

**Daughters of the Fairy Tale: Reclaiming the Monstrous-Mother in
Contemporary Feminist Fictions**

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis and the work contained herein was composed entirely by me and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere. Any sections of this thesis which have been published (or are forthcoming) have been identified in my acknowledgements. Information derived from the published work of others is recognised in the written text, and references have been provided in the Bibliography.

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Abstract

This thesis identifies a new wave of fairy tale retellings in the 2010s that coincide with, and reflect, some of the contradictions of fourth-wave feminism. These texts across a variety of media, primarily aimed at teenage girls and young women, are often framed with an apparently feminist goal: to disrupt rigid gender binaries, challenge patriarchal violence, and amplify marginalised voices. However, they frequently complicate these aims by positioning the ‘monstrous mother’ in opposition to the youthful heroine’s empowerment through physical action. Employing Barbara Creed’s theories of the ‘monstrous feminine’ as a unifying and empowering figure across the chapters, the thesis explores how the embrace of the monstrous-feminine can function as a collective mode of resistance. It argues that it is precisely through reading monstrosity as a site of possibility that they open space for a powerful mode of feminist agency.

Central to the inquiry of the thesis is to what extent texts resist, or are complicit with, prevailing ideologies and the scope they open for reclaiming the monstrous-feminine as resistance. The chapters explore this through the portrayal of sexual violence in films *Snow White and the Huntsman* (Sanders, 2012) and *Maleficent* (Stromberg, 2014); villains and victims in Helen Oyeyemi’s novels *White Is for Witching* (2009), *Mr Fox* (2011), and *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014); the female body as a site of resistance in the film *Red Riding Hood* (Hardwicke, 2011); and participatory reinterpretation of fairy tales in Mattel’s transmedia Ever After High franchise (2013–2017). The thesis concludes that contemporary retellings achieve their most radical feminist potential when they reclaim the ‘monstrous mother’

through storytelling, embracing monstrosity as a shared condition, a form of collectivity that constitutes a more powerful mode of feminist agency than physical action alone.

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Introduction: Daughters of the Fairy Tale

Reclaiming the Monstrous-Mother in Contemporary Feminist Fictions

‘We lived in a different time then, you know what I mean? I feel like the slut-shaming that went down was so absurd. [...] That was a really hard period of my life. I was really young. I didn’t really know how to deal with that.’¹ This reflection from Kristen Stewart recalls the summer of 2012 when *Us Weekly* published photo of her and director Rupert Sanders, “kissing like crazy”.² At the time Stewart was the highest paid female actor of 2012, riding the global success of the *Twilight* franchise, with the final film due to be released later the same year.³ She was also in a relationship with her *Twilight* co-star, Robert Pattinson. Sanders, meanwhile, was enjoying the acclaim of his directorial debut, *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012), in which Stewart starred as Snow White. Sanders’s wife, the model Liberty Ross, also briefly appeared in the film playing the mother of young Snow White in the prologue. *Vanity Fair* seized on this detail reporting the affair as ‘a perfect storm of humiliation’ for Ross because ‘she had played Stewart's mother in the same movie’.⁴ This framing positioned Ross and Stewart as rivals, reviving the fairy tale trope of a mother figure competing with a younger woman for the title of ‘fairest of them all’. In the fallout, Stewart

¹ Emma Kelly, ‘Kristen Stewart addresses that Rupert Sanders affair while dating Robert Pattinson’, *Metro News* (6 November 2019) <<https://metro.co.uk/2019/11/06/kristen-stewart-addresses-rupert-sanders-affair-dating-robert-pattinson-not-f-11048937/>> [accessed 3 June 2022].

² ‘Kristen Cheats on Rob: See All the Shocking Pics!’, *Us Weekly* (30 July 2012) <<https://www.usmagazine.com/celebrity-news/news/kristen-stewart-cheats-on-robert-pattinson-with-rupert-sanders-see-all-of-the-shocking-pics-from-their-fling-2012307/>> [accessed 16 May 2022].

³ Dorothy Pomerantz, ‘Kristen Stewart Tops Our List Of The Highest-Paid Actresses’, *Forbes* n.d. (<<https://www.forbes.com/sites/dorothypomerantz/2012/06/19/kristen-stewart-tops-our-list-of-highest-paid-actresses/>> [accessed 16 May 2022].

⁴ Evgenia Peretz, ‘Liberty, Without Torch’, *Vanity Fair* (12 November 2013) <<https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2013/12/liberty-ross-rupert-sanders-kristen-stewart>> [accessed 27 September 2025].

was dropped from the planned sequel, which was reconfigured as *The Huntsman: Winter's War* (2016), a male-led action film.

I begin with this example because it highlights an issue that is central to my reassessment of the way traditional fairy tales are retold in the second decade in the twenty-first century, a decade distinguished not only by an unusual proliferation of fairy tale retellings, but also by a shift in feminist sensibilities sometimes identified as a 'fourth wave'. The issue is that ideologies of femininity are deeply entangled with the mother-daughter relationship, meaning that the representation of this relationship is key to a feminist reading. Fairy tale retellings of this period are framed with apparently feminist aims: to disrupt rigid gender binaries, challenge patriarchal violence and amplify marginalised voices. Yet these aims are frequently undercut by a recurring trope, the 'monstrous mother' cast in opposition to a youthful heroine whose empowerment is figured through physical action. Employing Barbara Creed's theories of the 'monstrous-feminine' as a unifying and empowering figure across the chapters, the thesis explores how the embrace of the monstrous-feminine can function as a collective mode of resistance. It argues that it is precisely through positioning monstrosity as a site of possibility that these texts open space for a powerful mode of feminist agency. Central to the inquiry of the thesis is to what extent texts resist, or are complicit with, prevailing ideologies and the scope they open for reclaiming the monstrous-feminine as resistance. This thesis argues that acknowledging the impact of the relationships between the women in the story is the only way truly to subvert the neoliberal individualist message that has become embedded into Western fairy tale retellings.

The media framing of the Stewart-Sanders affair as generational conflict between mother and daughter serves to demonstrate how fairy tale tropes can be employed both to challenge and reinforce prevailing ideologies. As Merja Makinen asserts '[t]he fairy tale, as a well-known, culturally familiar body of texts with an almost canonical status...is a ripe site for both reduplication and rewriting, for pastiche and for parody'.⁵ While *Snow White and the Huntsman* rewrites passive fairy tale femininity by portraying the heroine as an empowered warrior at the head of an army, putting the character in armour did little to empower the actress who played her in the 'real world' as she lost her job. Liberty Ross also adapted the Snow White narrative in the aftermath of the affair, posting on Instagram an edited image of Disney's Snow White drinking wine and crying, accompanied by the caption "Not so pretty or so pure after all..." (Figure 1).⁶ In doing so, Ross positions herself as the patriarchal mirror of the traditional fairy tale, passing judgement on who is the 'fairest of them all'. That this gesture is simultaneously an act of understandable hurt and an unconscious reproduction of the fairy tale's logic of female rivalry is precisely what makes it such a compelling example, demonstrating how fairy tale tropes can be subverted yet still enforce 'old' ideologies. Although fourth wave feminism is characterised by the use of digital technologies to enable collective activism, this example also highlights a tension within such technologies: when mobilised for individual 'empowerment' they risk making women complicit in the very structures that serve to keep them 'in their place'.

⁵ Merja Makinen, 'Theorizing Fairy-Tale Fiction, Reading Jeanette Winterson' in Stephen Benson (ed.), *Contemporary Fiction and the Fairy Tale* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2008), pp. 144-177 (p. 148).

⁶ Beth Hardie, "'Not so pretty or pure after all" - has wife of Kristen's fling finally spoken out?', *Mirror* (17 July 2012), < <https://www.mirror.co.uk/3am/us-celebrity-news/kristen-stewart-cheating-liberty-ross-1174557> > [accessed 26 September 2025].



Figure 1 Snow White Instagram post

The decision to drop Stewart from the *Snow White and the Huntsman* sequel becomes even more striking when considered in light of her immense cultural capital at the time. Her fame had been cemented by 'The Twilight Saga', a global phenomenon that not only made her one of the highest paid actresses of 2012 but also positioned her as the face of a franchise that defined a generation of young adult cinema. The decision to exclude her from the sequel reveals how precarious female stardom remains in Hollywood. Despite her proven box-office value, the studio chose to erase her rather than confront any misconduct or public scandal more equitably. In doing so, the franchise reverted to the safety of a male-led action film, undercutting its own potential for a female-centred narrative and demonstrating how quickly even the most bankable young actresses can be discarded when their personal lives disrupt patriarchal industry norms.

While Stewart bore the brunt of media scrutiny, the fairy tale narrative was also weaponised against Ross. The same Vanity Fair article that claimed Ross played Stewart's mother in the film describes Ross's initial reaction to the affair as 'model of old-world grace in the face of L.A. tabloid culture', while her Instagram post is a 'gentle jab' (Peretz, 2013). Ross is aligned with an older more traditional form of femininity, one aligned with motherhood and gentle domesticity. Yet this is also used against Ross with the same article describing her as 'past the prime of her career' and 'focused on raising her children' (Peretz, 2013). As Kathleen Rowe Karlyn argues in *Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers* (2011), popular films reveal 'an enduring ambivalence about mothers, motherhood, and mother-daughter relations that dates from the earliest myths of Western culture and persists into media today. Since the late 1990s, motherhood has become an increasingly charged site on which unresolved conflicts about ideologies of gender, race, and class collide.'⁷ As the example of Ross and Stewart show, attempts to resolve such ideological conflicts often further entrench them.

Fairy tales historically reflect this ambivalent attitude that society has towards the mother / older woman, making the wave of retellings in the 2010s a potentially awkward vehicle to carry a feminist message. Rather than focus solely on the empowerment of the heroine, therefore, I focus on the way generational conflict is handled in these fairy tale retellings, and the impact that can have on the feminist message of the film. By interrogating the way the texts treat relational dynamics, between mothers and daughters and across generations, I analyse how effectively the feminist message being presented is able to

⁷ Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, *Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers: Redefining Feminism on Screen* (University of Texas Press, 2011), pp. 2–3.

overcome the limits placed upon it by the capitalist western fairy tale structure. As Karlyn states, '[t]he issue of motherhood has haunted Western feminism from its outset, in its struggle to free women from a biological determinism that links female bodies to reproduction. Indeed, ideologies of femininity are nowhere more intensely charged than around motherhood' (2011: 5). Karlyn argues that feminism has absorbed this ambivalence towards women in a way that replicates the misogyny it wishes to eradicate (2011: 5). Likewise, I argue that an analysis of the relationship between generations of women in a story can present alternative narratives about and representations of femininity, which subvert the patriarchal messaging that has become inherent in the western fairy tale form.

Karlyn's analysis of ambivalence towards mothers and daughters intersects with what Astrid Henry, in *Not My Mother's Sister: Generational Conflict and Third-Wave Feminism* (2004) calls the 'matraphor' — feminism's recurring use of the mother-daughter relationship as a way of understanding itself and its history. Henry argues that the matraphor has generated conflict within feminism as a movement and a body of knowledge, producing tensions as each generation positions itself in opposition to the one that precedes or follows it.⁸ Karlyn argues that it is the matraphor that has created the conflict within 'both an activist movement and a now institutionalized body of knowledge' as one generation distances itself from that which follows or precedes it. Taking this insight into contemporary fairy tale retellings highlights why an interdisciplinary approach is essential: it allows the texts to be situated within their broader cultural moment, where generational conflict is both a thematic concern and a lens for negotiating feminism's own identity. In practice, this means

⁸ Astrid Henry, *Not My Mother's Sister: Generational Conflict and Third-Wave Feminism* (Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 2.

I will consider not only the films themselves but also the media discourses surrounding them, including their marketing, the feminist debates they engage, and, where relevant, the 'star texts' of the actors involved. As Richard Dyer established in his ground-breaking *Stars* (1979), a star text is a composite of public representations, film roles, interviews, media appearances, and wider cultural phenomena, that together shape a celebrity's cultural image. This framework allows me to analyse Hollywood actors not only as performers but also as complex, interwoven narratives whose images inform how fairy tale retellings are received and understood. Reading fairy tale retellings in this context demonstrates how both popular culture and feminism itself remain haunted by ambivalence towards mothers, and how narratives of female rivalry are continually reactivated in ways that uphold patriarchal structures, even as they appear to resist them.

Dead Mothers and Wicked Stepmothers

Fairy tales often contain universally recognisable items such as the red apple of Snow White or Cinderella's glass slipper. In 'Disrupting the boundaries of genre and gender: postmodernism and the fairy tale', Cathy Lynn Preston argues that '[i]n postmodernity the "stuff" of fairy tales exists as fragments (princess, frog, slipper, commodity relations in a marriage market) in the nebulous realm that we most simply identify as cultural knowledge.'⁹ This familiarity the audience has with the 'stuff' of fairy tales is why Ross's drunken Snow White meme was successful as a criticism of Stewart. Identifying what constitutes the 'stuff' of fairy tales is key to unpacking the message the fairy tale is sending

⁹Cathy Lynn Preston, 'Disrupting the boundaries of genre and gender: postmodernism and the fairy tale', in Donald P. Haase, ed., *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2004), pp. 197-212 (p. 210).

as well as how they can be subverted in a feminist reading. Christy Williams argues that it is through collapsing and dismantling 'a variety of tales, tale types, motifs, and functions' in the fairy tale that the popular conception of mothers in fairy tales can be challenged, as well as the structuralist base of fairy-tale and folklore studies.¹⁰ Williams goes on to identify the wicked stepmother as a staple of the popular fairy-tale tradition and 'arguably its most famous villain. [...] the wicked stepmother has become a stock figure, a fairy-tale type that invokes a vivid image at the mention of her role – so much so that stepmothers in general have had to fight against their fairy-tale reflections.'¹¹ As the 'stuff' of fairy tales, the dead mother and the wicked stepmother tropes need to be addressed in order to subvert patriarchal notions that have become entrenched in the Western fairy tale tradition.

Unfortunately, many contemporary fairy tale texts fail to recognise the effect of this trope and instead focus on the young protagonist and a reversal of the 'damsel in distress' trope, with a simple reversal of the damsel becoming an action heroine. In this way fairy tale retellings, particularly in film, appear to be an 'easy' vehicle for an apparently empowering message. In the series *Grimm Thoughts* aired on Radio 4 during December 2012, Marina Warner asked the question; 'Have feminist ideals themselves now become the stuff of fairy tale?' in relation to the 2012 Disney film *Brave*.¹² *Brave* is set in the medieval period and features Merida, a feisty red-haired heroine who rides, shoots arrows and refuses to marry

¹⁰ Christy Williams, 'Who's Wicked Now? The Stepmother as Fairy-Tale Heroine', *Marvels & Tales*, 24.2 (2010), pp. 255–71, (p. 258).

¹¹ Williams, 'Who's Wicked Now? The Stepmother as Fairy-Tale Heroine', p.255

¹² 'BBC Radio 4 Extra - Grimm Thoughts', BBC, n.d. <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01pjjsz>> [accessed 15 August 2024].

according to tradition and the orders of her parents. Warner asks, how does Merrida's situation match the situation of young women in the West today? The 'strong female character' in film has become such a cliché as a tool of the 'feminist' retelling, that real issues of women's oppression in a patriarchal society are ignored. Treating the damsel in distress trope in isolation without recognising the wider context of the problems with the text leaves behind the other female characters and ultimately condemns the young protagonist to the same fate once she becomes the mother. As I argue in my chapter on *Snow White and the Huntsman*, putting Snow White in armour does not address the way that women are valued based on beauty and youth in the film, an issue reflected in society and painfully played out in the media in the case of the Stewart-Sanders affair. I argue that it is through identifying the origins and effect of the dead mother and wicked stepmother tropes they can be dismantled.

Once upon a time, it was mothers who were wicked, not stepmothers. In the 1812 first edition of 'Snow White', translated by Zipes (2014), the same queen who sits at her window in midwinter, pricking her finger and wishing into being 'a child as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as ebony wood', is also the queen who, when the mirror names Snow White as fairer, summons a huntsman and commands him to kill her daughter, bring back her lungs and liver, and let her cook and eat them.¹³ By the 1857 edition the opening scene changed with the addition of two short sentences: 'The queen died shortly after the child was born' and 'A year later, her husband, the king, married another woman.'¹⁴ The

¹³ Jacob Grimm, Wilhelm Grimm, and Jack Zipes (eds), *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition* (Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 170-171.

¹⁴ Jacob Grimm, Wilhelm Grimm, and Maria Tatar (eds), *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*, 1st ed (W.W. Norton, 2004), p. 244.

characterisation of the villain is otherwise identical, but the biological mother who conjured her daughter through a wish has been erased and a stepmother inserted in her place. As Williams argues, this editorial intervention effectively killed off the good mothers to make room for the villains, but what the textual comparison reveals is how precise and deliberate that erasure was, not a rewriting of the villain but a surgical removal of the maternal complexity the 1812 edition contains, the uncomfortable truth that the mother who wishes her daughter into existence and the mother who wishes to destroy her might be the same woman (2010: 259).

Fairy tales that once acknowledged the mother-daughter relationship, no matter how flawed, were now filled with dead mothers and monstrous step-mothers. Warner argues, in their romantic idealism, the Brothers Grimm literally could not bear a maternal presence to be equivocal, or dangerous, and preferred to banish her altogether. For them, the bad mother had to disappear in order for the ideal to survive and allow Mother to flourish as symbol of the eternal feminine, the motherland, and the family itself as the highest social desideratum.¹⁵

The editing process of the Brothers Grimm has many negative effects on the portrayal of mothers in popular fairy tales: as well as removing the birth mother from the story and replacing her with a wicked stepmother, the Brothers Grimm reinforced biological essentialism, privileging one relationship over the other, protecting the idealised image of the biological mother at the cost of non-biological (but still familial) female relationships. The biological father was also generally spared from being portrayed as a villain and instead

¹⁵ Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (Vintage, 1995), pp. 211–212.

was either oblivious to the plight of the child, killed off, or as much as a victim of the wicked stepmother as the child. Yet, as the texts examined in this thesis demonstrate, the Brothers Grimm's editorial decision to replace the biological mother with the stepmother opens up two possibilities for feminist and queer rewriting: The first is the reclamation of the dead birth mother herself, restoring her to the story and giving her back her complexity and her voice. The second is the exploitation of the non-biological maternal slot more broadly, a structural role that, precisely because it is not bound by biological essentialism, can be rewritten.

Bruno Bettelheim's psychoanalytical readings of fairy tale are perhaps the most influential theories of the use of fairy tales for children. His 1976 work *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tale* popularised the psychoanalytical approach to the fairy tale and embedded many of the beliefs surrounding fairy tales as a form of literature for children. Like the Brothers Grimm, Bettelheim felt that the wicked stepmother was a useful tool in the fairy tale to protect biological mothers from the hatred of their children. The wicked stepmother was a useful scapegoat for complicated and negative feelings that the child might have towards mothers:

So the typical splitting of the mother into a good (usually dead) mother and an evil stepmother serves the child well. It is not only a means of preserving an internal all-good mother when the real mother is not all-good, but it also permits anger at this bad 'stepmother' without endangering the goodwill of the true mother who is viewed as a different person... The fantasy of the wicked stepmother not only preserves the good mother intact, it also prevents having to feel guilty about one's

angry thoughts and wishes about her – a guilt which would seriously interfere with the good relation to the Mother.¹⁶

The language Bettelheim uses here is troubling, claiming that a good dead mother ‘serves the child well’ as they will have a wicked stepmother to project any uncomfortable feelings on to. Not only does he claim that the only good mother is (usually) a dead one, but he also reinforces the biological essentialism that the Brothers Grimm inserted into the text in calling the biological mother the ‘true’ mother. The feelings of the child are also privileged over the women concerned, be it the biological mother or wicked stepmother. The child is not required to deal with their own negative emotions but instead to project them as a form of hatred for a maternal figure. Fairy tales have often been criticised by feminist scholars for setting up unrealistic and unhealthy ideals of romantic love, but the same can be said for the mother-child relationship.

Despite Bettelheim now being widely discredited, fairy tale scholars such as Jack Zipes and Marina Warner have pointed to the long-term damage his theory of fairy tales has done.

Warner writes,

The bad mother has become an inevitable, even required ingredient in fantasy, and hatred of her a legitimate, applauded stratagem of psychic survival. Bettelheim’s theory has contributed to the continuing absence of good mothers from fairy tales in all kinds of media, and to a dangerous degree which itself mirrors current prejudices and reinforces them (1995: 213).

¹⁶ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (Vintage Books, 1977), pp. 68–69.

Although Warner was writing this in 1994, her argument still stands, as the media framing of the Stewart-Sanders affair in 2012 reveals how deeply Bettelheim's logic remains embedded in popular culture. Rupert Sanders, like the biological father of the traditional fairy tale, largely disappeared from the narrative, while the focus fell entirely on the conflict between Stewart and Ross, the rivalry between the two women amplified using the framework of the fairy tale.

This thesis positions Warner as an alternative to the narrative of female relations created by Bettelheim and the Brothers Grimm. As a historian, Warner considers the way that stories 'come from the past but speak to the present' and that acknowledging this enables her to sit in conversation with 'admired predecessors' such as Virginia Woolf and Angela Carter.¹⁷ Warner's acknowledgement of inheritance among female writers is vital in dismantling the damage of Bettelheim and Brothers Grimm. Not only do the Brothers Grimm and Bettelheim diminish the value of any female relationship that is not the good 'true' mother (which is impossible as she is dead), but those other relationships with women are portrayed as being actively harmful to the child. In an essay titled 'On the Use and Abuse of Folk and Fairy Tales with Children: Bruno Bettelheim's Moralistic Magic Wand', Zipes refers to Bettelheim as a 'charlatan, forger, liar, bully, and oppressor', and that by using fairy tales as a therapeutic tool for children he, along with other educators, 'perpetuated the diseases they desire to cure', echoing Karlyn's concern that feminism's ambivalence toward mothers replicates the misogyny it wishes to eradicate.¹⁸

¹⁷ 'Home', *Marina Warner* n.d. <<https://www.marinawarner.com/>> [accessed 8 July 2024].

¹⁸ Jack Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales*, Rev. and expanded ed (University Press of Kentucky, 2002), p. 179, p. 181.

The privileging of the child's experience of a text also acts to erase the storyteller from the fairy tale as the child is automatically considered to be the 'audience' and the fairy tale is intended to benefit them in some way. Again, the Brothers Grimm reinvented the fairy tale as a moralistic teaching tool for children where once they were oral folk tales shared in the main by women in order to share experience with other women. The tales were not purely for the benefit of the child but a shared experience between storyteller and audience.

Warner points out,

If we read the famous stories of child abandonment and suffering and subsequent salvation from the point of view of the putative teller, not the solicited audience of the child, we can cast a new light on the material and its bitter, internecine struggles between women. If the storyteller is an old woman, the old wife of the old wives' tale, a nurse or a governess, she may be offering herself as a surrogate to the vanished mother in the story (1995: 215).

This question over who is the narrator of the fairy tale is something I consider carefully in the analysis of my texts. Multiple storytellers layer multiple meanings, and therefore multiple ideologies, into the text. For example, in considering *Maleficent* the voiced narrator of the film is Aurora as an old woman; she, as the daughter, looks back to narrate the story of her mother. But the storyteller is also the screenwriter, to some extent the studio (Disney) and also Jolie as Maleficent who brings her own experience of adoptive motherhood to a reading of the text.

Warner continues by saying that the usual approach in fairy tale scholarship is from the point of view of the protagonist, who she characterises as 'the orphaned daughter who has

lost her real mother and is tormented by her stepmother, or her sisters, sometimes her stepsisters':

the interpreters usually assume that the reader or listener naturally identifies with the heroine. [...] Fairy tales are not told in the first person of the protagonist, and though Cinderella or Snow White engages our first attention as well as the narrator's, the voice of the storyteller may be issuing elsewhere. Imagine the characteristic scene, the child listening to an older person telling this story, and the absent mother materializes in the person of the narrator herself (1995: 214-5).

Warner's argument that reclaiming the storyteller is a way of reclaiming the mother is something that I build on in my analysis of the text. As the storyteller who utters the famous lines 'Once upon a time...' is an important fairy tale trope and an essential ingredient in the 'stuff' of fairy tales, who that voice belongs too is as important as what they say and presents a powerful form of female agency within the text.

By considering the narrator Warner reminds us that origin of the fairy tale is ancient, it has come down through generations and 'that many women have participated in its making, it's rather like a tapestry, it's been made over time by many hands and those hands are very often women and it reflects a lot of women's experience which is why it has become a massive field of enquiry into [...] women's lives.'¹⁹ Again it is important to consider here who has handed the fairy tale down through generations: if the 'good' mother is dead according to the Brothers Grimm and Bettelheim, who is telling these stories? In her introduction to the Penguin Books 75th Anniversary edition of Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, Kelly

¹⁹ 'Forever After: Angela Carter and the Reinvention of the Fairy Tale', *Living Knowledge Network*, n.d. <<https://living-knowledge-network.co.uk/library/angela-carter-fairytale>> [accessed 19 May 2024].

Link also writes about archetypes and patterns of fairy tales and the way they evidence stories 'in conversation' with other stories: 'Such multiplicity! Such mutableness! The stories remained themselves, and yet they could be reworked over and over and over again. You just had to pick the patterns, the archetypes, the bits of fairy tale business to which you felt most drawn.'²⁰ Link uses this recognition of 'fairy tale business' in a similar way to Preston, to demonstrate the way fairy tales can be retold to 'speak' across time, in particular to women. However, by killing the mother to privilege the child, Bettelheim and the Brothers Grimm removed this inheritance of women's experience from the fairy tale, an inheritance that Carter, as Link's introduction signals, would later work to restore.

This silencing within the tales themselves mirrors a wider absence in literary history, a perceived missing lineage of female voices, the sense of women searching in vain for foremothers. As Miglena Nikolchina beautifully summarises:

"I am the first of a new genus" (Mary Wollstonecraft). "When I looked around, I saw and heard of none like me" (Mary Shelley). "I look everywhere for grandmothers and find none" (Elizabeth Barrett Browning). "Why isn't there a tradition of the mothers?" (Virginia Woolf). Women have "no past, no history" (Simone de Beauvoir). "I look for myself throughout the centuries and I don't see myself anywhere" (Hélène Cixous). As Woolf [...] noted, "strange spaces of silence" [...] separate the solitary female utterances throughout history.²¹

²⁰ Kelly Link, 'Introduction' in Carter, Angela, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (Penguin, 2015), pp. vii-xxvii (p. x).

²¹ Miglena Nikolchina, *Matricide in Language: Writing Theory in Kristeva and Woolf* (New York: Other Press, 2004), p. 2.

The literary fairy tale of the Brothers Grimm is another example of this matricide: the dead women cannot tell their tales and the living women are wicked and monstrous. It is precisely this silence that the texts examined in this thesis attempt to fill by embracing the monstrous mother as the site where women's voices refuse to be contained.

It could be argued that Angela Carter's feminist reimagining of fairy tales in *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) works to undo this act of matricide. As Merja Makinen argues, Carter's work relentlessly attacks patriarchal stereotypes, depicting women who 'grab their sexuality and fight back [...] troubled by and even powered by their own violence'.²² Hugely influential, it remains a foundational work that continues to shape the field and yet, as Makinen observes, even Carter was softened in death. Following her untimely death in 1992, the language of fairy tales was repeatedly used in obituaries to frame her as a gentle 'Fairy Godmother' or benevolent 'White Witch' (1992: 2), precisely the kind of mythologizing that Carter herself had critiqued as a form of flattering women 'into submission':

'All the mythic versions of women, from the myth of the redeeming purity of the virgin to that of the healing, reconciling mother, are consolatory nonsenses [...]. If a revival of the myths of these cults gives women emotional satisfaction, it does so at the price of obscuring the real conditions of life'.²³

Ironically, Carter's literary peers reproduced the very mechanism she had exposed, transforming a writer who relentlessly depicted women powered by their own violence into another good but dead fairy tale mother. In positioning Carter as the mother of the feminist

²² Merja Makinen 'The Bloody Chamber and the Decolonization of Feminine Sexuality' in *Feminist Review* 42 (1992), pp. 2-15 (p. 2).

²³ Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*, (Virago Press, 2013), p. 5.

fairy tale, this thesis follows Makinen in embracing her as the 'literary terrorist of feminism', whose monstrous inheritance it traces forward into the texts that follow her.

The risk that feminist inheritances can be smoothed into consolatory myth even by those who celebrate them, is one that Clare Hemmings's critique of feminist storytelling in *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (2011) helps to theorise.

Hemmings shows how dominant narratives of progress, loss, and return smooth over multiplicity and risk silencing voices that do not fit neatly within them, particularly black and queer feminisms. Her emphasis on citation and affect, on what is remembered and the emotions assumed to bind us, echoes the dynamics of the fairy tale, where the mother is erased to privilege the daughter. I return to Hemmings's work in more depth in Chapter 3, but it is important to note here that, as with feminist histories, fairy tales can reproduce silences even as they claim to speak for women across time. Yet, as Warner, Link, and others have argued, fairy tales can also resist this closure, operating as a form of conversation between women across generations, since readers recognise when a fairy tale is being referenced in ways that no other text allows.

The Monstrous-Feminine in the Fairy Tale

This thesis takes further Warner's argument that the bad mother is a required ingredient of fantasy and argues that mothers and mother figures have become the monsters of the fairy tale, in place of the dragon or the ogre, positioned in opposition to the daughter character. However, I do not believe a simple reversal of the trope will suffice and instead an examination of why mothers have been made monstrous is required in order to dismantle the misogyny of the Brothers Grimm and Bettelheim. In her book *The Monstrous-Feminine:*

Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis (1993; 2nd ed. 2024), Barbara Creed draws on Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject as articulated in *Powers of Horror* (1982) to argue that the monstrous-feminine is a creation of patriarchal ideology 'designed to render women impotent in a male world.'²⁴ The monstrous-feminine holds that the female reproductive body is abject because it threatens the symbolic order, therefore women must be controlled.

Creed traces the monstrous-feminine back to ancient mythology (such as Medusa and Lilith) and through to Freud, whose 1927 paper 'Fetishism' states that 'Probably no male human being is spared the fright of castration at the sight of a female genital', a claim that locates the source of man's fear of woman in the female body itself and specifically in its difference from the male.²⁵ It is this Freudian framework, which constructs the female body as inherently threatening to male subjectivity, that Creed both draws on and seeks to dismantle, arguing that the monstrous-feminine is not a natural or inevitable response to female sexuality but a patriarchal construction designed to render women impotent (Creed, 2024: 4-5). Creed uses the term 'monstrous-feminine' rather than 'female monster' because it is more than a mere reversal of the male monster, the monstrosity of 'monstrous-feminine' is explicitly linked to and defined by her sexuality.

This thesis focuses in particular on Kristeva's notion of abjection as taken up by Creed, examining constructions of abjection in the human subject in relation to '(a) the 'border', (b)

²⁴ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, second edition (Routledge, 2024), p. xvi.

²⁵ Sigmund Freud, 'Fetishism', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey and others, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1953–74), xxi (1927), pp. 147–57 (p. 154).

the mother-child relationship, and (c) the feminine body' (Creed, 2024: 11). For Kristeva, the abject is that which disturbs identity, system, and order, what does not respect borders, positions, or rules. It is 'the place where meaning collapses', where 'I' am not (Creed, 2024: 11). Creed explains that

Although the subject must exclude the abject, the abject must, nevertheless, be tolerated for that which threatens to destroy life also helps to define life. Further, the activity of exclusion is necessary to guarantee that the subject take up his/her proper place in relation to the symbolic (2024: 11).

The maternal body is especially marked as abject because its reproductive functions reveal a visible 'debt to nature', thus destabilising the symbolic order by collapsing the border between self and other (2024: 13). In Creed's account, this produces the maternal figure as abject and the mother-child relationship as a site of conflict: 'the child struggles to break free but the mother is reluctant to release it' (2024: 13). While Creed applies this to horror cinema, it also helps explain the recurrent structures of fairy tales, where the 'good' mother is killed off and replaced by a monstrous maternal figure whose defeat becomes essential for the heroine's psychic survival.

In her more recent work *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine* (2022), Creed extends this framework to theorise what she terms 'Feminist New Wave Cinema' in which women revolt against male violence by embarking on a journey 'into the dark night of abjection, where they engage with the underlying horrors of the patriarchal order'.²⁶ Creed continues to draw on Kristeva's theory of abjection to explore what Kristeva calls 'revolt', which Creed argues

²⁶ Barbara Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine: Feminist New Wave Cinema* (Routledge, 2022), p. 2.

is central to Feminist New Wave films. This revolt often takes the form of a disturbance of identity, a collapse of boundaries which contain the possibility of rebirth: 'In confronting the threat to her sense of self, the female protagonist may draw on abjection itself, as abjection points to the frailty of the patriarchal symbolic order, to inspire her revolt' (2022: 4). The woman who enacts such revolt is, in Creed's terms, 'seen by representatives of the patriarchal order as abject — even as a terrorist' (2022: 13), a description that resonates with Makinen's characterisation of Carter as the 'literary terrorist of feminism', suggesting that the fictional monstrous-feminine and the feminist author who gives her voice are subject to the same patriarchal impulse to contain and silence. I extend this argument by suggesting that such boundary collapse is often accompanied by identification with the mother, or the mother figure, in the texts I examine. When consciously embraced, this relationship can become a source of empowerment rather than erasure. As Adrienne Rich has argued, 'the connections between and among women are the most feared, the most problematic, and the most potentially transforming force on the planet.'²⁷ This 'reabsorption' into the maternal does not obliterate the subject's identity but completes and strengthens it. Characters achieve a sense of wholeness not only by recognising shared experience, but also by encountering in the other something previously unacknowledged within themselves.

For example, in Chapter 2, Aurora's embrace of Maleficent as a mother figure allows Maleficent to reclaim a portion of her identity that had been suppressed by trauma. Similarly, in Chapter 4, *Red Riding Hood's* Valerie actively rejects the patriarchal legacy

²⁷ Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (Virago, 1984), p. 279.

symbolised by the wolf and instead embraces her grandmother's inheritance as both outsider and witch. These moments stand in stark contrast to Chapter 1, where Snow White's refusal to confront her connection with Ravenna ultimately leads to her undoing, driving her toward madness in front of the mirror. Yet, empowerment need not always take the form of maternal identification. In Chapter 1, a different kind of feminist revolt emerges through the transformative potential of costume and Theron's ability to fully embody Ravenna, demonstrating that reclamation of power can also occur through performance. Across these examples, the texts reveal that whether through maternal bonds or acts of self-transformation, the characters' engagement with forces traditionally framed as threatening or external ultimately becomes a pathway to agency.

This focus on empowerment, whether through maternal bonds, self-fashioning, or the reclamation of repressed identity, finds a clear parallel in contemporary analyses of feminist interventions in fairy tale adaptations. Athena Bellas argues in *Fairy Tales on the Teen Screen* that filmmakers such as Catherine Hardwicke subvert the traditional cautionary tale of Perrault and Grimm by presenting a 'keen critical insight' into the sexism embedded in those texts. For Bellas, Hardwicke provides 'moments of opposition and rupture' enabling the fairy tale heroine to escape the strictures society places upon her and instead positions her as a 'powerful storyteller who becomes an unruly figure'.²⁸ Bellas argues that moments of female adolescent resistance are played out through the fairy tales on the 'teen screen' which challenge 'limiting and prescriptive rituals of hegemonic feminine adolescence' (2017: 1). Bellas argues that the fairy tale texts she has chosen show the heroine confronting and

²⁸ Athena Bellas, *Fairy Tales on the Teen Screen* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 42.

resisting patriarchal power in order to 'rewrite the place of the girl in the narrative' (2017: 14). I build on Bellas's argument and connect her theories of female adolescent resistance with Creed's use of revolt. This is particularly pertinent to Chapter 5, when discussing the 'Royals and Rebels' of Mattel's Ever After High franchise. This thesis extends Bellas's argument to encompass the relationships between women in the story, arguing that it is not enough to make one alternative vision of girlhood visible to the detriment of other women's voices in the story and that it is the recognition of the connection between women that leads to true agency. The empowerment of the individual who is already pre-destined for 'specialness' only serves to enhance narratives of individualism and consumption. Problems are then seen as individual issues rather than systemic injustices perpetuated within a patriarchal culture.

Creed argues that the unifying figure in Feminist New Wave films is monstrous-feminine and that '[m]onstrosity is an empowering concept' (2022: 4). I argue that all my chosen texts contain a 'monstrous-feminine' character and that her embrace of what makes her monstrous in the eyes of patriarchy is what makes her an empowering character. While there is an empowering 'monstrous-feminine' character in each of my texts, not all of my texts recognise and present her as such and like Creed, I argue that not all my monstrous-feminine characters initially appear monstrous: as Creed says of the new monstrous-feminine protagonist, 'her revolt is understated but nonetheless it is just as powerful' (2022: 5). As I mentioned, the feminisms mobilised in these texts are often confusing and contradictory and as such do not always see the opportunity presented in these types of character and instead seek to empower the heroine in a very 'masculine' way rather than embracing the revolt of the monstrous-feminine. I explore this further particularly in

Chapter 1 while critiquing *Snow White and the Huntsman*, I argue that texts like *Snow White and the Huntsman* make a simple reversal of typical heroic male actions and give them to the female character to ‘empower’ her and ultimately fail in any feminist endeavour by ignoring the reason for her oppression: her gender. Just as Creed points out that the term ‘female monster’ implies a simple reversal of the male monster which ignores the way that female monsters are monstrous in a uniquely female way, so I argue that female empowerment cannot come about through a simple reversal of action but must embrace uniquely female agency.

In *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*, Creed increases her scope beyond the horror film to include ‘coming-of-age dramas, road movies, rape-revolt, and social issue films’ as part of Feminist New Wave Cinema (2022: 1). Creed argues this ‘new generation’ of predominantly female directors ‘break with tradition, challenge dominant forms, adopt new styles, and speak for the rights of women and social minorities’. She suggests that as they receive progressively greater recognition, Feminist New Wave Cinema constitutes a ‘specific historical movement’ (2022: 1). Creed does not identify fairy tales among her examples, although as I will show, women directors, scriptwriters and costume designers, among others, are responsible for a growing feminist sensibility in the fairy tale film. What Nikolchina identifies as a failure to ‘recuperate the missing mother’ in earlier feminist texts is also starting to change, as my examples will demonstrate (2004: 2). This thesis thus considers the way the ‘specific historical movement’ of Feminist New Wave Cinema intersects with the increase of feminist-coded fairy tale retellings, making the storyteller, and therefore the mother, visible again.

Approaching Fairy Tale in the 2010s

Zipes describes the increase of fairy tale texts in the second decade of the twenty-first century as a 'tsunami'.²⁹ Some were explicit in advertising their fairy tale origins such as the films *Red Riding Hood* (2011), *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012), *Mirror, Mirror* (2012), *Hansel and Gretel: Witch Hunters* (2013), *Jack the Giant Slayer* (2013), *Maleficent* (2014) and the television shows *Once Upon a Time* (2011-2018) and *Grimm* (2011-2017). Others alluded to their fairy tale origins in a subtler way (although some titles suggest otherwise) such as *Black Swan* (2010); *Sleeping Beauty* (2011); *Ex-Machina* (2015); *Beast* (2017) and the remake of the 1980s TV series *Beauty and the Beast* (2012-2016). Zipes suggests that the growth of fairy tale retellings reflects both the power of mass media and the cultural role these stories play (2016: 35). He argues that fairy tales have become 'the dominant cultural form of storytelling in our daily lives, thanks in large part to film and other mass-mediated technologies' (2016: 35). Their adaptability in different media such as literature, drama and cartoons makes them more accessible, bringing people together around narratives that 'speak to common problems' (2016: 35). At the same time, Zipes links the increase to contemporary anxieties: 'the more bewildering, if not distorted and perverted, our lives become, the more people seek refuge and meaning in fairy tales' (2016: 35). In the twenty-first century, amid rapid social and political conflict, Zipes notes that 'more fairy-tale and fantasy films have been created to address the symptoms that contribute to our present dilemmas' (2016: 35).

²⁹ Jack Zipes, 'The Great Cultural Tsunami of Fairy Tale Films' in Pauline Greenhill, and Kendra Magnus-Johnston (eds.), *Fairy-Tale Films beyond Disney: International Perspectives* (Routledge, 2016), pp. 29-55 (p. 29).

The texts I have chosen from the multitude of fairy tale retellings in this decade centre their narrative around the relationships of the central heroine and other women in the story, allowing new questions to be asked and creating a new space for feminist analysis. *Snow White and the Huntsman* examines the relationships between Ravenna and her stepdaughter Snow White. *Maleficent* explores the 'Sleeping Beauty' fairy tale through the relationship of the wicked fairy Maleficent and the child she curses, Aurora. Oyeyemi's novels *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014) and *White Is for Witching* (2009) tell the stories from the point of view of mothers, stepmothers, daughters and step-daughters, daughters-in-law and lovers. *White Is for Witching* also looks back at the matriarchal lineage and its expression in the relationship between the two central protagonists. Hardwicke's *Red Riding Hood* gives depth to the relationship between the heroine (Valerie) and her grandmother and also explores the tension between Valerie and her mother. The Ever After High franchise tells the story of daughters of fairy tale characters as they grapple with their fairy tale inheritance.

In his book *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales* (2002), Zipes argues that fairy tales are not timeless and universal, but rather products of the society in which they were created and told. He states, '[originally] the folk tale was (and still is) an oral narrative form cultivated by non-literate and literate people to express the manner in which they perceive nature and their social order and their wish to satisfy their needs and wants.'³⁰ Writing predominantly about Disney and the plethora of fairy tale merchandise

³⁰ Zipes, Jack, *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales*, Rev. and expanded ed (University Press of Kentucky, 2002), p. 7.

available, Zipes argues that while 'it would be an exaggeration to argue that the culture industry in the Western world has total control over cultural production and reception [...] it has grown in power and has a vast influence on the consciousness of consumers through the ideology carried by its products' (2002). Due to the global reach of neoliberal capitalism, the franchise is a very profitable format for the retelling of fairy tales. All of my chosen texts, with the exception of Oyeyemi's novels, are franchises or connected to a franchise in some way. As a result, the texts vary across a range of media, film, literary, animation, toys and websites.

The advantages of using different forms of media is that it gives a deeper understanding of the ideology being presented in the text, as Zipes says 'it is only within the context of the culture industry that we can learn something about the history of the folk and fairy tales' (2002: 4). Including paratexts such as popular media news stories and advertising in my reading provides contexts to the feminist analysis I make, just as analysis of the Brothers Grimm fairy tales tells the reader about nationalism and the family unit. For example, in my Ever After High chapter I discuss Wohlwend's work on dolls and identity formation which is important to consider in light of Mattel's claim of dolls 'empowering' children. In the same chapter I examine commodity activism which is also touched on in relation to star text in my *Maleficent* chapter; this feels like a natural continuation of Zipes' work as he outlines in the preface of *Breaking the Magic Spell*: 'I still maintain that literature and art cannot be fully understood without considering the socio-political-cultural context in which they are produced' (2002: ix).

My first chapter continues the story of Kristen Stewart as Snow White in *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012), a film that piggybacked on the popularity of Stewart's *Twilight* fame and marketed the character of Snow White as a kind of Joan of Arc in shining silver armour. In its promotional framing of Stewart's Snow White as a warrior heroine, the film signals a desire to reframe the old narrative of passive femininity. Yet, despite these promises, the film ultimately reasserts the very structures it seems poised to dismantle. I compare and contrast the characters of Snow White and Ravenna, arguing that they mirror one another: both are of 'fairest blood,' and their beauty and power are intrinsically linked. Snow White is presented as a child of nature, capable of communicating with and healing the world around her, whereas Ravenna embodies the monstrous-feminine, consuming the life force of those around her and her environment. The film's battles are not truly women's battles, and the narrative ultimately rewards a familiar kind of passive femininity dressed up in armour. Readings that cast Ravenna as a 'vigilante feminist' reveal the film's flirtation with action-heroine empowerment, yet these moments are fleeting. A strong undercurrent of violence against women, particularly sexual violence or the threat of it, remains unacknowledged and unresolved. The lack of recognition of these issues, combined with the treatment of aging women, suggests that physical action alone does not confer real power or agency.

It is through the contributions of costume designer Colleen Atwood and actor Charlize Theron that the film's potential for feminist subversion emerges. As the only senior female creative on the production, Atwood stages a visual narrative in almost direct opposition to the textual one: Ravenna's wardrobe employs textures of decay, animalistic symbolism, and a deliberate refusal of conventional feminine beauty, producing a silent revolt that both

complements and complicates her monstrous-feminine characterization. Theron brings a star text shaped by her role in *Monster* (2003), her work with the UN to combat violence against women, and her personal experiences as a survivor of domestic abuse. Through the interplay of performance and costume, Ravenna's body becomes a locus of abjection and resistance, a figure whose visual and embodied storytelling often conveys more political potency than the screenplay itself. By examining costume, performance, and star text alongside narrative, this chapter argues that Ravenna emerges as the site of the film's most sustained feminist critique, even as the text repeatedly resists fully endorsing it.

Chapter 2 examines Disney's *Maleficent* (2014), a film that blends the feminist ideology of screenwriter Linda Woolverton with the star text and activist persona of Angelina Jolie to create a redemptive origin story for one of Disney's most iconic villains. By reimagining Charles Perrault's classic tale of *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Maleficent* offers a bold feminist retelling that challenges traditional patriarchal narratives while addressing issues of sexual violence, trauma, and systemic oppression in ways unprecedented for Disney fairy tales. Critics have noted that the film is 'deepened by the meta-narrative of [Jolie's] own life,' referencing her evolution from a 'wild child' to adoptive mother and her ongoing work as UN Special Envoy to end sexual violence in conflict. By linking Jolie's public persona with *Maleficent's* cinematic story, the film amplifies its social critique, creating a dialogue between celebrity activism and narrative representation and underscoring the ways in which media can reflect and influence real-world concerns.

In contrast to *Snow White and the Huntsman*, Woolverton's screenplay demonstrates how contemporary feminist storytelling in popular culture can operate as a medium for social

commentary and change. Woolverton manipulates familiar fairy tale motifs to construct new meanings and forms of female agency, situating Maleficent within Barbara Creed's framework of Feminist New Wave Cinema. Maleficent embodies the 'monstrous-feminine', a figure who blurs the boundaries between human and monstrous, and her journey reflects Creed's notion of abjection: she confronts the horrors of the patriarchal system, including betrayal, violation, and the silencing of female power, and emerges as a figure of revolt against its corruption. The film's depiction of sexual violence as a tool of patriarchal control resonates with Jolie's activism, creating a metatextual link between Maleficent's struggle and real-world campaigns to end sexual violence in conflict zones. This alignment reinforces the film's message that confronting trauma and systemic injustice can be both empowering and transformative.

The narrative also foregrounds Maleficent's relationship with Aurora, the 'Sleeping Beauty', whose emergence as storyteller of her own life further destabilises the traditional patriarchal lineage of the fairy tale. Together, Maleficent and Aurora reclaim narrative authority, offering a dual model of resistance and empowerment. By rewriting their stories, the film challenges conventional depictions of femininity and delivers a transformative feminist message: resilience, defiance, and the reclamation of agency within a system designed to marginalize women. Ultimately, *Maleficent* exemplifies how feminist authorship, star text, and narrative reinvention converge to produce a cinematic experience that is socially conscious, culturally resonant, and unflinching in its engagement with sexual violence as a vehicle for critique and change.

Chapter three takes Creed's theory of the monstrous-feminine and applies it to three novels by British-Nigerian author Helen Oyeyemi: *White Is for Witching* (2010), *Mr Fox* (2011), and *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014). Hailed by the likes of Marina Warner and Kelly Link as an heir to Angela Carter, Oyeyemi interweaves new and old, western fairy-tale tradition and Yoruba folklore, creating stories that feel both familiar and uncanny. In these three novels, it is 'Snow White', 'Bluebeard', and attendant issues of whiteness, motherhood, beauty, and violence that Oyeyemi reshapes into entirely new narratives. While the first two chapters examined filmic examples of the monstrous-feminine without drawing directly on Carter's influence, turning to Oyeyemi allows me to situate the thesis more firmly within the 'conversation' Carter helped to establish, particularly the ways literary texts continue to influence popular culture fairy tale retellings. In this sense, Oyeyemi's work acts as a kind of 'bridge' within the thesis, connecting the film-focused analysis of the first two chapters, where Carter's legacy is present but not explicitly foregrounded, with the intertextual explorations of the final two chapters, where that inheritance is more directly traced in film and material culture.

Oyeyemi's work is primarily concerned with exploring the lived realities of racism and violence against women, and in that respect, many of her characters undergo journeys into the dark night of abjection, just as Creed describes. All three novels resist redemptive or cathartic endings, and the acknowledgment of intergenerational bonds among women is often fraught or ambivalent. For example, in *White Is for Witching*, Miri's recognition of the danger posed by her racist female ancestors to her black lover, Ore, grants her the agency to act decisively in defence of Ore. Miri's desire to consume Ore's heart aligns her with the Wicked Queen of *Snow White*, yet her cannibalistic impulses are also entwined with sexual

desire. Building on Sarah Ilott's work, I argue that the taboo of cannibalism is subverted in the novel: Miri's transgressive desire signals a shared humanity that the overtly racist Britain of the story refuses to acknowledge.

In *Boy, Snow, Bird*, Oyeyemi has faced criticism for her depiction of Frank, Boy's abusive father, who is revealed to be her birth mother, conceived through rape. While these critiques of transphobia warrant attention, I argue against a wholly paranoid reading of the novel, which risks silencing broader conversations about race, gender, and violence in the text. Drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's essay 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', I advocate for a reparative approach that remains open to mistakes while attending to hope, the very hope that suffuses the conclusion of *Boy, Snow, Bird*.

Helen Oyeyemi's fairy-tale retellings radically unsettle familiar villain/victim binaries, probing gender, intergenerational trauma, and the cultural construction of monstrosity. I bring Clare Hemmings's theory of progress, loss, and return in feminist storytelling into dialogue with Creed's theory of the monstrous-feminine to illuminate how Oyeyemi mobilizes monstrosity as a mode of feminist resistance. Hemmings argues that 'stories matter' not merely because they describe feminist histories, but because they 'shape the conditions of possibility' for feminist knowledge and politics. By extending Creed's film-focused framework into literary analysis, I show how Oyeyemi uses monstrous-feminine figures to disrupt patriarchal symbolic orders, fracture narrative closure, and unsettle the 'shared affective state' of feminist storytelling. Whereas feminist stories are often structured around progress, loss, and return, Oyeyemi's refusal to offer neat resolutions

foregrounds stories of discomfort and contradiction, ensuring that the voices and experiences marginalized within dominant narratives are made visible.

Chapter 4 situates Catherine Hardwicke's 2011 film *Red Riding Hood* within the tradition of feminist retellings of the tale Jack Zipes has called 'the most widespread and notorious fairy tale in the Western world'.³¹ The notoriety of the tale arises from the rape and violence at the core of the story and the way Little Red Riding Hood is blamed for her attack due to 'straying from the path'. Hardwicke, like Woolverton, is a self-proclaimed feminist with a well-documented history of giving voice to young female actors. I argue that Hardwicke's work also fits Creed's definition of Feminist New Wave film. After being fired from the *Twilight* franchise, Hardwicke called *Red Riding Hood* her 'wolf movie' in reference to the wolves that would appear in the *Twilight* sequel, *New Moon*. Hardwicke's retelling makes Valerie, her Red Riding Hood, the daughter of the wolf, with the potential to become the most powerful wolf if she submits to a bite. Heavily influenced by Carter's short story 'The Company of Wolves' (1979) in which Red Riding Hood willingly gets into bed with the wolf, the film also fits with the popular 'Supernatural Romance' genre in which a young woman falls in love with a supernatural creature, traditionally considered monstrous, such as the vampire or werewolf. Athena Bellas has argued that the positioning of Valerie as the predator presents alternative paths of girlhood that disrupt the patriarchal narrative of the fairy tale and I build on this to include generational 'Red Riding Hoods' that are contained in the story: Valerie's grandmother and mother who also went to bed with the wolf. I argue that Valerie's agency comes from her refusal to submit to the patriarchal bite of the

³¹ Jack Zipes, *The Trials & Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, (Routledge, 1993), p. 8.

werewolf, despite the power it offers her, and through embracing the inheritance of her grandmother instead, subverts the violent patriarchal inheritance of the story.

Chapter 5 examines Mattel's Ever After High franchise (2013–2017), a transmedia universe that reimagines the world of Western fairy tales through the daughters of well-known fairy tale characters. The franchise combines fashion dolls, animated webisodes, a Netflix cartoon series, and novels by the celebrated children's author Shannon Hale, creating a richly layered media ecosystem in which narrative and materiality intersect. Beyond the dolls themselves, the franchise extends into an interactive digital world featuring character blogs, online games, and quizzes, allowing fans to explore character relationships, make choices, and engage with storylines on multiple levels. In its promotional materials, Mattel frames 'Ever After High' as empowering for girls, emphasising the ability to define their own paths, make independent decisions, and, in essence, create their own destinies. Yet the underlying narrative structure is built around tension and conflict: daughters are positioned in opposition to their mothers, and characters are categorised into 'Royals', who embrace their mothers' legacies, or 'Rebels', who reject them. While this binary ostensibly foregrounds personal choice and empowerment, it simultaneously reproduces conventional fairy tale tropes of generational inheritance and normative expectations, revealing the contradictions inherent in packaging empowerment within a commercialised narrative. The franchise's engagement with fan culture is particularly significant. Drawing on Henry Jenkins' work *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, fans of Ever After High do not simply consume mass-produced media passively; rather, they interact with it on deeply personal and creative levels. Through fan fiction, social media storytelling, fan videos, and imaginative play with dolls, audiences produce their own cultural artefacts that

extend and transform the original narratives. Fans explore queer storylines, for example, by depicting dolls holding hands, kissing, or enacting noncanonical relationships, thereby participating in a process of narrative co-creation. In this sense, the dolls serve as tools through which fans can experiment with identity, agency, and relationality.

Informed by Barbara Creed's theory of the monstrous-feminine, the chapter examines how the dolls' hyper-feminised, partially nonhuman designs destabilise patriarchal symbolic structures. In conjunction with Jack Halberstam's concept of low theory from *The Queer Art of Failure*, this approach positions fashion dolls, children's animation, and ostensibly trivial media as sites rich with cultural and critical significance. Halberstam's framework celebrates the seemingly insignificant as productive disruptions to dominant structures of knowledge, allowing for the serious study of fantasy, play, and queer reinterpretation in media typically dismissed as frivolous. Applying this methodology to dolls enables a nuanced exploration of how girlhood is imagined, performed, and occasionally subverted through both narrative and material forms. Robin Bernstein's concept of dolls as 'scriptive things', objects that structure engagement and encourage particular performances, further informs this analysis.

While this chapter does not focus extensively on the dynamics of child play, it emphasises the stories communicated through the dolls themselves. Stella Bruzzi's theory of costume as an expressive, meaning-making system is particularly useful in this context, as the dolls' clothing and styling not only signal familiar fairy tale archetypes but also generate additional layers of meaning. This layering often positions Ever After High in relation to the Disney princess franchise, simultaneously referencing, critiquing, and expanding upon established visual and narrative grammars. By framing dolls as both material and narrative actors, this

chapter argues that Ever After High exemplifies how commercial, mass-produced media can function as a space for feminist and queer potential. The franchise invites girls not only to consume prewritten stories but to become co-authors of them, transforming dolls into instruments of participatory storytelling.

'I will become your weapon': Rape Revolt Narratives in *Snow White and the Huntsman*

At first glance, *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012) appears to join the wave of early 2010s feminist fairy tale revisions, following closely on the heels of *Red Riding Hood* (2011) and preceding *Maleficent* (2014). With its dark aesthetic, its casting of Charlize Theron as wicked queen Ravenna, and its promotional framing of Kristen Stewart's Snow White as a warrior heroine, the film signals a desire to reframe the old narrative of passive femininity. And yet, despite these promises, the film ultimately reasserts the very structures it seems poised to dismantle. The battles fought are not women's battles, and the narrative rewards a familiar kind of passive femininity dressed up in armour. Central to the film's characterisation of both women and to its broader engagement with the monstrous-feminine, is the figure of the mother. The film is threaded through with a recurring motif of maternal blood magic that structurally connects Ravenna and Snow White long before their conflict begins. That Ravenna subsequently becomes Snow White's stepmother deepens this genealogy further, she is not only Snow White's antagonist but her dark maternal double.

Readings that cast Ravenna as a 'vigilante feminist' reveal its flirtation with action-heroine empowerment, a problem I return to later in the chapter. This chapter argues that the most politically potent readings of *Snow White and the Huntsman* arise not from its male-authored screenplay or studio-driven revisionism, but from the contributions of two women: costume designer Colleen Atwood and actor Charlize Theron. As the only senior female creative on the production, Atwood creates a visual narrative that operates almost

in defiance of the film's textual one. Through textures of decay, animalistic symbolism, and a deliberate refusal of conventional feminine beauty, Ravenna's wardrobe stages a silent revolt. At times, narrative and costume converge, creating fleeting moments where the film briefly sustains the feminist disruption it otherwise resists. Theron brings with her a star text shaped by *Monster* (2003), her work with the UN on eliminating violence against women, and her own personal experience as a survivor of domestic violence. This chapter draws on feminist film theory, particularly Barbara Creed's concept of the monstrous-feminine in revolt and Stella Bruzzi's theory of costume as creating narrative discourse, to interrogate the film's contradictory use of multiple feminisms. It argues that through the interplay of costume and performance, Ravenna emerges as a figure of nonhuman, abject resistance, an embodiment of the monstrous-feminine, whose costumed body sustains the feminist critique that the film's narrative fails to fully realise.

Vigilante Feminism

Laura Mattoon D'Amore has described Ravenna as a 'vigilante feminist', a figure who undertakes her own protection and that of others in response to systemic failure to safeguard women.³² In her article 'Vigilante Feminism: Revising Trauma, Abduction, and Assault in American Fairy-Tale Revisions' (2017), D'Amore critiques American fairy tale film revisions in light of the historical moment in which they were created: young women have grown up 'assuming the rights won by feminists before them' but with the acute knowledge

³² Laura Mattoon D'Amore, 'Vigilante Feminism: Revising Trauma, Abduction, and Assault in American Fairy-Tale Revisions', *Marvels & Tales*, 31.2 (2017), pp. 386-405, (p. 387).

that rape culture is a 'pervasive threat that is inscribed on the bodies of girls and women who are under constant attack by social and political forces that desire to possess them and contain them' (2017: 387). D'Amore theorises the term 'vigilante feminism' to describe the reaction to this moment as portrayed in three fairy tale retellings, one of the case studies being the character of Ravenna in *Snow White and the Huntsman*. Vigilante feminism, as D'Amore frames it, channels the fantasy of retribution into female characters who take justice into their own hands when institutions fail. This mode has obvious parallels with broader cultural discourses of vigilante justice, such as superhero narratives or revenge films, but what marks it as feminist is its location in women's experiences of gendered violence.

D'Amore describes Ravenna as 'violent and cruel' and argues she 'reinscribes patriarchy' through her quest for power following her abduction and assault as a young girl:

In that way, it is possible to read her as a vigilante feminist because she uses the tools of the patriarchy to protect herself and her brother and, [...] thus believing in her own mind and through her own definition, that she is saving womankind (2017: 387).

While this reading usefully situates Ravenna's rage within a history of gendered violence, I argue it ultimately mischaracterises her position. Ravenna is not protecting women; she preys upon them, and there is no evidence in the film that Ravenna believes she is saving womankind from the violence of men. Her violence may emerge from a history of violation, but its perpetuation cannot be recuperated as feminist action and I would argue that it is

contradictory to describe anything that 'reinscribes patriarchy' as feminist. The film itself provides striking examples of how Ravenna's power operates against women rather than for them, such as her ritual of draining the youth and beauty of young women to sustain her own body.

As D'Amore herself acknowledges, vigilante feminism 'does not dismantle patriarchy but rather uses patriarchal means to undergird its own takeover' (2017: 390). Ravenna exemplifies this impasse: she wields patriarchal violence for her own ends, but this does not liberate women collectively; on the contrary, her reign generates further violence against them. D'Amore does acknowledge the feminist concerns with vigilante feminism and even cites Audre Lorde's argument that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house', however she argues that it acts as a corrective to women and girls' feelings of powerlessness (2017: 391). D'Amore maintains that while vigilante feminism may not be 'perfectly feminist' it should not be categorised as 'antifeminist' (2017: 392). This idea of 'difficult' feminist voices being silenced is something I return to, particularly in chapter 3, in line with Clare Hemmings's theory of progress, loss and return in feminist storytelling. However, I do not believe that D'Amore successfully overcomes any of the criticisms of vigilante feminism that she cites and I argue that *Snow White and the Huntsman* demonstrates the danger of endorsing this type of feminist portrayal. My second chapter on *Maleficent* also shows how such actions ultimately hurt the individual as well as those surrounding her collectively.

It is interesting that D'Amore uses Ravenna as the case study for her theory of 'vigilante feminism' when Snow White is probably a better fit. Snow White's actions align far more closely with the notion of vigilante feminism, albeit in a more restrained and morally legible form. As I discuss later, Snow White is shown resisting Finn, who is strongly implied to be a sexual predator, and she further takes on a protective role when she encounters the scarred women living in hiding from Ravenna. These moments place her within a recognisable cultural trope of women resisting predatory men, while also positioning her as a symbolic avenger for the unnamed women harmed by Finn. Her journey to the women in hiding likewise foregrounds her as a protector who acknowledges the collective damage inflicted by Ravenna's violence. These elements situate the character within the wider 'warrior-girl' cycle of the early 2010s, in which young heroines fought for survival and justice. As Jeffrey Brown argues in *Beyond Bombshells: The New Action Heroine in Popular Culture* (2015), this period was dominated by action-heroines in young adult cinema and literature, including *The Hunger Games* (2012), *Divergent* (2014), *Hanna* (2011), *Sucker Punch* (2011) and animated equivalents like Disney's *Brave* (2012).³³ *Snow White and the Huntsman* can be identified as part of this cycle, positioning Stewart's Snow White as the heroine, rather than Theron's Ravenna, as its heroine. Yet the film misses the opportunity to revise or complicate Ravenna's role, unlike *Maleficent* (2014), which, through the screenplay of Linda Woolverton, reimagines the villainess as its central figure and draws explicitly on Angelina Jolie's star text, as discussed in the following chapter. Both Theron and Jolie were of a similar age at the time the films were made, both had comparable careers as action heroines, and both were publicly engaged with humanitarian work around violence against

³³ Jeffrey A. Brown, *Beyond Bombshells: The New Action Heroine in Popular Culture* (University Press of Mississippi, 2015), p. 11.

women. What distinguishes *Maleficent* is its coherent feminist intention, it recognises the cultural weight of Jolie's persona and uses it to amplify the character's feminist potential. In contrast, *Snow White and the Huntsman* retreats into more conventional patterns.

Producer Joe Roth explicitly positioned the film within the 'warrior-girl' trend, citing *Alice in Wonderland* (2010) as a model and envisioning *Snow White and the Huntsman* as the first instalment of a trilogy:

We retain the basic story in the same way we retain the basic story of Alice, a young girl meant to be the queen who is cast out. [...] Snow White starts out not a damsel in distress, but innocent, and after 11 years of imprisonment by the Evil Queen, she escapes and learns the ways of a warrior in the woods.³⁴

Roth's language, 'we retain the same basic story', reveals how interchangeable he considers these narratives to be. For him, Snow White and Alice face essentially the same struggles, and their 'empowerment' derives from the same surface transformation into warriors. These ambitions to tell a familiar, recognisable tale sat uneasily alongside the creative visions of writers, directors and designers involved in the production of the trilogy, who sought to carve out something more narratively or aesthetically distinctive. This conflict between formulaic empowerment and creative ambition underlines how the demands of

³⁴ *Snow White and the Huntsman Being Conceived As a Trilogy*, Movies.ie, (5 July 2011) <<https://www.movies.ie/snow-white-and-the-huntsman-being-conceived-as-a-trilogy/>> [accessed 31 August 2025].

production and franchise-building can complicate and ultimately undermine, the feminist possibilities of these films.

The tension produced by these competing pressures is most visible in the figure of Ravenna, who embodies the contradictions of a film caught between market-driven demands for an action-heroine and the creative team's desire for a complex villain. While the reading of Ravenna as a vigilante feminist collapses under narrative scrutiny, we can see why D'Amore might have attempted such an interpretation. The impulse to cast Ravenna as an avenging feminist heroine is encouraged, since she is explicitly scripted as a survivor of sexual assault, a trauma that provides the motivation for her subsequent murders of kings. But while Ravenna's actions within the story cannot convincingly be called feminist, the spectacle of her body and attire opens another interpretive space, one in which costume and performance articulate a challenge to patriarchal ideals of femininity more forcefully than the script allows. In the end, the limits of vigilante feminism push us towards Ravenna's monstrous-feminine costuming, which stages the film's most sustained feminist challenge.

Costume as Counter-Narrative

Ravenna's costuming, designed by Colleen Atwood, serves as the primary vehicle through which her monstrosity and feminist revolt are articulated. While the film ultimately reasserts conservative structures of femininity through the triumphant ascension of Snow White to the throne, Ravenna's costumed body offers a counter-discourse. Through a convergence of costume theory and feminist film theory, this section establishes the

analytical lens for reading Ravenna's visual construction as both monstrous and nonhuman. In *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine: Feminist New Wave Cinema* (2022), Barbara Creed reconceives her earlier formulation of the monstrous-feminine (1993) to account for the new aesthetic and political terrain of twenty-first-century feminist horror. Central to this reframing is the concept of monstrosity as revolt. No longer merely a figure through which male-directed horror films process anxieties about female sexuality and reproduction, the monstrous-feminine in contemporary feminist cinema becomes a subject in her own right: a protagonist who engages with the abject, not as an object of horror, but as a site of transformation, revolt and agency. Creed writes that 'the monstrous-feminine as nonhuman in horror offers an actual and metaphoric construct with which to reimagine the past and explore the future through her turn to radical abjection'.³⁵ As I explained in my thesis introduction, Creed draws heavily on Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, particularly as articulated in *Powers of Horror* (1982). Abjection, for Kristeva, involves 'what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4).³⁶ The monstrous-feminine, especially in her nonhuman forms – vampire, siren, witch, alien, hybrid – inhabits these borderlands, and in doing so, exposes the fragility of the symbolic laws that seek to contain her. In Creed's revised model, the monstrous-feminine is frequently aligned with the nonhuman, which functions both as a means of disrupting anthropocentric structures of power, as Creed notes, 'Her monstrosity is a force for change' (2022: 3).

³⁵ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* Second edition (Routledge, 2024), p. 199.

³⁶ Barbara Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine: Feminist New Wave Cinema* (Routledge, 2022), p. 9.

This view of the monstrous-feminine as a transformative agent is particularly relevant to the depiction of Ravenna as a female figure who undergoes a journey into abjection and whose revolt is both psychic and symbolic. These dynamics, I argue, are most powerfully communicated through costume, which operates not just as character adornment, but as narrative and ideological discourse. It is here that Stella Bruzzi's theory of costume offers a vital conceptual bridge. In *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies*, Bruzzi argues that clothing is not secondary to narrative but, contrary to the 'bridesmaid status' afforded it, costume can 'impose rather than absorb meaning'.³⁷ Bruzzi insists on the disruptive potential of costume, its ability to interrupt narrative flow and challenge character coherence. This disruption is particularly evident, Bruzzi suggests, in costumes that operate as 'spectacular interventions', as in her discussion of the drag queen in *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), or the hit man's white gloves in *Le Samourai* (1967) (1997: xv). In these instances, costume becomes an active participant in the scene, 'imposing itself onto the character it adorns' and functioning as a 'radical narrative interjection' (1997: xv). Bringing Creed and Bruzzi into dialogue reveals the extent to which costume can articulate monstrosity, not just by signalling deviation from norms, but by visually embodying the abject. If the monstrous-feminine, in Creed's model, occupies a space of 'in-between-ness' and nonhuman hybridity, then Bruzzi's framework allows us to see how that hybridity is made legible on screen through materials, textures, and silhouette. In the case of Ravenna, the synergy between Creed and Bruzzi is particularly fruitful. Ravenna's costuming, with its sculptural, reptilian, feathered and sometimes insectile

³⁷ Stella Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies* (Routledge, 1997), p. xiv.

qualities, becomes the medium through which the monstrous-feminine externalises her revolt. As I will show in the later close readings, these costumes stage Ravenna's nonhuman identity: they align her with animality, death and decay as well as blurring the boundaries between clothing and body. They are, in Bruzzi's terms, 'spectacular interventions' that resonate with Creed's model of the monstrous-feminine as a liminal subject who, by embracing abjection, enacts a powerful critique of the symbolic order. To frame Ravenna as the monstrous-feminine in revolt, one must attend not only to her narrative arc, but to the materiality of her representation, the way her costumed body stages a confrontation with the structures that have sought to define and constrain her. Bruzzi and Creed together make this reading possible: Creed by theorising the monstrous-feminine as an agent of abject revolt, and Bruzzi by demonstrating how costume becomes a vehicle for such ideological resistance.

Charlize Theron's Star Text

If Atwood's costume design makes Ravenna visually monstrous, and Creed's and Bruzzi's frameworks explain how monstrosity and costume articulate feminist revolt, then Charlize Theron's star text further amplifies these meanings beyond the bounds of the film itself. Her casting brings with it an archive of roles and real-life narratives that complicate the character's reception and invite deeper political readings. Just as costume can tell a story untold in dialogue, so too can performance and persona, particularly when the actor is already associated with figures of female rage, trauma and transformation. Theron is an actor with a history of portraying complex women in films including *Monster* (2003), *North Country* (2005) and *Young Adult* (2011). *Snow White and the Huntsman* sits awkwardly

within this trajectory, as a film that gestures towards feminist content through casting and costume but ultimately fails to provide the narrative infrastructure to support it.

Theron's capacity to unsettle mainstream narratives is evident in her Oscar-winning portrayal of Aileen Wuornos in *Monster*. Written and directed by Patty Jenkins, who said she wanted to use the film to 'find that space in between the man-hating lesbian serial killer and the feminist hero', there are clear parallels between Ravenna and Wuornos.³⁸ Angela Cavanagh's reading of *Monster* through the lens of abject whiteness is particularly instructive here. She notes the media's fixation on Theron's physical transformation from 'beauty queen' to 'white trash killer', describing a kind of racialised, classed descent:

The film reviews are often accompanied by three sequentially presented photos of the real-life Aileen Wuornos, of the miraculously transformed Charlize Theron into a virtual likeness of Wuornos, and, thirdly, of the so-called real Charlize Theron appearing as a Hollywood model and beauty queen. These images document a gender transition from the domain of the beautiful into the domain of the monstrous-feminine (Creed, 1993). Because the transition occurs within the domain of the feminine (virgin to whore), and in the domain of whiteness—from virginal and angelic white feminine beauty, into the realm of the white trashy street-bound whore—it is a racially specific gender transition.³⁹

³⁸ Monica Michlin, 'Monster: Ambiguous Depiction of the Female Killer' *Cycnos*, 2006-11-09. <<https://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/publication/item/622>> [accessed 5 December 2024], p. 3.

³⁹ Sheila L. Cavanagh,, "'White Trash:": Abject Skin in Film Reviews of *Monster*', in Cavanagh, Sheila L., Angela Failler, and Rachel Alpha Johnston Hurst, eds., *Skin, Culture and Psychoanalysis* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 240-267, p. 256.

Ravenna's whiteness, or 'fairness', is similarly framed in terms of class in opposition to Snow White as I will examine later in the chapter.

This narrative of embodied trauma becomes even more powerful when contextualised with Theron's real-life experiences. In 1991, at the age of 15, she witnessed her mother shoot and kill her abusive father in self-defence.⁴⁰ Though this history has not defined her public persona, it subtly inflects the kinds of roles Theron has chosen and the emotional register she brings to them. In interviews, Theron has described the emotional and psychological toll of growing up with domestic violence:

I think it's way more complicated than having just one night of trauma in your life. With or without that, gender-based violence is so in your face in South Africa and globally. It's hard to not be aware of these things just purely by being a woman.⁴¹

In 2013, she publicly aligned herself with UN Women, advocating against gender-based violence globally with a particular focus on tackling violence against women in armed conflict and through trafficking.⁴² Theron's star text, then, does more than add depth to Ravenna; it radically destabilises the film's moral binary. These thematic echoes of trauma,

⁴⁰ Tamantha Ryan, 'Charlize Theron Reflects on "trauma" of Mom Fatally Shooting Dad in Self-Defense', *Page Six*, 2 November 2023 <<https://pagesix.com/2023/11/02/entertainment/charlize-theron-reflects-on-trauma-of-mom-fatally-shooting-dad-in-self-defense/>> [accessed 14 June 2025].

⁴¹ Lesley M. M. Blume, 'Charlize Theron and the Power of True Partnership', *Town & Country*, 2 November 2023 <<https://www.townandcountrymag.com/society/money-and-power/a45509269/charlize-theron-philanthropy-interview/>> [accessed 14 June 2025].

⁴² United Nations, 'Charlize Theron', *United Nations* <<https://www.un.org/en/messengers-peace/charlize-theron>> [accessed 14 June 2025].

revolt and embodied resistance are not confined to Theron's star persona; they find concrete, visible expression in her costuming throughout *Snow White and the Huntsman*. In the following close readings, I examine key costume sequences to explore how Atwood's designs construct Ravenna as a nonhuman monstrous-feminine figure whose abjection challenges the symbolic order.

"I Was Ruined by a King Like You": Ravenna's Rape Revolt and the Monstrous-Feminine

Creed's foundational theorisation of the monstrous-feminine provides a crucial framework for reading Ravenna in *Snow White and the Huntsman* as a figure of phallic and castrating power. In *The Monstrous-Feminine* Creed distinguishes between the phallic woman and the castrating woman, noting that the former is often misunderstood as the latter: 'the phallic woman has two forms: the woman either has a phallus or phallic attribute or she has retained the male's phallus inside herself' (2024: 164). Crucially, this is not about literal possession but about symbolic power: the phallic woman disrupts patriarchal structures by occupying the space of masculine agency and authority. The deadly femme fatale of film noir, carrying a gun in her purse, exemplifies the phallic woman. Creed further argues that the fear the phallic woman evokes is not simply tied to castration anxiety but to the threat of violent penetration: 'In representations of the penis as an instrument of violence, it doesn't threaten to castrate but rather to penetrate and split open, explode, tear apart' (2024: 165). This inversion is particularly relevant to Ravenna's first act as queen: the murder of King Magnus. Though she has already mortally wounded him using magic, Ravenna straddles him in the marriage bed and plunges a dagger into his chest, throwing her head back in what appears to be a moment of orgasmic release. The scene reconfigures

the dynamics of power and sexuality in starkly phallic terms: Ravenna becomes the penetrator.

Colleen Atwood's costume design in this scene plays to King Magnus' fantasy of the salvaged virgin, the passive bride rescued from the enemy's clutches. As Bruzzi notes, women in cinema often deploy the trappings of stereotypical femininity not for male pleasure but for their own ends: 'the ambiguity, therefore, no longer rests with the image (whether such a stereotyped femininity can be perceived as feminist) but with the possession of the image' (1997: 127). Ravenna possesses the image of the ideal woman only to dismantle it. Magnus finds Ravenna on the battlefield, chained and barefoot in the back of a prison carriage. This recalls Bruzzi's argument about the men in film noir: 'the gaze of the hapless men [...] is at least in part mocked because they never understand the complexity of what they are looking at' (1997: 127). Magnus is the hapless man who does not understand the complexity of Ravenna, a complexity later realised visually through her costumes. When Ravenna declares, 'I was ruined by a king like you', she repositions herself not as a helpless object of rescue, but as a survivor of sexual violence enacting revenge. Her body in this scene becomes the site of political retribution, echoing Creed's analysis of the rape-revenge cycle, in which female violence is not pathological but responsive, a revolt against patriarchal structures of abuse and domination. Ravenna's dagger, positioned as both weapon and phallus, reclaims the power of penetration. Instead of the traditional bridal loss of virginity we witness a symbolic reversal: the bride penetrates the groom, leaving blood on the wedding bed, not from herself, but from her victim.

This reversal is made even more pointed by the setting and visual composition of the scene. The camera frames Ravenna from below as she mounts the king, positioning her as dominant. Her expression shifts from passive acceptance to cold resolve, and then to ecstatic satisfaction as she delivers the fatal blow. Her long blonde hair, worn loose, and white gown all conform to virginal bridal iconography, but the content of her actions ruptures that frame. D'Amore describes the flowing white sleeves of Ravenna's gown as like angel wings: 'she is the angel of vengeance, taking justice for women who have been hurt by men' (2017: 394). While I disagree with D'Amore's reading of Ravenna's violence as a feminist act, I agree with the intentional positioning of her as an avenging angel in this instance, complicating the feminist messaging of the film. bell hooks identifies moments such as this as potentially 'liberatory images' within visual culture.⁴³ Reflecting on Ravenna's declaration that 'men ruin women', hooks describes the line as 'amazing', even characterising Ravenna as a 'hot Gloria Steinem'! For hooks, the power of such an image lies in the way it conveys the anguish of performing sexual availability for men, while at the same time opening the possibility of imagining femininity otherwise. While talking about the scene as part of a panel discussion on liberating the black female body hooks asks: 'What am I looking like when I am free? What is my eroticism in relation to myself? How do I change my relationship to glamour so that it is about myself?' Atwood's costuming of Ravenna, I argue, begins to answer these questions.

⁴³ bell hooks, 'Are You Still a Slave? Liberating the Black Female Body' | Eugene Lang College, *The New School YouTube Channel*, (2014) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJk0hNRQvzs>> [accessed 25 August 2025].

John Berger describes women as being born 'into the keeping of men', and as a result is split in two, as herself and the image of herself: 'A woman must continually watch herself.'⁴⁴

Men, he argues, 'survey women before treating them. Consequently how a woman appears to a man can determine how she will be treated' (2008: 25). This 'split self' of the 'surveyor' and the 'surveyed' is what hooks identifies as the 'anguish' encapsulated in Ravenna's cry, 'Men ruin women.' Ravenna's manipulation of how she is surveyed, through costume, gestures toward reimagining what freedom from that anguish might look like. Creed argues that the monstrous-feminine is liberating and transformative, the very thing hooks calls for. By aligning Ravenna's body with the nonhuman and the monstrous-feminine, Atwood's costumes create a 'counter-hegemonic' vision of revolt that is powerfully transformative. In this sense, hooks's theorisation of liberatory imagery resonates with Bruzzi's account of costume as 'spectacular intervention' in the narrative that opens the space of resistance.

Ravenna's masquerade as a passive bride fits neatly with Bruzzi's argument about costume as visual strategy offering a disruptive narrative force: the woman is not dressing to please men but to undo them. This disruption is underscored by the absence of any discourse of consent in the scene. King Magnus decides to marry Ravenna within a day of finding her, chained and dirty in the wreckage of battle. His desire for her is immediate and unquestioned, and the camera lingers on her beauty as justification for his actions.

Ravenna's revolt is not just personal but systemic. Her murder of Magnus is not revenge against a specific act of rape but against the entire logic that made such acts inevitable. As she says, 'Men use women, they ruin us, and when they are finished with us they toss us to

⁴⁴ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Penguin, 2008), p. 24.

their dogs like scraps'. Her words evoke a broader cultural reckoning with rape culture and the disposability of women's bodies. Ravenna's murder of Magnus can thus be read as an allegorical act of revolt against the patriarchal symbolic order, within which Creed describes 'the universal and entrenched practices of rape culture' as 'a crucial power structure' (2022: 51).

The consequences of this act are significant. With the king's death, the kingdom begins to decay: skies darken, nature withers, the atmosphere turns cold and lifeless. The Huntsman, as narrator, tells us that 'nature turned on itself'. This ecological collapse can be read symbolically: the unnaturalness of Ravenna's act, from a patriarchal perspective, is so great that it disturbs the order of the landscape. And yet, from a feminist viewpoint, this disturbance is necessary; Ravenna's journey into the dark night of abjection creates rupture. The wedding night scene serves as a pivotal moment in which Ravenna 'disturbs identity, system and order' (2022: 9). This is the monstrous-feminine not as a figure of fear alone, but as an agent of symbolic and political revolt.

The visual grammar of decay resonates in my next chapter on *Maleficent*, though there the trigger for this decay is reversed. In *Snow White and the Huntsman*, the land withers in response to Ravenna's act of vengeance, nature standing in for the symbolic order of the king that has been disrupted by the monstrous-feminine, again confusing the message of the scene: Ravenna as avenging angel against rape culture, or as abject transgressor whose revolt is cast as a violation of 'nature' itself. By contrast, in *Maleficent*, decay unfolds after Maleficent's assault: the land sickens with her, reflecting her violated body and psyche. The two films thus offer strange echoes of one another, staging ecological collapse as the

register through which patriarchal violence and its aftermath become legible, whether through an act of systemic revolt (Ravenna) or a traumatic wounding (Maleficent).

Skin, Blood, and Abjection

Creed's work on the monstrous-feminine is shaped by her engagement with Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, and in *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine* (2022), she builds further on Kristeva's argument that abjection is centrally concerned with the transgression of boundaries. Through the symbolic deployment of milk, blood, and whiteness, *Snow White and the Huntsman* articulates Ravenna's abjection not just thematically but materially.

Angela Cavanagh, drawing on Kristeva, offers a particularly useful frame through her concept of 'monstrous skins', those surfaces that rupture the ideal of the clean, contained, white female body. As she writes, 'monstrous skins excite and unnerve because they do not seem to contain the body, they threaten to tear or burst apart at the seams'.⁴⁵ Skin, in this formulation, is not merely an organic surface but a cultural boundary: a site where femininity is regulated, racialized, and made either visible or invisible. The monstrous skin, then, is that which exposes the instability of identity, particularly as it relates to femininity. Ravenna's body, clothed in scales, feathers and beetle wings, blurs the boundary between woman and animal, costume and skin.

Ravenna's body is the primary site upon which *Snow White and the Huntsman* stages its most visually arresting feminist tensions, and adorned and armoured in nonhuman materials, becomes a visual language of abjection and revolt. Returning to Bruzzi's theory

⁴⁵ Cavanagh, "'White Trash:' Abject Skin in Film Reviews of Monster', p. 251.

that women's clothing can operate as a disruptive filmic discourse, we can read Ravenna's costuming as a deliberate rejection of eroticised femininity. As Bruzzi argues, 'Women, both on and off the screen, have been over-identified with their image', but that over-identification can also become a tool of resistance (1997: 121). Ravenna's visual narrative takes this premise to its limit, using fetishised images of femininity to stage their own destruction. In Bruzzi's analysis, the fetishised image of woman does not serve the male gaze, but rather mocks it. As Creed notes in her analysis of the nonhuman femme fatale, the objectified woman 'de-eroticizes' her image through her journey into the dark night of abjection and her nonhuman transformation (2022: 96). I argue that rather than 'de-eroticising', Ravenna's change of costume from white virginal wedding attire to her animalistic gowns serves to define her eroticism in relation to herself, as argued by hooks: this is what Ravenna looks like when she is free.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Hooks, 'Are You Still a Slave?'



Figure 2 Ravenna emerging from the milk

Early in the film, Ravenna is shown submerged in a milky, opaque fluid, her body emerging white, smooth, and glistening transformed into something statuesque and otherworldly (Figure 2). The image recalls Cavanagh's description of the allure of white skin: 'Smooth, white, un-textured, immaculate and glowing skin strikes us as beautiful because it bears no trace of dirt, excrement, mess, chaos, disorder, blood or human innards' (2013: 260). For Cavanagh, this radiance 'performs a conceptual illusion', presenting the body as 'an inanimate object, untouched by the mundane materiality of everyday life. It is statuesque, strange and immortal (2013: 260). The camera accentuates this effect: shot from a low angle and tilting upward as Ravenna rises, the scene visually enlarges her presence and emphasises her power.

Ravenna's nudity in this scene, however, is not vulnerability but display. As Berger observes:

To be naked is to be oneself.

To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude. [...] Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display.

To be naked is to be without disguise.

[...] The nude is condemned to never to be naked. Nudity is a form of dress (2008: 29).

In this moment Ravenna is emphatically nude, not naked; her body is staged for spectacle, both for the audience and for her brother watching in the scene. She is made visible not as a self, but as an object. What emerges from the liquid is less a woman than a statue of a woman, or queen, monumentalised in whiteness. Yet this immaculate whiteness is not contained. The same milk that coats her skin is shown being channelled through pipes into the castle courtyard, where peasants gather to collect it. What adorned Ravenna's body now circulates through the social body, becoming both nourishing and repulsive. The use of milk connects the scene to Creed's use of the abject as discussed in the thesis introduction, as disturbing 'identity, system, order' and which does not 'respect borders, positions, or rules' and in particular the maternal body as abject (2024: 11). It may be read as Ravenna literally and symbolically feeding her subjects 'mother's milk', a perverse enactment of maternal duty, or as a residue of her ritual purification, an act that contaminates rather than restores the social order. In either case, the milk undermines the illusion of pure, statuesque immateriality with its associations with the abject female body.

Ravenna's skin, made momentarily smooth and perfect in the milk bath, contrasts sharply with her later visual deterioration. As Snow White grows in power, Ravenna's body begins to fail. These signs of decay mark her as abject not only because they signal physical

weakness but because they expose the lie of idealised femininity. Ravenna's body, increasingly unable to maintain this illusion, becomes a site of revulsion, not because it is monstrous in a traditional sense, but because it reminds the viewer of the body's materiality and its mortality. But through Atwood's costumes, Ravenna is not simply decaying, she is transforming, which can be read as a form of revolt. As Catherine Spooner points out when writing about Atwood's costumes in the films of Tim Burton, Atwood is adept at clothing 'strange and unusual' selves that 'refuse containment'.⁴⁷ Ravenna's wedding dress hints at this strange and unusual self even before she murders King Magnus and reveals her true nonhuman form.



Figure 3 Ravenna's wedding dress

⁴⁷ Catherine Spooner, 'Costuming the Outsider in Tim Burton's Cinema, or, Why a Corset Is like a Codfish', in *The Works of Tim Burton: Margins to Mainstream*, ed. by Jeffrey Weinstock (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 47–63, (p. 54).

The bodice of Ravenna's wedding dress (Figure 3), tightly corseted and embroidered, evokes classic bridal aesthetics, positioning Ravenna as a vision of virginal purity and courtly ideal. However, the dress also subverts expectations of bridal vulnerability, Ravenna's décolletage is dramatically exposed, framed by an architectural, almost cage-like collar made of what looks like bones and which juts outward, like an insect with the skeleton on the outside. This collar creates a physical barrier, marking its wearer as untouchable. The way it is raised away from her body is also reminiscent of a skin in the process of being shed. Ravenna is playing the part of the virginal bride but the tightness of the bodice straining across her chest suggests what is underneath is waiting to burst out.

After taking the throne Ravenna's costume begins to look like something else entirely: a nonhuman entity, composed of bird and insect. Another of Ravenna's costumes, her black feathered gown, further exemplifies this collapse of human into animal. In one sequence, Ravenna is attacked by William and the Huntsman, and in response, her body explodes into a shrieking mass of crows. Her form disintegrates violently, the crows throwing themselves onto the floor before recombining into her body clothed in the feather gown. Ravenna drags herself out of the tar-like liquid that has formed as the crows fell to the ground, her body apparently reconstructed from animal parts (Figure 4).



Figure 4 Ravenna's disintegration

In this scene, the costume participates in what Cavanagh describes as the 'monstrous skin' threatening to 'split apart at the seams'. Atwood describes the work involved in the creation of the gowns: it took a milliner two weeks to sew all the black feathers on the gown to prevent it looking like 'a messy feather-duster'.⁴⁸ Another iconic costume is the beetle-shell gown, worn in the latter part of the film. Constructed from overlapping iridescent panels, the dress mimics the carapace of a scarab or stag beetle:

The bodice of [the] dress is covered with hundreds of iridescent black beetle wings, the leftovers from Thai diners, who eat the insects. 'They were very, very difficult to work with because they were really sharp,' said Atwood, adding that each wing had to be drilled through to be attached. 'Everyone had cuts on their hands.'⁴⁹

The wings here do not merely decorate but sheath the body, producing an effect of armour or second skin, the sharpness of the material renders Ravenna simultaneously alluring and

⁴⁸ John Horn, 'In "Snow White and the Huntsman," Evil Queen's Costumes Cast a Spell', *Los Angeles Times*, 20 May 2012 <<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-xpm-2012-may-20-la-ca-snow-white-side-20120520-story.html>> [accessed 11 June 2025].

⁴⁹ Horn, 'In "Snow White and the Huntsman," Evil Queen's Costumes Cast a Spell'

untouchable. This use of 'skins' of the nonhuman in the costuming of Ravenna serves to represent her visually as the nonhuman monstrous-feminine.

Atwood's designs recall those by British fashion designer Alexander McQueen whose designs frequently used animalistic, insectoid and skeletal motifs. The black feather dress (Figure 7) from his *The Horn of Plenty* collection (Autumn Winter 2009-10) in particular is reminiscent of Ravenna's feather gown (Figure 6), especially when combined with the silhouette and high collar of Disney's wicked queen (Figure 5):



Figure 5 Disney's Wicked Queen



Figure 6 Ravenna's feather gown



Figure 7 Alexander McQueen, *Black Duck Feathers*, Autumn/Winter 2009

As Andrew Wilson notes in *Alexander McQueen: Blood Beneath the Skin* (2016), McQueen's designs were profoundly shaped by childhood trauma and his desire both to empower and shield women. Atwood's designs not only recall McQueen's aesthetic strategies but also enter into dialogue with his personal history, clothing Ravenna, the survivor of abuse, in garments inspired by the work of another survivor, thereby layering the costumes with narratives of endurance and transformation. McQueen's garments often functioned as forms of protection, intended to make women appear formidable rather than fragile: 'I want people to be afraid of the women I dress,' he declared.⁵⁰ In this context, McQueen's use of feathers, beetle wings, and reptilian prints can be read as a kind of armour, a second skin that fuses human and nonhuman forms. Wilson describes the women on McQueen's catwalk as transformed 'into an unclassifiable third sex or a mutant hybrid of animal and human', a description that could equally apply to Ravenna's monstrous metamorphoses (2016: 148). In his final collection before his death, *Plato's Atlantis* (Spring/Summer 2010),

⁵⁰ Andrew Wilson, *Alexander McQueen: Blood Beneath the Skin* (Simon & Schuster Limited, 2016), p. 40.

McQueen presented garments patterned after the thorax of a moth or the scales of a snake. These designs suggested not merely clothing as armour, but the 'embedding of protection into the very surface of the body itself'.⁵¹ Like Ravenna's beetle-wing gown, McQueen's creations blur the boundaries between fabric, skin and exoskeleton, producing a monstrous hybrid aesthetic that destabilises the distinction between human and nonhuman.

This idea of 'monstrous skin' finds an echo in Theron's own career, especially her performance as Aileen Wuornos in *Monster* (2003). As Cavanagh argues, media coverage of *Monster* often fixated on Theron's 'white trash' transformation, highlighting the supposed degradation of her beauty. This obsession with skin, literal and metaphorical, haunts both Theron's Wuornos and her Ravenna. In both cases, the character's abjection is coded as a visual and class-based fall: from smooth whiteness to ruptured monstrosity. In *Snow White and the Huntsman*, Ravenna's peasant origins are only briefly glimpsed, but they matter, especially in contrast to Snow White's aristocratic purity. Her transformation from a poor, vulnerable girl into a gilded queen mirrors, and darkly distorts, the traditional fairy tale trajectory. But rather than being rescued from poverty by a prince, she engineers her own ascent through violence and magic. The feathered dresses, the jewel-like beetle armour, all mark her body as adorned and artificial, concealing the trauma of her origins. Ravenna's abjection is a revolt against the symbolic order that defines feminine value through surface, smoothness and beauty.

⁵¹ Bee Wilson, 'Fierce, Feathered and Fragile: How Alexander McQueen Made Fashion an Art', *The Guardian*, 7 March 2015 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/07/fierce-feathered-fragile-alexander-mcqueen-life>> [accessed 22 July 2025].

If, as Cavanagh suggests, 'humane portrayals of monstrosity [...] serve an ethical function' by inviting identification with the abject, then *Snow White and the Huntsman* walks an uneasy line (2013: 159). It gestures toward sympathy for Ravenna, but the narrative ultimately reasserts the very norms she threatens to unravel. The film's conclusion, with Ravenna's death at Snow's hands, gains additional complexity when considered alongside Theron's role as Aileen Wuornos in *Monster*. Cavanagh writes that 'monstrous skins are vilified as psychically invested targets of abuse' explaining that the threat posed by Wuornos as a monster was so great that she had to be 'denied reality' and sent 'to the place of the dead' (2013: 262). Similarly, Hart (1994) argues that pathologizing Wuornos by invoking trauma and post-traumatic stress syndrome serves to obscure the sexual violence perpetrated by middle-aged, middle-class white men against prostitutes. According to Hart, Wuornos's death was necessary because she symbolized what might happen if all women began to defend themselves against male violence.⁵²

This reading parallels Ravenna's defeat in *Snow White and the Huntsman*, where a woman who takes control of her body and power is ultimately destroyed to restore patriarchal order. This contradiction is further amplified when considering D'Amore's observation that Ravenna's death at Snow White's hands can also be read as the symbolic erasure of a female survivor of sexual violence. D'Amore notes that 'Ravenna's broken body symbolizes our fears about rape and about what happens to the souls of women who experience the horrors of sexual violence. When Ravenna dies, she shrivels to nothingness and her story dies with her' (2017: 395). While I disagree with D'Amore's reading of Ravenna as a

⁵² Lynda Hart, *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression*, (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 153.

'vigilante feminist' I agree with her on this point of silencing: 'Snow White does not know about Ravenna's abused childhood story, nor will the world within the film's diegesis' (2017: 395). D'Amore's reading highlights the film's ambivalent approach to feminist revolt. While Creed and Bruzzi allow us to read Ravenna's costumed monstrosity as a site of abjection and ideological resistance, D'Amore's critique reminds us that the narrative ultimately undermines her agency.

Memory, Trauma, and the Disappearance of Costume

The scene that most explicitly evokes sympathy for Ravenna is also one in which costume is used to frame her body, rather than adorn it. As Ravenna recalls her childhood abduction we first see the present-day Ravenna naked and exposed, her spine prominent through her skin, echoing the spinal adornments of some of her costumes, but this is the real thing and it is raw and vulnerable. This stark exposure stands in deliberate tension with the earlier milk bath, where Ravenna's body was staged as a 'nude', here she is naked in Berger's sense of the word, without disguise. What once functioned as an immaculate surface now gives way to a body marked by fragility and abjection. It is in this scene, where Ravenna's body is exposed, that the origin of her trauma and her revolt is revealed, a revolt that Creed identifies as central to the feminist refiguring of the monstrous-feminine.



Figure 8 Ravenna's naked vulnerability

The scene begins in the present, with Ravenna hunched and naked (Figure 8). Her body is now frail, the camera lingers on her back, revealing the protrusion of her spine and the way her body folds into itself. She sits at the centre of a dark room, in a wide shot that emphasises her vulnerability. As the camera comes in close we see that her clothing is pooled around her waist, like a shed skin. Ravenna, stripped of her garments, ceases to conform to any of the visual categories the film has previously imposed on her, she is a vulnerable body. The camera moves from her present form into memory. As she curls into herself, we cut to a close up shot of young Ravenna and her mother, in their hut, panicked and afraid as their village is raided by armoured soldiers. These are presumably the soldiers of the king who 'ruined' Ravenna. Here, the audience is not being invited to fear Ravenna, but to witness the foundation of her monstrosity. This witnessing is not without discomfort, as the viewer is forced to reconcile Ravenna's later violence with this moment of pain. It is an ethical confrontation, one that echoes Cavanagh's argument that 'Humane portrayals of monstrosity or, rather, socially vilified people, serve an ethical function: they invite audiences to identify with a body, or social positioning, normally read as abject, by underscoring the vulnerability of the so-called monstrous subject' (2013: 249).

This sequence also introduces the spell cast by Ravenna's mother, an enchantment that binds Ravenna's beauty to her power. Her mother cuts Ravenna's skin, drawing three drops of blood and lets them fall into a bowl of milk which Ravenna drinks, echoing the scene where Ravenna's body and milk mingle before feeding the people in the castle. Milk thus binds Ravenna's body to both power and abjection. The spell is a moment of protection, but it is also a curse; it teaches Ravenna that her beauty is the source of her power and value. Snow White's mother performs an analogous act at the film's opening, pricking her finger on a rose thorn, she lets three drops of blood fall onto snow and wishes into being a daughter with skin as white as snow and lips as red as blood. Both mothers use blood as a medium of maternal will, one to conjure a child, the other to protect one, and in both cases the act inaugurates a destiny the daughter cannot escape. Yet there is a crucial asymmetry: where Snow White's mother spills her own blood, Ravenna's mother spills Ravenna's, marking her daughter's body as the site of sacrifice.

Here the film is consciously engaging with the maternal connection to the three drops of blood, drawing directly from the opening of the Brothers Grimm fairy tale:

And as she was sewing and looking out the window at the snow, she pricked her finger with a needle, and three drops of blood fell on the snow. The red looked so beautiful on the white snow that she thought to herself, "If only I had a child as white as snow, as red as blood".⁵³

⁵³ Jacob Grimm, Wilhelm Grimm, and Jack Zipes (eds), *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition* (Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 170.

The film begins with a faithful recreation of this scene, but where the Brothers Grimm text moves directly from this wish to Snow White's birth, the film embeds it within a chain of maternal blood magic. It is worth noting what the Brothers Grimm tale encodes in the motif. The needle prick that draws the queen's blood, present also in Perrault's 'The Sleeping Beauty' (1697), is symbolic of the patriarchal order: the virgin's blood spilled on the marriage bed. The film's reworking spreads those three drops of blood across three women acting in relation to one another and in doing so partially reclaims the motif, blood as maternal transmission rather than masculine possession.

This motif of three drops of blood echoes across these two foundational moments and finds its resolution in a third, the moment of Ravenna's death at Snow White's hand when three drops of her blood fall on Snow White's silver armour. The three drops from Ravenna onto Snow's breastplate mark not only Ravenna's defeat but also the completion of a maternal lineage, power passing through blood spilled onto a white surface. Snow White kills Ravenna using a technique taught to her by the Huntsman and she does so without knowledge of the connection between them, without knowing that Ravenna's violence was always a response to an original violation and that Snow's own existence was conjured through the same blood magic that shaped Ravenna. Killing Ravenna does not empower Snow White; it makes her the instrument of a patriarchal resolution that forecloses Ravenna's monstrosity without ever reckoning with its cause. In this sense, Ravenna assumes the maternal role not through choice but through the logic of the symbolic order itself: her blood is shed for Snow White's future, her defeat the condition of Snow White's ascension.

In each case, the spilling of blood is linked to transformation and meaning, but it is only in Ravenna's case that this transformation is tied to violence. Her mother understands the world they live in, and her spell is not a blessing but a desperate intervention in a patriarchal economy that destroys women when they are no longer deemed useful. It reminds the viewer that Ravenna's elaborate costuming, her monstrous transformation, and her violent reign are all responses to the original violence of being taken. As such, her revolt is enacted through her body, and most significantly, through how she clothes it, in the 'clothing' of the nonhuman, the beetle-wing gown and the feathered dress. By exposing Ravenna's body at its most vulnerable, the film also reveals the necessity of the 'spectacular intervention' of costume in her later presentation; she cannot exist in the patriarchal symbolic order as an unadorned woman, such a body is marked for violation. Atwood's costumes align Ravenna not with the mammal, but with the bird, reptile, insect, her costuming acts as her 'revolt against the horror of being human' (2022: 106). Ravenna's costuming 'borrows' the skin of the nonhuman and makes it her own: the armour of the stag beetle gown and the feathers of the crow gown each function as a visual denial of the vulnerability we see in the flashback scene. After being stabbed, Ravenna's body ages rapidly, her face wrinkling and her form almost collapsing in on itself. Creed notes that while the nonhuman monstrous-feminine is 'deliciously powerful', her transformation back into a human woman is 'uncomfortably familiar' and it is this forced return to a vulnerable, ageing female body that reveals Ravenna's monstrosity was never chosen, but necessary (2022: 102).

Rape Culture in Snow White and the Huntsman

Ravenna's framing as the monstrous-feminine in revolt against rape sits in direct contrast to the narrative the film tells about violence against women. Despite the prevalence of rape and violence against women the only character who articulates this reality is Ravenna, yet paradoxically, Ravenna also protects her brother Finn, a known perpetrator of sexual violence. The film presents two competing threads: Ravenna's personal rape revolt and a broader, systemic narrative of sexual violence and gendered oppression. Yet neither is adequately explored or resolved. The film appears to gesture towards female agency and empowerment, primarily through Snow White, but ultimately reasserts traditional patriarchal structures by failing to engage seriously with the trauma it invokes. Rape culture is defined by Rape Crisis UK as:

a culture where sexual violence and abuse is normalised and played down. Where it is accepted, excused, laughed off or not challenged enough by society as a whole.

Rape culture is also a culture where some people are making money, or benefitting in some other way, from this normalisation of sexual violence and abuse.⁵⁴

This definition resonates powerfully with the visual and narrative contradictions of the film where rape and sexual threat are everywhere, yet never directly confronted. Characters allude to the violence women endure, but the film itself remains committed to keeping its heroine symbolically pure and its violence largely off-screen.

⁵⁴ 'What Is Rape Culture?', *Rape Crisis England & Wales* <<https://rapecrisis.org.uk/get-informed/about-sexual-violence/what-is-rape-culture/>> [accessed 12 January 2025].

Finn, Ravenna's brother, is a particularly potent figure through which the film inadvertently reveals the structural nature of sexual violence. He is not merely a villain acting out personal deviancy; rather, he represents what Susan Brownmiller identifies in her ground-breaking work *Against Our Will* (1975) as a historical pattern of male dominance through rape in which women are 'trained to be rape victims' from an early age and that the fear of rape serves to keep men in a position of power, both as potential aggressor, but also as protector of women.⁵⁵ Finn's implied rape and murder of the Huntsman's wife, Sara, is never shown but is described in chilling detail: 'She screamed your name, but you weren't there' he tells the Huntsman, turning the trauma of sexual violence into a taunt designed to emasculate another man. In taunting the Huntsman with the murder of his wife, Finn reiterates rape as systemic male violence, reinforcing his dominance over women.

Brownmiller argues that rape functions to keep all women in a state of subjugation: it is not just an act against individuals, but a warning to all, a warning she traces back to the fairy tales themselves, which she reads as cultural instruments that have long trained women to internalise blame for male aggression. I return to this dimension of Brownmiller's argument in my analysis of *Red Riding Hood* in Chapter 4, where the rape parable at the heart of that tale is interrogated directly. Brownmiller's reading of the fairy tale as a training ground for rape culture may date from 1975, but the structures she identifies have not disappeared.

Writing in 2013, the year after *Snow White and the Huntsman's* release, Laura Bates documents in *Everyday Sexism* that 'thousands of women are 'running a daily gauntlet of

⁵⁵ Susana Onega, and Jean-Michel Ganteau, *Ethics and Trauma in Contemporary British Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), p. 66.

harassment that leaves some ‘terrified to go out or walk home alone at night’, evidence that the fear Brownmiller traced in fairy tales continues to shape women's lived experience.⁵⁶ That *Snow White and the Huntsman* reproduces these structures while appearing to challenge them is precisely what makes it a text of its cultural moment, and what connects it to Theron's own observation, as quoted earlier, that awareness of gendered violence is universal among women.

As I argued earlier *Snow White* is situated firmly within the ‘warrior girl’ cycle that dominated young adult cinema in the early 2010s, resisting predators, rallying others to battle, and embodying a symbolic purity that legitimises her as leader. D’Amore identifies Ravenna as her case study for ‘vigilante feminism’ but *Snow White* arguably fits this model more closely. Her resistance to Finn, who is strongly implied to be a sexual predator, and her protective stance toward the scarred women situate her within a recognisable cultural trope of women avenging or resisting predatory men. In these moments she functions as both survivor and symbolic avenger, a figure who acknowledges the collective damage inflicted by Ravenna’s violence. Yet unlike *Maleficent* (2014), which brings the monstrous mother and daughter into alignment in revolt against rape culture, *Snow White and the Huntsman* consolidates *Snow White* as its heroine while discarding the more radical potential embodied in Ravenna.

⁵⁶ Bates, Laura, *Everyday Sexism*, Paperback edition (Simon & Schuster, 2015), p. 24

A powerful yet underdeveloped sequence makes this tension clear. Snow White and the Huntsman seek refuge in a village populated only by women and girls, their faces scarred to look like tears, to make them undesirable to Ravenna. One woman explains to Snow White 'Our scars protect us. Without beauty, we are worthless.' The scars' function is left ambiguous. If they protect against sexual violence, the film risks reinforcing the myth that rape is driven by desire rather than power. If they are meant to deter Ravenna, it remains unclear what she consumes—beauty or youth. The narrative leans toward youth, as Ravenna's victims are left aged rather than dead, yet youth and beauty are collapsed into one another, reaffirming patriarchal ideologies that equate women's value with consumable bodies. The scarred women, like Ravenna, alter their bodies in response to violence and the village recalls Ravenna's trauma flashback, their huts and simple clothing aligning them with the peasant class. But the film abandons them: when Ravenna's soldiers attack, their fate is never revisited. The potential for collective resistance that they seem to offer is cast aside in favour of an individualist conflict between Snow White and Ravenna as heroine and villain. In abandoning the scarred women, the film also undermines Snow White's positioning within the warrior-girl trope itself, since her symbolic role as protector and avenger is stripped of any sustained engagement with the women she is meant to defend.

Snow White is constructed as the untainted feminine ideal in contrast with Ravenna's monstrous-feminine. The film makes a conspicuous point of her unmolested state. When Finn enters her cell, Snow remarks that he has never come inside before. The audience is meant to read this as a reassurance: she remains uncorrupted, untouched. This distinction is crucial to position Snow as the moral inverse of Ravenna. Both are of 'fairest blood' yet where Ravenna is marked by trauma, Snow is marked by innocence. This dichotomy is

played out in Snow's relationship with the Huntsman. When he rips away her skirt so she can flee more easily, she shies away, and he responds with 'Don't flatter yourself', a line that unconsciously reproduces rape culture's own logic: that assault is driven by desire rather than power, and that only beautiful women need fear it. Once the Huntsman is shown not to be an aggressor he takes on the role of protector, still in a position of power over Snow and her body which he exercises very physically: he rips her dress; forcibly pulls her around while giving her a lesson in self-defence; drags her away from the burning village of the scarred women; and kisses her when she is unconscious.

Kissing Snow without her consent is an uncomfortable motif in *Snow White and the Huntsman* as William (her childhood friend) also kisses her when she is unconscious after taking a bite from the poisoned apple. When the Huntsman kisses her not only is she unconscious, but he is drunk, and crying, and talking about how much she reminds him of his dead wife. Snow's only consensual kiss is with Ravenna while she is disguised as William and it is after this kiss that she takes the apple, which kills her. Like the apple Eve offers to Adam in the Garden of Eden, comparisons can be drawn between Snow White's apple and the forbidden fruit of the Bible as it symbolises sin, knowledge and sexual awakening. It is particularly interesting as a symbol of sexual awakening in the context of this scene as it is being offered to her by another woman, albeit in disguise. The scene mirrors an earlier scene between Snow and William as children when William offers an apple to Snow and as she reaches for it he snatches it away. This time as an adult Snow snatches the fruit from William / Ravenna first. The moment is framed as Snow's one act of flirtatious agency, snatching the apple rather than passively receiving it, but it ends fatally. Female desire, when initiated by women or outside patriarchal sanction, is shown as deadly.

Here the film gestures toward possibilities it refuses to explore. Snow's only consensual kiss is queer-coded, offered by Ravenna; her true 'awakening' comes from the Huntsman, but the scene undercuts the expected fairy-tale closure. He is not the childhood prince, but a drunk, broken man; his kiss is not romantic, but mournful and misdirected. A queer reading flickers at the margins, suggesting other ways of imagining Snow's awakening, but the film forecloses them, choosing instead to reassert male guardianship as the only acceptable resolution. As long as men control her body, Snow is safe; when she asserts autonomy, she dies. After Snow's resurrection by the Huntsman's kiss, she delivers a rousing speech to the gathered army of men, asking them to 'Let me be your weapon'. Although staged as empowerment, armoured, resembling Joan of Arc, her language and position cast her as an object to be wielded by men, not an agent in her own right. Even her call to arms, 'Who will be my brother?', frames action in masculine terms. The warrior-girl imagery is present, but its radical promise is hollowed out.

The Brothers Grimm 'Snow White' contains a further detail that haunts this reading. When the mirror first names Snow White as fairer, the queen (in the 1812 edition Snow White's own biological mother) commands the huntsman to kill her daughter and return with proof: 'bring her lungs and her liver back to me. After that I'll cook them with salt and eat them.' (2014: 171). The maternal body that wished Snow White into existence now wishes to consume her, the cannibalistic impulse is not simply murderous but boundary-dissolving, a horror rooted in the specific terror of maternal incorporation. The film reproduces this logic with striking directness: Ravenna commands that Snow White's heart be cut out and brought to her, intending to consume it and complete her power. Yet where the Brothers

Grimm fairy tale frames this as straightforward villainy, the film's cannibalistic impulse is complicated by everything we now know of Ravenna's history, her consumption of others is itself a response to having been consumed by the patriarchal order, her power contingent on perpetual feeding. The queer-coded kiss between them, now carries an additional charge, desire and consumption held in the same gesture.

Snow White and Ravenna serve as compelling mirrors of one another, both united by their 'fairest blood' and the intertwining of beauty and power. However, Snow White is depicted as a child of nature, embodying innocence and possessing the spiritual ability to heal and nurture the world around her. Conversely, Ravenna is a destructive force, draining the life from both people and environments. Ravenna's backstory as a child abducted and 'ruined by a king' renders her power inseparable from violence. Snow White's body, conversely, is never her own, wielded only when authorised by others. This contrast reveals two modes of feminine power: one vengeful, self-conscious, monstrous; the other sacrificial, innocent, and contained. The film's mirror, a symbol of the patriarchal male gaze represented as a golden cloaked male figure, serves as the voice of patriarchal authority, decreeing who is 'fairest of them all'. But Ravenna herself functions as another potential mirror, one that reflects an alternative form against rape-culture in the form of the monstrous-feminine, but Snow White refuses to see herself in that reflection. In doing so, the film rejects solidarity between women, positioning innocence as the only legitimate form of feminine power.

Conclusion: Dressing Revolt

Marina Warner's incisive question 'Have feminist ideals themselves now become the stuff of fairy tale?', is especially pertinent in evaluating *Snow White and the Huntsman*. The film

acknowledges rape culture and visually stages its effects, through the scarred women, through Ravenna's trauma, through Snow's warrior girl framing, but consistently retreats from their implications. Collective resistance is erased; Ravenna's feminist potential is contained; Snow's agency is framed within male guardianship. Even the fleeting possibility of a queer reading, glimpsed in Snow's only consensual kiss with Ravenna and the unsettling subversion of her awakening by the Huntsman, is foreclosed. By positioning Snow White as the warrior girl but also undermining it at every turn, the film acknowledges rape culture yet refuses to resolve or dismantle it. Instead, it contains the threat within familiar patriarchal structures, leaving the warrior girl hollowed out and the possibility of feminist resistance deferred.

In conclusion, *Snow White and the Huntsman* illustrates the contradictions of early-2010s fairy tale adaptations that claim feminist intent. While the film's narrative gestures toward female empowerment, through Snow White's warrior framing and Ravenna's apparent agency, these gestures are largely superficial, often reinforcing the very patriarchal structures they seem poised to challenge. The most politically potent moments of *Snow White and the Huntsman* emerge from the collaborative contributions of women, Colleen Atwood and Charlize Theron. Atwood's costume design transforms Ravenna into a figure of nonhuman, abject resistance, employing textures, animalistic symbolism, and deliberate subversion of conventional beauty to stage a silent revolt against narrative constraints.

Theron's performance amplifies this subversion, drawing on her star text and personal engagement with gendered violence to imbue Ravenna with layers of agency and menace that the screenplay cannot sustain. By situating Ravenna within the framework of the monstrous-feminine, this chapter has shown that feminist potential in mainstream fairy tale adaptations does not only reside in narrative resolution but also in the embodied and visual traces of revolt. Where *Snow White and the Huntsman* largely erases the possibility of intergenerational female solidarity, Ravenna's costumed body and Theron's performance offer fleeting but potent instances of feminist critique. These moments of abjection, defiance, and visual storytelling pave the way for the more sustained feminist interventions explored in Chapter 2, where *Maleficent* reconceives female power not only through individual revolt but also through relationality, narrative authorship, and the subversion of patriarchal archetypes.

Telling Old Tales Anew: From Monster to Mother in Disney's *Maleficent*

Disney's *Maleficent* (2014) reimagines Charles Perrault's classic tale of 'The Sleeping Beauty' (1697), offering a bold feminist retelling that challenges traditional patriarchal narratives. This chapter situates the film within Barbara Creed's theory of Feminist New Wave Cinema, exploring how the themes of monstrous-feminine and abjection emerge as a form of revolt. Although Creed's framework emphasises the role of directors, I argue that Linda Woolverton, as screenwriter, and Angelina Jolie, through her portrayal of Maleficent, are central to the film's feminist reimagining, shaping it as a narrative that subverts conventional gendered archetypes. Woolverton challenges the superficial approach to female empowerment that merely replicates traditional male hero archetypes, as seen in the previous chapter, underscoring how this reimagining interrogates deeper structures of power. Where the previous chapter traced a chain of biological maternal transmission corrupted by patriarchal violence, *Maleficent* proposes an alternative: chosen maternity as a form of resistance. Crucially, Woolverton positions Maleficent not as the villain of the fairy tale, but its original victim, whose violation rewrites the fairy tale's origin as an act of patriarchal violence.

I begin by exploring how Maleficent embodies Creed's concept of the monstrous-feminine. As a nonhuman figure, Maleficent blurs the boundaries between human and monstrous, exemplifying the abjection inherent in her journey. Her transformation from victim to empowered figure offers a lens through which the film critiques sexual violence as a weapon of war, delivering a powerful social commentary aligned with Jolie's UN work. I then turn to Maleficent's relationship with Aurora, the 'Sleeping Beauty' and Disney

Princess, examining her subtler yet equally compelling revolt. Through her emergence as storyteller and narrator of her own life, Aurora dismantles the patriarchal lineage that has historically defined her role. Ultimately, I argue that *Maleficent* delivers a transformative feminist message, reclaiming the power of the storyteller and positioning both Maleficent and Aurora as agents of revolt. By rewriting their narratives, the film challenges traditional depictions of femininity, presenting a story of resilience, empowerment and defiance against systemic oppression.

‘Journey into the Dark Night of Abjection’: Feminist New Wave Cinema

Barbara Creed’s theory of ‘Feminist New Wave Cinema’, as articulated in her book *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine* (2022), provides a useful critical lens for understanding the feminist subtext of Linda Woolverton’s *Maleficent*. As I explained in the Introduction, Creed builds on the work she began with *The Monstrous Feminine* (first published in 1993) and identifies a new wave of cinema in the early twenty-first century, dominated by female directors who explore diverse genres, from horror and road movies to coming-of-age dramas and social issue films.⁵⁷ These works, centred on female protagonists, highlight their rebellion against male aggression and patriarchal oppression, including misogyny, racism and homophobia. Central to this wave is the concept of the monstrous-feminine, a figure that embodies both terror and subversion, she is a symbol of revolt and empowerment. In this cinematic context, the monstrous-feminine is not merely monstrous in the traditional sense but is also a transformative figure capable of instigating social change.

⁵⁷ Barbara Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine: Feminist New Wave Cinema* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2022), p. 1.

Creed identifies the abject as a key element in the construction of female monstrosity, drawing on the concept of abjection developed by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* (1980), which refers to the process of confronting what is expelled or repressed by society, including aspects of the self that challenge boundaries and order. The abject is simultaneously repellent and fascinating, destabilising the subject by forcing an encounter with the liminal – what exists between categories such as self/other, human/inhuman, or pure/impure. This experience, Creed argues, is central to the narratives of female protagonists in feminist horror and fantasy, where abjection often becomes a catalyst for rebellion and transformation. Creed uses the term ‘monstrous-feminine’ to argue that a female monster is not the same as a male monster, as the female monster is monstrous in a uniquely female way. Female monstrosity is almost always tied to mothering and the reproductive body, which is considered a threat to the patriarchal order and must be controlled. Creed asserts that ‘Woman’s abjection is crucial to the functioning of the patriarchal order’.⁵⁸

The monstrous-feminine disrupts traditional gender roles by embodying both terror and subversion and Creed outlines five ‘faces’ of the monstrous-feminine: the archaic mother; the monstrous womb; the witch; the vampire; and the possessed woman (2024: 9). Creed positions this figure as a symbol of feminist resistance, capable of unsettling patriarchal structures and redefining female subjectivity. Creed’s later work, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine* (2022), explores how twenty-first-century feminist cinema has embraced the monstrous-feminine as a transformative figure: ‘[The monstrous-feminine] is portrayed [...]

⁵⁸ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Second edition (Routledge, 2024), p. 173.

as terrifying yet subversive – feminist viewers often found her empowering [...] her oppositional stance as represented by feminist directors has transformed into one of revolt’ (2022: 2). This revolt is not simply an emotional response to oppression; it is an active, transformative process. The female characters in these films-be they witches, mothers, or monstrous figures-reclaim their autonomy and power, challenging the patriarchal structures that confine them. The monstrosity they embody is not a source of shame, but a radical redefinition of female subjectivity.

I propose this concept of monstrosity as empowerment is reflected in *Maleficent* and although Creed focuses on directors who form part of the canon of the ‘Feminist New Wave’, Woolverton as a screenwriter can also be positioned within this movement. Woolverton transforms *Maleficent* from a two-dimensional villain, into a complex, empowered protagonist in the film. As a ‘monstrous-feminine’ figure, *Maleficent*’s terror is juxtaposed with her ability to defy patriarchal expectations and ultimately reshape her world. Through her monstrosity, she becomes a figure of maternal power, subverting the traditional villain-mother or passive-mother archetypes often seen in fairy tales. This shift mirrors the transformative potential of the monstrous-feminine as described by Creed, where revolt leads to a reimagining of identity and power. As Creed notes, the monstrosity of these characters ‘transformed into one of revolt,’ aligning with feminist aspirations for social change which Woolverton has stated as her aim through her writing. The figures Creed describes are not simply figures of horror but are imbued with the potential to deconstruct and reconstruct societal norms, often in ways that empower marginalised groups, reflecting Jolie and Woolverton’s aim of raising awareness of the effects of rape as a weapon of war with the Feminist New Wave.

While Creed's theory of the monstrous-feminine draws on folkloric figures, she does not specifically tackle fairy tale retellings. *The Monstrous Feminine* focused on portrayals of women in horror films, but the films Creed classes as part of the Feminist New Wave vary in genre. Although they all deal with the horrors of the patriarchal system, they are not all horror films, including, for example, *Promising Young Woman* (2020, dir. Emerald Fennell), *Nomadland* (2020, dir. Chloé Zhao) and *Winter's Bone* (2010, dir. Debra Granik). Creed describes the Feminist New Wave as 'richly inter-generic' with directors creating a 'feminist space – in which to explore the nature of the heroine's revolt' (2022: 6). Creed has also argued that not all heroines of Feminist New Wave Cinema appear monstrous but that the heroine's 'revolt is understated but nonetheless it is just as powerful' (2022: 5). I will go on to argue that while Maleficent more obviously meets the definition of monstrous feminine as the phallic mother, Aurora also revolts by claiming Maleficent as her mother, rejecting the patriarchal inheritance of her father and becoming the narrator of both her own story and that of her adopted mother. Although Creed's work focuses on horror and its exploration of abjection, resistance and female transgression, I propose that the monstrous-feminine and Feminist New Wave Cinema provides a compelling framework for enriching feminist readings of fairy tale films and that applying these concepts to fairy tale adaptations opens new avenues for understanding how these familiar narratives can be reimagined to challenge patriarchal structures and explore female agency. When reinterpreted through Creed's lens, fairy tales reveal opportunities to reclaim their latent feminist power. The monstrous-feminine, as a figure embodying abjection and resistance, aligns with the archetypal portrayals of women in fairy tales, particularly maternal figures who are cast as absent, dead or monstrous. As Jack Zipes suggests, fairy tales have always

carried subversive undercurrents, particularly in their original, darker forms.⁵⁹ These narratives can be reclaimed to challenge the dichotomies of good versus evil and passive versus active, which have traditionally constrained female characters. By applying Creed's insights, feminist readings of fairy tale films can uncover the subversive possibilities inherent in these narratives. In *Maleficent*, the character undergoes a profound transformation, which parallels what Creed terms a 'journey into the dark night of abjection' (2022: 12). This concept, borrowed from Kristeva's theory of abjection, refers to a process of confronting one's own marginalisation and the disturbing violence that comes with it. Abjection is the process by which the subject is cast out of the symbolic order, forced to confront their own otherness, and must then reckon with the horror of what is repressed or discarded by society.

Maleficent's loss of her wings is a literal and symbolic moment of abjection: she is violently separated from the one thing that defines her identity and power, and is cast out of The Moors, the sacred and untouched land she once ruled. This moment of physical and emotional devastation marks the start of her journey into abjection and her eventual revolt. Yet, as Creed notes, abjection can lead to empowerment:

[The] female protagonists of New Wave Cinema experience a katabasis, or fall, as they undertake a journey into the dark night of abjection where their sense of coherent identity is threatened, where they encounter male violence and from where they emerge changed, often reborn (2022: 14).

⁵⁹ Jack Zipes, 'The Cultural Tsunami of Fairy-Tale Films' in Zipes, Jack, Pauline Greenhill, and Kendra Magnus-Johnston, eds., *Fairy-Tale Films beyond Disney: International Perspectives* (Routledge, 2016), p. 6.

Maleficent's journey is not one of passive suffering; it is one of active resistance against the patriarchal system. In cursing the infant Aurora, she directly attacks the patriarchal line of the king; the curse ultimately leads to Aurora claiming Maleficent as her mother and creating a new matriarchal lineage. Abjection can then be seen as a source of creative potential, as it lays the groundwork for revolt and transformation: 'Abjection never goes away. Revolt, however, leads to new forms of culture [...]. Abjection can create new forms of language, culture, hope' (2022: 32). After experiencing the loss of her wings, Maleficent chooses to revolt, embracing her new form, and in doing so, creates what Creed calls a 'new self in the same body' (2022: 59). Thus, *Maleficent* aligns with Creed's vision of *Feminist New Wave Cinema* by embracing the figure of the monstrous-feminine as both empowering and subversive. Through her journey of abjection and eventual revolt, Maleficent critiques the patriarchal systems that seek to define and control her, while also highlighting the productive power of abjection to generate new forms of culture, identity, and empowerment. Woolverton's screenplay transforms Maleficent from a villain into a complex, multifaceted character who not only challenges the structures of power but also creates a new narrative of maternal strength and resistance. In doing so, *Maleficent* embodies the essence of Feminist New Wave Cinema, offering a profound exploration of female agency, power, and rebellion.

'Creation, that's what women are best at. We create, right? We bring life.': Linda

Woolverton's Feminist Narratives

Linda Woolverton stands out as a pivotal feminist screenwriter, particularly in her transformative contributions to Disney narratives. As the first woman to write an animated feature for Disney, Woolverton broke new ground with *Beauty and the Beast* (1991). Her

reimagining of Belle challenged the traditional Disney princess archetype, presenting a heroine defined by intellectual curiosity and a rejection of passive domesticity.

Woolverton's feminist sensibilities, deeply rooted in her personal values and shaped by the feminist movement of the 1970s, informed her creation of Belle as a character who sought adventure and independence. Reflecting on her approach to *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), Woolverton stated:

I came up as a feminist, in my day. And when I was first approached to do *Beauty and the Beast*, I knew that you couldn't do a throwback Disney victim/heroine. We weren't going to buy it as women after a whole awakening in the 70s. No one is going to accept that. So that started me on a path at relooking at these Disney princesses in a sort of different way. I feel that you have to have an empowering message or you're not going to be relevant. If you don't stay relevant to how people are and how women are approaching life now, it's not going to feel true.⁶⁰

By referencing the feminist awakening of the 1970s, Woolverton situates herself within the second wave feminist movement, and part of a broader cultural shift that demanded more realistic and empowering representations of women in media. Her assertion that 'you couldn't do a throwback Disney victim/heroine' emphasises her rejection of the passivity traditionally associated with earlier Disney princesses, whose stories often centred on their need to be rescued by male characters. Woolverton's insistence on narratives that speak to the evolving desires and realities of modern women helped make *Beauty and the Beast* not

⁶⁰ 'The Impact of Legendary Linda Woolverton, Writer of *Maleficent* | Wide Lantern', n.d <<https://web.archive.org/web/20160305141229/http://widelantern.com/2014/06/the-impact-of-legendary-linda-woolverton-writer-of-maleficent/>> [accessed 9 August 2023].

only culturally relevant but also ground-breaking, culminating in its distinction as the first animated film nominated for an Academy Award for Best Picture.

Woolverton has openly stated her ambition to effect cultural change through her writing:

It really comes to how this is contributing to who we are as a culture and as human beings. [...] Is this going to be putting into the world something that will elevate us or just be another \$200 million dollars just to entertain people for two hours as opposed to something they walk away from that changes them. And I think that's kind of arrogant, but that's how I feel.⁶¹

This approach reflects her understanding that feminist storytelling is inherently tied to power, echoing Clare Hemmings's assertion that '[narrative] is never just a matter of telling stories; it is always bound up with the power to determine which stories matter.'⁶²

Woolverton's approach to storytelling reflects a commitment to crafting narratives that resonate with and elevate audiences. As she explains, the aim is not just to entertain but to create works that contribute meaningfully to cultural discourse, addressing the complexities of gender and agency. Her feminist approach challenges the conventional 'strong female character' trope, rejecting the idea that empowerment must mimic traditionally male attributes like physical aggression:

Let's just not repeat the past, or not just take out a male protagonist and plunk in a female protagonist and call it good. [...] 'Wow, we can have women flying around,

⁶¹ 'The Impact of Legendary Linda Woolverton, Writer of Maleficent | Wide Lantern' <<https://web.archive.org/web/20160305141229/http://widelantern.com/2014/06/the-impact-of-legendary-linda-woolverton-writer-of-maleficent/>>

⁶² Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Duke University Press, 2011), <<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/lancaster/detail.action?docID=1172326>> [accessed 22 July 2024], p. 12.

and shooting rays at things, and blowing building up, just like the men always did’ – that’s great, but I think it’ll get boring really quick, unless we add something, really the truth about ourselves.⁶³

Woolverton challenges the superficial approach to female empowerment, as seen in the previous chapter on *Snow White and the Huntsman*, that merely replicates traditional male hero archetypes with female characters. Her critique suggests that simply swapping gender roles without deeper thought does little to advance meaningful representation. While she acknowledges the appeal of seeing women participate in traditionally ‘male’ acts of heroism, she argues that these depictions lack depth and authenticity if they fail to explore uniquely female experiences and perspectives. This makes her collaboration with Angelina Jolie in the role of Maleficent even more interesting, as I will explore later in the chapter, with Jolie’s transformation from what Joseph Gulam calls an ‘action babe’ into a serious actor who blends her personal values and activism with her acting work.

Woolverton’s feminist storytelling philosophy is deeply rooted in the concept of creation as a uniquely feminine form of power. She articulates this in her statement: ‘Creation, that’s what women are best at. We create, right? We bring life.’⁶⁴ In *Maleficent*, this philosophy manifests in the title character’s journey from destruction to redemption. Initially consumed by anger and betrayal, Maleficent curses Aurora, an act rooted in vengeance. However, over time, her relationship with Aurora evolves into one of care and love, symbolizing a form of

⁶³ ‘Maleficent: Disney Screenwriter Linda Woolverton On New Renaissance’, IndieWire, n.d. <<https://www.indiewire.com/features/general/linda-woolverton-disney-screenwriter-lion-king-beauty-beast-maleficent-1202182354/>> [accessed 9 August 2023].

⁶⁴ ‘Maleficent: Disney Screenwriter Linda Woolverton On New Renaissance’

creation that transcends biological motherhood. Through this bond, Maleficent reclaims her agency, finding empowerment not in acts of violence but in her ability to nurture, protect and ultimately restore the child she once cursed. The use of this unique form of agency sets Maleficent apart from the many other fairy tale films of the period and again intertwines Jolie's star text as a mother with the character of Maleficent. Woolverton's emphasis on creation as a source of power also critiques patriarchal narratives that traditionally devalue women's roles as caregivers and nurturers, framing them as passive or secondary. This stands in stark contrast to the typical 'strong female character' trope that relies on emulating male patterns of power, such as physical aggression or domination. Jack Zipes has praised *Maleficent* as a film 'to be taken seriously because it raises controversial issues in fairy tales that the Disney studios generally avoid, [...] the rape scene and the projection of an alternative 'green' world of social justice, one that is ruled by a woman.'⁶⁵ To elicit praise from Zipes, one of the world's foremost folklorists, demonstrates the success of Woolverton's aim to enact change through her work and also shows the possibility of using mainstream cinema to raise awareness of social issues. Later, I extend Zipes's argument to say that women, not one woman, rule over the 'green world of social justice' as both Maleficent and Aurora are empowered by the mother-daughter relationship (2016: 290).

The making-of featurette for *Maleficent* sheds light on Jolie's and Woolverton's collaborative approach to reimagining the character's transformation, highlighting their shared intention to make the film a deeply transformative exploration of Maleficent's

⁶⁵ Jack Zipes, 'Beyond Disney in the Twenty-First Century: Changing Aspects of American Fairy-Tale Films' in Jack Zipes, Pauline Greenhill, and Kendra Magnus-Johnston, eds., *Fairy-Tale Films beyond Disney: International Perspectives* (Routledge, 2016), pp.278-293 (p. 292).

complexity. Woolverton reveals that her initial challenge was to redeem a character capable of cursing a baby, which led her to conceive of the pivotal scene where Maleficent's wings are violently cut from her body. Reflecting on her research, Woolverton notes: 'In the original fairy tale, she was a fairy. [...] Where were her wings? The other fairies have wings. And then a lightbulb went off for me, that's what happened to her, someone stole her wings'.⁶⁶ This act of assault becomes a moment of profound abjection, aligning with Julia Kristeva's concept of a trauma that shatters identity and forces the subject into a liminal state, neither fully human nor other. Maleficent's loss of her wings signals her fall into abjection, severing her from her prior sense of self and positioning her as both monstrous and vulnerable.

Maleficent emerges as a quintessential example of Barbara Creed's monstrous-feminine. The severing of her wings, a violation of her bodily integrity, mirrors the castrating anxieties central to Creed's analysis. The scene, which I explore in depth later, evokes horror and transforms Maleficent into an abject figure; one whose trauma, anger, and eventual embrace of abjection challenge the patriarchal symbolic order. Angelina Jolie's engagement with the script reflects her investment in preserving Maleficent's duality as both an abject, monstrous figure and one capable of redemption. Jolie and Woolverton worked together to revise the character, negotiating between softening Maleficent's portrayal and maintaining her darker, more villainous edge. Woolverton recalls, 'Sometimes I would soften her, and Angelina would bring me back [saying], "Remember, she's still a villain."' ⁶⁷ Jolie emphasises

⁶⁶ 'From Fairy Tale to Feature Film', *Maleficent* dir. by Robert Stromberg (Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2014) [Blu-ray].

⁶⁷ 'From Fairy Tale to Feature Film', *Maleficent*.

the importance of retaining Maleficent's darker qualities, adding, 'I wanted to make sure we didn't lose her sense of wicked fun.'⁶⁸ Maleficent is a character who transcends the conventional roles of hero and villain and this juxtaposition closely aligns her with Jolie's own transformations in the public sphere.

'All the complexities that women have': The Impact of Angelina Jolie's Star Text on *Maleficent*.

As discussed in my introduction, Richard Dyer's notion of the 'star text' offers a productive framework for examining Hollywood actors as cultural constructions. Angelina Jolie provides a particularly compelling example, with her public image shifting from the rebellious 'wild child' persona of her early career to a later emphasis on maternal identity and humanitarian activism. This transition has directly influenced how audiences interpret her roles, particularly in relation to *Maleficent*, where her persona as both a mother and an advocate against gender-based violence deeply informs the feminist retelling of the Sleeping Beauty tale. Initially known as a 'wild child', Jolie gained notoriety for her unconventional lifestyle, high-profile relationships and roles in films such as *Girl, Interrupted* (1999) and *Tomb Raider* (2001). However, as her career progressed, her public image shifted dramatically. Central to this transformation was her becoming a mother (with three adopted children and three biological children), as well as her role as a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Special Envoy. Jolie's evolving star text was also closely intertwined with her relationship with Brad Pitt, a union that garnered intense media scrutiny and significantly influenced public perceptions of her identity. Jolie and Pitt first met in 2003 while filming

⁶⁸ 'From Fairy Tale to Feature Film', *Maleficent*.

Mr. and Mrs. Smith, where they played a married couple. At the time, Pitt was married to *Friends* star Jennifer Aniston, and Jolie had recently ended her marriage to actor Billy Bob Thornton. The chemistry between Jolie and Pitt on-screen fuelled tabloid speculation that their relationship extended off-screen. This led to rumours of an affair, painting Jolie as the 'other woman' and contrasting her as a seductive femme fatale against Aniston's 'girl next door' persona.⁶⁹ Though Pitt and Aniston publicly stated that their divorce in 2005 was unrelated to tabloid rumours, Jolie and Pitt officially became a couple soon after, further fuelling media speculation. The pair welcomed their first biological child, Shiloh, in 2006, and Pitt legally adopted Jolie's two children from her earlier adoptions, Maddox and Zahara.

Jolie's embrace of motherhood became a central element of her public image, she frequently discussed the experience of raising both adopted and biological children, positioning herself as a global advocate for family and humanitarian values. In 2008, she appeared on the cover of *W* magazine breastfeeding one of her new-born twins. The issue, titled 'Exclusive: Brad Pitt's Private Photos of Angelina Jolie', promised readers a glimpse into her life as a mother. Inside, Jolie openly reflected on the differences between adoptive and biological motherhood, revealing that before meeting Pitt, she had not envisioned having biological children.⁷⁰ One particularly revealing aspect of Jolie's public image at this time was her willingness to challenge conventional narratives around motherhood and

⁶⁹ Michelle Tauber and Tom Gliatto, 'Heartbreaker', *Peplemag* (2005) <<https://people.com/archive/cover-story-heartbreaker-vol-63-no-3/>> [accessed 23 August 2023]

⁷⁰ 'November Release: Angelina Jolie', *W Magazine*, (17 October 2008) <<https://www.wmagazine.com/story/novemberpressreleases08>> [accessed 23 July 2023]

beauty. When asked in *W* how she felt being photographed nude by Pitt just weeks after giving birth to twins, Jolie responded:

I'm with a man who's evolved enough to look at my body and see it as more beautiful because of the journey it has taken and what it has created. He genuinely sees it that way. So I genuinely feel even sexier.⁷¹

This statement, while affirming Jolie's confidence and comfort with her body, also invites critical analysis of the implicit dynamics of the male gaze in shaping women's self-perception. Jolie's assertion of feeling 'sexier' through Pitt's perspective reflects a complex interplay of empowerment and validation through external affirmation, a tension that underlines broader societal narratives surrounding femininity, motherhood, and desirability. *W* magazine, as a women's magazine, can be seen as complicit in this narrative by posing the question, something also seen in the *Vanity Fair* interview with Liberty Ross which I explored in my introduction.

Jolie's portrayal of motherhood extended into her professional work, with her personal experiences deeply informing her roles and public persona. This was exemplified in *Maleficent*, where Jolie's star text as both an adoptive and biological mother resonated with the film's themes. Notably, her daughter, Vivienne Jolie-Pitt, played the young Aurora in the film, a practical choice, as Vivienne was reportedly the only child who was not frightened by Jolie's imposing Maleficent costume and makeup! Jolie's children were also often present on set, further reinforcing the connection between her family life and professional endeavours. This reconfiguration of Jolie's star text as a nurturing mother and activist

⁷¹ 'November Release: Angelina Jolie'

represented a significant divergence from her earlier image as a rebellious and provocative figure. Despite its departure from Disney's traditional formula, *Maleficent* was a commercial triumph, grossing over \$758 million worldwide.⁷² The film's success is significant not only for Disney but also for Jolie, as it became her highest-grossing film and demonstrated the marketability of female-led narratives. This achievement is particularly noteworthy given Hollywood's ageist biases against women over 35 years old, especially in light of the prevailing fashion for a young action heroine as outlined in the first chapter.

This alignment of Jolie with the 'action babe' in cinema is explored by Joseph Gulam in *Lasting Screen Stars* (2016), where he argues that Angelina Jolie's star text is carefully constructed and strategically leveraged to align her cinematic roles with her public persona, blending commercial appeal with political and humanitarian engagement. Gulam emphasises that her career trajectory, from action star to socially conscious leading lady, demonstrates how celebrity branding can shape audience reception and narrative interpretation, particularly when the star's persona resonates with the themes of a film. He further notes that 'how a star's interventions into important issues – health debates, humanitarian crises and so on – have the potential to reinforce pre-existing aspects of his/her star persona while also adding new qualities that can increase career longevity'.⁷³ I extend Gulam's analysis by considering how these interventions not only reinforce Jolie's

⁷² Mike Fleming Jr, 'No. 6 'Maleficent' – 2014 Most Valuable Blockbuster Movie Tournament', *Deadline* (12 March 2015) < <https://deadline.com/2015/03/maleficent-profit-box-office-2014-1201391209/> > [accessed 9 August 2023].

⁷³ Joseph Gulam, 'From Action Babe to Mature Actress: The Place of Humanitarianism in Angelina Jolie's Lasting Screen Career' in Bolton, Lucy, and Julie Lobalzo Wright, eds., *Lasting Screen Stars: Images That Fade and Personas That Endure* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp.277-290, (p. 288).

persona but also enrich a feminist reading of her film roles, showing how her star text amplifies themes of female agency, moral complexity and ethical authority in characters such as Maleficent.

Jolie's star power played a crucial role in the film's marketing and reception. As Gulam observes, Jolie's involvement brought mutual benefits: her star text enhanced the film's appeal, while the film reinforced her persona as a 'maternal yet edgy figure' (2019: 287). The film's revisionist approach, combined with Jolie's performance, resonated with audiences across generations. Jolie's star text is deeply intertwined with her career trajectory, which has evolved from the high-octane roles of her early days as an 'action babe' to her later, more nuanced portrayals of complex characters. Gulam argues that Jolie's career reflects a deliberate effort to transcend the superficiality often associated with action roles, leveraging her humanitarian work and personal narrative to reframe her public image. He points out, 'the branding opportunities generated by celebrity campaigning were certainly evident in the case of *Maleficent*, where Jolie's ESVC interview corresponded with Disney's efforts to market the film as an edgy, revisionist fairy tale with cross-generational appeal' (2019: 287). This demonstrates how Jolie's off-screen persona and activism were not peripheral but actively shaped audience expectations. Yet, while Gulam emphasises marketing strategies, my analysis focuses on how Jolie's star text contributes to the film's feminist reinterpretation, showing that her public persona and her artistic choices are mutually reinforcing. This evolution aligns seamlessly with her casting as Maleficent, where her star text enriches Woolverton's feminist reinterpretation.

Jolie's 'action babe' phase is exemplified by her performances in films such as *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001) and *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* (2005). These roles cemented her reputation as a physically commanding and sexually confident star, a persona that appealed to the male-dominated action genre. Her portrayal of Lara Croft, in particular, emphasised her athleticism, beauty and ability to dominate traditionally masculine spaces, but it also situated her within the male gaze.⁷⁴ Jolie's characters in this era were often defined by their physicality and their relationships with men, reflecting broader industry trends that reduced female action stars to archetypes rather than fully realised individuals. While her action roles were outwardly glamorous, her off-screen persona as a self-possessed and unapologetic individual began to challenge the industry's narrow conception of women in action films. For instance, her bold choices in personal style, public relationships and outspoken interviews contrasted sharply with Hollywood's expectations of female stars. Gulam notes that this tension between conformity and rebellion allowed Jolie to cultivate a persona that was simultaneously mainstream and subversive, a duality that became instrumental in her later roles.

By the mid-2000s, Jolie began to consciously distance herself from the 'action babe' label, seeking roles that aligned with her humanitarian values and personal experiences. Films such as *A Mighty Heart* (2007), in which she portrayed journalist Mariane Pearl, and

⁷⁴ While Jolie agreed to wear a padded bra for the part to replicate the pneumatic figure of the computer game character, she insisted she did not want the role to be oversexualised. Jolie was subsequently very upset by the portrayal of the character in the film advertising: "It was, 'Why has someone superimposed a gun right in between my legs?' or 'My breasts are big enough – why are they enhanced that much bigger?'" For Jolie, it wasn't just about herself, it was about Lara, too. "I don't like seeing her in that position. She's so much like me."

Zach Johnson, 'Bra Padding, Drug Testing and Risk Taking: How Angelina Jolie's Tomb Raider Was Made', E! Online, (16 March 2018) <<https://www.eonline.com/news/920701/bra-padding-drug-testing-and-risk-taking-how-angelina-jolie-s-tomb-raider-was-made>> [accessed 7 December 2024].

Changeling (2008), where she played a mother searching for her missing son, marked a departure from her earlier projects. These films showcased her dramatic range and her ability to embody characters grappling with profound emotional and social issues. Gulam argues that this transition was not merely a shift in genre but a strategic redefinition of her star text, one that foregrounded her activism and personal growth. While Gulam emphasizes marketing and public perception, it is equally important to consider how these choices deepened the narrative resonance of her roles, allowing audiences to connect with her characters on a moral and emotional level. This intentional alignment between personal values and artistic choices illustrates how Jolie's star text serves both promotional and interpretive purposes.

The culmination of this evolution is evident in Jolie's portrayal of Maleficent, a character that embodies the complexity and depth she sought to bring to her roles. As Gulam observes, Jolie's ability to weave her humanitarian work into her artistic projects is central to her performance (2019: 287). This alignment between star text and character enriches the film's feminist themes, allowing audiences to connect with Maleficent not as a traditional villain but as a multidimensional figure shaped by her experiences. Jolie's collaboration with Linda Woolverton further underscores the significance of her star text in redefining Maleficent. Woolverton's screenplay subverts traditional fairy tale tropes, presenting Maleficent as a survivor of trauma who reclaims her agency through compassion and resilience. Jolie's input, informed by her own experiences and values, brought authenticity and emotional depth to the character. While Gulam foregrounds the commercial advantages of her persona, I argue that this evolution is equally significant in narrative terms: her persona allows Maleficent to transcend the typical villain archetype

and embody a nuanced, feminist figure whose moral and emotional complexity resonates with audiences. Jolie's transition from 'action babe' to feminist icon exemplifies her ability to reshape her star text to reflect her personal and professional values. As she observes, Maleficent embodies 'all the complexities that women have', reflecting both her on-screen character and her real-life negotiation of power, femininity and agency. In extending Gulam's framework, it becomes clear that Jolie's career evolution illustrates the dual function of star text: it ensures commercial appeal while simultaneously enriching the thematic depth of her films. By intertwining her public persona, humanitarian engagement and nuanced performances, Jolie enables Maleficent to operate as both a feminist text and a commercially successful cinematic experience.

Angelina Jolie's star text is not only shaped by her public roles and activism but also deeply informed by her private life, particularly her relationship with her late mother, Marcheline Bertrand. Jolie has often spoken about her mother's influence on her life and career, describing her as a nurturing, self-sacrificing figure whose strength and compassion left an indelible mark on her. Bertrand's death in 2007 from breast and ovarian cancer profoundly affected Jolie, shaping her personal narrative and her approach to both motherhood and her humanitarian work. Jolie's public reflections on her mother underscore how Bertrand embodied ideals of motherhood that Jolie sought to emulate and reinterpret in her own life. Jolie wrote about the experience in 2019 in an essay for TIME magazine, as a tribute to her mother, but also to raise awareness of how women's wellbeing and illnesses like cancer are part of a bigger picture:

When we speak of women's equality, it is often in terms of rights withheld, that ought to be given to us collectively. Increasingly I see it in terms of behaviour that

needs to stop. Stop turning a blind eye to the abuse of women. Stop blocking the ability of girls to get an education or access health care. Stop forcing them to marry a person you have chosen for them, especially when they are still children. Help young girls know their value. Help keep women you know safe.⁷⁵

Jolie underscores the urgent need to address systemic behaviours that harm women and prevent their empowerment, reflecting broader calls for equality and justice. Her emphasis on stopping harmful practices such as abuse, forced marriages and educational barriers mirrors *Maleficent*'s feminist narrative, which seeks to challenge and transform traditional power dynamics. Woolverton's retelling of 'Sleeping Beauty' reframes Maleficent's story to highlight the consequences of systemic violence, specifically through the metaphor of Stefan's theft of her wings. Jolie has acknowledged the thematic weight of this scene, suggesting it resonates with the experience of violation, saying, 'We were very conscious, the writer and I, that it was a metaphor for rape.'⁷⁶ Jolie's speech at the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict underscores the larger cultural relevance of this narrative. She described sexual violence in war as a tactic that perpetuates cycles of trauma and division:

⁷⁵ 'Angelina Jolie: Medical Advances in Women's Health Are Important. But They're Only Part of the Picture', Time, (24 October 2019) <<https://time.com/5709290/angelina-jolie-cancer-research-prevention/>> [accessed 23 July 2023].

⁷⁶ Katey Rich, 'Angelina Jolie Confirms a Key Maleficent Scene Was About Rape', Vanity Fair, (12 June 2014), <[https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2014/06/angelina-jolie-maleficent-rape?srsId=AfmBOop7J-
ea2qzn2GiJSIKNg5twFRxeiH-6gBwT649sXL2VswBnZInl](https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2014/06/angelina-jolie-maleficent-rape?srsId=AfmBOop7J-
ea2qzn2GiJSIKNg5twFRxeiH-6gBwT649sXL2VswBnZInl)> [accessed 7 February 2024].

Sexual violence in conflict is a uniquely destructive act and method of war. It is an outrage to all morality. All too often the stigma and shame associated with sexual violence remains with the victim rather than the perpetrator.⁷⁷

This analysis parallels the treatment of Maleficent in the film, where she is initially stigmatised and ostracised for the harm inflicted upon her but ultimately reclaims her power and challenges the systems that oppressed her. The removal of Maleficent's wings is a moment of abjection that serves as a catalyst for everything that follows in the film. Maleficent reclaims the space of abjection which serves to empower her. By embedding the narrative of assault and recovery into *Maleficent*, Jolie and Woolverton extend the film's reach beyond entertainment, using it as a medium to provoke conversations about gendered violence and justice. I explore how this is achieved later in my close analysis of film scenes. Jolie's insistence on seeing the broader realities of women's lives and addressing issues before they reach a crisis point aligns with Woolverton's aims to 'tell the truth' about women. Maleficent's journey from pain and vengeance to healing reflects a restorative approach to justice as we see at the end of the film with the two women ruling over an alternative 'world of social justice'.⁷⁸ Together, Jolie's humanitarian work and Woolverton's storytelling in *Maleficent* advocate for a profound cultural shift toward justice and empowerment.

⁷⁷ 'Chair's Summary - Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict', GOV.UK, n.d. <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/chairs-summary-global-summit-to-end-sexual-violence-in-conflict/chairs-summary-global-summit-to-end-sexual-violence-in-conflict>> [accessed 3 July 2022].

⁷⁸ Zipes, 'Beyond Disney in the Twenty-First Century', p.290

Sleeping Beauty Awakes: Storytelling as Feminist Revolt

I turn now to the dynamic between Maleficent and Aurora, whose intertwined rebellions together reimagine the fairy tale form. While I previously explored Maleficent as a figure of the monstrous-feminine, this section argues that Aurora's quieter but equally profound rebellion as the narrator of her own story challenges fairy tale narratives. By embracing Maleficent as her chosen mother and rejecting the patriarchal inheritance of her biological father, Aurora claims agency over both her identity and her story. In doing so, she dismantles the conventional fairy tale framework that casts her as passive, instead asserting herself as subject and shaper of her story. Extending Zipes's earlier argument about the transformative potential of the film, I contend that Maleficent portrays a feminist vision in which power is not centred in a singular figure but shared between Maleficent and Aurora. Their mother-daughter bond becomes the foundation for a collective empowerment that reclaims storytelling itself as an act of feminist resistance. The analysis that follows examines key scenes to demonstrate how, together, Maleficent and Aurora reshape the fairy tale tradition.

Maleficent is presented to the viewer in the opening shots of a film as 'nonhuman', as a child (played by 14-year-old Isobelle Molloy) with golden eyes and loose waves in her hair, wearing a dress of natural colours, barefoot, flying around the Moors with magnificent feathered wings. Maleficent's powers are introduced through her ability to heal a broken tree branch with a golden light, a visual metaphor that aligns her with divine creation and natural harmony. This golden light, often associated in Western spiritual tradition with purity and benevolence, positions Maleficent as a guardian figure within the Moors, a

bountiful and unspoiled realm evocative of the Garden of Eden. Her role as protector mirrors the mythic archetype of a divine intermediary tasked with shielding paradise from external corruption, in this case, the encroaching forces of man. In her updated edition of *The Monstrous Feminine* (2024), Creed examines how the portrayal of the monstrous-feminine as nonhuman disrupts the patriarchal order by challenging its anthropocentric values. This framework is particularly relevant to *Maleficent*, whose supernatural traits and dominion over the Moors mark her as both a force of nature and an existential threat to the human kingdom's patriarchal structures. In western culture, woman is aligned not with the world of reason, but with 'body, nature and the animal as demonstrated in the Garden of Eden story where woman chooses the fruits of the garden and listens to the wisdom of the serpent over the word of god' (2024: 189). Creed argues that this alignment with the nonhuman in feminist films can be read as a protest against 'a phallogocentric and anthropocentric masculine symbolic order that specifically denigrates woman' (2024: 189). Similarly, *Maleficent's* bond with the natural world and her role as its protector place her in opposition to the patriarchal kingdom, positioning her as a figure who defies and disrupts anthropocentric control.

Despite *Maleficent's* childlike innocence and playful demeanour in the idyllic Moors, her physical traits - horns, claw-tipped wings, golden eyes and blood-red lips — carry connotations of demonic or hellish imagery. These characteristics, borrowed from the 1959 Disney villain, foreshadow her complex duality as both protector and perceived threat, positioning her as a figure who challenges binary representations of good and evil. As *Maleficent* is shown growing into a woman she also becomes more powerful. When *Maleficent* first appears as an adult (portrayed by Angelina Jolie), she ascends dramatically

through the clouds into a radiant, heavenly sky. Her serene posture, hovering effortlessly with arms outstretched and palms upturned, resembles traditional depictions of archangels or saints, emphasising her alignment with divine authority. Yet this angelic imagery contrasts with her demonic features, such as her horned silhouette. This juxtaposition reinforces Creed's notion of the monstrous-feminine as a figure who transcends and destabilises conventional moral categories. Maleficent's characterisation evokes several mythological figures that Creed identifies as precursors to the monstrous-feminine. Her feathered wings and commanding presence recall the Sirens, whose half-bird forms and enchanting powers symbolised both allure and danger. Similarly, her fierce protectiveness over the Moors echoes the vengeful nature of the Roman Furies, goddesses who punished the unjust. Her physical strength and aerial dominance link her to Nike, the winged goddess of victory, while her association with both creation and destruction parallels Lilith, the winged demon of Jewish folklore and Adam's first wife, who defied patriarchal constraints. Maleficent's animalistic traits, coupled with her physical power and stewardship over the flourishing realm of the Moors, portrays her as a living embodiment of nature's autonomy, a direct challenge to the anthropocentric, patriarchal structures of the human kingdom and casting her as a symbol of resistance against systemic oppression.

Despite Maleficent's alignment with the nonhuman, as a child she befriends a human boy, Stefan, who sees her as 'just a girl'. Woolverton uses motifs from Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* in exploring the relationship between Maleficent and Stefan: Maleficent's first physical encounter with Stefan, when she takes his hand, leads to her being burned on the finger by the iron ring he wears, that serves as a stand in for the prick of the finger on a spinning wheel of the Disney original. On Maleficent's sixteenth birthday, Stefan gives her what the

narrator describes as 'true love's kiss', evoking the iconic moment from the original *Sleeping Beauty*. Yet this kiss, which is later revealed to be hollow, serves as a bitter irony. While in the classic tale true love's kiss signifies protection and salvation, in *Maleficent* it foreshadows betrayal. Stefan's actions later expose how the idealisation of romantic love in patriarchal narratives can mask self-serving intentions, subverting the trope and reframing it as a critique of exploitative power dynamics. In recasting these iconic motifs as instruments of betrayal, Woolverton positions *Maleficent* as the tale's 'original' *Sleeping Beauty*, not its villain but its first victim.

Maleficent's cursed sleep comes in the form of a drink drugged by Stefan, and it is while she lies in this induced state that he uses iron chains to sever her wings. She awakens just as daylight dawns, and the cinematography of the scene intensifies the emotional impact of her violation. The camera lingers on her face as she realises what has been done, capturing the raw anguish of that moment before gradually panning to reveal the bloody stumps where her wings once were. This deliberate pacing mirrors the invasive nature of the act, forcing the audience to confront the brutality of Stefan's betrayal. The contrast between her curled, vulnerable form and the vast, open landscape of the Moors underscores both the isolation and magnitude of her suffering. Her anguished screams echo through the Moors and reach Stefan as he flees with her wings on a cart, the camera pulling back to show her lying in a foetal position on the ground. The scene's composition of close-ups that create intimacy, pans that build horror, and juxtapositions that heighten the sense of violation, make the audience complicit in experiencing *Maleficent*'s pain and foreground the brutality of Stefan's act, the originating violence from which *Maleficent*'s monstrous-feminine revolt

grows and which makes her subsequent reclamation of the maternal, in her relationship with Aurora, all the more politically charged.

The brutality of this scene becomes fully legible when set against the tale Woolverton is rewriting. In Perrault's tale, the princess is cursed as a baby by a slighted fairy who declares that despite 'her beauty and accomplishments, the princess was going to prick her finger with a spindle and die of it'.⁷⁹ In the Brothers Grimm 'Little Briar Rose', which Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* most directly adapts, the prince breaks the curse with a kiss: 'There she lay, so beautiful that he could not take his eyes off her, and he bent down to kiss her.'⁸⁰ The prince's kiss is presented as salvation, not the violation of an unconscious woman. By positioning Maleficent as the tale's first Sleeping Beauty, drugged and assaulted by a man she trusted, Woolverton's uncanny recreation of the Sleeping Beauty myth creates a sense of unease in the viewer precisely because the story is both familiar and unfamiliar, the same patriarchal logic, stripped of its romantic disguise. Stefan's betrayal of Maleficent is not merely a personal act but a reflection of patriarchal structures that prioritize power over loyalty and exploit vulnerability. His ambition is fuelled by the King's declaration that whoever kills Maleficent will inherit the crown, turning Maleficent's body into a battleground for male advancement. By mutilating Maleficent, Stefan enacts a form of patriarchal violence that seeks to strip her of both her agency and her power, reinforcing the systemic exploitation of women as tools for personal and political gain.

⁷⁹ Charles Perrault, Angela Carter, and Jack Zipes, *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault*, Penguin Modern Classics (Penguin, 2008), p. 18.

⁸⁰ Jacob Grimm, Wilhelm Grimm, and Maria Tatar (eds), *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*, 1st ed (W.W. Norton, 2004), p. 238.

Maleficent's violation by Stefan fractures her identity, but it is also an attack on the Moors, the community which Maleficent protects. This recalls the statement from the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict:

Sexual violence in conflict is a uniquely destructive act and method of war. It is an outrage to all morality. Survivors who have gone through the trauma of an attack too often also face rejection by their families and reprisals from their communities. [...] Sexual violence in conflict poses a grave threat to international peace and security. It exacerbates tension and violence and undermines stability.⁸¹

This quote highlights how sexual violence destabilises both individuals and communities, a dynamic mirrored in Maleficent's story. Stefan's violation of Maleficent is not just an assault on her body but an act of symbolic warfare against the Moors, the community she protects. The once lush, green Moors are transformed into a desolate, snowy wasteland, while the creatures Maleficent once played with cower away from her, reflecting how such violence fractures communities. This environmental decay serves as a visual metaphor for the broader destabilisation caused by patriarchal systems that exploit nature. This is a strange echo of the effect I described in the previous chapter, where Ravenna's conquest in *Snow White and the Huntsman* similarly scars the landscape, reinscribing cycles of trauma and vengeance. The desolate landscape, filmed in bleak greys, blacks and browns, reflects the attack on Maleficent as an attack on nature itself.

⁸¹ 'Chair's Summary - Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict'

A hint of her former protective nature is seen when she saves a crow trapped under a net from being clubbed by a farmer and turns him into a human man. However, Maleficent's decision to transform the crow into a man without wings mirrors the violation she suffered at Stefan's hands, creating a haunting parallel. While her intent may initially appear altruistic, the crow's anguished reaction, 'What have you done to my beautiful self?', reveals the unintended consequences of her control. This act highlights how trauma can perpetuate cycles of harm, as Maleficent's actions echo the same dynamics of domination and loss that were inflicted upon her. Maleficent is able to control the crow's form to use for her own ends; she needs his wings to spy on the human realm echoing the abuse inflicted on her when Stefan took her wings in order to become king. This ability to control the crow's form reflects her attempt to reclaim agency in the aftermath of her trauma, but it also reveals the complex morality of her actions. By imposing her will on another being, she mirrors the power dynamics Stefan exploited when he took her wings. This duality complicates her role as a protector, suggesting that her trauma has reshaped her into both a victim and an agent of control. The film thus critiques not only the cycles of abuse but also the difficulties of recovering agency in a world defined by domination.

Woolverton and Jolie have spoken extensively about the challenge of redeeming Maleficent's character, particularly through the transformative moment when she curses Aurora as an infant. The curse, rooted in Maleficent's anguish and rage, becomes a vessel for exploring trauma and its consequences. Jolie has described Maleficent's violation as an act so violent and aggressive that it fractures her identity, stripping her of 'her maternity, her womanhood, and her softness.' As Creed argues, drawing on Kristeva, abjection is not only a site of dehumanisation but also of potential revolt against the patriarchal order that

produces it: 'In confronting the threat to her sense of self, the female protagonist may draw on abjection itself, as abjection points to the frailty of the patriarchal symbolic order' (2022: 4). Maleficent's dark transformation embodies this concept, her villainous costume becomes a tapestry of symbolism: the wing-like cape signifies the loss of her physical wings and freedom, the cane reflects her struggle to navigate the physical repercussions of her mutilation, and the crow embodies both companionship and the replacement of her stolen agency. As with Ravenna's sculptural costumes in *Snow White and the Huntsman*, Maleficent's attire stages the monstrous-feminine on the body, externalising trauma as both spectacle and revolt. The stark contrast between Maleficent's former role as a mother goddess soaring above the Moors and her current confinement within the walls of the castle visualises the cost of patriarchal violence. Even as she spreads her wing-like cape in a gesture reminiscent of flight, the camera's tighter focus emphasises her reduced physicality.

The curse scene serves as the linchpin of the narrative, bringing together themes of trauma, vengeance, and transformation while setting the stage for Maleficent's redemption:

The princess shall indeed grow in grace and beauty, loved by all who meet her. But before the sun sets on her sixteenth birthday, she will prick her finger on the spindle of a spinning wheel and fall into a sleep-like death, a sleep from which she will never awaken.

Her infamous curse not only propels the story forward but also critiques the patriarchal ideals of love and power. Her words carry dual significance: they foreshadow Aurora's fate while mocking the concept of 'true love's kiss,' a bitter reference to Stefan's earlier betrayal. Maleficent's proclamation that 'no power on earth' can change the curse alludes to the supernatural power of maternal love, something not yet understood by the characters or

audience. The juxtaposition of her green magic with her usual golden magic further emphasises her fractured identity, as her abjection becomes both the source of her vengeance and the potential site of her emotional recovery. If we carry forward from the previous chapter D'Amore's theory of 'vigilante feminism', this scene it clearly shows Maleficent taking her revenge on Stefan by targeting his daughter, and while the audience may relish seeing Stefan beg Maleficent for mercy it sits uncomfortably with the idea of the victim of this act being a baby girl. I argue that this clearly demonstrates the ultimate failure of the type of vigilante feminism described by D'Amore that not only 'reinscribes patriarchy' but does not seek to dismantle it. Woolverton shows that using violence against women and girls as a tool of war to attack men is shown to replicate the very patriarchal structures it aims to punish, using the bodies of women and girls as instruments rather than challenging systemic power. As Maleficent walks the line between vengeance and redemption, the curse binds her to Aurora's fate, creating a relationship that becomes the heart of the film.

The Wall of Thorns

While Maleficent's initial curse demonstrates the morally fraught limitations of revenge-driven vigilante feminism, her subsequent creation of the wall of thorns marks a transition from reactive vengeance to proactive reclamation of space and bodily agency. After Stefan's attack on Maleficent, she uses her power to create a huge wall of thorns between the Moors and the human realm. She then uses it after her own assault to protect herself from any further attack and also because the loss of her wings has created a crisis of identity for her, and she longer sees her physical body as capable of defending the land. This shift reframes Maleficent's power: rather than harming others, it asserts control over her own

environment and embodies an active, rather than destructive, form of female agency. Woolverton repurposes the familiar motif of the wall of thorns from Charles Perrault's 'The *Sleeping Beauty*' (date), in which the hedge encloses the princess as a passive object awaiting rescue, and the Disney animated adaptation, in which only the prince can penetrate the barrier. In *Maleficent*, the thorns are a space of female sovereignty: the wall originates from Maleficent herself, protecting her home, asserting her bodily presence, and eventually nurturing Aurora's growth.

In Perrault's version, which has influenced most subsequent retellings of the tale, the thorns enclose the princess within the castle, symbolising her passive role as an object to be rescued:

Within a quarter of an hour, a great number of trees, some large, some small, interlaced with brambles and thorns, sprang up around the park and formed a hedge so thick that neither man nor beast could penetrate it. This hedge grew so tall that you could see only the topmost turrets of the castle, for the fairy had made a safe, magic place where the princess could sleep her sleep out free from prying eyes.⁸²

Similarly, in Disney's animated *Sleeping Beauty*, the wall of thorns is an obstacle only the prince can penetrate. In *Maleficent*, however, the thorns signify active resistance against patriarchal violence. Unlike the Perrault story, the wall of thorns arrives after Maleficent's cursed sleep, not Aurora's. The wall is created by Maleficent to protect the Moors, not the

⁸² Perrault, 'The Sleeping Beauty', p. 20.

castle, and in a reversal of the Sleeping Beauty paradigm, it is the female body, not the male, that is able to penetrate the wall at will. Through Creed's lens, Maleficent's creation of the thorns embodies the archaic mother: she becomes a figure of both nurture and aggression, capable of enforcing boundaries while reclaiming power in response to patriarchal violence. The thorns are not merely a defence but a reassertion of her bodily agency and identity.

The wall of thorns that Maleficent raises around the Moors inverts one of the most persistent spatial tropes of the fairy tale tradition. Where Perrault's enclosure renders the female body, in Rebecca Munford's terms, 'a mysterious secret locked away at the centre of the Gothic Castle', encased within a series of nested thresholds that make her a spectacle of virtuous passivity, Maleficent's thorns enclose on her own terms.⁸³ Munford describes this Perrault space as 'a space of abjection where the subject is suspended in a position of perpetual danger, a morbid inversion of the womb space' (2013:34), but Maleficent transforms that morbid inversion into its opposite, a womb space that nurtures active femininity and directed outward against patriarchal violence. The film makes this spatial politics visually explicit through the stark contrast between the organic, womb-like Moors and the phallic towers of Stefan's castle rising above the thorn wall: a visual embodiment of Maleficent's revolt against the system that sought to contain her.

⁸³ Rebecca Munford, *Decadent Daughters and Monstrous Mothers: Angela Carter and European Gothic* (Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 33.

Building on the wall of thorns as a reconfigured monstrous womb, the imagery also evokes the psychoanalytic motif of the *vagina dentata*, the 'toothed vagina', which symbolises both sexualized danger and female power. Creed notes two origins for the myth of *vagina dentata* and that 'both stress the incorporative rather than castrating aspect of this figure' (2022: 118). One is the 'oral sadistic mother' like the witch of 'Hansel and Gretel', which reflects the anxiety that the mother the child feeds from might desire to feed on the child. The other, which I argue is in line with the monstrous-feminine representation of Maleficent, is the 'all-encompassing maternal figure of the pre-Oedipal period who threatens to symbolically engulf the infant' (Creed, 2022: 119). In this sense, the wall of thorns functions as a psychoanalytic and symbolic embodiment of female corporeal power, maternal authority, and resistance to patriarchal intrusion, encompassing the Moors, positioned as the untamed natural world in opposition to the patriarchal symbolic order of the human kingdom. The king's desire to conquer and control the Moors, and the horror at nature 'fighting back', reinforces the alignment of the female body with nature, supporting the eco-feminist reading praised by Zipes. In *Maleficent*, the 'danger' of the *vagina dentata* is reframed: the thorns assert a boundary of defence while simultaneously signalling male anxiety. Nervous soldiers patrol the border, unable to penetrate the barrier, demonstrating that this space of female power is both protective and threatening to patriarchal authority. Aurora's safe navigation of the space underscores the distinction between destructive threat and self-directed, generative power.

The narrator tells us that Aurora is fascinated by 'what lay beyond the fearsome wall of thorns', while the camera shows her reaching towards it. Aurora is shown as a small but colourful figure in the middle of the screen, with the thorns looming over her while

Maleficent and Diaval (her crow companion) observe her unseen. The scene's composition reinforces the film's thematic exploration of barriers and the unknown, as well as the size of Aurora compared to the border confronting her, yet she shows no fear of being overwhelmed by it. Aurora's tentative exploration of the wall, reaching out, touching, and moving within its bounds, signals the transfer of female agency across generations. The thorns, as a controlled embodiment of *vagina dentata*, represent both potential danger and protective power. In this way, Maleficent's creation of the wall facilitates Aurora's emerging autonomy, showing that the monstrous womb can be both a site of power and a nurturing environment. The wall of thorns symbolises not only a protective barrier but also a maternal assertion of agency, shielding the Moors from patriarchal forces while nurturing Aurora's growth and transformation within its bounds. Maleficent's control over this space allows Aurora to develop her agency, contrasting sharply with the passive, enclosed femininity of earlier 'Sleeping Beauty' narratives.

As Aurora grows into a young woman, Maleficent continues to watch over her, observing her interactions with the natural world. A montage depicts Aurora rolling down a grassy bank, emerging from a pile of golden autumn leaves, and feeding a deer from her hand – a gesture that directly mirrors young Maleficent's actions in an earlier scene. The montage is lit with warm, glowing light, producing a sense of continuity and vitality that sharply contrasts the harsher shadows and abrupt cuts used in Stefan's castle scenes. The effect aligns Aurora with the Moors' regenerative rhythms and this visual parallel with young Maleficent establishes a symbolic connection between the two characters, suggesting a shared bond and highlighting the theme of generational interconnectedness. The narrator's line, 'She wondered at the world about her', ostensibly describes Aurora, but the focus

shifts to Maleficent's reaction, captured in a close-up of her face framed by thorns. This visual juxtaposition of Aurora's playful immersion in nature and Maleficent's confinement within the thorns underscores Maleficent's liminal state; it signifies her potential for transformation, as she begins to see the world anew through Aurora's eyes. The importance of this narration deepens when we later discover that the voice belongs to Aurora as an older woman recounting her own story. This revelation reframes the narrative as Aurora's subjective reflection, positioning her as an agent in crafting her identity and the story's meaning. The scene visually and thematically anchors Maleficent's evolving relationship with Aurora and foreshadows her eventual journey through abjection and self-redefinition.

When Maleficent recognises herself in Aurora, she parts the wall of thorns and carries her into the Moors under a sleeping spell before waking her. This moment, echoing a birth scene, symbolises Aurora's rebirth into a nurturing, maternal space free from patriarchal constraints. Within this 'womb space' created by Maleficent, Aurora is allowed to grow, thrive, and explore her curiosity without fear of punishment. This marks the first time Maleficent fully reveals herself to Aurora, fearing she will be perceived as monstrous.

Instead, Aurora reassures her, saying:

I know who you are. You're my fairy godmother. You've been watching over me my whole life. I've always known you were close by. Your shadow has been following me since I was small. Wherever I went your shadow was always with me.

Through these words, Aurora claims Maleficent as her mother, acknowledging her constant presence and care. By aligning herself with Maleficent, Aurora rejects the patriarchal symbolic order and begins to recreate herself on her own terms as the daughter of the monstrous-feminine. Rather than representing an abject womb space that threatens

identity, the Moors solidify the shared identities of Maleficent and Aurora as mother and daughter. This maternal bond becomes a form of revolt against patriarchal structures, culminating in Aurora becoming Maleficent's heir rather than Stefan's. The depth of this shift is underscored in a cutaway scene where Stefan rejects his wife's dying wish to see him, choosing instead to converse with Maleficent's severed wings, which he claims 'mock him.' As Aurora's biological mother passes away, Aurora is symbolically reborn to Maleficent, a mother figure defined by care, connection, and liberation from patriarchal constraints.

The maternal revolt against the patriarchal system culminates when Aurora is woken from her cursed sleep by Maleficent's kiss. In Disney's original *Sleeping Beauty*, the non-consensual kiss from the prince has long been critiqued as emblematic of patriarchal violence inflicted on the passive female body. Woolverton addresses this critique by retaining the prince's kiss but rendering it ineffective, serving multiple symbolic functions. First, the prince's failure to break the curse emphasises that Aurora's agency cannot be restored by male intervention. For his kiss to succeed would imply a restoration of male power and dominance over the female body. Second, this impotence acts as a metaphorical castration, undermining the traditional narrative of male heroism tied to the 'prick' of the spindle and the restoration of the female protagonist. Instead, the curse is broken by Maleficent's kiss on Aurora's forehead, which seals their consensual mother-daughter bond. This act redefines 'true love' as maternal rather than romantic, subverting patriarchal expectations of love as defined through male agency. By choosing Maleficent as her mother, Aurora asserts her autonomy and aligns herself with the monstrous-feminine, completing their shared revolt against the patriarchal order. Maleficent's earlier pronouncement that

'no power on earth' can break the curse highlights the transcendent nature of their bond, which exists beyond the constraints of the symbolic order. Creed describes this type of revolt as 'intimate revolt' and is brought about through 'an encounter with male violence and its dark underside – abjection' (2022: 54). Both Aurora and Maleficent have encountered and been affected by male violence, leading to a questioning of their own being that is central to their revolt and development of selfhood. For this revolt to be complete, both parties must have agency and it is Aurora's choice that seals it. In claiming Maleficent as her mother, Aurora does not simply receive care but actively consents to the bond, transforming a relationship that began as a curse into a freely chosen maternal inheritance.

The Final Battle

The maternal bond forged through Maleficent's kiss is immediately tested in the final battle scene as Maleficent and Aurora work together to defeat the patriarchal order. After Maleficent's kiss awakens Aurora the pair attempt to leave the castle and return to the Moors. However, Stefan, consumed by his desire for dominance and revenge, seeks to destroy Maleficent. Trapped by soldiers wielding iron shields, Maleficent faces Stefan, who approaches with iron chains in a deliberate echo of the instruments used to sever her wings. His taunt, 'How does it feel to be a fairy creature without wings in a world where you don't belong?' tells the audience that he was fully aware of the consequences of what he did to Maleficent and his intention to destabilise her identity and the collective power she represented. It also recalls Jolie's statement at the ESVC summit about survivors of trauma

being rejected by their communities, a parallel that reinforces the film's deliberate alignment of Maleficent's story with real-world experiences of gendered violence.

As Stefan lunges at Maleficent with a sword, the camera focuses on her face in a moment of tension, a cinematic technique often used to signal the penetration of a weapon. This expectation is subverted when golden magic surges behind Maleficent, and the camera pans out to reveal her wings restored. This symbolic act of revolt is initiated by Aurora, who has liberated Maleficent's imprisoned wings from their glass case. The return of her wings signifies both literal empowerment and the restoration of her identity as a complete being, no longer defined by Stefan's violation. Aurora's decisive act also marks her own journey into the dark night of abjection as she confronts the horror committed by her father against Maleficent. Having grown up outside the human realm, already excluded from the symbolic order, Aurora has a unique perspective on the patriarchal structures that seek to control and define women. Learning that her biological father mutilated Maleficent deepens her awareness of the abject foundations upon which his power rests and she literally 'overthrows' him by pushing over the glass case and freeing Maleficent's wings.

Aurora's actions and Maleficent's triumph embody the narrative structure of 'rape-revolt films', which, as Creed observes:

deplore abject masculinity while applauding the woman who, as the monstrous-feminine, revolts against his abject deeds. On her journey through her own personal nightmare, into the depths of abjection where she encounters her violent enemy –

brushes up against his abjection – she returns not contaminated but transformed through an intimate or interior revolt that is liberating (2022: 54).

Stefan represents the abject masculinity of patriarchal power, his violence rooted in domination and destruction. This act of revolt aligns Aurora with the monstrous-feminine, transforming her from a passive figure into an active agent of change. As Creed explains, 'In acting against the patriarchal order, she is seen by its representatives as abject – even as a terrorist – but as Kristeva argues there can be grandeur in such revolt' (2022: 13). Aurora's decision to release Maleficent's wings demonstrates her embrace of the abject and her willingness to challenge the symbolic order. Maleficent, fully restored and newly empowered, rises into the air with her wings outstretched, illuminated by the moonlight. The visual symbolism is striking as she soars above banners bearing patriarchal coats of arms, representing her ascent beyond the structures of male dominance. This moment not only signifies her personal triumph but also underscores the collective strength of the maternal bond between Maleficent and Aurora in dismantling the patriarchal order.

Conclusion: The Power of Retelling

The film's conclusion sees Aurora crowned as Queen of both the Moors and the human realm, a symbolic resolution that reflects her dual heritage and the union of two previously divided worlds. Her crowning signifies the rejection of patriarchal hierarchies in favour of a rule founded on unity and interconnectedness, themes echoed throughout the film. As Aurora ascends to power, she embodies the legacy of Maleficent's revolt, showing that their shared defiance against patriarchal oppression has reshaped both realms. In the closing moments, the narrator reveals, 'So you see, the story is not quite as you were told. And I

should know, for I was the one they called Sleeping Beauty.’ This revelation repositions Aurora as the storyteller, reframing the events of the film as an act of intimate revolt. By reclaiming her narrative and that of her adoptive mother, Aurora asserts agency over the version of the story told to future generations. Warner’s argument that reclaiming the storyteller is a way of reclaiming the mother finds new resonance here. In Aurora’s narration, the absent biological mother materialises through her adoptive mother Maleficent, and Aurora herself becomes the voice for the tale. This doubling of mother and daughter as storytellers reflects the ‘multiple storytellers layering multiple meanings’ that I outlined in my introduction, where narration itself becomes a site of female agency. As Woolverton notes, the power of storytelling lies in its ability to create and transform; through her retelling, Aurora ensures that the complexities of Maleficent’s dual role as hero and villain are preserved, challenging the reductive binaries of patriarchal myth. Aurora’s concluding words, ‘My kingdom was united not by a hero or a villain as was predicted, but by one who was both hero and villain. And her name was Maleficent’, emphasise the transformative power of this narrative act. By naming Maleficent as the unifying force, Aurora challenges the traditional fairy tale dichotomy of good versus evil, instead celebrating the complexity and power of the maternal figure.

This moment deepens Zipes’s reading of the film to encompass Maleficent as ruling the ‘the green world of social justice’ alongside Aurora, an example of female collectivity that sits in opposition to the symbolic order of patriarchal rule by one king (2016: 292). It also refuses the warrior-girl trope discussed in the first chapter by sharing the ‘happy ending’ between Aurora and Maleficent. Aurora’s revelation as the narrator throughout the film

demonstrates that her revolt does not end with the battle that overthrows Stefan and the patriarchal order; it continues into her old age as she reshapes her story and Maleficent's legacy. Creed acknowledges that storytelling can serve as a form of intimate revolt, a deeply personal engagement with abjection and transformation that enables connection with others. Aurora's narration testifies to the enduring power of revolt and, as Warner suggests, to the way every storyteller is shadowed by the absent mother.

Despite its intended family audience and fantasy setting, *Maleficent* can be located within the framework of Barbara Creed's theory of Feminist New Wave Cinema. While Creed's analysis privileges the figure of the director, my reading demonstrates that Woolverton's script and Jolie's performance constitute a feminist intervention that destabilises patriarchal archetypes at both the narrative and representational level, showing that revolt in feminist cinema need not emerge through physical action alone. Where the preceding chapter demonstrated how the erasure of female relationships perpetuates cycles of trauma and undermines the feminist potential of retellings, this chapter has shown that *Maleficent* reimagines precisely those intergenerational bonds as sources of empowerment. By shifting the axis of revolt from isolated agency to a shared articulation of narrative authority, the film disrupts the neoliberal individualism embedded in many contemporary retellings and foregrounds the transformative potential of women's relationships as sites of resistance. In so doing, *Maleficent* advances the central argument of this thesis: that it is in the representation of female relationality, rather than individual physical action, that transformative feminist work can be done. The next chapter extends this focus into the

literary realm, turning to Helen Oyeyemi's fairy tale retellings to examine how narrative structure, affect, and intergenerational trauma shape feminist meaning.

'People can smile and smile and still be villains': Villains and Victims in *White Is for Witching*, *Mr Fox* and *Boy, Snow, Bird*

Helen Oyeyemi's fairy-tale retellings, *White Is for Witching* (2009), *Mr Fox* (2011), and *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014), radically unsettle familiar villain/victim roles, probing gender, intergenerational trauma and the cultural construction of monstrosity. In this chapter, I draw on Clare Hemmings's theory of progress, loss and return in feminist storytelling to examine how narrative structure and affect shape feminist meaning. Hemmings argues that 'stories matter' not simply because they describe feminist histories, but because they 'shape the conditions of possibility' for feminist knowledge and politics.⁸⁴ I bring Hemmings into dialogue with Barbara Creed's theory of the monstrous-feminine, which exposes how female-coded monstrosity has historically been cast as abject, threatening or unruly. Extending Creed's film-based framework into literary analysis, I examine how Oyeyemi's fiction mobilises monstrosity as a mode of feminist resistance, disrupting the symbolic order. While feminist stories are often told through narratives of progress, loss, and return, those dominant narratives can exclude uncomfortable stories that disrupt the 'story' of feminism, an omission that Hemmings herself warns is inherently political. I argue that by disrupting the villain/victim binary and refusing narrative closure, Oyeyemi fractures the 'shared affective state' of feminist storytelling, uncovering hidden voices. Across all three novels, it is motherhood that serves as the primary site through which these disruptions are staged, extending and complicating the maternal dynamics explored in the preceding film chapters.

⁸⁴ Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Duke University Press, 2011), p. 1.

Oyeyemi's rewriting of fairy tale roles shares important affinities with Angela Carter, who is often credited with pioneering the subversive use of fairy tale tropes to interrogate gender, power, and desire. Critics have frequently noted this resonance: the review of Oyeyemi's *Gingerbread* in *The Guardian* observed that Oyeyemi's work 'earned her comparisons to Angela Carter', while *The Independent* argued,

in her reappropriation of fairy stories, Oyeyemi is risking comparison to Angela Carter, but it would be both foolish and denigrating to say that she is running a similar course. Helen Oyeyemi is unique. She is staking out territory which is hers and hers alone, and doing it in a way of which Carter [...] would have been proud.⁸⁵

Situating Oyeyemi in this legacy underscores one of the central arguments of this thesis: Carter's influence continues to shape how contemporary writers engage with fairy tales, while Oyeyemi, through her interweaving of western tradition and Yoruba folklore, pushes those narratives into new cultural and affective registers. This Carter–Oyeyemi connection will be explored most fully in my discussion of *Mr Fox*, where Oyeyemi's metafictional rewriting of Bluebeard can be set alongside Carter's strategies in 'The Bloody Chamber' (1979).

⁸⁵ Erica Wagner, 'Gingerbread by Helen Oyeyemi Review – a Modern Fairytale', *The Guardian*, (10 April 2019) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/apr/10/gingerbread-helen-oyeyemi-review>> [accessed 27 September 2025].

Stuart Evers, 'What Is Not Yours Is Not Yours by Helen Oyeyemi, Book Review', *The Independent*, (24 March 2016) <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/what-is-not-yours-is-not-yours-by-helen-oyeyemi-book-review-a6950496.html>> [accessed 27 September 2025].

The chapter opens by demonstrating how Creed's use of the monstrous-feminine can act as a tool for subverting the dominant narratives of progress, loss and return that Hemmings identifies, giving voice to complex and sometimes contradictory feminisms that refuse resolution. It then turns to *White Is for Witching*, where Oyeyemi blends Snow White motifs with Caribbean folklore to stage maternal haunting and inherited racism within the haunted-house setting. In *Mr Fox*, Oyeyemi complicates this inheritance by inserting herself into the metafictional 'Bluebeard' retelling. Through the figure of Mary Foxe, the 'curious bride' who challenges her author, Oyeyemi stages a metafictional confrontation with patriarchal storytelling, positioning herself simultaneously as writer and character, a move that reframes authorial power itself as a form of maternal inheritance, from Carter to Oyeyemi to her fictional creations. Finally, *Boy, Snow, Bird* reconfigures the wicked stepmother tale through the lens of race and maternal ambivalence, foregrounding how the monstrous mother is simultaneously villain, victim and survivor, a figure whose failures of maternal care are inseparable from the intergenerational trauma and silencing that fracture the fairy tale archetypes of beauty and motherhood. Taken together, these novels show how Oyeyemi adapts Carter's legacy and through Creed's monstrous-feminine and Hemmings's feminist storytelling, positions motherhood as the central site through which the fairy tale's patriarchal structures can be both reproduced and resisted.

Disrupting Feminist Narratives: Hemmings and Creed

Clare Hemmings's critique of feminist storytelling identifies three dominant narrative forms: progress, loss and return (2011: 3-4). The 'progress' narrative points to the idea of feminism evolving and improving over time, and maps on to feminist wave theory which sits within certain decades. Hemmings argues that this narrative simplifies diverse feminist thought and also silences voices that do not fit into their wave, for example black and queer feminisms (2011: 6). The 'loss' narrative views earlier feminism with nostalgia, that a more radical form of feminism has been lost. Finally, the 'return' narrative calls for a return to an earlier radical form of feminism in order to 'rescue' Western feminism (2011: 5). Hemmings argues that in order to unpick these narratives, attention must be paid to 'citation and affect' as the 'key techniques through which these narratives operate, through which they are secured and made believable'. By citation, Hemming means that who is, or is not cited in Western feminist history 'underwrites the decade by decade approach' of feminist wave theory (2011: 20). Affect is the presumed 'shared affective state' of 'despair and hope, resentment and passion' that forms the dominant narrative of progress, loss and return (2011: 24). While these structures are intended to be empowering, Hemmings warns that they also risk silencing voices that do not fit neatly into such trajectories. Her concern is not in writing 'truer' stories, but the politics 'that produce and sustain one version [...] as more true than another' (2011: 15). In particular, stories marked by racial trauma and intergenerational damage may be excluded from feminist canons in the pursuit of coherence or closure, something I explore further in the following chapter regarding what Diana Purkiss calls 'the myth of the burning times'.⁸⁶ For Hemmings, the stories we tell about feminism are never neutral: they carry ideological weight.

⁸⁶ Dianne Purkiss, 'Women's Rewriting of Myth' in Larrington, Carolyne, ed., *The Feminist Companion to Mythology* (London: Pandora Press, 1992), pp. 441-457 (p. 442).

This recognition of storytelling as a methodological and political imperative becomes especially urgent in contexts where trauma is inherited, silenced, or structurally obscured, conditions that Oyeyemi's fiction repeatedly foregrounds. Her retellings of fairy tales are not simply reinterpretations but unsettling acts of narrative resistance. Across *White Is for Witching*, *Mr Fox*, and *Boy, Snow, Bird*, Oyeyemi refuses to offer her readers moral clarity. Instead, she presents characters who occupy ethically ambivalent terrain: not quite victims, not quite villains, but figures shaped by violence and inherited trauma. This ambiguity acts as a feminist intervention that resists the binary logic particularly seen in fairy tales, and embodies what Hemmings terms 'recitation': 'when we fold what haunts these stories back into them, making visible what is, importantly, *already there*' (2011: 180). This idea of a hidden history 'haunting' the text is particularly pertinent for exploring Oyeyemi's novels and particularly her use of fairy tale; as Hemmings puts it, recitation 'operates as a breaking open of the presumed relation between the past and the present' (2011: 181).

To explore how Oyeyemi stages this resistance, I bring Hemmings into conversation with Creed's theory of the monstrous-feminine. In her analysis of horror cinema, Creed argues that female monstrosity, figures like the witch, the possessed girl, or the monstrous mother, symbolise cultural anxiety around women's bodies, sexuality and power. Yet as Creed explains, in *The Monstrous-Feminine*, these figures are reclaimed, not as villains, but as sites of radical disruption, threatening the symbolic order and refusing domestication. Creed's concept of radical abjection, the process in which identity and order are 'disturbed or undermined', provides a useful framework for reading Oyeyemi's characters, whose bodily

transgressions, psychic wounds and generational hauntings resist containment.⁸⁷ Although Creed is primarily writing about horror film, her framework is built on Kristeva's account of authorship and abjection in which she lists a canon of all male writers.⁸⁸ In *Return of the Monstrous Feminine*, Creed pushes beyond Kristeva's privileging of male writers to identify a powerful female lineage of creativity, including Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, Angela Carter, Toni Morrison, and Margaret Atwood, whom she positions as 'writers of abjection' (2022: 14). This lineage answers, in part, the 'strange spaces of silence' that Nikolchina identifies as separating women's voices throughout literary history. In this chapter, I take up that theoretical move and apply it to Oyeyemi, positioning her within this female genealogy of 'writers of abjection'.

Creed and Hemmings might seem to work in different registers, one focused on cinematic monstrosity, the other on feminist historiography, but together they offer a powerful toolkit for analysing Oyeyemi's fiction. Creed helps us read female monstrosity not as the source of horror but as a revolt against the system that produces it. Hemmings, meanwhile, reminds us that 'the story one tells about the development of feminist theory is itself political', and extends it to familial and cultural storytelling, where trauma is often reproduced through omission (2011: 14). When read together, their theories illuminate how Oyeyemi's fiction not only disrupts fairy tale archetypes, but fractures the 'political grammar' of feminist storytelling. Oyeyemi's use of chalk-eating, haunted houses and vanishing women does not produce catharsis or recovery, but forces the reader to sit with discomfort, or as Mary Foxe

⁸⁷ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Second edition (Routledge, 2024), p. 190.

⁸⁸ Barbara Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine: Feminist New Wave Cinema* (Routledge, 2022), p. 14.

terms it, the 'obscene'. This aesthetic of discomfort recalls Kristeva's claim, cited by Creed, that the 'aesthetic task' is 'to embrace the abject with all that entails' (2022: 13). Like Carter, Oyeyemi extracts the 'latent content from... traditional stories [to use as] the beginnings of new stories', but her practice also resonates with Creed's account of abjection as 'leading to the formation of new ways of thinking and speaking' (2022: 13).⁸⁹ In drawing out what is suppressed in inherited tales and transforming it into new narrative forms, Oyeyemi situates herself, in Creed's terms, as a writer 'in revolt'. Read this way, Oyeyemi does not merely inherit Carter's legacy but embodies the disruptive force of the monstrous-feminine herself. By compelling her readers to inhabit precisely this terrain, Oyeyemi performs what Hemmings terms 'recitation': folding back what haunts feminist and cultural stories into the present, making visible what is already there. In this sense, her fairy-tale retellings are not simply subversive updates but structurally and affectively radical interventions.

Angela Carter's Legacy

Like Carter, Oyeyemi complicates the roles of villain and victim, resisting simplistic reversals and instead exploring how women's experiences are shaped by cultural narrative and symbolic violence. In 'The Bloody Chamber' (1979), Carter created a feminist heroine in the form of the mother who hunts down the Marquis and saves her daughter. This has often been read as one of the most radical revisions of the 'Bluebeard' story, for it transfers agency away from the victimised bride and into a matrilineal figure, disrupting the patriarchal pattern of male violence and female passivity. However, critics such as Patricia

⁸⁹ Helen, Simpson 'Introduction' in Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (Vintage Books, 2007), pp. vii-xix (p. vii).

Duncker and Avis Lewallen have challenged Carter's approach, arguing that Carter risks simply inverting power dynamics, replacing male predators with female ones, rather than dismantling the underlying structures of violence that underpin the fairy tale.⁹⁰ As Merja Makinen explains, feminist critics have suggested that Carter is 're-writing the tales within the strait-jacket of their original structures' and that her efforts to create an 'active female erotic' are sometimes compromised by the constraints of the original forms, reproducing rather than transforming the patriarchal gaze (1992: 4).

Makinen defends Carter's work against these criticisms by highlighting the author's strategic use of irony and deconstruction. Far from being trapped by patriarchal forms, Carter uses the familiar tropes of fairy tales to engage in a complex dialogue with their ideological underpinnings. As Carter herself stated: 'I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode'.⁹¹ In this sense, what appears as constraint might also be read through Creed's Kristevan lens: Carter embraces the 'abject', working within structures that contaminate and collapse, and from this unstable terrain producing 'new ways of thinking and speaking'. Her narratives are not merely reversals but playful, subversive reimaginings that allow for multiple interpretations. For instance, in 'The Company of Wolves', Carter transforms the familiar Red Riding Hood story into a tale of female sexual awakening and agency, where the heroine does not fear

⁹⁰ Merja Makinen, 'The Bloody Chamber and the Decolonization of Feminine Sexuality', in *Feminist Review* 42 (1992), pp. 2-15 (p. 4).

⁹¹ Angela Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line', in *On Gender and Writing*, edited by Michelene Wandor (Pandora Press, 1983), pp. 69-77 (p. 69).

the wolf but embraces him, asserting her own desire, an highly influential retelling that can be seen echoed in my following chapters on Catherine Hardwicke's *Red Riding Hood* and Mattel's 'Ever After High' doll franchise, both of which develop Carter's strategy of remodelling passive fairy tale heroines into active subjects. This tension around the construction of the 'active female erotic' becomes central in the embedded tale 'What Happens Next', in which a young woman becomes enthralled by a mysterious older man precisely because he may be a murderer, not in spite of it. This unsettling dynamic recalls Carter's interest in female desire within patriarchal scripts but pushes it into even more ambivalent territory. Reading 'What Happens Next' alongside 'The Bloody Chamber' thus allows for a comparison between Carter's articulation of the active female erotic and Oyeyemi's unsettling exploration of how attraction, violence, and authorship entwine. Like Carter, whose women are, in Makinen's words 'troubled by and even powered by their own violence' (1992: 2), Oyeyemi refuses the comfort of a tidy feminist resolution. As I will show, Oyeyemi's fiction is shaped by distinct historical and racial contexts, and her emphasis on intergenerational trauma, silencing, and affective ambiguity brings a different emotional register to her storytelling.

Race, Beauty and Inheritance in *White Is for Witching*

Although *White Is for Witching* is less overtly a fairy tale retelling than *Mr Fox and Boy*, *Snow, Bird*, it draws on European, African and Caribbean folklore to explore themes of beauty, race and female inheritance. The novel makes passing references to familiar tales such as the Grimms' 'Hansel and Gretel' and Perrault's 'Bluebeard', while also evoking 'Snow White' through recurring motifs: the red and white apple: and the frequent use of

black, white and red, colours strongly associated with the traditional tale. It also appears Oyeyemi is playing with ideas she explores in more depth in later novels such as *Boy*, *Snow*, *Bird*: the suggestion of a black Snow White character and using the fairy tale to explore themes such as racism, lost mothers, beauty and destructive female relationships. In addition to these European influences, Oyeyemi draws on Caribbean folklore through her use of the soucouyant, who by day takes the form of an old woman with wrinkled skin, but at night sheds her skin and is able to fly in search of victims to feed on. The soucouyant appears in the background of the novel's haunting, embodied through the figure of the 'goodlady', and complicates the story's fairy tale logic with a cross-cultural layering of myth, monstrosity, and possession.

Set in 29 Barton Road, a haunted guesthouse in Dover, the novel centres on twins Miranda and Eliot Silver, who live with their father, following the death of their mother, a photographer killed while working in Haiti. Miranda suffers from pica, a compulsive eating disorder that drives her to consume chalk and plastic, an affliction that runs through the maternal line of the Silver women. These women – Miranda, her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother – haunt the house both literally and figuratively. The novel is narrated by Eliot, Miranda's Black girlfriend Ore and the house itself: 29 Barton Road is animated by ancestral trauma and by the 'goodlady', a spirit conjured by Miranda's grandmother Anna Good, who was renamed after marrying into the Silver family. This spirit, seemingly fused with Anna herself, serves to torture racial others and ultimately expel them from the house. Miranda believes she is possessed by the goodlady, and this possession appears to be a symbolic channel for the inherited racism and repression passed through the Silver line. The

family name 'Silver' is itself a marker of inherited whiteness, reinforcing the maternal line as a transmitter not just of trauma but of racial ideology. The guesthouse at 29 Barton Road functions as a poisoned site of feminised legacy, where the power of the maternal line is preserved but perverted, used not to nurture, but to torment. The novel traces the events leading to Miranda's disappearance: she is last seen walking barefoot into the night. Her fate is ambiguous: she may have escaped, committed suicide, or, in keeping with the house's uncanny agency, been absorbed into the structure as punishment for her love of Ore. By refusing a clear narrative closure for Miranda, *White Is for Witching* unsettles the reader's expectations of villainy and victimhood to reshape the grammar of the fairy tale form.

Snow White and the Poisoned Apple

Miranda initially appears to embody a subversive version of Snow White, but Oyeyemi rewrites her passivity into an act of resistance, reworking the poisoned apple motif into a form of sacrifice. The novel opens with the mystery of 'where is Miranda?' and various possible answers from different characters. The first is Ore who says, 'Miranda Silver is in Dover, in the ground beneath her mother's house. / Her throat is blocked with a slice of apple'.⁹² This imagery is reminiscent of Snow White who appears to die after biting a poisoned apple proffered to her by her wicked stepmother; the apple is half red and half white. Ore's belief that Miranda is lying beneath the ground with an apple blocking her throat invokes true love's kiss waking Snow White and dislodging the apple. Miranda is

⁹² Helen Oyeyemi, *White Is for Witching*, (London, Picador, 2009), p. 1.

further identified as the heroine of the tale when Ore explains that, unlike the passive Snow White who is tricked into eating the poisoned apple, Miranda has chosen this fate 'as the only way to fight the soucouyant', which she believes has possessed her (2009: 1).

Oyeyemi extends the Snow White metaphor to Ore, who also receives a poisoned apple, but unlike Miranda, rejects the tale's logic, only to find herself unravelled by the house's racialised violence. The apple offered to Ore is half white and half red, like that offered to Snow White in the Brothers Grimm fairy tale, and clearly grounds Ore in the fairy tale framework of a story that prizes white skin. When Ore goes to stay at the guesthouse it appears on her pillow: 'It had arrived while my back was turned [...] It was only white on one side. The other side was red. [...] I dropped the apple into the bin on my way out of the room' (2009: 1). 29 Barton Road leaves the apple for Ore, putting Ore in the role of Snow White, a role that Ore rejects. Likewise, Ore's rejection of the poisoned apple causes her to waste away; she loses weight to the extent her family comment on it and manages to perfect the appearance of eating at the dinner table whilst being 'careful to not let any food or water touch [her] lips' (2009: 215). Ore begins to lose her identity, fading away not only physically but also metaphorically. Shortly after the incident with the apple on her pillow Ore takes a shower in the guesthouse and sees her skin coming off on the towel as she dries herself:

I frowned and looked at my towel. Where it had touched me it was striped with black liquid, as dense as paint [...] 'The black's coming off,' someone outside the bathroom door commented. Then they whistled 'Rule, Britannia' and laughed (2009: 214).

As Sarah Ilott observes in *New Postcolonial British Genres* (2015), Oyeyemi here literalises the violence of racism, making Ore's body the site upon which the logics of colonialism and assimilation are enacted. This dissolution continues as Ore notices Miranda's lipstick imprinted on her own lips, a red she cannot scrub away. Having rejected the apple, she is nonetheless marked by Miranda's colour, the 'lips as red as blood' of Snow White, a beauty ideal rooted in patriarchal and racialised standards. In losing her own colour while taking on another's, Ore's identity is destabilised: she is caught between erasure and forced assimilation.

Oyeyemi's use of the traditional 'Snow White' colour motifs of red, white and black throughout the novel serve to remind the reader of the fairy tale as well as playing with the female beauty ideals of western society: skin as white as snow and lips as red as blood, hair as black as ebony. The repetition of red-on-white imagery not only invokes these standards of femininity but also echoes the colours of the English flag, a symbol later tied to the right-wing nationalism that haunts the text. Oyeyemi thereby collapses the categories of gendered beauty and national identity, exposing how both women's bodies and the 'body' of the nation are policed by the same symbolic palette. Lily Silver's very name embodies whiteness and shimmer, and her death in Haiti further complicates this imagery: the site of her demise is itself freighted with colonial history and the memory of black resistance. Eliot's premonition of 'white feathers tipped with blood' entwines beauty with violence, while 29 Barton Road re-narrates Lily's death in explicitly racist terms: 'Stupid, stupid; Lily had been warned not to go to Haiti. I warned her. [...] But black wells only yield black water' (2009: 5-9). Here black, the third element of the Snow White triad, is reconfigured as a

marker of contamination. By weaving the motifs of red, white and black through both fairy tale aesthetics and racialised violence, Oyeyemi demonstrates how deeply entangled ideals of femininity, nationalism and colonial power are, and how destructive they become when imposed on female and racialised bodies.

The Soucouyant

Just as Oyeyemi uses the poisoned apple and the colour triad of red, white and black to expose how racialised and gendered identities are imposed and eroded, she further complicates these dynamics through the figure of the soucouyant. Oyeyemi aligns Miranda not only with the innocent Snow White but also with the monstrous stepmother and the Caribbean soucouyant, a being associated with female autonomy, rage and abjection. Ore describes the soucouyant as ‘a double danger – there is the danger of meeting her, and the danger of becoming her’ (2009: 155). If Miranda is possessed by the goodlady and the goodlady is the soucouyant, then the implication is that Miranda is also a soucouyant. Miranda is cast as a liminal figure, both Snow White and evil queen, victim and soucouyant, neither wholly innocent nor wholly monstrous, blurring the boundaries between self and other, good and evil. Her possession by the racist ‘goodlady’ suggests a loss of stable identity, a hallmark of the monstrous-feminine in Creed’s framework, the embrace of which leads to a revolt against the patriarchal symbolic order.

When Miranda asks Ore to tell her a story about a girl who ‘gets away’, Ore tells her the story of a girl who finds where the soucouyant hides her skin: she treats it with salt and

pepper so the monster cannot re-enter her 'old woman skin' and watches as she burns when the sun comes up (2009: 166). Miranda sympathises with the soucouyant and thinks that she is the 'girl who gets away' that Miranda had requested from the story:

'The soucouyant gets away, though. Doesn't she count as a girl?'

I drew back. 'No, she doesn't,' I said. 'She is a monster. She dies.'

'Does she?'

'All monsters deserve to die.'

Miranda didn't say anything (2009: 166).

Oyeyemi's use of the soucouyant as the apparent villain of her story is interesting as it is tied up in misogynistic attitudes, particularly directed at old women. Giselle Anatol argues that as the soucouyant is always female the stories have developed as a way to 'socialise women to accept patriarchal mandates and condition men to expect women to do so'.⁹³

Anatol claims that the soucouyant is so feared because,

Unlike the "good" woman who marries, is faithful, bears and nurtures children, and anchors the domestic space, the soucouyant of conventional tales is a woman who satiates her individual physical needs (including the sexual desires associated with bloodsucking). She is all the more frightening for completely abandoning her physical body, rather than embracing its alleged limitations (physical weakness) and purposes (childbirth). She is not just a potential source of danger to individual subjects; she is an active agent in society's destruction.⁹⁴

⁹³ Giselle Anatol, 'Vampires from the Caribbean: The Soucouyant' (2009) University of Stirling (<http://www.gothic.stir.ac.uk/guestblog/vampires-from-the-caribbean-the-soucouyant/>) [accessed 14 November 2016].

⁹⁴ Anatol, 'Vampires from the Caribbean: The Soucouyant'.

Creed identifies the vampire as one of the archetypes of the monstrous-feminine, figures that embody female desire and disrupt the normative roles of nurturer and mother. Oyeyemi's soucouyant, with her autonomy and hunger, directly embodies this feminist version of the vampire, making her both terrifying and transgressive. Miranda's identification with the soucouyant rather than the heroine reflects her growing sense of herself as monstrous and her instinctive sympathy with figures who defy social expectation. Ilott describes Miranda's sympathy for the soucouyant, reading her communion with the morning sun 'a signal of her liberation'.⁹⁵ Miranda says nothing when Ore states that 'all monsters deserve to die', possibly because she disagrees with the sentiment, or because she does not agree that the soucouyant is a monster, or because she sees herself in the soucouyant. Ilott adds that folklorists have reclaimed the soucouyant against colonial pressures for female submission: 'It is significant, in light of this, that Miri reads the soucouyant as a good figure, a woman trapped in ancient skin who recognises the potential for escape, flight and agency' (2015: 73). Miranda too is trapped in an 'ancient skin' embodied by the house, and her reading of the soucouyant's release at sunrise as liberation foreshadows the sacrifice she later makes.

Anatol's reading of the soucouyant as a woman who satiates her own appetites and sexual desires closely resembles Miranda and the way she increasingly views Ore as something to be consumed. As Ore lies sleeping next to her Miranda fantasises about eating her, 'running her nose over the other girl's body, turning the beginning of a bite into a kiss whenever Ore stirred. [...] Her head had spun with the desire to taste' (2009: 191). This desire to feast on

⁹⁵ Ilott, Sarah, *New Postcolonial British Genres: Shifting the Boundaries* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 73.

Ore's body parts also aligns Miranda with Snow White's wicked stepmother who in the Grimm fairy tale asks a huntsman to bring back Snow White's lungs and liver for her to boil in brine and eat (although Disney's retelling of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* and the queen requesting Snow White's heart is more commonly remembered). Miranda too longs for Ore's heart, and not metaphorically:

She lay her head against Ore's chest heard Ore's heart. The beat was ponderous. Like an oyster, living quietly in its serving-dish shell. [...] Miranda could have taken it, she knew she could. Ore would hardly have felt it (2009: 191).

Ilott writes, 'What starts out as a scene of erotic and gastronomic desire develops more sinister undertones as the language becomes selfish, greedy and even murderous. The novel implies that it is not, as the Silver women fear, the white majority who are at risk of being consumed' (2015: 65). Maisha Wester also points to the use of white cannibalism of black bodies in *African American Gothic in the Era of Black Lives Matter* (2025), as a way of 'making whiteness strange' in texts that traditionally treat the black body as 'other'. Wester points to the use of cannibalism to demonstrate 'white socio-political and cultural appropriations of Black bodies, culture, and artefacts'.⁹⁶ Wester's reading of cannibalism as a way of 'making whiteness strange' highlights how Miranda's desire enacts this racialised consumption. Yet unlike the wicked stepmother who devours in order to maintain her 'fairness', Miranda is acutely aware of the monstrosity of her longing, writing in her notebook: '*Ore is not food. I think I am a monster*' (2009: 192). Like the wicked queen who seeks Snow White's heart to remain the 'fairest of them all', Miranda recognises that her

⁹⁶ Maisha Wester, *African American Gothic in the Era of Black Lives Matter*, 1st edn (Cambridge University Press, 2025), p. 42.

own hunger reproduces the racism of white cannibalism, a desire to preserve the privileges of 'fairness' and whiteness by consuming the black other.

In contrast, the Brothers Grimm's Snow White is repeatedly undone by her own desire: the queen exploits her longing three times, first with laces pulled so tight they stop her breath, then with a poisoned comb, and finally with the apple. Each time the dwarves rescue her and warn her against speaking to strangers and each time she cannot resist. When the queen offers the apple, she has calculated precisely for this weakness, eating the white half herself: 'Snow White longed for the beautiful apple, and when she saw that the peasant woman was taking a bite, she could no longer resist.' In 'Snow White' female desire is framed as a weakness that must be managed by male guardians or it will prove fatal. Oyeyemi refuses this logic, when Ore is offered the apple she drops it in the bin, her rejection is an act of self-determination not allowed by the traditional tale. Where the Brothers Grimm fairy tale punishes female desire with death, Oyeyemi transforms it into the ground of agency, Ore's refusal and Miranda's acceptance are both acts of will that Snow White is never permitted. That this occurs within a relationship between two women is the point, their desire exists entirely outside the patriarchal economy, answerable to no male guardian, no prince, no symbolic order.

The radical nature of Oyeyemi's rewriting can be more clearly understood by placing her into conversation with Angela Carter, the author with whom she is so often compared. In Angela Carter's 'The Lady of the House of Love' from *The Bloody Chamber*, which rewrites the Sleeping Beauty narrative, a vampiric Countess is humanised by an innocent soldier and dies as a result of her refusal to feed upon him. Like Miranda, the Countess is both victim

and monster, trapped in a cycle of consumption that she does not fully control. Carter's Countess is described as having 'no mouth with which to kiss, no hands with which to caress, only the fangs and talons of a beast of prey', just as Miranda's desire to kiss Ore becomes inseparable from the urge to bite.⁹⁷ In both texts, intimacy is haunted by violence, and female desire is rendered monstrous. Yet Carter humanises the Countess through her encounter with the soldier, a man who represents rationality and life, and who inadvertently precipitates her death by allowing her to imagine an alternative. Carter's story questions the villain/victim script and the patriarchal gender roles that support it: her soldier cycles off at the end of the narrative to take his place on the battlefields of World War One, becoming another kind of victim to patriarchal violence. Oyeyemi goes further, however, by displacing the heterosexual frame: Ore is no soldier-saviour but another woman, marked by racial otherness and by her own refusal of the Snow White script. This shift complicates the politics of rescue: Miranda's sacrifice does not redeem her from her racist inheritance, just as Ore's survival is not uncomplicated.

As an embodiment of the monstrous-feminine, Miranda is not merely a cautionary tale or villain, but a site of feminist possibility. Her identification with the soucouyant marks a potential for transformation and revolt, echoing Creed's view that the monstrous-feminine can catalyse new forms of agency. Her recognition that consuming the white chalk of Dover starves rather than nourishes her can be read as a journey through abjection, confronting the horror of the patriarchal system. Believing herself possessed, she begins to embrace monstrosity as inheritance, understanding the trauma embedded in the Silver line and the

⁹⁷ Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (Vintage Books, 2007), p. 121.

structures of the patriarchal symbolic order that must be dismantled. Her acknowledgement that Ore sustains her, even as her love harms Ore (*'I am a monster'*), reconciles her to her fate. While Snow White blindly accepts the poisoned apple, Miranda sees it for what it is and actively consumes it in order to save Ore.

Oyeyemi's refusal to resolve Miranda's fate within a redemptive feminist narrative resonates with what Catherine Spooner terms 'barbaric feminism'. Spooner argues that *White Is for Witching* 'disrupts innumerable racist and misogynist paradigms, including that of the clean and proper, white, bourgeois, female subject, but provides no clear feminist message'.⁹⁸ Barbaric feminism, as Spooner defines it, 'stays with the trouble'; it refuses the dream of progress toward a safe or rationalised future, and instead opens up 'an arrested space, in which the savagery of girlhood plays out, an unsettled and unsettling – and distinctly Gothic – feminism' (2019: 114). Miranda's chalk-eating, 'consuming her own whiteness even as she symbolically erodes the borders of Britishness that her great-grandmother fought so hard to shore up', becomes emblematic of this barbaric mode. Her death is framed by Ore as an act of agency, a choice to fight the soucouyant, yet the recursive structure of the novel suggests that Miranda, buried with the apple lodged in her throat, may awaken and the story repeat, as Spooner notes, 'a conclusion in which progress and reason are triumphant is denied' (2019: 114). Together, Creed's monstrous-feminine and Spooner's barbaric feminism reveal how Oyeyemi resists the redemptive closure of fairy tale logic, leaving readers instead with repetition, ambivalence and unsettling possibility.

⁹⁸ Catherine Spooner, 'Unsettling Feminism: The Savagery of Gothic' in Hogle, Jerrold E., and Robert Miles, with Jerrold E. Hogle and Robert Miles, *The Gothic and Theory: An Edinburgh Companion*, Edinburgh Companions to the Gothic, 1st edn (University Press, 2019), pp. 103-115, (p. 114).

Wicked Stepmothers and Generational Disappointment

Returning to Oyeyemi's own framing of 'wicked stepmother stories' as narratives of intergenerational disappointment, the novel reveals how inherited trauma shapes not only the daughters but the mothers, too. Oyeyemi has said that 'every wicked stepmother story is to do with the way women disappoint each other across generations', a claim that offers a compelling lens for reading her haunted house in *White Is for Witching*.⁹⁹ The stepmother is not literal here, but the pattern of disappointment, control and inherited harm echoes across four generations of Silver women, all bound to 29 Barton Road, a house that is itself a manifestation of their entangled traumas. In this sense, Oyeyemi rewrites the fairy-tale figure of the stepmother into a distinctly gothic register, where the biblical 'sins of the fathers' become the disappointments of mothers and daughters, a matrilineal inheritance of guilt, confession and haunting.

If there is a villain in this novel, it is not any single woman, but the house they inhabit, and even then, the house is only 'as good as they are'. If the house is the villain then it is only what the Silver women have made it. The dysfunctional and damaging relationships between the women are not hidden, Miranda knows that Lily 'never knew her mother, and she doesn't care' and cites it as one of the key things that makes Lily who she is (2009: 7). The origin of this malevolence is traced back to Anna Good, whose grief and rage after her

⁹⁹ Liz Hoggard, 'Helen Oyeyemi: "I'm Interested in the Way Women Disappoint One Another"', *The Guardian* (2 March 2014) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/mar/02/helen-oyeyemi-women-disappoint-one-another>> [accessed 10 May 2025].

husband's death animate the house's consciousness: 'I hate them,' she said. 'Blackies, Germans, killers, dirty... dirty killers. He should have stayed here with me. Shouldn't have let him leave. Bring him back, bring him back, bring him back to me' (2009: 118). This passage reveals the origin story of the house as a container of racialised fear, loss and possession, feelings passed down through Jennifer, Lily and Miranda. The house's voice becomes a spectral record of how women not only suffer but perpetuate emotional violence. This resonates directly with Oyeyemi's notion of disappointment between women: these are not passive victims of patriarchy, but participants in cycles of trauma and violence.

Jennifer, Lily's mother, becomes one such casualty. Her attempt to escape, to leave Dover, her child and her inherited role, is thwarted by the house, which may have lured her into its walls. One version of the story claims Jennifer disappeared through 'a door in her bedroom that she had not seen before' (2009: 85). As Manuel Aguirre observes, the Gothic universe is 'one of spaces [...] with doors opening from the everyday 'domain of rationality and intelligible events' to 'the world of the sublime, terrifying, chaotic Numinous which transcends human reason'.¹⁰⁰ Jennifer's disappearance literalises this threshold: the domestic bedroom door becomes a portal into the numinous and terrifying. In this sense, the Silver women echo Bluebeard's wives, trapped within the house's forbidden chambers. Another version of Jennifer's disappearance suggests that Anna strangled her:

Believe it, don't believe it, as you will. Of course there is the idea that Anna caught Jennifer and tried to stop her leaving, that the two fought, that Jennifer strangled to

¹⁰⁰ Manuel Aguirre cited in Ashlee Joyce, *The Gothic in Contemporary British Trauma Fiction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 14-15.

death in a circle made of Anna's fingers. But that is unrealistic for a number of reasons. And besides, without a corpse there is no proof (2009: 84-5).

The novel does not confirm either version, forcing the reader to reckon with an unresolved villainy; the deliberate ambiguity prevents Anna being explicitly named as the villain. The narrative's refusal to say outright that Anna killed Jennifer universalises the experience of trauma as irresolvable haunting, but the more plausible reading is that Anna did indeed murder her daughter. This tension between ambiguity and likelihood raises the ethical stakes of Oyeyemi's storytelling: how far does the refusal of certainty illuminate trauma, and how far does it risk obscuring violence?

Trauma theory clarifies why Oyeyemi's narrative refuses to resolve this ambiguity and why that refusal is itself ethically significant rather than evasive. In *Studies in Hysteria* (1895), Freud and Breuer describe traumatic memory as organised in concentric layers around a 'pathogenic nucleus', the original traumatic event buried so deeply that even the 'talking cure' cannot make 'direct headway' towards it, rendering it available to victims only indirectly and belatedly.¹⁰¹ Drawing on this model, Cathy Caruth defines trauma as a perpetually 'unclaimed experience', one that exceeds the victim's capacity for assimilation and returns through repetition and haunting rather than direct recall (2019: 6). For Caruth, trauma is not only an individual wound but also something that circulates collectively, 'not only the passing on of a trauma but also the passing on of a survival that can only be possessed within crisis larger than any single individual or any single generation' (2019: 6). However, as Ashlee Joyce stresses, Caruth's universalising model carries risks; critics such as

¹⁰¹ Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria*, trans. by James Strachey and Alix Strachey, ed. by Angela Richards, Pelican Freud Library, 3 (London: Penguin, 1974), p. 218.

Dominick LaCapra and A. R. Denham warn that collapsing distinctions between individual and collective trauma can obscure the specific social and political conditions in which trauma emerges (2019: 11). In *White Is for Witching*, Oyeyemi seems acutely aware of this danger: while the novel stages trauma as repetitive and unresolved, it also locates that repetition in particular histories of gendered and racialised violence, resisting any simple move to universalise suffering.

The house's justification for Jennifer's fate is disturbingly pragmatic, presenting its actions as a way of keeping Jennifer safe from the atrocities happening in the world: 'Phnom Penh burning [...], the young bones in the mud at Choung Ek, the Cambodians [...] sprawled in graves [...] they dug for themselves' (2009: 85). This invocation of the Cambodian genocide demonstrates the way the Silver women, and thus the house, have absorbed horrors beyond their own familial grief. Yet here the politics of trauma representation become deeply fraught. As Joyce notes, drawing on Martin Modlinger and Philipp Sonntag, literary trauma theory carries the risk of turning 'speaking about other people's pain' into an 'ethical minefield', since it can blur distinctions between victim and perpetrator and even produce 'surrogate victimage', where the suffering of others is appropriated and cheapened (2019: 10). The Silver women, blinded by their racism, enact precisely this danger: they transform themselves into surrogate victims, folding global atrocities into their own narrative of loss and exclusion. In doing so, they cheapen the suffering of others and perpetuate their own sense of dispossession.

Using Joyce's framework, we can situate *White Is for Witching* within a broader field of contemporary British trauma fiction, where the Gothic becomes a vehicle for representing

belatedness and repetition. Like the novels Joyce cites, such as Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, which transforms guilt into a recursive narrative that can never achieve resolution, Oyeyemi's novel refuses closure and insists on the lingering presence of harm. Sharon Rose Wilson makes a similar point in her reading of Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride*, observing that all the characters are both the Robber and the Robber's victims, 'children of the violence that has characterised human history'.¹⁰² This formulation usefully highlights how villainy can be distributed rather than confined to a single figure, but it also risks universalising trauma, collapsing different histories of violence into a shared condition. Oyeyemi pushes against this tendency; in *White Is for Witching* the house is not simply a symbol of 'human' violence in general, but specifically of racism, misogyny, and intergenerational disappointment. The malevolent spirit of 29 Barton Road is born out of the consciousness of people, time, and place, and is thus a socially constructed villain in the most literal sense.

Reimagining the Bluebeard Tradition in Mr Fox

In *Mr Fox*, Oyeyemi reimagines the 'Bluebeard' tradition through a metafictional duel between author and muse. The tale of the monstrous bridegroom becomes a frame for examining how stories naturalise gendered violence, positioning fiction as both complicit in and capable of disrupting oppressive patterns. Through the narrative sparring of Mary Foxe, positioned as Bluebeard's curious bride who confronts St John Fox, her author, Oyeyemi stages a dialogue between character and creator, blurring the boundaries of narrative authority. Like Carter, she extracts latent content from traditional tales to generate new

¹⁰² Sharon Rose Wilson, *Myths and Fairy Tales in Contemporary Women's Fiction: From Atwood to Morrison* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 19.

stories, foregrounding abjection, curiosity and revolt. By prising open Bluebeard's chamber and exposing its narrative mechanisms, Oyeyemi performs a radical retelling that unsettles the scripts through which women's deaths have long been rendered as spectacle. This section begins by situating *Mr Fox* within the wider Bluebeard lineage before turning to its dialogue with Carter and to the destabilisation of villain/victim roles that underpins Oyeyemi's feminist storytelling.

The 'Bluebeard' story, popularised by Charles Perrault in 1697, tells of a wealthy nobleman who repeatedly marries and murders his wives. In the best-known version, Bluebeard entrusts his new wife with the keys to his castle, warning her never to open one particular room. Overcome by curiosity, she disobeys and discovers the corpses of his previous wives hanging from hooks. When Bluebeard returns and finds the bloody key, he prepares to execute her, but her brothers intervene, killing him before he can deliver the fatal blow. The tale ends with the wife inheriting his fortune and remarrying. Other versions of the tale sharpen different aspects of the monstrous bridegroom. In the Brothers Grimm's 'Fitcher's Bird' (1843), the heroine survives by disguising herself in feathers and outwitting the murderer, foregrounding trickery and escape. 'The Robber Bridegroom' (1812), also by the Brothers Grimm, emphasises cannibalistic violence and betrayal, while the English folktale 'Mr Fox', collected by Joseph Jacobs in 1890, features the bride who discovers her betrothed is a killer and confronts him with the bloody evidence. Oyeyemi's decision to name her novel after 'Mr Fox' signals her interest in this lineage, but she transforms the story into a metafictional duel over the very narratives that legitimise violence against women.

Perrault's framing of the wife's curiosity as culpable is legible in the text itself. Bluebeard presents his prohibition as a single, reasonable exception to his otherwise extraordinary generosity: 'open everything, go everywhere, but I absolutely forbid you to go into that little room.'¹⁰³ The diminutive description of the 'little' key, the 'little' room miniaturises the prohibition while amplifying the wife's transgression and his tone throughout is that of a patriarch addressing a child rather than a husband addressing a wife. When she reaches the forbidden door, the narrative frames her curiosity not as rational suspicion but as a kind of madness she cannot control: 'her curiosity so tormented her' that 'the temptation was so strong she could not resist.' (2008: 6-7). The discovery that awaits her of 'the corpses of all the women whom Bluebeard had married and then murdered, one after the other', is presented not as a vindication of her suspicion but as the consequence of her disobedience (2008: 7).

Perrault ends with a moral that makes his position explicit: 'Curiosity is a charming passion but may only be satisfied at the price of a thousand regrets.' Yet the tale's own logic undermines this framing entirely. If curiosity is the crime that justifies the wives' murders, what did the first wife do? She could not have been curious about a room that contained no bodies yet, her murder was entirely pre-emptive. Bluebeard's system does not punish transgression; it manufactures it, creating the prohibition in order to have grounds for the violence that was always already planned. Angela Carter's translation exposes this irony by adding 'Another Moral': 'No modern husband would dare to be half so terrible, nor to demand of his wife such an impossible thing as to stifle her curiosity.' (2008:10). Where

¹⁰³ Charles Perrault, Angela Carter, and Jack Zipes, *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault*, Penguin Modern Classics (Penguin, 2008), p. 6.

Perrault's moral silences the wives by blaming them, Carter's answer-back refuses that silencing, performing in her editorial act the same gesture of feminist reclamation that, as this chapter argues, Oyeyemi enacts in *Mr Fox*, giving voice to the women the tale most wishes to keep quiet.

In *Secrets Beyond the Door: The Story of Bluebeard and his Wives* (2006), Maria Tatar argues that 'Bluebeard' stages 'the intricate workings of the mind, making manifest what is usually hidden from view'.¹⁰⁴ She asks whether it is a moral tale, warning women against disobedience, a suspense narrative about a husband's mysterious past, a psychological thriller set in 'the mansion of the mind', or 'a "double-plotted narrative" about two people who mirror each other in their use of duplicity' (2006: 53). Unlike most canonical fairy tales, 'Bluebeard' negates the 'happily ever after' by showing what can happen after marriage and what can go wrong within the domestic sphere. Perrault's literary version reduces the agency of the wife and punishes her for her curiosity. While folk versions emphasised her cunning, delaying execution by suggesting she wished to 'tart herself up for her execution' in order to buy time until her rescue, Perrault refigured her as pious and penitent, asking only for time to pray (2006: 58). This shift erases the heroine's trickster qualities, aligning curiosity with sin rather than agency. These folk tales also allowed for the dead wives to be 'reassembled' and brought back to life, something that Perrault's version effectively silenced. Tatar suggests that such versions of 'Bluebeard' can be read as a 'genealogy of survival', where the heroine's curiosity becomes empowering, a means of resisting domination and asserting control over her life (2006: 59). The Bluebeard bride as trickster

¹⁰⁴ Maria Tatar, *Secrets Beyond the Door: The Story of Bluebeard and His Wives* (Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 53.

also finds a parallel in Oyeyemi's use of Yoruba folklore, where the figure of Anansi embodies cunning resistance against more powerful forces.

The violence of Bluebeard also intersects with the presentation of the death of a beautiful woman as spectacle. As Tatar notes, Bluebeard's wives are often displayed 'with their heads on pedestals or with their bodies hanging from the walls, like portraits in a gallery' (2006: 65). Murder becomes a form of art. Oyeyemi herself has acknowledged the allure and the danger of this trope:

As a reader and film watcher, I find the death and the maiden trope spectacular when it's properly done—for example, when it feels organic to the story and doesn't participate in a dodgy aesthetic. [...] All I ask of a story about the murder of a woman, or the murder of several women, is that it doesn't imply that her death was beautiful, or that the murdered woman is in some way more beautiful or potent or interesting in death.¹⁰⁵

Mr Fox can be read as her response to that problem. St John Fox is a novelist whose female characters are routinely killed off, their deaths transformed into literary tableaux. Just as Bluebeard's chamber turns women's bodies into a collection, so St John's novels accumulate murdered heroines for the pleasure of readers. Oyeyemi literalises this connection by having Mary Foxe, his fictional creation, 'return' to accuse him of being a serial killer. But *Mr Fox* also operates on another level: Oyeyemi positions herself as the curious wife, prising open the locked chamber of the death-and-the-maiden trope to see what happens when its

¹⁰⁵ Crispin, J., 'Sex, Love and Murder in "Mr. Fox"', *Kirkus Reviews*, (2014) <<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/news-and-features/articles/sex-love-and-murder-mr-fox/>> [accessed 18 May 2025].

mechanisms are exposed. In doing so, she enacts the very curiosity Tatar identifies, not only through her characters but in her own authorial practice, testing how far the Bluebeard script can be pushed, unsettled and rewritten. Oyeyemi thus adapts the 'Bluebeard' tale into a metafictional exploration of authorship, violence and complicity. At the same time, her assumption of the curious wife's role aligns with what Creed, drawing on Kristeva, describes as the monstrous-feminine 'in revolt'. Oyeyemi's authorial curiosity therefore performs the very aesthetic task Kristeva identifies, to 'embrace the abject with all that entails', unsettling the cultural scripts that have long normalised women's deaths as beautiful spectacle.

Stories Within Stories

In *Mr Fox*, St John Fox, a 1930s American novelist, is visited by his fictional creation Mary Foxe, who accuses him of being a serial killer for consistently killing off his female characters and challenges him to change his ways. What follows is a series of stories within stories, weaving together fairy tale and genre fiction in a battle of wits between St John and Mary. At first the boundaries of authorship appear clear: St John begins with the story of a man who cuts off his wife's head, and this tale results in Mary losing her own head back in St John's study. When St John asks how his story could impact on Mary in 'real life' Mary responds with 'It's all very technical [...] You couldn't possibly understand'.¹⁰⁶ Oyeyemi appears to be making a point about how violence against women in art can impact on real life, while at the same time mocking the idea that it can have an impact with such a ridiculous situation. St John pleads that 'that's just the way the story went. I didn't know

¹⁰⁶ Helen Oyeyemi, *Mr Fox*, (Picador, 2011), p. 9.

that was us' (2011: 9). St John's acknowledgment that his stories 'really happen' in Mary's life connects to Hemmings's notion that feminist stories do not simply communicate ideological content but affective experience, the way in which violence in art and media shapes our emotional responses. St John's dissonance, both creator and destroyer, challenges readers to think about the way narratives become social truths, not just in fiction but in the real world.

The expected structure of a Bluebeard tale is one of opposition: a monstrous husband; a disobedient wife; and a chamber of horrors. One would anticipate, therefore, that a retelling such as *Mr Fox* would provide a clear division between villain and victim. Yet Oyeyemi deliberately unsettles this expectation. As the stories within stories proliferate, it becomes increasingly difficult to tell who is narrating, St John or Mary, and who occupies the role of Bluebeard or his bride. The voice who rebukes St John Fox for his ways, Mary, is St John Fox himself. When St John explains that he did not know how his stories would impact Mary (such as causing her to lose her head), he is really acknowledging the impact that the stories he tells have on himself. In an interview, Oyeyemi said that this 'battle of words' between Mary and her creator was what she found most enjoyable about writing the novel and that 'the sparks between Mary and Mr. Fox over the necessity of the "death and the maiden" trope' are the most interesting part.¹⁰⁷ Mary challenges St John Fox on the treatment of women in his work and points out the danger in what Mr Fox does:

¹⁰⁷ Crispin, 'Sex, Love and Murder in "Mr. Fox"'.

What you're doing is building a horrible kind of logic. People read what you write and they say, 'Yes, he is talking about things that really happen,' and they keep reading and it makes sense to them. You're explaining things that can't be defended [...]. It was because he needed to let off steam [...] it was because she was irritating and stupid, it was because she lied to him, made a fool of him, [...] it was because 'nothing is more poetic than the death of a beautiful woman', it was because of this it was because of that. It's obscene to make such things reasonable (2011: 120).

Mary Foxe challenges this contempt for women, which has taken the form of glamorisation of the murder and torture of women in film, literature and art. Mary's intervention unsettles emotional norms through which gendered violence is made to feel inevitable, justified, or romantic. However, in an interview Oyeyemi states that she does not feel *Mr Fox* argues one way or another regarding the depiction of violence against women in art, but that she would 'be thrilled if it adds to the fund of narratives that question the legitimacy of such a centrepiece' which adds further evidence positioning Oyeyemi as the agential 'curious wife' playing with what it feels like to be villain and / or victim.¹⁰⁸

This instability recalls what Maria Tatar identifies as the central tension of the Bluebeard tradition: its silencing of women. In Perrault's version, the bride is stripped of her cunning and recast as penitent, her curiosity framed as sin. The murdered wives remain voiceless, their stories locked behind the forbidden door. Later retellings attempt to redress this silencing, granting the heroine trickster qualities or even reanimating the dead brides so that they can speak. Oyeyemi extends this gesture by refusing to stabilise narrative voice

¹⁰⁸ Crispin, J., 'Sex, Love and Murder in "Mr. Fox"'.

altogether. When Mary Foxe loses her head in one of St John's stories, only to continue speaking in his study, the line between storyteller and victim collapses. The effect is not simply to 'give voice' to the silenced, but to reveal that the silencer and the silenced may be aspects of the same figure. As Tatar puts it, *Bluebeard* can be read as 'a double plot about two people who mirror each other in their use of duplicity' (2006: 53). In *Mr Fox*, that mirroring becomes literal: Mary and St John are not just reflections of each other but both projections of Oyeyemi herself. This collapse of roles complicates the moral economy of the Bluebeard tale. Instead of identifying a clear villain, Oyeyemi suggests that violence against women is embedded in the very structures of storytelling. St John is horrified to find that his fictions rebound on Mary, but Mary herself is also his creation, an extension of his imagination. Here, villain and victim are not separate figures but two halves of the same psyche. *Mr Fox* takes up the tradition Tatar describes, where curiosity and trickery can become acts of survival, but complicates it by showing how even survival is entangled with the very logics it seeks to resist. The difficulty of disentangling villain and victim in *Mr Fox* can be illuminated by returning to Carter's 'The Bloody Chamber', where the Marquis embodies a more traditional, though no less grotesque, Bluebeard figure.

The Monstrous Bridegroom

There are strong ties between 'The Bloody Chamber' and *Mr Fox*. Carter describes the Marquis in 'The Bloody Chamber' watching his 'dolls' break free of their strings.¹⁰⁹ St John also watches as first Mary and then his wife Daphne fight back against the roles he has

¹⁰⁹ Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, p. 40.

ordained for them. In the opening paragraphs of *Mr Fox* St John is quick to describe the control he has over his wife, boasting that:

She doesn't complain about anything I do; she is physically unable to. That's because I fixed her early. I told her in heartfelt tones that one of the reasons I love her is because she never complains. So now of course she doesn't dare complain (2011: 1).

Both St John and the Marquis embody patriarchal fantasies of mastery: the husband as manipulator, the wife as pliant doll. Carter's feminist strategy was to subvert this fantasy by introducing a mother-saviour who slays the Marquis and rescues her daughter. In doing so, Carter dramatized a matrilineal mode of survival, breaking open the Bluebeard script and returning agency to female characters. Oyeyemi, by contrast, appears at first to adopt a similar model through Mary Foxe's resistance, but then unsettles the parallel. Mary pushes against St John's narrative violence and the roles he has ordained for her, yet the resemblance quickly falters, for unlike Carter's clear opposition between Marquis and rescuer, Oyeyemi entangles Mary and St John so closely that they cannot be separated. Mary is, after all, him.

This destabilisation situates *Mr Fox* not only in dialogue with Carter but also within a longer Gothic lineage. Oyeyemi's novel participates in a much broader cultural conversation about the 'monstrous bridegroom' and the allure of dangerous men. Marina Warner writes in *Once Upon a Time* that fairy tales such as 'Bluebeard' or 'Beauty and the Beast' with a monster bridegroom are as 'entangled with the bride and with questions of female desire as they are with male drives. [...] Bluebeard [is] [...] an enemy, a sadist, and a rapist – who can

also be irresistibly alluring'.¹¹⁰ This 'attractive villain' has become rooted in popular culture as Joseph Crawford shows in *Twilight of the Gothic*:

By the late 1980s [...] the heroes of popular romance had been growing steadily darker [...] carried from respectability to criminality, and from self-control to physical and sexual aggression. [...] the villains [...] had been growing increasingly sympathetic [...] capable of love and aching for redemption.¹¹¹

In this cultural landscape, the figure of Bluebeard blends easily into that of the brooding romantic lead. Oyeyemi plays on this tradition by presenting St John Fox as both villain and conflicted narrator. His attraction lies precisely in his self-awareness: he recognises his own violence yet cannot help repeating it.

Most striking, however, is the embedded story 'What Happens Next' which makes the Bluebeard script newly unsettling (2011: 123-171). Reminiscent of Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), a link Oyeyemi signals by also naming St John's wife Daphne, the tale follows a young woman (Mary) who becomes enthralled by a mysterious older man (St John Fox), a figure whose allure derives from his possible violence. St John may or may not have murdered his wife, yet crucially Mary is drawn to him because of this possibility, not in spite of it: "Oh you,' I said. 'You are a man I've been waiting to meet'" (2011: 150). Her attraction rests on the tension between danger and desire; the suspicion that he is a killer intensifies

¹¹⁰ Marina Warner, *Once Upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tale* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 92.

¹¹¹ Joseph Crawford, *The Twilight of the Gothic? Vampire Fiction and the Rise of the Paranormal Romance, 1991-2012* (University of Wales Press, 2014), p. 58.

rather than undermines his appeal. In staging this scenario, Oyeyemi confronts the Gothic fantasy Warner describes, where the monstrous bridegroom is both enemy and irresistible.

The story-within-the-story becomes darker still when Mary recalls her parents' relationship and a time when her father wrote a poem all over her mother's body. What once seemed playful is retrospectively revealed as prelude to violence:

Then he made her turn over and wrote all across her front, pressing hard, and the letters were big and ugly, but she pranced around afterwards holding out her arms and saying things like: 'Am I in the poem? Or is the poem in me?' (2011: 136).

At the time, Mary admits, 'I didn't like what was happening and I didn't know why' (2011: 136). Only later does she reveal:

Just over two years later, my father killed my mother. She was running away from him down some stairs and he seized her by the hair at the nape of her neck [...] and forced a knife through her chest. From behind (2011: 138).

What appeared as poetic intimacy becomes a literal inscription of violence. As Tatar reminds us, Bluebeard's wives are displayed as art; here too, the mother becomes both text and victim, her body transformed into the site of male authorship and destruction.

This narrative makes clear why Oyeyemi turns to the genre of gothic romance. As Crawford observes, 'precisely because of its lower cultural status, genre fiction is sometimes less rigorously policed than more prestigious literary forms, allowing it to directly address themes that such forms can explore only indirectly' (2014: 2). By staging paternal violence through gothic romance tropes Oyeyemi exploits genre's capacity to dramatize taboo desires and inherited trauma. Crucially, her narrators are not simply repelled by violence but

compelled to recount it, demonstrating how cultural scripts of male brutality are transmitted, normalised, and internalised across generations. 'Your mother wasn't the first and won't be the last', Mary is told by her father (2011: 114). Here, the father reframes the mother's murder as an inheritance, passed down through generations of male violence against women. Yet in recounting her mother's story, Mary transforms that inheritance into resistance: the inherited knowledge of violence, however painful, equips her to recognise and refuse the script St John is writing. This is the same gesture Aurora performs in *Maleficent* when she claims Maleficent as her mother by telling her story. Oyeyemi performs the same act at the level of authorship, in giving voice to murdered women, she claims their stories as her own feminist inheritance.

Oyeyemi layers this Gothic inheritance with explicit fairy-tale imagery. Mary recalls modelling in a 'grey wolf suit and a red cape [...] the snarling wolf's head [...] hung around my neck, sharp teeth and bright gums', casting herself at once as Red Riding Hood and the wolf (2011: 133). This doubling recalls Carter's 'The Company of Wolves', where the fearless girl climbs into bed with the wolf, and more broadly Carter's recurrent use of the human-animal hybrid to figure female desire. Later Mary confronts St John directly, arranging his hands around her throat 'tight like a choker' and demanding, 'Did you kill her and get away with it? How did you get away with it?' (2011: 15). This willingness to court danger echoes Carter's fearless girl, but Oyeyemi presses further into abjection by linking Mary's desire to her traumatic inheritance. Her attraction to the man who may have murdered his wife is inseparable from the violence she has witnessed in her parents' relationship. In *Mr Fox*, Oyeyemi performs the work of the curious bride, embracing the abject as both subject and method to show how genre itself colludes in making women's suffering a spectacle. This

same logic of haunting inheritance carries into *Boy, Snow, Bird*, where the Snow White tradition becomes a stage for racialised beauty and maternal ambivalence.

Revising the Snow White Narrative in *Boy, Snow, Bird*

Boy, Snow, Bird retells the story of 'Snow White', with the story narrated in part by each of the title characters: Boy the 'wicked stepmother' of the story; Snow who is Snow White; and Bird who is Boy's biological daughter. Published after *White Is for Witching* and *Mr Fox*, the novel solidified Oyeyemi's reputation as a writer of radical fairy-tale retellings, often cast as 'heir' to Angela Carter and a significant voice in black feminist fiction. As I outlined earlier, Carter's feminist revisions were controversial: Duncker and Lewallen argued that Carter simply inverted power dynamics rather than dismantling them and remained constrained within 'the strait-jacket of [the tales'] original structures'.¹¹² Carter's work was thus both celebrated and challenged for the very qualities that made it ground breaking. Oyeyemi inherits this contested legacy; like Carter, she refuses neat resolutions, probing instead how inherited violence and racialised beauty ideals fracture kinship and identity. But like Carter, Oyeyemi has also faced charges of failure. Much of the critical debate around *Boy, Snow, Bird* has centred on the late revelation that Boy's abusive father Frank is in fact her mother Frances, a survivor of rape who becomes Frank after trauma. This narrative choice has been read as transphobic, aligning gender transition with violence. As Chloe Buckley and Sarah Illott note in their introduction to the novel, in this 'Frank-enstian construction of identity, [being] transgender is associated with monstrosity and the result of trauma'.¹¹³ Reviewers

¹¹² Makinen, 'The Bloody Chamber and the Decolonization of Feminine Sexuality', p. 4.

¹¹³ Chloe Buckley and Sarah Illott (eds), *Telling It Slant: Critical Approaches to Helen Oyeyemi* (Sussex Academic Press, 2017), p. 19.

have also argued that the twist, arriving in the last hundred pages, leaves ‘not enough time to handle the topic with the kind of nuance and compassion it demands’.¹¹⁴

While such critiques warrant serious attention, I argue that to read the novel solely through this controversy is to fall into what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls a ‘paranoid reading’, one that anticipates injury, exposes structures of oppression, and insists on vigilance against harm. A paranoid reading is necessary, but not sufficient, as Sedgwick emphasises: ‘it seems to me a great loss when paranoid inquiry comes to seem entirely coextensive with critical theoretical inquiry rather than being viewed as one kind of cognitive/affective theoretical practice among other, alternative kinds’.¹¹⁵ If we stop at paranoia we risk silencing Oyeyemi’s broader interventions about race, trauma and female inheritance. A reparative reading, one that acknowledges harm but also remains open to ambivalence, contradiction and hope, allows us to see how the novel unsettles fairy tale binaries to tell complex stories of survival and kinship. By invoking Sedgwick’s distinction between paranoid and reparative reading, I am not denying the ethical urgency of paranoid critique, but resisting its dominance. The urgency of making this kind of reparative reading is underlined by Oyeyemi’s identity as a young Black feminist writer, as in this case paranoid reading closes down the intersectional potential of her work. Reparative reading here means holding onto Oyeyemi’s exploration of trauma and inheritance alongside its troubling representations,

¹¹⁴ ‘Book Review: Boy, Snow, Bird by Helen Oyeyemi’, *Reading In The Growlery* (25 August 2014) <<https://readinginthegrowlery.wordpress.com/2014/08/24/book-review-boy-snow-bird-by-helen-oyeyemi/>> [accessed 15 September 2025].

¹¹⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2003), p. 126.

rather than dismissing the novel outright. In this light, I read *Boy, Snow, Bird* as an expansion of Carter's project: not only reimagining fairy tales as feminist allegories, but using them to interrogate whiteness, the violence of racial passing, and the fractured inheritance of female identity.

Fairy Tale Heroines and the Inheritance of Whiteness

Boy Novak enters *Boy, Snow, Bird* as the figure most obviously aligned with the fairy tale heroine: she is blonde, beautiful, and fleeing an abusive father. As she escapes New York for the town of Flax Hill, Oyeyemi positions her within the familiar grammar of fairy tales, the persecuted young woman in flight. Yet this framing quickly unravels, revealing how easily the categories of victim and villain collapse into one another. Boy's golden hair, the most conventional mark of fairy tale beauty, becomes the site where Oyeyemi unsettles both gender and racialised expectations. Marina Warner notes in *From the Beast to the Blonde* that 'Golden hair tumbles through the stories in impossible quantities', functioning as shorthand for virtue and desirability.¹¹⁶ Only Snow White departs from this pattern, her 'hair black as the wood of the window-frame' recalling the symbolic palette of red, white and black that structures the tale. Oyeyemi takes up this palette but racialises it: red (blood), white (skin) and black (hair) signify not only femininity and beauty but also the violent logics of racialisation. Into this symbolic system she inserts gold, historically linked to purity, desirability and the exalted whiteness of European fairy tales, to ask who gets to be 'the fairest of them all'. The desirability of Boy's golden hair takes on an additional meaning

¹¹⁶ Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde* (Cambridge: Vintage, 1995), p. 365.

in the novel as she marries into an African American family who have been successfully passing as white in 1950s segregated America.

The destabilisation of fairy tale symbolism in the novel becomes a narrative strategy for complicating Boy's identity. At first she appears as the golden-haired, fairy tale heroine of the novel, but Oyeyemi persistently unsettles this image. Boy's beauty isolates her, producing moments of uncanny self-alienation. The novel's opening line signals from the outset that Boy's relationship with mirrors will not follow the fairy tale's script: 'Nobody ever warned me about mirrors, so for many years I was fond of them and believed them to be trustworthy'.¹¹⁷ In the Brothers Grimm 'Snow White', the mirror is an instrument of patriarchal authority, the queen consults it daily not to know herself, but to ask if she is worth knowing, if she is 'the fairest of them all'. The mirror's verdict is always comparative, her value depends entirely on another woman being worth less. When its verdict changes 'Snow-White is a thousand times fairer than you', the queen accepts the authority of the mirror, redirecting her violence accordingly.

Boy's mirror does the opposite: rather than confirming her identity, it withholds it entirely. At a party she stands transfixed before what she believes is 'a god-awful portrait', unable to see it clearly: 'I stayed standing in front of it for longer than I actually looked at it. Time ticked by and I faced the portrait dead-on without seeing it at all.' (2014: 20). When her eyes refocus, she discovers she has been looking at her own reflection without recognising it. Yet Arturo (Boy's love interest), watching from across the room, misreads the scene entirely:

¹¹⁷ Helen Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, (Picador, 2014), p.3.

'He seemed to think he'd caught me practicing being fascinating' (2014: 21). In dismissing her as a 'dress-maker's model', a beautiful, decorative object with nothing of worth to offer, Arturo performs the same act as the Brothers Grimm, imposing the script of the vain, punishable queen onto Boy (2014: 21). Boy herself understands the distinction precisely: 'I should tell him this isn't vanity. If it was vanity, I'd have been able to disguise it, all this insipid smirking at myself. Other women did it all the time; it was just they didn't get caught.' (2014: 21). Vanity, she recognises, is a socially manageable performance. However, the male gaze, whether Brothers Grimm or Arturo, cannot distinguish between a woman who looks at herself too much and a woman who cannot find herself at all. That Boy cannot recognise her own reflection but immediately and accurately reads Arturo's contempt speaks to precisely this dynamic, she has no stable image of herself, yet she has been thoroughly trained to register male judgement.

What Oyeyemi stages through Boy is not a straightforward transformation from heroine to villain but the inheritance of violence and its uneasy negotiation. Boy's beauty and golden hair implicate her in a system that elevates 'fairness' while erasing blackness; her wicked stepmother-like impulses expose how easily women internalise and pass on patriarchal cruelty. By contextualising her behaviour within abuse and survival, Oyeyemi demonstrates that villainy here is not innate but socially constructed. It is the action that can be labelled 'villainous' rather than the character themselves. Boy embodies the contradictions of inheritance: she carries her father's violence, resists perpetuating it, yet remains caught in the symbolic order that renders whiteness as beauty and power.

While Boy's golden hair implicates her in the symbolic order of whiteness, her stepdaughter, Snow Whitman embodies the fairy tale aesthetic of white perfection. When Boy meets her stepdaughter for the first time, she is struck not only by Snow's beauty but by the way others reflect it back:

I watched the women watching Snow. Their reverence was over the top. Sure, she was an extraordinary-looking kid. A medieval swan maiden, only with the darkest hair and the pinkest lips, every shade at its utmost. She was like a girl in a Technicolor tapestry, sure, sure, but... they'd had a while to get used to her, and acting like that every time they laid eyes on her seemed to me like the fastest way to build an insufferable brat (2014: 78).

Boy's description of the women watching Snow, makes the social mirror, the collective adoration Snow produces in others, the real object of Boy's attention. Snow's perfection signals her alignment with the Snow White archetype, 'the fairest of them all', yet Oyeyemi destabilises the trope by racializing it: unknown to Boy, Snow is the adored child of a black family passing as white and the women's reverence is not only for her beauty but for what her whiteness represents: survival, acceptance, even protection in a racist America.

Boy's hatred of Snow is not really about Snow at all, it crystallises from what the social mirror does with her. Boy admits that 'Snow was blameless', yet she still found herself hating her: 'Snow's daintiness grew day by day, to menacing proportions. I would've hit her and decided it was self-defence. I wouldn't have seen the rat catcher (or the snake bracelet) in my actions until much later.' (2014: 142). The 'rat catcher' invokes Boy's abusive father, while the snake bracelet, a gift from Arturo, screams 'wicked stepmother'. Boy recognises

these tendencies in herself yet resists acting them out fully; her self-awareness makes her an unlikely villain. The first-person narration intensifies this resistance, as hearing Boy's voice prevents the reader from entirely othering her. Instead, we are drawn into her ambivalence, forced to see how cycles of violence reproduce themselves.

The birth of Boy's daughter Bird exposes the fragile foundations of this passing. Boy recalls the moment:

Then there was Bird in my arms, safe and well, and dark. No. It wasn't just her shade of gold [...], it was her facial features too. As that nurse said when she thought I was too wiped out to hear: 'That little girl is a Negro.'

I didn't want to show her to anybody. [...] The doctor thought I'd gone to bed with a colored man, and I had. He was my husband (2014: 131-2).

Here inheritance becomes visibly racialised. Bird's skin tone reveals the Whitmans' hidden lineage, and the admiration once lavished on Snow becomes dangerous in its implications. Snow embodies the fantasy of 'passing' successfully, but Bird embodies its exposure. Boy's choice to send Snow away is therefore not about vanity or jealousy, as in the traditional stepmother tale, but about protecting her darker-skinned daughter. By removing Snow, the 'fairest' child, Boy attempts to shield Bird from the hierarchies that already structure the family's adoration.

This reversal of the stepmother's logic highlights Oyeyemi's radical reworking of the 'fairest of them all' motif. As Warner points out, the Old English meaning of 'fair' was 'beautiful, or

pleasing', developed by the thirteenth century into 'free from imperfections or blemish' and by the sixteenth carried explicit connotations of 'a light hue; clear in colour'.¹¹⁸ Oyeyemi exposes how this semantic shift underpins racialised ideals of beauty. Snow is not simply 'most beautiful', she is 'most white'; through Snow, Oyeyemi makes visible how racial violence reshapes maternal inheritance.

While *Boy* and *Snow* dramatize how whiteness and beauty fracture maternal inheritance, Olivia Whitman embodies the maternal wish itself, but twisted by the violence of racism. Olivia Whitman is Arturo's mother and in order to allow the family to continue to pass as white, sent away her dark-skinned daughter, another example of a child being sent away to maintain an older woman's position as 'fairest'. When Olivia first sees Bird, she responds with rejection rather than love, due to Bird's dark skin, which threatens the Whitmans' fragile place in society. Boy recalls: 'It was Olivia Whitman I could not forgive. When Bird came home, she was our first visitor, and she took one look at Bird, a cold, thorough look, then turned her gaze away' (214: 133). Boy narrates this scene with disgust, describing Olivia's presence as toxic. Yet Oyeyemi refuses to let the reader settle into an easy judgment. Olivia's rejection of Bird, while abhorrent, is not unmotivated; it emerges from her own memories of life under white supremacy. She recalls being threatened by a white woman while working in a shop: 'If I have a daughter I don't want anyone talking to her like that [...] If I do, if I ever hear that in the voice of a child of mine, I'll make her sorry all right. I'll wring her damn neck' (2014: 135). Olivia's words invert the Snow White maternal fantasy, in which a queen hopes for a daughter 'with skin as white as snow, lips as red as

¹¹⁸ Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, p. 363.

blood, and hair as black as ebony'. Instead of beauty, Olivia wishes for the protection offered by white skin. But what begins as a mother's protective fantasy mutates into a threat of violence against her own daughter. Olivia's desire to spare her children the indignities of black womanhood is recast as punishment, an inheritance of fear rather than freedom.

Oyeyemi underscores these dynamics of race and power in a confrontation between Boy and Olivia:

I said: 'You think I won't slap you, Olivia, but I will. Keep going and you'll see.'

[...] 'The last person who threatened to slap me was a white woman. Blonde, like you. No Southern belle, either. Just trash.'

I told myself, *Stop it. Whatever else she says don't rise to it.* I wanted a grandmother for Bird. Olivia wasn't the one I would have chosen, but she was a generous grandmother to Snow and if she put her mind to it, she could do it again (2014: 133-4).

Here Boy, the abused daughter who once fled her violent father, repeats the language of threat. Crucially, she does so as a blonde white woman threatening a black woman, a dynamic that Olivia immediately recognises. Olivia links Boy to the white woman who once humiliated her, reminding us that violence is never abstract but historically situated. Boy tells herself to stop, reasoning that Olivia might yet be a grandmother to Bird, but the racial undertones of the exchange linger. The scene makes visible how easily cycles of violence cross lines of gender and generation, but it also underscores the asymmetry of lived experience: Boy, a white woman, can sympathise with Olivia's pain yet cannot fully comprehend what it means

to endure racist violence. Her threat to Olivia exposes how whiteness itself becomes weaponised in moments of maternal conflict, even when deployed by a woman who has herself been victimised. As Joyce cautions, critics of trauma fiction must remain sensitive to the wide range of historical and cultural factors that define victims' experiences, Boy may know violence intimately, but her experience of gendered abuse is not the same as Olivia's experience of racialised violence and the confrontation exposes the limits of equating them. (2019: 9).

Olivia's story is not a tale of progress, nor of nostalgic return; it is a story of loss, in which the legacy of racist violence becomes inscribed into the emotional grammar of motherhood itself. Her rejection of Bird shows how unacknowledged trauma reverberates across generations, reproducing the very hierarchies she wishes to escape. Oyeyemi's insistence on Olivia's ambivalence aligns her with the Silver women in *White Is for Witching*, who also transmit fear and violence rather than empowerment. Yet the terms of comparison must be handled carefully: the Silver women are white, and their haunting is explicitly racist, a defence of purity and property, whereas Olivia is a black woman whose survival strategies have been warped by her own subjection to racism. What links them is not moral equivalence but the shared dynamic Oyeyemi traces across both novels: the maternal wish for safety, warped by structural violence, transforming into a reproduction of harm.

By refusing to reduce Olivia to a two-dimensional villain, Oyeyemi dramatizes how structural racism warps maternal inheritance at its root. Olivia's wish, born of survival, becomes toxic to the next generation. Her story does not offer moral clarity but demands that the reader

sit with contradiction and discomfort, to recognise in Olivia the violence of internalised racism in her reaction to Bird's dark skin and a black woman traumatised by racist violence. Joyce reminds us that trauma narratives often blur the boundaries between victim and perpetrator, producing what she terms the risk of 'surrogate victimage', in which one person's suffering is taken as a substitute for another's (2019: 10). Oyeyemi carefully resists this substitution: Olivia's trauma is not interchangeable with Boy's, and her survival strategies, however harmful, are shaped by the specificity of racialised violence. This question of blurred victim-perpetrator roles, and of the dangers of appropriating another's pain, becomes even more fraught in the case of Frank Novak. Introduced first as Boy's abusive father and later revealed as Frances, a lesbian survivor of rape, Frank embodies the unsettling overlap of trauma suffered and trauma inflicted. Like Olivia, Frank is both shaped by violence and complicit in its perpetuation.

Frank / Frances Novak

Frank Novak is the first figure in *Boy, Snow, Bird* who appears to fit the role of fairy tale villain without complication. Introduced as Boy's father, he is a rat catcher whose brutality is described in chilling detail: 'he goes to the basement, selects a cage, and pulls its inhabitant's eyes out. The rats that are blind and starving are the best at bringing death to all the other rats, that's your father's claim' (2014: 6). Frank's cruelty extends to his daughter: Boy recalls how he would punch her in the kidneys, thump the back of her head, and hold her face-down in water until she fainted (2014: 6-7). The most harrowing scene comes when Frank drugs her, ties her to a chair, and holds a starving rat to her cheek:

‘Why are you shaking like that?’ my father asked, tenderly. ‘Do you think that if I scar you no one will love you? You’ve got the wrong idea, girl. This will help your true love find you. He’ll really have to fight for you now.’ There was a thickness to his voice; I cracked one eye open. He was crying (2014: 122).

Here Frank performs the roles of both torturer and fairy tale narrator, casting Boy as the damsel whose ‘true love’ must fight for her, even as he scars her. His tears disturb the villain role: this is a figure whose violence is saturated with his own unresolved pain. Oyeyemi underscores this doubling by aligning Frank with another morally ambiguous figure: the Brothers Grimm’s ‘Pied Piper of Hamelin’ (1816), who enacts terrible retribution on a town that has denied him fair payment. The Pied Piper differs from many fairy-tale villains in that we see his motivations, even if we reject them. This combination of brutality and distorted rationalisation echoes through the novel and reflects Oyeyemi’s larger project: to reveal villainy not as innate evil, but as harm shaped by pain, trauma, and unmet needs.

This structure of contextualising brutality deepens with the novel’s late revelation: Frank is not Boy’s father but her birth mother, Frances, a lesbian survivor of rape who ‘became’ Frank after profound trauma. Boy’s best friend Mia uncovers this while searching for Boy’s mother:

Frances was raped. It was an acquaintance of hers [...]. He was an undergrad at Columbia who thought that all lesbianism meant was that you were holding out for the man who really got you excited. Frances had warned him to stop airing this view. Frances had issued her warning to this guy in front of other people and I guess that

had humiliated him and – don't let me rationalize what he did anymore, Boy (2014: 293).

Mia's plea not to rationalise the rape closely echoes Mary's critique of St John Fox in *Mr Fox*. Both scenes catalogue the excuses men give for harming women, only to expose them as 'obscene'.¹¹⁹ Frances is described as being attractive with a 'knock-out smile', 'hair as long as Lady Godiva's' and a 'twinkle in [her] eye' (2014: 292). When Mia shows Boy photos of her mother she says 'Look at her. [...] I know she's your mother, but you get the appeal, right?' (2014: 292). The description of Frances' Lady Godiva-like hair also recalls the 'tumbling golden hair' of the fairy tale heroine, a symbol that links her back to Boy and foregrounds the genealogy of trauma women inherit if their stories are not told.

Mia explains that Frank told her he 'looked in the mirror one morning when he was still Frances, and this man she'd never seen before was just standing there, looking back' (2014: 294). This doubling of mirror scenes is significant: where Boy cannot recognise herself in her own reflection, Frances looks in the mirror and sees a stranger looking back. Where the Brothers Grimm's mirror confirms the Wicked Queen's identity through patriarchal verdict, both Boy and Frances look into their reflections and find a stranger looking back, the self 'unmade' by inherited violence and the symbolic order's compulsory gendering and racialised beauty standards. Frank's attempt to mutilate Boy's face could be read as a misguided way of protecting her from rape, justified by Frank's logic that men will not want Boy if she is no longer beautiful.

¹¹⁹ Oyeyemi, *Mr Fox* p. 120.

As I have already suggested, the critical discomfort around Frank's characterisation, and especially the charge of transphobia, invites what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick terms a 'paranoid reading', one that anticipates injury, exposes structures of oppression and insists on vigilance against harm. Such a reading is necessary, since it makes visible the novel's troubling conflation of gender transition with violence. Yet Sedgwick reminds us that paranoia alone cannot exhaust a text's meaning, nor should it become the only legitimate mode of critique, as she writes, 'Paranoia knows some things well and others poorly' (2003: 130). If we stop at paranoia, we risk reducing *Boy, Snow, Bird* to pathology and missing what else the narrative attempts. This distinction allows us to hold onto the ethical urgency of paranoia without making it the only possible mode of reading. As Sedgwick insists, 'To be other than paranoid [...] to practice other than paranoid forms of knowing does *not*, in itself, entail a denial of the reality or gravity of enmity or oppression' (2003: 127-8).

A reparative reading, by contrast, opens space to hold the novel's ethical difficulties while also attending to its exploration of trauma, monstrosity, and kinship. Sedgwick contrasts the paranoid stance with the reparative position, a mode of knowing oriented not toward suspicion but toward assembling and sustaining. Moving towards reparative reading, Sedgwick writes, 'represents an actual achievement [...] to move toward a sustained *seeking of pleasure* [...] rather than to continue to pursue the self-reinforcing [...] self-defeating strategies for forestalling pain offered by the paranoid/schizoid position' (2003: 137). The reparative position 'inaugurates ethical possibility – in the form of a guilty, empathetic view of the other as at once good, damaged, integral, and requiring and eliciting love and care'

(2003: 137). A reparative reading of *Boy, Snow, Bird* does not ignore ethical difficulties with the text, but it keeps in view the other messages Oyeyemi delivers about how violence is embedded in legacies of trauma, rape, homophobia and misogyny, echoing across generations. Frank's story is not offered as linear progress or as tragic loss; it is affectively structured around contradiction and discomfort. The reader is forced to confront the inheritance of trauma without resolution.

In order to apply Creed's theory of the monstrous-feminine in a reparative rather than paranoid mode I turn to trans theory's own engagement with monstrosity and to a suggestive resonance in Oyeyemi's naming of her character. In her landmark essay 'My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage' (1994) Susan Stryker takes Frankenstein's monster as its central figure, arguing that the transsexual body occupies an 'unnatural' position similar to the creature, 'flesh torn apart and sewn together again' and 'perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment'.¹²⁰ That Oyeyemi names her character Frank is worth pausing over. Whether or not the allusion is deliberate, it places Frank within a tradition of figures whose monstrosity is produced by the refusal of the symbolic order to accommodate them. Stryker reclaims monstrosity as a site of trans power and resistance, declaring: 'I am a transsexual, and therefore I am a monster', before insisting that words like 'creature', 'monster' and 'unnatural' need to be reclaimed by the transgendered: 'By embracing and accepting

¹²⁰ Susan Stryker, 'My Words to Victor Frankenstein', *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning*, nos 3–4 (2011), pp. 83–96 (p. 84).

them...we may dispel their ability to harm us' (2011: 85-6). Like Creed, Stryker argues that monstrosity challenges the cisnormative symbolic order directly.

Stryker's essay is also pertinent to how the symbolic order punishes those who refuse its gendering decrees: 'a gendering violence is the founding condition of human subjectivity' (2011: 93) and 'gender attribution is compulsory; it codes and deploys our bodies in ways that materially affect us, yet we choose neither our marks nor the meanings they carry' (2011: 92). Frances's rape is an act of precisely this symbolic order, a violent reassertion of patriarchal authority over a body her rapist refused to accept as self-defining, specifically because she had defined herself as a lesbian. Read alongside Stryker, Frank's subsequent refusal to abide by that order's decree becomes legible as resistance, one of many possible responses to a system that has already enacted violence on the body it seeks to define. Frank's story blurs boundaries of gender, kinship and social legibility, becoming narratively abject in Creed's terms, a figure whose otherness cannot be contained within conventional categories of villain or victim. Like Boy and Olivia, Frank both absorbs and perpetuates trauma, his attempted mutilation of Boy's face, framed as protection against rape, is a misguided maternal strategy shaped by structural violence. Reading Frank through both Creed and Stryker, his narrative abjection can be read as part of Oyeyemi's broader project of mobilising monstrosity as a mode of feminist and queer resistance, the monstrous mother reclaimed not despite her contradictions but through them.

The reparative possibilities of such a reading surface in the novel's conclusion, when Boy, Snow, Bird, and Mia prepare to travel to New York to see Frank. Boy explains to Bird:

'We're going to New York for a few days.' I looked at Snow and Mia. 'All of us. We're going to go look at a quilt your great-grandmother on my side made, Bird. It's an important quilt. It's in a museum. I don't know why I started with the quilt. Really we're going down there to go see somebody. She needs us, I think. [...] And we need her.' (2014: 307).

Boy's decision to go to Frank, accompanied by her stepdaughter Snow, her biological daughter Bird, and her best friend Mia, represents a reparative gesture that is only possible because Frank has been reclaimed, however tentatively, as the monstrous mother, a figure whose fractured, abject identity is acknowledged as part of the family's inheritance. This gathering of women recalls the moment in Stryker's essay where she describes her 'little tribe' gathered in a hospital delivery room, a group whose bonds the hospital staff could not categorise, yet whose kinship nevertheless constitutes a radical form of maternal inheritance (2011: 89). That the novel's gathering of women also draws in Olivia, whose earlier rejection of Bird seemed to foreclose any possibility of repair, signals the scene's deeper reparative logic: 'Bird almost startled the life out of Olivia by planting a noisy kiss on her cheek' (2014: 308). This scene reframes Frank as central to a fractured inheritance that must be reclaimed if it is to be transformed.

Boy's mention of the quilt first is significant in more ways than one. It belongs to a great-grandmother on Boy's side of the family, an inheritance she reaches for before she can name Frank as the true purpose of the journey. Like the family itself, the quilt is stitched

together from disparate parts, its wholeness achieved not despite its seams but through them and speaks to the novel's family as a whole; Boy, Snow, Bird, Mia, Frank, Olivia, each of them pieced together under conditions not of their choosing. That the quilt is in a museum gestures toward a longer tradition of women's making as a form of testimony, of stories stitched into fabric when other forms of record were unavailable or denied. The quilt is proof that women's making endures beyond violence, that maternal inheritance, however fractured, can be carried forward. It is this inheritance that Boy draws on as she prepares to reclaim Frank as part of the family's matrilineal inheritance.

Conclusion: Progress, loss, return

In conclusion, Oyeyemi's fairy tale retellings unsettle familiar binaries of villain and victim. Drawing on Creed's monstrous-feminine and Hemmings's account of feminist storytelling, I have argued that her fiction embraces abjection as both subject matter and method, fracturing the affective grammar of feminist narratives and refusing catharsis. Across *White Is for Witching*, *Mr Fox*, and *Boy, Snow, Bird*, Oyeyemi situates herself as both heir to and innovator beyond Carter, fusing western fairy-tale traditions with Yoruba and Caribbean folklore to expose how cultural scripts of race, gender and violence are repeated, inherited and sometimes resisted. Central to this inheritance is the figure of the monstrous mother, whose reclamation, however ambivalent and unresolved, is the thread that runs through all three novels. Oyeyemi's authorial stance as the 'curious bride' signals a feminist practice that unsettles storytelling itself: destabilising genre, multiplying frames and haunting the reader with voices that cannot be silenced. Her novels thus function as sites of haunting, while also claiming curiosity and unruliness as a feminist method. It is this logic of haunting

inheritance and abjection that the next chapter pursues in a different register: Catherine Hardwicke's *Red Riding Hood* (2011), a Hollywood retelling indebted to Carter's 'The Company of Wolves'. Like Oyeyemi, Hardwicke reimagines fairy tale archetypes through the lens of female desire and generational inheritance, but she does so within the idiom of mainstream supernatural romance, exposing how Carter's legacy circulates not only in literary fiction but also in popular film.

'All the better to hear you with': Feminist Storytelling in Catherine Hardwicke's *Red Riding Hood*.

Catherine Hardwicke's *Red Riding Hood* (2011) offers a radical re-telling of the classic Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault fairy tale, challenging the 'rape parable' narrative that blames the victim for her own assault. This chapter situates the film within the frameworks of Athena Bellas's analysis of female adolescent resistance and Barbara Creed's theory of revolt in Feminist New Wave Cinema, exploring how the text provides 'moments of opposition and rupture' enabling the fairy tale heroine to escape the strictures society places upon her. It is organised into two parts. In Part 1, I examine Hardwicke's approach as a filmmaker, delving into her background as a director who prioritises authentic female voices, evident from her directorial debut *Thirteen* (2003) which she co-wrote with the thirteen-year-old lead actress. I argue that Hardwicke's commitment to embedding a female voice within the film's narrative is central to this subversion of conventional gender roles, positioning her Red Riding Hood as a powerful storyteller who becomes an 'unruly' figure. Using Barbara Creed's theory of the monstrous-feminine, I argue that Valerie (Red Riding Hood) embraces the identity of the witch who rejects the patriarchal power of the werewolf, marking her as a transgressive figure who challenges patriarchal norms. Running through both parts of the chapter is an argument about maternal inheritance and it is through embracing this inheritance that Valerie finds her agency, transforming what has historically been a story of female victimhood into one of matrilineal resistance. In Part 2, I explore how Hardwicke reinterprets the sensory symbolism of the wolf in the iconic 'Grandmother, what big teeth you have' exchange, shifting it away from traditional

associations. By doing so, she subverts the male gaze and empowers Red Riding Hood actively to perceive and articulate her own experience, positioning her as an agent of revolt.

Resisting the Rape Parable: Red Riding Hood and Feminist New Wave Cinema

The tale of '*Little Red Riding Hood*' has long troubled feminist fairy-tale scholars. As established in my first chapter, Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will* (1975) argues that popular tales serve to 'train women to be rape victims', and nowhere is this more explicit than in 'Little Red Riding Hood', which Brownmiller identifies as a parable of rape that naturalises male aggression and disciplines girls into self-policing obedience.¹²¹ For Brownmiller, the wolf is not simply a folkloric predator but a symbolic figure of sexual violence, and Red's fate demonstrates how women are taught to internalise blame for male aggression. The tale rehearses the logic of rape culture: that women's curiosity, disobedience, or even their physical attractiveness invite danger. In this framing, the act of violence is naturalised. Jack Zipes develops Brownmiller's critique, situating the tale as an overtly male construction. As he argues, '*Little Red Riding Hood*' is not an organic folk tale but a cultural artefact shaped and disseminated by male authors: 'Not women but men – Perrault and the Brothers Grimm – gave birth to our common image of Little Red Riding Hood. [...] *Little Red Riding Hood* reflects men's fear of women's sexuality – and of their own as well'.¹²²

¹²¹ Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (Fawcett Columbine, 1993), p.309.

¹²² Jack Zipes, *The Trials & Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood* (Routledge, 1993), p. 80.

In *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood* (1993) Zipes attempts to save the character of Little Red Riding Hood by shedding light on the true nature of the famous Perrault retelling as a tale of 'double violence': 'Perrault's writing is en-gendered violence because he conceived a strategy that violated an oral (female) perspective and fostered notions of violence through this strategy by treating the girl in the tale as a sadomasochistic object' (1993: 8). Perrault's literary intervention not only introduces an act of symbolic sexual violation but also enacts a kind of textual violence, erasing the oral, female-centred versions of the tale in favour of a moralistic story that disciplines girls into passivity and obedience. Zipes argues that it is this violence that makes *Little Red Riding Hood* 'the most widespread and notorious fairy tale in the Western world, if not the entire world' (1993: xi). Crucially, the cultural work of the tale lies not only in its depiction of violence but also in the moral lesson Perrault attached to it: 'Children, especially pretty, nicely brought-up young ladies, ought never to talk to strangers: if they are foolish enough to do so, they should not be surprised if some greedy wolf consumes them, elegant red riding hoods and all.'¹²³ The phrase 'they should not be surprised' is the moral's most telling gesture, it withdraws sympathy, framing Red's consumption as the foreseeable consequence of her own foolishness rather than the wolf's violence. That her 'elegant red riding hood' is consumed alongside her is equally pointed, her beauty and her fine clothes are part of what makes her culpable. The parable thus becomes a cautionary tale that disciplines women through fear, encouraging them to police their own behaviour in order to avoid male aggression. The imagery of the wolf as predator and Red as victim has consequently become one of the most persistent metaphors in Western culture for sexual violence. This logic, of course,

¹²³ Charles Perrault, Angela Carter, and Jack Zipes, *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault*, Penguin Modern Classics (Penguin, 2008), p. 3.

mirrors the structures of rape culture more broadly: women are warned not to walk home alone at night, not to wear provocative clothing, not to invite attention. When they do, and violence occurs, responsibility is shifted onto them rather than onto the perpetrator.

Given this history, it is unsurprising that feminist scholars and writers have sought to rescue *Little Red Riding Hood* from its violent and victim-blaming origins. Zipes says, 'it is not by chance that most of the new and experimental versions [...] have been written by women and are feminist' (1993: xii). Authors such as Angela Carter and Tanith Lee have returned to Red Riding Hood to reclaim her voice, agency and sexuality, reworking the story as one of resistance rather than submission. These feminist rewritings position Red Riding Hood as an unruly figure who confronts, outwits or even embraces the wolf, destabilising the gender hierarchies the Perrault and Brothers Grimm versions sought to enforce. This context is vital for understanding Catherine Hardwicke's 2011 film *Red Riding Hood*. Emerging from a tradition of feminist retellings, Hardwicke explicitly challenges the rape parable narrative by reimagining Red Riding Hood as an active storyteller and agent of revolt. Perrault's tale does not only make Red culpable, it makes her foolish: sitting in bed beside the wolf, Red exclaims 'Grandmother, what big teeth you have!' only to be told 'All the better to eat you up!' at which point 'the wicked wolf threw himself upon Little Red Riding Hood and gobbled her up.' (2008: 3). She cannot distinguish her grandmother from a predator lying in her grandmother's bed. As I argue in the second part of this chapter, it is precisely this dynamic that Hardwicke inverts through redistributing the sensory powers to Valerie. Rather than cautioning against female desire, the film embraces it as a site of power, placing Red in direct opposition to patriarchal structures of violence and control. Hardwicke's heroine does

not 'train women to be victims'; instead, she becomes a figure of resistance who destabilises the symbolic order itself.

Among the retellings Zipes collates, Angela Carter's 'The Company of Wolves', from her collection of fairy-tale rewritings *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) stands out as a foundational feminist rewriting of 'Red Riding Hood', one that not only inspired Zipes but also seeded the gothic and lycanthropic imagery reworked by Hardwicke in *Red Riding Hood*. Zipes dedicated the second edition of *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood* to Carter and describes the volume as written 'in her spirit', explicitly aligning Carter's feminist re-visioning with his broader project of recuperating Red from patriarchal control. Carter's heroine is described as 'an unbroken egg', signalling both her vulnerability and her potential. Yet, in contrast to the traditional version of the tale that Brownmiller critiques as 'training women to be rape victims', Carter's Red Riding Hood is armed with a knife and 'afraid of nothing'.¹²⁴ Her heroine resists the cultural conditioning encoded in Perrault's tale, refusing to embody the submissive victim that the traditional parable seeks to produce. When confronted by the werewolf (who has already devoured Granny), the girl throws his shirt into the fire, following the wisdom of 'old wives' tales' which caution that burning a werewolf's clothes prevents him from reverting to human form. In doing so, the girl demonstrates an awareness that the true danger lies not in the wolf but in the man he becomes. The tale concludes with the heroine sleeping 'sweet and sound [...] between the paws of the tender wolf' (2007: 139). Carter thus reclaims female sexuality from a

¹²⁴ Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (London: Vintage Books, 2007), p. 138.

patriarchal framework that codes it as dangerous or shameful, rewriting it instead as a site of power and choice. Crucially, Carter's narrative reclaims the act of storytelling itself from male dominance: women tell stories to one another, and it is the collective wisdom of women, those 'old wives', that equips the heroine to resist violence and reframe her destiny. Therefore, the tale enacts a meta-narrative gesture: women pass on knowledge through storytelling. It is by listening to the advice of other women that the girl survives, reclaiming the oral, female-centred tradition that Perrault's didactic version had suppressed. This matrilineal transmission of knowledge and survival, of women equipping one another to resist patriarchal violence, is an inheritance both Oyeyemi and Hardwicke claim from Carter. While Oyeyemi, like Carter, complicates and refuses to resolve that transmission, staging the ways women can perpetuate as well as resist patriarchal violence, Hardwicke translates it into a more affirmative cinematic mode, one in which the maternal lineage is ultimately a source of empowerment rather than ambivalence.

Neil Jordan's 1984 film adaptation *The Company of Wolves*, co-scripted with Carter, translated her feminist fairy tale strategies into cinema, visually intensifying her ideas through surreal dreamscapes and grotesque transformations. The film foregrounds bodily metamorphosis and unsettling imagery, such as wolves erupting from men's mouths or flesh tearing open, an effect that destabilises categories of human and animal, self and other. As Hannah Priest observes in 'I was a teenage she-wolf: boobs, blood and sacrifice' (2015), Jordan's film draws a 'clear and unequivocal parallel between female adolescence, menarche and lycanthropy', situating the heroine's 'bestial side' as a metaphor for 'her

natural sex drive' and her 'sexual complexity'.¹²⁵ Priest argues that while the connection between lycanthropy and women had been made in earlier narratives, *The Company of Wolves* is one of the earliest cinematic texts to make lycanthropy-inflected female adolescence its central concern, presenting the heroine's 'hormonally-driven bodily change and sexual awakening' as 'both naturalised and universalised', marking a shift in the cultural imagination of the female werewolf (201: 129). However, in *Fairy Tale and Film* (2015), Sue Short criticises Jordan's film for its departure from Carter's original ending to the tale, arguing that Jordan 'removes what was most powerful about Carter's version: the validation of Red Riding Hood as a sexual being'.¹²⁶ Short is even harsher on Hardwicke's *Red Riding Hood*, dismissing it as 'a very pale comparison' to Jordan's film which, 'despite being made three decades after Jordan's film, seems far more regressive in its gender politics, and worryingly devoid of any feminist impulse' (2015: 149). I return to Short's dismissal later in the chapter, arguing that such critiques overlook the ways Hardwicke validates Red Riding Hood's sexual agency and employs Carter's feminist strategies for a new cultural moment.

Hardwicke's *Red Riding Hood* explicitly situates itself within this Carter–Jordan lineage. Like Carter's Red Riding Hood, Valerie refuses victimhood and confronts male violence head-on. Yet Hardwicke also extends the metaphorical framework Priest identifies in Jordan's film. Where Jordan aligns lycanthropy with menarche and the onset of sexual development, Hardwicke reframes Valerie's association with the monstrous to stage a broader negotiation

¹²⁵ Hannah Priest, 'I was a teenage she-wolf: boobs, blood and sacrifice' in Hannah Priest ed., *She-Wolf: A Cultural History of Female Werewolves* (2017), pp. 129-147, (p. 129).

¹²⁶ Sue Short, *Fairy Tale and Film: Old Tales with a New Spin* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 148.

of female identity. As Priest argues of post-1980s texts, such works often shift away from presenting lycanthropy as a 'natural part of female development' and instead configure it as a 'negotiable and voluntary process' that can be 'reconfigured and repurposed where necessary (or desired)' (2017: 130). Indeed, Hardwicke's *Red Riding Hood* refuses the patriarchal inheritance of the wolf by rejecting the bite that would fully transform her. In this sense, Hardwicke's film borrows Jordan's gothic aesthetics, dreamlike tone and exploration of abjection as a catalyst for transformation, but also updates the Carter–Jordan lineage for a twenty-first-century context: Valerie's 'bestial side' is not simply an emblem of sexual awakening but the means by which she claims selfhood on her own terms.

Hardwicke's feminism is evident not only in *Red Riding Hood* but across her wider body of work. Her directorial debut *Thirteen* (2003) was co-written with Nikki Reed, then thirteen years old and playing the lead role, a fact Hardwicke highlighted as crucial to the film's authenticity: 'I didn't try to write a script about a thirteen-year-old; I wrote it with her', she explained.¹²⁷ This participatory ethos signals Hardwicke's ongoing commitment to embedding female voices within her films, an approach that positions her firmly within a feminist filmmaking tradition. Hardwicke went on to cast Reed as Rosalie in *Twilight* and she played the role through the following five films, making her a household name. Hardwicke has also been outspoken about the sexism she has faced as a female director in Hollywood; one example is that despite her interest in directing *The Fighter*, she was not given an

¹²⁷ 'Exclusive Interview With 'Red Riding Hood' Director Catherine Hardwicke', Hollywood.com (7 June 2014) <<https://www.hollywood.com/movies/exclusive-interview-with-red-riding-hood-director-catherine-hardwicke-57291168>> [accessed 27 September 2025].

interview because she was told the film needed to be directed by a man. Hardwicke was the only female director in *The Twilight Saga* film franchise, a series defined by its ardent young female ‘Twi-hard’ fans. While Hardwicke was not deemed a suitable director to tell a man’s story, male directors were awarded the direction of four (out of five) films in a lucrative franchise for teenage girls, one which Hardwicke herself originally cast and set the stylistic tone. *Twilight* is also the only film of the franchise that retains the first-person narrative of Bella throughout the film and shows her to be the truly awkward and clumsy girl described in the source material.

Hardwicke has been open about wanting to make a difference through her art, saying in a 2023 interview that one of the reasons she made *Twilight* was to encourage people to love the planet:

It was my idea to have Bella be a vegetarian and we go to the greenhouse where you see the recycling compost. I was just kind of putting in messages about loving our planet. I’m just so happy that people are caring about the planet more.¹²⁸

Hardwicke had pushed to get *Twilight* made when film studios did not want to take the risk, but although it turned into a hugely lucrative franchise, Hardwicke still did not get the recognition within Hollywood one would expect from such success: ‘I wanted to do other cool stuff, but I didn’t get the calls that you would expect after having made a \$400 million success and launching a billion dollar franchise.’¹²⁹ *Red Riding Hood* was Hardwicke’s next

¹²⁸ Kitty Grady ‘Catherine Hardwicke: “I Made Twilight to Help People Love the Planet”’, *A Rabbit’s Foot*, (16 November 2023) <<https://a-rabbitsfoot.com/editorial/film/twilight-anniversary-interview-catherine-hardwicke/>> [accessed 31 January 2025].

¹²⁹ Cara Nash, ‘Unsung Auteurs: Catherine Hardwicke’, *FilmInk* (13 April 2023) <<https://www.filmink.com.au/unsung-auteurs-catherine-hardwicke/>> [accessed 31 January 2025].

film following *Twilight* and she called it her 'wolf film', possibly in reference to *New Moon*, the second film of the Twilight franchise and the first to feature the shape-shifting wolf-pack.

Situating *Red Riding Hood* within the wider cultural moment of the early 2010s also strengthens its feminist reading. The period was marked by a surge of feminist activism, from Caitlin Moran's *How to be a Woman* (2011) to Laura Bates's *Everyday Sexism* project (2012) in the UK, alongside campaigns such as the Fawcett Society's 'This is what a feminist looks like'. In the US, Million Women Rise marches had been drawing attention to male violence since 2008. Hardwicke's decision to retell *Red Riding Hood*, a tale long coded around sexual danger and predation, within this cultural moment resonates with what Barbara Creed identifies as Feminist New Wave Cinema: films as driven by heroines whose goals are not merely survival or assimilation but 'revolt' against rape culture and the patriarchal symbolic order that sustains it. Hardwicke's feminist practice extends beyond the film itself, in 2015 she directed the public service announcement video for Lady Gaga's 'Til It Happens to You', produced in conjunction with *The Hunting Ground*, a documentary on campus sexual assault, suggesting a continuity of purpose that, read retrospectively, *Red Riding Hood* anticipates. As explored in earlier chapters, Creed positions the monstrous-feminine as central to this feminist cinematic project, figures such as the witch, the vampire, or the abject mother embody revolt and transformation, their terrifying qualities inseparable from their subversive potential. In *Maleficent*, Woolverton refigured Disney's villainess as a maternal monstrous-feminine whose abjection propels her into revolt. Hardwicke stages the same gesture in Valerie, rejecting the patriarchal inheritance

embodied by the werewolf, she inhabits the witch-like role of her grandmother, embraces her outsider status, and narrates her own story.

Hardwicke's *Red Riding Hood* can be understood as both a continuation and a transformation of the feminist horror tradition Carter and Jordan established. Where Brownmiller identified Perrault's version of the tale as one that 'trains women to be rape victims', Carter and Jordan reclaimed the narrative by foregrounding female agency and desire within a gothic horror mode. Hardwicke extends this trajectory by creating a feminist teen horror text that translates those subversive themes for a new generation of viewers. Her position as the director of *Twilight* gave her the cultural capital to bring feminist horror into the mainstream, opening space for young women, the very demographic Perrault's moral sought to discipline, to encounter a Red Riding Hood who revolts rather than submits. This positioning aligns her with Creed's Feminist New Wave Cinema, where revolt is the heroine's goal and the monstrous-feminine is recast as liberating and transformative. Casting Amanda Seyfried as Valerie further underscores this connection: Seyfried had recently starred in *Jennifer's Body* (2009), another feminist horror text that weaponised female monstrosity against patriarchal violence. Through Seyfried, Hardwicke's film not only reclaims Red Riding Hood from its rape-parable origins but also situates her heroine within a wider feminist horror genealogy. It reclaims abjection as a generative force, situating Valerie as part of a lineage of heroines whose revolt destabilises patriarchal systems and reclaims the power of storytelling itself.

Hardwicke's *Red Riding Hood* also needs to be situated within the burgeoning genre of paranormal romance that flourished in the wake of *Twilight*. As Hannah Priest notes, 'in the female werewolf YA fiction of the early twenty-first century, it is rare to find lycanthropy explicitly associated with menarche' (2017: 133). This reflects both the older age of the heroines, 'between sixteen and nineteen', and the generic conventions of paranormal romance, which prioritise 'the 'paranormal' and 'romance' aspects of the texts' over bodily transformation (2017: 133). Within this genre, the menstrual cycle is 'rarely presented as 'a key lycanthropic trigger' and the horror-inflected association between female biology and monstrosity largely falls away (2017: 133). As Priest explains:

The menstruating werewolf – and the menstruating woman more broadly – is often read as (potentially) evoking the image of the *vagina dentata*, and, thus, the castatrix. While this continues to be a significant association within horror, the paranormal romance genre rarely posits such a relationship between the young woman, her own body and the bodies of men around her (2017: 133).

Red Riding Hood unsettles this generic division, while Hardwicke adopts the familiar tropes of paranormal romance, the love triangle, the brooding supernatural lover, the gothic atmosphere popularised by *Twilight*, she also draws on horror cinema's use of the menstruating woman as 'monstrous-feminine'. Hardwicke's film therefore occupies what Priest identifies as a rare space: operating in two registers at once: as a horror-inflected continuation of the Carter–Jordan lineage of lycanthropic adolescence, and as a mainstream YA supernatural romance that capitalises on the popularity of *Twilight*. This dual positioning also anticipates the ways Hardwicke draws on the figure of the witch to destabilise patriarchal boundaries, a connection I develop in the following section.

Blood, Witches, and Revolt: Hardwicke's Monstrous-Feminine

Zipes's claim that Perrault and the Brothers Grimm created the rape parable out of fear of female sexuality resonates with Creed's theory of the monstrous-feminine, in which women's reproductive and maternal functions are constructed as sources of horror. In both accounts, female sexuality is not represented on its own terms but is reshaped by patriarchal ideology into something threatening and monstrous. Perrault's attempt to discipline female desire by punishing Red's curiosity finds its parallel in horror cinema's association of menstruation and reproduction with monstrosity, a symbolic strategy that Creed argues sustains patriarchal control. Creed describes the witch in film as 'the implacable enemy of the symbolic order. [...] The witch sets out to unsettle boundaries between the rational and irrational, symbolic and imaginary.'¹³⁰ Creed emphasises that she herself does not consider women as abject beings, but that the representation as monstrous is a function of an ideological project 'designed to perpetuate the belief that woman's monstrous nature is inextricably bound up with her difference as man's sexual other' (2024: 82). Creed argues that historically, the figure of the witch is predominantly associated with women (although men have also been accused of being witches) due to the 'magical' association of the ability to create new life (2024: 73). It is precisely this disruptive quality that Hardwicke seizes upon in her storytelling practice. The witch's power to unsettle boundaries between the symbolic and the material, the rational and the irrational, becomes a model for how Hardwicke destabilises patriarchal categories within her retelling.

¹³⁰ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Second edition (Routledge, 2024), p. 75.

Horror cinema frequently maps this association onto the female body by linking supernatural powers to menstruation. Creed observes that, while melodramas and 'women's films' sidestep the subject of menstruation, horror can make it central:

In some horror films the witch's supernatural powers are linked to the female reproductive system – particularly menstruation. It is interesting to note that, despite the range of subjects covered in the maternal melodrama and the women's film, menstruation is not one. It is to the horror film that we must turn for any direct reference to woman's monthly cycle (2024: 76).

One of Creed's examples of the witch in horror film is the 1976 film *Carrie* in which a young woman's telekinetic powers are awakened when she experiences her first menstruation, linking women's blood with the possession of supernatural powers, 'powers which historically and mythologically have been associated with the representation of woman as witch' (2024: 78). Carrie is consistently abjected throughout the film through her association with blood; after bleeding in the school gym showers she is pelted with sanitary products by the other girls who taunt her for not understanding what is happening to her body. In another infamous scene, Carrie is covered in a bucket of pig's blood at the moment she is crowned as prom queen, cruelly set up by her classmates. Carrie's initiation into womanhood is thus framed as a spectacle of abjection, where menstrual blood marks her body as polluted and terrifying. This cultural coding of female blood as monstrous sets the stage for Hardwicke's intervention: rather than depicting blood as a site of shame, she reframes it as a symbol of revolt and feminine power, rewriting the monstrous-feminine as a space of agency instead of abjection.

Hardwicke demonstrates an awareness of the abjection of woman through bodily function and also of the witch, but like other directors of the Feminist New Wave film she embraces the abjection and turns the association of woman's blood and the witch into something visually stunning. Hardwicke consciously uses the cape to evoke blood, Valerie's blood specifically, not blood drawn through violence, but her blood as a woman who menstruates. In Part 2 I examine specific scenes where the red of the cape is used to signal Valerie's feminine revolt against male violence; such as when it pools around her as she crouches to collect Father Solomon's severed hand, or flows across the snow of the mountains when she walks with Peter, or when it acts as a blanket for their naked bodies when they make love. Blood is considered abject matter in patriarchal ideology, but in Hardwicke's *Red Riding Hood* it is beautiful, used to signify points of revolt within the text and celebrated as a symbol of women's blood and feminine power.

Another way that Hardwicke connects the cloak with femininity is showing that the cape is a gift to Valerie from her grandmother and a symbol of their love and close relationship. In the film Valerie's grandmother is played by Julie Christie, who according to Hardwicke did not want to be the 'crotchety old woman' of the traditional fairy tale. That is not the vision Hardwicke had for her either and she describes her as 'bad-ass':

[T]his is a lady that lives out in the woods. She's a bad-ass. She's got to be tough enough to live out there. She's got to be cool enough to be bohemian and collect the herbs and live in her own world. The people in the village probably think she's a

witch because she's different. She's got dreads and amulets. I wanted her to be a lot more interesting than a finger-wagging grandmother, so we did a revamp on that.¹³¹

Valerie's grandmother is the one person she fully confides in; there are several scenes in which Valerie discusses what is going on in her life such as her feelings about being sold in an arranged marriage into the most powerful family in the village so her mother gets more money. In the commentary for the film, Amanda Seyfried who plays Valerie speaks about Valerie's relationship with grandmother: 'She's the only person I tell everything to, I really connect with her, for whatever reason, and the way she chooses to live.' These early scenes also establish a shared language between Valerie and her grandmother, in old sayings that would be classed as 'old wives tales'. Hardwicke uses this term in a similar way to Carter, by demonstrating the truth in these 'tales' and the power of a shared oral history between women, as I explore later in the chapter. In foregrounding the oral wisdom passed between Valerie and her grandmother, Hardwicke implicitly challenges what Zipes calls the 'double violence' of Perrault's and Grimm's version, which erased the female oral tradition and replaced it with patriarchal moralising. Hardwicke's grandmother figure restores this matrilineal storytelling, validating women's knowledge as a means of survival and resistance.

The relationship between Valerie and her grandmother is central to Hardwicke's feminist retelling of Red Riding Hood, especially when set against the 'big reveal' of who the wolf is: Valerie's father, Cesare. As explored in Part 2, the wolf is the embodiment of male violence

¹³¹ Christina Radish, 'Catherine Hardwicke Interview RED RIDING HOOD', Collider (10 March 2011) <<https://collider.com/catherine-hardwicke-interview-red-riding-hood/>> [accessed 22 February 2025].

and his violent acts of murder and mutilation are all carried out to reassert his own power. Valerie's sister is murdered by him, her mother is mutilated and her grandmother is also killed by the wolf. Cesare wishes to bite Valerie so she too can become a wolf and continue his lineage. However, Valerie refuses the patriarchal inheritance, much like Aurora's rejection of her father's crown in *Maleficent*. Creed has argued that the alignment of the monstrous-feminine with the animal and non-human can be used in an empowering way, and I agree as demonstrated through my analysis of *Maleficent* as nonhuman in my second chapter and embracing the 'animal' self can be a form of revolt for the monstrous-feminine. However, in the story of *Red Riding Hood* the wolf is intrinsically linked with male violence, rape culture and oppression of the feminine. Hardwicke resists the empowerment of her heroine by turning her into the wolf and instead has her embrace the inheritance of her grandmother as the outsider witch. Valerie's rejection of the wolf's inheritance is therefore more than a plot point: it stages a choice between two forms of the monstrous. The wolf embodies patriarchal violence, domination, and rape culture, while the witch embodies female revolt, outsider status, and the reclamation of abjection. In aligning her heroine with the witch rather than the wolf, Hardwicke demonstrates what Creed identifies as the liberating potential of the monstrous-feminine: a revolt that destabilises the patriarchal order from within.

I position my reading of Hardwicke's feminist storytelling alongside Athena Bellas's analysis in *Fairy Tales on the Teen Screen: Rituals of Girlhood* (2017). Bellas argues that adolescent sites of female agency can be located in moments where teen screen heroines enter a

liminal zone of opposition to the status quo.¹³² The feminist optics of her book trace the transformative effects of these ruptures in narratives that ordinarily relegate girlhood to a subordinate position. Bellas identifies this ‘liminal gap’ as vital because it articulates that which is ‘unspeakable’, producing ‘an alternative space on the margins of the dominant narrative order that carves out a new mode of signification and representation’ (2017, 13).

I argue that Hardwicke’s mobilisation of the senses creates precisely this kind of alternate space. Her feminist storytelling is not confined to narrative and visual strategies but is materially embedded in the text itself. For example, as I explore in Part 2, the red cloak was embroidered with intricate patterns that are invisible on camera but affect the actors directly, enhancing their embodied storytelling. Here Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s theorisation of texture and textiles in *Touching Feeling* is especially illuminating. Drawing on Renu Bora, Sedgwick observes that ‘to perceive texture is always, immediately, and de facto to be immersed in a field of active narrative hypothesizing, testing, and re-understanding of how physical properties act and are acted upon over time’.¹³³ The embroidered cloak operates in precisely this way: stitched by many hands it carries what Bora terms ‘texxture’: a surface ‘dense with historical and affective traces’ (2003: 14). As I explore further in Part 2, this ‘texxtural layering’ is central to Hardwicke’s feminist storytelling, situating meaning not only in what Valerie sees or says but also in what she touches, wears and eats.

¹³² Athena Bellas, *Fairy Tales on the Teen Screen: Rituals of Girlhood* (Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2017), p. 13.

¹³³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2003), p. 13.

Bellas suggests that Hardwicke's main method of creating this 'alternate space' is by exposing the violence of the male gaze through Valerie's point-of-view shots and overturning it with the 'girl's gaze'. Combined with Valerie's voice-over narration, these strategies articulate her recognition of patriarchal discourses of femininity and her resistance to them: 'her ability to challenge and oppose it, is central to her capacity for agency' (2017: 60). I do not disagree with Bellas, and in Part 2 I unpack her argument further in relation to specific moments in the film. However, I suggest that Hardwicke's project goes further than narratively centring Valerie. She also aesthetically and materially situates the female body, long coded by patriarchy as destabilising and abject, as a site of feminist storytelling. Narrative is embedded in the sensory realm of the body, from the cloak's embroidery to Valerie's tactile, visual, and vocal presence. This privileging of the senses recalls Creed's account of Feminist New Wave, where the monstrous-feminine emerges through Kristeva's 'revalorizing [of] the sensory experience': 'Feminist New Wave films explore the heroine's emotions and senses as she struggles to explore her own identity and to speak in her own voice'.¹³⁴ By rooting the film in these bodily registers, Hardwicke not only wrests the tale from the patriarchal symbolic order of the wolf and the male storytellers, but also returns storytelling to the female body those storytellers sought to control. This does more than simply invert the male gaze and male narrator, Hardwicke turns the female body and senses into a mode of storytelling, one that cannot be silenced or contained.

¹³⁴ Barbara Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine: Feminist New Wave Cinema* (Routledge, 2022), p. 4.

As discussed, while Red Riding Hood's embrace of her animal side is often framed as an empowering act in feminist retellings, such as Carter's 'The Company of Wolves', in Hardwicke's film Valerie's resistance to the wolf functions instead as a symbol of revolt. Bellas further argues that Valerie's embrace of the witch identity is central to this resistance: 'When the townspeople accuse her of being a witch, she does not struggle against this outsider identity; rather, she uses it to her advantage as a measure of resistance to the conventional feminine role she has been urged to adopt' (2017: 53). As I later argue, the film's ending shows Valerie's full embrace of this outsider identity and the freedom it offers. What I want to develop further, however, is how Hardwicke constructs this resistance not only through plot and dialogue but embeds the story in sensory registers. If Bellas identifies the 'girl's gaze' and the witch identity as crucial sites of agency, I suggest that Hardwicke expands this project by reclaiming the wolf's sensory power, hearing, seeing, touching, consuming, and redistributes them to Valerie. Each sense becomes a feminist intervention: voice and storytelling, gaze and spectacle, touch and desire, food and survival, resisting the binary separation of mind and body and acknowledges that they are entangled. In the following section, I examine how Hardwicke reworks the iconic exchange, 'the better to hear/see/grab/eat you with', to dismantle the rape-parable logic of the tale and transform the female body into a source of unruly, resistant storytelling.

Part 2: Hearing, Seeing, Touching, Eating: Feminist Revisions of the Wolf's Gaze

If Perrault's tale and the Grimms' revisions worked to discipline Red Riding Hood by scripting her as a blameworthy victim, Hardwicke rewrites the narrative on and through the female body itself. Valerie is not only made narrator but also spectacle; her voice, her gaze, her touch, and her body become the media through which the story is told. By investing the

red cape with symbolic weight and staging Valerie's body as the site of revolt, Hardwicke transforms what patriarchal ideology has coded as monstrous into a feminist form of storytelling. 'Little Red Cap' is famous for the scene between the titular heroine and the wolf, disguised as Grandmother, as Little Red Cap runs through the various body parts of the wolf and the wolf attributes the relevant sense to them:

'Oh, grandmother, what big ears you have!'

'The better to hear you with.'

'Oh, grandmother, what big eyes you have!'

'The better to see you with.'

'Oh, grandmother, what big hands you have!'

'The better to grab you with.'

'Oh, grandmother, what a terribly big mouth you have!'

'The better to eat you with!'¹³⁵

This exchange, iconic in fairy tale tradition, encapsulates what Jack Zipes calls the 'double violence': the symbolic violation enacted against Red within the story, and the textual silencing of female oral traditions by male authors. The wolf monopolises the senses as tools of predation, while Red is positioned as the passive object of his consumption. The violence is therefore doubled: the girl is destroyed both in body and in narrative. Hardwicke consciously undoes this symbolic double rape by redistributing the senses to women. Where Grimm and Perrault gave perception and narration to the wolf, Hardwicke reclaims them for Valerie and her matrilineal line. She does so on multiple levels: Valerie narrates in the first

¹³⁵ Grimm, Wilhelm Grimm and Jacob Grimm, Jack Zipes, and Andrea Dezsö, eds., *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 86-87.

person, Hardwicke herself directs with a largely female team, and the film addresses an audience of young women whose gaze and desires it centres. In place of the wolf's predatory 'better to hear/see/grab/eat you with', Hardwicke offers feminist counter-claims: Valerie's voice, her point of view, her desire, and her survival.

In the Brothers Grimm retelling, four out of five senses are included: hearing, seeing, touching, and eating, while smell is conspicuously absent, probably because the brothers sanitised the tale to remove opportunities for 'ribald humour'.¹³⁶ Hardwicke restores smell to the narrative, enabling Grandmother to 'sniff out' the real wolf, underscoring how all the senses can be mobilised against patriarchal storytelling. By returning sensory experience to her heroine, Hardwicke also returns the tale to women's voices, experience and bodily autonomy. More broadly, she transforms sensory experience itself into feminist storytelling: Valerie's body and senses become narrative devices that dismantle the wolf's control.

The structure of Part 2 draws on the Grimms' exchange to explore how Hardwicke reframes female transgression through the senses. 'The better to hear you with' examines the restoration of female voice and storytelling, drawing on Bellas, Purkiss, and Hemmings. 'The better to see you with' turns to Valerie's point of view and the female gaze. 'The better to grab you with' explores Valerie's desire and sexuality through touch, including her relationship with Peter and the creation of the cape as women's work and artistry. 'The better to eat you with' examines male violence and objectification, returning to Angela Carter's insistence that Red Riding Hood is 'nobody's meat'. While 'grab' and 'eat' may

¹³⁶ Maria Tatar, *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*, (W.W. Norton, 2004), p. 146.

appear interchangeable, I argue for their distinction: 'grab' can signify both aggression and consensual passion, whereas 'eat' is aligned with violence and violation, including the symbolic double rape identified by feminist critics. These senses inevitably overlap, but they provide a framework for analysing how Hardwicke dismantles the wolf's monopoly on perception and restores sensory and narrative power to Red Riding Hood. What follows begins with hearing, the sense most directly tied to voice and storytelling, and thus the first step in Hardwicke's reclamation of Red Riding Hood from patriarchal silencing.

'The better to hear you with'

Valerie and her grandmother transgress boundaries both as women who choose to live outside society (beyond the village walls) and as storytellers: Grandmother tells Valerie stories, and Valerie, in turn, tells the viewer her own story through the first-person voiceover. When Valerie goes to Grandmother upset about her sister and her betrothal, Grandmother says 'Remember, my Granny used to say: All sorrows are...' and Valerie finishes her sentence: '...less with bread.'¹³⁷ This exchange demonstrates the continuity of women's oral storytelling across generations, with Valerie finishing the words first spoken by her great-great-grandmother. Like Carter, Hardwicke gives the 'old wives' tales' respect and authority within the text, repositioning them as sources of female wisdom rather than as superstitious mutterings. The scene showing Valerie and Grandmother sharing a meal also gives the audience a visual representation of how storytelling circulates between these two women. Their exchange grounds knowledge not in patriarchal instruction but in domestic intimacy, food, and memory. (This scene is also one I look at in more detail in the

¹³⁷ Catherine Hardwicke, and David Leslie, *Red Riding Hood: From Script to Screen* (Insight, 2011), p. 41.

'Eat me' section as Hardwicke demonstrates Valerie and Grandmother's connection over food is key to Valerie's understanding the horror of patriarchal violence.)

Hardwicke also gives Red Riding Hood the voice of authority in narrating her own story. In place of the male storytellers of the literary fairy tale, Perrault or Grimm, who both silence Red Riding Hood and cast her as culpable, Valerie speaks in the first person, recounting a story of unruly girlhood. This revision undoes what Jack Zipes calls the 'double violence' of Perrault's tale: the symbolic violation enacted against Red within the narrative and the textual violation of suppressing women's oral versions in favour of a didactic male-authored cautionary tale. As Bellas observes:

Hardwicke provides an important revision: Little Red Riding Hood is the omniscient storyteller and authoritative overseer of the narrative. [...] With her agency restored, the Red Riding Hood heroine is shown to not only speak back to the male authorities in her world, but also articulate her demands beyond their strictures (2017: 57).

By positioning Valerie as storyteller, Hardwicke returns authority to the heroine herself, and in doing so demonstrates how feminist filmmaking can return voice to women silenced both in text and in history.

Hardwicke subverts the traditional cautionary tale of Perrault and Grimm by embedding a 'keen critical insight' into the sexism of those texts, providing what Bellas calls 'moments of opposition and rupture' that enable Valerie to escape the strictures society places upon her and emerge as a 'powerful storyteller who becomes an unruly figure' (Bellas, 2017: 42).

Hardwicke's strategy also works at the level of production, *Red Riding Hood* is a story told by

women: Hardwicke as director, working with a largely female creative team, embeds women's perspectives behind the camera as well as within the story. This literal reclamation of authorship from men like Perrault and Grimm, who 'gave birth to our common image of Red Riding Hood' (Zipes), underscores the film's project of returning the tale to female storytellers. In this way, Hardwicke undoes the parable's symbolic double rape by foregrounding women's speech in every layer of its construction, from Valerie's first-person narration to the collaborative labour of Hardwicke and her female crew.

This insistence on women's voices also answers Diane Purkiss's concerns about feminist myth-making. In her work on women retelling myths, Purkiss argues that attempts to revise patriarchal stories by offering positive female role models or reclaiming negative ones often fail: 'attempts to produce positive role models and tell feminist stories will repeatedly founder if we assume that stories can be excised from text, culture and institution, that their meanings are not circumscribed by their histories'.¹³⁸ For Purkiss, such strategies risk reproducing the very exclusions they seek to undo. Hardwicke, however, manages to avoid this trap by acknowledging the patriarchal damage inflicted on 'Little Red Riding Hood' by Perrault and Grimm, while also reclaiming the oral traditions that preceded them. Valerie's authority as storyteller is not presented as a simple corrective or utopian rewriting, but as an act of revolt that exposes the violence of literary history and reclaims the wisdom of women's speech.

¹³⁸ Dianne Purkiss, 'Women's Rewriting of Myth' in Larrington, Carolyne, ed., *The Feminist Companion to Mythology* (Pandora Press, 1992), pp.441-457, p. 442.

The danger Purkiss identifies is sharpest in her analysis of radical feminist witch mythology in *The Witch in History*. Feminist storytellers, she argues, can silence uncomfortable voices even in the act of reclamation.:

Here is a story. Once upon a time, there was a woman who lived on the edge of a village. She lived alone, in her own home surrounded by her garden, in which she grew all manner of herbs and other healing plants. Though she was alone, she was never lonely; she had her garden and her animals for company, she took lovers when she wished, and she was always busy.¹³⁹

The myth of 'the burning times', framed with the familiar fairy tale opening of 'Once upon a time', functioned as a form of empowerment, yet, as Purkiss observes, it often privileged the spectacle of women's bodily suffering over their actual words: 'radical feminists' attempted to make witches seem real by focusing on the essential stuff of the body in pain rather than the more difficult matter of their words' (1996: 26). In emphasising suffering, the very voices of accused women were again erased. Purkiss's critique underscores how easily feminist storytelling can replicate patriarchal silencing if it privileges myth over testimony.

Here Clare Hemmings's account of feminist historiography offers a useful extension. As discussed in the previous chapter, Hemmings identifies three dominant narrative forms in feminist storytelling, progress, loss, and return, each of which risks consolidating certain voices while excluding others. The myth of the radical feminist witch seeks to recover a more radical past to rescue the present and aligns with the 'loss' narrative, presenting a

¹³⁹ Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1996), p.26

feminist utopia which was destroyed by the patriarchy in the form of the witch trials. Such stories are politically powerful, sustained through what Hemmings calls 'citation and affect', but they can also silence histories that do not fit their trajectory, a point that Purkiss makes. *Red Riding Hood*, however, sidesteps this danger, Hardwicke does not present Valerie's story as a utopian 'return' to a feminist past; her world is compromised and hostile, marked by betrayal, violence, and suspicion. Hardwicke includes those uncomfortable voices, as I explore in the following section and allows us to hear them. Thus, in Hardwicke's retelling, 'the better to hear you with' is no longer the wolf's assertion of predatory listening but Valerie's reclamation of storytelling as revolt. By restoring voice to Red Riding Hood, both through her position as narrator and through Hardwicke's own authorship as a woman director, the film resists the patriarchal silencing enacted by Perrault and Grimm. It also avoids the pitfalls Purkiss and Hemmings identify, acknowledging the exclusions and violences of feminist as well as patriarchal storytelling while insisting that women's voices must be heard.

'The better to see you with.'

In the traditional fairy tale, Red Riding Hood is the object to be looked at: by the wolf, by the huntsman, and by the male storyteller who frames her as culpable. Hardwicke's film, by contrast, works to center Valerie's vision. Bellas argues Hardwicke's employment of the 'girl's gaze' through the point-of-view shots frequently employed in the film where the audience literally sees through Valerie's eyes. Centering Valerie's gaze acts 'as a revisionary force, rupturing the dominance of adult male masculine narrative authority' thereby reclaiming the story from Perrault and the Brothers Grimm.

A key example of this comes when Valerie first speaks to the wolf during an attack on the village. Valerie looks intently into the wolf's eyes and sees her own reflection (Figure 9). This image performs two functions: it renders the wolf the object of the female gaze, inverting the traditional fairy-tale dynamic in which Red Riding Hood is the object of the wolf or huntsman's gaze, and it suggests that Valerie recognises herself in the wolf, both literally and metaphorically. (This moment also prepares for Valerie's public humiliation in the wolf-mask sequence. Because she can hear the wolf speak, a power rooted in her hidden identity as his daughter, Father Solomon accuses her of witchcraft.)



Figure 9 Valerie in the eye of the wolf

Bellas offers a different reading of this scene:

In one scene set in the front garden of Valerie's home, her father – who is also the wolf – attacks the heroine. [...] Valerie's image is reflected in an extreme close-up of one of the wolf's enormous eyes. Transfixed and unable to move, she is quite literally captured and controlled by his gaze. Creating an image that quite literally depicts the dynamics of the gaze – the wolf / male as possessor, the female figure as captured object – Hardwicke explicitly brings Perrault and the Grimms' male gaze to the surface of the film (2017: 46).

Bellas does make an important point: 'Hardwicke's film appears to be keenly aware of the dominant male gaze, and renders its mechanisms so explicitly and excessively that its violence becomes painfully obvious' (2017: 46). I would argue, however, that while Hardwicke does foreground the violence of the gaze, she also works to reclaim it. The wolf's fairy tale line 'all the better to see you with' is here inverted, claimed instead by Valerie's gaze. In order for that inversion to take place, the violence and control of the male gaze must first be acknowledged, as Bellas points out, but Hardwicke subverts it by making Valerie see herself reflected in the wolf's eye.

While I do not reject Bellas' argument, I suggest that the violence is overstated. To frame the scene as an 'attack' risks re-inscribing Valerie as victim. The violence that actually arises from this encounter comes in the form of the punishment of Valerie by the villagers which I will discuss. The wolf could easily bite her by force, but instead he pauses, waiting for her to choose to join him, claiming to know her true self. Valerie may be transfixed, but I read this as fascination with her own reflection: the wolf's eye becomes a mirror through which she begins to claim the gaze. In this way, Hardwicke surfaces the male gaze of the traditional fairy tale only to subvert it, allowing Valerie to transform it into a tool of self-recognition. Cesare in his human form is presented as a pathetic harmless drunk: Valerie even kicks him as he lies on the floor at the village dance; another male character is shown simulating sex with him while Cesare appears drunkenly oblivious. As an abuser Cesare is quietly sinister, presenting and playing to the image his family and the villagers have of him as a failure: he is gaslighting them, a wolf in sheep's clothing. As Bellas notes, 'a range of men have their 'eyes on' Valerie', but Hardwicke unsettles this by aligning the filmic gaze with Valerie herself, positioning the men as objects to be looked at rather than subjects of control (2017:

46). In recognising herself in the wolf's eye, Valerie is not simply caught by a male gaze but instead looks back at herself.

Bellas argues that Hardwicke's activation of the girl's gaze as central and authoritative 'undermines the sexist structures that work to suppress and marginalise Valerie's power and point of view'. A very powerful use of Valerie's gaze comes in the scenes following her encounter with the wolf, when she is accused of witchcraft by Father Solomon because she can hear the wolf speak (a power rooted in her hidden identity as the wolf's daughter). Because the wolf is drawn to Valerie, the villagers decide to leave her out instead of the usual sacrificial goat, in the hope that he will leave the village in peace. Valerie is handcuffed and put in a metal wolf mask, which she describes in her voiceover as being 'designed for public disgrace'. Villagers come and speak to her, including her former friend Prudence, who says:

I want you to know that you may have fooled Roxanne, but you don't fool me, not anymore. You were always too good, too pretty, too perfect. You tricked us. Now you're going to get what you deserve.

Prudence's words are charged not only with suspicion but with jealousy, already visible in an earlier scene which established Prudence and Valerie as rivals for Peter's affections. This rivalry, staged through the body and the gaze, is carried into the wolf-mask scene where Prudence's condemnation fuses sexual competition with patriarchal scapegoating.

In her book on the films of Sofia Coppola, Anna Backman Rogers argues that as a feminist director, Coppola gives the female viewer 'what they *know already to be true* and she demands that the male viewer bear the burden of what it means to be made the object of

the gaze.’¹⁴⁰ This argument can also be applied to the scene in which Valerie is paraded through the village in the wolf mask. Although Valerie states that the mask is ‘designed for public disgrace’, its effect is more complex. The mask narrows and constricts her vision, but this very restriction sharpens her perspective and forces the spectator to share it (Figure 10). Instead of being consumed as pure spectacle, Valerie becomes the spectator; her gaze is fixed on the villagers who approach and condemn her, making them, the objects of the female gaze (Figure 11).



Figure 10 Valerie in the wolf mask

¹⁴⁰ Anna Backman Rogers, *Sofia Coppola: The Politics of Visual Pleasure* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019), p. 15.



Figure 11 Valerie's gaze

Hardwicke exploits this tension by aligning the camera with Valerie's eyes, so that the villagers' accusations reveal more about the patriarchal system that pits women against one another than about Valerie herself. As Backman Rogers insists, 'Above all, a feminist film must address the spectator as female (as opposed to portraying the female body or character as strong or weak, which is far too simplistic a response)' (2019: 14). Hardwicke achieves this by making Valerie the one who looks, even at the moment she is most on display.

Prudence's betrayal of Valerie exemplifies this dynamic and shows how women can be complicit in their own oppression: patriarchy sets women against one another through ideals of female perfection. Diane Purkiss critiques the myth of the 'burning times' in similar terms:

This is, above all, a narrative of the Fall, of paradise lost. It is a story about how perfect our lives would be – how perfect we women would be, patient, kind, self-sufficient – if it were not for the patriarchy and its violence (1996: 8).

Hardwicke resists this vision of a feminist golden age: Valerie's female friends turn against her, and her own mother attempts to sell her into marriage. Women in this story are not simply patient and kind; rather, their rivalries and betrayals reveal how patriarchal structures foster hostility between them. This also recalls Carter's 'The Werewolf', where Red Riding Hood discovers her grandmother to be the wolf and exposes her to violent death, foregrounding intergenerational female conflict within a patriarchal frame.

Hardwicke draws on this lineage but also develops it in continuity with her wider work: from her directorial debut *Thirteen* (2003), she has explored the volatility of female friendship and the ways in which competition, envy, and betrayal complicate feminist ideals. Her feminism is therefore not a rose-tinted myth of 'sisterhood' but one attentive to the messy, often destructive dynamics that exist between women under patriarchy.

'The better to grab you with.'

In the Brothers Grimm tale, the wolf's 'better to grab you with' signals predatory hands that seize, restrain, and prepare Red Riding Hood for consumption. Hardwicke reclaims this gesture by transforming 'grabbing' into an act that signifies revolt, intimacy, and care.

Across *Red Riding Hood*, touch is a vehicle for Valerie's agency: she wields the knife, she reaches for her lover, she is wrapped and unwrapped by the iconic cape. In each instance, the tactile becomes central to female subjectivity, unsettling the rape-parable tradition that frames Red Riding Hood as the passive object of another's grasp. Hardwicke's explicit use of touch as an act of storytelling opens up the film to feminist readings of women's labour, denying the passive 'fairy tale princess' stereotype. Valerie's hands are never idle: she chops wood, kills and skins a rabbit, conducts the funeral rites for her sister by washing and dressing her body. Her action is an important part of her agency, overturning the passive

rape-parable tradition that Brownmiller critiques. This reclamation of the tactile means that 'grab' in Hardwicke's film does not reproduce the wolf's violence but becomes a feminist refrain: grabbing as revolt, grabbing as desire, grabbing as care. As Sedgwick observes 'the sense of touch makes nonsense out of any dualistic understanding of agency and passivity; to touch is always already to reach out, to fondle, to heft, to tap, or to enfold' (2003: 14). The tactile in *Red Riding Hood* is disruptive in precisely this sense: knives, bodies, and fabrics do not simply adorn the story but intervene in its patriarchal logic, imposing new meanings that foreground revolt and female agency.

The film first establishes Valerie's character through her tactile refusal of domesticity: sent to fetch water, she drops the bucket and takes Peter's hand, abandoning the chore for the thrill of the forest. Her voiceover insists she 'tried to be a good girl', but this swift gesture undermines the notion of 'goodness' as obedience. As Bellas points out, Valerie's repeated voice-over repudiation of the 'good girl' narrative throughout the film is 'central to her capacity for agency' (2017: 60). For Bellas, this addition of the heroine's 'authoritative perspective [...] creates a significant space in which discourses of 'good girl' femininity can be contested and revised [...] and this opens up space for the introduction of the heroine's desiring gaze' (2017: 60). Hardwicke stages this shift visually: the dropped bucket, symbol of domestic duty, is displaced by Peter's hand, symbol of unruly choice.

In the forest, Valerie and Peter attempt to trap rabbits. When Peter hesitates to kill the animal, Valerie takes the knife and does so herself (off-screen). By grasping the knife, Valerie assumes the traditionally male roles of huntsman, recalling Carter's heroine who similarly 'has her knife and is afraid of nothing'. The rabbit itself is symbolic: in folklore,

rabbits evoke innocence, sexuality, and fertility. In Christian iconography, the white rabbit often accompanies images of the Virgin Mary, symbolising purity and the Immaculate Conception. To kill the white rabbit is therefore to refuse these symbolic burdens, to reject the demand that Valerie embody sacrificial innocence or passive fertility. It also tells us that Valerie is prepared to get her hands dirty in pursuit of her own desires.

If Valerie's first act in the film, in dropping the bucket and grabbing Peter's hand, signals a refusal of domestic docility, it also foreshadows the more radical act of touch that arrives in her confrontation with Cesare, her father and the wolf. After killing Cesare using the silver tipped nails of Father Solomon's severed hand, Valerie slits her father's belly, fills it with stones, and stitches it shut (Figure 13). The sequence is deliberately material: Hardwicke lingers on the audible tear of skin, on Valerie's bloody fingers, on the thick thread biting through flesh. Reading the scene through Maria Tatar's account of the Brothers Grimm version clarifies the radical turn. Tatar notes that the huntsman's cut has often been read as a kind of symbolic caesarean: the girl 'jumps out', 'placing even birth under the sign of male mastery' (2004: 148). Valerie's action deliberately inverts that logic. As Creed notes 'when male bodies become grotesque, they tend to take on characteristics associated with female bodies', in this case a pregnant one (2024: 20). By opening Cesare and filling the cavity with stones, she performs what we might call a reverse impregnation, a refusal of patriarchal lineage at the level of the body. The play-on-words in the name 'Cesare' (evoking caesarean) further underscores the inversion: where the huntsman's caesarean secures male possession of the female body, Valerie's cut interrupts and terminates that inheritance.

The stones add another symbolic layer. On one level, they turn Cesare into a dead weight, sinking him in the lake, but they also return us to the horror-inflected associations of menstruation and monstrosity that, as I argued earlier, Hardwicke carries into the paranormal romance frame. As Creed notes, ‘the glance of a menstruating woman, like the glance of the Medusa or Gorgon, was once thought to turn men to stone’ (2024: 64). Medusa, Creed explains, is regarded by historians of myth as a ‘particularly nasty’ version of the *vagina dentata*, condensing male fears of castration and unruly female sexuality (2024: 121). Valerie’s act works in a similar register: cutting into her father’s body and weighting it with stones becomes a symbolic castration, a refusal of his attempt to reproduce his power through her. It is crucial that Valerie performs this act while wearing her red cape, the garment repeatedly framed as a visual analogue of female blood. In patriarchal ideology, menstrual blood is abject; in Hardwicke’s imagery, it becomes beautiful, a sign of revolt. Medusa’s petrifying gaze and Valerie’s flowing cloak both function as spectacular emblems of what the patriarchal symbolic order fears: the visibility of female sexuality and reproductive power. Where Perrault punished Red Riding Hood’s transgression, Hardwicke insists on its display, a feminist rewriting that figures the wolf in the register of stone rather than the girl in the register of meat, a symbolic reversal that insists on the visibility of female power and the termination of male inheritance.

Creed’s analysis of the monstrous-feminine and abjection helps name what Hardwicke is doing with this tactile excess. Blood, viscera, the opened abdomen, these are the very substances and thresholds that patriarchal culture casts as abject, the ‘stuff’ that must be excluded to maintain symbolic order. Valerie’s hands enter the abject zone and work there: cutting, packing, stitching. In this light, the scene is not only about killing the wolf-father but

about revaluing female proximity to blood. The film has already prepared us for this: Valerie skins the rabbit without squeamishness and, with the village women, washes and dresses her sister's corpse, Valerie is seen tenderly plaiting her hair (Figure 12).



Figure 12 Valerie tends to her sister's corpse



Figure 13 Valerie sews the stones into Cesare's stomach

These domestic rites, traditionally women's tasks, are reimagined as sources of strength: what patriarchy defines as 'women's work' (sewing, washing, tending bodies) becomes a means through which Valerie asserts her agency. When preparing Cesare's body Valerie does not tremble or turn away from the grisly task; she acts in a matter-of-fact way, as if

preparing the carcass of an animal for a meal. In a tale that has long reduced girls to 'meat' Valerie refuses that position and instead handles the category of meat with authority.

Hardwicke pointedly contrasts Valerie's violent touch with her erotic touch. Where the former reclaims sewing, cutting, and stitching as tools of revolt, the latter reclaims desire itself as a source of agency. Valerie and Peter's relationship is expressed through physicality, often initiated by Valerie rather than by Peter. This inversion of gendered expectation is most apparent in the scenes where Valerie uses her body to perform desire on her own terms. At a village celebration, Peter dances suggestively with Prudence out of jealousy, Valerie responds by dancing with her female friend, locking eyes with Peter throughout. Desire here is not staged as passive receptivity but as play: the two lovers communicate through their bodies without touching, turning absence and withholding into flirtation. This culminates in a near-sex scene in the barn, with Peter whispering to Valerie that he could 'eat her up'. Hardwicke deliberately reclaims this line, so often coded as a metaphor for rape in the traditional fairy tale, as a moment of consensual passion. What was once a threat becomes playful intimacy, a reminder that, as Carter's heroine insists in 'The Company of Wolves', 'she knew she was nobody's meat' (2015: 138).

The politics of touch are made even more visible in the film's alternate endings, which foreground female sexual desire in different registers. Hardwicke herself described the process of creating an alternative ending:

As a director, every moment when you're on set you try to be creative in that moment and one moment during filming I had this crazy idea and thought, 'why don't you try this?' So I shot a different ending and then we tried it as one of the

possible endings for the final version and I liked it a lot. I think the final one you saw in theaters might be better but I like them both. It's kind of like a contest, 'which one is more interesting?'¹⁴¹

In the theatrical ending Valerie imagines a dream-like future with Peter, her cloak trailing like a bridal train(Figure 14).



Figure 14 Valerie in the snow

Bellas highlights the dramatic shift of cinematography and lighting from the claustrophobic setting of the village: 'The cinematographic framing is wide, giving an impression of Valerie's figure freely and fluidly moving in the frame. [...] The flexibility and fluidity of the figure's movement through the liminal landscape is further emphasised by the billowing undulations of Valerie's red cloak' (2017: 52). This sequence offers a fantasy of union but displaces sexual consummation, with Peter leaving Valerie to protect her from his urges. By contrast, the Blu-ray ending consummates the relationship. Valerie and Peter make love in the snow, lying naked on the red cloak. Later, when Peter returns, Valerie is shown holding their child, also wrapped in the cloak. Here the tactile symbol of the film, the cloak, becomes fused with

¹⁴¹ 'Exclusive: Catherine Hardwicke Includes New Ending on Red Riding Hood DVD', Tribute.Ca, n.d. <<https://www.tribute.ca/news/exclusive-catherine-hardwicke-includes-new-ending-on-red-riding-hood-dvd/2011/06/02/>> [accessed 2 January 2019].

maternal continuity: wrapping her child in the cloak signifies not the continuation of Cesare's patriarchal line, but a new matrilineal inheritance through Valerie and her grandmother.

These dream-like visions again place *Red Riding Hood* in a lineage with Neil Jordan's *The Company of Wolves*, which, as Laura Hubner argues in *Fairy Tale and Gothic Horror* (2018), depicts the werewolf as a figure of liberation 'from the shackles of society or the strict codes of civilization. In this sense the notion of joining the company of wolves can be a means to express a necessary initiation or rite of passage into the woods to become wise to the animal within us, shattering fixed notions of self and other'.¹⁴² Hubner points out that Jordan conveys this realm of the werewolf through 'the dream visions of a teenage girl', and Hardwicke echoes this technique, using Valerie's dream sequences as spaces of disruption, liminality, and transformation. Indeed, Hardwicke had already deployed fantasy dream visions as feminist interruptions in *Twilight*, where, as Bellas argues, Bella's fantasy dream sequences 'reconceptualise elements of spectacle and time [...] in ways resistant to the tale's construction of girlhood and passivity' (2017: 79). The dreams provide moments of disruption that fracture linear narrative and unsettle conservative trajectories. I argue that the dream sequences in *Red Riding Hood* perform a similar function, they are not escapist fantasies but interruptions that stage identity as resistant to patriarchal containment.

¹⁴² Laura Hubner, *Fairy Tale and Gothic Horror: Uncanny Transformations in Film*, SpringerLink Bücher (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 120.

The Red Cape

Valerie's red cape is the fabric that both frames and extends her agency, it is the film's most potent tactile symbol, carrying layers of cultural, feminist, and material significance.

Hardwicke herself foregrounded its centrality:

It was a big deal to myself and the costume designer. We were like, 'How are we going to portray this iconic element that's the title?' The title of the movie is a piece of clothing. We did mock-ups of it. Doing research back into that time period, any piece of fabric was valuable because it took so much effort to make, so we thought maybe it was made from old bits of curtains and other things, so the whole lining of the cape is made from different patterns. And then, there was all this embroidery. We thought that the grandmother made it lovingly for her granddaughter, and she's this creative soul. So, we actually had 14 women in Vancouver who did a sewing circle and stitched everything into the cape. There was a lot of heart and love and actual hours that went into it to make it have that quality. It was a pretty big deal.¹⁴³

This lengthy reflection is worth quoting because it demonstrates how Hardwicke explicitly reimagines the cape as an artefact of women's work, both within the film and beyond it. On screen, the cape is a gift from Grandmother, symbolising maternal love and female continuity; off screen, it was literally produced by a circle of fourteen women, whose stitches embed female artistry into the very fabric of the narrative.

Cindy Evans, the costume designer, elaborates:

¹⁴³ Radish, 'Catherine Hardwicke Interview RED RIDING HOOD'.

We stencilled in this beautiful pattern that goes all the way around the cape, like a swirly paisley, and then we had a stitching circle of women, 8 or 10 of them at a time, who embroidered over the stencil pattern using six different shades of red. It's tough to see, but my intention was that it shouldn't look obvious, and if you catch a glimpse of it, it's a beautiful surprise.¹⁴⁴

That this embroidery is barely visible on screen makes its significance greater: it is a hidden labour, perceptible only to the actors, a tactile reality of women's craft that exceeds cinematic spectacle. Here Hardwicke also aligns her narrative with the medieval French sewing circles that Zipes notes as crucial contexts for oral fairy-tale transmission and the origin of the Little Red Cap tale. The cape thus functions as both a material prop and a historical echo, connecting Valerie to the long history of women's storytelling through craft.

Sedgwick's reflections on textiles and touch in provide a critical framework for understanding the feminist stakes of Hardwicke's tactile storytelling. Sedgwick describes her own practice of 'the nonlinguistic work of textile art' alongside her writing, noting how it expanded her sense of textured reality beyond the 'privilege of the written word' (2003: 3). She also turns to the work of textile artist Judith Scott, whose wrapped fibre sculptures foreground 'multicolored yarn, cord, ribbon, rope, and other fiber' as sites where touch and affect dissolve the subject-object divide, 'the sense of sight is seen to dissolve in favour of that of touch' (2003: 22). This insistence that textile practices themselves generate meaning

¹⁴⁴ Lester, Tracey Lomrantz, 'Exclusive: Behind-The-Scenes Scoop From The Costume Designer Of Red Riding Hood', *Glamour* (11 March 2011) <<https://www.glamour.com/story/exclusive-behind-the-scenes-sc>> [accessed 17 December 2018].

echoes Hardwicke's off-screen decision to have a women's sewing circle embroider Valerie's cape, embedding layers of female artistry into the narrative.

As Sedgwick reminds us, touch unsettles the binary of passivity and agency, always implying action as well as reception (2003: 14). Valerie's hands embody this refusal of passivity: sewing, cutting, washing, caressing, they create agency rather than merely receiving it. Sedgwick uses Renu Bora's distinction of 'texture' and 'texxture' with two x's: 'Texxture is the kind of texture that is dense with offered information about how, substantively, historically, materially, it came into being' (2003: 14). The cape exemplifies 'texxture', as a material surface dense with the historical and affective traces of its making, while also staging the intimacy between 'textures and emotions' that for Sedgwick shifts the focus away from performance as the privileged site of essential truths towards new questions of phenomenology and effect (2003: 14). Reading the film through Sedgwick's account of textiles and touch reveals Hardwicke's tactile excess as not ornamental, but a deliberate sensory practice of storytelling that foregrounds women's labour.

This is where Stella Bruzzi's theory of costume becomes vital. As I outlined in my first chapter, Bruzzi argues that clothing is not passive adornment but can 'impose rather than absorb meaning' and act as a 'spectacular intervention'. Hardwicke's cape is precisely such an intervention: not simply decorative, but narratively disruptive. It asserts itself at crucial moments: when Valerie crouches to collect Father Solomon's severed hand, when she and Peter lie naked in the snow, when she later wraps her baby, imposing meaning that extends beyond the text. Warwick and Cavallaro's concept of 'gift-wrapping' further illuminates the importance of the cape:

Items of clothing such as scarves, especially if they are conspicuously juxtaposed to conservative garments, appeal precisely to the gift-wrapping mentality. They are apparently dispensable additions to the more substantial gear they accompany. But they are also, vitally, so many invitations to unwrap the authorized, clothed body.¹⁴⁵

Valerie could walk through the village without it and appear clothed; yet the garment is indispensable to the tale, imposing itself at every critical juncture. Warwick and Cavallaro's reminder that 'Dress renders it [the body] analysable, either forcibly through required clothing, or voluntarily through self-selected garments; it becomes manipulable through the effects of being dressed' is especially resonant here (1998: 75). Grandmother first wraps Valerie in the cape after her sister's death, intended as a future bridal garment. Father Solomon, by contrast, calls it a 'harlot's robe' as he chains Valerie for sacrifice, re-inscribing the patriarchal coding of female sexuality as dangerous excess.

Peter is the only one permitted to 'unwrap' Valerie within the cloak, but even here Hardwicke resists objectification: their love scene is framed not as exposure but as shared enfolding, both of them tangled in the length of red fabric. The cape makes Valerie's body legible, but on Hardwicke's terms rather than the patriarchal ones of Perrault or the Grimms. On screen, it transforms her into Red Riding Hood, marking her as central. Off screen, its hidden embroidery and layers of women's labour inscribe an alternative story: one of care, community and female creativity. Hardwicke's treatment of the cape therefore performs a double gesture, it renders Valerie's body analysable within the narrative while also insisting on the unread layers of craft that escape the camera.

¹⁴⁵ Dani Cavallaro and Alexandra Warwick, *Fashioning the Frame: Boundaries, Dress, and Body*, Dress, Body, Culture (Berg, 1998), p. 50.

This symbolism of the cape reaches its fullest expression in the alternate ending, where, as noted earlier, Valerie wraps her child in the garment. Hardwicke reframes the future of Red Riding Hood not as dependent on paternal inheritance but as embedded in the body of the mother. Creed's theory of the monstrous-feminine and abjection deepens this reading, in patriarchal ideology, menstrual blood is abject matter, repeatedly staged as horrific excess in horror cinema. However, Hardwicke counters this by transforming the cape into a visual analogue of menstrual blood that is beautiful, not shameful. She explains:

If you Google images of the cape, you'll see thousands of images from back in the late 1800s, you'll see paintings inspired by the red cape, you'll see fashion layouts and commercials that are inspired by the red cape, and you'll see anime artists in Japan who have a bad-ass chick wearing a super-long cape and holding a bloody axe. It's always been that powerful symbol. People interpret the blood, the coming of age, getting your period, or just heightened sexuality and sexual power. It means so many different things.¹⁴⁶

Here Hardwicke makes explicit the link between the cape and menarche. Valerie's cloak literalises her 'difference' as monstrous-feminine: the red cloth marks her body as other, aligning her with bodily fluids that disrupts the boundaries of the self. Where patriarchal ideology seeks to render menstrual blood polluting, Hardwicke visualises it not as something to be hidden but as something to be spectacularly displayed: spreading across the snow, flowing in dream sequences and pooling around Valerie (Figure 15).

¹⁴⁶ Radish, 'Catherine Hardwicke Interview RED RIDING HOOD'.



Figure 15 Valerie's cape

In doing so, Hardwicke adds a crucial dimension to her feminist storytelling. Valerie's authority does not rest solely on her role as narrator or on the alignment of the camera with her gaze as Bellas argues; it is also staged through her embodied presence, through the way her body is marked, wrapped and extended by the cape. Hardwicke insists on the female body as both destabilising to patriarchal order and generative of new meaning. By saturating the screen with Valerie's cloak Hardwicke celebrates what patriarchal discourse abjects: she rewrites the very terms of monstrosity, turning the female body itself into a form of storytelling.

'The better to eat you with'

While the previous section stages Valerie's body as a site of spectacle and revolt, 'the better to eat you with' exposes the patriarchal hunger that seeks to consume it. Hardwicke now turns to the violence of male appetite: the hand that strokes; the mouth that devours; the patriarchal desire to reduce the female body to object. This section traces how the logic of consumption underwrites both Father Solomon's religious authority and Cesare's domestic tyranny, and how Valerie resists being positioned as edible flesh. Together they enact the logic of consumption: women rendered edible; bodies reduced to objects. Carter's defiant

heroine 'knew she was nobody's meat'; Hardwicke extends this refusal, turning scenes of threatened consumption into moments that expose and destabilise patriarchal power.

Father Solomon arrives in the village during the preparations for the festival celebrating the slaughter of a wolf the villagers believe to be their werewolf. Father Solomon tells them they are wrong because a werewolf will return to its human form when it is dead, so the wolf's head on a spike cannot be the werewolf. He demonstrates this by showing the villagers the contents of a box containing the paw of the werewolf that he had hunted: the werewolf initially escaped, but Solomon took the paw as a souvenir. When he returned home, he found his wife with a bloody stump where her hand had been and the paw had turned back into a human hand, his wife's hand. Realising that she was the werewolf, he killed her. The box contains her hand, which he still keeps as a grotesque trophy. This scene literalises patriarchal consumption: the wife reduced to a limb, preserved and displayed as a sign of male mastery. It also echoes the severed hand that features in both *The Company of Wolves* and 'The Werewolf'. The story is mirrored to an extent when Father Solomon loses his hand to Valerie's father, in werewolf form, who bites it off during a confrontation. Valerie later collects this hand in her basket (which would usually contain a piece of cake and a bottle of wine in the Grimm version) and carries it to Grandmother's house to use as a weapon against the werewolf. Valerie thus re-appropriates patriarchal violence as her own survival strategy, turning the instrument of male domination into a tool of revolt.

The logic of women-as-meat is further dramatized in Father Solomon's encounter with Roxanne. When Roxanne pleads for her brother's life (he has been accused of witchcraft and tortured by Solomon), she first offers him money before unbuttoning her blouse,

pulling it down around her shoulders, terrified but willing to trade her body. Father Solomon feigns interest, telling her to turn around, examining her with the same cold detachment he applies to the meat on the table before him: he toys with the possibility of consuming her, then laughs and dismisses her. This grotesque scene collapses woman and meat into the same category of consumable matter, anticipating Father Solomon's treatment of Valerie. Hardwicke underscores the parallel visually: Father Solomon's silver-tipped fingers dig through a piece of meat in an earlier scene, pulling apart the flesh and eating it, and here they hover possessively over Roxanne's body. Throughout Valerie's trial, Father Solomon grips Roxanne by the wrist as she testifies against Valerie, reluctantly and in tears. (Notably, Roxanne cites Valerie's athleticism as a reason to be suspicious of her, something that is picked up in my next chapter when I explore another Red Riding Hood character, Cerise Hood.) Both examples demonstrate Father Solomon's objectification of women, both those he desires (Valerie) and those he ridicules (Roxanne).

This appetite is staged most chillingly when Father Solomon drapes the red cloak around Valerie's shoulders. Where Grandmother had wrapped Valerie in the cloak as a gesture of maternal love and continuity, Father Solomon violently recodes it as a 'harlot's robe'. The gesture is accompanied by his lingering touch, as his silver-tipped fingers stroke Valerie's hair with the same predatory touch he displayed when tearing at flesh. Hardwicke makes the echo unmistakable: the hands that ripped into meat now caress a young woman's body, collapsing the line between food and flesh. In this way, Solomon embodies the patriarchal logic that conflates women's bodies with consumable matter, a logic the film exposes and resists through Valerie's ultimate rejection of both his authority and Cesare's claim. Father Solomon enacts patriarchal violence under the guise of religious authority, while Cesare

represents its domestic face. Throughout the film, he performs uselessness: a pathetic, drunken failure who is kicked to the ground at a village dance and mocked by other men. This image of harmlessness is a mask, Cesare is in fact the werewolf, a wolf in sheep's clothing who hides his violence beneath the performance of inept masculinity. His duplicity makes him even more dangerous than Father Solomon, because it renders him invisible until it is too late.

Cesare's violence is revealed most fully when Valerie arrives at Grandmother's house. Believing she has come for sanctuary, Valerie instinctively reaches for bread and stew, the same food that had earlier comforted her when she and Grandmother repeated their ancestral saying: 'All sorrows are less with bread'. That earlier exchange was intimate and maternal, grounding Valerie in a female lineage of nourishment and storytelling. Now, however, the meal has been transformed. Cesare, posing as Grandmother, repeats the phrase, 'All sorrows are less with bread' impersonating Grandmother. This act echoes the wolf's impersonation of Grandmother in the Brothers Grimm's tale, but it also does something new: Cesare tries to insert himself into the shared female tradition that Valerie had with her grandmother. Rather than reassuring her, the false repetition alerts Valerie to the fraud, exposing Cesare's attempt to infiltrate and usurp the continuity of women's voices.

The food itself confirms the rupture. The pot that once contained vegetable stew now simmers with a dark, meaty substance. Valerie tastes it and recoils: 'What is this?' she demands. I would like to return here to the concept of 'texture' and expand it to include food. In the earlier meal with Grandmother, the camera holds a wide shot: Valerie is seated

at the table while Grandmother moves between stove and table, preparing the stew. The warm lighting from fire and candles makes the space glow with amber tones, and the sound design layers domestic noise, crockery, crackling flames, bread being torn, into a rich layered soundscape. The stew itself is light in colour, full of visible vegetables, part of a ritual of nourishment and continuity (Figure 16).



Figure 16 The vegetable stew and bread

By contrast, the later scene is far darker and more claustrophobic. The camera moves in tight on Valerie, isolating her body as she spoons the stew herself, Grandmother absent from the frame. The bread is missing, breaking the ritual from before. The food's substance is now dense and blackened, with something resembling a bone protruding from it, and the soundscape strips back to the wet, amplified noise of stew hitting the bowl (Figure 17). Valerie recognises the fraud not only in Cesare's words but in this altered sensory field: the image, the sound, and the food retain none of the texture that signified Grandmother's care. What had been layered and sustaining now reads as hollow impersonation, revealing Cesare's attempt to overwrite female lineage.



Figure 17 Grandmother stew?

This corruption of the stew's texture prepares the ground for the grotesque implication of cannibalism: a meal emptied of Grandmother's hallmarks becomes a site where Cesare's violence threatens to consume her altogether. The implication is that she may have consumed her grandmother's flesh, recalling the cannibalistic element of early oral versions of the tale that the Brothers Grimm sanitised (Tatar, 2004: 141). In those versions, the girl unwittingly eats her grandmother before climbing into bed with the wolf. Hardwicke reintroduces this motif not by showing cannibalism outright but by staging Valerie's refusal of the meat. Cannibalism is one of the most abject transgressions in horror cinema, collapsing boundaries between eater and eaten, subject and object. In oral versions of the Red Riding Hood tale, the girl eating her grandmother stages this abjection as an initiation into womanhood, symbolically erasing the older woman to take her place. This also reflects Carter's story of 'The Werewolf' in which the granddaughter inherits her grandmother's house and 'prospered'. Valerie neither consumes her grandmother nor submits to being consumed by Cesare.

Cesare's broader violence underscores the stakes of this scene. He has already murdered his eldest daughter when he discovered she was not biologically his; he disfigured his wife for her infidelity and killed her lover; and he finally killed his mother when she uncovered his secret. Valerie does not experience physical violence at his hands, but his desire for her carries incestuous undertones. He wishes to bite her under the blood moon, to pass his curse on to her and continue his lineage. This desire fuses the wolf's predatory sexuality with the patriarchal demand for inheritance, making Valerie's body the vessel of a violent genealogy. Yet Valerie resists not by brute force but by subversive performance. As Cesare attacks Peter, Valerie calls out 'Papa!', momentarily invoking the paternal bond. Cesare turns, and Valerie stands posed as the perfect Red Riding Hood: wide innocent eyes, body demurely framed, basket clasped before her as if offering a gift (Figure 18).



Figure 18 'Little Red Riding Hood'

In this instant, Valerie is literally cloaked in the 'good girl' femininity she has rejected throughout the film. By performing the patriarchal fantasy of obedient daughter and passive victim, she lures Cesare into dropping his guard. The basket, in the Grimm tale a vessel for cake and wine, tokens of domesticity, becomes a trap, it contains Father Solomon's severed hand with silver tipped fingers, which Valerie uses to stab her father, killing him. In

reclaiming 'the better to eat you with', Hardwicke turns the act of consumption from a metaphor of violation into a measure of resistance. Valerie and Grandmother sharing bread and stew embodies female inheritance, Cesare's attempt to appropriate this maternal bond only exposes him as an imposter.

Conclusion: Freedom in the Shadows

Hardwicke reframes the true monstrosity of the tale not as Valerie's blood or difference, but as the patriarchal demand to consume and reproduce through women's bodies. Cesare's intended bite, like Father Solomon's silver-tipped fingers, seeks to inscribe Valerie as edible flesh and conduit for a corrupted lineage. Valerie's refusal asserts a feminist logic that she will be neither meat nor patriarchal tool. Instead, she takes up the inheritance of her grandmother, witch, outsider, storyteller, and with it the promise of female continuity. The closing voiceover confirms this logic. Valerie tells us that the village soon 'fell back into the old ways' but she herself 'could no longer live there, I felt more freedom in the shadows of the forest'. The film's final images show Valerie tending her garden, accompanied by her cat, awaiting Peter, now a werewolf. She lives beyond the village not as exile but as choice, her outsider status recast as liberation.

However, for Sue Short in *Fairy Tale and Film* (2015), the film's romantic ending constitutes a 'de-clawing' of the heroine, assimilating her into the heteronormative romance plot. Short describes Valerie's love for Peter as 'slavish devotion' and that the promise they will become 'werewolf lovers has none of the same charge that Carter gave such a union' with the main point being to 'distance the heroine from her parents and initiate an outsider romance designed to attract *Twilight* fans' (2015: 149). Short concludes: 'Realising that her

father is a murderous werewolf [...] and that she shares his bloodline, Valerie despatches him and goes to live in her grandmother's house, where she and fellow werewolf Peter can presumably enjoy some freedom' (2015: 149). This critique, however, contains an internal tension; earlier, Short faults Jordan's *The Company of Wolves* for removing 'what was most powerful about Carter's version: the validation of Red Riding Hood as a sexual being' (2015: 148). Yet, as I have argued, Hardwicke explicitly validates Valerie's sexual desire while also embedding her sexuality within a wider framework of female storytelling and inheritance. By refusing to acknowledge this, Short effectively forecloses the possibility that romance plot designed to 'attract Twilight fans' might themselves be reconfigured as forms of agency. Bellas, by contrast, recognises this, arguing that Valerie 'independently negotiates a place for herself within the liminal space of the forest, and harnesses the power of the outsider identities of hunter, traveller and witch' (2017: 63).

Valerie's refusal to succumb to her father's bite and become the most powerful werewolf, and her choice instead to live in her grandmother's house, can be read as a rejection of patriarchal notions of success tied to physical power. Rather than inheriting Cesare's corrupted lineage, she embraces the inheritance of her grandmother. As Debra Ferreday argues in 'The Feminine Art of Failure', feminist refusal can take the form of a 'radical form of passivity', a refusal that is nonetheless an act: 'It's about not-becoming because the notion of becoming is perceived as following the capitalist logic of production and models of success'.¹⁴⁷ Ferreday draws on Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*, which calls for 'a political refusal that declines Western feminist theories of 'agency and power, freedom and

¹⁴⁷ Debra Ferreday, 'The Feminine Art of Failure: Queering Feminist Spectatorship', *Quaderns de Psicologia*, 16.1 (2014), pp. 141–52, p. 145.

resistance'' in order to attend to alternative ways of being (Ferreday, 2014: 146). Valerie's 'not-becoming' the werewolf is read by Short as a failure, a 'de-clawing', but can equally be seen as precisely this kind of feminist refusal.

Short's dismissal of Hardwicke's film as 'regressive in gender politics and devoid of feminist impulse' exemplifies precisely this problem of who gets to decide what counts as agency. Valerie's life in her grandmother's house is less about 'enjoying freedom' with Peter, as Short dismisses it, and more about embracing her status as 'outsider', or, as Ferreday puts it, refusing 'the demand to become properly adjusted to society' (2014: 146). I argue that Valerie's withdrawal to the forest resonates with Ferreday's and Halberstam's logic of refusal and 'not-becoming': her ending validates female desire while simultaneously rejecting patriarchal lineage. I develop Ferreday's and Halberstam's frameworks more fully in the following chapter, in relation to Cerise Hood in Mattel's Ever After High franchise, a character who is the child of the union between Red Riding Hood and the wolf.

This chapter has traced how *Red Riding Hood* becomes a site where feminist retelling is enacted not only through narrative and voice but through the body, costume and sensory experience. Beginning with the history of the tale's patriarchal framing in Perrault and the Brothers Grimm, where Red is scripted as a complicit victim and her oral lineage erased, I have shown how Hardwicke reclaims the story by aligning it with Carter's defiant heroines, Creed's monstrous-feminine and Hemmings's insights into feminist storytelling. In the first part of the chapter, I examined how Hardwicke situates her retelling within a lineage of feminist fairy-tale revision, establishing Valerie as a witch-figure who resists patriarchal authority. In Part 2, I argued that Hardwicke reworks the iconic sensory exchange between

Red Riding Hood and the wolf, redistributing voice, gaze, touch, and appetite back to women. Hardwicke's retelling ultimately insists that women's bodies, so long coded as abject or consumable, are also the very means of storytelling. Valerie's refusal to be meat, her rejection of patriarchal inheritance and her embrace of female inheritance mark a radical shift in the tale's trajectory. Valerie's ending may appear solitary, but she is never truly alone: she carries the grandmother's inheritance with her into the forest, her resistance rooted in a female lineage. In this sense the chapter traces a complete arc of monstrous mother reclamation with the grandmother as original outsider and witch, Valerie as her inheritor and in the alternate ending, Valerie herself becoming the monstrous mother, wrapping her child in the red cloak. Where Perrault and the Brothers Grimm sought to discipline female desire, Hardwicke celebrates it; where they silenced women's oral traditions, she restores them. Hardwicke's *Red Riding Hood* thus emerges not as a cautionary parable but as a feminist counter-myth: a story of unruly girlhood and embodied revolt.

'Choose Your Own Ever After': Empowerment in Mattel's Ever After High Franchise

Mattel's Ever After High franchise (2013–2017) reimagines the world of Western fairy tales through the daughters of fairy tale characters, merging fashion dolls, animated webisodes and novels into a multimedia universe. Uniquely among the texts examined in this thesis, Ever After High makes the mother-daughter relationship its explicit organising principle: every character is defined by her inheritance from a fairy tale mother and every narrative conflict turns on whether she will embrace or reject it. Yet the franchise's engagement with motherhood extends beyond its fictional world. The dolls themselves are material objects that mediate real mother-daughter relationships: purchased by mothers who may recognise in their daughters' dolls the fairy tale heroines of their own childhoods and marketed through a rhetoric of 'commodity activism' that recruits mothers as agents of empowerment. Drawing on feminist theory, this chapter interrogates how Ever After High disrupts traditional fairy tale scripts through a commercially packaged rhetoric of empowerment, examining how resistance and inheritance are articulated through both narrative and material form. This chapter positions the doll line, its supporting media, and its visual design within Barbara Creed's theory of the monstrous-feminine, exploring how these hyper-feminised, nonhuman figures 'make a nonsense of a patriarchal symbolic order'. In particular, the figure of Cerise Hood, the daughter of Red Riding Hood and the wolf, connects the franchise's maternal inheritance argument directly to a feminist literary genealogy: the embodiment of Carter's revolutionary Red Riding Hood from 'The Company of Wolves'.

Jack Halberstam's notion of low theory in *The Queer Art of Failure* grounds this chapter's approach to fashion dolls and children's animation as rich sites of cultural meaning rather than merely frivolous or commercially empty texts. Halberstam's theory privileges failure, contradiction and the seemingly trivial as productive disruptions to dominant structures of knowledge. In this context, it enables a serious engagement with the abject and the monstrous and queer reinterpretation, all within texts not typically granted critical weight. I extend Halberstam's methodology to dolls, using Ever After High to ask how girlhood is imagined, scripted and sometimes subverted through plastic and narrative. These questions are further grounded in Robin Bernstein's theory of dolls as 'scriptive things', material objects that prompt particular performances or ways of engaging, and Stella Bruzzi's theory of costume as an expressive, meaning-making system. The dolls' visual grammar reveals tensions between destiny and rebellion, tensions mirrored in the narrative world where daughters are expected to follow in their mothers' footsteps, a generational inheritance and resistance to it, that connects with Clare Hemmings' theory of feminist 'progress, loss and return' narratives. By turning to a doll, a supposedly low, feminised object, this chapter asks whether even a commercial, mass-produced franchise might carry the potential for feminist and queer subversion, expanding the scope of feminist fairy tale storytelling to include embodied, participatory practices.

The World of Ever After High

Mattel's Ever After High puts a unique spin on fairy tale retellings by reimagining the genre through a transmedia franchise. Launched in 2013 as a follow-up to the successful Monster High doll line, Ever After High centres on the teenage children of classic fairy tale characters, such as Raven Queen (daughter of the Evil Queen) and Apple White (daughter of Snow

White), who attend a magical boarding school designed to prepare them to inherit their parents' narrative roles. Conflict arises when Raven Queen resists taking on her 'evil' destiny, an act that threatens the narrative stability of the entire fairy tale world.

Headmaster Milton Grimm, who insists that the stories have to be repeated if they are to continue to exist, attempts to preserve tradition and control. This sets up a binary between the Royals, who wish to follow their predetermined stories, and the Rebels, who want to 'rewrite the script' and claim a future of their own:

Yet while the conflict brews, daily life goes on. This forces the students to not only figure out their beliefs and wishes and how to fight for them, but to also navigate the way this affects their familial relationships, friendships, and romances, as well as their school results. Life at Ever After High may be enchanting, but simple it is not.¹⁴⁸

This framing signals that, despite its fantastical premise, Ever After High engages with questions of identity, agency, and relational ethics, layering social and emotional realism into a world of fairy tales and dolls. Unlike traditional fairy tale adaptations in books or films, Ever After High unfolds through a broad transmedia strategy: a line of fashion dolls, animated webisodes (2013–2016), a series of novels by Shannon Hale, an interactive website, and numerous merchandise tie-ins including clothing, stationery, and games. While primarily marketed toward young girls, the franchise appeals to a range of age groups: the dolls are labelled for ages 6+, the cartoon is rated 8+ by children (and 9+ by parents, according to Common Sense Media), and the novels are geared toward readers aged 10–12. This multimodal format extends the reach of the fairy tale narrative, blending physical play, digital interaction, and literary engagement across developmental stages.

¹⁴⁸ 'The World of Ever After High', Ever After High Wiki, n.d.
<https://everafterhigh.fandom.com/wiki/The_World_of_Ever_After_High> [accessed 19 February 2021].

Fashion dolls and other media marketed toward girls have long been the target of criticism, often dismissed as frivolous, overly commercial, or ideologically damaging. Barbie remains the most prominent example, criticised for promoting unattainable beauty standards and shallow consumerism. In 2010, Natasha Walter published *Living Dolls, The Return of Sexism*, its cover printed in Barbie pink and featuring a naked female torso with a Barbie doll covering the groin. The back cover declares:

Empowerment, liberation, choice. Once watchwords of feminism these terms have now been co-opted by a society that sells women an airbrushed, highly sexualised and increasingly narrow vision of femininity. We have come so far already. For our daughters, the escalator doesn't have to stop on the dolls' floor.¹⁴⁹

The marketing rhetoric clearly embodies what Clare Hemmings describes as feminist storytelling of progress, loss, and return, as discussed in Chapter 3. The book's title frames the return of sexism as a loss narrative; the claim that 'we have come so far' evokes a progress narrative; and the call for a renewed understanding of empowerment, liberation, and choice suggests a return to feminist roots. I do not argue against Walter's larger point; indeed, I share many of her concerns, but I want to caution against the silencing effect that this mode of feminist storytelling can have. As Debra Ferreday argues in 'The Feminine Art of Failure' (2014), contemporary performances of femininity, whether through selfies, fashion, or other popular practices, are frequently read as evidence of women's subordination, rather than as practices worthy of analysis in their own right.¹⁵⁰ Ferreday

¹⁴⁹ Natasha Walter, *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism*, Paperback edition (Virago, 2011), front and back cover.

¹⁵⁰ Debra Ferreday, 'The Feminine Art of Failure: Queering Feminist Spectatorship', *Quaderns de Psicologia*, 16.1 (2014), pp. 141–52, (p.142-143).

argues that ‘the aligning of cis women’s attachment to femininity with feminist failure is a characteristic contemporary trope which, paradoxically, works to render invisible and inaudible the complex affective attachments and shared practices which are at stake in feminine identity performances’ (2014: 143). In this framing, the feminine subject becomes ‘burdened with the imagined failure of feminine futures’ (2014: 143). The same logic underpins critiques of dolls like Barbie or Ever After High, where femininity itself is cast as failure, either a capitulation to capitalism or a betrayal of feminism. The literal and metaphorical positioning of dolls as the ground floor of patriarchy risks dismissing the very voices and creative expressions of the girls whose experiences the feminist project claims to protect.

In their article *Barbie Play and the Public Pedagogy of Abjection* (2018), Michelle Bae-Dimitriadis and Olga Ivashkevich observe that much academic work on Barbie focuses on the prescriptive femininity the doll is seen to represent, often overlooking how girls themselves use dolls in subversive or contradictory ways. While acknowledging the importance of critiquing Barbie’s dominant script as a consumer artefact, they argue that ‘its function in girls’ play appears to be rather ambiguous’, and that it can simultaneously ‘facilitate conformity’ and ‘inspire resistance’ (2018: 65). Drawing on Kristeva’s theory of abjection, Bae-Dimitriadis and Ivashkevich suggest that girls’ transgressive play with Barbie ‘speaks to a feminist desire to revolt against the masculine logic that demands that girls sanitize and mask their seemingly ‘flashy’ language and practices in order to submit to the dominant order’ (2018: 67). I explore this more fully later in the chapter in my reading of the Cerise Hood doll as a figure of the monstrous-feminine, but raise it here to argue that what

Walter sees as a troubling 'strange melding of the doll and the real girl' can instead be read as complex, creative, and even radical (2011: 2).

Despite emerging during a period of heightened feminist awareness around girlie culture, newer franchises like Ever After High have encountered similar critiques. One reviewer described the dolls as 'tarted-up versions of Disney's Princesses', implying that, despite their stylistic differences, they largely recycle familiar ideals.¹⁵¹ The comparison with Disney is also telling. As I discuss later in the chapter, Disney was already rethinking its own Princess doll marketing in response to complaints from parents about the messaging being sent to their daughters. This recurring emphasis on the parental gaze, particularly the maternal gaze, plays a significant role in the reception of doll-based media. Walter's invocation of 'our daughters' on the back of *Living Dolls* is echoed in Peggy Orenstein's 2012 book *Cinderella Ate My Daughter: Dispatches from the Front Lines of the New Girlie-Girl Culture*, whose title positions the mother as a kind of feminist foot soldier battling against pink plastic consumerism.

The critique of dolls and pink packaging sits within a broader feminist debate about 'girlie culture' that is worth examining carefully. It can be seen as emerging from 'lipstick feminism' and 'choice feminism' of the 1990s which emerged as part of third wave feminism's attempt to reclaim feminine aesthetics and pleasures. By embracing makeup, fashion, and traditionally 'feminine' styles, girlie feminists challenged the second-wave suspicion of such practices as tools of patriarchal oppression, reframing them instead as

¹⁵¹ Claire Suddath, 'The \$500 Million Battle Over Disney's Princesses', *Bloomberg.Com* (17 December 2015), <<https://www.bloomberg.com/features/2015-disney-princess-hasbro/>> [accessed 19 February 2021].

potential sites of agency and empowerment. As Leandra Zarnow argues, publications like *Bust* magazine embodied this ethos, deeming sexual politics to be its 'feminist mission' but also constructing 'a feminist culture that was diverse in lifestyle choice only for those who could buy in'.¹⁵² In this sense sexuality and hyper-femininity were 'reclaimed' for feminism, but also risked reducing political engagement to consumer style. This critique resonates with Orenstein and Walter's concerns about pink-packaged femininity, showing how feminist unease with girly culture reflects not just children's play but broader anxieties about commodified feminism. As Ferreday points out, feminine practices are rarely permitted to stand as self-expression; they are almost always read as 'selling' something, whether the self, emotional labour, or patriarchal and capitalist values (2014: 149). In this sense, girly culture is caught in the same bind: what might be playful or contradictory risks being flattened into evidence of complicity.

These critiques of consumer-driven girly culture in feminist media also resonate in debates around dolls and children's play. Feminist anxieties about dolls and pink packaging often operate less as critiques of children's practices than as projections of adult fears. This also further serves the patriarchal narrative of the 'good mother' and the 'bad mother', with the bad mother in this case perpetuating sexist ideals through buying her daughter Barbie dolls. Even putting aside the question of whether dolls cause measurable harm to girls' self-esteem (for which there is no clear evidence¹⁵³), this approach implies that rejecting girly

¹⁵² Leandra Zarnow, 'From Sisterhood to Girly Culture: Closing the Great Divide between Second and Third Wave Cultural Agendas', in *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*, Hewitt, ed. by Nancy A., (Rutgers University Press, 2010), pp. 273-302 (p. 283-288).

¹⁵³ K, Rice, and others, 'Exposure to Barbie: Effects on Thin-Ideal Internalisation, Body Esteem, and Body Dissatisfaction among Young Girls', *Body Image*, 19 (2016), doi:[10.1016/j.bodyim.2016.09.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2016.09.005) [accessed 27 September 2025].

culture is a straightforward path to protection. As Bae-Dimitriadis and Ivashkevich suggest, this binary thinking, between damage and safety, conformity and rebellion, oversimplifies the complexity of girls' play. Moreover, the attack on dolls and Barbie pink culture removes the possibility for nuanced readings of these objects and practices, and instead reinforces generational tensions, where adult feminist anxieties are projected onto children's play.

This cultural and sometimes feminist devaluation is part of a broader gendered hierarchy in which media for girls is treated as inherently less valuable or meaningful than its boy-targeted counterparts. As Sherilyn Connelly observes, while Star Wars is legitimised and masculinised through a lineage of toys and paratexts, girl-focused series like My Little Pony are often dismissed as 'junk'.¹⁵⁴ Ellen Seiter similarly notes how such franchises confused 'educated middle-class parents, who see them as incompatible with liberal feminist ideals'.¹⁵⁵ These reactions reveal not only anxieties about gender and consumer culture, but also a refusal to engage seriously with the subversive potential these texts and objects make possible. One consequence of this gendered hierarchy is that toy companies often rebrand dolls to appear more empowering by aligning them with action rather than narrative. As Megen de Bruin-Molé notes in her discussion of the Goldieblox feminist toy line, the 'Goldie action figure', which comes with a kit enabling her to abseil, closely resembles a traditional doll, but 'seizes on the distinction of "action" to claim greater value for its product compared to the feminized doll, all the while trying to newly apply that typically

¹⁵⁴ Sherilyn Connelly, *Ponyville Confidential: The History and Culture of My Little Pony, 1981-2016* (McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2017), p. 71-72.

¹⁵⁵ Ellen Seiter, *Sold Separately: Children and Parents in Consumer Culture*, Rutgers Series in Communications, Media, and Culture (Rutgers University Press, 1993), p. 170.

masculinized term to the play of girls'.¹⁵⁶ Similarly, Disney's decision to market dolls like Star Wars: Forces of Destiny under the label 'Adventure Figures' reflects a broader cultural belief that empowerment must be expressed through movement, combat, or goal-oriented activity, qualities historically associated with masculinity. This framing not only devalues the doll as an object, but also implies that the imaginative, relational, and narrative-driven forms of play more typically associated with femininity are inherently passive or less empowering. Ever After High, by contrast, invites empowerment through storytelling rather than action, stories that are materially scripted in the form of a doll. The characters are not abseiling or wielding lightsabers; instead, they challenge inherited scripts, reject predestined roles, and imagine alternative futures for themselves. This act of narrative authorship, of rewriting the fairy tale, is no less powerful than masculinised forms of action, and perhaps even more so. It emphasises agency in how girls understand, shape, and perform identity within story worlds that have historically denied them agency.

In response to the kinds of dismissal outlined above, this chapter draws on Jack Halberstam's concept of low theory to reframe how we understand cultural texts like Ever After High. Halberstam introduces low theory in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), a work that seeks to 'dismantle the logics of success and failure', and argues that 'under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world'.¹⁵⁷ Ferreday makes a similar move when she applies Halberstam's queer politics of

¹⁵⁶ Megan de Bruin-Molé, "'Does It Come with a Spear?'" Commodity Activism, Plastic Representation, and Transmedia Story Strategies in Disney's Star Wars: Forces of Destiny', *Film Criticism*, 42.2 (2018), doi:<https://doi.org/10.3998/fc.13761232.0042.205>.

¹⁵⁷ Judith Halberstam, *The queer art of failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), p. 2.

failure to femininity, cautioning that ‘a critique of the commodification of the pleasures and desires, as well as the creative potentials produced through feminine cultures need not necessarily entail a critique of femininity itself’ (2014: 145). In other words, it is not femininity per se that should be read as failure, but the demand, often within feminism, that feminine attachments be disavowed.

Ferreday explicitly mobilises queer theory to make this claim, suggesting that

Although cis femininity in particular has traditionally been excluded from the spectrum of bodily identities imagined as queer, queer theory and femininity share certain affinities: not least their tendency to be dismissed as ‘first world problems’, as luxuries only to be afforded in times of socio economic and intellectual plenty (2014: 145).

For Ferreday, reading femininity through queer theory does not mean redeeming it as secretly subversive, nor granting it value only when it can be shown to contain agency. Rather, she stresses: ‘in suggesting that femininity is queer, I am not attempting to appropriate queer politics as a way of redeeming normative practices... Instead I would argue that feminine performances ‘speak for themselves’; that if they are sometimes incoherent, self-contradictory, unintelligible, this in itself tells us more about the contemporary status of femininity than any attempt to resolve or reduce them to a single ideological statement’ (2014: 147). Ferreday’s application of Halberstam thus opens space to read feminine practices, including dolls and doll-play, not as capitulations, but as complex performances that dramatize contradiction, ambivalence, and imaginative resistance.

I turn to Halberstam not only for his theoretical intervention into normative values, but also for the way he blends low theory with high theory, a strategy I attempt by applying Creed's feminist horror film theory to a doll franchise, reading Bruzzi's costume theory through the clothing of a doll, and extending Bernstein's theories of scripted things to the plastic forms of children's toys. Drawing on Ferreday's reading of Halberstam allows me to read *Ever After High* as 'a far more sophisticated and self-aware rejection of masculinist values than femininity's detractors would allow' (Ferreday, 2014: 143). Taken together, these frameworks allow me to approach *Ever After High* not simply as a commercial franchise, but as a layered and contradictory cultural artefact. Low theory offers a counterpoint to dominant academic approaches, embracing failure, contradiction, and the lowbrow as generative, rather than dismissible. As Halberstam writes, low theory is 'a kind of theoretical model that flies below the radar, that is assembled from eccentric texts and examples and that refuses to confirm the hierarchies of knowing that maintain the *high* in high theory' (2011: 16). This theoretical stance opens space for reading *Ever After High* dolls not just as products of commodity culture, but as complex narrative and material scripts that allow for feminist and queer interventions, even from within the structures of corporate branding.

Dolls as Scriptive Things

Robin Bernstein argues that childhood is a powerful and often under-theorised site of cultural formation, particularly in relation to race, gender, and power. In *Racial Innocence* (2011), she challenges the prevailing assumption that children's culture is ephemeral or untraceable, instead insisting that it leaves behind tangible residues in the form of material

culture.¹⁵⁸ Central to this framework is her method of *'scriptive things'*, which reframes how we understand the agency of objects. Bernstein poses two key questions: 'What historically located behaviours did this artefact invite? And what practices did it discourage?' (2011: 8). This shift in focus moves us away from individual interpretations of use and toward the embedded, culturally located performances invited by objects such as dolls. These are not inert playthings, but artefacts that participate in scripting, enabling and constraining action through their design, marketing, and social context. For Bernstein, a 'script' is not a fixed instruction or inevitable outcome, but rather a prompt: an embedded invitation that can guide and shape behaviour without determining it absolutely. As she writes:

The term script denotes not a rigid dictation of performed action but rather a set of invitations that necessarily remain open to resistance. [...] To describe elements of material culture as 'scripting' actions is not to suggest that things possess agency or that people lack it, but instead to propose that agency emerges through constant engagement with the stuff of our lives (2011: 8-9).

This is particularly useful for analysing dolls, which are frequently overlooked in cultural theory, especially when associated with femininity and childhood. Dolls, Bernstein argues, are 'crucial props within the performance of childhood because they are contrivances by which adults and children have historically played innocent' (2011: 19). At the same time, they are saturated with ideological meaning. She describes how Frances Hodgson Burnett, as a child, used a black rubber doll with a 'cheerfully hideous grin' to stage scenes from

¹⁵⁸ Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights, America and the Long 19th Century* (New York University Press, 2011), p. 8.

Uncle Tom's Cabin. Burnett's choice of this doll was, as Bernstein stresses, 'not random, but was prompted by the doll's physical properties: its blackness in combination with its composition of gutta-percha, a form of resilient rubber used in nineteenth-century dolls to enable them to survive rough play that would destroy a doll made of porcelain or wax' (2011: 69-71). This material durability, combined with the doll's racialised design, prompted violent play: Burnett whipped the doll when casting it as Uncle Tom, reassured by its grin that such violence was somehow enjoyable. While Bernstein's focus is on the racial politics embedded in dolls, this framework is also useful for considering how ideologies of gender and sexuality are scripted into playthings, and how children may reject those scripts. Where Bernstein shows how dolls helped sustain racial hierarchies under the guise of 'playing innocent', the examples of abject play I go on to discuss unsettle the scripts of purity and propriety that dolls are supposed to encode. Bernstein's most powerful provocation links the doll directly to questions of personhood and historical violence: 'Dolls, [and] doll play [...] weld childhood to slavery's most foundational, disturbing and lingering question: What is a person?' (2011: 17). This framing positions dolls not as innocent or apolitical objects, but as vital sites in the ongoing construction of racialised and gendered subjectivity.

Building on Bernstein's method, I ask: how can a non-agential artefact like a doll script empowerment? (A question also considered by marketing executives: 'To win Disney's Princess license, Hasbro had to figure out how to translate this lofty vision of "empowerment" into a plastic doll'.¹⁵⁹) This question becomes especially pertinent when we

¹⁵⁹ Suddath, Claire, 'The \$500 Million Battle Over Disney's Princesses'

consider how doll franchises, such as Ever After High, have been routinely dismissed as lowbrow, overly commercial, or ideologically conservative. Yet Bernstein's framework insists that we take such material culture seriously, acknowledging its complexity and its capacity to script a range of performances. Dolls are not blank slates nor simply tools of socialisation; they are rich cultural texts. Some of the scripts they offer may reinforce normative femininity, but others open possibilities for resistance, hybridity, or creative subversion. Just as Halberstam calls for theoretical attention to the marginal, the 'eccentric', and the failed, Bernstein gives us tools to examine how dolls operate within and against cultural norms. Both theorists emphasise open-endedness: Halberstam writes about failure as a space of possibility, and Bernstein defines scripts as invitations rather than commands. Together, they help us reframe doll play as a potentially subversive practice, one where girls may take up, rewrite, or resist the roles offered to them. I return to this point below when considering how later accounts of Barbie play echo and extend this dynamic: just as Burnett's choice of doll was shaped by its racialised materiality, so too is the choice of Barbie, scripted with the symbolism of idealised femininity, whiteness and thinness, never neutral.

As the critiques of Walter and Orenstein outlined above demonstrate, feminist critiques have long positioned dolls as symbols of regressive femininity, reinforcing narrow ideals of beauty, domesticity, and passivity. This concern has led to counter-franchises (e.g., Goldieblox) that script empowerment through physical activity, like abseiling. However, such narratives risk reducing empowerment to traditionally masculine-coded actions, overlooking how subversion can emerge through unexpected channels such as fashion,

ambiguity, and play. As Hemmings (2011) warns, feminist stories of progress and loss can obscure the lived experiences of girls themselves, especially when their modes of expression (e.g., fashion or fantasy) are coded as frivolous. Stella Bruzzi's theory of costume in cinema deepens this analysis by framing clothing as a site of narrative and ideological intervention. As I argued in Chapter 2, costume can serve as a 'spectacular intervention', destabilising coherence and complicating character identity and plays a role in scripting the abject. I extend this principle to dolls: although not worn by live actors, dolls' clothes function as miniature costumes that impose visual scripts onto plastic bodies. These scripts, like Bernstein's, are open to reinterpretation and resistance through play. As in Chapter 2, Barbara Creed's theory of the monstrous-feminine further extends this framework, reading monstrosity as a feminist strategy of revolt. Her account of the hybrid, the nonhuman, and the abject as sites of disruption is especially relevant to dolls like *Cerise Hood*, daughter of Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf. Cerise's design fuses feminine-coded fashion (long hair, high-heeled boots) with animalistic elements (fur trims, lupine symbols). Like Ravenna in *Snow White and the Huntsman*, Cerise visualises hybrid monstrosity, but in a playable, stylable, and interactive form. Here, Bernstein's concept of 'scriptive things' becomes especially potent. It allows us not only to analyse monstrosity as representation, but to ask how it is performed, how children engage with abjection as imaginative agency.

Recent ethnographic research on Barbie play underscores this point. Michelle Bae-Dimitriadis and Olga Ivashkevich (2018) argue that Barbie dolls, though marketed as 'an ideal doll for girls that symbolizes a perfect version of White, middle-class womanhood', are frequently taken up by children in transgressive ways that destabilise this script (2018: 64).

Drawing on Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, they frame such play as a refusal of the symbolic order, or what Kristeva terms the 'Law of the Father': the patriarchal logic that 'separates mind from body, proper from improper, purity from impurity, life from death, and order from chaos through prohibition and sacrifice and makes these dualistic oppositions natural' (2018: 67). In their study, girls performed acts ranging from 'homosexual enactment to limb mutilation', enacting a form of self-otherness, self-rejection, and incompleteness [that] compel[s them] to break Barbie's symbolic order' (2018: 65). As they argue:

Girls' objectification of the self-as-other through Barbie play, thus, has a potential to recognize the Father as lack and loss rather than the Mother by dissociating the maternal with the impure, uncanny, and monstrous. Ultimately, this affective process expands the dimensions of girls' imaginary practice with a drive towards non-objectification, non-identification, and non-differentiation— which works to reinstate the maternal order of (pre)symbolic flesh (2018: 68).

Their case studies bring these dynamics vividly to life. In one instance, eight-year-old Anna Beth declared her two dolls 'gay' before gleefully orchestrating the violent death of Ken. In her play, Ken embodies the Law of the Father, the patriarchal force of possession and heteronormativity, only to be violently overthrown by unruly Barbies. His murder is 'full of affect and jouissance with a maternal, flashy, irrepressible force spilling out from and overflowing the scene', dissolving Barbie herself as a symbolic figure and disappearing into the very violence that annihilates the patriarchal law that produced her (2018: 70). What remains is a chaotic, pre-symbolic realm of flesh, beyond binaries of clean/dirty or perfect/imperfect imposed by cultural norms.

Their second case study makes this collapse of boundaries between doll and girl even more explicit. In their account, Stephanie and her friend Jeff subjected a 'supersize' Barbie doll to escalating violence: 'She yanked Barbie's hair, banged it on the floor, and amputated its other arm and leg as well. Stephanie tucked her arm inside the t-shirt she was wearing and grabbed Barbie's amputated arm as if it was her own extended arm' (2018: 71). Here the doll's body becomes both weapon and prosthesis, its dismembered arm serving as an uncanny extension of the girl's own. What might be dismissed as a disturbing collapse of boundaries between toy and child, what Walter terms the 'strange melding of the doll and the real girl', instead opens onto a scene of imaginative experimentation with hybridity, violence, and bodily excess. Rather than signalling passive absorption of Barbie's idealised femininity, such play enacts a form of creative resistance, where the girl reshapes the doll's meaning through acts of abjection. For Bae-Dimitriadis and Ivashkevich, such episodes exemplify how 'abjecting Barbie play teaches [girls] to depart from conventional notions of pedagogy' and instead allows girls to 'experiment with their desires and identities outside of phallogocentric regimes' (2018: 72). This perspective shifts dolls away from being passive objects of consumption and reframes them as pedagogical sites where children actively resist, remake, and critique gendered scripts through fantasy, violence, and desire.

Creed's theorisation of monstrosity as a space of feminist potential dovetails with Bernstein's insistence that children are not passive recipients of adult ideology. As Bernstein writes:

An understanding of children as experts in the scripts of children's culture, as virtuoso performers, challenges the position, espoused by Jacqueline Rose and James Kincaid, that children's culture is created by one, empowered group (adults) and given to or forced upon another, disempowered group (children) (2011: 29).

Instead, she shows how children take up and manipulate the 'co-scripts' of narrative and material culture to produce a 'third prompt: *play itself*' (2011: 29). This framing resonates with Ever After High, which explicitly invites players to 'Choose Your Own Ever After'. In this context, dolls become not just narrative vessels but costumed sites of abjection, hybridity, and imaginative agency. Bernstein helps us read the doll's surface as a visual script; Creed helps us understand how that script may challenge symbolic norms.

Even corporate market research inadvertently supports this argument. Hasbro, in reviewing responses to princess franchises, found that girls' preferences were not fixed or uniform:

Sometimes they liked a character because of her dress; other times they focused on her abilities, such as archery and sword fighting (Merida, from *Brave*) or the ability to conjure ice and snow (Elsa). Sometimes they want a prince, sometimes there is no need for a prince.¹⁶⁰

This mirrors Karen Wohlwend's research on how children remix narrative scripts through play. In her analysis of Monster High, Wohlwend argues that while the franchise trades in

¹⁶⁰ Suddath, 'The \$500 Million Battle Over Disney's Princesses'.

‘facile notions of girlhood’, it also allows children to ‘rupture and reimagine girlhoods’.¹⁶¹

Monster High (and by extension Ever After High) becomes a site of identity construction where gendered meanings are taken up, reworked, and sometimes resisted. These performances are shaped by both corporate narratives and children’s own improvisations. Wohlwend notes that the intertextual nature of these franchises means that dolls, TV shows, apps, and accessories form a matrix of meanings, a space in which identity is not fixed, but continually negotiated.

Wohlwend draws connections between Monster High and other tween-targeted franchises like Twilight, also supported by Mattel doll lines. Ever After High dolls, as material objects, carry inherited narrative scripts (e.g., Apple White as daughter of Snow White) alongside contemporary layers: they are stylish, modernised versions of princess tropes, signalling both conformity and potential subversion. Wohlwend calls these artefacts ‘available identities and lives’ that children are invited to purchase and inhabit. As she writes:

These messages, verbal and material, must be read as intertexts, to understand how they play against and with one another to make particular ways of ‘doing girl’ seem natural and expected. [...] When children play with dolls, they access multiple potential meanings to perform the expected identities and roles [...]. This makes doll play a key site where children take up and reproduce stereotypical ways of doing *girl* but also where they can use imagination as a social practice to remake and expand ways of participating in childhood cultures. [...] [A] producer’s design for a fashion

¹⁶¹ Karen E. Wohlwend, ‘Ghouls, Dolls and Girlhoods: Fashion and Horror at Monster High’, in *Generation Z: Zombies, Popular Culture, and Educating Youth* ed. by Victoria Carrington, Jennifer Rowsell, Esther Priyadharshini, and Rebecca Westrup (New York: Springer, 2016), pp. 115-130 (p. 115).

doll embedded in its smiling plastic features, sleek hair, and silken gown can easily be replaced and shifted from glamorous princess to powerful superhero by a player's reimagining that swoops the doll through the air (2016: 119).

In this sense, play becomes a kind of low-theoretical intervention; a doll designed to be displayed as a passive object can be swooped through the air as a superhero. As Bernstein also points out, the physical qualities of dolls shape how they are used. A soft doll may invite cuddling; a plastic one with jointed limbs, like the Ever After High dolls, scripts stylisation, posing, and display. The inclusion of a stand suggests that the doll is to be admired as well as played with, further complicating the performance of girlhood and the visual scripting of empowerment.

Mattel vs Disney

This tension between scripted performance and imaginative agency becomes especially pronounced when we consider Ever After High in relation to its most powerful cultural competitor: Disney. Mattel had worked with Disney since 1955, holding the license to manufacture Disney Princess dolls, one of the most lucrative and recognisable toy lines globally. However, in 2016 Disney moved the contract to Hasbro, a decision driven in part by the conflict of interest between Mattel's Ever After High and Disney's own property *Descendants*, which also centres on the teenage children of princesses and villains. With two rival toy lines drawing from similar fairy tale lineage, Disney was no longer comfortable with Mattel's implicit critique of its brand. (Disney has since moved back to Mattel for the production of the Princess dolls!) Indeed, Mattel had already gestured toward the

limitations of traditional fairy tales in its marketing, through the Ever After High press release, the company not-so-subtly alluded to outdated representations of femininity, inviting consumers to leave behind the kind of passive narratives exemplified by earlier Disney Princesses. As Claire Suddarth point out, Disney, for its part, was beginning to hear ‘you’re-sending-the-wrong-message-to-our-daughter’ complaints from parents, particularly around the passivity, homogeneity, and aesthetic of its Princess line.¹⁶² In response, Disney began to reframe the brand, aiming to portray its heroines as more courageous, independent, and active. ‘The Princess franchise has to evolve’ said Josh Silverman, Disney’s Executive VP of Global Licensing. ‘The focus will be on empowered heroines’.¹⁶³ Hasbro, already manufacturing toys for Star Wars and Marvel, was seen as a better fit for this reinvention and using a company well known for action toys, a choice that reinforces, as I argued earlier, the conflation of empowerment with masculinised action.

If Ever After High invites players to ‘choose your own destiny’, then the destiny it implicitly critiques is the one most iconically codified by Disney’s princess narratives. While Mattel’s dolls embrace fairy tale lineage, they also revise, stylise, and hybridise it. This distinction is not incidental; it forms part of Mattel’s strategic positioning against the cultural dominance of Disney’s princess brand. Here I compare the visual scripting of Ever After High dolls with Disney’s costuming of its princesses, arguing that fairy tale being retold through Mattel’s franchise is that of the Disney animation rather than older texts such as Perrault and the

¹⁶² Suddath, ‘The \$500 Million Battle Over Disney’s Princesses’.

¹⁶³ Suddath, ‘The \$500 Million Battle Over Disney’s Princesses’.

Brothers Grimm. Crucially, these costumes are also embedded with intertextual cues that invoke their Disney counterparts as seen in the images below:

Ashlynn Ella – Daughter of Cinderella

Ashlynn Ella's design borrows heavily from the visual language of Disney's version (Figure 19). She wears the soft pink and blue of both Cinderella's iconic gowns, has puffed sleeves and a sheer sparkly overskirt, and wears transparent blue heels that function as her 'glass' slippers. Her handbag, shaped like a clock, nods to the midnight deadline in Cinderella's story, anchoring the character within a familiar visual genealogy. The pink and blue outfit reflects both Cinderella's pink gown that is ruined by the ugly stepsisters and the blue gown bestowed on her by her Fairy Godmother. The layering of the blue and pink echo the ripping of the gown, signalling an important point in the fairy tale narrative (Figure 20).



Figure 19 Mattel Ashlynn Ella doll



Figure 20 Disney's Cinderella in her pink dress

Rosabella Beauty – Daughter of Beauty and the Beast

Rosabella Beauty presents a more explicit intertextual echo (Figure 21). Her outfit, dominated by a bold yellow palette, clearly references Belle’s famous ballgown in Disney’s version of the fairy tale (Figure 22). Her characterisation as ‘bookish’ is visually amplified through oversized reading glasses and a handbag shaped like a book, solidifying the connection to the Disney character’s love of reading. Here again, costume is a visual shorthand that draws on Disney’s iconography.



Figure 21 Mattel Rosabella Beauty doll



Figure 22 Disney's Belle

Apple White – Daughter of Snow White

Apple White, daughter of Snow White, may initially seem a departure: her blonde hair contrasts with Disney's raven-haired version (Figure 23). However, her design still incorporates key recognisable markers: a red apple-shaped purse, puffed sleeves slashed with colour, a red bow in her hair, and a high-necked white collar (Figure 24).



Figure 23 Mattel's Apple White doll



Figure 24 Disney's Snow White

As I outlined in chapter 2, Stella Bruzzi argues that costume is not secondary to narrative, but a primary and often disruptive force. Rejecting what she calls its 'bridesmaid status'

Bruzzi insists that clothing can ‘impose rather than absorb meaning’, capable of interrupting character coherence and narrative flow. It is important to note here that Ever After High relies on the costume of the dolls not as mere ornamentation, but as a layered site of storytelling and identity. The costumes worn by the dolls do more than simply distinguish one character from another: they encode familial legacy, character alignment (Royal or Rebel), and subcultural affiliation. Unlike Disney or even Bratz, where clothing is often treated as a fashionable accessory, Ever After High costumes are deeply entangled with the franchise’s core message of rewriting or resisting destiny. We can see this narrative function most clearly in the contrast between the Royals and the Rebels. As well as through books, cartoons, and packaging, the difference is immediately legible in the dolls’ clothes. The Rebels’ outfits reference a stylised blend of goth, punk, Lolita, emo, and even fetish fashion. Black lace, red tartan, corsetry, studded cuffs, fingerless gloves, streaked or coloured hair, and elaborate hats are common elements, offering a polished, commercialised shorthand for ‘alternative’ girlhood. The Royals, by contrast, are dressed in more traditionally ‘pretty’ outfits, bows, puffed sleeves, glittery skirts, but they too carry traces of subcultural stylisation. Most strikingly, however, none of the Ever After High heroines wear the floor-length gowns that define Disney’s princess iconography. Instead, they all appear in mini-skirts or mini-dresses, a sartorial shift that literalises the ‘tarted-up’ critique levelled at the dolls.

These overlaps between Mattel’s dolls and Disney’s princesses may stem from multiple sources. They may be a strategic critique of Disney’s outdated portrayals of femininity, an effect of Mattel’s former manufacturing role for Disney Princess dolls, or simply a way to

ensure immediate visual recognition among consumers. Most likely, it is a combination of all three. Regardless of origin, these visual parallels work to both invoke and subvert the Disney fairy tale template, signalling Mattel's repositioning of the princess narrative as one of self-determination rather than passive fulfilment. This costume contrast underscores the idea that the fairy tale 'destiny' being resisted at Ever After High is not simply a generic tradition, it is specifically the Disney-fied version, one already under scrutiny by concerned parents. What appears to be mere appropriation of Disney's aesthetic as a marketing tactic, also serves as a strategic restyling that both draws on and destabilises the Princess template. At stake in this comparison is not only aesthetic difference, but also a politics of girlhood consumption, one that aligns with what Sarah Banet-Weiser calls 'commodity feminism' where empowerment is marketed through individual choice and style. By offering alternatives to the Disney ideal, Mattel taps into adult anxieties about the princess paradigm while simultaneously commodifying that critique for its own ends.

Mattel's press release for the 2014 global launch of Ever After High makes this commercial strategy of empowerment explicit. Opening with the phrase 'turning a new page in fairytale history', the statement situates the brand within a lineage of revisionist fairy tale retellings.¹⁶⁴ The name of the franchise itself, Ever After High™, trademarks the language of narrative closure, appropriating the most recognisable phrase in fairy tale tradition to signal both continuity and transformation. The dolls are described as the 'teenage sons and daughters of well-known fairy tale legends', but crucially, they are also positioned as

¹⁶⁴ 'Mattel Announces the Global Launch of Ever After High', Mattel Inc. n.d. <<https://investors.mattel.com/news-releases/news-release-details/mattel-announces-global-launch-ever-after-high.htm>> [accessed 3 April 2017].

'relatable'. More revealingly, Mattel claims the brand reaches consumers at 'every touch point' signalling a deliberate expansion into a transmedia ecosystem designed to envelop the child in a branded, immersive experience. The company's messaging constructs empowerment as a brand value. Senior Vice President of Global Brand Marketing, Stephanie Cota, states: 'Ever After High celebrates the idea that the story of your life is not written in permanent ink—our characters help convey to girls the importance of having the courage and confidence to make your own decisions and to create your own destiny'.¹⁶⁵ This rhetoric of rewriting and self-authorship sounds progressive, yet its terms are vague. What does it mean, exactly, to create one's own destiny within a commercial framework so tightly scripted by corporate storytelling, merchandise design, and algorithmically targeted media content?

Bernstein's concept of the doll as a 'scriptive thing' can be used to analyse how Ever After High offers its consumers a set of prompts that can be embraced, refused, or rewritten. As Bernstein notes, for many children, stories and material culture are mutually sustaining, dolls 'seemed only things stuffed with sawdust' she writes, until 'literature assisted imagination and gave them character' (2011: 69). Mattel's decision to commission acclaimed YA author Shannon Hale to write the franchise's accompanying novels reflects this insight. The books extend the dolls' narratives, acting as an additional layer of scripting. Editorial director Erin Stein highlighted Hale's ability to create 'believable' reimaginings of fairy tales, an important claim, given that Hale's existing work (e.g. *Princess Academy*, *The Goose Girl*) blends feminist revisionism with popular accessibility. Hale herself framed the

¹⁶⁵ 'Mattel Announces the Global Launch of Ever After High'.

project in terms of empowerment through reading: 'The term "reluctant reader" is usually used about boys, but there are a lot of girls out there who are reluctant readers as well'.¹⁶⁶ Hale noted that dolls and accompanying media could act as a 'hook' to draw girls into reading, a point that troubles the idea that toy-based narratives are always intellectually impoverished. Within the narrative, students are pressured to sign the Book of Destiny, a magical contract that binds them to repeat their parents' stories.

Apple White, the daughter of Snow White, wants Raven Queen (the daughter of the Evil Queen) to poison her so that she can fulfil her narrative arc: die, be revived by true love's kiss, marry her prince, and rule her kingdom. In one webisode, Apple even moves in as Raven's roommate to encourage the poisoning. Raven's refusal to follow through throws the logic of fairy tale closure into crisis: Apple's ideal life literally depends on her scripted death. This narrative structure both parodies and critiques the rigid determinism of traditional fairy tales, and by extension, the Disney model in particular. As Halberstam argues, queer failure disrupts the logics of success by exposing how they rely on impossible, contradictory, or destructive terms. Apple's success story is only legible if she dies, if she submits fully to the script of feminine sacrifice and erasure. Read through Halberstam, Apple embodies a spectacular form of failure: she reveals that the promise of success under patriarchal and neoliberal frameworks is itself structured around loss. Her 'ideal life' depends on both her own death and Raven's compliance.

¹⁶⁶ Karen Raugust, 'Shannon Hale and Mattel Live Happily "Ever After"', PublishersWeekly.Com (6 June 2015) <<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-industry-news/article/57691-shannon-hale-and-mattel-live-happily-ever-after.html>> [accessed 31 March 2025].

Mattel's rhetoric emphasises individual confidence and courage, yet the pathway to empowerment is routed through commercial consumption. The press release simultaneously addresses two audiences: the child, through personalised appeals to 'your destiny' and the parent, who is reassured that Ever After High is 'not like the fairytales you grew-up reading'.¹⁶⁷ This dual targeting participates in what Banet-Weiser and Mukherjee call commodity activism: a mode of resistance or empowerment expressed through consumer behaviour. While it may appear hypocritical for a corporation like Mattel, long criticised for promoting unrealistic standards of femininity through Barbie, to market a fashion doll franchise as empowering, Banet-Weiser and Mukherjee argue that such contradictions are intrinsic to the structure of commodity activism itself. Within neoliberal culture, activism is no longer external to the market but embedded within it. Just as children's literature constructs a child to address, brands have constructed the social activist as a consumer. Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser argue that this has arisen due to the shifting forms of activism in a time when heroic social movements are in decline: 'Marked by a new generation of "posts" – postfeminism, postrace, postpolitics – neoliberalism, we are warned, has hastened the "death of civil rights", the "end of feminism", the "collapse of the Left"'.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁷ 'Mattel Announces the Global Launch of Ever After High'.

¹⁶⁸ Sarah Banet-Weiser and Roopali Mukherjee, 'Introduction: Commodity Activism in Neoliberal Times', in *Commodity Activism: Cultural Resistance in Neoliberal Times*, ed. by Sarah Banet-Weiser and Roopali Mukherjee (New York: NYU Press, 2012), pp.1-17 (p. 2).

In this context, self-esteem and empowerment become products rather than processes, things that can be purchased, worn, displayed. By acknowledging the emotional content of consumer transactions, commodity activism enables the exploration of the way that realms of culture once considered 'outside' the official economy have been harnessed. For example, the empowerment of girls has traditionally been understood as something to be developed outside of consumer culture, but self-esteem is now a post-feminist product that can be acquired through consumption. Essentially, say Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, the creation of 'value' drives capitalism, but the meaning of 'value' changes (2012: 14). Mattel's use of fairy tale language and structures amplifies this dynamic. The franchise signals feminist resistance through its narrative of choice and rebellion, but delivers that resistance via a product line of highly stylised fashion dolls. Girls can 'choose their own destiny' but only within the aesthetic, material, and narrative parameters set by Mattel. The possibilities for self-authorship are real, but they are also monetised and packaged for sale. Halberstam also acknowledges this tension, arguing that while 'many readers may object to the idea that we can locate alternatives in a genre engineered by huge corporations for massive profits' animation has the power to open up 'new narrative doors and [...] unexpected encounters between the childish and the transformative and the queer' (2011: 18-19).

As Megen de Bruin-Molé argues, what matters is not simply how films or characters represent women, but how 'these representations and aims are continually negotiated and re-interpreted by fans, creators, licensees, and feminists around the world'.¹⁶⁹ Disney may

¹⁶⁹ de Bruin-Molé, "Does it Come with a Spear?"

have been unable to rewrite the original fairy tales, but it could influence how those stories were marketed. Mattel's Ever After High pre-empted this move by encouraging girls to reject the 'happily ever after' imposed on them by legacy narratives, a rejection that taps into both feminist critique and consumer desire. Again, this kind of marketing functions as 'commodity activism', in which empowerment becomes a consumable product, reconciling individual self-interest (choosing a doll) with collective feminist concerns (challenging restrictive narratives). Consumption thus becomes a mode of agency, especially when facilitated by interactive, affective platforms. Through its 'digital ecosystem' Ever After High extends this logic: users can take quizzes to find out which character they're most like or which after-school job suits them best, encouraging repeated engagement that folds identity-formation into the act of buying. Each result, such as working in a shoe shop for Cinderella's daughter, is tied to a character and, by implication, a product. Banet-Weiser links this kind of affective consumption to labour. Brands ask consumers not simply to buy, but to participate, producing immaterial labour in the form of engagement, affect, and creative identification. This form of work is exploitative in some ways, but it is also productive: 'Neoliberal capitalism does not only make workers out of consumers' she argues, 'but consumption itself becomes the primary kind of labour now performed' (2012: 51).

Fan readings: Performance

As Bernstein argues, dolls are scriptive things: they invite certain performances and behaviours, but these scripts are not rigid, they can be resisted, reinterpreted, and

rewritten. In the case of Ever After High, the dolls do not stand alone, they are part of a wider transmedia narrative that includes webisodes, novels, apps, and social media content. This creates a rich field of prompts from both material and narrative culture that script the performances of childhood and fan play in complex and layered ways. As Henry Jenkins argues in *Convergence Culture* (2006):

The term, participatory culture, contrasts with older notions of passive media spectatorship. Rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands'.¹⁷⁰

In this way, the boundary between producer and consumer is porous, and storytelling becomes a collaborative process. In Ever After High, fans take up both the narrative and material scripts offered by Mattel and reshape them through imaginative play, fanfiction, doll photography, and social media. These practices are not only creative, they are political, allowing fans to articulate alternative readings of empowerment and identity that the official narrative may only hint at.

Fan engagement with Ever After High demonstrates what Henry Jenkins defines as participatory culture, where fans are not passive consumers but active producers of meaning. He notes that 'convergence, as we can see, is both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process. [...] Consumers are learning how to use these different media technologies to bring the flow of media more fully under their control

¹⁷⁰ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York University Press, 2006) p. 3.

and to interact with other consumers' (2006: 18). In this context, the meaning of a character or storyline is not confined to what the franchise or its creators intended. Instead, fans collaboratively reinterpret and re-script those meanings through their own creative outputs, fan art, Instagram staging, fan fiction, and online commentary. These fan readings offer rich terrain for identity work, especially in relation to gender and queerness. Jenkins argues that fans 'poach' from mass media texts, appropriating and reshaping them in ways that serve their own cultural and emotional needs.

This idea is central to how Ever After High fans have reimagined characters through queer and feminist lenses. They are not simply receiving messages from Mattel; they are actively negotiating, resisting, and reworking those scripts, often producing alternate narratives that deviate from the heteronormative and commodified intentions of the franchise. Halberstam also states that children's media is particularly powerful in this sense, arguing that childhood is 'an essentially queer experience in a society that acknowledge through its extensive training programmes for children that heterosexuality is not born but made' (2011: 27). Fairy tales, particularly those popularised by Disney, have long functioned as key sites for this training, scripting heterosexuality as destiny through romance, marriage, and reproductive closure. Ever After High reproduces this framework in its premise, where characters are defined through lineage and expected to follow predetermined romantic paths. At the same time, however, the franchise exposes the instability of these norms. The repetition of heterosexual pairings across generations reveals the extent to which such identities must be continually reinforced rather than naturally assumed. Moreover, the presence of hybrid and nonhuman genealogies, such as Cerise Hood, the daughter of Red

Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf, or Kitty Cheshire, the child of a grinning cat, disrupts assumptions about normative coupling. These tensions open up spaces for alternative readings, allowing fans to engage with the ambiguities and fractures within the fairy-tale system.

It is not only the physical doll that enables the reimagining of character narratives; fan interpretations of the cartoon itself also generate alternative readings that contribute to identity construction. Apple White's storyline provides a useful example. As one of 'The Royals', Apple is expected to fulfil her predetermined destiny as the daughter of Snow White by signing the Book of Destiny, ensuring the continuation of her fairy tale. This destiny requires her to be poisoned by Raven Queen so that she can be revived by true love's kiss, marry her prince and ultimately rule her kingdom. Crucially, Apple's prescribed destiny offers her certainty, she knows that her 'true love' will be the one who revives her.

This apparent certainty is disrupted, however, within the narrative world of *Ever After High*. In the Netflix film *Ever After High: Dragon Games* (2016), Raven Queen's mother (the Evil Queen) escapes from the mirror prison and poisons Apple White, sending her into a magical coma. Daring Charming, who has been set up as Apple's romantic counterpart throughout the series, is called upon to administer true love's kiss, but his kiss fails. Apple remains unconscious. At her funeral, held in a glass coffin, a direct reference to Snow White, her friend Darling Charming (Daring's sister) rushes forward and gives her CPR (Figure 25). There is a flash of light, and Apple wakes up as if 'by magic'. Darling Charming's back story is also

of relevance here: destined to be the 'Damsel in Distress', Darling is a rebel who disguises herself as a knight and goes around rescuing people. Darling's secret identity as the 'masculine' White Knight subverts the heteronormative destiny of her character; her actions in turn subvert the heterosexual destiny of Apple White.

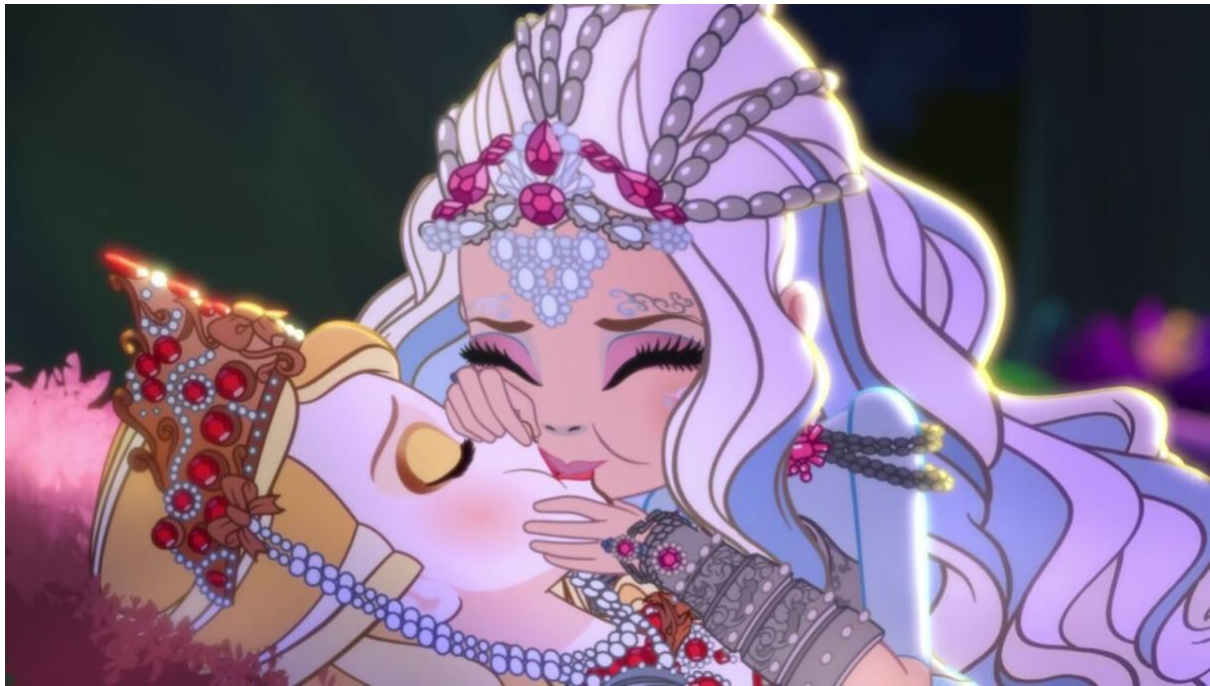


Figure 25 Ever After High: The Dragon Games

The scene admits at least three readings: that CPR, not true love's kiss, saves lives; that true love need not be romantic; or that Darling Charming is Apple White's true love. Darling's character adds further complexity to this reading. She is Darling's sister, but unlike her brother, she is a rebel. Destined to be the 'Damsel in Distress' she disguises herself as a knight and saves others instead. Her actions subvert the heteronormative expectations of her character and, in turn, those of Apple White. Though the animation makes it visually clear that the moment is intended as CPR (Darling pinches Apple's nose and tips her head back), fans, particularly queer fans, have interpreted it as a 'true love's kiss' that challenges the heterosexual assumptions of the fairy tale genre. In this sense, Apple's 'failure' to be

revived by the 'right' person according to the fairy tale script enacts Halberstam's notion of queer failure, unsettling the promise of heterosexual destiny and gesturing instead toward alternative ways of imagining love, kinship, and survival beyond the prince's kiss.

These interpretations have gained momentum on fan platforms like Instagram and Tumblr. One such account, @fairesteverafter, posted daily in February 2024 under the hashtag #femslashfebruary, featuring female Ever After High dolls posed romantically or as if on a date. One post shows Apple and Darling posed as in an engagement photo, as if Darling has just slipped a ring on Apple's finger (Figure 27). The caption reads: 'These two have been holding hands on my shelf for 8 full years, so it's about time.'¹⁷¹ These visual posts are more than mere expressions of fandom, they represent a physical re-authoring of the characters' stories.

¹⁷¹ fairesteverafter, '#femslashfebruary day 12: ring', Instagram, 12 February 2024 <<https://www.instagram.com/p/C3P8-xQuM7/?igsh=MXFicXc5bzA3aDd4eA==>> [accessed 27 September 2025].



Figure 26 Instagram post Apple and Darling



Figure 27: Instagram post engagement photo

In this way, fan readings of the animated text loop back to the physical manipulation of the dolls themselves: fans pose them holding hands, kissing, or dressed for dates, materialising queer desire through hands-on interaction with the object. The doll becomes both the site and medium of narrative transformation. Doll accessories such as rings, which might be dismissed as mere fashion details, are re-coded by fans to signify an engagement ring for a queer couple. The doll's sculpted hands exemplify this scriptive potential, the fingers are slender, splayed, and angled in a way that suggests delicacy, a pose that seems designed to hold or display accessories such as a handbag or a ring. Yet that same moulded shape enables other uses: the splayed fingers can echo the way a woman might display a ring for the camera, or the expectant gesture of waiting for a partner to slide the ring onto her hand. Just as easily, when positioned near another doll, the hand can be read as a gesture of intimacy, cupping a partner's face in a loving caress (Figure 26). What might initially appear as a neutral design choice for accessorizing becomes a script that fans creatively rework, staging queer romance through the doll's body and, in doing so, queering a gesture more often associated with heterosexual engagement photos frequently seen on social media. Scripted with the symbolism of heteronormative romance, Ever After High dolls are taken up by fans and re-scripted into queer couplings, showing how the very qualities that encode patriarchal order can also be turned toward its disruption.

This is a poignant example of what Jenkins calls the emotional investment of fan labour: how personal identification with a character or scene fuels a desire to extend or alter a narrative. In *Dragon Games*, Mattel leave just enough ambiguity for Darling's gesture to be interpreted as platonic, or romantic, allowing fans to step in and construct queer meanings.

According to Banet-Weiser the fans are performing a kind of immaterial labour, they produce affective, cultural, and symbolic value for brands through their engagement and creativity. In this sense, the queering of Ever After High is both subversive and strategic, it serves the emotional needs of the fan while also aligning with Mattel's marketing language that stories are 'not written in permanent ink' and they have been empowered to 'choose their own destiny'. Rather than fans simply imposing their own readings onto a neutral text, Mattel has carefully scripted the franchise, providing the tools for a queer reading to take place and to be performed materially through the dolls, while also protecting itself from potential conservative backlash. By accepting the fairy tale power of 'true love's kiss' to revive, but denying that it must be administered by a prince, fans reclaim the doll's scripted heteronormativity as queer kinship, staged through plastic and pose.

This interplay between fan intervention and corporate scripting raises questions about how specific dolls are positioned within the franchise. While *Dragon Games* foregrounds heroic archetypes and invites queer reinterpretations through ambiguity, other dolls extend this dynamic more explicitly. In the next section I turn to Cerise Hood, a character whose design history is particularly telling. Not only does she occupy a liminal role in the Ever After High narrative, but the existence of a 'special edition' Cerise doll marketed toward adult collectors highlights how Mattel simultaneously courts fan creativity and controls the terms of engagement. Strikingly, Cerise was the first Ever After High character to receive a special edition release, despite not being one of the two central protagonists, Apple White and Raven Queen, this decision underscores her distinctive role within the franchise's symbolic order.

She-Wolf: Cerise Hood

Cerise Hood presents a particularly compelling case within Ever After High, not only because she is positioned as one of the franchise's 'Rebel' figures, but also because she lacks a Disney counterpart; prior to her release, Red Riding Hood dolls had not appeared in the mainstream toy market, with existing versions limited mainly to niche collector subcultures rather than mass-produced play dolls for children. As the daughter of Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf, Cerise embodies hybridity and secrecy in ways that trouble the patriarchal symbolic order of the fairy tale. Significantly, her sister Ramona, who is openly aligned with her wolf heritage, was never produced as a doll. This omission suggests that Mattel was less willing to market a character whose identity was already fixed and unapologetically wolf-like, preferring instead the figure of Cerise, whose narrative revolves around concealment and the gradual negotiation of her dual lineage. In this way, Cerise embodies a state of becoming rather than being, a quality that dovetails with the brand's rhetoric of 'choosing your own destiny' while also leaving her available for multiple projections and identifications.

Unlike most dolls in the franchise, which retell Disney-fied versions of classic tales, Cerise functions as a continuation of what is already recognised as a feminist text: Angela Carter's 'The Company of Wolves'. In this sense, Mattel's doll line extends the feminist reworking of 'Red Riding Hood' discussed in the previous chapter, initiated by Carter, adapted by Neil Jordan, and reimagined by Catherine Hardwicke. This further situates Cerise in an intriguing

cultural space: she is both a mass-produced tween doll and the inheritor of a feminist literary and cinematic genealogy. In Creed's terms, she is a contemporary iteration of the *femme animale*, 'part-woman and part-animal' who 'deliberately set[s] out to undermine the dominant norms of an anthropocentric and phallogocentric symbolic order.'¹⁷² Ever After High may appear far removed from feminist horror cinema, but it encodes the same subversive tensions in a child-friendly form: monstrosity as revolt and hybridity as a challenge to patriarchal order. Cerise hides what she considers a terrible secret: her father is the Big Bad Wolf. Red Riding Hood and 'Badwolf', as he is known, fell in love at Ever After High, secretly married, and had two daughters, Cerise and Ramona. They are considered as the first 'Rebels' of the school. Because their parentage must remain hidden, so too does their sisterhood: Cerise is aligned with Red, Ramona with Badwolf. Following their supposed destinies would mean Ramona is fated to eat Cerise and be killed by the woodsman. This startlingly violent plot for a tween franchise echoes other troubling 'destinies' in the series, such as Apple White needing to be poisoned by her roommate. Cerise's hybrid identity therefore exposes the instability of fairy tale inheritance and, drawing on Creed's concept of radical abjection, demonstrates how nonhumanness can 'make a nonsense' of the patriarchal symbolic order.¹⁷³

¹⁷² Barbara Creed, 'Ginger Snaps: the monstrous-feminine as *femme animale*', in *She-Wolf: A Cultural History of Female Werewolves*, ed. by Priest, Hannah, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), pp. 180-195, (p. 181).

¹⁷³ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Second edition (Routledge, 2024), p. 199.

Creed's expanded second edition of *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (2024) is instructive here. Creed points to the substantial number of female directors, script-writers and producers in the twenty-first century who have turned to horror film to 'tell their own stories' and that these films share an interest in the female nonhuman protagonist, or the monstrous-feminine, such as the human/animal hybrid, providing a fascinating way the body of the monstrous-feminine opens up questions about the meaning of human and nonhuman in patriarchal discourse (2024: 188). 'The turn to the nonhuman in feminist horror through the figure of the monstrous-feminine could be viewed as a protest that specifically denigrates woman, aligning her with the nonhuman: animal, alien, other' (2024: 189). While the Ever After High franchise seems a long way away from the horror films that Creed discusses, and also an entirely different type of text, I would argue, a story in which a sister eats another certainly has horror elements. As Creed states:

The monstrous-feminine as nonhuman in horror offers an actual and metaphoric construct with which to reimagine the past and explore the future through her turn to radical abjection [...]. She engages with her otherness and draws on the power of radical abjection to make a nonsense of a patriarchal symbolic order of law and language that itself denies the importance of the nonhuman (2024: 199).

At Ever After High, Headmaster Grimm personifies the symbolic order: students must repeat their parents' stories or face obliteration. Mattel's narrative exposes the absurdity of such destiny, following the 'rules' produces horror and chaos rather than the order Headmaster Grimm promises.

My concern here is with dolls as texts rather than with play as a social practice, I treat dolls as objects that script stories before they are ever taken up by players. Through their material bodies, clothing and paratexts, dolls anticipate particular forms of play and narrative. Where Bae-Dimitriadis and Ivashkevich show girls repurposing Barbie through abject play to resist what Barbie symbolises, I turn to Bernstein's idea of 'scriptive things' to ask a different question: what kind of story is Mattel scripting through Cerise? What is being reinscribed and what is being resisted? Here, disruption is pre-written into the doll, monstrosity is not merely latent but named, visualised and authorised by the paratext. The result is a corporate invitation to stage monstrosity as resistance, an empowering script that still sits uneasily within the very symbolic order it seeks to upend.

Cerise's character design makes this scripting visible not only through narrative but also through styling. Unlike Apple White's Lolita-inspired gowns or Raven Queen's gothic regalia, Cerise's wardrobe borrows from punk aesthetics: plaid, leather textures and hooded silhouettes mark her as an outsider within the school's visual order. The fact that each central heroine is aligned with a recognisable subcultural style, Apple with Lolita, Raven with goth, Cerise with punk, suggests a deliberate strategy by Mattel to appropriate and repackage subcultural identities for tween consumption. Punk, with its associations of rebellion and anti-authoritarianism, reinforces Cerise's narrative of resistance while simultaneously being commodified as a marketable fashion choice. While Mattel's use of a punk 'wolf-girl' doll with clear links to Carter's feminist heroine could be dismissed as corporate appropriation of subculture, Bernstein's framework allows us to resist closing the question too quickly. Dolls, as scriptive things, do not only carry ideology but structure the possibilities of how stories can be told through play. Ferreday likewise urges us to ask 'what

else might we find?' if we refuse to read such performances solely for evidence of capitalist ideology (2014: 147). In Ferreday's terms, such visual cultures may 'structure the kinds of feminine performances that are possible' and gesture toward 'new feminine futures' (2014: 148). It is in this light that I turn to a close comparison of the two versions of Cerise, the signature doll and the Comic-Con exclusive Cerise Wolf, to show how Mattel scripts monstrosity differently across their designs, packaging, and paratexts.

At first glance the 'signature' Cerise Hood doll reads as Red Riding Hood: a small red hood, red-and-black plaid dress, lacy black sleeves, twin skirts, pale pink lips and long dark-brown hair with a single white streak. The hood is not just costume but cover, concealing the wolf ears inherited from her father (the doll itself does not have wolf ears, though they are referred to in the cartoon). Her wardrobe reinforces maternal inheritance, the red cape, the basket, while minimising paternal lineage. Wolf traits are muted: a fur-lined basket, a grey streak in the hair (Figure 28).



Figure 28 Mattel Cerise Hood doll

Each release is accompanied by a diary entry, and in hers, Cerise writes:

I have a secret. I know what you're thinking... everyone has a secret. But, does everyone have to hide their secret every moment of every day? I go to Ever After High because it's my destiny to be the next Red Riding Hood. But that's not all of who I am. That's because of my father, the Big Bad Wolf. So I guess you could say I am my secret. Every day I have to hide my half-wolf ears. Nobody can ever know about my true nature, which is a total fairy-fail!¹⁷⁴

Here 'Big Bad Wolf' is struck through, while the language of 'fairy-fail' casts secrecy itself as a failure. For Cerise, being forced to suppress her hybridity is not a triumph of obedience

¹⁷⁴ 'Cerise Hood's Diary'.

but a failed performance of destiny, one that reduces her to less than she is. She insists she is more than Red Riding Hood's daughter, even if her wolf identity must remain hidden.

By contrast, the San Diego Comic-Con exclusive 'Cerise Wolf' doll performs disclosure and monstrous pride. San Diego Comic-Con, one of the largest fan conventions in the world, is a key site where toy companies release limited-edition dolls aimed at adult collectors. Unlike the signature version, this Cerise intensifies her punk aesthetic into horror spectacle, eyes glow yellow, fangs peek from pink lips, claw-like smoke trails frame her eyes, and a wolf headdress anchors her floor-length red cape. But what makes the Comic-Con edition especially significant is that monstrosity is not only expressed through clothing, it is materialised in the doll's very body, yellow eyes and painted fangs cannot be removed like a cape or skirt, and for the first time the wolf ears are sculpted rather than merely hinted at. Whereas the signature Cerise Hood could theoretically 'pass' by being redressed, Cerise Wolf encodes hybridity at the level of face and form. Taken together, these stylistic and material elements refuse concealment: monstrosity is no longer latent or optional but permanently visible, scripting Cerise as a figure of embodied hybridity and feral pride. In Bernstein's terms, the doll remains a 'scriptive thing', but one that channels play in new directions by hardwiring monstrosity into its design, limiting the possibility of erasure while expanding the scope for performances of monstrous-feminine resistance.



Figure 29 Cerise Wolf doll

The diary entry that accompanies this doll is also different and forms part of the box itself, which is designed to look like an ornate storybook. When opened, the packaging reveals Cerise running through a forest of cardboard trees, the trees look like they have been cut out of the pages of the book (Figure 29). The staging is highly symbolic, Cerise is pictured not as enclosed within the book of destinies but as breaking free of it, tearing through the pages that once confined her story.

My entire life, people knew me as Cerise Hood, daughter of Red Riding Hood. But that's half the truth. My father's the Big Bad Wolf, though it was a secret I had to hide. Yes, I said "had" to. I was done hiding. [...] The new "me" looked back. My, how fierce my hair was. My, how sharp my teeth were. With pride, I pulled back my long, red hood. My, how big bad my ears were.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁵ 'Cerise Wolf's SDCC Diary', Ever After High Wiki, n.d.
<https://everafterhigh.fandom.com/wiki/Cerise_Wolf%27s_SDCC_diary> [accessed 16 September 2025].

Her diary narrates the moment of revelation: pulling back her hood, renaming herself 'Cerise Wolf', and finding acceptance among peers. The language also echoes the iconic exchange between Red Riding Hood and the wolf as explored in the previous chapter, but here both roles are claimed by Cerise who is both wolf and girl. However, the diary also reveals the consequences of Cerise claiming her hybrid identity:

My parents looked at me with despair in their eyes. As they began glowing, I realized what was happening, "Mom! Dad!" The legends were true! When fairytales break from destiny, they vanish, along with their story. I turned to Headmaster Grimm, "Don't do this! This was my choice" but it was too late. In a bright FLASH my parents were no longer there.¹⁷⁶

The packaging and diary work together to dramatize the stakes of Cerise's revelation. The cardboard book forest visually encodes her refusal of predestined narrative, showing her literally breaking through the pages of the 'Book of Destinies'. The disappearance of her parents, meanwhile, literalises the dangers of breaking the law of destiny, to claim a hybrid identity is to risk the erasure of familial inheritance itself. This is not only the father who vanishes, but also the mother, a double loss that suggests Cerise is rejecting both her stories. Following Ferreday, this moment can be read as a gesture toward 'new feminine futures', where identity is not bound to parental scripts but remade through monstrosity and hybridity. Creed's notion of 'radical abjection', of the desire of the monstrous-feminine to 'transgress boundaries, to weaponize her nonhuman identity, to defy the law' clarifies what is at stake here (2024: 189). Cerise is already both Red Riding Hood and the Wolf;

¹⁷⁶ 'Cerise Wolf's SDCC Diary'.

secrecy does not alter her hybridity, her nonhuman body itself exposes the impossibility of fulfilling the patriarchal scripts imposed upon her. Headmaster Grimm's claim that breaking from destiny will cause chaos is revealed as a means of keeping the students in place, a threat that loses force when Cerise survives her disclosure and the disappearance of her parents is revealed to be a nightmare. In this sense, the doll encodes not only monstrosity but also the impossibility of fitting societal expectations.

The Cerise Wolf doll makes this especially clear: like Hardwicke's use of the cape in *Red Riding Hood*, Cerise's hood and cloak might appear dispensable as items of costume, yet they remain symbolically indispensable, tethering her to the tale of maternal inheritance. Warwick and Cavallaro remind us that clothing is always more than decoration: it renders the body 'analysable' and 'manipulable' through its effects.¹⁷⁷ With the cloak Cerise is the daughter of Red Riding Hood and the wolf and recalls Carter's 'The Company of Wolves', without the cloak, she is still *femme animale* and therefore disruptive of the symbolic order. Mattel's scripting resonates with Creed's theorisation of the monstrous-feminine, a figure whose body, marked as animal and other, both denigrates and disrupts the patriarchal order (2024: 189). But if Cerise Wolf makes monstrosity materially irreducible, her plastic body also raises further questions about what other cultural scripts are being embedded and transmitted. As Bernstein reminds us, dolls are never neutral but carry cultural scripts in their very materiality and the same materiality that enables resistant play can also carry forward older, more troubling residues. Just as clothing inscribes cultural meaning, so too

¹⁷⁷ Dani Cavallaro and Alexandra Warwick, *Fashioning the Frame: Boundaries, Dress, and Body, Dress, Body, Culture* (Oxford ; New York: Berg, 1998), p. 75.

does the colour and texture of plastic, drawing Cerise into a longer history in which monstrosity and race have been intertwined in children's culture.

A further parallel can be drawn, cautiously, to Bernstein's reading of the nineteenth-century topsy-turvy doll. (I say 'cautiously' as I am drawing a link between two material objects in which the two contexts could not be more different: the topsy-turvy doll was hand-stitched within the conditions of enslavement and smuggled resistant critique into white households, while the Cerise doll is a mass-produced product of capitalist consumer culture.) The 'profoundly doubled' form of the topsy-turvy doll fused two figures into one, 'a black torso and a white one fuse at the waist, where a shared skirt fences the races. To play with the black half-doll, one flips the skirt over the head of the white half-doll, and vice versa' (2011: 81). Bernstein explains that the doll was often sewn by enslaved African American women, who embedded within its materiality a 'polyvalent representation of their experiences of sexual violation' (2011: 81). Bernstein cites Karen Sánchez-Eppler as influentially reading the doll as both 'prudish' and 'obscene', prudish in that the skirt concealed any genital markers, obscene in that the fusion of black and white bodies 'nervously refers to racial mixing within antebellum plantations and to systematic rape of enslaved African American women by white slaveholding men (2011: 81). However, as Bernstein notes, the script of the topsy-turvy doll depended on the two figures literally sharing a skirt, a material fusion that made it impossible to deny their connection acting as a claim to common womanhood: 'The single shared skirt gendered the poles of the dolls equally; it asserted, long before the declaration attributed to Sojourner Truth, that if white women are women, then black women are also women' (2011: 89). The design also meant

that neither the black nor white figure could ever remain permanently 'on top', flipping between the halves became part of play, a gesture that unsettled hierarchies.

Bernstein argues that when an enslaved African American woman sewed such a doll for a slaveholding white child, the result was 'not only intellectually brilliant but also angry and bitterly witty' (2011: 89). The doll itself became a sign of systematic rapes committed by white men, sometimes quite literally the child's own relatives, tucked beneath the child's blanket as 'a sign of the child's enslaved half-sibling, either literal or symbolic' (2011: 89). This act staged a trenchant political critique through humour, as the white child cuddled and adored a thing that was simultaneously 'explicitly prudish (in the lack of a crotch) and implicitly obscene (in the reference to rape, illicit sex, and resultant birthing)' (2011: 89). Here, softness itself mattered. The doll's texture 'instructed the child to carry the thing into the spaces in which cuddling occurred: the home, the bed' (2011: 90). In this way, the topsy-turvy doll functioned as a 'Trojan horse', smuggling enslaved women's anger, critique, and experience of violence into the intimate sphere of white households. Bernstein links this to other resistant practices of enslaved women, such as spitting into food, acts of abject intrusion that became effective only when the oppressor unknowingly incorporated them, by eating the food or cuddling the doll (2011: 89). In Kristeva's and Creed's terms, this is abjection as disturbance: a pollution of the symbolic order that unsettles identity and law.

Later versions of the topsy-turvy doll, however, complicate this scripting. As Bernstein notes:

Contemporary topsy-turvy dolls contrast a pale-faced Little Red Riding Hood at one pole with a brown Wolf in Grandma's Clothing at the other; thus they retain the sexual subtext while cloaking—but not expunging—the racial meanings that enslaved women sewed into these dolls a century and a half earlier (2011: 242).

The shared skirt no longer asserts a claim to common womanhood; instead, girlhood and wolfhood are staged as binary opposites. Where the nineteenth-century doll unsettled hierarchies by materially fusing black and white women into a single body, the contemporary version stages opposition, casts the darker figure as the wolf and the white figure as girl. As I explored in the previous chapter, Red Riding Hood has frequently been read as a rape parable, with the wolf emblematising predation and Red as its intended victim. The fact that the black girl figure of the nineteenth-century doll has been replaced by a brown wolf, while the white girl remains intact, powerfully demonstrates Bernstein's insight about cultural residues. As she argues, 'the culture of childhood so often retains and repurposes that which has elsewhere become abject or abandoned' (2011: 7). Cultural residues persist in children's toys and play long after they have disappeared from adult culture, 'fragmentary images or gestures often linger, altered yet recognizable, in the culture of childhood after they have receded or even disappeared from adult culture' (2011: 7).

The contemporary topsy-turvy doll is precisely such a residue. In reworking the rape-parable subtext, it unconsciously perpetuates racist scripts, the stereotype of black men as sexual predators of white women, with whiteness preserved as innocence and blackness cast as threat and aligned with the animal, undoing the message of shared womanhood scripted in

the original doll. In other words, the racial and sexual scripts of the topsy-turvy doll have not disappeared but persist in this contemporary doll for children. The doll has now also taken on a new script, that of the story of 'Red Riding Hood'. In this way, the doll scripts the moralising message of the fairy tale itself, that girls should remain obedient, passive and 'good' in order to avoid danger. What makes this particularly striking is that, like the original topsy-turvy doll, the contemporary version is meant to be cuddled. In this sense it is almost 'obscene', to borrow Sánchez-Eppler's term, that little girls are invited to embrace an object that quietly trains them in fairy tale obedience and the fear of transgression.

It is against this layered background of the rape parable, the claim to shared womanhood, and its contemporary inversion, that Cerise Hood's representation becomes most complex. Cerise is described as having 'tan skin' inherited from her wolf father, which inevitably recalls a history in which blackness is associated with monstrosity. At the same time, werewolf figures in Mattel's wider franchises, such as Clawdeen Wolf in *Monster High*, whose brown skin is frequently read as African American, demonstrate how hybridity is often coded through mixed-race aesthetics.¹⁷⁸ What distinguishes Cerise is the explicit 'Red Riding Hood' reference of her cape, which carries the baggage of the rape-parable tradition. However, here that story is rewritten: her parents' union is not one of predation but of love, making Cerise herself a subversion of the rape parable even as she inherits its troubling cultural residues. Where the nineteenth-century topsy-turvy doll materially fused black and

¹⁷⁸ Hannah Priest, 'Introduction: a history of female werewolves' in *She-Wolf: A Cultural History of Female Werewolves*, ed. by Priest, Hannah, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), pp. 1-23, (p. 23).

white bodies and the contemporary version opposed Red Riding Hood and the brown wolf, Cerise embodies both positions simultaneously.

Within this framework, Cerise's tan skin should be understood less as a resolved statement by Mattel than as part of an enduring cultural script in which racialised difference, monstrosity, and abjection remain tightly entwined. Here Bernstein's observation that scripts can be either reinforced or resisted is especially useful. As my earlier example of Barbie play demonstrates, the play with Barbie became abject because it resisted that scripted by the doll, but if the doll already embodies the abject, what story is then being told? Does the monstrous-feminine lose her power of resistance if she is knowingly consumed? Or does the 'smuggling' of the monstrous-feminine Cerise into the glossy hyper-feminised world of commercial fairy tales act as an invitation to players to incorporate hybridity and abjection into their own performances of femininity? Rather than answering, I want to suggest that this 'fairy-fail' of a clear ideological message opens up space for other readings and instead embraces Halberstam's 'queer art of failure' to explore new ways of being: the doll's inability to deliver a coherent script becomes productive in itself.

This is precisely why dolls matter, to study dolls like Cerise is to study the cultural afterlife of stories, ideologies and abjections that live on through play. If 'Red Riding Hood' has long functioned as a rape parable, and if the topsy-turvy doll smuggled messages of racial equality simultaneously with racial violence beneath its skirts, then Cerise's tan-skinned hybridity can be read as part of this inheritance, a 'fragmentary' but powerful retelling of cultural scripts about gender, monstrosity and possibly race. Reading racial ideologies into

the colour of Cerise's plastic skin does not provide resolution, but it does reveal the persistence of scripts embedded in children's culture, scripts that dolls both preserve and transmit. In this sense, Cerise's plastic form cannot simply be read as a failure of Mattel to reckon with racialised tropes, but part of what makes the doll a contradictory 'scriptive thing'. Ferreday reminds us that if we stop reading only for ideology, we can instead ask, 'what else might we find?' The Cerise dolls prompt precisely this question: they show how feminist revolt can be packaged alongside racialised scripts, how monstrosity can be scripted as both danger and possibility. To read them seriously is to uncover not just a corporate fantasy of girlhood, but the hidden inheritances of violence, race and resistance that persist within its plastic. For this reason, the study of dolls is not trivial but essential, they are objects in which the contradictions of culture are staged, materialised and sometimes made available for disruption.

Conclusion: Fairy Tale Inheritance

In conclusion, this chapter has argued that Ever After High stages fairy tale inheritance as a site of both patriarchal control and feminist disruption, making visible the contradictions of destiny, monstrosity and girlhood. By bringing Creed's theory of the monstrous-feminine into dialogue with Bernstein's notion of dolls as 'scriptive things', I have shown how the franchise encodes resistance not only in its narratives but also in its plastic and costume design. Cerise Hood crystallises these dynamics: as the hybrid daughter of Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf, she embodies the ambivalence of monstrosity: at once a feminist figure of revolt and a continuation of racialised scripts that link darkness with animality. She

is also the monstrous mother's most literal heir: the daughter whose very existence reclaims the fairy tale's most feared union, between Red Riding Hood and the wolf, as an act of love rather than predation. Mattel's scripting of Cerise is therefore contradictory: she is sold as a heroine of empowerment while carrying traces of the troubling cultural scripts embedded in the fairy tale tradition. Yet it is precisely this ambivalence that makes her significant. Dolls like Cerise do not simply reproduce ideology but invite us to see how revolt and inheritance are scripted together, how monstrosity can be packaged as both danger and possibility.

Drawing on Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*, this chapter has also approached dolls and children's animation as rich sites of cultural meaning, rather than frivolous or commercially empty texts. Halberstam reminds us that failure, contradiction, and the seemingly trivial can act as productive disruptions to dominant structures of knowledge. Ferreday extends this framework by reminding us that femininity itself is too often cast as failure, whether in fashion, selfies or dolls, and dismissed as trivial or complicit. In turning to dolls, a medium often dismissed as trivial or purely commercial, I have argued for the importance of material culture in feminist analysis. Ever After High reveals how even mass-produced toys participate in the storytelling of feminism and queerness, not only echoing the feminist reimaginings of Carter, but also embedding their own resistant scripts in plastic, costume and play. To take such objects seriously is to acknowledge that the contradictions of culture are staged not only in high art or cinema but also in the glittering, hybrid forms of children's media. In Ever After High, 'The End is Just the Beginning': even the most commercial of dolls can script futures beyond the stories they inherit.

Conclusion: 'The End' is Just the Beginning

'... always be empowering girls. Always!' - Mattel CEO

(Will Ferrell), Barbie (2022)

Once upon a time, in a land far, far away, a fair maiden lived a perfect life with many friends. One morning, she awoke with a start, rubbed her eyes and noticed – alas! – her terrible morning breath. Later, at the beach, she removed her shoes to run to the sea and fell. 'My feet!' she exclaimed, 'My heels are on the ground!'. Her once-arched feet, which had fitted so perfectly into delicate, impossible shoes, were now shockingly flat. In distress, the maiden ventured to the outskirts of the land to seek the help of the wise Weird woman. She had once been the fairest of them all, until 'somebody played too hard with her in the real world'. The Weird woman told the maiden that she must travel to the far away realm of 'The Real World' to seek the girl to whom she had become 'inextricably linked'. On her journey, the fair maiden faced many foes, all servants of the dark lord, The Patriarchy. At last, she discovered the girl to whom she was inextricably linked, Gloria and Gloria's wise daughter, Sasha. But lo, in the maiden's absence, The Patriarchy attacked the fair land, casting a cruel spell over all her friends. The maiden despaired, until Gloria lifted her spirits with a rousing speech, calling them to unite. Thus did the maiden, Gloria, Sasha, and the Weird woman raise a brave army of women (and Allan), defeating The Patriarchy and breaking the spell. And so it was that by embracing the monstrous-feminine, honouring their matriarchal inheritance and harnessing collective feminist agency, they began the work of living happily ever after.

This fairy tale is, of course, the plot of Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* (2022). The film demonstrates the political force of feminist collectivity and the embrace of monstrosity when narrative, costume, performance, and authorship align toward a shared end. Its details resonate strikingly with the concerns of this thesis: Weird Barbie, living on the edge of Barbieland, recalls the outsider witch figure in *Red Riding Hood*. Gloria's 'weird, dark and crazy' drawings of 'irrepressible thoughts of death Barbie' become the point of connection with her daughter, echoing Aurora's embrace of the monstrous mother in *Maleficent*. The collective take-down of the Kendom drives home the political force of female solidarity. Barbie's body itself also becomes a site of feminist revolt: her flat feet refuse the dainty shoes much like the ugly sisters' and Cinderella's glass slipper, a failure of containment that recalls Ravenna's straining wedding bodice and Maleficent's dismembered wings, fluttering in a glass case. This, ultimately, is the argument of my thesis: that feminist storytelling emerges most forcefully when monstrosity is embraced as a shared inheritance, when the mother is restored to the tale, and when agency is forged collectively through costume, performance, and voice.

Throughout this thesis, I have used Barbara Creed's account of rape-revolt narratives in Feminist New Wave cinema as a measure of how far a text succeeds in mobilising the monstrous-feminine against patriarchy. Barbie's journey into the 'Real World' crystallises this trajectory. In the Real World she is subjected to the male gaze for the first time, which she immediately recognises as threatening, observing that it carries 'an undertone of violence'. In that moment she identifies the cause of her objectification as her sexual difference and denies it, announcing to the men that she 'does not have a vagina'. Gerwig underscores male complicity here: Ken, desperate to affiliate himself with patriarchal

authority, denies any ‘undertone of violence’ and asserts to the men that he does ‘have a penis’, though, of course, he does not. Yet despite this lack, he is still granted access to what he calls ‘The Patriarchy’, which he proceeds to import into Barbieland, transforming it into the Kendom.

In staging these dynamics, Gerwig translates into comic register what Creed described in her theorisation of Feminist New Wave films:

Determined to discover their own identity and desires, [the protagonist] embark[s] on a journey into the dark night of abjection, where they engage with the underlying horrors of the patriarchal order. Their journey is feminist in that they have the courage to revolt and enter into that dark place in order to see for themselves the corruption at the heart of the symbolic order.¹⁷⁹

Barbie’s trajectory aligns closely with this structure: her recognition of the violence embedded in the male gaze, her confrontation with the patriarchal order, and finally her return to Barbieland to lead a collective revolt against the symbolic order imposed by Ken. What distinguishes Gerwig’s reworking is its reflexivity and humour, which lay bare the absurdities of patriarchal power while insisting on the seriousness of its effects.

In *Snow White and the Huntsman*, I argued that feminist potential surfaces not in the male-authored screenplay but in the work of creative contributors often treated as peripheral in critical hierarchies: Colleen Atwood’s costumes, which stage Ravenna’s body as a site of animality and revolt, and Charlize Theron’s performance, which carries her own star text of

¹⁷⁹ Barbara Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine: Feminist New Wave Cinema* (Routledge, 2022) p. 2.

feminist activism. Yet the film itself falters, unable to translate these eruptions into coherent agency and collapsing into tropes of physical action as empowerment. *Maleficent*, by contrast, reveals what became possible when women's authorship shaped the text more directly. Linda Woolverton's screenplay and Angelina Jolie's performance together craft a story that confronts sexual violence and refigures the monstrous mother as a figure of survival. Aurora's claim of Maleficent as her mother and her narration of the story itself enacts a reclamation of both maternal voice and storytelling authority.

My third chapter extended this argument into literary fiction, turning to Helen Oyeyemi's *White Is for Witching*, *Mr Fox*, and *Boy, Snow, Bird*. Her novels fracture progress narratives, unsettle villain/victim binaries, and give space to voices often deemed 'difficult' within feminist storytelling. Oyeyemi is positioned by critics in a lineage of feminist writers including Angela Carter, while also troubling the smoothness of that inheritance. She returns the mother to the text, but often in ambivalent, even troubling forms, reminding us that feminist inheritance cannot always be comfortable, but refusing to silence those difficult voices. As an author positioned in Carter's lineage, Oyeyemi anticipates the auteur direction of Catherine Hardwicke in chapter four, whose *Red Riding Hood* reclaims feminist agency through creative authority within a cinematic frame. Hardwicke embeds feminist agency in adolescent sensory experience. By redistributing the wolf's powers of seeing, hearing, touching, and consuming to Valerie, Hardwicke refuses the separation of mind and body and instead foregrounds the girl's embodied experience as a source of revolt.

Finally, in chapter five, I considered Ever After High, a Mattel doll franchise representative of a form of media often dismissed as frivolous or damaging, yet one that reveals unexpected

feminist and queer possibilities. Drawing on Jack Halberstam's *Queer Art of Failure* and Robin Bernstein's concept of dolls as 'scriptive things', I argued that these hyper-feminised figures stage contradictions of destiny and rebellion. Their costumes, poses, and designs script forms of abject play that disrupt patriarchal order. Dolls become sites of both conflict and connection between mothers and daughters, dramatizing how feminist inheritance can be contested, resisted, or reimagined through material culture. Ever After High not only expands the scope of feminist fairy-tale revisionism into the realm of children's toys but also anticipates the cultural work taken up a decade later in Gerwig's *Barbie*, another Mattel property that insists on taking doll culture seriously as a site of feminist storytelling.

Taken together, these chapters reveal several shared themes. As I outlined in my introduction, fairy tales have long erased the mother or cast her as monstrous and these retellings attempt to reclaim her with varying degrees of success. Across them, the monstrous-feminine emerges as a figure of revolt, unsettling the symbolic order and staging feminist disruption. At times, agency falters when characters remain disconnected from others, such as Snow White killing Ravenna without acknowledging their shared heritage. At other times, that shared heritage proves troubling and refuses closure or coherent feminist readings, as when Miranda is absorbed into the racist maternal structure of 29 Barton Road, or the ending of *Boy, Snow, Bird* where all the women pile into a car on a journey to reclaim their maternal inheritance. But where collectivity emerges, so too does political force: Aurora and Valerie both refuse the erasure of their maternal line, as do the students of Ever After High, whether Royal or Rebel, who embody that inheritance in their very material form.

This thesis therefore contributes to feminist cultural studies in several ways. It extends Marina Warner's account of reclaiming the storyteller and Barbara Creed's theory of the monstrous-feminine across new media, demonstrating their relevance not only for cinema but for literature and dolls. It reframes monstrosity as a form of feminist inheritance, a shared condition that enables collective revolt and restores the monstrous mother as a site of possibility and resistance. It highlights the importance of creative contributors often marginalised in critical hierarchies, but central to meaning-making, expanding attention beyond directors and scripts to include the textures of fabric, the bodies of dolls, the gestures of performance and the participation of fans. It also insists on the generative power of incoherence, or 'failure', suggesting that contradictions and fractures are themselves feminist strategies. Feminist storytelling then, arises not only through narrative and direction, but through costume design, star performance, material culture, and play.

The closing scene of *Barbie* offers a fitting emblem of these arguments. Gloria and Sasha drop Barbie off for an appointment she is very excited about. She steps out of the car in her bright pink Birkenstocks, embracing her flat feet on her own terms. The scene is staged as though Barbie is about to embark on another high-powered job or glamorous adventure, as Gloria and Sasha cheer her on from the car. Instead, she approaches the receptionist and proudly announces she is there for her gynaecology appointment. This moment is quietly radical. It insists that female agency is not only about battlefields or boardrooms but also about claiming the body as a resistance. The force of this scene lies as much in its details, the pink shoes calling back to the scene with Weird Barbie, the performance, the cheering of the mother and daughter, as in its narrative set-up, reminding us that meaning arises collectively, through textures and gestures as much as through authorial design. Read in the

context of the United States' long history of using women's reproductive health as a political battleground, Barbie's visit to the gynaecologist reminds us that the work of feminist storytelling does not end with happily ever after.¹⁸⁰ Like the figures of the monstrous-feminine who haunt these retellings, it insists that the body, inheritance, and collective revolt remain ongoing sites of struggle. 'The End', as these texts repeatedly demonstrate, is always just the beginning.

¹⁸⁰ In June 2022, the United States Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* (1973), the landmark ruling that had legalised abortion nationwide. The decision marked a profound regression in reproductive rights and underscored how the female body continues to serve as a contested site of political power. Released the same year, *Barbie* resonates against this backdrop, its final scene pointedly reasserting the significance of bodily autonomy.

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