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Some "Grimm" Reflections on Mothers and Daughters
A Fairy Tale for Our Times

In this paper we utilize both the fairy tale genre and sociological auto/biography. Drawing on our own experiences and those of participants from our research we argue that traditional definitions of what makes a "real" and a "good" mother and a "real" and a "good" daughter persist beyond the fairytales of our childhood, despite (and sometimes because of) the challenging discourse of feminism. We suggest that increasingly diverse maternal and reproductive experiences of mothers and their daughters today subvert both traditional and contemporary representations and prescriptions of mothers and daughters.

For Dorothy and Alice

In this article we draw on traditional and challenging discourses and reflect on some maternal and reproductive identities and experiences of mothers and daughters. According to Michel Foucault (1980, 1984), discourses are historically variable ways of specifying knowledge and truth; through discourses we are encouraged to see what is and what is not "the truth." As such, discourses "are not merely linguistic phenomena, but are always shot through with power and are institutionalized as practices" (Ransom, 1993: 134). Powerful medical, political, academic, and lay discourses surround motherhood and, by implication, the reproductive responsibilities of daughters; they specify the relation between women and mothering, sanction who should and should not mother, and inform us of when, how, and why we should mother. A significant vehicle for the distribution of discourses, including the social norms and values of motherhood and daughterhood, is the literary genre of the fairy tale:

Almost all critics who have studied the emergence of the literary fairy

tale in Europe agree that educated writers purposely appropriated the oral folk tale and converted it into a type of literary discourse about mores, values, and manners so that children would become civilized according to the social code of that time. The writers of fairly tales for children *acted* ideologically by presenting their notions regarding social conditions and conflicts, and they *interacted* with each other and with past writers and storytellers of folklore in a public sphere. (Zipes, 1983: 3)

We are not the first to challenge the normative script for women within fairy tales. Take, for example, these extracts from *Rapunzel's Revenge: Fairytales for Feminists*:

> "Have you noticed," said the Sleeping Beauty suddenly, "that in many of our stories, our enemies are other women?"
>   "That's because men wrote the stories," said Cinderella. "It makes them feel good to have women fighting among themselves for male attention."
>   "Well then," said the Sleeping Beauty, "we'll just have to re-write the stories ourselves. I'd just love to rescue some good-looking fellow who's been imprisoned in a castle or tower by a wicked uncle or step-father."
>   "That's a ridiculous plot," said Goldilocks contemptuously.
>   "I know," said the Sleeping Beauty, "but it's actually the plot of our stories in reverse." (Kavannagh, 1985: 7-8)

> The prince kept the glass slipper in his briefcase along with his vodka and white lemonade. Occasionally he would take it out and stroke the glass and wish he was the kind of man Cinderella would marry.
>   He was sitting playing with the shoe one day when Cinderella came in.
>   "I really think you should see someone about this foot fetish you have," she said kindly. "I'm sure it's something they could cure…."
> Cinderella gently took the shoe away from the prince, she held it up to the light.
>   "Listen here, Prince, why don't you help us, the group that are trying to get shoes like this banned, crippling young girls' feet, and lethal too." (Binchy, 1985: 64)

See also the cartoon by Jacky Fleming on the opposite page.

Other feminist academics, too, have used this approach. Liz Stanley and Sue Wise (2000), in a critical discussion of the relationship between and among feminist theory, social theory and feminism, compare the relationships within the academic feminist community to those of the participants in "The

Emperor's New Clothes." (See also Marchbank and Letherby, 2000, for a different reading of the tale.)

As suggested in the examples above, in traditional fairy tales heroines are always stereotypically beautiful and always fulfil their expected feminine script by being dutiful daughters. Although their tales usually end before marriage and parenthood begins, we are left in no doubt that they become good mothers. The villains of the piece are often women, too: bad women in every way, with their "otherness" frequently compounded by the unnaturalness of their relationship to our heroines, such as a step-parenting relationship. The beginning of "Cinderella" highlights some of the ways in which women are defined as "good" or "bad" within the fairy tale:

> The wife of a rich man fell sick, and as she felt that her end was drawing near, she called her only daughter to her bedside and said, "Dear child, be good and pious, and then the good God will always protect thee, and I will look down on thee from heaven and be near thee." Thereupon she closed her eyes and departed. Every day the maiden went out to her mother's grave, and wept, and she remained pious and good. When winter came the snow spread a white sheet over the grave, and when the spring sun had drawn it off again, the man had taken another wife.
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>   The woman had brought two daughters into the house with her, who were beautiful and fair of face, but vile and black of heart. Now began a bad time for the poor step-child.… There she had to do hard work from morning till night, get up before daybreak, carry water, light fires, cook and wash. Besides this, the sisters did her every imaginable injury—they mocked her and emptied her peas and lentils into the ashes, so that she was forced to sit and pick them out again. In the evening when she had worked till she was weary she had no bed to go to, but had to sleep by the fireside in the ashes. And as on that account she always looked dusty and dirty, they called her Cinderella.… (The Brothers Grimm, 1884, np.)

In challenging the traditional and (some) contemporary expectations of women in relation to mother and daughter identities, we utilize and subvert the traditional fairy tale which explains the use of "Grimm" in our title. It is not only Grimms' tales and style that we draw on, but "Some 'Perrault/Anderson/Grimm' Reflections on Mothers and Daughters" does not have quite the same ring to it, or even make sense. Charles Perrault, writing and publishing in the 1600s wrote, amongst other tales, Sleeping Beauty, Little Red Riding Hood, Mother Goose and an early version of Cinderella. Both the Grimm brothers (who in the 1800s published hundreds of stories based on tales that they said had been handed down for generations) and Hans Christian Anderson (who likewise published numerous stories in the nineteenth cen-

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tury) removed the sexual references from the original stories and introduced moral warnings in order to make them "suitable" for children. The Grimms' stories include *Rapunzel*, *Hansel and Gretel*, *Cinderella* and *Little Snow White*. Anderson's include *The Emperor's New Clothes*, *The Princess and the Pea*, *The Snow Queen*, *The Little Mermaid*, *The Ugly Duckling* and *The Red Shoes*. Since their publication these stories have been translated around the world, read to countless generations of children and, more recently, made and re-made into films (there has, however, also been some subversion here: see the *Shrek* trilogy for an example).

Thus, in our challenge to the normative reproductive script for mothers and daughters, we use a fairy tale approach to highlight even further how traditional expectations persist and are supported within the societies in which we live, although we could, of course, just as easily have draw on other cultural and media formats. In addition, our story draws on our own autobiographies as well as the biographies of our research respondents, demonstrating how, like all researchers, our lives have influenced our research and our research has influenced our lives (see Kirkman, 1999a, 2001b; Letherby, 2003). The "neutral" scholar is a fiction (Charmaz and Mitchell, 1997; Bauman, 2000), a cunning plot device to shore up academic authority. None of us is outside society; we are all part of it (e.g. Mills, 1959; Ribbens, 1993).

Thus, our fairy tale reveals that traditional definitions of what makes a "real" and a "good" mother and a "real" and a "good" daughter persist beyond the fairy tales of our childhood, despite (and sometimes because of) the challenging discourses of feminism. The personal is, indeed, political; it is also

theoretical: one person's experience can help us to understand the experience of others (Letherby, 2003).

We now begin our tale, Dear Reader, with confidence that you will recognise the irony in the telling.

Are you sitting comfortably?

[Why are you sitting comfortably? Should you really be reading a story at this time of day?

Never mind; we'll begin anyway.]

Once upon a time, not so long ago, there lived two women on opposite sides of the world. They were both wicked. Neither was a mother although both had hoped to be so.

One of the women in our story, Gayle, trained as a nursery nurse, at least partly in preparation for the care of all the children she intended to have. But she found it very difficult to become pregnant when she and her husband felt that the time was right. Of course, if her mother-in-law had had her way, Gayle and her husband would have thrown away the evil contraceptive pills on the day on which they were wed. They might as well have been poisoned apples. When she finally did become pregnant, there was great rejoicing by her family and friends. The joy was followed by great sorrow when Gayle lost their baby at 16 weeks gestation. Lots of people tried to comfort her with platitudes such as, "Never mind; it will all be better next time" and "Of course it was all for the best," but the next time never came and benefits were hard to identity.

A period of loss and distress followed, and it was Gayle's mother, Dorothy, who helped Gayle through the darkness. Dorothy was in all ways Gayle's Fairy Godmother as well as her biological mother. It was more important to Dorothy that Gayle was happy rather than that her daughter made her a grandmother. The doctor, though, was not so kind. He told Gayle and her husband that they could consider *in vitro* fertilisation "if all else failed," but recommended that they not go "that far," letting "Nature take its course."

When, after many, many months, Gayle emerged from the dark tunnel of distress, she had decided not to pursue further medical investigations. Some people would not accept this as a decision reached by Gayle for self-preservation and told her that, if she would not attempt everything she was offered as the heroine in the fairy tale would, then it was her own fault she was not a mother.

The other anti-heroine of our tale is Maggie, who trained as a kindergarten teacher, working with children just as Gayle had done. Maggie, too, was unable to become pregnant. When she thought she had succeeded at 25, she and her husband were very proud, but it lasted only through one missed period. She tried pills and potions to stimulate her ovaries to produce more eggs; she attempted to bewitch her husband to make love to her more often when she was fertile; but there was no magic transformation. Her eggs were, it seemed, irreparably cracked.

Maggie continued teaching for a few years, coming to specialise in hearing-impaired and intellectually disabled children. But it was too hard working with other people's children when she had none of her own. She went to university to retrain as a psychologist. Maggie was lucky that she made this decision in the few years of free university education in Australia. Her Fairy Godmother was Gough Whitlam, the prime minister who brought about a brief period of radical reform.

At 30, when she had begun her second year of study, Maggie's problems were solved by a hysterectomy, the result of many enormous fibroid tumours. After the operation, an excited junior doctor told her that one was the size of an orange, another as big as the base of her water jug. He almost did a little dance when he said, "That was really pathological!" Maggie's mother-in-law said that she knew how Maggie felt because she had "just had the dogs done." A hospital social worker confidently told Maggie that she was "mourning her uterus" and did not listen when Maggie tried to say that, on the contrary, she was mourning all her lost children.

Once she came out of hospital, Maggie's friends—all of whom seemed to be prodigiously fecund—were convinced that she wanted to spend lots of time holding their babies. When, through sheer effort of will, Maggie became a non-mother rather than an infertile woman, she was avoided by her friends with little children. Even her loving younger sister, Cynthia, whose three sons Maggie treasured, laughingly told her that she used Maggie's new persona and tidy house to threaten the children: "If you don't do as you're told I'll send you to live with Maggie!" She had become the wicked, selfish, Childless Woman.

The ways in which some people defined Maggie and Gayle—and the ways in which they thought about themselves—were, of course, affected by dominant discourses of womanhood, motherhood, (reproductive) daughterhood, and childlessness (Foucault, 1980, 1984; Letherby, 2003). Power is constituted in discourses and it is in discourses that power lies. As Gayle has since argued:

> In Western Society, all women live their lives against a background of personal and cultural assumptions that all women are or want to be mothers and that for women motherhood is proof of adulthood and a natural consequence of marriage or a permanent relationship with a man. (Letherby, 1994: 525)

Infertility discourses, therefore, stress that women who are unable to have babies are indeed bewitched—desperate victims, full of anguish and suffering (Franklin, 1990: 200)—their reproductive capacities broken and cracked, their lives and psyches under the same evil spell.

Maggie's way of fighting this spell was to immerse herself in her studies. Even though she had missed almost a full semester, she completed the year top of her class. Her lecturers asked her if she was possessed. Maggie's husband

was ambivalent about her academic success and said that standards must have dropped since his day. By the time she graduated, their marriage was over. She began a part-time Ph.D., looking at families of disabled children, while lecturing at her old teachers' college and tutoring in the Psychology Department of her university.

Meanwhile, Gayle decided that it was difficult for her to work with children, at least for a time. This was probably for the best, because everyone "knows" that women who do not have children know nothing at all about them or how to care for them. But Gayle was perplexed about what to do, now that she was unable to prove herself as a woman. Eventually she went to night classes to perfect the typing skills she had developed in school, consciously or unconsciously (perhaps as a result of a Wise Man's curse) pursuing another stereotypical female occupation. At the same time, Gayle decided to study something else of interest, and enrolled in A-level Sociology, which she loved and which led, a few years later, to what some would perceive as her ultimate downfall.

After a couple of years Gayle began an undergraduate degree in Sociology and, although her studies had helped her to understand and to challenge the traditional narratives of womanhood, she still hoped that one day she would become a mother. No baby came, but Gayle enjoyed her undergraduate studies so much that she decided to keep studying. Luckily she won a scholarship and was able to undertake a Ph.D. focusing on the experience of infertility and involuntary childlessness, which her own autobiography had shown her was misunderstood.

Ancient tales augured the dangers courted by Gayle and Maggie in returning to study. As many men have argued—from the beginning of time until relatively recently, in scholarly journals as well as down the pub—too much learning is bad for women and their reproductive capabilities (e.g. Ford et al., 1953; Spencer, 1893; Sturgis, 1957). It will wither their ovaries and dry up their milk. It can also wreck their marriages, as Gayle, like Maggie, soon discovered. Her husband, although initially supportive, became unhappy about Gayle's return to learning and four months before her finals Gayle moved out of the marital home and went to stay with her mother. For six months Gayle and Dorothy slept in a single bed. Gayle has since found out that her mother (who, you remember, is also her Fairy Godmother) slept for all of that time with one foot on the floor.

When researching for her Ph.D., Gayle met the Other Man: a father who lived with and cared for his two teenage boys. So, when Gayle and John decided to live together, Gayle began an intimate relationship with John's children. She mothered them but was not their mother. Just like Cinderella and Snow White, Gayle washed and cooked for the men in her life, although she was very, very lucky because her new partner did all the ironing "for her."

Unlike Cinderella and Snow White, however, Gayle is not the heroine in her story because she is that frustrated, ugly, cruel, and wicked person, the

Step-Mother: the giver of the cold, cold kiss and the person you must never, ever take an apple from.

It is hard to imagine, but in fairy tale land Maggie is possibly even more wicked. She, too, moved out of her marital home (which happened to be a vicarage) and it did not go down too well with the parish that she left the vicar on Christmas Eve. Maggie found a Handsome Prince five years after her marriage ended and was thrilled to discover that he was sterile, so there was no danger of her barrenness blighting his life. However, she soon learnt that the Handsome Prince had a lively imagination and had dreamed up a story about how a woman with no uterus and a man with no sperm could have a baby, using Maggie's eggs, donor sperm, and another woman's uterus.

At first this tale was a nightmare and Maggie feared that she would lose the security of her childfree non-motherhood. Eventually, she mentioned the Prince's dream to her youngest sister, Linda, a mother of two children, who said she would love to have a baby for her, although not with her own eggs. Cynthia offered eggs if she needed them, but could not gestate and relinquish a baby. As it happened, Linda conceived at the first attempt, using Maggie's egg. Linda and Maggie thought they were being strong, feminist women in overcoming the limitations of nature and were proud of their achievement (see Kirkman and Kirkman, 1988, 2001; Kirkman and Kirkman 2002). When their story became known, they were astonished to discover that they were anathema not only to the Church but to other women, who said that Maggie was cruel to her sister and treated her baby as a commodity (Attwood, 1988; Dixon, 1988; West, 1988). Maggie threatened the future of her sister, the sisterhood, motherhood, and her daughter Alice. She was a Wicked Woman. Nevertheless, the sisters lived happily ever after, despite being cast in a story of gloom and despair. Alice is now 20 and has survived the maternal cruelty, burdened only by the intrinsic inadequacies of parents.

Maggie's first Ph.D. was derailed by her complicated path to motherhood, but she began another when her daughter started school. Maggie, like Gayle, had learnt how different her experience of infertility was from accounts offered in her undergraduate studies, and also researched women's experiences of infertility for her Ph.D. in psychology (e.g. Kirkman, 1999b, 2001a, 2002, 2003b).

Maggie does not regret the way her life has unfolded. Without these (at times painful) vicissitudes she would not be the person she is and would certainly not be mother to the daughter she has. But she is aware that, in a public version of her story, she remains the Ugly Sister who took Cinderella's baby. Maggie is comfortable researching infertility because it is many years since she has been an infertile woman. She researches donor-assisted conception without feeling any personal ramifications, even though her husband needed to use a sperm donor. These plots are part of Once Upon a Time, in which "insider" knowledge has attained the perspective of "outsider" reflection (see Woollett, 1996). Maggie does not, however, research surrogate motherhood.

This feels too much like the story she is still living. (There is a precedent for seeing surrogate motherhood as a nasty fairy tale: Annas, 1988.)

Gayle, too, feels blessed that she has been able to devote such a lot of time and attention to an issue that is so important to her life. But it has not always been easy. Respondents in her doctoral study were often really interested in Gayle's story, one of the consequences of undertaking research as an "insider." All in all, Gayle undertook 99 interviews and received 100-plus letters during her research. Two-thirds in to the 18-month data-collection period, Gayle began to wonder if she was bewitched, for when asked about her feelings and views she could no longer distinguish her own experience from those of the women and men in her study. Gayle became even more anxious and confused when the people she was speaking and writing to assumed that she would always make the same decisions as they had and hold the same opinions that they did. For example, although she believes that it is "a woman's right to choose," some of Gayle's respondents had been led by their experiences to deny abortion as an appropriate choice for women. Maintaining her own values whilst not upsetting the women who were so freely telling their own stories to Gayle made her feel more wicked then ever.

So, Gentle Reader, both Gayle and Maggie were able to indulge themselves within the "ivory towers" of academe rather than live, as most people do, in the "real world," and this helped them to cope with their stigma. They did become mothers of a sort, but did not fulfil their role as reproductive daughters in the traditional way, in the way of good women in fairy tales. Many people—some close to them, others they hardly knew—challenged their choices and told different stories about their experiences. Many did not cast them as mothers at all: not real ones.

Some women in Gayle's research also became social mothers as stepparents, foster mothers, or adoptive mothers. Many of them talked about not being full members of the "motherhood club": unable to tell the tales of labour, and found wanting when judged against "real" mothers. They felt excluded and ignored. After all, as improper women, it was not worth asking their opinion. And if these women did find other things to enrich their lives and begin to feel positive about their childlessness, they risked being thought unnatural for giving up the quest to fulfil themselves as all women are expected to do (for example, Letherby, 1999, 2002, 2003).

Similarly, Maggie discovered in her research that some women who had become mothers using eggs donated by other women thought of themselves as not "real" mothers, but just playing a part not rightly theirs (Kirkman, 2008), which is not surprising given that we are told tales from infancy in which the only real (and for "real" read "good') mother is the mother with a biological connection to her child. These women found it hard to suppress entirely their sense of masquerade, even though donors of eggs and embryos stressed that it was the nurturing—the "mothering"—that made a mother, not the genetic connection to a child (Kirkman, 2003a). But then, donors

are themselves accused of being unnatural mothers for giving away their genetic material (Vautier, 2005), so what would they know? And women who become mothers when their female partners have babies have a very hard time persuading others that they are any kind of a mother (Kirkman, 2004; see Donovan, 2000).

The involuntarily childless women in Maggie's Ph.D. research, like those in Gayle's research, were buffeted by the discourse that women inevitably become mothers; by the objections of some feminists to assisted reproductive technology; by the assumptions of many people that, if they were not pursuing every chemical and surgical intervention available, they did not really want to be a mother; and by expectation that they should "get over it" in the time-frame of other people's attention span. All this took place alongside the constant, perverse demand that they justify their desire to be mothers (Kirkman, 2001a, 2001b). Women whose lives fail to conform to the canonical narrative of motherhood are difficult to accommodate as benign characters in our stories.

Of course, many biological mothers are "damned" too. Motherhood is something that all women are expected to do, but only in the "right" social, economic and sexual circumstances. The collection edited by Helena Ragoné and France Winddance Twine (2000) demonstrates the many ways in which women can be marginalised as deficient or improper mothers by virtue (for example) of their race, class, fertility, or sexuality, through "the policing of normative womanhood" (Rapp, 2000: xvi). As Elaine DiLapi (1989) argues, there is a hierarchy of motherhood in which many mothers, such as teenagers, lesbians, older women, and disabled women, are defined as "inappropriate," just like mothers who did not give birth to their children or who are not genetically related to them. We, of course, have been placed by others low down on the hierarchy of motherhood. But we are defiant, and define ourselves and each other as real in all ways: women with attitude, definitely Snow Queens, not Snow Whites.

Some of the women in Gayle's study who became biological mothers—with or without medical assistance—also spoke about not being "good enough" women or "good enough" mothers. They felt under great pressure to be perfect—always available, always attentive—and, at the same time, not to be *too* attentive nor *too* possessive. After all, aren't such desperate women likely to be a terrible burden on their children, always demanding perfection? Claims to this effect have been made by some feminists (for example, Rowland, 1987) as well as religious conservatives (Fisher, 1989: 75). In addition, those who got pregnant with medical assistance were sometimes accused of disturbing Mother Nature and putting a price on a "God-given" gift. Such biological mothers are like those dolls with two heads and no legs: turn them up one way, and you have the Fairy Queen; flip them over, and there is the Wicked Witch (see Letherby 1999, 2002, 2003). So it is not enough to be a biological mother; motherhood must be achieved through socially-sanctioned plot developments with no deviation from the story.

And, because women are constructed as intrinsically selfless, even childless women are perversely positioned as bad mothers because of their failure to sacrifice themselves to children (Tyler May, 1998). There are many ways for women to be Villains.

As Gayle and Maggie came to understand the canonical narrative of womanhood and the hierarchy of motherhood, they placed their own stories in the discursive milieu. Their reflections had led them to see that the woman who fitted that canonical narrative was a rarity. The vicissitudes of contemporary life ensure that few women marry young, stay married to the same man with whom (unaided by medical science) they have the requisite number of children, whom they raise in a stable home. Perhaps it is this very threat to the discursive ideal that nurtures the perception of women who do not fulfil it as wicked or at least inadequate.

The warnings and morals implicit in fairy tales suggest that women must conform to the requirements of womanhood. But maybe Prince Charming cannot impregnate Cinderella. Perhaps Sleeping Beauty is infertile. And what if the Babe in the Woods herself becomes a stepmother?

Gentle Reader, our story has reached the end of the beginning. It has a long way to go to Happy Ever After. But, to keep you company on the journey, we want to add a Moral of our own:

> *It is to the benefit of all women that we accept the many ways of being a daughter, including nonmotherhood, and that we support women in their diverse experiences of mothering.*

Engaging in research on topics related to our experience has led each of us to reflect on our own choices, opportunities, and barriers. It is a rare luxury to have time to evaluate and draw on significant life events, let alone to be paid and praised for doing so. Most people, including our respondents, are unlikely to be in this position. We are grateful for our academic indulgences and, indeed, for our relationship which has facilitated further solo and shared reflection, not least through the writing of this piece. Nevertheless, we remain frustrated that the roles of Mother and (reproductive) Daughter are caught in a narrative time-warp, despite the opportunities for repositioning motherhood that are presented by reproductive developments and changes to the structure of the family. Political and social discourses throughout the Western world maintain a traditional view of women and motherhood (Sha and Kirkman, under review), supported by some contemporary academic discourses. We present our Grimm fairy tale as part of the resistance to this gendered fundamentalism.

Our tale echoes others who have drawn on the genre as a means of challenging the discourses communicated by canonical narratives. According to Christina Bacchilega (1997: 50), re-reading and rewriting traditional fairy tales serve:

to expose, make visible, the fairy tale's complicity with "exhausted" narrative and gender ideologies, and, by working from the fairy tale's multiple versions, … to expose, bring out, what the institutionalization of such tales for children has forgotten or left unexploited.

Of course, as Ussher (1997: 12) notes:

Fairy tales are just the beginning; the message of what it is to be "woman" is constantly conveyed to women through the mass media. Girls' comics, women's magazines, romantic fiction, advertising, as well as films and television aimed at female audiences, may appear to have moved beyond the narrow romantic script of fairy tales, providing a more sophisticated or complex view of what it is to be "woman."

But they have not done so. The pressure of reproductive responsibility can be transmitted not only culturally but from mother to daughter; each generation imposes expectations on the next. We must keep telling new, liberating stories. Let us continue to challenge our enchantment: our capture in the High Tower of limited ways of being a woman.

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