Rewriting fairy tales
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Little Red Riding Hood
Ears, Eyes, Teeth.

Did you spot me quickly?
I know you did

(I'm quite the stunner).

I tossed my hair,
I hitched my skirt;
The usual
Ritual dance

(You want me).

He came from the dark
With his ears and eyes
And shining teeth –
They charmed me in,

Snake on a hook.

Take me mister – I’m yours –
Swathed in red, pulsing red,
My heated heart is yours:
The blood in my veins is
Yours.

Mother dear, you never warned
About the charming wolves.
You never said
Us little girls need
Camouflage cloaks and
Cold carving knives to
Hack it in the wood.
Mother, mother, teach me quick:
That bad men tear and rip.

Peel back the scarlet hood,
Unsheathe me

(This isn't what I had in mind).
He grinned his cut-glass teeth at me,
Whispered, “I want you,
   This is only natural;
Fifteen’s far too old to stay un kissed”
   (Wait, I don’t want to do this).

Am I wet enough for you yet,
   Herr Wolf?
Sticky teeth and sticky thighs.
Take a bite, I’m easy:
I’m off the path.
But here’s the truth;
I never made it
   to
   the
   other side.

Cinderella
Glass and Paint

(Of course, I saw you first:
   You’ll pick me and you’ll say
   “She’s mine.”)
I’ll hang on your hip,
Hold me there, grind me,
Paint my face with bright hot
Ash and, god, kiss me:
   Because I’m worth it.

I step on the shoes
And rub my heel down
   (the price of poster-perfect pins).
You turn to me and praise
How long it took to
Decorate my face.

This doll blinks her heavy eyes:
Painted glass beads
In a masquerade face
   - Whirl me round.

I slip into silk,
Flash the flesh - you’ll love me
Now.
Touchez-moi on the dance floor, monsieur -
   I’ll melt between your fingers.

Stop.

The cold glass cracks.

I’ll peel off the blinding dress,
Step out of the skirts and
Stand in my ragged skin:
   A shredded shadow.
   You turn away.

I am made of ash:
   Blow me into dust.
Snow White
After Apples

They wound me in white cloth,
With my quick virgin smile.
They bundled me up and
They packaged me off:

La belle bar-coded bride.

I whispered, “I do,” and
I was all for you, then.

I left my red lip-stain
On your hot, hard throat. You
Locked me in my kitchen
Chair, with my loose white limbs:

The washed-out wife
(It’s true).

The marriage bed burns
The pale white skin
And scratches beauty
From your star-crossed cheeks.

The apples are ripe,
They bloom in my blistered throat,
To choke me up
As I kiss you:

This isn’t what was meant for me:

My white skin was not made for walls,
My shining hair not hewn for the hearth
And my lips -
My red, hot lips -  
Were not made for your dripping mouth.

Your eyes are cold now,  
Lost their lust  
For some harlot or whore  
With your hoard of belles bastards  
    Fawning at your feet.
(Does she call you her prince?  
Does she purr out your name  
And make you moan?)

Don’t worry, I’ll be here,  
My sweet, mon mari:  
The dutiful wife  
In your bed,  
    Ready to wipe you down.

Just you see.

At night  
The curtain falls away  
To jet black gleaming glass,  
The mirror laps me with its tongue,  
Touches my cheeks  
In my dreams;  
Flickers its eyes  
    and calls my name.

I smile as it shows me my lips and my teeth  
    To bite up skirts  
And little bastard girls,  
    As the black consumes.
Fairy tale rewrite: critique

‘At the focal point of the fairy tale stands man’ (Lüthi 1976, 137). This can be seen in practically every popular fairy tale: Briar Rose must be rescued by a handsome prince, Beauty has her Beast and Bluebeard hides a terrible secret. These stories have long been gathered and retold by men, such as Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm. Their tales very much focus on the idea of male supremacy and seek to ‘acculturate women to traditional social roles’ (Lieberman 1972, 185). Although there were fairy tales collected by women, such as Madame d’Aulnoy’s seventeenth century ‘Les Contes de Fées’, the popularity, endurance and adaptability of the Grimm and Perrault versions suggest that the female voice in fairy tales has been stifled throughout time. I decided to write a series of poems from the first-person perspective of fairy tale ‘heroines’ since, when I was reading these texts, I thought that the women, although central to the story, were not portrayed in an equal manner to men, with their personalities being crushed under the weight of heroic princely victories. I have therefore provided several female characters with voices, which could suggest that these girls and women are no longer to be dismissed as passive and submissive, but rather violently restrained by patriarchy in the society in which they live. I have chosen to rework the popular tales of ‘Little Red Riding Hood’, ‘Cinderella’ and ‘Snow White’, as these stories in particular stuck out to me as ones where male characters intervened with the fate of females to rescue them from danger (or spinsterhood). Therefore I think it is very possible to read my new poems using feminist criticism.

In terms of French, or poststructuralist, feminism these poems can be seen as ‘écriture feminine’, as they question traditional poetic language enforced by patriarchy. The structure of the poems is sometimes erratic, even unstable, as they fight to create their own poetic structure that veers away from traditional writing, exploding the myth that art must be male-dominated and supervised by the ‘dominant’ sex (Watkins, 2001, 97). However, I think these poems also reflect aspects of Anglo-American feminism, as all three question woman’s place in society and the ‘subservient’ feminine roles that are thrust upon them (Madsen 2000, 9). All of my poems seek to deconstruct the binary oppositions of masculine and feminine, showing that the roles held by fairy tale characters (and many people in today’s society) are outdated and unhealthy for a modern day audience.
I wanted these poems to use adult themes, in order to differentiate them from tales associated with the nursery, and would suggest that the message I am trying to convey is different from that of the traditional tales. Therefore, I took my inspiration from the stories of Angela Carter in *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), which use rich imagery to make the tales darker, seen in the representation of the wolves in ‘The Company of Wolves’, ‘They are grey as famine, they are as unkind as plague’ (Carter 1979, 130). This leads them away from the land of talking animals that has been so popularised by Disney. Olga Broumas’s poem, ‘Little Red Riding Hood’, was also a major inspiration for my pieces and gave me the idea of working the tales into feminist poetry. Broumas’s poem used references to the fairy tale in order to show comparisons with the life of not only the fairy tale protagonist, but also with the lives of ‘other women / who might be walking the same road to their own grandma’s house’ (Broumas 1977, 120), an idea that I have also tried to use in my own poetry.

By using poems instead of the traditional fairy tale form of narrative prose, I have created a short space to concentrate as much emotion as possible, often resulting in intense, dramatic imagery which draws these tales further away from their tame, literary backgrounds, and into the strong voices of individual women who are crying out to be heard. The short length of the poems also allowed me to turn my attention to more than one fairy tale, which I think gives the reader more variety as well as allowing a range of female protagonists a chance to speak out: from a naïve young girl, to a bitter, middle-aged housewife, showing these women growing wiser as the sequence of poems progresses. I also felt that there was room for different readings and ambiguity in my poems, which allowed the reader to interpret the piece as they wished, and not just be barked morals at, as was common with some of the older versions of these stories. However, I think that all of my poems are linked by the strong themes of female sexuality and violence towards women which I feel creates a bond between each of these fairy tale heroines.

My first poem, ‘Ears, Eyes, Teeth’ tells the story of ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ as the young girl goes from innocence to experience. In the Grimm version of the story, this development is seen as positive, as Red Riding Hood learns from her mistake by talking to strangers, ‘Never again will you stray from the path’ (Grimm 1812, 16). However in my poem, her mistake is to be her downfall, reminiscent of the earlier Perrault version of the story, where the little girl is eaten. Although the Grimm and Perrault tales do not give the girl’s age, I wanted her to be at her time in her youth when she is likely to go through the most physical
and mental change. By making the girl fifteen years old, I have placed her at the peak of adolescence, which can also be seen in the modern rewrites, ‘Wolfland’ (1980) by Tanith Lee and Carter’s ‘The Company of Wolves’ (1979). When writing this piece, I wanted to give the fairy tale a more sinister edge, which I feel has become lost in the pantomime effect of ‘Oh, Grandmother, what big eyes you have!’ (Grimm 1812, 15). Therefore, I have created a darker atmosphere by using a negative lexical set of fear, ‘cut-glass’, ‘rip’ and ‘tear’, when describing the wolf. By visually trailing off at the end of the poem, it is suggested that the protagonist is dying and fading away.

However, the tale can also be read as a ‘parable of rape’, which makes the poem even more horrific (Brownmiller 1976, 343-4). I have suggested this with the ambiguous statement ‘I never made it/to/the/other side’, as the little innocent girl who entered the forest did not pass through unchanged. The wolf is personified, ‘He grinned’ and ‘mister’, which makes him a man who is ready to take advantage of the young girl. I think the poem can be seen, in terms of feminism, as the idea that certain men still view themselves as having dominance over women, and women must ‘submit[s] to patriarchal needs’ (Rowe 1979, 217). Red Riding Hood does not put up much of a fight, ‘Wait, I don’t want to do this’, because society has taught her that in order to be feminine she must be passive, submissive and not challenge the status quo. However, her panicked, ‘Mother, mother, teach me quick’ suggests that she realises (too late) that what is happening to her is wrong. The overtly sexual, ‘Am I wet enough for you yet, Herr Wolf?’ holds a bitter, sarcastic tone, as if Red Riding Hood has finally realised what is happening to her. Also, during the suggested rape, ‘Peel back the scarlet hood, / Unsheathe me’, the metre and line lengths become jagged and visually more varied than the rest of the poem, revealing the young girl’s shock and disorientation as well as the jagged teeth of the highly sexual wolf/man.

For ‘Glass and Paint’, I used the story of ‘Cinderella’, incorporating both the Grimm and Perrault versions of the tale. By sexualising the character of Cinderella using phrases such as ‘grind me’, I have tried to steer the poem as far away from the well-known Disney version as possible. The fantasy of helpful cartoon animals and magic wishing trees has deserted the protagonist, and been replaced by a harsh reality of man-made dresses and makeup which confines the woman to her role in society as a beautiful object of male admiration. At the start of the Perrault story, ‘Cinderella is helpless, [and] forsaken’ (Lüthi 1976, 61), but in my version, the protagonist stays this way. Cinderella is alone throughout the poem, and even her
potential lover leaves her at the end once she is stripped of all her finery, ‘I peel off the blinding dress … You turn away’.

Fairy tales can be said to reinforce the ‘patriarchal status quo’ as they make female subordination seem a romantically desirable fate (Rowe 1979, 209). The ‘romance’ that my Cinderella so desires is false, as the man is only attracted to her for her clothes, make-up and the performance of femininity that she projects every day of her life, without concerning himself with her personality as he does not bother to talk to her (Butler, 1990, 25). He is not attracted to her, but rather the image she gives out, as she mimics how other women are portrayed in the media, even quoting the L’Oreal slogan, ‘Because I’m worth it’. The alliteration seen throughout the poem such as, ‘the price of poster-perfect pins’ echoes tabloid and magazine headlines, emphasising woman’s connection with the media. Cinderella must take part in a mass ‘beauty contest’ (Lieberman 1972, 188), in order to win the male’s affections, which is exemplified in the ostentatious ball held by the prince. I think this can very much be seen in the traditional fairy story: if it had not been for Cinderella’s apparel, ‘cloth of gold and silver, all beset with jewels’, she would have gone unnoticed by the Prince, rather than being admired by him: ‘he was very much in love with the beautiful person’ (Perrault 1697, 18 and 21). Lieberman has suggested that women learn from fairy tales that to be beautiful is to be rich and loved – therefore Cinderella in both my own and the traditional tales seeks to portray herself as an ‘objet-d’art’ and a figure of lust in order to progress in society instead of relying on her own ‘pluck, resourcefulness, or wit’ (Lieberman, 1972, 188).

It could be suggested that my Cinderella is complicit in society’s ‘beauty contest’, as she chooses to ‘decorate’ her face with make-up and wear ‘silk’ in order to attract her prince. However, this seems to be the only way of life that the protagonist knows, even basing her opinions of herself on this idea of male supremacy: Cinderella finds out that men, in the form of the key cipher ‘The Prince’, will only like her when she is ‘painted’ and preened, and when she discovers this, she views herself as worthless, ‘I am made of ash: / Blow me into dust’. No-one values her personality, as the society in which she lives is purely based on appearances, and the person she has tried to become through her looks is just a ‘masquerade face’. The series of monosyllabic words set apart form the rest of the text, ‘Stop. / The cold glass cracks’, brings into stark reality the predicament the protagonist is in. However, it is seemingly too late for her to change and Cinderella can only fade into ‘dust’.
For my poem, ‘After Apples’, I have turned the character of Snow White into a potentially evil mother figure, bringing the traditional tale full-circle. The poem is set after the usual versions end, where Snow White realises, as she becomes older, that she is not happy living the married life that was always expected of her in a society where ‘marriage dominates’ (Lieberman 1972, 189). Snow White moves into a world of ‘absolute capitulation’ within patriarchy when she married a prince (Rowe 1979, 217). The idea for this poem was sparked by the Gilbert and Gubar essay, ‘The Queen’s Looking Glass’ (1979), which suggests that Snow White is to be subjected to the same fate as her step-mother. Bettelheim’s interpretation suggests that the ‘stepmother’s temptations’ of possessing ultimate beauty are very close ‘to Snow White’s inner desires’ as she accepts the laces and combs from the queen, wishing to be beautiful too (Bettelheim 1976, 211). Therefore, it can be suggested that the queen ‘foreshadows the destiny of Snow White’ (Gilbert 1979a, 42), just as in Anne Sexton’s ‘Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs’ poem, the adult queen Snow White in the final stanza is seen ‘referring to her mirror / as women do’ (Sexton, 1981, 229). This also suggests the Victorian binary opposition where women can only be one of two people: an angel or a monster. In ‘After Apples’, her rising anger towards her husband’s infidelity enables her to realise that she can no longer be an ‘angel’, and must therefore change herself into something ‘monstrous’ in order to fulfil a female role that is expected of her in society.

My Snow White is reminiscent of the sexual and active female characters of Angela Carter, who control their own fate, particularly in ‘The Lady of the House of Love’, by using men to their own advantage. This is seen in ‘My clothes have but to fall and you will see before you a succession of mysteries’, which suggests that the man sees whatever she wants him to as he is controlled by her performance (Carter 1979, 119). Also, the woman’s sexuality can be seen in ‘Embraces, kisses … that breathes lasciviously of forbidden pleasures’, as Countess Nosferatu entices a young man so she can drink his blood rendering him powerless (119). However, Carter’s dominating character embodies the female ‘monster’ role as she is actually a blood-drinking vampire. In my poem, it can be suggested that Snow White has no other option but to become this monster-figure as this is the only choice offered to women whose identity has been stripped away by marriage (Lieberman 1972, 200). As a result of this loss of personal identity, the poem’s protagonist is very bitter towards her husband and the beautiful children of his mistress who Snow White wishes to ‘bite up’. I have conveyed a seething anger using a steady beat throughout the poem, particularly at the start in the regular six syllable lines of the first two stanzas, culminating in confused, mixed syllable-length lines to
show Snow White’s frustration. The tell-tale ‘Just you see’ shows the speaker’s transition from a ‘docile’ and ‘submissive’ child (with her ‘virgin smile’) to a spiteful ‘demonic’ woman (Gilbert 1797b, 203).

I think these poems have successfully rewritten three classic fairy tales in a new and feminist way. I feel that these texts uphold the feminist belief that ‘[t]he female pen offers escape from the prison of the male text’ (Gilbert 1979b, 208), as by using a different perspective, the poems offer a voice to women rather than suppressing their words, as well as exposing the wrong-doings of patriarchy within society. The women or ‘victims’ in the poems (Lieberman 1972, 194), seem to be calling out for help, asking the reader to break them out of the patriarchy they are bound up in. I feel that these poems have an important message which draws attention to the appalling treatment of many women in traditional male-dominated versions of fairy tales.

**Bibliography**


