

**THE WOMAN-CHILD OF FAIRYTALES: ACHIEVING A BALANCE
BETWEEN MATURITY AND YOUTH**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	1
Literature Review.....	1
Thesis Statement	2
Theoretical Framework	2
Project Description	2
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	3
INTRODUCTION	4
Analyses of Fairy Tale Women and Children	4
The Woman-Child in the Grimms and Perraut	6
CHAPTERS	
I. CHAPTER I: SNOW WHITE AND THE FROG KING’S PRINCESS.....	7
The Concept of Childhood.....	7
Snow White	7
The Frog King	9
II. CHAPTER II: BLUEBEARD AND THE WICKED QUEEN.....	12
Bluebeard’s Wife	12
Snow White’s Wicked Queen	12
III. CHAPTER III: THE VIRGIN MARY’S CHILD.....	15
The Tale	15
Mary as the Perfect Role Model	16
Falling to Curiosity and Disobedience	17
The Young Queen’s Pride	19
IV. CHAPTER IV: BROTHER AND SISTER	22
The Tale	22
Virtue in Obedience	23
Virtue in the Golden Garter	26
Virtue in the Act of Motherhood	27

CONCLUSION.....	30
The Woman-Child Motif	30
The Need for Future Research	30
WORKS CITED	32

ABSTRACT

The Woman-Child of Fairytales: Achieving a Balance Between Maturity and Youth

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Literature Review

A number of scholars have noticed similarities in what societies within fairy tales expect of women and children and how they treat them, but scholars tend to keep the spheres of childhood and adulthood separate. Maria Tatar for instance, notices a link between women and children in the disciplinary consequences that befall both groups, who are perceived as committing the same types of sins. For instance, mere curiosity is considered grounds for punishment, which position women and children in ways that emphasize their deferential functions in society. Similarly, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar link the similarity between woman and child with what they read as an internal struggle happening within the fairy tale woman. The Wicked Stepmother of the Grimm's Snow White is read as a woman who wants to take control of her own life and write her own story, whereas Snow White represents the kind of deferential innocence that could kill the Queen if it were ascribed to her. In opposing the princess, the Wicked Stepmother is fighting to keep her life of action and agency by attempting to kill her inner passivity, her inner Snow White. She is thus positioned between two conflicting states of being, the first an angel and the other a witch. Cristina Bacchilega notes how the

process of naturalizing innocence and the desire for children as part of organic womanhood allows for a dependency on the patriarchy and heterosexuality in order to achieve her ‘natural state.’ In centering a woman’s spotlight primarily on her as a child and then on her having one of her own, her experiences are narrowed until society can only see her as either a child or mother.

Thesis Statement

This paper argues for the existence of a ‘woman-child’ by examining how successful fairytale women are simultaneously symbolically associated with both adult and childlike states, as well as how those who become too adult-like or childlike are punished by their narratives.

Theoretical Framework

This paper draws upon feminist and psychoanalytical theory to explore gender issues and how these interact with childhood inside of both folktales and the larger context of children’s literature and culture.

Project Description

Through an analysis of gender relations, it is possible to recognize an identity struggle going on within fairy tale women as they are pushed by their societies to become what this project has coined a ‘woman-child,’ a female who embodies culturally desirable — and sometimes contradictory — attributes of both adulthood and childhood simultaneously. By evaluating Perrault’s “Bluebeard,” the Grimms’ “Snow White,” “The Frog King,” “The Virgin Mary’s Child,” and “Brother and Sister,” this paper points out how a number of symbolic motifs, plot devices, and objects that have been interpreted by critics to represent adult traits such as sexual maturity, passion, and puberty are juxtaposed with other symbolic elements that represent childlike traits such as submissiveness, purity, and naivety.

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INTRODUCTION

In Giambattista Basile's, version of the Snow White fairy tale, entitled "The Young Slave," a young woman named Cilia becomes pregnant after swallowing the leaf of a beautiful rose in order to win a wager. After managing to hide her pregnancy for as long as she can, she gives birth to the story's heroine, Lisa, "a beauteous woman-child" who is later destined to 'die' under the curse of an aggrieved fairy. Though in this particular story and context, the phrase used to describe Lisa — woman-child — may simply serve as an archaic label for a newborn female, the term perfectly encapsulates the culturally acceptable balance that some women in fairy tales, primarily European tales, need to maintain between maturity and juvenility.

Analyses of Fairy Tale Women and Children

While some scholars, such as Marina Warner, Jack Zipes, and Steven Swann Jones to name a few, have noticed similarities in what societies within fairy tales expect of women and children, and how they treat them, other scholars go beyond merely recognizing these similarities. The approaches of four critics in particular — Maria Tatar, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and Cristina Bacchilega — are central to the shaping of my argument. Maria Tatar notices a link in the disciplinary consequences that befall both groups: "Like children, women — by nature volatile and unruly — were positioned as targets of disciplinary intervention that would mold them for subservient roles making more visible forms of coercion superfluous" (Tatar 96). Similarly, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar interpret the similarity between woman and child as an internal struggle happening within the fairy tale woman. The Wicked Stepmother of the Grimm's "Snow White" is read as a woman who wants to take control of her own life and write her own story, a woman of "almost infinite creative energy" (Gilbert and Gubar 38),

whereas Snow White “represents precisely the ideal of ‘contemplative purity’...an ideal that could quite literally kill the Queen” (39). In opposing the princess, the Wicked Stepmother is fighting to “kill the Snow White *in herself*, the angel who would keep deeds and dramas out of her own house” (39). She is thus positioned between two conflicting states of being, “the one a sort of angel, the other an undeniable witch” (36). Cristina Bacchilega notes that innocence, along with the desire for children, is considered so natural for a woman that it, “limits her experience, focusing on her as ‘child’ and ‘mother.’ The artful naturalizing of this heroine's initiation process (from being a child to being with child) conceals the narrative prescription of her dependence on patriarchy and heterosexuality as well as the prescription of her independence” (Bacchilega 3).

For the most part, it is evident that analyses of fairy tale women and children tend to keep the spheres of childhood and adulthood separate. A woman may be disciplined like a child, she might wish to 'kill' her inner child, but she is still expected to choose one or the other, to be either a woman or a child. This paper brings this conversation another step forward and argues that a reason why misfortune befalls many of these fairy tale women is because they do not exist as both child and adult *simultaneously*; they fail to internalize and embody a culturally acceptable balance between maturity and juvenility. Though these women are pushed towards the realm of adulthood in the way that they are expected to achieve sexual maturity and skills for the purpose of becoming a mother and pleasing a husband, they are still shown or expected to be obedient, submissive, and pure, behaviors that can be described as characteristics of childhood. If a woman is to have any chance at success in these stories, she must become a ‘woman-child,’ a term adopted from Giambattista Basile’s description of a newborn female in “The Young Slave.” This paper argues that a woman-child is a female who maintains a precarious balance between the two

realms by embodying only the most socially acceptable and desirable attributes of both adulthood and childhood. A heroine who upsets the balance by becoming either too adult-like or too childish must beware of the repercussions of straying too far into either realm, and the consequences of this imposition of values is an identity struggle that takes place as the woman tries to find a foothold that asserts her identity as either an adult or a child.

The Woman-Child in the Grimms and Perrault

This argument draws upon fairytales from the two best known collections of fairy tales within Western culture, those of the Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault. In order to observe the manner in which the women in the Grimms' "Snow White," "The Frog King," "The Virgin Mary's Child," "Brother and Sister," and Perrault's "Bluebeard" are required to strike an acceptable balance between childhood and adulthood, it is necessary to understand the symbolic intent of different plot points and objects that are presented in these texts. Seemingly unimportant details, such as the use of blood in a story for example, can be — and have been — interpreted as being representative of among other things, puberty. Once the interpretations of the objects are brought to light, it is possible to observe how the object's presence juxtaposes the way in which these characters are also given other objects or traits, such as hair color, that are indicative of some kind of youthful state, behaviors found or expected in children, and descriptions that betray their physical or psychological youth. Additionally, it becomes possible to see how women who upset the balance — such as Bluebeard's wife, Snow White's Wicked Queen, and the Virgin Mary's child— either by becoming 'too childish,' 'too adult-like,' or both must beware the repercussions of straying too far into either realm.

CHAPTER I

SNOW WHITE AND THE FROG KING'S PRINCESS

The Concept of Childhood

The concept of childhood and adolescence is a relatively recent phenomenon; historically, children have been given adult responsibilities at a much younger age than modern times have established. Children worked as soon as they were needed and girls often entered into marriages as soon as they were capable of having children — in fact, England's age of consent and marriage during the year 1275 was set at only twelve years old (Robertson), both of which mark the time around when girls begin entering puberty. Because literature so often mirrors the times in which it was written, perhaps this accounts for why the move for girls in fairy tales “from the culture of childhood to the world of women and their marriages does not require a giant step,” as Maria Tatar contends, “[T]he gap between the behavior expected from children and the conduct demanded of wives is not...as great as one might expect” (Tatar 96). As a result, fairy tale women such as Snow White, for example, are expected to embody both childlike characteristics and adult attributes, the most important of which are chastity and the ability to become a mother as well as fulfilling this role.

Snow White

The symbolism surrounding Snow White's conception is essential to this interpretation. As her mother, the queen, sits sewing at a window in midwinter, she accidentally pricks her finger on her needle and watches through the window frame as three drops of blood fall onto the snow (Grimm 196). The contrast of colors inspires a longing in this good queen, bringing about her desire for a child, “as white as snow and as red as blood and as black as the wood of my

window frame,” a wish which is surely granted with the birth of her daughter. The choice of colors in this request — particularly red and white — is no accident; in a study of chromatic symbolism in fairytales, Francisco Vaz Da Silva connects the color red with “feminine bleeding in connection to potential fertility,” and the number of blood drops in this particular story as being indicative of “the three bleedings...at puberty, defloration, and birth giving” (Silva 245). The color white, on the other hand, is “the precondition for red,” or the requirement of a girl’s purity before she is allowed to embark on any of these exploits (Silva 246). In wishing for a daughter red as blood and white as snow, the queen is already detailing part of the childhood/adulthood balance between virginity and motherly expectations that will be demanded of Snow, all before the girl has even been conceived.

Snow White’s portrayal throughout the story provides more evidence of this balance. By the time the story’s conflict begins, Snow White — at only seven years old — already embodies desirable attributes; she is described, “as beautiful as the day and more beautiful than the queen herself,” a claim confirmed by the magic mirror when it declares her to be the fairest in the land (Grimm 196). Her time with the dwarves showcases her gradual advancement into the realm of adulthood as she prepares for her future by learning the arts of housekeeping and cooking (199). Since the skills she acquires match what have been predetermined by her society to be an acceptable occupations for adult women, the mirror still declares her superiority (199). Snow White is only a child and yet, with the combination of purity, an “innocent heart”, naivety and knowledge of domestic skills, she already epitomizes the quintessential paradigm of womanhood which the Wicked Queen through age and experience has long since left behind.

This “woman-child” status that Snow White has obtained is not threatened by the passage of time the way another woman’s may have been. Instead, it remains preserved and protected in

the time she spends under the Wicked Queen's enchantment. Indeed, despite the "years and years" she spends in the coffin, the text gives the reader no indication that this time ages Snow White in any way, either physically or emotionally (202). On the day the Prince finds her, Snow White has not decayed in the slightest, but rather has remained as red, white, and black as the day she first took a bite of the poisoned apple (202), and she therefore has not run the risk of upsetting the harmony she has achieved. Because she is able to essentially pick up where she left off, she is enticing enough for the prince to whisk her away and marry her.

The Frog King

Another princess who must learn to become a woman-child is the one detailed in the Grimm's "The Frog King." This story opens with the youngest daughter of a king, a princess who — though we are never told her age — is obviously still a child; she is a little girl with a "little hand," young enough to still have a golden ball as her favorite plaything and to cry inconsolably when she accidentally tosses it into a spring (2). Like Snow White, at a young age this princess is already described as having unimaginable beauty, so much so that even the very sun is, "filled with amazement each time it [casts] its rays upon her face." (2). While this mention of the sun's wonder is useful in placing emphasis on the declaration of the princess's good looks, it can also be interpreted as an indication that the princess is ready to become a mother. In a paper investigating symbolism in fairytales, folklorist Katherine M. Briggs points out that the sun, whose presence in folklore stops hauntings and drives away evil spirits, "everywhere... symbolizes fertility and life" (Briggs 140). This is surely accurate, seeing as how the ancient mythologies of many different cultures equate certain deities with both the sun and fertility, such as the Norse god Freyr (McCoy) or the Latvian goddess Saule (Putelis). Because the sun is representative of fertility, its approval of the princess can be interpreted as a blessing

womb; a marker of puberty, and therefore an indication that the princess is ready to begin preparing herself for motherhood.

But just as the good queen wanted a child who was not only red but also white, this princess cannot only have the sun's approval; she must also have her golden ball. In the same paper, Briggs mentions that gold, being "untarnishable" as well as "the highest and purest metal [in the Great Chain of Being]" is not only used to represent royalty, but is rather more frequently used to represent chastity (Briggs 140). For instance, Marina Warner observes that the "luminosity" of golden hair "made it...the traditional color of virgins' hair" (Warner 367), with "virgin saints and martyrs" such as "Catherine, Agnes, and Barbara" being depicted as blonde (Warner 368). Moreover, Briggs also mentions that this particular golden article—the princess's golden ball—has been understood by some critics to be "a symbol of maidenhead" (Briggs 140). Perceiving the golden ball in this light not only puts a new spin on the traditional story, it also strengthens the notion that this princess is not allowed to have the red without the white; she may be capable of joining the world of adults, but will only be allowed to do so if she balances it out with the preservation of her purity.

While Snow White's journey to becoming a woman-child is not tainted by rebellion or reluctance—there is no indication that she has any issue with travelling this path that has been laid out for her—in contrast, the princess in "The Frog King" is plagued by doubts. Because the princess's possession of both the golden ball and the sun's approval can be interpreted as her having both kept herself chaste and entered into puberty, she can now begin her search for a husband, and thus the frog's introduction becomes the arrival of a potential suitor. This princess, however, wants nothing to do with him. She "[runs] off", away from the frog as soon as she gets her ball back (Grimm 3), and is "in a state of fright" when she sees him at the door of her castle

(Grimm 3). In refusing to mature the way she is being told to, she is simultaneously retreating deeper into the childhood sphere, actions which threaten to uproot her personal future if they are allowed to continue and thus, her father repeatedly commands the princess to do as the frog says. In doing so, he not only ensures that the princess does not deviate from her path, but also reinforces a theme Maria Tatar brings up about the works of another German collector of fairytales, Ludwig Bechstein; “women have to be treated like children in order to get them to behave” (Tatar 104). The king must remind her of the subservient position she holds in his household as both his child and a woman; she must submit to what is being demanded of her as a marker of the obedience her position owes him. Ultimately, the doubts and fears that hold the princess back do not do so for long; she eventually overcomes her reluctance to leave part of her childhood behind and embraces her status as a woman-child by accepting the proposal of the newly transformed prince.

CHAPTER II

BLUEBEARD AND THE WICKED QUEEN

Bluebeard's Wife

Not every woman who risks falling prey to unacceptable 'childish tendencies' is lucky enough to be pulled back before she goes too far, and the wife in Perrault's "Bluebeard" is a prime example. While Snow White and the princess in "The Frog King" are celebrated when they embody childlike characteristics by being obedient and submissive, Bluebeard's wife makes the mistake of becoming too childish by adopting two of the most dangerous attributes associated with women and children; disobedience and curiosity. As Tatar points out, in fairy tales, "like children, women [are] by nature volatile and unruly" (Tatar 96), and are "classed with children as agents of disobedience" (Tatar 97). In both succumbing to curiosity and disobedience after her husband dangles a small key in front of her and prohibits her entry into the chamber it opens (Perrault 223), Bluebeard's wife no longer embodies the ideal woman-child balance because she has stepped too far into the childish domain. She subsequently reaps the consequences of her transgression by finding herself in a nightmare and nearly losing her life. It is not until she repents of her actions and begs forgiveness for her error that she is saved. As Heidi Anne Heiner notes, however, her salvation does not come from Bluebeard, but rather from her brothers (Heiner).

Snow White's Wicked Queen

Bluebeard's wife is given a second chance by her narrative, the Wicked Queen in the Grimm's "Snow White", on the other hand, is not. In fact, she is a prime example of what happens when the scale is tipped too far in favor of maturity. From her introduction the Wicked

Queen is immediately established as Snow White's opposite in nearly every way, most importantly in terms of knowledge: a quality where its accumulation as aging progresses becomes a defining feature of adulthood. Where Snow White is never described as mindful or even aware of her physical beauty — in fact, she's never told *why* her stepmother wants her dead, only that she does — the Wicked Queen is painted as “beautiful, but proud and haughty...she could not tolerate anyone else who might rival her beauty” (Grimm 196). Moreover, her interests are found not in the socially respectable tasks of cookery and housekeeping, but in the dark arts of witchcraft and magic, skills she actively uses to ensure the preservation of her beauty and of her way of life.

This difference in the level and type of knowledge they each hold is significant. Snow White is able to become a woman-child with remarkable ease because she is held back from the unacceptably adult qualities of her stepmother by a childlike ignorance that keeps her from becoming too self-aware and subsequently prevents her from making too many decisions independently. The Wicked Queen's lack of ignorance on the other hand, emboldens her to try and seize control of how her life will play out, by any means and at whatever cost. Self-awareness has become vanity and assertiveness has been transformed into pride, two aspects Tatar describes as “the cardinal sins of women in folktales...which make for a strong will...that must be broken before a woman is sufficiently obedient to qualify for matrimony” (Tatar 103), leading her to become something the narrative cannot let go unpunished. Where Snow White is defined by her easy embrace of the path becoming a woman-child has laid out for her, the Wicked Queen is instead marked by her utter refusal to accept the punishment coming her way for failing to reach the same goal. She has become too adultlike, and the consequences of her

choices will be the loss of her place as the fairest in the land. When she attempts to take control once more by removing her rival from the narrative, the cost instead becomes the loss of her life.

CHAPTER III

THE VIRGIN MARY'S CHILD

The Tale

As a woodcutter chops wood one day, all the while despairing his poverty and the consequences it has for his starving family, he is confronted by “a tall, beautiful woman...wearing a crown of shining stars on her head” (Grimm 8). This is the Virgin Mary and she has come to lighten the man’s load by offering to adopt his daughter and take her to live in Heaven, an offer to which the woodcutter readily agrees. Mary takes the child to Heaven where “everything [goes] well for the girl” (8), and on the day the girl turns fourteen, Mary gives her a task just before leaving on a journey. The young maiden is put in charge of the keys to the thirteen doors of Heaven, and although she “may open twelve of the doors” she is forbidden to open the final one (8). Curiosity, however, proves to be an irresistible temptation, and the young maiden opens the final door to find the Holy Trinity, who marks her finger by turning it gold when she attempts to touch the holy fire. When Mary returns and confronts her about her disobedience, the young maiden lies three times before she is turned mute, cast out of Heaven, and forced to live for years in a woodland prison as punishment.

One day, she is found and rescued by the king of the country who asks her to be his wife and she agrees. On the night the new queen gives birth to her first son, the Virgin Mary returns and temporarily restores her voice in order to give her a chance to confess, which the queen refuses to do. Her child is taken away as punishment, and the kingdom begins to suspect their queen of foul play. The Virgin Mary gives her a second opportunity the night her second son is born, but the queen’s continued denial prompts her to take the second child as well. When the

third opportunity is squandered and the third child lost, the people of the kingdom sentence the queen to die, convinced she is an ogress who has been cannibalizing her own children. Finally, as the fires begin to burn the stake she is bound to, the “hard ice of [the Queen’s] pride melt[s]” and Mary gives her back her voice so that she may confess her transgression (11). Her repentance is rewarded with the return of her children and the “[bestowal] of happiness on her for the rest of her life” (11).

Mary as the Perfect Role Model

This tale with its forbidden chambers and enticing keys strongly resembles Perrault’s “Bluebeard.” However, in light of such parallels, one might wonder why the role normally belonging to the tyrant Bluebeard has been given instead to a woman known for her piety. Why choose the Virgin Mary and not some other saint to bring about both the heroine’s punishment and salvation? In many ways, the venerated version of Mary can be described as the ultimate example of a successful woman-child, a woman who maintained her childlike purity even as she undeniably entered adulthood when she became a mother. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar remind us, “In the Middle Ages...mankind’s greatest teacher of purity was the Virgin Mary, a mother goddess who perfectly fitted the female role [Sherry] Ortner defines [in *Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?*] as ‘merciful dispenser of salvation’” (20). Additionally, according to the catechism of the Catholic church, Mary is the only human to have been born completely pure, “[t]he most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the moment of her conception...preserved immune from all stain of original sin” (Vatican) a concept known as Immaculate Conception.

This purity is both reinforced and highlighted by 1) the virgin birth of Christ — an event that allowed Mary to assume motherhood without needing to enter the cycle of sexuality — and 2) the Marian dogma of perpetual virginity, in which Mary “remained a virgin in conceiving her

Son...in giving birth to him...in carrying him...always a virgin” (Vatican). As a female figure whose authority is backed by the Church, Mary serves as the perfect choice to deliver the story’s moralizing message of repentance. The perfect balance between virginity and motherhood, she serves as the ideal model of womanhood that the story’s heroine must choose to obey and imitate if she wishes to find happiness, which she does, at least in the story’s beginning. As the girl spends her time in Heaven eating and drinking her fill and playing with “the little angels” (Grimm 8), the way she is dressed indicates that she is well on her way towards successfully achieving the status of woman-child. She is as dressed in “clothes...made of gold” (8), a color that as Briggs tells us can be interpreted as signaling the purity that comes from her chastity (Briggs 140) while also calling attention to her privilege as a child living among the saints. As the story progresses, however, her future is jeopardized as the young maiden succumbs to her burning curiosity, an action that pushes her too far into the realm of childhood.

Falling to Curiosity and Disobedience

On the girl’s fourteenth birthday Mary, like Bluebeard, in preparation for a long journey gives the child the thirteen keys of heaven and permits her entry into all the chambers they open save one. Though the maiden makes clear her intention to do as she is told when she “[promises] to be obedient” (Grimm 8), her fight against curiosity begins as she explores the rooms: “Now the forbidden door was the only one left, and she felt a great desire to know what was inside... she could not still the urge in her heart. Her desire kept gnawing and pecking away at her and gave her no peace” (8-9). When she succumbs and opens the final door and “[sees] the Holy Trinity sitting in fire and splendor,” the maiden reaches out to “[touch] the light just a little with her finger, and the finger turns golden,” a mark that remains even as she “[washes] and [rubs] it as much as she [can]” (Grimm 9). While at first glance it may seem like the symbolism of the

color gold no longer indicates purity, this is not the case. In this moment, gold is no longer being used to signal the maiden's purity (as it is in "The Frog King"), but rather to signal the purity of the Holy Trinity that has permanently marked the child and ironically highlighted her transgression for all to see. It is possible to interpret this crucial shift in meaning by looking at two key moments in the Bible involving Moses. First, when Moses requests to be allowed to see God's glory, God only permits him to see his back, because God tells him, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live" (Exod. 33.20). Clearly, because of God's sanctity, one cannot even look at Him. In light of this, the gravity of the maiden's disobedience is deepened when the reasoning behind Mary's rule becomes clear: she should not have opened the final door because this is where God — the Holy Trinity — dwells. The same risk of death that Moses took as he made his request has now taken by the maiden. However, while Moses did not die because he'd been given permission by God, this young maiden does not die because she is shown mercy. If the Almighty had wanted it, she would be dead.

The second biblical moment occurs as Moses descends from Mount Sinai: "As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him" (Exod. 34.29-30). Moses was so transformed by this experience it was clear to anyone who looked at him. Just as the time spent with God left its evidence on Moses' appearance, so the act of touching the holy light left its mark on the maiden of this tale. Ironically, although the gold in its essence still signals purity — this time pertaining to the holiness of God — the stark contrast between the splendor of this golden mark and the maiden's skin highlights how her disobedience has ruined any advances she may have made towards attaining the balance required of a woman-

child. The heroine is no longer worthy, and becomes less so after squandering the three opportunities Mary gives her to tell the truth: “You’ve disobeyed me, and you’ve even lied. You’re no longer worthy enough to stay in heaven” (Grimm 9). When the maiden is subsequently stripped of her voice and cast back down to earth, she spends the next few years trapped in a prison of hedges and thorns, crying bitterly “whenever she thought about how beautiful it had been in heaven and how the angels had played with her” (9). However, when she is later presented with the opportunity to repent — an action which would put her back on the path towards achieving woman-child status — the young maiden chooses instead the path of Snow White’s Wicked Queen, and allows her pride to hold her back.

The Young Queen’s Pride

The tale’s similarities to Bluebeard end with the girl’s banishment. After this, the maiden is rescued from her woodland prison by a king and taken as his bride. She becomes a queen and later reunites on three separate occasions with the Virgin Mary, who offers her an opportunity to admit her sin each time, chances that are repeatedly rejected. When compared to the bitter regret she felt whilst trapped in the hedge, it is not entirely clear why the heroine continues to fraudulently insist on her innocence. That this sudden influx of pride occurs after the maiden has become a queen may reinforce a connection Maria Tatar makes between pride and royalty: “[a]rrogance, haughtiness, and pride—whatever the name, it runs in the blood of most royal fairytale women and motivates a plot that relentlessly degrades women and declares them to be social misfits until they have positioned themselves as wives in subordinate roles to husbands” (Tatar 104). In this case, the subordinate role the queen must embrace through adherence to the religious moral code set by God is one of obedience to Mary. It is the persistence of the young queen’s prideful heart, however, that prompts her to refuse to humble herself by admitting any

wrongdoing. In the same way that her childish curiosity is punished by the narrative with her exile, the queen's pride is an unacceptable adultlike behavioral trait that comes with its own consequences, and she loses three different children one after another as punishment.

It is interesting that the young queen is granted three separate opportunities to repent of her sin, especially after taking into account that other female protagonists in similar situations, such as Bluebeard's wife, often receive next to none. The crucial difference between the two is derived from the conspicuous timing of each opportunity. Mary does not approach the queen in the years immediately following her banishment, nor does she appear to her when she marries the King. It is not until a year after this wedding, when "the queen [gives] birth to a son," that Mary reintroduces herself into the narrative and offers the first opportunity for atonement (Grimm 10). She returns a year after that when "the queen [gives] birth to another son," and again a year after that when "the queen [gives] birth to a beautiful little daughter" (10). Evidently, only when the queen fulfills what Margaret Atwood would deem her "biological [destiny]" (Atwood 220), becoming a mother, does she get an opportunity to repent. When placed within the context of conforming to a balance between adulthood and childhood, this timing makes it clear that although the queen's pride pushes her into dangerous territory within the realm of adulthood, her choice to give birth serves as a counterbalance that offsets the damage only pursuing the former was causing.

This damage caused by the queen's pride is only reversed when she decides to humble herself and admit her original mistake, that "[she] opened the door" (Grimm 11). This choice to finally step away from the adultlike trait that was keeping her trapped — her pride — and pursue the childlike trait she has been missing — obedience to Mary's commands — signals the moment she achieves the woman-child balance she has for so long been struggling with. Her

reward comes swiftly and dramatically: the fires of her pyre are put out by the “rain [that pours] from the sky” and the Virgin Mary descends from the skies with her children in a flash of light (11). The queen is given back her children and Mary blesses her, “[bestowing] happiness on her for the rest of her life” (11).

CHAPTER IV

BROTHER AND SISTER

The Tale

In this Grimm tale, there was once a little brother and a little sister who after the death of their biological mother live with their stepmother, a cruel and negligent woman who “beats [them] every day” and gives them “nothing but hard crusts of bread” to eat (41). As their lives have since “not had one moment of happiness” they decide to escape their misery by running away to the woods (41). The children quickly grow weak and thirsty, when the brother comes across the sound of a spring. Unbeknownst to them, however, their stepmother “had put a curse on all the springs in the forest” after realizing that the children had run away, and so as the siblings approach the spring, the sister hears a warning: “Whoever drinks of me will be turned into a tiger” (42). She convinces her brother not to drink and they come across a second spring, where the sister is once again warned not to drink since “whoever drinks of [the spring] will be turned into a wolf” (42). This warning occurs a final time when they come across a third spring, but the brother’s thirst is so great that he ignores his sister’s pleas, drinks, and turns into a fawn, much to his sister’s dismay. Still, she swears to “never forsake [him]” (42) and the two live peaceful lives settled inside a little house in the woods.

Sometime after this when the king of the country holds a hunt, the sounds reach the fawn’s ears and he begs his sister to allow him to be a part of it. She permits it, so long as he returns by evening and remembers to say “My little sister, let me in” when he wants to return inside (43). When the fawn joins the hunt a second time, he is wounded, which allows a huntsman to follow him and report back to the king. The king orders his men to distract the fawn

while the king makes his way to the little house in the woods and comes across the sister, “the most beautiful maiden he had ever seen in his life” (44). He proposes and she accepts under the condition that she be allowed to keep the fawn. They live happily.

When the stepmother discovers the fate of the children she thought were dead, she begins to plot how “to bring about their misfortune again” (45). After the queen gives birth, the stepmother and her one-eyed daughter disguise themselves as maids and murder the queen by trapping her in a burning bathroom. This allows the stepmother to disguise one-eyed daughter so she may take the queen’s place, although “she could not replace the eye that the daughter had lost” (45). Yet, every midnight the ghost of the queen silently returns to feed her baby and stroke the fawn, an event witnessed only by the nurse and later the king. When the king realizes that this “[could] be no one else but [his] dear wife” she comes back to life and reveals the crimes committed by her stepmother and stepsister (46). They are both sentenced and killed, and the death of the stepmother releases the brother from his cursed transformation, allowing the siblings to “[live] happily until the end of their days” (46).

Virtue in Obedience

There are few heroines who can rival Snow White’s ability to effortlessly embrace the balance between woman and child quite like the sister in this tale. Never once is there a need for the narrative to discipline her the way the maiden in the Virgin Mary’s Child needs to be disciplined since she never once makes a misstep. The obedience of this character to the rules laid out by the woman-child motif reveals itself through the obedience she demonstrates in the story, first to her brother, and then to the rules guiding feminine behavior, specifically self-denial in response to the streams’ proclamations.

When the brother of this tale first presents the idea of running away from the cruelty of their stepmother, his sister obeys him without question. She follows him as they “[walk] over meadows, fields, and stones” never once complaining, and allows herself to be guided when her brother “[takes her] by the hand, and sets out” (42). The brother’s authoritative attitude before his transformation may lead readers to believe that he is the elder of the two; however, the text makes no definitive statement in regards to the birth order of either sibling. The girl may be a “little sister” but he is also “a little brother” (41). Because of this, it is far more likely that this obedience is due to the female’s yielding of authority to the primary male figure in her life. As Jack Zipes states, “children are conditioned to assume and accept arbitrary sex roles. These socially conditioned roles prepare females to become passive, self-denying, obedient, and self-sacrificial (to name some of the negative qualities) as well as nurturing, caring, and responsible in personal situations (the more positive qualities)” (Zipes 3). By adhering to the guidelines of these traditional sex roles, the sister recognizes her place in the world and puts into practice some of the socially ascribed behaviors and attitudes this position imposes on her.

The sister’s obedience to the socially constructed norms of traditional femininity reveals itself further during the children’s first encounter with the supernatural. As the brother and sister walk through the woods, growing thirstier and thirstier all the while, they finally “[find] a spring rushing and leaping over stones” where they might take a drink (Grimm 42). However, the sister hears the stream’s proclamation and interrupts her brother before he can quench his thirst. This happens twice more before the brother grows so frustrated he ignores his sister’s pleas and takes the sip which transforms him into a fawn.

In literature, it is not unusual for hunger, thirst, and the act of consuming to be interpreted as having an underlying connotation of sexual appetite. Steven Swann Jones, for example, makes

one such connection in the Grimm fairy tale “The Speaking Horsehead,” a story in which the heroine develops a thirst so overpowering she drinks from a stream:

“[A] conflicted attitude toward sexuality is illustrated in ‘The Speaking Horsehead’ by the heroine’s losing her position...as a result of having sullied herself by lying on the ground in order to quench her ‘thirst,’ in other words, to satisfy her sexual appetite...Her physiological needs are forcing her to do something that she believes her mother believes is immoral...The serving girl who takes her place is blithely unfettered by the moral qualms that appear to afflict the heroine. The substitution in this case may be seen as a split between the two selves of the heroine, in which the more instinctual, self-gratifying, impulse-oriented, and less moral side of the heroine takes over.” (Swann Jones 70).

When interpreting the act of drinking found in “Brother and Sister,” it may go too far to read this same layer of sexual undertone in the story. The reason, after all, that the siblings should not drink from the stream is that their stepmother’s spell will transform them into animals if they do. However, the words that the sister hears, “[w]hoever drinks of [the stream] will be turned into a tiger,” (Grimm 42) are a statement of fact, not a warning for the sister to obey. While Jones’ argument about the Horsehead’s heroine is appropriate, it may also be argued that in both stories, indulging one’s thirst is unacceptable not because it marks a moment of disobedience to any physical authority (mother or stream), but because it violates the feminine code of conduct that conventional sex roles foist onto women. The stepmother *wants* the sister to break this code by drinking from the stream; the mother in “The Speaking Horsehead” on the other hand, does not.

This feminine code is a rulebook almost entirely about suppressing one’s impulses, whatever those may be. The choice to obey these rules by practicing restraint is expected of the sister for, as Natalia Andreivskikh points out, “eating without constraint certainly represents

refusal to conform to socially determined gender behavior marked by moderation”

(Andreivskikh 141). In this light, refusing to drink is a kind of rehearsal for the sister, a chance to practice denying the same kind of physiological impulses and desires that in the future she will have to repress during her years in total isolation with the fawn. These are impulses that might come in the form of an unacceptable sexual appetite, but could also manifest themselves as pride, vanity, childish curiosity, or even the desire for social connection. This act of self-abnegation further reinforces the sister’s willingness to be obedient, in this case, to the principles guiding feminine behavior.

Virtue in the Golden Garter

Although the sister is still expected to be obedient if she is to be a woman-child, it is the transformation of her brother from a human to a fawn that releases her from the requisite deference to him as the primary male figure in her life. After mourning the fate of her sibling through her tears, the sister is finally free to take action. She reassures the fawn: “Hush, my dear little fawn. I shall never forsake you” and immediately proceeds to “[take] off her golden garter and [puts] it around the fawn’s neck” (Grimm 42). Afterwards, she attaches a rope made of rushes that she can use to lead him further into the forest towards the house where they can live and she can look after him (42). The item of note in this passage is of course the sister’s golden garter, and its golden hue is by itself enough to signal the girl’s purity, the requisite childlike trait of a woman-child. In this particular tale, however, the virtue of childlike purity is also signaled by the sister’s choice to place it around the fawn’s neck after she comforts him.

According to Anne E. Duggan, the real-life “concerns about the process of pregnancy...made their way into folk and fairy tales,” (Duggan 422). These concerns manifested themselves through the number of different superstitions surrounding gestation and childbirth,

including the belief that the physicality of the offspring revealed some truth about the mother. The appearance of “birthmarks or other deformities [in offspring] signal the mother’s sin,” and children born with “golden chains and stars on foreheads” can “be read as signs of a mother’s virtue” (Duggan 421). Although the true relationship between the fawn and the heroine is that of brother and sister, the words the sister uses to reassure her brother after his transformation signal a crucial shift in the relational and authoritative dynamics between the two: “Hush, my dear little fawn. I shall never forsake you” (Grimm 42). These are words a mother might use to soothe the anxieties of her child, reflecting the sister’s newfound responsibility to look after her brother because he can no longer look after himself. As a result, she has stepped into the role and authority of a mother and he has been ‘reborn’ into her child. The first thing he receives immediately after this ‘birth’ is a golden garter, a “golden chain” (Duggan 421) around his neck, and this action makes it possible to more directly draw a connection between the virtue of the offspring (the fawn) and the virtue of the mother (the sister).

Virtue in the Act of Motherhood

The choice of the sister to become a mother figure to her brother is not only effective in spotlighting the purity signaled by the golden garter around the fawn’s neck, it is also key in allowing the sister to acquire the most fundamental trait of adulthood fairy tale women must be willing to receive in their journeys towards becoming women-children: motherhood. As Bacchilega reminds us, fairy tale narratives “work to present cultural assumptions, particularly gender-related ones, as natural. [Women] [c]onsenting to heterosexuality and motherhood is portrayed as natural” (Bacchilega 3). True to this claim, the sister does not hesitate to consent to motherhood when given the choice, something she incidentally manages to acquire without the taint of sex, like the Virgin Mary. As the story progresses, her behavior towards the fawn

illustrates her active desire to successfully meet these newfound motherly expectations. She provides shelter for her child by “[making] a soft bed for the fawn” to sleep in and feeds him “tender grass, which he [eats] out of her hand” (Grimm 43). When the fawn is injured after the joining the hunt, she “[washes] off the blood [and places] herbs on the wound” (44). Though at first she does not want to let the fawn out again for fear that the hunters will kill him, the sister “with a heavy heart...[opens] the door for him,” actions which mirror one of the common anxieties of parenthood. Furthermore, when the king of the country finds her and proposes marriage, the sister does not view this as an opportunity to leave her past behind and start a new life. In fact, she only agrees to marry the king if he recognizes that “the fawn must come with [her] too” since she “won’t ever forsake him” (44).

This choice to continue pursuing motherhood persists even in face of the narrative’s ultimate test of her resilience, death. It is not difficult to assume that any motherly action the sister could take dies when she perishes in the fire that the disguised stepmother and stepsister had set in her bathroom. However, even this is not enough to prevent her return since “at midnight, when everyone [is] asleep except the nurse...the true queen [enters the nursery]” (45). Notably, she does not seek justice for herself. Instead, she “[lifts] the baby out of the cradle, [takes] him in her arms, and [suckles] him” and also “[does] not forget the fawn” since she “[goes] to the corner where he [is] lying and [strokes] his back” (45). The sister does not allow anything to get in the way of making sure her children are taken care of because she truly loves them. Additionally, her choice to “never [utter] a word” (45) during her visits until the final three nights further augments the genuineness of her desire to be a good mother. She does not need to speak a word because, “in wordlessness lies sincerity” as Marina Warner observes of Shakespeare’s long suffering Cordelia, “as a mute subject, Cordelia speaks from the heart, as

even her name suggests. Words are lies...imagery is a counterfeit fabric deployed to deceive” (Warner 390).

The persistent pursuit of motherhood, an acceptable trait of adulthood, combined with the demonstration of obedience and purity, both acceptable traits of childhood, illustrates the sister’s worthiness to be named a woman-child and receive the rewards that come with this success. As a result, “life [is] restored to her” and her murderers are sentenced and executed (Grimm 46). The death of the stepmother allows “the fawn [to be] transformed and [to regain] his human form” and the brother and sister are finally free to “[live] happily until the end of their days” (46).

CONCLUSION

The Woman-Child Motif

The link between women and children is undeniable. As we have seen in the Grimm tales “Snow White,” “The Frog King,” “Virgin Mary’s Child,” “Brother and Sister” and in Perrault’s “Bluebeard,” it is possible to observe one manifestation of this link through the way these stories use symbolism as a tool with which to detail the adult expectations and childlike propensities that the women of these stories are expected to embody. These fairy tale women must be obedient, submissive, and chaste, while at the same time, they must embrace their futures as wives and mothers by not entering the cycle of sexuality until it serves as a bridge to the fulfillment of these roles. The choice to step too far into the realm of adulthood or to step back into realm of childhood prompts the invisible hand of their stories to dole out these character’s due consequences. Only by successfully maintaining the balance necessary to achieve the status of woman-child will these women embody the archaic standard of womanhood that will ultimately bring them success to their lives.

The Need for Further Exploration

While the close readings of the tales discussed in this paper lay a foundation for recognizing the presence of the woman-child in fairy tales, there is still plenty of ground left to explore. For instance, why is her presence evident in some tales but not others? Rewards are showered onto women-children like Snow White as much as they are showered onto heroines like Molly Whuppie, despite the fact that the latter — who in her cleverness outsmarts a giant several times — certainly cannot be called a woman-child at any point in her tale.

Another question arises from the nature of the oral tradition of folk and fairy tales in which several variations of tales often exist across time and cultures. How do the differences in tellers, culture, and time periods transform the narrative's use of symbolism? What is it about these differences that affects whether or not the tales promote the woman-child as the ultimate ideal?

Is the woman-child an ideal today? An initial evaluation of this question might suggest not, since modern writers often make a conscious effort to subvert the traditional portrayals of female characters in favor of creating more complex interpretations. Writers who retell popular fairy tales often choose to transform the source narrative in ways that correct what they identify as negative qualities of the story. However, could the woman-child still somehow make an appearance in these renditions? Or has the constant shifting in modern understandings of gender, sexuality, and the roles of men and women rendered her obsolete?

Finally, could the woman-child be a universal phenomenon? Answering this question will require an exploration of other fairy tale or folklore traditions from around the world, since by drawing upon the Grimms and Perrault, this study has restricted itself to the Western tradition of folklore.

These are only a few of the questions that could serve as the basis for future research. While there may be no simple or easy answer to any of these questions, making an effort to understand the nuances of the woman-child motif may lead to a better understanding of how culture has evolved in its perceptions of women and children and whether or not society still clings to the woman-child in some way.

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