GENTLE WOLVES
Re-contextualizing Fairy Tale Illustration

A thesis presented to The Honors
Tutorial College, Ohio University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation from the Honors Tutorial
College with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in
Studio Art–Graphic Design

by Madeleine Valley, April 2013
This thesis has been approved by
THE HONORS TUTORIAL COLLEGE
and THE COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS

SHERRY BLANKENSHIP
Professor, Graphic Design
Thesis Adviser

VINCENT CARANCHINI
DOS, Honors Tutorial College
Studio Art

JEREMY WEBSTER
Dean, Honors Tutorial College
The history of fairy tales is tangled and complex. From Grimm and Anderson to Walt Disney, what we know as fairy tales have been filtered through so many film studios, illustrators, writers, and TV shows that they are almost unrecognizable from the versions first published in print—which are in turn unrecognizable from the stories that inspired them. Part of the appeal of researching and interpreting fairy tales is that each iteration of them so far is indicative of the culture that created it—and more to the point, how women were viewed by the culture of the time. In the 1830’s, Hans Christian Andersen filled his with an overabundance of stepmothers to reflect the high birth mortality rate for mothers; in 1900 Arthur Rackham illustrated the stories of the Brothers Grimm with waif-like, scantily-clad heroines, a fantasy escape from the tightly-corseted women of his own time; In the mid-20th century Walt Disney gave his princesses heroes and happy endings so that they might live their post-World War II domestic dreams; in 1979 Angela Carter made her heroines first-wave feminist icons. Each re-interpretation has offered a new vision of the women it contains, but one thing remains constant: the focus is on the women.

What first attracted me to the idea of researching fairy tales was actually a reading of Angela Carter’s “Company of Wolves.” She had been explained to me as a “feminist” author, but what struck me most about the story was the fact that Little Red wasn’t the hero—what made her a dynamic character was the fact that she was ambiguous. It’s not clear in the story what her intentions are, because the reader is removed from the action, as well as from any internal thoughts the characters are having. Part of the disconnect between characters and the reader has to do with the fact that Carter uses language similar to that of the Brothers Grimm or Hans Christian

Andersen\textsuperscript{2}. Their original language is also strangely detached—sentences are simple, since the stories were meant to be understood by children, but there’s a restrained horror underlying many of their stories once the reader begins to understand what is happening to the characters. This comes from the subject matter of the story contrasted with the simplified, detached tone. Much like harsh lighting in a horror film, the dry, honest language the original writers used, and that Carter used also, highlights the creepier elements of the stories.

I hadn’t read older versions of fairy tales when I read Carter’s re-interpretation of “Little Red Riding Hood”, but her tone gripped my imagination, so I went back to the original texts by Charles Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, and other translations to see what I would find. What I discovered was that Carter wasn’t so removed from older versions of the story. In Perrault’s version of “Little Red,” the girl and her grandmother die violent deaths at the hand of the wolf; in the Grimm version, the huntsman cuts open the wolf’s belly while he’s still alive before the girl and her grandmother drown him; early French and Italian versions of the story have the wolf tricking the girl into eating parts of her grandmother for dinner, and are probably where Carter got the idea of Little Red burning her clothes before getting into bed with the wolf. In contemporary times, the most often told version is probably Grimm’s. In a contemporary context, the fact that the young girl (who is the hero of the story) commits these violent acts in order to prosper at the end of her story, presents a certain moral ambiguity. In “The Werewolf,” author Angela Carter re-imagines the classic Grimm fairy tale “Little Red Riding Hood,” or, “Little Red Cap,” to great effect.

Carter’s audience is likely familiar with “Little Red Cap” and its didactic theme of good triumphing over evil (good symbolized by the young girl, and evil symbolized by the wolf who terrorizes her). However, by re-contextualizing the story and staying true to the original tone, Carter lends the tale fresh depth and meaning. She adds humanity to a classic villain, and thus adds complexity to the question of right and wrong. This suits an adult audience that has outgrown Grimm’s stories for children.

In her short story, Carter very clearly pulls inspiration from the original. In the original Grimm tale, there is no specific setting described for the story further than “once upon a time”. Carter elaborates much further, setting up a “cold,” “harsh,” superstitious town as a backdrop for her characters. Though this may seem like a divergence from her source material, the vaguely historical setting Carter creates is not so different from what many people imagine upon hearing “once upon a time.” For children, this phrase conjures up images of castles and princesses, but for adults who are more familiar with history and the hardships of life, “once upon a time” might very well be a time and place like the one Carter describes.

She also makes references to witchcraft, again reinforcing the vague history of her setting, and describes the fate of a suspected witch with harsh frankness: once villagers find a witch’s third nipple, “they stone her to death.” Though this is jarring in contrast to more popular versions of fairy tales, it echoes the language the Brothers Grimm use in their original stories. For example, in “Little Red Cap,” when the wolf finds Little Red Cap’s grandmother, “he went straight to the grandmother’s bed without saying a word and gobbled her up. Next he put on her clothes and her

nightcap, lay down in her bed, and drew the curtains. Though the image of a wolf in human clothing is lighthearted, it follows the image of a wild animal eating the protagonist’s grandmother. The Brothers Grimm downplay what would be, in real life, a traumatizing event, much as Angela Carter downplays the violence and injustice of stoning a witch.

Furthermore, in both the Grimm and the Carter versions of the story, Little Red Cap kills the wolf or assists in killing it (in “Little Red Cap,” the huntsman kills the first wolf but Little Red Cap kills the second), and thus triumphs over evil. She suffers no guilt or adverse consequences in either story. In Carter’s version, “the child lived in her grandmother’s house; she prospered.” In Grimm’s, “Little Red Cap went merrily on her way home, and no one harmed her.” In the Brothers Grimm version of the story, this ending is not so disturbing, since the wolf is very clearly meant to represent evil and Little Red was acting in self-defense. In Carter’s version, she combines the characters of the wolf and the grandmother, so that putting the same ending on the story garners an entirely different reaction from her reader. Carter’s Little Red Cap comes off as callous and evil, even though the story justifies her actions. Her grandmother is a witch, and is punished according to the law of the town. Additionally, Carter’s Little Red Cap plays only a minimal part in her grandmother’s death, whereas the Grimm version has Little Red Cap murder the second wolf almost on her own. Carter challenges the reader to ask why one girl is innocent while the other is guilty, when their crimes are so similar.

The reason Carter’s retelling of “Little Red Cap” is so effective is that she is pulling from such an established story. The Brothers Grimm are known for their fairy
tales, which have been retold time and time again. In almost every popular retelling, there are changes made, and yet the essential lessons are usually kept intact. Because of this long history, the story of Little Red Cap and the lesson it teaches are one and the same: good triumphs over evil. In children’s stories, evil characters are usually dehumanized (in “Little Red Cap,” the villain is literally not a human) to avoid the sticky questions that come with killing or hurting another person. By bringing the humanity back to her villain, Angela Carter asks older readers to take another look at the meaning of “good vs. evil” and to ask themselves who really deserves to win. Instead of crafting the innocent and exemplary little girl of the Grimms’ story, Carter creates an antihero who is not only more dynamic, but infinitely more interesting and engaging than the original. Her voice breathes a second life into a centuries-old story.

The idea of “voice” is important when discussing fairy tales. Before Carter and many other contemporary authors began interpreting these stories, the only audible voices retelling fairy tales were those of men: Disney, Grimm, Andersen, and Perrault, to name a few. However, the majority of the men whose fairytale retellings we are most familiar with didn’t write in their own voice. That is to say, part of the success of books by Perrault and Andersen stemmed from the idea that every story in a fairy tale collection was being told to the reader by a “Mother Goose” type of figure. This myth goes hand in hand for most readers with a quaint image of an old, matronly woman surrounded by children, telling stories like “Little Red Cap” or “Rumplestiltskin” by a cozy fire—the image that graced the inside of an early edition of Perrault’s Tales of Mother Goose. This concept excused excessive violence for audiences of the Grimms’ book (the stories were from a simpler time and place, Mother Goose didn’t know these
things weren’t proper to talk about). This concept rocketed Perrault, the Grimms, and Andersen to popularity. Their books weren’t seen as collections of fairy tales retold by men, they were seen as a nursemaid in the form of a book, a continuation of a long oral history that had been lost and needed to be revived. And this is fine, except that while these men wrote with the voice of a woman, the voices of actual women were often being ignored.

But who’s to say these stories weren’t exactly what the authors claimed they were? Was it all just a marketing scheme or were the brothers Grimm really in contact with a million old-fashioned nursemaids who were giving them their best stories? Of course it is difficult, given the widespread appeal of these stories and the sheer number of adaptations and interpretations currently in existence, to trace any of the stories we currently know as “fairy tales” to their source. Supposedly before fairy tales people told folk tales. Each country seems to have had its own version of Beauty and the Beast, or Cinderella, or Little Red Riding Hood that was told amongst family and friends. The Brothers Grimm, for instance, included the huntsman in their “Little Red Cap” (1812) and the character is now a common addition to Western retellings, coming to the rescue of Little Red and her grandmother in most contemporary retellings. However, before the Brothers Grimm, Charles Perrault wrote his “Little Red Riding Hood” (1697), which is decidedly less uplifting. In Perrault’s version, the little girl first takes off her clothes and gets into bed with the wolf dressed as her grandmother, and then the wolf gobbles her up. Perrault ends his story without any further resolution, adding in a couple didactic lines warning young ladies to stay away from charming strangers. An
1889 edition from Poland suggests that the story has roots in a lunar myth, and that the red color of the girl’s cape originally cast her as “twilight,” who is then swallowed by “the wolf of darkness.” Instead of a warning to young girls, this version has cultural roots in an explanation of night and day.

Italy spawned a significantly more disturbing tradition of this girl’s story, originally known as El Cappelin Rosso. “Little Red Hat,” the English translation, sees the little girl meeting an ogre in the wood who beats her back to her grandmother’s house and kills her grandmother. In a twist of disturbingly realistic detail, he doesn’t eat the old woman whole, instead using the grandmother’s intestines as a door latch replacement and storing her teeth, jaws, and a jar of her blood in the cupboard. When Little Red Hat finally arrives, the ogre feeds the girl pieces of her own grandmother for dinner before making her get into bed with him and eating her as well. What further distinguishes this version of the story is the dark humor with which it’s told, which is most evident as the wolf interacts with the girl:

A little while later Little Red Hat said, “Grandmother, I’m thirsty.”
“Just look in the cupboard,” said the ogre. “There must be a little wine there.”
Little Red Hat went to the cupboard and took out the blood. “Grandmother, this wine is very red!”
“Drink and keep quiet. It is your grandmother’s blood!”
“What did you say?”
“Just drink and keep quiet!”

Another distinction regarding this version of the story is the idea of Little Red dawdling on her way to the cottage. The ogre runs ahead while she stops to pick flowers, essentially sealing her own fate. Rather than displaying the little girl as an

---

13 Ashliman, “El Cappelin Rosso”
14 Ashliman, “Little Red Hat”
innocent child who is put in danger by forces outside her control, this version portrays her as an idiot, who seems to be willfully ignoring her own instincts and the danger of her own situation.

French folklore has its own version of the tale, known simply as “The Grandmother.\textsuperscript{15}” It’s similar to the dark tale that comes out of Austria and Italy, but the little girl makes a narrow escape by pretending to go to the bathroom outside and instead running away. The crass humor of “Little Red Hat” pervades this story as well, with the ogre asking the girl if she’s “doing a load” when she doesn’t immediately return from her bathroom trip. These are really only a few different variations of the story of Little Red Riding Hood that have been compiled over time, and each of the stories we know as “fairy tales” today have at least this many versions from all over the world, including Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, and Cinderella.

The problem with following the “oral tradition” that spawned our contemporary idea of fairy tales is that these folk tales were almost all compiled in the 18th or 19th century, by Western male authors who wanted to create an evocative atmosphere for their readers. In other words, people wanted to read fairy tales to feel more connected to the mythical storytelling tradition that their ancestors had started, and authors who wanted their stories to be read knew to tap into that market\textsuperscript{16}. There is no evidence that these stories were ever told around the fireplace like we always envision, but this image persists because authors wanted it to. Perrault, for instance, named his collection of fairy tales Tales of Mother Goose, in what was likely a conscious attempt to evoke a matronly storyteller who had passed these stories from fireside to fireside her whole

\textsuperscript{15} Ashliman, “The Grandmother”
\textsuperscript{16} Harries “Oralities”
life. Though these authors may have used oral sources, in reality, there were written sources that Perrault and his contemporaries were pulling from, including Italian stories published a century earlier, ancient Greek mythology, and Arthurian legends. Any stories that came before the end of the 17th century, oral or written, in no way resemble what we know as fairy tales today. This does not lessen the legitimacy or importance of the stories, but oftentimes the myth of the oral tradition that spawned fairy tales erases the sources who are actually responsible.

Nonetheless it is true that over time, all the fairy tales we know today traveled across the world the same way “Little Red Riding Hood” did, intertwining and creating hybrids, until it became impossible to verify a singular source for any of them. However, these tangled traditions inspired later iterations that are easier to trace. Unlike the scattered tales they stem from, our contemporary concept of the “fairy tale” is based on the published fairy tale that originated amongst the noble classes around the 16th century. Two publications arose in Italy at that time, Francesco Straparola’s *Le Piacevoli Notti* (1550-53) and Giambattista Basile’s *Il Pentamerone* (1634-36). They contained the earliest known (written) versions of stories such as Cinderella, Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty, among others. These tales were based on the folk tales that peasants had been telling for centuries, but their respective authors had adapted the tales to a noble audience. The characters that had always been represented by working classes were slowly replaced by nobles and royalty. The fairy tale princesses we are so accustomed to didn’t exist prior to these publications. At the time, a published work would only be accessible to those citizens who could afford a book and who were

17 Straparola
18 Basile
literate enough to read a book, meaning nobility. Basile’s book in particular, however, had a lasting impression, and remained popular until a century later, when it was reinterpreted once more.

Much like our culture today, the 17th century French aristocracy was preoccupied with the oral tradition of folk tales and by Basile’s collection of them, and the group of women known as the Précieuses were more taken than most\(^9\). These women were courtiers, many of them friends of Catherine de Vivonne, Marquise de Rambouillet during the reign of Louis XIV. Witty, bored, and too rich for their own good, they would escape from the politics and intrigue of the royal court at the time by gathering in private salons. These regular meetings, referred to commonly as salons, became a place where they could talk freely (for the most part, although Louis XIV was notoriously paranoid and not above spying on his own courtiers, so the women had to be careful). Though the women of the salons had little to complain about in terms of wealth or comfort, being noblewomen allowed them very little actual freedom. The problems they faced included a lack of access to education, a lack of political clout, and the pervasive tradition of forced marriages for women in the upper classes. The salons became a place where women could speak their mind. Political discussions were common, as were poetry readings and literary debates. The women, who became known collectively as the \textit{Précieuses} though that term refers to several groups over several years, weren’t content just to discuss their problems. Their political influence was inconsequential and their numbers too few to stage any sort of direct protest. They began to express themselves by writing novels, short stories, and poems, and by performing comedic plays. Most of these written works functioned on

\(^9\) Harries
a couple of levels. At first glance, they were a way for rich women to keep themselves amused and nothing more—and many prominent figures at the time dismissed them as such. In fact, Moliere wrote a play that poked fun at the précieuses called *Les Precieuses Ridicules*, which is still performed today to much success. Moliere’s play mocked the women as being pretentious and unintelligent. Many scholars today still refuse to take these women seriously or to pay credit to their efforts. However, for the authors and their friends, these works contained layers of meaning, functioning as commentary on French society and the reign of the Sun King.

One of these women was Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve. Unfortunately, not much is known about Barbot de Villeneuve except that she is credited with publishing the first known version of Beauty and the Beast\textsuperscript{20}. Another notable member of the précieuse circle was Madame d’Aulnoy, a member of Vivonne’s circle. As a teenager, d’Aulnoy was forced into an arranged marriage with a man twice her age, and she was vocal about her unhappiness with the situation. However, according to the convention of the time, the marriage was upheld, and before long a public affair threw her name into scandal. A few years of self-imposed exile cleared her name, and she returned to Paris with fresh fodder for her own fairy tales. In 1697, she published several of the stories with which she had often regaled the group, titling the collection “Les Contes des Fées,” literally, “Fairy Tales.” D’Aulnoy, in naming her book, invented the phrase “fairy tale.” One of the stories in her collection, the one she is most remembered for today, was called “The White Cat,” and contains several not-so-subtle autobiographical elements\textsuperscript{21}. Her main character is a cat (formerly a princess) who was

\textsuperscript{20} Mendelson
\textsuperscript{21} d’Aulnoy
forced into an arranged marriage as a human and cursed by wicked witches. She isn’t forced to marry her odious fiancee, but the witches kill her true love and turn her into a cat as a punishment. The story is intricate, the characters dynamic, and for these reasons, even though it has all the fantastical elements of a traditional fairy tale, it is a different breed altogether. Unfortunately for d’Aulnoy, the same year another collection of fairy tales was published: Charles Perrault’s Tales and Stories of the Past With Morals, commonly known by its subtitle, Tales of Mother Goose. Perrault’s stories were devoured by the general public, and d’Aulnoy was mostly forgotten.

D’Aulnoy was not the first voice in the history of fairy tales to be overlooked or forgotten, and she will not be the last. These days there are new interpretations of old stories everywhere you look. Popular culture is, now more than ever, obsessed with fairy tales. 2012 saw the bicentennial of the publication of Grimm Brothers’ *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, and with it, a resurgence of fairy tale influences on art, literature, and popular culture. A search of “Grimm’s Fairy Tales” on Amazon.com, the most popular online bookstore on the web, yields 7,802 results, with 86 related books and movies released in the last month alone. October of 2011 saw two new primetime television shows emerge, ABC’s *Once Upon a Time* and NBC’s *Grimm*. Both shows explore what would happen if the real world and the world of fairy tales collided, and both are still airing with a devoted following. On the big screen, a 2011 film called *Sleeping Beauty* was not a retelling of that fairy tale in so much as it was a dark thriller whose title added an element of ironic sweetness to the story. March 2012 saw the release

---

22 Perrault
23 Kitsis
24 Carpenter
25 Sleeping Beauty
of a live-action, kid-friendly retelling of Snow White called Mirror Mirror\textsuperscript{26}. Three months later, Snow White and the Huntsman\textsuperscript{27} put a very different spin on the same story, focusing on a truly evil queen who, true to the earliest versions of the Snow White tale, will stop at nothing until she can consume the heart of an armor-wearing, sword-wielding Snow White. Both stories stay faithful to the Grimm’s original version in their own way, though both add a certain spunkiness to the original heroine that Disney neglected in his 1937 film. According to Rotten Tomatoes, it is the latter version of the 2012 Snow White films that was more successful, though Mirror Mirror seems to have found itself a solid place amongst the silly children’s movies of today, as it has outsold its counterpart in DVD. 2013 introduced audiences to a live action version of “Jack and the Beanstalk” (\textit{Jack the Giant Slayer})\textsuperscript{28} and a cheesy blockbuster dubbed \textit{Hansel and Gretel: Witch Hunters}\textsuperscript{29}. 2014 will see the release of a live action retelling of Sleeping Beauty from the antagonist’s point of view, called Maleficent, set to star Angelina Jolie\textsuperscript{30}. Stills from this film have been released, and all signs point to an early Disney influence, in order to play to the version of the story that moviegoing American audiences will be most familiar with. The 2012 Snow White films, and, although it’s too early to say for sure, probably Maleficent as well, are almost as notable for the stylized look of the cinematography and the costuming as they are for the way they reinterpret their source material. Mirror Mirror takes a Tim-Burton-esque approach to its characters’ costuming, with very heavy and fantastical Elizabethan influence.

\textbf{Leading up to} the film’s release, the costume design was the most-discussed aspect of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{26} Mirror, Mirror
\item \textsuperscript{27} Snow White and the Huntsman
\item \textsuperscript{28} Jack the Giant Slayer
\item \textsuperscript{29} Hansel and Gretel: Witch Hunters
\item \textsuperscript{30} Maleficent
\end{itemize}
The fashion industry in general has been pulling a great deal of inspiration from this genre of stories in recent years. The Elie Saab Couture Spring-Summer 2013 line (figure A) was described as an “ode to delicateness” by its designer, and his gowns were described as “fairy tale frocks” by fashion editors because of their old-fashioned femininity and lacy frivolity. 2007 saw the release of a Dior fragrance called “Midnight Poison,” the ad campaign and branding for which was inspired by a dark, twisted version of Cinderella (B). Two years later, Lady Gaga posed for a fashion editorial in Vogue magazine that was based on the story of Hansel and Gretel (C). Fellow celebrities Lily Cole and Andrew Garfield played the children, while Gaga, in 11-inch heels, filled in for the wicked witch. The same magazine saw another editorial in November of 2010 that was titled “Beauty and the Beast,” starring Drew Barrymore. The photographs involved Barrymore wearing priceless gowns and draped over a lion, with each spread featuring a quote, ostensibly from the story of Beauty and the Beast. Footwear designer Charlotte Olympia’s Fall 2013 collection is simply called “Fairy Tales,” and each piece is based on a different fairy tale or fairytale theme (D). The connection between the fashion industry and the idea of fairy tales is not surprising. The fashion industry is, first and foremost, an industry, and a thriving one at that. However, fashion is often downplayed as a frivolous pursuit, not to be taken seriously, much like the Precieuses in their time. Fashion, and the person who invests time in it, often contains hidden depths, like the fairy tales the pages of Vogue often reference.

The photographer of Drew Barrymore’s 2010 Vogue shoot was none other than Annie Leibovitz, who is a world famous photographer in her own right, but who has
also been preoccupied with the idea of fairytales in a couple of her projects over the past few years. Most notable of these is her campaign for Disney parks, which started in 2007 and is continuous to this day. In January of 2007, she released the first few photos in what would become a major series, each featuring one to three famous actors or musicians posed in the place of Disney fairy tale characters with a pithy slogan tying the image back to Disney. To date, the campaign can boast the inclusion of Julie Andrews, David Beckham, Taylor Swift, and Beyoncé, as well as many others, standing in for characters from Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast, Pocahontas, and Alice in Wonderland. The ongoing nature of the campaign ensures that the list of celebrity endorsers and fairy tale references is ever-growing (E).

The popularity of the Leibovitz Disney campaign is likely due to the fact that, although it was intended to be a print campaign, the internet got ahold of it, and a few blog posts later, it was viral. A discussion of pop culture is not complete without a mention of viral internet campaigns, and several of these over the past few years have been fairy tale-themed. One of the most popular trends on internet forums today is the creation and admiration of “minimal” poster designs, with iterations having been created for almost every film or book series at this point, to varying degrees of success. Graphic designers started this trend, which has since been endlessly repeated and imitated (most involve a solid color background and a simplified version of an icon or object that represents the movie or book in question, a formulaic approach that is easy to duplicate even for non-designers). One of the first people to create a series of “minimal” posters, thus launching the trend, was in fact a designer by the name of Christian Jackson. He created a series of posters that represented classic fairy tales in
simple, iconographic ways. Many of his designs are clever, some involving a subtle jab at the story in question, and many telling a sort of inside joke with a viewer who is familiar with the story. Another internet sensation that owes its origins to fairy tales is the Disney wedding dress. Alfred Angelo currently carries a line, and has since 2009, of wedding dresses based on Disney princesses’ famous gowns. These dresses have been blogged and buzzed about since they were released, often with a mix of disdain and awe. It’s understandable that an entire generation of internet-addicted young adults is so captivated by the thought that someone has designed gowns based on their childhood memories. This demographic, the teens and 20-somethings who spend more time on the internet than anyone else, are in many ways the “Disney generation” (many were children for the release of several Disney princess movies in the 80’s and 90’s), and as such the internet is often captivated by anything fairy tale-related. Until the second half of the 20th century, the general public’s idea of a fairy tale was translated through the brothers Grimm or Hans Cristian Anderson. These days, the immediate translation is through Disney’s movies. This explains the popularity of the art of Ryan Astamendi and Dina Goldstein, both photographers who have taken to photographing real-life princesses, though to drastically different ends. Astamendi’s “Real Princesses” (F) seeks to recreate the look of Disney princesses with real women modeling the parts, and does so incredibly successfully. To look at his photographs is to see Disney come to life. Goldstein’s (G) project is titled “Fallen Princesses,” and is predictably less glorifying than Astamendi’s. Though the latter translates Disney princesses visually into the real world, Goldstein translates them conceptually, answering the question: what if princesses really lived in our world, after they got their “happy endings”? According to
her, Belle would be addicted to plastic surgery, and Cinderella would be an alcoholic. Her dark twist on the stories is simultaneously hilarious and heartbreaking, but the internet is captivated: a photoset of her work has been commented on and “liked” over 10,000 times on Tumblr, a social blogging site.

With countless examples of fairy tale imagery, fairy tale fashion, fairy tale literature and movies and television shows, a pattern is beginning to emerge. All of these contemporary examples reinterpret their source material (which is itself a reinterpretation), and many of them challenge storytelling conventions in order to appeal to a contemporary audience. Many contemporary versions challenge the traditional fairytale gender roles, allowing female characters more autonomy and independence than they may have had in their original stories. However, there’s a dichotomy that also emerges amongst all these versions. Many of them, like the Elie Saab collection, embrace the soft, feminine side of the fairy tale tradition. Others, like the Dior fragrance or Snow White and the Huntsman, sacrifice pastel sweetness for a darker, more grownup take on their stories. What is missing is a balance between these two approaches. Judging by the way pop culture treats fairy tales, one might get the impression that traditional femininity negates strength. This is ridiculous, of course. A woman does not need to be rescued by a prince charming the minute she starts wearing pastel and lace, just as a woman who can fend for herself doesn’t therefore relinquish her right to act traditionally feminine. However, when the main characters of our fairy tales are constantly bifurcated into one of these two opposing roles, the majority of women remain unrepresented. And if there’s any literary genre that should represent women, it is that of the fairy tale, which has been dominated by female characters since
its inception.

Women seem to have a special connection to fairy tales, if only because the main characters are so often female. In the world of Hollywood where a movie’s main character is far more likely to be male than female, Disney princesses (and the stereotypes they represent) are an anomaly, for better or worse. Walt Disney has been criticized countless times for his narrow-minded representation of women. To be fair, Snow White and Sleeping Beauty are not especially dynamic characters. A few contemporary women may connect to the mild-mannered docility these early princesses represent, but for most, princesses like Mulan and Pocahontas, who spoke their minds and fought for their beliefs, were a welcome addition to the Disney family. These characters still experienced a backlash, and not undeservedly, for being too thin, too conformist to Western ideals of beauty, or too removed from their original stories. The problem seems to be that there is too much pressure placed on too few characters to represent women accurately. We don’t need one Disney princess to represent all women; we need a bigger variety of characters to represent parts of all of us.

Besides the prevalence of female characters over time, another factor that sets the fairy tale apart from other literary genres is the prevalence of illustrations that have been provided for these stories throughout their history. The same way each retelling of a classic tale tells us about the author and the culture, each illustrator who has put his or her hand to a fairy tale has succinctly, often inadvertently, documented their own prejudices and cultural biases.

Visual translations of fairy tale women didn’t start with Disney movies. Fairy tale illustration is not an easy topic to delve into, spanning several centuries, several
countries, and several genres. Even today, fairy tales are re-interpreted by countless artists on a daily basis. The timelessness of the classically told fairy tale makes it ripe for illustration. The first notable illustration of a fairy tale was probably the front page of Perrault’s *Tales of Mother Goose* in 1695. The engraving by Gustave Dore was the first illustration of a Mother Goose character, and it’s the only one we usually think of to this day. It portrays a matronly woman with glasses, a hooked nose, and a book in her lap, surrounded and covered by children who appear to hang on her every word. The engraving is so iconic that even those who have never seen it recognize the scene and the character that it represents. Dore portrays the scene with a stylized realism that would typify fairy tale illustration for the next few centuries. Indeed, everything about Dore’s image would become iconic over the years.

For the most part, each new edition of Perrault’s or the Grimm brothers’ collections was a chance for a different illustrator to re-imagine each story. Consider the popularity of these authors: there are new editions of their works published constantly, and this has been true since the first editions. Illustrations of fairy tales, even exclusively the fairy tales of Grimm and Perrault, encompass so many countries, styles, artists, and time periods that it’s practically an artistic genre unto itself. That said, there are some illustrators whose versions of these stories were more iconic and who might be used as benchmarks. After Dore, illustration of fairy tales remained consistent until around the late 19th century. The Arts and Crafts movement coincided with a Victoria and Albert–inspired patronage of the arts and new printmaking processes, and suddenly illustration was experiencing a golden age. Arthur Rackham illustrated limited editions of Grimm’s fairy tales in 1900 that enjoyed immense popularity. His illustrations are iconic.
primarily ink, gouache, and watercolor, the softness of his color application emphasizing his delicate heroines (I). In the 1910’s Kay Nielsen, a Danish illustrator, started creating his own limited edition books. His style was considerably more graphic, but his heroines were as waif-like and lovely as Rackham’s. The characters these illustrators and most of their Golden Age counterparts create are lovely and feminine, with small waists and long hair. I grew up looking at these illustrations, but I didn’t want to re-create them. I wanted to create illustrations that held the same delicacy and opulence, without being so literal or specific. There had to be a contemporary twist that matched my retelling and a lack of specificity in terms of the characters so that anyone looking at the images could relate to them.

I am not the only woman who has retold a classic fairy tale in recent years. Other more popular examples include Gail Carson Levine, whose Ella Enchanted retold Cinderella in an expanded form and gave the main character a modern attitude; Shannon Hale, whose retelling of The Goose Girl sparked my own interest in fairy tales when I was younger; and the Once Upon a Time series (2002-2010, Simon Pulse), written by female authors covering a bevy of classical fairy tale stories. Most women who are well-known in the world of fairy tale literature are known for retelling stories, re-contextualizing them, and generally making changes to the plots that we are familiar with. Most men in the world of fairy tale literature (historically Perrault and Grimm, more recently Philip Pullman and other translators) are known for their translations of the stories. This isn’t universally true, of course, but for men there seems to be less pressure to make updates when it comes to fairy tale characters. For my graphic design

33 Levine
34 Hale
35 Dokey
thesis project, I retold the Grimm story “The Goose Girl.” I made the decision not to change the plot of the story, not to update the main character or make her “sassier,” and not to move the story to a contemporary context. I wanted simply to retell the story in a voice that hadn’t been heard before in the world of fairy tale retellings.

Through my research, I’ve come to see each iteration of classical fairy tales as a voice in a large conversation. Even when women like D’Aulnoy and the Precieuses were working, men’s voices were usually the only ones heard. Oftentimes, these men would write with a “feminine” voice, channeling the mythical Mother Goose or the imaginary nursemaid they claimed their stories originated from. However, this false feminine voice covered up the real females who were telling these stories. As Angela Carter wrote in the introduction to her collection of fairy tale translations in 1990, the stories of Mother Goose were a kind of “old wives’ tales—that is, worthless stories, untruths, trivial gossip, a derisive label that allots the art of storytelling to women at the exact same time as it takes all value from it.” This is no longer true. Female writers who have been overlooked for so long are beginning to catch up. My retelling of “The Goose Girl” is my way of adding another female voice to the conversation.

In illustrating my retelling, I tried to balance the delicate femininity that has so long been a part of fairy tale illustration while also staying true to the tone of my time, which is contemporary and sarcastic and not at all delicate. I also wanted to avoid showing characters or landscapes to illustrate events in the story. The only human form who is presented fully in the book is the statue of Louis XIV, who loosely represents the king in the story. For the princess and her lady-in-waiting, I left things more open-ended. As I’ve grown up, I haven’t always been sweet, graceful, and lovely. There
are many days when I have nothing in common with the delicate ladies from older illustrations, and I didn’t want to alienate any readers who might feel the same. By not giving my princess a face, she can take on the persona of any reader. For the most part I did this by cropping photographs in order abstract them, and then combining them with graphic backgrounds and settings so as not to specify setting either.

In short, my approach was to take imagery and decoration from the past and “retell” visually by collaging it digitally with other images or textures and my own vector art. I pulled imagery from France in the late 17th century, during the reign of Louis XIV—when the Precieuses were writing. I also used several photographs and textile patterns from Versailles, the palace the Sun King designed. In pulling from this specific time period and place, I was attempting to pay homage to the Precieuses writers. This imagery was what surrounded them when they retold fairy tales, and it seemed appropriate to recall it for my own retelling. However, in terms of color, I strayed from this era. I tried to use a palette that would look, above all else, playful, without looking too childish. Though fairy tales have often been retold for children, I told my story for an audience of my peers, as did the Precieuses before me. When d’Aulnoy and her contemporaries were retelling fairy tales, they started verbally, as I did. They were known for the style they used to tell each tale, which was casual and conversational. The goal was to make the story sound as unrehearsed as possible. This meant that the stories floating around salons weren’t child-friendly. They were filled with all the slang, innuendo, and pop culture references that make up adult conversations. Some of these elements snuck into my retelling as well. In this way, my final book is my contribution to the visual and literary conversation of fairy tales. I
hope it speaks to its own time and context as much as other iterations have spoken to theirs in the past.
**ONCE UPON A TIME**

So there was this princess, right?

SHE BEGAN with the princess' jewelry, then started stealing her clothes, and **EVENTUALLY** turned the guards against her.
Bibliography


_Sleeping Beauty_. Director Clyde Geronimi. The Walt Disney Company. 1959.


_Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs_. Director David Hand. The Walt Disney Company. 1938.


