest taboo, Bettelheim claims, that makes the girl feel sex animal-like and loathsome; for him, de Beaumont's tale 'foreshadows by centuries the Freudian view that sex must be experienced by the child as disgusting as long as his sexual longings are attached to his parent, because only through such a negative attitude toward sex can the incest taboo, and with it the stability of the human family, remain secure'.²² Beauty's loving devotion which transforms the Beast, he seems to suggest, *must* be based on her incestuous love for her father: 'the girl can transfer—and transform—this oedipal love for her father most freely and happily to her lover if, in sublimated fashion, it seems to offer a belated fulfillment of her childish love for her father, while at the same time it presents fulfillment of her mature love for an age-correct partner'.²³ The incestuous desire, then, is regarded here as the foundation of 'the human family'.

Bettelheim's notion of 'the human family' is based on the exchange of women between men under patriarchy. The rose for which Beauty asks her father, Bettelheim points out, symbolises the love between the daughter and the father as well as the loss of the girl's virginity when her father breaks it from the stem to take it to her. Although he emphasises the reluctance on the father's part when he takes Beauty to the Beast's palace 'against his will' and then leaves the palace alone 'with a heavy heart',²⁴ Bettelheim makes it clear that it is her father who brings about her defloration by another man. He praises the father's act of risking his life for his daughter in stealing a rose from a stranger's garden. But, of course, the father did not know that the master of the palace

²¹ Bettelheim, p. 139.

²² Bettelheim, p. 308.

²³ Bettelheim, p. 284.

²⁴ Bettelheim, p. 305.

is a frightening beast when he stole a rose; all he knew was that the master was an extremely wealthy man. And Bettelheim has nothing to say about the father's revealing the fact to the Beast that it is his daughter who requested the rose. It is difficult to deny the reading that the father sacrifices his daughter to the Beast in expectation of a profitable exchange, and that Beauty is an object of exchange between two men, one gaining a beautiful virgin as his wife and the other obtaining great wealth for giving away his daughter.

In the light of Bettelheim's interpretation, the underlying assumption of de Beaumont's tale becomes more evident: in a patriarchal society, the daughter figures as a commodity, and it is only as a commodity that she can find any value in herself, let alone happiness. In the chapter called 'Women on the Market' in *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977), Luce Irigaray describes the economy at work in a patriarchal society: 'The economy—in both the narrow and the broad sense—that is in place in our societies thus requires that women lend themselves to alienation in consumption, and to exchanges in which they do not participate, and that men be exempt from being used and circulated like commodities'.²⁵ De Beaumont's 'Beauty and the Beast' sanctions this masculine economy by making it appear natural and attractive to young girls. The (master's) narrative of both de Beaumont's fairy tale and Bettelheim's interpretative discourse on the tale, serves to seduce women into consenting to its law which Irigaray calls 'hom(m)o-sexuality', namely, 'the exclusive valorization of men's needs/desires, of exchanges among men'.²⁶ Women's desires, therefore, are not taken into account;

²⁵ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 172. For a close feminist analysis of Lévi-Strauss's notion of kinship, see Gayle Rubin, 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex', in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. by Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review, 1975), pp. 157-210, particularly pp. 169-183.

²⁶ *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 171.

women are treated as commodities, which is the only way they can have any value in '*the economy of (so-called) masculine sexuality*'.²⁷ As for (so-called) feminine sexuality which is derived from the social roles imposed on women, i.e., mother, virgin and prostitute, claims Irigaray, woman in any of these roles has no '*right to her own pleasure*'.²⁸

'In the end', writes Bettelheim, 'through her love both father and husband regain their lives'.²⁹ For him, this male dependence on, as well as exploitation of, the female seems to be the most desirable form of happy ending, the ending which, in fact, obliterates *her* desire. At the moment of the Beast's transformation into a handsome prince, Beauty, who has developed complex feelings for 'her dear Beast', 'could not forbear asking where Beast was'.³⁰ After the Beast's transformation towards the ending, a curious change in narrative occurs gradually in the direction of the obliteration of Beauty's subject status as well as of her desire, which culminates in the last sentence in which the subject shifts from 'she' to 'he': '*he* married Beauty, and lived with her many years and their happiness as it was founded on virtue was compleat'.³¹ As if a woman does not, should not, and cannot want anything?

Bettelheim closes *The Uses of Enchantment* with his discussion of 'Beauty and the Beast' not without reason: 'As a parent myself, I preferred to end with a fairy tale which tells that a parent's love for his child is also as old as man, as is the child's love for his [*sic*] parent. It is out of this tender affection that there grows a different love which, once the child is grown, will bind him to his beloved'.³² The closing sentence of *The Uses*

²⁷ *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 184.

²⁸ *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 187.

²⁹ Bettelheim, p. 284.

³⁰ Opie and Opie, p. 150.

³¹ Opie and Opie, p. 150; my emphasis.

³² Bettelheim, p. 310.

of *Enchantment* confirms the universality of the positive Oedipus complex whose origin is supposed to be ‘as old as man’: ‘This is one of the manifold truths revealed by fairy tales, which can guide our lives; it is a truth as valid today as it was once upon a time’.³³ Bettelheim’s discourse seeks to reduce the fairy tale to a parable which speaks the ‘truth’ of psychoanalysis. Referring to Bettelheim’s work, Jacqueline Rose, while acknowledging its ‘attention to the complexity of unconscious process for both adult and child’, argues that ‘the concept of mastery—with its associated meaning of coherence in psychic and sexual life—is none the less the central term through which this complexity is conceived and by means of which it is finally resolved’.³⁴ To challenge Bettelheim’s master discourse on the fairy tale, I will begin by asking: how universal is de Beaumont’s text of ‘Beauty and the Beast’, which, Bettelheim claims, carries a truth handed down from time immemorial?.

First of all, we must remember the fact that ‘Beauty and the Beast’ Bettelheim discusses here is a *literary* fairy tale, not a *folk* fairy tale as he makes it sound like. He does recognise the literary origin of de Beaumont’s text he chooses to discuss amongst other versions of the tale (he mentions in a footnote Perrault’s ‘Riquet à la Houppe’, which, he claims, ‘loses out as a fairy tale’ because of its ‘explicit moral’³⁵); as his argument proceeds, however, he decides to ignore its literariness and, in doing so, universalises the equally ‘explicit moral’ de Beaumont as a governess intends to inculcate in young girls. De Beaumont’s eighteenth-century text is clearly a moral story which preaches to girls about the values of self-sacrifice, obedience, industriousness and

³³ Bettelheim, p. 310.

³⁴ Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan or the Impossibility of Children’s Fiction*, rev. edn (London: Macmillan, 1994), p. 14.

³⁵ Bettelheim, p. 304n.

sentimentality which they have to cultivate in order to become happy in their lives.³⁶ By looking at other versions of the 'Beauty and the Beast' tale, one can see what has happened in the process of the canonisation of this particular text.

'Beauty and the Beast' is a variant of the tale type 'The Search for the Lost Husband', which, as considered in Chapter 2, belongs to the female tale about winning. The episodic structure of this tale type is outlined in Aarne and Thompson's *The Types of the Folktale* as follows:

- I. The Monster as Husband
- II. Disenchantment of the Monster
- III. Loss of the Husband
- IV. Search for Husband
- V. Recovery of Husband³⁷

The plot summary of this tale type suggests that it is basically a story of quest. The tale takes the form of a quest in which the heroine has to perform difficult tasks in order to recover her lost husband.³⁸ De Beaumont's tale, however, lacks the element of quest. The usual happy ending of the Search for the Lost Husband tale is not the disenchantment of the monster as it is in de Beaumont's 'Beauty and the Beast', but the heroine's successful recovery of her lost husband whose true appearance (his physical

³⁶ We must note here that, although limited by her time, Madame de Beaumont, as a teacher and a writer, worked for the women's cause, claiming their right to education. For her life and ideas, see: Patricia A. Clancy, 'A French Writer and Educator in England: Mme Le Prince de Beaumont', *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 201 (1982), 195-208.

³⁷ Aarne and Thompson, p. 140.

³⁸ Torborg Lundell, comparing 'The Search for the Lost Husband' with its male equivalent called 'The Man on a Quest for his Lost Wife', points out that the Aarne-Thompson index plays down female activity by using the word 'search', rather than 'quest': 'One gets the impression that a woman *searches*, as for a lost sock, while a man sets off on a *quest*'. See Lundell, pp. 154-55. It must be also noted that the subject is omitted from the title of the female tale.

beauty is always emphasised) has already been revealed to her and has stirred passionate love in her. In de Beaumont's tale, what drives the narrative is the male desire, the desire of her husband and her father, and the heroine functions as the object of mediation for men.

The plot of 'Beauty and the Beast' may bear a more distinct resemblance to that of 'The Frog King', a tale classified separate from the Search for the Lost Husband tale type. In the Grimms' 'The Frog King, or Iron Heinrich', the princess, beautiful but selfish and cruel, is forced by her father to comply with the demands of the frog which has helped her to retrieve her favourite golden ball from the well. When the frog insists on sleeping in her bed, she hurls it against the wall and, upon this, the frog changes into a handsome prince. In this tale, like 'Beauty and the Beast', the heroine disenchant the monster at the end, but the happy ending is brought about by the heroine's act of violence, not by her sentimental compassion on the disgusting frog for his good nature.

The characteristics of the Search for the Lost Husband tale type underlined above, female quest and female desire, can be found in the earliest extant literary version of the 'Beauty and the Beast' tale, 'Cupid and Psyche', embedded in Apuleius' *The Golden Ass* written in the second century A. D. In 'Cupid and Psyche', the princess of extraordinary beauty—people worship her as 'the New Venus'—arouses the anger of the true Venus, who tells her son Cupid to punish the girl with his arrows.³⁹ Psyche, in obedience of the oracle conveyed to her father, marries an invisible husband who, according to the oracle, is '*a dire mischief, viperous and fierce/ Who flies through aether and with fire and sword*', but, as she later finds out, is the god Cupid, who, disobeying his mother's order, makes Psyche his wife.⁴⁰ At his exquisitely built palace, the bride is

³⁹ 'Cupid and Psyche', trans. by Robert Graves, in Zipes, *Spells of Enchantment*, p. 4.

⁴⁰ Zipes, *Spells of Enchantment*, p. 3.

welcomed by disembodied voices, served by unseen hands, and entertained by invisible musicians. Every night her unseen husband comes to embrace her in the dark and leaves her just before daybreak. One night, Psyche pleads with her reluctant husband to allow her to see her family. Despite Cupid's warning, she gives away to her two elder sisters the fact that she still does not know what he looks like. The wicked sisters, jealous of Psyche's happiness and luxury, advise her to chop off the head of her husband while he is asleep because he is, they remind her of the words of the oracle, a poisonous snake. Taking their advice, Psyche holds a lamp over the bed and sees the divine beauty of Cupid. She stares at his golden hair, his white neck, his flushed cheeks, his soft white wings, and the rest of his beautiful body. She then accidentally pierces her thumb with his arrow and falls in love with him: 'Burning with greater passion for Cupid even than before, she flung herself panting upon him, desperate with desire, and smothered him with kisses'.⁴¹ But a drop of lamp oil falls on his shoulder and wakes him. Cupid, after reproaching her, flies away. Psyche, now pregnant, sets out on her travel in search of her husband while her malicious sisters both die in a horrible way. She accomplishes the four impossible tasks set by the envious Venus, and the couple is eventually united with the mediation of Jupiter, who grants Psyche immortality. She bears a daughter whose name is Pleasure.

The first half of 'Cupid and Psyche' resembles the story of 'Beauty and the Beast' in which the heroine is forced to live with a (in the former case only imagined) monster. The second half, which 'Beauty and the Beast' lacks because it ends with the disenchantment of the Beast, is about the heroine's quest for her lost husband with whom she falls passionately in love. 'Cupid and Psyche', unlike 'Beauty and the Beast', does

⁴¹ Zipes, *Spells of Enchantment*, p. 13.

not moralise about choosing one's partner for his goodness over his physical appearance or wit; it tells more about the heroine's desire which is physical in nature. In the Norwegian variant 'East o' the Sun and West o' the Moon', the heroine is married off by her father to the wealthy White Bear and, discovering that he is a lovely prince, falls in love with him; but, again, she wakes him by dropping tallow from the candle. She travels to east o' the sun and west o' the moon, and eventually retrieves her husband. Calling it 'one of the most lyrically beautiful and mysterious of all Northern European fairy tales', Carter includes this Norwegian tale in *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales* under the heading of 'Good Girls and Where It Gets Them'. In a note to this tale, Carter underlines the difference between its heroine and the heroine of de Beaumont's tale:

But Madame Leprince de Beaumont's Beauty is a well-brought-up young lady, designed to conform in a bourgeois, virtuous fashion. Madame Leprince de Beaumont worked as a governess for twenty years; she wrote extensively on good behaviour. But *this* young woman does not hesitate to go to bed with a strange bear and is betrayed by her own desire when she first sees the young man under the bearskin: '... she thought she couldn't live if she didn't give him a kiss there and then'. Then he disappears. But she get [*sic*] him in the end.⁴²

'The Tiger's Bride', Carter's second 'Beauty and the Beast' tale, focuses on the moment of the revelation of the Beast's true form, which is also the moment of the awakening of the heroine's sexual desire, evoking other variants of the Search for the Lost Husband tale which foreground the theme of female sexual awakening.

It must be noted, however, that Carter's exploration of the sexual imagery of fairy tales does not subscribe to Bettelheim's psychoanalytic normativisation of their sexual meanings. When asked about her opinion of Bettelheim's view in an interview,

⁴² *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, p. 238n.

Carter replies:

When I wrote my book of fairy tales, *The Bloody Chamber*, I had read Bettelheim, and I was interested in the psychoanalytic content of the stories. Everyone knows that Bettelheim is terrific with children, but I think he is sometimes wrong. I'm not sure that fairy tales are as consoling as he suggests. An historian named Robert Darnton, in a very nice book called *The Great Cat Massacre*, has a long essay about the oral tradition of fairy tales. He says you can hardly talk about the latent content of stories which are explicitly about cannibalism, incest, bestiality and infanticide, and of course he's right. I do find the imagery of fairy tales very seductive and capable of innumerable interpretations, however. But some of the stories in *The Bloody Chamber* are the result of quarrelling furiously with Bettelheim. It seems to me important that 'Beauty and the Beast' does not come out of oral tradition: it's an art story, written for children—just as my stories are art stories—and it was intended as a perfectly tuned moral tale.⁴³

Carter's views on the interpretations of fairy tales are summarised in this passage. For her, it is important to see the fairy tale in the historical context and to recognise the difference between oral and literary fairy tales.⁴⁴ Most significantly, she also stresses the protean nature of the imagery of fairy tales, either folk or literary, which 'seduces' the reader to interpret it in many different ways. Her tales are 'art stories', expressing a possible (although not the only) interpretation of the imagery of fairy tales. Carter's interpretation of the fairy tale, like Bettelheim's, especially foregrounds its sexual imagery; yet she uses it to criticise sexual politics and also to suggest an alternative vision of sexual relationship.

'The Courtship of Mr Lyon'

⁴³ Haffenden, pp. 82-83.

⁴⁴ For Darnton's historicist approach to the fairy tale, see Robert Darnton, 'Peasants Tell Tales: The Meaning of Mother Goose', in *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Vintage, 1985), pp. 9-72.

'The Courtship of Mr Lyon' closely follows de Beaumont's story, except that it is an updated version set in England. On a stormy night, Beauty pauses in her chores to look out of the kitchen window, worrying about her father's safe return. In the opening paragraph, the omniscient narrator compares the girl's skin to the snow on the road, which is 'white and unmarked as a spilled bolt of bridal satin'.⁴⁵ Her father, with his car stuck in the snow, thinks of 'his Beauty, his girl-child, his pet' (p. 41). But it is he who causes the unmarked whiteness of his daughter to be smeared with blood. The moment the father plucks a white rose for his daughter, the Beast, with his body of a lion clothed in 'a smoking jacket of dull red brocade', appears and threatens him (p. 44). After inspecting the photograph of Beauty which the father produces from his wallet, the Beast growls: 'Take her the rose, then, but bring her to dinner', upon which the external third-person narrator comments: 'and what else was there to be done?' (p. 45).

Carter's retelling renders explicit the nature of the exchange agreed upon by the father and the Beast. A ruined man exchanges his daughter, a beautiful girl of a marriageable age, for the financial aid from a rich bachelor; the contract is made between two men and on economic terms. Beauty, at dinner in the Beast's house, regards his great paws as 'the death of any tender herbivore', herself being 'Miss Lamb, spotless, sacrificial' (p. 45). In *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* (1979), published in the same year as *The Bloody Chamber*, Carter criticises the traditional male imagination of woman either as the holy virgin (Justine for Sade) or the profane whore (Juliette), and cautions us against the deadly limitation of women's own positioning of themselves as blameless victims since to do so means to be involved in the perpetuation of the system of power which oppresses and marginalises its victims. Beauty in this tale,

⁴⁵ Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p. 41. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

by identifying herself with 'Miss Lamb', implicitly colludes with the male definition of a virtuous daughter, thereby preventing herself from acting on her own accord. She, therefore, feels obliged to obey her father and the Beast:

Yet she stayed, and smiled, because her father wanted her to do so; and when the Beast told her how he would aid her father's appeal against the judgement, she smiled with both her mouth and her eyes. But when, as they sipped their brandy, the Beast, in the diffuse, rumbling purr with which he conversed, suggested, with a hint of shyness, of fear of refusal, that she should stay here, with him, in comfort, while her father returned to London to take up the legal cudgels again, she forced a smile. For she knew with a pang of dread, as soon as he spoke, that it would be so and her visit to the Beast must be, on some magically reciprocal scale, the price of her father's good fortune. (p. 45)

Although she is not totally unaware of her exchange value, the nature of the contract made between the two men remains 'magical' to her. The narrator hastens to add: 'Do not think she had no will of her own; only, she was possessed by a sense of obligation to an unusual degree and, besides, she would gladly have gone to the ends of the earth for her father, whom she loved dearly' (pp. 45-46). As de Beaumont makes her pedagogic purpose clear by putting her tale in a framework in which the governess gives lessons to her pupils, Carter, even more emphatically, makes the reader feel the presence of a governessy moraliser. As late-twentieth-century readers, however, we cannot take the pedagogic voice used by Carter at its face value; it only adds to our understanding of the implications of such conventional morals which render obscure the reality of a patriarchal society where women, with or without their consent, are exchanged as objects for the continuation of its system. The narrative voice of 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon', while appearing to serve the master's plot, in fact undermines its ideology. There is, indeed, nothing 'magical' about the father's gaining of money; the terms of the contract, despite

the Beast's showing of shyness and the father's silence, is clear to both parties, who conspire to exploit the daughter's naturalised Oedipal devotion to her father.⁴⁶ The endorsement of classic fairy tales such as de Beaumont's 'Beauty and the Beast' is one of the means by which the dominant system seduces women into consenting its ideology, promising them that they will be rewarded in the end for their obedience. But what sort of reward is awaiting this Beauty?

Beauty's idle holiday in the Beast's luxurious residence is interrupted by a telephone call from her father, who, with the help of the Beast's lawyers, is now 'as good as rich again' (p. 48). She immediately joins him in a splendid hotel in London, promising the Beast that she will come back before the winter is over, for she is 'moved almost to tears' when the Beast, sinking his great head on to his paws, asks her: 'You will come back to me? It will be lonely here, without you' (p. 48). However, time passes quickly while she goes out on her father's arm to theatres and parties; winter is almost gone. Returning to her father, she becomes his pet again, replacing her mother, who is said to have died at her birth. Beauty now blossoms into full femininity according to the standard of her class:

Returning late from supper after the theatre, she took off her earrings in front of the mirror; Beauty. She smiled at herself with satisfaction. She was learning, at the end of her adolescence, how to be a spoiled child and that pearly skin of hers was plumping out, a little, with high living and compliments. A certain inwardness was beginning to transform the lines around her mouth, those signatures of the personality, and her sweetness and her gravity could sometimes turn a mite petulant when things went not quite as she wanted them to go. (p. 49)

⁴⁶ Referring to 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon', Sylvia Bryant points out the 'proprietary conspiracy among masters': 'a certain duplicity exists between the Beast and Beauty's father, for both are indeed accustomed to being masters, possessors of beautiful and valuable things'. See Sylvia Bryant, 'Re-Constructing Oedipus Through "Beauty and the Beast"', *Criticism*, 31 (1989), 439-53 (p. 446).

Upon this, the narrator comments:

You could not have said that her freshness was fading but she smiled at herself in mirrors a little too often, these days, and the face that smiled back was not quite the one she had seen contained in the Beast's agate eyes. Her face was acquiring, instead of beauty, a lacquer of the invincible prettiness that characterizes certain pampered, exquisite, expensive cats. (p. 49)

The moralising voice, while blaming Beauty for her vanity on the surface level, ironically implies that, although no longer 'fresh', Beauty has become a perfect vain bourgeois woman, a good match for Mr Lyon in a smoking jacket.

Beauty's 'trance' before the mirror breaks when the Beast's pet spaniel comes to her hotel room; Beauty senses that the Beast is dying. Arriving at his dark, cold and deserted house, she finds him lying motionless, with his eyes closed. At her 'Oh, Beast [...] I have come home', his eyelids flicker; 'How was it she had never noticed before that his agate eyes were equipped with lids, like those of a man? Was it because she had only looked at her own face, reflected there?' (p. 50). The Beast then opens his mouth:

'I'm dying, Beauty', he said in a cracked whisper of his former purr. 'Since you left me, I have been sick. I could not go hunting, I found I had not the stomach to kill the gentle beasts, I could not eat. I am sick and I must die; but I shall die happy because you have come to say go-bye to me'. (p. 50)

'Actually', states Carter in an interview referring to de Beaumont's tale, 'it's an advertisement for moral blackmail: when the Beast says that he is dying because of Beauty, the only morally correct thing for her to have said at that point would be, "Die,

then”’.⁴⁷ In ‘The Courtship of Mr Lyon’, however, Beauty does not say, ‘Die, then’; instead, she flings herself upon the Beast, covers his paws with her kisses, and cries out: ‘Don’t die, Beast! If you’ll have me, I’ll never leave you’ (p. 51). In this tale, there are no magic spell to be broken and no fireworks or music to celebrate the transformation of the Beast which is described in realistic terms:

When her lips touched the meat-hook claws, they drew back into their pads and she saw how he had always kept his fists clenched but now, painfully, tentatively, at last began to stretch his fingers. Her tears fell on his face like snow and, under their soft transformation, the bones showed through the pelt, the flesh through the wide, tawny brow. And then it was no longer a lion in her arms but a man, a man with an unkempt mane of hair and, how strange, a broken nose, such as the noses of retired boxers, that gave him a distant, heroic resemblance to the handsomest of all the beasts. (p. 51)

So, after all, the Beast was only a rich man with leonine features, if not ‘one of the loveliest princes that eye ever beheld’.⁴⁸ This ending resembles ‘Riquet à la Houppe’, Perrault’s version of ‘Beauty and the Beast’, in which Beauty’s love makes the ugly prince appear handsome and heroic to her. Carter’s tale suggests that it is not the Beast’s physical transformation but Beauty’s psychological transformation that brings about the happy ending; unlike Perrault’s tale, however, it also reveals that Beauty’s love for the Beast derives from ‘moral blackmail’. After her transformation into a pampered upper-class lady, Beauty begins to see the Beast as he is, and it is in this sense that Beauty and the Beast are now on equal terms.⁴⁹ The Beast, who now turns out to be ‘Mr

⁴⁷ Haffenden, p. 83.

⁴⁸ Opie and Opie, p. 150.

⁴⁹ Margaret Atwood reads the transformation of Mr Lyon differently: ‘Mr Lyon, who begins as a beast—in fact, *the* Beast of *Beauty and the Beast*—is changed by love from carnivore to hervivore’. See Margaret Atwood, ‘Running with the Tigers’, in *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, ed. by Lorna Sage (London: Virago, 1994), pp. 117-35 (p. 124). However, the tale suggests that Beauty may not be a ‘tender

Lyon', utters a romantic cliché: 'Do you know [...] I think I might be able to manage a little breakfast today, Beauty, if you would eat something with me' (p. 51).

'The Courtship of Mr Lyon', as its title indicates, centres on the action of the Beast; it tells how *he* succeeds in fulfilling his own desires. The courtship of Mr Lyon begins with the financial blackmail and ends with the moral and emotional blackmail. Beauty, a typical model of a girl brought up to fit perfectly into society, does not even think of questioning the patriarchal values which deprive her of any possibility of autonomy. She listens and smiles, and, when required, displays sentimental compassion for a rich but ugly man.

Whose desire is at work in this narrative? Clearly, the desire is the Beast's, for he chooses, confines, and possesses the girl he desires, driving the narrative towards the final acquisition of her as his wife. It is also the father's since it is he who first proposes to a wealthy stranger an exchange between his daughter and a large fortune, the latter being aptly secured by him. Beauty remains a passive receiver of male desire, a commodity passed from one man to another.

The closing line of the tale evokes a tableau of a conventional bourgeois marriage complete with a drowsing spaniel in the corner: 'Mr and Mrs Lyon walk in the garden; the old spaniel drowzes on the grass, in a drift of fallen petals' (p. 51). This is certainly a happy ending for the Beast and most likely for Beauty, an expensive cat, who lives comfortably ever after with her rich husband; however, Carter's narrative makes sure that it can be also taken ironically as a parody by the reader. 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon' creates a distance between the overt message of the tale and an ironic tone behind it by inserting the narrator's double-edged comments and also by exaggerating the

herbivore' as she herself believes, for she is eating 'a cold bird' while musing upon her status as innocent victim (p. 45).

sentimental tone to the point of parody, especially towards the end.

‘The Courtship of Mr Lyon’ almost exactly reproduces the plot of de Beaumont’s ‘Beauty and the Beast’ while at the same time creating a critical space for the reader or, more precisely, for *some* readers. Carter’s rewriting gradually displaces the original narrative through a subtle manipulation of narrative, revealing the male desire underlying the master’s plot and the ‘magic’ it uses to render its ideology transparent and, indeed, seductive to women.

‘The Tiger’s Bride’

Carter’s story collection strategically places ‘The Tiger’s Bride’ immediately after ‘The Courtship of Mr Lyon’, the latter of which, as discussed above, reveals through parody and exaggeration the intention of the master’s plot and a woman’s complicity in it. ‘The Tiger’s Bride’ is a loose adaptation of its original, retaining only the first part of the plot in which the girl is given to the Beast by her father and also the motif of a magic mirror which, held in the heroine’s hand, reflects her father’s face. It is a feminist re-appropriation of ‘Beauty and the Beast’; it uses transformation, the central motif which occurs at the end of ‘Beauty and the Beast’, to make it serve for a feminist purpose of creating a space in which woman can be represented as a desiring subject. With this re-direction of the intention of the plot, ‘Beauty and the Beast’ becomes a tale of female sexual initiation in which a girl comes to discover and to celebrate her own sexuality. ‘The Tiger’s Bride’ begins with the customary contract between two men, the girl’s father and her future husband, which places the girl as the object of exchange, but ends in, or starts again as, a reciprocal relationship on equal terms between two subjects, the male and the female.

Fairy tales are generally told in the third person from the viewpoint of the

external narrator, and 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon' follows this convention. 'The Tiger's Bride', however, takes the first-person narrative by the heroine, thereby allowing her to express her views and feelings in her own words. The heroine, who is the daughter of a Russian aristocrat, admits that she is a beauty, but what distinguishes her from de Beaumont's Beauty is that she is well aware of her own status as a commodity (a high-priced commodity at that for her beauty and virginity) in a masculine economy. She tells us: 'I certainly meditated on the nature of my own state, how I had been bought and sold, passed from hand to hand' (p. 63). Unlike de Beaumont's Beauty, this disillusioned heroine does not say: 'I am very happy in thinking that my death will save my father's life, and be a proof of my tender love for him'.⁵⁰ She does not delude herself into believing in her father's love and goodness, and no wonder: 'My father said he loved me yet he staked his daughter on a hand of cards' (p. 54). To this, she cynically adds: 'You must not think my father valued me at less than a king's ransom; but, at no more than a king's ransom' (p. 54). The father's financial difficulty is here presented not as fortuitous but as the direct outcome of his folly, and he is forced to give up his daughter not through an act of love for her, which is to steal a rose for her. Upon leaving for the Beast's palazzo, she gives her father a white rose, which becomes smeared with blood from her pricked finger—a grotesque parody of the rose which the father in the original tale steals for his daughter. Far from being a self-sacrificing daughter, she does not conceal her anger at her father: 'I drew the curtains to conceal the sight of my father's farewell; my spite was sharp as broken glass' (p. 55). The heroine's cynical awareness of patriarchal injustice to daughters, however, is not all this tale is about. The most striking as well as the most significant change made in this retelling, as I will show, is to the

⁵⁰ Opie and Opie, p. 143.

ending.

The Beast in this tale is a real tiger cruelly in disguise, wearing a mask with a human face painted on it and looking like a sad parody of humanity: 'He is a carnival figure made of papier mâché and crêpe hair' (p. 53). On her way to the Beast's palazzo in his carriage, the heroine remembers the story of a 'tiger-man' told by her nurse: 'his hinder parts were all hairy and only from the head downwards did he resemble a man' (p. 56). If she does not behave herself, the nurse would tell her, the tiger-man will come and 'Yes, my beauty! GOBBLE YOU UP!' (p. 56). This rational girl, however, feels no fear but remains practical: 'Old wives' tales, nursery fears! I knew well enough the reason for the trepidation I cosily titillated with superstitious marvels of my childhood on the day my childhood ended. For now my own skin was my sole capital in the world and today I'd make my first investment' (p. 56).

Arriving at the Beast's palazzo, the heroine finds herself surrounded only by animals, the Beast, his simian valet and his horses which are given the use of the dining room and for which the girl holds respect in line with 'Gulliver's opinion' (p. 55). The walls of 'this spurious Eden' are 'painted, aptly enough, with a fresco of horses, dogs and men in a wood where fruit and blossom grew on the bough together' (p. 57). Is this, then, the Blakean paradise, what the heroine ironically calls 'the blessed plot where the lion lies down with the lamb'? (p. 51). The Beast's palazzo, however, is cold, forlorn and dead. The girl is attended by a mechanical maid, 'this clockwork twin of mine' (p. 60), which goes about its work clicking and soon winds down.

The Beast's sole request is to see the heroine naked and only once; after that, she can go home with the sum her father has lost to the Beast at cards and also with some fine presents for her. On hearing this, she 'let[s] out a raucous guffaw' (p. 58). Her pride would not tolerate such a humiliating bargain: 'Take off my clothes for you,

like a ballet girl? Is that all you want of me?' (p. 61). Refused twice, the Beast sheds two drops of tears, which turn into a pair of diamond earrings. This recalls a scene from Cocteau's film in which Beauty's tears turn into diamonds, which in turn may be related to a customary motif in fairy tales which shows the good nature of the heroine as in Perrault's 'Les Fées', now usually known in England as 'Diamonds and Toads', in which the good girl, who helps a poor old woman who is actually the Fairy, has flowers and jewels drop from her mouth every time she speaks while the bad girl lets out snakes and toads. Here, however, it is the Beast who sheds diamond tears; the girl never cries. The motif of tears turned into diamonds, given a different interpretation, plays a significant part at the end of 'The Tiger's Bride'.

The Beast then asks the heroine to go riding with him and his valet. In her own riding habit which is magically delivered to her, she rides out into the wilderness with five other animals, the tiger, the monkey, and three horses. She then begins to feel a change in herself:

A profound sense of strangeness slowly began to possess me. I knew my two companions were not, in any way, as other men, the simian retainer and the master for whom he spoke [...]. I knew they lived according to a different logic than I had done until my father abandoned me to the wild beasts by his human carelessness. This knowledge gave me a certain fearfulness still; but, I would say, not much... I was a young girl, a virgin, and therefore men denied me rationality just as they denied it to all those who were not exactly like themselves, in all their unreason. If I could see not one single soul in that wilderness of desolation all around me, then the six of us—mounts and riders, both—could boast amongst us not one soul, either, since all the best religions in the world state categorically that not beasts nor women were equipped with the flimsy, insubstantial things when the good Lord opened the gates of Eden and let Eve and her familiars tumble out. (p. 63)

She now recognises the affinity between herself as woman and her company of animals in

the male-centred world, both of them being categorised as non-Man, the body without reason nor a soul.

In her reading of Irigaray's reading of Plato in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (1993), Judith Butler argues that the Aristotelian binary opposition between form = man and matter = woman excludes 'the feminine', the term which is a '*catagoresis*' as it is excluded from the 'proper' language.⁵¹ Butler maintains that 'the feminine', described as matter or body within philosophical descriptions, is 'a topos of the metaphysical tradition': 'Disavowed, the remnant of the feminine survives as the *inscriptional space* of that phallogocentrism, the specular surface which receives the marks of a masculine signifying act only to give back a (false) reflection and guarantee of phallogocentric self-sufficiency, without making any contribution of its own'.⁵² As I discussed in Chapter 3, woman figures as a space in the master's plot, reflecting the desire of the masculine subject who penetrates woman-space. In the metaphysical soul/body binary—in Western culture, philosophy is the master discourse as well as the master's discourse as Irigaray speaks of '*its position of mastery*'⁵³—the masculine occupies both terms of opposition, the masculine and the feminine, the latter of which Butler calls 'the *specular feminine*'; on the other hand, what Butler tentatively calls 'the *excessive feminine*', which is erased from the binary, 'cannot be named at all and, indeed, is not a mode'.⁵⁴

When Carter's heroine looks into the Beast's magic mirror, she sees not her own reflection, but only man (in this case, her father). She can never find her own,

⁵¹ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 37.

⁵² Butler, p. 39.

⁵³ Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 74.

⁵⁴ Butler, p. 39.

individual 'self', but is always confronted by the image—and the desire—of man.⁵⁵ But what if woman re-claims her own right to the body and, indeed, to desire? Butler writes: 'If she takes on a proper name, even the proper name of "woman" in the singular, that can only be a kind of radical mime that seeks to jar the term from its ontological presuppositions'.⁵⁶ To mine this metaphysical essentialism is what the heroine of 'The Tiger's Bride' does in her re-appropriation of 'woman' which figures as body and, therefore, is closer to beast in the specular logic. Through the act of such mining, she experiences her first transformation; her second transformation, which occurs at the end of the story, not only 'jars' but also exceeds 'phallogocentric self-sufficiency'.

When they reach the bank of the river, that liminal space regarded as bordering the other world, the Beast proposes to reveal his nakedness to the girl. Although she feels that she cannot bear the sight, she accepts this as she acquires the new knowledge: 'The Tiger will never lie down with the lamb; he acknowledges no pact that is not reciprocal. The lamb must learn to run with the tigers' (p. 64). She faces the naked Beast, the massive figure of the tiger, nothing of which reminds her of humanity: 'A great, feline, tawny shape whose pelt was barred with a savage geometry of bars the colour of burned wood. His domed, heavy head, so terrible he must hide it. How subtle the muscles, how profound the tread. The annihilating vehemence of his eyes, like twin suns' (p. 64). She then feels a strong sensation inside her: 'I felt my breast ripped apart as if I suffered a marvellous wound' (p. 64). She, on her own accord, begins to unfasten

⁵⁵ Irigaray's rewriting of Lewis Carroll's *Alice* in her 'The Looking Glass, from the Other Side', the first chapter of *This Sex Which Is Not One*, also makes this point. Referring to Irigaray's text, Susan Sellers states that neither Alice nor any woman 'can live, either on *this* side—where she is made use of and suppressed—or on the other side since this does not, as yet, exist', and that the text stresses the need for 'an alternative optics, an other style, a different way of proceeding'. See Susan Sellers, *Language and Sexual Difference: Feminist Writing in France* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 137.

⁵⁶ Butler, p. 38.

her jacket, still full of virginal pride but with 'a certain trepidation lest this frail little article of human upholstery before him might not be, in itself, grand enough to satisfy his expectations of us' (p. 64). In the pact which the Beast makes, the relationship between the two ceases to be the one between predator and prey. She, therefore, on her part, must 'show him I would do him no harm' (p. 64). Her skin, which she previously regarded as a commodity between men, now has a different (or, indeed, excessive) meaning: 'I showed his grave silence my white skin, my red nipples, and the horses turned their heads to watch me, also, as if they, too, were courteously curious as to the fleshly nature of women' (p. 64). In this reciprocal pact made between a beast and a woman, meat becomes flesh. Here, the usual connotation of meat being animal and flesh being human is displaced, for the girl discovers her 'fleshly nature' through establishing an equal relationship with a beast. If meat is something 'intended for consumption',⁵⁷ Carter speculates in *The Sadeian Woman*, women as objects of exchange between men are better called meat than flesh. Flesh, 'the instrument of love',⁵⁸ is absent in a masculine economy which denies the idea of free and mutual exchange between men and women. What if woman re-appropriates the body which man, opposing it to the soul, has separated from himself and has given to woman and beast? Can we then not begin to imagine, through this mimeticism, the opening up of an excessive space where 'feminine libido' would cease to be an oxymoron? The girl is now transformed: 'I felt I was at liberty for the first time in my life' (p. 64).

Her metaphysical transformation is followed by a physical one. Back in the Beast's palazzo, the heroine finds that her father, having received a tremendous amount

⁵⁷ Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* (London: Virago, 1993), p. 137.

⁵⁸ *The Sadeian Woman*, p. 150.

of money from the Beast, now summons her. Despite her father's and the Beast's expectation, however, she decides not to go back to her father; instead, she sends him the Beast's clockwork maid, which resembles her former self, dressed in her own clothes to perform the daughter's role in patriarchal society. She then begins to take off all her clothes, feeling as if she is 'stripping off [her] own underpelt', before the indifferent eyes of the mechanical maid which objectify her body as 'the cold, white meat of contract' in 'the market place, where the eyes that watch you take no account of your existence', which is the world she has lived in as a commodity (p. 66). Naked except for a pair of diamond earrings made of the Beast's tears, she clutches a fur cloak and proceeds to the Beast's den. The whole household has gone through transformation as well; the simian valet strips his clothes off to reveal his own fur, and the furs the heroine wears resolve into a pack of squeaking rats.

The tiger, having abandoned his human disguise, is now pacing up and down his reeking den. The heroine calls up her nursery fears:

He will gobble you up.

Nursery fears made flesh and sinew; earliest and most archaic of fears, fear of devourment. The beast and his carnivorous bed of bone and I, white, shaking, raw, approaching him as if offering, in myself, the key to a peaceable kingdom in which his appetite need not be my extinction. (p. 67)

Unlike Bettelheim's assuring narrative of transformation, the beast in this tale remains a beast. The fearful beasts which 'gobble you up' in nursery tales, however, do not materialise here, for the heroine is not afraid. The girl, abandoning her father who represents the human male, decides to become the tiger's bride, offering herself not as meat but as flesh, that which makes love possible. In other words, she offers herself not in economic terms but as a gift which does not involve a profitable return. Cixous

suggests that, although there is no absolutely 'free' gift, there can be an 'other' gift: 'How does she give? [...] She too gives *for*. She too, with open hands, gives herself—pleasure, happiness, increased value, enhanced self-image. But she doesn't try to "recover her expenses". She is able not to return to herself, never settling down, pouring out, going everywhere to the other'.⁵⁹

As the heroine holds out her hand, the tiger slowly approaches her, shattering everything in his house with his tremendous purring:

He dragged himself closer to me, until I felt the harsh velvet of his head against my hand, then a tongue, abrasive as sandpaper. 'He will lick the skin off me!'

And each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of shining hairs. My earrings turned back to water and tricked down my shoulders; I shrugged the drops off my beautiful fur. (p. 67)

In this last passage of 'The Tiger's Bride', the girl undergoes yet another stripping with the tongue of the tiger, which completes her transformation into a real (real in the fairy-tale sense) tiger, all fleshly and fully awakened to her own desire as a woman. We are invited to interpret the Beast in this tale as representing what is animal in her, or the libido itself, which Freud has denied to women and which the heroine eventually reclaims in *her* story.⁶⁰ 'The Tiger's Bride', then, can be read as an attempt to answer Freud's question; what a woman wants, the text suggests, is to desire, to be a desiring subject, as well as to be desired in a mutual relationship. It is important to recognise here that the

⁵⁹ Cixous, 'Sorties', p. 87.

⁶⁰ Merja Makinen, for instance, writes: 'Read the beasts as the projections of a feminine libido, and they become exactly that autonomous desire which the female characters need to recognize and reappropriate as a part of themselves (denied by the phallogocentric culture)'. Read in this light, Duncker's argument that the ending of 'The Tiger's Bride' presents 'the ritual disrobing of the willing victim of pornography' seems to be too narrow an interpretation. See Makinen, p. 12, and Duncker, p. 7.

heroine does not transform into a female predator like Sade's Juliette;⁶¹ Beauty and the Beast meet 'to assuage desire in a reciprocal pact of tenderness', as Carter puts in *The Sadeian Woman*.⁶² Solidity of the diamond earrings gives way to fluidity as the girl and the beast finally create a reciprocal relationship which admits neither of predator nor of victim, a relationship which exceeds masculine logic.

It is significant that the heroine's awakened sexuality is symbolised by the image of fluidity in the final scene of 'The Tiger's Bride'. It should be also recalled that the girl's mental transformation takes place by the river, the incessant flowing of water. In 'Volume-Fluidity', Irigaray claims that, since she has no *form*, woman is 'always already in a state of anamorphosis in which every figure becomes fuzzy'.⁶³ Under 'phallogocracy', however, woman's fluidity is in danger of freezing into 'phallomorphism', a morphology based on one and the same. That the tiger's tears turn into solid diamonds indicates that the flowing, woman's sexuality, is still repressed. When the girl is ready to embrace her own fleshly nature, the diamonds turn back into fluid; her transformation coincides with the liquefaction of solid ground.⁶⁴ The girl's sexuality does not solidify into a single, unified whole which has a definitive teleology; the tale ends when she has just begun to touch herself, to explore her sexual self hitherto untouched.

⁶¹ Avis Lewallen's reading of 'The Tiger's Bride' as endorsing the Sadeian framework of 'fuck or be fucked' misinterprets Carter's critique of Sade which argues that not only the passive Justine but also the aggressive Juliette is trapped within the dichotomy of masculine logic. See Avis Lewallen, 'Wayward Girls but Wicked Women?: Female Sexuality in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*', in *Perspectives on Pornography: Sexuality in Film and Literature*, ed. by Gary Day and Clive Bloom (London: Macmillan Press, 1988), pp. 144-58 (p. 149).

⁶² *The Sadeian Woman*, p. 8.

⁶³ *Speculum of the Other Woman*, p. 230.

⁶⁴ Referring to the transformation scene of 'The Tiger's Bride', Bacchilega writes: 'It values the flow of tears and water over the "for-ever" of diamonds, thus unlocking a frozen world'. See Bacchilega, p. 99.

Conclusion

Carter's reworking of 'Beauty and the Beast' first offers an analysis of the tale's patriarchal seduction and then suggests an empowering possibility for women. 'The Tiger's Bride' transforms 'Beauty and the Beast' into a story of a girl's sexual awakening. The reversed ending of this tale, however, is not totally unexpected; the possibility is already there in de Beaumont's original text and more evidently in its preceding versions. It is a possible outcome of a girl's sexual encounter with a man who, according to Bettelheim, first appears to her to be a beast.⁶⁵ 'The Tiger's Bride' re-appropriates Bettelheim's normative Oedipal interpretation by turning the Beast into a projection of Beauty's libido. Marriage, the traditional happy ending, is suggested ironically in the title 'The Tiger's Bride'; it is not the marriage in a Bettelheimian sense that brings about the happy ending of the tale (it is never said to have happened anyway). What makes us feel happy at the end of the tale is the extraordinary image of sensuality—'I shrugged the drops off my beautiful fur'—which evokes the fluid nature of feminine jouissance. 'The Tiger's Bride' reworks 'Beauty and the Beast' in such a way that a woman can embrace her own sexual desire, the Beast inside herself; in doing so, the tale gives one possible answer to the riddle of femininity. However, as Bacchilega suggests, Carter's reworking of 'Beauty and the Beast', while enabling Beauty to gain 'control over the path of her initiation process', also demonstrates 'how narrow that narrative path is, and how it shapes the heroine's conforming or contesting journey'.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Carter tries out different possibilities of the sexual encounter between the girl and the beast also in 'The Company of Wolves' and 'Wolf-Alice', her retellings of 'Little Red Riding Hood', both included in *The Bloody Chamber*.

⁶⁶ Bacchilega, p. 102.

Chapter 5

A Happy Ending for a Narcissistic Woman:

Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*

Fairy tales are stories of development, depicting a transformation of young protagonists into socially, psychologically and sexually mature beings. As I have suggested, however, traditional fairy tales reflect different developmental paradigms for the male and the female. One element of such normative paradigms concerns narcissism. This chapter will attempt to read Angela Carter's novel *Nights at the Circus* (1985) as a fairy tale about female narcissism which also involves a reconsideration of male narcissism. *Nights at the Circus* not only involves fairy-tale motifs but also, more significantly for my purpose, has a fairy-tale structure, presenting psycho-sexual development of the protagonists through magical adventures. Carter's fairy-tale novel, unlike traditional fairy tales, has two protagonists, one male and one female, in each of whose life-stories coexist the elements of both the male and the female fairy tales, and it ends with the merging of the life-stories of two individuals. If the fairy tale happy ending is always brought about by the union, if not the marriage, of two individuals, the novel seems to suggest, one may wish to hear two stories instead of one, to know how both characters develop into maturity and come to find happiness together. Before discussing *Nights at the Circus*, I will first examine the definition of narcissism.

On Narcissism

The term 'narcissism' comes from the myth of Narcissus. Narcissus, in Ovid's account,

is a young man of extraordinary beauty who unwittingly falls in love with his own image reflected in a pool of water. His unrequited love for the image of himself is Nemesis' punishment for his coldness towards his many admirers including Echo, the fairest of all nymphs. It is also what the prophet pronounces to be Narcissus' fate, that he will live long 'if he does not come to know himself'.¹ Narcissus, spellbound by his self-image which he finally recognises to be himself, pines away and dies.

Freud first used the term narcissism to account for homosexual object-choice in a note added to *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) in 1910.² Then, in the Schreber case (1911), Freud came to posit the two stages in sexual development, auto-erotism and object-love.³ It was in 'On Narcissism: An Introduction' (1914), that he fully integrated the notion of narcissism into the psychoanalytic theory, defining it 'structurally' rather than seeing it as a 'stage' in development.⁴

In 'On Narcissism: An Introduction', Freud distinguishes two types of narcissism, primary and secondary. Primary narcissism is a state in which an ego is entirely focused on itself. It is the original narcissism of a child who loves its own ego as the ideal ego and is characterised by a lack of differentiation between ego and id. As he grows up and is awakened to the discrepancy between his ideal ego and his actual ego, the individual tries to preserve this 'narcissistic perfection of childhood' by setting up in himself an 'ego ideal' on to which his self-love is now displaced.⁵ This ego ideal is what Freud later comes to term the super-ego, the 'censoring agency' which is in the first

¹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. by Mary Innes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), pp. 83-87 (p. 83).

² Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, in *PFL*, VII, pp. 31-169 (p. 56n).

³ Freud, 'Psycho-Analytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides)', in *PFL*, IX, pp. 129-223 (pp. 197-98).

⁴ J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Karnac, 1988), p. 255.

⁵ 'On Narcissism: An Introduction', in *PFL*, XI, pp. 59-97 (p. 88).

instance imposed from outside such as parents, teachers and society in general.⁶ Primary narcissism is found in every individual as a stage in the normal process of the development of the ego: 'The development of the ego consists in a departure from primary narcissism and gives rise to a vigorous attempt to recover that state. This departure is brought about by means of the displacement of libido on to an ego ideal imposed from without; and satisfaction is brought about from fulfilling this ideal'.⁷ This latter state, which Laplanche and Pontalis describe as 'a narcissism contemporaneous with the formation of the ego through identification with the other person',⁸ is called 'secondary' narcissism. In a secondary narcissistic state, libido is withdrawn from the loved objects and returned to its own ego. Secondary narcissism, Freud argues, is also satisfied by being loved: 'Loving in itself, in so far as it involves longing and deprivation, lowers self-regard; whereas being loved, having one's love returned, and possessing the loved object, raises it once more'.⁹ For Freud, the state of being in love is the seesaw between ego-libido and object-libido, i.e., between narcissism and object-love. Although loving the other necessarily impoverishes ego-libido, he argues, a damming-up of libido in the ego causes unpleasurable tension when ego-libido exceeds a certain amount: 'A strong egotism is a protection against falling ill, but in the last resort we must begin to love in order not to fall ill, and we are bound to fall ill if, in consequence of frustration, we are unable to love'.¹⁰

Freud distinguishes two kinds of object-choice, the 'anaclitic' or 'attachment' type and the narcissistic type: 'a human being has originally two sexual objects—himself

⁶ 'On Narcissism', p. 90.

⁷ 'On Narcissism', p. 95.

⁸ Laplanche and Pontalis, p. 256.

⁹ 'On Narcissism', p. 94.

¹⁰ 'On Narcissism', p. 78.

and the woman who nurses him'.¹¹ Here, one may want to ask: can the latter be distinguished from the former? And Freud admits that both kinds of object-choice are ego-syntonic in that it serves the purpose of satisfying the ego-instincts. He then points out the 'fundamental differences' between the male and female sexes in respect of their type of object-choice by claiming that the anaclitic type of object-choice is, 'properly speaking, characteristic of the male'.¹² In the case of the male subject,

[anaclitic object-choice] displays the marked sexual overvaluation which is doubtless derived from the child's original narcissism and thus corresponds to a transference of that narcissism to the sexual object. This sexual overvaluation is the origin of the peculiar state of being in love, a state suggestive of a neurotic compulsion, which is thus traceable to an impoverishment of the ego as regards libido in favour of the love-object.¹³

A man in love idealises the object of love to which he transfers his original self-love. The overvaluation of a loved object impoverishes a man's ego to such an extent that he appears self-less. It follows from this that a man's strong narcissism, his overvaluation of himself, lies in the heart of his object-love, for it is his original narcissism that he transfers to the sexual object, a woman who, as I will consider below, is thought to have retained her original narcissism.

A woman, according to Freud's following observation, loves only herself:

A different course is followed in the type of female most frequently met with, which is probably the purest and truest one. With the onset of puberty the maturing of the female sexual organs, which up till then have been in a condition of latency, seems to bring about an intensification of the original narcissism, and this is unfavourable to the development of a true object-choice with its accompanying sexual

¹¹ 'On Narcissism', p. 81.

¹² 'On Narcissism', p. 82.

¹³ 'On Narcissism', p. 82.

overvaluation. Women, especially if they grow up with good looks, develop a certain self-contentment which compensates them for the social restrictions that are imposed upon them in their choice of object. Strictly speaking, it is only themselves that such women love with an intensity comparable to that of the man's love for them. Nor does their need lie in the direction of loving, but of being loved; and the man who fulfils this condition is the one who finds favour with them.¹⁴

This does not seem to explain much; beautiful women are narcissistic because they are beautiful. Except that, if we suppose 'good looks' to be an approximation to the culturally approved images of beautiful women, it may be understood that what Freud is saying here is that women generally love the ideal images of beautiful women set up in themselves as the ego ideal. In other words, what Freud means by the beauty and the charm of narcissistic women can be regarded as a normative image of womanliness which such women incorporate as a superego in order to become loveable objects. In her 1929 essay entitled 'Womanliness as a Masquerade', Joan Riviere argues that there is no authentic womanliness behind the mask, that the essence and the masquerade are the same thing:

Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it—much as a thief will turn out his pockets and ask to be searched to prove that he has not stolen the goods. The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the 'masquerade'. My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing.¹⁵

What Freud regards as female narcissism, then, is not about loving one's own ego as an ideal ego which recognises no outside objects, but about loving or, rather, appearing to

¹⁴ 'On Narcissism', p. 82.

¹⁵ Joan Riviere, 'Womanliness as a Masquerade', *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. by Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Kaplan (London: Methuen, 1986), pp. 35-44 (p. 38).

love the normative image of ideal femininity which one is expected to perform in order to *be* a woman. If there is no innate femininity as such, the female subject, in order to exist in society at all, must keep projecting what society defines as the 'feminine' superego. For Lacan, the feminine masquerade, the woman's narcissistic turning of her own body into the phallus, is what veils the ideal phallus of the mother which neither sex ever possesses.¹⁶ Apart from the issue of feminine masquerade, there is another significant aspect of narcissism in women which Freud fails to notice, which is the female narcissism based on the girl's love for, and her identification with, her mother. The kind of narcissism which women are said to develop at the onset of puberty seems far more complex than a mere 'intensification of the original narcissism' as Freud assumes.

Instead of exploring the nature of female narcissism further, Freud swiftly shifts his attention to the importance of such narcissistic women *for men*:

The importance of this type of woman for the erotic life of mankind is to be rated very high. Such women have the greatest fascination for men, not only for aesthetic reasons, since as a rule they are the most beautiful, but also because of a combination of interesting psychological factors. For it seems very evident that another person's narcissism has a great attraction for those who have renounced part of their own narcissism and are in search of object-love. The charm of a child lies to a great extent in his narcissism, his self-contentment and inaccessibility, just as does the charm of certain animals which seem not to concern themselves about us, such as cats and the large beasts of prey. [...] It is as if we envied them for maintaining a blissful state of mind—an unassailable libidinal position which we ourselves have since abandoned.¹⁷

Here, Freud again makes clear that women's secondary narcissism is a continuation of

¹⁶ See Jacques Lacan, 'The Meaning of the Phallus', in *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École Freudienne*, ed. by Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, trans. by Jacqueline Rose (London: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 74-85.

¹⁷ 'On Narcissism', pp. 82-83.

the primary narcissism of an infant. In other words, he is arguing that women are egotistic like children (and also like cats and tigers) who care nothing about the outside world. This is why Freud feels that he has to make an excuse: 'Perhaps it is not out of place here to give an assurance that this description of the feminine form of erotic life is not due to any tendentious desire on my part to depreciate women'.¹⁸ But why should he think that he 'depreciates' women when he discusses their narcissism? Why does he make no mention here of the part of narcissism which 'normal' men have *not* abandoned? According to his theory, it must be recalled, it is the boy's narcissistic attachment to his penis that leads to the normal development of masculinity.

Freud's observation above on female narcissism must be considered in relation to his statement in 'Femininity', where he adds a definitive negative meaning to female narcissism:

Thus, we attribute a larger amount of narcissism to femininity, which also affects women's choice of object, so that to be loved is a stronger need for them than to love. The effect of penis-envy has a share, further, in the physical vanity of women, since they are bound to value their charms more highly as a late compensation for their original sexual inferiority.¹⁹

Freud here argues that this particular narcissism specific to the female stems from a feeling of inferiority which replaces the little girl's infantile narcissism. Female narcissism, therefore, is defined as a 'compensation' for woman's narcissistic 'wound'.²⁰

This explains and confirms the view Freud puts forward in 'On Narcissism' that to bear a

¹⁸ 'On Narcissism', p. 83.

¹⁹ 'Femininity', p. 166.

²⁰ When she discovers her lack, states Freud, the girl becomes aware of 'the wound to her narcissism'. See Freud, 'Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes', p. 337.

child can, as it were, 'cure' a narcissistic woman. He writes: 'Even for narcissistic women, whose attitude towards men remains cool, there is a road which leads to complete object-love. In the child which they bear, a part of their own body confronts them like an extraneous object, to which, starting out from their narcissism, they can then give complete object-love'.²¹ The child is supposed to dissolve a woman's sexual inferiority, the cause of her narcissism, for she can now love her own body once her child, which Freud equates with a penis, becomes a part of it.

In Freud's view, the love for a penis lies in the heart of narcissism in adults of both sexes. Female narcissism as it is described by Freud is a narcissistic projection of the ideal image of women for men; his definition of male object-love reflects the male subject's own narcissism. As Sarah Kofman points out, 'men's fascination with this eternal feminine is nothing but fascination with their own double, and the feeling of uncanniness, *Unheimlichkeit*, that men experience is the same as what one feels in the face of any double, any ghost, in the face of the abrupt reappearance of what one thought had been overcome or lost forever'.²² Freud's *femme fatale* is locked up in the male's projection of his own narcissism, frozen into an ice-cold figure only to be admired and not being capable of loving on her part. Narcissism in this sense—frigid women and ego-impooverished men—does not seem to help men and women to build a mutually satisfying relationship. Freud writes: 'The great charm of narcissistic women has, however, its reverse side; a large part of the lover's dissatisfaction, of his doubts of the woman's love, of his complaints of her enigmatic nature, has its root in this incongruity between the types of object-choice'.²³ Is there any way out of this 'incongruity'?

²¹ 'On Narcissism', p. 83.

²² Sarah Kofman, *The Enigma of Woman: Woman in Freud's Writings*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 56.

²³ 'On Narcissism', p. 83.

As I mentioned earlier, there is a different factor in female narcissism, different in the sense that it is derived not from the male desire for the phallic mother but from the girl's identification with her mother who loves her and whom she loves. In the development of the ego of the girl child, identification with the mother should develop strong narcissism in women, for the girl's love for the mother must be not only anaclitic but also narcissistic whereas for the boy his love for the mother is assumed to be only anaclitic. Freud dismisses this point in his discussion of female narcissism because he states elsewhere that the girl, when she discovers the lack of penis in her body as well as in her mother's, must develop hostility towards her mother.²⁴ But suppose that she does not? It may be argued that the girl's identification with the mother, which continues even after the 'discovery' of their shared lack, blurs the strict distinction between the anaclitic type and the narcissistic type, for, if the girl identifies with 'the woman who nurses' her, is it possible to decide whether her object-choice is anaclitic or narcissistic?

Carter's *Nights at the Circus* can be seen as an attempt to re-define female narcissism from a woman's point of view and to re-evaluate it as a positive element in a girl's development into an adult woman. It does so by using the familiar fairy-tale formula and by transforming it in such a way as to suggest a different developmental paradigm which need not be detrimental to either sex. The story of Fevvers, the heroine of *Nights at the Circus*, follows the plots of 'Sleeping Beauty' and 'Cupid and Psyche', which are intercepted by 'Bluebeard' episodes in the middle. In these fairy tales of romance, the heroines are at first preoccupied with, as well as locked up in, their own beauty but are later awakened to object-love. It is in this sense that these tales can be

²⁴ In 'Femininity', Freud writes: 'The turning away from the mother is accompanied by hostility; the attachment to the mother ends in hate. A hate of that kind may become very striking and last all through life'. See 'Femininity', p. 155.

read as stories about female narcissism, about the transition from self-love to object-love in the female subject. In rewriting these familiar fairy tales, *Nights at the Circus* suggests that female narcissism may not have to be resigned altogether in order to love the other; on the contrary, narcissism, the ability to love oneself, is what is needed to establish a reciprocal relationship with the other.

Sleeping Inside Her Beauty: Fevvers's Story

'Sleeping Beauty' is probably the fairy tale most frequently attacked by feminists from Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan to Hélène Cixous and Teresa de Lauretis.²⁵ The heroine wakes up from a hundred years of sleep to find herself to be the object of someone else's desire, left with no choice but surrendering herself to the man who discovers and saves her. In 'Sleeping Beauty', a beautiful woman wakes up from her narcissistic slumber to the demand of the outside world that her self-sufficiency be replaced by her submission to her male saviour. Sleeping Beauty's development into femininity seems problematic to us because it leaves out the fulfilment of her object-love while highlighting the renouncement of her self-love which leads to the story's happy ending.

Bruno Bettelheim's interpretation of 'Sleeping Beauty' reflects the view that this fairy tale romance represents the girl's normal development into femininity, which consists in her renouncement of self-love for object-love. According to Bettelheim, the central topic of 'Sleeping Beauty' is the period of passivity and lethargy at the start of puberty. During this period which immediately precedes and follows their first

²⁵ See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. by H. M. Parshley (London: Pan, 1988), particularly pp. 215-16; Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (London: Gollancz, 1963), particularly pp. 127, 304; Hélène Cixous, 'Sorties', particularly pp. 66-67; and de Lauretis, particularly p. 133.

menstruation, girls withdraw their attention from the outside world and concentrate on their inner selves.²⁶ The heroine's pricking of her finger which puts her into a long sleep, he suggests, symbolises the first menstruation which is the 'curse' handed down to her from an old woman with a spindle.²⁷ Sleeping Beauty's long-lasting sleep represents the period during which she completely turns inwards and concentrates all her mental energy on the contemplation of the self. Bettelheim reads 'Sleeping Beauty' as a fairy tale which thematises female narcissism, the apparent torpor caused by the girl's preoccupation with her own budding sexuality which, she believes, will be satisfied by her union with a perfect partner whom she dreamily awaits.

Like Freud, Bettelheim suggests that narcissistic women, represented in fairy tales in such figures as Sleeping Beauty and Snow White, are cold and totally insensitive to the outside world: 'During their sleep the heroines' beauty is a frigid one; theirs is the isolation of narcissism'.²⁸ For Bettelheim, 'Sleeping Beauty' is a warning against falling into such narcissistic withdrawal which would paralyse the girl's development into a 'normal' womanhood. Only by relinquishing her narcissism, he seems to claim, can Sleeping Beauty become a 'woman', and it is the male subject's desire for her that breaks her open: 'The kiss of the prince breaks the spell of narcissism and awakens a womanhood which up to then has remained undeveloped. Only if the maiden grows into woman can life go on'.²⁹ I am here concerned with what such a 'womanhood' aroused by the kiss of the prince may consist in.

To bring about the full sexual implication of the tale, Bettelheim chooses to

²⁶ Bettelheim rigorously denies the gender specificity of this tale in the early part of his argument but nevertheless goes on to discuss its exclusively 'female' nature.

²⁷ Bettelheim, p. 233.

²⁸ Bettelheim, p. 234.

²⁹ Bettelheim, p. 234.

discuss Basile's version called 'Sun, Moon, Talia'. The princess Talia falls into a deathlike sleep when she pricks her finger with a splinter of hemp. A foreign king, who happens to pass by, falls in love with her and lives with her for a while. He soon leaves and forgets all about her. Meanwhile, Talia bears two children, Sun and Moon, while fast asleep. She awakes when one of her babies sucks the splinter out of her pricked finger. One day the king remembers his adventure and returns to Talia. He has his wife, who attempts to kill Talia and her children out of jealousy, thrown into the fire, and marries Talia. This version of the 'Sleeping Beauty' tale, in Bettelheim's view, makes clear that the ultimate femininity consists in motherhood: 'Female completeness is not achieved when falling in love, not even in intercourse, nor in childbirth [...] but complete selfhood [of the female] comes only with having given life, and with nurturing the one whom one has brought into being: with the baby sucking from the mother's body'.³⁰ For Bettelheim, 'Sleeping Beauty' is a specifically female tale because it celebrates the girl's entrance into motherhood which he calls 'the summit of femininity'³¹; it is through her nursing her child (whom Bettelheim invariably refers to as 'he') that she is reawakened to life as a fully developed female, i.e., a mother. Bettelheim adds that, even in the tale's later abridged forms such as Perrault's and the Grimms' versions, 'we feel [...] that she is the incarnation of perfect femininity'.³² Here again, we find the phallocentric solution to female narcissism; even a beautiful woman can develop object-love as she bears and nurses a (male) child. Although Bettelheim does not explicitly mention it, Freud's equation *penis = child* plays a significant part in Bettelheim's interpretation of 'Sleeping Beauty'. In this view, development into femininity is completed when a woman

³⁰ Bettelheim, p. 235.

³¹ Bettelheim, p. 235.

³² Bettelheim, p. 236.

relinquishes her self-love for her love for a penis in the form of a child.

It is interesting to compare Bettelheim's reading of the female fairy tale of development with his reading of 'Jack and the Beanstalk', one of the most popular hero tales, which, as we saw earlier, Peter Brooks considers as paradigmatic of the male plot of ambition. Bettelheim argues that the meaningfulness of 'Jack and the Beanstalk' lies in its advocacy of 'the desirability of social and sexual self-assertion in the pubertal boy, and the foolishness of a mother who belittles this'.³³ Jack the hero asserts his masculine self through the power of the 'phallic beanstalk', on which 'the child will climb into the sky to achieve a higher experience'.³⁴ With his 'newly discovered sexual equipment',³⁵ Jack takes possession of the giant's properties, slays him, and returns to his mother. It is typical of Bettelheim's argument that here he introduces another version of the 'Jack' tale to complement his formulation of the hero tale as the reflection of the male child's sexual and social development. The tale called 'Jack and His Bargains', according to Bettelheim, better presents the Oedipal problems of a little boy because of its focus on 'a battle for dominance between son and father' rather than on a mother-son conflict.³⁶ Again, it is a story of the young hero's 'phallic self-assertion', and this time, he gains a magic stick which beats up his enemies including his father when he says: 'Up stick and at it' (a phallic connotation here is even more obvious than in the case of the beanstalk).³⁷ It is important to Bettelheim that the hero of this version gains a princess at the end. After sleeping beside her without touching her for three nights and thus demonstrating not only sexual power but also sexual self-control, the hero proves himself

³³ Bettelheim, p. 184.

³⁴ Bettelheim, pp. 187, 190.

³⁵ Bettelheim, p. 187.

³⁶ Bettelheim, p. 184.

³⁷ Bettelheim, p. 187.

as a sexually and socially mature being and lives happily ever after with his wife.

Read in this light, the typical hero fairy tale shows that the male child develops masculinity on the basis of his narcissistic interest in his penis. In the 'Jack' tales, the boy turns outward, rather than inward, to prove the magical power of his penis. What appears to be object-love, i.e., the acquisition of the beautiful princess, serves to satisfy the male subject's desire to aggrandise the self by enhancing his narcissism. The desire of the narrative of male narcissism demands the surrender of the sought-after person in his adventure, i.e., a beautiful woman who, through masquerade, appears to him to be the omnipotent phallus of his ideal. Sleeping Beauty, with her frigidity and indifference, is a narcissistic woman *par excellence*, an ideal object to be fetishised by the male. The story of Sleeping Beauty, whom Bettelheim calls 'the incarnation of perfect femininity', presents the female as a static space to be conquered by the male subject at the end of *his* story of development and narcissistic self-assertion. The masculine desire of the narrative demands that the self-loving woman to whom he transfers his self-love should give herself away, discard her own self-love, and become his possession as a reward. Her happiness, as Bettelheim assures us, will be complete when her child brings her the sought-after object, i.e., a penis.

Fevvers, the heroine of Angela Carter's novel *Nights at the Circus*, however, resists this fairy tale convention and wishes to preserve her own sense of the self which she calls her 'me-ness', 'unique and indivisible', after her happy union with her lover.³⁸ Fevvers's story suggests that narcissism in women is not necessarily what Freud assumes it is, i.e., a compensation for sexual inferiority. Her story requires us to re-consider Freud's notion of female narcissism which is defined exclusively in terms of passivity as

³⁸ Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus* (London: Pan, 1985), p. 280. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

the desire to be the loved object of the other. If narcissism in woman is regarded not only as reflective—I love myself which is loved by men—but also as self-sufficient as is the case with her narcissistic identification with the female figure who loves her and whom she loves, a woman does not necessarily have to give up her own selfhood in order to love and to be loved by her partner. Instead, she can love the other as her mother loved her *and* continue to love herself, which is identified with the loving and loved object. Carter's story of a narcissistic woman suggests that female narcissism is not in itself such a bad thing which must be discarded altogether in a happy love relationship as Freud assumes (although he seems to prefer remaining an unhappy lover who pines for a cold beautiful woman); on the contrary, it is essential for a woman to love her own self in order to establish a reciprocal relationship with the other.

Fevvers is a star aerialist at the end of the nineteenth century, who is billed as the 'Cockney Venus' and who calls herself 'Helen of the High Wire' (p. 7). Fevvers, a marvellous bird-woman, is a narcissistic woman *par excellence*. Since she was seven years old, she has been a '*tableau vivant*', cast in such symbolic roles as Cupid, the Winged Victory and the Goddess of Death (p. 23). Her life, as she herself acknowledges, has been an 'apprenticeship in *being looked at*—in being the object of the eye of the beholder' (p. 23). This is how she has become a connoisseur of what Laura Mulvey calls '*to-be-looked-at-ness*'.³⁹ As the object of the look, Fevvers professionally specialises in femininity, which calls up the Lacanian image of femininity described by Eugénie Lemoine-Luccioni as follows: 'In thus offering herself to the look, in giving herself for sight, according to the sequence: see, see oneself, give oneself to be seen, be

³⁹ Mulvey, p. 11.

seen, the girl—unless she falls into the complete alienation of the hysteric—provokes the Other to an encounter and a reply which give her pleasure'.⁴⁰ Spreading her wings on stage, Fevvers derives such pleasure from the spectators' look: 'Look at me! With a grand, proud, ironic grace, she exhibited herself before the eyes of the audience as if she were a marvellous present too good to be played with. Look, not touch' (p. 15).

Unlike the Lacanian feminine woman, Fevvers is not totally absorbed in to-be-looked-at-ness, for she is also 'ironic', all the time calculating the money she receives for the service. She calculates her effects and 'performs' gestures of 'grand, vulgar, careless generosity' (p. 12). Besides being an accomplished performer, she is a successful entrepreneur with her own body as her sole capital. Money is her primary concern: 'You'd never think she dreamed, at nights, of bank accounts, or that, to her, the music of spheres was the jingling of cash registers' (p. 12). She appears to be in control of her self as well as of her income. If there is any self behind her public self, it is her practicality, or rather, her greed for money, which she is careful not to reveal to anyone except Lizzie, her foster-mother, who is still part of her self. Money, therefore, is her fetish in the sense of Marx's concept of commodity fetishism which, like Freud's theorisation of fetishism in psychoanalysis, appeared in the nineteenth century when capitalism began to blossom as the dominant principle. As Lizzie—a hard-core communist whose favourite opera is *'Marriage of Figaro'*, for the class analysis' (p. 53)—foresees, Fevvers's obsession with money almost destroys her when she is lured into Bluebeard's castle twice, blinded by her own desire for money. Perrault's 'Bluebeard' also indicates that the heroine marries her gruesome husband because of his enormous wealth. Fevvers, an independent working woman, does not have to *marry* a

⁴⁰ Eugénie Lemoine-Luccioni, *Partage des femmes* (Paris: Seuil, 1976), p. 85; cited and trans. by Stephen Heath in 'Difference', *Screen*, 19 (1978), 51-112 (p. 92).

Bluebeard; she can, by utilising her public image of goddess, exploit such male predators in order to increase her bank account.

Fevvers's femininity, although it is an ironic acting out of what a woman is conventionally thought to be like, nevertheless defines her 'me-ness', what she thinks she is. Her artificial blondness *is* part of her self. When, held as hostage in the middle of wilderness, she cannot make herself up as the public 'Fevvers' (there is no peroxide to dye her hair, no corset to mould her body), she begins to feel that she is losing her me-ness. Her self fades as her hair becomes less blonde. Her me-ness comes back to her when she regains her courageous, heroic self. When she searches out her beloved and tries to rescue him by making a spectacle of her body again, she receives the sense of her self returned to her from the awe-struck look of the spectators. Without the use of peroxide, she already feels more blond. Here, Fevvers can become Fevvers without a feminine masquerade, for her consciousness of me-ness has been developed and re-defined through her adventures. And, as I will show, the ending of the novel suggests that her selfhood will continue to be re-created in relation to Walser, who is to write down her, or rather their, life-story.

When she first meets Walser, Fevvers has not yet been ready to construct a reciprocal relationship with the other which is not defined in terms of (masculine) economy; her conception of a relationship is one obtaining between the object/commodity and the spectator/customer. But she knows that something in her is still asleep. Having lived as an object, a sign, a symbol for others, she feels that she, as a woman in flesh and blood, has not yet come out of a 'shell':

As for myself, I worked my passage on Ma Nelson's ship as living statue, and, during my blossoming years, from fourteen to seventeen, I existed only as an object in men's eyes after the night-time knocking on the door began. Such was my apprenticeship for life, since is it not to

the mercies of the eyes of others that we commit ourselves on our voyage through the world? I was as if closed up in a shell, for the wet white would harden on my face and torso like a death mask that covered me all over, yet, inside this appearance of marble, nothing could have been more vibrant with potentiality than I! Sealed in this artificial egg, this sarcophagus of beauty, I waited, I waited ... although I could not have told you for what it was I waited. Except, I assure you, I did *not* await the kiss of a magic prince, sir! With my two eyes, I nightly saw how such a kiss would seal me up in my *appearance* for ever! (p. 39)

Even after her huge success as an aerialist, Fevvers, like Sleeping Beauty, still awaits 'some special fate' which will awaken her dormant potentiality inside a glass casket. Unlike Sleeping Beauty, however, Fevvers is not going to give herself to a prince as a reward for his adventure, for she regards such a fate as a confinement for ever in the shell of her appearance, as a consolidation of her status as object. Her body, although others may confine it in whatever meanings they choose, is for her 'the abode of limitless freedom' (p. 41), that which will liberate and fly her away.⁴¹

Fevvers is brought up in a brothel, the home of Lizzie, who finds her as a baby abandoned in a basket. Ma Nelson, who runs the brothel, is a suffragist and, in her brothel, sex is sold and bought without any illusion; here in Ma Nelson's house, it is made clear that whores are working women who exchange their sex for money whereas in marriage this economic aspect of sex is concealed, disguised as love. Fevvers grows up in this all-female world of Ma Nelson's brothel where her foster-mothers educate and cherish her. It is in this place 'in which rational desires might be rationally gratified' that

⁴¹ Carter's creation of Fevvers as a woman who can (literally) fly may be related to Cixous's metaphorical use of the word '*voler*' (fly/steal): 'To fly/steal is woman's gesture, to steal into language to make it fly'. Morag Shiach's account of this process: to 'steal what they need from the dominant culture, but then fly away with their cultural booty to the "in between", where new images, new narratives, and new subjectivities can be created', aptly describes what Carter attempts to do in her reworking of old patterns in *Nights at the Circus*. See Cixous, 'Sorties', p. 96; and Morag Shiach, *Hélène Cixous: A Politics of Writing* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 23.

she comes to learn the true nature of the relationship between men and women in the times she lives in as well as the importance of female bonding in such times (p. 26). The time comes, however, when she has to fly from the nest, the paradise of her girlhood.

Before starting her career as an aerialist, Fevvers experiences a crisis in her life in Madame Schreck's 'museum of woman monsters', where she is locked up in her appearance which is now defined as that of a freak (p. 55). After Ma Nelson's sudden death, Fevvers enters Madame Schreck's house from bare necessity and starts to pose as 'the Angel of Death' at the head of the marble slab on which lies 'the Sleeping Beauty', the girl who, like Bettelheim's pubertal girl, has become a perpetual sleeper since the age of fourteen when her menses started (p. 70). This freak Sleeping Beauty is a grotesque parody of Sleeping Beauty, a fetishised image of a beautiful maiden who remains totally passive in her innocent slumber. She never wakes up, but dreams sad dreams, weeping in her endless sleep. No prince wakes this Sleeping Beauty, who remains nothing but an object of the desire of the male customers who, as Fevvers claims, are more freakish and 'unnatural' than the inmates of the freak show (p. 61). Fevvers eventually manages to free herself from incarceration in the freak house.

Fevvers becomes a star because people believe *and* do not believe—'Is she fact or is she fiction?' is her 'slogan' (p. 7)—that she is a woman with wings. Instead of submitting her abnormality, i.e., the fact that she has wings, to being put in a freak show, Fevvers mythologises her own body and turns it into a symbol of people's dream, imagination and desire. That people at once believe *and* do not believe her feathers leads us to suppose that her feathers figure as the phallus, as what Elizabeth Grosz describes as 'a fantasized emblem of power and sexuality that the infant commonly attributes to the mother', which is distinguished from the penis, a biological organ which men possess and

women lack and which is given the phallic status in 'a shared, cultural fantasy'.⁴² Fevvers is a phallic woman on stage; her feathers embody the fantasised phallus of the mother which is lost but whose absence is disavowed.

It is because of this disavowal that Fevvers's body becomes a fetish, a displaced phallus. Mr Rosencreuz and the Grand Duke, the two Bluebeard figures in *Nights at the Circus*, fetishise her winged body. Mr Rosencreuz, who wears round his neck a pendant of a winged phallus, buys Fevvers from Madame Schreck. He is a caricature of a phallocrat who, in Lacanian terms, not being content with *having* the phallus, desires to *be* the phallus himself. For him, Fevvers's body represents the power which can bestow on him what he most desires, i.e., a winged phallus which for him represents immortality. His desire is purely narcissistic in that it is entirely focused on the preservation of his own ego. His sexual impotence indicates that he is incapable of loving the other and that it is as if all of his libido were dammed up in his own ego, which, according to Freud, in turn has 'an exceedingly lowering effect upon self-regard'.⁴³ To satisfy his narcissistic desire and to overcompensate his feelings of inferiority, Mr Rosencreuz wishes to incorporate the omnipotence of the phallus which he attributes to his fetish, i.e., Fevvers's winged body. He wants to be united with her body which *is* the phallus in order to desire his own body and to *be* the desired phallus himself. He demands of Fevvers that she should come out of the bathroom neither naked nor clothed, that her castrated sex, which he both disavows and affirms, is neither exposed nor covered, for such is the very state on which the construction of the fetish is founded. Fevvers solves this riddle by covering her body with her long and abundant hair as if it were an extension to her pubic hair,

⁴² Elizabeth Grosz, 'Phallus: Feminist Implications', in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary*, ed. by Elizabeth Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 320-323, (p. 320).

⁴³ 'On Narcissism', p. 93.

which, if we follow Freud, is the most ‘natural’ way for women to hide their castrated sex of which they are all ashamed (here I am referring to Freud’s remark in his lecture on ‘Femininity’ that women might have invented the technique of ‘plaiting and weaving’ out of their unconscious wish to conceal their ‘genital deficiency’ with the pubic hair whose natural growth they imitate by practising this technique).⁴⁴

Mr Rosencreutz’s attitude towards his fetish is ambivalent; his worship of Fevvers’s body exists side by side with his desire to violate, or, to put it more precisely, to castrate it. On the one hand, he reveres Fevvers as an omnipotent goddess; he believes that a bird-woman, who is ‘neither one nor the other’ (p. 76), can give wings to the phallus which he believes is dragged downwards by the female genitalia, ‘the female part, or absence, or atrocious hole, or dreadful chasm, the Abyss, Down Below, the vortex that sucks everything dreadfully down, down, down where Terror rules’ (p. 77). On the other hand, what he intends to do in his ritual is to rape Fevvers with a blade in place of ‘his other weapon, poor thing, that bobbed about uncharged, unprimed, unsharpened’, as Fevvers describes it (p. 83). In ‘Fetishism’ (1927), Freud refers to ‘the two mutually incompatible assertions’ of a fetishist: ‘the woman has still got a penis’ and ‘my father has castrated the woman’.⁴⁵ By identifying himself with his father, the fetishist wishes to become the castrator of his revered object. Mr Rosencreutz’s attempt fails because he is totally unprepared to find that Fevvers, like himself, is also equipped with the phallus of the father—‘Quick as a flash, out with my own!’, says Fevvers in recalling her adventure (p. 83)—which is represented by a toy sword which she produces from her hair on the point of her castration. This time, Fevvers manages to escape from the Bluebeard’s castle with the help of her mascot sword which she inherited from Ma

⁴⁴ ‘Femininity’, pp. 166-67.

⁴⁵ Freud, ‘Fetishism’, in *PFL*, VII, pp. 345-57(p. 357).

Nelson, her other foster-mother who was dressed in Admiral's uniform. Her sword, however, is broken by the Grand Duke, the second Bluebeard figure in the novel. The Duke literally freezes her into an object of his fetish by having her life-size ice-sculpture made especially for her visit to his palace. Fevvers is almost added to his collection of 'marvellous and unnatural toys' as a bird-woman in a golden cage (p. 187).

Significantly, a woman, Madame Schreck, is not deluded by such a fantasy of the phallic woman. She knows precisely what kind of power Fevvers's body exercises over men and, instead of using that knowledge to protect the girl, exploits her as a commodity in her museum of woman monsters. If Lizzie and Ma Nelson, her foster-mothers in a brothel, represent the good mother figure who nourishes, protects and educates Fevvers, Madame Schreck (Madame Fright) is the evil stepmother who incarcerates her in a prison-like house where Fevvers is locked up in the image of her body as it is fetishised by men. As is customary with fairy tales, this witch-like figure is duly punished in the end for her desire for her own fetish, money.

Starting her career as an aerialist, Fevvers carefully constructs her public self as the Cockney Venus. Her femininity is excessive and squalid, with huge blue eyes, abundant peroxided blonde hair, full breasts, frilly garments in all colours and all the other paraphernalia of a vulgarised angel, a 'winged barmaid' rather than a divine goddess as Walser notes (p. 16). She bashes her long, thick eyelashes at him. She farts, gorges on an eel pie 'with gargantuan enthusiasm', and belches in front of him (p. 22), but all the time 'wary' of her effect on him (p. 11). In other words, Fevvers deliberately subverts the image of a high goddess. There is, as Walser notes, 'nothing subtle about her appeal, which was just as well if she were to function as the democratically elected divinity of the imminent century of the Common Man' (p. 12). However vulgar the role she performs may be, Fevvers nevertheless is an idol, a symbol, an object of admiration

and wonder. Her perfectly smooth, marble body on stage makes her body inaccessible and unimaginable to Walser.

Such a perfectly smooth and closed body of a narcissistic woman is what Peter Brooks foregrounds in his reading of Balzac's *La Peau de chagrin*, in which the protagonist Raphaël desires Foedora, who gives the novel's second part the title *La Femme sans coeur*:

Feodora represents the problem of desire in that, eminently desirable, she is herself impervious to desire, a smooth surface on which desire cannot take hold. *La Femme sans coeur* could in fact be considered a euphemism, and a displacement or metonymy, for another lack: the lack of sex, the lack of the bodily opening through which Raphaël's desire could find satisfaction. Such an interpretation forcibly presents itself to the reader in the curious and memorable scene in which Raphaël hides behind the curtains in Foedora's bedroom in order to see her undress. This eminently infantile scenario has its explicit motivation in the desire to see if Foedora has any hidden bodily defect that would explain her refusal to give in to erotic desire. When Raphaël sees her naked—yet slightly veiled by her light shift—there is no defect visible, but rather the absence of defect: the all-too-perfect, the marble body of the Medusa. Raphaël encounters here the significance of the absent phallus. Yet since the anatomy of this absence—part of Foedora's female 'perfection'—is veiled, itself an inaccessible absence, the sexual difference gives no passage to desire, no means of *appropriation of the object*. Rather, as in Freud's reading of the Medusa myth, it is the looking subject—the voyeur—who receives the mark of castration.⁴⁶

Brooks then goes on to claim that Foedora embodies what he calls the 'antithesis' of desire, the drive towards the end which will be at once its meaning and its destruction since 'Feodora is death, precisely the death of the desire which in her inaccessibility to desire she represents'.⁴⁷

In Brooks's view, the body of a narcissistic woman lacks the lack which marks

⁴⁶ Brooks, p. 57; my emphasis.

⁴⁷ Brooks, p. 57.

the sexual difference; instead, her body is a closed surface, a self-sufficient whole which castrates the man who beholds it. The lack of the lack here seems to amount to presence, for Foedora is given the status of a phallic woman because of the fact that her sex, or its absence, is *veiled* both literally and metaphorically. Because the lack which marks the female body is veiled, Foedora appears to lack nothing, which means to Raphaël that she has no desire for a penis which would fill the absence. Her narcissistic self-sufficiency is a threat to her admirer whose desire is, in Brooks's words, to 'appropriate' the woman as 'object'. At the same time, to imagine her as phallic, as not lacking, is to protect him from facing her sex unveiled. Raphaël fetishises Foedora's body as the holeless, sexless body, as what Brooks calls 'the all-too-perfect, the marble body of the Medusa', in order to avoid facing the fact that her sex is neither a phallus nor its lack.

In his short essay entitled 'Medusa's Head' (1922), Freud applies his theory that 'a terror of castration [...] is linked to the sight of something', in this case, of the female genitals, to the myth of Medusa.⁴⁸ Freud argues that, although her hair serves as 'a mitigation of the horror' by replacing a penis with snakes, Medusa's head represents 'the terrifying genitals of the Mother' according to the rule that 'a multiplication of penis symbols signifies castration'.⁴⁹ This is why, claims Freud, 'the sight of Medusa's head makes the spectator stiff with terror, turns him to stone'.⁵⁰ Since 'becoming stiff means an erection', the male spectator can console himself with the thought that 'he is still in possession of a penis, and the stiffening reassures him of the fact'.⁵¹ His possession of a

⁴⁸ Freud, 'Medusa's Head', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, XVIII, pp. 273-74 (p. 273).

⁴⁹ 'Medusa's Head', pp. 273-74.

⁵⁰ 'Medusa's Head', p. 273.

⁵¹ 'Medusa's Head', p. 273.

penis can be proved to himself only by the sight (imagined or represented in works of art) of its absence in the other. In 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1975), Cixous parodies Freud's statement above: 'it's the jitters that give them a hard-on! for themselves!'.⁵² Perseus cannot look Medusa in the face because he is afraid of death by petrification. Medusa's head, as a symbol of castration, is detachable and is attached to the aegis of Athena, the beautiful and formidable goddess of war who remains sexually unapproachable and who, in Freud's words, 'frightens and repels because she is castrated'.⁵³ 'But', asks Cixous, 'isn't this fear convenient for them? Wouldn't the worst be, isn't the worst, in truth, that women aren't castrated?'.⁵⁴ What if her sex is not the lack, but the presence of something else? Cixous writes: 'You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing'.⁵⁵ Such a laugh of the Medusa, as I will show, figures as the happy ending of *Nights at the Circus*, a fairy story about a narcissistic woman.

Significantly, Freud in the same essay refers to the act of displaying the genitals as 'an apotropaic act', which means 'what arouses horror in oneself will produce the same effect upon the enemy against whom one is seeking to defend oneself'.⁵⁶ He mentions a scene from Rabelais's *Pantagruel* in which 'the Devil took to flight when the woman showed him her vulva'.⁵⁷ But which does Freud mean, Rabelais or the woman,

⁵² Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Brighton: Harvester, 1981), pp. 245-64 (p. 255).

⁵³ 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p. 273.

⁵⁴ 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p. 255.

⁵⁵ 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p. 255.

⁵⁶ 'Medusa's Head', p. 274.

⁵⁷ 'Medusa's Head', p. 274. The frame story of Basile's seventeenth-century fairy tale collection *Il Pentamerone* may be relevant here. Seeing an angry hag display her genitals to rout a naughty boy, the princess, who has never smiled in her life, breaks out into a fit of laughter. Hearing such a merry laugh, the hag lays the princess under a curse which turns out to be the curse of love, the occasion of the tale's happy ending. It must be

when he refers to the 'one' who wishes to repel the enemy with the exposure of that which he or she fears, i.e., the female genitals? Certainly it cannot be the woman, for why should she be afraid of her own 'vulva' which in the Devil's eyes appears to be a 'huge and continuous cavity, extending in all directions'?⁵⁸ Rabelais's old woman succeeds in frightening away the Devil by making him believe that her vulva is the 'wound' inflicted by her husband, whom she describes as 'the devil-scratcher'.⁵⁹ The cunning woman wins the game by defiantly turning what Freud supposes to be a woman's 'narcissistic wound' into a powerful weapon. Freud fails to acknowledge the lack of horror on the woman's part in this instance of apotropaic exhibitionism and goes on to make a contrast between the act of showing the female genitals and that of exhibiting the penis, suggesting that the 'erect male organ has an apotropaic effect, but thanks to another mechanism'.⁶⁰ 'To display the penis (or any of its surrogates)', for Freud, 'is to say: "I am not afraid of you. I defy you. I have a penis"'.⁶¹ Male exhibitionism, in his view, is driven by 'unconscious narcissistic motive forces', whereas female exhibitionism is derived not from narcissism, but from the *male* horror of the female sex.⁶² However, why should we not assume an element of narcissistic defiance on *her* part when a woman reveals her sex to intimidate not only the Devil but also other kinds of men? Can we not hear the triumphant laughter of the Rabelaisian woman? This is what Cixous seems to imply when she writes: 'Let the priests tremble, we're going to

noted that it is only the princess who is laughing at the sight of the old woman's genitals; both the boy and her father, the latter being totally preoccupied with his effort to make his daughter laugh, suddenly disappear from the scene. It is very likely that they have taken to flight like the Devil in Rabelais's story.

⁵⁸ François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, trans. by J. M. Cohen (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), p. 549.

⁵⁹ Rabelais, p. 549.

⁶⁰ 'Medusa's Head', p. 274.

⁶¹ 'Medusa's Head', p. 274.

⁶² 'Medusa's Head', p. 274n.

show them our sexts!’.⁶³

Fevvers is a narcissistic, self-sufficient woman who wears Medusa's head. She displays her feathers as if to defy the spectators; her wings, like Medusa's snakes, compensate for *and* represent castration. Her story, however, ends neither in her death nor in the death of the male spectator, for *Nights at the Circus* is a story told not only from the perspective of a male subject but also from a fetishised narcissistic woman, a literary figure which has long been frozen into an object of men's desire in Western literary tradition, often referred to as *la femme fatale*, *la belle dame sans merci*, or *la femme sans coeur* as Balzac calls Foedora. And the male spectator, the novel tells us, is also 'reconstructed' in his story (p. 291). Walser, after undergoing his adventures, faces Fevvers's naked body which indeed lacks a bodily opening, in this case, a navel, which should be visible when the body is seen from the front. He does not, however, receive 'the mark of castration' as Brooks writes of Raphaël when he peeps at Foedora's slightly veiled body which seems to him to have no orifice; the lack of a navel in Fevvers's body witnessed by Walser here seems like a parody of the lack of sex in Foedora's body imagined by Raphaël the fetishist. But how does Walser come to be reconstructed?

The Story of Jack the Fearless

Walser's story is an adventure story with a radical twist, for it progresses through the degradation and the metaphorical stripping of the hero and the conventional masculinity he represents. At the beginning of the novel, Walser is presented as a fearless hero who has already gone through dangerous adventures and who now needs his reward, a woman; at the same time, he is revealed to be a Sleeping Beauty who is yet to be awoken

⁶³ 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p. 255.

to a different state of consciousness. His encounter with Fevvers leads him to go through a process of gradual awakening to the recognition of his inner self, rather than a course of aggrandising and establishing his self as a masculine subject as in the conventional male fairy tale plot. The desire to dissolve 'normal' masculinity and reconstruct it into something else, in fact, lies in the heart of the narrative of *Nights at the Circus*. This desire, as I will show, is rather violent, once tearing the hero into pieces in order to make a different being out of him.

Walser's story is first of all related to the Grimms' fairy tale called 'A Tale about the Boy Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was', to which the novel makes an explicit reference by stating that Walser is 'like the boy in the fairy story who does not know how to shiver' (p. 10). The hero of the Grimms' 'A Tale about the Boy Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was' is a numbskull who can 'neither learn nor understand anything' and does not know 'how to get the creeps'.⁶⁴ When he grows up, his father casts him out after failing to make him learn what fear is with the help of a sexton who poses as a ghost in the church steeple. On the road, while keeping saying to himself, 'If I could only get the creeps! If I could only get the creeps!',⁶⁵ the boy meets a man who promises him to make him get the creeps by sending him to the gallows from which seven hanged men are swinging. The boy again fails to feel fear, and is then told by an innkeeper about the haunted castle where great treasures are guarded by evil spirits. Anyone who can spend three nights in the castle, it is said, will set the treasures free and win the hand of the king's daughter. The boy, who is now a handsome young man, succeeds in spending three nights in the castle without being scared by the evil spirits

⁶⁴ 'A Tale about the Boy Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was', in Zipes, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, pp. 12-20 (p. 12).

⁶⁵ Zipes, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, p. 14.

who try to harm him. He thus saves the castle, marries the beautiful princess, and lives very happily with her. However, he still keeps saying, 'If I could only get the creeps! If I could only get the creeps!', which begins to annoy his wife. One night, his wife, as suggested by her chambermaid, pours a bucket full of cold water and minnows on him while he is asleep: 'Then the little fish began flapping all over him, causing him to wake up and exclaim, "Oh, I've got the creeps! I've got the creeps! Now I know, dear wife, just what the creeps are"''.⁶⁶

'A Tale about the Boy Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was' apparently conforms to the typical plot pattern of the hero fairy tale in which the hero slays monsters and gains wealth, power, and a princess. What makes this tale peculiar is the nature of the object which the hero lacks and in search of which he sets out on a quest, for fear is an emotional quality which is rarely required of a fairy-tale character. Fear is exactly the opposite of what the hero is usually expected to demonstrate in his adventure: courage. One cannot, however, have courage unless one can feel fear; fear is the condition of courage, which is one of the most important qualities that fairy tale heroes have to learn in order to live happily ever after. Since he does not and cannot feel anything, the boy's ostensibly courageous acts in fact do not require courage which by definition is the overcoming of fear. As the etymology of the word 'courage' suggests (*cor* means 'heart' in Latin), he has no heart, being incapable of feeling any emotion whether it is fear, courage or, indeed, love.

What happens if the object of the quest is not material, political and sexual success but fear, the very mental quality that is generally thought to hinder a hero in his progress? Owing to the peculiar nature of his sought-after object, the customary fairy

⁶⁶ Zipes, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, p. 20.

tale happy ending of marriage and enthronement does not offer the hero of 'A Tale about the Boy Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was' complete satisfaction. The story, therefore, does not end there; he is still heard to be repeating, 'If I could only get the creeps! If I could only get the creeps!'. Because he fails to feel fear even when the most gruesome spirits come in flocks in the haunted castle, his psychological defect is not going to be cured by any such customary test of courage. In order to shudder or to get the creeps, he has to learn to *feel*. It is his wife helped by her chambermaid who puts an end to his quest by teaching him what fear is. Their marital bed, the place where she shows him, unmistakably suggests the sexual nature of this revelation which finally makes the hero fully satisfied. Bettelheim ascribes the hero's lack of fear to 'repression of all sexual feelings' and argues that 'it was sexual anxiety that led to the hero's inability to shudder'.⁶⁷ By repressing all feelings, suggests Bettelheim, these heroes 'protect themselves from discovering exactly what they are anxious about'.⁶⁸ Bettelheim, therefore, sees their 'absence of feelings' as 'the void left by their repression'.⁶⁹ If we follow his argument, then, to fill this void or the gap in the consciousness of the male subject can be seen as the theme and the driving force of 'A Tale about the Boy Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was'.

Yet what exactly is the nature of this 'void' made by the hero's sexual fear? And what is it that scares the boy out of his wits in bed? There is what Bettelheim calls 'a subtlety' in this tale; 'fear' in the title is replaced by 'shudder' in the boy's consciousness. For Bettelheim, 'repugnance' which the anxiety-riddled subject feels about the sexual act makes him 'shudder', but does not arouse 'active fear'.⁷⁰ Although

⁶⁷ Bettelheim, p. 281.

⁶⁸ Bettelheim, p. 280.

⁶⁹ Bettelheim, p. 280.

⁷⁰ Bettelheim, p. 281.

Bettelheim does not elaborate on it any further, this slippage seems to be important in the interpretation of the tale.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud makes a distinction between ‘fright’, ‘fear’, and ‘anxiety’ (*Schreck*, *Furcht*, and *Angst* in German) in his discussion of traumatic neurosis:

‘Anxiety’ describes a particular state of experiencing the danger or preparing for it, even though it may be an unknown one’. ‘Fear’ requires a definite object of which to be afraid. ‘Fright’, however, is the name we give to the state a person gets into when he has run into danger without being prepared for it; it emphasizes the factor of surprise.⁷¹

If we follow Freud’s definition here, the feeling the hero of the fairy tale wants to learn seems to correspond to ‘fright’. The boy is taken by surprise when a pail of cold water full of minnows is poured over his body during his sleep. The factor of surprise also plays the decisive part in the French variant of ‘A Tale about the Boy Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was’ called ‘Yann the Fearless’, in which the hero is frightened out of his wits when the princess cuts open a loaf of bread with a live bird in it.⁷² Whatever the act of the female partner may be, it is the fright it causes that seems to lead the story to its happy ending. If what causes the hero’s fright is attributed to his female partner, we may assume that he discovers something in the female about which he has not yet been prepared to know. Read in this light, the word used in the title of the Grimms’ tale ‘fear’ (*Fürchten*) may be seen as suggesting what the boy has to be afraid of, although he, as an unconscious fairy-tale hero, has no access to this knowledge; and the narrative itself

⁷¹ *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, pp. 281-82.

⁷² See ‘Yann the Fearless’, in *Folktales of France*, ed. by Genevière Massignon, trans. by Jacqueline Hyland (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), pp. 3-8.

seems to 'forget' the feared object as it goes on, thereby facing it at the end of the story as if in another 'fright'. Can the tale, then, be related to the fear of castration, the male fear of the female sex which reminds him of the possibility of the loss? Is the boy frightened by the lack of a penis, that part of his body which gives him self-assurance? And why is the wife so eager to tell him about it?

The princess in 'Yann the Fearless' teaches the hero what fear is because she loves him. She wants to marry him but he insists that he will not marry until he learns what fear is. Her desire for him, like a bucket full of cold water poured over his body in his sleep, wakes up the dormant part of his self. It may be argued, therefore, that it is the female desire that brings about the happy ending of this story, filling the gap in the narrative. 'A Tale about the Boy Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was' is not necessarily about that customary object of male fear to which Bettelheim so vaguely alludes. As I will argue below, Carter's reworking of 'A Tale about the Boy Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was' in *Nights at the Circus* explores a different interpretation of the tale which suggests that fear is related to the loss not of the penis but of love when one recognises its mutual nature.

Jack Walser is a young and handsome reporter from California who comes to London to interview Fevvers, the most famous aerialist of the time. Walser is said to have travelled around all over the world since he stowed away on a steamer as a 'scapegrace urchin' (p. 9). Blessed with luck like all fairy-tale heroes throughout his adventuring, he has successfully made his way in the world. Having gone through 'a picaresque career which rubbed off his own rough edges', he now 'boasts the smoothest of manners' (p. 9). All the world's catastrophes he has witnessed so far, however, have not 'altered to any great degree the invisible child inside the man, who indeed remained the same dauntless lad'

dreaming of 'an endless promise' beyond the horizon (p. 10). He 'loved to hear his bones rattle', but 'if he was afraid of nothing, it was not because he was brave; like the boy in the fairy story who does not know how to shiver' (p. 10). Like the hero in 'A Tale about the Boy Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was', Walser is afraid of nothing not because he is brave but because he does not know '*how* to be afraid' (p. 10). In the story of Walser, to know how to be afraid is related to the capacity to know one's '*self*': 'In all his young life, he had not felt so much as one single quiver of introspection' (p. 10). Lacking introspection, he 'had not experienced his experience *as* experience' (p. 10). He makes a good reporter precisely because of this defect; he is an observer without any personal feelings. Although he has undergone his own picaresque adventures which have apparently made a man of him, Walser is still 'unfinished' (p. 10), or, as Fevvers's foster-mother Lizzie puts it, 'not hatched out, yet' (p. 171). He still has to undergo a rite of passage which will furnish him with feelings. To 'experience *as* experience', he has yet to learn to *feel*, to learn what fear is.⁷³

Jack is the generic name for the English fairy-tale heroes who slay giants and rescue beautiful maidens. Like a typical fairy-tale hero, Jack Walser lacks introspection and, therefore, is free from anxieties. Like Jack in 'Jack the Giant-Killer', Walser moves without fear from one adventure to the next. His worldly sophistication, scepticism and self-composure, however, begin to falter as he listens to Fevvers's outlandish autobiographical story which she calls 'the truth' (p. 34). While he runs his scrupulous pen on his notebook in her dressing room, Fevvers talks, farts, eats, and belches.

⁷³ Victor J. Seidler argues that the identification of masculinity with reason since the Enlightenment has fragmented men's experience, preventing them from developing any meaningful relation with their emotions, feelings, needs, and desires. See Victor J. Seidler, *Rediscovering Masculinity: Reason, Language and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1989), particularly pp. 14-21.

Fevvers's excessive bodiliness and her narrative which, like Sheherazade's, draws him into an all-night session of storytelling, begin to work on him, shaking his reason and intriguing him into deciding to 'spend a few nights at the circus' in order to write a story about her (p. 91). He is fascinated by the 'unguessable depths' reflected in Fevvers's eyes (p. 30), which suggest the presence of a world still unexplored by him, which is the unfathomable depth of the other and the equally infinite depth of his inner self. Walser thus sets out on a quest, this time, not as an observer but with himself involved in the story he records.

The first stage of Walser's initiation takes place in the circus of Colonel Kearney, which he joins as a clown. Walser tells his London chief: 'It's the ambition [...] of every red-blooded American kid to run away with the circus' (p. 90). To 'run away with the circus', at this point, is still felt to be another of those adventures which he records as an observer and from which he comes back unchanged. The city of St Petersburg, where the circus holds the first performance in their world tour, is superimposed on Walser's present state: 'this Sleeping Beauty of a city, stirs and murmurs, longing yet fearing the rough and bloody kiss that will awaken her' (p. 97). Like Fevvers, Walser is a Sleeping Beauty who remains asleep in the depth of his heart and, in the course of this adventure, he is to be awakened by a 'rough and bloody kiss'.⁷⁴ For Bettelheim, as I considered earlier, 'The Sleeping Beauty' represents the period of passivity during adolescence which throws a child into a quiet concentration on itself. It is during this period of apparent quiescence that children achieve introspection which is needed for their psychological maturity. Going through 'a series of cataclysmic shocks'

⁷⁴ Andrew Teverson points out that *Nights at the Circus* 'masculinises' the female model by presenting Walser as a male Sleeping Beauty. See Andrew Teverson, 'It Was So, It Was Not So: The Use of Fairy Tale in the Fiction of Angela Carter and Salman Rushdie' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, 1999), p. 89.

during his adventures as a reporter, Walser seems to have already achieved what is usually considered as manhood. However, his growth concerns only the surface: 'sandpaper his outsides as experience might, his inwardness had been left untouched' (p. 10). Driven by the desire to master the outside world, to get over yet another crisis in an unknown place, Walser endlessly seeks for an external stimulus, which only deflects him from facing his own inner self. To develop his inwardness, he must spend a long period of contemplation on his inner being, putting aside his usual consciousness of the outside world. Such a process of inner growth through both experience and contemplation, as Bettelheim also claims to be the case, is not gender-specific. The problem with Bettelheim's interpretation of fairy tales is that, in his attempt to deny sexual stereotyping in fairy tales, he often resorts to the Jungian principle of the union within one individual of the two opposite elements of the masculine and the feminine, assuming that such a union nevertheless helps protagonists to achieve conventional gender identity, either masculine or feminine. In the case of 'Sleeping Beauty', Bettelheim ends up demonstrating the specifically *female* nature (the distaff which causes bleeding as a penis, the evil fairy's curse as menstrual bleeding, and so on) of such adolescent inactivity. By choosing to analyse the Italian version of the tale 'Sun, Moon, and Talia', in which the heroine is raped and then bears two children while asleep, Bettelheim comes to the conclusion that 'Sleeping Beauty' is a tale about female sexuality which is to be physically broken open by male sexual aggression which, he suggests, is replaced by a kiss in the popular versions of the tale.⁷⁵ It is in this sense that he regards Sleeping

⁷⁵ It must be noted that Perrault's tale depicts Sleeping Beauty awakening on her own accord at the end of her hundred years of sleep *before* being kissed by the prince who happens to be there at the right moment. It may be argued that the scene of the heroine's awakening in Perrault's version gives the theme of the tale its due, highlighting the girl's inner maturity which is achieved just before she meets her prince.

Beauty as 'the incarnation of perfect femininity'. Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, however, reminds us that we must resist such gendering of Sleeping Beauty, for her sleep can be seen as representing a period of inactivity and self-imposed seclusion necessary for the psychological development of *both* the female and the male.

The first step in Walser's inner development is clowning, which requires the ability to stand humiliation. The art of clowning depends on the ability to degrade everything, to transform everything in the world including oneself to the sphere of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the 'material bodily stratum', that which is the opposite of reason and spirituality.⁷⁶ Walser, in his thick make-up of a clown, begins to perceive the gap between appearance and the inside, the fissure which problematises the apparently seamless relationship between them. This perspective gives him 'a vertiginous sense of freedom', making him experience 'the freedom that lies behind the mask, within dissimulation, the freedom to juggle with being, and, indeed, with the language which is vital to our being' (p. 103). Walser's newly acquired freedom to play with being and language, with what is real and what is imaginary, is what Bakhtin defines as the effect of the mask: '[The mask] contains the playful element of life; it is based on a peculiar interrelation of reality and image'.⁷⁷ The mask in this post-Romantic novel, however, has another meaning unknown in folk culture, one which Bakhtin calls 'the Romantic mask'

⁷⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 41. Several critics have discussed *Nights at the Circus* in terms of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque. See, for instance, Paulina Palmer, 'From "Coded Mannequin" to Bird Woman: Angela Carter's Magic Flight', in *Women Reading Women's Writing*, ed. by Sue Roe (Brighton: Harvester, 1987), pp. 179-205; Rory P. B. Turner, 'Subjects and Symbols: Transformations of Identity in *Nights at the Circus*', *Folklore Forum*, 20 (1987) 39-60; and Elaine Jordan, 'Enthralment: Angela Carter's Speculative Fictions', in *Plotting Change: Contemporary Women's Fiction*, ed. by Linda Anderson (London: Arnold, 1990), pp. 19-40.

⁷⁷ Bakhtin, p. 40.

which reveals a 'terrible vacuum, a nothingness' lurking behind it.⁷⁸ In a blizzard, the Colonel's clowns all dissolve into nothingness.

The humiliation Walser feels in the clown's mask begins to shake his hitherto unchallenged conviction of his own integrity. The now alienated outside of himself makes him perceive the presence of the inner being behind the mask, which marks a stirring of introspection in him. In his clowning outfit, Walser both intentionally and unintentionally 'makes a fool of himself' as he is told to do by the Colonel. Besides playing the role of the Human Chicken on stage, he makes a fool of himself by being rescued unheroically by heroic women. Walser, grandly failing in his heroic attempt to save a girl from a tiger, is rescued by the Princess of Abyssinia, the tiger tamer: 'by the very "heroicness" of his extravagant gesture, he had "made a fool of himself"' (p. 114). He is again saved by a woman, this time, by Fevvers herself, from the Strong Man's fierce attack on him. His heroism misfires; luck is no longer with him. Either on or off stage, he is no longer a hero. The shell of his inner self, kept intact throughout his previous adventures, is now cracked; humiliation makes the first crack. He is forced to feel.

Humiliation, one of the strongest feelings that affect one's sense of the self, is followed by love. Walser cries when he hears Mignon, a battered girl who retains a child-like innocence, sing, and, seeing Fevvers also in tears, he 'felt an extraordinary sensation within his breast: his heart dissolved' (p. 142). Walser falls in love for the first time in his life. He falls in love with Fevvers, who is the first woman to succeed in humiliating him, crushing 'his own hitherto impregnable sense of self-esteem' (p. 145). Spending one night at the circus turns Walser from a dauntless hero into a humble

⁷⁸ Bakhtin, p. 40.

admirer of a narcissistic woman. To 'hatch out' completely, however, Walser needs to undergo a yet more radical experience.

Coinciding with the end of the first stage of Walser's initiation, the circus itself begins to dissolve. Buffo the Great, the master clown, his mind having completely dissolved on stage, is sent to a Russian asylum. The Professor, the intelligent ape, leaves the circus and becomes independent of his much less intelligent and less human keeper. The tigress who once tried to tear Walser apart and who now dances with Walser on stage (like 'Beauty and the Beast' with its sex reversed) is shot dead when she becomes murderously jealous of Mignon, who dances with the male tiger who is her partner. The circus almost loses Fevvers as well, who sets out on her own adventure alone and comes back tattered and tearful from the Duke's palace.

Parallel to Walser's, the story of Samson the Strong Man also centres on his psychological development, albeit in a different direction. In contrast to Walser, whose masculinity derives from his belief in rationality, the Strong Man in his tiger-skin loin cloth represents an all-muscles-and-no-brains type of machismo. Naïve and witless as he is, his heart breaks when it first occurs to him that Mignon, whom he has been using as a mere outlet for his lust, may leave him for ever. In his case, it is not emotions that he has to learn, for he is already 'a great sentimentalist' (p. 167). To be able to love someone, he must learn to think; he needs to become sensible, not sentimental. At the thought of losing Mignon, he begins to feel a stirring of love. His heart breaks, and 'out of the fracture, sensibility might poke a moist, new-born head' (p. 167). His love is unrequited in the end, but he finds happiness in living close to Mignon and her lover, the Princess.

Walser is yet to undergo a kind of psychological stripping in order to feel, to get rid of the male resistance to emotion which is so deeply ingrained in him. He loses all his memory when the train on which the circus troupe heads towards Siberia is bombed by a

band of outlaws. Separated from the rest of the troupe, Walser is again rescued by a woman, this time, by a female escapee who has been imprisoned in an asylum for killing her brutal husband. She kisses and wakes this male Sleeping Beauty, whose first word is 'Mama' (p. 222). In the Siberian forest, Walser temporarily loses rationality and becomes 'all sensibility, without a grain of sense' (p. 236). Whereas he once had the ability to rationalise but no capacity to feel, he now becomes 'a sentient being' without rationality (p. 236). His only need now is to eat and to demand food from the one whose maternal love he instinctively feels. However, he still seems to retain fragmented memories of the one he loves and needs without understanding what these images mean. In this state of mind, Walser is adopted by the Shaman, who takes Walser as his successor because both Walser's incomprehensible behaviour (he crows like a cock, the remnant of his former self on stage as the Human Chicken) and his babbling in English, which is equally incomprehensible to the Shaman, are in tune with the art of shamanism which specialises in 'the supreme form of the confidence trick' if the circus presents its lower form (p. 263). After finishing the first stage of his initiation as a clown, he now moves on to the second stage, shamanism.

Walser's apprenticeship in shamanism begins when he drinks the Shaman's urine and hallucinates. Here, shamanism, like clowning, is also connected to the sphere of the material bodily stratum, albeit in a different way. The Shaman's village is a world of 'a sort of magic realism' where there is no distinction between fact and fiction: 'Strange fate for a journalist, to find himself in a place where no facts, as such, existed!' (p. 260). It is a small but self-sufficient universe with its own logic and its own interpretation of the world (the tribespeople have decided to ignore the existence of the outside world). As an apprentice in shamanism, Walser is reborn as a new man, or 'the New Man', to suit Fevvers, who is the symbol of 'the New Woman' at the turn of the century (p. 281).

As he gradually begins to think, a doubt comes to him as to whether the world which he now lives in is the only world: 'Is there, as I sometimes imagine, a world beyond this place?' (p. 260). This epistemological question puts him into deep introspection: 'So Walser acquired an 'inner life', a realm of speculation and surmise within himself that was entirely his own. If, before he set out with the circus in pursuit of the bird-woman, he had been like a house to let, furnished, now he was tenanted at last' (pp. 260-61). Walser, for the first time in his life, becomes conscious of the self and its relation to the world. However, has he forgotten about his love? Is he going to live as a shaman for the rest of his life?

Walser is finally rescued by Fevvers, whose own adventures also bring her to a new consciousness of her self. When Fevvers breaks into the Shaman's hut to save him, Walser, now 'reconstructed' (p. 291), does not recognise her at first. The questions he asks her: 'What is your name? Have you a soul? Can you love?', indicate what he has learned after undergoing the ordeals which dissolved and then reconstructed his self (p. 290). He fully regains his memory, above all, the memory of his love, but his transformation cannot be undone: 'He was as much himself again as he ever would be, and yet that "self" would never be the same again for now he knew the meaning of fear as it defines itself in its most violent form, that is, fear of the death of the beloved, of the loss of the beloved, the loss of love' (pp. 292-93). Like the boy in the fairy tale who went forth to learn what fear was, Walser finally learns what fear is. In his story, as in the fairy tale, it is the woman he loves who teaches him fear. The thought of losing Fevvers for ever (it would have been so if he had not been rescued by her) causes him to experience real fear. Love, then, is the condition of fear; the knowledge of love causes anxiety. Such fear may be the most primitive fear of an infant who fears the loss of its mother. Unlike love in its earliest state between mother and child, however, the love

between Fevvers and Walser is a relationship between two separate individuals, each having established their own selfhood. It is a reconstruction of the mother-child relationship, but with a radical difference in its embrace of separability *and* union. A 'happy love once more', Freud resignedly writes of the dream of a narcissist,⁷⁹ for he does not seem to believe in the possibility of mutual love which is a recuperation with difference of the original mother-child relationship. Narcissism and object-love coexist in such a relationship without cancelling one another; on the contrary, the coexistence of both types of love seems to be the very condition of mutual love.

Nights at the Circus, unlike traditional fairy tales, gives us the stories of both sides, the hero and the heroine. So that was *his* side of the story. The happiness of the happy ending of this fairy-tale novel is not complete until we know the rest of *her* story.

The Woman on a Quest for Her Lost Lover: Fevvers's Story Continued

Nights at the Circus, from *her* point of view, follows the plot of the Search for the Lost Husband tale in which the heroine loses and retrieves her beloved after going through ordeals. The Search for the Lost Husband tale, as discussed in Chapter 2, is a female fairy tale about 'winning', which involves much more activity on the heroine's part than another female plot, the Innocent Persecuted Heroine tale of which 'Sleeping Beauty' is a variant. Fevvers's story is based not only on the plot of awakening in 'Sleeping Beauty', but also on the plot of adventure, that of the Search for the Lost Husband tale. The story of awakening, combined with the adventure story, becomes a story in which the heroine through her own resources strives to attain happiness, in this case, self-fulfilment through mutual love. Carter's reworking of female tales, however, does not

⁷⁹ 'On Narcissism', p. 94.

have that particular quality of the female plot, which is the punishment of the female vice of curiosity which moves a story like 'Cupid and Psyche' forward. Fevvers loses her beloved not because of the conventional cause of female curiosity but in an accident with which she has little to do. Walser's disappearance is not a punishment for her behaviour; the incident belongs to his story which follows its own course for the reconstruction of his self. In her story, Fevvers is punished for a different reason, for her material greed. Like Walser, she has to go through a transformation before she can learn to love and, indeed, to fear.

Fevvers's predicament in the house of the Russian Bluebeard, the Grand Duke, deeply wounds her self-confidence which is based on the illusion of her own omnipotence. She turns inwards at this point. The section which follows this incident is told in the first person by Fevvers. Her adventure comes to temporary suspension during her long journey towards Siberia, the next stop for the circus. Confined in a train compartment in the middle of wilderness, she is forced into introspection. Lizzie, who has been protecting Fevvers from the outside world like the old witch in 'Rapunzel', warns her that she is growing 'more and more like [her] own publicity' since Walser's appearance (p. 198). What then, protests Fevvers, is this 'self' which lies behind her public self? Lizzie tells her that that is precisely what Fevvers is yet to create: 'You never existed before. There's nobody to say what you should do or how to do it. You are Year One. You haven't any history and there are no expectations of you except the ones you yourself create' (p. 198). Fevvers only sulks and fidgets, being made uncomfortable with the idea that she has not yet found what she can call her own 'self'. Lizzie, her foster-mother, cannot help her with this because she is still undetachable from what Fevvers believes to be her omnipotent self. Fevvers's identification with Lizzie, like the girl's identification with the positive side of the mother, presents a positive aspect of

female narcissism based on female bonding. It is a narcissistic identification with another, older woman who loves her and whom she loves, which, as I have shown, Anne Sexton foregrounds as a possible element in 'Rapunzel'. *Nights at the Circus* incorporates the female-centred plot as sub-plots as can be seen in Mignon's union with the Princess and, more utopian in its prospect, in the women escapees' construction of an all-female community. These female-centred happy endings, based on strong bonds of affection amongst women, present another possible form of the fairy-tale happy ending for women.

In Fevvers's case, it is a man she falls in love with. In Fevvers's story, it is through her relation to, and her desire for, this absolute other that Fevvers can find her own self. And her narcissism, based on strong female bonding, enables her to love someone who is different from her without, unlike the Freudian seesaw of self-esteem and object-love, itself being diminished or destroyed. The sight of Walser makes her ponder on her own feelings towards him: 'What *is* it this young man reminds me of? [...]' It might be the vague, imaginary face of desire' (p. 204). For the first time in her life, Fevvers feels a stirring of desire which is unrelated to money. This new-born feeling has to grow further until she is ready to fly away on her own without the help of her foster-mother.

Separation from her beloved makes a woman out of Fevvers. If before she was 'a rational being' as she calls herself, she now comes to feel; Fevvers, a material girl, develops sensibility (p. 225). When the train is bombed, the survivors, except for Walser, are kidnapped by a band of outlaws who wrongly suppose that Fevvers, by using her fame, will be able to ask the Tsar's pardon for their crimes. Fevvers, with her conventional sentimentality, cries out: 'My young man will come and save us!' (p. 241). However, it turns out that it is she who has to go and save him. Fevvers ponders on the

course of her adventure carried out so far: 'Young as I am, it's been a picaresque life; will there be no end to it? Is my fate to be a female Quixote, with Liz my Sancho Panza? If so, what of the young American? Will he turn out to be the beautiful illusion, the Dulcinea of that sentimentality for which Liz upbraids me, telling me it's but the obverse to my enthusiasm for hard cash?' (p. 245). Now that both her mascot sword, which ties her to the omnipotent mother, Ma Nelson, and her right wing are broken, Fevvers, a female picaro, loses her 'feeling of invulnerability' (p. 273). However, she is to regain self-confidence through her quest for her lost lover. The moment she recognises once again 'the wonder in the eyes of the beloved', she becomes 'whole' and already feels 'more blonde' even without dying her hair (p. 285).

Fevvers realises the transformational power of true love when she witnesses how Mignon is made beautiful by love. Mignon, who has kept being abused by men since being orphaned in her early childhood, is transformed by love. Mignon's story is that of Cinderella, turned from rags to riches: 'What fairy godmother had touched the little street-waif with her wand?' (p. 162). Mignon, however, is a Cinderella who loves a woman, united not with a prince but with the Princess of Abyssinia, the tiger tamer and the pianist, with whom she decides to live together for music and for love. Unlike Cinderella, Mignon is not abused by her stepmother; she is presented as a victim of male-dominated society who has been constantly exposed to exploitation and violence at the hands of men. After being used, raped and beaten by men, she became like a ghost, a being without any substance or feelings. It is not only her appearance that changes through love, but also her inner being which is represented by her singing. Fevvers notes that Mignon's singing, which used to be impersonal and mechanical before she becomes 'a woman', is now charged with 'her new-found soul': 'the song was utterly transformed and yet its essence did not change, in the same way a familiar face changes yet stays the

same when it is freshly visited by love' (p. 247).

In 'Narrative Transformations' (1969), Todorov writes that transformation represents 'a synthesis of difference and resemblance' and that narrative itself is 'constituted in the tension of two formal categories, difference and resemblance'.⁸⁰ Without any element which is different and new, a discourse is only pure information, not narrative, whereas we find a discourse 'beyond narrative' when there is nothing we can recognise as the same.⁸¹ Carter's reworking of well-known fairy tales in *Nights at the Circus* is also transformation in this sense: the same-but-different. Significantly, Fevvers also realises that not only transformation but also invention is necessary for a new order, as she watches wild tigers gather to hear Mignon's song and the Princess's piano: 'the girls will have to invent new, unprecedented tunes for them to dance to. There will be an altogether new kind of music to which they will dance of their own free will' (p. 251). Such a project to create the altogether new, the novel indicates, has just begun, and is still to be continued in the future.

Now fully aware of her love, Fevvers decides to set out on a quest for Walser. Her love for Walser begins to cause discord between herself and Lizzie; this is a necessary step in the process of her psychological maturation to become able to act for love through her own resources. Lizzie, who is said to have implanted rationality in Fevvers's mind, notices 'a moral growth' in her foster-daughter who is now determined to act not for money but for love alone (p. 282). However, Lizzie tries to dissuade Fevvers from falling in love, pointing out what sort of conventional ending awaits lovers: 'The prince who rescues the Princess from the dragon's lair is always forced to marry her, whether they've taken a liking to one another or not. That's the custom. And I

⁸⁰ Todorov, 'Narrative Transformations', in *The Poetics of Prose*, pp. 218-33 (p. 233).

⁸¹ Todorov, 'Narrative Transformations', p. 233.

don't doubt that custom will apply to the trapeze artiste who rescues the clown. The name of this custom is a "happy ending" (p. 281). Lizzie, who is suspicious of the heart, believes that in such endings a woman gives her whole self away to her lover. However, Fevvers tries to envision a different ending in which a woman does not have to give her 'essence' away:

Surely he'll have the decency to give himself to me, when we meet again, not expect the vice versa! Let him hand himself over into my safekeeping, and I will transform him. You said yourself he was unhatched, Lizzie; very well—I'll *sit* on him, I'll hatch him out, I'll make a new man of him. I'll make him into the New Man, in fact, fitting mate for the New Woman, and onward we'll march hand in hand into the New Century. (p. 281)

'Perhaps so, perhaps not', says Lizzie, detecting 'a note of rising hysteria' in Fevvers's voice (p. 281). Indeed, Fevvers is carried away a little too far here, but she has a more concrete idea of what sort of role 'the New Man' may play not only for herself but for all the women in the coming century:

Think of him as the amanuensis of all those whose tales we've yet to tell him, the histories of those woman [*sic*] who would otherwise go down nameless and forgotten, erased from history as if they had never been, so that he, too, will put his poor shoulder to the wheel and help to give the world a little turn into the new era that begins tomorrow. (p. 285)

Fevvers believes that Walser's talent in words, in writing down people's histories, can be put to use for the cause of women. But then she becomes too much of a visionary for Lizzie, a cultural critic:

And once the old world has turned on its axle so that the new dawn can dawn, then, ah, then! all the women will have wings, the same as I. The dolls' house doors will be open, the brothels will spill forth their

prisoners, the cages, gilded or otherwise, all over the world, in every land, will let forth their inmates singing together the dawn chorus of the new, the transformed. (p. 285)

For all the women to have wings like Fevvers's and to 'rise up and fly away', Fevvers must surely, as Lizzie admonishes, 'improve [her] analysis' (pp. 285-286). Lizzie says, 'This old witch sees storms ahead, my girl. When I look to the future, I see through a glass, darkly' (p. 286).

Yet the novel ends with the beginning of what Fevvers imagines as her own happy ending. She meets Walser as a new man, completely 'hatched out' and ready to love. When Fevvers and Lizzie break into the Shaman's god-hut during a ritual, the Shaman tries to turn Fevvers 'from a woman into an idea': 'Fevvers felt that shivering sensation which always visited her when mages, wizards, impresarios came to take away her singularity as though it were their own invention, as though they believed she depended on their imaginations in order to be herself' (p. 289). Looking at her own figure reflected in Walser's eyes, she experiences an identity crisis: 'Am I fact? Or am I fiction? Am I what I know I am? Or am I what he thinks I am?' (p. 290). Once her confidence in knowing what she is is shaken, Fevvers begins to wonder if her mirror-image, which she has unquestioningly perceived to be her self, may be an imaginary construction of someone else, not of her own. Here, Lizzie comes to her assistance: 'Show 'em your feathers, quick!' (p. 290). With her right wing broken and her hair and plumage discoloured, she feels that she is no longer a Venus or a Helen, but only 'a poor freak down on her luck' (p. 290). However, Fevvers nevertheless spreads her wing and, as the astonished eyes watch her blow away the stale air in the Shaman's god-hut, she begins to regain her own self as what defies the very distinction between fact and fiction, as what carries all the world's 'hubris, imagination, desire' (p. 291). Here, Fevvers's

narcissism, her pleasure in being looked at, is not merely passive but affirmative, defying and triumphant: 'Now she looked big enough to crack the roof of the god-hut, all wild hair and feathers and triumphant breasts and blue eyes the size of dinner plates' (p. 291).

Fevvers finds that Walser is completely 'reconstructed', that 'some other hen had hatched him out' (p. 291). The prince she rescues is not the same person as she remembers he was. They will have to start all over again, with their new consciousness of themselves. Walser will have to start writing down Fevvers's life-story again, this time with himself included in it. So Fevvers cries out: 'Get out your pencil and we'll begin' (p. 291).

Fevvers as Medusa: The Female Monster Is Laughing and She Is Beautiful

The novel's 'Envoi' recounts the happy ending of the story of Fevvers and Walser which is also only the beginning. Walser, his memory restored, is pinned to the bed by Fevvers and lies naked while she washes herself in a pot of water. He notices that Fevvers, like a bird, does not appear to have a navel, but, as the one whose realism has been shaken to its foundation, he is no longer interested in distinguishing between fact and fiction as long as Fevvers is 'real' to him.

Once they lie side by side in bed, Walser cannot help asking Fevvers one question, that is, why she tried to convince him of her feathers. Realising that she has once fooled him into believing that she is a fraud, i.e., an ordinary woman who pretends to be a marvellous bird-woman, Fevvers laughs, and laughs, and laughs:

The spiralling tornado of Fevvers's laughter began to twist and shudder across the entire globe, as if a spontaneous response to the giant comedy that endlessly unfolded beneath it, until everything that lived and breathed, everywhere, was laughing. (p. 295)

It is this 'laughter of the happy young woman' that ends the story of Fevvers and Walser (p. 295). Fevvers's laugh, like that of Cixous's Medusa, is the laugh of a narcissistic woman who triumphantly exhibits her sex. Her happy laugh in bed causes everyone including Walser, 'the deceived husband', who 'was not quite sure whether or not he might be the butt of the joke', to feel happy and to laugh with her (p. 294). Their story is at the same time closed and opened up by the carnival laughter whose nature, as Bakhtin observes, is universal and utopian. Fevvers is certainly a monster, a woman with wings and no navel who has had to use a confidence trick to pass as a 'normal' woman—and to live at all—in society. She has now found someone who loves her as she is and who does not make a fetish of her body by turning it into the phallus of his ideal.

Nights at the Circus provides the heroine with a partner whose mind undergoes a radical reconstruction which strips him of all the conventional notions about rationality and masculinity which he has believed in and which have been the cause of monstrous deformation of the human psyche, both male and female. Bakhtin's following observation on laughter seems to describe best the transformational aspect of the happy ending of this fairy-tale novel:

Necessity, in every concept which prevails at any time, is always one-piece, serious, unconditional, and indisputable. But historically the idea of necessity is relative and variable. The principle of laughter and the carnival spirit on which grotesque is based destroys this limited seriousness and all pretense of an extratemporal and unconditional value of necessity. It frees human consciousness, thought, and imagination for new potentialities.⁸²

While we are hearing Fevvers's laughter which destroys the seriousness of necessity, we may be able to catch a glimpse of her utopian vision of the new era.

⁸² Bakhtin, p. 49.

Conclusion

The narrative of *Nights at the Circus* takes the fairy-tale drive towards integration and re-directs it to produce different effects. The couple of this fairy-tale novel may truly live happily ever after. Yet it must be remembered that this is only the beginning or, in Lizzie's words, the Year One, for the ending of the novel indicates only that the heroine and the hero have just 'hatched out'. The desire to hatch out, to become aware of one's own self and its relation to others and to the world, indeed, seems to drive the stories of both Fevvers and Walser forward. The story ends with the laughter of a narcissistic woman, the laughter which represents an always unfinished transformation. At the end of the story, Fevvers becomes a woman who can love as a subject. Her laughter as a happy woman is shared by her male partner who himself has been transformed after a long period of concentration on his inner self and who is still in the process of 'becoming'. Like 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon' and 'The Tiger's Bride', *Nights at the Circus* again takes a narrow path; however, it reworks the conventional narrative line of fairy-tale romance for both women *and* men in order to envision different modes of psycho-sexual development which need not lead to the establishment of fixed (gender) identities.

Chapter 6

Caught in a Plot: A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance*

The end determines the beginning and the middle. If the end gives the narrative its meaning, that meaning depends on *the kind of an end* towards which the narrative is driven. Peter Brooks does not question that there is only *one* end, thereby assuming that there is only *one* desire which drives the narrative forward. As I have argued, that desire is masculine, the desire for self-aggrandisement through appropriating the other. In traditional fairy tales, the end is always the same, bringing the narrative to the death-like stasis of the happily-ever-after at the moment when the hero satisfies his desire for wealth, power and, a woman. The fairy-tale happy ending is death-like because it is the death of the desire itself, the desire of the hero and of the narrative. Byatt's writing and rewriting of fairy tales, as this chapter will show, problematise the fairy-tale ending, especially its pre-determined uniformity and its finality. It is in the light of such awareness of the teleology of closure in the traditional fairy-tale plot that I will read *Possession: A Romance*.

Possession is a story about a quest for a story and, ultimately, for its end. It interweaves the 'real' lives of two sets of lovers, one dead and one alive, with their literary works. It is a complex novel which spans various genres of writing: poetry, personal letters, diaries, biography, literary criticism, detective stories, romance, and fairy tales. In *Possession*, the fairy tale figures not only as embedded texts but also as the structuring principle which links the two love stories, one Victorian and one contemporary, through its traditional motifs and patterns. The timeless, universal aspect

of the fairy tale, however, is counterbalanced with its literariness, its personal note, for the fairy tales in *Possession* serve the purpose of imagining new, different stories for both men and women from a woman's point of view.¹ Amongst the myriad intertexts of *Possession*, my reading singles out the fairy tale, especially the sphere where it overlaps the romance, and examines how the formulaic plot of the fairy-tale romance is used and transformed in the novel.

A Questing Hero: 'The Glass Coffin'

Possession begins with a lack, when Roland Mitchell, the main focaliser of the novel, feels a violent need to know more. The lack of knowledge, therefore, is the initial lack which is to be filled at the end of the story. The revelation of the enigma and the union of lovers which follows, however, are not all that makes the story meaningful to the hero. As the quest reaches its height, the fulfilment of the desire for knowledge loses its significance and another lack emerges as something more urgent in his life, a lack whose nature is revealed only when the novel approaches its end. I will consider the story of Roland, the hero on a quest, in relation to the hero of the story for which he is looking and to the hero of the fairy tale 'The Glass Coffin' embedded in *Possession*.

Roland Mitchell is an unemployed postgraduate who calls himself 'an old-fashioned textual critic', the kind of critic who is considered to be useless by the literary theorists of the postmodern 1980s such as Fergus Wolff, Roland's 'rival in the departmental rat-race', who writes 'a deconstructive account of Balzac's *Chef-d'Oeuvre Inconnu*' in the English Department where he holds a post.² Roland is concerned with

¹ Victoria Sanchez refers to this purpose as a 'feminization' of the fairy tale. See: Victoria Sanchez, 'A. S. Byatt's *Possession*: A Fairytale Romance', *Southern Folklore*, 52 (1995), 33-52 (p. 33).

² A. S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance* (London: Vintage, 1991), pp. 50, 15, 32. Further

meticulously tracing the sources of the works of Randolph Henry Ash, a fictional Victorian poet, reading his poems 'Line by Line', as one of Roland's essays on Ash is entitled (p. 467). Unlike Ash, whose portrait by Manet presents him as an authoritative Victorian patriarch with powerful features, Roland is 'a small man, with very soft, startling black hair and small regular features' and is nicknamed 'Mole' by his girlfriend Val (p. 11). Roland, whose name reminds us of the questing hero of the *Chanson de Roland*, the best-known medieval French epic, is less an epic hero than a fairy-tale figure. Roland, as Catherine Belsey points out, is also 'the heir to Browning's questing Childe Roland, himself a descendant of the fairy-tale hero who rescues his sister from the Dark Tower of Elfland'.³ Roland's life-story, as I will show below, parallels the story of the little tailor in a female rendition of the Grimms' fairy tale 'The Glass Coffin'.

Roland is brought up by a woman who tries to make him an instrument of her desire, of her aspiration to have, to do, and to be more, which has never been satisfied either in her life or in her husband's life. Roland's mother, 'a disappointed English graduate', gives her son the best possible education the family budget can afford (Roland is made to do a paper-round to have private tuition in French) in order to ensure his academic success (p. 10). Her aspiration, however, is ungratified because Roland, unlike many picaresque heroes of male fairy tales, himself lacks aspiration. He chooses Val, whom he meets at a Freshers' tea party and with whom he starts to live, because she 'projected a sort of calm, a lack of strife', an attitude which he shares (p. 11). Val, however, comes to mirror Roland's disappointed mother and her 'jeering note', as she becomes more and more disappointed in herself at college (p. 14). She begins to project

references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

³ Catherine Belsey, *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 85.

her own aspiration onto Roland just as his mother did and to desire his advancement in his career. Roland, however, does not compete with his rivals but makes friends with them, even liking Fergus, who dismisses him as harmless and 'dull' (p. 138). Val's desire is, therefore, also ungratified and, as she begins to support herself and her unemployed boyfriend by doing various temping jobs which she ironically calls her 'menial' work (as Cinderella is forced to work as a menial servant in her own house), their relationship becomes bitter and hopeless (p. 14). Roland secretly wishes Val's Cinderella-like promotion, her rescue from their miserable life together by some rich banker—which in fact comes true when a rich solicitor in his Porsche comes to rescue her. Interestingly, Roland's lack of strife is contrasted with the aspiration of the female figures who surround him. So far, he has kept being pushed forward by women; he has been an instrument of women's hopes and expectations which they could not fulfil in their own lives. The initial lack in Roland's story, therefore, is that he has not yet lived his own life, that he has not yet found his own voice.

Roland's quest begins when he breaks an inhibition. When he accidentally comes across Ash's hitherto undiscovered manuscripts in the London Library and realises they look very much like drafts of a love letter, Roland is 'seized by a strange and uncharacteristic impulse of his own' and instinctively steals the letters (p. 8). With this stolen clue in his hands, he sets out on his quest to look for a story whose beginning is hinted by Ash's draft letters. Driven by 'narrative curiosity', he tries to seek out the evidence for this possible love story which at this point is totally unknown to the Ash scholars (p. 238). For the first time in his life, Roland is seized by unreasonable passion, by the desire to *possess* the letters and the knowledge about them, which drives him to throw away his hitherto unsatisfactory but nonetheless quiet life and to set out for a reckless adventure, this time, of his own free will.

The beginning of a story stirs in the reader a desire, the irresistible desire to know what happens next. On reading the letters that Roland discovers, the reader is also 'seized by an impulse'. Ash's two draft letters begin with '*Dear Madam*' and stop in the middle; they do not have ends. What the letters, especially the first draft, convey is the writer's 'sense of urgency', his need to see the addressee again ('*I write with a strong sense of the necessity of continuing our [...] talk*', '*you and I must speak again*') (pp. 7, 5). It becomes clear from these letters that Ash's first encounter with the woman whom he so urgently addresses in his letters was also marked by a stirring of desire, and that their first meeting could be the beginning of a story. Ash desires to know whether she feels the same 'necessity' to begin their story and tries to confirm that the story has begun. The second draft is less urgent but it ends with his desperate plea for her understanding: '*I am sure you understand*' (p. 6). Although, at this point, none of us (neither Roland nor the readers of *Possession* who read the drafts with him) is yet sure even whether the letter was posted at all, our desire has been stirred and we must know what happens next.

Once stirred, narrative desire can be satisfied only by the knowledge of the end. As Peter Brooks reminds us, the desire for the end should not be gratified too quickly; it needs a detour, which is the very element that constitutes a narrative. *Possession* makes a long detour before it reveals the ending of a love story; yet the knowledge of its true ending, as we shall see, is not given to Roland and other characters who become involved in his quest, but only to us, the readers of the novel. This ending of *Possession* suggests that a life-story, unlike detective fiction which drives the reader towards the complete dissolution of an enigma and which is the form Byatt's novel also takes, is far more complex, and that there are always things which fall outside of the knowledge of detectives/biographers. Letters and diaries, the only evidence available to them, can

never form a closed narrative but inevitably leave an enigma, for what is not written cannot be known. And, as Roland himself later realises, letters have no teleology of closure: 'Letters [...] are a form of narrative that envisages no outcome, no closure. [...] Letters tell no story, because they do not know, from line to line, where they are going' (pp. 130-31). Nevertheless, once gripped by narrative curiosity,⁴ Roland cannot help but to try to (re)construct a story from the letters, and neither can the readers of the novel. For the moment, the question we all want to ask is: has the story begun?

At the beginning of his quest, Roland meets Maud Bailey, a feminist scholar who specialises in the work of Christabel LaMotte, the most likely addressee of Ash's letter in question about whom Roland knows nothing. When he visits her in her office in Lincoln University, Roland is intimidated by her impatient and 'elderly-authoritative' attitude, noting that her 'voice lacked warmth' (pp. 43, 40). Moreover, her comments on Ash are bluntly hostile: 'All that cosmic masculinity. That anti-feminist poem [...]'. All that ponderous obfuscation. Everything she [Christabel] wasn't' (p. 42). Maud explicitly looks down on Roland, making him feel 'like a recalcitrant nursery-school child' in her office (p. 43). In this scene of their first meeting, the narrator and the primary focaliser of the novel are almost fused, so that the readers also see through Roland's eyes and find Maud as Roland does: beautiful, contemptuous, and cold.⁵ Like

⁴ Although the word 'curiosity' which Roland uses is different from 'desire', which connotes the forward march of self-assertion, the two share the sense of self-uncontrollability, for curiosity is also a state in which one may, like Psyche and Raimondin, Melusine's husband, be gripped by the need to know and understand something, as one may be driven by desire.

⁵ Catherine Belsey points out the allusions made by the name 'Maud': 'Maud is Tennyson's Maud, the text makes clear, from whom she inherits a social standing higher than her lover's and "a cold and clear-cut face ... Perfectly beautiful". But does she not also, perhaps, owe something to Christina Rossetti's novel, *Maude*? And even to Yeats's representation of Maud Gonne ("Pallas Athene in that straight back and arrogant head")'. See Belsey, p. 85. For the original references, see 'Maud: A Monodrama', *Alfred Lord Tennyson: Selected Poems*, ed. by Aidan Day (Harmondsworth: Penguin,

Roland, we see her from the beginning as a haughty princess in fairy tales who would not smile or would not marry, as, to use Roland's words, a 'most untouchable woman' who lives secluded in the glass tower of the Lincoln Library (p. 48). However, as we later discover, the image of the Princess in the Tower is also a mask which Maud wears in self-defence, as a means of protecting her self from invasion. She is a fairy-tale Beauty—when she blushes, 'Red blood stained the ivory', evoking the figure of Snow White (p. 50)—who is alienated from her own beautiful appearance, which she uses to alienate others. Looking at her reflection in the mirror, Maud is not sure if 'This is I', for 'the doll-mask she saw had nothing to do with her, nothing' (p. 57).

As for Roland, it never occurs to him that he is to rescue this princess, for his quest is not sexually motivated. He decides to share his findings with her out of necessity, out of his need to find out about the story whose beginning he has just read. He eventually falls in love with her during his quest, which she gradually takes over through her own literary resources as well as through her blood relationship with Christabel and, as they discover at the end of their quest, with Ash.

In the course of his quest for a story, Roland himself becomes caught up in the plot he is looking for, the plot of a love story, of a romance. Although his adventure is initially concerned not with sexual desire but with narrative curiosity—'not greed, curiosity, more fundamental even than sex, the desire for knowledge', muses Roland (p. 82)—Roland incidentally rescues Maud, the Princess in the Tower who has been put to sleep physically and emotionally. His quest, at its earliest stage, comes to involve Maud, who begins to share his passion. As literary detectives, Roland and Maud begin to engage themselves in the pursuit of evidence in order to reconstruct the love story of Ash

and Christabel. Passion for knowledge unite them together, and the romance for which they look begins to have effect on themselves, for what they are looking for is love, the love between the two poets whose works affect them deeply. The narrative of the letters exchanged between the two poets drives their readers forward, changing them and being changed by them. Both Roland and Maud are infected by the desire of the letter, by its 'urgency' to be read. Roland tries to describe to Maud why he dared to steal the letters from the library: 'Because they were alive. They seemed *urgent*—I felt I had to do something. It was an impulse. Quick as a flash. [...] They seemed private' (p. 50). Ash's letters are 'alive' in the sense that they still stir such an urgent desire in their readers, times and worlds apart. Roland says, 'I just wanted know what happened next' (p. 50). To 'know what happened next' is to read for the plot, and Maud is now implicated in this irresistible desire of the reader, the quest for a story and, inevitably, for its end. So what happened next? Ash's letter is a love letter addressed to a specific reader, Christabel. Love letters demand privacy and a reply. Did she reply to his letter if it was ever posted?

At this point of his adventure, Roland reads a fairy tale written by Christabel—and so does the reader of *Possession*. 'The Glass Coffin', Christabel's rewriting of the Grimms' fairy tale of the same title, is one of the embedded stories in the novel. It is a story about a little tailor who goes out into a wild forest in search of work and chances on an adventure in which he is to save a Sleeping Beauty and becomes rich. Christabel's 'The Glass Coffin' is not only *framed* in the story of Roland and Maud, but it also *frames* their story, forming their, as well as our, readings of their life-story, as a window frames a view. Roland is by now vaguely aware of the story which underlies the stories of both Ash and himself. Recalling the image of that superhumanly sensitive Princess in Andersen's 'The Princess and the Pea', Roland muses: 'Blanche Glover called Christabel

the Princess. Maud Bailey was a thin-skinned Princess. He was an intruder into their female fastnesses. Like Randolph Henry Ash' (p. 58). It would seem that he does in fact know how to read the two stories, the story he is looking for and the story he himself is caught in.

Like their other tales about a little tailor such as 'The Brave Little Tailor' and 'The Clever Little Tailor', the Grimms' 'The Glass Coffin' presents the hero as a picaro who, in the manner of the Proppian hero, goes out into the world to try his luck and, with a little bit of bravery and magically fortunate circumstances, gains a beautiful maiden and great wealth. The little tailor in the Grimms' tales presents a typical hero of poor origin who, at the end of his adventure, gains everything he desires and lives happily ever after. By underlining the contrast between the initial misery of the hero who has neither money, nor power, nor a partner, and the complete material, social and sexual satisfaction he feels at the end of the story, the Grimms' tale dramatises how such a humble fellow as a little tailor may be lucky enough to satisfy his desire to have, to do, and to be more.

In contrast, Christabel's 'The Glass Coffin' emphasises the little tailor's craft itself, referring to him as 'a fine craftsman' in the opening sentence (p. 58), thereby setting a different tone from the Grimms' tale which begins: 'Let no one ever say that a poor tailor cannot advance far in the world and achieve great honors. He needs only to hit upon the right person and, most important, to have good luck'.⁶ Christabel's hero is said to be journeying through a forest 'in search of work perhaps' (p. 58); no mention is made of his ambition to 'advance far in the world and achieve great honors'. Whereas the opening of the Grimms' tale is already marked by the stirring of the masculine desire

⁶ 'The Glass Coffin', in Zipes, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, pp. 522-27 (p. 522).

for self-aggrandisement, Christabel's tale suggests from the beginning that our hero, the little tailor, values his craftsmanship as a tailor and that his happiness may not lie in the usual fairy-tale happy ending of marriage and ascendance to the throne.

In a forest, Christabel's little tailor meets his *donor*, a little grey man who lives in a little house with animals. The little grey man rejects him first since he has no need for 'a master craftsman' as the tailor introduces himself, but, with the approval of a great grey dog called Otto, offers him a night's lodging in return for the housework for the evening (p. 58). The little tailor, being 'a craftsman, even if he could not exercise his own craft', cooks a beautifully decorated pie. He also pays kind attention to all the animals in the house, for he believes in 'good manners' (p. 59). In this way, the little tailor passes the test and is given a gift by the little grey man. The demonstration of domestic skills is usually required in heroines, but not in heroes. In the Grimms' 'The House in the Forest', on which Christabel's 'The Glass Coffin' also draws for the little grey man and his house in a forest full of animals, the heroine is rewarded for taking care of the old man and the animals in the house and marries the man who turns out to be an enchanted prince. The Grimms' collection as a whole, as Bottigheimer demonstrates in *Grimms' Bad Girls and Bold Boys*, reflects the gender-biased idea that boys should be bold and seek adventures in the world, whereas girls should be obedient and willingly perform domestic tasks in their own, or their future husband's, home. Christabel's tale reverses this moral, and it is the hero who receives a reward for his cooking and his motherly attention to the animals.⁷

⁷ Roland is also given the 'key' to his adventures for demonstrating 'feminine' qualities. He shows friendliness to Fergus and once cooks a pheasant for him, and it is Fergus who sends him to Maud, his ex-lover, thereby involuntarily giving Roland the key to his adventure. When Roland feeds a large number of cats which are left starving after his landlady's death, the cats accompany him to her hitherto forbidden garden, where he is given the key to another quest in which, it is suggested, he is to find his own voice in

Christabel's tale nevertheless follows the traditional male plot of adventure in which the hero rescues a beautiful maiden. Of the three things the little grey man shows him, a purse, a cooking pot and a little glass key, the tailor chooses the third, partly because, as a craftsman, he admires the 'masterly skill' with which the glass key is made, and also because 'curiosity is a great power in men's lives' (p. 60). In fairy tales, curiosity often creates the movement of the plot, and it is also curiosity that begins Roland's story in which the key to his adventure is Ash's draft letters. Taking a customary fairy-tale decision by preferring to the first two objects which would give him immediate satisfaction (inexhaustible money or food) the mysterious third, the little tailor sets out for an adventure and finds a beautiful lady sleeping in a glass coffin in an underground chamber. The tale, however, suspends the linear movement of the male plot for a moment and lets the hero—'as I have told you', the narrator tells us, he is 'first and foremost a craftsman' (p. 63)—pause to marvel at the intricacies of the miniature work of a glass dome which contains a whole castle set in a park. However, it turns out that the glass dome is not made with fine craft but with black magic which has incarcerated the lady and her castle. When he approaches the glass coffin, he sees, between a mass of gold hair which he first takes for gold threads to make cloth, a face, 'the most beautiful face he could have dreamed of or imagined': 'And he *knew*—it is always so, after all—that the true adventure was the release of this sleeper, who would then be his grateful bride' (p. 63; my emphasis). The narrator of this story reveals the fact that the hero *knows* exactly what happens next—that he knows the plot he is caught in. The little tailor then finds a keyhole in the glass coffin: 'And he *knew* that this was the keyhole for his wondrous delicate key' (p. 63; my emphasis). When he puts the key in, the glass

coffin breaks into pieces. Then the sleeper opens her eyes, and the little tailor, 'because he *knew* this was what he must do', bends and kisses her cheek (p. 63; my emphasis).

The repetition of 'he knew' increases the sense that the little tailor is only acting out a story we all know very well, the story in which the hero is expected to undertake a certain adventure at the end of which he is to be rewarded with wealth, power, and a beautiful maiden. Christabel's tale draws the reader in by ensuring that s/he is familiar with the story she tells. The fairy tale is a genre which depends on repetition, on the retelling of what we already know: the reader of the fairy tale always already knows what happens next. The fairy tale seems to make an exception to what Roland Barthes regards as the general principle of the text, which is the notion that it is an enigma that keeps the reader reading.⁸ But is it really the case that the fairy tale has no enigma?

Repetition itself, as Freud discovered, can yield pleasure. The pleasure of repetition is what drives us to read the fairy tale, the same old story, over and over again. Yet there is still an enigma in the fairy tale, for the reader, in the act of reading, is driven by the desire to know what happens next, to read for the plot. Readers of the fairy tale, then, must temporarily *forget* the story they already know very well and re-create in themselves that state of innocence, the innocence of a child which they once all had access to but which now seems to be lost to them for ever. In other words, in reading the fairy tale, we become childlike. Unlike children before they become used to the fairy-tale formula, however, we know the stories too well. This apparently contradictory desire of the reader to repeat the same as if it is new is what Freud calls a compulsion to

⁸ In *S/Z*, Barthes identifies five 'codes' according to which the reading of a narrative is structured. One of the codes, what he calls the 'hermeneutic' code or 'Voice of Truth', concerns enigmas and answers. The detective story would be the clearest example of the hermeneutic. See Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 21.

repeat. As in the child's *fort-da* game, we repeat the loss of what is most familiar to us, knowing that it will be returned to us only in the end. Barthes writes about such repetition of unveiling the same enigma in the text, although the pleasure for him is Oedipal: 'an Oedipal pleasure (to denude, to know, to learn the origin and the end), if it is true that every narrative (every unveiling of the truth) is a staging of the (absent, hidden, or hypostatized) father'.⁹

Many modern rewritings of traditional fairy tales manipulate and subvert just such expectations of the reader. Christabel's 'The Glass Coffin' insists on reminding readers of the fact that they already know the story, deliberately obstructing, as it were, their blissful childlike innocence. Readers are forced to reflect on their own way of reading which is a kind of temporary disavowal of knowledge. Nonetheless, the tale keeps assuring readers of their return to the familiar by following the traditional plot of the fairy tale *almost* until the ending. It is at the end of the story (in the last passage which looks almost like a postscript) that readers are to face what is unexpected, what modifies their knowledge. As we shall see, this aspect is more evident in the structure of Byatt's novel itself.

Returning to our little tailor, we find him less than determinedly keen on impressing the beautiful woman whom he releases from the incarceration:

'You must be the one', said the young woman, 'You must be the one I have been waiting for, who must release me from enchantment. You must be the Prince'.

'Ah no', said our hero, 'there you are mistaken. I am no more—and indeed no less—than a fine craftsman, a tailor, in search of work for my hands, honest work, to keep me alive'. (pp. 63-64)

⁹ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 10.

The tailor's 'no more—and indeed no less' shows his modesty as well as his pride. He sees his profession not in terms of the 'humble' social status indicated in and by the Grimms' tale, but as something which is valuable in itself. The lady, however, does not take his point and laughingly assures him that he will be rich enough if he rescues her from the black artist and takes her hand in marriage. She then tells him her own story, how she comes to be placed in confinement in the glass coffin: she was put to sleep as punishment when she firmly refused to marry the black artist on account of her love for her brother.¹⁰ When she is awakened from a long sleep, she readily accepts her saviour who is not her brother as if she had to go through a long period of quiet contemplation before she can renounce incestuous love and accept the right partner.

Yet the little tailor does not take for granted the customary procedure of the story:

'Of course I will have you', said the little tailor, 'for you are my promised marvel, released with my vanished glass key, and I love you dearly already. Though why you should have me, simply because I opened the glass case, is less clear to me altogether, and when, and if, you are restored to your rightful place, and your home and lands and people are again your own, I trust you will feel free to reconsider the matter, and remain, if you will, alone and unwed'. (p. 66)

Here, the narrator adds: 'And you may ask yourselves, my dear and most innocent readers, whether he spoke there with more gentleness or cunning' (p. 66). Indeed, for we know that he knows the story he is in, and the lady tells him that 'the spell was as the

¹⁰ It is interesting to note that, in the Grimms' 'The Glass Coffin', the heroine not only refuses the black artist's proposal of marriage but attempts to kill him with a pistol. It is also she who gives the tailor a kiss when she awakes. This unconventionality of the heroine (compared to the Grimms' other heroines) may derive from the source of 'The Glass Coffin', which is adapted from a literary fairy tale embedded in a novel, Sylvanus's *Das verwöhnte Mütter-Söhngen* (1728).

spell was, that a kiss received after the successful disintegration of the glass casket, was a promise, as kisses are, whether received voluntarily or involuntarily' (p. 66). And he *does* take the lady's hand and her handsome castle in the end. Does this tale, then, also end like the Grimms' tale, the last sentence of which runs: 'And on that very same day, the maiden kept her promise and gave her hand at the altar to the lucky tailor'?¹¹ Although he himself may not have expected, something else is still missing for the true happy ending for our little tailor.

The little tailor defeats the black artist with a splinter of glass, which is the same material used by the artist to harm the woman, and thus becomes her true saviour. The lady is reunited with her brother, who had been turned into the grey dog Otto and who is returned to his human form when touched by her tears. All their possessions are turned back to their original state. We are told that the three, the little tailor, the lady and her brother, 'did live happily ever after' (p. 67). They live like three good friends (it must be noted that the wedding of the tailor and the maiden is never mentioned) and, while the brother and the sister go hunting during the day, the tailor sits by the hearth and is 'merry with them in the evenings' (p. 67). Having thus obtained all the necessary paraphernalia for the customary happy ending, the tailor now realises the essential element for *his* happiness. The last passage of Christabel's 'The Glass Coffin' runs as follows: 'Only one thing was missing. A craftsman is nothing without the exercise of his craft. So he ordered to be brought to him the finest silk cloth and brilliant threads, and make for pleasure what he had once needed to make for harsh necessity' (p. 67). In a usual fairy-tale happy ending, marriage freezes the movement of the tale into stasis—a moment which will last forever. The static state of rich, married life which the hero reaches at the

¹¹ Zipes, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, p. 527.

end of this tale, however, seems to cancel the life he has lead so far as a fine craftsman, with pride and delight in his own work. The little tailor, therefore, feels that he has become 'nothing' when he is deprived of any practical need for exercising his craft. Even though he again starts tailoring in the castle, his craft is now no longer 'necessary', but only what gives him 'pleasure'. It is here that we recall our (by no means unhappy) little tailor at the beginning of the tale, who wanders alone in a wild forest, believing that 'he should come across someone who should want his skills—he was an incurable optimist', and imagining 'a fortunate meeting around every corner' (p. 58); we pause to wonder whether this ending was really what he should have desired for himself, and whether this is what we all should desire in the stories we read as well as in our life-stories. In her essay on fairy stories, Byatt comments on her 'The Glass Coffin': 'The personal note, the nineteenth-century and twentieth-century feminist note in that story is the sense that the expected marriage, the rescuing of heroine and house from captivity in glass, is a lesser thing than the freedom to walk in the Forest and work'.¹²

In Christabel's 'The Glass Coffin', the ever-increasing desire of a fairy-tale picaro for self-aggrandisement does not take form and become the driving force of narrative as in the Grimms' tale. Brooks's male plot of ambition is not at work here. Christabel's little tailor knows the story he is caught in and, although he does actually follow the sequence of the traditional male plot, he is neither driven by the desire to possess what the story promises him (a beautiful maiden and great wealth), nor satisfied by the fulfilment of that desire. Christabel's rewriting explores a different possibility in the Grimms' 'The Glass Coffin', the tale driven by the masculine self-assertion of the typical male plot. Christabel once says to her cousin who wishes to become a writer like

¹² A. S. Byatt, 'Fairy Stories: The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye', <http://www.asbyatt.com/fairy.htm>.

herself: 'All the stories, my cousin, will bear telling and telling again in different ways. What is required is to keep alive, to polish, the simple clean forms of the tale which *must* be there [...]. And yet to add something of yours, of the writer, which makes all these things seem new and first seen, without having been appropriated for private or personal ends' (p. 350). Rewriting, Christabel believes, is not about 'appropriation' but about breathing new life into old tales. Old tales, for her, are the tales she used to hear from her father Isidore LaMotte, who 'had hoped to do for the French what the Brothers Grimm did for the German people—recount the true pre-history of the race through the witness of folk-tale and legend' (p. 173). As I have already pointed out, the Grimms' tales are now considered to be *literary* fairy tales, and Christabel's—and ultimately Byatt's—tales also belong to this literary tradition. For Christabel as for Byatt, however, the traditional tales are there to be rewritten over and over again, not to be frozen into their supposedly 'authentic' form.

Christabel's retelling of 'The Glass Coffin' poses us a new question: What does a man really want? Christabel's hero practises tailoring, a craft related to the technique of weaving which Freud, as considered earlier, associates with femininity by suggesting that weaving, one of the few contributions he believes women have made to our civilisation, imitates the growing of the pubic hair which would conceal their 'genital deficiency'.¹³ By cutting and sewing, the tailor makes cloth into clothes which will also conceal the body of their wearer. In this sense, the movement of the Grimms' hero from a poor tailor to the possessor of great wealth and title may be seen as the movement away from a feminine position which the tale equates with humbleness and poverty to an ideal state of full masculinity. In Christabel's tale, however, the little tailor continues to

¹³ Freud, 'Femininity', pp. 166-67.

tailor even after the happy ending; the exercise of his craft itself is presented as what makes him happy. The accession to social, material and sexual power is not what he really wants in his life, for he knows the pleasure in creating his own work which is needed and appreciated by someone. As Bottigheimer points out, many of the Grimms' tales show how one becomes rich and happy by working diligently. Christabel's tale, however, sees work not in terms of the work ethics of the Grimms' and her own time, but as a source of pleasure itself, as what gives life a meaning. For Christabel, it is not marriage either that promises happiness, although Bettelheim claims that fairy tales teach us the truth that marriage gives us *the* meaning of our lives. It is true, indeed, that not all men and women think it best to live deprived of the pleasure of practising their own craft whatever it may happen to be. The last passage Christabel adds to the tale suggests to us an alternative happy ending in which what matters is not to have social and sexual success but to be able, as she herself wishes in her life, to live life as art.¹⁴ Roland, the hero of *Possession*, is someone who has not yet found his own craft. Although he is already a practised, if not distinguished, literary critic, he begins to find true passion and pleasure in creating something, in his case, with words. With my reading of Christabel's 'The Glass Coffin' in mind, I will now return to his story.

It is Maud who performs the first difficult task by solving a riddle and by finding the letters Christabel kept in the house where she died. Maud finds 'a treasure-hunt clue' in one of Christabel's poems about dolls, which leads her to discover the letters wrapped

¹⁴ Ann Ashworth's Jungian interpretation of both the Grimms' and Christabel's 'The Glass Coffin' as 'stories of 'individuation, with the hero defeating the dark aspect of his shadow (or the princess's dark animus) and being united with the anima, his soul guide or feminine counterpart' does not apply to Christabel's tale when we take account of the twist which Christabel adds at the end to question the conventional fairy-tale happy ending which attaches the utmost importance to such a union. See Ann Ashworth, 'Fairy Tales in A. S. Byatt's *Possession*', *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology*, 15 (1994), 93-94 (p. 94).

up and hidden under the dolls (pp. 83-84). Roland, being totally ignorant about Christabel and her work, could not have done this alone, yet it is he who first of all gains access to the forbidden house. Christabel is said to have spent her later years in her sister's house, which now belongs to Sir George and his wife Lady Bailey. Like a dragon in a fairy tale or 'some old goblin', Sir George resides over the treasure, the sought-after object, forbidding just such literary detectives the entrance to his lair (p. 78).¹⁵ Roland, who comes to visit Christabel's grave guided by Maud, finds Lady Bailey helplessly stuck in the mud in her wheelchair. 'I have had an adventure and been rescued by a knight', Lady Bailey later says to her husband. The hero saves not a young, beautiful princess but an old woman in a wheelchair, who turns out to be the *helper/donor* in his adventure. He and Maud are thus let in to the castle, the house where the treasure lies. Because the love story concerns two people, Ash and Christabel, the quest also requires two seekers, Roland and Maud, who have different concerns and different inclinations. They thus set out on a quest together to (re)construct the story.

As Roland has assumed, the discovered correspondence of Ash and Christabel shows that their love story had actually begun, this love story being illicit because Ash had a wife. After reading the letters together, Roland and Maud make a trip to North Yorkshire, whither, they deduce, Ash and Christabel travelled together in secret. While tracing the footsteps of the two poets fiercely in love with each other, the two literary detectives come to know each other and unexpectedly discover that they share a certain view on life in common—a 'powerful coincidence', as Maud puts it (p. 267). When they are talking about their own post-Freudian, 'knowing' generation (knowing about desire and about a self, knowing that 'we are driven by desire'), Roland confesses: 'Sometimes

¹⁵ The name George calls up that legendary dragon slayer, Saint George.

I feel [...] that the best state is to be without desire [...] what I *really* want is to—to have nothing. An empty clean bed. I have this image of a clean empty bed in a clean empty room, where nothing is asked or to be asked' (p. 267). To this, Maud replies: 'That's what I think about, when I'm alone. How good it would be to have nothing. How good it would be to desire nothing. And the same image. An empty bed in an empty room. White' (p. 267). We find our hero, Roland, lacking in the desire to have, to do, and to be more; he wishes to be free from his, and anyone's, desire. And he finds that the same vision of the white, empty, desire-free bed is shared by Maud, a scholar of international reputation—whom Freud would have called 'more masculine than feminine'.¹⁶

And here comes the moment of rescue, the moment when the hero releases the princess from her incarceration. But this time, it is only her hair that he releases. Like all fairy-tale princesses, Maud has beautiful blond hair, too yellow to be believed to be natural (once 'hissed and cat-called' at a feminist conference) (p. 271). Her problem is her beautiful appearance which she feels objectifies her as if she was 'a kind of *possession*' (p. 506). When they first meet, Roland also automatically identifies her as a Princess. She tightly plaits and then covers up her blond hair, which she feels to be the emblem of conventional feminine beauty. Unlike Roland, she is socially successful, but inhibited, emotionally and physically. Her frigidity derives from her firm refusal to be an object of the desire for possession, to be a reward to be bestowed upon a hero after his adventure. She has had a disastrous relationship with Fergus Wolff, both a tall, blond and brave fairy-tale Prince and a Wolf (Roland calls him 'a devourer'), who tried to conquer her whole being and to subject her under his will (p. 507). She tells Roland that

¹⁶ Freud, 'Femininity', p. 150.

Fergus ‘used to *prance around*’ the flat, naked, quoting Freud on woman’s penis-envy at her at six o’clock in the morning: ‘I couldn’t work. [...] I—I felt battered. For no good reason’ (p. 271). Her work on liminality in Christabel’s work is closely related to her own concern with boundaries, her own fear of invasion. She lives alone in the unapproachable glass tower, protecting herself by building the fortress of feminist literary theory. However, she lets down her hair for Roland in response to his tenderness. There is a poem by Christabel about the story of ‘Rapunzel’, which appears at the beginning of the chapter in which Roland is to meet Maud for the first time. In Christabel’s ‘Rapunzel’, the prince watches Rapunzel letting down her hair for the old witch, not out of desire for her, but in compassion for her ‘Pain’:

The black claws go clutching
Hand over hand
What Pain goes shrilling
Through every strand!

Silent he watches
The humped One rise
With tears of anguish
In his own eyes. (p. 35)

On seeing Maud’s hair tightly knitted under the headscarf, Roland ‘was moved—not exactly with desire, but with an obscure emotion that was partly pity, for the rigorous constriction all that mass had undergone, to be so structured into repeating patterns’, and says to her: ‘Life is so short [...]. It has a right to breathe’ (p. 272). And Maud sees that he is not ‘making a pass’, that his feeling is indeed ‘for the hair, a kind of captive creature’, and undoes the braids (p. 272). When the rigorous restrictions she has been putting on a part of her body, suffocating its life, are thus removed, Roland ‘felt as though something had been loosed in himself, that had been gripping him’ (p. 272). And

the pale, cold princess is now 'flushed' (p. 272). Roland makes the princess release her hair not, like the prince in the Grimms' 'Rapunzel', to climb up to her chamber high up in the tower, but only to release *her* body from 'Pain' and to let life come back to it. This incident surely helps to make the two feel closer to each other than before (her headdress is part of the fortress she has built around herself), but, more importantly, it is felt to be liberating to both because it has nothing to do with the possessive *desire* from which both of them wish to be free.

As their search for the story of the dead lovers progresses and reaches its height, Roland begins to feel left out of what he initially thought was *his* quest. He then realises that he has been pursuing something else as well. His quest is not only literary (in the sense of narrative curiosity) and (incidentally) sexual, but, more importantly, it has to do with his craft with language: 'He had hopes—more, intimations of imminence—of writing poems' (p. 431). He has also been in search of his own words, his own voice, which he has not yet known that he has, and his adventure eventually leads him to find out that he actually has 'things to say' (p. 475). When he returns to his deserted flat (Val has already left, and he finds that his landlady is now dead), he goes out alone into the landlady's garden which has been forbidden to him. In the garden, he feels 'so happy', and 'words' begin to come to him:

Tonight, he began to think of words, words came from some well in him, lists of words that arranged themselves into poems... He could hear, or feel, or even almost see, the patterns made by a voice he didn't yet know, but which was his own. The poems were not careful observations, nor yet incantations, nor yet reflections on life and death, though they had elements of all these. [...] Tomorrow he would buy a new notebook and write them down. Tonight he would write down enough, the mnemonics. (pp. 474-75)

Roland feels real happiness at this moment, when he begins to discover his own words

for the first time: 'He had time to feel the strangeness of before and after; an hour ago there had been no poems, and now they came like rain and were real' (p. 475). Like the little tailor in Christabel's 'The Glass Coffin', Roland finds happiness in creating something, in making patterns with words. And words come to him when he becomes alone. But these words, which had not been there before, are inspired by his re-reading of Ash's poems in the context of his discovered love letters and also by his own love for Maud. The 'well' of words in him is filled by love—the love he finds in poetry and the love he finds in real life. In order to be able to write poetry, however, Roland feels the need to be alone. Love is an essential but not the single most important element of his happy ending which is also a possible beginning of his life as a poet. Although the story of Roland's adventure comes to a close when he is united with his princess, the ending does not freeze his life into stasis, but rather opens up possibilities. His poetry remains unwritten in the novel; as absence, it constitutes a new lack which creates another movement in his life-story. It is in this aspect especially that his story is linked to Christabel's 'The Glass Coffin', at the end of which the little tailor finds happiness in pursuing his work freely.

The Princess in the Tower

Maud, the Princess, also needs solitude for her work. She is a Sleeping Beauty who refuses to be possessed by her waker. 'Sleeping Beauty' figures as the sub-plot of the Grimms' picaresque 'The Glass Coffin', in which the beautiful maiden lies asleep as a reward to be won by the hero after his adventure. Whereas in the Grimms' tale the female plot essentially serves to complement the male plot, Christabel's version takes into consideration the lady's wish as well, making sure that she can live happily ever after with her beloved brother as well as with her saviour. Not only Roland, the little tailor,

but also Maud, the princess, has her own work whose exercise is essential for her happiness. The story of Roland and Maud, which constitutes the main plot of *Possession*, unites Maud with Roland, but at the same time allows her to preserve her autonomy and solitude, these being the necessary conditions for the continuation of her work by which she sets great store in her life.

Maud's story is to be read in connection with Christabel's work and her life-story, for they share the same fear of invasion which would threaten their autonomy. Christabel's writings are concerned with necessity, or fate, in stories as her life is an attempt to step out of the path which has traditionally been prescribed for women. In her rewritings of traditional fairy tales, not only does she change the tone of the tales into a less 'masculine' one in which there is less of a forward march of desire, but, more radically, she questions the ending which the stories *demand*. She does not, however, actually change the stories and give them completely new endings; she only suggests that there are different ways in which men and women can find real happiness. Marriage or romance, her stories seem to claim, can be a threat to the enjoyment of the freedom to create, especially for women. The happy ending for Christabel, a fine craftswoman that she is, would be to continue to create freely and to be read ever after.

Together Maud and Roland read and discuss Christabel's rewriting of the Grimms' 'Hans My Hedgehog'. Christabel's tale ends with the following sentence: 'And if he regretted his armoury of spines and his quick wild wits, history does not relate, for we must go no further, having reached the happy end' (p. 53). This ending suggests that the hero, who has won everything—wealth, a princess, throne—and has been turned into 'a beautiful Prince' at the end of the story, may have preferred his former self as a hedgehog, as a wild, resourceful swineherd in a forest (p. 53). As I discussed above, Christabel's tales question the customary fairy-tale happy ending, and make us ask: do

we readers—whether one is a man or a woman—all wish for that ending, marriage, wealth and power? And it that really *the* ending? As with the case of ‘The Glass Coffin’, her ‘Hans My Hedgehog’ follows the traditional plot until its happy ending; it is the narrator’s final comment on the story, which I cited above, that makes readers pause to reflect on their own expectations in reading this familiar fairy tale and invites them to imagine an alternative ending, a different story which is yet to be told.

One of the fragments from Christabel’s story collection, *Tales for Innocents*, tells about a woman whose story seems to begin *after* the happy ending—about ‘a Queen, who might have been thought to have everything she could desire in the world, but had set her heart on a strange silent bird a traveller had told of’ (p. 51).¹⁷ Besides this beginning of the story of the desiring Queen, a woman who desires something else than a happy marriage, there is another fragment, which is the beginning of a story about an adventurous heroine. There, a third daughter, who is ‘a useless, hopeless, dreaming daughter’, ‘perversely’ desires to go out into ‘the wild wood, where there were no plates and no stitching, but might well be a need of such things as she knew she had it in herself to perform’ (pp. 52-53). The heroine does not yet know what it is that she can ‘perform’; she is yet to find her own ‘craft’ which she feels is something different from the domestic chores the tradition allocates to a daughter. So this tale is also related to

¹⁷ This fragment of Christabel’s story evokes Madame d’Aulnoy’s fairy tale called ‘The White Cat’, in which a queen whose ‘chief passion was for travel’ and who ‘undertook to go and see a certain mountain, of which she had heard tell surprising things’. The queen then ‘had such a violent urge to taste’ the fruits she finds in fairies’ garden and is allowed to eat them in exchange for the child she carries in her womb. The queen, ‘anxious to slake her craving, flung herself on them [...] and devoured rather than ate them’. Her adventure brings a disaster not only to her daughter but also to herself and to her whole kingdom, which ends when her daughter, turned into the White Cat, is rescued by a prince. Although the author does not fail to forget to mention the queen as ‘the unworthy mother’ in the tale’s moral, d’Aulnoy’s description of the desiring queen leaves a vivid impression. See Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy, ‘The White Cat’, trans. by John Ashbery, in Warner, *Wonder Tales*, pp. 19-63 (pp. 40, 41, 44, 63).

the important theme in Christabel's work, which is happiness in finding and pursuing one's own work.

In her response to Ash's first letter, Christabel tries to modify what she perceives to be his image of herself by claiming that she is: *'not like a Princess in a thicket, by no means, but more like a very fat and self-satisfied Spider in the centre of her shining Web, if you forgive me the slightly disagreeable Analogy. Arachne is a lady I am greatly sympathetic to, an honest craftswoman, who makes perfect patterns'* (p. 87). She refuses his proposal for their meeting and, instead of offering him *'a plate of cucumber sandwiches'* in her house, encloses a poem in which she compares herself to a *'Spider'*, a *'Silken Self'*, who diligently spins out *'Silk Thread'* and savagely *'snaps at'* those who disturb her work (p. 87). Like her little tailor in *'The Glass Coffin'*, Christabel values her craft: *'I am a creature of my Pen, Mr Ash, my Pen is the best of me'* (p. 87). As an independent craftswoman, she draws a *'slightly disagreeable Analogy'* between a *'self-satisfied'* Spider and herself, thereby subverting the image of a solitary Princess who needs to be *'rescued'* by a hero to become happy.¹⁸ Later in their correspondence, Christabel again compares herself to the Spider, and, this time, the comparison is more urgent:

words have been all my life, all my life—this need is like the Spider's need who carries before her a huge Burden of Silk which she must spin out—the silk is her life, her home, her safety—her food and drink too—and if it is attacked or pulled down, why, what can she do but make more, spin afresh, design new—you will say she is patient—so she is—she may also be Savage—it is her Nature—she Must—or die of Surfeit—do you understand me? (p. 180)

¹⁸ A hundred years after Christabel's days, the analogy between a spider and a female artist became a frequent motif in feminist criticism. For comprehensive bibliographical research on the relationship between women and spiders in Western mythology, see Chapter 1 of Marta Weigle, *Spiders and Spinsters: Women and Mythology* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), pp. 1-44.

Writing is now a necessity and, indeed, her life; Christabel *must* write as the Spider must spin out her thread.

Arachne is a woman who prides herself on her craftsmanship. That she values her skill so highly as to try to compete with a goddess shows her heroism as a craftswoman—the spirit Christabel feels sympathetic to. Ovid tells how Arachne weaves various scenes in which gods transform themselves to seduce and rape women, both divine and mortal, into a beautiful pattern.¹⁹ Athene, recognising her rival's peerless craftsmanship, angrily destroys Arachne's tapestry and repeatedly strikes her with the shuttle. Arachne hangs herself but is transformed into a spider by the goddess, who takes pity on her. The word 'spin' derives from 'spider', which is '*arachne*' in Greek.

Spinning, storytelling, and women have been closely associated in the Western tradition. In *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*, a re-valuation of the role played by women in the history of storytelling, Marina Warner writes: 'Spinning a tale, weaving a plot: the metaphors illuminate the relation; while the structure of fairy stories, with their repetitions, reprises, elaboration and minutiae, replicates the thread and fabric of women's principal labours—the making of textiles from the wool or the flax to the finished bolt of cloth'.²⁰ The essence of weaving lies in making infinitely different patterns through repeating and varying old and familiar motifs; the same is true of the art of storytelling. In her letter to Ash, Christabel draws a line between '*fragile*' female art and '*great*' male art: '*entrapment or enticement as qualities of Art—of Ariachne's art they may be—and by extension of merely fragile or glistening*

¹⁹ 'Neither Pallas not even Jealousy personified could find any flaw in the work'. See Ovid, p. 137.

²⁰ Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 23.

female productions—but not surely of your own great works’ (p. 159). However, the arts of spinning and storytelling, each structurally resembling the other, are not necessarily subordinate to other forms of creation, as Christabel also seems to perceive. In spinning, one can transform old patterns into something of one’s own, into patterns which are the same but different. To weave is also to unweave old patterns.²¹

Christabel sends Ash her poem on ‘Cupid and Psyche’, written from the viewpoint of ‘the Spinster Ants’: ‘They brought their feeling Sympathy/ To human Task and Trouble./ [...] They sorted—cleaned—and ordered/ What lay in—feckless—Heap/ That Psyche—all incapable—/ Her tryst—with Love—might keep./ [...] The Ants toil for no Master/ Sufficient to their Need’ (p. 162). About this poem, Ash asks: ‘*Is the social affection of the anthill truly a better thing than the love of men and women?*’ (p. 162). In its displacement of the primacy of Love in the fairy tale ‘Cupid and Psyche’, Christabel’s ‘Psyche’ is a means of precaution against Ash, by whose urgency she is alarmed, telling him that Love or Eros would destroy her independent and solitary life with her companion Blanche Glover in their cottage called ‘Bethany’, where two ‘spinsters’, a poet and a painter, work for no Master, but try to make life into ‘Art—a daily duty of crafting’ (pp. 186-87). Christabel’s *Tales for Innocents* is illustrated by Blanche. They live together as two creative women who respect each other’s art. Their way of life, as Leonora Stern, a fictional American feminist scholar, expresses in her writing, appeals to the lesbian-feminist ideal of an all-female community. Christabel wishes that ‘no wicked Fairy envied us our pleasant lot’ (p. 44). But an ‘envious’ intruder soon approaches their house and takes away ‘the Princess’—as Blanche cannot

²¹ Freud’s depreciatory association of women with the technique of weaving (women weave to hide their inferior sex) has been re-appropriated by female artists. See, for instance, Judy Chicago’s feminist re-appropriation of needlework in *The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage* (New York: Anchor, 1979).

help calling her companion so.

Ash comes to regard Christabel as his 'Muse', and asks in his letter: '*Could the Lady of Shalott have written Melusina in her barred and moated Tower?*' (p. 188). He claims that being a poet and being a Muse are 'complementary' rather than 'incompatible' (p. 188). The matter is not so simple, however, as his former Muse, his wife, reveals in her own writing which is not poetry but a diary, which is described as dull and full of domestic details. Ellen Ash in her diary becomes suddenly animated after reading Christabel's *Melusine*:

Today I laid down *Melusina* having come trembling to the end of this marvellous work. [...] Here is no swooning sentiment, no timid purity, no softly gloved lady-like *patting* of the reader's sensibility, but lively imagination, but force and vigour. [...] She is beautiful and terrible and tragic, the Fairy Melusina, inhuman in the last resort. [...] Perhaps the most surprising touch is that the snake or fish is beautiful. (pp. 120-1).

Her reading of Christabel's *Melusine* prompts her to remember her own buried desire to write. She remembers herself as a young girl, 'reading high Romances and seeing myself simultaneously as the object of all knights' devotion—an unspotted Guenevere—and as the author of the Tale' (p. 122). She 'wanted to be a Poet and a Poem', but now finds herself, at sixty, to be 'neither' (p. 122). She reflects upon 'the lively ambitions of the young girl' to be a Poet and a Poem:

It may be that this is the desire of all reading women, as opposed to reading men, who wish to be poets and heroes, but might see the inditing of poetry in our peaceful age, as a sufficiently heroic act. No one wishes a man to be a Poem. That young girl in her muslin was a poem [...]. But I now think—it might have been better, might it not, to have held on to the desire to be a Poet? (p. 122)

She reflects on the peculiar aspect of women's reading, which is their double

identification with the writing subject and with the object of *his* writing, and their inevitable exclusion from the subject position. As they grow older, women find themselves deprived also of the latter position, being no longer young and beautiful. All she can do, Ellen feels, is to be a good ‘helpmeet’ to her husband, which, Beatrice Nest, a fictional scholar on Ellen Ash, in her book *Helpmeets* claims, is exactly what Ellen did; but Ellen wishes to do something, ‘to be a very little more’ (p. 122). She cries helplessly, for, although she now feels full of energy, she does not know what to do.

Christabel is aware of such dangers of being an object of a Poem, and refuses to become a Muse: ‘*Think of me if you will as the Lady of Shalott—with a Narrower Wisdom—who chooses not the Gulp of outside Air and the chilly river-journey deathwards—but who chooses to watch diligently the bright colours of her Web—to ply an industrious shuttle—to make—something—to close the Shutters and the Peephole too—*’ (p. 187). Christabel wishes to be a Lady of Shalott who *did not* come out of the tower, but continued to enjoy weaving her Web in the seclusion of her own space. In her essay entitled ‘Ice, Snow, Glass’, included in *On Histories and Stories* (2000), Byatt discusses the imagery of ice, snow and glass in fairy tales and reflects on ‘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’.²² Byatt regards the Lady of Shalott as an artist, whose weaving transforms the world seen through a mirror into a work of art; she is ‘solitary and alive’ even if the images she perceives in the magic mirror are ‘only shadows and reflections’.²³ The Lady dies, like Snow White’s mother, when she looks out of the

²² Byatt, *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000), p. 156.

²³ *On Histories and Stories*, p. 158.

window and faces reality, that is, her fate as a woman. Byatt writes: 'Preserving solitude and distance, staying cold and frozen, may, for women as well as artists, be a way of preserving life' (p. 158). Christabel's willed solitude is 'a way of preserving life', and so is Maud's.

Reading Christabel's letters makes Maud feel uneasy—'Christabel, defending Christabel, redefined and alarmed Maud'—because Maud shares the same fear of intrusion with Christabel, a woman who wanted desperately to pursue her work (p. 137). Maud's organised mind is a defence against 'threats': 'Pin, categorise, learn' (p. 136). Back in her flat, where she finds herself threatened even by the presence of letters in the letterbox, Maud begins to ask herself: 'Why could she do nothing with ease and grace except work alone, inside these walls and curtains, her bright safe box?' (pp. 136-37). A princess in a glass tower, self-satisfied, but in too much fear of invasion from the outside. Maud is reminded of the riddle Christabel puts to Ash, which is '*a fragile Riddle*' about '*a gold, soft cushion*' '*enclosed in its own crystalline casket*' and then '*wrapped in silk*' which has '*no lid*' but is '*sealed and smooth*':

An Egg is my answer. What is the Riddle?

I am my own riddle. Oh, Sir, you must not kindly seek to ameliorate or steal away my solitude. It is a thing we women are taught to dread—oh the terrible tower, oh the thickets round it—no companionable Nest—but a donjon.

But they have lied to us you know, in this, as in so much else. The Donjon may frown and threaten—but it keeps us very safe—within its confines we are free in a way you, who have freedom to range the world, do not need to imagine. I do not advise imagining it—but do me the justice of believing—not imputing mendacious protestation—my Solitude is my Treasure, the best thing I have. I hesitate to go out. If you opened the little gate, I would not hop away—but oh how I sing in my gold cage—

Shattering an Egg is unworthy of you, no Pass time for men. Think what you would have in your hand if you put forth your Giant strength and crushed the solid stone. Something slippery and cold and unthinkably disagreeable. (p. 137)

Christabel makes a protest against the conventional plot of the Innocent Persecuted Heroine tales such as 'Rapunzel', 'Sleeping Beauty' and 'Snow White', the plot which 'teaches' us that the Princess in the Tower must always be rescued by a hero to live happily ever after. Christabel has a different desire; for her, the Princess is incarcerated but also protected in '*the Donjon*', for it is only inside the tower with '*the thickets round it*' that she can be '*safe*' and '*free*'. Christabel suggests that the only way for a woman in her time to be able to create safely and freely is to be alone in a closed space, in a glass coffin, where she can explore the infinite world of her own imagination. The world outside is a threat to her freedom which she can enjoy only inside her private world; '*life*' is protected by the shell and the white of an egg (p. 137). As her love for Ash becomes more and more powerful, she comes to fear the part of her inner self, the outside inside her, which drives her to break out of the cage she willingly confines herself in.

Christabel and Ash, although they both know the plot they are caught in, cannot help speaking in the language of romance—Ash writes: '*I have known you were my fate*'; and Christabel: 'This is necessity' (pp. 192, 276). Christabel, however, looks at her fate 'with some amusement' (p. 281). On their first night during their trip together, Ash finds in their room 'a huge brass bed on which several feather mattresses lay majestically, as though separating a princess from a pea' (p. 282). Such references to fairy tales, however, can be deceptive, for Christabel, knowing about his expectations, does not behave like an innocent princess. Ash is confused: 'Such delicate skills, such informed desire, and yet a virgin' (p. 285). Christabel says to him: 'Let us collude with necessity. Let us play with it' (p. 288). Both in her writing and in her life, she attempts, instead of fighting against fate, to play with it. There are, however, things which are inevitable and irreparable in life; Blanche, feeling betrayed and deserted, kills herself, and Christabel

becomes pregnant.

The plot of 'Rapunzel' underpins both the story of Maud and that of Christabel. Ash is the prince who comes to rescue the princess in a tower. For him, Blanche is the witch who seeks to prevent this heroic rescue. Although Ash succeeds in taking the Princess out of the tower, the story does not end happily, for the heroine herself does not wish for the conventional happy ending of such a fairy-tale romance. On the contrary, when she becomes sure of her pregnancy, she becomes '*so angry*' about the consequence of a romance which only a woman has to suffer. Her '*solitude and self-possession*' are threatened and then '*destroyed*' by Ash (p. 502). A Fallen Woman, she might have been called. Christabel has her own plot, however, and tries to devise her own story in which she will be able to live happily as a poet, if not as a mother (she moves in with her married sister as an aunt of her own child). She is also determined not to make the result of their romance into a happy ending for Ash, her lover and the intruder, who is childless in his marriage; she hides herself and their child from him, playing upon the plot of a Fallen Woman who murders her own child ('Gode's Story', told by an old nurse in her uncle's house in Brittany, tells such a tale). Christabel becomes Melusine, prohibiting Ash from knowing the truth.

Melusine

The Fairy Melusine: Proem, whose opening appears in *Possession*, is Christabel's rewriting of the legend of Melusine, a snake-woman. In *Possession*, *The Fairy Melusine* figures as a subject of contemporary feminist criticism and also as a reference point for the two main interlaced stories of romance in the novel, one Victorian and one contemporary. I will first consider the romance, which is the genre to which *Melusine* belongs and which appears in the subtitle of the novel, *Possession: A Romance*.

The 'original' *Melusine* was composed by Jean d'Arras in the fourteen century as *chanson de geste*. *Chanson de gestes*, as with the *Chanson de Roland*, were epics mainly commissioned by French feudal families, singing the praises of the heroes of whom these families claimed to be descendants. In the fourteenth century, the tradition of the *chanson de geste* drew to a close and the romance, which had absorbed its many elements, became dominant. With this shift, love rather than combat became the major subject matter. Compiled in this period, *Melusine* displays an intermediary form between these two genres. For its emphasis on sexual love rather than heroic deeds, *Melusine* comes close to a romance which has, to use Gillian Beer's words, a "'feminine' temper'.²⁴

Today, the word 'romance' would most often remind people of the kind of popularised and commercialised literature written for the fulfilment of day dreams, especially women's. The romance has undergone a great metamorphosis in the course of its historical development. The term 'romance' in the early Middle Ages meant the new vernacular languages derived from Latin, the language of the learned. The work composed in the vernacular was then called romance. Therefore, the 'romance' originally referred to the form of literature. The term then began to include the qualities of the literature in these languages, in contrast to those of the works written in Latin. What I am concerned here is not to trace its historical transformation in detail, but to explore what Beer calls 'the resilience of the romance impulse' in Western literature, especially in terms of its affinity with the fairy tale, another genre of literature on which it also draws.²⁵

The qualities characteristic of the medieval romance, Beer states, were 'a

²⁴ Gillian Beer, *The Romance, The Critical Idiom*, X (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 25.

²⁵ Beer, p. 4.

preoccupation with love and adventure and a peculiar vagrancy of imagination'.²⁶ Love, adventure and imagination are precisely what characterise the fairy tale. The following definition of the romance which Beer gives as 'a cluster of properties' equally applies to the fairy tale:

The themes of love and adventure, a certain withdrawal from their own societies on the part of both reader and romance hero, profuse sensuous detail, simplified characters (often with a suggestion of allegorical significance), a serene intermingling of the unexpected and the everyday [...], a happy ending, amplitude of proportions, a strongly enforced code of conduct to which all the characters must comply.²⁷

Of these characteristics, the relationship between the romance and the reader needs some elaboration. In the passage above, Beer suggests that not only the romance hero but also the reader of a romance 'withdraws' from society. This means that readers of the romance are expected to immerse themselves in the world which it depicts, suspending their everyday concerns and common-sense beliefs. In other words, the romance demands, as the fairy tale does, a 'childlike' reading. Beer writes: 'The romance requires of us the wholehearted involvement which a child feels in a story told; in that sense there is something "childlike" in the pleasure of romance'.²⁸ The reading of a romance is 'childlike' not because of the world it portrays, but because of the reader's dependence on the narration; the pleasure of reading a romance will be totally deprived if the reader, instead of believing, begins to doubt and mock the idealised and hero-centric world of romances as impossible and absurd. In this sense, the reading of the romance is similar to that of the fairy tale which also expects the absolute belief in what it tells on the part

²⁶ Beer, p. 4.

²⁷ Beer, p. 10.

²⁸ Beer, p. 8.

of the reader. This kind of withdrawal from reality can, of course, be merely 'escapist', but it can, as Beer argues, also be 'instructive': 'By removing the restraints of rationalism it can reach straight to those levels of our experience which are also re-created in myth and fairy-tale'.²⁹ Like the fairy tale, a romance, when it is not used or abused or even prostituted as offering an easy means of escape from reality, can express the universal impulses of our experience. And it is to this aspect of the romance that Christabel has recourse as a possible means of expressing her ideal vision which does not yet exist in reality. Christabel tells her cousin that 'Romance is a proper form for women' and that it is 'a land where women can be free to express their true natures [...] though not in this world' (p. 373). In the land of Romance, she claims, 'the soul is free of the restraints of history and fact' so that 'poetic and imaginative truth' can be expressed (p. 373). And the fairy tale is also her favourite form. The affinity between the romance and the fairy tale comes from their capacity to represent another truth by carrying the reader to the world of another, deeper reality.

Jean d'Arras's epic/romance *Melusine* tells the story about the marriage of Raimondin, one of the chiefs of the family of Lusignan, to Melusine, a fairy, whose lower body transforms into that of a serpent or a fish every Saturday. Melusine, who gains a soul by marrying a mortal, makes her husband promise never to look at her on Saturdays. The two live happily for a while in the castle built by Melusine, and their six children, all of whom have strange deformities, grow up. On one Saturday, Raimondin, out of curiosity, breaks his promise by peeping through the keyhole at his fairy wife while she is having a bath. He witnesses her snake-like lower half. Later, although he has decided to keep it secret from her, he blurts out before her what he has seen. On hearing his

²⁹ Beer, p. 9.

betrayal, Melusine becomes angry and turns into a dragon. She flies away, for ever abandoning her mortal husband. Her legend has it that her castles, unlike castles in fairy tales, were real and still exist in Poitou.

Melusine has a plot similar to that of 'Cupid and Psyche', the earliest extant literary fairy tale in the West, in which it is the mortal wife Psyche who, imagining her husband to be a serpent, steals a look at him in his sleep and finds out that he is Cupid, the beautiful god of love. Whereas the fairy tale 'Cupid and Psyche' has a customary happy ending in which Psyche is reunited with her husband, the medieval romance *Melusine* ends when the mortal hero is deserted by his supernatural wife. The ending of *Melusine* belongs to a different tradition of fairy tales from that of the Grimms and Perrault which has become dominant in Europe; it derives from the Celtic and Breton folktales about a man's encounter with fairies and his return to *this* world, the kind of tales which Gode, an old nurse, would tell in the 'Dark Month of November' and the 'Very Dark Month of December' round the hearth in Brittany.

Christabel's rewriting of *Melusine* is said to have been published at the beginning of 1870s. 'The feminists are crazy about it', says Fergus to Roland (p. 33). For some, it 'expresses women's impotent desire', while others, the 'new feminists', 'see Melusina in her bath as a symbol of self-sufficient female sexuality needing no poor males' (pp. 33-34). Virginia Woolf, explains Fergus, 'adduced it as an image of the essential androgyny of the creative mind' (p. 34). For Fergus himself, Melusine is a phallic woman with a 'muscular' snake-like tail (p. 33). Here, we recall Balzac's voyeur who peeps at the narcissistic, fetishised woman and receives the mark of castration himself. Melusine can be seen as another Medusa-like figure in traditional literature who is now re-interpreted by feminists as laughing.

Melusine, a legendary snake-woman, is one of the fairy enchantresses such as

Circe, the Sirens, Lamia and so on, who are beautiful but cold-blooded, and who entice and deceive men. Christabel claims that ‘in Romance, women’s two natures can be reconciled’ (p. 373). She argues that men see women as ‘double beings, enchantresses and demons or innocent angels’, and asks: ‘Who knows what Melusina was in her freedom with no eyes on her?’ (p. 373). Her rewriting of *Melusine* is an attempt to show what women are from *their* point of view, not in relation to men. She sees Melusine more as a female creator and a gift-bearing culture heroine than as a dangerous monster. Both Christabel and Maud are seen by men as Melusine—a ‘Belle Dame Sans Merci’ as Ash once calls Christabel,³⁰ or a woman who ‘thicks men’s blood with cold’ as Fergus describes Maud (pp. 510, 34). Also, both women deliberately use such images of women to ward off the intrusion from the outside, to mystify, as it were, their true natures. There is a comic episode in which Roland quite innocently tries to peep through a keyhole in the bathroom door to see if it is occupied. Maud comes out of the bathroom and confronts him at this awkward moment. She walks away with a dragon on her kimono trailing behind her. Roland, however, begins to feel her pain and to perceive the story on her side which falls outside of such a frame-up rooted in men’s desire.

Maud’s own interest in Christabel’s *Melusine*—one of her essays on Christabel’s work is entitled ‘Melusina, Builder of Cities: A Subversive Female Cosmogony’—lies in its representation of the fairy’s castle-building (p. 38). Maud says to Roland: ‘I write about liminality. Thresholds. Bastions. Fortresses’ (p. 506). Her own fear of being invaded leads her to focus on the significance in another woman’s writings of making boundaries and building fortresses to keep the outside world away.³¹ For her as for

³⁰ Christabel’s family name LaMotte reminds us of Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué, the author of *Undine* (1811). Undine is another Romantic watery enchantress who marries a mortal but is obliged to return to her river when her husband breaks his promise to her.

³¹ Maud’s family name ‘Bailey’, signifying the outer wall of a castle or a court enclosed

Christabel, solitude is what is most precious in her life. The kind of romance which does not end happily tells about the heroine's 'pains', such as the pains of the Little Mermaid, whom Christabel regards as another Melusine-like figure, who, succumbing to romance, 'felt, with her legs, that she was walking on knives' (p. 374). 'The fishtail', says Christabel, 'was her freedom' (p. 374). Looking back, Ash writes to her: 'as though my love was an act of brutal forcing, as though I were a heartless ravisher out of some trumpery Romance, from whom you had to flee, despoiled and ruined' (p. 456).

Ending: 'The Threshold'

Christabel's 'The Threshold', which appears in the text just before we read the Ash-Christabel correspondence, is a tale about a man's choice between three women with three caskets, the choice, as we have seen, of Paris, of Bassanio, and of King Lear. As Byatt herself claims elsewhere, the tale consciously reworks Freud's view on this motif in 'The Theme of the Three Caskets'. Freud concluded his essay by stating that man must choose the dull third over the gold and the silver women since, sooner or later, he has to accept Death. Even if that is what man has to do, it is a hard choice, as the young hero in Christabel's 'The Threshold' finds it. Although he wanted very much to choose a woman who is not Death, the hero has no other choice but to obey what the story demands, to which even the narrator of the tale finds herself subject.

'The Threshold' begins in the middle where the Childe,³² the hero, is already on

by it, evokes a tower and a sense of defended isolation. 'Motte', a mound forming the site of a castle, is also related to these images.

³² 'Childe' calls up Robert Browning's 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came', thereby evoking both Roland and Maud (who is related to the image of the Dark Tower). The title of Browning's poem is taken from Edgar's song in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, which is also a story about a man's choice between three women. These resonances tie 'The Threshold' to the meta-narrative which frames it and also to the imagery in extra-textual literary sources. For the original reference in Shakespeare, see *King Lear*, III. 4. 178, in

his quest for 'the Herb of Rest', which his father desires to have so as to 'end [...] his long agony' (p. 154). He meets three women with three caskets, gold, silver and lead, amongst which he has to choose one. The bright, gold lady, he thinks, offers 'happiness' (p. 153). The silver lady's song about 'the long night' of lovers moves him so deeply that he longs to take her, feeling that 'she knew his secret soul' and that 'it was himself, surely, she offered him' (p. 154). The third and the last is the dim, soft lady, who indeed promises to offer him the object of his quest, the Herb of Rest, that is, Death. Upon hearing this, the Childe's heart is 'wrung indeed', for he is 'loth' to abandon the gold lady or the silver one for the dull third upon whom he *knows* his choice must fall (pp. 154-55). Here, the narrator intervenes:

And you know, and I know, do we not, dear children, that 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, is she not? But let us have a moment's true sorrow for the silver blisses the Childe would have preferred, and the sunlit flowery earth which is my own secret preference, and then let us decorously follow as we must, as he takes up the soft hand of the third, as his fate and the will of his father decree, and says, half-musing, 'I will come with you'. (p. 155)

In 'The Threshold', the narrator addresses the reader even more insistently than in 'The Glass Coffin'. While 'decorously' following the traditional fairy-tale plot, she nevertheless resists such 'wisdom in all tales'.³³ At the most critical moment in the hero's adventure, the moment of choice, the narrator turns to the reader to make sure that they both already know what happens next. We all know that our hero, in fact, has no choice.

The Alexander Text of William Shakespeare: The Complete Works, ed. by Peter Alexander (London: Collins, 1980), p. 1095.

³³ We recognise the narrative voice of Christabel's fairy tales as the female one because, as many of the literary fairy tales produced in Victorian England, it has, to use Byatt's own words, 'the slightly tortured archness of a Victorian woman talking to children'. See Byatt, 'Fairy Stories'.

And it is not only the hero whose heart is wrung: the narrator also reveals her own mortification as a reader of all tales. She again intervenes: 'And one day we will write it otherwise, that he would not come, that he stayed, or chose the sparkling ones, or went out again onto the moors to live free of fate, if such can be. But you must know now, that it turned out as it must turn out, must you not? Such is the power of necessity in tales' (p. 155). 'One day', but for the moment, she 'decorously' follows the plot which she must follow.

Led by the third woman, or the Goddess of Death as Freud would have called her, the Childe steps on the threshold of the standing stones and sees:

Beyond the lintel was a descending track, winding and winding, between banks of sweetly scented flowers he had never seen or dreamed of, blowing soft dust at him from their huge throats, and lit by a light neither of day nor of night, neither of sun nor of moon, neither bright nor shadowy, but the even perpetual unchanging light of that kingdom... (p. 155-56)

Here on the threshold, the omniscient narrator of *Possession* leaves the story with an ellipsis, without closing it. Byatt states elsewhere: "'The Threshold" was written "backwards" to satisfy [Freud's essay's] criteria'.³⁴ The over-determined plot of the tale is decorously followed by Christabel, who, while enjoying the process of fulfilling the required narrative between the beginning and the end, expresses her resistance to 'the power of necessity in tales'. The hero of the tale does not in the end dare to make a different choice to step out of the pattern he is caught in; but Christabel, who decides to follow a different plot—different from the one which is allocated to the women of her time—in her own life, desires to imagine, and lets her readers imagine, a different story in

³⁴ Sanchez, p. 40.

which one need not submit to fate, the power of necessity.

Referring to 'The Threshold', Byatt writes: 'Christabel's commentary was "knowing" about inevitability; my own writing was "knowing" about Freud. But the story was primary and had its own life'.³⁵ How does 'The Threshold' reflect, or refract, Freud's 'The Theme of the Three Caskets'? By building on the imagery of three women, the gold, the silver and the lead, which Freud interpreted as representing the mother, the wife and Death herself, 'The Threshold' maximises the lure of other possibilities and makes readers question the inevitability, as well as the rightness, of the hero's choice. The story certainly gives us the pleasure of repetition, the pleasure of reading the same old pattern again and again. Yet given only the middle of the tale, we are made uncomfortable with such power of necessity in tales. Christabel's knowingness skips the beginning, and Byatt's knowingness suspends the story in the middle. After making a reluctant decision ('he was loth to abandon' the other two women who are life and sex), the hero, in a trance, looks into the nether world. We ourselves have, childlike, followed the story up to this point, knowing *and* not knowing its end. Then, we are left on 'the threshold', which we all know to be the point of no return. The hero's choice on the Death-woman may indeed be 'right' according to Freud's scheme of man's life, but the tale leaves an enigma, which is not so much about 'that' ending as about stories which are written 'otherwise' and whose endings we have not yet heard of. To question the power of necessity in tales, we must feel its temptation; we may then be able to transform old tales into something same-but-different, a tale which steps out of the prescribed pattern without losing the same old grip of tales. Roland and Maud, although they do follow the same old plot of romance, resist what is demanded by the story they

³⁵ Byatt, *On Histories and Stories*, p. 131.

are caught in, and try to write their own desires into its ending.

Roland and Maud visit Brittany to read Christabel's cousin's journal, which tells how Christabel, pregnant, took refuge in her uncle's house and secretly bore her child. Chased by the people who have by now become aware of their plot, Roland and Maud flee as if they were accomplices in a crime. At this stage, the two are not yet lovers; their peaceful coexistence is free from sex and desire. Yet as we all expect without expecting (we may hear Christabel saying, 'it is always so, is it not?'), their happy ending, feared *and* desired by both, coincides with the end of their Quest. Roland reflects on the overpowering grip of Romance:

Somewhere in the locked-away letters, Ash had referred to the plot or fate which seemed to hold or drive the dead lovers. Roland thought, partly with precise postmodernist pleasure, and partly with a real element of superstitious dread, that he and Maud were being driven by a plot or fate that seemed, at least possibly, to be not their plot or fate but that of those others. And it is probable that there is an element of superstitious dread in any self-referring, self-reflexive, intuned postmodernist mirror-game or plot-coil that recognises that it has got out of hand, that connections proliferate apparently at random, that is to say, with equal verisimilitude, apparently in response to some ferocious ordering principle, not controlled by conscious intention, which would of course, being a good postmodernist intention, *require* the aleatory or the multivalent or the 'free', but structuring, but controlling, but driving, to some—to what?—end. Coherence and closure are deep human desires that are presently unfashionable. But they are always both frightening and enchantingly desirable. 'Falling in love', characteristically, combs the appearances of the world, and of the particular lover's history, out of a random tangle and into a coherent plot. Roland was troubled by the idea that the opposite might be true. Finding themselves in a plot, they might suppose it appropriate to behave as though it was that sort of plot. And that would be to compromise some kind of integrity they had set out with. (pp. 421-22)

Both Roland and Maud want to keep 'their sense of their separate lives inside their separate skins' (p. 424). If they cannot fight against the plot and against the desire for

the end it demands, they must rewrite the ending in such a way that they can both preserve their own integrity. There is some hope for this late-twentieth-century couple, for Roland has little to do with the masculine desire to *possess* the woman: 'He had no desire for any strenuous Romantic self-assertion. Nor did he desire to know *who* Maud essentially was' (p. 424). Romance, he thinks, 'was one of the systems that controlled him, as the expectations of Romance control almost everyone in the Western World, for better or worse, at some point or another' (p. 425). Romance, however, may not be inherently bad and oppressive for men and women; it can be modified into a story which is still a Romance, but is different from the stories we already know. Roland and Maud must follow *and* resist the plot they are caught in.

Near the end of the Quest, Beatrice Nest, another craftswoman, helps Maud and Roland. She is a retired professor who initially wanted to work on Ash but, since a woman was not 'allowed' to do such a thing at the time when she started her PhD, was advised to become a scholar of his wife Ellen (p. 220). She has long since been trying to edit Ellen Ash's journal, to which she alone has direct access. She is thought by Blackadder to be like 'Carroll's obstructive white sheep', and by Cropper to be 'one of those puffed white spiders, bleached by the dark, feeling along the threads of her trap from her central lair' (p. 112). Feminists see her as 'some kind of guardian octopus, an ocean Fanfir, curled torpidly round her hoard, putting up opaque screens of ink or watery smoke to obscure her whereabouts' (p. 112). 'There is an age at which, I profoundly believe', says Beatrice to Maud, who comes to consult Ellen's diary, 'one becomes a *witch* [...] and there are *witch-hunts*' (p. 221). Old, unmarried, and content with exercising her own craft, Beatrice (just as Christabel felt about herself in old age, calling herself '*an old witch in a turret*') feels that she has become a witch-like figure, unloved and isolated (p. 500). If she is a witch, she is a good one, a *helper*, who informs Maud

of the secret plot of Mortimer Cropper, another devouring Wolf or the *villain* who desires to *possess* Ash, to dig up Ash's grave in order to retrieve a certain letter. People now assume that the end of the story is in the coffin, for they find out that Ellen buried with her husband the last letter Christabel wrote to him, this being a possible clue to the enigma as to how their love story ended. Cropper is duly caught just *after* he succeeds in procuring the letter (for no one can resist, not even Beatrice, narrative curiosity).

Letters demand to be read, and even the letter which was buried in the grave (for Ellen could not bring herself to destroy it) desires to be read. So they all sit together, friends and enemies (Leonora, Maud's 'feminist sister', forgives Maud for outwitting her, and James Blackadder, Roland's supervisor and another craftsman, not only forgives him, but also turns out to be his *helper*, like the little grey man in 'The Glass Coffin', in getting a job), and read the letter. The letter is sealed, indicating that neither Ash nor Ellen read it. In her last, unread letter to Ash, Christabel reveals the true consequence of their romance, which is what became of their child. This *dénouement* reveals Maud to be 'a central figure in this story', as Roland remarks, for she turns out to be descended from both Christabel and Ash (p. 505). Maud's quest for the end of a story has been a quest for her own origin, the end coinciding with the beginning. Maud suddenly has a sense of the fearful necessity of the plot in which she is caught: 'There's something unnaturally *determined* about it all. Daemonic' (p. 505).

'What next', Maud asks Roland, 'What happens next? To us?' (p. 505). Possessed by love, they must devise their own happy ending. Trying to express her love, Maud goes cold: 'When I feel anything—I go cold all over. I freeze. I can't—speak out. I'm—I'm—not good at relationships' (p. 506). Roland, a gentle hero who values his own solitude, does not break the glass coffin which protects Maud, but melts it without, as Maud puts it, 'blur[ring] the edges messily' (p. 506). Their sex—Maud is at first

‘afraid of that too’—blurs boundaries but not ‘messily’: ‘very slowly and with infinite gentle delays and delicate diversions and variations of indirect assault Roland finally, to use an outdated phrase, entered and took possession of all her white coolness that grew warm against him, so that there seemed to be no boundaries’ (pp. 506-7). Maud, at last, *feels*: ‘he heard, towards dawn, from a long way off, her clear voice crying out, uninhibited, unashamed, in pleasure and triumph’ (p. 507). Their happy ending is a ‘cunning’ one, as Roland puts it, which ends in ‘a modern way’ in which they can keep the autonomy of each other, without invasion, without breaking the eggshell which protects autonomy (p. 507). Unlike in the nineteenth century, marriage is now no longer a necessity but an option for lovers; they will probably live separately (Roland has found a job abroad). They will rewrite the all too familiar fairy-tale romance into their own story, into a fairy tale yet to be written. Through their Quest, both Roland and Maud have come to know more about themselves; their Quest has been a quest for self-knowledge. At the end of the story, they find what they want, both as craftsmen and as lovers. A happy ending which the Grimms did not imagine and which Christabel wanted to write.

Postscript

The last chapter of *Possession* is titled ‘Postscript 1868’. The ‘Postscript’ tells about the *true* ending of the story of Ash and Christabel. Nearly ten years after their last meeting, Ash decides to go and look for Christabel in her sister’s house; near the gate, however, he comes across, not Christabel, but a little girl whom he at once recognises as her, and his own, child. He makes her a crown of flowers and receives in return a lock of hair from her. He keeps this incident secret from both Christabel and his wife, and the girl soon forgets about the message he leaves for Christabel. The knowledge of this meeting

would have made Christabel feel happier, for she could not be sure if her last letter, which she entrusted to his wife, had reached him. And it would have reassured the detectives as well, for they know that the letter did not reach him, thus leading them to believe that Ash died in ignorance of his child's fate. But *we*, the readers, are given all, or, rather, a little more. The omniscient narrator tells us: 'There are things which happen and leave no discernible trace, are not spoken or written of, though it would be very wrong to say that subsequent events go on indifferently, all the same, as though such things had never been' (p. 508).

The end determines the beginning and the middle, retrospectively modifying the whole story just being read. *Possession* is a story about an ending, about a quest for closure, the quest in which the readers themselves become engaged. Driven by narrative greed, we read on and on until we are assured of *the* end of the story. Yet just when we think that we have reached the end, we are given another ending in the 'Postscript'. In *Possession*, the 'Postscript', given outside the story of romance, brings us back to the beginning, opening up a closure once more. If Ash *knew*, then the whole story needs to be re-read in the light of our knowledge of this fact. This ending in the form of postscript suggests the impossibility of knowing the true ending, therefore, the true meaning of a life-story, that is to say, of the story we believe we are in. If we, even a decade after the postmodern 1980s, still love to hear traditional fairy tales, this is due to their perfect endings. In fairy tales, everything to be done is done, everything to be said is said, and everything to be known is known, and it stops there, bringing the narrative to a halt. The fairy-tale happy ending freezes life into a static state, so that nothing remains untold. The happily-ever-after of the fairy tale satisfies our desire, and our need, for an ending. And to know the end is to die, as Ash, who *knew* the end, writes in his poem: 'We are driven/ By endings as by hunger. We *must* know/ How it comes out, the shape

of the whole [...] / Do we desire [...] Moment's cessation or a maw crammed full / Of sweetest certainty, though with that bliss / We cease' (p. 476). A quest for closure in life-stories, however, seems to have no *true* ending, for there are always things which remain unknown. The impression of absolute truth can remain only speculative since no real person has access to the authority to know it. Still, we cannot be free from the teleology of closure which is at work in every narrative including the narratives we make about our own lives. All we can do, as Christabel does in her rewriting of fairy tales, may be to keep questioning the teleology of closure which drives us towards a necessary end by adding our own postscripts, new, different endings which we have not yet heard of.³⁶

Conclusion

Possession, as Jean-Louis Chevalier remarks, is both a 'trying' and a 'trial of conclusions'.³⁷ All the characters, Chevalier observes, try to come to, to reach, to draw, and to jump to conclusions, yet the true conclusion which they believe that they have reached is revealed to be a false one. However, this does not deny the 'conclusion' of the story of romance which unites the two main characters. The second ending given in the 'Postscript' leads to infinite numbers of endings, opening up infinite possibilities

³⁶ And there is another postscript given outside the novel by Byatt herself, the 'author' of *Possession*. Richard Todd gives an account of the 'real' incident: 'Towards the end of 1994, Professor Linda K. Hughes of Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, editor of *Victorian Poetry*, received, doubtless to her surprise, a letter from Dr Maud Mitchell-Bailey announcing the discovery of two hitherto unknown fragmentary poems by Christabel LaMotte'. Maud's letter reveals not only that she has married Roland and had a daughter with him, but, more importantly, that her experience of motherhood has led her to recognise new possible interpretations of Christabel's poetry, thereby opening up yet another story. See Richard Todd, *A. S. Byatt* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1997), p. 77.

³⁷ Jean-Louis Chevalier, 'Conclusion in *Possession* by Antonia Byatt', in *Fins de romans: aspects de la conclusion dans la littérature anglaise*, ed. by Lucien le Bouille (Caen: Presses Universitaires de Caen, 1993), pp. 109-31 (p. 110).

which do not necessarily cancel out each other. The narrative structure of *Possession* undermines the masculine model of closure and gives an alternative conception of closure in which the teleological drive is dispersed and gives way to multiple desires. It gives fluidity priority over solidity.

Possession is a romance. It tells the story of lovers who know that they are caught in a plot and who try to resist the gripping power of romance. The late-twentieth-century couple rewrites the happy ending of the fairy-tale romance in such a way that they can love each other without compromising their need to preserve their autonomy and to work. Their story is still a romance but with a difference.³⁸ However, one may, of course, refuse to be caught in such a plot altogether. When asked to write the fairy story of her own life, Byatt wrote 'The Story of the Eldest Princess'.³⁹ In this story, the heroine, a 'reading' princess, realising that she is caught in a familiar plot in which she, being not the youngest but the eldest of three sisters, *must* fail, deliberately steps out of the plot prescribed for her, and begins to quest for her own happiness, which is to tell stories as a way of life.⁴⁰ She turns away from possible romances and continues her way because, like the little tailor in 'The Glass Coffin', she is not looking for love. She reaches the house of a storyteller, a little grey woman, who does not have to 'worry

³⁸ Byatt again re-invents a fairy-tale romance in 'Cold', where two opposites, a cold princess and a fiery prince, devise their own way of coexistence. See Byatt, 'Cold', in *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998), pp. 113-82.

³⁹ 'The Eldest Princess' shows in a simple fairy-tale format the complex interplay of life and fiction in Byatt's writings. Referring to 'The Eldest Princess', Byatt writes: 'I am an eldest daughter, and as a small child suffered from a profound sense of injustice that in stories of three brothers or sisters it was always the youngest who succeeded—as though to be the eldest carried with it a Fate of failure and being surpassed'. It is interesting to compare her account of sibling rivalry with Margaret Drabble's feelings about Byatt, her older sister: 'And you never do catch up [...]. You are always behind. No matter how hard you try. She will always be older, cleverer, in higher heels'. See Byatt, 'Fairy Stories'; and Suzie Mackenzie, 'Mothers and Daughters', *Guardian Weekend*, 16 December 2000, p. 39.

⁴⁰ Byatt, 'The Eldest Princess', in Park and Heaton, *Caught in a Story*, p. 15.

about princes or kingdoms', but who 'dance[s] alone'.⁴¹ And the Princess 'felt she had come home to where she was free'.⁴² The next chapter will consider 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye', the story of a woman who also steps out of her previous existence and rewrites her own story, which is and is not a romance.

⁴¹ 'The Eldest Princess', p. 25.

⁴² 'The Eldest Princess', p. 26.

Chapter 7

Imagining Different Desires:

A. S. Byatt's 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye'

Byatt's story collection, *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye: Five Fairy Stories*, reproduces 'The Glass Coffin', which, taken out of the context of *Possession*, functions differently even though its wordings are identical with those of its 'original' version. As Richard Todd argues, 'The Glass Coffin', when reprinted as a self-contained tale in a story collection, loses much of its complexity which becomes palpable only in its relation to the larger narrative in which it is embedded as a kind of hidden clue.¹ The narrative voice, when it is no longer recognised to be Christabel's, may sound less suggestive, less subversive, and less urgent. This is because it ceases to produce a level of meaning which can be activated only when it is read with the knowledge of the context in which this story-within-a-story is placed. *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* places this pseudo-Victorian fairy tale in another frame that gives us a historical perspective in our reading of Byatt's literary fairy tales. 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye', which takes up more than half of the collection, is a modern fairy tale set in our time when men and women are given more choices in their lives. Its title plays with the reader's orientalist expectations (traditional oriental fairy tales are now regarded in the West most often as light adventure stories for children, and sometimes as exotic erotica for adults), and also evokes the Western literary motif of a nightingale (as an inspiration for love-poetry and also as a symbol of imaginative escape from the present as in John Keats's 'Ode to a

¹ See Todd, pp. 40-45.

Nightingale'), indicating a meeting of different cultures which takes place in the tale through sharing of stories. I will first consider the *Arabian Nights*, the best-known oriental story collection in the West, on which Byatt's tale draws heavily in several respects.

The *Arabian Nights* in the West

'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye', as its title makes clear, is a fairy story which has elements of oriental literature, especially the *Arabian Nights*, which is also known as *The Thousand and One Nights*.² In the 'Acknowledgements' of *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye*, Byatt acknowledges the influence of Robert Irwin's *The Arabian Nights: A Companion* (1994) on 'its ideas and its construction'.³ Before examining how the *Nights* and Irwin's interpretation of the *Nights* affect Byatt's tale, I will first consider how the *Nights* has influenced European literary imagination since it was introduced at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

The influence of the *Arabian Nights* on western literature is so great that to ask about it is, according to Irwin, 'a little like asking about the influence on western literature of that other collection of oriental tales, the Bible'.⁴ Nevertheless, Irwin goes on to trace what he calls 'Children of the *Nights*' (the phrase is used as the title of the last chapter of his book) since the appearance of Antoine Galland's French translation in the years between 1704 and 1717, the first substantial translation of the *Nights* in Europe.

² Hereafter abbreviated to the *Nights*.

³ A. S. Byatt, *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye: Five Fairy Stories* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 279. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁴ Robert Irwin, *The Arabian Nights: A Companion* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), p. 237.

Galland's adaptation of the *Nights*, which had an instant success, played a decisive role in the history of the influence of the *Nights* on European literary imagination, especially on the development of the literary fairy tale. The favourable, indeed enthusiastic, reception of Galland's work owes much to the cultivation of fairy tales in the literary salon which started at the end of the seventeenth century. Galland's work was read and discussed by literary society ladies and their male friends like Perrault, all of whom found in it the imaginative extravagance they sought for in their telling and retelling of literary fairy tales.⁵ Irwin suggests that this was exactly the effect Galland himself aimed at, for he did more than translate. Irwin claims that, following the footsteps of humanist translators of classical literature during the French Renaissance, the so-called 'beautiful infidels', Galland was convinced that 'good taste took precedence over strict accuracy in translation': 'Galland's decorous aim in translating the *Nights* was not so much to transcribe accurately the real texture of medieval Arab prose, as to rescue from it items which he judged would please the salons of eighteenth-century France. Therefore, the barbarous and the overly exotic were toned down or edited out. The gallant and the pleasing were stressed or inserted'.⁶ Although 'domesticated' to please society ladies, the djinns became incorporated into the French fairy tale from this time on.

Galland's work was also followed by a rush of pseudo-oriental pastiches and parodies in the early eighteenth century. The works of Anthony Hamilton, which are characteristic of the light mock-oriental fictions produced during the first few decades

⁵ Perrault's 'Bluebeard', which appeared in his 1697 story collection *Contes de la mère l'Oye*, soon became orientalisised as its subsequent illustrations show. For the examples of illustrations for 'Bluebeard', see Opie and Opie, pp. 104-08; and also Figure 1 and Figure 2 in my thesis, pp. 72-73.

⁶ Irwin, p. 19.

after Galland's publication, were highly acclaimed at the time, and, together with Galland's translation, became as popular in England as in France.⁷ Hamilton's and his followers' 'oriental' stories were primarily concerned with the wild flight of imagination and the free and explicit representation of sexuality they found in the *Nights*. Other writers such as Voltaire and Samuel Johnson, Irwin maintains, used 'a fabulous Orient as a field of philosophical enquiry'.⁸ Most of the moral tales in the oriental mode produced in eighteenth-century England, however, used oriental props for the purpose of sermonising.

In late-eighteenth-century England, the dark aspect of the *Nights* came to be foregrounded. For example, William Beckford's *Vathek* (1786) is a Gothic novel written in the oriental mode. Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas De Quincey also found sinister imagery in the *Nights*, which not only filled their opium-laced reveries but filtered into their works. Although Edward Said maintains that the *Nights* is associated in English literature primarily with innocent childhood which is to be left behind,⁹ his observation, as Irwin claims, is partial. Curiously, however, we can find nowhere in the *Nights* tales either the terrifying, blood-curdling images or the extreme psychological states laden with such morbid hallucinations which these Gothic and Romantic writers claimed to have found in them. Nineteenth-century writers, like those in the previous century who borrowed oriental motifs and settings from the *Nights* to entertain or moralise, were more interested in its content, the magical and the exotic, than in its form. Although some of them did use the story-within-story technique, they do not seem to

⁷ Jonathan Scott's *Arabian Nights Entertainments*, the first literary translation of Galland's work into English, appeared in 1811.

⁸ Irwin, p. 243.

⁹ See Edward W. Said, 'Islam, Philology and French Culture', in *The World, the Text and the Critic* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 268-89 (p. 271).

have been interested in exploring the significance of the frame as a narrative device.¹⁰

The Victorian period saw both the rise and the decline of the interest in the *Nights*. Although it exerted a pervasive influence on nineteenth-century English and American writers, the *Nights* ceased to fascinate writers from the late nineteenth century onwards and became increasingly relegated to the entertainment of children in heavily expurgated versions. Irwin suggests that Edward William Lane's 'instructional' translation (1838-41) and Sir Richard Francis Burton's 'kinky' edition in sixteen volumes (1885-88), both of which, in Irwin's opinion, are 'stylistically unattractive and bottom-heavy with annotation', may have been 'actually responsible for that decline'.¹¹ In France, Joseph Charles Mardrus published his sixteenth-volume translation in the years between 1899 and 1904. Mardrus's loose adaptation, rather than translation, of the *Nights* was, states Irwin, 'a belated product of *fin-de-siècle* taste, a portrait of a fantasy Orient, compounded of opium reveries, jewelled dissipation, lost paradises, melancholy opulence and odalisques pining in gilded cages', so that 'the stories appear at times to have been written by Oscar Wilde or Stéphane Mallarmé'.¹² Byatt, on the other hand, gives a more positive view on these transliterations in her review of Husain Haddawy's *Arabian Nights II: Sindbad and Other Popular Stories* (1995), stating that Mardrus's work 'is unauthentic and deliciously readable, part of our culture also'.¹³

These 'eccentric' translations, although they may have put off some readers as Irwin suggests, became an inspiration for modernist writers who were interested in the rich and complex storytelling techniques of the *Nights* which give 'early and exotic

¹⁰ There are some exceptions such as Jan Potocki's *The Saragossa Manuscript*, in which framed stories and stories which frame them are structurally linked to mirror each other.

¹¹ Irwin, pp. 24, 34, 274.

¹² Irwin, pp. 37-38.

¹³ Byatt, 'Nights to Remember', *Sunday Times*, 17 December 1995, 5, p. 9.

examples of framing, self-reference, embedded references, hidden patterns, recursion and intertextuality',¹⁴ all of which are preoccupations of twentieth-century writers. Irwin points out that James Joyce and Marcel Proust both made numerous references to the *Nights* and made use of these devices to achieve in their works what Irwin calls 'the omnigatherum richness of the *Nights*'.¹⁵ Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentinian writer who was fascinated by the Burton translation of the *Nights*, was especially interested in its complex framing device. Borges's short stories explore the workings of framing and self-reference in literature which lead the reader to reflect on the possibility that he himself may be framed in someone else's story. Moreover, Borges's notion of intertextuality points to the fact that the influence works in both ways, that is to say, the *Nights* influence writers as much as writers influence the ways in which we read and re-read the *Nights*.¹⁶ Borges's reading and rewriting of the *Nights* has become an inspiration for the late-twentieth-century novels which concern the self-reflexive nature of narrative. Women writers have found yet another potential in the *Nights*, foregrounding the resourcefulness of Sheherazade, the fictional storyteller of the frame story, who spins out infinite narratives to bring about a happy ending. In Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, as we have seen, Fevvers's overnight telling of her life-story to her future husband (her storytelling is explicitly related to that of Sheherazade) eventually bears

¹⁴ Irwin, p. 278.

¹⁵ Irwin, p. 279.

¹⁶ Borges's notion of intertextuality is probably best shown in 'Pierre Ménard, Author of the *Quixote*', which tells the story of a twentieth-century writer whose retelling of *Don Quixote* with exactly the same words is not at all the same book as the one written by Cervantes. See Jorge Luis Borges, 'Pierre Ménard, Author of the *Quixote*', in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: Modern Library, 1983), pp. 36-44. For a discussion of intertextuality in Borges's 'Pierre Ménard, Author of the *Quixote*', see *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*, ed. by Michael Worton and Judith Still (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), pp. 13-14.

love.

The *Nights* has affected Western literature in terms of both content and form from the early eighteenth century onwards, and, as Irwin remarks, it may be easier to discuss those writers who were *not* influenced by the *Nights*.¹⁷ That these children of the *Nights* have read and reworked it in their own manners means that the *Nights* itself has kept being rewritten. And, of course, Byatt is also listed by Irwin as one of the children of the *Nights*.¹⁸

The *Arabian Nights* and 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye'

In 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye', Byatt is concerned with both the form and the content of the *Nights*, which are perceived by her to be integral. Her approach is postmodernist as well as feminist. 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye' reflects on the nature of fate in stories, especially women's fate. It is an elaborately wrought meta-fairy tale with a narratologist as its heroine; it interweaves various other stories as well as narratological interpretations of stories, which are interlocked thematically and structurally.

There are four elements with which 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye' seems to be particularly engaged: fate, gender, story-within-story structure, and the djinn. 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye' is primarily concerned with fate (or Fate) as the patterning principle in the *Nights*, and it is in this respect that the tale is most indebted to Irwin's observation. In the chapter called 'The Universe of Marvels', Irwin writes: 'Though largely invisible, Fate is a leading character in the *Nights*'.¹⁹ To show the

¹⁷ Irwin, pp. 290-91.

¹⁸ It is unlikely, however, that Irwin here refers to Byatt's 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye', which appeared later in the same year.

¹⁹ Irwin, p. 198.

workings of fate in stories, Irwin retells an Arab tale called 'The Appointment at Samarra',²⁰ a tale which is also retold in 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye'. In this tale, a man flees his native city because he sees Death strangely looking at him, and arrives in Samarra only to meet Death there; Death looked at him strangely because 'Death knew that they had an appointment in Samarra that night'.²¹ In the *Nights* stories, Fate 'watches over everything and meticulously arranges it all'.²² Irwin argues that, in the *Nights*, Novalis's formula: 'Character is destiny' is reversed, for the characters in the *Nights* are 'what fate (working hard on behalf of the storyteller) makes them do'.²³

In the chapter called 'Formal Readings', which discusses Propp's and his followers' narrative theory, Irwin claims that 'the pattern was chosen by the storyteller rather than imposed as an unconscious constraint upon him'.²⁴ Indeed, the storyteller has the freedom to choose one pattern over another; yet can he choose not to use any of the patterns that are familiar both to himself and to his audience? In other words, is Fate, which determines plot, not what is demanded by stories, rather than by storytellers? If the number of plots are limited—'Fantasy has its rules', states Irwin in his discussion of Propp²⁵—then should we not imagine a different plot in order to tell a truly different story? In modern stories, as I will argue, Fate is replaced by desire (or Desire) which is the desire of stories, of which the desire of storytellers is also a part in the sense that their subjectivity is a field where various desires intersect. Byatt's tale re-examines the patterning principle of old as well as new stories, and attempts to imagine different desires to tell a new, 'unprecedented' story (p. 105).

²⁰ This tale is not included in the *Nights*.

²¹ Irwin, p. 195.

²² Irwin, p. 197.

²³ Irwin, p. 197.

²⁴ Irwin, p. 230.

²⁵ Irwin, p. 214.

'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye' reflects on Fate both in its traditional sense and in its modern sense in which Fate is replaced by Desire in such a way that the characters' fortune appears to be a result of their free choice. Desire, as Peter Brooks's masterplot makes evident, is as powerful and relentless as Fate, driving a narrative towards a certain predetermined end. A character's ostensibly free choice is controlled and designed by Desire, that masterplotter of modern stories. And, as I have argued, Desire which drives stories forward has been masculine. Gender, therefore, is inseparable from Fate; one's gender determines one's fate. 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye' problematises the gendered destiny which underlies the *Nights* stories as well as various other stories in Western literary tradition. It challenges the assumption that Fate, like sex, is something already programmed outside our forces, and underlines another aspect of Fate which is personal and which allows individuals to create their own pathways. The heroine of 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye', like the Eldest Princess, steps out of the path which seems to await her, and forges her own destiny.

The frame story and the framed stories of 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye' are linked by the key question: What do women most desire?. As Irwin shows, some of the *Night* tales use the device of linking the framed story with the story which frames it by means of the '*Leitsatz*' ('key sentence') and the '*Leitwort*' ('leading-word').²⁶ In 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye', the repetition of the key question in variations ensures that the theme will gradually develop in the reader's mind as well as in the mind of its heroine, who is made to ask that question of herself. And both the reader and the heroine, who is a narratologist,²⁷ know that the question was also Freud's, but with a

²⁶ Irwin, p. 230. Irwin is here indebted to David Pinault's analysis of the *Nights*. See David Pinault, *Story-Telling Techniques in the Arabian Nights* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), pp. 18-22.

²⁷ The heroine states in one of her lectures that Freud 'claimed not to know what women

crucial difference: whereas Freud's 'What does a woman want?' inquires about 'need' and implicitly presupposes that there can be only one answer to the question, 'What do women desire most?' pertains to the question of 'desire' and assumes that there are several things that women may desire. In 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye', one story mirrors and echoes other stories in, as well as outside, the text.

The djinn is known in the West primarily as a wish-granter; the djinn appears from a bottle and offers to grant three wishes to the person who has opened the bottle. The djinn, therefore, is a figure who makes us think of our wishes, what we desire most; he represents the possibility and the impossibility of fulfilling desires. And the question which the djinn asks, of course, is: what do you wish for?, which is connected to the key theme of women's desire in Byatt's story, for it is women who are asked this question by the djinn. The djinn is also a figure who reminds us of our mortality, for he himself is usually immortal and outlives human beings. The djinn figures in yet another way in 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye', in which the djinn appears as an embodiment of the power of storytelling and imagination represented by the *Nights*. The heroine's romance with the djinn, therefore, is a romance with what she imagines from words and stories.

The First Wish: Body

'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye' opens with the formulaic fairy-tale beginning: 'Once upon a time' (p. 95). However, as soon as it is evoked, the sense of timeless universality is immediately overturned, for the story reveals itself to be a fairy tale set in our time, 'when men and women hurtled through the air on metal wings' (p. 95). Byatt's story uses such conventional fairy-tale expressions both ironically and affectionately to

really wanted' (p. 267).

comment on today's society. The heroine, whom we first find on 'metal wings', is described by the narrator as 'a woman who was largely irrelevant, and therefore happy' (p. 95). Gillian Perholt is a narratologist in her fifties, whose business is to tell 'stories about stories' (p. 96).²⁸ Gillian is on her way from London to Ankara, where she is to attend an international conference. 'Floating redundant', she murmurs 'blissfully', imagining, and *seeing* in her mind's eye, the serpent in Paradise described by John Milton (p. 98).²⁹ 'I am in the midst of fierce forces', muses the modern independent woman, identifying her status with that of Milton's snake: 'I am nearer the sun than any woman of my kind, any ancestress of mine, can ever have dreamed of being, I can look in his direction and stay steadily here, floating redundant' (p. 98). To float redundant, as we shall see, is what defines happiness for Gillian, a free and independent woman.

As her children and her husband have already left home (albeit in different ways and for different reasons), Gillian feels 'redundant' as a woman, being neither a wife, nor a mother, nor a mistress. In her redundancy, however, she feels happy because she now feels free; her irrelevance, the story makes clear, is her happiness. Although redundant as

²⁸ The name Gillian Perholt calls up djinn, Perrault, and, when pronounced by the djinn as 'Peri-han', *peri*, a mythical female spirit.

²⁹ In *Paradise Lost*, Milton writes of the insinuating serpent who appears before Eve in Paradise:

not with indented wave,
 Prone on the ground, as since, but on his rear,
 Circular base of rising folds, that towered
 Fold above fold an surging maze, his head
 Crested aloft and carbuncle his eyes;
 With burnished neck of verdant gold, erect
 Amidst his circling spires, that on the grass
 Floated redundant: pleasing was his shape,
 And lovely.

See John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, IX, 496, in *Paradise Lost*, ed. by Alastair Fowler (London: Longman, 1971), pp. 468-9.

a woman, however, she is not redundant as a narratologist; in fact, her work is 'in demand everywhere' (p. 103). Gillian is happy because she is freed from the traditional fate of a woman, which binds her in marriage, waiting and enduring, so that she can pursue her own work freely. As in the stories of Christabel, Maud and the Eldest Princess, the exercise of craft which for her is storytelling is what matters in Gillian's life-story.

On receiving a fax from her husband which tells her that he is leaving her for a younger woman, Gillian feels 'full of lightness, happiness and purpose' (p. 103). She felt: 'like a prisoner bursting chains and coming blinking out of a dungeon. She felt like a bird confined in a box, like a gas confined in a bottle, that found an opening, and rushed out. She felt herself expand in the space of her own life' (pp. 103-04). This suggests that marriage for her has been a form of confinement, not 'the space of her own life'. When left by her husband, she feels that she is finally freed from her long incarceration. This release from a married life is a necessary condition for the beginning of her own story.³⁰

Gillian can feel happy in her new freedom because she is an independent woman with a profession of her own. 'She knew she was lucky', for the fate of her 'ancestresses' would have been otherwise; exhaustion and death were most likely to be their fate (p. 104). 'Certain female narratologists', the narrator explains, 'talked with pleasurable awe about wise Crones but she was no crone, she was an unprecedented being, a woman with porcelain-crowned teeth, laser-corrected vision, her own store of

³⁰ The heroine of 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye' evokes Byatt's 'Medusa's Ankle', a short story contained in *The Matisse Stories* (1993), in which Susannah, a moderate, middle-aged classicist with swollen ankles, turns into an enraged Medusa with snake-like coils on her head and finds herself stepping into a new existence. Unlike Gillian's, however, Susannah's new life includes her husband, who recognises the difference in her after she had her adventure.

money, her own life and field of power' (pp. 104-05).³¹ It is made clear that this story, although its form as a fairy story seems to look backward at the past, is, in fact, going to tell something new and 'unprecedented'. The ageing heroine is not a wise old woman or a witch in old tales, but a modern independent woman who is free from the fate of her ancestresses, who can float redundant in the pursuit of her work.

The conference to be held in Ankara is called 'Stories of Women's Lives' (p. 107). On hearing the title, Gillian thinks, 'with a thrill and a shudder', of 'Patient Griselda' (p. 107). The mixed sense of terror and excitement she feels here marks the beginning of her adventure; the idea of interpreting and retelling the story of Griselda seems to her to be a kind of taboo. She breaks this inhibition and tells *her* version of 'Patient Griselda'. Yet her adventure, as all adventures are, is fraught with danger; she becomes haunted by the apparition of exhausted women in stories who wasted their lives in waiting and enduring. This apparition makes Gillian remind of the traditional fate of women from which she, as a modern, unprecedented being, believes herself to be free. She begins to feel her fate, which is her death, coming towards her when she finally feels free.

As in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, 'Patient Griselda' appears in 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye' as a story within a story told by a fictional character. The story of Griselda, when retold by Gillian, becomes a horror story, a story about the horrible fate women have to suffer in stories. For her, it is *the* story about women's lives, including her own. Gillian, an ageing woman, retells the tale with empathy, not from outside as is the case with Chaucer's story which is told by the Clerk of Oxford with the

³¹ The terms 'crone' and 'hag', once used pejoratively, have been re-appropriated by some feminists who attempt to re-invest these figures with (female) authority over knowledge and storytelling. It is along these lines that Angela Carter's *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales* was reprinted in America as *Old Wives' Fairy Tale Book*.

male author behind him. 'Patient Griselda' is a story about a woman who is subjected to a series of cruel testing by her husband, Walter, who marries her on the condition of her absolute obedience to him. Griselda, like Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*, goes through a long period of endurance until her daughter and her son (who are taken away from her by her husband, who tells her that he is going to put them to death) reach a marriageable age. This 'lull' in the narrative, remarks Dr Perholt, is fatal to Griselda, who, as a human being, does not resurrect like Persephone after long winter, but lives only one life, and 'most of that life has been taken by plotting, has been made into a grey void of forced inactivity' (pp. 113-14).

'Patient Griselda' displays a typical female plot, the plot of the Innocent Persecuted Heroine tale. The heroine is persecuted severely and for a long period of time *without* breaking any inhibitions. Here, we recall Propp's observation that prohibition is there to be broken since the transgression of prohibition in fairy tales figures as what creates the movement of the story, not as what calls forth moral judgement. Yet whereas heroes almost always break prohibitions to proceed to the next stage of their adventures without being punished, heroines are either heavily punished for their transgression (as in the stories about 'winning') or equally heavily persecuted even without breaking any prohibitions (as in the stories about 'suffering'). The story of Griselda tells how the heroine does *not* break her husband's orders. Propp observes that 'each new act of villainy, each new lack creates a new move'³²; in this story, however, movement is made impossible by her husband, the masterplotter of what appears to be her story. Lacking the movement on the heroine's side, the story has a stifling effect on the reader.

³² *Morphology of the Folktale*, p. 92.

What makes 'Patient Griselda' stifling, almost unreadable, is the role the husband plays in the narrative. The 'peculiar horror of Patient Griselda', observes Gillian, 'lies in the narration of the story and Walter's relation to it. The story is terrible because Walter has assumed too many positions in the narration; he is hero, villain, destiny, God and narrator—there is no *play* in this tale' (p. 120). 'Patient Griselda' is *his* story, not hers; his desire drives the story towards its predetermined end, without taking into account the possibility that she may have her own desires, that she may not be happy with what he believes to be the perfect happy ending that he designs for the story.

Walter tells his wife to return to her father because he intends to take a young bride. Patiently, she obeys and leaves, only to be called back to attend his wedding as a servant. When asked her opinion about his new bride, she praises her beauty, but warns him never to torment this young bride as he has done with her. Here, says Gillian, Walter has '*his* dénouement, the end of *his* story' (p. 116; my emphasis); he reveals to Griselda that the bride is her daughter and the squire who accompanies the bride is her son, and that all should be well now that she has passed his test.

'And what did Griselda do?' asks Gillian, 'And what did she say, and what did she do?' (p. 117). When she comes to this point in her talk, Gillian suddenly stops, being unable to move or speak, for she sees before her a huge apparition, an old female figure with a toothless mouth and flat withered breasts. It is a ghost of Griselda, exhausted after going through decades of patience, which begins to haunt Gillian and which she perceives to be her Fate, namely, Death. Like Griselda, Gillian feels that her energy has been stopped for too long, too long to start seeking her own happiness. After a moment of embarrassment for the audience, Gillian resumes her talk.

After going through a long period of patience and inactivity, Griselda, like Hermione, is allowed to breathe again. At this dénouement, however, Griselda faints.

She revives, thanks her husband, and again falls into unconsciousness, embracing both her daughter and her son so tightly that people are almost unable to free the children from her grasp. Gillian suggests that here Griselda is 'strangling' her children in her swoon: 'Chaucer does not say, the Clerk of Oxford does not say, that she was strangling them, but there is fear in his words, and in the power of her grip, all her stoppered and stunted energy forcing all three into unconsciousness, unknowing, absence from the finale so splendidly brought about by their lord and master' (p. 119). Griselda's unconscious revenge on her husband is to disappear with her children from the grand finale plotted by him, the masterplotter of the narrative.

Of course, however, Griselda is revived again and restored to her place, 'to begin again' (p. 120). The moral of the story, according to the Clerk and Chaucer, is that, like Job, 'human beings must patiently bear what comes to them' (p. 121). 'And yet', protests Gillian,

Our own response is surely outrage—at what was done to Griselda—at what was taken from her, the best part of her life, what could not be restored—at the energy stopped off. For the stories of women's lives in fiction are the stories of stopped energies—the stories of Fanny Price, Lucy Snowe, even Gwendolen Harleth, are the stories of Griselda, and all come to that moment of strangling, willed oblivion. (p. 121)

We also think of Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, Cinderella and many other heroines of classic fairy tales, whose stories are not their own, but plotted by their male masters.³³

³³ We may also recall the 'moment of strangling, willed oblivion' of the governess of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, the story which is also directed by the Master, her absent employer. In her case, it is suggested that she ends up actually suffocating the child to death: 'The grasp with which I recovered him might have been that of catching him in his fall. I caught him, yes, I held him—it may be imagined with what a passion; but at the end of a minute I began to feel what it truly was that I held. We were lone with the quiet day, and his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped'. See Henry James, *The*

Here, we return to Peter Brooks's notion of the female plot of endurance, of which the story of Patient Griselda seems to be an extreme example. Brooks, however, does not see in stories of women's lives such 'stopped energies' of women, for his formulation of the female plot does not consider women's desires as a force which would drive the narrative forward. For Brooks, desire, the driving force of the narrative, is always masculine; the masculine desire is the driving force of all narratives including the female plot in which the heroine perseveringly waits to be admitted by *his* desire. In this scheme, women's energies are spent on trying to meet men's desire. However, one cannot use all one's energies on being passive, on being patient; energies are stopped while waiting.

Gillian's observation that 'the stories of women's lives in fiction are the stories of stopped energies' can be a definition of the traditional female plot. And this is ultimately Byatt's own conclusion in *Imagining Characters: Six Conversations about Women Writers* (1995), where she discusses with the psychoanalyst Ignês Sodr  six novels by women writers which include Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, Charlotte Bront 's *Villette*, and George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, whose heroines are mentioned above in Gillian's talk. There, Byatt observes that 'most great novels by women were about what to do with energy that might be stopped off'.³⁴ Byatt also speaks about the 'horror' of the story of Hermione:

I've always had a sort of horror of Hemione as a figure of death. I find her deeply alarming. [...] She's in fact somebody who has had all her

Turn of the Screw, in *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, X, ed. by Leon Edel (London: Hart-Davis, 1964), pp. 15-138 (p. 138). For an analysis of the Master's grip in *The Turn of the Screw*, see Shoshana Felman, 'Turning the Screw of Interpretation', in *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, ed. by Felman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), pp. 94-207.

³⁴ Byatt and Sodr , p. 39.

adult life and the growing up of her children taken from her by being closed in the tomb, and is only allowed to come to life when she's too old to live her life. And so she is in a sense a real figure of life-in-death. [...] A fear of having a life that isn't a life.³⁵

Gillian's retelling of 'Patient Griselda' echoes her own life-story which frames it. The story of Griselda is a story of the life of a woman whose marriage confines her in a closed, tomb-like space. Gillian, as suggested earlier, has been feeling the same sense of confinement during her marriage. Although she now feels free and full of life, the gruesome image of Patient Griselda haunts her as if threatening to subject her to the traditional fate of women in stories which is exhausted womanhood and death.

The stories of women's lives are plotted differently from those of men's, and this is the issue Gillian's friend Orhan Rifat explores in his talk, which he says is 'about character and destiny and sex in the folk-tale, where character is *not* destiny as Novalis said it was, but something else is' (p. 126). And this 'something else', in Orhan's argument, is gender.

Orhan's talk, which is titled 'Powers and powerlessness: djinns and women in *The Arabian Nights*' (p. 106), begins with the statement that 'misogyny is a driving force of pre-modern story collections' from *The Ocean of Story* to *The Thousand and One Nights* (p. 123). Driven by a deep hatred towards women, argues Orhan, these stories portray women as 'deceitful, unreliable, greedy, inordinate in their desires, unprincipled and simply dangerous, operating powerfully [...] through the structures of powerlessness' (p. 124). This paradigm applies even to the case of Scheherazade, the resourceful storyteller in the frame story of the *Nights*, who is 'nevertheless using cunning and manipulation from a position of total powerlessness', with her fate hanging

³⁵ Byatt and Sodr , p. 92.

like a sword in her bedchamber by 'the thread of her narrative' (p. 124). It is King Shahriyar who has real power over Scheherazade as well as all the other women in his kingdom. Scheherazade, however, is not as powerless as Griselda, for she is given the right to exercise one kind of power, the power of storytelling and plotting, which, as Orhan remarks, 'is enough' (p. 125). Unlike in 'Patient Griselda', where the husband alone orchestrates the narrative, here it is Scheherazade herself who, despite her powerless position as a woman, manipulates the plot to postpone her destiny, to 'spin out her life until it becomes love and happy-ever-after' (p. 125). Nevertheless, the happy ending which Scheherazade brings about by telling stories for one thousand and one nights also falls within the framework of the female plot. Orhan observes that destiny, that which controls and designs stories, is different according to gender. In the frame story of the *Nights*, states Orhan, 'destiny for men is to lose dignity because of female rapacity and duplicity, and destiny for women is to be put to the sword on that account' (p. 129). The alteration he makes to Novalis's formulation is: Gender is destiny, which echoes Freud's formulation: 'Anatomy is destiny'.³⁶ Stories of women's lives are stories of endurance; women patiently wait to be permitted a place in the master's story. What awaits them at the end of the story is, as Orhan puts it, 'the somnolence of daily life', which in real life, however, is not the end of women's and men's life-stories, for 'the dailiness of daily life is her end as it is Cinderella's and Snow-White's but not Mme Bovary's or Julien Sorel's who die but do not vanish into the afterlife of stories' (p. 125). For Gillian, the dailiness of her married life itself has been felt to be incarceration, that which stops her energies and forces her into inactivity.

³⁶ Freud, 'On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love (Contributions to the Psychology of Love II)', in *PFL*, VII, pp 243-60 (p. 259); and 'The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex', in *PFL*, VII, pp. 313-22 (p. 320).

While Orhan is discussing the role of the djinns as the unconscious force which watches over and adjusts destinies in 'Camaralzaman and Princess Budoor', one of the framed stories in the *Nights*, in which both the prince and the princess, like Walter, first refuse to marry, Gillian drifts into reminiscence and begins to reflect on the story of her own life as a woman. She remembers the idea she used to have of a woman she was going to be, which is a conventional image of a happily married woman. She finds her present state as 'a narratologist in Ankara' 'much more interesting and surprising' (pp. 136-37).

The next day in the Museum of Anatolian Civilization, Gillian meets an 'Ancient Mariner',³⁷ a hairless, djinn-like man, who tells her the story of Gilgamesh, the ancient Sumerian tale about chance and destiny (p. 137). In the story of Gilgamesh retold to Gillian by the Ancient Mariner, Gilgamesh rejects the goddess Ishtar, telling her that 'he didn't want her, he wanted to remain free' (p. 144). His rejection of the goddess eventually leads to the death of his friend Enkidu. He then sets out on a voyage into the afterlife and finds out the secret of eternal youth. The moment he obtains the magic flower of immortality, however, he loses it by unwittingly letting a snake, which is attracted by its sweetness, snatch and eat it. The story of Gilgamesh tells about the inevitability of fate, of which Gillian becomes increasingly aware.

When she goes out with her Turkish friends to the temple of Ephesus, Gillian is asked to make a wish by two Leylas, Leyla Doruk and Leyla Serin (it is said in Turkey

³⁷ On the influence of the *Nights* on Coleridge's works, Irwin refers to the following passage from John Livingston Lowes's *The Road to Xanadu*: 'to attempt to trace the prints of the *Arabian Nights* [...] in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", and "Christabel", and "Kubla Khan", were like seeking the sun and the rain of vanished yesterdays in the limbs and foliage of the oak. But the rain and sun are there'. See Irwin, p. 267; and John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 416.

that, if you make a wish standing between two people with the same name, the wish will come true). Knowing the conventions of the tales about making wishes, Gillian says laughingly: 'I am enough of a narratologist to know that no good ever comes of making wishes. They have a habit of twisting the wishers to their own ends' (pp. 159-60). She mentions a Nordic tale in which the peasant's wife has her nose decorated with sausage strings. One of the fairy-tale conventions 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye' reworks is the plot of the tale group known as 'The Three Wishes', in which the last wish is always used to undo the first two wishes.³⁸ Although often told as a comic fable about the evil of greed, the Three Wishes tale also suggests something important about our desire; the third and the last wish, although apparently made in an involuntary way, may be regarded as representing our unconscious wish for the state of quiescence. In tales about making wishes, one wishes for extravagant riches, for a drastic change in life, but this wish has to be undone to return life to its original state. As we shall see, Byatt's tale treats the motif of three wishes in connection with Freud's notion of death drive. However, this story, which is also a story about making wishes, follows a different pattern from that of the Three Wishes tale, a pattern which the heroine designs for herself. Pressed by her friends, Gillian nonetheless makes a 'precise and careful wish' to be invited as a keynote speaker to a conference in Toronto with 'a first-class air-fare and a hotel with a swimming pool' (p. 161). This apparently trivial episode, which inserts a brief version of the tale about three wishes, prefigures what happens to Gillian later in the story: she

³⁸ In de Beaumont's eighteenth-century version called 'The Tale of the Three Wishes', a fairy appears before a rich man and his wife, offering to grant them three wishes. The wife unthinkingly wishes for a yard of black pudding simply because the fire is good. The infuriated husband then wishes the pudding to be attached to her nose. The last wish is spent in removing the pudding from her nose. The moral of this tale is: 'let us wish for nothing, and take things as it shall please God to send them'. See also for other variants of this tale, Opie and Opie, pp. 151-54.

meets a 'real' wish-granter who offers to grant her three wishes.

In the theatre of Ephesus, Gillian again sees the vision of an old woman, this time the Virgin Mary, 'a real bewildered old woman, a woman with a shrivelled womb and empty eyes [...] waiting quietly for death until it came', and experiences 'the strange stoppage of her own life' (pp. 166-67). She explains to Orhan the state she is in: 'I feel more alive now than ever before. But lately I've had a sense of my fate—my death, that is—waiting for me, manifesting itself from time to time, to remind me it's there. It isn't a battle. I don't fight it off. It takes charge for a moment or two, and then lets go again, and steps back. The more alive I am, the more suddenly it comes' (p. 167-68).

Then, for the third time, Gillian encounters Fate in the Hagia Sophia (although she knows that 'Haghia' derives from 'holy' and 'Sophia' means 'wisdom', Gillian cannot help associating Haghia with a 'Hag'), where she is forced by three softly laughing women to touch a dark, wet hole in the pillar for fertility wishes, and is horrified. What she instinctively wishes there, as she reveals later, is to be freed from women's fate, to be a man instead of a woman. This story, however, does not follow the traditional fate of women in stories; as we shall see, there is a wonderful twist to her life-story.

Back in her hotel room,³⁹ Gillian again confronts an apparition, this time, of herself. In the bathroom mirror, she 'saw her death advancing towards her, its hair streaming dark and liquid, its eyeholes dark smudges, its mouth open in its liquescent face in fear of their convergence' (p.p. 189-90). Gillian then takes out the glass bottle she has just bought at the Grand Bazaar. The bottle, if it is a real one, is the nineteenth-century Turkish glasswork called 'çesm-i bülül', meaning 'nightingale's eye' (p. 183).

³⁹ The name of the hotel 'Peri Palas' (*peri* meaning a female spirit) indicates that Gillian has entered into the world of magic.

While rubbing it under the tap, she drops it, letting its stopper fall off, and out comes a djinn in a green tunic, who proposes to grant her three wishes. The djinn in this tale is described with 'oriental' sexual openness; he curls up on Gillian's bed with his genitals peeping under his tunic, emanating 'a strong horripilant male smell' (p. 193).

The question the djinn puts to Gillian: 'If there is anything you desire' (p. 195) brings us back to Freud's question: What does a woman want? Now it is a question which Gillian, a woman, has to ask of herself. It is also the key question linking the stories which Gillian and the djinn tell to each other.

After a brief discussion about the conditions of wishes (she is a narratologist who knows too well about such occasions), Gillian carefully makes her first wish: 'I wish [...] for my body to be as it was when I last really *liked* it' (p. 201). The djinn immediately fulfils this wish, and her body becomes as it was twenty years ago, a ripe and lively body of a thirty-five-year-old woman, the body she can feel most comfortable with. She is satisfied with the outcome of her '*intelligent* wish' (p. 203); she can now stop lamenting over her sadly decaying body. Her face is not particularly beautiful but, with this body, she thinks, 'I shall *feel* better, I shall like myself' (p. 203). Her first wish is to be able to love her own body again, to recover the time lost in her confinement. Her thus rejuvenated body plays a significant role in her new life.

The Second Wish: Love

While Gillian decides upon her two remaining wishes, the djinn begins to tell his life-story, how he comes to be incarcerated in the bottle. The story of his incarcerations is also a story of his love, and his first story is about the Queen of Sheba, with whom he was in love. The story of the Queen of Sheba told by the djinn is related to the stories of Walter, Camaralzaman and Budoor in terms of the desire *not* to marry. The Queen of

Sheba, as the djinn describes, was a powerful and wise woman. She used to say: 'How can I, a great Queen, submit to the prison house of marriage, to the invisible chains which bind me to the bed of a man?' (p. 209). However, the moment she saw the Suleiman, she 'desired him' (p. 210). The djinn, who was 'sick with desire for her', tells her to think of her 'freedom', her 'autonomy', only in vain because her love was her fate (p. 210). As is customary in fairy tales, the Queen nevertheless set her suitor three difficult tasks, the last of which was to 'tell her what women most desire' (p. 211). The Suleiman, after performing the first two tasks, 'looked into her eyes and told her what women most desire' (p. 211). The Queen then granted him 'what *he* desired', which was marriage (p. 211).

What was the answer? The djinn does not tell Gillian, and we, readers, do not receive the knowledge, either. In the story of the Queen of Sheba, a woman asks a man the question: What do women most desire?, whereas Freud's 'What does a woman want?' is a question asked by a man, who claimed that it was an enigma, that he did not know the answer. The djinn tells us that the Suleiman, who looked into her eyes, knew the answer. What was it? And why did she ask that question? The point of this dénouement which leaves an enigma may lie in the fact that the Queen of Sheba's question is impossible to answer, that the man who solves it in the story is indeed superhuman. And that the storyteller does not reveal the answer gives the reader the freedom to imagine it for him/herself. Was it love that the Queen wanted because she was in love with him and he saw it in her eyes? Or was it something else? 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye' uses the question in order to open up the possibilities of thinking about women's desire.

Gillian is intrigued by the Queen of Sheba's question, for it is precisely the question she is now asking of herself. 'Tell me', says Gillian, who cannot help

interrupting the djinn's story, 'What do women most desire?' (p. 213). The Djinn, however, evades the answer: 'If you do not know already, I cannot tell you' (p. 213). 'Maybe they do not all desire the same thing', replies Gillian (p. 213). 'Maybe you do not', says he (p. 213). He then asks her to tell her life-story, because he cannot tell, therefore is intrigued by, what *she* desires. But Gillian is eager to hear the rest of his story first.

The jealous djinn, after being incarcerated in a flask by the Suleiman, was freed by a slave girl. The girl first wished to be loved by Prince Mustafa, with whom she was in love. Her second wish was to be pregnant, the wish which seems 'natural but very stupid' to the djinn (p. 215), for it would have happened anyway without his magic interference. Mustafa was assassinated, and the girl was put in a sack to be drowned in the sea. Frozen with terror, she could not make any wish to free herself as well as the djinn, who waited to hear her third wish. The bottle to which he was still half-tied was then opened by the fattest of all women, who was so 'self-satisfied and slow-witted' as to seal him up again in his bottle and let herself be strangled by the Sultan's mother (p. 221). The djinn says to Gillian, 'my luck was femininity' (p. 222). His story so far has told us that 'feminine' women either wish to be loved and be pregnant, or wish nothing because of their weak and foolish nature.

Yet Zefir, the third and the last woman who incarcerated the djinn, was different. Zefir, entering a merchant's harem at the age of fourteen, was discontent with her marriage which imprisoned her like a bird in a cage. She was angry because she was full of energy but had nothing at all to do all day. She spent her time creating, although in a manner in which a woman was traditionally allowed to create, which is sewing and embroidering. She sewed pictures of stories in silk; her art, however, went unnoticed. The djinn says to Gillian: 'And she was angry because she knew she was capable of many

things she couldn't even define to herself, so they seemed like bad dreams—that is what she told me. She told me she was eaten up with unused power and thought she might be a witch—except, she said, if she were a man, these things she thought about would be ordinarily acceptable' (p. 224). Zefir's life-story is also related to the stories of Griselda and Hermione, the stories of women whose energies are stopped because of their gender. Unlike Griselda, however, Zefir was angry and revealed her discontent to the djinn, who taught her various branches of knowledge such as mathematics, astronomy, languages, poetry, history and philosophy. But Gillian interrupts: 'Why did she not wish to *get out of there?*' (p. 225). He advised against it because *he* desired to stay with her and to teach her. Gillian is jealous of Zefir—she has come to think of him as '*her* djinn' (p. 227)—but, at the same time, 'felt troubled on Zefir's behalf, by the djinn's desire to be both liberator and prisoner in one' (p. 227). A woman in that situation, in Gillian's eye, would have wished, above all things, to be liberated from her imprisonment. It was Zefir herself who said, 'if she were a man'; then, why did she not wish that? And was this, we begin to wonder, the answer to the Queen of Sheba's question? To be a man and be freed from women's fate? What did Zefir, a woman of fierce temperament and outstanding talent, want? So Gillian asks the djinn: 'Did she wish for *anything at all?* Or did you prevent her to keep her prisoner?' (p. 227). The djinn says that she did, and her first wish was to fly to the Americas with him. Zefir then wished, as Gillian guesses that she did, to be pregnant. When she became pregnant, however, Zefir became angry again, and began to berate him for having 'ruined her life' (p. 230). Her third wish was: 'I wish I could forget I had ever seen you' (p. 230). So she forgot the djinn, who was left inside a sealed bottle. Her third and last wish, therefore, was spent on returning things to their original state, as if nothing had happened.

So that was how the djinn came to be incarcerated in the bottle, the

nightingale's eye, which came into Gillian's hands. In his life-story are embedded stories of women's lives, of women's wishes, which are connected to Gillian's story, her life and desires as a woman. Was Freud right, we are made to wonder, in his conviction that women either wish for a child (which he considered as a 'feminine' wish) or wish for a penis (a 'masculine' wish)? Or did the Queen of Sheba wish for something else which was beyond Freud's speculation?

Having told his history, the djinn now demands: 'you must tell me your history' (p. 231). The first story Gillian tells him is a story about a story which she wrote and burned when she was at a boarding-school, where she, like Zefir, felt imprisoned. She wrote a book about 'a boy, a man, the Other', out of her desire and her need to escape from the reality of her incarceration (p. 232). But her 'imagination failed', and the boy in her story called 'Julian/Julienne' remained 'almost absent' (p. 233).⁴⁰ Then she tells the djinn that there was a boy who was 'real', not 'flesh and blood', but 'real' in her imagination, a 'golden boy who walked beside me wherever I went' (p. 234). The djinn recognises 'those beings', and says that Zefir, too, had known one (p. 234). He came with a name, says Gillian, which was 'Tadzio' (p. 234).⁴¹ After reciting a poem which contains strange names—'Chimborazo', 'Cotopaxi', 'Popocatapetl'—and the golden boy, Gillian remarks: 'The names are not the names of the boy, they are the romance of language, and *he* is the romance of language—he is more real than reality' (p. 236). This observation on names and what they evoke in our mind as real seems to express one of the pleasures of reading the *Arabian Nights*. The names in the *Nights*, to those who are not familiar with Arabic, are not only foreign but also fabulous, evoking fantastic images

⁴⁰ The name Julian/Julienne assonantly evokes Gillian.

⁴¹ Tadzio is the name of the golden boy with whom the protagonist of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* falls in love.

which may not be found anywhere in 'reality'.⁴² Names stay with us and come to have their own life in our imagination. But, interestingly, Gillian's djinn does not have a name; 'And I am here', says he (p. 236).

Gillian's second story, the story she has never told to anyone, is about the troubled relationship between her mind and her body, about what she felt about her body when she was a young woman. Once looking at her young, perfect body in a bathroom mirror, she was 'terrified', and felt as if she had 'a weapon, a sharp sword, I couldn't handle' (p. 241). In telling her life-story, Gillian re-discovers herself, 'searching for feelings she had never interrogated' (p. 242). To tell a story of one's own life is to re-define oneself, and Gillian realises that she could never feel the perfect body of a young woman to be her own. 'I am a creature of the mind, not the body, Djinn', she says to him (p. 242). The powerfully desirable body of a young woman, it was felt to her, had nothing to do with the reality of her mind, but it belonged to the banal reality of daily life in a family: 'And I felt sick, and felt my body to blame' (p. 243).

The third story Gillian tells the djinn is a story not about herself but about another woman, an old Ethiopian woman whom she saw in a documentary programme on television. Confined in a little hut in a starving village, the old woman says to her interviewer: 'It is because I am a woman, I cannot get out of here, I must sit here and wait for my fate, if only I were not a woman I could go out and do something' (p. 248). So this story is also related to the Queen of Sheba's question. The old woman wishes to be a man, instead of a woman. Gillian tells the djinn that this was what she herself wished, 'before I could stop myself' (p. 248), when she was forced to touch a wet hole

⁴² The Arab storytellers, on their part, invented fabulous names for characters from foreign countries like Princess Budoor, who is supposed to come from China but whose name does not sound like Chinese.

in the pillar for fertility wishes in Hagia Sophia. As a child, she also tells him, she used to wish that she were not a woman. She has told these stories to the djinn, because she ‘thought, perhaps, that was what the Queen of Sheba told Solomon that all women desired’ (p. 249). The djinn’s answer, however, is: ‘It was not. [...] Not exactly’ (p. 249).

Looking at the djinn on her bed and at ‘his sex coiled like a folded snake and stirring’, Gillian makes her second wish: ‘I wish you would love me’ (p. 250). To this he replies: ‘maybe you have wasted your wish, for it may well be that love would have happened anyway, since we are together, and sharing our life stories, as lovers do’ (p. 250). Byatt’s tale grants great importance to the act of telling and sharing stories; to give and to share narrative as life is presented as a mutually empowering way of engaging the other.

Gillian knew that love would have come out of such sharing of life-stories without her wishing, and it was because of, not in spite of, this that she wished what she wished. The apparent redundancy of her second wish is important to her. She tries to explain: ‘Love [...] requires generosity. [...] I wanted—it was more that I wanted to give *you* something—to give you my wish’ (p. 250). The reciprocal nature of her second wish sheds a new light on the question of women’s desire: her wish at once demands and gives. The djinn replies: ‘You give and you bind [...] like all lovers’ (p. 251). To give oneself to someone, which requires courage, is also to bind him, but this act of giving oneself to someone for love is to be distinguished from the act of merely possessing someone to satisfy one’s desire. Gillian’s wish to be loved by the djinn is given to him as a gift, so that her wish, or her desire, is shared between the two. Reciprocity may be what characterises an other, different desire, which has been suppressed and made invisible in stories, even in stories of women’s lives. And this may have been the answer

to the Queen of Sheba's question, which pervades 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye' as absence, as an enigma.

Gillian and the djinn make love. Their love-making also shows the reciprocity of love and desire. With the djinn who is literally shape-shifting, Gillian,

seemed to swim across his body forever like a dolphin in an endless green sea, so that she became arching tunnels under mountains through which he pierced and rushed, or caverns in which he lay curled like dragons. He could become a concentrated point of delight at the pleasure-points of her arched and delighted body; he could travel her like some wonderful butterfly [...] and then become again a folding landscape in which she rested and was lost, lost herself for him to find her again [...] holding her breast to breast, belly to belly, male to female. (pp. 251-52)

He is both a 'sea' and 'dragons', both a 'butterfly' and a 'landscape', that which 'pierces' and 'holds' her; she becomes a 'dolphin' which swims across his body and 'caverns' in which he rests. The metaphors used here suggests the nature of their lovemaking, their mutual shape-shifting in which the opposites coincide and keep changing places again and again.

The Third Wish: Freedom

The patterning through the key question, 'What do women most desire?', is given a new twist near the end. Gillian takes the djinn back to London, where she finds that she has been granted her other wish, the wish she made between the two Turkish women with the same name, the wish which might, indeed, have happened without magical intervention: she receives an invitation to a conference in Toronto as the keynote speaker. She then takes the djinn to Toronto with her. The title of her talk this time is 'Wish-fulfilment and Narrative Fate: some aspects of wish-fulfilment as a narrative

device', in which she incorporates a story provided by the djinn (p. 257).

'Characters in fairy tales', begins Gillian, 'are subject to Fate and enact their fates', and magical intervention they use to change their fates 'only reinforces the control of the Fate which waited for them' (p. 258). She argues that there is no real choice or freedom for characters in fairy tales, unlike those in modern novels such as George Eliot's *Lydgate* and Proust's *Swann*. But Gillian also says: 'We feel that when Proust decides to diagnose sexual inversion in *all* his characters he is substituting the novelist's desires for the Fate of the real world' (p. 259). And this is exactly the point of my argument: Desire may play the same role as Fate does. Desire, as I have argued, does not merely belong to a particular individual, but is more pervasive, operating powerfully as the invisible masterplotter. Fate in traditional fairy tales may re-emerge in modern stories as Desire, as the driving force of narrative which is as ineluctable as Fate. Both Desire and Fate are determined by the masculine desire, as the stories of women's lives embedded in 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye' also indicate.

Yet in this talk, Gillian's concern is not gender, or not apparently so. She goes on to tell a story which she has heard from the djinn. The story goes as follows. A poor fisherman catches a wish-granting ape, and makes careful and discreet wishes gradually to create a peaceful happily-ever-after world like the one we find in fairy tales. The fisherman, however, begins to notice that the ape is becoming smaller and smaller as he continues to make wishes. One night, he overhears the diminishing ape saying to his brother ape: 'It is my Fate to lose power and to diminish. [...] I wish I were dead but none of my wishes may be granted. Oh, it is hard, it is hard, it is hard' (pp. 264-65). The good-natured fisherman then decides to give the next wish to the apes and tells them to wish for their 'heart's desire': 'And both apes vanished as if they had never been' (p. 265). Although he cannot make any more wishes, the fisherman continues to live

comfortably with the things he has wished for (the house, the wife, and the business) which do not disappear with the wish-granting ape.

‘In fairy-tales’, Gillian observes, ‘those wishes that are granted and are not malign, or twisted towards destruction, tend to lead to a condition of beautiful stasis, more like a work of art than the drama of Fate’ (p. 266). Like Peter Brooks, Gillian relates the stasis of the happy-ever-after to Freud’s notion of death drive. Freud’s initial belief in ‘our desire, our will to live happily ever after’, she argues, is contradicted by his discovery of ‘a desire for annihilation’, i.e., death drive (pp. 267-78). Gillian concludes: “‘*The aim of all life is death*”, said Freud, telling his creation story in which the creation strives to return to the state before life was breathed into it, in which [...] the diminishing of the ape, is not the terrible concomitant of the life-force, but its secret desire’ (p. 268). She argues here that the diminishing of the ape represents the desire of the life-force. The fisherman’s desire diminishes as he desires to have more and more; desire has its end. The vanishing of the apes, therefore, is the death of desire, which, according to Freud, is the aim of all life. And, as in Brooks’s argument, the death of desire coincides with the end of narrative.

What distinguishes Gillian’s argument from Brooks’s, however, is its choice of the tale whose ending is marked by generosity: the fisherman gives away his last wish as a gift. The story Gillian chooses to tell is about sharing one’s desires with the other. The wish-granting apes wish to be freed, and so does the fisherman, if only on an unconscious level. The fisherman’s secret, and deepest, desire is to be freed from his endless wishes, from Desire. As Walter Benjamin observes in ‘Fate and Character’ (1919), ‘happiness is, rather, what releases a man from the embroilment of the Fates and

from the net of his own fate'.⁴³ Brooks, on the other hand, takes *La Peau de chagrin* as the prime example which represents his idea of narrative desire. Balzac's *La Peau de chagrin* is a tale also influenced by oriental tales, a tale in which the hero desperately attempts and fails to avoid the terrible inevitability of Fate with the power of the magic skin on which Arabic letters are inscribed. Raphaël wishes the death of others as well as the death of his own desire, and 'he dies convulsively biting his beloved Pauline in the breast, in the final inarticulate gasp of desire'.⁴⁴ Raphaël's wishes are all directed to the satisfaction of his own desires, leaving no possibility of reciprocity. His ugly, convulsive death is felt to be even more terrible because his last wish remains incommunicable, even to his lover. A woman, it must be also remembered, figures as death in Brooks's masterplot.

But why did Gillian choose to tell the story of wishing apes in her talk? And why did the djinn tell this particular tale to her? 'You made my paper incoherent', she complains to him: 'It was a paper about fate and death and desire, and you introduced the freedom of wishing-apes' (p. 269). The fisherman's giving of his last wish as a gift would be 'incoherent' in the framework of Brooks's, and ultimately in Freud's, masterplot; however, Gillian's life-story progresses towards the fulfilment precisely of this desire, the desire to share one's desires with the other. Back in her hotel room, Gillian is now ready to make her last wish: 'I wish you could have whatever you wish for—that this last wish may be your wish' (p. 270). Then, the bottle breaks into pieces, and the djinn is freed. Gillian, like the fisherman, gives away her wish to her wish-granter in order to make him free. It is, of course, true that the djinn might have been

⁴³ Walter Benjamin, 'Fate and Character', in *One Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), pp. 124-31 (p. 126).

⁴⁴ Brooks, p. 51.

freed without her wishing so, since he was promised his freedom after granting his emancipator three wishes whatever they might be. She could, for example, have wished to be pregnant; her body is now young enough for that. But Gillian desires to give him her last wish and to become his liberator. What she desires most is freedom but, unlike the woman in Chaucer's 'The Wife of Bath's Tale' whose ultimate desire is to have the sovereignty over her husband, she also wishes to give freedom to the one whom she loves.⁴⁵ 'Thank you', says the djinn (p. 270). He promises her to come back 'from time to time' (p. 270).

Before they part, the djinn buys Gillian a glass paperweight called 'The Dance of the Elements' (p. 272). Looking at a host of multicoloured ribbons of glass suspended in the sphere, the djinn remarks: 'Like rushing seed. [...] Full of forever possibilities. And impossibilities, of course' (p. 272). Gillian, who is 'sorrowful and yet full of a sense of things being as they should be', utters Prospero's words: 'Now to the elements. [...] Be free and fare thou well' (pp. 272-73).⁴⁶ He vanishes.

Postscript

This is, however, not the end of 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye'; there is a sequel to it, like the postscript to *Possession*. The omniscient narrator tells us a part of what happened to Gillian afterwards: 'And did she ever see him again, you may ask? Or that may not be the question uppermost in your mind, but it is the only one to which you get

⁴⁵ In 'The Wife of Bath Tale', a retelling of the story of Gawain and the Lady Ragnell, the knight (who is sentenced to death for having raped a maiden) answers the riddle of women's desire as follows: 'A woman wants the self-same sovereignty/ Over her husband as over her lover,/ And master him; he must not be above her'. See Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, trans. by Nevill Coghill (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), pp. 299-310 (p. 304).

⁴⁶ For the original reference, see Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, V. 1. 18.

an answer' (p. 273). The narrator, whose presence is made perceptible from time to time, reminds us of the fact that we are reading her/his version of the story, and that there are things which are not told in her/his story. Significantly, Byatt's fairy tales often employ such authority of the narrator in order not to delimit but to open up narrative possibilities; the narrator holds back *and* suggests other possible endings, thereby encouraging us to add our own postscripts to the story.

'Two years ago', so the narrator tells us, the djinn did return to Gillian (p. 273). Gillian, on her way to a conference, stops at New York and goes into a paperweight shop. Looking at various paperweights, she remarks, 'I like the geometrically patterned flowers best. [...] More than the ones that aim at realism, at looking real' (p. 275). Being a narratologist, she shows preference for the patterning (of fairy tales) rather than the realism (of novels). What patterns stories is Fate, that which controls and designs; she has accepted what seems to be her Fate, which is to part with her immortal lover. She is then shown two weights, one with a snake and the other with a flower, which give the perfect illusion of reality. The snake and the flower make her think of Gilgamesh, and she wishes to buy them. Yet she is put off by the high price and says: 'I wish—' (p. 276). And there he is, emerging behind her to grant her wish with his magic credit card. The narrative voice tells us:

There are things in the earth, things made with hands and beings not made with hands that live a life different from ours, that live longer than we do, and cross our lives in stories, in dreams, at certain times when we are floating redundant. And Gillian Perholt was happy, for she had moved back into their world, or at least had access to it, as she had had as a child. (p. 277)

The djinn leaves her again, telling her that he 'shall probably return again' (p. 277). Gillian says, 'If you remember to return in my life-time', to which he replies, 'If I do' (p.

277).

This 'ending', as the narrative voice reminds us, is only one of the things that happened to the heroine. We are free to ask ourselves other questions and to imagine possible answers to them: the djinn returned again to stay with her, or he never returned again, or Gillian became pregnant and bore a magic child, and so on. One thing we are sure of, however, is that it is a happy ending, that our heroine lived happily ever after as a free and happy woman. 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye' is a romance in the sense that it is a 'romance of language', which has fascinated the heroine since her childhood. Its ending, however, does not freeze the story into a death-like stasis; instead, it leaves the story full of 'forever possibilities' and 'impossibilities'. The djinn will come back when Gillian is feeling the reality of stories, of the world of imagination, when she is 'floating redundant'. The story does not close with the pseudo-eternity of the happily-ever-after, but leaves the heroine feeling happy in her freedom, which is the freedom of a woman who is in the middle of her own story. The middle of a story is a field where a certain amount of uncertainty and unpredictability is allowed. Before meeting the djinn, Gillian ponders on the liveness of a live tennis match, which has 'the wonderful open-endedness of a story which is most beautifully designed towards satisfactory closure but is still undecided' (p. 188). To watch a live match is to read a story in progress: 'A live match was live, was a story in progress towards an end which had not yet come but which must, *almost certainly* come. And in the fact of the *almost* was the delight' (p. 188). It is this '*almost*' that leaves the story full of forever possibilities and impossibilities (as to the tennis match Gillian watches with the djinn, it takes a totally unexpected turn when the djinn intervenes through the surface of the television screen). Gillian desires to be in a story in progress, to be in the middle of a story, whose satisfactory closure is anticipated but is still unknown. The essence of a story is this

almost, but not entirely, determined nature of the middle, which is also the essence of life as the stories in the *Nights* demonstrate. Characters in the *Nights* stories, amongst whom Sheherazade is the most obvious example, survive by telling stories; stories, their almost unpredictable nature while they are being told, assure the survival of their tellers.

And what about the Queen of Sheba's question, the key question which links together the frame story and the framed stories in 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye'? What do women most desire? Gillian desires neither a penis nor a child. Neither is her last wish, as Zefir's was, to forget about the djinn, which means to be rid of her own desires. Gillian wishes to give him what she most desires, which is freedom. She wishes to be loved by the one whom she loves; she wishes to remain free and to make her lover free. This reciprocity of desire frees both her and her lover from Fate which is also Desire. Maybe the answer to the Queen of Sheba's question was this, or we could imagine that it was, for she was also free and was in love. 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye' is a fairy tale about a woman's desire, and it is *her* desire that drives the narrative towards its end. She does not desire to possess the other at the end of the story; her story is not driven by the 'masculine' desire for self-assertion through appropriation. What Gillian desires is to live a story in progress, which is attained by *not* possessing the djinn who is her lover. Her desire is marked by reciprocity and generosity; love and freedom are to be shared between two individuals, not to be possessed by one. Because it concerns the desire of two, her story does not close with the consummation—and the death—of one desire.

Death, for Gillian, is not the absolute other to be fought against and conquered. When she meets the djinn, she becomes alive and invigorated; but he also represents Fate, reminding her of her mortality. He represents life-force and death at once, or to

use Byatt's own words, 'death as an invigorating force'.⁴⁷ And the djinn figures as yet something else, as 'the passion for reading tales'.⁴⁸ The djinn, who is an emanation from stories, embodies the power of imagination in stories, which Gillian once had access to as a child and which she takes back when she takes back her freedom.

Gillian's encounter with the djinn makes her finally free from the traditional pattern of women's lives, and the apparition of Griselda, of exhausted womanhood, disappears. She can now tell her own story, which, of course, must have an end but is still open and undecided. She can now continue to explore her own craft of telling and studying stories, which is also to look at glass, which Gillian sees as a 'solid metaphor' for art, for glass is 'a medium for seeing and a thing seen at once' (p. 275). And her free, happy life continues. The narrator leaves the story in the middle, with full of possibilities and impossibilities, for the heroine desires an open ending, a story almost for ever in progress.

Conclusion

'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye' is a story of a woman's life which interweaves stories of other women's lives as well as a woman's interpretations of these stories. The heroine rereads and retells stories of women's lives from a woman's point of view, reclaiming women's voice in the tales which are about women's lives but which have been told from the master's point of view. Her encounter with the spirit of storytelling makes her realise that Destiny, as well as Desire, can be rewritten. Byatt's reworking of the fairy tale focuses particularly on the notion of closure and presents an alternative conception of ending which admits of multiple desires. While acknowledging Brooks's

⁴⁷ *On Histories and Stories*, p. 132.

⁴⁸ *On Histories and Stories*, p. 132.

idea of narrative drive, Byatt's tale suggests that narrative desire, once stirred, need not be killed off in a single discharge which will finalise its life. The djinn may and may not return to Gillian. That he does return once shows that the end of his incarceration, which is brought about by Gillian's 'redundant' wish, is not the end of the story; instead, the reciprocal nature of her desires opens up multiple possibilities, enabling us to imagine different desires, which we may call 'feminine' desires of narrative. 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye', which refuses to conform to the narrow pattern of the fairy-tale romance without denying it, offers a mode of ending which is more open than the one offered in *Possession: A Romance*. 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye' closes its narrative in order to be opened up again and again, ensuring that we need not succumb to the master's teleology.

Conclusion

What does a woman want? My discussions of narrative desire have sought to reclaim Freud's question by displacing it, by asking instead what consequences women's attempts at re-appropriating the male discourse about women might have for the possibilities of thinking about desires in narrative for women and for men. My reason for choosing as my main material the narratives of and on fairy tales was the centrality of fairy tales in theories of narrative. For instance, Propp, whose work on the morphology of the fairy tale had a decisive influence on the development of narratology, chose the fairy tale as his material not simply because its structure is easy to analyse but because its structure is basic to all narratives. Readings of other kinds of narratives including modern fiction can benefit from his formulation of the plot pattern according to the notion of function which gives precedence to action over character.

The fairy tale is a form which is rigid and mobile at the same time. The basic structure remains always recognisable even when some of the conventions of the genre are radically altered. It is precisely because of its inflexible formality that the fairy-tale plot gives way to infinite variations which can be recognised by the reader as such. In this respect, the literary fairy tale is a genre which makes explicit the act of *re*-working in the most palpable manner.

My interest particularly lies in the kind of rewriting which addresses the issues concerning the relations between gender and narrative desire. As I pointed out in Chapter 2 and 3, there is a problem of universalisation/masculinisation in the existing dominant discourses on narrative. Propp's theory masculinises all kinds of fairy-tale narratives by ignoring the fundamental differences between hero and heroine tales and by

presenting the male model as the universal one. Although Peter Brooks's psychoanalytic account of narrative mobilises the static model of narrative structure and proposes a model which takes into account the dynamics of narrative structuration, his notion of narrative desire uncritically inherits and uses the male-centred assumptions implicit in both Propp's and Freud's theories.

The works by Angela Carter and A. S. Byatt discussed in this thesis propose a different conception of narrative desire. Both Carter and Byatt creatively attempt to answer Freud's question, albeit in different manners. In doing so, they challenge the masculine desire at work in such traditional narratives as the fairy tale and lead us to reconsider the existing theories of narrative which assume the universality of the masculine narrative desire.

Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* was written in the aftermath of the so-called sexual revolution during the 1960s and 70s, which leaves its trace in her work in that her revised fairy tales can be regarded as laying claim to women's 'equal' access to the libido (although it may manifest itself differently in women). Carter's reworking of the Oedipal is to bring it to its extreme and to represent what exceeds its logic. Her rewritings of fairy tales retain the fairy-tale drive towards integration in order to produce a different effect; the happy endings in 'The Tiger's Bride' and in *Nights at the Circus* subvert the binary opposition based on gender by creating a space where woman ceases to be a passive receptacle of male desire and becomes a desiring agent herself. In this sense, Carter's texts can be regarded as an attempt to answer Freud's question directly by representing woman's re-appropriation of the male-centred conception of desire.

Such feminist re-appropriation of the masculine logic to make it serve for women, however, seems to leave a problem. In Carter's texts I discussed, male figures tend to function as instruments of women's desire. Whereas the heroine in 'The Tiger's

Bride' appropriates the Beast as the beast inside herself, *Nights at the Circus* empties out the male of his (masculine) identity in order to supply the heroine with a new partner who is to be a receiver of her desires ('Think of him as the amanuensis of all those [women] whose tales we've yet to tell him'). The effectiveness of such a strategy as an alternative model, I would argue, is not to be overestimated. In the light of the discoveries I made in my discussions of Byatt's texts, Carter's rewritings of fairy tales appear to be a less radical way of re-formulating the master's plot. The desire which drives the narratives of 'The Tiger's Bride' and *Nights at the Circus* is convergent in its movement towards the moment of (the beginning of) the consummation of a desire which is sexual and Oedipal, albeit with vengeance. Consequently, it inevitably follows a single path of fulfilling the desire in the final discharge, which is a mode of pleasure which does not totally exclude female subjects but which is masculine in nature, as I argued in my discussion of Brooks's theory. What these texts ultimately purport to do, and actually do, is to subvert the hierarchical binary opposition based on gender and to represent a woman as an actively desiring agent rather than as a passive receptacle of the male's desire. This is, indeed, a liberating idea and a necessary step in opening up a space where women can express their own desires. And the liquefaction of diamonds at the end of 'The Tiger's Bride' is an extraordinarily sensual image evocative of a fluid nature of female (and possibly feminine) sexuality. Although I do not deny the mode of desiring based on a masculine morphology, my analysis of narrative desire has led me to call also for a conception of desire which would challenge such teleology of closure itself. In both 'The Tiger's Bride' and *Nights at the Circus*, the pleasure principle of narrative as described by Brooks is fulfilled at the end—in Beauty's transformation into a beautiful, desiring tigress, and in Fevvers's triumphant, ecstatic laughter. Carter's re-directing of the fairy-tale drive, therefore, seems to be also driven by the dynamics

Brooks describes; it ultimately subscribes to the narrative model whose aim and meaning are concentrated on the single act of discharge of tension at the end. We—at least some of us, both women and men—feel the need to imagine desire not only as centripetal but also as centrifugal force.

Byatt's texts present a less provocative but more radical revision of the master's plot. As the ordering of my textual analyses suggested, Byatt's subtle re-formulation of the master's plot can be appreciated more fully *after* we consider the feminist implications of Carter's texts. Byatt's reworking of fairy tales takes issue with the late-twentieth-century concerns with the politics of gender, identity, culture and text, and offers alternatives to the dominant patterns of thought rather than tries to subvert the binary oppositions inherent in them.

Byatt seems to suggest that the fairy tale can be used strategically as a means of making sense of reality and as a source of common understanding of human nature and the world. To find patterns in life gives us a sense of security, but her writings also warn us against the dangers of being contented with conforming to the same old patterns. Byatt uses the fairy tale to look backward *and* forward, to think about new ways of relating to others and to oneself by re-evaluating what we may have in common.

In 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye', Byatt uses and displaces Freud's question in order to undermine the assumptions which led Freud to ask the question in the way in which he did. The apparent redundancy of the heroine's wishes makes redundant Freud's question itself. Her desires open up multiple possibilities of women's desires, and what she most desires is not to give a definitive answer to that question, not to give in to a teleology which will finalise her own story.

The notion of the teleology of closure still seems essential to the ways in which narratives are read and discussed. The possession of power, wealth and a partner in the

traditional fairy-tale happy ending presents in the most basic form a perfect stasis of narrative closure. However, Byatt's writings suggest that happy endings can and should be imagined in different ways. Both *Possession* and 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye' offer a critique of the universal/masculine discourses on women, narrative and desire *and* new directions for overcoming such exclusion of differences by refusing to subscribe to the master's plot and to the kind of pleasure it prescribes. The heroine of 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye' refuses to subsume the other under the self-same desire by liberating the djinn, who represents narrative desire and its other.

If Brooks's narrative model which incorporates psychoanalysis with narratology does not apply to certain narratives which have already been produced, we need to reconsider the conception of narrative desire to account for how we read such different narratives. A different conception of narrative desire emerges from my discussions of women's texts of rewritings of fairy tales. A 'feminine' desire of narrative allows desires to diverge into infinitely different directions. To read texts which are based on a different economy, we need to find alternatives to the male-centred assumptions about what constitutes pleasure.

The approach I chose to take in this thesis, which is to read for the plot, is, of course, not the only way of reading narratives; there are many other ways of subverting the master's narrative by focusing on such elements as style, language, voice, metaphors, symbols, themes and so on. However, I believe that my focus on the relations between gender and narrative desire is a valid approach which serves to fill a gap in the current feminist criticism of fairy tales. My conceptual framework can be also applied to a broader area of investigation beyond the limits of my project here. One may, for example, find rewritings of fairy tales by male writers which do not conform to the masculine conception of plot. One may also attempt to delineate a different model of

plot by developing the metaphors of women's morphology. Susan Winnet, for instance, uses a biological metaphor of mothering such as birth and breast feeding to envision a specifically feminine (but not necessarily female) model of narrative desire.¹ Marianne Hirsch's reading of myths and modern fiction in *The Mother/Daughter Plot* foregrounds the mother/daughter plot which calls into question the conventional Oedipal pattern of the love plot. Further research may be done on the question of reader response by investigating what happens in the actual process of reading women's rewritings of fairy tales and whether men read them in the same way as women do. One may also investigate how rewritings of fairy tales such as Carter's and Byatt's challenge the way in which we read realist fiction. Such varied explorations will serve to illuminate the important implications of the ways in which different desires operate in the act of reading fairy-tale narratives.

My current project may be placed within a broader framework of what Susan S. Lanser calls 'feminist narratology'. In 'Toward a Feminist Narratology' (1986), Lanser sets out the notion of feminist narratology whose 'immediate task' is 'to ask whether feminist criticism, and particularly the study of narratives by women, might benefit from the methods and insights of narratology and whether narratology, in turn, might be altered by the understanding of feminist criticism and the experience of women's texts'.² My own concern falls where feminism, narratology and psychoanalysis intersect in exploring the question of plot. My study of women's rewritings of fairy tales raises a question as to the exclusiveness of the existing theories of plot and narrative desire, and calls for a different model of narrative which would acknowledge multiple narrative

¹ See Susan Winnet, 'Coming Unstrung: Women, Men, Narrative, and Principles of Pleasure', *PMLA*, 105 (1990), 505-18.

² Susan S. Lanser, 'Toward a Feminist Narratology', *Style*, 20 (1986), 341-63 (p. 342).

desires.

The fairy tale is basically a moral form; its function is not only to *tell* but to *do* something to the reader. This performative aspect of the fairy tale, of course, can be used for a reactionary purpose, but it can also be used for a subversive purpose to challenge the dominant discourses which exclude differences such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class and culture. The fairy tale's blurring of the boundary between the magical and the real can serve to envisage a vision which is utopian and realistic at the same time. The fairy tale creates a transitional textual space, from the past to the present and from the magical to the real, and places us in a temporal and epistemological gap. Both Carter and Byatt use this peculiar hybridity of the fairy tale in their re-considerations of dominant ideas. Their evocation of the past is not nostalgic; neither do they posit a utopia in a distant future of 'someday'. The ending of 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye' promises us the pleasure, here and now, of for ever desiring something other than oneself.

Although deeply ingrained in us, the traditional fairy tales of quest and romance can be re-written to express our own different desires. Women are already telling their own stories. We now need to find alternatives to the conception of plot as possession or solution in order to describe in a positive manner (not in terms of a lack or a failing of plot) the multiple possibilities of desiring opened up by women's tellings and retellings of their own stories.

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