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Once Upon a Time She Kissed the Girl: A Feminist Reading of Two Fairy Tales by Neil Gaiman

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Abstract

Since the second wave of the feminist movement started to gain ground in the 1960s, the fairy tales by the brothers Grimm have been examined and criticised by feminist researchers and writers, mainly due to their unfavourable portrayal of women. This essay examined and discussed two rewritings of the popular fairy tales “Snow-White and the Seven Dwarves” and “Sleeping Beauty” by the British author Neil Gaiman, entitled “Snow, Glass, Apples” and *The Sleeper and the Spindle*, in order to see whether his versions differ in their portrayal of women, and can be considered more feminist and modern. Since feminism is still a much debated subject, and since there still exist inequality between men and women, the belief that a contemporary story can automatically be considered more feminist is not entirely unproblematic. Most portrayals of women in literature and media have in common that women are often portrayed in a powerless, silenced, or secondary state. This representation of women is not something that everyone is wholly conscious of, and for most people seeing women in this way, as helpless, victimised and unimportant is nothing strange; that is how we have been raised, with the aid of media and literature, to regard women. For this reason, this essay chooses to examine the aforementioned short stories from a feminist perspective, to see if, and how, Gaiman has changed them to be more feminist. When examined according to four aspects often associated with feminist studies, Gaiman’s versions proved to be more feminist in regards to the topics broached and the overall portrayal of women.

Table of contents

Abstract	
Introduction	1
Snow, Glass, Apples: Feminine Sexual Tension	3
The Sleeper and the Spindle: Breaking Out of the Discourse	12
Conclusion	19
Works cited	21

Introduction

In 1812, the first edition of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, which would later be known as *German Popular Stories* when first translated to English in 1823, and later on as *Grimms' Fairy Tales*, a title which most modern readers are familiar with today, by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm was published in Germany. Revised editions of this book would later become some of the most popular, and arguably some of the most important collections of fairy tales to date. However, despite its name it was originally not primarily meant for children, but rather for the Grimms' academic peers, as the book contained scholarly annotations along with the stories (Yolen xviii). The fact that the fairy tales were not meant for children was hardly unusual at the time. Tatar writes that

[f]olklorists are quick to point out that fairy tales were never really meant for children's ears alone. Originally told at fireside gatherings or in spinning circles by adults to adult audiences, fairy tales joined the canon of children's literature [...] only in the last two to three centuries. (xiv)

Even though the brothers Grimm wrote their collection at a time when fairy tales started to be known as children's literature, their intention was thus not to provide reading material for small children. They wanted instead to preserve, and record, pieces of German prose in order to demonstrate its greatness.

However, by 1819, Wilhelm Grimm started to intentionally edit and revise the stories to be suitable for younger readers. This meant that the tales took on a more moralising tone, in order to steer children in what Wilhelm Grimm perceived to be the right direction in life. Thus

[t]he heroes and heroines are all honest, kind, hard-working, faithful, industrious, and follow the rules. Men and boys are valued over the women and girls. Being a good wife and mother is what the females aspire to, and bad mothers [...] are dealt with ruthlessly, much more so than bad fathers. (Yolen xix)

At the time of publishing, not many people would have frowned upon these social values, the gender roles assigned to them, and the implications that women were only meant to be wives and mothers, existing mainly for their husbands and children. However, during the 1960s, as the second wave of the feminist movement started to gain ground, this did not go unnoticed, and the fairy tale genre was heavily criticised for how women were portrayed. Amongst the stories which attracted a considerable amount of attention one finds “Snow-White and the Seven Dwarves” and “Sleeping Beauty”, both of which were criticised for their stereotypical gender roles and their portrayal of women.

Since then, numerous adaptations and rewritings have been made of several of the Grimms’ fairy tales, many of them with “an explicit or implicit feminist agenda” (Joosen 5). One of the authors who has published short stories based on the two aforementioned fairy tales is the British author Neil Gaiman, who published the short story “Snow, Glass, Apples”, based on “Snow-white and the Seven Dwarves” in 1999, and more recently *The Sleeper and the Spindle* which was first published in a collection of short stories in 2013, and later on in a stand-alone, illustrated version. *The Sleeper and the Spindle* is based on both “Snow-white and the Seven Dwarves” and “Sleeping Beauty”. Considering the previous statement by Joosen that a significant number of fairy tale rewritings tend to contain an implicit or explicit feminist message, can Neil Gaiman be said to have done the same thing? Has he rewritten these stories with an implicit or explicit feminist agenda, and in that case, how has he rewritten them in order for them to be more feminist?

This essay means to analyse and discuss Neil Gaiman’s two rewritings, “Snow, Glass, Apples” and *The Sleeper and the Spindle*, from a feminist perspective in order to determine how his versions might be more feminist, and if they consequently represent more modern values, than the original Grimm fairy tales. Although it could be argued that a short story from the late 20th century naturally must be more feminist in its depiction of women than a fairy tale from the 19th century, there still exists plenty of misogyny today, and the fight for equality between men and women is still ongoing. This means that a story written today might contain unfavourable portraits of women, much like a story from the 19th century, and that a feminist perspective is still viable when studying modern literature. When examining a text from a feminist point of view, one can be said to “identify and oppose the various ways women are excluded,

suppressed, and exploited” (Lynn 194). A feminist perspective can also be seen as a way of examining how women “have been written” (Lynn 197). It is this definition of feminist literary criticism that this essay refers to when arguing whether something can be considered ‘feminist’, or not.

This essay will argue that Gaiman’s two stories are, overall, more feminist in their portrayal of women than the original Grimms’ fairy tales. The stories will be examined one by one, and compared to the originals based on four aspects frequently discussed in feminist theory. Firstly the question of female emancipation, which concerns women’s liberation and independence, will be discussed. Next, gender roles, meaning whether women are portrayed in a stereotypical manner, will be examined. After this, women’s sexuality in combination with the question of heteronormativity will be highlighted. Lastly the concept of punishment, which in fairy tales often equals death, and whether women and men receive different punishments for behaving badly, will also be examined.

Snow, Glass, Apples: Feminine Sexual Tension

The story of Snow-White and her evil stepmother is one of the best known fairy tales in Western culture. In the Grimms’ original version of “Snow-White and the Seven Dwarves”, henceforth referred to simply as “Snow-White”, Snow-White’s mother dies in childbirth, and is replaced by a wicked stepmother. For the stepmother, beauty means everything, and when Snow-White turns seven she is considered to be even more beautiful than her, and must consequently die. The stepmother orders a huntsman to kill Snow-White, and bring back her heart for the stepmother to eat. Snow-White’s father remains invisible during the entire story, and can thus be considered uninterested in protecting his daughter from his wife’s murderous intentions. However “as she was so beautiful the huntsman had pity on her” (Grimm 341), and he allows her to run away. Snow-White then lives in a cottage with seven dwarves, who offer her protection in exchange for household services. As time goes by, the stepmother finds out about Snow-White’s forest sanctuary, and tracks her down a total of three times before she eventually manages, seemingly, to kill her, by making her eat a poisoned apple. As Snow-White is so beautiful the dwarves cannot bear to bury her; they fashion a glass coffin for her instead. Time passes, and after “a long, long time” (Grimm 348), a prince finds Snow-White’s coffin. He falls in love with her on the spot and tells the dwarves

that he will “honor and prize her as my dearest possession” (Grimm 348), if they will let him have her. They agree, and as the prince rides off with her, she wakes up from her comatose sleep, and they get married. At their wedding, Snow-White’s stepmother is forced to dance to death in a pair of red-hot iron slippers.

Gaiman’s choice of narrator in “Snow, Glass, Apples” can be said to be significant from a feminist perspective, since he has disregarded the typical male voice. The discourse of the original version by the brothers Grimm, where there is an omniscient, extradiegetic narrator, differs greatly from Gaiman’s, since he has opted instead for a first person perspective. In his version it is the Queen who is the narrator which can be said to be a sign that she as a woman is allowed to take up a lot more space in the discourse than the Queen in the original version. She is the centre of the story and it is her voice that guides the reader through it. Having a female voice tell a fairy tale is in itself something that deviates from the norm, since women more often tend to get silenced. Bottigheimer states, concerning female silence, that “discourse can be understood as a form of domination, and speech use as an index of social values and the distribution of power within a society” (51). She then goes on to say that in the Grimms’ fairy tales “silence is almost exclusively female” (74). This means that silencing women in a given discourse, or fairy tale, is another way to establish male domination and power over women. By altogether removing women, and thereby the female perspective, the male voice is the only one that is heard, and the subliminal message this creates is that the only voice that matters, and that should be heard, is male. However, Gaiman has chosen to release the silenced female voice by casting women as the leading protagonists and narrators, thus breaking the silence that has been enforced on women in fairy tales. Gaiman provides readers with a female perspective, and implicitly states that a woman’s story can be as important, and as interesting, as that of a man.

Since the story uses a first person narrator, rather than an omniscient one, it can be interpreted in a number of different ways. In Gaiman’s version Snow-White is described as the antagonist, and it is heavily implied by the narrator that she is not human, but a monster feeding on other people’s blood. Gaiman has hereby retained the original element of cannibalism that was present in the original fairy tale, but instead of the stepmother eating Snow-White’s heart, Snow-White is here drinking blood, making her lips “not red *as* blood, but red *with* the blood of her victims” (Law 184). However, there are signs that the stepmother in Gaiman’s version is in fact an unreliable narrator. When

referring to the King she says that she “caught him” (“Snow, Glass, Apples” 371), and that she “had cast a glamour on [her]self” (“Snow, Glass, Apples” 379) in order to do so. It is thus suggested that her meeting with the King was not by chance, but that she had been spying on him for years, before finally orchestrating their encounter in order for her to become Queen. The fact that the Queen can be seen as unreliable when it comes to her own intentions, means that the reader begins to doubt her accounts of Snow-White, and starts to question whether she really is the antagonist, and whether the Queen can be considered the protagonist. By switching these two roles, and by making the reader doubt the Queen’s intentions, Gaiman can be said to have reverted back to stereotypical gender roles, with a wicked stepmother, versed in magic, and a damsel in distress.

When looking at stereotypical gender roles it is also important to examine Snow-White’s real parents. Very little is said about Snow-White’s real mother in Gaiman’s version; like in the original she has died in childbirth, which is typical for the fairy tale genre. Henneberg states that “[w]hen fictional children retain one parent, it is usually the father; mothers fall by the wayside much more readily” (127). In Gaiman’s version this makes Snow-White seem like an even more malicious child for the stepmother, since she, according to the stepmother, killed her own mother simply by being born. As far as the King is concerned, he is frequently mentioned, although not in relation with his daughter. The Queen never seems to see them together, and he does not seem to actively participate in Snow-White’s upbringing. This corresponds to the original story, in which the father is rarely mentioned, although he is very much alive. In the original version, the stepmother is hereby expected to take up the stereotypical maternal nursing role, and provide comfort and security for the young Snow-White. The fact that the stepmother in Grimms’ story refuses to take on this stereotypical gender role is essentially her biggest crime, while the absent and uninterested father is not punished at all, even though he can be argued to be as wicked as the stepmother, in not saving or caring for his own child. Bottigheimer confirms that

[a] general pattern of exculpating men and incriminating women permeates *Grimms’ Tales*. [...] each of which provides a stepmother who assumes the burden of blame while the father, virtually absent, shoulders no share of the responsibility for his children’s fates. (81)

A bad mother, or stepmother, is thus considerably worse than a bad or absent father, since “benign neglect contrasts favourably with the monstrous deeds of their wives” (Tatar 149). The husbands and fathers in classic fairy tales are thus typically considered to be better than their wives, simply by not being as bad as them. However, in Gaiman’s version the King and Queen share the same fate. They both end up dying, either because Snow-White really is a monster, or because of their failures as parents and guardians. This means that Gaiman punishes both the Queen and the King equally, and makes no gender distinction when it comes to parenting.

The King and Queen’s relationship, whilst he is still alive, seems to be one consisting mainly of sex, which is important when analysing their relationship, and also in order to understand what drives the Queen’s actions. “I had my own chambers. My husband the king, he had his own rooms also. When he wanted me he would send for me, and I would go to him, and pleasure him, and take my pleasure with him” (“Snow, Glass, Apples” 372). Her life seems to revolve around the King, and she seems more like his mistress than his wife, taking pleasure simply in giving him pleasure. As time goes on, the King sends for her less and less, and when he does he seems sick, and his body is covered with tiny scars, like bites. When he dies, the Queen remarks that “[t]here were scars on my love, her father’s thighs, and on his ballock-pouch, and on his male member, when he died” (“Snow, Glass, Apples” 374). A possible analysis of this would be to believe the Queen, and assume that Snow-White is in fact a monster who has killed her father by draining him of all his blood. However, taking into account the previous examples suggesting that the Queen is an unreliable narrator, this would rather suggest that the King and Snow-White had an incestuous relationship, and that Snow-White would instead be the victim of sexual abuse. The scars on the King’s member would thus stem from the violence used when he forced his daughter to engage in sexual activities against her will. This might suggest that the King dies, not because Snow-White kills him, but due to the guilt of sexually abusing his own underage daughter. He dies as a punishment for regarding women as nothing but sexual objects. When the Queen orders Snow-White to be killed, it can thus be argued to be because of jealousy, since her husband preferred the very young Snow-White, and found her to be prettier. Gilbert and Gubar write, concerning the original Grimms’ tale that

[h]is, surely, is the voice in the looking glass, the patriarchal voice of judgment that rules the Queen's – and every woman's – self-evaluation. He it is who decides, first, that his consort is “the fairest of all”, and then, as she becomes maddened, rebellious, witchlike, that she must be replaced by his angelically innocent and dutiful daughter, a girl who is therefore defined as “more beautiful still” than the Queen. (38)

Even though Gilbert and Gubar are here referring to the original story, their observation can be applied to Gaiman's version as well. The Queen's jealousy would then, both in the original Grimms' version and Gaiman's version, according to Gilbert and Gubar, stem from the patriarchal society in which she lives, where her value lies in her beauty. Andrea Dworkin comments that the Queen in Grimm's version was “ambitious and recognized that beauty was coin in the male realm, that beauty translated directly into power because it meant male admiration, male alliance, male devotion” (36). Thus, it is not beauty in itself which is the goal for these women, but rather what beauty brings with it, namely, security and power. In a patriarchal society, female friendship can be said to be very difficult “since the voice of the looking glass sets them against each other” (Gilbert and Gubar 38). The two Queens, Gaiman's and Grimms', might have simply acted based on what they had been taught by society, to eliminate their competition, meaning other, younger women. Even though Gaiman's Queen can be said to be strong and powerful in her position as the sole monarch, she is still not independent and free from masculine influence and control.

The fact that the Queen is the sole monarch after the King's death is another important aspect of Gaiman's version, especially in regards to female emancipation. It is stated that “my people claimed that I ruled them with wisdom” (“Snow, Glass, Apples” 376), thus implying that she is a competent and intelligent leader. Unlike the original version there is no invisible King. In Gaiman's version the Queen rules alone. She is thus, at least after the death of the King, independent. However, the fact that her emancipation and independence comes as a result of the death of a man is still quite telling. She could never rise above him whilst he was still alive, but gains her liberty, not as his equal, but as his widow. The fact that she rules independently can also be seen as a contributing factor to her downfall. Law observes that

Gaiman's queen, however, is damned because she will never be meek. [...] She was not a weakened widow, but instead a wise ruler, both fair and just. Yet, in the end it does not matter how 'fair' she is. Justness, wisdom, compassion, and even beauty are not enough to compensate for the grievous sin of female self-sufficiency. (181)

The Queen thus oversteps her rights as a woman when she takes on the role of regent, without a man, or a phallus, by her side to justify her power and her position as a leader. Law confirms that "[i]t is in her role as regent that she exceeds the constraints of patriarchy. She is not wife, mother, or mistress to any man" (Law 187). The portrayal of the Queen as strong, independent, just and wise, is flattering for a female fairy tale figure. However, she is still not allowed to rule alone, since she does not conform to the patriarchal notion of femininity and sexuality.

Sexuality is an interesting topic to examine when it comes to "Snow, Glass, Apples", since throughout Gaiman's story the Queen's sexuality seems to be repressed, suggesting that female sexuality is something sinful and forbidden. When first encountering the King, she says that "[h]e asked for the best of what I had; a king's right, it was" ("Snow, Glass, Apples" 371), calmly stating that it is his right to have sex with her, regardless of what she might want herself. When the Queen later on, after the King's death, wants to indulge her own sexual desires with a visiting prince, the prince demands her to

[s]tand in front of the opened window, far from the fire, until [her] skin was chilled stone-cold. Then he asked [her] to lie upon [her] back, with [her] hands folded across [her] breasts, [her] eyes wide open – but staring only at the beams above. He told [her] not to move, and to breathe as little as possible. He implored [her] to say nothing. ("Snow, Glass, Apples" 381)

The prince wants her to be passive, a cold corpse, but when the Queen's body starts responding to his touches and her desires become evident, he is no longer able to perform. In this he can be said to represent phallogentric sexuality, where the focus lies on the phallus and the pleasure of the man, "[h]e takes but is unwilling to be taken. Pleasure other than his own is terrifying and paralyzing" (Law 188). This means that the

Queen's female sexuality is seen as something dangerous and frightening by him, as he is not used to having to please, but only to be pleased. The prince then goes on to find Snow-White, who has been poisoned by the Queen, and falls in love with the fact that she is cold to the touch, and acts dead. The prince in the original story has often been accused of necrophilia by feminist writers, bartering for Snow-White's dead body like an object, suggesting that women should be passive and subordinate to men, or as Dworkin claims "[f]or a woman to be good, she must be dead, or as close to it as possible" (42). In Gaiman's version of the story, this is very much the case for the prince, who loses all interest in the Queen as she breaks the illusion that she is nothing more than a corpse for him to use. In a sense the Queen can be said to be punished, not only for not living up to the ideal of a nursing and caring mother, or for ruling alone, but also for not living up to the ideal of a subdued and asexual woman. For one, she does not conform completely to the heteronormative society in which she lives, since she shows a tentative sexual interest in Snow-White, a woman and additionally her stepdaughter, and ultimately she does not allow her sexuality to be controlled. Madsen suggests that ways of controlling feminine sexuality are, amongst other things, "the objectification of women – the creation of cultural artefacts from women's bodies; and the representation of dominance or male authority as sexually arousing" (155). The Queen is unable to allow male authority and dominance to rule her sexuality; instead she wants to take pleasure in sex, just like men, without being subdued. Law states that "[t]he queen, in rendering [the prince] impotent, represents metaphorical castration and for that she must pay" (189). By having desires of her own, by not being dead, so to speak, she is not a good woman and have failed to adapt and to live up to the standard set for women. This inability to conform to the patriarchy's expectations of her as a passive, submissive and almost asexual being is another reason for her to be punished. However, since the prince is depicted in such a coarse and sinister manner, the fact that he, and consequently the archaic notions of female sexuality, are all allowed to live on, seems as an affront to the reader, and deeply unjust. This means that Gaiman can still be considered to make a feminist point, even by permitting the downfall of his female narrator. By portraying the patriarchal successor as undesirable and evil, and by showcasing the limitations a patriarchal society puts on women, Gaiman toys with the notion that a necrophiliac is far better equipped to rule in a patriarchal society, since he has a phallus, than a wise and just woman. Gaiman can be said to claim that not all men

are worthy monarchs simply because they are male, but that the character of the ruler is far more important than having a symbol of masculinity.

In contrast to the Queen, Snow-White is exactly what the prince is looking for, since she is, seemingly, a model of female submission. Law remarks that Snow-White “[i]s the fulfilment of the patriarchal structure. She embodies the external traits of virginity, complete with physical submission epitomized in the image of her unconscious body encased in glass” (189). Both in Gaiman’s version and the original the prince falls in love with her for the fact that she is beautiful, but also because she is lifeless, which suggests that she can be controlled. Bronfen argues that “Snow White performs the apotheosis of one of the central positions ascribed to Woman in western culture; namely that the ‘surveyed’ feminine body is meant to confirm the power of the masculine gaze” (102). By being dead, or passive, Snow-White is effectively stating that the one who admires her is the active one, the one with all of the power. In the original fairy tale, this is disguised as love and admiration for Snow-White’s beauty. In Gaiman’s version the prince is driven entirely by his sexual desires, which makes him far from the benevolent saviour which masculinity typically represents when saving a damsel in distress. Law observes that “Gaiman uses the character of the prince to undermine patriarchy with its own ideals. The prince is the type of man a phallogocentric economy inevitably creates” (189). Gaiman can thus be said to have unmasked the prince and his underlying sexual desires for Snow-White, making him into a villain, representing the patriarchal repression, and expected submission, of women.

In Gaiman’s version the Queen also seems scared of her own sexuality when it comes to Snow-White, which is important when looking at female sexuality and the patriarchal notions of heteronormativity. When the Queen first encounters Snow-White the girl is only five years old, but the Queen states that she “had been frozen by her, owned and dominated” (“Snow, Glass, Apples”, 373), which is a very sexualised way of describing their meeting. After this encounter the Queen proceeds by barring her door with an oaken pole, and places iron bars across her windows to protect her from Snow-White. The oaken pole and the iron bars could be said to be phallic symbols, and by placing them between herself and Snow-White she might be trying to protect herself against her own forbidden sexual desires, by keeping these desires in check with symbols for normative and masculine sexuality. Madsen states that “[t]he control of feminine sexuality is achieved through strategies such as the ideology of ‘compulsory

heterosexuality” (155), meaning that the Queen’s sexual desire towards Snow-White as another woman is forbidden in a patriarchal, heteronormative, society. Other evidence which suggests that the Queen is sexually attracted to Snow-white in Gaiman’s version, is the fact that as the Queen is about to be executed, she says that “I shall think no more on this. I shall think instead of the snowflake on her cheek. I think of her hair as black as coal, her lips, redder than blood, her skin, snow-white” (“Snow, Glass, Apples” 384). In her final moments, the Queen chooses to think about Snow-White’s physical attributes, rather than her own life or her impending demise, implying that this gives her comfort in some way, manifesting her obsession with Snow-White until the very end.

In the original fairy tale, sexuality, and especially female sexuality, was something to censor from the public eye according to Wilhelm Grimm. Bottigheimer explains that “[s]ince one consistent direction of development in the editorial history of *Grimms’ Tales* is the subversion and eradication of feminine will [...], it becomes clear that feminine desire should also disappear” (161). There is however some signs of female sexuality left in the brothers Grimms’ version of “Snow-White”, notably in the apple, as a symbol of the original sin. In the bible Eve eats the apple from the forbidden tree, and as a consequence becomes aware of her own nudity. In the original version of “Snow-White”, the Queen and Snow-White share the poisoned apple, although only the side which Snow-White eats is actually poisoned. Bettelheim writes that “[i]n ‘Snow-White’ mother and daughter share the apple. That which is symbolized by the apple in ‘Snow-White’ is something mother and daughter have in common which runs even deeper than their jealousy of each other – their mature sexual desires” (213). This means that even in the original version of “Snow-White”, there might be said to be some sexual tension between the daughter and her stepmother, something that must be eliminated, which is easiest done by eliminating the stepmother. The fact that the Queen in Gaiman’s version does not share the apple with Snow-White, like in the original version, but instead throws it on the ground and runs away terrified, can also be an indicator of her fear of the sexual tension that exists between them, and her denial of what Bettelheim called “their mature sexual desires”. Gaiman can thus be said to have used the latent sexual tension that is present in the Grimms’ story, and to have amplified it in his own version. By not censoring female sexuality, Gaiman is acknowledging the fact that women are more than passive, heterosexual mannequins, and is challenging the traditional accounts of female sexuality.

The Sleeper and the Spindle: Breaking Out of the Discourse

The original story of “Sleeping Beauty” begins, ordinarily enough for a fairy tale, with a King and his wife wishing for a child. Their wish is eventually granted, and the Queen gives birth to “a little girl who was so pretty that the King could not contain himself for joy” (Grimm 646). A feast is held in order to celebrate the birth of the princess, whose name, Brier Rose, is not mentioned until the second to last page of the story, and to the feast the King invites twelve wise women who bestow the princess with gifts of beauty, virtue and “everything in the world that one can wish for” (Grimm 648). However, a thirteenth wise woman shows up, and as she is disgruntled for not having been invited to the feast she declares that on her fifteenth birthday the princess shall prick her finger on a spindle and die. Luckily, one wise woman’s gift remains, but she is unable to undo the magic of the evil witch. However, she manages to soften the curse, and makes it so as the princess will not die, but instead sleep for a 100 years. As the girl turns fifteen, the prophecy is fulfilled, and the whole palace falls asleep, along with the princess. A hedge of briar thorns begins to grow around the castle, creating an impenetrable wall. During a 100 years several young men and princes try their luck getting through the thorns to see the beautiful sleeping girl, but they all fail. As the 100 years are drawing to an end, a young prince comes along just as the briars are whittling and the curse is ending. He makes his way into the castle, and when he sees the beautiful princess, he gives her a kiss right at the moment that the curse is lifted, and they end up getting married.

When it comes to female emancipation, Gaiman’s version of the story plays with the idea of gender roles and heteronormativity, in a way that makes it decidedly more modern than the original Grimm version. In Gaiman’s version there is no lucky prince who ends up being in the right place at the right time. In fact there are hardly any men in Gaiman’s version at all, but instead a heroine who happens to be the Queen of her own kingdom. Kolbenschlag suggests that Grimms’ Sleeping Beauty “is most of all a symbol of *passivity*, and by extension a metaphor for the spiritual condition of women - cut off from autonomy and transcendence, from self-actualization and ethical capacity in a male dominated milieu” (5). In featuring a woman as the protagonist, who has to save the beautiful princess, Gaiman’s story deviates significantly from traditional fairy tales and goes against the traditional portrayal of women as passive. Since Gaiman also removes

almost all men, the women no longer find themselves in a male dominated milieu, like in the original fairy tale. Simone de Beauvoir writes, concerning women and their lives, that

[w]oman is the Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Snow White, she who receives and submits. In song and story the young man is seen departing adventurously in search of a woman; he slays the dragon, he battles giants; she is locked in a tower, a palace, a garden, a cave, she is chained to a rock, a captive, sound asleep; she waits. (271-272)

This is however not the case in *The Sleeper and the Spindle*, where the female protagonist takes control of her own life and refuses to be asleep, to wait. She decides to take matters into her own hands, and rather than waiting for a prince to solve the problem of the sleeping sickness that is spreading across the country, she dons her armour, and heads out to save her kingdom, and consequently herself. The main characters in both stories discussed in this essay are thus female, meaning that in both “Snow, Glass, Apples” and *The Sleeper and the Spindle*, women’s voices are allowed to be heard. The main character’s in Gaiman’s stories are also both female rulers, and it is stated that they are both competent at their jobs, showcasing that women can be good regents without having a man by their side.

. Females are not silenced textually in Gaiman’s version, but are allowed to figure frequently in the discourse. The fact that there are hardly any men mentioned, and no men acting as important or prominent characters, with the exception of three male dwarves aiding the heroine on her way, can also be seen as a feminist step towards a more untraditional female dominated discourse. Additionally, a parallel can be drawn between how men mentioned in Gaiman’s story are being treated and depicted, and to how women have usually been portrayed in traditional literature. When speaking to her first minister, the Queen seems to almost belittle him, suggesting that he would not know what to do if put in charge. “She called for her first minister and informed him that he would be responsible for the kingdom in her absence, and that he should do his best neither to lose it nor to break it” (*The Sleeper* 21). By referring to her kingdom as an object which can be broken or lost, she speaks as one might to a child, simplifying an advanced concept by minimalising it. By suggesting that he should “do his best” she

assumes that he is not capable of simply heeding her orders, but that he is instead almost certain to fail, incapable of actually doing what he is told. When dealing with her fiancé she does nearly the same thing. “She called for her fiancé and told him not to take on so, and that they would still be married, even if he was but a prince and she a queen, and she chucked him beneath his pretty chin and kissed him until he smiled” (*The Sleeper* 21). She comforts him with promising words and playful touches, much like one would comfort a pouting child, or perhaps, a particularly difficult woman who is making a fuss over nothing. By treating her male subjects as children, she is showing that she does not put much faith in men. Additionally, by emphasising the fact that she is more powerful than them, whilst portraying them as quite weak and simple minded, they are effectively being portrayed as typical female characters. This creates an interesting role reversal, in which the Queen acts as a traditional man and the men as traditional women, passive and submissive, thus not conforming to stereotypical gender roles.

The female protagonist in *The Sleeper and the Spindle* is none other than Snow-White¹, who is about to get married. In continuing with the story of Snow White, Gaiman has allowed for the reader to speculate on what actually comes after the ‘happily ever after’. In the case of the *Sleeper and the Spindle*, Snow-White is acutely aware of her future as a wife, and how she as a woman is going to spend the rest of her days.

It seemed both unlikely and extremely final. She wondered how she would feel to be a married woman. It would be the end of her life, she decided, if life was a time of choices. In a week from now, she would have no choices. She would reign over her people. She would have children. Perhaps she would die in childbirth, perhaps she would die as an old woman, or in battle. But the path to her death, heartbeat by heartbeat, would be inevitable. (*The Sleeper* 14)

Unlike many fairy tale princesses and queens, she is aware of her situation as a woman living in a patriarchal society. What is even more striking is the fact that she is not content, and does not want to settle. Even though it is suggested that she might die as a warrior, an unusual occupation for women in traditional fairy tales, the possibility of

¹ Note that it is not the same Snow White as in “Snow, Glass, Apples”.

dying in battle still would not make her free, since it would not be her own choice. Kolbenschlag touches upon the concept of marriage as she writes that

[t]he second persona in the little girl's repertoire is that of the desire to *live for another*. This role will school her in self-forgetfulness, service and sacrifice, in nurturing rather than initiating behaviours. Above all, it will teach her to 'sleep' – to wait, forever if necessary, for the expected *other* who will make her life meaningful and fulfilled. She will give up everything when the expected one comes, even the right of creating her own self. (12)

The heroine in Gaiman's version does not want to give up the right to create her own self, she wants to maintain her independence, and does not want to live her life for anyone but herself. Towards the end of the story she says, when speaking of her stepmother and how she had been manipulated by her, that "[l]earning how to be strong, to feel her own emotions and not another's, had been hard; but once you learned the trick of it, you did not forget" (*The Sleeper* 59). Snow-White learnt how to break free of her stepmother's harmful influence, and taught herself to become an independent individual. This can also be said to be a feminist comment concerning women's struggle to become emancipated, learning to feel their own emotions, having their own opinions, instead of just being taught what to think and feel by patriarchal structures. Gaiman's Snow-White in this story can be said to be a representative for modern emancipated women as she decides to walk her own path, instead of the one already made for her. She defies the destiny laid out for her and her fellow female fairy tale counterparts, by being the protagonist and saving the princess, thus refusing to conform to stereotypical gender roles. She breaks free of the fairy tale discourse, in a double sense. She breaks away from the discourse of the original version of "Snow-White" by creating her own, definitive, ending to the story and thus redeeming herself of the traditional view of Snow-White as passive and submissive. Additionally, she also breaks away in the sense that she is not being silenced like many women in fairy tales. She has her own voice and is allowed to speak up. In the end she makes the choice not to return to her kingdom, but instead to walk away from traditional life and marriage, into the unknown, which might be seen as a metaphor for women leaving their traditional roles as simply wives and mothers behind, in order to move forward and to create their own identities. Unlike in

“Snow, Glass, Apples”, where the female main character is punished for trying to be an independent woman ruling without a phallus, *Snow-White in The Sleeper and the Spindle* is instead rewarded for breaking away from traditional gender roles and expectations. If “Snow, Glass, Apples” can be seen as a story portraying the dangers of a patriarchal society, that creates men who adore the dead female body, and where women are punished to effectively showcase the typical demands of a woman to be pure and submissive, *The Sleeper and the Spindle* can be seen as a story that instead shows that women have the right to walk away from the expectations placed on them and that they might be happier breaking away from traditional roles, instead of trying to conform to patriarchal standards.

Snow-White is not the only character who breaks out of the fairy tale discourse. The aged princess whom Snow-White aids in escaping her lifelong prison, also differs substantially from old women typically found in fairy tales. Henneberg writes that old women in fairy tales “are generally locked into one of three types: the wicked old witch, the selfless godmother, or the demented hag” (128). In the brothers Grimms’ version of “Sleeping Beauty”, there is an elderly woman present when Sleeping Beauty pricks her finger, and goes to sleep. However:

[H]er presence does not appear to affect anything that happens. A flat character, the old woman has neither the power to protect Brier Rose by keeping her out of the spindle's reach nor to harm her by killing her or by extending the hundred-year sleeping spell when the prince discovers her. (Henneberg, 130)

When it comes to the old princess in *The Sleeper and the Spindle*, she cannot be said to belong to any of the categories above. She is simply an old woman who has been used as a guardian, whilst her own life was slowly being drained from her. In the end of the story she gets her revenge though, by killing the witch who has stolen her life. She is thus not the traditional old woman normally found in fairy tales, and breaks away from the ageism and the stereotypical roles typically forced upon old women. As opposed to the old woman in the original story, she regains the control of her life in the end, and the ability to affect the outcome of the events around her, rather than simply being marginalised and unimportant for the story, proving that a woman does not have to be

defined by her youth. By having the aged princess break out of the discourse and being more than just another old hag, Gaiman can be said to challenge the idea that women have an expiration date, meaning that when they are not young and beautiful anymore, they are worthless.

Even though the portrayal of Snow-White in *The Sleeper and the Spindle* can be seen as a very modern representation of women, there are still characters who conform to certain traditional gender roles, like Sleeping Beauty who is not a victim in this version of the story, but instead a villain. She is a witch who has put the entire kingdom to sleep in order to steal the sleepers' life force, so that she may regain her youth and beauty, thus conforming to the stereotypical notion that for a woman her value lies in her appearance. Bottigheimer writes that "[i]t would seem that *Grimm's Tales* is sprinkled with conjuring witches, but instead it is young and beautiful women who call forth and direct powerful natural forces" (50). Thus, casting a woman in the role of the villain is rather stereotypical, and especially since she also happens to embrace her sexuality, making her a symbol for dangerous female sexuality. As opposed to the original Sleeping Beauty, who is eroticised through her lifelessness, Gaiman's version of her is in no way sexually passive, or submissive. After Snow-White has woken her, Sleeping Beauty states that "[a]ll will love me, and you, who woke me, you must love me most of all" (*The Sleeper* 59). She is therefore not an innocent and submissive girl, but much like the stepmother in "Snow-White", she is a woman who recognises the value of beauty and youth in a world ruled by men. Dworkin argues that the classic figures of "Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Snow-white, Rapunzel – all are characterized by passivity, beauty, innocence, and *victimization*. They are archetypal good women – victims by definition. They never think, act, initiate, confront, resist, challenge, feel, care, or question" (42). Gaiman's Sleeping Beauty is in no way a victim; she is asleep because she herself has made it happen. Unlike the original Sleeping Beauty, she has not had anything done to her against her will, and she is in no need of saving. She is thus no damsel in distress, but she still belongs to the stereotypical category of the dangerous villain, seducing her way to power and using her sexuality to prey on the weak-willed.

When Sleeping Beauty is eventually killed towards the end of Gaiman's story, it can be interpreted as a punishment for her lack of independence and as if Gaiman is trying to kill off the stereotypical portrait which she is based upon. She conforms to the fairy tale discourse in the sense that she locks herself in a tower, voluntarily, and goes to

sleep for several years. Unlike other female fairy tale figures, she chooses to be passive herself, in order to achieve youth and beauty, to better fit in with the patriarchal view of the ideal woman. She can thus be viewed as a stereotypical character, who in failing to break out of the fairy tale discourse, is forced to die. As previously stated concerning “Snow, Glass, Apples”, norm-breaking characters, such as the Queen, are also killed off occasionally. However, the important difference is that the killing of the Queen in “Snow, Glass, Apples” can be said to have a deeper meaning than simply punishing a woman for overstepping her bounds. By allowing the prince, a necrophiliac and the representation of patriarchal structures, to live on and prosper, Gaiman is suggesting that the patriarchal way of life, and the notion that women should not be allowed to rule alone, might be wrong and unjust. The killing of Sleeping Beauty also seems to question patriarchal structures, especially concerning female beauty and youth. Sleeping Beauty is punished for accepting the ideas that women are better if they happen to be beautiful and young, thus suggesting that women should not decide their own worth based on the archaic notions of a patriarchal society.

Since there are no important male characters in *The Sleeper and the Spindle* it is not possible to distinguish between female and male punishment, but one can instead compare the fate of Sleeping Beauty and Snow-White. Sleeping Beauty dies as a result of her failing to resist the fairy tale discourse, whilst Snow-White embarks upon a journey to make her own destiny, ultimately being rewarded for her independence.

Another important aspect of the female protagonist in Gaiman’s version of Sleeping Beauty, is the fact that she might be homosexual, or bisexual, meaning that her emancipation may also be sexual in nature. As she replaces the prince in the original story, she also kisses Sleeping Beauty awake, effectively breaking the heteronormative tradition of the fairy tale genre. “She touched the pink lips to her own carmine lips and she kissed the sleeping girl long and hard” (*The Sleeper* 49). The fact that she does not just kiss her, but that she does it hard and for a longer period of time, gives the impression that she is not averse to kissing a girl, even though heterosexuality has been enforced as the norm for a very long time. If she is homosexual, it might also explain her reluctance to get married, since that would mean spending her life with a man, and why she decides not to return to her kingdom. Walking away from a life as a traditional woman, a wife and eventually a mother, might also mean walking away from the traditional heterosexuality imposed on women. In the end, her sexuality, and also the

sexuality of Sleeping Beauty who does not seem to care about such things as gender when it comes to love, can be questioned, which in itself is a sign of a more modern and nuanced fairy tale than that of the brothers Grimm.

In both *The Sleeper and the Spindle*, and “Snow, Glass, Apples”, female sexuality is thus an important aspect of the stories. In *The Sleeper and the Spindle*, the female protagonist accepts herself for who she really is, and breaks away from the enforced heteronormativity, whilst the Queen in “Snow, Glass, Apples” desperately tries to deny and run from her unwanted sexual desires towards another woman. Gaiman addresses female sexuality in both of these stories, and by so doing he is removing the taboo that has long been associated with female sexuality. *The Sleeper and the Spindle* makes an interesting contrast to “Snow, Glass, Apples, since the patriarchal voice has, to a large extent, been suppressed, as opposed to “Snow, Glass, Apples” where the patriarchal voice eventually re-establishes itself by killing the queen. Even though the fate of the two main characters differ, the message can be said to be nearly the same, namely that women are far from simply passive and submissive asexual dolls.

Conclusion

A common denominator when it comes to the Grimms’ fairy tales is that the beauty of the females is always emphasised, and that their physical qualities along with their virtue and obedience is always celebrated. The women are typically silenced, either physically or textually, and are rarely allowed to take up a lot of space in the discourse. Gaiman’s rewritings of “Snow-White” and “Sleeping Beauty” can be argued to change this. In his “Snow, Glass, Apples” and *The Sleeper and the Spindle*, female characters are abundant and there is a shortage of male voices, rather than female ones. The female protagonists are allowed to make their voices heard, and they are celebrated for more than simply their good looks. They are strong and wise rulers, who show a desire to live an independent life. In his versions the patriarchal notions of sexuality and womanhood are challenged. By portraying the prince in an unfavourable light in “Snow, Glass, Apples” Gaiman uncovers the dangers of living according to the rules of a patriarchal society that kills just and wise female rulers who refuse to conform to the roles of mother, wife and submissive lover. The notion of heteronormativity is also challenged in Gaiman’s versions, as homosexual desires and tendencies are an important aspect of his stories. Some characters can be said to conform to stereotypical gender roles, but

they are often punished, seemingly for being stagnant and unwilling to break out of the traditional fairy tale discourse.

In general, Gaiman's versions of the Grimms' fairy tales, can be said to be more modern on a structural level as well as content wise. He allows women to have their own voices, whilst denying men theirs; an unusual role reversal, putting women at the centre of the discourse. By having female protagonists and heroines, instead of the traditional prince and heroes, he modernises the fairy tales, and makes them more relatable to women, showing that women are not just passive and submissive objects, but that they are just as capable of ruling and saving a kingdom as men. Sexuality, and especially female sexuality, is often alluded to, and brought forward as something, not to be feared, or censored, but instead as something that should be considered natural, suggesting that the enforced heteronormativity is not the only possible option. As Snow-White walks away from her traditional path in the end of *The Sleeper and the Spindle*, she can be said to personify female emancipation, walking away from tradition, and into the future. In conclusion, Gaiman can be said to have written the stories studied in this essay with an, if not explicit, then at least implicit feminist agenda. By criticising patriarchal conceptions regarding women, and allowing women the right to have a voice, these stories are decidedly more modern than the Grimms', and can be said to argue for a more equal society, where a woman's worth is not based on her looks and youth. As a society we still have a long way to go before such a thing as feminism can be considered redundant, and Gaiman's stories, and their representation of women as strong-willed and independent individuals, can be considered to be an interesting addition to a new generation of fairy tales. One in which young women may find important female role models, and where they do not have to be content with being damsels in distress.

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