

is no longer sought, she derives her status from her husband, and her personal identity is thus snuffed out. When fairy tales show courtship as exciting, and conclude with marriage, and the vague statement that 'they lived happily ever after,' children may develop a deep-seated desire always to be courted, since marriage is literally the end of the story.

The controversy about what is biologically determined and what is learned has just begun. These are the questions now being asked, and not yet answered: to what extent is passivity a biological attribute of females; to what extent is it culturally determined; Perhaps it will be argued that these stories show archetypal female behavior, but one may wonder to what extent they reflect female attributes, or to what extent they serve as training manuals for girls? If one argued that the characteristically passive behavior of female characters in fairy stories is a reflection of an attribute inherent in female personality, would one also argue, as consistency would require, that the mercantile reward system of fairy stories reflects values that are inherent in human nature? We must consider the possibility that the classical attributes of 'femininity' found in these stories are in fact imprinted in children and reinforced by the stories themselves. Analyses of the influence of the most popular children's literature may give us an insight into some of the origins of psycho-sexual identity.

Notes

- 1 Alison Lurie, 'Fairy Tale Liberation', *The New York Review of Books*, December 17, 1970, p. 42.
- 2 Lurie, 'Witches and Fairies: Fitzgerald to Updike', *The New York Review of Books*, 2 December, 1971, p. 6.
- 3 Andrew Lang, ed., *The Green Fairy Book* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), pp. ix-xi.
- 4 In these stories, the girl who marries a beast must agree to accept and love a beast as a husband; the girl must give herself to a beast in order to get a man. When she is willing to do this, he can shed his frightening, rough appearance and show his gentler form, demonstrating the softening agency of women (as in the story of Jane Eyre and Mr. Rochester). These heroines have an agentive role, insofar as they are responsible for the literal reformation of the male.
- 5 Lang, ed., *The Blue Fairy Book* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966) p. 98. All quotations are from this edition.
- 6 Lurie, 'Fairy Tale Liberation,' *loc. cit.*
- 7 Ruth Kelso's *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956) demonstrates that 'the moral ideal for the lady is essentially Christian . . . as that for the gentleman is essentially pagan. For him the ideal is self-expansion and realization. . . . For the lady the direct opposite is prescribed. The eminently Christian virtues of chastity, humility, piety, and patience under suffering and wrong, are the necessary virtues.' (p. 36)

18 The Queen's Looking Glass

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar

As the legend of Lilith shows, and as psychoanalysts from Freud and Jung onward have observed, myths and fairy tales often both state and enforce culture's sentences with greater accuracy than more sophisticated literary texts. If Lilith's story summarizes the genesis of the female monster in a single useful parable, the Grimm tale of 'Little Snow White' dramatizes the essential but equivocal relationship between the angel-woman and the monster-woman, a relationship that is also implicit in Aurora Leigh's bewildered speculations about her dead mother. 'Little Snow White', which Walt Disney entitled 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarves', should really be called Snow White and Her Wicked Stepmother, for the central action of the tale — indeed, its only real action — arises from the relationship between these two women: the one fair, young, pale, the other just as fair, but older, fiercer; the one a daughter, the other a mother; the one sweet, ignorant, passive, the other both artful and active: the one a sort of angel, the other an undeniable witch.

Significantly, the conflict between these two women is fought out largely in the transparent enclosures into which, like all the other images of women we have been discussing here, both have been locked: a magic looking glass, an enchanted and enchanting glass coffin. Here, wielding as weapons the tools patriarchy suggests that women use to kill themselves into art, the two women literally try to kill each other with art. Shadow fights shadow, image destroys image in the crystal prison, as if the 'fiend' of Aurora's mother's portrait should plot to destroy the 'angel' who is another one of her selves.

The story begins in midwinter, with a Queen sitting and sewing, framed by a window. As in so many fairy tales, she pricks her finger, bleeds, and is thereby assumed into the cycle of sexuality William Blake called the realm of 'generation', giving birth 'soon after' to a daughter 'as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as the wood of the

window frame'.¹ All the motifs introduced in this prefatory first paragraph — sewing, snow, blood, enclosure — are associated with key themes in female lives (hence in female writing), and they are thus themes we shall be studying throughout this book. But for our purposes here the tale's opening is merely prefatory. The real story begins when the Queen, having become a mother, metamorphoses also into a witch — that is, into a wicked 'step' mother: '... when the child was born, the Queen died,' and 'After a year had passed the King took to himself another wife.'

When we first encounter this 'new' wife, she is framed in a magic looking glass, just as her predecessor — that is, her earlier self — had been framed in a window. To be caught and trapped in a mirror rather than a window, however, is to be driven inward, obsessively studying self-images as if seeking a viable self. The first Queen seems still to have had prospects; not yet fallen into sexuality, she looked outward, if only upon the snow. The second Queen is doomed to the inward search that psychoanalysts like Bruno Bettelheim censoriously define as 'narcissism,'² but which (as Mary Elizabeth Coleridge's 'The Other Side of the Mirror' suggested) is necessitated by a state from which all outward prospects have been removed.

That outward prospects *have* been removed — or lost or dissolved away — is suggested not only by the Queen's mirror obsession but by the absence of the King from the story as it is related in the Grimm version. The Queen's husband and Snow White's father (for whose attentions, according to Bettelheim, the two women are battling in a feminized Oedipal struggle) never actually appears in this story at all, a fact that emphasizes the almost stifling intensity with which the tale concentrates on the conflict in the mirror between mother and daughter, woman and woman, self and self. At the same time, though, there is clearly at least one way in which the King *is* present. His, surely, is the voice of the looking glass, the patriarchal voice of judgment that rules the Queen's — and every woman's — self-evaluation. He it is who decides, first, that his consort is 'the fairest of all,' and then, as she becomes maddened, rebellious, witchlike, that she must be replaced by his angelically innocent and dutiful daughter, a girl who is therefore defined as 'more beautiful still' than the Queen. To the extent, then, that the King, and only the King, constituted the first Queen's prospects, he need no longer appear in the story because, having assimilated the meaning of her own sexuality (and having, thus, become the second Queen) the woman has internalized the King's rules: his voice resides now in her own mirror, her own mind.

But if Snow White is 'really' the daughter of the second as well as of

the first Queen (i.e., if the two Queens are identical), why does the Queen hate her so much? The traditional explanation — that the mother is as threatened by her daughter's 'budding sexuality' as the daughter is by the mother's 'possession' of the father is helpful but does not seem entirely adequate, considering the depth and ferocity of the Queen's rage. It is true, of course, that in the patriarchal Kingdom of the text these women inhabit, the Queen's life can be literally imperilled by her daughter's beauty, and true (as we shall see throughout this study) that, given the female vulnerability such perils imply, female bonding is extraordinarily difficult in patriarchy: women almost inevitably turn against women because the voice of the looking glass sets them against each other. But, beyond all this, it seems as if there is a sense in which the intense desperation with which the Queen enacts her rituals of self-absorption causes (or is caused by) her hatred of Snow White. Innocent, passive, and self-lessly free of the mirror madness that consumes the Queen, Snow White represents the ideal of renunciation that the Queen has already renounced at the beginning of the story. Thus Snow White is destined to replace the Queen *because* the Queen hates her, rather than vice versa. The Queen's hatred of Snow White, in other words, exists before the looking glass has provided an obvious reason for hatred.

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

The first death plot the Queen invents is a naïvely straightforward murder story: she commands one of her huntsmen to kill Snow White. But, as Bruno Bettelheim has shown, the huntsman is really a surrogate for the King, a parental — or, more specifically, patriarchal — figure 'who dominates, controls, and subdues wild ferocious beasts' and who thus 'represents the subjugation of the animal, asocial, violent tend-

encies in man'.³ In a sense, then, the Queen has foolishly asked her patriarchal master to act for her in doing the subversive deed she wants to do in part to retain power over him and in part to steal his power from him. Obviously, he will not do this. As patriarchy's angelic daughter, Snow White is, after all, *his* child, and he must save her, not kill her. Hence he kills a wild boar in her stead, and brings its lung and liver to the Queen as proof that he has murdered the child. Thinking that she is devouring her ice-pure enemy, therefore, the Queen consumes, instead, the wild boar's organs; that is, symbolically speaking, she devours her own beastly rage, and becomes (of course) even more enraged.

When she learns that her first plot has failed, then, the Queen's storytelling becomes angrier as well as more inventive, more sophisticated, more subversive. Significantly, each of the three 'tales' she tells — that is, each of the three plots she invents — depends on a poisonous or parodic use of a distinctively female device as a murder weapon, and in each case she reinforces the sardonic commentary on 'femininity' that such weaponry makes by impersonating a 'wise' woman, a 'good' mother, or, as Ellen Moers would put it, an 'educating heroine'.⁴ As a 'kind' old pedlar woman, she offers to lace Snow White 'properly' for once — then suffocates her with a very Victorian set of tight laces. As another wise old expert in female beauty, she promises to comb Snow White's hair 'properly,' then assaults her with a poisonous comb. Finally, as a wholesome farmer's wife, she gives Snow White a 'very poisonous apple', which she has made in 'a quite secret, lonely room, where no one ever came'. The girl finally falls, killed, so it seems, by the female arts of cosmetology and cookery. Paradoxically, however, even though the Queen has been using such feminine wiles as the sirens' comb and Eve's apple subversively, to destroy angelic Snow White so that she (the Queen) can assert and aggrandize herself, these arts have had on her daughter an opposite effect from those she intended. Strengthening the chaste maiden in her passivity, they have made her into precisely the eternally beautiful, inanimate *objet d'art* patriarchal aesthetics want a girl to be. From the point of view of the mad, self-assertive Queen, conventional female arts *kill*. But from the point of view of the docile and selfless princess, such arts, even while they kill, confer the only measure of power available to a woman in a patriarchal culture.

Certainly, when the kindly huntsman-father saved her life by abandoning her in the forest at the edge of his kingdom, Snow White discovered her own powerlessness. Though she had been allowed to live because she was a 'good' girl, she had to find her own devious way of resisting the onslaughts of the maddened Queen, both inside and

outside her self. In this connection, the seven dwarves probably represent her own dwarfed powers, her stunted selfhood, for, as Bettelheim points out, they can do little to help save the girl from the Queen. At the same time, however, her life with them is an important part of her education in submissive femininity, for in serving them she learns essential lessons of service, of selflessness, of domesticity. Finally, that at this point Snow White is a housekeeping angel in a *tiny* house conveys the story's attitude toward 'woman's world and woman's work': the realm of domesticity is a miniaturized kingdom in which the best of women is not only like a dwarf but like a dwarf's servant.

Does the irony and bitterness consequent upon such a perception lead to Snow White's few small acts of disobedience? Or would Snow White ultimately have rebelled anyway, precisely because she *is* the Queen's true daughter? The story does not, of course, answer such questions, but it does seem to imply them, since its turning point comes from Snow White's significant willingness to be tempted by the Queen's 'gifts', despite the dwarves' admonitions. Indeed, the only hint of self-interest that Snow White displays throughout the whole story comes in her 'narcissistic' desire for the stay-laces, the comb, and the apple that the disguised murderess offers. As Bettelheim remarks, this 'suggests how close the stepmother's temptations are to Snow White's inner desires'.⁵ Indeed, it suggests that, as we have already noted, the Queen and Snow White are in some sense one: while the Queen struggles to free herself from the passive Snow White in herself, Snow White must struggle to repress the assertive Queen in herself. That both women eat from the same deadly apple in the third temptation episode merely clarifies and dramatizes this point. The Queen's lonely art has enabled her to contrive a two-faced fruit — one white and one red 'cheek' — that represents her ambiguous relationship to this angelic girl who is both her daughter and her enemy, her self and her opposite. Her intention is that the girl will die of the apple's poisoned red half — red with her sexual energy, her assertive desire for deeds of blood and triumph — while she herself will be unharmed by the passivity of the white half.

But though at first this seems to have happened, the apple's effect is, finally, of course, quite different. After the Queen's artfulness has killed Snow White into art, the girl becomes if anything even more dangerous to her 'step' mother's autonomy than she was before, because even more opposed to it in both mind and body. For, dead and self-less in her glass coffin, she is an object, to be displayed and desired, patriarchy's marble 'opus', the decorative and decorous Galatea with whom every ruler would like to grace his parlor. Thus, when the Prince

first sees Snow White in her coffin, he begs the dwarves to give 'it' to him as a gift, 'for I cannot live without seeing Snow White. I will honour and prize her as my dearest possession'. An 'it,' a possession, Snow White has become an idealized image of herself, a woman in a portrait like Aurora Leigh's mother, and as such she has definitely proven herself to be patriarchy's ideal woman, the perfect candidate for Queen. At this point, therefore, she regurgitates the poison apple (whose madness had stuck in her throat) and rises from her coffin. The fairest in the land, she will marry the most powerful in the land; bidden to their wedding, the egotistically assertive, plotting Queen will become a former Queen, dancing herself to death in red-hot iron shoes.

What does the future hold for Snow White, however? When her Prince becomes a King and she becomes a Queen, what will her life be like? Trained to domesticity by her dwarf instructors, will she sit in the window, gazing out on the wild forest of her past, and sigh, and sew, and prick her finger, and conceive a child white as snow, red as blood, black as ebony wood? Surely, fairest of them all, Snow White has exchanged one glass coffin for another, delivered from the prison where the Queen put her only to be imprisoned in the looking glass from which the King's voice speaks daily. There is, after all, no female model for her in this tale except the 'good' (dead) mother and her living avatar the 'bad' mother. And if Snow White escaped her first glass coffin by her goodness, her passivity and docility, her only escape from her second glass coffin, the imprisoning mirror, must evidently be through 'badness,' through plots and stories, duplicitous schemes, wild dreams, fierce fictions, mad impersonations. The cycle of her fate seems inexorable. Renouncing 'contemplative purity,' she must now embark on that life of 'significant action' which, for a woman, is defined as a witch's life because it is so monstrous, so unnatural. Grotesque as *Errour*, *Duessa*, *Lucifera*, she will practise false arts in her secret, lonely room. Suicidal as *Lilith* and *Medea*, she will become a murderess bent on the self-slaughter implicit in her murderous attempts against her life of her own child. Finally, in fiery shoes that parody the costumes of femininity as surely as the comb and stays she herself contrived, she will do a silent terrible death-dance out of the story, the looking glass, the transparent coffin of her own image. Her only deed, this death will imply, can be a deed of death, her only action the pernicious action of self-destruction.

In this connection, it seems especially significant that the Queen's dance of death is a silent one. In 'The Juniper Tree', a version of 'Little Snow White' in which a boy's mother tries to kill him (for different reasons, of course) the dead boy is transformed not into a silent art

object but into a furious golden bird who sings a song of vengeance against his murderess and finally crushes her to death with a millstone.⁶ The male child's progress toward adulthood is a growth toward both self-assertion and self-articulation, 'The Juniper Tree' implies, a development of the *powers* of speech. But the girl child must learn the arts of silence either as herself a silent image invented and defined by the magic looking glass of the male-authored text, or as a silent dancer of her own woes, a dancer who enacts rather than articulates. From the abused Procne to the reclusive Lady of Shallott, therefore, women have been told that their art, like the witch's dance in 'Little Snow White', is an art of silence. Procne must record her sufferings with what Geoffrey Hartman calls 'the voice of the shuttle' because when she was raped her tongue was cut out.⁷ The Lady of Shallott must weave her story because she is imprisoned in a tower as adamant as any glass coffin, doomed to escape only through the self-annihilating madness of romantic love (just as the Queen is doomed to escape only through the self-annihilating madness of her death dance), and her last work of art is her own dead body floating downstream in a boat. And even when such maddened or grotesque female artists make sounds, they are for the most part, say patriarchal theorists, absurd or grotesque or pitiful. Procne's sister Philomel, for instance, speaks with an unintelligible bird's voice (unlike the voice of the hero of 'The Juniper Tree'). And when Gerard Manley Hopkins, with whom we began this meditation on pens and penises and kings and queens, wrote of her in an epigram 'On a Poetess,' he wrote as follows:

Miss M.'s a nightingale. 'Tis well
Your simile I keep.
It is the way with Philomel
To sing while others sleep.⁸

Even Matthew Arnold's more sympathetically conceived Philomel speaks 'a wild, unquenched, deep-sunken, old-world pain' that arises from the stirrings of a 'bewildered brain'.⁹

Yet, as Mary Elizabeth Coleridge's yearning toward that sane and serious self concealed on the other side of the mirror suggested — and as Anne Finch's complaint and Anne Elliot's protest told us too — women writers, longing to attempt the pen, have longed to escape from the many-faceted glass coffins of the patriarchal texts whose properties male authors insisted that they are. Reaching a hand to the stern, self-determining self behind the looking-glass portrait of her mother, reaching past those grotesque and obstructive images of 'Ghost, fiend,

and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite', Aurora Leigh, like all the women artists whose careers we will trace in this book, tries to excavate the real self buried beneath the 'copy' selves. Similarly, Mary Elizabeth Coleridge, staring into a mirror where her own mouth appears as a 'hideous wound' bleeding 'in silence and in secret,' strives for a 'voice to speak her dread'.

In their attempts at the escape that the female pen offers from the prison of the male text, women like Aurora Leigh and Mary Elizabeth Coleridge begin, as we shall see, by alternately defining themselves as angel-women or as monster-women. Like Snow White and the wicked Queen, their earliest impulses, as we shall also see, are ambivalent. Either they are inclined to immobilize themselves with suffocating tight-laces in the glass coffins of patriarchy, or they are tempted to destroy themselves by doing fiery and suicidal tarantellas out of the looking glass. Yet, despite the obstacles presented by those twin images of angel and monster, despite the fears of sterility and the anxieties of authorship from which women have suffered, generations of texts *have* been possible for female writers. By the end of the eighteenth century — and here is the most important phenomenon we will see throughout this volume — women were not only writing, they were conceiving fictional worlds in which patriarchal images and conventions were severely, radically revised. And as self-conceiving women from Anne Finch and Anne Elliot to Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson rose from the glass coffin of the male-authored text, as they exploded out of the Queen's looking glass, the old silent dance of death became a dance of triumph, a dance into speech, a dance of authority.

Notes

- 1 'Little Snow White'. All references are to the text as given in *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales* (New York: Random House, 1972).
- 2 Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Knopf, 1976), pp. 202–3.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 205.
- 4 See Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), pp. 211–42.
- 5 Bettelheim, p. 211.
- 6 See 'The Juniper Tree', in *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales*.
- 7 Geoffrey Hartman, 'The Voice of the Shuttle', in *Beyond Formalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 337–55.
- 8 *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 133.
- 9 See Matthew Arnold, 'Philomela', in *Poetry and Criticism of Matthew Arnold*, ed. A. Dwight Culler (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), p. 144, l. 7.

19 Feminism and Fairy Tales

Karen E. Rowe

To examine selected popular folktales from the perspective of modern feminism is to revisualize those paradigms which shape our romantic expectations and to illuminate psychic ambiguities which often confound contemporary women. Portrayals of adolescent waiting and dreaming, patterns of double enchantment, and romanticizations of marriage contribute to the potency of fairy tales. Yet, such alluring fantasies gloss the heroine's inability to act self-assertively, total reliance on external rescues, willing bondage to father and prince, and her restriction to hearth and nursery. Although many readers discount obvious fantasy elements, they may still fall prey to more subtle paradigms through identification with the heroine. Thus, subconsciously women may transfer from fairy tales into real life cultural norms which exalt passivity, dependency, and self-sacrifice as a female's cardinal virtues. In short, fairy tales perpetuate the patriarchal *status quo* by making female subordination seem a romantically desirable, indeed an inescapable fate.

Some day my prince will come.¹ With mingled adolescent assurance and anxiety, young girls for many centuries have paid homage to the romantic visions aroused by this article of faith in fairy tale. Even in modern society where romance co-habits uncomfortably with women's liberation, barely disguised forms of fairy tales transmit romantic conventions through the medium of popular literature. Degenerate offspring of fairy tales, such as *Real Romances*, *Secret Romances*, *Intimate Romances*, and *Daring Romances*, capitalize on the allure of romance, but sell instead a grotesque composite of pornography and melodrama ('He Brought My Body to Peaks of Ecstasy on His Water-Bed ... Yet I Knew I Had to Leave Him for Another Lover').² Traditional fairy tales fuse morality with romantic fantasy in order to portray cultural ideals for human relationships. In contrast, pulp romances strip the fantastic machinery and social sanctions to expose, then graphically exploit the implicit sexuality.