

The Mirror's New Message? Gender in the Adolescent Postmodern Fairy Tale

• Judith Franzak •

Résumé : Le présent article examine l'élaboration du «genre sexué» dans deux recueils de contes postmodernes, soit *The Rose and the Beast* de Francesca Lia Block et *Truly Grim Tales* de Priscilla Galloway. À la lumière d'une approche féministe, l'auteure aborde les thèmes reliés à l'identité (les idylles, les liens parentaux et amicaux). La construction de l'identité s'y avère à la fois normative et subversive. Par exemple, la passivité dite féminine est remise en cause mais elle ne s'articule que comme réplique à la violence. Par ailleurs, les contes reprennent des dichotomies séculaires hétérosexuel/homosexuel, naturel/culturel, parent/beau-parent. Ces récits offrent néanmoins une matière fascinante pour les adolescents désireux d'explorer les stéréotypes reliés au genre.

Summary: This article examines the construction of gender in two collections of postmodern fairy tales for adolescents, *The Rose and the Beast* by Francesca Lia Block and *Truly Grim Tales* by Priscilla Galloway. Using a feminist gender theory lens, I explore gender across themes of parenting, romance, and agency. Gender construction in these stories is both normative and subversive. The authors challenge stereotypes of passive females, although female agency is achieved primarily through threatened violence. However, the stories also reiterate standard dichotomies, notably between heterosexual and homosexual and between natural parent and stepparent. These collections provide an intriguing entry point for adolescents interested in exploring gender stereotypes.

I never did like children, but I didn't want to think of killing her, even though I hated her father to spend time with her, time stolen from me.

But the mirror's new message changed everything.

— Priscilla Galloway, *Truly Grim Tales* (105-06)

The central character in Priscilla Galloway's story "A Taste for Beauty" is forced into an unpleasant realization when her magic mirror

changes its familiar message. She is no longer the fairest, the mirror informs her; it is her stepdaughter Snow who is the reigning beauty queen. The character in the story believes the message is new, but readers will recognize the mirror's message and anticipate the events that are certain to follow.

Galloway's story is from her collection of contemporary fairy tales for adolescents, *Truly Grim Tales* (1995). Francesca Lia Block's *The Rose and the Beast* (2000) is another collection of fairy tales reworked for modern readers. Reviewers have praised both authors for these updated traditional tales. According to one critique, Galloway's stories are "quite sophisticated . . . and their cleverness and the rather sardonic, even foreboding, tone may give older readers a new view of folktales" (Flower 78). Another assessment implies that Block's stories will appeal to adolescents because "the context is very modern, with issues of drug addiction, rape, and suicide smoothly woven into the stories, which are infused with a palpable if not explicit eroticism" (Segal). Block and Galloway do more than update traditional fairy tales, however; they reinvent these tales, enriching them with a postmodern ethos.

Jack Zipes notes that contemporary authors of fairy tales often "raise highly significant questions about social and political conditions" (*Happily Ever After* 9), not the least of which is how gender is enacted. According to Belinda Y. Louie, gender stereotyping is a consistent feature of children's literature despite a wealth of scholarship which points to such limited portrayals of females and males (142-43). Because fairy tales have been criticized as vehicles of gender oppression (Lieberman), it is interesting to explore the ways in which authors of postmodern fairy tales for adolescents treat gender. Do the stories in *Truly Grim Tales* and *The Rose and the Beast* perpetuate normalized gender roles, or are they effective in subverting dominant conceptions of gender? In looking at portrayals of gender in these two books, I will first discuss the postmodern nature of the stories and my use of the term *gender* before turning to a thematic analysis of the stories.

Postmodernism Greets the Prince(ss)

The practice of reworking fairy tales is as old as the tales themselves (Zipes, *Sticks and Stones* 99-125; Bacchilega 1-11, 20-23). From the seventeenth-century aristocratic French women who retold the tales in salons to the many contemporary retellers of fairy tales in Canada and the United States, individuals have rearranged and transformed the tales to fit their cultural conditions (see Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth* 15-48). Jack Zipes differentiates between the productive processes of duplication and contamination in reproductions of traditional tales: a *duplication* of a fairy tale mirrors the original by reproducing the images and values consistent with the traditional story (*Fairy Tale as Myth* 8-9), whereas a *contamination* of a fairy tale is one

in which the creator transforms the tale by incorporating unexpected themes, characters, or motifs to suggest a new meaning (*Sticks and Stones* 102). Both Block and Galloway have contaminated traditional tales to explore alternate possibilities, and in doing so, they have created works that challenge readers to see what has long been hidden in the traditional versions of these stories.

In opening her collection of contemporary fairy tales, Galloway speaks to the literary and folkloric heritage informing her work:

Whoever plays with the grand old stories owes a huge debt to centuries of storytellers who have gone before, those who have told and retold, and those who have written down and collected. They have given me such delight, and so much to ponder. Nonetheless, I've always known they left out a lot and were unaware of even more. It has not been easy to discover the truth, but I have persisted. Gradually the stories behind the stories have become clear. (ix)

Like Galloway, Block professes delight in traditional fairy tales and recognizes a need for them to be revised. In an online interview with the book's publisher, HarperCollins, Block notes: "I have always loved fairy tales. . . . I wanted to make them new because I find contemporary settings very dynamic and because so many of the themes are very relevant to my life" ("Francesca Lia Block"). She, too, claims to have discovered "truth" in her revisions of the fairy tale, although her position is more tentative than Galloway's. In the same interview, Block discusses her writing process:

I usually begin with the poetry of language. . . . Later, certain truths are revealed to me and I often go back and work on bringing them out more fully in the story. In some ways, starting with the fairy tales made my job easier because the truths are already inherent in the original work. I just had to find a way to apply it to my life. ("Francesca Lia Block")

While truth claims like those made by Galloway and Block have a distinctively modernist ring, the story collections are better understood from a postmodernist perspective: Zipes comments on Galloway's presumption that she has uncovered "the truth" behind the stories, noting that her truth may well be a reader's untruth (*Sticks and Stones* 119), and such a lack of certainty about truth is a hallmark of postmodernism (Hargreaves). Theorists have spun out the terms *postmodern*, *postmodernism*, *postmodernity*, and *postmodern age* to speak to a range of aesthetic and cultural conditions. Stanley Aronowitz and Henry A. Giroux contend that the term *postmodern* is important because "it directs our attention to a number of changes and challenges that are a part of the contemporary age" (62). The postmodern age has seen the collapse of ideological certainty with an attendant rise in a plurality of previously marginalized voices (Hargreaves). Such multiple

voices are heard in Galloway's collection, where she uses a first-person narrator in six of the eight stories, giving voice to characters silenced in more traditional versions of the tales in a way true to postmodern form. The expression of multiple viewpoints, combined with the array of destructive cultural conditions presented in these tales, identifies them as postmodern.

Gender Construction in the Fairy Tale

Postmodern fairy tales presume a reader's familiarity with an earlier version of the tale, one in which gender may have been constructed differently. Citing feminist scholarship on fairy tales, Elizabeth Yeoman comments on the essentialist view of the female: "In most of the best known versions of fairy tales . . . the only strong females are witches; witches are typically wicked and females (other than witches) are often victims who survive only because they are rescued by men" (432).

Marcia K. Lieberman also offers a feminist critique of female acculturation through the fairy tale. She identifies gendered character traits and plot devices that appear repeatedly in the traditional fairy tales anthologized by Andrew Lang in *The Blue Fairy Book* (1966) and *The Green Fairy Book* (1966). Such patterns include the beauty contest, a focus on courtship that leads to a pivotal marriage event, passive and submissive heroines, victimized girls, a rescue performed by a male character, and female aging defined by malevolent power (187-200). Additional scholars have also pointed to the limited repertoire of roles ascribed to female characters in fairy tales (see Hanlon; Westland). Because fairy tales are accorded significant power in the process of socializing and educating children (Zipes, *Don't Bet on the Prince* xiv), these textual images play a central role in acculturating readers to accept and reproduce normalized gender expectations. According to Zipes, a significant function of the fairy tale is to inform young readers' expectations about gender: "As a key agent of socialisation, the fairy tale enables the child to discover his or her place in the world and to test hypotheses about the world. For years the classical literary tales were mainly articulations and representations of a male viewpoint" (*Don't Bet on the Prince* xii). A male viewpoint, in the case of fairy tales, reflects a hegemonic patriarchal view of a division between categories of male and female which are characterized, respectively, by domination and subordination.

Feminist gender theory questions the binary opposition of male and female, arguing instead that gender is a social construct that intersects with other identity constructs such as race, class, and sexuality. Gender is not a static entity but a process. As Johanna Foster writes,

[Feminist gender theorists] understand gender, not to mention other identities such as sexuality and race, to be social and historical processes that

create multiple meanings in multiple sites, ones that occur on many levels of social interaction — from microrelations to macrorelations. (433)

Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman contend that gender is a managed activity that corresponds to normalized expectations (127). Children are inducted into this process early, they write, with lasting effects:

The “recruitment” process involves not only the appropriation of gender ideals (by the valuation of those ideals as proper ways of being and behaving) but also *gender identities* that are important to individuals and that they strive to maintain. Thus gender differences, or the sociocultural shaping of “essential female and male natures,” achieve the status of objective facts. (142)

When categories of female and male are constructed textually, they convey gendered ideology with which readers must contend. Zipes argues that fairy tales are an especially potent socializing force:

It is not by coincidence that numerous feminist critics, women *and* men, feel that the fairy tales of their childhood stamp their present actions and behavior in reality. There are certain fairy-tale patterns, motifs, and models which constantly arise in our life and in literature which appear to have been preserved because they reinforce male hegemony in the civilisation process. (*Don't Bet on the Prince* 9)

Ethnographic researchers such as Temple, Westland, Yeoman, and Rice who are interested in the influences that fairy tales have on young readers have contributed to our understanding that, although stereotypical gender ideals form part of a cultural constellation, the process of gender construction is significantly more complicated than passive absorption of gendered values presented through text. Postmodern fairy tales are replete with complex and contradictory gender messages; evidence of this is apparent when taking a closer look at the thematic elements that characterize gender portrayal in these story collections. Using a feminist gender theory lens, I will examine how both Block and Galloway construct gender in the context of common fairy tale themes of parenting, romance, and power. While there are a number of conventional fairy tale themes and story elements that include character traits such as jealousy, honesty, cleverness, and foolishness, such themes do not explicitly address the role of gender in the fairy tale. By exploring themes of parenting, romance, and power, I will suggest that contested sites of gender construction become visible and that it is possible to see just how new (or how traditional) the mirror's message is.

Parenting in the Postmodern Fairy Tale

One way to look at gender construction in fairy tales is by examining the depiction of adult characters, particularly adults serving in a parental capacity. Deborah O'Keefe's analysis of adult males and females in classic children's literature demonstrates how parenting roles are highly gendered (83-94). Furthermore, she points out how reassuring these images are to young readers: "The books I loved told me mothers always acted like mothers and fathers like fathers and when they did not, they were representing some deviant role that was also familiar and thus bearable, like the stepmother or the unjust father" (84.) Fairy tales offer distilled versions of such "deviant roles" in that they feature extreme caricatures. Vengeful stepmothers compete with heroines for male attention while natural mothers in fairy tales "provide a counter-pattern of female protection" (Rowe 213). Adult males in fairy tales also typically represent extreme images. Common are doting fathers who are nonetheless inept at protecting their children ("Beauty and the Beast," "Rumpelstiltskin") or who are tyrannical rulers ("Jack and the Beanstalk," "Bluebeard"). Since traditional tales offer such limited options for adult males and females, one might expect contemporary authors to present a wider range of possibilities. A look at adult characters in the stories by Block and by Galloway reveals that some stories disrupt traditional gendered notions of motherhood and fatherhood while others do not.

In particular, Block's textual images have startling implications for mother-daughter relationships. Block uses seductive imagery to reclaim feminine associations with fertility, nature, and nurturing, infusing them with New Age consciousness and suggesting that being female means embracing traditional female characteristics. Adolescent females in her stories appear to be daughters of a benevolent Mother Earth. In "Rose," a rendition of Rose Red and Rose White, Block crafts two girls brimming with organic goodness: "Rose Red's voice evokes volcanoes, salt spray, cool tunnels of air, hot plains, redolence, blossoms" (134). While the very voice of Rose Red carries mystical power, Rose White is an updated earth mother who "makes pumpkin [sic] soup, salads of melon and mints and edible flowers. She makes dresses out of silk scarves" (135). In another story, "Glass," the Cinderella character is a domestic goddess who grows fragrant flowers, cooks exotic dishes, and cleans with passion (56-59). The unnamed Cinderella character and the energetic Rose White may enjoy contemporary luxuries, but they are not that far removed from their folkloric forebears who toiled away at household chores in the name of womanhood.

As nurturing as these females are in a hip, New-Age way, they experience significant trauma around issues of motherhood. The title character in "Snow" is given to a male gardener by her mother, still a girl herself,

who fears the infant will devour her (4). It is, of course, the other way around: the mother seeks out her daughter some years later, jealous of her purity and beauty, determined to poison her. Denied previous relationships with other females, Snow falls under her mother's magic spell and consumes the poison. The untrustworthy gardener breathes life back into Snow, who then rejects him in favour of the seven brothers who raised her: "She wanted them. More than gardeners or mothers. . . . I am a freak, she thought, happily. I am meant to stay here forever. I am loved" (30). In this case, Block seems to suggest, a freak is one who wisely prefers the companionship of trusted friends rather than the relationships offered by a malevolent mother and a creepy suitor.

Mothers who cause problems (sometimes unwittingly) for their daughters surface again and again in Block's stories. As a result of her fervent empathy, the narrator of "Ice" experiences physical symptoms of disease when her mother develops breast cancer. Not only does the mother in "Tiny" (a rendition of *Thumbelina*) give birth to an unusually small child, but she unintentionally attracts the attention of the boy with whom Tiny falls in love, thus causing her daughter to leave. In "Wolf," Block's Little Red Riding Hood kills her mother's rapist boyfriend who has been molesting her for years. The unnamed narrator affirms her daughterly devotion, confessing that "I really love my mom. You know we were like best friends and I didn't even really need any other friend" (105), and remembering that "She used to say to me, Baby, I'll always be with you" (106). She appears to be the ideal mother for a strong-willed teenage girl, a mom who not only knows the latest fashions but looks good wearing them. The relationship has its price, however, as the younger character makes clear: "I believed her until he started coming into my room. Maybe she was still with me but I couldn't be with her those times. It was like if I did then she'd hurt so bad I'd lose her forever" (106). Worried about the emotional toll it would take, the child shelters her mother from the knowledge that this man is molesting her. Instead of presenting an adult protecting a child, Block flips the script and presents a daughter shielding her negligent mother. The heroine ultimately kills the predatory male, but only after he murders her mother. The story closes with the girl fantasizing a dream:

Maybe one night I'll be asleep and I'll feel a hand like a dove on my cheekbone and feel her breath cool like peppermints and when I open my eyes my mom will be there like an angel, saying in the softest voice, When you are born it is like a long, long dream. Don't try to wake up. Just go along until it is over. Don't be afraid. You may not know it all the time but I am with you. I am with you. (129)

The angelic vision is a gesture toward renaming feminine divinity (Daly), yet the message is troubling: life is a struggle, the heroine learns, and even mothers who are best friends can end up being liabilities.

Motherhood fares differently in Galloway's book, though she includes absent mothers ("The Voice of Love") as well as mothers who die in childbirth or shortly thereafter ("The Name," "Blood and Bone," "The Prince"). While Block's stories focus on female adolescents and mothers are seen solely through their daughter's eyes, Galloway offers an expanded view of motherhood. In "The Good Mother," a futuristic rendering of "Little Red Riding Hood," the protagonist Ruby encounters a she-wolf while on her way to deliver medicine to her ailing grandmother. The beast seeks blood and flesh, we learn, not to satiate her own hunger but to feed a den full of pups. Ruby stumbles across the den after fleeing the beast, who she believes has killed her grandma. She takes a wolf pup hostage and returns to her grandma's cottage in hopes of distracting the she-wolf from further attacks. Ruby's grandma is not dead; indeed, it is she who develops a solution that promises to provide sustenance and safety for all. Fearful of the giant voracious clams that inhabit the territory, Grandma suggests that hunting the clams together will provide protection for the humans and food for the beasts. All three central females in the story — Ruby, her grandma, and the beast — display strong maternal feelings combined with cool-headed problem-solving capabilities. This ending refutes images of powerful good women in traditional tales who, according to Lieberman, "are nearly always fairies, and . . . remote: they come only when desperately needed" (197).

The central female character and narrator of "Bed of Peas" also experiences strong maternal feelings, though circumstances prevent her from being able to enjoy the pleasures such feelings might bring. As the title suggests, the story draws upon the traditional Princess and the Pea tale. The narrator is a princess whose father forbids her to marry her true love, an Arabic slave who serves as the King's gardener. The two lovers elope, and immediately the princess realizes her body is too sensitive to endure the fast pace of their horses. Like many characters in these stories, she comments on the earlier text that informs her character: "An old story tells of the princess who felt a pea through twenty mattresses. Foolish people tell it in her praise. Nonsense! . . . Such sensitivity makes woman or man unfit for life, except as a pampered pet" (38). After many barren years with her husband, she finally becomes pregnant. She welcomes "the daily struggle with nausea, lost again each day, the strange sweet ache in my breasts, the drop of clear fluid that I could squeeze from my nipple" (41), all textual signifiers of femaleness. Her princess body betrays her again in its ravenous cravings for greens from the neighbouring sorcerer's garden. The final betrayal by her delicate body comes through the extremely difficult delivery of her daughter. Worst of all, because her husband has bargained away the child in exchange for the witch's lettuce, the couple must give up their daughter. The remainder of the story details their relentless search for the child. When they finally make contact with her, she is a princess expecting

her first child. The narrator, longing to be a grandmother to the baby, struggles with whether or not to tell the girl she is her "real" mother. The story ends with the narrator musing about how to raise the yet unborn princess: "I would like to make sure that any new little princess learns to ride as she learns to walk. No soft princess body for her. She can learn to sleep on a bed of peas" (59). The story, which is largely about female bonding, offers a critique of mothers who acculturate their daughters into a narrow view of what it means to be female.

Whether seen through their daughters' eyes or provided with their own voices, mothers are central to both Galloway's and Block's stories, just as they are in traditional tales. But what about adult males? Are they — like adult females — defined primarily in terms of parenting roles, or are other options available to them? Perry Nodelman reports a startling lack of analysis on masculinity in children's literature, observing that "masculinity is often understood exactly as not being either eccentric or repressed — as just being one's natural, normally human self" (9). In fairy tales, the natural, normal way of being for males is to wield power over females in their family or kingdom. When an adult male appears in a fairy tale, he is a patriarch whose decisions and actions often have grave consequences, whether he is a king or a commoner.

In the adolescent fairy tale worlds created by Block and by Galloway, adult males seem to have inherited the privilege and authority granted to them by their textual precursors. In Block's stories, adult males are rare. The notable exceptions are the child-molester in "Wolf" and the father figure in "Beauty," Block's version of the traditional "Beauty and the Beast." In the latter story, the adoring father causes the undoing of his relationship with his beloved daughter, Beauty. He learns too late that the cost of picking a rose for his daughter from the beast's garden is the daughter herself. As it happens, Beauty flourishes in the beast's companionship as they develop an intimate, symbiotic relationship. She sheds her civilized manners and becomes a wild child herself, suggesting a potent alternative to being "a beauty." Sensing her father's need later, she returns to nurse him on his deathbed. She feels relief when he dies and rushes back to the beast. Upon her return, however, she finds that the beast has become distant, clumsy, and disinterested. Their supportive emotional bond severed, they quarrel and grow further apart. The how and why of the beast's transition is not clear, but the intent is. The beast has become a man and, in so doing, necessitates Beauty's gradual return to feminine ways: "Each time, after they quarreled, Beauty bathed, combed the tangles from her hair, and began to wear shoes again for a few days. . . . [S]ecretly, sometimes, she wished that he would have remained a Beast" (197-98). To be civilized or tamed, according to this story, demands acceptance of gender norms. Whether or not Block is critiquing such norms is not clear, but what is evident is that, even in death, Beauty's father has the power to reclaim his daughter.

Galloway's stories feature more adult males than Block's, and they are cast in a wider variety of roles. The central male character in "Bed of Peas," for instance, is a loving husband intent on finding his daughter. He has access to power accorded to him as a Bedouin chief, but rather than using it to oppress others he uses it to find his child. The fathers in "The Name" and "The Prince," on the other hand, are remote and disapproving of their sons' rejection of traditional masculinity. The father in "The Name" tells his crippled, sensitive son to "be a man" (3), and the prince's father commands that he marry a woman and produce a (male) heir (130). Other adult males appear as stepfathers, who, like the recurrent evil stepmother, are depicted as abusive ("A Taste for Beauty"). While Galloway presents a range of adult males, her stepparents are similar to Block's: whether stepmothers or stepfathers, they are selfish and violent. In an age of multiple family arrangements, one might expect Galloway and Block to challenge such stereotypes rather than seeming to endorse what is all too familiar.

Discourses of Romance

If adult characters in fairy tales serve as gendered archetypes, then the dynamics of the relationships between partners can be read as figurative maps to adulthood. A central theme in fairy tales, both traditional ones and these contemporary versions, is the importance of courtship. Lieberman maintains that, for female characters in particular, romantic discourse is a defining moment: "In effect, these [traditional tales] focus upon courtship, which is magnified into the most important and exciting part of a girl's life, brief though courtship is, because it is the part of her life in which she most counts as a person herself" (199). Notably absent in current scholarship is a discussion of how male characters experience romantic discourse in fairy tales. Given the significance of courtship in the tales, it is important to take a close look at how Block and Galloway present this rite of passage.

When Block's character Tiny falls in love with an adolescent male poet, she decides to be brave and declare her presence. She stows away in his pocket and, after arriving safely at his house, she hops out and confronts him. Surprised and delighted, the object of her affection kneels down to get a closer look at this thimble-size creature, staring "at every part of her perfect little body. He felt a bit perverse about it, but he didn't care because she seemed to be enjoying his gaze" (51). This is a gaze that asserts itself throughout Block's stories. Male characters view females in Block's stories through what feminist film theorists have identified as "the male gaze." Drawing on the work of E.A. Kaplan, Meredith Rogers Cherland explains the male gaze as one in which "the camera assumes a male point of view and positions female figures in ways meaningful to men — as idealized mothers, for example, or as objects of male sexual desire" (37). In the case of text, the camera's view is represented by the authorial voice. Block's

stories are replete with the presence of this male gaze. For example, the gardener's gaze toward the infant Snow implies intended molestation: "There was no way he could keep her himself, was there? (He imagined her growing up, long and slim, those lips and eyes)" (5). In "Rose," it is the male gaze that signifies the end of female friendship. When the injured bear that Rose Red and Rose White nursed back to health becomes a human male, Rose Red loses her friend to heterosexual romance. She demonstrates her understanding of compulsory coupling by merging the male's gaze with her own: "He is staring at Rose White, whose hair is like the honey sunlight pouring in through the leaded glass window; she has berry-stained lips and hands and is wearing her flower wreath and her dress that is half the size it once was because it has been turned mostly into bandages" (148). And in "Ice," the narrator reports without any perceptible discomfort that the boy she liked "said he hoped I didn't mind, that he'd been watching me through the window, he wasn't a crazy stalker or anything, he just couldn't help it" (209).

Underlying the male gaze is an appearance-based assessment that defines female worth (Chancer 84). In fairy tales, the measure of a woman is often presented in the guise of the beauty contest (Lieberman 188-89). Winning looks in fairy tales are usually associated with being thin and fair. The insidious racism of fairy-tale beauty is not directly challenged by either Block or Galloway, with the exception of Block's use of a Korean-American girl as the heroine in her Bluebeard tale, "Bones." The narrator does not explicitly reveal her ethnicity; rather, readers instead rely on context clues like the girl's home in Korea-town and her ironic self-description as a "slightly feral one-hundred-pound girl with choppy black hair" (165). In one story, Block appears to tacitly endorse a standard of white beauty. The narrator of "Ice," engaged in the ultimate beauty contest, claims that "I would have ripped out my hair and had implanted a wig of long silver blond strands, cut my body and sewn on whole new parts. I would have flayed my skin to find a more perfect whiteness beneath" (218). Fortunately, the character does not have to go to such extremes to win her beloved's devotion, though it is significant that she understands metaphorically how beauty is defined. If Block is vague about ethnic identity, she is less so about the value of thinness. From the elfin Tiny to the taut abdomen of Charm, Block's characters reinforce the presumed superiority of thinness.

Despite Block's frequent references to a character's appearance, several of her stories suggest that beauty is not the most important determiner of female worth. When Snow's mother presents her with a (poisonous) gift, Snow is surprised because she "had never thought of herself as beautiful. For her, beauty was Bear's voice telling her bedtime stories and the way Buck's eyes shone and Lynx's small graceful body. She thought it was strange this woman would want to give her a present because of how she looked" (23). Yet, unlike Snow, the narrator of "Ice" clearly understands

the relationship between appearance and desirability. Her envy of the rival beauty queen is extreme: "I wanted to destroy the body I was trapped in, become what she was, no matter what it took. No matter how much mutilation or pain" (229). In the end, though, the male chooses her over her rival, thus implying that love reaches beyond physical attributes.

While many of Block's characters experience the male gaze, Galloway offers a direct challenge to it in two of her stories. In "The Woodcutter's Wife," Hansel and Gretel's malicious stepmother turns out to be a witch who demands human sacrifice for her own replenishment. She tells the reader that although it may seem strange for such a powerful creature to choose the humble form of a woodcutter's wife, in truth it is easier than being young and beautiful: "Being beautiful is a full-time job, even with power such as mine was then. And do what one will, one gets older and loses it" (108). Beauty in this story is not valorized as a source of female power, but in "A Taste for Beauty," Galloway returns to the theme of equating beauty with female power. The narrator in this story presents an interesting challenge to the male gaze by confronting it directly. She is offered a chance to get away from her slaughterhouse job if she wins a beauty contest. Seizing the opportunity with gusto, she acknowledges that she "never knew it took so much work to be beautiful" (99-100) and accepts help from the enigmatic Esmeralda, whose ancestors were murdered by the king's ancestors. In exchange for assuring her success in the beauty contest and ultimate marriage to the king, Esmeralda demands that the narrator kill the king's daughter. The narrator forgets her promise until her magic mirror delivers a new message: "It may be hard to believe, but I had really forgotten all about it when the mirror changed its message and told me my stepdaughter, Snow, was more beautiful than I" (105). She continues:

But the mirror's new message changed everything. I have to be the most beautiful, anybody can understand that. I have to have the king most in love with me. It doesn't matter what people say about character and intelligence being important and beauty being only skin deep. I know better. (106)

Jealousy and fear fuel her determination, and the story ends with her assertion that "it won't be difficult at all" (106) to kill the child. On the surface, the story seems to reiterate the power of the male gaze. Yet, the story can also be read as a sardonic commentary on the way females are valued for their appearance.

Closely linked to the beauty contest is a romantic discourse which privileges heterosexual coupling. Bronwyn Davies underscores the role romantic discourse plays in communicating gendered norms:

Romantic discourse is one of the fundamental props of the male/female dualism. . . . Because story provides a substantial and detailed manifesta-

tion of the culture, it is through story that children can learn the patterns of desire appropriate for their gender. . . . Learning the appropriate patterns of desire enables young women to 'voluntarily' and uncritically take up the subject positions made available to them in the patriarchal gender order, and thus to become the *other* to the men in their world. (145)

The othering of the feminine is apparent in Galloway's story "The Voice of Love." In this version of "The Little Mermaid," the heroine agrees to be silenced in exchange for human legs that will enable her to spend time with the prince whom she has rescued from the sea and with whom she has fallen in love. As in many other bargains struck in these stories, the female ultimately pays a high price in exchange for immediate gratification. Once on land, the mermaid loses the kingdom's predictable beauty contest to a preening, materialistic princess. After revelling in his new wife's fleshly delights, the prince comes to understand what is lacking; as he yearns for the more meaningful companionship of the silent friend, he realizes that "A man could drown in her body for a time, but not forever" (67). He commands his subjects to find the mermaid girl and bring her back to the palace. His orders notwithstanding, they are unable to find the girl, who has returned to the sea in her original form. Eventually realizing this, the prince "longed to visit her home, even though he knew he could not survive under the sea" (72). The mermaid's sisters easily lure him into the ocean, where he meets certain death. In this story, male and female are from different spheres and are unable to create a mutual space. On the one hand, this can be read as a critique of a male-centred world because the prince is sure to die. Yet the story replicates the standard difference between male and female, a dichotomy that almost always privileges the male gender.

Galloway's stories are full of interesting examples of border crossing, as in the desire of both mermaid and prince to experience a relationship with someone outside of their cultural territory. Other instances of this include the princess in "A Bed of Peas," who leaves her (apparently) European kingdom to marry a Bedouin chief, and the ogre's wife in "Blood and Bone" ("Jack and the Beanstalk"), who was raised by pygmies but now lives with humans. Each of these border crossings interrupts rigid, socially-prescribed norms, one of the most pervasive of which is compulsory heterosexuality.

Heterosexual coupling is predominant in both Block's and Galloway's tales, though one story in each collection advances the possibility of same-sex romance. Block's version of Sleeping Beauty, "Charm," tells the story of Rev, a heroine-addicted adolescent female who poses for erotic photographs in exchange for drugs. She is being gang-raped at a party when the female Charm comes to her rescue. The care Rev receives from Charm reads like a visit to a chic spa, complete with blooming courtyards and repasts of

jasmine rice and coconut milk (85-86). As the story unfolds, Charm reveals that her relationship with Rev dates back to when they were victims of child pornography together. Realizing that Charm is a missing piece of the puzzle that is her life, Rev responds to Charm's kiss with passion: "Rev felt as if all the fierce blossoms were shuddering open. The castle was opening" (97). With imagery that suggests sexual desire, Block subverts the traditional Sleeping Beauty/Prince Charming romance by casting females in both lead roles. It is significant, however, that the incipient lesbian romance is a response to child abuse; both Rev and Charm are traumatized individuals who find redemption in their relationship.

Galloway offers a more direct challenge to heterosexual dominance in "The Prince." The story opens with the title character musing on his past: "Guilt. Guilt. Guilt. My analyst keeps telling me I need to work out my feelings of guilt. Such nonsense" (124). Though he appears dismissive of his analyst's observations, the Prince acknowledges that his guilt stems not from his mother's death in childbirth nor his father's constant warring but from the loss of his childhood friend/tutor Stephen, with whom he enjoyed a homoerotic relationship. Subject to teasing for his unattractive looks and for this liaison, the Prince adopts a bully stance predicated upon privilege. He shuns female suitors and intimidates his servants. Having thus rid the castle of unwanted interlopers, the Prince enjoys perfumed footbaths with the tutor. Unexpectedly, his father finds him "head bent over my dear friend's precious feet. Stephen half-sat, half-lay on the padded couch" (127). The King is outraged, the Prince shamed, the tutor sentenced to death. The Prince secretly witnesses his friend's hanging, watching as "the feet, those dear, dear feet, vanished as the body dangled" (128-29). Some months later, the King summons the Prince to his deathbed to tell him he must "find a mate, a female" (130) in order to inherit the kingdom. At the royal ball, the Prince dutifully plays the role of eligible bachelor, all the while loathing what he sees: "Could I stand to marry one? Perhaps, if she seemed empty enough, transparent enough. Perhaps" (131). At that moment he spies the young woman wearing glass slippers: "My eyes had not left her feet as they nestled like twin birds in their delicate little cages. Such feet! Oh, Stephen, you'd have loved them too. How I longed to put them into the footbath, to pour in the perfumed oil!" (131). As the Prince vows to possess the damsel with the exquisite feet, he really affirms his affection for the male tutor. The female is merely a beard, a prop in the Prince's schema of power and privilege.

Galloway's story is rich with ironic tone, evidenced by her bracketing the story in terms of a psychoanalytic session. The Prince's foot fetish appears captivatingly eccentric, yet it smacks of homosexual stereotyping. Furthermore, it is clear that the Prince will not find fulfillment in the new relationship. Characters in both "Charm" and "The Prince" are representative of the kind of damaging stereotypes and inaccuracies about lesbians

and gays found in other young adult literature (McLean 183). "The Prince" reinforces the belief that fictional gay people "can expect a lonely, isolated adulthood characterized by a series of unhappy love relationships," while Charm and Rev's recovered childhood memories suggest that they "have been traumatized into homosexuality" (McLean 183). These stories do subvert compulsory heterosexuality, but they stop short of questioning ideological categories of normality and abnormality, inclusion and exclusion, and homosexual and heterosexual (Dilley).

Violence as a Path to Agency

Romance in these stories, heterosexual or otherwise, reinforces the notion that courtship plays a key role in the heroine/hero's sense of self. For many female fairy tale characters, this sense of self often entails being what Lieberman calls the "glamorous sufferer or victim," pointing out that "What these stories convey is that women in distress are interesting" (194). Bluebeard is perhaps the most notorious tale of a woman in distress, a story that Block recreates in contemporary Los Angeles. This story features one of Block's most poignant characters, a young woman who "dreamed of being part of the stories — even terrifying ones, even horror stories — because at least the girls in stories were alive before they died" (153). The narrator gets her chance to live a little when she meets Derrick Blue, a charismatic music promoter, at a house party. In a surprising turn of phrase, she reveals that the male gaze connotes danger: "And then I was hungry for him," she recalls, "this man who seemed to have everything, and to actually be looking at me. I didn't realize why he was looking" (158). She succumbs to the power of his gaze, feeling "like [she] was high on coke coke when he looked at me" (159). Initially her self-destructive inclination is so extreme that she admits that "I wanted him to break me. Part of me did. He said, I can make you whatever you want to be. I wanted him to. But what did I want to be? Maybe that was the danger" (161). The real danger, as it turns out, is not her uncertain sense of self but the fact that Blue is a serial killer. As she listens to his stories and realizes her own vulnerability, she imagines the voices of his previous victims:

I didn't see the bones but I knew they were there, under the house. The little runaway bones of skinny, hungry girls who didn't think they were worth much — anything — so they stayed after the party was over and let Derrick Blue tell them his stories. He probably didn't even have to use much force on most of them. (164)

At that point, the narrator's voice seems to merge with Block's as she asserts that "I will rewrite the story of Bluebeard" (164). No brothers or sisters will come to her aid; rather, she will rely on her own power to run

away because that is something she has learned to do (165). She succeeds in getting away from the killer and, safe in her car, she again hears the voices of other victims who need her "to write their song" (166).

The song this character might write would be a mournful one, one that recognizes the rampant violence, both physical and psychic, visited upon female characters in fairy tales. Just as in traditional tales, females are subject to acts with deadly intention: in six of Block's nine stories, heroines face an explicit threat of violence. The violence may come from another woman ("Snow"), the self ("Ice"), or a male ("Wolf," "Charm," "Bones," and "Glass"). In only one case is the heroine unable to resist the violent act, and that is because she does not recognize its presence. This occurs in the story "Tiny" when the miniature heroine reveals herself to her beloved boy poet. As mentioned earlier, he subjects her to the power of his male gaze, and, in doing so, captures her voice: "He knew that he would never be without the right words again as long as she was with him, but he thought he should officially ask her anyway" (51-52). She consents to being his muse if he allows her to sleep in his bed. Accepting this demand, he is transformed to her size and becomes "the prince of the flowers" (52). While it might seem hopeful that it is the male who has to change to inhabit the feminine world, this is a potent example of symbolic violence in which a female is silenced.

In several of her stories, Block's heroines escape assault because they are saved in an act of romantic rescue. Lieberman comments on the prevalence of such scenes in fairy tales:

the device of the rescue itself is constantly used. The sexes of the rescuer and the persons in danger are almost as constantly predictable, men come along to rescue women who are in danger of death, or are enslaved, imprisoned, abused, or plunged into an enchanted sleep which resembles death. (195)

Block puts her own spin on the rescue device. In "Charm," the title character saves Rev not only from her male attackers but also from her heroin addiction. By assigning a female to the prince's role in this story, Block subverts the anticipated male rescue of females in distress, suggesting that women can be their own liberators. She plays with this notion again in the story "Snow" when the heroine is awakened by the possessive gardener whom she then rejects, choosing instead the nurturing company of the seven brothers. That she chooses multiple male companionship is less significant than the act of choosing. By exhibiting an ability to act on her own behalf, Snow demonstrates the power of female agency. This theme continues in "Blue" and "Wolf": in both of these stories, the heroines refuse to be victims and exercise independence by resisting the male predator. The story "Ice" presents conflicting messages about female agency. The narrator expresses violent psychic rejection of her own body because the boy she loves

has fallen for an icy porn queen. Yet even with a powerful negative self-image, she gains the heroic role by rescuing her "prince" from the porn queen's evil spell.

That female characters express self-determination in Block's stories is hardly surprising. An article in the online magazine *Book* discusses Block's use of "strong female characters who grapple with the harsh aspects of modern life, like AIDS, drug abuse, eating disorders and incest" (Kloberdanz). A reviewer of *The Rose and the Beast* comments that, "as Block's fans would expect, the story heroines are strong young women who eventually learn they are capable of controlling their own fate [sic]" (Segal). And yet, while these heroines demonstrate agency in their ability to fight back, their fates often seem bound up in patriarchal structures.

In contrast to Block, who employs female agency against violence as a central plot line, Galloway uses violence against women as a contextual backdrop for several of her stories. In "Blood and Bone," the narrator struggles with whether or not to capture the pygmy child Jack, whose bones would provide medication for her terminally-ill husband, Sard. She mentions in an aside that Sard "knocked out one of [her] lower front teeth one night. It was an accident, he doesn't know his own strength, but it wouldn't have happened if he hadn't gone through the whole of his six-pack and most of another besides" (31). The image of the abusive husband is evident in other passages. She describes how Sard settles down in front of the Holo with several beers after dinner, where he often falls asleep (21). Even though technology changes (i.e., a Holo instead of a television), stereotypes remain. Despite his behaviour, Sard's wife seems to genuinely love her husband. Upon learning that she is a half-pygmy, half-human "freak," and that her bones are sought by both medical and government forces, the narrator opts to sacrifice herself in order to save Jack and provide her husband with a supply of medicine. "Either way," she muses, "the happy years of my life with Sard are over" (34). The irony of her sentiments emerge when she asks, "Why have I done this? It's silly for women to sacrifice themselves. I can't bear waste" (34). As the story ends, it is unclear if either Jack or Sard will live, let alone benefit from her sacrifice. What is clear is that even in contemporary fairy tales, women sometimes choose to be victims.

The opening lines of Galloway's "A Taste for Beauty" offers another glimpse of the terror violence wreaks upon victims:

Whump. Snap. "Help!"

Whump. Snap. "Help!"

Over and over, those sounds still chase each other through my mind. . . . The first two sounds are Pa hitting Mum and something breaking. The third one is her scream. It is always a thin scream, thready, lacking all sense of vitality or power. Just like Mum. (97)

The narrator loathes her stepfather and her mother, whom she blames for

subjecting herself to spousal abuse. Like several of Block's characters, she escapes from these brutal circumstances by expressing her agency. In order to do so, she co-opts the tools of the oppressor, becoming an expert with a knife at her abattoir job. However, it is ultimately through the supposedly feminine power of beauty that she seeks her escape by winning the local beauty contest.

O'Keefe reminds us that females who appear responsible for their own status as victims are anything but new in children's literature:

Folk tales gave us the Sleeping Beauty (she made herself vulnerable by pricking her finger), and Snow White in her glass coffin (she erred in accepting the poisoned apple). It is clear in such cases that a hostile person hurt the heroine, yet somehow the heroine was guilty too, had "brought it on herself," and needed to atone in a purgatorial paralysis. (19)

It is important to recognize that even if female characters subject to violence in these contemporary fairy tales are complicit in their own oppression, it is the threat of violence that appears to be a prerequisite condition of agency. That is, females who explicitly demonstrate their power do so only after being confronted with violence. Roberta Seelinger Trites defines feminist agency in children's literature as the character's ability to "assert her own personality and to enact her own decisions" (6). She, too, comments on the traditional "Sleeping Beauty" tale, arguing that, "While in prefeminist novels the protagonist tends to become Sleeping Beauty in a movement from active to passive, from vocal to silent, the feminist protagonist remains active and celebrates her agency and her voice" (8). Female power in children's literature is of paramount importance, yet in these examples from contemporary fairy tales, it is achieved only through reacting to dire circumstances.

Conclusion

Neither Block nor Galloway makes any claim to authoring feminist versions of classic fairy tales. Their work, however, contains characteristics of what Zipes (*Don't Bet on the Prince*) and others (Trites 4-9) have identified as feminist literature. Block's characters place a positive value on traditionally female spheres and define the source of female power as love that extends beyond sexual desire. While Block is relentlessly optimistic, Galloway fits more in the tradition of fairy tale authors who draw heavily upon irony. Her sophisticated stories complicate gender roles and contradict expectations based on traditional fairy tales. Zipes points out that authors of feminist fairy tales for older readers often appear cynical:

the patterns and themes are also designed to stress liberations and transformation. But there is a more guarded position or sober attitude with re-

gard to the possibilities for gender rearrangement. In some cases the writers are outright pessimistic, or pessimistic in a provocative manner that makes the reader desire change. (*Don't Bet on the Prince* 9)

In terms of "gender rearrangement," the fairy tales told by Block and by Galloway push toward alternative gender displays and, at the same time, reiterate timeworn dichotomies between categories of female and male, good and evil, pretty and ugly. Thus, the mirror's message is not so new after all. The "edginess" of the stories masks the conservative foundations of the tales.

Bacchilega points out that postmodern fairy tales are both normative and subversive. The new fairy tale contains inherent contradictions, she maintains, and thus "produces wonder precisely through its seductively concealed exploitation of the conflict between its *normative* function, which capitalizes on the comforts of consensus, and its *subversive* wonder, which magnifies the powers of transformation" (7). The conflicting gender images presented in *The Rose and the Beast* and *Truly Grim Tales* raise questions about how "normal" is defined and what constitutes subversion. In this way, the cultural scripts that Block and Galloway have creatively reworked provide a fascinating entry for adolescents engaged in dialogue about gender norms.

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