

Never Afters

Female Friendship and Collaboration in
Contemporary Re-visioned Fairy Tales by Women

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Bachelor of Arts

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Abstract

Antagonism among girls and women in fairy tales has been the subject of much critical and popular discussion over recent decades. Significantly less attention, however, has been paid to the frequent absence of collaborative female relationships in traditional fairy tales and their contemporary retellings. Holding re-visioned fairy tales to be a type of feminist creative praxis, this thesis investigates how mutually beneficial relationships between female characters may be constructed within such narratives. “Never Afters” is a collection of six re-visions, written as sequels to well-known fairy tales from the Western European corpus. Situated within a genre that commonly isolates female characters or foregrounds female antagonism, each re-vision employs one (or more) of five key strategies that are used by contemporary authors to imagine collaborative female relationships within retold fairy tales: inversion, insertion/deletion, expansion, fusion, and extrapolation. The exegesis contextualises my creative work and assesses the strengths and limitations of each strategy by critically examining how they are used in contemporary fairy tales by authors including Emma Donoghue, Theodora Goss, Angela Slatter, Aimee Bender, and Kelly Link. I demonstrate that expansion, fusion, and extrapolation best allow authors to introduce new female characters and fresh feminist perspectives that move away from female exceptionalism and instead foreground female collaboration and friendship as potent sources of narrative power. The exegesis further argues that the cognitive sciences, and schema theories in particular, may offer insights as to why collaborative female relationships have received such scant representation. Using case studies of my own creative praxis, I explore the ways in which female isolation and acrimony are re-inscribed in contemporary work and recommend the adoption of new frameworks through which creative writers may critically and reflexively interrogate their

tacit storytelling knowledge.

Key terms: creative writing, fairy tales, feminism, female collaboration, female friendship, schema theory, cognitive science

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Statement of Authorship and Originality

I am the author of the thesis entitled:

**Never Afters: Female Friendship and Collaboration in Contemporary Re-visioned
Fairy Tales by Women**

Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Except where explicit reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma. No other person's work has been relied upon or used without due acknowledgement in the main text and the list of references of the thesis. No editorial assistance has been received in the production of the thesis without due acknowledgement. Except where duly referred to, the thesis does not include material with copyright provisions or requiring copyright approvals.

Signed: Kirstyn McDermott

Date: 9th April, 2020

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attendance at conferences run by the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) and the Australian Fairy Tale Society (AFTS) during my candidacy sparked many thought-provoking discussions that furthered my research, as well as fostering new connections and friendships.

Infinite thanks is owed to my dear friend Dr Ellen Gregory for the many writing sessions (fuelled by coffee, wine and gin) that kept me going over the years. It is not an exaggeration to suggest that, without her ceaseless encouragement and unflinching counsel, I might have abandoned this project entirely.

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for all the girls in fairy tales, and all the girls who write them

Preface

The following novelettes from my creative work, “Never Afters”, were individually published during my candidacy:

- “By the Moon’s Good Grace.” *Review of Australian Fiction*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2014.
- “Burnt Sugar.” *Dreaming in the Dark*, edited by Jack Dann, PS Publishing Ltd, 2016, pp. 319-344.
- “Braid.” *Review of Australian Fiction*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2017.
- “Triquetra.” *Tor.com*, Macmillan, 5 Sept. 2018.
www.tor.com/2018/09/05/triquetra-kirstyn-mcdermott/

The following paper was also published during my candidacy and has been expanded and updated to comprise the third plateau of this thesis:

- “There is Always a Next Witch: Creative Intuition and Collaborative Female Relationships in Fairy Tales.” *TEXT*, Special Issue 43: Into the Bush: Australasian Fairy Tales, October 2017, pp. 1-13,
www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue43/McDermott.pdf

We must use what we have to invent what we desire.

Adrienne Rich, *What Is Found There*

Heroic, though, those seven sons, any story you find them in. (And of course you find them; we're taught early of the worth in groups of men who conspire).

Genevieve Valentine, "Familiaris"

This is the way the story ends, she thinks.

It ends. And then you get to write your own story.

Theodora Goss, "Snow White Learns Witchcraft"

First Plateau: Introduction

Background, Rationale and Overview

My relationship with fairy tales is an ambivalent one. While they were among my favourite childhood entertainments — encountered in lavishly illustrated volumes as well as Little Golden Books and the occasional offering from Disney — I drifted away from stories of self-sacrificing maidens and put-upon princesses as I grew older. But our first loves never quite relinquish their grip on our psyches and I have come to recognise many of the dynamics, motifs and themes of traditional fairy tales operating in my own creative work, albeit at several removes. My second and most recent novel, *Perfections* (2012), is concerned with two sisters, an ill-thought wish, and the most terrible of sacrifices, and it was a project I struggled with throughout its entire writing. It took me far too long to realise that I was, in essence, writing something of a contemporary fairy tale in the guise of a feminist horror story, and even longer to accept that this was something I *wanted* to write. Fairy tales were too feminine, I feared, too *girly* to be taken seriously by the male-dominated horror genre in which I had situated myself for so long. Although counting myself a feminist, I had not yet fully grappled with Helene Cixous' imperative to “write as a woman, toward woman” (875).¹

It was while writing *Perfections* that I conceived the idea of a collection of stories I began to think of as post-fairy tales. I wondered what happened to the characters, particularly the female characters, in fairy tales once their narratives came to a close. The commonplace ‘happily ever after’ felt too dismissive an ending to provide me with meaningful closure. Instead, I found myself wanting to explore further the lives of the

¹ The examination of this particular thread of internalised misogyny might require a research project all of its own.

fairy-tale girls, to examine the impact of fairy-tale events on their bodies and psyches, and to imagine how they might recover from trauma and establish their own power and space in the world. In short, I aimed to construct the subsequent acts of their stories as women. A more precise framework and thematic approach to this collection emerged during my preliminary research, triggered by a paper by Michael Mendelson that looks closely at the collaborative relationships within the tales collected by the Grimm brothers and identifies a pattern of female isolation. Even more significantly, female isolation is a dynamic carried over into many contemporary re-visions and one I sought to reimagine and so redress in my creative research.

Research Questions and Key Terms

The key research question I have sought to answer both creatively and critically is: *How can collaboration and friendship among female characters be re-visioned in contemporary fairy-tale narratives by women?* A number of subsidiary questions have directed my research throughout this project. How are the dynamics between female characters presented in well-known western European fairy tales popularised by the Grimm brothers, Charles Perrault, Hans Christian Andersen, and Andrew and Leonora Lang?² How do contemporary female authors working in the genre of re-visioned fairy tales represent the relationships between female characters in their short fiction? How is female collaboration and friendship more widely represented in dominant cultural, artistic

² It should be noted that this popularisation of fairy tales under the names of these mostly male authors, collectors and anthologists has served to elide much of the creative and editorial work of early female authors of fairy tales. Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy, Charlotte-Rose de La Force, Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier and the other *conteuses* of the seventeenth and eighteenth century French salons, for example, once "dominated the field of fairy tales and were the touchstones of the genre" but were gradually eclipsed by the simpler style of fairy tale exemplified by Perrault (Harries 17), while the work of Leonora Lang as writer, translator and editor of the coloured fairy books has long been overshadowed by her husband's anthropological reputation and academic credentials, with Andrew Lang historically credited as the editor of the collection, despite his contribution to many volumes being arguably slight (Day).

and social narratives? What is the importance of representing a variety of positive female relationships, both in art and the culture in general, and in my own personal creative practice? How can re-visioned fairy tales contribute to a feminist re-imagining of female collaboration and friendship? What cognitive factors might inhibit the creation of these relationships and how can such barriers be overcome? Such questions waxed and waned in significance, formulating and dissolving as my focus regularly shifted and resettled in response to new discoveries, but all acted as invaluable guide-ropes along the way.

For the purposes of my research, I have taken a necessarily broad conceptual view of both *collaboration* and *friendship* between female characters. Generally viewed as one or more people working together towards a common goal³, *collaboration* is denoted in this thesis by cooperative acts that contribute in some degree to the positive condition of one or more characters involved. This positive condition may be goal achievement, task completion, distress alleviation, harm prevention, knowledge sharing, and so on. Instances of collaboration may involve characters working jointly to reach the same end or, alternatively, may result in the achievement or satisfaction of separate and disparate goals/desires. Significantly, I do not hold as a requirement of collaboration that characters demonstrate an explicitly caring or even necessarily friendly attitude towards one another, although prolonged animosity between characters would be at odds with a truly collaborative relationship. Two strangers, for example, might recognise a mutual benefit in temporarily working with one another but, having achieved their goal, prefer to simply go their separate ways without any interpersonal bonds having been formed.

In addition to collaboration, this thesis explores *friendship* among women, a term

³ The Oxford Dictionary defines collaboration as “the action of working with someone to produce something” and the Cambridge Dictionary as “the situation of two or more people working together to create or achieve the same thing”, while the Macquarie defines *collaborate* as “to work, one with another; cooperate”.

that is defined by sociologists as a socially recognised and highly personal extra-kin relationship that is entered into voluntarily by parties who view each other as equals (Bell; Van Deusen). Although scholars acknowledge that friends may be found within families, kinship and friendship are generally viewed as mutually exclusive social roles on the basis that “[o]ne cannot be forced into friendship, but one has no choice over who are one’s kin” (Bell 12). While this might be a useful sociological distinction to make, I argue that although kin relationships are forced upon us, we retain the choice to develop and maintain additional layers of friendship within our family circles. Within my research, female friendship thus refers to the pre-existence, ongoing development, or establishment of a mutually beneficial, cooperative and supportive personal relationship between female characters within a narrative, whether such relationships are platonic, sexual, romantic, or familial. As with the sociological distinction between kinship and friendship, I am deliberately blurring categorical lines that would treat lovers and friends as distinct and separate roles. Sexual or romantic relationships neither require nor necessarily result in friendship, but those who are lovers may also consider themselves friends. Lastly, while friendship certainly does not preclude the existence of power imbalances, interpersonal frictions, or other problems that may arise between characters, the overall tenor of the relationship should be positive and respectful.

Female Isolation and Collaboration in Fairy Tales and Other Narratives

Fairy tales are influential and enduring cultural narratives, whether we encounter them in a traditional form or in contemporary retellings, set down in print, celluloid or pixels. Drawing upon the Jungian notion of archetypal fairy tales being creations of our collective unconscious, Marina Warner notes their ongoing popularity and the widely held “belief that the stories have the power to lead by example and shape character,

especially gender, to engineer social citizens, and inculcate values and ideology” (*Once* 125-126). Although isolation in both physical and psychological terms is arguably “one of the governing principles in the fairytale” (Lüthi 42), Mendelson, nevertheless, finds “a remarkably high incidence of collaborative effort” (111) in the tales collected by the Grimm brothers — at least among men and boys, or between male and female characters. Indeed, a close survey of the Grimm corpus concludes that “unlike their male counterparts ... women are — in most cases — operating without the benefit of female companionship, support, understanding, or even contact” (112). This dynamic is replicated within the greater tradition of western European fairy tales, with young girls often placed in adversarial relationships to other female characters: the dead or ineffectual mother; the jealous stepsisters and/or stepmother; the wicked queen. While there is a wealth of critical discourse concerning the antagonistic, combative and destructive relationships among girls and women in fairy tales (Bacchilega *Postmodern*; Bottigheimer; Haase *Fairy*; Tatar *Hard*; Warner *From*; Zipes *Myth*; Zipes *Art*) as well as redemptive analysis that argues for the resourcefulness and resilience of oppressed female characters (Tatar “Tests”; Warner *From*), there has been little analysis of the recurring *absence* of female collaboration and friendship that often results in the isolation of a girl or young woman within her own story. Girls in fairy tales are, as Mendelson succinctly phrases it, “forever acting alone” (111). Mendelson’s argument that it is male characters in Grimm who mostly benefit from instances of cooperation or collaboration is reinforced by research by Maria Tatar, who argues that “fairy-tale heroines the world over are often required to labor for their salvation while their male counterparts rely on magic or helpers to carry out chores” (*Hard* 29-30). If representations of girls and women cooperating with each other are rare, it is even more troubling to note that when such interactions do appear they often depict female characters working together towards evil ends, as with the

collaborative bullying of Cinderella by her stepsisters and stepmother, and their combined attempts to deceive the prince. In this way “collaboration is tantamount to corruption” (Mendelson 118) with collaborations among girls and women framed as dangerous or destructive rather than empowering. It is a dynamic that travels from traditional tales to their contemporary versions, as well as across various forms of media. For instance, when reflecting upon the version of “Cinderella” she encountered as a young girl, Louise Bernikow observes:

It is a story about women alone together and they are each other’s enemies. This is more powerful as a lesson than the ball, the Prince or the glass slipper. The echoes of ‘Cinderella’ in other fairy tales, in myth and literature, are about how awful women are to each other. (18)

Even when positive female collaboration is represented, it is often framed as exceptional. To take an illustrative example from film, three recent and critically acclaimed Disney/Pixar adaptations of fairy tales — *Tangled* (Howard and Greno 2010), *Brave* (Chapman and Andrew 2012) and *Frozen* (Buck and Lee 2013) — have been justly celebrated for their centralised female-female relationships, while still boasting an almost exclusively male supporting cast with whom the girls can interact and, therefore, collaborate (Asher-Perrin). This form of female isolation might even, in regards to the Disney oeuvre at least, be an intended feature, with former executive Andy Mooney admitting that the “prevailing wisdom at the studio was that somehow having the princesses gang together would destroy the individual mythology and, therefore, the value of their films” (in Murray).

Although retold fairy tales in literary form have grown in popularity and number since the 1970s, the ways in which female characters collaborate or, more commonly, fail to collaborate, appears to have changed little — an especially disconcerting state of affairs considering the rich vein of feminist perspective that runs through the genre, from

Anne Sexton's *Transformations* (1971) and Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979) to Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch* (1993) and the work of other contemporary authors such as Jane Yolen, Catherynne M. Valente, Kelly Link and Angela Slatter. Contemporary re-visioned fairy tales, although able to embrace with enthusiasm changes in geography, time, setting, gender, sexuality, and so on, are still too often ensnared either by antagonistic or fractious female relationships or by persistent female isolation. Two such collections, *The Rose and the Beast* (2000) by Francesca Lia Block (2000) and *The Witch and Other Tales Retold* by Jean Thompson (2014), for example, both set their re-visions in the present day and depict nuanced female protagonists, but with rare exceptions the relationships among the girls and women in these stories are largely fractious or else do not end well for those involved. Similarly, three recent original anthologies of re-visioned fairy tales — *My Mother She Killed Me, My Father He Ate Me* edited by Kate Bernheimer (2010), *Once Upon a Time* edited by Paula Guran (2013) and *The Starlit Wood* edited by Dominik Parisen and Navah Wolf (2016) — showcase a variety of diverse authors who all approach their chosen tales in unique and imaginative ways, and yet instances of female collaboration or friendship are rare.

Perhaps this scarcity should not come as a surprise considering the dearth of related scholarship. The relationship between fairy-tale fiction and the wider scholarship concerning folklore and fairy tales has been described by Stephen Benson as having “extraordinary synchronicity” and being “fascinatingly close” (5), while Jack Zipes argues that recent decades have witnessed “an inextricable, dialectical development of mutual influence of all writers of fairy tales and fairy-tale criticism” (*Relentless* 122). A lack of critical attention paid to the absence of collaborative relationships among female characters in fairy tales might then contribute to the lack of representation of such

relationships in re-visioned stories, particularly those by authors who are themselves familiar with the scholarship and who thus find themselves drawn to the slaying of more prominent anti-feminist dragons, such as passive female protagonists, a lack of intersectionality, or the controlling patriarchal prescriptions of feminine roles, desires and expressions (Bernheimer *Mirror*). It is an oversight that has surfaced many times in recent discussions with peers, whether they are located within academia or working creatively outside of it. On one occasion, after presenting a paper at a recent conference⁴, in which I pointed to the paucity of female collaboration and friendship in contemporary fairy tales, a prominent fairy-tale author, illustrator, storyteller, songwriter and musician emailed to confess that, having reconsidered her in-progress fantasy series, “there is scope to develop collaborative relationships between some of my female characters. So far, across four volumes, it only occurs once!” (John-Krol).

Within the wider field of contemporary fantasy fiction, in which retold fairy tales often find a home, Jane Tolmie identifies an “enduring cultural fantasy of the strong woman who rises above a general condition of female disenfranchisement” (145), resulting in a trend of female exceptionalism within the genre. The heroine of such a narrative “must be exceptional to catch our attention”, standing in stark contrast to the “silent rank and file of women” around her who thus provide a foil for both her abilities and (often feminist) sensibilities (146). As Tolmie observes: “Strength needs weakness; extraordinary needs ordinary; the exception depends on the general condition” (146). This focus on empowered, exceptional women might be a contributing factor in the downplay of female collaboration more generally — a woman may need to stand alone to be perceived as strong and independent, especially when framed by western ideals of

⁴ “Into the Bush: Its Beauty and Its Terror”, Australian Fairy Tale Society Conference 2016, Melbourne.

individualism.⁵

This is not to say, however, that *all* relationships among girls and women in contemporary fairy-tale re-visions are portrayed as negative or destructive. In *Kissing the Witch*, Donoghue critiques the ingrained heteronormativity of fairy tales by creating a series of nested stories that explore romance and eroticism from a queer perspective. Here we are shown women finding themselves in each other, and in each other finding strength, joy and the chance to escape from oppressive social strictures and personal confinements — representations common to stories that seek to re-vision fairy tales by focusing upon non-heterosexual characters (Cole). Angela Carter, by contrast, finds a different focus in restoring the primacy and protective nature of mother/daughter relationships in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, particularly and most spectacularly in the titular tale of her collection. Indeed, Veronica Schanoes points out that relationships between mothers and daughters became “a primary site of attention for both 1970s and 1990s writers of fairy-tale and myth revisions” (*Fairy* 18), citing as examples the work of Carter and other contemporary authors such as Tanith Lee, Robin McKinley, Terry Pratchett and Kelly Link. The reclamation of the mother/daughter bond is seen by critic and poet Adrienne Rich as being integral to any feminist project, breaking as it does a deeply entrenched patriarchal prohibition: “Women are made taboo to women — not just sexually, but as comrades, cocreators, conspirators” (*Woman* 255). While the continued positive representation of both queer relationships between women and mother/daughter bonds are of great importance, these dynamics often elide the narrative possibilities of loving *platonic* relationships between women, regardless of their sexuality or genetic ties. With that caveat, my own creative work does explore positive

⁵ On individualism as a western ideal see, for example, Saidbek Goziev.

female relationships of various kinds, including queer relationships and those between mothers and daughters, while placing primary emphasis on friendship bonds.

It is important to stress that the issues outlined above are not unique to fairy-tale narratives. The scant — or skewed — attention paid to female friendship has also been identified in such diverse genres as thirteenth century Icelandic sagas (Van Deusen), late twentieth century poetry by women (Bertram) and even contemporary Hollywood comedies that often view friendship as being merely “a *stage* in women’s lives” (Boyle and Berridge). Sue Short charts a direct lineage from fairy tales to modern horror films, pointing out that the horror genre often draws from these older stories, borrowing motifs and reworking thematic concerns, but with an intent to disrupt and unsettle rather than instruct and comfort. However, the genre still sees “female power and the very notion of ‘camaraderie’ frequently undermined by sexual rivalry and a narrative impulse towards punishing ‘wayward’ girls” (80). Its narratives, even those ostensibly centred around female characters, often depict them in toxic competition with one another and “expressly caution against trusting other women” (108).

As part of her ongoing doctoral studies, Tara Moss has consolidated a mass of data and research on the representation of women in a variety of cultural narratives — both fictional and ‘real-life’ media portrayals — to support her argument that relationships between women are often constructed as and/or perceived to be aggressive, duplicitous, and lacking in “normal portrayals of female friendship” (88). The recent marriages within the British royal family — explicitly aligned with fairy-tale tropes in the public imagination at least since the advent of Princess Diana (Hampson; Miller; Stammers) — provide an excellent illustration of this constructed narrative in action. Kate Middleton and Meghan Markle, as women framed within refracted and interconnected Cinderella stories, have been almost instantly perceived as antagonists within the popular

press, with the media first “stoking pseudo-rivalries between the duchesses” before later “report[ing them] as fact” (Adegoke). This same “catfight trope, where two women compete out of jealousy and insecurity” (Wiseman) has been played out previously in the media, with Diana Spencer and Sarah Ferguson as the unfortunate duchess-conscripts, and shows little sign of abating in its current iteration. As Julie Rieden, *Australian Women’s Weekly* editor-at-large, wryly observes: “‘Meghan and Kate get along’ is not a *story* that sells magazines as well as, ‘Meghan and Kate are at each other’s throats’” (in Jeffery; emphasis mine).

When attempting to understand why collaborative female relationships might not garner as much attention as female rivalry, it is important to consider the types of narratives that are valued by the dominant culture. Preliminary research into the gender of protagonists in award-winning novels indicates that they are overwhelmingly male — regardless of the gender of a book’s author (Griffith “Books”) — with the same holding for film (Griffith “Films”). If accolades such as the Booker Prize, the Pulitzer Prize and the Academy Awards are perceived as measures of cultural worth, then such findings suggest that stories *about* women are not valued very highly. By extension, if there are precious few culturally significant stories that feature women protagonists, it is not difficult to surmise that an even smaller number portray positive collaboration or friendship *among* girls and women.

Female Friendship, Feminine Subjectivities and Sororophobia

When considering the depictions (or lack thereof) of female collaboration and friendship in fairy tales and other narratives, it is useful to compare them with the real-life experiences of women. The philosophical, anthropological, sociological and historical literature around friendship has a long tradition that, until recently, has failed to take into

account — or often even acknowledge — the existence of such bonds among women. For philosophers from Aristotle through to Derrida “friendship ... almost invariably means friendship between men” (Jefferson 139) with the *absence* of female-female friendships in the literature only beginning to attract attention, if not necessarily an abundance of scholarship, in the last decades of the twentieth century (Penelope Anderson; Bray; Grayling; Jefferson; O’Connor; Orbach and Eichenbaum; Schulenburg). In her critical review of the literature around female friendships, Pat O’Connor finds that such relationships have been “systemically ignored, derogated and trivialized within a very wide variety of traditions”, with explicit attempts made to “portray women as incapable of friendship” and the bonds between them as “‘two-faced’, ‘gossipy’ or as a juvenile phase in the progression towards ‘normal’ psychosexual development” — a progression that should ideally culminate in the primacy of (heterosexual) marriage and motherhood in order for women to attain maximum happiness and well-being (9-15). The cultural privileging of these roles over friendships with other women is neatly reflected in the concept of *hetero-reality*, defined by Janice G. Raymond as “the world view that woman exists always in relation to man” and that “women without men are women without company or companionship” (3). By contrast, men’s desires and destiny may include women but are not encompassed by them. Rather, Raymond argues that male bonding, transactions and rapport are perceived as normative, with male-male friendships “institutionalised in every aspect of an apparently hetero-relational culture” (10).

Alongside the recent scholarly interest in female friendship (or its absence), there have also been numerous studies into female rivalry and hostility, with relational aggression among young (largely white, largely western) women a frequent focus (for example: Anthony et al.; Cowan “Ingroup”; Cowan “Women’s”; Dobson; Loya et al.). While the pervasiveness of such “feminine rivalry” is undeniable, research indicates that

it is often spurred by gendered cultural beliefs and representations that “categorically shape expectations for how ‘women’ and ‘men’ should act” and depict “women as uniquely and negatively competing against each other” (Anthony et al. 312-313). In addition, such rivalry may arise from the internalisation of “cultural messages ... that present women as inferior to and less important than men” resulting in a “sense of personal inadequacy” (Cowan “Ingroup” 399), and/or by the desire to “appeal to a masculinised, hetero-sexualised gaze” through “discourses of superiority and inferiority” that reject “negative qualities stereotypically associated with femininity” (Dobson 140). Yet, despite the strictures of hetero-reality and the persistence of popular mean-girl stereotypes, several studies have established that female friendships are “no different in emotional strength” from romantic/marital relationships — and may in fact offer more equity — and that women not only actively seek out the company of other women but derive tremendous pleasure, support and value from these friendships (O’Connor 15-16). It is little wonder then, that feminist scholars continue to remind us that “[s]trong bonds between and among women are the evidence of and essence of feminism” (Jane W. Brown 205).

Nevertheless, there remains a curious disconnect between women’s experience of female friendship and its representation in the art they produce. Vicki Bertram, for example, contrasts the wealth of affection, gratitude and love expressed by women poets for their female friends in the acknowledgements of published books with the startling absence of these relationships in their actual poetry. After noting that there are “countless examples of comradeship between men” (629) in the literary arts but “so very few commonly-recognised myths or stories about female friendship upon which to draw” (632), Bertram goes on to identify additional factors that might contribute to this state of affairs. With sexual activity privileged as “the marker of significance in relationships”

(631) in our culture — whether these be heterosexual or homosexual⁶ — romantic, sexual and marital relationships take ideological prominence over platonic friendship bonds between women, regardless of the intensity or longevity of the latter. Moreover, close female friendships in reality are often characterised by “mirroring” and thus may be experienced as a threat to individual identity via what Bertram describes as “parasitic intimacy” wherein women reach towards a point of familiarity, empathy and understanding with one another that “risks denying [their] separate, distinct, and different existence” (637). The concept of fluid ego boundaries between women was first described by psychologist Nancy Chodorow, whose work on mother-daughter bonds and their influence on later female-female relationships provided the impetus for the school of clinical research and psychoanalytic theorising that emerged from the Wellesley Stone Centre in the 1980s. Judith Jordan, among other theorist-clinicians, writes extensively about the relational self and feminine subjectivities, with particular attention paid to mother-daughter relationships and the development of empathy among women that results in permeable ego boundaries, arguing that this model

goes beyond saying that women value relationships; we are suggesting that the deepest sense of one’s being is continuously formed in connection with others and is inextricably tied to relational movement. (138)

Building on such work, psychologists Susie Orbach and Luise Eichenbaum provide a nuanced study of female friendship arising out of their own practice, documenting not only the security and “easy reciprocity” (18) that such bonds offer but also their capacity to provoke negative emotions (including anger, envy, competition, guilt and sorrow)

⁶ Or, indeed, bisexual/pansexual — although the outward presentation of such relationships, when monogamous, is almost inevitably perceived as being either hetero- or homosexual with the more fluid sexuality of the individual being neatly erased. While the exploration of such expressions and representations are beyond the scope of this thesis, *RePresenting Bisexualities: Subjects and Cultures of Fluid Desire* edited by Donald E. Hall and Maria Pramaggiore provides an excellent starting point for further investigation.

without providing an accepted framework for discussion or redress. Significantly, they argue that cultural constructions of womanhood affect interactions between women and that “etched into our very identity are the grammatically correct ways of being ... and the grammatically incorrect ways of being ... women” (46). This concept of grammatically correct or incorrect is useful when considering the broader consequences of a lack of collaborative female relationships in fairy tales and other narratives. After all, if representations of women as either adversarial or isolated dominate the fictional discourse, and if romantic/sexual relationships are consistently elevated above ‘mere’ friendships, it is important to ask whether women might feel it ‘incorrect’ to diverge from such constructs both in their artistic endeavours and in their lives. This is a question to which I return in the third plateau of this thesis.

In her detailed study of “otherness between and among women” (4), Helena Michie uses the term sororophobia to describe the negotiation of sameness and difference within female relationships, and to encompass “both the desire for and the recoil from identification with other women” (9). Using a range of cultural, critical and literary texts, Michie analyses the representations of relationships among women, with a focus on the ways in which the concept of otherness is constructed and performed. While acknowledging the sisterly feminist impulse to cast other, potentially likeminded, women as “the mirror in which we ... look anxiously for ourselves” (4), Michie provides a sharp critique of the feminist movement’s “dependence on the concept and idiom of the family [and] its entanglement with the figures of the sister and the mother” (7), pointing to the “exclusionary tendency” (9) of such discourse. Not every woman has, or is, a mother, just as not every woman has, or is, a sister, and the focus of feminism on these literal and/or metaphorical relationships can be as coercive and “distressingly utopian” (8) as it is empowering. Along with family, Michie rejects the lexicon of community for its similarly

exclusionary connotations, preferring instead the less stable concept of a “coalition” that, she argues, is more suggestive of “voluntary affiliation” and is not “inevitably tied to identity or exclusion” (14). Feminism, and feminist relationships, need to embrace otherness among women, rather than elide these differences in service to an imagined hegemonic sisterhood.

Michie’s coalition model echoes the poststructuralist concept of the rhizome, articulated by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari as being an “acentred, nonhierarchical, non-signifying system” that consists of a number of interconnected multiplicities or “plateaus” which are “always in the middle, not at the beginning or the end” and which “communicate with one another across microfissures” (21-22). By way of just one illustrative metaphor, Deleuze and Guattari point to the pairing of an orchid and a wasp:

The orchid deterritorializes by forming an image, a tracing of the wasp; but the wasp reterritorializes on that image. The wasp is nevertheless deterritorialized, becoming a piece in the orchid’s reproductive apparatus. But it reterritorializes the orchid by transporting its pollen. Wasp and orchid, as heterogeneous elements, form a rhizome. (10)

These two separate and distinct entities are entangled in a dance of mutualism that both claims and cedes individual territories, defying definition by dichotomy to form a construct that simultaneously encompasses and enlarges without either organism achieving primacy over the other. They intersect in “neither imitation nor resemblance, only an exploding of two heterogeneous series on the line of flight composed by a common rhizome” (10). Participants of Michie’s coalition would similarly be able to operate as discrete and separate entities within a non-hierarchical system, able to forge intersecting paths of communication and knowledge dissemination, and also — to overlay her stipulation of free choice — able to leave and rejoin at different times, using diverse points of egress/ingress. Such a model thus allows women to maintain their own

individuality while constructing close and mutually beneficial connections.⁷

Creative Research as Rhizome

The rhizome has also proven a beneficial and iterative model for my own research and has governed this project on several levels. Like the orchid and the wasp, my creative artefact and exegesis themselves operate as a rhizome, as plateaus interconnecting and communicating with each other, without the imposition of hierarchy, rank or order.

Applying this model to my research project has greatly assisted in lessening the anxiety around the ‘artefact vs exegesis’ dichotomy that still confronts many creative-practice doctoral researchers (Brien et al.; Cosgrove and Scrivenor; Kroll “Practice”; Smith and Dean *Practice-led*). Despite the implied linearity imposed by the practicalities of PDFs and publishing, neither the artefact nor the exegesis should be considered as having the first or final word. Rather, the two elements work symbiotically (Finlayson et al.) to address the research question from different angles, via intersecting pathways, constructing “a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight” (Deleuze and Guattari 21).

This rhizomatic thesis includes a major creative writing component — a collection of six novelettes⁸ entitled “Never Afters” — embedded within four plateaus of a ‘connective’ exegesis (Hamilton). The exegetical writing adopts what Jillian Hamilton describes as a “dual perspective” that looks “both out towards an established field of

⁷ Of course, the privileging of an “independent selfhood” as ideal or normative can itself be called into question, with Julienne van Loon arguing that “there is not just energy and strength in merged attachment, but a deep collective sense of affirmation and belonging” (52).

⁸ A novelette is commonly defined as a piece of fiction having a length between 7,500 and 17,500 words, although these precise limits may differ among markets, publishers and awards criteria (“Hugo Award Categories”; “Nebula Rules”). Due to space restrictions, only six have been included in this thesis, but a seventh has been written and forms part of the collection as a whole.

research, exemplars and theories, and inwards towards the experiential processes of the creative practice” (370). This first plateau introduces the project and outlines its key questions and concepts, contextualises my research in relation to the existing literature around fairy tales, feminine subjectivities and female friendship, and describes my methodologies and methods. The creative work that immediately follows draws from the established corpus of western European fairy tales, with each novelette using a well-known tale as a launching point to enact a dual process of feminist re-vision: an interrogation and reinterpretation of the hypotext⁹ as received backstory, alongside an imagined construction of the later life of its female protagonist in order to explore the possibilities of collaboration and friendship among women. With “Never Afters” having delivered a creative reply to the research question, the next two plateaus of my exegesis offer additional critical responses. The second plateau discusses five key strategies that authors have used to introduce collaborative female relationships in their re-visioned fairy tales, with contextual analysis of my own work alongside several short fiction exemplars by other contemporary female writers. The third plateau turns to cognitive science for possible insights as to why contemporary re-visioned fairy tales continue to replicate the common narrative dynamics of either female acrimony or female isolation, and suggests that the adoption of new reflexive frameworks can result in advancements in our creative practice, with case studies of my own writing of “Never Afters” presented as demonstrations of praxis. The fourth plateau provides a conclusion, summarising my project and looking outward to further areas of possible research.

Far from operating merely as a structural model, the rhizome also serves as a

⁹ Gérard Genette defines the “hypotext” as an earlier text upon which a later text is based or “grafted” (5). This concept, along with its particular application within my research, will be discussed in greater detail at the beginning of the second plateau.

useful organising principle for my research methods and methodologies. Following Deleuze and Guattari, Jeri Kroll has frequently advocated a rhizomatic conception of creative research that invites writers to “construct and follow pathways that the product and process suggest” and so allows research to drive a writer’s practice while simultaneously enabling such creative practice to suggest new directions for research (“Laboratory” 117-118). For researchers dealing with both artefact and exegesis, a rhizomatic strategy can provide the flexibility and freedom required to “explore ideas in a non-hierarchical, anti-linear, multi-method research style” and allow us to more readily “forge associations between the theoretical and creative work” (Ryan). The rhizomatic research model is also echoed in the iterative cyclic web proposed by Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean, which maps a cycle of academic research, practice-led research and research-led practice to “suggest how a creative or research process may start at any point ... and move, spider-like, to any other” (“Introduction” 19). The iterative nature of such a web (or rhizome), which Smith and Dean consider “fundamental to both creative and research processes” (19), holds particular significance for my own creative praxis and will be discussed further in the following section. It is important to first emphasise, however, that a rhizomatic strategy should not grant creative researchers *carte blanche* to plunge into every enticing rabbit hole that comes our way and burrow along indefinitely. Rather, such an approach requires both rigour when considering possibly fruitful avenues of research, and reflexivity in knowing when to resurface and reassess. With the rhizome characterised by both non-linearity and a shifting multiplicity of entrances, exits and interconnecting pathways, it is vitally important to keep a reliable compass at hand. My research question operated as the compass in this research, supported by a robust and well-grounded methodology.

Research Methodology

My governing methodological approach is one of creative praxis. Building upon strategies originating in action research, most specifically the enquiry cycle (Kemmis and McTaggart), praxis is not merely the intersection of theory and practice. Rather, it is an iterative and recursive cycle that demands a reflexive position on the part of the researcher and leads to changes in, and new knowledge about, practice itself (Crouch; Kemmis; Mark K. Smith). Significantly for my own research, which seeks to re-vision fairy tales from a feminist standpoint and so broaden our cultural understanding of collaborative female relationships, praxis also brings into play an ethical element via its Aristotelian lineage as meaning “action that is *morally-committed, and oriented and informed by traditions in a field*” (Kemmis and Smith 4, emphasis in original). Defining creative praxis as “the critical and inextricable meld of theory and practice”, Robyn Stewart stresses the need for creative practitioners to be articulate and to possess the ability to “analyse and write about our practice in sophisticated ways” (“Practice”). She also points to reflexivity as instrumental in the development of these vital attributes, as it requires creative researchers to adopt an ongoing “critical perspective” that assumes “that ideas that underpin their practice should be questioned” (“(Re)inventing”). Creative praxis also overlays neatly the iterative web cycle theorised by Smith and Dean, with both models encompassing the methodologies and methods of practice-led research, research-led practice and traditional academic research. It provides a unified and rhizomatic methodology that enables me to move iteratively, recursively and, above all, seamlessly between creative and exegetical research, between novelette and conference paper, with the objectives and outcomes of each sphere overlapping, informing and regularly altering the shape and trajectory of its neighbour.

Within my praxis, I assume the role of a bricoleur, who has been variously described as a “maker of quilts” (Denzin and Lincoln 4) or a “weaver of stories” (Yardley) or a practitioner who “creat[es] meaning through reassembly, by (re)organising and weaving meaningful relationships among apparently heterogeneous objects” (Boisvert). Tess Brady playfully describes such a researcher as needing to “function a little like a bowerbird that picks out the blue things and leaves all the other colours”, who strives to attain a robust working knowledge in a number of disciplines, rather than highly specialised knowledge in a single field. It is a means of working that I have employed unknowingly in my own creative practice for many years, appropriating research, tools and approaches that best suit the task at hand and switching tracks as rapidly as projects demand. In the context of creative research, the bricoleur is “seeking to explore, reveal, inform and perhaps inspire by illuminating aspects of *insider praxis* within their field” (Stewart “Creating” 128; emphasis mine). As my own project involves the “double articulation” (Haseman 150) of creative artefact and exegesis, both of which spur investigations across a range of disciplines, bricolage has proven to be a productive and cohesive approach. Fitting comfortably within the reflexive and rhizomatic nature of my research, it has allowed me to draw from disciplines as diverse as creative writing, literature and film studies, history, sociology, linguistics, and cognitive science, stitching in relevant discoveries as required.

To clarify an often contentious term in the creative arts, *reflexivity* is employed in this thesis in a poststructuralist sense to refer to methodologies that incorporate critical reflection strategies (Elizabeth Smith) and that require creative practitioners to not only become self-aware, particularly in terms of their practice, but also to be able to formulate and communicate new and useful knowledge about creative practice (Hecq “Review”). Reflexivity can also be aligned with the concept of exegetical thinking — the array of

cognitive and creative practices that become “enmeshed in both creative writing and research processes in a growing ‘spiral’ of complexity and innovation as connections are made between the thesis components” (Alberts et al. 1). The reflections of Elizabeth Claire Alberts upon her own research experience illustrate the benefits of the type of critical reflexivity and exegetical thinking involved in creative praxis:

Looking back at my process, it seems as if I was involved in a kind of complex, reiterative thinking process that circled and cycled between exegetical research and creative practice, where research influenced practice, and practice influenced research ... a process that produces an intricate pattern of thinking, allowing the mind to cycle through processes, reiterate ideas, or crisscross in numerous directions. The exegesis and creative texts, as well as the thinking and writing processes involved in their creation, had eventually become inextricable, each informing and explicating the other, and driving the creativity of the project to a new level.
(9)

Although beyond the scope of this project to explore, the concept of active consciousness as articulated by Dominique Hecq is useful when considering the role of reflexivity in creative praxis, referring as it does to “the process of bringing to consciousness what previously lay beneath its surface, namely something pre-conscious or unconscious” (“Creative” 185). The third plateau further investigates the role of unconscious processes in creative writing practice, as well as providing case studies to illustrate praxis in action.

Research Methods

Within my overarching methodology of creative praxis, I have employed three key research methods: fairy-tale re-vision, feminist fictionmaking, and research fiction. These work together to form a robust pyramid, providing clear directions for research and relating to one another via my feminist interpretative framework. This section will explore these key methods in detail, as well as summarising several additional strategies

that are commonly utilised within creative research, such as reflexive reading, journaling, and participation in workshops.

Fairy-tale Re-vision

The critique of culturally dominant narratives through revision and retelling has long been regarded as a vital arena for feminist¹⁰ praxis, a position sharply articulated by Rich, who holds any act of writing from and through a feminist perspective to be inherently revisionist in nature:

Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new, critical direction—is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves ... A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live ... and how we can begin to see—and therefore live—afresh. (“When” 18)

The critical re-casting of existing literary artefacts is in itself neither new nor uniquely feminist. Linda Hutcheon’s studies of parody (and adaptation) push for a broader definitional view beyond the common meanings of ridicule and imitation, arguing that parody is “one of the major forms of modern self-reflexivity” (2) that operates as “repetition with critical distance” (6). While accepting its sharp-edged utility for exposing ideology, Anna E. Altmann distinguishes between parody and poesis and makes the case for the latter as being a more powerful tool for feminist revisionists. Parody “looks back” on a genre or form in order “to comment on that form and the meaning that has already been made with it”, whereas poesis “looks forward” by resisting the temptation to foreground its critical commentary, choosing instead to focus upon creating “a new and

¹⁰ As it can be for other modes of praxis that seek to challenge, displace and/or queer the dominant cultural axes of race, class, sexuality, ability or geosocial lines, although third-wave intersectional feminists would hold that their praxis can and should encompass these intersecting and overlapping perspectives.

wider world of meaning through reconfigured events and characters” (23). Rachel Blau DuPlessis notes the mythopoeic tendency of female poets¹¹ to “rewrite, reinterpret, or reenvision classical myths and other culturally resonant materials” (105) with the aim of forging “an anticolonial mythopoesis, an attack on cultural hegemony” (107) that works to displace and/or delegitimise dominant cultural narratives. The need to be familiar with these core texts while maintaining a critical distance from them is a crucial tenet of feminist re-vision: “we need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us” (Rich “When” 19). It is in poesis then, and mythopoesis in particular, that I situate my own creative practice. Each of the novelettes in “Never Afters” sits in dialogic discourse with its hypotext, with the critical literature surrounding its hypotext, and with fairy tales in general, but my primary intention as a writer of fiction is to create an engaging story: one in which character and plot take centre stage while politics and theory toil assiduously behind the scenes. The unifying conceit of the collection sees me quite literally “writing beyond the ending” (DuPlessis 1-19) of well-known fairy tales that commonly keep their female protagonists isolated from other women, leaving me free to construct new worlds, new narratives and new meanings in the spaces that come after.

Since the latter decades of the twentieth century, feminism has held particular significance for the critical study of fairy tales and their creative retellings (Haase *Fairy*; Joosen *Critical*; Zipes *Relentless*). Cristina Bacchilega describes fairy tales as “ideologically variable desire machines” (*Postmodern* 7) that “continue to play a privileged role in the production of gender, and as such are deconstructed and

¹¹ DuPlessis is speaking specifically of twentieth-century poets, her study having been published in 1985. However, mythopoesis continues to be regularly and reliably practised by female poets and authors to this day (“Mythopoeic Awards”).

reconstructed in a variety of ways” (*Postmodern* 1). For creative writers, fairy tales provide material that is well known and easily manipulated, while granting access to a collective past of social storytelling that allows for “apparently limitless, highly idiosyncratic re-creation” (*Postmodern* 5). Bacchilega champions postmodern narrative strategies that lend themselves to a feminist framing of retold fairy tales that both critiques and reshapes their traditional form, as well as recognising the significance of the genre for female readers and writers. Elizabeth Wanning Harries disputes this postmodern/traditional dichotomy, however, arguing that fairy tales have always been of two models: compact, which do not seem to depend on references to other stories; and complex, which “work to reveal the stories behind other stories, the unvoiced possibilities that tell another tale” (17). Although the compact mode has until recently dominated fairy-tale fiction, Harries sees contemporary retellings as a continuation of the kinds of longer and more complex stories created by the French *conteuses* of the seventeenth century. Further, she argues that complex retellings that take the form of sequels or prequels to traditional fairy tales are of particular interest to the feminist re-visionary project as they give their characters “a life beyond the usual contours of the fairy-tale romance” and allow authors to “pry the old stories open, revealing their inadequacies and their silences” (101). In a similar vein, Susan Sellers imagines the feminist rewriting of fairy tales as akin to “new embroideries” that add “fresh images and colours to radically alter the picture” (29) and open old stories from within to admit different possibilities and perspectives. Sellers compares feminist revision to the psychoanalytic concept of holding — that argues for the necessity of boundaries in order to encourage progress — and links this concept to Julia Kristeva’s strategies for dissident writing, in that “it provides a context within which we can rend and renew our relation to the established order: prompting us to reject what unfairly binds us while reaffirming our allegiance to what is

productive” (30). Babies should not be thrown out with their bathwater, after all, and few writers — or critics — of fairy tales would demand the genre be excised wholesale from the culture. Rather, Sellers contends that feminists rewrite these persistent and influential texts along two related and intersecting lines: as acts of demolition that expose and detonate the stories that have previously restricted women, or as tasks of construction that create “enabling alternatives” (30). It is a delicate balancing act as every instance of retelling may also serve to acknowledge or even reinforce the authority of its hypotext (Cranny-Francis; Purkiss); the anti-mythic still cradles the mythic within itself (Zipes *Myth*). Nevertheless, complex feminist fairy-tale re-visions effectively disrupt what Vanessa Joosen refers to as our “horizon of expectation” (*Critical* 23), encouraging us to view with fresh eyes and altered perspectives those narratives with which we thought ourselves so familiar.

Fairy tales come swathed in an enticing aura of otherworldliness while simultaneously being burdened by layers of history, a combination that resonates with contemporary readers even when the specifics of traditional variants may not be “tuned quite so conveniently to modern sensibilities” (Benson 4). It is this tension between the past and the present that many contemporary revisionist authors explore and exploit, drawing on both fairy-tale fictions and the surrounding critical discourse to do so. As previously mentioned, the synchronous, even mutualist, relationships that exist between fairy-tale authors, critics and their often entangled texts have recently become the focus of significant scholarship (Benson; Joosen *Critical*; Zipes *Relentless*). In her influential examination of creative and critical intertextualities, Joosen concludes that “retellings and criticism participate in a continuous and dynamic dialogue about the traditional fairy tale” (*Critical* 3) and identifies a metacritical impulse in feminist revisionist authors who use literature as a “self-reflexive critical tool” (*Critical* 36) rather than take the route of

academic literary criticism. Of course, there are feminist revisionists who choose to follow both paths. Author and academic Veronica Schanoes uses a psychoanalytic framework to explore the intertextuality between fairy-tale revisions and fairy-tale scholarship, arguing that both fairy-tale revision and feminist psychoanalytic theory “aim to make visible women’s lived experiences ... explore relationships between women [and] attempt to present women’s stories as central to our understanding of humanity” (*Fairy* 3). She draws on the concept of the relational self, in opposition to the male-centred Freudian theories of literary revision and (mis)reading posited by Harold Bloom, to theorise that the connection between the revisionist writer (or the re-vised story) and the hypotext(s) might be modelled as a mother-daughter relationship:

Not only do these revisions portray the contemporaneous concepts of feminine subjectivity ... but we can also consider the revisions themselves as case studies in second-wave mother-daughter relationships. These revisions enact between texts, between themselves and their traditional sources, the permeable boundaries, shared identity and fluid sense of self that ... are characteristic of feminine subjectivity as well as the mother-daughter matrix generative of that subjectivity. Revision not only incarnates prior versions of the tale, but it is also identified with those versions by looking toward its own revision, just as Chodorow argues that a mother of a daughter usually experiences a simultaneous identification with her own mother as well as with her infant daughter. (*Fairy* 33-34)

While this is a valuable lens in certain respects, as a female writer of re-vised fairy tales, I nevertheless find myself resisting this linear, hierarchical model, suspecting it of being as gendered and potentially problematic as the Oedipal model articulated by Bloom. Creative writers may come at their revisions from any number of angles and trajectories, which are neither hierarchical nor imply lineage in the way we understand familiar genealogies. Moreover, the definition of a “literary mother” that Schanoes constructs for the purposes of her study — “an older female character responsible for the welfare of and with power over a younger character, or an older female character who has borne such

responsibility and power in the past” (*Fairy* 18) — artfully subsumes other familial or friendship-based female relationships into itself, negating their significance if not their existence via this maternal vortex.¹² Perhaps an author/text relationship with their hypotext(s) — creative or critical — might instead be modelled as a collegial bond where footing is more or less equal, where a re-vision maps to a collaboration or even a friendship rather than a birthing. Michie’s preferred framing of female relationships as respectful and voluntary coalitions is once again a profitable consideration here, as is the concept of the fairy-tale web recently theorised by Bacchilega as “a field of reading and writing practices” that takes into account the increasing proliferation of fairy tales, including fairy-tale adaptations and re-visions, critical responses, and other cultural practices that operate in “an intertextual dialogue with one another” and are informed by “more multivocal unpredictable uses of the genre” (*Transformed* 16-18). A web or a coalition are both non-hierarchical and decentred constructs that eschew linearity, provide intersecting pathways, and allow for multiple means of access, echoing the rhizomatic model around which my own research is structured. Modelling fairy-tale revision as a rhizome allows deep and significant connections to form between its plateaus (the multiplicity of creative and critical writers, artists, filmmakers and so on, and also their texts) and fosters free and reciprocal exchanges of knowledge, influence and inspiration within a non-gendered and inclusive system that is fluid, self-reflexive and in a state of near constant flux.

Feminist Fictionmaking

¹² Sororal relationships, for example, seem discounted by this definition. As the eldest daughter of a newly single mother, I certainly possessed both (partial) responsibility for and power over my two younger sisters for much of my teenage and young adult years but do not, and did not ever, consider myself their mother — a position ratified by my sisters, to judge by their frequent retorts of “You’re not my mother!”

Fairy-tale revision can be further refined via feminist fictionmaking, the term Enza Gandolfo has coined to describe her method of writing fiction in order to emphasise both its constructed nature (as opposed to popular conceptions of writer as conduit/genius) and its political intentions. It is the significance of authorial intention that concerns Gandolfo as both a creative writer and researcher, not in the sense that such an element “must be discovered by the reader in order to access the true meaning of the text” but because it is “a way to understand and articulate the creative writing and research process” (“Constructing” 63). As feminist writers, our political intentions inform our creative work and so need to be combined with critical reflexivity and reflective practice of the kind espoused by Donald A. Schön, for example, to ensure that we remain “always awake ... and alert to the ways that the writing is shaping and forming; to what the text is *becoming*” (Gandolfo “Feminist” 141). As creative writers, Gandolfo reminds us, we are not in the business of directly influencing policy with our research but rather aim instead to “create understanding, empathy and connection” with our eventual readers (“Constructing” 63). In researching and writing “Never Afters”, my intention was not only to return the voices of my female protagonists, allowing them to tell their own stories in first-person narratives, but to build for them communities of other women in whom they might find support and friendship, thereby creating a fictional but “*recognisable* world that reflects women’s social reality” (Gandolfo “Feminist” 143; original emphasis). As the next two plateaus of my exegesis will explore, my success in realising this objective was somewhat mixed, with my espoused feminist politics occasionally bending beneath narrative demands and the pressure of the dominant discourse. Nevertheless, my intention and resolve throughout have aligned closely with Gandolfo’s expression of her own feminist fictionmaking:

I wanted to practice fiction writing so that my feminism was at the

forefront; to be clear about my feminist intentions; to be vigilant in terms of monitoring my own tendencies towards the stereotypes and dominant discourses; to engage actively with feminist and related theory and to reflect on its impact on the process and practice of writing. (“Constructing” 66)

The constant vigilance necessitated by feminist fictionmaking, along with the surgical finesse required to weave both my critical research and my politics into my re-visioned fairy tales — using stitches so fine they never leave a scar — proved to be a challenging, but also highly rewarding, endeavour.

Research Fiction

My fairy-tale re-vision and feminist fictionmaking are both underpinned by the method of research fiction. Defined by Eva Sallis as “fiction which, to a significant degree, expresses the outcomes of a body of research and which is the culminating point of an investigation which could have been written up, at least in part, in academic prose”, research fiction is distinct from similar works that use research for the simpler purposes of fact checking, world building and authentication of textual detail. As with all modes of fiction, research fiction may range from didacticism to entertainment, but its “critical elements will be subordinate to its engagement with the emotions and the imagination of its readership” (Sallis). This becomes a critical and creative challenge, requiring the writer to transform their theoretical underpinnings using the tools and strategies of fiction so as to render them all but invisible to readers who might be simply looking for an engaging story. Sallis further proposes that research fiction is “uniquely suited to contentious issues” such as social, political and cultural concerns, which in turn makes it an ideal approach for a project such as mine that deconstructs, critiques and foregrounds feminist themes. The research undertaken for “Never Afters” was, in accordance with my role as bricoleur, wide-ranging and diverse. Although I conducted a large amount of

investigation to build verisimilitude for my fictional worlds and characters — research into various time periods and geographic locations, for example, as well as food, clothing and customs, along with the refinement of idiosyncratic language systems as appropriate — this alone would not allow my creative artefact to be counted as research fiction. My research, however, went much further than this. I studied each hypotext selected for revision in depth, reading different traditional versions as well as more contemporary retellings and interpretations in prose, poetry, film and, on occasion, the visual arts, to map how the fairy tale has been previously approached and understood. I also surveyed the critical literature across several disciplines, as well as pieces documenting reader/audience reception written by non-academics embedded within popular culture, and the more reflective, often paratextual writing of authors and artists who work with fairy tales.¹³ The conclusions drawn from this type of research — one that might, for clarity, be termed second-order research — inform the themes, content and character dynamics of my creative work, and I have sought to embed them within their narratives.

As a collection of research fiction, “Never Afters” can also be seen as an exercise in dialogism (Bakhtin; Herndl) that sits in heteroglossic conversation with the surrounding fairy-tale discourse — historic, scholarly, popular, artistic — offering “only one of many possible realities; it is not inevitable, not arbitrary, it bears within itself other possibilities” (Bakhtin 37). The novelettes claim no ultimate authority or final word on the tales they re-vision, admitting instead a number of voices and perspectives: their characters, the cultural and critical discourse, and my own. Feminist revisionists, as Anne Cranny-Francis observes, “present not one authoritative narrative, but two narratives — the revised version of the traditional narrative, and its discursive referent, the traditional

¹³ More detailed discussion of the critical literature and relevant authorial writing is included in the second plateau of this thesis.

narrative” (89). In proposing new readings of their hypotexts as well as critiques of the fairy-tale genre itself, my own creative work invites questions from readers and provokes further lines of investigation. Reviewing my early story notes, I have been surprised at how much “Never Afters” has developed during the research process, with some novelettes unrecognisable from their light preliminary sketches and other story ideas abandoned entirely. Bringing together the key methods of fairy-tale revision, feminist fictionmaking, and research fiction has resulted in a creative praxis that demands both rigour and reflexivity — a demand my feminist writer-self now responds to with renewed and robust conviction.

Additional Methods

Throughout this project, I have also used several methods that are more commonplace within creative research and which coexist “in a state of generative cross-fertilisation” (Brien 57-58). I have engaged in reading as research — not only the critical reading of academic, creative and cultural texts outlined above and discussed in the overview of literature below, but creative and connective reading as a “speculative and imaginative exercise that produces a range of ideas, impressions, hunches and insights about how the text to be written or in progress might be achieved or improved” (Brien 56). A reflexive reading practice can be “as creative an activity as writing” especially when the core of my thesis explicitly depends upon continuous “new readings of old texts” (Carter “Notes” 69). Such a process feeds into journaling, which has often been advocated in order to both document and demonstrate “a conscious and well-articulated awareness of the research practice in evidence in the creative work” (Bourke and Neilsen 3). It would be disingenuous to intimate that I kept regular, organised and well-thumbed physical journals during this project; my journal-mode writing has long been more akin to the disparate and dog-eared scraps described by Eugen Bacon (“Writerly”), spanning several

physical notebooks (amid to-do lists, personal notations and other ephemera), scribbled in the margins of research articles, saved as digital files on my laptop and phone, as well as collected on many literal scraps of paper — usually the first thing available to hand. Periodically harvested and transcribed into the Scrivener file that serves to organise my research, this sporadic and (in hindsight) rhizomatic journaling practice nevertheless “informs the mapping of self and research” and has helped to “validate creative praxis and product” (Bacon “Journaling” 1). For me, an unconstrained approach has allowed for free and fluid reflective writing, facilitating connections between practice and research and thus furthering the project’s advancement, more than an orderly and linear progression between rigid acid-free covers. Lastly, though by no means less vital to my creative research, has been the familiar cycles of drafting, revising, editing and workshopping, all of which produce important evidence “relating to the acts and actions of creative writers” (Harper 165), and mirror the iterative nature of my research as a whole. I have benefitted immeasurably from being a member of the same close-knit critique group for nearly two decades, and was able to workshop “Never Afters” with them as the novelettes were being written, as well as putting multiple drafts before select peers and my research supervision team. The diverse and sometimes conflicting feedback received via these processes was essential to my creative praxis, allowing me to gauge the effectiveness of research integration within my creative work and, crucially, to step outside my own political standpoint and view the novelettes through a multiplicity of lenses.

Selection of Primary Texts

As the genre of re-visioned fairy tales continues to enjoy exponential growth across a variety of mediums and intended audiences, it has been necessary to devise clear and

restrictive criteria for the selection of primary texts that form the contextual core of my research, serving to both situate my own creative work and focus my exegetical writing. In delineating the boundaries of ‘contemporary’ for myself, I have used the influential and critically acclaimed collection *Kissing the Witch* by Emma Donoghue (first published in 1993) as a point of ingress and have considered texts published up until the present (2019), roughly a twenty-five year span.¹⁴ While I often forayed further afield into the arenas of film, poetry, novels and visual arts when researching and revisiting the specific fairy tales upon which my own stories were based, additional parameters have proven useful for identifying the texts to be discussed in the second plateau of my exegesis. An exclusive focus on short¹⁵ fictional narratives in the written mode was required to make my sample size manageable and to better contextualise my own work in “Never Afters”. Short fiction, being closer in length and form than novels to the traditional tales from which I have sourced my hypotexts, also presents a suitable medium for mapping connections, themes, character shifts, and other narrative departures.

When considering the types of short fiction to survey, I followed the lead of Zipes who distinguishes between duplicate stories that merely reproduce “a set pattern of ideas and images” and so “reinforce a traditional way of seeing, believing, and behaving”, and revisions that seek to “alter the reader’s views of traditional patterns, images, and codes” (*Myth 9*). It is the latter that concerns this research project, as I am concerned with

¹⁴ Although the term “contemporary literature” more generally refers to the period following World War II until the present, I am specifically interested in examining the work of authors roughly contemporaneous to myself and so have applied a shorter time span. In addition, I wished to focus on authors who followed in the footsteps of the 1970s “Angela Carter generation” (Benson 2) and were influenced by their earlier revisionist work (Schanoes *Fairy*). Donoghue’s collection proves an ideal departure point, being regarded by scholars as a significant work of feminist fairy-tale revision in this period (Harries; Joosen *Critical*; Schanoes *Fairy*; Zipes *Why*).

¹⁵ Defined for my purposes as a piece of fiction presented as a self-contained short story, novelette or novella, rather than a novel-length narrative of 40,000 words or more (“Hugo Award Categories”; “Nebula Rules”).

analysing how female friendships and collaborations are introduced in ways that alter the established dynamics of well-known fairy tales. It is also worth noting that many works of contemporary short fiction reference motifs, characters or plot dynamics in ways that are not obvious rewritings of any particular tale, and thus may be considered ‘new’ narratives in the fairy-tale mode (such as those that form the majority of Angela Slatter’s collections *Sourdough and Other Stories* and *The Bitterwood Bible and Other Recountings*, or much of the short fiction by Kate Bernheimer). Harries describes such a strategy as “transliteration” (after Olga Broumas) where writers “tend to ignore or elide the old didactic patterns” and instead harness “our memory of salient images, often apparently peripheral details, transforming them into new centers of meaning” (135-136). However, as my research is focused upon the changing dynamic of female relationships between classic fairy tales and their explicit contemporary re-visionings, such new or transliterated fairy tales have largely been excluded from this study.¹⁶

In addition, in the second plateau, I have chosen to focus on texts by female authors who have done substantial creative work that deals with fairy-tale themes and content, and/or whose work has been framed by its inclusion in fairy-tale themed anthologies, magazines and other markets. It can be safely assumed (and is often evidenced by paratextual artefacts such as author forewords or interviews) that such authors have more than passing familiarity with fairy tales and that their interest in the revisionary project produces complex texts that grapple critically with their chosen hypotexts (Joosen *Critical*). The rationale for my decision to focus exclusively on female authors is twofold. Firstly, as my research examines the dynamics in play between female

¹⁶ Although the revisionist strategy I have identified as *fusion*, to be discussed at length in the second plateau, does address a specific type of ‘new’ narrative that combines two or more clearly identifiable fairy tales.

characters in fictional stories, I am particularly interested in how female authors of such stories approach these representations. The exploration of how women writers — myself included — imagine, frame and represent these relationships in fairy-tale narratives is particularly significant as it is “women who have more consistently and en masse worked to re-flesh the fairy tale” (Bacchilega *Postmodern* 48). Secondly, as surveys of literary publication and reception reveal, female authors continue to be under-represented when it comes to criticism, reviews, literary awards, syllabus inclusion and almost any other marker of critical visibility and worth (Harvey and Lamond; King and Clark; Petersen). In focusing on the work of women writers, my research project contributes to redressing this imbalance.

The final parameter I considered for text selection was the intended readership. As with most of my creative work, “Never Afters” has been written with an adult audience in mind, and so I have focused on stories written primarily for adults (including, occasionally, young adults) rather than those produced for children. Although fairy tales have often been targeted at children (Zipes *Relentless*), folklore scholars point to their origins as an oral tradition practised for the entertainment and edification of listeners of all ages, with much sub-textual content directed towards adults (Harries). Contemporary fairy-tale revision began to gather steam in the 1970s under the influence of what Stephen Benson has termed the “fairy-tale generation” or the “Angela Carter generation” — a collection of writers (including Robert Coover, A. S. Byatt, Margaret Atwood, and Carter) whose “fictional projects are intimately and variously tied to [fairy] tales and tale-telling” (2). Since this time, there has been a wealth of fairy-tale literature published for an explicitly adult readership and it is among contemporary writers of such stories that I situate myself.

Conclusion

My research contributes not only to the literature surrounding fairy-tale re-visions, in both its creative/fictional and critical/theoretical modes, but furthers knowledge in the field of creative writing as process and practice. Through its ongoing articulation of my creative praxis, my exegetical writing contributes to the demystification and demythologisation of creative practice in general and creative writing in particular. As Estelle Barrett points out, the ways that we currently receive, consume and valorise artworks as commodities serves to mystify rather than illuminate by privileging product over process. She theorises the exegesis as a meme — “a vehicle for fixing ideas in our collective consciousness” (160) — that enables creative researchers to replicate and disseminate the studio process rather than valorise a finished product. Jeri Kroll, Graeme Harper, and Robyn Stewart, among others in the discipline of creative research, have similarly called for a greater emphasis on the theorising and articulation of *process* over the type of exegetical writing that simply applies the methodologies of literary theory or cultural studies to a creative component as though it is a hermetically sealed artefact. As well as furthering the development of the discipline of creative writing, my exegesis adds to the growing corpus of self-conscious, self-aware and self-reflexive writing that seeks to dismantle some of the more persistent cultural myths about artists and art-making.

The creative component of my thesis is situated within the expanding and dynamic contemporary genre of re-visioned fairy tales, and thus contributes both creatively and critically to the discourse within and around this genre. What unifies “Never Afters” and sets it apart from the main corpus of similar revisionary work, is my decision to present an array of positive relationships between female characters throughout the entire collection, while acknowledging both the very real and the culturally mythologised difficulties that often beset the interactions of girls and women. It

should be noted that, although I have written a total of seven novelettes that will make up the collection in its (hopefully) published form, only six have been included in this thesis due to word-count restrictions. It was a difficult decision, but I felt that the flavour of female relationships depicted in my “Beauty and the Beast” sequel (“Winterbloom”) overlapped with some of the novelettes already written, and so it could be safely – if sorrowfully – set aside. Instead, I included “After Midnight”, my “Cinderella” story, to provide a darker counterpoint to the positive themes of female friendship and collaboration present elsewhere in the collection. While this novelette does include a significant collaborative element, its focus is the toxic, patriarchal worldview that its narrator has internalised and from which she refuses to escape.

In summary, the representation of female friendship and other collaborative relationships between women in fictional narrative forms remains limited, lacking both range and depth, and is often framed by received cultural wisdoms that hold women to be their own worst enemies (Anthony et al.; Bertram; Dixon-Smith; Piper “Myth”; Piper “Woman’s”). This situation needs to be addressed in the stories we tell, both in fiction and in real life via the media, personal anecdotes, and so on. As we find more varied, textured and multi-faceted representations of what it means to be a woman, in diverse relationships with other women, we can better imagine our own selves inhabiting such roles — and, perhaps more importantly, other women inhabiting them. This is not to say that all representations of female relationships need to be positive or utopian, and it must be acknowledged that fractious, combative, manipulative and other toxic dynamics between women also reflect aspects of reality. They are not, however, the *whole* of reality and our fictional narratives should provide a better balance. The evil stepmothers, jealous sisters and two-faced friends in such stories would not be so problematic if there were equivalent attention being paid to their supportive, caring and inspiring counterparts.

“Never Afters” explores how productive female collaboration, rather than competition, may thrive and become a potent force of narrative power.

As a whole, my research project seeks to both validate and elevate the cultural status of female friendship and other collaborative relationships among women, both in my fictional representations and in the critical work that not only analyses these dynamics, but which frames the re-visionary project in terms of a non-hierarchical network of collaborators in conversation — if sometimes strenuous disagreement — with one another.

Second Plateau: Strategies

No work of fiction is conceived or created in isolation — each is a “text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts” (Genette 1) — and “Never Afters” is no exception. As discussed in the first plateau of this thesis, the genre of contemporary fairy tales is explicitly and consciously intertextual, with creative writers and theorists alike operating within a rhizomatic web of influence, commentary and critique. New fairy-tale fictions that deliberately adopt a political stance are “always look[ing] backwards to engage with older tales, while simultaneously looking forward, or at least sideways, towards a new way of understanding or embodying fairy-tale themes” (Do Rozario et al. 1-2) and in so doing cast fresh perspectives and dislodge new meanings from these old, yet resilient, stories.

This plateau examines a modest corpus of re-visioned fairy tales that depict collaborative female relationships in order to identify and discuss five key strategies that their authors — including Emma Donoghue, Margo Lanagan, Kelly Link, Angela Slatter and Catherynne M. Valente — have employed to bring previously non-existent relationships into being. I have identified these strategies as: *inversion*, where either the gender of characters or the gender-based dynamics between characters are reversed; *insertion/deletion*, where new characters are added or familiar characters removed; *expansion*, where a familiar tale is extended beyond its original narrative bounds; *fusion*, in which elements from two or more tales are combined into a new narrative; and *extrapolation*, wherein a tale is retold from the perspective of a minor or implied character. This list is not intended to be exhaustive and other tactics may be detected, or indeed devised, in the future. It is also important to note that any single strategy is not

necessarily applied to the exclusion of others and that many authors, including myself, often use multiple strategies to bring about instances of collaboration and/or friendship among girls and women in a re-visioned fairy tale. For the purposes of this plateau, however, I will be analysing the use of one primary strategy in each of the stories selected as exemplars. My own novelettes will be included in this analysis, both to contextualise my work within its field and to examine the efficacy of my chosen revisionist approach. Before beginning, however, it is necessary to define more precisely what I mean by a term that is central to any discussion of intertextuality: the hypotext.

Contemporary Conflation and Amalgamated Hypotexts

In his influential study of transtextuality, Gérard Genette defines a hypotext as an “earlier text ... upon which [a later text; the hypertext] is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary” via a “transformative process” (5). His example of Homer’s *Odyssey* (c.700-800 BCE) as the hypotext of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) is clear and indisputable, underscoring his preferred definition of hypertextuality, which requires “the shift from hypotext to hypertext [to be] both massive (an entire work B deriving from an entire work A) and more or less officially stated” (9). When it comes to the retelling and adaptation of fairy tales, however, the originary hypotext is often more difficult to identify. In the late twentieth century, fairy-tale scholars began to shift focus away from ideas of originality or ur-texts and towards a more de-centred, non-linear conception of “the folktale as a network of multiple texts in dialogue with one another” (Haase “Hypertextual” 224). This intertextual approach, concludes Donald Haase, positions each fairy tale as “a component in a larger web of texts that are linked to each other in multiple ways and have equal claim on our attention” (“Hypertextual” 225). Bacchilega extends this model into the contemporary arena, suggesting that rather than thinking of the

revisionist process as involving the “exclusive connection between two texts at a time”, it might be better viewed as a “practice that weaves multiple texts with one another, translating them across media and audiences” (*Transformed* 32). Similarly, in her study of adaptation and appropriation, Julie Sanders notes that different texts may be in dialogue with each other as well as their common hypotext and argues for thinking about these relationships “in terms of complex processes of filtration, and in terms of intertextual webs or signifying fields, rather than simplistic one-way lines of influence from source to adaptation” (24). Bearing in mind these models of woven, networked — even rhizomatic — webs, Genette’s definition of a singular, readily identifiable hypotext might be usefully extended to instead hypothesise an amalgamated hypotext in place of any specific iteration of a fairy tale from which a re-visioned story may be grafted.

An amalgamated hypotext reflects the intertextual, transitional and postmodern qualities that scholars have variously claimed for the contemporary fairy-tale genre (Bacchilega *Postmodern*; Haase “Hypertextual”; Joosen *Critical*) as well as speaking to its multivocal nature. In her analysis of the fragmentary nature of fairy tales within postmodernity, Cathy Lynn Preston refers to the content, dynamics, tropes or “stuff” of fairy tales as “free-floating cultural data” (210) that can be invoked through a variety of media and mediums, including children’s stories, fiction for adults, poetry, comics, visual and performing arts, films and television shows, academic texts, advertising, and internet memes. Significantly, Preston concludes that the “performer’s and the audience’s fragmented cultural knowledge may have been acquired through any or all of the above forms of cultural production” (210). Conceptualising an amalgamated hypotext¹⁷

¹⁷ The concept of the amalgamated hypotext may also be seen as a rhizome in terms of its interconnected structure and the multiple points of ingress/egress it offers to readers (and writers). In this way, it reflects the development of fairy tales as being palimpsests of a kind, the product of what Zipes refers to as “the symbiotic relationship of oral and literary currents” that have flowed through one another within fairy-tale cultures (*Irresistible* 3).

necessarily relies on a fairy tale's popularity and cultural dissemination. An amalgamated hypotext of "Cinderella" in contemporary US-dominated culture, for example, would be spun from wicked stepmothers and jealous stepsisters, princes and marriage balls, fairy godmothers and glass slippers. That its compositional elements may have been conflated from sources as diverse as Grimm, Disney or Little Golden Books, or that divergent variants of the tale also exist, does not undermine the argument that an amalgamated hypotext is the culturally dominant, if more generalised, shape by which a particular fairy tale has become best known and against which we can analyse its contemporary revisions. The concept of an amalgamated hypotext also addresses an issue of practical concern for any study of revisionist fairy tales that focuses on authorial choices and strategies, namely the difficulty of identifying with certainty the exact source(s) that — consciously or otherwise — informed the retelling. Aside from infrequent information provided in paratextual spaces such as forewords/afterwords, interviews, blog posts, and so on, we often cannot know whether an author is re-visioning a story from Perrault¹⁸, for example, or from Disney, or from any number of illustrated children's books, or from other sources entirely. It is even more problematic to isolate the direct influence of critical scholarship on a particular re-visioned text, which "can only be proved with conviction in a few rare instances" (Joosen *Critical* 3). Hypothesising an amalgamated hypotext instead may thus better reflect contemporary revisionist practice and allow fruitful analysis of creative strategies to proceed without the need to first pinpoint precise antecedents, and I have adopted this approach in much of the discussion around re-visioned fairy tales that follows.

¹⁸ And in the original French, or an English translation such as the one made by Angela Carter.

1. Inversion

Inversion is one of the most common strategies employed by contemporary authors of retold fairy tales and can involve one of two applications: the inversion of the established gender¹⁹ of a character or the inversion of an established (and often gendered) dynamic. In the first instance, a revision may be made to a story by means of a gender reversal or “gender flip” (Cochrane; Lysbakken), as the practice is commonly known. Instead of a prince rescuing a princess, for example, this traditional male character might be rendered instead as a girl or woman. Similarly, brothers might become sisters, or the traditionally male gender of helper characters might be inverted to allow a greater female presence and thus create more opportunity for collaboration and the forming of positive female relationships. As a socio-anthropological term, gender reversal “may be understood to be any change, whether ‘total’ or partial, in social behaviour, work, clothing, mannerisms, speech-designation, or ideology, which brings a person closer to the other (or, in polygender systems, *another*) gender” (Ramet 2, emphasis in original). Much analysis of gender reversal in fiction is concerned with the reversal of gender *roles*: the depiction of female characters with culturally constructed masculine characteristics, behaviours and/or social roles — and vice versa (Ashliman; Attebery; Lorié). Although the strategy of inversion may indeed encompass such role reversals, they are not an automatic result of replacing a male character in a fairy tale with a female one, nor does gender inversion necessarily seek to mock or even overtly challenge specific sexist stereotypes in the portrayal of either gender as do many instances of contemporary gender-flipping in literature, film and other media (Cochrane; Lysbakken). Rather, the type of gender

¹⁹ Although I have come across no exemplars where the gender of a character is changed to one more diverse than the (cis)male/(cis)female opposition, this thesis neither presumes nor endorses a binary construct of gender and acknowledges that contemporary expressions of gender are more fluid and often in flux.

inversion I have identified may be employed both to increase the number of female characters within a narrative and to allow the author to explore female-centred stories in greater complexity and depth. This latter impulse might also drive the second and arguably more subtle application of inversion as a narrative strategy: the reversal of an established relationship dynamic between existing female characters in a fairy tale without modifying their gender. What if stepmothers, for example, were portrayed as kind instead of cruel? Or witches more inclined to help lost children than devour them? By inverting the antagonistic and toxic female relationships that this thesis argues are not only common within the genre of fairy tales but actively favoured by the dominant culture, contemporary revisionist authors are able to examine fresh ways in which female characters might interact and so create the “enabling alternatives” for which feminist fairy-tale scholars have long advocated (Sellers 30). This section analyses several retellings that utilise inversion as a key strategy to bring female collaboration and friendship into being, to re-examine the relationships between mothers and daughters, and to overlay queer readings onto traditionally heteronormative fairy tales.

The swapping out of canonical male characters for female equivalents is a feature of Catherynne M. Valente’s novella *Six-Gun Snow White* (2013). Set in a mythical Old West, the heroine of this “Snow White” retelling is half-Crow and half-white, her name bestowed by her vicious stepmother, Mrs H, to remind her of the pale skin she will never possess. As in its hypotext, the relationship between the two female characters is violent and toxic, and a teenage Snow White runs away in search of the tribe from which her long-dead mother originated. After a journey beset with male violence, including a near fatal showdown with a bounty hunter engaged by Mrs H, Snow White is granted refuge in Oh-Be-Joyful, a small town populated by “run-off women, whores, cattle Kates, bandits, desert rats, and gunslingers ... all sour on the whole idea of going back where they came

from” (101). This female-only settlement is run by seven outlaws who stand in place of the seven (male) dwarves of the hypotext and, although life is difficult and dangerous in the male-dominated West, the gender inversion allows Valente to paint a sparse but convincing portrait of a rugged, gritty community of outcast women, all pulling together and contributing to the ongoing health of their community under the understanding that “a camp is just like a body; you work all day just to keep it alive” (111). Despite this collaborative effort, and the genuine love that the women come to feel for Snow White, they are unable to thwart the evil designs of Mrs H and the text’s overarching theme of the inescapable trauma of toxic mother-daughter relations. Oh-Be-Joyful might be a sanctuary, peopled with women who are practical, knowledgeable and compassionate — if somewhat world-weary — but it’s not enough to save a brittle, broken girl who cannot “stop hanging [her] heart on her mother” (111). In what may be read as a poignant nod to “Sleeping Beauty”, the Oh-Be-Joyful women preserve Snow White’s body long after her ‘death’ — and even long after their own — allowing the girl a century or more of ageless sleep before she finally returns to the waking world, her liberation from Mrs H finally secured by simple virtue of being the last one left standing. Valente’s strategy of inversion serves not only to flesh-out the fairy tale’s female cast but to provide a more complex portrait of women and their interactions with one other. Unlike the hypotext, in which the only female relationship was defined by homicidal jealousy, *Six-Gun Snow White* also presents us with women who have built a protective, supportive community for themselves and women like themselves, and who willingly extend their love and protection to Snow White while acknowledging that the girl has her own agency and is thus free to make her own mistakes.

Gender inversion is similarly employed in other contemporary retellings to construct caring and collaborative relationships among multiple female characters. In

“The True Story” (1998), Pat Murphy also takes “Snow White” as its hypotext and inverts the gender of the seven dwarves, rendering them as seven old women who “lived in a cottage in the forest, where they meditated and prayed” (285) and who come to provide sanctuary for a threatened young princess. However, the more significant inversion in this story concerns the relationship between Snow White and her stepmother, with the queen portrayed as being an active participant in ensuring the safety of her stepdaughter. The queen is aided in her efforts by the child’s peasant nursemaid, by local nuns²⁰ who point the way to the seven women in the forest, and by the women themselves — with whom she retires to live years later. Although none of these female helper characters are particularly prominent in the narrative, their existence portrays a patriarchal world in which an informal network of women nevertheless successfully collaborate to thwart the powers that seek to harm and oppress them. Angela Slatter, an Australian author who has been largely overlooked by the critical literature despite creating an impressive body of work in the contemporary fairy-tale genre, similarly inverts a formerly male character in “The Juniper Tree” (2006) to depict domestic relationships among female characters with more emotional complexity than in the hypotext. In the version of the story collected by the Grimms, a mercenary stepmother kills the son of her new husband due to the “great love” she feels for her own daughter, and her knowledge that the boy “would always stand in her way and prevent her daughter from inheriting everything, which was what the woman had in mind” (*Complete* 172). Slatter changes the stepchild to a girl, Simah, who likewise becomes the unfortunate casualty of her father’s decision to remarry. Before the fatal event occurs, however, an affectionate and sensitive relationship is woven between the two girls as Marlechina, the newcomer to the household, grows “fond of her

²⁰ The nursemaid and nuns are examples of the strategy of insertion, which will be discussed at length in the following section.

stepsister, and trie[s] her best to protect Simah from the worst of Second Wife's temper" ("Juniper" 97). Of course there is only so much a child can do in this regard, and the story follows the familiar narrative: the decapitation of Simah by her stepmother; the grisly charade that leads a distraught Marlechina to believe herself the murderer; the cooking of Simah's flesh into a stew eaten by her unwitting father; the burial of her bones beneath the juniper tree. It is at this point, however, that Slatter significantly departs from the plot of the hypotext. Rather than seek revenge, the immediate concern of the singing bird into which the murdered child transforms is the alleviation of the guilt that burdens her stepsister and, by the end of the story, the two girls are reunited.

As mentioned, the strategy of inversion does not apply solely to the gender reversal of existing characters in a narrative but may instead involve a deliberate reworking of the relationship between female characters to explore themes of collaboration and friendship. In "The Tale of the Voice" (1993) — her retelling of "The Little Mermaid" — Emma Donoghue inverts the traditionally antagonistic dynamic between the mermaid and the sea witch in the hypotext, with the older woman granting her love-struck petitioner's wish even as she advises her to "[c]hange for your own sake . . . not for what you imagine another will ask of you" ("Voice" 192). In this new "collaborative dynamic", as Ann Martin points out, the witch "requires the younger woman to make her own decisions and her own mistakes", encouraging her to "learn life for herself" rather than dictating how she should act from a position of authority (21). Moreover, as the girl discovers near the end of the story, the witch had not actually stolen her voice in the first place:

I don't have your voice, you know, she said softly. You do. . . Your songs are still out there on the clifftop, hanging in the air for you to find them. She paused, searching my face. Wish to speak and you will speak, girl. Wish to die and you can do it. Wish to live and here you are. (202)

It is interesting to note that this particular collaboration does not rely for success on the formation of strong, interpersonal bonds between the two characters; neither woman sees the other for years afterwards, and only then for the extra-narrative purpose of linking through the next story in the collection. Although the exploration and representation of female friendship is a key objective of my research, it is equally important to depict women collaborating without the driving impetus of friendship or romance. Similarly, Kelly Link inverts the hypotextual antipathy that exists between two primary female characters in “Travels with the Snow Queen” (1997), while also keeping the multiple female helper characters original to “The Snow Queen” in her own retelling. In considering the antagonism between Gerda and the Snow Queen in the Anderson tale — an antagonism centred around a male character, Kay, who is wanted by both — feminist critic Ellen Brown reflects upon what the story teaches her: “That other women are my enemy: I will oppose them to gain the love of men. That there is power in being feminine, as long as we are feminine in the ways defined by patriarchy: Gerda’s power is her goodness, her devotion, and her many tears” (5). The inversion employed by Link turns such lessons on their head. “Travels with the Snow Queen” presents an ambivalent young woman (whose point of view is meshed with the reader’s via the intimate second person narrative) searching for her unfaithful, disinterested ex-lover, and a queen who has clearly grown bored of her spellbound houseguest. Instead of rescuing Kay and returning to their apartment, Gerda takes up the offer to join Snow Queen Tours and command her own goose-drawn sleigh. Significantly, this enterprising travel business both acknowledges the plight of a certain class of female fairy-tale character and seeks to offer some minor compensation:

Special discount tours for older sisters, stepsisters, stepmothers, wicked witches, crones, hags, princesses who have kissed frogs without realizing what they were getting into, etc. (103)

How delightful, to imagine a group of carefree crones or squad of stepsisters travelling the countryside together under Gerda's expert guidance, released from the confines of their fictional roles, unburdened by the judgement of storyteller, critic and reader alike. As with the Donoghue story, the collaborative dynamic that forms between Gerda and the Snow Queen is predicated neither on friendship nor another type of personal bond, but is instead a working relationship of mutual benefit to both parties — not to mention the host of other female characters who will enjoy the services their travel business provides.

As well as being employed to generate female friendships, collaborations and communities within re-visioned stories, inversion proves a useful strategy to scrutinise mother-daughter relationships and to cast these often fraught fairy-tale bonds in a more nuanced light. While the creation of a positive relationship between the two stepsisters in Slatter's "The Juniper Tree" has already been noted, an equally important concern is the maternal bonds that are tested, broken and rebuilt through the course of the retelling. Although we only ever know Second Wife as just that, her subordinate status deemed to be synonymous with her name, she is nevertheless presented in a more sympathetic manner than most fairy-tale stepmothers. The presence of a stepson in the hypotext provides a motive for murder based on a need for financial security; his replacement with a stepdaughter necessitates a massaging of this reasoning, opening the character of Second Wife to greater complexity. Slatter thus assures us that "Second Wife loved her daughter with all her heart and vowed she would love her stepdaughter just as well" ("Juniper" 97) but despite these good intentions, her heart is eventually turned by the preference she believes her husband displays for his own child. After killing Simah, Second Wife displays signs of regret and when her stepdaughter returns as a bird, it is the creature's song that pierces her heart and allows her genuine remorse to flow free, revealing "the empty place where Simah could have resided had jealousy not taken hold"

(101). The bird also feeds Second Wife a juniper berry, the consumption of which results in the magical pregnancy that ultimately delivers Simah back to the world “exactly as she had been on the day before her death” (103). The final movement focuses upon Simah, Marlechina and Second Wife — now the birth mother to *both* girls — and their fleeting moment of reconciliation before Second Wife is pulled beneath the juniper tree, presumably to join Simah’s first mother in her unearthly vigil. This is not a cruel punishment meted out in standard fairy-tale fashion, it is important to emphasise. Second Wife is drawn knowingly, perhaps even willingly, down “to rest” and before she does, her last words are an instruction to her first daughter that contain, finally and wholly, an acceptance of her second: “Take care of your *sister*, Marlechina.” (103; emphasis mine).

The reconciliation between mother and daughters is also a major theme of another of Slatter’s re-visions, “The Bone Mother” (2010), in which the hostile dynamic between Baba Yaga and Vasilissa in the Russian fairy tale is inverted through the reinvention of their relationship as one of estranged grandmother and granddaughter. Slatter also makes explicit what may only be inferred from the hypotext, that a magical doll gifted to Vasilissa by her dying mother, Shura, is actually the form taken by the woman after her death. Although “The Bone Mother” begins with the familiar wicked stepmother who attempts to send Vasilissa into Baba Yaga’s forest and thus to her doom, the story rapidly centres around its maiden–mother–crone triad and the trials that lead ultimately to their reconciliation. The relationships are not without friction, but it is the genuine love that develops between Vasilissa and Baba Yaga, and an understanding of one another mediated in no small part by Shura, that allows for a satisfying resolution to both the intergenerational conflict and the story itself. In constructing these redemptive relationships, Slatter fleshes out the character of Baba Yaga, presenting us with a deathless crone who spends her days travelling about in her mortar helping those in need.

Although she is seldom thanked for it, she “heals when she can and, when she cannot, ushers others along their path, easing suffering, tempering fear” (“Bone” 135) among her often female clientele. It should be noted that the narrative climax of “The Bone Mother” hinges on an act of betrayal and deceit by a fearful mother whose sick child Baba Yaga has recently saved, demonstrating that the development of positive and satisfying relationships among women does not require a false utopia wherein *all* women respect and assist one another at all times. There is plenty of room in our tales still for female antipathy.

As previously noted, the inversion of the familiar antagonism between Snow White and her stepmother is the focus of Murphy’s revisionist efforts in “The True Story”. Presented in first person and suffused with the calmness of retrospect, the narrative retells the famous story from the Queen’s point of view. There is a sense of the testimonial in her account — framed by its very title as being the more truthful one — as well as a weary resignation. This tale, she knows, will not prevail over that disseminated by the “storytellers” who she declares from the outset to be untrustworthy “liars” (278). She is a stepmother, after all, and “in the storytellers’ tales, stepmothers are often wicked” (280-1). In Murphy’s tale, however, the young queen dotes on Snow White, teaching her to read and write, giving her lessons in music and embroidery, and making up stories to tell her of princesses who are “clever and kind and bold and strong — as well as beautiful” (282). The rotting core of this retelling is in fact Snow White’s father the King, who remarried for power and resources and whose erotic cravings skew towards the terribly young and close to home. Once confronted with the abuse her seven-year-old stepdaughter has newly begun to endure — via a cleverly mundane use of a mirror’s reflection — the queen acts quickly to secure her safety. Throughout the text, Snow White is referred to as “the child” or “the princess”, with the definite article serving to

keep a subtle but enduring distance in the queen's testimony, despite the clear affection to which she otherwise attests. However, at the moment she discovers the girl in peril — and only in this moment — she verbally claims her as “my daughter” (284). It is a powerful scene, underscoring the loving familial relationship that Murphy imagines might exist between these two iconic female adversaries.

In addition, the inversion strategy at work in “The True Story” allows for pointed commentary on the hypotext itself with its emphasis on female rivalry over more caring female relationships. The queen again criticises the storytellers, who can be read as coded references to the Brothers Grimm, and who “cannot imagine a king lusting after his daughter — but ... can imagine a wicked queen killing a child for jealousy” (287).

Women cannot be trusted with power, their patriarchal stories tell us, and an aging beauty is the most dangerous of monsters. The queen also reserves a portion of reproach for those who receive these narratives with too much credulity:

Don't they ever wonder, in all the times they hear about the evil queen, what the king was doing while the queen was sending the princess away and working her terrible spells? If the king was so good and the queen was so evil, why wasn't the king protecting his daughter? (287)

Such questions have indeed bothered me in recent years, and the culpability of fairy-tale fathers is a minor theme I explore in “Burnt Sugar”, “After Midnight” and my own re-visioning of Snow White, “Triquetra”. Certainly, creative writers such as Murphy and myself are not alone in this concern. Earlier variants of “Snow White” describe the jealous queen as being the child's natural mother and/or implicate the king in his wife's efforts to despatch her daughter (Stone; Tatar *Hard*). The gradual expulsion of the theme of incest from the fairy-tale tradition, and the amelioration of the “unlawful love” (Warner *From* 347) that remains in the canon, have also been noted, as has the clear separation between tales of lustful fathers and those of jealous (step)mothers even though,

as Maria Tatar points out, “the father’s desire for his daughter . . . furnishes a powerful motive for a stepmother’s jealous rages and unnatural deeds” (*Hard* 150). By replacing the toxic relationships in such stories with an older woman who is protective of her (step)daughter, inversion enables a finer focus on the mechanisms of patriarchy, which too often ensnare and endanger them both. There are, however, potential consequences to employing such reversals as a revisionist strategy, as Harries points out. While they can “illuminate the patriarchal, sexist systems that lie beneath most classic fairy tales . . . these simplistic reversals merely redistribute guilt and responsibility — and leave the existing punitive system of values more or less unchanged” (100). Snow White’s stepmother in “True Story” is exonerated, for example, but her father is now an imminent threat to her wellbeing. The polarised nature of the tale itself, with its narrative insistence on a clear-cut villain, remains unchallenged.

My own research and creative work are primarily concerned with collaborative relationships among women that are neither sexual nor romantic, with the first plateau of this thesis arguing that friendship and other platonic female bonds are poorly represented and/or undervalued within a culture that privileges sexual activity as “the marker of significance in relationships” (Bertram 631) and thus may be easily overshadowed. Nevertheless, it would be disingenuous to leave unacknowledged the queer relationships that are either implied or explicitly portrayed in re-visioned fairy tales that increase the numbers of girls and women in their narratives with the aim of developing positive bonds between them. To explore but one example, when gender inversion is used by Francesca Lia Block in “Charm” (2000) — a story from her collection of re-visioned fairy tales, *The Rose and the Beast* — it both establishes a vital female friendship and initiates a queer romance. Set in contemporary Los Angeles, this reworking of “Sleeping Beauty” centres around Rev, an isolated young woman addicted to heroin after an abusive childhood

during which her adoptive parents involved her in the making of child pornography.

Female beauty, and the attendant fears and (female) jealousies it is presumed to provoke, is imagined by Rev as the primary source of her misfortunes:

Was the curse that she was born too beautiful? Had it caused her real parents to abandon her, fearful of the length of lash, the plush of lip in such a young face? Was it the reason the men with cameras had sucked away her soul in little sips, because any form that lovely must remain soulless so as not to stun them impotent? Was it what made Old-Woman-Heroin's face split into a jealous leer as she beckoned Rev up to the attic and stabbed her with the needle that first time? (79-80)

Block reverses the gender of the usual charming prince and instead presents us with Miss Charm, an actress who rescues Rev from gang-rape during a party at her villa. Charm ejects the men from her home and assists Rev in cleaning up — literally at first, preparing an oil-scented bath with “candles that were arranged around the tub like torches along the ramparts of a castle” (83-4); then figuratively, providing her with food and a safe haven and allowing her to sleep “for days and days” (89), sweating and dreaming as she weans herself off heroin. It is only after Rev awakens from her withdrawal process that Charm reveals her true identity as a friend Rev remembers only vaguely from childhood, a relationship once so vital as to be consecrated with a blood-sister pact. An old photograph of the two girls, naked and shackled together, restores to Rev not only the memories of abuse she has been trying to escape, but the wonder and salvation that female friendship (if not more) can provide in an otherwise hellish existence. As with the most popular versions of “Sleeping Beauty”, the tale ends in a kiss — this time given and received in full consciousness and with enthusiastic consent — that metaphorically brings Rev back to her waking, hopeful, drug-free self:

When Charm kissed her, Rev felt as if all the fierce blossoms were shuddering open. The castle was opening. She felt as if the other woman were breathing into her body something long lost and almost forgotten. It

was, she knew, the only drug either of them would need now. (97)

The friendship begun in girlhood has bloomed into the beginnings of a romantic relationship between the two young women, forged through shared trauma and the experiences of helping one another in times of darkest need. Block at once challenges the heteronormativity of traditional fairy tales and continues the “demythologising business” (Carter “Notes” 71) of Angela Carter, re-visioning what some feminists have regarded as “the most passive and repellent fairy-tale heroine of all” (Tatar “Show” 142) by restoring her agency and providing her with a female friend and potential lover that she consciously chooses, rather than a male rescuer who imposes both his gaze and his will upon her sleeping body. Although few of the female relationships within Block’s collection end on similar notes of optimism, her re-visionary work does consistently endeavour to fill in the “silences that surround the relationships of women ... in familiar fairy tale narratives” (Marshall 224).

While I have identified inversion as being a key strategy that authors of re-visioned fairy tales commonly employ to create fresh instances of collaboration and friendship among women and/or to re-imagine traditionally antagonistic relationships between female characters, it is not one that I have found reliably useful in my own creative work. The primary reason for this lies in the restrictions I placed upon myself in writing the novelettes that comprise “Never Afters”. As my intention was to compose sequels to well-known fairy tales, I was reluctant to significantly alter the plots, characters or established relationship dynamics in a hypotext that would need to serve as a familiar backstory for readers.²¹ That said, in “By the Moon’s Good Grace”, I inverted both the archetypal gender of the wolf and his predatory relationship with Red Riding Hood

²¹ My only significant departure from this self-imposed restriction occurred in “The New Wife”, a re-vision of “Bluebeard”, which will be discussed later in this plateau.

(Beckett) to give the girl an aunt more concerned with the initiation of her young niece into a loving, lupine family. Inversion was also used in “Braid” to re-interpret the relationship between Zel’s birth-mother and Gothel as being one of female cooperation, as the theft of a baby over her mother’s craving for salad greens would likely disengage the necessary sympathy I wanted my readers to feel towards Gothel, and neither did I want the young woman to be such an awful mother that taking the child from her might be considered a blessing. What I needed was an unwanted pregnancy and a new mother seeking to give up her daughter for adoption, a common enough occurrence in any age, surely, but not one that I thought could be overtly connected to the “Rapunzel” hypotext. Although I had mapped out the rough structure of “Braid” early in my research, I owe a debt of gratitude to “A Difference in the Dose” by Marina Warner²² and the exegetical paper that accompanied it for supplying a more precise *raison d’être* for my Gothel’s adoption of her daughter. Not only did Warner’s work remind me that an antecedent tale by Giambattista Basile specified parsley as the much-craved herb, but she noted that parsley could be used as an abortifacient (“After” 334). cursory Google searches for “parsley” and “miscarriage” return numerous websites of varying degrees of reliability, but support the idea that — for good or ill — parsley is popularly perceived as a natural albeit dangerous (Ciganda and Laborde) way to miscarry an unwanted pregnancy, and my connection thus presented itself in much the same way it had presented itself to Warner when considering her own retelling:

The expectant mother in the fairy tale, who craves a certain herb from the witch, might be trespassing in the garden of a cunning woman expert in such matters and, when discovered, might indeed agree instead to hand over the baby at birth. (335)

²² This short story will be discussed further in the “Expansion” section of this plateau.

As well as allowing an act of mutually beneficial cooperation between Gothel and the woman who gave birth to Zel to sit at the very inception of her life story, this discovery propelled me towards a more complex matrilineal world in which women's reproductive rights and healthcare, along with women's right to administer healthcare, hang in the balance (so to speak). In writing the majority of my re-visionary work for "Never Afters", however, I was less interested overall in recasting the particulars of my hypotexts via strategies of inversion and more concerned with ensuring that the subsequent lives of their protagonists included the possibility of female friendship and collaboration.

2. Insertion/Deletion

The insertion of new female characters into a re-visioned fairy tale is another recurrent strategy used by authors to fill out an often sparse female cast and so construct relationships among girls and women where previously there were none. Where inversion alters either the gender of hypotextual characters or the dynamics between them, the strategy of insertion leaves existing characters in situ and instead adds new players to the narrative. Sisters, mothers or aunts may appear where previously there were none — or none living at least — or newly minted female friends and advisors might enter the re-visioned tale to offer support, comfort or wise counsel. Less frequently employed is the mirror strategy of deletion, whereby characters are removed from a narrative without being replaced. Eliminating the jealous stepsisters and stepmother from the Cinderella equation, for example, exposes fertile ground for developing the relationship between a poor serving girl and the magical godmother who seeks to raise her from the ashes. Authors may employ insertion and deletion simultaneously within a story, increasing the cast of female characters as well as sharpening the narrative focus upon their relationships and interactions. This section discusses several re-visioned fairy tales that showcase the

use of these strategies, either separately or in tandem, to analyse the representation of female friendship and collaboration that results.

In her novella “Burning Girls” (2013), Veronica Schanoes takes the hypotext “Rumpelstiltskin” and stretches it across a much longer narrative that charts the trials of two Jewish sisters who leave their hostile homeland of Poland in the late nineteenth century for the promise of a safer life in America.²³ The younger sister, Shayna, inhabits the role of the girl instructed to spin gold from straw — here, she will be required to make an impossible number of shirtwaists in a single night — but it is Deborah, her elder and a clear insertion into the original framework, who is both protagonist and point of focalisation. Additional female characters have also been inserted into the story: the sisters’ grandmother, a witch and wisewoman who apprentices Deborah in the arts of magic and healing; Yetta, Deborah’s best friend in childhood; Ruthie, the roommate, political ally and possible lover Deborah finds in the factory; and the numerous women, both in Poland and America, who come seeking help and advice for their troubles. While the miller’s daughter in “Rumpelstiltskin” is wholly isolated without even a hint of female support, Schanoes uses the strategy of insertion to create a vibrant and complex network of girls and women who befriend, assist and defend one another, even amid the interpersonal conflicts that inevitably arise. By contrast, none of the antagonists in “Burning Girls” can be classed as insertions: the braggart miller role maps to Johnny Fein, a drug dealer, pimp and all-round “dangerous man to know” with whom Shayna becomes naively involved; the king becomes one of his friends with whom he has “wagered more money than [Shayna’s] life is worth”. Intriguingly, Rumpelstiltskin

²³ The first two thirds of this novella provides a prequel of sorts to the “Rumpelstiltskin” tale and so it can also be viewed as employing the strategy of expansion that will be discussed later in this plateau. I am focusing on the strategy of insertion here due to the importance of the additional female characters in the final act of the novella that essentially re-vision “Rumpelstiltskin” as its primary narrative.

himself is reimagined as a *lilit*, a female demon with a taste for baby-snatching who, having been thwarted once by the young Deborah, follows the sisters from the Old Country to the new. The gender inversion produces a perverse echo of the female collaboration that otherwise permeates the story: a fearsome but kindly old woman who arrives to assist a distraught girl in her hours of greatest need, only to demand the most reprehensible of payments.

Unlike the miller's daughter left to fend for herself in the aftermath, Shayna has Deborah and Ruthie to turn to. Although their relationship has been strained near to breaking over Deborah's disapproval of Johnny Fein, the older sister is quick to lay her grievances aside when an obviously distressed Shayna asks for help:

“Shayna *maedele*,” I said. “Baby girl, what has happened to you?”

She waved her hands and sat down at the table, her head bent.

“I've done a terrible thing, big sister.”

“Nothing so terrible that I cannot solve it,” I said. I didn't have the heart to give her the tongue-lashing she deserved.

The immediate, unthinking intimacy to which both young women revert when faced with undeniable trouble is affecting, even when the tension between them bubbles close to the surface. While it often takes Ruthie's quiet pragmatism and skills in mediation to bridge the rough waters between them, the powerful if complicated love that Deborah and Shayna have for each other is never in question. Significantly, it is the collaborative action of all three women that ultimately prevents the *lilit* from claiming Yael, Shayna's infant daughter. Ruthie employs stage tears and flattery — an arguably 'feminine' arsenal — to buy them necessary time. Deborah, at great physical cost, uses ritualised magic to secure the demon's secret name. And Shayna weaponises her anger, directing it at last

towards a worthy target: the devious creature that would dare to steal her child.

Collaboration, of course, is not always enough to ensure a woman's survival, and it is Deborah's misguided conviction that the *lilit* has been defeated and banished for good that ushers in the novella's deeply tragic conclusion. Schanoes leaves us with a final image, inspired by the very real tragedy of the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, that all too poignantly echoes the trio's doomed efforts:

Three women stood on another window ledge together. They linked arms, closed their eyes, and jumped, and their aim was good, but they tore right through the bottom of the safety net, and the firemen holding it were splattered with blood.

While Shayna's daughter has been saved, Shayna perishes in the inferno ignited by the vengeful *lilit* — along with scores of innocent women. Such a negative outcome should not be read as the result of using insertion as a strategy. Indeed, none of the key strategies discussed in this plateau are on their own a solution to all the problems that may beset women in fairy tales, nor do they guarantee optimistic endings to their stories. Insertion, as with the other strategies, is simply a mechanism by which to circumvent female isolation, explore positive female relationships, and/or imagine collaborative female communities. Other narrative forces remain in play, such as the social critique with which Schanoes infuses "Burning Girls", and far from dismissing the efficacy of female collaboration, the novella's finale is more an indictment of a capitalist patriarchy that devalues women's work, women's bodies and women's safety.

However, by introducing fresh female collaboration into a story, insertion may assist in driving the narrative to a triumphant conclusion, as demonstrated by two re-visited fairy tales by Jane Yolen and Cate Kennedy, both written in the realist mode. Yolen's "Snow in Summer" (2011) is a retelling of "Snow White" set in a small 1940s American town and keeps intact the bones of the hypotext — a dead mother, a jealous

stepmother and oblivious father, a plot to kill the beautiful daughter, and even seven hospitable dwarves — but also inserts the friendly and forthright Miss Nancy who, as the girl’s mother’s closest friend, is suspicious of her replacement right from the start. It is Miss Nancy who regularly gives Snow/Summer “a kind word, sweet pop, and a magic story when [she] was blue” (8) as well as offering pragmatic advice, including where a girl should kick a man when he’s forcing himself upon her in the deep woods. The most significant narrative re-vision to the tale comes as Snow/Summer remembers not only the happy-ever-after endings of the stories Miss Nancy told her, but also the woman’s constant coda — “Still, you must make your own happiness, Summer dear” (12) — and, taking the words to heart, kills her ill-intentioned stepmother with a frying pan. This act ensures not only her own safety and happiness, she tells the reader, but that of Miss Nancy as well, who promptly marries Snow/Summer’s serial monogamist father. Told with deadpan humour and more than one wink to readers familiar with the hypotext, “Snow in Summer” gives testament to the efficacy of female collaboration. Good things happen when girls and women choose to support one another, Yolen reminds the reader — except, of course, to those women who don’t.

Kennedy, when asked to contribute to an anthology of retold fairy tales, tells how she “wanted to write about contemporary peril, and the guises a wolf might come in, and who, in spite of everything, might be keeping watch” (“Afterward” 47) and found “The Wolf and the Seven Young Kids”, collected by Grimm, to be a suitable springboard. The resulting novella, “Seventy-Two Derwents” (2011), takes the form of a handwritten journal kept by Tyler at the behest of her grade-six teacher, Mrs Carlyle. It is via this document that Mrs Carlyle comes to learn of Tyler’s troubled home life: her single, impoverished mother whose own trauma and insecurities compromise her maternal instincts; and Shane, a paroled drug addict and latest in a long line of bad choices her

mother has made, a man with sexual designs on the prepubescent girl into whose house he has inveigled himself. Kennedy inserts into her story a network of girls and women who support Tyler and ultimately come to her rescue. Aunt Jacinta sends Tyler her phone number with a pointed message to ring if she ever needs help “*for anything at all*” (17). Her teenage sister Ellie, clearly identifying Shane’s predatory nature but feeling unable to intervene, does her best to minimise the risk, often sharing a bed with her younger sister and procuring a phone so Tyler can “text [Ellie] at school if anything goes wrong” (27). It is Mrs Carlyle, however, who sets the final resolution in motion. Having taken the girl under her wing and earned her trust, the teacher is able to act on pertinent events reported in Tyler’s journal in an effort to remove the threat to her safety.

The novella might have concluded here, with a beloved and attentive teacher stepping into the maternal breach, but Kennedy brings her story back to the ending of the hypotext and in so doing pushes the benefits of female collaboration further still. While Mrs Carlyle’s actions land Shane in trouble with the authorities, they also infuriate the man, sending him in search of the girl who “ran and told her fucken teacher” (39). The ensuing confrontation threatens not only Tyler but also Ellie, who steps valiantly into harm’s way to protect her younger sister, and it is at this moment that their mother rises up to slay the wolf with her good pair of sewing scissors. For a woman who has spent the bulk of the narrative in discord with her daughters, demoralised by her controlling boyfriend, and convinced of her own worthlessness, this final action is nothing less than heroic. Moreover, it is an action that might not have been possible without an earlier precedent for female collaboration being set for her. Chronically unemployed, Tyler’s mother finds herself enrolled in a Centrelink-run small business program, sewing designer plush toys to sell on consignment in a local store. With her anxiety over the first order palpable, her daughters come to her aid, Tyler helping to make half the toys and Ellie

coming up with a finishing touch — white dots in otherwise black eyes to lend them a heart-warming appearance. Moreover, the genuine enthusiasm later shown for the Glamour Plushies by the woman who sells them, validated by the cash payment Tyler’s mother receives for her handiwork, instils in her a renewed sense of confidence, pride and self-worth. Without prompting, she shares the proceeds with Tyler, a gesture that acknowledges the vital contribution of her daughter and begins to repair the fragile bond between them. The restorative success of the Plushies project is referenced in the climactic scene:

Someone had come along and put the white dots into her eyes and they were bright as black glittering glass, and her mouth was like the line you cut in the felt, one hard snip straight across the pattern, across the exact right spot. (42-3)

As with Yolen’s “Snow in Summer”, the new female characters inserted into Kennedy’s re-visioning of “The Wolf and the Seven Young Kids” allow important collaborative relationships to flourish, benefitting not only the story’s protagonist but other girls and women in her life as well. Perhaps most significantly, none of these collaborations on its own is presented as the solution to the danger Tyler faces, nor is any single woman tasked with sole responsibility for her rescue. Instead they each make their own contributions, working together and alone, and it is the cumulative effect of these efforts that produces a successful outcome. Not only does the insertion of female characters undermine the notion that isolation need be upheld as a governing principle of the fairy-tale genre (Lüthi), but it also adds to the complexity and relevancy of revisionist works and lends verisimilitude to those told in the realist mode. No woman need stand alone to triumph against adversity, such contemporary stories argue — and indeed, without magic or other fantastical means, perhaps no single woman can. While female collaboration does not automatically result in female victory, as evidenced by the fate of Shayna in “Burning

Girls”, women who help one another greatly increase the odds of mutual success.

Rather than insert new characters into a received narrative, an author may instead choose to pare down the existing cast via the strategy of deletion, with “The Tale of the Shoe” (1993) by Donoghue providing a striking illustration of the effects a dramatic erasure can produce. Largely thanks to the films of Disney and their prolific spin-offs and merchandising, “Cinderella” is among the most popular and well-known fairy tales in contemporary Western culture, with the cruel stepmother and ugly stepsisters seemingly intrinsic elements. By removing these characters wholesale — “Nobody made me do the things I did, nobody scolded me, nobody punished me but me” (2) — Donoghue shifts the focus away from the theme of female rivalry that has dominated this tale for so long, and in its place creates an intimate and complex portrayal of what Martin describes as a non-hierarchical generational collaboration that allows “women to learn and grow through their experiences with other women” (8). This Cinderella is lifted from the isolation and abject misery she has imposed upon herself by the sudden appearance of a stranger — an older woman, once her deceased mother’s friend, who now steps into the role of the (non-magical) Fairy Godmother. Ensnared both by the mechanics of her hypotext and by her own internalised expectations of what “girls are meant to ask for” (3), however, the narrator goes through the “clockwork” (6) motions of gowns and balls and princes in frantic search of a prescribed future she is certain will make her fortune. The older woman, by contrast, is a study in the benefits of patience, assisting the girl in her quest while waiting for her to arrive at her own realisation of the other options available to her. Donoghue concludes with an intimate metaphor that captures their burgeoning romance: “So then she took me home, or I took her home, or we were both somehow taken to the closest thing” (8). This blurring of subject and object, along with the inconclusiveness of who is taking who where and what “home” might mean to each of them, echoes the

permeable ego boundaries theorised by Judith Jordan in her study of feminine subjectivities and the relational self, and suggests that the collaborative relationship the women have thus far enjoyed will continue as their romantic attachment develops.

Likewise, in “The Tale of the Needle” (1993), Donoghue removes from “Sleeping Beauty” the fairies who both bless and curse the royal baby, and instead focuses her re-visioned story around a princess who has spent her young life so cossetted that she knows nothing of hunger, pain, sorrow or death — until she is scratched by a kitten. The animal’s resultant drowning, ordered by her overprotective parents, sparks rage and rebellion. The only stories she has ever been told are “family stories, and they [are] all the one story” — her history and future at once mapped out in a “dusty tapestry” of marriages, children and happily-ever-afters (172). It is the old woman who sits spinning in a secret room who ultimately tells the princess the truth, despite clearly having been exiled for previous efforts: “they’ve tried to stop me teaching any of the things I know. Now they’re trying to prevent you from learning all the things you don’t” (178). She invites the princess to spin and rocks with laughter when the girl inevitably pricks her finger. Far from bringing about one hundred years of slumber, the injury instead wakes the princess from her life of cushioned ignorance and sets her on the path of knowledge, with the old woman as her guide. It is a striking narrative reversal and one that again argues for the importance of female mentorship. Moreover, the deletions in both “The Tale of the Shoe” and “The Tale of the Needle” allow Donoghue, as Keridwen N. Luis argues of *Kissing the Witch* as a whole, to “unravel these stories from the roots, and weave them anew, [revealing] the restrictions of the plot itself” (172). With formerly key antagonists removed, rather than inversed, the traditional narrative of the hypotext is directly challenged, inviting the reader to question plots previously presented as the inevitable result of human (female) nature.

In some re-visioned fairy tales, the strategies of insertion and deletion are employed simultaneously to create closer female connections within a once familiar narrative. Margo Lanagan, for example, takes a cue from older, more ribald versions of “Little Red Riding Hood” (*Zipes Trials*) to create her own bawdy rendition, “Titty Anne and the Very, Very Hairy Man” (2012), in which the protagonist is a young wolf-girl from a family of nine similarly lupine children. Under the gentle guidance of their mother, her sisters and brothers are tasked with shaving Titty Anne’s pelt so that she might pass as a nine-year-old human when taking a basket of cakes and cream to the grandmother, and the ensuing scene is a delightfully humorous portrayal of the close-knit collaborative relationships that exist between them. In addition to this insertion of a familial pack, Lanagan deletes the woodcutter/huntsman character who has become an intrinsic element in the popular tale since the version presented by Grimm. Without this traditionally male saviour, it falls to the irritable but pragmatic grandmother (and wisewoman) to follow of the stench of the bzo who has eaten her granddaughter and deftly slice open his stomach. It isn’t only the rescue of Titty Anne, however, that bonds these two characters so firmly by the end of the story. As the girl notices the beginning of her first menses, it is her grandmother who brusquely clears up any confusion over the origin of the blood. The older woman has long been at odds with her daughter-in-law’s family — “the grandmother was their father’s mother, and blamed their mother somehow for his dying. She couldn’t abide the sight of all his children, the Motherness of them mixed in with her son” (103) — but sharing in this female rite of passage breaks down what remains of her resistance. In another first, Titty Anne is invited to follow her grandmother back home for tea and cakes and the reader is left with the satisfying impression that they have witnessed an initiation of sorts, the healing of a rift, and the seeding of a new iteration of generational collaboration.

In “Little Radish” (2008), Slatter likewise uses both insertion and deletion to imbue the tale of “Rapunzel” with more positive and supportive relationships between women. The canonical Gothel is no more, and with her goes a stolen baby and a girl imprisoned against her will. Instead we have Little Radish, the Rapunzel analogue, who grows up with a family that fails to understand her longing for “utter solitude” (33) and who dreams of finding a tower in which she might closet herself away from the world. Inserted into this narrative vacuum is the wise woman Sybille²⁴, who tells the girl of an invisible tower, instructs her in the magic needed to access it, and provides her with animal familiars to keep her company should her seclusion prove too lonely. It is Sybille who helps deliver the girl’s stillborn baby and who counsels and comforts her through the grief that follows, offering a caution against continued isolation: “People ... were not meant to be alone. Men and women, women and women, men and men, all should find each other. Solitude was for those broken beyond repair” (41). She herself is not, as Little Radish and likely the reader have assumed, “an outcast, an old witch with no love nor need for it” (41) but instead is only recently widowed after a marriage of forty years, and a mother to sons who regularly visit. Thus provided with an alternative model for possible happiness, the girl departs the tower with her deceased child on a mission to reunite with her prince. As in “Seventy-Two Derwents”, however, this re-vision does not thrust the weight of collaboration onto a single pair of female shoulders and Sybille, having played her part, withdraws from the narrative and returns to her own life. In her stead, Slatter inserts a second female character to aid Little Radish, a village woman who not only

²⁴ Her name recalls the oracles of the ancient world who were both respected and feared for their prophetic abilities. Although it might be tempting to argue that Sybille is simply an inversion of Gothel, rather than the two characters demonstrating the strategies of insertion/deletion, their actions and roles in the narrative are significantly different. While it is possible that the wise, helpful and nurturing Sybille might inhabit the maternal role played by Gothel, she neither steals/acquires/adopts the infant Rapunzel nor later installs her in the tower — two actions indivisible from the hypotextual Gothel character.

knows of the prince and where he may be found, but offers additional assistance in the form of travel and a safe place to spend the night. Once again, we see an (albeit smaller) network of women providing vital and unquestioning support for a troubled female protagonist, actions which ensure an optimistic ending for the girl and her narrative both.

In keeping with my creative intention to write re-visioned fairy tales that are largely sequels to the hypotexts upon which they are grafted, I largely eschewed insertion/deletion along with inversion as a strategy to bring about female collaboration in my own stories. As I define it, insertion refers to new characters created and deposited largely into the narrative time-frame of the hypotext itself, rather than into narratives that expand or extrapolate from it. There was, however, one significant exception. Although primarily a sequel to Perrault's "Bluebeard", I chose to begin "The New Wife" slightly before the hypotext ends for the specific purpose of inserting the wraith-wives into the narrative. The New Wife's sister, Anne, was not so much deleted from the narrative as transported — away from Bluebeard's house where she acted as lookout in the hypotext and back to her own home. This allowed me to establish a potential coalition of women whose shared experience of domestic violence and entrapment leads them to embody the type of sororophobia theorised by Michie. Through their words and actions, the wives demonstrate "both the desire for and the recoil from identification with other women" (Michie 9) as they find themselves in constant negotiation of place and position within the common household. Having internalised some of the more misogynistic readings of their situation (Lewis 197-246; Zipes *Why* 172), the wraith-wives at first show no interest in aiding the New Wife in her plight. Ultimately, however, the defeat of their sadistic husband is only made possible via the pragmatic alliance of all the women — including the servant girl, Suzette, another insert into the hypotext. While it cannot be claimed that any of the women in "The New Wife" would deem each other friends by the end of the

story, the story instead acknowledges the potential benefits of neutrality:

We are not to be friends, then, Charlotte and myself, nor enemies neither — and I find myself strangely relieved. There is a weightlessness in speaking the truth precisely as one wishes, in casting aside all mannered artifice and guile. A cruelty perhaps, if one chooses to hear it, but also a kindness. (129)

“The New Wife” argues that the ties and loyalties of friendship, although valuable, should not be necessary in order for women to recognise a common problem and join together to solve it for the common good. Insertion, in this case, proved a fertile strategy to quickly create a multitude of female characters within my re-vision, all of them sharing a morbid connection that would be instantly understood by the reader.

3. Expansion

Expansion involves the exploration of a hypotext significantly beyond the temporal confines of its original narrative and is employed in the creation of sequels or prequels to existing fairy tales, or in their immediate continuation. By expanding the hypotext in this manner, new female characters and relationships that are neither present nor implied in the source tale may be introduced. Alternatively, the relationships between existing female characters, particularly if acrimonious, may be further explored and developed within a different temporal location to the hypotext, thus providing an opportunity for reconciliation, collaboration, or even the formation of lasting friendships. Revisionist authors such as myself use the strategy of expansion to approach a well-known fairy tale as a history of sorts, choosing to write a sequel that expands the story beyond its “classic, misleading ‘happily ever after’” and so give its characters “a life beyond the usual contours of fairy-tale romance” (Harries 101). In addition to enabling the introduction of new female characters into the later (or former) life of a fairy-tale girl, or allowing for

existing relationships to evolve over time, expansion also opens the door to a metatextual critique and re-visioning of the hypotext itself. Such a strategy, as Harries observes, enables authors to “pry the old stories open, revealing their inadequacies and their silences” (101). New characters in expanded narratives are materially different from those created using the aforementioned strategy of insertion. Whereas insertion introduces previously unknown characters to the existing plotline of a fairy tale, expansion constructs a fresh narrative that springs from but does not necessarily retell its hypotext, and thus any new characters should be considered native to this text rather than inserted into it. This section discusses the ways in which expansion may be applied as a revisionist strategy in order to frame the hypotext as a history that may be retrospectively reconsidered by those who lived it, to explore generational collaboration and the evolution of hypotextual relationships, to create new instances of collaboration among women, and to imply a continuation of female stories beyond their narrative bounds.

In presenting “Conversations with the Sea Witch” (2019) as a sequel set several decades after the events of “The Little Mermaid”, Theodora Goss not only recasts the hypotext via a lens of considered retrospection, but provides a vivid portrait of friendship between two female elders — a demographic often poorly represented, especially in fairy tales (Henneberg). The prince in this re-visioning has married his oceanic rescuer, bestowing upon her the name of Melusine. Now an aged queen dowager, Melusine has fond memories of life beneath the sea and upon the land, of a royal marriage that provided her with children and grandchildren, and of all her years as “wife, mother, widow” (“Conversations” 203). The primary focus of the story, however, is the caring and respectful relationship that has evolved between Melusine and the sea witch who took her song when she was a girl, and with whom she now spends each afternoon engaged in meaningful conversation. With so much time having passed, these former adversaries

have become “old friends” (203) and the reader is warned not to pity these “[t]wo old women ... whom the world has left behind... They get more enjoyment out of these talks than you can imagine” (200-1). Importantly, their friendship is more than just talk. The sea witch brings Melusine poultices for her sore throat; the queen dowager provides a sympathetic ear for her companion’s confession of love and magic gone wrong. So evident is the closeness of their bond that, when Melusine reveals a suspicion that her youngest granddaughter, a child born with webbed fingers and a fascination with water, will one day find the sea witch and ask to be returned to the ocean, the reader is confident it will be a wish met with kindness and generosity. By expanding upon the hypotext, Goss is able to poignantly construct a rarity in the fairy-tale genre: a collaborative relationship between two older women who have each lived the truism that “we all make difficult choices” (202) and who have found wisdom, happiness and satisfaction in the markedly different fruits their decisions have borne.

The retrospective lens is one I have applied to most of my creative work in “Never Afters” in order to recast the hypotexts in varying degrees and to highlight the importance of female knowledge, experience and a critical understanding of both. With the exception of “By the Moon’s Good Grace” and “The New Wife”, the novelettes are all set some years or even decades after the events of their hypotexts and thus their protagonists have had ample opportunity to consider their past life and reinterpret their childhood or adolescence through adult eyes and experience. In “Braid”, Zel is able to reconcile her complicated relationship with Gothel, finding and extending forgiveness to the woman who both raised and imprisoned her, while Fairest in “Triquetra” has developed an uneasy but strangely affectionate truce with her stepmother that ultimately allows for trust and reconciliation between the two women. “Burnt Sugar” most prominently underscores the importance of a retrospective critical lens, holding it to be an essential element in Gretel’s

decision to collaborate with rather than defer to the younger version of herself. Had she continued to stand alone at the oven, merely hoping that “*this* time the girl will make a different choice” (69), it seems unlikely that the girl-witch-girl cycle would have been broken. Rather, such an interruption requires Gretel to draw on the strength of her older, wiser self — the self that has known the strength and wisdom of other women and has been shaped by them — in order to stand between the girl and the story that would be told about her. For herself, Gretel makes the choice to live, to resist the persistence of narrative; for the young Gretel, she postpones further decisions until the girl is older. Her promise to keep the Book safe until then is a significant pledge. Gretel does not seek to deny the girl agency or prevent her from gaining knowledge, but is merely delaying this eventuality until the young Gretel is a grown woman, fully cognisant of what she seeks and all the risks it might entail. Only in “After Midnight”, a novelette written as a deliberate foil to the rest of the collection, does retrospect fail its protagonist. Instead of being able to move beyond the trauma of her past, the queen is psychologically frozen and isolated, refusing to set aside her distrust and suspicion of other women and fearful of once more losing her place in the world.

The potential time span between a sequel (or a prequel) and its hypotext allows for the exploration of positive intergenerational relationships, a key theme in several of my novelettes. “By the Moon’s Good Grace” is a story about female kinship, presenting generational collaboration between women in the ritualised passing down of knowledge, and the ways in which older women provide sanctuary and make sacrifices to ensure the future success of daughters and nieces. The protagonist’s mother and aunt Rachel have been estranged, as might be expected when one lives as a woman and the other as a wolf, with their mother’s decision to “live betwixt” (89) so that she might share her time with both daughters likely an ongoing cause of dispute. When grief and danger bring them

together, however, the thread that runs between the two sisters holds firm. The communal needs of the family are of primary importance to wolves, as evidenced by Rachel's immediate reprimand that "we never turn on kin" (93), by the month the girl spends with the wolves and her resulting knowledge that "[n]ot one of us be more important'n any other, and me aunt always gonna put the needs of her pack first" (99), and, most significantly, by the mother's instinctive, unquestioning defence of her daughter when the girl's life is threatened. Generational collaboration in "Braid" comes in the form of the golden hair that once grew from Zel's scalp and which is now permanently imbued with Gothel's magic. It is this sentient braid, in service as Gothel's proxy, that brings Gryff to his beloved in exile, that enables Zel to save the life of Chance by averting Keeper Dorn's otherwise certain death, and that ultimately enacts a brutal vengeance for the murder of Will. The connection that Gothel has maintained between herself and her adopted daughter proves vital even in the final moments of her life: using the last golden hair, Zel is able to stitch up the magic bird and send it on its way to find her own daughter, hoping at last to mend the fracture that has split her family apart for so long. Similarly, the reconciliation between Fairest and her stepmother in "Triquetra" is central to her own survival and that of her daughter. The young queen's crucial decision to at last trust her stepmother rests in part upon the older woman's admission that she is culpable for past events and thus responsible for making reparations:

"But you could have fled at any time!"

"Is that what you think? That I could leave you to the fate I myself had wrought? You, and then your daughter? The mirror held me for so long, so sweetly and so ruthlessly — but the fault was mine. I stood before it. I asked my foolish question. I opened my heart to its hooks."

"Has this been your penance?" The words taste as bitter as they sound.

"No, Fairest, it has been my justice. And it is not yet done." (272)

A reading of the hypotext put forth by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar reinforced the

creative development of “Triquetra”. Putting forwards the argument that “female bonding is extraordinarily difficult in patriarchy”, they identify the magic mirror as being “the patriarchal voice of judgement that rules the queen’s — and every woman’s — self-evaluation” (38) and thus fosters female rivalry. It is an alignment supported by critical and creative writers (Joosen “Feminist”) with some re-visions of the tale dismissing the mirror entirely and instead pointing to Snow White’s father as key instigator (Donoghue “Apple”; Murphy; Yolen “Snow”). While Gilbert and Gubar seem resigned to the expectation that Snow White will remain entangled in patriarchy and so fall victim to the same toxic dynamics that once ensnared her stepmother (42), I was determined to forge an exit strategy for my maiden-mother-crone triad, one that relied on the acknowledgement and forgiveness of past misdeeds, as well as a present-day commitment to trust and cooperation with one another.

Female collaboration in “Never Afters” is also well established outside of familial relationships. In “Triquetra”, Fairest’s albeit unwitting collaboration with Lady Heron is what enables the noblewoman to finally destroy the mirror and put an end to its manipulations. Zel in “Braid” enjoys mutually beneficial relationships with many other women in her world, including her friend Boorma, her sometimes lover Hegg, and the women of the villages with whom her family trades and to whom she offers healthcare. In “Burnt Sugar”, Gretel forms strong bonds with Dagmar and Rezia, women to whom she has initially offered shelter and a means of earning their livelihood, while the uneasy coalition of female characters in “The New Wife” work together to defeat their sadistic, spectral husband and liberate themselves from his house. Even “After Midnight” offers a successful female conspiracy in the rescue and subsequent escape of the pregnant and imprisoned maidservant, despite the refusal of its protagonist to involve herself. Indeed, one of the ongoing narrative arguments of my creative work is that only the combined

efforts of women can provide liberation from the patriarchal structures of power and influence that beset them; it is only trust in each other, despite internalised anxieties and suspicions, that can heal the rifts that keep us trapped in our toxic past.

As with the other strategies discussed in this plateau, however, expansion is not a guaranteed panacea to all the challenges that may beset female characters within a fairy tale, but rather may assist in illuminating potential paths beyond what Harries terms “the persistence of fairy-tale expectations and ‘old notions’” (101). While there is no explicit reconciliation forged between two former female adversaries in “The Difference in the Dose” (2010), Marina Warner’s sequel to “Rapunzel”, the re-visioned tale does ultimately promise reconnection and the healing of old wounds. Bella (Rapunzel), the girl once adopted by wealthy horticulturalist Charis (Gothel) and raised in a New York penthouse, is now mother to ten-year-old Daisy, who has begun to question the absence of a maternal grandmother in her life. Although Bella has had no contact with Charis since her self-imposed exile in Italy with her less-than-princely husband, the woman she continues to think of as her mother “still moves through [her] dreams” (“Difference” 322) and haunts her days. It is Daisy’s unflagging curiosity about her heritage that finally spurs Bella into investigating first the current whereabouts of Charis and then, almost inadvertently, “the other mother in her story ... the one with no name, the one who had given birth to her and then given her away” (326). Warner presents a multi-faceted meditation on the nature(s) of motherhood, engaging the reader’s empathy for women whose desire to have children is biologically denied them, as well as for those who find themselves pregnant with no wish to parent. Here there are no polarised fairy-tale villains — except, perhaps, for the too-controlling Piero — only a constellation of girls and women connected to one another through ties of blood and upbringing, with all the emotional complexities that such relationships can accrue. True to the realist mode in which “The Difference in the Dose”

is written, Warner resists a neat conclusion and instead draws the curtain at the moment before Bella, with Daisy in tow, meets her birth mother for the first time. Nevertheless, there is an undeniable note of optimism to be read in the final image of the figure silhouetted in the doorway, shining a welcome torch to guide her, as yet, unmet daughter and granddaughter safely out of the dark.

Such an inconclusive ending also illustrates another strength of expansion as a revisionist strategy: the act of writing a sequel to a well-known tale not only pries open the old story, but has the potential to set a pattern. If a fairy tale is no longer thought of as neatly closed and cauterised, then its sequel should likewise be considered as no more than a segment in a much larger continuous narrative, inviting still further expansions — if only in the imagination of its readers. Throughout my career, my creative work has favoured open-ended narratives, and “Never Afters” is no different. The immediate threat to the lupine family in “By the Moon’s Good Grace” may be resolved, but the girl’s decision about whether she will be wolf or woman (or both) remains unwritten. “Triquetra” and “The New Wife” both leave their protagonists at the onset of a journey, accompanied by new-found allies, uncertain as to where their lives will lead but at least confident that their futures will be better than their pasts — whereas the protagonist of “After Midnight” is left to her own bleak but ambiguous future as the conspirators she failed to help make their escape. The final note of optimism in “Braid” is struck not by metaphors of travel but rather via Zel’s decision to remain in the village through spring in hopes that Chance may return, and in the understanding of her family’s growing need for a settled home. A desire for home, for the love and security it holds, is also what motivates Gretel at the conclusion of “Burnt Sugar”. The knowledge that she still has a life and a place beyond the expected ending of the Book’s narrative acts as both anchor and compass, and among her parting thoughts are hopes for the future:

More than anything, I wish to see Dagmar again, and Rezia too. I wish to see how tall and strong the babe has grown. I wish to sit in my rocking chair by the window and listen for the creaking of mule carts in the spring.

All these things mean home to me, and I need no trail of breadcrumbs to find them. (72)

Through the expansion of their original hypotexts, the lives of fairy-tale women — along with the lives of their daughters, their granddaughters, and their friends — remain unbounded by the flattening effect of happily ever after. Instead, their stories continue into a future with limitless potential for female collaboration, advancement, and re-vision.

4. Fusion

Less commonly used, but a significant strategy in short fiction nonetheless, is the fusion of two or more fairy tales into a single re-visioned narrative. Fusion allows an author to bring the often isolated female characters from different stories together in the same place and time, establishing new relationships and providing opportunities for collaboration, friendship and mutual support. If Snow White and Sleeping Beauty were to meet, for example, what secrets, fears and ambitions might the two somnambulant princesses have to share with one another? In retellings involving two female characters who were formerly sole protagonists of their own tale, fusion can encourage a sharing of focalisation or otherwise even distribution of narrative weight around them both, as the following analysis of two re-visioned fairy tales demonstrates. In addition, the strategy of fusing disparate fairy tales may more readily invite explicit commentary on the hypotexts and on the wider genre itself, as the complex intertextual nature of a fused re-vision further ruptures Joosen's "horizon of expectation" (Critical 23) by inviting readers to consider not simply the retelling of a single tale, but rather the metatextual intersection of several.

Amal El-Mohtar consciously employs fusion as a strategy to create a successful collaborative relationship between the two female characters in her story “Seasons of Glass and Iron” (2016). The author identifies the conception of this text as her desire to tell her young niece a fairy tale “about women rescuing each other” (“Author” 111), recounting how she originally landed upon the idea of combining the protagonists from two separate fairy tales, “The Black Bull of Norway” and “The Glass Mountain”. The published version of the story ultimately draws upon two additional hypotexts, with Tabitha’s history conflating elements from “East of the Sun and West of the Moon” and “The Enchanted Pig” as well as “The Black Bull of Norway”. El-Mohtar’s motivation for writing “Seasons of Glass and Iron” comes in part from the high regard in which she holds friendship and her belief in its restorative power:

I’m often amazed by the things we’re willing to endure that we would never allow our loved ones to suffer, and the double standard that governs the stories we tell ourselves. I treasure the ways in which friendship can undermine the poisonously seductive narratives we sometimes trap ourselves in ... (111)

This treatise is the beating heart of the tale, with the compassionate and collaborative relationship that develops between Amira and Tabitha its primary focus. When the pair meet, Tabitha having climbed the glass mountain in her fourth pair of iron shoes to find Amira perched on a throne “perfectly suited to her so long as she does not move” (“Seasons” 93-94), their initial exchange is steeped in wary suspicion — perhaps understandable for two isolated women already wounded by the desires and demands of abusive men and the world at large. An affinity nevertheless takes seed, with Amira inviting her guest “in tones of deepest courtesy” to spend the winter wearing down her shoes on the mountain, and Tabitha choosing to stay “because somewhere within the measured music of Amira’s words she hears *please*” (97). It is a cautious, hesitant start to

their relationship, but one that is immediately bolstered as the pair exchange anecdotes about geese and the sound they make both taking off and in flight — powerful images of freedom that El-Mohtar winds through her narrative like labyrinth thread, subtly guiding her protagonists towards an exit. Still, it takes most of the winter, and the threat of the separation that spring will herald, for the women to finally trust each other with their origin stories. Amira reveals that she chose the glass mountain to avoid a horde of ravenous suitors, as well as her father’s “unspeakable conclusion” (103), which cannot help but call to mind the king’s incestuous desire in “Donkeyskin” and other such tales; Tabitha explains that she must wear out seven pairs of iron shoes to break the enchantment worked on her husband, a man she loves despite the fact that “he spoke to her in a language of thorns and claws, and by night ... hurt her with his body” (105). Though each defends their situation, having spent years internalising the kind of systemic misogyny that blames women for the bad behaviour of men, it is the close friendship that has developed, with its accompanying expectations of honesty and trust, that allows the pair to finally accept a more truthful reading of “each other’s lives against their grain” (“Author” 111), at once absolving blame and restoring agency:

“Tabitha”—and Amira does not know what to do except to reach for her hand, clutch it, look at her in the way she looks at the geese, long to speak and be understood—“You did nothing wrong.”

Tabitha holds Amira’s gaze. “Neither did you.”

They stay that way for a long time, until the sound of seven geese’s beating wings startles them into looking up at the stars. (“Seasons” 107)

The significance of this friendship, as well as the solemnity with which the reader is invited to regard it, is evidenced by the story’s concluding scene. Tabitha, knowing she must leave before the suitors return in spring, tells Amira that she wants to marry her after all — “not as a husband would” (108) but rather to take her away from the stillness of her mountain throne and into the world. Amira agrees, on condition that her friend relinquish

the iron shoes, for she doesn't want to "walk on air and darkness if the price is [Tabitha's] pain" (109). Against their resultant anxieties around leaving the life they have known and the tools that have aided them, however high the toll, the women pledge to share knowledge and resources, to support, teach and learn from each other as they take their first tentative steps into the world together. In demanding that two protagonists share a single narrative, while ceding the significance or primary status of neither woman, the strategy of fusion stresses the advantages of female collaboration over toxic competition. As isolated women, neither Tabitha nor Amira has been able to free herself of the fairy-tale narratives that have confined and oppressed her; united, they are unstoppable.

It is commonplace to speak of people who are neither romantically nor sexually entangled as being "just" friends, regardless of the length or depth of the connection they share, with the qualifier sneakily reinforcing a social hierarchy that places romantic relationships — particularly heterosexual ones — in the topmost tier and marriages at its very apex. So it is somewhat startling, if extremely gratifying, to see a female friendship referred to in a manner that grants it the same elevated status as a marriage — the traditional reward for many fairy-tale girls who survive the trials of their tales. The bond between Tabitha and Amira is to be taken seriously, El-Mohtar reminds the reader. They are not merely marking time or filling space with one other until a more important (romantic) relationship comes along. Their respectful, honest and life-saving friendship is the point of the story, as the final section of the text affirms. Until now, the two women have been the kind of joint protagonist that fusion encourages, sharing focalisation equally but separately, with section breaks clearly flagging the exchanges between their alternating points of view. The last break, which occurs after they have joined hands in a sign of their commitment to each other and to their forthcoming journey, ushers in an ambiguous focalisation — or perhaps a melded one:

“Where should we go?” whispers one to the other.
 “Away,” she replies, and holding on to each other, they stumble into the
 spring, the wide world rising to meet them with the dawn. (110)

No longer the clearly delineated entities of Amira and Tabitha, their friendship has forged of them a new configuration, an as yet nameless she/they that demands to be acknowledged in its own right. In this manner, El-Mohtar applies the strategy of fusion to the narrative of “Seasons of Glass and Iron” and reflects its mechanics in the arc of her characters. Such a conclusion again calls to mind the fluidity of permeable ego boundaries, as well as illustrating Michie’s feminist model of a coalition — albeit a coalition of two in this case — to emphasise the importance of female friendship and collaboration in questions of women’s liberation, equality and their ability to thrive in the world.

Fusion similarly operates to merge narrative and character — the latter more literally — in Slatter’s combined re-visioning of “The Raven” and “The White Bride and the Black Bride”. Beginning life as two separate retellings that the author felt unable to make work on their own — “neither story was right — neither was *enough*” (“Preface” 191) — “Flight” (2013) lifts the disobedient girl from “The Raven” and deposits her into an expansion of the second tale, a sequel in which she becomes Emer, the equally disobedient daughter of the White Bride, now queen, and niece of the manipulative Black Bride, presumed dead after her brutal punishment within the nail-studded barrel. Emer is spelled into raven form and held prisoner by her aunt, both to lure the White Bride into a vengeful trap and to coerce Emer into retrieving a magical crown that the Black Bride hopes will restore her own health. The relationship between the two sisters is a toxic one, defined by years-old hatred, jealousy and distrust, with the darker of the two rightly bearing the brunt of the blame for what has passed between them. It might have been tempting to end “Flight” with the White Bride’s successful rescue of her daughter and

victory — once and for all — over her malevolent sibling, but Slatter treads a more nuanced path. The crown, we are told, “mends broken things” (“Flight” 212), and, as the battling women crash through the castle window and land on the cobblestones below, their two bodies, their two *selves*, become one. It is Emer who sees the union for what it is: both a reconciliation and a remaking, a collaboration of sorts between two women who were never really whole to begin with:

She thought of her mother as she had always known her, the docile White Bride, so kind and loving; wise but so bound by convention; always passive, meek, and accepting—until the loss of her daughter. It had taken tragedy to give her the strength, determination and courage the Black Bride always had but used selfishly. (213)

This reading of “The White Bride and the Black Bride” as a story of the split self is not new. Joan Gould, for example, in her interpretation of the Grimm tale as symbolising a woman’s discovery of her two selves, sees the original journey to the palace through a metaphorical lens: “Two spirits compete for space in the coach that represents the woman’s body” (194). This competitive friction remains unresolved in the hypotext, with the White Bride overthrowing the aggressive, self-centred urges of her sister-self. It takes the intercession of a third party — daughter to one, niece to the other — to heal the rift and reunite both sides at last as a “single woman, lovely and whole” (“Flight” 213).

While metaphors of (re)unification are powerful, and in “Flight” are framed as the healing of a woman who has been damaged by the splitting of herself in twain, caution is required when the strategy of fusion is extended to such figurative lengths. Even more than the ending to “Seasons of Glass and Iron”, the literal fusion of these two diametrically different women into one cohesive self can be read as an illustration of Orbach and Eichenbaum’s theory of merged attachment that they argue is “the fabric out of which female friendships are fashioned” (54). Merged attachment, while fostering

empathic, intimate connections between women, simultaneously discourages separation and autonomy, restricting the success of women through their fear that difference will lead to rejection and/or abandonment. The mechanics of sororophobia are on full display here and, as Michie reminds us, “it is more comforting to imagine that difference can be contained and kept at bay by the construction of a single, powerful identity” than to accept the persistence and even necessity of “otherness between and among women” (4). This is not to say that the strategy of fusion must always lead to a kind of merged attachment between protagonists from formerly separate narratives,²⁵ but for authors working with two previously isolated or antagonistic female characters there is a clear temptation to bind them intimately together or to resolve their differences through unification. Although I have not found an exemplar, it would be interesting to see how fairy tales re-visioned via the strategy of fusion might work when maintaining clear difference and separation between their female characters while nevertheless depicting them as autonomous participants in a collaborative and successful coalition. Fusion was not employed as a strategy for imagining such collaborations within my own novelettes, as it ran counter to my stated creative intent of re-visioning fairy tales as sequels to a single well-known text.

5. Extrapolation

The creation of a re-visioned narrative that extrapolates from, rather than directly retells, a well-known fairy tale lends itself well to the production of new female characters and the exploration of more positive relationships between them. By taking secondary, minor or

²⁵ Or indeed that fusion must exclusively involve primary characters at all. It is not difficult to imagine a revision that brings together minor or even implied characters from different fairy tales, a hybrid approach that combines fusion with the strategy of extrapolation to be discussed in the next section.

even implied/inferred characters and making them the protagonists of their own stories, the author in effect creates a shadow narrative to the original tale. Even more so than expansion, extrapolation allows for an imaginative uncoupling from the hypotext, allowing the new narrative to be peopled with potentially new female characters and their resultant relationships. My use of ‘extrapolation’ here is unrelated to the term as it is commonly employed within science fiction²⁶ criticism to refer to “the technique of basing imaginary worlds or situations on existing ones through cognitive or rational means” (Wolfe 16) by which the genre tends to “extrapolate from current realities into the future” (Stockwell 5). Rather, it is closely aligned with a newer genre that Jeremy M. Rosen has dubbed “minor-character elaboration”, which emerged in the later decades of the twentieth century and is characterised by “the overt appropriation of a canonical literary text’s plot, setting, and characters, and the conversion of a minor character from the predecessor into the protagonist of the new text” (146-147). For Rosen, “minor” is a relative term that encompasses characters who are either “fairly central” or “merely mentioned” in their hypotext as well as “characters that authors invent from scratch and install at the margins of a familiar story” (147) — the latter including what I refer to as implied or inferred characters. One of the features of the minor-character elaboration genre, which is reflected in my analysis of extrapolation as a revisionist strategy in this section, is that authors working in this space consistently structure “their narratives around the points of view of those [minor] characters, at times focalizing through their perspectives but most often converting them to reliable narrator-protagonists of their own stories” (149). Although Rosen’s argument, along with his survey of exemplar novels, makes a compelling case for further study of this contemporary genre as a significant site

²⁶ Or speculative fiction, as the broader umbrella genre is known.

of social and political critique, his analysis falls largely outside the scope of this thesis. Thus, while the two fairy-tale re-visions discussed below might count as examples of minor character elaboration, I am focusing on their use of extrapolation as a revisionist *strategy* to imagine female collaboration, rather than exploring their literary *genre* classification and its broader socio-political implications.²⁷

The short fiction of Aimee Bender has been described by Zipes as combining “elements of the folk tale, magic realism, the grotesque, and the macabre ... that ruptures readers’ expectations” (*Relentless* 130) and resists easy categorisation. Jo Carney argues that Bender’s work “does not call attention to its kinship with the fairy-tale tradition” (221) and, rather than being “distinctly revisionist” in nature can be better understood as “echo[ing] fairy-tale contours in general rather than a specific tale” (235). “The Color Master” (2010) is thus something of a departure, being closely and explicitly tied to a particular hypotext. In this short story, written for a collection of re-visioned fairy tales, Bender takes inspiration from “Donkeyskin” and, rather than directly retell the disturbing story of a princess pursued by her lustful father, infers a community of artisans who create the gowns of moon, sun and sky that will prove her salvation. Although Carney regards “The Color Master” as “a prequel of sorts” (236), I would argue this to be a misclassification as the primary events of the story occur contemporaneously with the first third of the hypotext, making it more in keeping with the strategy of extrapolation than expansion. The protagonist, Patty, works as an apprentice in a store that produces exquisite clothing and shoes in an array of impossible-seeming colours, each in perfect

²⁷ Moreover, in describing the revisionist *strategy* outlined here (rather than the *genre* identified by Rosen), I would argue that the verb “extrapolate” wields more precision in its general meaning “to infer (an unknown) from something that is known” (“Extrapolate”) than the verb “elaborate” that is defined as “to add details in writing, speaking, etc.; give additional or fuller treatment” (“Elaborate”). An author may use extrapolation to infer an entirely different narrative, rather than provide more details or allow an additional treatment or perspective on the same narrative.

mimicry of the natural world. While the process is overseen by the expert Color Master, the actual work of bringing these preternatural items into being is a highly collaborative one, with the (mostly) female dyers all pitching in to come up with the right methods and materials for the job at hand. The Color Master is bedridden and close to death at the time the orders for the three dresses begin to arrive, however, and so she appoints Patty project leader — although continues to offer sage advice and much-needed validation.

Significantly, she is also privy to the incestuous intentions of the king and so with each new order instructs Patty to “[p]ut anger in the dress” that will “give the daughter the strength to leave instead” (374). Although the first two dresses are qualified successes, Patty is still coming to terms with the esoteric art of the final colour mix and is too distracted to remember to include the vital ingredient of anger. It is only at the death of her friend and mentor, coupled with the injustice she feels that the Color Master’s immense talent has gone unrecognised and unremarked upon by all except the dyers who worked with her, that Patty at last finds what she needs:

I felt the ghost of her, passing through me, as I mixed and dyed, and I felt the rage in me, that she had to be a ghost: the softness of the ghost, right up next to and surrounding the sharp and burning core of my anger. Both guided my hands. (383)

This final act of generational collaboration does the trick. Soon after the Princess has received this dress that holds the colour of the sky, that seethes with its maker’s righteous fury, she leaves town. While readers familiar with “Donkeyskin” will know the rest of that story, Patty remains in the dark as soon as the Princess she has helped to freedom passes out of her narrative. Bender’s creation of this collaborative coalition of artisans is motivated by a long-held fascination with one particular element of the hypotext: “I read ‘Donkeyskin’ many times as a kid, and what I loved most were those dresses. Inside an unsettling, provocative story . . . was the universe revealed in fabric. What would it look

like, a dress the color of the moon?” (384) By employing an extrapolative strategy to re-vision the fairy tale rather than more directly retell its narrative, Bender creates a new story that sits behind and beside her hypotext, one that is replete with women working together to achieve their goals, and offering sympathetic assistance to a beleaguered sister they have never once met.

By contrast, Goss chooses a more prominent hypotextual character as the protagonist of “A Country Called Winter” (2019), an extrapolation of “The Snow Queen” set in contemporary Boston. Studious MA candidate Vera is originally from Winter — a fictional country whose detailed political history grounds it in the real world despite its many fantastical qualities — having been brought to the USA as a little girl by her mother following political upheaval. By the end, it is revealed that Vera, or Versika as she is known in the closest transliteration of her native tongue, is actually the Snow Queen, heir to the throne of Winter, the country, and governess of winter, the season, a revelation that comes as a great shock to Vera but which will not surprise readers familiar with fairy tales. Like Bender, Goss fills her story with supportive and sympathetic female characters, weaving a collaborative network of women around Vera from the very start. Nana Anna, lady-in-waiting by hereditary right and now after-school nanny, teaches her unsuspecting charge the stories and history of Winter, helps her retain the language and even makes a cryptic deathbed appeal: “Versika, when it is time, you must go back” (172). Vera’s mother both protects her daughter and offers wise counsel — Vera herself notes that “When I don’t know what to do about a situation, I ask my mother” (181) — but allows her to make her own life-changing, world-changing, decision when the time comes. The same is true for both Baroness Hapsenkopf and Lady Moon; they advise and encourage, emphasising her heritage and assuring her that she will learn how to rule on the job, but stop short of forcing Vera to accept the crown. There is even a female friend,

Stephanie, who lets Vera know when her boyfriend, Kay, begins dating grad student Gerda and why they ultimately break up. While the unchallenged presentation of Gerda as Cool Girl turned Crazy Ex-Girlfriend is problematic, the tone of the relationship between her and Vera is nevertheless significant. Although the two women are placed in an antagonistic configuration within the narrative, there is no overt hostility between them.

Vera, in fact, explicitly acknowledges Gerda's abilities and strengths:

She was a good teacher, I'll give her that. She found meanings in Dickinson's poems that I had not seen. I had admired them for their artistic and intellectual engagement. Gerda revealed their incandescence. (176)

Although she is initially devastated by the relationship between Gerda and Kay, Vera refrains from directing bitter recriminations towards the 'other woman' — a trope that has become common in both fictional narratives and real life. Instead, she rightly sees any betrayal as belonging solely to Kay and, even then, she is able to pragmatically accept that the couple appear "synched" (177), better suited for one another perhaps than Kay and herself might have been. In the end, Gerda is a minor element in the plot, withdrawing as quickly as she appeared without any first-hand drama to entangle Vera, and in a culture perpetually greedy for a taste of female rivalry — especially when it revolves around a man — this presents as a decisive narrative victory. In both the Goss and Bender stories, the use of extrapolation as a revisionist strategy to centre a previously sidelined (or even non-existent) female character and embed her within a collaborative support network, invites the reader to regard the hypotext — and, by extension, other hypotexts — as unfixed, offering not an authoritative telling of a particular story but rather one single perspective among a multitude of possible narratives.

Any discussion of the strategy of extrapolation would be incomplete without returning briefly to Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch*. Although some of the stories from this

collection have been included in this plateau to illustrate inversion and deletion, it should be noted that the collection as a whole operates as a series of linked extrapolations, many of which incorporate female friendship, collaboration and/or romance. The learned spinster in “The Tale of the Needle”, for example, goes on to recount once being the girl who traded her voice for love in “The Tale of the Voice”, while the princess, we have already met as the flower-woman who makes dresses for the protagonist of “The Tale of the Skin”. This nested structure, wherein each narrator ends their tale by asking a secondary character to relate her own, can itself be viewed as a portrayal of collaborative female storytelling, producing a cohesive and eloquent text that carries far more weight than the sum of its parts. *Kissing the Witch* thus provides an affirmation that the tales women tell do matter and “implies ... a complicated webwork in which *every* character, no matter how minor, has her own story” (Luis 167). Rosen refers to this as “perspectival pluralism”, a stance that proclaims the “individuality of any character ... and insists on a pluralist, perspectival notion of truth” (144). Such is the power of extrapolation as a strategy, undermining as it does the dangerous myth of a single story (Adichie) and the notion that only some of us are equipped to be leading ladies, while the rest need be satisfied with supporting roles, and reminding us that our lives have more resonance when read together, rather than in isolation.

I have not employed the strategy of extrapolation in my own creative work, as my re-visions are focused exclusively upon the subsequent lives of the protagonists of their hypotexts and tell the stories from their perspectives.

Conclusion

Re-vision, as Rich defines it, is “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new, critical direction” (“When” 18) and this plateau has

identified and analysed five key strategies that are used by authors to engage in such revisionist acts, with contemporary short fiction texts provided as exemplars. Specifically, I have discussed how inversion, insertion/deletion, expansion, fusion and extrapolation may be employed not only to increase the number of female characters within re-visioned fairy tales but, more importantly, to re-imagine how girls and women interact. Using these strategies, either alone or in combination, authors are able to move away from common tropes of female isolation or antipathy and instead explore ideas of female collaboration and friendship, creating re-visioned fairy tales with nuanced and complex representations of the various beneficial and affirming relationships than can exist among women, including those of a familial, personal or purely pragmatic nature, as well as those derived from participation in temporary coalitions or more enduring communities. This is not to say that these strategies can only be employed to such ends, and it certainly is no difficult task to imagine them being used to increase representation of other types of characters, to subvert a different set of problematic dynamics, or simply to spur creativity in other, non-political directions. In addition, as previously mentioned, none of the strategies analysed in this plateau are intended to be offered as catch-all remedies to the paucity of female collaboration in the fairy-tale genre, nor does their application ensure that female characters within such narratives will triumph. They do, however, provide means by which authors may sidestep female isolation and antipathy to focus instead on the ways in which female community and collaboration can function as engaging narrative drivers.

The strategies each have strengths and advantages, with their use likely dependant on the author's intentions in re-visioning a particular hypotext. Inversion may assist in providing a direct rebuttal to the toxic dynamics that ensnare many fairy-tale girls and women, particularly in the case of mother-daughter relationships. If a closer focus on

affirming female relationships is required, insertion and/or deletion may prove profitable. Expansion, fusion and extrapolation all work in different ways to explicitly dismantle the hypotext as a single authoritative narrative, allowing generous scope for metatextual critique and inviting readers (who may also be writers) to consider an infinity of potential iterations that swoop, circle back and connect to one another in a rhizomatic fairy-tale web. Of course, there are also weaknesses and disadvantages to consider. The gender inversion of male helper characters into female, or a dual inversion of relationship dynamics wherein evil (female) characters become male and good (male) characters take female form, can result in a demonisation of boys and men within a narrative, or even in the absence of any non-female character — a result that is not necessarily a narrative fault, but which may have been an unintended outcome. Utilised in too simplistic a manner, as Harries has noted (100), some revisionist strategies can serve to mirror problematic fairy-tale structures, tropes and mechanisms, rather than call them into question. Other disadvantages are of a more practical nature, idiosyncratic to individual authors or texts, as some brief background discussion to my own work illustrates. My original plan for “Never Afters” to be a collection of ten to twelve much shorter stories was abandoned after I completed the first two novelettes and realised that my chosen strategy of expansion would reliably result in longer narratives. This was due partly to my incorporation of retrospective re-visioning of hypotext as backstory, but primarily to the fact that, as I was crafting a new sequel with a plot unbounded by that of the hypotext, my creative work was able to expand exponentially. This is not an intrinsic weakness of the strategy per se²⁸, but a factor that should nevertheless be considered by authors (such as

²⁸ Indeed, the greater word length provided by a novelette or novella, for example, may provide an explicit benefit in allowing for even deeper and more complex exploration of female relationships, while still taking the easily digestible, one-sitting format of short fiction.

myself) who lean towards writing complex narratives with a strong emphasis on detailed characterisation and world-building, as opposed, for example, to those such as Kate Bernheimer who uses flatness and abstraction as key techniques of fairy-tale creation and whose work thus tends to be more compact and “scarce of word” (“Fairy” 64). Individual authorial needs aside, the five key strategies examined in this plateau all share the same potential. By providing clear means by which to introduce collaborative female relationships into re-visioned fairy tales, they all assist authors in producing complex intertextual narratives that “work to reveal the stories behind other stories, the unvoiced possibilities that tell another tale” (Harries 17).

Third Plateau: Schemas

If asked to think about female characters from fairy tales, a number of popular classics might spring immediately to mind: Snow White and the Wicked Queen who attempts to murder her; Cinderella, who endures the bullying of her stepmother and stepsisters and is rewarded for her patient submission; Gretel, who saves her brother by pushing a child-eating witch into an oven. While female antagonism in well-known fairy tales has been the subject of much critical analysis and creative exploration, this thesis has argued that the relative scarcity of collaborative female relationships in such texts is often overlooked by many theorists and creatives.²⁹ This scarcity of representation is reflected in cultural production more broadly, with the taboo of women as “comrades, cocreators, conspirators” (*Woman* 255) identified by Adrienne Rich still seeming to underpin many of the narratives, fictional and otherwise, to which we are exposed and from which we arguably learn to navigate the world.

This plateau posits that the cognitive sciences, and schema theories in particular, may offer insights as to why these types of positive female relationships receive such scant representation in contemporary re-visioned fairy tales, and why such tales often — although by no means always, as the previous plateau has demonstrated — continue to replicate the common narrative dynamics of either female isolation or acrimony.

Following a brief overview of schemas and their operation, I consider how story schemas and person schemas might intersect in the unconscious mind of the creative writer to influence her intuitions — or feelings of ‘rightness’ — during the process of story

²⁹ Although not overlooked by all, as the previous plateau has demonstrated.

creation and development, with case studies of two of my own novelettes exploring these ideas through the lens of creative praxis. Finally, I conclude that the adoption of new frameworks through which to critically interrogate our tacit storytelling knowledge can result in real cognitive change and subsequent advancements in our creative practice — in my case, a portrayal of collaborative female relationships that maintain a necessary narrative drive and verisimilitude. Through purposeful reflection and reflexivity, writers are able to question what we think we know about stories, as well as how we think we know it, and so discover new creative paths and perspectives.

Creativity, Cognitive Science and Schema Theories

As previously discussed, representations of relationships between women, both fictional and real, are often framed by gendered cultural views. Women are our own worst enemies, prone to bitching, gossiping and backstabbing; secretly we all hate each other (Anthony et al.; Moss; Piper “Myth”; Raymond 3-6). While men are mates, women are mean girls or frenemies; female rivalry is natural, innate and unhealthy (Dyrenfurth; Piper “Woman’s”). The psychological concept of cognitive schemas provides a useful way to understand the persistence of such framings and the manner by which they may influence how creative writers craft fictional narratives and, in particular, the representations of relationships between female characters within them. In drawing on research from the cognitive sciences, this plateau follows an interdisciplinary approach that has been advocated by an increasing number of creative writing researchers in recent years as a means to provide a fresh and enlightening perspective from which to view creativity, its processes and outcomes (Brophy; Freiman; Takolander; Woolfe).

Schemas have been theorised in various ways but can be broadly defined as unconscious cognitive structural units and processes that underlie aspects of human

knowledge (Brewer and Nakamura 140) and are dynamic, interactive and interdependent (Dowd and Pace 215-217). Schemas serve to process, categorise, organise, assimilate and retrieve information, and have interpretive and predictive functions when it comes to encountering new knowledge and situations. Far from being neutral, schemas have been shown to “actively bias perception and memory processes” as well as the “encoding, storage and retrieval of information” (Dowd and Pace 216). In addition, Lawrence P. Riso and Caroline McBride theorise that schemas are “resistant to change” and “exert a powerful influence over cognition and affect ... through unconscious information processing, rather than through unconscious motivation and instinctual drives” (5). Current research in neuroscience situates schemas as “more specifically physiological, neutrally organised patterns created by neural connections made in the brain” (Freiman 133) that, it is important to again emphasise, remain entirely unconscious and so beyond our direct experience or control. Significantly, although finding a considerable amount of research around schema activation, Riso concludes that “there is virtually no work on what leads to the deactivation of schemas” (222). With this in mind, my theoretical suppositions in this plateau are entirely that: conjectures and hypotheses supported by my own practice-led understanding, presented here as explorations that signpost a need for further investigation and empirical research.

In the fields of linguistics and cognitive psychology, the more specific concept of a story schema or narrative schema has been defined as “a mental structure derived from sensitivity to structural regularities in stories” (Mandler 433). The research around story schemas in regards to written narratives has focused largely on reader encounters and on the characteristics that best facilitate comprehension, remembering, retrieval and reconstruction (De Beaugrande; Mar and Oatley; Rice; among others), with limited empirical research into the influence that story schemas bring to bear on the creative

processes of writerly minds. We should not forget, however, that writers were readers first and indeed remain so throughout their creative careers, making these reader-based studies highly relevant. As writers, we are the sum product of all the narratives — fictional, anecdotal, cultural, mythical — that we have encountered throughout our lives, and what we do when we create our own stories can be considered a type of ‘reverse engineering’. In writing, we draw on schemas constructed during our reading of fiction and apply this knowledge — consciously and unconsciously — to the creation of new narratives. While in the literature concerning story schemas and narrativity the consistent definition of narrative remains commonly “a series of causally linked events that unfold over time” (Mar and Oatley 174), I would argue that the concept of story schema can be usefully expanded and applied to other elements that constitute a fictional narrative rather than simply referring to its structure and/or plot. Events happening over time might provide a workable description of the bare-bones of story structure, but it does little to hint at the visceral and emotional attraction that storytelling holds for human beings. We do not read fiction — or write it — simply to find out what happens next. If that were the case we might happily read synopsis accounts of novels on Wikipedia and rejoice in the time saved. Rather, as Raymond A. Mar and Keith Oatley suggest, it is perhaps “not how a text is structured that really defines narrative, but its content and our responses to this content” (174). In this approach, the emphasis shifts to what many creative writers — and readers — would regard as the heart of narrative fiction: characters or, as Mar and Oatley would describe them, “autonomous intentional agents and their interactions” (174). The characters we encounter in fiction, the ways in which they interact with each other as well as their psychological and physical representations, contribute to the construction and recalibration of cognitive schemas, which in turn impact the way we process, interpret and remember narratives and their constituent elements. The operation of such feedback

loops will be elaborated upon further during the discussion of my novelette “Burnt Sugar” later in this plateau.

When considering how fictional characters are encountered and created, the concept of a person schema, which “represents a *generic* knowledge structure about a type of person” (Woll 62), bears consideration. After all, readers commonly speak of falling in love with characters, hating them with a passion, or indeed any number of emotions and experiences of intimacy that might seem more appropriate to relationships formed with flesh-and-blood counterparts. Likewise, writers often feel that characters speak up during the creative process, make their own decisions and influence the nature and direction of the narrative in unexpected ways. While these reports may be viewed as metaphorical descriptions of experience, recent research suggests that comprehending characters in fiction parallels the comprehension of actual people in the real world, and that fiction may increase empathy and sociability in frequent readers (Mar et al.). Fiction also affects processes related to theory of mind — the ability to recognise and understand the mental states of others — via the ongoing character construction, perspective-taking, and literal mind-reading (especially in the case of first-person narration) that reading requires (Kidd and Castano). Indeed, Mar and Oatley go so far as to claim that fictional stories are “simulations of selves in the social world”, the function of which is to “abstract social information so that it can be better understood, generalized to other circumstances, and acted upon” (173). Through frequent exposure to fictional narratives we are likely to meet many more people, and many more types of people in many different situations, than we otherwise would in real life — and often, or so we perceive, with a greater degree of intimacy. It would seem likely then that these encounters with fictional characters result in the construction and modification of person schemas in much the same way as they are constructed when we meet living people in the real world.

In the writing of fiction, the concept of story schema — what a narrative is like — and person schema — what people are like — intersect. The creative writer draws on both their knowledge of stories and their knowledge of the world and its inhabitants to produce fiction that engages readers, communicates effectively, and has the required measure of verisimilitude when it comes to the characters presented. The latter holds true even in the speculative genres in which the setting may be an alternative, futuristic or fantastical world. In such stories, it is the psychological realism of characters and the believability of their motivations and interactions that provide an anchor point for readers travelling in strange waters (Mar and Oatley). Creative writing requires a constant negotiation between our perception of reality and the demands of narrative. Although most writers endeavour to avoid stereotypes and one-dimensionality, we nevertheless condense, exaggerate, sketch and shortcut, coaxing characters into being whom we hope will both ring true as people *and* fulfil the needs of the story in which they find themselves. The concept of “narrative necessity” is discussed by Jerome Bruner who argues that, unlike logical and scientific constructions that can be empirically falsified, the acceptability of a narrative (fictional or otherwise) is governed by convention, and determined by verisimilitude (4-5). If we judge a story both by how it conforms to the reality that it represents and by how it fits into our schema of what stories are like, how then do we disentangle our understanding of reality *from* our expectation of narrative? Based on current findings in cognitive science, Ellen Spolsky proposes that narratives “teach us by managing our neuronal/brain/body responses” in similar ways to direct experience and that “[c]ontinuous encounters with narrative ... recursively reorganize an individual brain/mind into a connected set of schemata that represent the self and the situation of that self in its environment” (40). Narratives help us to make sense of the world and of ourselves and others moving within it — indeed, it has been asserted that stories are the

primary tool by which we acquire and process knowledge (Bruner; Herman; Schank and Abelson) as well as feeding back into our perceptions of how the world works. It is a commonplace view that creative writers conduct a close (and often continuous) study of the world around us and that the stories we create reflect reality to varying degrees. However, as much of our knowledge of the world is gained and understood via our exposure to and interaction with narratives (Bruner; Damasio; Herman; Spolsky), the texts we create might more accurately be said to reflect *storied* realities. A thorough disentanglement of reality from narrative is likely an impossible task, and perhaps not one that is even desirable.³⁰ However, the recognition of the narratives that help construct our understanding of reality, along with our willingness to challenge their limitations in order to explore new narratives — and potentially construct new realities — is an endeavour that requires a high degree of reflection and reflexivity on the part of the creative writer. Not only should we make ourselves aware of the underlying cognitive processes that govern our acquisition of knowledge and development of expertise, but we should be prepared to question our own instincts and intuitions as writers, as the following case studies will demonstrate.

Case Study One: “Burnt Sugar”

The process of writing “Burnt Sugar” illustrates the possible influence of story schemas upon narrative creation, highlighting the unconscious cognitive obstacles that may exist for a creative writer seeking to portray positive female collaboration in her storytelling. “Hansel and Gretel”, the hypotext upon which my novelette expands, was one of my favourite fairy tales as a young girl, as well as the one I found most disturbing. Two

³⁰ After all, as Shirley Jackson warns: “No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality.” (243)

children are terrorised by a cannibalistic witch, with Gretel forced to commit a grisly murder in order to save both herself and her brother, after which they are both expected to go back to live with the father who abandoned them in the forest in the first place — and everyone seems happy about this! In the original Little Golden Book edition, which remains my most vividly recollected version of the tale, both the anonymous author and the illustrator, Eloise Wilkin, have gone to great pains to lessen the trauma of the ending. Here, the children return to find that their now repentant father has been searching the forest for them during their absence and that the cruel stepmother has simply “gone away forever” — likely a euphemism for her traditionally off-stage death. The demonisation of the stepmother figure, contrasted with a more positive or at least ameliorating portrayal of the father, is common to many well-known versions of this tale. The Grimm brothers revised their original 1812 version so that by the publication of the fourth edition of their collection in 1840, the biological mother had been replaced by a stepmother who hen-pecks a passive and reluctant father into abandoning the children in the woods (Grimm and Grimm *Annotated* 72-85). Common psychoanalytical readings of “Hansel and Gretel” tend to conflate the witch in her gingerbread house with either the wicked stepmother or the children’s dead mother, prompting Sylvia Henneberg to observe that the tale “enacts two literary matricides as a means to create a space in which the cultural script of the old woman as despicable threatening influence can be rehearsed and reified before she, in turn, must die” (129). It is precisely such cultural scripts that I have sought to interrogate and disrupt with “Never Afters” as a whole.

In writing “Burnt Sugar”, my intention was to examine cycles of gendered violence and oppression, family dysfunction and the long-reaching effects of trauma, as well as to investigate how collaborative female relationships might result from and contribute to personal healing and self-validation. While the novelette does indeed speak

to such themes, during pre-writing and actual writing I began to consider the nature of narrative itself and how it may wield the forces of tradition. The stories that we encounter in childhood are those that may shape us most intimately, providing early frames through which we come to see the world and its workings. Recognising both a comfort and a danger in this well-worn familiarity, I found myself pondering just what cultural and personal consequences there might be in telling ourselves — and our own children — the same stories over and over again. If fairy tales are indeed “ideologically variable desire machines” (Bacchilega *Postmodern* 7) that may be reworked in a near infinite variety of ways, then what was it that *I* truly desired in re-visioning these once-beloved, much-maligned stories from my youth? Did I seek to pry feminist secrets from their innards or strip them naked and point out their flaws? What happens when love wrestles with scorn, when ambivalence squats froglike in the mind, awaiting a kiss to resolve it one way or the other? These simultaneous feelings of attraction and repulsion, which so complicate my (feminist, feminised) relationship to fairy tales, echo the dynamics of sororophobia explored in the first plateau of this thesis. The questions they provoke continue to influence my research and demand regular interrogation as part of my creative writing praxis.

The ending that I originally conceived for “Burnt Sugar” felt perfect. It had weight and resonance; it tingled beneath my fingernails. My creative process is very much an embodied one (Stanciu; Willis), and I often feel the rightness of a story, its rhythms and flow — or conversely its fits and starts — as physical sensations. Likewise, physical sensations influence my creative process and often act as anchor points. During the planning of this story, for example, I melted a pan of sugar mixed with water on the stove and left it to burn. The sweetly acrid scent, the thickness of it that swiftly coated the back of my throat, became touchstones for Gretel, intrinsically linked with the witch/woman as

I crafted her story. Writing this, I can taste it again and Gretel herself comes flying back to me years after setting her aside. Often, it feels as though I do not inhabit the characters I am writing about so much as they inhabit me — bodily and psychologically, their experiences, emotions and sensations bleed into my own as I cast about for the shape of their stories. Gretel's shape was to be circular, an ouroboros made from equal parts fear and hope, and the original ending of "Burnt Sugar" is preserved, more or less, within the finished novelette. As in the final version presented in this thesis, Gretel was to have become a witch with her own gingerbread house and a new pair of lost children to deal with. Having witnessed her moving through too many familiar motions — albeit from the opposite perspective — we would leave the old woman bent before her oven, waiting to feel the press of girlish hands in the small of her back as has happened to so many Gretels before her. This time, she would hope it to be different. *This* time, she would want *this* girl to make a different choice — although she would do, could do, nothing to intervene. In what were to be the last moments of the novelette as I intended it, Gretel (along with the reader) would still have found some necessary comfort in the cyclical nature of her story:

There is a rightness to this moment, I feel it. To the vast, inexorable clockwork turning and grinding and falling at last, again, into place. There is a rightness to me, to all I have done, and will do once more. I cling to such certainty; it's all that remains. (69)

Narrative structures in which the ending of a story rejoins or otherwise mirrors its own beginning are both common and powerful. Joseph Campbell's articulation of the hero's journey as "the nuclear unit of the monomyth" in its cycle of "separation–initiation–return" (28) along with Maureen Murdock's counter proposal of the heroine's journey that describes "a circular path that move[s] clockwise" (3) both use myth and folklore to identify cyclical narrative structures in human storytelling. Circular narratives continue to

feature in contemporary fiction, with Brian Richardson finding that a narrative that “always returns to and departs from its point of origin” and so presents “infinitely repeated instances of otherwise singulative events” is a well-known structure in postmodern literature, particularly in stories that are non-mimetic in nature (48). My own work in “Never Afters” clearly draws from both traditions, and the original cyclical structure of “Burnt Sugar” was also in keeping with my creative tendency to play with the liminal and the ambiguous, to resist collapsing possibilities and instead invite the reader to consider for themselves what might happen next. It was a structure and shape that felt pitch perfect for this story, and for Gretel.

If the ending I have outlined above would not have been an entirely optimistic one, this seemed of little concern to me at the time — as a writer who regularly works in the genres of horror, dark fantasy and contemporary gothic, “not entirely optimistic” is my wheelhouse. Discomfort had become my comfort zone, in many respects; unequivocally positive outcomes were to be distrusted. Moreover, they felt incredibly difficult to pull off with sincerity. And so, the final image of Gretel the witch bent before her oven was what I kept in my sights as I began to write “Burnt Sugar”. It was an ending that felt unavoidable, that felt so intrinsically right, until I was almost upon it. Until, lying awake one night and mulling through what I planned to write the next day, I was struck by an awful realisation: my planned ending was, in fact, terrible. If it felt perfect to me, if it delivered that narrative frisson all writers aim for, then that might simply be because it fit within what I now regard as a certain narrative schema. The satisfaction of a cyclical story, the pleasure of patterns, no matter how perverse, the notion that something is inevitable, is *right*, because it has always been that way — this is precisely the narrative that I should be challenging. And where on earth were my collaborative women? As the writer of their story, it felt as though these two characters, these two Gretels, were

refusing to put aside their distrust of one another. The most I could coax from Gretel the witch was a grim hope for change, albeit a change that she herself felt unable to effect. Gretel the girl remained entirely unmoveable. This dynamic between the two primary female characters, I should stress, was not something I had previously questioned; it was in fact the point of the circular ending as I had imagined it. Having become conscious of this self-defeating narrative structure, however, I began to construct a different ending — or, rather, to write beyond the ending that I had originally conceived. Gretel the witch is still there in front of her oven, bent beneath the will of the Book, except now she pushes back, rises up, her hands seared by hot iron. She turns around to face the younger Gretel, her younger self, and says, “Stop. Enough ... Let me make this choice for us both” (71). She has finally realised (along with the author) that it is her place to make these difficult, necessary decisions. It is her role, not as witch, but as woman and elder, to pave such paths as might never have been trod before and set the young girl upon them.

Uniquely, I have had the opportunity to undertake a crude comparative road-test of both versions of “Burnt Sugar”. On two separate occasions, I was able to relate a distilled version of the narrative to two different people, leading them up to my original ending before guiding them past it to where the novelette now concludes. In both cases, the listener’s keen approval of the first ending was audibly and visibly expressed, confirming my suspicion that, had I written “Burnt Sugar” as originally intended, it would indeed have been a satisfying and successful story. However, their enthusiasm only deepened upon hearing the extended conclusion, where the narrative cycle is definitively broken and the Gretels’ futures becomes their own to define. While a sample size of two is hardly conclusive, the experience bolstered my newly formed resolve to continually question my creative instincts, to interrogate more precisely those initial feelings of ‘rightness’ I had almost implicitly come to trust as a writer of fiction. It is important to

point out, however, that my change to the original ending was not a mere intellectual exercise born of a need to fit my fiction to certain research parameters, but arose instead from an embodied internalisation of the research itself as well as sustained, focused reflexivity. Further, the detachment with which I have spoken of being “struck by an awful realisation” about my first ending is somewhat disingenuous — in fact, the realisation felt as though it came to Gretel first, or at least came *through* her. As I considered my story, I came to sense her resistance to the cyclical path I was insisting upon; I could feel the burning iron of the stove on my own palms as she tried to push herself away; I could taste, again, the burnt sugar in the back of my/our throat. Far from being abandoned, my embodied process was maintained throughout the writing of the entire novelette, and I continued to note its affirming signals. Curiously, the final ending of “Burnt Sugar” now seems like the only way the story *could* have been written, even though I have clear and documented evidence to the contrary. Identifying and resisting the particular story schemas that had initially attracted me to a, somewhat, defeatist, cyclical narrative, enabled me instead to push the tale beyond these limitations and discover an empowering, collaborative finale for both my Gretels.

Case Study Two: “The New Wife”

If writing “Burnt Sugar” prompted me to consider the possible effect of specific story schemas within my creative practice, then my subsequent experience around conceiving and writing “The New Wife” brought me face to face with a similar set of unconscious cognitive obstacles potentially erected by the person schemas at work in my mind. Unlike the other novelettes in “Never Afters”, where only two or three women interact at any given time within the narrative, the house in “The New Wife” is populated by two living women, five wraith-wives, and the unseen and largely unsensed First Wife, most of

whom intermingle regularly, or are at least aware of one another's proximity, and juggling them all proved a challenge. As with most of my creative work, I did not map out or overly plan the narrative, or even all of the characters,³¹ before I began to write the first scene. Instead, I developed the story as I wrote and researched around it, relying again on the signals of my embodied creative process to guide me towards verisimilitude, especially when it came to its characters. Plotting this novelette proved particularly frustrating, for a number of reasons that need not be explored here, and my concentration on this element — in what often felt like a three-steps-forwards, two-steps-back progression, or lack of it — called my attention away from considering the possible cognitive mechanics driving what felt like organic character development. In addition, the craft requirements of managing a large ensemble were not particular strengths of mine, with my work usually centring around a smaller number of players, and I often found myself focused on the mechanics of action, description and dialogue rather than explicitly conscious character creation. It was only midway through the writing process, as I did begin to reflect more consciously on the fractious female relationships in “The New Wife”, that I paused to consider the nature of my own schemas around women and their expected behaviours, as well as how such schemas may have been constructed and modified throughout my life, and their possible influence on this story and the collection as a whole.

Early on, my somewhat nebulous thoughts around re-visioning “Bluebeard” were markedly different to the novelette in its final form. While the wraiths were always intended to be part of the story, I was inspired by the *conteuses* of the seventeenth and

³¹ Suzette was initially a minor character conceived on the fly and from the necessity to explain how a lone, unexpectedly housebound woman manages to obtain such necessities as food and firewood, who then rapidly became an integral, inextricable part of the story.

eighteenth century French salons of whom Charles Perrault was a junior member, and so played with the idea of a manor house cum boarding school for wayward girls. This was to be a place filled with laughter and music and teenage shenanigans, presided over by wives both living and dead, with the defeated spectre of their former husband caged within his own murderous chamber — a tale of light to counter the darkness of the hypotext. As my research progressed, however, the planned narrative became gloomier and increasingly claustrophobic, the threat of Bluebeard looming ever larger, until all that remained of my female-centred salon were the names of the *conteuses* after whom my wraith-wives were duly christened. Part of this shift in focus arose from my irritation with and desire to explicitly challenge a persistent strain of criticism that, as Maria Tatar points out, seeks to defend “a man whose murderous deeds are fully sanctioned by the outrageous behaviour of his wives” (*Secrets* 134), or that which holds the positions of husband and wife to be symmetrical:

[H]e is simultaneously the disobeyed husband, the victim of his wife’s violation of authority, and a ruthless pervert whom society should punish; likewise she is both her treacherous temptor’s next victim and the violator, the breaker of her own promise, whom her husband should punish. (Lewis 206)

How on earth can their misdeeds carry equal weight, I wondered. Is the wife as deserving of her fate for simply peeking into a prohibited room as her husband is for killing his other wives? Are we to suppose that if a wife does resist the temptation to use the key, then Bluebeard will let her live rather than devise another test for her to fail? And even if she passes, over and over again, are we then to deem her oblivious marriage to a sadistic sociopath to be a good resolution, despite the number of dead women already rotting away behind the forbidden door? Ultimately, I decided that my re-visioning of “Bluebeard” needed to begin in a place as dark and as maddening as these questions: in

the bloody chamber itself, with the newest wife confronted not only by the knowledge of her husband's crimes but with the grisly manifestation of her murdered predecessors. I still wanted the other wives present in the story, and I wanted to show their hard-won liberation from the past that imprisoned them.

After many months of mulling the story over, my intention when I actually began to write "The New Wife" was to portray the wraiths as an already established, tight-knit cohort. Initially suspicious and territorial, they would still be curious about the young woman assumed to be joining them in their spectral afterlife, and would soon form a collaborative and affectionate relationship with her in order to overcome their shared problems. I wished to contrast these productive bonds with the isolation of the unseen First Wife, a being who lives so deep in her trauma that she becomes fused with the very house in which she met her death, who refuses connection with others in similar predicaments, who chooses an eternal, bloodthirsty vengeance over the possibility of freedom. As soon the words hit the screen, however, the wives quickly manifested a fractious disunity — not only with the New Wife, but with one another. Apart from the genuine concern that the solicitous Henriette displays for Marie-Catherine, the wives are impatient, irritable and dismissive, their interpersonal connections restricted to morbid comparisons of how long they each resisted the temptation of the key. These dynamics scarcely change throughout the novelette; even in collaboration, the wives continue to squabble and snipe.³² The addition of Suzette only compounded the problem, with the two living women largely at odds with one another as well as with the wraiths. As I noted during the writing process, and mentioned to friends with no small amount of

³² Of course, these very words are themselves gendered, with neither "snipe" nor "squabble" verbs that are generally used to describe the actions of adult, heterosexual, cisgender men. And yet, how easily they flow forth when labelling the behaviour of women.

exasperation, whenever multiple women were on the same page, all they ever did was argue. Even more grating, the wives were all at their most lively, their most engaging and *real*, when they were in discord. Occasional attempts on my part to avert or subvert this dynamic produced a certain amount of creative and cognitive resistance. Whenever I tried to force them to get along, to forge friendships even, the characters felt flat and unnatural. “They just refuse to be friends,” I recall lamenting to my partner. “All they want to do is fight!” Collaborative female relationships are the core of my research project — if I was incapable of creating such dynamics in my creative work, what did that say about me both as a writer and as a woman?³³

It is important to emphasise that when I speak, here and in the previous case study, of characters “insisting” and “refusing” and otherwise acting independently of my creative intentions, it is both a metaphor and not. It is an impossibility that fictional beings created from my own mind should act — or speak or feel — in any manner that is not also of my own mind, regardless of whether or not I feel directly and experientially connected to the process. We should remember that, within our minds, a “vast amount of processes and contents ... remain unconscious, not known in core or extended consciousness” (Damasio 228) and that, by definition, may never be consciously known or directly experienced (Brophy 38-45). As such, it is perhaps not surprising that we would feel disconnected from the outcomes of such processes or that our conscious selves might seek to express these subjective and often embodied feelings of disconnection in metaphorical, even quasi-mystical, terms. Flashes of inspiration. Disembodied muses

³³ It was during the drafting (and redrafting) of this novelette that I had an odd and anxious dream. I was attending an academic conference, discussing my PhD research with someone whose identity I could not remember upon waking but in my dream knew to be a prestigious and highly regarded scholar in the field. After talking at some length, the Esteemed Scholar leaned forwards and put her hand over mine. “I’m sorry, dear, but you’re completely wrong,” she told me, her voice gentle and kind. “Women *cannot* be friends, everyone knows that.”

bestowing ideas. Characters speaking with their own voices and acting of their own (unexpected) volition. Andrew M. Greeley expresses these familiar creative experiences as akin to being taken over or controlled by another: “Demon, god, Muse, call it what we will, we are in the grip of a force that seems outside of ourselves, at least outside the normal rational self of everyday life” (71). Whatever label we choose to place on it, the role the unconscious plays in our creative practice is felt, if not clearly understood, by all writers. The cognitive schemas operating in this unconscious space may be responsible for a measure of what I have felt as an instinctive, embodied resistance to creating characters that do not fit easily into established cultural and creative scripts. Consider, by way of illustration, the following exchange that might be imagined to occur during the process of drafting a story:

I am writing a story, I say. I am writing about women.

This is what a story looks like, my unconscious prompts. This is how female characters behave.

I want my female characters to work together, to collaborate willingly and even joyously. I want them to win.

You're doing it wrong.

Clearly, it is not as simple as this. However, as I have demonstrated, schema theories do have the capacity to explain and validate certain aspects of the creative process. Most significantly, the notion that such cognitive structures are both dynamic and reactive, that they are being constantly modified and recalibrated with exposure to new knowledge inputs (John R. Anderson 157-163), that they are neither static nor analogous to a prison-house, can be an empowering one for creative writers. Although we are unable to reach into our unconscious to directly delete, alter or reorganise our schemas — how

convenient that would be! — we may still effect cognitive transformation through purposeful, reflexive action that challenges the tacit knowledge about stories that we often deploy in our writing practice. By evaluating what we think we know from a fresh perspective, or via a different framework, we invite new knowledge that, quite literally, changes our minds.

Ultimately, as evidenced by the final version of “The New Wife” included in this thesis, I abandoned attempts to portray the development of any sort of significant friendship between the aggrieved, disparate women whose shared trauma proved to be a wedge rather than a means of bonding. The story was too advanced by the time I began to consciously consider the influence of person schemas on its development, the characters too real for me to attempt to dismantle them wholesale and start afresh. Instead, I accepted the sororophobia that ebbed and flowed through the household and concentrated on exploring how a group of women who are never likely to be friends, whose forced association continues to wound and abrade, may nevertheless find respectful and productive ways in which to work successfully together for the benefit of all. Perhaps this achievement might even be considered all the greater for lacking personal attachment as a significant motivator. Still, my failure to manifest that original notion of a band of merry widows rankles, as I noted in reflective notes a year or so after finishing work on the novelette:

I still feel *The Real Story* like a phantom limb. (Or a phantom heart?) In going back to my notes and skimming over the current draft, I feel it itching within me again, demanding to be written properly and I know – I know – that I am not up to the task. Have I failed this story? ... I feel an odd (and likely foolish) responsibility here ... to the story that I could not manage to tell. And to the characters, especially the character of First Wife who remains trapped in that house, and her own horrors... It's ridiculous but it hurts in a real, embodied way. Not the concept of failure itself, but this particular failure, my failure as a writer to a fictional story and to fictional characters.

Later, in a conversation with a fellow author and academic about my research, I brought up “The New Wife” as an example of the persistence of female acrimony as a presumed default stance among groups of women, explaining my own difficulties in creating this circle of would-be collaborators. Possibly, she suggested, it was the more basic need to sow conflict into the story that was so instinctive to me. A narrative without conflict, after all, lacks drive and engagement. True, I conceded, but there is still a violent, sadistic husband and the mysterious First Wife to provide plenty of scope for conflict, challenge and tension — besides, should the genders be reversed, I couldn’t imagine a group of male characters being immediately at each other’s throats, rather than recognising potential comrades in arms. And yet, we agreed after lengthy consideration, we so often find it difficult to imagine female characters behaving otherwise.

Significantly, I have no shortage of real-life role models from which to draw my templates for caring, generous, collaborative women. When I initially announced the subject of my research, I found myself inundated with links concerning fairy-tale news, articles and criticism from real-life friends and social media acquaintances, most of whom were female.³⁴ Likewise, female academics, independent researchers and creative writers who work in the area of fairy tales and their retellings have been welcoming and generous in sharing their time, expertise and resources over the years. In fact, since leaving high school, I have had little direct experience of the sort of instinctive and natural animosity between women that I have portrayed in “The New Wife”. This is not to suggest that such animosity never occurs, only to underscore that it is not a significant part of my lived experience as a woman, living, working and socialising among many other women. From where, then, am I drawing my understanding about how women behave towards each

³⁴ Links that continue to trickle in to this day!

other? Why do Charlotte and the other wives feel so real to me and provoke such verisimilitude when I write them as catty and mocking? Why do they insist on their mutual suspicion and refuse to extend the same generous hands I myself have known? Perhaps this ‘knowledge’ of female interactions has indeed been shaped more by the fictional characters I have encountered and feel I understand most intimately, than by the living, breathing human beings in the world around me. As the research outlined earlier has indicated (Mar and Oatley; Mar et al.), these hundreds upon hundreds of female characters — often isolated, often acrimonious, often framed as exceptional — have constructed and modified the person schemas in my mind at least as much as my own lived experience. Reflecting upon this entanglement, and considering precisely *how* it is that I know what I think I know, remains an ongoing challenge and it is one that I take up with vigour. My embodied creative process signals when characters are working, when they feel as real on the page as they might sitting beside me — but why they feel real, and what it is about them that triggers the sensations of verisimilitude, remains subject to influence and cognitive evolution. If I can finally jettison the unconscious stereotypes that I intellectually know to be false, if I can internalise and embed the positive, collaborative relationships among women that I regularly witness, then perhaps the bright and laughter-filled salon version of “The New Wife” might be a tale I can at last sit down to write.

Conclusion

As a creative writer, my foray into cognitive science has been extraordinarily fruitful.³⁵

Reaching a greater understanding of the unconscious processes and structures operating in

³⁵ Although here I will borrow a wise caveat from Sue Woolfe: “It is possible that I have made connections between findings in science and my ‘felt experience’ that are naïve and invalid. My interpretations of neuroscience may be naïve and invalid also. I can only offer my experience as an artist as a starting point for debate.” (ix)

the human mind has enabled me to approach my creative praxis with a higher degree of reflexivity and encouraged me to think even more deeply about my craft and the texts it produces. Although I make no empirical claims, the two case studies included in this plateau have elucidated an in-practice exploration of schema theory as it may apply to the development of narrative and character within fiction. When writing “Burnt Sugar”, I found myself wrestling with the attraction and seeming ‘rightness’ of a cyclical narrative, and the powerful story schema that contains it. With “The New Wife”, my struggle was with person schemas and the ways in which my unconscious has processed, organised, interpreted and predicted information about women and how they are ‘supposed’ to behave. In both cases, and throughout the writing of my collection as a whole, I have felt the tension between my intuitive, embodied process — with its accompanying signals of ‘rightness’ — and my conscious, analytical attempts to manifest my research organically within my creative work. At the start of this project, I did not anticipate the extent to which the rigour and reflexive nature of this type of research would transform my stories, let alone how suspicious I would become of my instincts as a writer of fiction. Perhaps suspicious is too strong a word. Let us say, I have become more mindful that what feels intuitively ‘right’ might actually be more akin to cognitive pattern-making, or pattern-matching. After all, my intuitions as a writer have been honed through a lifetime of exposure to narratives and the resultant construction and modification of schemas.

As writers, we are what we read to a very real extent, and it may not only be craft-related knowledge I have tacitly imbibed but also a ‘storied’ view of the world and its inhabitants. Rather than continue to take such knowledge for granted, I have sought to apply the new frameworks and perspectives that have arisen as a result of first defining and then reflexively pursuing the research goals of my larger project. My examination of the lack of collaborative female relationships in re-visioned fairy tales, accompanied by

consideration of how this situation might be redressed in my own creative work, has been both compass and lens. It should be emphasised, however, that the mere establishment of a framework is not a solution in itself. Challenging the tacit knowledge about stories and characters that I have acquired over two decades of writing for publication, and consciously developing new narrative strategies that allow for a different representation of women working together, while maintaining narrative drive and sustaining verisimilitude, is an ongoing process. And not necessarily a comfortable one for a writer who has for so long heeded the embodied signals of her storytelling instincts and intuitions. Recalling again Susan Sellers' contention that the re-visioning process can be both an act of demolition that explodes previously restrictive stories and an act of construction that creates "enabling alternatives" (30), I like to remind myself that part of this ongoing demolition and construction work must take place within my own mind, as well as on the page.

I am not suggesting that creative writers abandon or ignore the more intuitive aspects of their creative process, but rather that we regard these with a sceptical eye and an awareness of the unconscious cognitive structures, such as schemas, that underpin them. As Helen Garner notes, "You learn to listen to your intuitions, but then you have to learn to build on them" (in Woolfe and Grenville 72). Becoming attentive to the nature and possible origins of the knowledge that our unconscious holds and draws upon, and granting that this knowledge might be insufficient or even run counter to our conscious intentions, is vital reflexive work, especially for writers whose goal is to critique, subvert and/or redress perceived social imbalances. Reflexivity, writes Gillie Bolton, is the "near-impossible adventure of making aspects of the self strange" (8), and the identification and adoption of new frameworks will enable creative practitioners to interrogate our default assumptions, impulses and personal theories. While this plateau has illustrated how

participation in a higher degree program has led me to consider methods by which schemas may be recognised and challenged, more investigation into other strategies that creative writers may access to provoke greater self-reflection and reflexivity is needed. Kevin Brophy suggests that consciousness may have the potential to disrupt unconscious processes and sketches an intriguing possibility: that our unconscious is a “self or selves we might marvel at or learn from if we can negotiate an existence closer to the tricky border we share with that being” (50). Such a negotiation must surely, if tentatively, begin with an increased awareness of how the unconscious works and how we, as creative writers, can better work with it to inform and improve our creative practice.

Fourth Plateau: Conclusion

The overarching goal of this project has been to investigate how collaboration and friendship among female characters can be re-visioned in contemporary fairy tales, with my research proceeding rhizomatically along three primary “lines of flight” (Deleuze and Guattari 21). Firstly, following the lead of scholars such as Sellers, Harries, Schanoes, Joosen and Bacchilega, this thesis regards fairy-tale re-vision to be a vital form of feminist creative praxis, a methodology I have employed to produce my own collection of re-visioned fairy tales, “Never Afters”. Such a project aims, in the words of Maria Tatar, to “demystify these sacred cultural texts, to show that we can break their magical spells and that social change is possible once we become aware of the stories that have guided our social, moral, and personal development” (*Classic* xvii). This thesis has demonstrated that, not only are collaborative female relationships within fairy tales notably scarce (Mendelson; Tatar *Hard*), this absence that is often replicated in contemporary retellings (see, for example: Bernheimer *Mother*; Guran; Parisien and Wolfe) and contextualised by a wider cultural (mis)perception of how girls and women interact within one another. As Que Minh Luu, executive producer of the ABC comedy series *Content* (2019), observes:

I think we’re used to seeing ... men who despite all odds love each other and get through the shit together, but often female relationships ... are portrayed as vicious or bitchy. But there’s this new trend now where people are realising ... that’s not really an accurate depiction of female relationships, because by and large women are pretty supportive of each other. (in Williams)

Pushing back against the established dichotomy of either female acrimony or female isolation in fairy tales, I have endeavoured instead to imagine and explore different expressions of mutually beneficial female relationships, including mother-daughter

bonds, queer relationships, collaborations both temporary and long-lasting, and, of course, genuine friendships. My creative artefact, therefore, assists in redressing the balance in representation by providing complex, nuanced portrayals of female collaboration and friendship at various ages and under diverse circumstances. While there are additional narrative and thematic forces at work — including an explicitly feminist critique of the hypotexts and their surrounding scholarship, as well as the use of sequels as a particular mode of retelling — “Never Afters” is the only collection of retold fairy tales among those I have found within my research parameters that centres on positive and mutually beneficial female relationships throughout its text³⁶.

Of course, my novelettes are not entirely alone in their depiction of female collaboration and friendship, and the second investigative line this thesis pursued was to assemble a corpus of contemporary re-visioned fairy tales in which similar dynamics among girls and women are explored. Significantly, my critical analysis of these texts has identified, defined and discussed five key strategies that the selected authors — as well as myself — employ to embed affirming female relationships in their fiction: inversion, insertion/deletion, expansion, fusion and extrapolation. In doing so, I have demonstrated the success of such strategies in depicting greater positivity and nuance in how female characters interact, and facilitating the creation of complex intertextual narratives that serve to critique, expand and enliven the genre as a whole. I should also note how frustrating it often was to discover a distinct lack of pre-existing scholarship around many of the authors or, more specifically, the particular texts I had found that include female collaboration, with this absence of available secondary analysis posing a contextual challenge to my own research. While this scant attention may partially be a result of some

³⁶ Even “After Midnight”, with its focus on the suspicions and jealousies of the Queen, depicts a (presumably) successful female collaboration at work in the background.

authors (or texts) being relatively recent, others seem to have been simply overlooked in the critical literature despite having published an impressive body of fairy-tale related work. Understandably, there is ample scholarship around Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch*, for example, as well as significant critical attention paid to Block's *The Rose and the Beast*. By contrast, critical analysis of the short fiction of distinguished Australian authors Angela Slatter and Margo Lanagan, for example, returns almost no results in comprehensive database searches. It is hoped that the attention paid to such authors in this thesis will invigorate greater interest among the wider global community of fairy-tale scholars.

Having embarked upon writing my own re-visioned fairy tales, as well as analysing the work of other authors in the field, my third line of inquiry emerged from the reflexive interrogation of my own creative practice in order to better understand how the portrayal of female collaboration and friendship might be continually downplayed and overlooked, even in the work of authors who are themselves female and engaged with supportive female networks. Using research from the cognitive sciences, I have posited that schema theories in particular might offer both explanation and validation for some aspects of the creative process and have suggested that further investigation using an interdisciplinary approach might be a fruitful arena for creative researchers to explore. With much of our knowledge about the world gained through exposure to narratives (Bruner; Damasio; Herman; Spolsky), this thesis argues that creative writers might be reflecting a storied reality in our work as much as (if not more than) our lived experiences, thus replicating fictional worlds and people rather than 'real' ones. Through intimate case studies of my own creative practice, I have sought to examine the possible effects of schemas upon narrative creation and highlight the unconscious cognitive processes at work in the creative mind. Importantly, I have also recommended that

creative writers — and perhaps artists of all stripes — regularly seek to adopt new frameworks through which to critically examine our tacit knowledge and learned expertise in order to advance our creative practice. This thesis thus contributes to a growing body of work that seeks to articulate both the process and practice of creative writing, rather than merely its products, and it is hoped that the insights it offers into my own creative praxis may be of interest and assistance to other practitioners and researchers.

While I am pleased with “Never Afters” as a whole, there are certain aspects of the collection that, for me at least, remain unresolved. Firstly, the necessary depth and rigour of my research enabled me to recognise the machinations of Michie’s sororophobia operating within my own creative work but not to entirely overcome it. Indeed, as one of my supervisors noted after reading a draft of “Winterbloom”, the last novelette that I finished for this project:³⁷

I enjoyed the relationship between the two women: unease gentling into a kind of friendship. Is it just me, or is there quite a bit of this in the collection? A sense that women’s relationships with each other often have to overcome initial distrust, envy, unease, and/or that unease remains within the relations that emerge. (Sulway)

While it was always my intention to construct female relationships that were complex and even fractious, allowing for both positive and negative feminine expressions, and shying away from problematic utopian ideals, I admit to finding myself troubled to realise that I have been unable to imagine even a single unbridled, unquestioning, uncomplicated beginning to a female friendship. Only the well-established relationships — Gretel and Dagmar in “Burnt Sugar”, for example, or Zel and Boorma in “Braid” — reflect a comfortable ease between the women, with no details provided as to the origins of these

³⁷ Based on “Beauty and the Beast” and, as previously noted, omitted from this thesis.

bonds. Further, in reflecting upon my entire writing career, I can see this is a pattern that runs deep — my female characters seldom interact with other girls or women in ways that are unapologetically positive. There is often an element of suspicion, distrust or jealousy, even if this later softens. This discovery echoes Bertram’s study of female poets, whose strong real-life friendships remain absent from their poems, leaving me to wonder once again why my creative work so often fails to incorporate my personal knowledge and lived experience of female collaboration and friendship. While beyond the scope of this thesis to fully explore, it is certainly an outcome that will provoke much future contemplation.

In developing my novelettes and discussing them with colleagues and peers, a number of interrelated questions also began to chafe at me. Do we restore collaborative relationships between women at the expense of male characters? Must the payment for resurrected maternal figures be a phalanx of monstrous fathers? If antagonists are no longer to be reliably female, is it men who will be shunted in to take their place? Are my stories, as one (male) friend bluntly put it, merely exercises in “man-bashing”? It rankles to be writing unapologetically female-centred stories while simultaneously fielding demands for male feelings and concerns to be taken into account, but still. Perhaps the powerful attraction of the protagonist vs antagonist structure may be a product of our common mode of storytelling that privileges the individual over the cohort or community. In the omitted “Winterbloom”, I deliberately crafted a story without an embodied antagonist. Conflict and tension arise instead from a complicated marriage and years of well-intentioned miscommunication. An early reader described it as gentle but compelling. When pushed for further consideration, “gentle” seemed to be code for “without violence” or “lacking a villain”. While it remains another concern largely beyond the remit of this thesis to explore, I do wonder if what we need for socio-cultural

balance is more of these “gentle” stories, tales that explore collaborative struggles against the external, often systemic, forces that too frequently beset us all.

In order to contextualise my own creative work and ensure that the scope of my research remained manageable, this project has focused solely upon short literary fiction written primarily for adult readerships. Obviously, this leaves open numerous avenues for further research into the representation of female relationships, not only in other literary fields such as novel-length works or fiction written explicitly for children and/or younger adults, but in narrative media produced for film and television, as well as that generated within the fields of visual and performing arts. The emerging digital arena of narrative-based gaming, as well as virtual and augmented reality storytelling, all of which involve various degrees of interaction and immersion from their audience-participants, would also almost certainly prove fertile grounds for the exploration of how female collaboration and friendship is depicted within key fields of contemporary cultural production. In addition, it would be interesting to investigate if the strategies I have identified authors using to introduce positive interactions among girls and women in re-visioned fairy tales are also employed by authors seeking to challenge, displace and/or queer the dominant cultural discourse along axes of race, class, sexuality, ability or geosocial boundaries.

In its three-pronged approach to researching the representation of female collaboration and friendship in re-visioned fairy tales, this thesis has made a valuable contribution to the critical literature around contemporary fairy tales, as well as expanding the dynamic genre of fairy-tale fiction itself, and has also furthered knowledge in the field of creative writing as process and practice via the articulation and reflexive exploration of my own creative praxis. I would like to conclude by reflecting one final time upon a pertinent re-visioned fairy tale, “The Story of the Eldest Princess” (1994) by A. S. Byatt. The protagonist is a bookish young royal, the eldest of three sisters, who is sent on a quest

to retrieve a magical bird. Because she is well versed in fairy tales, the princess knows that she, along with her middle sister, will necessarily fail, and that it will be the third and youngest sibling who will ultimately fulfil the quest. At first, the perceived futility of her situation leaves her despondent:

She thought, I am in a pattern I know, and I suspect I have no power to break it, and I am going to meet a test and fail it, and spend seven years as a stone. (48)

Despite her foreboding, the eldest princess continues on, aiding a trio of injured animals she encounters along the way. Her knowledge of fairy tales ultimately informs her rebellious decision to leave the prescribed path and journey instead to find a “very wise woman” (51) who lives in the Last House in the forest. In this mission she is wholly successful, and the old woman is quick to provide validation for her decisions:

You are a born storyteller ... You had the sense to see you were caught in a story, and the sense to see that you could change it to another one. (66)

This eloquently articulates the re-visionary impulse that drives many authors of contemporary fairy tales, myself included. The ability to recognise the fictional, cultural and personal narratives that ensnare us, to imagine alternatives and hold confidence in the possibility of change, is necessary for us to first break, and then remake them. To do so, we must continually put to ourselves the same question that the wise old woman asks of the eldest princess: “Why should things be as they always were?” (67).

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