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# Bad Mothers and Wicked (Step)Monsters

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–  
Thèse de doctorat en  
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Apolline WEIBEL

–  
**Bad Mothers and Wicked (Step)Monsters**  
Ambivalence, Violence, and Subversion of the  
Mother/Daughter Plot in Contemporary Fairy-Tale  
Retellings

Sous la direction de  
Madame la Professeure Isabelle ALFANDARY

Thèse soutenue le 06 janvier 2023

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## Résumé

### **Belles-mères et reines-sorcières : ambivalence, violence et subversion de l'intrigue mère/fille dans les réécritures contemporaines de contes de fées**

Alors que les contes de fées cherchent désormais à émanciper leurs héroïnes du carcan des genres, le maternel se distingue par son immuabilité, prisonnier de dyades manichéennes et d'intrigues monosémiques comme Blanche-Neige de son cercueil. Cette thèse propose donc une relecture contemporaine du rôle de la belle-mère, centrée sur son rapport ambivalent à la maternité. La résistance de cette figure à toute subversion révèle en effet un enracinement profond de la violence matrilineaire dans le genre : l'ubiquité de cette mauvaise mère – qui emprisonne et empoisonne – est symbolique d'un maternel en tension, où l'intrigue mère/fille ne peut qu'être tragique. La coexistence narrative de cette dyade est ainsi rendue impossible par l'indifférenciation des corps et sujets féminins imposée par le canon patriarcal, toute existence du Soi impliquant nécessairement un évincement de l'Autre. Dès lors, les rapports matrilineaires se trouvent compliqués par l'apparition de dynamiques destructrices dans la diégèse : la marâtre désire ingérer – et ainsi (ré)absorber – le corps de la fille ; celle-ci réagit en adoptant une attitude matrophobe. C'est alors que réapparaît la mère originelle, qui se place en double inversé de la marâtre, permettant ainsi le clivage des figures maternelles. Le reflet de cette autre-mère inquiète et aliène la marâtre, pour qui l'absence de lien biologique avec l'héroïne est preuve de son infériorité. C'est cependant par le prisme de cette non-filiation qu'une subversion de la tragédie matrilineaire est possible, l'hybridité du rôle de la belle-mère permettant la création d'alternatives protéiformes, ambivalentes et inclusives à l'intrigue matrilineaire.

**Mots-clés :** ambivalence, clivage, conte de fées, genre, maternité, matrilinearité, réécriture, relation mère/fille.



## **Abstract**

### **Bad Mothers and Wicked (Step)Monsters: Ambivalence, Violence, and Subversion of the Mother/Daughter Plot in Contemporary Fairy-Tale Retellings**

While fairy-tales now strive to emancipate their heroines from the constraints of gender and genre, the maternal remains strikingly immutable, confined by Manichean dyads and monosemic plots like Snow White by her coffin. Therefore, this thesis proposes a contemporary interpretation of the wicked stepmother's role through the prism of her ambivalent relationship to the maternal. The resistance of this figure to subversion attempts reveals a profound anchoring of matrilineal violence within the genre: the ubiquity of this cruel mother—who poisons and imprisons—is indeed evidence of a tension-laden institution where the mother/daughter plot can only ever be tragic. The diegetic coexistence of this dyad is rendered impossible by the lack of borders between female bodies and subjects within the patriarchal canon, any existence of a Self inevitably requiring the erasure of the Other. Matrilineal relations are further complicated by the emergence of destructive dynamics within the diegesis: the stepmother wishes to ingest—and thus (re)absorb—the daughter's body, and the latter reacts by assuming a matrophobic attitude. It is then that the biological mother reappears, functioning as the stepmother's inverted double and implementing the splitting of maternal figures. The reflection of this other-mother unsettles and alienates the stepmother, for whom the absence of biological bond with the heroine is evidence of her utter inferiority. However, it is also through the prism of non-filiation that a subversion of the mother/daughter tragedy becomes possible, the hybridity of the stepmother allowing the creation of protean, ambivalent and inclusive alternatives to the maternal plot.

**Keywords:** ambivalence, fairy-tale, gender, matrilineality, mother/daughter relationship, motherhood, retelling, splitting.



*To Adrienne Rich, Alison Bechdel, and all the (m)others in my mirror.*





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If you enjoy reading to music, the following playlist has been designed and with this dissertation in mind:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/1qX3Es8RDZNaIBWZz4kOK2?si=9b65c6f2d7b54ab8>.

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## Introduction: Once Upon a Time...

The place of the institution of motherhood within contemporary Western societies is problematic and interesting in equal measure, in that it is currently subjected to bidirectional, seemingly contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, more and more alternatives to the hetero-nuclear family model appear—and tend to become increasingly normalised—within these cultures: blended families, surrogacy, homo- and coparentality, polyamorous families (Goldfeder and Sheff 157-158; Hefez 56). The growing recognition of these forms of parenting—as well as their gradual expansion beyond the borders of counterculture—points towards the necessity of a more inclusive (re)definition of mothering. On the other hand, we must also take into consideration the synchronous resurgence of conservative discourses and reactionary movements, as evidenced by the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in June 2022. These opposite and contradictory dynamics reveal the multimodal tensions surrounding the institution of motherhood within the contemporary Western world. .

Interestingly, this phenomenon also translates into a heightened presence of mothers and maternal interests within the public sphere, crystallising into political discourse as well as artistic productions. For instance, the last fifteen years have seen the emergence—and subsequent popularising—of literature centred on motherhood and maternal experiences. This multiplication of matricentric subgenres in women’s writings—also referred to as “mummy-lit” and “momoirs”—underlines a noteworthy shift in the relationship between the literary canon and the institution of motherhood, which manifests most visibly in the acute, ongoing interest for maternal themes and figures displayed by contemporary literary productions (Palmer 1-2). However, one must wonder whether these productions are overrun with the same contradictory tensions and ambivalence towards motherhood as the societies they emerge from. How is mothering (re)defined by contemporary Western literature?



One of the most interesting literary genres to consider with regard to these questions is undoubtedly the fairy-tale. Fairy-tales indeed continue to occupy a central place within children's literature to this day, and are often used as a medium of oral transmission and emotional bonding between parents and children (Frude and Killick 442). If a gradual decline of storytelling situations has been occurring in Western societies, as underlined by Walter Benjamin in "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov" (1936), telling tales remains to this day a cornerstone of infantile nurture and education. Besides, current research in psychodynamics and attachment theory argues that parental presence during storytelling is necessary for a sound emotional maturing of children:

When the person telling a scary story is the child's parent or caregiver, the threat provided by the story is rendered tolerable because of the close and constant presence of the secure attachment figure. Stories told in such a secure context can help children to confront their fears, to face up to potential difficulties relating to security issues and to develop problem-solving and coping strategies. (Frude and Killick 444)

This very premise also suggests that any representation of parentality in fairy-tales is likely to be shared with the child by a parental voice, thus creating a direct association between parents and their literary alter egos.

In addition, the didactic and educational purpose of fairy-tales (Haase 2008) inherently implies that any representation of real-life elements they may offer—such as parenting, marriage and gender dynamics—may be apprehended as fact, and therefore be particularly impactful on readers of all ages. Feminist discourse has in fact repeatedly underlined the misogynistic treatment of womanhood in canonical fairy stories, and its potentially harmful impact on the emotional development of young readers and listeners, particularly that of little girls and queer children (Petter 2018). Paradoxically, alongside with

critiques targeting dated and problematic fairy-tale tropes has emerged a contemporary resurgence of on-screen adaptations aiming to palliate these issues—or at the very least, to tailor the canonical material to its most impressionable readers, albeit with variable success. For instance, Disney’s 2014 live-action adaptation of “Sleeping Beauty”—renamed *Maleficent* after its new eponymous protagonist—weaves together an extended metaphor on the importance of consent in heterosexual relationships as a response to contemporary criticism regularly targetting the ending of the original tale. More importantly with regards to this dissertation, this film features a surprisingly nuanced exploration of matrilineal relationships and dynamics, positing that non-biological mother/daughter relationships are as legitimate and valuable as more culturally-sanctioned forms of kinship, such as biological filiation and heterosexual romance (Crosby 49).

However, this recent enthusiasm for subversive fairy-tale adaptations in film and television is not as easily identifiable in written fairy-tale productions, where Manichean dyads of maternal figures remain strikingly numerous and polarised: biological mothers thus continue to be represented as kind, devoted, and self-sacrificial, and are usually dead or missing throughout the narrative. Non-biological mothers, on the other hand, are systematically painted as selfish, cruel, and antagonistic to the hero(ine)’s journey (Greenhill et al. ch. 70; Whited 114-116). Besides, this association of non-biological motherhood to negative portrayals and stereotypes is unfortunately far from restricted to works of fiction, many foundational fairy-tale tropes being proven to have direct impact on contemporary societies. For instance, in 2014, the introduction of a “Cinderella Law” bill aiming to criminalise emotional abuse against children was discussed in the United Kingdom (“New ‘Cinderella Law’”). Interestingly, the very name of the bill implicitly attributes abusive parenting to a specific category of parents: stepmothers. This equivalence however seems questionable in an era where stepmothers have become increasingly common due to

the multiplication of blended families. According to a study conducted in 2017 by Anna Miller et al., the wicked stepmother trope still has damaging effects on real-world stepmothers and the way they experience parenting, forcing them to develop coping mechanisms and subversion techniques (1998-2003).

This research is a stark reminder of the unchallenged detrimental impact of the wicked stepmother trope on concrete stepparenting experiences within contemporary societies. Therefore, one is led to question the reasons behind both the existence and the resistance of this particular element of the fairy-tale canon. What does the figure of the wicked (step)mother say about the place of motherhood in fairy-tales and their retellings? How can the continued appeal of this stock character on popular cultures and literatures be explained, especially with regard to its complete opposition to the contemporary diversification of maternal experiences within contemporary hegemonic cultures?

Interestingly, one must note that the character of the wicked stepmother didn't emerge as a definitive part of the fairy-tale canon until the nineteenth century, when the Grimm brothers' *Children's and Household Tales* (1812) concretised a shared desire to distance abuse and cruelty from the figure of the biological mother. The insertion of the wicked stepmother as an irredeemable villainous character indeed allowed fairy-tales to preserve their most violent narratives without endangering motherhood as a social institution (Tatar 141-145). From that point onward, representations of maternity in fairy-tales were inherently and structurally binary. As explained by Marina Warner in *From the Beast to the Blonde* (201-202), most fairy-tale mothers can be divided into two opposite categories: on the one hand, the angelic, biological mother, and on the other hand, the cruel and wicked "stepmonster." This first type of fairy-tale mother is most often vividly idealised and romanticised by the narrative, while simultaneously—and somewhat paradoxically—being predominantly absent from the diegesis itself. These same mothers, always biologically

related to their children, are prototypically portrayed as beautiful, selfless, and utterly devoted to their role within the family unit. Conversely, the wicked (step)mother embodies the dangers of feminine independence, excessive vanity, and self-centredness: not only refusing to mother—both physically and emotionally—they indeed go as far as to pose a direct threat to the survival of their (step)children.

## **1. Research questions**

With this thesis, I am interested in looking at how this dichotomy of maternal figures has evolved within the genre, and is currently being portrayed. Is there a discernible pattern ruling contemporary representations of mothers in fairy stories? If so, to what extent does it reflect or reject the mutations of motherhood within modern Western societies? More importantly still, why do (bad) mothers continue to be a source of mingled fascination and repulsion for present-day readers and storytellers? Guided by these questions, I have decided to focus my research on the representation of wicked (step)mothers in contemporary fairy-tale retellings, and on how it builds upon traditional tropes of the genre to reveal a constellation of overlapping tensions surrounding modern literary motherhoods. To do so, I question the causes and sources of this topical wickedness, and analyse the new patterns embraced by maternal and matrilineal violence within fairy narratives. I also argue that contemporary retellings subvert the angel/monster maternal dyad by proposing alternative, ambivalent models of maternity based on hybridity, inclusivity, and mutual empathy.

In order to refine the scope of this thesis, I have also decided to focus my research on a specific matrilineal pair: the mother/daughter dyad. The primary reason behind this decision has to do with the literary canon: the most infamous wicked (step)mothers are interestingly always those antagonising female heroines, such as in the tales of “Snow White” and

“Cinderella”. Evidently, examples of abusive (step)mother/son dynamics also exist, and mustn’t be disregarded; however, I argue that hostile relationships between women are particularly worthy of analysis due to what they inevitably reveal of the patriarchal—and often misogynistic—roots of a literary canon in which the coexistence of female subjects remains ostensibly inconceivable. Thus, mutually-destructive mother/daughter narratives are often presented as catalysed by feminine traits defined as dangerous by patriarchal literature, amongst which jealousy, vanity and sexual rivalry (Barzilai 516-522). Therefore, the evolution of these tropes in an era otherwise intent on establishing a feminist countercanon to the fairy-tale genre becomes particularly interesting to discuss. Besides, mother/daughter narratives also allow storytellers to confront different conceptions of femininity, as well as how they are—or refuse to be—shaped by mothering and being mothered. Finally, one must note a significant lack of both literature and critical theory centred on mother/daughter narratives, which leads Adrienne Rich to declaring, in *Of Woman Born* (1976): “[The] cathexis between mother and daughter ... is the great unwritten story” (225). It is therefore inherently relevant to analyse this dyad through the prism of a genre where matrilineal plots can be considered an integral part of its canon—albeit in extremely problematic ways.

In light of these remarks, my research focuses on contemporary wicked (step)mother figures, and their role within the mother/daughter plot in anglophone fairy-tale retellings. In an attempt to determine how normative motherhood is currently defined in and by the fairy-tale genre, I investigate the source of the bad mother’s topical wickedness, as well as the reasons behind the alleged defectiveness of her mothering attempts. I also question the intrinsic association of mother/daughter dyads with tragic denouements: to do so, I look at two recurring elements of fairy-tale narratives—the looking-glass and the dead mother’s diegetic spectre—as disruptive forces preventing any sound matrilineal bonding between (step)mother and (step)daughter. I then discuss exceptions to what Rich calls “the essential

female tragedy” (237): subversive alternatives to the mutual destruction of female characters, intent on reflecting the many ongoing mutations of motherhood within contemporary cultures and societies.

## 2. Corpus

In order to acquire a global yet accurate vision of the contemporary tropes surrounding fairy-tale motherhood, a vast and varied corpus is inherently necessary. However, accounting for the width, diversity and continued dynamism of fairy-tale retellings and revisions as a literary subgenre, applying clear limits to both my research topic and my primary corpus is also a necessity. First of all, the decision to work on anglophone fairy-tales as a whole—with no distinction between North American, British and Irish productions—is fuelled by a desire to construct a corpus of works articulated around the same subversive and desontologising intent, rather than merely emanating from a single cultural or geographical sphere. Indeed, the late twentieth and early twenty-first century saw a similar regain in interest for the fairy-tale genre sweep through both North America and the United Kingdom, driven in part by feminist theorists, activists and writers (Zipes, *Don't Bet on the Prince* xi-xiii). In fact, one of the first and most influential fairy-tale collections emanating from this era is Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979): Carter's volume is indeed largely credited for having inspired many other fairy-tale retellers (Zipes, *Oxford Companion* 84-86, 421-427). My research therefore focuses on productions subsequent to its publication date, and covers fairy-tale retellings published between 1979 and 2019.

So as to ensure the structural unity of my final corpus, the choice was also made to focus solely on novels and short-stories, whether functioning independently or woven together in a collection. Fairy-tale retellings can of course be found in many other types of

literary works—poetry and drama in particular—but including them in this dissertation’s corpus would have led me to discussing strategies of literary adaptation for the stage, as well as the use of stylistic and metrical devices. It therefore seems more coherent to focus on works retaining the same narratological structure as the original fairy-tales. Conversely, my approach establishes no distinction with regard to either the gender of the author, or the intended audience of their literary works. Indeed, comparing and contrasting representations of wicked mothering emanating from male writers to those, more numerous, produced by women is essential to the process of defining contemporary fairy-tale motherhood, as it highlights both the specificities of female portrayals of motherhood and the evolution—or lack thereof—of patriarchal conceptions of ideal mothering. As for the presence of adult, young-adult, and children’s literature in my primary corpus, it is justified by the very nature of my research topic: as I contrast motherly and daughterly experiences of matrilineal violence within the diegesis, I must also pay attention to how their representation in children’s literature diverges from those destined primarily to adults and parents.

Finally, it is necessary to clarify the type of works that qualify as fairy-tale retellings and revisions in the context of my research. By this designation, I refer to both stories reworking a single, specific fairy-tale with a particular intent or slant—be it feminist, queer, or postmodern—as well as more hybrid narratives weaving together characters, plotlines and motifs from different tales, providing that the prototypical stories and tropes remain clearly identifiable as such. In this respect, it is necessary to underline that most fairy-tale retellings centred on the character of the wicked stepmother happen to be revisions of either “Cinderella” or “Snow White.” One must note, however, that in several of these retellings, stepmothers have been transformed back into biological mothers; I comment on the causes and significance of this narrative shift in the first chapter of my dissertation. Besides, in an attempt to present an analysis as accurate and comprehensive as possible of mother/daughter

dynamics, I also take into consideration narratives opposing heroines to maternal figures who fall between the categories of stepmother and biological mother: my research indeed accounts for atypical mother-adjacent figures, such as the wicked witch of “Rapunzel” stories.

My final corpus is therefore comprised of novels and collected short stories by twelve different anglophone writers; I present and outline each of these retellings further throughout my dissertation. Besides, if most of the authors this research focuses on are women, one must nevertheless note the presence of fantasy writers Neil Gaiman and Gregory Maguire, postmodernist Robert Coover, and observational storyteller Garrison Keillor. In terms of women’s writings, the North American sphere is represented by the works of speculative fiction writers Margaret Atwood and Catherynne M. Valente, as well as by Danielle Teller’s most recent novel *All the Ever Afters* (2018). As for British and Irish literature, I focus on queer and feminist retellings produced by Emma Donoghue, Nikita Gill, Tanith Lee and Sarah Maitland, without forgetting to discuss the precursor of subversive fairy-tale revisions, Angela Carter.

Before moving on to discussing the methodological and disciplinary approaches favoured by this thesis, it is necessary to reiterate the delimitations of my object of study: wicked (step)mothers. By this term, I designate any mother figure—biological or not—who has a conflictual, violent and destructive relationship with her (foster) daughter(s) throughout the narrative. This definition therefore includes not only stepmothers and biological mothers, but also mothers-in-law, foster mothers and even some fairy godmothers. I indeed focus my research on characters who establish their wickedness through mothering: by rejecting and subverting their narratively-assigned role as nurturers and caretakers, they instigate violence within traditional mothering situations, which often culminates in the destruction of one or both female characters. All in all, I consider any narrative where the relationship between



female personae mirrors—or further dramatises—the canonical mother/daughter plot as defined within the fairy-tale genre.

### 3. Methodology

My theoretical approach is based on a desire to bridge the gaps in the existing critical literature, which I discuss in greater detail throughout the following chapter. Thus, despite indisputable fascination for the character of the wicked stepmother, this figure is nonetheless very often disregarded by the critical canon. For instance, feminist analyses of contemporary fairy-tales tend to focus on the subjectivation and empowerment of the heroine, rather than on the seemingly immutable character of her villainous (step)mother. Furthermore, even when the latter's narrative importance is acknowledged, it is very rarely done through the prism of maternity. This assessment becomes all the more problematic in light of the contemporary movement of this character towards more explicitly maternal plotlines. In *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar consider the mother/daughter dyad as a metaphor for the opposition of angelic and monstrous forms of femininity, therefore failing to acknowledge the inherently violent and conflictual nature of the filial relationship that unites these two characters (36). Additionally, Clarissa Pinkola Estés's Jungian interpretation of maternal tropes similarly dismisses the specificities of stepmothering to focus instead on how fairy-tales construct maternal archetypes that shape the collective unconscious (483).

On the few occasions that abiological filiation is discussed by psychoanalytic theorists, the (step)mother/daughter dynamic is often interpreted as one of jealousy and sexual rivalry, fuelled by the desire to (re)appropriate the father's gaze and affections (Bettelheim 202-204). However, the quasi-systematic absence of father figures in contemporary fairy-tale revisions both hinders this hypothesis and underlines the heightened

importance of matrilineal affects within present-day narratives. These ambivalent emotions are explored by Shuli Barzilai in her article “Reading ‘Snow White’: The Mother’s Story” (1999), in which she declares: “‘Snow White,’ then, is the story of two women, a mother and a daughter: a mother who cannot grow up and a daughter who must. Hate rather than love becomes the keynote of their story. ... There is no resolution in sight for the relationship, only hostility and conflict” (534). However, she also argues that the mother/daughter narrative is inevitably one of violence and mutual destruction, and in so doing fails to account for more subversive retellings in which the plot steers towards the coexistence or reconciliation of matrilineal characters. In *Fairy Tales, Myth and Psychoanalytic Theory* (2014), Veronica Schanoes interestingly explores these alternate narratives, while maintaining a clear focus on motherhood and its intersections with feminist and psychoanalytic theory (15-17). While she puts forward a very convincing interpretation of fairy-tale retellings as acts of matrilineal dialogue between successive generations of women and texts (34-35), her analysis does not look sufficiently into the discrepancies between the different types of mothering bonds that come into play within these retellings. My research therefore intends to bridge this theoretical gap—as well as the ones previously mentioned—in keeping with Schanoes’s work and primary intent.

The first disciplinary issue raised by my research concerns the intersections—or lack thereof—between real and fictional maternal experiences, as well as their impact on one another. Can the characterisation of fairy-tale (step)mothers be understood as a commentary on modern motherhood in spite of the fantasy setting often maintained by modern story(re)tellers? To answer this question, it is first necessary to look into the pedagogical purpose of fairy-tales, as well as challenge the dichotomy opposing fictional and concrete human experiences. Indeed, the recurring presence of fantasy elements in children’s and young adults’ literature suggests that the mirroring—and distorting—of reality through the

lens of fairy literature may actually strengthen the didactic impact of fairy-tales over their young readership (Haase 734-735). This hypothesis correlates with Tzvetan Todorov's definition of the fantastic as a moment of hesitation experienced by readers when presented with a narrative that blurs the frontier between reality and the supernatural (165). Building upon his claim, I argue that this approach is especially relevant with regards to fairy-tale motherhood, as the uncanny dimension of maternal figures is inevitably heightened by their quasi-systematic association to witchcraft.

The narratological equation between these two fairy-tale antagonists—the wicked witch and the (step)mother—immediately raises an interesting question regarding the morphological importance of stock characters: what is the structural place of the bad mother in fairy narratives, and how has it evolved from the original tales to their contemporary retellings? In this respect, my thesis contrasts Vladimir Propp's formalist understanding of the narrative function of fairy-tale antagonists (79-83) to the intersection of contemporary maternal tropes with the motifs indexed by the Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) classification system (2004). I also look at the fairy-tale genre through the prism of myth, questioning the applicability of Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralist theories—which he posits in his 1955 “The Structural Study of Myth”—to the connected form of the fairy-tale.

In order to account for the evolution of maternal narratives within the fairy-tale genre, I then compare the contemporary framing of the revised mother/daughter plot to its original, primarily structural and morphological role within the diegesis. The most notable divergence—a heightened focus on maternal characters and motifs—stems from two distinct dynamics, both characteristic of the retelling as a contemporary fairy-tale subgenre: on the one hand, the vivid influence of psychoanalytic theories over the portrayal of mothers and daughters alike; on the other hand, the underlying tension between an overtly feminist authorial intent and the problematic place of motherhood within both first- and second-wave

feminism, albeit for different reasons. My analysis of these dynamics is therefore based on a crossed theoretical approach, merging applied psychoanalysis with feminist theory.

In this respect, I refer to Freudian theory to posit that the fairy-tale (step)mother functions as a diegetic embodiment of the uncanny, simultaneously epitomising the familiar as well as absolute alterity as defined by the phallogocentric literary canon (Evans 133). Building upon this argument, I look at mothers and motherly bodies through the prism of Julia Kristeva's definition of the abject ("Approaching Abjection" 129), and argue that contemporary fairy-tales subvert patriarchal views of maternity by turning the idealised body of the mother into an uncanny, threatening, and devouring entity. My research also discusses contemporary, intradiegetic manifestations of matrilineal anxiety: in this respect, I focus in particular on fairy-tale expressions of daughterly dread, whether they may stem from matrophobia—the fear of transforming into one's own mother (Rich 238)—or from the cognitive process of maternal splitting (Anderson 74). I also discuss how these phobic impulses paradoxically coexist with contemporary feminist efforts to acknowledge and remedy the literary silence surrounding mother/daughter narratives by divorcing them from their traditional, patriarchally enforced tragic resolution (Irigaray, "Ce sexe" 140).

While the influence of psychoanalysis and feminist theory on contemporary fairy-tales reveals the deeply ambivalent, tension-laden place of motherhood and matrilineal narratives within the genre, it is equally important to look at how biological and non-biological mothering is being redefined by tales that choose to subvert or reject the prototypical maternal tragedy. Building upon Irigaray's remarks regarding the lack of narrative space for mother/daughter plots within phallogocentric languages and literatures, I then analyse fairy-tale revisions in which an imbalanced, detrimental matrilineal bond—be it caused by estrangement, anxiety or abuse—is placed at the centre of the narrative. My research indeed considers the topical "loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the

daughter” (Rich 237) as a contemporary retelling of the myth of Demeter and Persephone, the aim of which is to emphasise the urgency of reclaiming motherly (and daughterly) ambivalence as an inherent part of matrilineal bonding.

With regard to ambivalence, I discuss Donald Winnicott’s 1953 definition of the “good-enough mother” (*The Child* 10) and its impact on fairy-tale characters; I also look at how it intersects with more ambivalent depictions of motherhood within contemporary narratives. Finally, I consider the specificities of the many instances of non-biological nurture portrayed in present-day fairy stories. From this, I argue that these hybrid alternatives to traditional mothering situations double as privileged sites for the development of queer narratives of female kinship. I also suggest to consider stepmothers as potential incarnations of what Adrienne Rich refers to as “countermothers”: namely, non-biological mother figures who are promoted to a parental rank by younger women in order to counterbalance the detrimental, disempowering maternal image provided to them by their original mothers (250-251).

To conclude, the main purpose of this dissertation is to assess the evolution of the portrayal of wicked (step)mothers within the fairy-tale genre, as well as explore the contemporary narrative strategies aiming to subvert and redefine the mother/daughter plot. My theoretical approach is triple, and combines narratology, applied psychoanalysis, and feminist studies. I also discuss the intersections of gender and genre as an echo of the mutual influence literature and culture have over each other. Throughout this thesis, I hope to prove that contemporary fairy-tale retellings present a deliberately matricentric slant, exploring and decomposing the prototypical mother/daughter tragedy in order to magically re-enchant it through the prism of the wicked stepmother, a deliberately subversive figure embodying the desire to reclaiming ambivalent, imperfect “othermothering” as an experience rooted in hybridity, queerness, and inclusivity.

#### 4. Dissertation plan

This dissertation is divided in three main sections, each of them guided by a different theoretical approach to my object of study: wicked (step)mothers and the mother/daughter plot within fairy-tale retellings. In the first section, I focus on the stock character of the wicked (step)mother as a structural element of the fairy-tale canon, and assess its resistance and mutations within contemporary revisions of prototypical fairy stories. I thus trace the literary and narratological origins of my corpus, and identify the major theoretical dynamics currently at play within the genre. In the following section, I consider these revisions through the double prism of feminist theory and applied psychoanalysis: I argue that the reclaiming of prototypical elements of the genre by these two movements sheds light on a multiplicity of anxieties which surround contemporary maternity and stem from mothering and mothered figures alike. The final section of my research focuses on the strategies of subversion and redefinition of the mother/daughter plot implemented in contemporary fairy-tale revisionism. I suggest that the matrilineal tragedy is averted through the hybridisation and queering of atypical, maternal-adjacent bonds, and that motherhood is subsequently redefined—in partial accordance with its contemporary evolution within Western societies—through inclusivity, empathy and ambivalence.

The first section of my thesis, comprised of three chapters, focuses on the genesis of the wicked (step)mother figure within the fairy-tale canon, and its evolution throughout the history of the genre. In the first chapter, I analyse the existing literature on the subject of fairy-tale maternity and, more specifically, the mother/daughter plot. After establishing the anthropological roots of wicked (step)mothering as a narrative trope, I assess the impact of patriarchal constructs upon fairy-tale depictions of womanhood and matrilineality, hoping to show how malevolent mothers serve to implicitly define—and enforce—the borders of

culturally acceptable femininity, as well as the dangers of defying them. I then discuss the mutual influence and theoretical exchanges taking place between the fairy-tale genre and applied psychoanalysis, in an attempt to establish the extent to which the figure of the wicked (step)mother has been understood and instrumentalised by this discipline as the literary incarnation of the maternal object, be overcome by the developing, prepubertal child. I conclude this chapter by examining the feminist interpretation of matrilineal violence in the fairy-tale genre as a strategy of resistance and disruption of patriarchal order, which reveals profound discomfort and ambivalence with the institution of motherhood itself.

The second chapter looks at the place of the retelling within the fairy-tale genre as a whole, underlining how narrative transformation and revision must be regarded as integral to the genre canon, and can serve a variety of purposes, from playful reinterpretations of canonical tales to deliberate subversions of the most foundational tropes of the genre aiming to unveil its underlying biases. After discussing postmodern attempts to disenchant fairy narratives through the prism of literary entropy, I argue that, rather than announcing the oncoming end of the fairy-tale genre, the contemporary mutations of its matrilineal (counter)canon can be read as acts of narrative and metanarrative reflection centred on the mother/daughter plot attempting to carve multiple ways out of its patriarchally enforced tragic resolution. Building upon these conclusions, the third chapter focuses specifically on the diegetic role of the wicked stepmother within fairy narratives. To do so, I compare and contrast conflicting attempts at mapping out the underlying structure(s) of fairy-tales in the hope of eventually unveiling a single, monolithic *Urtale*, before questioning how successfully each of these approaches accounts for the continued presence of maternal antagonism within the genre. In light of the many inadequacies of Propp's and Lévi-Strauss's understanding of myth and fairy-tale, I finally turn to the Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) Index, and suggest that a new tale-type ought to be created in order to gather the many tales centred on

generational conflict between (step)mothers and (step)daughters within a single subcategory of the fairy-tale genre.

In the second section, I discuss contemporary revisions of maternal narratives through a double theoretical prism merging feminist studies and psychoanalytic theory. Throughout Chapter 4, I therefore examine the intersection of the figure of the wicked stepmother and that of the fairy-tale witch: after uncovering the historical and cultural roots behind the emergence of the witch as a recurring and popular antagonist of fairy-tale and folklore, I question the inherently ambivalent position of the witch with regards to gender, underlining the paradoxical dimension of her simultaneous existence as an agent of patriarchal order, and her contemporary reclaiming by feminist theory as the figure of radical female empowerment *par excellence*. I conclude this chapter by a thorough analysis of witch-mother as a hybrid figure of the fairy-tale canon and countercanon alike, underlining the frequent equating and regular overlap between motherhood, witchery, and monstrosity within the genre, as well as the contradictory diegetic positioning of the witch as a threat to the maternal and, concurrently, as an inherently maternal figure herself.

Chapter 5 sheds light on the intrinsically patriarchal and phallogocentric nature of the fairy-tale canon through the prism of its inherently vilifying depictions of (step)mothers and, more generally, motherhood as an institution. I first look at the recurring interconnectedness of fairy-tale maternities, misogynistic violence, and sexual abuse, underlining how such narrative tropes implicitly renders the upsurging of matrilineal violence inevitable, by transforming pregnancy and birth-giving into horrific, traumatic experiences of utter female desubjectification. I then underline how this patriarchal fairy-tale canon posits the maternal body as inherently uncanny and abject, leading to the emergence and crystallisation of matricide as a structural element of the fairy-tale canon. The following chapter looks at the motif of doubling and the many matrilineal binaries inherent to the genre, positing that the



distribution of maternal characters alongside impermeable Manichean categories—evidenced most strikingly by the prototypical angel-mother/stepmonster dyad—further the problematic subordination of the maternal to the unchallenged supremacy of biological and heteronormative filiation. I then endeavour to re-examine matrilineal fairy-tale violence through the prism of suppressed maternal ambivalence, positing that the systematic vilification of instances of maternal hatred paradoxically leads to the aggravation of the prototypical mother/daughter strife. Finally, I suggest that the diegetic positioning of (step)mother and (step)daughter as inverted doubles of one another—alongside with the constant threat of matrilineal usurpation through ritualistic narrative matricide—stems from the lack of clearly defined ego boundaries within female generational dyads, and results in the need for a violent and definitive of mothers and daughters.

The third and final section of this dissertation focuses on contemporary strategies to subvert and redefine motherhood through the prism of the fairy-tale. Chapter 7 thus begins by looking at fairy-tale revisions that willingly reject the prototypical mother/daughter tragedy by steering the narrative towards the eventual reconciliation of female characters. I also demonstrate how these retellings openly resist the perpetuation of matrophobic narrative cycles by depicting female protagonists who either approach motherhood with little anxiety, or even seek it voluntarily. This chapter also examines the various narrative mutations undergone by the figure of the wicked stepmother throughout the contemporary fairy-tale counter canon, from her newfound position of story(re)teller and subversive antiheroine, to her seemingly metanarrative awareness of the patriarchal narrative constructs underlying the fairy-tale genre. Building upon these transformations, I argue that contemporary fairy-tale retellings endeavour to (re)invite historically silenced voices within the genre, leading in turn to the emergence of maternal writing, partially as response to the inadequacies and biases of

*écriture féminine* as conceptualised by second-wave feminist theory, but also as a deliberate attempt to reclaim—and perpetuate—a matrilineal literary (counter)canon.

From these conclusions, the final chapter considers the varied typology of atypical mothering situations occurring in fairy-tale retellings, and suggests that these forms of non-biological parentality and kinship can be compared to Adrienne Rich's definition of "countermother[ing]" (250-251). In light of this, I argue that it is actually through the lack of traditional filiation between female characters that the mother/daughter plot can be subverted and redefined away from its prototypical ties to narrative violence and matrilineal destruction. In this respect, I conclude this chapter by a discussion of queer fairy-tale retellings, through which I explore the intersections of dangerous femininity—as embodied by wicked queens and powerful witches—with marginalised and silenced female desires. In this respect, I argue that the non-biological "othermother" is an intrinsically hybrid and shapeshifting figure who often prompts a displacement of female desires, thus transforming maternal longing into longing for the (m)Other.

The primary purpose of this dissertation is not merely to acknowledge the contemporary relevance and sustained popularity of wicked (step)mothers within the fairy-tale genre. Rather, my research demonstrates how, despite continuing to embody the most uncanny, dangerous, and monstrous aspects of femininity, the (step)mother has completely shifted narratives within recent years: her arc now revolves primarily around maternal anxiety and matrilineal violence. This alienating relationship with motherhood, dating back to the patriarchal roots of the fairy-tale genre, is heightened within contemporary revisions so as to echo the current cultural discomfort *vis-a-vis* maternity and its evolution(s) within Western cultures. However, contemporary subversions of the mother/daughter plot also serve to implicitly outline a more inclusive (re)definition of motherhood, reclaiming ambivalence,

queerness, and empathy as ways to avert matrilineal violence, and substituting traditional maternal binaries with realistically hybrid and imperfect mother figures.

## **Part 1.**

# **From Red Apples to Red-Hot Shoes: Wicked Mothers in the Fairy-Tale Canon**



# Chapter 1. The Great *Miswritten* Story: Silenced Mothers and Abused Daughters in Fairy-Tale and Folklore

Why and how did literary stepmothers garner the “wicked” epithet? What explains their continued presence as antagonists in fairy-tales as well as their retellings? Before looking in greater detail at the many iterations and transformations of villainous (step)mothers throughout the genre, it is necessary to look at how existing literary criticism answers these central questions. Following the critical approach favoured in this thesis, this chapter therefore looks at how maternal violence targeting heroines has been interpreted by narrative, psychoanalytic and feminist theory, whilst also taking into account the historical and social origins of certain characters and tropes. It additionally outlines the main theoretical gaps and discrepancies revealed by these arguments—especially in light of postmodern and feminist contemporary retellings—and suggests how to remedy them all the while building upon them.

If critical interest in the wicked stepmother as a stock character of the genre grew sharply in the wake of feminist fairy-tale revisionism—ignited in part by Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* (1979)—the character was seldom considered through a maternal prism, or even independently from its role within the heroine’s narrative arc. Thus, most of the theories I discuss thereafter present the villainous (step)mother as a counterpoint to the heroine’s empowerment—or lack thereof—as well as a symbolic antagonist to the sound development and maturing of prepubescent readers. Theoretical concern for the maternal dimension of the wicked (step)mother archetype has emerged a lot more recently, taking root in keynote monographs such as Shuli Barzilai’s “Reading ‘Snow White’: The Mother’s Story” (1990) and Veronica Schanoes’s *Fairy Tales, Myth and Psychoanalytic Theory: Feminism and Retelling the Tale* (2014).

Throughout this chapter, I thus aim to detail and question the main four interpretative movements that I argue emerge from this varied and contrasted critical corpus. From a narrative standpoint, firstly, the wicked (step)mother is considered a pivotal element of traditional fairy-tale plots, triggering the apparition of narrative violence and facilitating the embodiment of parental abuse, be it witting or not. Thus, one must not neglect the extent to which the violence depicted in original fairy-tales reflects and inflates social realities of the time period. It is also crucial to keep in mind the didactic and educational purpose of fairy-tales when attempting to understand the role of the wicked stepmother's character. Thus, villainous mothers paradoxically serve to define ideal femininity—as envisioned by patriarchal literatures and societies—by utterly rejecting its prototypical markers: they embody the dangers of untamed, empowered and potent femininity, but also receive systematic and violent punishment for exhibiting those traits. This way, they implicitly help outline gender roles and acceptable gender performance to child-readers.

A similar idea is interestingly developed in psychoanalytic readings of both Freudian and Jungian inspiration, where the stepmother figure serves a dual purpose: she epitomises abusive and “wicked” mothering—allowing the child to better cope with ambivalent displays of parenting—as well as the narcissistic potential of the female psyche that the pubertal child must renounce. For psychoanalysts, therefore, the (step)mother is not considered as an independent, rounded character as much as the crystallisation of uncanny and disturbing manifestations of unrestrained femininity and maternity. Feminist critique, conversely, denounces the narrative demonisation of female empowerment, arguing that the stepmother's subversion of traditional maternity must be read as a tactic of feminist resistance: by transforming motherhood into a violent and alienating process, “bad” fairy-tale mothers reject their patriarchally-assigned role as nurturers.

Interestingly, many of these interpretations lose relevance when confronted to contemporary fairy-tale revisions, in which greater emphasis is often put on maternal voices in an effort to develop empowering fairy-tale counternarratives. Postmodern retellings thus bring to the fore the motif of daughterly violence in order to reclaim ambivalence as a phenomenon occurring organically between mother and daughter. With regards to this, I discuss the process of matrilineal ambivalence in further detail throughout this dissertation. Finally, many rewritings also seek to question and disrupt the canonical hierarchy between biological and non-biological mothers, a distinction often overlooked by both psychoanalytic and feminist fairy-tale critique. These observations will therefore guide my analysis as I set out to identify the main theoretical shortcomings that my dissertation will attempt to palliate.

### **1.1. Anthropological Roots of the Wicked Stepmother Trope**

As previously mentioned, the lack of evolution in the representations of wicked (step)mothers within the fairy-tale genre is all the more intriguing in that it contrasts with a continued interest and fascination for this literary figure across all forms of media (Tatar, “Hard Facts” 141). Thus, the heroine’s triumph over the wicked witch has become an inevitable structural element of fairy-tale resolutions, as argued by Maria Tatar: “In ‘Cinderella’ tales, (step)mothers are regularly boiled in oil, rolled down hills in barrels spiked with nails, and torn to pieces by wild animals. The fate of the witch in the Russian ‘White Duck’ shows us just how important it is to eliminate every trace of a malignant female” (“Off with Their Heads” 131). In this respect, it is interesting to consider the mother’s demise through the prism of catharsis: throughout the tale, the reader is invited to revel and delight in cruel, twisted and abusive depictions of mothering. However, the narrative may only be brought to a close—and the heroine allowed to live “happily ever



after”—once the bad mother has been adequately punished for her sinful and abusive conduct. Inversely, the protagonist is eventually rewarded for exhibiting prototypical feminine traits—among which kindness, patience and abnegation—throughout her many narrative hardships. With regards to the idea of maternal destruction as catharsis, Torborg Lundell declares:

[Folktales] deal with common human psychological and social issues in a form that allows for a release of tension in many ways: through wish fulfilment, projection of negative feelings away from the immediate and personal sphere, or therapeutic symbolic articulation of forbidden or uncomfortable feelings (hatred and/or fear of motherpower), and laughter. (193)

Lundell’s argument interestingly brings to the fore the possibility of ambivalent feelings towards the mother, unrelated to the successes—or failures—of her parenting; I explore this notion further in a subsequent section of this chapter.

Although the villainous mother can be considered a cornerstone of traditional fairy-tale narratives, it is necessary to distinguish its appearance from that of the wicked *stepmother* archetype. As previously mentioned, female antagonists were originally biological mothers, until they were supplanted by stepmothers—and, more occasionally, mothers-in-law—after the publication of *Children’s and Household Tales* by the brothers Grimm in 1812 (Warner, *Beast to the Blonde* 218). This substitution stems from a desire to keep acts of parental cruelty and violence separate from the figure of the original mother, as explained by Lundell:

This is, by the way, the distinction [always] made between the real mother and the “other,” mean mother: the real mother is, by definition, nice; when she is not nice, she has by some mysterious process turned into that “other” mother, identical but

separate. Similarly, the stepmother in folk tales occupies the same place structurally, and socially, as the biological mother and is in that sense identical to her. It is only her behavior that separates her from the first mother figure. (18)

The biological mother is, in turn, idealised to the point of being stripped of her maternal status at the first display of ambivalence: “Biological mothers may appear in both negative and positive roles, but when they are negative they are typically not referred to as ‘mother.’ ... Also, the same mother is very rarely seen as both negative and positive ... . Furthermore, a mother must be superhumanly patient and never tired or else she will be punished.” (52-53)

This systematic splitting inevitably creates an implicit moral hierarchy between biological and foster forms of parenting, a distinction which becomes all the more problematic to uphold in view of contemporary attempts to legitimise alternate forms of mothering in Western societies.

Despite this arbitrary, Manichean opposition between biological mother and wicked stepmother, depictions of motherly violence in traditional fairy-tales do not merely reveal the anxious fantasies surrounding maternity: though hyperbolic, traditional acts of malevolence perpetrated by the (step)mother often reflect the social realities associated with being a mother at the time of publication. In this respect, Lundell remarks that the term “wicked mother” was initially coined to refer to infanticide and, more specifically, the act of smothering a child (5-9). Building upon this observation, she underlines the impact of socioeconomic living conditions on the quality—and sometimes the very possibility—of mothering: she cites, among other examples, the frequency of death at childbirth as well as the economic strain created by feeding large families as possible causes for the neglect or abandonment of children (18-19). Besides, as she and Tatar explain, corporal punishment was considered an intrinsic part of domestic and social education in most of the Western world until the early twentieth century. The systematic resorting to physical and moral violence as a

means of punishing the undisciplined child might explain the recurrence of maternal abuse in fairy-tales, especially in the case of daughters:

[When] a mother is made responsible for the shortcomings of her daughter, there arises in her a terrible inner conflict between the emotional instinct to love, help and protect, and social propriety and identity of self, which has no legitimate outlet or place. The goals of mothering become confused, as they are in the mother who beats her daughter instead of helping her. (Lundell 123)

In addition, Warner suggests that hatred for the (step)mother—encouraged by her portrayal in fairy-tales—might also alleviate the guilt regarding the social and familial alienation of vulnerable women: “Hatred of the older woman, and intergenerational strife, may arise not only from rivalry but from guilt, too, about the weak and the dependent. The portrait of the tyrant mother-in-law or stepmother may conceal her own vulnerability, may offer an excuse for her maltreatment” (*Beast to the Blonde* 227).

If these elements are helpful in understanding how the stock character of the wicked (step)mother came to crystallise within the fairy-tale canon, it is equally necessary to assess their relevance within the framework of contemporary fairy-tale revisions. Interestingly, though all aforementioned theorists set out to justify and contextualise the (step)mother’s villainy, they fail to question her narrative place as a moral antagonist. This opposes the intent of many contemporary retellings—such as Robert Coover’s *Stepmother* (2004) and Sara Maitland’s “The Wicked Stepmother’s Lament” (2003)—in which the (step)mother’s voice becomes the focal point of the narrative. Failing to recognise mother-blaming as a constituent element of the genre is all the more problematic in that it utterly denies the possibility of non-destructive mother/daughter intrigues, as well as the eventual reconciliation

of female characters: the mother must still be defeated in order for the heroine to be granted a happy ending.

Besides, these historical and social observations underline the immutable nature of maternal violence, and therefore tend to overlook the variety of forms it might take beyond prototypical sexual and social rivalry. This is especially apparent in the way Tatar contrasts maternal and paternal violence:

That the drama of maternal evil (which involves sexual jealousy and domestic enslavement) came to be favoured over that of paternal evil (which involves the expression of forbidden sexual desires) comes as no surprise. What is astonishing, however, is that dual tyrannies exercised by mothers and fathers display such stability in the manner of their representation among different eras and cultures. No matter how far and wide we look, there are just not as many fathers who browbeat their daughters with requests for fresh laundry or clean floors, while the number of mothers who turn their daughters into domestic slaves is legion. By the same token, mothers never seem tempted to propose to their sons, though widowers find their daughters virtually irresistible. (“Off with Their Heads” 137)

This claim is particularly interesting when accounting for the frequency of maternal grooming and incest in contemporary fairy-tale retellings, such as in Gregory Frost’s “The Root of the Matter” (1993), Tanith Lee’s “She Sleeps in a Tower” (2017), and Anne Sexton’s *Transformations* (1971). Finally, it is imperative to reconsider the justification given for the transformation of bad mothers into stepmothers, especially in light of contemporary revisions where the biological nature of mothering is often kept deliberately ambiguous throughout the narrative. In that scenario, what becomes of the wicked stepmother archetype?

## 1.2. Didactic Tales under Patriarchal Systems

Another central dimension of this stock character lies in its intersection with gender and femininity: one might indeed wonder which aspects of womanhood are embodied by the figure of the villainous (step)mother, and how they serve to implicitly delineate ideal femininity. It is also interesting to ponder upon the origins of the mother's conflict with the fairy-tale heroine, and what they reveal about the influence of phallogentrism on the fairy-tale urtext. In this respect, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that the bad mother embodies the dangers and subversive nature of female creativity, independence, and empowerment as defined by the fairy-tale canon. On the other hand, the heroine epitomises desirable feminine traits such as passivity, dutifulness and innocence:

[Patriarchal] texts have traditionally suggested that every angelically selfless Snow White must be hunted, if not haunted, by a wickedly assertive Stepmother: for every glowing portrait of submissive women enshrined in domesticity, there exists an equally important negative image that embodies the sacrilegious fiendishness of what William Blake called the "Female Will." (28)

With regards to "Snow White" narratives, the motif of the looking glass is also particularly relevant to Gilbert and Gubar: they assert that the mirror echoes and amplifies the voice of the father, setting both female characters against each other.

[The father's voice], surely, is the voice of the looking glass, the patriarchal voice of judgment that rules the Queen's—and every woman's—self-evaluation. He it is who decides, first, that she must be replaced by his angelically innocent and dutiful daughter, a girl who is therefore defined as "more beautiful still" than the Queen. (38)

According to them, therefore, the mother/daughter dyad is a symbolic representation of the inherent tension between opposed models of femininity, and their confrontation is triggered by the voice of the father—a narrative incarnation of the systematic patriarchal bias for one over the other.

The presence of the looking glass also underlines the central place that beauty and physicality occupy within the mother/daughter plot. As Cristina Bacchilega argues, “it is the patriarchal frame that takes the two women’s beauty as the measure of their (self) worth, and thus defines their relationship as rivalry” (*Postmodern Fairy Tales* 33). The association of femininity with beauty is even more interesting when looking at how maternal violence is depicted in “Snow White” narratives: the wicked queen is thus seen subverting traditional motifs of femininity—a comb, a mirror, bodice laces, her own appearance even—and turning them into utensils of witchcraft and violence (Lundell 95-110). In this respect, Linda J. Lee underlines how the French term for stepmother and mother-in-law—*belle-mère*—reiterates this superimposition of beauty, femininity, and motherhood (“Mothers-in-Law” 641-642). Though this argument would certainly also apply to the term *beau-père*, one must keep in mind that non-biological paternal antagonists are a far less common in the fairy-tale canon than wicked stepmothers are. Finally, one must note that the (step)mother’s attractiveness generally decreases throughout the tale, as her wickedness—and her (step)daughter’s beauty—increases. This narrative inversion is even more noticeable when the fair heroine is contrasted to unsightly stepsisters, who take after their biological mother the way the heroine does after hers:

In the case of wicked but human women, it is also implied that being ill-favored is corollary to being ill-natured, as with Cinderella’s step-mother and step-sisters.

Cinderella is pretty and sweet, like her dead mother. The step-mother is proud and

haughty, and her two daughters by her former husband are like her, so that their ill-temper appears to be genetic, or at least transmitted by the mother. (Lieberman 392)

According to Lieberman, beauty in fairy-tales is inherited from the biological mother and evolves alongside the character's morality. The heroine's journey, therefore, is to mature into a culturally—and patriarchally—appropriate young woman by closely mirroring her (ideal) biological mother, while also thwarting the monstrous femininity of her stepmother.

The association of non-biological mothers with both dangerous feminine markers and decreasing physical attractiveness is unsurprising in light of the role the maternal antagonist plays within the narrative as a whole. As I previously mentioned, the resolution of heroine-centric fairy-tales indeed lies in the defeat—and punishment—of the bad woman/mother: “[the] trope of the evil, powerful ‘other’ mother [serves as] a vehicle through which the protagonists resolve questions of identity, one’s (gendered) place in the world, and the kinds of interpersonal relationships that are culturally sanctioned” (Parsons et al. 371). Throughout the consumption of fairy-tales, the female child is hence supposed to internalise the desire for (heterosexual) matrimony and motherhood, while utterly rejecting pride, vanity, independence, and sexual promiscuity (Tatar, “Off with Their Heads” 103; Lundell 28-37). Warner however suggests that, as a result, wicked stepmothers are entrusted with more narrative agency than their hapless, younger counterparts—and therefore have a greater impact on contemporary popular culture. This is evidenced and heightened, she argues, by the feature films produced by the Walt Disney Animation Studios:

Both films [*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and *Cinderella* (1950)] concentrate with exuberant glee on the towering, taloned, raven-haired wicked stepmother; all Disney’s power of invention failed to save the princes from featureless banality and his heroines from saccharin sentimentality. Authentic power lies with the

bad women, and the plump cosy fairy godmother in *Cinderella* seems no match for them. (*Beast to the Blonde* 207)

According to Warner's claims, villainous (step)mothers seem perfectly positioned to become figureheads of feminist fairy-tale revisionism, so as to subvert the systematic demonisation of female power and agency. However, as noted earlier, contemporary retellings predominantly focus on empowering its heroines, while maternal figures are left to embody new forms of abuse and wickedness.

The resistance of maternal evil to feminist subversions is all the more interesting that it sets mothers apart from other women and implies an intrinsic opposition between female agency and the experience of maternity, be it biological or not. Motherhood, it appears, must be understood as a sole, restrictive identifier that functions as an obstacle to female empowerment. If upholding such a narrow definition of maternity in the wake of intersectional, fourth-wave feminist theory is already quite problematic, it also contrasts vividly with recurring maternal motifs of contemporary fairy-tale retellings. Indeed, even though maternal antagonists are still an integral part of the fairy-tale canon, I argue that modern narratives focus more explicitly on the ambivalent mother/daughter bond. In this respect, Gilbert and Gubar's understanding of the heroine/queen dyad in "Snow White" narratives partially fails in that it erases the parental stakes of the confrontation. By reading this dichotomy as a symbolic representation of the tension opposing female archetypes, they silence the specificities of mother/daughter narratives and their (mis)representation within patriarchal literatures and societies.

Furthermore, considering fairy-tales as a medium of imparting social codes to female children goes against the very existence of adult-oriented stories, in which the character of the wicked (step)mother is no less absent. In this respect, Lundell suggests that adult



readers—and mothers in particular—might find themselves better represented by the imperfect, ambivalent mother than her younger, dutiful counterpart: “In spite of the propaganda for motherhood as the foremost goal for ‘good’ womanhood, actual women seemed to have regarded motherhood with mixed feelings” (9). However, even when accounting for the reappropriation of maternal villainy by contemporary women readers, the conflict between mother and daughter continues to appear as an inevitable element of the fairy-tale narrative. In fact, this goes directly against Christy Williams’s definition of feminist revisionism:

Feminist retellings of fairy tales in literature and popular culture often try to subvert what have been perceived as narrowly defined roles for women in the popular tales. Rather than creating “new” feminist fairy tales, these retellings seek to reclaim the figures of women in the better-known tales in which women are constructed in less than flattering ways: from passive objects of male desire to powerfully evil figures working from selfish motivations. (265)

The exclusion of wicked stepmothers from this literary trend— along with the continued idealisation of the (dead) biological mother—is therefore both intriguing and paradoxical.

### **1.3. Psychoanalysis and Slaying the (Step)Monster**

In order to explain this alienating phenomenon, it is necessary to look at psychoanalytic interpretations of traditional fairy-tales and, in particular, of the narrative role of the bad (step)mother. Most well-known is Bruno Bettelheim’s controversial claim that the wicked queen in “Snow White” stories embodies female narcissism as the source of destructive sexual jealousy. “The story of Snow White warns against the evil consequences of narcissism for both parent and child. Snow White’s narcissism nearly undoes her as she gives

in twice to the disguised queen's enticements to make her look more beautiful, while the queen is destroyed by her own narcissism" (203). He further argues that the splitting of the poisoned apple underlines threatening similarities between the Queen's and Snow White's psyches and stresses that the narcissistic potential of the heroine must be tamed before a happy ending can be achieved (213). In this respect, the destructive punishment of the wicked (step)mother—who embodies the failure to overcome female narcissism—is necessary for the eventual restoration of moral order:

But before the "happy" life can begin, the evil and destructive aspects of our personality must be brought under our control. ... Untrammelled sexual jealousy, which tries to ruin others, destroys itself—as symbolized not only by the fiery red shoes but by death from dancing in them. Symbolically, the story tells that uncontrolled passion must be restrained or it will become ones undoing. Only the death of the jealous queen (the elimination of all outer and inner turbulence) can make for a happy world. (214)

According to Bettelheim, the educational purpose of fairy-tales is therefore paramount and justifies the recurrence and stability of maternal motifs and archetypes in contemporary fairy-tales.

Interestingly, jealousy is also identified by Sibylle Birkhäuser-Oeri and Marie-Louise von Franz as the prime cause of the stepmother's wickedness, albeit stemming from different premises. Thus, they argue that jealousy derives from an uncontrolled distortion of maternal love, rendering it both violent and overwhelming:

Quand ils mettent en scène des méchantes marâtres, les contes de fées décrivent un conflit tellement aigu entre la mère et la fille que la mère s'en prend souvent à la vie même de sa fille. Tous les contes n'expliquent pas clairement pourquoi la marâtre est

si malfaisante. Dans *Blanche-Neige*, il s'agit de jalousie. La jalousie est l'envers de l'amour, c'est elle qui le rend amer et lui impose ses limites. Elle fait cependant partie de l'amour, car elle constitue une ébauche de sa négation. (66)

This argument introduces the notion of oppressive (s)mothering as a literary trope, whilst emphasizing the importance of attaining independence from the formidable Mother Archetype (Lundell 23, 37). The notion of maternal archetype is derived from Jungian theory, and often used to interpret the cruel nature of mothering in fairy-tales. Thus, literary theorists such as Birkhäuser-Oeri, von Franz and Lundell argue that fairy-tale (step)mothers function as incarnations of the negative aspects of the Mother Archetype, also referred to as the Terrible Mother (Lundell 189-192). Though her intrinsic association to nature is maintained, it is utterly subverted: the fairy-tale mother becomes a devouring, poisonous and sorcerous figure—a sadistic tormentor instead of the instinctive nurturer the Great Mother ought to be. Finally, Birkhäuser-Oeri and von Franz suggest that traditional fairy-tales are interested in depicting the heroine's "maternal complex" as triggered by the (step)mother's innate propensity to excessive and defective mothering (27).

The dichotomy between Great and Terrible Mother archetypes is especially relevant to the fairy-tale genre for two reasons: firstly, it mirrors the existing dyad formed by the original (dead) mother and the "stepmonster". Secondly, it interestingly echoes Bettelheim's interpretation of maternal duality in fairy-tales. In *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976), Bettelheim thus argues that the doubling of maternal figures in traditional tales such as "Snow White" and "Cinderella" illustrates a common psychological coping mechanism developed by children faced with ambivalent mothering: the real mother is split in two morally divergent figures—one perfect and the other wicked—so that the child may feel anger for the latter whilst still loving the first:

The typical fairy-tale 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. (69)

This remark is especially intriguing in that it underlines the cultural taboo—even in fictional, literary settings—surrounding imperfect or detrimental motherhoods: not only can biological mothers never be envisioned as the perpetrators of abuse or violence, the resulting hatred experienced by their (step)daughters is presented as equally unacceptable and suppressible (204). The idealisation of maternity as a defining female experience contrasts vividly with the systematic blaming of fallible mothers: it points to the impossibility of both motherly and daughterly ambivalence—a notion which I find especially revealing in light of contemporary fairy-tale revisionism, and will explore in much greater depth throughout this dissertation.

Returning to the theme of appearance as a defining element of the wicked stepmother trope, it is crucial to underline the central place of maternal bodies in psychoanalytic readings of fairy-tales. Thus, whether she be considered an incarnation of the Mother Archetype or the epitome of female jealousy and narcissism, the (step)mother is generally characterised both by her body and her abusive treatment of the heroine’s. The perverse nature of her mothering is indeed revealed by the constant subversion of her body’s nurturing capabilities: she is the one who mutilates, poisons and devours children, both metaphorically—by smothering and imprisoning them—and literally—by dismembering and feeding off of them. In this respect, let us now pay particular attention to the recurrence of narrative motifs of ingestion and (re)absorption in mother/daughter tales. When discussing the structure of “Rapunzel” stories, Holly Tucker thus declares:

The conflation of the mother, daughter, and parsley in “Persinette” is similarly based on a series of symbolic exchanges, each of which has at its core the notion of sexual and nutritional incorporation. ... [The husband] offers his own “fruit,” his daughter, to the fairy in exchange for the herb. The girl is then herself metaphorically “swallowed” by the surrogate mother, the fairy who imprisons her. (106-107)

If the ingestion of the heroine by the villainous mother figure remains symbolic in “Rapunzel” stories, it is not the case in most iterations of “Snow White”: the witch-queen is indeed explicit about her desires to feed off her stepdaughter’s organs so as to regain her own physical power and autonomy (Bettelheim 207). In this regard, Barzilai argues that cannibalistic mothers epitomise excessive maternal impulses rather than bodily rivalry. Like Tucker however, she attributes these violent urges to a desire to imprison the pubescent daughter: “The unnatural mother is therefore seen as desiring to eat rather than to feed her child. ... It represents a preemptive strike: she wants to eat (leave) me; I will eat (make her leave me) first” (231). Either way, these maternal motifs underline a strong cultural discomfort with pregnant bodies and female genitalia that builds upon the myth of the devouring womb (*vagina dentata*) and manifests itself through what Susan Sellers refers to as “perversions of the mother-child bond” (119).

If applied psychoanalysis can provide us with many compelling perspectives regarding the narrative role of wicked (step)mothers within the fairy-tale genre, it nevertheless fails to account for several significant elements of both traditional and contemporary mother/daughter fairy-tale plots. Most striking, perhaps, is the lack of commentary on the narrative shift from wicked mothers to stepmothers in the wake of the Grimms: not only does Bettelheim not acknowledge the explicit hierarchy between biological and non-biological mothers when looking at split maternal figures in fairy-tales, he also overlooks the way the constant idealisation of the first escalates narrative tensions between

stepmother and heroine. Furthermore, presenting maternal splitting as a necessary consequence of experiencing ambivalent parenting raises two questions that Bettelheim fails to explore further: what are the causes of maternal ambivalence in fairy-tales, and can (step)mothers also be negatively impacted by displays of daughterly ambivalence? In this respect, Bettelheim suggests that the motif of maternal jealousy in “Snow White” stories might illustrate a necessary displacement of envy from the child to the bad mother (204). Building upon this remark, my dissertation proposes to analyse the motif of matricide in contemporary fairy-tale revisions, as well as how it relates to the systematic silencing of violent impulses experienced by female children (Lundell 183).

It is equally necessary to underline that most psychoanalytic interpretations of mother/daughter fairy-tale narratives place the blame on the (step)mother—whose defeat is necessary to ensure the sound development of the child—thus leaving little if any possibility for positive maternal representation in fairy-tales. However, as I have explained earlier, contemporary revisions of traditional mother/daughter fairy-tales reveal a strong desire for the recontextualization of maternal violence, and often advocate for the eventual reconciliation of (step)mothers and daughters (Schanoes 15-18). In this regard, it might be relevant to analyse contemporary retellings through the prism of other mother-centric psychoanalytic theories, such as Melanie Klein’s research on splitting and attachment (“Emotional Life of the Infant” 198-236, “Schizoid Mechanisms” 292-320), as well Donald Winnicott’s figure of the “good-enough-mother” (“Transitional Objects” 1-34). The narrative role of fathers—both as an object of desire for the mother/daughter dyad (Bettelheim 112) and as the incarnation of patriarchal power and customs—also ought to be reconsidered in light of their frequent erasure from contemporary mother/daughter tales, such as in *Kissing the Witch* by Emma Donoghue and *White as Snow* by Tanith Lee (Barzilai 520-525).

#### 1.4. Feminist Resistance to the Maternal Plot

The central place taken by conflictual mother/daughter relationships in contemporary fairy-tale retellings hints at the intrinsic tension between maternity and womanhood in Western literatures and societies. In this respect, it becomes necessary to discuss feminist critique of the fairy-tale genre and, in particular, of its binary representation of motherhood. Returning to the motif of the looking glass in “Snow White,” it is intriguing to note that it does not only serve to contrast the fading beauty of the (step)mother with that of the heroine: it also highlights the inherent cyclicity of womanhood by foreshadowing the eventual replacement of the first by the latter (Abate 185). Interestingly, the fairy-tale heroine traditionally becomes a mother herself at the end of the tale, but only after the sole other (living) maternal presence has been defeated:

The mother’s fall marks the beginning of Snow White’s rise of consciousness in two ways: 1) she undergoes a ritual, the wedding, which places her in a new social context and unites her with a masculine power and 2) she is liberated from negative mother power which has been returned to the Great Mother, reclaimed by her in her role of the Death Mother. This opens a potential for Snow White’s identification with a positive mother idea which could enable her to pursue an active and creative life. (Lundell 37)

Even the idealised, biological mother is not exempt from this phenomenon: in fact, in most “Snow White” and “Cinderella” narratives, the uncanny physical resemblance between mother and daughter is frequently underlined, so as to foreshadow the complete obsolescence of the first once her reproductive purpose fulfilled. In this respect, Maria Tatar declares: “The biological mother, as we have seen, becomes implicated, through her fertility and childbearing, in the cyclical rhythms of nature, which include decay and death” (“Off with

Their Heads” 224). Elaborating upon this idea, Lundell argues that motherhood represents the final ordeal for the fairy-tale heroine who, in turn, becomes at risk of having her narrative subjectivity eventually erased by a child:

When she gives birth, the folktale heroine faces her most crucial and potentially destructive confrontation with the Great Mother archetype. ... At no other time is the folk tale heroine in such danger of losing her identity and her life, either symbolically or actually. ... She experiences more power than she has ever been allowed: the power of life and death. (196)

The parallel underlined by Lundell between maternity and female narrative power brings to the fore another central dimension of feminist fairy-tale criticism: the argument that the (step)mother’s displays of “wicked” maternity might represent a resistance tactic levelled against patriarchal conceptions of womanhood. As Barzilai explains, in the context of fairy-tales “the old nurturing gestures—be it grooming or feeding—are threatening. Mothers always smothers, as when ‘[she] pulled the lace so tight that Snow White’s breath was cut off and she fell down as though dead’” (534). This subversion of maternal scenarios and motifs is all the more striking when the antagonist is a non-biological parent: the canonical hierarchy between mother and stepmother is thus aggravated by the creation of parodic scenes of maternity in which violence replaces love and nurture. “As [the stepmother] is not [the children’s] biological mother, eating them might be seen as a metaphorical wish to become pregnant with them, integrate them into her body, so they would be inseparable. She attempts to recreate the mother’s power over the infant,” Katarina Labudova thus explains (83). On the other hand, Schanoes, building upon Luce Irigaray’s work on motherhood, suggests that the literary motif of poisonous mothering—be it epitomised by breastmilk or poisoned apples—is in fact intrinsically linked to the “bound(ary)lessness” (52) nature of the mother/daughter dyad. Noxious fluids must therefore be understood as symbols of the mutual ambivalence and



alienation that imprisons both women in a state of eternal, uterine-like coexistence. “The milk flowing from [the] mother turned to poison,” she argues, “and both and mother daughter exist in a state of paralysis, either overwhelming or turning away from each other” (24).

However, one might also wonder if the recurrence of violent, pseudo-maternal scenarios and motifs in recent fairy-tales does not also epitomise the frustration experienced by contemporary (step)mothers when their attempts at mothering inevitably fall short of patriarchal standards and ideals. In this respect, the continued social unacceptability of maternal ambivalence—along with the unquestioned belief in the supremacy of biological mothering—puts stepmothers and other non-biological nurturers at particular risk of developing such resentment, which might account for the continued presence of maternal hostility in revised fairy-tales. As Lundell explains:

“The mother-daughter mystery and the right kind of awe and ambivalence” is, I believe, lost in patriarchal structure, supported by a patriarchal church and religious values that ranks mother inferior to Father. This fosters in women and mothers, as Hillman so eloquently phrases: “general fear of the negative feelings, fear of realising her hatred for her children in the death aspect in her loving, the witchery in her intelligence. ... Without the archetypal perspective, nature receives a one-sided, only good definition, and everything that does not accord is called ‘unnatural’ and negative.” (227)

This position is also defended by both Barzilai and Schanoes, who underline the importance and necessity of creating alternate, more ambivalent mother/daughter narratives that question the patriarchal constructs surrounding fairy-tale depictions of womanhood and maternity. In this regard, Barzilai argues that the maternal plot must be reclaimed as the narrative core of “Snow White” stories. ““Snow White”” she declares, “is the story of two women, a mother

and a daughter: a mother who cannot grow up and a daughter who must. Hate rather than love becomes the keynote of the story.” (534) This assertion is echoed by Schanoes when discussing Lee’s *White as Snow*, in which “the feminized magic, the witch-queen’s power, is generated by a neglected daughter’s adoration of her mother: the woman’s power and beauty, even her sense of self is triggered by her daughter’s desire.” (1) Interestingly, though Lee’s retelling does not seem to erase maternal violence as a structural element of the fairy-tale, it points to female alienation as being its primary cause: the main drive of the narrative—in lieu of hatred and rivalry—becomes the heroine’s desperate wish to be reunited with (and loved by) her wicked mother.

Finally, feminist criticism of maternal archetypes within the fairy-tale genre also investigates the violent consequences both biological and non-biological parenting are seen to have on (step)mothers. When discussing the inherent tension between (female) selfhood and motherhood in fairy-tale narratives, Lundell thus suggests that pregnancy is akin to an uncanny experience of otherness within one’s own body, thus rendering it inherently invasive and threatening. Similarly, she equates breastfeeding to an act of aggression—reminiscent of cannibalistic consumption—against which contemporary mothers revolt by turning it against the infant. (195, 220) Looking at more psychological forms of maternal suffering, Barzilai interprets motifs of imprisonment and (re)absorption as violent responses to the fear of abandonment experienced by mothers of adolescent daughters: “Corresponding to separation anxiety in children, to the fear of being cut off from parental love and protection, there is a comparable anxiety in adults: a fear of being cut off from the child’s proximity and dependence, a fear of freedom from the thousand and one tasks that structure the life of a mother.” (527) In this regard, it becomes necessary to restate that any absence of a clear boundary between mother and daughter—especially in the wake of puberty—is generally considered as unhealthy and unnatural by Western cultures:

Feminist theorists often push back against the notion that a close mother-daughter relationship, even one in which the participants have permeable ego boundaries, must of necessity be unhealthy. The damage, if damage there be, lies in the destruction of the mother's self by patriarchy, and thus her inability to help the daughter construct a solid sense of self. (Schanoes 2)

Though Schanoes and Barzilai efficiently demonstrate that wicked (step)mothers are all but exempt from abuse and alienation in fairy narratives, it is crucial to note that they never question the systematic association of mothering and being mothered with female abuse and suffering. One is therefore led to wonder whether the institution of maternity is, indeed, inherently wicked, or whether the fairy-tale genre illustrates a cultural bias against the possibility of positive interpersonal relationships between women.

Feminist critical theory is particularly relevant to my dissertation in that it provides many significant insights into the creation and evolution of maternal antagonists within the fairy-tale genre: it thus considers the stock character of the wicked (step)mother as a literary crystallisation of the many contradictory tensions and anxieties surrounding the institution of motherhood in intrinsically patriarchal systems. However, as I previously suggested, feminist fairy-tale criticism diverges significantly—yet paradoxically—from the literary trends evidenced by contemporary feminist and postmodern fairy-tale revisionism. Thus, if feminist scholars such as Barzilai and Schanoes offer compelling interpretations regarding the causes of maternal violence and the variety of its narrative incarnations, they fail to acknowledge contemporary works in which maternal violence is either overcome or altogether absent. One must indeed wonder how narratives such as Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch* and Coover's *Stepmother* can inform our contemporary understanding of maternity: does the absence of maternal abuse in such revisions impact the traditional resolution of the “mother/daughter plot”? (Hirsch 105) If it does, where does the narrative conflict stem from, and does it impact

depictions of mothering throughout the tale? In this regard, my dissertation looks more closely at the theme of ambivalence—both motherly and daughterly—and how it is not only reclaimed but normalised by contemporary narratives. I specifically discuss how empathy is currently being presented as an alternative to splitting when attempting to cope with ambivalent displays of parenting—an idea Schanoes briefly touches upon when she declares: “Rather than representing a ‘regression’ into a state of infantile symbiosis, fusion, or merging, empathy is a sign of maturity that requires the recognition of difference before affective arousal: otherwise no true insight into the other’s affective state can be obtained.” (54)

On the subject of daughters, it is also regrettable that feminist theorists—with the notable exception of Schanoes—rarely discuss the role and representation of (step)daughters within contemporary narratives. Many recent retellings, such as Atwood’s “Unpopular Gals” (1992) and Maitland’s “The Wicked Stepmother’s Lament”, thus reverse the traditional fairy-tale structure by centring the narrative on the character of the wicked stepmother. The traditional fairy-tale heroine therefore finds herself demoted to minor and often antagonistic roles, even when conserving her canonical character traits. Other revisions, such as Gaiman’s “Snow, Glass, Apples” (1998) and Lee’s “When the Clock Strikes” (1983), use opposite tactics: while maintaining the traditional focus on young, isolated heroines, they transform them into morally reprehensible and cruel characters. Readers are therefore left to sympathise with the stepmother, as well as acknowledge the necessity of her wickedness. My thesis consequently looks at these new fairy-tale motifs and argues that they indicate a contemporary desire to question and recontextualise female violence through the creation of subversive mother/daughter counternarratives. As part of my analysis of this new matricentric countercanon, I look at the recent evolution of the mother/stepmother dyad through the prism of contemporary redefinition(s) of motherhood by Western cultures. Interestingly, this

structural dimension of the mother/daughter plot is left unclear by both Barzilai and Schanoes: they discuss maternal wickedness as a whole, without introducing any distinction between biological and non-biological mothers. However, as I mentioned earlier, this dichotomy has far from disappeared from contemporary narratives, and remains utterly relevant to any contemporary discussion surrounding literary maternity. In this respect, my dissertation argues that the continued presence of non-biological mothers in fairy stories now serves to illustrate of the multiplicity of forms mothering can take, while encouraging narrative depictions of alternate types of female bonding—such as friendship, mentorship and romance.

Though none of the works analysed through the course of this literature review appears to adequately account for all aspects of (step)maternal representation in contemporary fairy-tale revisionism, they are nonetheless representative of the many intersections of the genre with four specific schools of literary theory: narratology, anthropology, psychoanalysis and feminism. My dissertation therefore borrows from these four disciplines to palliate remaining gaps in the critical discourse surrounding contemporary representations of wicked (step)mothers and their subsequent subversions of the mother/daughter plot. The first section of this thesis therefore focuses on the evolution of the structural role of maternal antagonists within the fairy-tale genre and questions the anthropological implications of these depictions in light of recent redefinitions of the institution of motherhood by Western societies. The following part focuses on the intersections of fairy-tale revisionism, psychoanalysis and feminist theory, and argues that the resistance of maternal violence as a motif of contemporary fairy-tales reveals an underlying crisis of literary motherhood that stems from the unbridgeable gap between patriarchal conceptions of maternity and concrete experiences of mothering and being mothered. Finally, the third section looks more specifically at the mother/daughter dyad through the prism of

fourth-wave feminism and queer theory and suggests that, through the reclaiming of filial ambivalence, mother/daughter empathy, and marginalised female relationships, contemporary authors distance themselves from binary representations of motherhood to create a subversive fairy-tale counter canon centred on deconstructing the prototypically tragic mother/daughter plot.

To do so, my dissertation discusses in greater detail the contemporary reclaiming of maternal voices within the fairy-tale canon, and analyses how matricentric narratives articulate their relationship to maternity as an institution, as well as to female children. In this regard, I pay particular attention to the theme of parental ambivalence and how it intersects with motifs of motherly violence. So as not to overlook the other pole of the mother/daughter dyad, this thesis also focuses on displays of daughterly violence and ambivalence by discussing narratives in which the traditional binary repartition of feminine traits is deliberately subverted. Building upon Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1976), I argue that motifs of "matrophobia" (235-236) represent a narrative counterpoint to maternal violence. As a continuation of this attempt to look at motherhood through different narrative prisms, I then discuss the structural triangle formed by the heroine and the maternal dyad, commenting on its metatextual presence within contemporary stories—as well as, paradoxically, its regular erasure from them. Finally, this dissertation argues that fairy-tale revisionism offers a concrete alternative to the mother/daughter tragedy by merging elements of the fairy-tale canon with the myth of Demeter and Persephone, thus creating a counternarrative that both embraces female ambivalence and reclaims marginalised desires and relationships as an intrinsic part of matrilineal bonding.



## Chapter 2. Transforming Tales: Mirroring and Distorting throughout the Genre

What makes a story a fairy-tale? Such a question brings to the fore an intriguing yet central dichotomy of the fairy-tale genre: although its literary canon comprises many prototypical and recognizable elements—amongst which character types, narrative settings, motifs and imagery—it nevertheless fails to be permanently associated to a specific writing style, narrative form, or authorial intent. The resurgence of fairy-tales within English and North American literature in the late twentieth century similarly underlines the inherent tension opposing traditional tales to their most subversive contemporary retellings. Indeed, although ties to prototypical elements of the genre are still identifiable in modern fairy stories, contemporary writers also set out to explore, disrupt, and sometimes collapse the boundaries and very fabric of the genre. Robert Coover's postmodern fairy-tale collection *A Child Again* (2005), for instance, includes a series of unsequenced textual fragments printed on the back of a deck of oversized playing cards, to be arranged into a structured narrative by the readers themselves. This experimental story—titled “Heart Suit” and inspired by the Mother Goose nursery rhyme “The Queen of Hearts” (1782) and Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) (Carroll 112)—thus questions the genre's traditional reliance on chronological and univocal storytelling by crafting a fragmented alternative to the prototypical narrative structure.

The early twentieth century also saw the onset of animated feature film adaptations of traditional fairy stories by the Walt Disney Animation Studios, with the critically-acclaimed release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937. Interestingly, the child-friendly variants coined by Walt Disney Productions have had significant impact on the fairy-tale genre as a whole, both by constructing an alternative to the Western literary canon established by such



writers as Hans Christian Andersen, Charles Perrault, and the Grimm brothers, but also by challenging the implicit association of fairy stories with oral and literary storytelling. The influence of “characteristic Disney fairy-tale formulas” (Zipes, *Oxford Companion* 132) on contemporary popular culture and imaginaries is therefore undeniable, sometimes to the point of having them overshadow the traditional tales, as stressed by Marina Warner in *From the Beast to the Blonde* (1994):

Disney’s vision has affected everybody’s idea of fairy tales themselves.... The disequilibrium between good and evil in these films has influenced contemporary perceptions of fairy tale, as a form where sinister and gruesome forces are magnified and prevail throughout – until the very last moment where, *ex machina*, right and goodness overcome them. (207)

Though not every adaptation and retelling is bound to alter the fairy-tale canon to the extent of Disney’s animated features, it nonetheless remains crucial to underline that the successive revisioning and transformation of traditional tales represents a unique and organic characteristic of the genre.

In this respect, one is led to wonder whether the abundance of fairy-tale retellings and revisions since the late twentieth century merely illustrates the natural evolution of the literary canon, or whether it might indicate a more definitive and significant disruption of the genre. In the context of this dissertation, I am particularly interested in the evolution of representations of maternal wickedness throughout the genre and, more specifically, in how it intersects with the subversive, disruptive and revisionist intent—or lack thereof—of modern fairy-tale retellings. Therefore, this chapter first explores the inherent tension between unicity and multiplicity at the root of the fairy-tale genre, while paying particular attention to the poetics—and politics—of fantasy and wonder within traditional and contemporary tales. I

then discuss modern tactics of canon revision and reconfiguration through the prism of matricentric fairy-tales. I argue that these story(re)tellers are intent on constructing a contemporary fairy-tale countercanon to reclaim and celebrate marginalised and silent voices within the genre through parody, subversion, and disruption of the most stable and intrinsic elements of the genre. Finally, this chapter proposes to equate the relationship between the fairy-tale canon and its successive revisions to the mother/daughter dynamics and patterns displayed within traditional fairy stories. Building upon the work of Veronica Schanoes in *Fairy Tales, Myth and Psychoanalytic Theory* (2014), it discusses mother-tales and daughter-tales at intra and extradiegetic levels, paying specific attention to the concepts of gender, authority, and (in)dependence.

## 2.1. The Magic Mirror of Fairy-Tales

“Tout conte pousse sur d’autres contes,” declares Patricia Eichel-Lojkine in *L’usage du conte* (2017), underlining the organic interdependence and many intersections between original fairy-tales and their successive retellings, as well as between the traditional tales themselves (Eichel-Lojkine 290). She further describes the fairy-tale genre as “un art de la reprise et de la variation... reprise d’idées déjà formulées, de patrons, de modèles antérieurs, voire de clichés et de lieux communs” (290). This statement brings to the fore two intrinsic and central elements of the genre: its roots within popular culture and folklore, as well as its crystallisation as a literary genre through successive transformations, adaptations, and revisions. Interestingly, the circumstances surrounding the collection of oral folktales and their transformation into a fully-fledged literary genre is, itself, shrouded in wondrous and quasi-mythical elements. Most notably, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm’s attempt to reconfigure and revitalise German culture through the gathering of peasant tales and their subsequent

publication in *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* in 1812 and 1815 (Warner, *Once Upon a Time* 14) has been greatly romanticised so as to underline the ties between the Grimms' stories and existing German folklore, while simultaneously erasing their other more diverse and literary sources. In this respect, Terri Windling explains:

Although legend has them roaming the countryside collecting stories from stout German peasants, in truth the Grimm brothers acquired most of their tales from a middle-class circle of friends, who in turn were recounting tales learned from nurses, governesses, and servants, not all of them German. Thus the "German folk tales" published by the Grimms included those from the oral folk traditions of other countries, and were also influenced by the literary fairy tales of writers like Straparola, Basile, D'Aulnoy, and Perrault in Italy and France. (Winding, "The Poisoned Apple")

The treatment of gender by the Grimms throughout this enterprise—both intra- and extradiegetically—is particularly interesting to discuss, as it stems directly from the necessity of revising tales in order to make them more palatable for children, while also outlining many of the patriarchal constructs that would come to shape the fairy-tale canon. In fact, although a significant portion of the tales compiled by the Grimms came from women writers and other female sources from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Peyrache-Leborgne 58), the very nature of their work as collectors paradoxically contributed to strengthening the implicit association of the fairy-tale canon to male voices, forcing subsequent female storytellers to write against the patriarchal canon (Fisk 17; Harries 14). However, before discussing the ways contemporary women writers accomplish this subversive revisioning, it is necessary to also discuss the Grimms' treatment of intradiegetic female voices. "What the Grimms created was a composite narrative, one revised over a period of several decades, with countless fine calibrations designed to make the story, paradoxically, a pure and unadulterated capture of

folk traditions but with a child-friendly orientation,” Maria Tatar explains, underlining the constant evolution of fairy-tales even within the works of a single writer—or, in this case, two (*The Fairest of Them All* 18). These successive revisions, however, often focused on simplifying family dynamics by displacing the narrative conflict outside of the biological, nuclear family, as Warner argues:

Wilhelm in particular [infused] the new editions with his Christian fervor, emboldening the moral strokes of the plot, meting out penalties to the wicked and rewards to the just to conform with prevailing Christian and social values. They also softened the harshness – especially in family dramas. They could not make it disappear altogether, but... on the whole, they tended toward sparing the father's villainy, and substituting another wife for the natural mother, who had figured as the villain in versions they were told.... (*Beast to the Blonde* 211)

The structural shift from biological mothers to stepmothers as primary narrative antagonists—aside from indicating unwillingness to convey negative images of biological motherhood—is extremely significant to my research, as it has impacted the fairy-tale canon to the point of almost permanently erasing biological maternal antagonists, while turning the wicked stepmother into one of the most recognizable and popular figures of the fairy-tale genre. In fact, interest in this particular stock character has recently emerged from fairy-tale studies—as demonstrated in the previous chapter—as well as from contemporary feminist fairy-tale retellings. “[If] the wicked woman drives most of the variation in the Snow White tale type, can we ignore the possibility that she might, in fact, be the true center of the narrative—or more plausibly, a divergent center that merits equal attention to psychology?” Soman Chainani questions in his 2003 essay on Angela Carter’s “The Snow Child” (1979) (Chainani 216). Throughout this dissertation, I suggest that many contemporary storytellers set out to do precisely that, using narrative tools such as parody, subversion, and (re)framing

to deconstruct the Grimms' conception of wicked (step)mothers (Fisk 15). My argument therefore refers primarily to the Grimms' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* when discussing canonical versions of traditional fairy-tales. This focus does not intend to negate the cultural relevance of other acclaimed fairy-tale writers such as Charles Perrault, Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy and Hans Christian Andersen; it merely underlines the enduring influence of this collection on the structural, cultural and literary definitions of the fairy-tale:

[One] thing is certain: most definitions of a fairy tale begin with a fixed or imaginary notion of the Grimms' fairy tales, and there are numerous translations and picture books based on the Grimms' tales throughout the world. The Grimms, whether one admires them or not, appear to have established the model and proper fairy tale.

(Zipes, "Contamination of the Fairy Tale" 77)

Before delving into the ways contemporary writers subvert fairy-tale representations of maternity and femininity—as well as the very fabric of the genre—it is important to bring to the fore a fundamental dichotomy of fairy-tale retellings: variants and revisions. When discussing the process of adaptation within the fairy-tale genre, Claire Malarte-Feldman distinguishes what she calls *duplication*—the simple retelling of a pre-existing tale by a different writer, be it in a different language or not—from the more purposeful fairy-tale *revision*: “Revision, on the other hand, is a process of critical adaptation in which the new version implicitly questions, challenges, or subverts the story on which it is based by incorporating new values and perspectives” (2). Interestingly, though the contemporary fairy-tale (counter)canon seems primarily comprised of revisions ranging from subversive to openly political, traditional variations on traditional tales are far from extinct. For instance, Philip Pullman defines his 2013 fairy-tale collection *Grimm Tales: For Young and Old* in the following terms:

[My] main interest has always been in how the tales worked as stories. All I set out to do in this book was tell the best and most interesting of them, clearing out of the way anything that would prevent them from running freely. I didn't want to put them in modern settings, or produce personal interpretations or compose poetic variations on the originals: I just wanted to produce a version that was clear as water. My guiding question had been: "How would I tell this story myself, if I'd heard it told by someone else and wanted to pass it on?" (Pullman xiii)

Tatar underlines a similar dynamic when discussing non-literary fairy-tale adaptations in the introduction of *The Fairest of them All* (2020), a collection of "Snow White" variants and retellings from around the world. She thus distinguishes stories aiming to charm and entertain from more disruptive and critical tales:

What becomes evident in considering how the Grimm tale and the Disney film are recycled is how sharp the divide is between critical adaptations of the story and nostalgic re-creations. There are versions that aim to shock and startle, and then there are rescriptings designed to do exactly what the Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein found so revolting about Disney films: they soothe, entertain, and distract, lulling us into a passive state. (27)

Throughout this dissertation, I discuss contemporary revisions much more often than variants, as this corpus has been chosen in part for its overt matricentric slant, which in itself indicates a critical distancing of the author from the original tale, as well as a desire to profoundly alter the traditional diegesis by transforming one of its most codified and recurrent characters. However, it is equally necessary to underline that the border between these two types of fairy-tale adaptations remains utterly porous. Thus, even the loosest and most subversive revisions have to preserve some prototypical elements of the genre to insure

their identifiability both as retellings and as fairy-tales in their own right. On the subject of Coover's 2004 *Stepmother*—a postmodern, novelised amalgamation of several traditional tales and prototypical tropes of the genre—Christy Williams thus explains that, “though *Stepmother* is clearly a postmodern novel, it also is a fairy tale. It contains all the recognizable traits of the fairy-tale genre and then plays with them. The novel does not abandon fairy-tale patterns in remaking the genre, but instead shows possibilities for those patterns” (270). Williams's argument naturally leads one to ponder over the authorial intent and narrative purpose of fairy-tale revisions: do disruptive retellings set out to revitalise or, on the contrary, to overthrow the traditional tales they are built upon? In this respect, Merja Makinen argues that Angela Carter's postmodern, feminist collection of fairy-tale revisions *The Bloody Chamber* straddles the line between playfulness and destructiveness, as “[her] tales do not simply ‘rewrite’ the old tales by fixing roles of active sexuality for their female protagonists—they ‘re-write’ them by playing with and upon (if not preying upon) the earlier misogynistic version” (5). On the other hand, Stephen Benson describes Coover's fairy works as infused with a much clearer destructive intent:

[Coover's] texts are neither manifestly sensible nor consistently nonsensical. They are rather texts in which fairy-tale conventions of meaning and morality meet post-fairy-tale requirements of complexity and complication, without synthesis or resolution. As such, they hint at a terminus for the genre, or at least an impasse, a dead end. They think that possibility in many ways: in being full of aging characters, in being saturated with tradition to the point of rankness, and in being saturated with tradition to the point of chaos.... (“Late Fairy Tales” 138)

I would however argue that, rather than permanently disrupting or subverting the constructs of the genre, Coover's works merely questions and discusses their arbitrary, authoritative

nature (Williams 266). On the topic of Coover's authorial intent, Ronan Ludot-Vlasak similarly argues that:

Si les jeux sont faits, autant l'admettre : puisque qu'il n'est plus question de reconduire un acte de fiction qui a perdu son pouvoir de conviction, l'écrivain peut au moins, pour commencer, jouer avec les formes anciennes de la fabulation et s'amuser ainsi à exposer leur irrémédiable usure. Cette stratégie ludique est, chronologiquement, la première adoptée par Coover pour faire œuvre de littérature, malgré tout. Même si elles ne furent réunies et publiées que plus tard dans le recueil *Pricksongs & Descants* (1969), c'est bien par de courtes nouvelles que l'auteur débute son parcours. Beaucoup renvoient le lecteur aux formes populaires et archaïques du récit : contes de fées ou épisodes bibliques. Au moyen d'innovations formelles, l'auteur s'emploie à « défamiliariser » ces fables, en choisissant par exemple de les raconter sous un angle inhabituel. ... Coover bouleverse les séquences narratives, met en concurrence plusieurs versions irréconciliables de la même histoire, ou change de registre à l'intérieur d'une nouvelle, passant du réalisme à l'absurde. Ces diverses techniques font prendre conscience au lecteur de ses propres attentes en les frustrant, et attirent ainsi son attention sur les stéréotypes qui constituent les récits. Par ailleurs, en construisant ses variations autour de textes canoniques, l'auteur accomplit ce qu'il appelle un geste « ré-créatif », c'est-à-dire tout à la fois ludique et propre à renouveler des formes usées. (Ludot-Vlasak and Pellegrin 250-251)

Thus, while Benson and Ludot-Vlasak similarly describe Coover's tales as demonstrating intimate awareness of the ongoing dynamics of entropy at play within the fairy-tale genre, Ludot-Vlasak more successfully identifies the playful nature of Coover's authorial intent, presenting his work as straddling the line between re-creation and recreation. With regards to this, I argue that this dual approach to the fairy-tale canon may serve to carve out space for



contemporary retellings which, while undeniably subversive, still maintain a form of affection for the tales they rework. In fact, the slight ambivalence of Coover's relationship to canonical tales reminds one of the relationship between fairy-tale mothers and daughters. I discuss this idea further in the final section of this chapter, through the prism of Schanoes's matrilineal reading of the retelling process.

Besides, one must also consider that the mirroring process occurring between traditional tales and their retellings might be intrinsic to the natural evolution of this literary form, and might paradoxically serve to revitalize the fairy-tale genre within contemporary literature. On the subject, Schanoes declares:

A revision does not replace the traditional tales from which it springs, but rather it revivifies them, gives them new life, both incarnating the original tale in itself and re-animating it by providing new perspectives, new understandings, and thus forcing an old tale back into consciousness and making it once more the subject of thought.

Revisions derive their effect partially through the invocation and disruption of earlier tales; therefore they require the persistence of the earlier tales in order to achieve their full effect. (61-62)

The interdependence of traditional tales, variants, and retellings therefore establishes an intertextual network of fairy stories (Peyrache-Leborgne 78) that successive retellers build upon and sometimes comment on intradiegetically. This idea is for instance explored in Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* (1993), a collection of queer, feminocentric fairy-tale retellings whose very title blurs the line between variation and revision, and which concludes on an implicit, ambiguously erotic invitation for future storytellers to reclaim the oral dimension of the genre by circulating these new tales: "This is the story you asked for. I leave it in your mouth" (224). Donoghue's approach can be

contrasted with Margaret Atwood's short story "There Was Once" (1992), in which the traditional tale is stripped of its prototypical attributes one by one, until the fairy-tale is rendered utterly barren and virtually impossible:

"There was once a poor girl, as beautiful as she was good, who lived with her wicked stepmother in a house in the forest."

"Forest? *Forest* is passé, I mean, I've had it with all this wilderness stuff. It's not a right image of our society, today. Let's have some *urban* for a change."

"There was once a poor girl, as beautiful as she was good, who lived with her wicked stepmother in a house in the suburbs."

"That's better. But I have to seriously query this word *poor*."

...

"There was once-"

"What's this *was, once?* Enough of the dead past. Tell me about *now*."

"There-"

"So?"

"So, what?"

"So, why not *here?*" (*Good Bones* 16-17)

If multiplicity and intertextuality can be considered as intrinsic elements of the fairy-tale genre, they are insufficient to adequately define the narrative core of its literary canon. In fact, the coining of the expression *conte de fées* (fairy-tale) by Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy in 1697 hints at what is arguably the most central and essential narrative element of the genre: the presence of magic, fantasy and wonder within the diegesis. One must thus question the effects of fantasy and magical elements on the readership and, more importantly, how they might be instrumentalised by contemporary fairy-tale retellers. First, let us note that the presence of magical motifs and wondrous plots in a literary genre primarily destined to

children is far from surprising: one of the primary purposes of traditional fairy stories was indeed to encourage escapism and suspension of disbelief in young readers (Zipes, “Changing Function” 20-21). However, many contemporary critics—among which Cristina Bacchilega—underline that distancing fairy-tale stories from real-world dynamics and issues inevitably dulls any message or moral the narrative might have wished to convey: “When I reflect on the continuity between the ‘wonder folk tale’ and the fairy tale, I find I want to emphasize the ideological paradox or ‘trick’ which in its multiple performances informs both: that magic which seeks to conceal the struggling interests which produce it” (Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales* 7). According to Bacchilega, the setting of fairy narratives within magical realms and fantasy worlds implicitly severs the bond between tale and storyteller, thus accelerating the appropriation of folktales by Western bourgeois literature.

Although Bacchilega successfully identifies dynamics of depoliticisation impacting children’s literature far beyond the fairy-tale genre, I argue that fairy-tales should not be considered as inherently divorced from engaged, transformative literature. In fact, from the onset of the genre—and despite its imaginary and unidentifiable settings—fairy-tales have been considered especially dangerous for young readers, leading the Grimm brothers to revise and subdue their most disturbing tales. This discourse interestingly still circulates within contemporary Western societies, in spite of a cultural shift in the patterns and elements considered as problematic, as explains by Dominique Peyrache-Leborgne:

Dès le début des années 1970, Elena Gianini Belotti dans *Du côté des petites filles* (1973) s’insurgeait contre les contenus de la littérature enfantine, « responsables d’un discours discriminatoire, réactionnaire, misogyne et anhistorique d’autant plus grave que de telles escroqueries sont destinées à des enfants qui les assimilent avec aucun recul critique. » (31)

Besides, the renewed engagement of contemporary postmodern and feminist writers with the fairy-tale genre—alongside with the growing critical interest for fairy-tale studies in Western academia—paradoxically seems to contradict its alleged escapist purpose. On the subject of the underlying tension between entertainment and activism at the heart of the fairy-tale genre, Benson declares:

Contemporary prose fiction, in all its variety, is concerned with the collapsing of barriers and the dismantling of hierarchies, both aesthetic and ideological, and with the admittance of otherness, or at least the uncovering of an otherness already working within. The mute definitiveness of the fairy tale as a genre could be presumed by comparison to be a piece with precisely those categories the fiction is supposed to call into question. Furthermore, for all the leftist charges of a forgetting of history, the fiction in question is pervasively concerned with all things contextual, and so again out of tune with the ostensible otherworldliness of “Once upon a time.” The fairy tale thus seems an odd choice, or at the very least ill suited for the capture of the zeitgeist. (*Contemporary Fiction* 3)

I argue that, as a response to the structural contradictions underlined by Benson, contemporary fairy-tale retellers resort to using dual tactics of *disenchantment* and *re-enchantment* to convey subversive messages. The first consists in altering the prototypical setting of traditional tales by recontextualising—and often removing altogether—traditional wondrous elements from the diegesis, thus exposing the underlying, problematic constructs and dynamics at play within the genre (Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales* 35-36). Garrison Keillor, for instance, uses this strategy in “My Stepmother, Myself” (1981), in which the traditional fairy-tales “Snow White”, “Hansel and Gretel” and “Cinderella” all take on an explicitly political slant. By setting this triple retelling in the context of a report on real-world stepmothers—as well as by commenting sympathetically on the sociohistorical causes of

“wicked” parenting—Keillor reframes the genre’s reliance on (step)maternal violence as a narrative trope (Keillor 55-59). Alongside this trend of realistic recontextualisation, many contemporary writers also turn traditional wonder tales into magical realism narratives, so as to purposefully blur the boundary between fiction and reality:

The influence of realistic literature and magic realism is perceptible in fairy-tale retellings for all ages. Magic is one of the typical fairy-tale features that disappear or take on new guises in late twentieth-century retellings, inconsistencies are resolved, historical contextualization, and character description increase. A decline of the magical is perceptible, but the supernatural does not disappear completely. Authors exploit the coincidence as an ambiguous space between magic and realism, or make ample use of stylistic and narrative devices such as metaphors, similes, or unreliable narrators to give a new dimension to elements that formerly belonged unambiguously to the realm of the supernatural. (Joosen, “Disenchanted the Fairy Tale” 228)

The second aforementioned narrative tactic—which I refer to as *re-enchantment* throughout this chapter—relies on instrumentalising the “otherworldly” nature of fairy-tales (Benson, *Contemporary Fiction* 3): by setting the tale within a fantasy realm with no explicit real-world equivalent, contemporary retellers are able to tackle subversive topics and weave new narratives in order to distance the readership from outdated constructs of the genre (Gamble 12). In this respect, Warner declares:

Paradoxically, the remoteness of [the] traditional setting [of fairy-tales] – the palace, the forest, the distant and nameless kingdom, the anonymity and lack of particularity of their cast of characters, the kings and queens and princesses with names like Beauty or the Fair with the Golden Hair...all this underpins the stories’ ability to grapple with reality. As Wallace Stevens believed, it helps us to see the actual world

to visualize a fantastic one. Fairy tales typically use the story of something in the remote past to look towards the future, their conclusions, their “happy endings” do not always bring about total closure, but make promises, prophecies. (*Beast to the Blonde* xxi)

Angela Carter’s “The Snow Child” thus makes use of a fantasy setting and magical motifs to metaphorically reflect the loss of narrative power and social status experienced by the character of the Countess <sup>1</sup>after the apparition of the heroine:

The Countess dropped her glove in the snow and told the girl to get down to look for it; she meant to gallop off and leave her there but the Count said: “I’ll buy you new gloves.” At that, the furs sprang off the Countess’s shoulders and twined round the naked girl. Then the Countess threw her diamond brooch through the ice of a frozen pond: “Dive in and fetch it for me,” she said; she thought the girl would drown. But the Count said: “Is she a fish, to swim in such cold weather?” Then her boots leapt off the Countess’s feet and on to the girl’s legs. Now the Countess was bare as a bone and the girl furred and booted; the Count felt sorry for his wife. (*The Bloody Chamber* 91-92)

Contemporary fairy-tales are therefore characterised by a more diffuse relationship with fantasy and magic than their traditional counterparts, with retellers either choosing to reframe traditional tales within more realistic contexts or to shroud their magical and supernatural elements with narrative ambiguity. These dynamics hint at a potential overlap—or at least a correspondence—of fairy-tale settings to real-world situations. This partially explains why

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<sup>1</sup> Carter’s “The Snow Child” is inspired by the Grimms’ “Little Snow-White” and “Snowdrop”; the character of the Countess can therefore be considered as an amalgamation of the two wicked queens.

the contemporary mutations of the maternal within the genre seem to closely mirror the successive redefinitions of motherhood within Western cultures.

## 2.2. The Uses of Disenchantment

An essential characteristic of contemporary fairy-tale retellings as defined throughout this chapter lies with its recurring intersections with feminist and postmodern literature. Modern retellings thus often seek to question and disrupt traditional elements of canonical fairy-tales, be it to explore and expand the margins of the genre or, on the other hand, to expose and undermine its patriarchal and phallogocentric roots. Thus, before discussing how feminist fairy-tale retellings tackle problematic representations of maternal wickedness within the canon, I would like to look at the treatment of maternity and mother/daughter narratives within the parodic, playfully distorted “anti-tales” (Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales* 22-23) produced by postmodernist writers. In his article on “Cinderella”, Zipes explains that the most unstable section of the story across its many variants and adaptations remains the ending and, in particular, the punishment—or lack thereof—of the cruel stepmother and stepsisters (Zipes, *Oxford Companion* 110-113). Building upon this observation, I argue that postmodern fairy-tale retellers are particularly interested in exploring and rewriting the endings of traditional fairy-tales, particularly in the case of matricentric stories. Thus, on the subject of Margaret Atwood choosing to “write beyond the ending” of well-known fairy-tales (DuPlessis 6), Sharon Wilson explains:

Postmodern novelists who embed fairy-tale intertexts generally “revise” or deconstruct them, using irony, parody, and sometimes satire of these intertexts alongside the tales’ original character types, themes, motifs, and images. Often turning fairy-tale plots upside down, reversing outcomes, and using unreliable

narrators, anti-heroes/heroines, and magical realism, the texts generally exist in a romance mode and may still depict transformation and metamorphosis. (99)

The tropes and strategies outlined by Wilson are strikingly visible in Coover's novel *Stepmother*—in which the eponymous character attempts to rescue her daughters and stepdaughters from their canonical tragic fate—as well as in Keillor's "My Stepmother, Myself," a passionate defence of wicked stepmothers by fairy-tale heroines both echoing and parodying feminist fairy-tale criticism. Interestingly, both these revisions are framed as decentred continuations of traditional fairy-tales merging elements from several stories to weave an intertextual commentary on the systematic vilification of (step)mother figures.

Keillor's use of humour and parody in "My Stepmother, Myself" is interesting to discuss further, as it relies almost exclusively on prior knowledge of feminist fairy-tale criticism to take full effect. For instance, the first section of Keillor's narrative triptych directly echoes Sandra Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's feminist reading of "Snow White" stories, detailed in the introduction of *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979):

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

In trying to come to terms with myself, I've had to come to terms with my stepmother and her envy of my beauty, which made our relationship so destructive. She was a victim of the male attitude that prizes youth over maturity when it comes to women.



...In fact, she *was* beautiful, but the mirror (which, of course, reflected that male attitude) presented her with a poor self-image and turned her against me. (Keillor 57)

Keillor's motley fairy-tale therefore indicates metatextual awareness of contemporary fairy-tale studies and discourses, as well as a desire to subvert their authoritative dimension by (re)integrating them within the very fictional setting they set out to criticise. In addition to this parodic intertext, Keillor injects humour within the tale by greatly minimizing the violence and abuse inflicted upon Cinderella by her wicked stepmother, which he refers to as "little disagreements" and "the 'good old days'" for which the heroine finds herself "longing" (59). In fact, attempts to justify maternal abuse by framing it as a misguided yet necessary effort to toughen up passive heroines are extremely common within contemporary fairy-tale retellings, amongst which Nikita Gill's "The Stepmother's Tale" (2018), Sara Maitland's "The Wicked Stepmother's Lament" (2003), and Margaret Atwood's "Unpopular Gals" (1992). Atwood in particular makes similar use of a euphemistic narrator to subvert not only the character of the wicked stepmother, but also the grave and tragic dimension of fairy-tales as a genre:

The thing about those good daughters is, they're so good. Obedient and passive. ...

What would become of them if it weren't for me? Nothing, that's what. ...

I stir things up, I get things moving. "Go play in the traffic," I say to them. "Put on this paper dress and look for strawberries in the snow." It's perverse, but it works.

(*Good Bones* 23-24)

Perhaps one of the most significant points of intersection between postmodern revisions and feminist retellings of traditional fairy-tales is their intent to "shock and startle" contemporary readers (Tatar, *The Fairest of Them All* 27). Such an effect is often achieved by starkly deviating from prototypical fairy-tale endings, as well as by weaving a darker,

crueller, and sometimes uncanny fairy-tale countercanon, intended solely for adult consumption. Thus, though the fairy-tale genre has to some extent always been shaped by and for adult readers (Zipes, “Changing Function” 23), contemporary adaptations set out to permanently dissolve the previously intrinsic link between fairy stories and children’s literature. This pattern is particularly apparent with Carter, whose fairy-tales are no longer intended—or appropriate—for young audiences (Peyrache-Leborgne 53). For instance, on the subject of “The Snow Child”, Chainani declares:

Carter’s model ... attempts to deconstruct fairy-tale and pornographic archetypes simultaneously by tracing their origin to the same source. By exposing the surface falsity of both constructions, she can open up the possibility of revealing sexuality at an unconscious level, of creating a reading experience designed to replace pleasure with discomfort. (230)

Carter’s blunt, almost austere description of fatherly rape in “The Snow Child” thus makes the incestuous undertones of the original tale both unambiguous and unexpectedly vivid: “Weeping, the Count got off his horse, unfastened his breeches and thrust his virile member into the dead girl. The Countess reined in her stamping mare and watched him narrowly; he was soon finished.” (Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* 92) Tanith Lee’s fairy stories—compiled in *Red as Blood* (1983) and *Redder than Blood* (2017)—are equally laden with sexual themes and scenes, rendered even more startling by being inserted in tales devoid of any such previous undertones. For instance, “She Sleeps in a Tower” transform the traditional “Cinderella” narrative into a pretext for the prostitution of the maternal protagonist’s underage daughters:

I come out to [men] in the garden, and I ask, do they know where they’ve come to.

And they don’t say, “The brothel,” no, they play along, these kinky fellows. They say

they've come to the tower. And some of them even say, "Is she sleeping here?" And, of course, she always is. Three shes. One in each tower. I go by how they talk of her youth, whether they want the youngest now, who's ten, or the middle girl of eleven, or my eldest, who's just twelve years. (*Redder Than Blood* 72)

In addition to their intent to (re)create striking and disruptive fairy-tales for adults, Carter and Lee are also comparable in that they both express interest the treatment of gender within the fairy-tale genre, coupled with a desire to expose the phallogocentric anchoring of its canon. According to Bacchilega, the fairy-tale genre must be considered as a producer of gender (Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales* 9-10) in light of the way it instrumentalises the appearance of *mimesis*—conveyed through the motif of the looking glass—to (re)frame the concept of woman from an existing gender category into a totemic, fictional construct:

To take an extreme case, when Snow White is presented as a "natural" woman, the artful construction of her image encourages thinking of her and other stereotypical heroines in pre-cultural, unchangeable terms. By showcasing "women" and making them disappear at the same time, the fairy tale thus transforms us/them into man-made constructs of "Woman." (9)

Consequently, Bacchilega explains, contemporary fairy-tale revisions set out to demonstrate, among other assessments, the artificial and oppressive nature of these constructs through reframing:

Postmodern re-visions of "Snow White" acknowledge the power that such a metaphor has had. Rather than simply renewing and updating that power, however, they name and question its ideological nature. If the fairy tale symbolically seeks to represent some unquestionable natural state of being, postmodern fairy tales seek to expose this state's generic and gendered "lie" or artifice. Assuming that a frame always selects,

shapes, (dis)places, limits, and (de)centers the image in the mirror, postmodern retellings focus precisely on this frame to unmake the mimetic fiction. (24-25)

The deconstruction of gendered archetypes that Bacchilega presents as the primary purpose of postmodern fairy-tales is clearly expressed within Gill's 2018 collection *Fierce Fairy Tales*, in which traditional fairy-tale motifs are either revealed as being artificial constructs, or subversively repurposed as symbols of female empowerment:

*So Rapunzel, Rapunzel, she cut off her own hair, she used it as a rope, climbed down from the tower and ran away to find her own freedom, to make her own fortune, like a bird finally free of her shackles and without so much as looking back.*

No one is coming to save you, my love. No prince, no saviour, no knight in shining armour. But don't you worry about a thing. You've already got what should save you, hiding inside the marrow in your own powerful spine, your own bones.  
(85)

The intradiegetic awareness of phallogentrism Gill instrumentalises throughout her collection interestingly brings to the fore another pattern of contemporary feminist fairy-tale retellings: the systematic debunking of traditional actantial patterns, followed by a redistribution of narrative roles according to more nuanced and culturally relevant models. In this respect, Anna Fisk thus declares:

Feminist criticism of mythical wicked women has highlighted and attempted to redress these cultural constructions of wicked women with interpretations and revisions of the tales that portray the wicked woman as an unconventional heroine who has been misrepresented through the years, labelled "evil" because she resists the *status quo* of patriarchal society. (15)

Once again, Atwood's metatextual reflection on structural and thematic prerequisites within fairy-tales in "There Was Once" underlines the disconnect between literary representations of wicked parenting and real-life situations:

"Better. But I am so *tired* of negative female images! And stepmothers—they always get it in the neck! Change it to *stepfather*, why don't you? That would make more sense anyway, considering the bad behaviour you're about to describe. And throw in some whips and chains. We all know what those twisted, repressed, middle-aged men are like—" (*Good Bones* 17)

This observation is echoed in "Unpopular Gals", in which the archetypal wicked stepmother—seemingly removed from any identifiable narrative context—expresses anger and weariness regarding the silent and silenced role of (step)fathers within tales of daughterly abuse:

It's true, there are never any evil stepfathers. Only a bunch of lily-livered widowers, who let me get away with murder vis-a vis their daughters. Where are they when I'm making those girls drudge in the kitchen, or sending them out into the blizzard in their paper dresses? Working late at the office. Passing the buck. Men! But if you think they know nothing about it, you're crazy. (23)

In Atwood's "Unpopular Gals"—as in many contemporary fairy-tale revisions—the use of intradiegetic, first-person narration is also instrumental in shedding light on the oppressive patriarchal constructs of the genre, both by injecting defamiliarizing otherness within traditional diegeses, and by allowing female voices to comment on the genre by directly addressing the reader: "You can wipe your feet on me, twist my motives around all you like, you can dump millstones on my head and drown me in the river, but you can't

get me out of the story. I'm the plot, babe, and don't ever forget it" (24). Thus, while discussing the narrative prism used by Coover in *Stepmother*, Christy Williams argues:

First-person narration ... acknowledges the subjectivity of the narrative position ... .

The narrating voices are fully entrenched in fairy-tale tradition and so carry with them the authority of that tradition. Coover provides *Stepmother* with not only a voice, but with a voice recognizable as authoritative in fairy-tale tradition. Thus the reader is able to both identify with *Stepmother* because of her first-person account, which diminishes the distance between character and reader in the popular tales, and recognize that voice as imbued with the authority expected of a traditional extradiegetic narrator. (261)

Donoghue similarly uses female voices as the narrative thread weaving together her fairy-tale fragments into a coherent, structured collection, thus hinting both at the interconnected nature of the fairy-tale canon and at the multiplicity of female voices long silenced by patriarchal literary dynamics. As argued by Elizabeth Wanning Harries, "[Donoghue's] last tale gestures toward an infinitely receding sequence of tales and unknown continuations: 'I leave it in your mouth.' The frame dissolves or vanishes; the reader's voice carries on.... Donoghue's imaginative reworking of the tales, then, is a play for voices. Each tale is told by a different voice; no two voices are alike" (Harries 133-134). Donoghue's female characters are thus intrinsically doubled, serving simultaneously as (anti)heroine and storyteller, and hinting at the possibility of a self-produced fairy-tale countercanon centred on the reclaiming of silenced, queer, wicked female voices.

In light of this contemporary pattern, it is necessary to underline that traditional fairy-tales customarily rely on the erasure of the narrator's voice and diegetic presence to strengthen the appearance of objectivity and authority of the tale. Bacchilega indeed argues

that, in order to divert the reader's attention away from the inevitable patriarchal framing of fairy-tales and reinforce their mimetic dimension, writers resort to "a very simple but powerful narrative strategy [of] fairy-tale production: [having] an external impersonal narrator whose straightforward statements carry no explicit mark of human perspective—gender, class, or individuality ... a form of ventriloquism that highly complicates the issue of narrative accountability" (Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales* 34). Contemporary fairy-tales therefore develop against this prototypical structural element, interestingly mirroring the aesthetics of oral storytelling within the diegesis by reemphasising the role of the narrator and their positioning *vis a vis* the readership. This way, contemporary retellings bring to our attention the roots of the fairy-tale as a genre requiring more than one participant, and in which the teller can never be fully trusted, for their position of power renders them able to distort and transform the diegesis at will. For instance, in *All the Ever Afters* (2018), Danielle Teller offers a novelised retelling of "Cinderella" through the narrative prism of the wicked stepmother:

I know more of the princess's history than anyone else alive, and the true tale is not as fantastical as the one sung by troubadours. Nobody is interested in the story of a flesh-and-blood nobleman's daughter, one who wet her bed, complained of boredom, fought with her kin, and turned up her nose at winter greens just like any mortal child....

I do not set out to write the princess's history, but my own, the only tale I have the authority to tell.... As for fables about good and evil and songs about glass slippers, I shall leave those to the minstrels. They can invent their own tales about Cinderella.

(4)

This way, Teller not only revives the inherent bond between storytelling and the fairy-tale genre, she also hints at the possibility of women reclaiming their earlier narrative roles as *conteuses* and producers of the canon.

The potential development of a feminist countercanon to the fairy-tale genre, at the instigation of women writers and centred on reclaiming silenced female voices and narratives echoes Warner's claim that the systematic alienation of women and children within patriarchal cultures paradoxically allowed them to carve out a subversive space for narrative experimentation within the fairy-tale genre:

Fairy tale offers a case where the very contempt for women opened an opportunity for them to exercise their wit and communicate their ideas: women's care for children, the prevailing disregard for both groups, and their presumed identity with the simple folk, the common people, handed them fairy tales as a different kind of nursery, where they might set their own seedlings and plant out their own flowers. (*Beast to the Blonde* xxiii)

This subversion strategy is not, however, only identifiable within contemporary feminist revisions of fairy-tales. In fact, I argue that contemporary retellings are intent on returning to the roots of the genre by exploring the bond between the folk and fairy stories in a contemporary light. In *When Dreams Came True*, Zipes thus alludes to the underlying connections between the early crystallisation of the fairy-tale canon and the literary representation of marginalised social groups:

The more the literary fairy tale was cultivated and developed, the more it became individualized and varied by intellectuals and artists, who often sympathized with the marginalized in society or were marginalized themselves. The literary fairy tale allowed for new possibilities of subversion in the written word and in print; therefore,



it was always looked upon with misgivings by the governing authorities in the civilization process. (7)

Building upon this historical connection, he then argues that contemporary fairy-tale retellings ought to revive the bond between folk voices and fairy stories so as to preserve the subversive and transformative power of the genre.

There is no doubt that the fairy tale has become totally institutionalized in Western society, part of the public sphere, with its own specific code and forms through which we communicate about social and psychic phenomena. ... This code has its key words and key marks, but it is not static. As in the oral tradition, its original impulse of hope for better living conditions has not vanished in the literary tradition, although many of the signs have been manipulated in the name of male authoritarian forces. As long as the fairy tale continues to awaken our wonderment and enable us to project counterworlds to our present society, it will serve a meaningful social and aesthetic function, not just for compensation but for revelation: the worlds portrayed by the best of our fairy tales are like magic spells of enchantment that actually free us. Instead of petrifying our minds, they arouse our imagination and compel us to realize how we can fight terror and cunningly insert ourselves into our daily struggles, turning the course of the world's events in our favor. (31)

In this respect, the many intersections of contemporary fairy stories with issues of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and social status come as little surprise. As previously mentioned, Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch* revises traditional fairy-tales through the prism of queer desires and interpersonal female relationships; Catherynne Valente's *Six-Gun Snow White* reframes the traditional "Snow White" narrative as one of ethnic oppression and abuse at the hands of the stepmother:

Mrs. H reached over the card table and smoothed my hair between her fingertips. “You are not entirely ugly, but no one would mistake you for a human being. That skin will never come clean. And that hair! Black as coal, and those lips, as red as the hearts your savage mother no doubt ate with relish... .”

From that day forward she never used my name. Eventually I forgot it. Mrs. H called me something new.... She named me a thing I could aspire to but never become, the one thing I was not and could never be: Snow White. (32-33)

Meanwhile, Keillor’s “My Stepmother, Myself” briefly touches upon the real-world financial and social hardships associated with becoming a stepmother (Keillor 57-59). In fact, the fairy-tale genre itself has recently been expanding past traditional, Western definitions of literature, invading many new branches of popular culture throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century. This contemporary diversification contributes to the blurring of borders between canonical and non-canonical literature—an arbitrary binary which my dissertation similarly attempts to debunk by focusing on a wide variety of retellings with diverse cultural impact and literary significance.

### **2.3. Mother-Tales, Daughter-Tales**

The slow disintegration of the dichotomy opposing popular fiction to literary works is interestingly mirrored by the gradual dissolution of the border between children and adult fairy-tales. As argued by Zipes:

It becomes increasingly difficult to draw boundaries between fairy tales for children and adults. One thing is clear and has always been true: adults have always read, censored, approved, and distributed the so-called fairy tales for children. On the other hand, as more and more children have become functionally and culturally literate, as

they have become more worldly, they have either sought the reading material of adults or been exposed to this material. (“Changing Function” 23-24)

However, as I have previously explained, the opposite dynamic is of equal significance: many contemporary fairy-tale retellers—notably Angela Carter, Robert Coover and Tanith Lee—have (re)appropriated stories destined for children so as to produce gritty, grim and gory narratives aimed primarily at adult readers. In this respect, Warner declares that “the fairy tale grew up in 1979”, with the publication of Carter’s influential, adult-oriented collection *The Bloody Chamber* (Warner, *Once Upon a Time* 141). In addition, the aforementioned shift of contemporary retellings towards intradiegetic, subjective narrators often reinforces the blurring of adult and children voices; this is particularly true of Tanith Lee’s *White as Snow* (2000), a novelisation of “Snow White” in which the focalisation balances between the heroine, Coira, and her wicked (step)mother Arpazia. One must also note that the interpretation of uncanny and magical diegetic elements by child readers and focalisers starkly differs from that of adults (Zolkover 70-71). In this respect, Neil Gaiman’s 2002 *Coraline* is particularly intriguing, as it reportedly generates more unease among adult readers than children, despite being primarily aimed the latter group:

Children react to the story fundamentally as an adventure. They may get a little bit scared, but it’s an “edge-of-your-seat, what's-gonna-happen-next, oh scary!” thing, because you’re giving them a story about somebody like themselves... . Adults get scared ... adults get disturbed, and I think one reason for that is because it’s a story about a child in danger and I think we’re hardwired to worry about children in danger. (Gaiman, “No real controversy”)

The blurring of borders between children and adult fairy literature also carries particular significance with regards to the object of my dissertation. Indeed, the

transformation of traditional storytelling dynamics and the gradual alteration of the intended purpose of fairy-tales both mirrors and impacts intradiegetic depictions of parent/child relationships within the contemporary (counter)canon. In this respect, it is important to stress that, at the time of their compilation by the Grimm brothers, the primary aim of fairy-tales was not the education or entertainment of children, but rather the crystallisation of German cultural identity and literary heritage (Warner, *Once Upon a Time* 67). In addition, Zipes argues that the didactic and moralistic function of fairy-tales was abandoned in the eighteenth century, due to the supposedly detrimental effects of marvellous literature on children:

In England, North America, and most of Central Europe, the fairy tale for children of the upper classes had been rejected and more or less banned because of its alleged frivolous nature and precisely because of its “wondrous” elements. It was feared that children would get “crazy ideas” from the fairy tales because they were filled with pagan ideas, superstitions, magic, and fantasy. Moreover, the tales did not encourage them to learn a definitive, categorical, and rational way of thinking and approaching life. If they taught them anything, it was to wonder, hope, wish, and fantasize.

(“Changing Function” 17)

One is therefore led to question the evolution—or lack thereof—of the purpose of contemporary fairy-tales, as well as how the expansion of the genre beyond its primary intended audience might intersect with modern family dynamics. In this respect, Andrew Teverson reminds us that “with their power to normalize gender, sexuality, and relationships from familial to romantic, fairy tales provide narrative models for identity and behavior” (Teverson 270). I thus argue that contemporary fairy-tale retellings must still be considered as primarily educational, as they are concerned in teaching young and adolescent readers about the dangers of maintaining the patriarchal status quo, as well as the importance of developing tactics of subversion and resistance both within literature and society (Chainani 234). This

narrative purpose is in fact explicitly stated and explored in Gill's short piece "Take Back Your Fairy Tale":

Await no princes to save you  
 through their lips touching yours  
 whilst you are in unwilling slumber.

Meet each other in the womb  
 of your enchanted dreams,  
 Snow White and Sleeping Beauty.

.....

Darkling magic is coursing through those veins,  
 turn it into kindling, my resourceful girls,  
 find one another in the fog realm,  
*wake each other up instead.* (63)

The maternal voice created by Gill thus emulates traditional storytelling situations while turning maternal discourses empowering. This way, she hints at the possibility of positive, supportive mother/daughter relationships within the fairy-tale genre.

One must also note that, in spite of the subversive and disruptive function of contemporary fairy-tale revisions, modern narratives also invite adult readers to reconnect with the roots of the genre through emulating familiar scenarios of child-like wonder and fantasy. According to Schanoes:

Reconsidering the well-known tale reminds the writer of the previous pleasure in or dissatisfaction with the narrative—the lost childhood emotion. The desire to recapture that pleasure, or, alternatively, to amend that dissatisfaction, by writing a more fulfilling version of the story impels the writer to revise, and that revision represents a

future wish, in the sense that the revision is an appeal to future readers, to whom it can serve as the present impetus or the past memory. (66-67)

Warner also alludes to this idea in *Once Upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tales*, in which she explains that fairy stories carry particular significance for adult (re)readers and (re)tellers due to the presence of magical and wondrous elements which turn uncanny when encountered again upon adulthood:

In their modern transformations, fairy tales can be sited in this version of the Uncanny, which then opens on to the possibilities of full-blown magical realism. But this is not the complete story, and the Todorovian categories fail to take account of the way fairy tale is poised, not between knowing and not knowing the causes of the wonders and enchantments, but between accepting them (as the ideal child reader does) and rejecting them (as the adult reader can be expected to do). The form however draws the latter into the stance of the former: we are not always placed in doubt as to what to believe, but rather invited to return to an imaginary state of trusting fictions, and this carries a special pleasure. The duality lies partly in the tale itself, but chiefly in ourselves as readers. (46)

The purpose of modern fairy-tale revisions therefore seems not to be limited to the empowerment and entertainment of contemporary child audiences; retellers are equally concerned with weaving a literary countercanon made of darker, disturbing, and often political tales destined to adult readers. These tales are instrumental in bridging the gap between parent and child by reconnecting adult audiences to familiar themes and motifs from their childhood, albeit retold in a new light.

Looking more specifically at the works discussed in this dissertation, it is necessary to underline that, even within the prism of contemporary matricentric fairy-tale retellings, the

narrative gap between original tale and its retelling(s) varies greatly. Thus far, I have primarily discussed revisions whose literary roots are easily identifiable, but many contemporary writers also attempt to spin new tales from the straw of the fairy-tale canon. In this respect, Schanoes argues that the process of literary (re)creation through patterns of imitation and rejection closely mirrors dynamics of the mother/daughter bond—a fascinating notion which I will discuss in greater depth in the following subsection of this dissertation (Schanoes 33-55). Before looking at revisioning as a potentially matrilineal process, however, it is necessary to discuss these transformed tales and the relationship they entertain with their literary ancestors. The first process this section discusses is one I have previously alluded to: the reframing of fairy narratives within specific historical, textual or contextual settings. Gregory Maguire’s novels *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister* (1999) and *Mirror Mirror* (2003)—retellings of, respectively, “Cinderella” and “Snow White”—illustrate this process: the traditional tales are expanded upon through specific historical prisms, yet conserve uncanny and wondrous elements that root them firmly within the fairy-tale genre. Similarly, Valente’s *Six-Gun Snow White* re-roots the traditional “Snow White” narrative within the mythical Wild West, turning the colour symbolism present within the original tale into an allegory of race relations between settlers and Native Americans. As for Lee’s *White as Snow*, though it bears no direct ties to a specific historical era or geographical location, it artfully merges story elements from “Snow White” and “Snowdrop” with the myth of Demeter and Persephone, thus allowing for a profound yet ambivalent look at maternal wickedness and destructive mother/daughter narratives.

Lee’s hybrid fairy-tale is reminiscent of another pattern of structural disruption within fairy-tale retellings: the creation of motley stories through the weaving together of traditional tales within a single narrative unit. This process is particularly prevalent in stage and film adaptations, as evidenced by the recent popularity of the musical *Into the Woods* and the

*Shrek* film franchise (Silva 188); however, it has also impacted contemporary fairy literature at large, with such works as Gaiman's *The Sleeper and the Spindle*, Gill's *Fierce Fairy Tales* and Keillor's "My Stepmother, Myself." Both Gaiman and Keillor thus structure their hybrid tales around a common thematic center, in which all the narrative fragments they borrow intersect. This arbitrary gathering of tales according to tropes and motifs creates an interesting diegetic parallel to existing fairy-tale classification systems, which I discuss in greater detail in the following chapter. In Keillor's case, the narrative is centred on the defence of various wicked stepmothers by successive fairy-tale heroines, in an explicit effort to recontextualise the seemingly inevitable malevolence of fairy maternity:

How cruel is the typical stepmother?

Not very, according to the report, which examines many cases of alleged cruelty and finds almost all of them untrue.

"The media have jumped on every little misunderstanding and have blown it up to outlandish proportions," the report finds. Recently, three stepdaughters whose relationships with their stepmother are well known agreed to speak out and set the record straight. (56)

Gaiman, on the other hand, structures *The Sleeper and the Spindle* around the motif of cursed sleep, as the title indicates. The heroine—a feminist, empowered incarnation of Snow White—embarks on a quest to rescue a different princess from eternal sleep, in a narrative that borrows many elements from "Sleeping Beauty" stories and entwines various fairy-tale motifs within a singular fantasy realm:

"Why don't you just go to sleep?" asked the girl, and she smiled guilelessly, just as the queen's stepmother had smiled when she wanted something. There was a noise on the stairs, far below them.



“I slept for a year in a glass coffin,” said the queen. “And the woman who put me there was much more powerful and dangerous than you will ever be.”

“More powerful than I am?” The girl seemed amused. “I have a million sleepers under my control. With every moment that I slept I grew in power, and the circle of dreams grows faster and faster with every passing day. I have my youth – so much youth! I have my beauty. No weapon can harm me. Nobody alive is more powerful than I am.” (49-50)

The third type of hybrid retelling this dissertation discusses bears much resemblance to narratives of entwined fairy-tales, yet presents no easily identifiable trope or motif indicative of its canonical source(s); this type of revision is therefore extremely akin to original fairy-tales. For instance, Gaiman’s young-adult novel *Coraline*, though borrowing from a multitude of fairy-tale tropes, motifs, and plots, only bears slight resemblance to its primary source, Lucy Clifford’s 1882 cautionary tale “The New Mother” (Ahlin). Despite this discrepancy, Gaiman’s fairy-tale engages with the dichotomy of good and wicked mothering to the same extent as much stricter retellings, and his villainous “other mother” must be considered as a thinly veiled analogue of the traditional wicked stepmother who threatens and imprisons:

The other mother shook her head, very slowly. “Sharper than a serpent’s tooth,” she said, “is a daughter’s ingratitude. Still, the proudest spirit can be broken, with love.” And her long white fingers waggled and caressed the air.

“I have no plans to love you,” said Coraline. “No matter what. You can’t make me love you.” (*Coraline* 90)

They stared at each other for over a minute. Then the other mother said, “Manners!”  
... Then she stood up, and up, and up: she seemed taller than Coraline remembered.

She reached into her apron pocket and pulled out, first the black door key, which she frowned at and tossed into her shopping bag, then a tiny silver-colored key. She held it up triumphantly. “There we are,” she said. “This is for you, Coraline. For your own good. Because I love you. To teach you manners. Manners makyth man, after all.”

(92-93)

Similarly, Coover’s *Stepmother* takes place in a wondrous, magical realm in which a multiplicity of fairy-tale characters and motifs coexist, but which only incidentally references specific fairy stories. Instead, Coover crafts an original, metanarrative tale in which the eponymous protagonist wearily comments on the unfair treatment of unpleasant and wicked women throughout the genre:

How many I’ve seen go this way, daughters, stepdaughters, whatever ... I know where they go: to be drowned, hung, stoned, beheaded, burned at the stake ...dragged down the street in barrels studded on the inside with nails ... . Their going always sickens me and the deep self-righteous laughter of their executioners causes the bile to rise, and for a time thereafter I unleash a storm of hell, or at least what’s in my meager power to raise... (1-2)

The dynamic of distorted mirroring and partial metamorphosis that characterises contemporary fairy-tale retellings carries particular relevance for this dissertation, as I argue that the very process of revisioning directly parallels matrilineal dynamics as they are depicted within the fairy-tale genre. As suggested by Schanoes, the relationship between an original tale and its revision can be assimilated to that of a fairy-tale (step)mother and her (step)daughter, in light of their structural resemblance coupled with their antagonistic yet interdependent relationship:

Not only do [contemporary] revisions portray the contemporaneous concepts of feminine subjectivity by their characters' feelings, experiences, and actions, but we can also consider the revisions themselves as case studies in second-wave mother-daughter relationships. These revisions enact between texts, between themselves and their traditional sources, the permeable boundaries, shared identity, and fluid sense of self that Chodorow, Nancy K. Miller, Irigaray, and the Stone Center theorists argued are characteristic of feminine subjectivity as well as the mother-daughter matrix generative of that subjectivity. (33-34)

In Lee's *White as Snow*, for example, the extreme physical likeness and lack of identity boundaries between mother and daughter is mirrored by the mingling of their narratives and voices, creating continuity, permeability, and interdependence between the two characters:

Hands met, and parted. Candacis arrived before the woman. They were of equal height. Extraordinary eyes were fixed on her own....

Two faces, both the same. The lips drawn in, the eyes wide and set like ice.

Then, both turning, to look back, and the eyes clashing against each other with a flash....

The image and its reflection. But which was which? (147)

When discussing the relationship between “mother-story”—the original fairy-tale—and “daughter-story”—its contemporary revision—Schanoes also argues that “the daughter-story is continuous with the mother-story, incorporating those traditional stories as a vital part of its identity, necessary for full understanding, and the mother-story contains the daughter-story *in potentia* or *in utero*, as it were” (Schanoes 34). Once more, this is particularly true in Lee's *White as Snow*, as Coira's narrative arc closely mirrors that of her mother Arpazia, up to the climactic moment of destructive confrontation.

However, considering the relationship between traditional tale and modern retelling through the prism of mother/daughter dynamics raises the possibility of the eventual replacement of the first by the latter, as a form of intertextual realisation of the magic mirror's prophecy. Indeed, if mothers and daughters cannot coexist diegetically—an arbitrary patriarchal claim which I put under scrutiny throughout this dissertation—can mother-tales and daughter-tales truly live side by side within the contemporary fairy-tale (counter)canon? “The story [of ‘Snow White’] offers a meditation on competition in general, on the way the new supplants the old and the way the next ‘version’ is always more beautiful and attractive than the one before it, displacing and destroying its precursors,” Tatar declares in *The Fairest of Them All*, alluding to the effects of this process on fairy literature as a whole (34). At first glance, it can indeed seem as if many revisions of the prototypical mother/daughter plot do little more than retell the same story through a different narrative prism or invert the actantial roles between (anti)heroine and antagonist. On the other hand, even morally ambiguous revisions seem unable to permanently alter the trope of (step)maternal wickedness (Benson, “Late Fairy Tales” 138). In this respect, I find particularly striking that stepmothers seldom survive contemporary diegeses, even when they are portrayed with nuance and empathy throughout the story. For instance, Gaiman's “Snow, Glass, Apples” (1994) concludes with the execution of the stepmother, despite having portrayed her as protective and selfless throughout the narrative:

I will not scream. I will not give them that satisfaction. They will have my body, but my soul and my story are my own, and will die with me.

The goose-grease begins to melt and glisten upon my skin. I shall make no sound at all. I shall think no more on this.

I shall think instead of the snowflake on her cheek.

I think of her hair as black as coal, her lips as red as blood, her skin, snow-white.

(384)

Besides, Schanoes argues that considering daughter-tales as subversive reiterations of mother-tales does not, in fact, require the destruction of the latter. On the contrary, she declares:

Revision not only incarnates prior versions of the tale, but it is also identified with those versions by looking toward its own revision, just as Chodorow argues that a mother of a daughter usually experiences a simultaneous identification with her own mother as well as with her infant daughter. Insofar as a revision both requires and embodies its older version, the revision does not destroy its mother-story, but instead re-creates and prolongs its life... . (34)

However, she also explains that true revisions require meaningful intent to distinguish themselves from fairy-tale variants. Retellings, she argues, ought not only to repeat the mother-tale, but rather to expose its biases and demand a transformation of literary status quo:

If repetition is dangerous, even fatal, what, then, differentiates a revision from mere repetition, or, in Zipes's language, a duplicate? Revision, as much as it preserves old stories... also demands strategic change, change that is consciously meaningful in order to be a true revision. But it is change in the context of a familiar cultural tale that produces the greatest meaning: we cannot throw out the old stories that formed us, giving us great pleasure and constraining us in equal measure. Even if we wished to, it is simply not possible. These stories are a part of us, and so they make us part of them. (77)

Building upon Schanoes's understanding of the retelling as an intrinsically matrilineal process, this dissertation therefore attempts to uncover the patriarchal biases brought to the fore by contemporary revisions of wicked (step)mothers and fairy maternities, as well as the solutions outlined by subversive reinterpretations of the mother/daughter plot.

Throughout this chapter, I have examined the relationship between the fairy-tale canon and its array of successive variants and revisions from the onset of the genre as a written form. From this in-depth discussion clearly emerges the intrinsic link between the fairy-tale as a literary form and the very process of revisioning, which dates back to its oral origins and serves to keep it shape-shifting and culturally relevant. Interestingly, the presence of fantasy and magical elements within the genre is not only instrumental to its continued popular appeal, but also to the processes of reflection and distortion that inform both the literary canon and its subversive alternatives, from early anti-tales to the contemporary countercanon. If transformation and evolution must be considered as inherent processes of fairy literature, it is however necessary to also underline the specificities of contemporary retellings, which, rather than offering variations on well-known and well-loved narratives, wittingly questions their most canonical and structural elements. Rather than hinting at the inevitable end of the genre in its literary form, however, contemporary retellings develop tactics of disenchantment to question the nature, purpose and biases of the genre, while simultaneously reviving it for contemporary audiences through strategies of re-enchantment and distorted mirroring.

Finally, the aforementioned dynamics hold particular significance in the specific context of matricentric revisions and modern mother/daughter narratives. Interestingly, the transformation of wicked parenting within contemporary fairy-tales bears direct repercussions on the conception of the genre as an intergenerational storytelling medium envisioned as a tool of education and entertainment for child audiences. The current

debunking of these binary constructs hints at the possible emergence of a repurposed fairy-tale countercanon meant to empower and enthrall readers of all ages and genders, while also rekindling its historical and cultural ties to the folk. In addition, the relationship between traditional tales and their contemporary revisions can be interpreted as a metatextual variation on mother/daughter fairy-tale dynamics. In this respect, this dissertation argues that feminist and postmodern revisioning can provide both textual and contextual commentary on the patriarchal roots and biases of fairy-tale mothering, as well as suggest new tales to spin in order to eventually mend the prototypical mother/daughter fairy-tale plot.

## Chapter 3. Wicked Narratives: Understanding the Role of the (Step)Mother

Despite the width and diversity of its ever-changing canon, the fairy-tale paradoxically remains one of the most codified literary genres with regards to its use of language and narrative formulas. Set phrases and expressions such as “once upon a time” and “happily ever after” carry such intrinsic and easily identifiable ties to the genre that they are often used as the titles of contemporary adaptations and parodies, so as to root them within the fairy-tale genre whilst preserving a sense of wonder over the specific subject-matter. The television series *Once Upon a Time* (2011-2018), for instance, revolves around the conflictual coexistence of traditional fairy-tale heroes and villains within a single, contemporary setting, while Stephen Sondheim’s critically-acclaimed musical *Into the Woods* (1986) crafts an original, motley folktale centred on the dwelling place of many dangerous fairy-tale creatures: the woods. The fact that the presence of such minor linguistic elements is sufficient to turn narratives into fairy stories is indicative of a trend shared by many contemporary retellers and folklore scholars alike: the desire to break fairy-tales down to the smallest identifiable unit—be it a succession of plot elements, a combination of stock characters or, indeed, a simple motif or formula.

This common interest, however, manifests itself through a variety of often conflicting approaches, typologies, and terminologies, not always specific to the fairy-tale genre. The character of the wicked stepmother perfectly illustrates this diversity: she can indeed be considered as a prototypical antagonist of the genre, but also as a one-dimensional stock character in many hero-centric adaptations. Her narrative presence also conveys a particular set of themes and motifs that can either be tale-specific—the looking glass, the poisoned apple—or intrinsic to the character itself—witchcraft and cannibalism. This observation also



brings to the fore a central paradox of fairy-tale typologies in the context of this dissertation: despite being one of the most popular and codified characters of the genre, the wicked (step)mother has rarely been discussed by structural and morphological studies of folktales, especially in comparison to psychoanalytic and feminist criticism. Additionally, many of the traditional narrative and thematic features associated with maternal antagonists are either subverted or removed altogether from contemporary fairy-tale revisions. What becomes of the diegetic role of the wicked stepmother when, for instance, she is made the (anti)heroine of the tale, as in Danielle Telle's *All the Ever Afters*? Is the dichotomy of maternity and rivalry as intrinsic as we have been led to believe?

In order to answer these questions, this chapter sets out to discuss the narrative role of the wicked stepmother both as an essential character of the fairy-tale canon, and as the unlikely subject of subversive retellings belonging to a burgeoning matricentric counter canon. If, as the protagonist of Margaret Atwood's "Unpopular Gals" indignantly declares, the wicked stepmother "[is] the plot... and don't [we] ever forget it" (*Good Bones* 24), does it still make sense to think of fairy-tales as being structured around the hero's journey? The first section of this chapter is thus concerned with the conceptual challenges which arise when attempting to define the genre according to structural and morphological patterns, so as to distinguish it from analogous literary forms. In doing so, I pay particular attention to the inherent tension between unicity and multiplicity at the core of the genre. The following section discusses fundamental morphological and structural notions—amongst which functions, mythemes, tale types and motifs—through the prism of contemporary mother/daughter stories, in an attempt to determine the invariable and contingent attributes of (step)maternal antagonism, as well as how contemporary retellers set out to instrumentalise and subvert them. In the final section, I argue for the importance of establishing a specific, contextualised and holistic morphology of contemporary

mother/daughter tales through the (re)combining of elements from previous systems, so as to accurately represent and comment on the changing nature of matrilineal plots and characters within the modern fairy-tale countercanon.

### 3.1. Shape-Shifting Tales

Prior to any attempt to determine the intrinsic narrative structure of fairy-tales—as well as the motifs and patterns comprising it—it is necessary to clearly define the fairy-tale genre by establishing its possible thematic and morphologic boundaries. This preliminary process, however, appears as inherently problematic when considering the field of folklore and wondertales: indeed, many of its constituent genres share several fundamental elements—among which recognisable plot patterns, binary character types, and recurring motifs of magic and wonder. These multiple intersections inevitably blur the boundaries between myths, legends, fables and folktales, forcing us to question the very existence of a distinct fairy-tale genre. In his critique of Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), Claude Lévi-Strauss attempts to introduce a definitive distinction between folktales and myths by arguing that folktales present the same patterns and structural elements as myths do, yet on a smaller—and therefore less significant—scale. “Tales are miniature myths,” he explains, “in which the same oppositions are transposed to a smaller scale, and this is what makes them difficult to study in the first place” (“Structure and Form” 178). In addition, he argues that the profane nature of folktales triggers a greater lack of codification in the cultural use of the form (176). Interestingly, a very similar idea is developed by Bruno Bettelheim in *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976), in which he argues that the dichotomy between myths and fairy-tales relies on the alleged uniqueness of mythic heroes, to which he

opposes the more commonplace fairy-tale protagonist who goes through predetermined plots and trials without any undertone of exceptionalism:

There are not only essential similarities between myths and fairy tales; there are also inherent differences. Although the same exemplary figures and situations are found in both and equally miraculous events occur in both, there is a crucial difference in the way these are communicated. Put simply, the dominant feeling a myth conveys is: this is absolutely unique; it could not have happened to any other person, or in any other setting; such events are grandiose, awe-inspiring, and could not possibly happen to an ordinary mortal like you or me. The reason is not so much that what takes place is miraculous, but that it is described as such. By contrast, although the events which occur in fairy tales are often unusual and most improbable, they are always presented as ordinary, something that could happen to you or me or the person next door when out on a walk in the woods. Even the most remarkable encounters are related in casual, everyday ways in fairy tales. (36-37)

The subjective nature of Bettelheim's argument is striking, however. In fact, even within the traditional fairy-tale canon, many protagonists are presented as extraordinary both by nature and through their narrative adventures. For instance, even the passive heroine of the Grimms' "Little Snow White" is described as prophetically beautiful by both the magic mirror and the omniscient narrator, marking her as exceptional on a diegetic level: "But Snow White was growing up, and grew more and more beautiful; and when she was seven years old she was as beautiful as the day, and more beautiful than the Queen herself" (Grimm and Grimm 188). If Lévi-Strauss's distinction between myth and folktale might initially seem more relevant and applicable than Bettelheim's, it is nevertheless necessary to stress that, according to Alan Dundes, the story of Oedipus—upon which Lévi-Strauss constructs his entire argument—actually is more akin to a folktale than a myth:

Suffice it to say that if a myth is “a sacred narrative explaining how the world and humankind came to be in their present form,” then it is perfectly obvious that the story of Oedipus is NOT a myth. As folklorists very well know, it is in fact a standard folk tale, namely, Aarne-Thompson tale type 931. (The number was assigned by Aarne in his original *Verzeichnis der Märchentypen*, FFC 3, published in 1910.) So it turns out that Lévi-Strauss, like Propp, began his analysis of “myth” with a folktale! (Dundes, “Binary Opposition” 45)

Interestingly, Bettelheim’s and Lévi-Strauss’s arguments intersect in their understanding of the fairy-tale genre as a literary form reified by unwavering structural codes, which manifest themselves through a generalised suspension of disbelief often bordering on indifference to even the most wondrous and exceptional plot elements. (Todorov 54) A very similar idea is developed by Max Lüthi in *The European Folktale* (1951):

The folktale envisions and depicts a world that unfolds before us as the antitype of the uncertain, confusing, unclear, and threatening world of reality. Whereas the diversity of the real world is constantly on the verge of dissolution, whereas the forms of the real world blossom and wilt, and whereas the realistic legend never tires of representing this process of growth and decay, the folktale crystallizes forms and gives us clear lines and solid unwavering figures—not in lifeless stillness, however, but in purposeful motion. The persons and things it depicts do not wither. With decisive abruptness they may turn into other persons or things, but they do not fade away, they do not dissolve. The folktale’s episodes do not break off or lose their sense of direction, but pure and sure they reach their specified goal. (Lüthi, *The European Folktale* 85-86)

The narrative immutability described by Lüthi not only hints at the presence of many underlying structural, morphological and thematic patterns within the genre; it also stands in direct opposition with the idea of a shape-shifting, transformative fairy-tale canon fuelled by constant revisions, which I discussed at length in the previous chapter. In this respect, one is led to wonder whether the nature of the fairy-tale genre might in fact lie within its systematic resistance to definition and categorisation, or whether these paradoxical observations might be indicative of a profound transformation of the fairy-tale genre within contemporary Western cultures. Interestingly, the works discussed throughout this dissertation all exhibit strong variations in form and content when compared to the traditional tales they rewrite. In *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), for instance, Angela Carter maintains most of the prototypical narrative elements of the stories she revisits—developing some and reframing others without denaturing the original tale. On the other hand, short stories such as Atwood’s “Unpopular Gals” and Sara Maitland’s “The Wicked Stepmother’s Lament” only reference traditional fairy-tales through unordered lists of traditional plot points and motifs.

“Sweep that grate.” “Tidy your room.” “Do your homework.” ... “Wake up, hurry, stop day-dreaming, no you can’t, yes you must, get a move on, don’t be so stupid,” and “You’re not going to the ball, or party, or disco, or over to your Nan’s, dressed like *that*.” (Maitland 35)

I stir things up, I get things moving. “Go play in the traffic,” I say to them. “Put on this paper dress and look for strawberries in the snow.” It’s perverse, but it works. All they have to do is smile and say hello and do a little more housework, for some gnomes or nice ladies or whatever, and bingo, they get the king’s son and the palace, and no more dishpan hands. (Atwood, *Good Bones* 23)

In addition, even the idea of fairy-tales existing as a literary genre similar yet distinct from that of myths is called into question by contemporary tales, as exemplified by Tanith Lee's *White as Snow* which merges the traditional plot of "Snow White" with the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone, resulting in a hybrid narrative espousing a non-prototypical form: the novel. In light of this dichotomy, this chapter attempts to underline the structural, morphological and stylistic elements that serve to define tales of wicked (step)mothers, while paying particular attention to the ways they are maintained, subverted or erased by contemporary revisionists.

In a chapter discussing formalism within the fairy-tale genre, Jill Terry Rudy declares the following:

[For] the fairy tale... content usually is diminished as attention is drawn to the "nuts and bolts" of the storytelling, or perhaps that the content actually is the storytelling's nuts and bolts in the form of motifs or functions (depending on the analytical starting point) in generative combination, as the smallest units of composition or meaning organized into tales and narrative cycles. (36)

With this statement, she posits the importance of identifiable structural and morphological fairy-tale patterns over what she describes as the story's content—that is to say, the more variable and plot-contingent elements of each fairy-tale iteration. However, the primacy of structure over other narrative elements—such as style, content, or character—is far from unquestionable. For instance, fairy-tale scholar Jessica Tiffin argues for the importance of "texture" in fairy-tales (6), which she describes as a specific combination of structural and stylistic motifs allowing for the identification of fairy-stories even in their most disrupted forms.

By identifying fairy tale by texture, I am [...] invoking a range of characteristics which rely heavily on clean lines, deliberate patterning and a geometry of structure and motif, but also include style, voice, and some aspects of content and mimetic approach. This attribute of texture, rather than language or motif, renders a fairy tale intrinsically familiar and identifiable even through literary manipulation, and it is precisely this quality of identifiability which allows the form to provide such a rich ground for metafictional play. (8)

I build upon Tiffin's comprehensive approach of fairy-tale texts further throughout the final section of this chapter, as I attempt to establish a contemporary, holistic morphology of (step)maternal wickedness in fairy-tale retellings. However, if the production of fairy-tales depends not only on the inclusion of predetermined sequences of narrative syntagms, but rather on the replication of diverse tropes, motifs and topoi originating from a shared fairy-tale hypotext, we are once again led to question the porosity of the genre's borders. With regards to this idea, Zipes develops the controversial notion of fairy-tale "meme" ("Changing Function" 15) to designate a variety of markers and codes stemming from the fairy-tale canon, yet internalised by Western cultures to the point of involuntary replication within works of fiction unrestricted to the fairy-tale genre.

Formalist and structuralist attempts to decompose and classify folktales according to the inner structuring of the plot brings to the fore another problematic assumption of literary folklorists: the potential existence of a single, monolithic Urtext—or rather, in this case, an *Urtale*—being declined time and again by storytellers from across the world. However, envisioning the structural dissection of folktales as a way of unveiling a universal narrative at the root of the genre posits itself directly against diachronic and contextual analyses of the fairy-tale canon. Dundes, for instance, criticises Propp's *Morphology* for its widespread disregard of social and historical context, which he assimilates to an inappropriate

dissociation of the folk—the cultures and storytellers originating the works Propp discusses—and the tale (Rudy 37). Interestingly, a very similar critique is often addressed to the Finnish School’s historic-geographic approach, as explained by Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt in *American Folklore Scholarship: A Dialogue of Dissent* (1988):

The final, and perhaps more serious, problem with [the historic-geographic method] was the separation of the folk from the lore. Scholars talked of tales that migrated from country to country, but they excluded from the discussion the tellers of the tales and the effect they had on the creation and dissemination of folktales. This was part of the orientation of the literary folklorist, toward a study of the text and an elimination of the folk. (110)

Hans-Jörg Uther’s 2004 *The Types of the International Folktales*—a thorough revision of the Aarne-Thompson Tale Type Index (1928; 1961)—similarly acknowledges the problematic disregard for cultural origins in previous iterations of the system, while also alluding to its questionable omission of non-European folklore and narrative traditions.

The [Aarne-Thompson] system encompassed only European narrative tradition, with relevant material from western Asia and European settlements in other regions. Even in Europe, the traditions were documented unevenly. Documentation varied considerably from place to place, and for some (for example, Denmark and Russia) no information was provided at all. Evidence from Portugal, and from eastern and southeastern Europe, was often missing. The narrative traditions of small ethnic groups (Basques, Ladini, Frisians, Sorbs, etc.) were not, or not sufficiently, documented. (*International Folktales Part I* 7)

One might thus wonder whether the study of cultural origins and non-Western storytelling traditions might be intrinsically incompatible with attempts to map out and classify fairy-tales



according to narrative structure and recurring literary patterns. Zumwalt however argues that the main discrepancy opposing literary and anthropological approaches to folklore studies lies, in fact, in the object of study rather than the purpose itself:

The literary folklorists in their study of the diffusion of a narrative focused on the narrative itself. It was the text that interested them. And it was the *origin* of the text that concerned them. They asked: What is the *Ur* form and from whence did it come? And their questions were phrased: What does the narrative tell about the people and from whence did they come? The focus was different: for the literary folklorists, the text; for the anthropological folklorists, the people. But the underlying framework sustained the same assumptions. Through the study of diffusion, age and origin could be ascertained. The original narrative could be reconstructed; and the traditional culture could be described. (122)

Finally, the discrepancy that appears most strikingly when confronting structural and formalist fairy-tale studies to the corpus of this dissertation lies in its systematic and undisputed disinterest for the tale's *dramatis personae* (Propp 20). For instance, literary folklorist Max Lüthi argues that fairy-tale actants are rarely provided with depth or symbolic significance unless it expressly advances the plot:

Only rarely does the folktale mention sentiments and attributes for their own sake or to create a certain atmosphere. It mentions them when they influence the plot. Even then it does not like to mention them by name. It does not speak of the hero's compassion, credulity, or magnanimity, but rather shows him as he pays ransom for a mistreated corpse, as he trusts his brothers instead of regarding them with suspicion, or as he helps them instead of punishing them. Attributes and sentiments are expressed in actions: that is, they are projected onto the same plane on which

everything else takes place. The whole realm of sentiment is absent from the folktale characters, and as a result they lack all psychological depth. (*European Folktale* 13)

I argue that this statement is directly contradicted both by the character-centric approach favoured by many contemporary storytellers, as well as by the undeniable psychoanalytic slant of numerous adult-oriented fairy-tale subversions. Indeed, to name but two examples, Lee's *White as Snow* and Maitland's "Empty Nest Syndrome" both refer to psychoanalytic processes in quite an overt way. While "Empty Nest Syndrome" depicts a protagonist coping with her own internalised ambivalence by dividing herself into a Good and a Bad Mother (94-95), in *White as Snow* it is the heroine who splits her (biological) mother into archetypal figures so as to endure the latter's regular displays of indifference and cruelty (87-88). Lee even foreshadows this eventual splitting by framing the denial of the maternal breast as a metonymic illustration of Arpazia's sadistic mothering (47). Finally, *White as Snow* also portrays Coira as wishing to be reabsorbed into her mother's womb (226), a motif which deliberately echoes Luce Irigaray's understanding of language as intrinsically underpinned by a constant desire to return to a pre-verbal state of existence through a phantasised re-entering of the mother's womb (*Speculum* 140).

Thus, as I previously mentioned, several of the works discussed throughout this dissertation explicitly set out to retell traditional tales through a (step)maternal prism, so as to explore the psyche and motivations of the tale's prototypical villain. As a result, these revisions offer portraits of wicked mothering that are infinitely more nuanced and ambivalent than that of their prototypical counterparts, all the while relegating the traditional fairy-tale plot to a metaphorical exploration of real-world issues and dynamics. For instance, the conclusion of Danielle Teller's *All the Ever Afters* focuses on the ambivalent emotions of the protagonist towards her stepdaughter Ella, as well as on the way she reflects on her failures

and wrongdoings as a parental figure—an element that is never found within traditional variants of “Cinderella.”

We did perhaps treat Ella too harshly when she was a girl, but I know that Charlotte and Matilda truly wanted their stepsister to be happy. So did I, though not nearly so much as she deserved. I am still trying to make peace with my failures.

In a more complicated way, we also wanted Ella to be undaunted in the face of difficulty, thoughtful about the motives of others, hardy in the face of God’s small punishments. Charlotte and Matilda’s teasing, like my discipline, was meant to temper her character, as fire tempers steel. It was perhaps not in Ella’s nature to learn these things, and stringency may not have been the proper tool for teaching her, but we meant her no malice. It is only in old age that I recognize that not all characters have a core of steel. (371-372)

In this light, Propp’s argument regarding the interchangeability of the *dramatis personae* associated with each narrative function he identifies—which I discuss further throughout this chapter—strikes one as utterly inadequate (21). In fact, the very existence of the wicked stepmother as a stock character contradicts this idea, as the choice of a figure profoundly associated to mothering to replace of the biological mother as prototypical fairy-tale antagonist indicates that fairy-tale wickedness needs to maintain its ties to the maternal to remain efficient on a diegetic level. Furthermore, I argue that contemporary representations of wicked maternities are set to reflect real social and cultural issues surrounding motherhood within patriarchal cultures; the plots they revise or (re)create are therefore particular to mothers.

As I previously mentioned, attempts to break folktales down to syntagmatic and paradigmatic patterns inevitably reinforce the tension between unicity and multiplicity that

runs through the genre. Indeed, envisioning fairy-tales as successive and arbitrary variations on a single, fixed structural model—be it based on a combination of narrative functions or the presence of specific binary dyads—presupposes the existence of an underlying, universal narrative at the root of the folktale canon. Propp explicitly defends this position in his *Morphology of the Folktale*, where he declares that “[all] fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure” (23). Propp’s argument interestingly contradicts the very premise of Aarne’s and Thompson’s indexes: indeed, if fairy stories are reducible to variations on a single syntagmatic structure, gathering them according to specific tropes, motifs or stock characters—elements which Propp considers as contingent and substitutable—appears as an artificial and arbitrary endeavour (Murphy 8). Building upon Propp’s distinction between fairy-tale morphology (fixed and logical) and content (shape-shifting and arbitrary), Lévi-Strauss declares:

The existing [fairy-tale] classifications (Miller, Wundt, Aarne, Veselovskij) are of some practical use, but they shatter against the same obstacle: it is always possible to find tales in them that come under several categories at once. This remains true, whether the classification is based on the types of tales or on the themes brought into play. The assembling of themes is arbitrary with everybody and rests on the intuitions and theoretical creed of each author rather than on analysis . . . . Aarne’s classification provides an inventory that is most helpful, but his assembling of themes is purely empirical, and tales are assigned to particular rubrics in an arbitrary way.

(“Structure and Form” 168)

However, a very similar critique can be levelled at both Propp and Lévi-Strauss, whose respective systems are either too precise to be applicable to the entirety of the folktale canon, or too generic to be restricted to a single literary genre.

The existence of narrative structures and patterns specific—and restricted—to fairy-tales must in fact be questioned. Thus, whereas Propp's *Morphology* proposes a sequence of thirty-one functions which may appear within fairy narratives, he also explains that only two of these functions are truly intrinsic to the folktale diegesis, in that they are instrumental to setting the plot in motion: lack and villainy.

[Propp] regards the one absolutely necessary function to be the element of lack or villainy (a situation of lack, or an injury caused by a villain). He thus arrives at the following definition: "Viewed morphologically, any narrative can be called a wondertale (*Zaubermärchen, conte merveilleux*) that develops from an act of injury or a state of lack, through certain mediating functions, to an eventual wedding or other concluding (or extricating) functions." (Lüthi, *The European Folktale* 130)

In light of this wide-ranging definition, the system proposed by Propp appears as readily adaptable to a multitude of other literary genres—paradoxically forcing us to bring the very notion of folktale morphology under scrutiny. In addition, a sizeable portion of the corpus used for this dissertation is comprised of short-form fairy-tale vignettes, often severed from the rest of the traditional fairy-tale plot. Therefore, even allegedly central diegetic functions—such as lack and villainy—may become extremely difficult to identify<sup>2</sup>. The most striking instance of deliberate departure from traditional plot structures might be Atwood's "There Was Once", in which the traditional fairy-tale plot is gradually stripped down from its core elements until nothing remains but the title formula, the wondertale eventually giving way to a metatextual commentary on the genre's constructs (*Good Bones* 14-17). In the same way as fairy-tale morphologies might be applicable to a variety of other literary genres, one

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<sup>2</sup> The lack of applicability of morphologic and structuralist models with regards to contemporary fairy-tale retellings also suggests that these theoretical branches may not be suited to the analysis of the postmodern and deconstructed fairy-tales that make up the majority of the countercanon, which is why the following chapters shift their theoretical focus from narratology to applied psychoanalysis, feminist theory, and queer studies.

must question the relevance of alternative narrative systems and structural models to fairy diegeses. In this respect, it is particularly interesting to consider Algirdas Greimas's actantial model and Joseph Campbell's monomyth theory through the prism of fairy-tale. Greimas, firstly, proposes a paradigmatic narrative model intersecting with both Proppian and Lévi-Straussian theories, which Vanessa Nunes and Pauline Greenhill describe as particularly apt to the study of folktales (Greenhill and Nunes 23). As for Campbell's monomythic model, it applies to the fairy-tale genre to the same extent as Lévi-Strauss's study of myths does, as insightfully demonstrated by Maria Tatar in *The Fairest of Them All*:

It does not require a great leap of imagination to connect Snow White stories with that one “marvelously constant story” that the American mythographer Joseph Campbell identified in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. The hero's journey, according to Campbell, traces a trajectory from the womb to the (symbolic) tomb, followed by resurrection in one form or another. Campbell describes the pattern more compactly as Departure, Initiation, Return, and he sees in that move an upward spiral that tracks the hero (his heroes are all emphatically male) “on a perilous journey into the darkness” and draws him into a labyrinth from which he emerges as a charismatic leader. No such glory awaits Snow White, but the stations of her suffering are in fact not so radically different from the nodal points of the hero's journey and suggest that beauty can work a magic of its own. (47)

Though none of the aforementioned models applies to this dissertation's corpus in its entirety, I argue that some of the elements they provide can be (re)combined in order to establish a morphology specific to the hybrid tale type discussed throughout this thesis: contemporary fairy-tale revisions centred on the relationship of wicked (step)mothers with their (step)daughters. One major difficulty however remains: if all the tales in this corpus adhere to a single structural or morphological model—or even present a specific series of

narrative motifs—how does one account for their outlying elements? Is there meaning to be drawn from a tale’s variable narrative components, or must they be discarded as arbitrary by-product, as Propp suggests? Once again, these questions lead us back to the underlying tension between the alleged universality of fairy-tale structure and content and the increasingly diverse and shape-shifting nature of its contemporary canon. To bridge this theoretical gap, it is interesting to consider how, contrary to Propp, Lévi-Strauss proposes a model that accounts for the variations and transformations of the narratives it discusses:

Thus, our method eliminates a problem which has been so far one of the main obstacles to the progress of mythological studies, namely, the quest for the true version, or the earlier one. On the contrary, we define the myth as consisting of all its versions; to put it otherwise: a myth remains the same as long as it is felt as such.  
(“Structural Study” 435)

Dundes similarly suggests that tale types must be considered not as strict categories, but rather as a way of classifying fairy-tale variants according to shared narrative elements while also accounting for their individual and contextual elements. Though this method of gathering tales might appear as arbitrary in the way it constitutes tale types, it however offers valuable insights regarding the way myths and tales evolve and travel across the world:

Broadly speaking, a tale type is a narrative structure presenting a brief plot indicating motifs, settings, characters, and actions shared by a similar group of stories. As Dundes explains, “a tale type is a composite plot synopsis corresponding in exact verbatim detail to no one individual version but at the same time encompassing to some extent all of the extant versions of that folktale” (1997, 196).

(Greenhill and Nunes 21)

Building upon this argument, Dan Ben-Amos interestingly proposes to define the fairy-tale genre through the irreducible dichotomy of universality and community, so as to reconcile the shape-shifting nature of its canon with the presence of strict codes, identifiable formulas and fixed structural elements within the canon:

First, universality and community can be viewed not as contradictory but as complimentary attributes. The relations that govern folklore are universal; the references to culture and history are specific. The principles of distinctiveness in form and in theme – the unusual, incongruous, and, conversely, the absolutely harmonious are universal – but the languages, the social and historical experiences, the religious systems, and the moral values that make up the substance of folklore of respective societies are communal. (Ben-Amos 24)

### **3.2. The Function of Maternal Evil**

Despite Propp's disregard for the role and construction of *dramatis personae* in folktales, the study of his *Morphology* in the context of this dissertation can provide us with many valuable insights regarding the formalistic purpose of antagonism in fairy-tale diegeses. As I previously mentioned, from a finite list of thirty-one fairy-tale functions, Propp designates two in particular as intrinsic to fairy narratives: lack and villainy. In fact, both these terms refer to variants of a single function; their role is to set the fairy-tale plot in motion by injecting, respectively, desire or conflict within the diegesis. Propp thus designates villainy as "the villain [causing] harm or injury to a member of a family" and lack as "one member of a family either [lacking] something or [desiring] to have something" (Propp 30, 35). At first glance, one might therefore associate the figure of the wicked stepmother primarily to the realm of villainy: in prototypical "Snow White" and "Cinderella"



stories, for instance, it is the usurping mother's violence and abuse which triggers the heroine's desire to escape and seek supernatural help. In fact, many postmodern revisions of these tales even present acts of maternal villainy as required by the fairy-tale plot, rather than motivated by an intradiegetic purpose:

The thing about those good daughters is, they're so good. Obedient and passive. Sniveling, I might add. No get-up-and go. What would become of them if it weren't for me? ...

I stir things up, I get things moving. (Atwood, *Good Bones* 23)

However, I argue that it is equally pertinent to discuss contemporary retellings of wicked (step)mother narratives through the prism of lack as a Proppian function, in light of the dynamics of alienation and longing that characterise contemporary matrilineal fairy-tale plots. Thus, in revisions seeking to question or justify the wicked nature of maternal figures, greater interest is often given to the mother/daughter plot in terms of forced alienation and mutual lack of matrilineal bonding. Coover's *Stepmother*, for instance, attributes the protagonist's acts of malice to an ill-fated desire to save her daughters and stepdaughters from their prototypical fate (1-2). Similarly, Lee's *White as Snow* reframes the final aggression of the heroine by her mother as an ultimate and overwhelming encounter between both characters, to which Coira quickly surrenders to due to the desperate longing for maternal attention and affection she expresses throughout the narrative:

*She's smothering me, Coira thought. Her arms round my waist, my neck, her long dusty hair, snow-white now; all over me, in my mouth. I can hardly breathe. ...*

*Let her smother me. I want her to. What else is there for me? (273)*

In addition to mirroring traditional narratives of maternal villainy with new tales centred on matrilineal alienation and lack, the contemporary fairy-tale (counter)canon also

questions the association of stock characters to specific arcs and narrative functions. Thus, if Propp's *Morphology* presents the folktale's *dramatis personae* as arbitrary and substitutable, it also creates several categories of character-types stemming from their sphere of influence over the plot. In this respect, I argue that the seven categories Propp constructs are deliberately blurred and (re)combined by contemporary fairy-tale retellers. While outlining the morphological model constructed by Propp, Manuel Aguirre explains that "only seven characters are available to wondertale-tellers: hero, false hero, villain, donor, helper, dispatcher, princess (sought-for person) and/or her father" (165). Interestingly, with the exception of "father", all the roles listed by Propp are assumed by the wicked (step)mother somewhere within the corpus of this dissertation. Coover's *Stepmother* and Teller's *All the Ever Afters*, for instance, retell traditional fairy-tale plots through the narrative prism of the wicked stepmother, transforming her into the heroine, narrator and focaliser of the new tale. In addition, depending on the moral alignment and magical abilities of maternal figure(s) in contemporary fairy-tales, their roles often oscillate between that of villain, dispatcher, helper, and donor—sometimes within a single tale. Garrison Keillor's "My Stepmother, Myself" and Sara Maitland's "The Wicked Stepmother's Lament" both explain this blurring of roles as stemming from the reframing of acts previously interpreted as villainous into misguided attempts to empower and nurture fairy-tale heroines. On the other hand, Emma Donoghue's "The Tale of the Apple" maintains more ambiguity over the dichotomy of villain and helper; the stepmother's allegiance and intentions are indeed kept opaque throughout most of the story:

The apple was half ripe. One side was green, the other red. She bit into the green side and swallowed and smiled. I took the apple from her without a word, bit into the red side, and began to choke. Fear and excitement locked in struggle in my throat, and blackness seeped across my eyes. I fell to the ground . . . .

[My] mouth was full of apple, slippery, still hard, vinegary at the edges. I could feel the marks of my own teeth on the skin. I bit down, and juice ran to the corners of my lips. It was not poisoned. It was the first apple of the year from my father's orchard.

(58)

The role of “princess” also appears as strikingly mutable in contemporary fairy-tale revisions. Lee's *White as Snow* thus weaves the stories of Coira and her mother Arpazia together throughout the novel, presenting them as a dyad of fairy-tale heroines recurringly foiled by the progression of the other's narrative arc. In Neil Gaiman's “Snow, Glass, Apples,” conversely, it is the wicked queen who presents most of the attributes of traditional fairy-tale princesses—kindness, beauty, selflessness—and comes to be endangered by her wicked stepdaughter. Finally, the role of “false hero” is particularly interesting to consider through the prism of “Snow White” retellings, as the recurring trope of extreme physical likeness between the heroine and her (step)mother often leads to them usurping each other's identity in their quest for power, love, or freedom:

Arpazia became aware of him first, and her eyes left the mirror image of her daughter. She scanned the Hunter King and knew he was no longer hers. Indeed, it was shown to her very clearly. For it was to her other self he went, the maiden in her white. And he took her hand, and Candacis was gazing up at him, for a moment overwhelmed because here was her memoried dream. (148)

In light of these examples, it becomes striking that contemporary stepmothers are no longer tethered to villainy, and can take on a variety of narrative roles throughout revised fairy-tale plots. However, I argue that this newfound narrative hybridity paradoxically prevents the wicked (step)mother's substitution by any other stock character from the genre canon—be they villainous or heroic—without profoundly altering the tale: indeed, the wicked

(step)mother is no longer bound to a stable and univocal narrative function, but rather to a set of intrinsically maternal motifs, tropes, and motivations. In this respect, it is important to stress that the thirty-one narrative functions identified by Propp are not rendered irrelevant by contemporary fairy-tale revisions: on the contrary, they are altered, expanded, duplicated and reorganised in order to create motley narratives, combining identifiable literary roots with modern stakes and endings. For instance, let us look at the final function in Propp's model: "The hero is married and ascends the throne. (Definition: *wedding*. Designation: W.)" (63). Despite the importance Propp places upon this function, it is absent from Catherynne M. Valente's *Six-Gun Snow White*: the tale concludes with the heroine waking up from a hundred-year sleep and attempting to adapt to contemporary society. Supplanting the tale's traditional resolution with a more subdued and ambivalent outcome, Valente's ending doesn't reward its protagonists with love or power; instead, "Snow White gets a social security card. She gets a job building houses out in California. Picks oranges. Doesn't talk about herself. Never did. If you press her she'll say she lost everything in the flood and she supposes that's true. She goes to see the castle by the sea and it's a museum now" (152). Alternatively, Lee's *White as Snow* and Gaiman's *The Sleeper and the Spindle* both extend past the "wedding" function, constructing new sequences<sup>3</sup> of narrative syntagms to eventually weave different folktales together. In fact, Gaiman's fairy-tale opens on the very prospect of the heroine's wedding, which never becomes realised diegetically but serves as a pretext for the heroine to embark on a twisted variant of the "Sleeping Beauty" plot:

The queen woke early that morning. "A week from today," she said aloud. "A week from today, I shall be married."

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<sup>3</sup> Like Aguirre suggests in "An Outline of Propp's Model for the Study of Wondertales," I use the term "sequence" rather than "move" to translate the Russian word *xod* (169).

It seemed both unlikely and extremely final. She wondered how she would feel to be a married woman. It would be the end of her life, she decided, if life was a time of choices. In a week from now, she would have no choices. She would reign over her people. She would have children. Perhaps she would die in childbirth, perhaps she would die as an old woman, or in battle. But the path to her death, heartbeat by heartbeat, would be inevitable. (2)

Finally, in light of contemporary variations on the (step)mother/daughter fairy-tale plot, I argue that the penultimate function proposed by Propp—designated as “punishment” (63)—might require a more positive contemporary alternative. In this respect, I suggest the term “reconciliation” as a counterpart to Proppian “punishment”: the doubling of this function would both mirror the aforementioned villainy/lack dyad, and account for the many contemporary retellings in which villainous (step)mothers are either redeemed or escape retribution by the end of the tale.

Despite the tenuous genre border Lévi-Strauss establishes between myths and folktales, it is relevant to discuss his structural model through the prism of contemporary fairy-tale retellings, and more particularly, how it applies to tales of (step)maternal antagonism. As I previously stated, one of the most striking aspects of Lévi-Strauss’s understanding of myth is the way it embraces successive transformations and expansions of the canon through eras and cultures, all the while arguing for a stable structural model:

[Since] the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction (an impossible achievement if, as it happens, the contradiction is real), a theoretically infinite number of slates will be generated, each one slightly different from the others. Thus, myth grows spiral-wise until the intellectual impulse which has

originated it is exhausted. Its growth is a continuous process whereas its structure remains discontinuous. (“Structural Study” 443)

The possibility Lévi-Strauss introduces regarding the eventual elucidation of myth raises interesting questions regarding underlying processes of entropy within literary genres: one may indeed be led to wonder whether—once an *Urtale* is successfully identified, or the constructs of the genre have become sufficiently subverted—the fairy-tale genre may come to its natural end, having become an exhaustive and exhausted genre that no longer permits retellings of any kind. These interrogations are reminiscent of postmodern concerns with the possible end of the fairy-tale genre, thus strengthening the thematic and structural overlap between myths and folktales. The evolutive nature of myth also leads Lévi-Strauss to arguing against the Proppian idea that formalism alone is sufficient to understand folktales:

By restricting itself exclusively to the rules that govern the arrangement of elements [Propp] loses sight of the fact that no language exists whose vocabulary can be deduced from its syntax. The study of any linguistic system requires the cooperation of the grammarian and the philologist. In regard to oral tradition it means that morphology is sterile until fertilized by direct or indirect ethnographic observation. Propp's idea that the two tasks can be separated, that the grammatical study can be undertaken first and the lexical study postponed until later will result only in the production of a lifeless grammar and a lexicon in which anecdotes replace definitions. In the end, neither will accomplish its purpose. (“Structure and Form” 186)

As an alternative, Lévi-Strauss proposes a structural study of “mythemes” whose linguistic meaning is already culturally established, and which are essential to the understanding of the mythic “metalanguage” created by their combination (187-188). Although he stresses that the

structural study of myths and folktales is indissociable from ethnographic observation, he nonetheless warns against certain biases of psychoanalytic and anthropological interpretations of mythology—an argument that holds particular significance with regards to the object of our study:

[Psychoanalysts] and many anthropologists have shifted the problems to be explained away from the natural or cosmological towards the sociological and psychological fields. But then the interpretation becomes too easy: if a given mythology confers prominence to a certain character, let us say an evil grandmother, it will be claimed that in such a society grandmothers are actually evil and that mythology reflects the social structure and the social relations; but should the actual data be conflicting, it would be readily claimed that the purpose of mythology is to provide an outlet for repressed feelings. Whatever the situation may be, a clever dialectic will always find a way to pretend that a meaning has been unravelled. (Lévi-Strauss, “Structural Study” 429).

Although with this statement, Lévi-Strauss successfully identifies a potential pitfall of this research, he nevertheless agrees that there is significance to be deciphered from the unravelling of myths. According to him, the meaning of mythologies lies within the recurring structural binaries upon which myths are constructed, and the universal, irreconcilable contradictions that they reflect (Haring 929). As I previously mentioned, Lévi-Strauss argues that these contradictions appear more strikingly within myth than fairy-tales, as “[tales] are constructed on weaker oppositions than those found in myths. The former are not cosmological, metaphysical, or natural, but, more often, local, social, and moral” (Lévi-Strauss, “Structure and Myth” 176). In light of the permeable boundaries within the two genres, however, I argue that it is relevant to look at the fairy-tale canon through the prism of the paradigmatic binaries identified by Lévi-Strauss. Tales of wicked (step)mothers, in

particular, seem strikingly overrun with interwoven binaries and distorted doubles: kind heroines are faced with malevolent matriarchs; youthful beauty presents an eternal threat to ageing female bodies; real motherhood is systematically tainted and twisted by jealous, unnatural mothers. In fact, these binaries are so intrinsic to the fairy-tale canon that many contemporary revisions set out to explore the underlying attractiveness of otherness in acanonical manners. For instance, Nikita Gill's "Difficult Damsels" denounces the oppressive boundaries of binary representations of female characters within the fairy-tale genre:

Not all girls are made of sugar  
and spice and all things nice.

These are girls made of dark lace  
and witchcraft and a little bit of vice. (109)

This sentiment is interestingly echoed through a maternal prism further into Gill's collection, as "Mothers and Daughters" underlines the artificial, Manichean binary opposing mothers and stepmothers in the genre:

Sometimes her mouth will twist  
into something not a smile, not benevolence.  
And she will be all the things  
that you thought only stepmothers can be.  
Her pain received no outlet. (134)

According to Lévi-Strauss, the binary paradigms present in mythologies and folktales are recurring symbols of fundamental, insoluble contradictions that may only be bridged temporarily through the (re)creation of myths (Haring 929). In this light, one might wonder whether the contemporary resistance and appeal of antagonistic (step)mother/daughter fairy-tale dynamics might indicate the existence of such an underlying opposition, and thus justify



the apparent impossibility of rethinking this relationship in more positive terms. On the subject of mother/daughter relationships and narratives in Western societies, Adrienne Rich declares that “[the] cathexis between mother and daughter—essential, distorted, misused—is the great unwritten story” (Rich 228). Interestingly, this statement intersects with the Lévi-Straussian idea of irreconcilable, universal dyads emerging within mythological texts as a way of expressing discomfort and attempting to alleviate underlying tensions. As argued by Joan Peternel, furthermore, the mother/daughter binary is particularly prevalent in fairy stories, as it is often doubled intradiegetically with motifs of reflection and mirroring:

Doubleness is indicated in characters in fiction similarly to the way it is indicated in mythology and fairy tales—where the characterization is spontaneous, of course. The use of reflection, as in water or a mirroring device of any kind, is common. Snow-White, the good princess, lies asleep in the glass coffin, while the evil queen gazes into her wonderful looking glass, the reflection suggested by the mirror and the coffin made of glass pointing to the double identity of queen and princess. (Peternel 456)

Although motifs of doubling might be less striking in other tales of wicked (step)mothers, the mother/daughter binary is almost systematically mirrored by another structural opposition: that of the good biological mother and the wicked stepmother. Similarly to how the intrinsic tensions between youth and age, mother and daughter, and good and evil prevail in these narratives, the opposition between ideal and wicked mothering is presented as both inevitable and unsolvable. In this respect, this dissertation suggests that contemporary fairy-tale revisions veer away from the canonical mother/daughter binary and towards a ternary structural pattern confronting the wicked (step)mother to both the heroine and the original, dead mother. This phenomenon is particularly striking, for instance, in Gaiman’s *Coraline*, in which the two mother figures—the original and the other—coexist within the diegesis and take turns as narrative foils:

It sounded like her mother. Coraline went into the kitchen, where the voice had come from. A woman stood in the kitchen with her back to Coraline. She looked a little like Coraline's mother. Only...

Only her skin was white as paper.

Only she was taller and thinner.

Only her fingers were too long, and they never stopped moving, and her dark red fingernails were curved and sharp. ...

"Who are you?" asked Coraline.

"I'm your other mother," said the woman. (38-39)

At this stage, it is necessary to remember that Lévi-Strauss does account for the existence of ternary oppositions in myths ("Structure and Myth" 188); narrative triptychs are also explored by Lüthi upon discussing the recurring numerical patterns within fairy-tales:

Thus it is no accident when these three numbers are dominant in the fairytale: the one in the person of the hero or heroine; the two in the many polarities and in the tendency to divide into halves, into sequences of two; and the three in the structuring of groups and in the ordering of episodes. Only one, two, and three are relevant to the building of episodes. ("The Fairy Tale as Art Form" 45)

Although Lüthi successfully identifies the episodic nature of these ternary fairy-tale paradigms, he fails to comment on their presence and significance at the level of character dynamics. In light of this analytical gap, the final section of this chapter proposes to identify and discuss ternary patterns and paradigms at play within contemporary (step)mother/daughter narratives, as well as the underlying oppositional dynamics they might reflect.

Before attempting to determine whether the establishment of a contemporary morphology of subversive wicked (step)mother tales would be at all pertinent, however, it is necessary to analyse the tale type system developed by Antti Aarne (1910) and edited by Stith Thompson (1928; 1961) and Hans-Jörg Uther (2004), so as to assess how it might help further our understanding of fairy-tale types, motifs and, more importantly, their instrumentalisation by postmodern retellings. It is striking that, in spite of some identifiable inadequacies in both its methods and the resulting classification, the Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) Index—as well as Thompson’s accompanying *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (1932-1936; 1955-1958)—is still extensively used within the fields of contemporary folklore and fairy-tales studies (Nunes and Greenhill 21). To an even greater extent than Propp’s morphology and Lévi-Strauss’s structural theory of mythology, these two indexes indicate an underlying interest in gathering and classifying tales according to common narratives (tale types) or recurring symbols and tropes (motifs). Unsurprisingly, the wicked stepmother appears as a constitutive element of several of the fairy-tale motifs described by Thompson. More specifically, motifs G205 (“witch stepmother”), P282 (“stepmother”), and S31 (“cruel stepmother”) specifically designate variants of this stock character with no distinction of tale type or plot (1252; 2076; 2212). This index will therefore prove particularly useful to this dissertation as I discuss the subversions, transformations and interweaving of maternal tropes and motifs within the burgeoning fairy-tale countercanon.

In spite of the wicked (step)mother’s anchoring as an antagonistic fairy-tale motif, no specific tale type is identified by the ATU Index as directly related to the portrayal of maternal evil. Instead, tale types are determined according to the presence of predetermined narrative syntagms organised into specific sequences, most often doubled with significant thematic and symbolic overlaps. As a result, all narratives belonging to a same tale type can

be considered successive variations on a single canonical plot, and thus be compared to assess cultural and chronological transformations of the fairy-tale canon:

Although the definitions of a tale type as a self-sufficient narrative, and of a motif as the smallest unit within such a narrative, have often been criticized for their imprecision, these are nevertheless useful terms to describe the relationship among a large number of narratives with different functional and formal attributes from a variety of ethnic groups, time periods, and genres. (Uther, *International Folktales Part I* 10)

While the ATU Index interestingly suggests that syntagmatic narrative patterns are not significant *per se*, but must instead be examined through a distinctively contextual prism, it however remains restrictive and arbitrary in the way it identifies and labels tale types (Murphy 8). In fact, most of the works discussed throughout this dissertation belong to one of the three following tale types: “The Maiden in the Tower” (ATU 310); “Cinderella” (ATU 510A) and “Snow White” (ATU 709) (Uther, *International Folktales Part I* 190; 293; 383-384). However, as I previously argued, many of these retellings either deviate starkly from the tale’s traditional plot structure, or deliberately include motifs and narrative patterns stemming from other tale types to create composite, unclassifiable narratives such as Coover’s *Stepmother* or Gaiman’s *Coraline*. Additionally, let us note that the first aforementioned tale type makes no mention of the maternal quality of the villain, describing her only as “the witch” (310), while the other two erase the existence of biological maternal antagonists altogether, only referring to the villain as “the stepmother” (293; 393-384). If in light of this, the ATU classification cannot be considered as completely pertinent in the context of this dissertation, it will nonetheless prove helpful as a descriptor of fairy-tale patterns and plot types, similarly to Thompson’s *Motif-Index*; it will also be instrumental in

helping us construct an original, hybrid tale type centred on the recurring narrative and symbolic patterns identifiable in the contemporary mother/daughter fairy-tale counter canon.

### 3.3. (De)Constructing the Mother/Daughter Plot

Though the models established by Propp, Lévi-Strauss and their contemporaries have profoundly impacted our understanding of the fairy-tale genre, contemporary revisions of its canon often deliberately reject prototypical plot structures in an attempt to challenge the genre's reliance on its most intrinsic narrative elements, as well as to expand its boundaries beyond a specific set of syntagms, literary forms, and univocal stock characters. With respect to contemporary retellings centred on maternal antagonism, specific sequences of traditional fairy-tale plots emerge as particularly unstable and regularly disrupted; it is therefore relevant to wonder what their modern mutability might reveal with regards to maternal representation in postmodern fairy literature. Thus, whereas a significant number of contemporary tales maintain many prototypical elements of traditional openings—such as the colour symbolism of Snow White's prophetic conception, or the act of defiance leading to the rapt of the newborn child in "Rapunzel" stories—their endings differ a lot more starkly from their narrative models. Keillor thus crafts a triple, inverted narrative beginning where traditional fairy-tales end, and then works backwards to establish the remainder of the plot:

The truth is that I [Cinderella] am busier than ever. Supervising a large household staff—cooks, maids, footmen, pages, ladies-in-waiting, minstrels and troubadours, a bard or two—is just plain hard work. Often I find myself longing for the "good old days" when my stepmother made me sweep the hearth. (59)

Similarly, the wedding function outlined by Propp's *Morphology* is regularly suppressed, transformed into a dangerous peripeteia, or revised through a queer prism. In Donoghue's

*Kissing the Witch*, for instance, the Rapunzel-inspired heroine of the “The Tale of the Hair” has a quasi-romantic, corporeal reunion with her nurturer, the witch:

After several minutes had passed I edged forward. It was my left foot that found her. I felt my way along her body to her face; her eyes were shut, wet with what I thought was tears until I tasted it. I picked the thorns from her lids, as delicately as I could. Her hand came up and felt my head, the short damp hair....

I took her head on my chest and wept over her, salt in her wounded eyes. It was the only way I knew to clean them. I didn't know whether they would heal, or whether she would have to learn the world from me now. We lay there, waiting to see what we would see. (52)

Finally, as I previously mentioned, the irruption of maternal villainy within the plot is often reframed as a misguided act of empowerment, a consequence of the (step)mother's rebelling against the oppressive, patriarchal constructs shared by the narrative and the genre. Other times, the mother's malevolence is doubled with a subplot on matrilineal alienation and longing, allowing in turn for a much greater variety of (re)interpretations of the villain's demise, ranging from cathartic retribution to empathetic reconciliation.

Another significant factor in the divergence of contemporary fairy-tales from their original structural and morphological models lies in the influence of concomitant theoretical approaches and critical studies—most notably poststructuralism, psychoanalysis and feminist theory—on both the form and content of the genre. Thus, as deplored by Lévi-Strauss, psychoanalytic interpretations of matricentric narratives in fairy-tales have led to a gradual merging of the wicked (step)mother as a fairy-tale motif and as a literary embodiment of negative maternal archetypes. Jane Garry and Hasan El-Shamy define the difference between motif and archetype as follows: “While a motif is a unit of interest in a tale or some other

genre such as a proverb, joke, ballad, or riddle, an archetype is a pattern of primary significance with deep psychic resonance that also occurs in various literary genres” (Garry and El-Shamy xv). Additionally, the structural binaries Lévi-Strauss identifies in myth—and, by extension, folktales—overlap significantly with psychoanalytic interpretations of doubling as a literary motif. In this respect, Joan Peternel explains:

The source of the double as a concept of division is located by Freud in the idea of an immortal soul, an idea rising, according to Freud, from infantile narcissism or primitive superstition. When some impression revives in the psyches of civilized adults those infantile complexes or primitive beliefs, the double no longer appears to be an assurance of immortality, but rather appears as an “uncanny harbinger of death” (“The ‘Uncanny’”). (454)

As I previously demonstrated, the impact of postmodernism on the fairy-tale genre is most tangible in contemporary efforts to subvert the structure and prerequisites of the genre, as evidenced most starkly by Atwood’s deliberate unravelling of the traditional fairy-tale plot in “There Was Once”, as well as by the anti-heroine of Coover’s *Stepmother* revolting against the oppressive and arbitrary tropes of the canon. Similarly, the impact of feminist theory and criticism on the nature of contemporary fairy-tales is undeniable. For instance, efforts to empower prototypical female characters of the genre—albeit rarely deployed on (step)mothers and daughters simultaneously—underline a contemporary resurgence of interest in *dramatis personae* and characterisation. On a textual level, this phenomenon translates into narrative and focal shifts, as well as an expansion of the genre beyond its prototypical short, plot-driven form. The contemporary bias for character-centric fairy-tale retellings is for instance particularly striking in Maitland’s “The Wicked Stepmother’s Lament” and Atwood’s “Unpopular Gals”, in which the traditional fairy-tale plot is all but

abandoned in favour of a metanarrative commentary on the psyche and motivations of the maternal antagonist:

I'm not exactly looking for self-justification. There's this thing going on at the moment where women tell all the old stories again and turn them inside-out and back-to-front—so the characters you always thought were the goodies turn out to be the baddies, and vice versa, and a whole lot of guilt is laid to rest: or that at least is the theory ... . Anyway, it would be hard to find a version of this story where I would come out a shiny new-style heroine: no true version, anyway. All I want to say is that it's more complicated, more complex, than it's told, and the reasons it's told the way it is are complex too. (Maitland 130-131)

In light of the significant impact of contemporary critical studies on the nature of the genre (counter)canon, I argue that any morphological or structural model that might be deduced from studying contemporary fairy-tale retellings must necessarily be doubled with a diachronic commentary on its social, cultural and literary context. As explained by Dundes, “[structural] analysis is not an end in itself! Rather it is a beginning, not an end. It is a powerful technique of descriptive ethnography inasmuch as it lays bare the essential form of the folkloristic text. But the form must ultimately be related to the culture or cultures in which it is found” (“Introduction” xiii). For instance, in the same way the wicked stepmother first emerged as a stock character in order to distance biological maternity from motifs of abuse and cruelty, the widespread return to wicked biological mothers in modern tales—as well as the blurring of the boundaries between the two—must necessarily be discussed in light of the contemporary transformations of the institution of motherhood within Western cultures. In this respect, both Atwood and Gill implicitly criticise the systematic, unquestioned demonisation of non-biological mothers, as well as the underlying implication that birth mothers can never be cruel or abusive:



But I am so *tired* of negative female images! And stepmothers—they always get it in the neck! Change it to *stepfather*, why don't you? That would make more sense anyway, considering the bad behaviour you're about to describe. (Atwood, *Good Bones* 17)

Sometimes her mouth will twist  
 into something not a smile, not benevolence.  
 And she will be all the things  
 that you thought only stepmothers can be. (Gill 134)

Similarly, aside from (re)orienting fairy-tale revisions towards an adult readership, the widespread interest of contemporary storytellers in themes of abuse and sexual assault indicates both greater awareness of the institutionalisation of misogyny by patriarchal literatures and cultures, as well as—paradoxically—the continued fetishization and sexualisation of violence against women within the genre. Thus, in addition to making previous undertones explicit, many contemporary revisions deliberately inject scenes of sexual violence to traditional fairy narratives, be it in an attempt to legitimise the mother's subsequent hatred and abuse of the daughter, to humanise (step)maternal villains, or merely to illustrate the unchallenged presence of patriarchal ideas and structures within the fairy-tale canon.

As I previously argued, the corpus of tales discussed throughout this thesis is intrinsically matricentric. Indeed, in addition to the contemporary slant towards increasingly complex, nuanced and ambivalent portrayals of fairy-tale characters—protagonists and villains in particular—this dissertation evidences widespread interest in fairy-tale mothers, and in the prototypically binary structure of their nature (biological or *qnot*) and expressions (good or wicked). In this respect, the structural patterns espoused by these new narratives are

undoubtedly subordinated to a primacy of character, as well as altered by deliberate attempts to subvert traditional fairy-tale arcs and biases. I therefore argue that—contrarily to the morphological model defended by Propp—contemporary folktales do not stem from a unique sequence of functions declined into multiple narratives according to incidental, arbitrary elements, but rather from multiple attempts to divorce a prototypical fairy-tale antagonist from the literary canon that originated it, so as to subvert and reframe it through the dual prism of modern cultural dynamics and literary criticism. This contemporary shift interestingly echoes Atwood’s short story “Unpopular Gals” by suggesting that the wicked (step)mother might, in fact, *be* the plot (*Good Bones* 24). In this respect, one might note that the works discussed throughout this dissertation have very few formal and structural attributes in common, with the exception of a narrative focus on antagonistic (step)mothers, and identifiable structural and thematic ties with existing fairy-tales. The prototypical short form of traditional folktales is thus abandoned in novelisations such as Maguire’s *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister* and Teller’s *All the Ever Afters*, whereas Keillor’s “My Stepmother, Myself” chooses to reframe three traditional fairy stories within a contemporary and deliberately realistic setting. Even the Manichean division of narrative roles between (step)mother and (step)daughter is recurrently questioned and subverted, be it by tales inverting their prototypical positions—Gaiman’s “Snow, Glass, Apples”, for instance—or by subverting the tale’s traditional resolution and rejecting the triumph of the heroine and demise of her wicked (step)mother.

In addition to the contemporary shift of the fairy-tale genre from plot- to character-driven narratives, we must note that greater attention is now given to the representation of interpersonal dynamics between stock characters of the genre which, in the case of this dissertation, translates into a narrative focus on matrilineal relationships. In her analysis of “Snow White” variants, Shuli Barzilai declares that “‘Snow White,’ then, is the story of two

women, a mother and a daughter: a mother who cannot grow up and a daughter who must” (534). Her focus on the maternal subplot of “Snow White” interestingly echoes the direction taken by many contemporary retellers of wicked (step)mother stories, hinting in turn at a widespread discomfort with previous representations of mother/daughter relationships in literature. On the subject of silenced matrilineal bonds in the Western literary canon, Rich declares that:

The loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy. We acknowledge Lear (father-daughter split), Hamlet (son and mother), and Oedipus (son and mother) as great embodiments of the human tragedy; but there is no presently enduring recognition of mother-daughter passion and rapture. (237)

The contemporary multiplication of retellings exploring the ambivalent emotions and tragic conclusion inherent to the traditional mother/daughter fairy-tale plot can be considered as a direct response to the literary gap identified by Rich—an attempt to (re)write the “great unwritten story” (218). In this respect, intersections of the matricentric fairy-tale countercanon with mother/daughter mythologies and religious paradigms are inevitable, as evidenced most starkly by the extensive mythologic intertext of Lee’s *White as Snow*. It is intriguing that Lee chooses to weave elements from the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone in her novelisation of “Snow White,” as Marianne Hirsch suggests this particular myth as a potential starting point for the development of specific mother/daughter mythologies:

Alternate women-centered mythologies—the story of Demeter and Persephone, for example—are available to women writers, such as Toni Morrison, who wish to re-

write the story of mother-child relations from maternal perspectives and, in particular, from the perspective of the mothers of daughters. (Hirsch 5)

In light of these elements, it becomes evident that the wicked (step)mother does not only serve as a token of subversive fairy-tale retellings, but that she also embodies the epitome of feminist efforts to revise the literary representation of (step)mothers and matrilineal relationships so as to better reflect contemporary social and cultural dynamics. The abandonment of prototypical elements of the genre at both a morphologic and thematic level paradoxically forces us to rethink the ways we understand and structure the fairy-tale canon, which is what I propose to do in the final section of this chapter. Thus, similarly to the way Tatar underlines the problematic aspects of using colour-symbolism (“Snow White”) to designate tales of the type ATU 709 (Tatar, *Fairest of Them All* 35), I argue that the ATU Index overlooks the increasing number of hybrid fairy-tale retellings centred around specific themes and motifs, thus discouraging analyses of fairy-tale themes and *dramatis personae* across tale types. Though to some extent, the wicked (step)mother is already instrumental to fairy-tale classification in Thompson’s *Motif-Index*, the contemporary retellings discussed in this dissertation go beyond merely revising a stock character of the genre; rather, they create a new overarching tale type which deliberately merges (or sometimes parts with) traditional elements of fairy-tale diegeses in order to weave new fairy stories centred specifically on the dynamics of antagonistic (step)mothers and (step)daughters. The remainders of the original plot therefore become incidental, primarily serving as a pretext to explore ambivalent matrilineal bonds within a transgressive and uncanny context where awe and wonder can coexist. The hybrid tale type thus created—which I have proposed to name “The (Step) Mother Who Abuses her Daughter”—therefore constitutes my primary object throughout this dissertation. However, additional tale types referenced in the ATU Index will also help us identify and categorize intertextual tropes and syntagms that might recur within this corpus.

In fact, though I have already mentioned that most of the stories discussed in this thesis are variations on three major tale types, this corpus also borrows elements from other, less readily identifiable tale types, such as “The Mother Who Did Not Bear but Nourished Me” (ATU 713) and “The Mother Who Wants to Kill her Children” (ATU 765).

Building upon Lévi-Strauss’s structural approach to myths and folktales, I argue that it is relevant to analyse contemporary fairy-tale retellings of the aforementioned tale type (The (Step) Mother Who Abuses her Daughter) through the prism of the binary and ternary paradigms that structure them. Thus, in addition to the mother/daughter binary which serves to catalyse the contemporary matricentric fairy-tale plot, several other recurring underlying dyads and triads can be identified. The dichotomy of good and wickedness, first of all, is directly inherited from traditional fairy-tales; however, it is also often subverted by contemporary storytellers who invert traditional narrative roles and reframe traditional stories through new prisms, such as Neil Gaiman, Danielle Teller and Gregory Maguire. Many contemporary folktales also carry distinctively feminist overtones in the way they depict and discuss maternity; in this respect, the evolution of the previously unquestioned opposition between biological and non-biological motherhood in fairy-tales must be discussed in light of contemporary social and cultural redefinitions of motherhood as an institution. Whereas Maguire explicitly tackles the negative connotations associated with non-biological mothering in *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister*—where Clara<sup>4</sup> angrily declares: “[I] honor my father and my mother... I honor my mother’s memory and what she gave to me. And you’re not my mother” as an act of rebellion against her newfound stepmother Margarethe (Maguire, *Confessions* 166)—Emma Donoghue chooses to explore the queer potentialities of non-biological female bonding.

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<sup>4</sup> Clara is Cinderella’s counterpart in Maguire’s novelisation of the eponymous tale; her narrative role is therefore similar to that of the traditional fairy-tale heroine.

As for Tanith Lee, she offers an ambivalent and ambiguous take on this dichotomy in *White as Snow*, in which she deliberately blurs the boundary between biological and non-biological maternity throughout the tale and within the very character of Arpazia. Additionally, I argue that the Manichean dichotomy of original and foster maternity present in the fairy-tale genre must be discussed in parallel with the love/hatred binary: indeed, far from maintaining the traditional polarity of these two dyads, contemporary narratives repeatedly upend and debunk them, be it through a queer prism like in Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch*—in which hatred gradually morphs into romantic and sexual desire for the non-mother—or through the subversive reclaiming of motherly and daughterly ambivalence implemented in Lee's *White as Snow*. Lee's novel thus concludes on a double admission by mother and daughter of ambivalent feelings for the other: Arpazia does so right before her final attempt to murder her daughter (273), while the latter fondly defends her mother even after her eventual demise (317). Finally, as I previously suggested, contemporary depictions of matrilineal dynamics in fairy-tales must be reimagined as ternary rather than binary<sup>5</sup> so as to account for the spectral presence of the perfect, angel-mother—be it as a concrete actant of the diegesis or as an amorphous embodiment of patriarchal ideals of motherhood. Indeed, her role in the polarisation and acceleration of the (step)mother/daughter conflict cannot be overstated. In this respect, Maitland's "The Wicked Stepmother's Lament" delves briefly into the ambivalent relationship of the eponymous stepmother with the heroine's original mother:

When I first married her father I thought [my stepdaughter] was so lovely, so good and so sad. And so like her mother. I knew her mother very well, you see; we grew up together. I loved her mother. Really. With so much hope and fondness and awareness of her worth. But—and I don't know how to explain this without sounding like an

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<sup>5</sup> In so doing, our approach to fairy-tale plot deliberately shifts away from structuralism, to instead concern itself more specifically with the interpretation(s) maternal studies make of the contemporary mother/daughter fairy-tale plot.

embittered old bitch which I probably am—she was too good. Too giving. She gave herself away, indiscriminately. (131-132)

In addition to the binary and ternary oppositions that structure the contemporary fairy-tale canon, motifs and symbols are crucial to our understanding of modern-day matrilineal relationships within the genre. Considering motifs as “the minimal narrative unit” of fairy-tales (Rudy 34) makes it possible for us to comment on the evolution of the genre’s canon, according to which ones survive in successive retellings, and which others emerge in response to existing biases within the canon. In this respect, this dissertation proposes an in-depth discussion on recurring maternal motifs in contemporary fairy-tales, and on their association to good and wicked mothering. Unsurprisingly, the magic mirror of “Snow White” tales strikes as perhaps the most permanent and significant motif associated to the mother/daughter fairy-tale plot: it is through the looking glass that matrilineal confrontation is first implemented, and it is often through its destruction that the resolution can eventually be attained. In Donoghue’s “The Tale of the Apple,” for instance, the reconciliation of female characters is only achievable in the wake of the magic mirrors’ destruction: “We said not a word of what was past. [My stepmother] said, I keep breaking mirrors” (52).

In addition to the looking glass reflecting and blurring motherly and daughterly bodies together, this dissertation discusses motifs of nourishing, poisoning, and anthropophagous consumption as allegories of good and defective mothering. Thus, from poisoned apples to stolen rampions and from lentils to lungs and livers, tales of wicked (step)mothering are brimming over with metaphors for parental feeding practices, often turned dangerous and poisonous by malevolent intent. In addition, the consumption of daughterly flesh and organs by the (step)mother must be read as a distinctively maternal motif in light of its many intersections with uncanny representations of mothering and pregnant bodies as devouring

monsters—all the more so in the case of unnatural mothering<sup>6</sup> (Barzilai 231; Labudova 83). Finally, this dissertation discusses motifs of (step)maternal nurturing and the artificial—and often fatal—way in which they systematically fail to emulate patriarchal ideals of mothering. For instance, the final reunion of Coira and Arpazia in Lee’s *White as Snow* is framed as a corporeal embrace which borders on uterine reabsorption; an act of extreme (s)mothering that eventually proves fatal to the heroine:

*She’s smothering me, Coira thought. Her arms round my waist, my neck, her long dusty hair, snow-white now, all over me, in my mouth even. I can hardly breathe....*

And Arpazia held her as if to press her back inside her body, into the warm oven of her womb. And as if to press herself into the womb of Coira. (Lee, *White as Snow* 273)

Similarly, in Gaiman’s *Coraline*, the other mother’s attempts to educate and teach the heroine strike one as disproportionately menacing and cruel (Gaiman, *Coraline* 92-93), whereas the witch’s misguided attempts to protect the heroine through imprisonment and deception in Donoghue’s “Tale of the Hair” eventually lead to her own bodily mutilation at the hands of the heroine (Donoghue 51-52).

The shape-shifting and evolutive nature of the fairy-tale canon makes it inherently elusive and thus difficult to define or decompose into specific structures, models, or systems. As a response to the multiplicity of its forms and variants, as well its many intersections and overlaps with other literary genres—myth and fantasy in particular—literary folklorists have strived to uncover a unique, totemic *Urtale* through the systematic study of fairy-tale structure. The most notable models to have emerged from these attempts are undoubtedly Vladimir Propp’s morphology, which posits narrative functions—rather than characters or

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<sup>6</sup> Here meaning non-biological.



motifs—as being the smallest identifiable unit within the fairy-tale genre. Through the sequencing of functions into specific narrative syntagms, Propp thus argues, the narrative outline of any and all folktale can be identified and thus elucidated. The second model, developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss as a response to Proppian theories, suggests that fairy-tales—and to an even greater extent, myths—are structured not according to horizontal syntagms of narrative functions, but rather according to vertical binary paradigms expressing universal and unsolvable cultural contradictions through the medium of text.

Though neither of these two models is applicable as such to the contemporary fairy-tale (counter)canon due to its subversive and intrinsically revisionist nature, I have nonetheless argued throughout this chapter that functions, motifs, and paradigms remain indispensable notions to the study of postmodern fairy-tale retellings. Thus, in order to propose a holistic and contextualised commentary on the portrayal of (step)maternal wickedness within contemporary tales—as well as on its impact on the nature of the mother/daughter plot—it is necessary to establish a fairy-tale morphology specific to matricentric folktale retellings. To do so, I have proposed to gather contemporary stories of wicked (step)mothers under a new overarching tale type based on the ATU Index, which I have proposed to name “The (Step) Mother Who Abuses her Daughter”. In addition to creating this original, hybrid tale type, this dissertation sets out to discuss the paradigmatic dyads and triads that structure these new twists on traditional tales, as well as the many fairy-tale motifs turned explicitly maternal by contemporary storytellers. However, before attempting to shed light on these new patterns and omnipresent fairy-tale elements, it is paramount to comment on the many intersections of the figure of the wicked (step)mother with yet another antagonistic female stock character of the genre: the witch.

## **Part 2.**

# **My Mother, She Killed Me: Matrilineal Tragedy in Fairy-Tales**



## Chapter 4. Maiden, Mother, Crone: Intersections with the Figure of the Witch

From the title of Emma Donoghue's fairy-tale collection—*Kissing the Witch*—to the epithet they both share, it seems that the stepmother can never be entirely separated from the figure of the—equally wicked—witch. At this stage of our analysis, it thus becomes necessary to comment on this adjective which remains the prerogative of antagonistic female characters in the fairy-tale canon. Thus, in addition to foreshadowing the villainous slant of a character's (step)mothering, the term "wicked" also underlines the latter's thematic and symbolic overlap with yet another nefarious female character of the genre—the malevolent witch. According to Linda J. Lee, the witch is in fact one of the three most popular and recurring female villains in fairy-tales, alongside the ogress and the (step)mother (Lee, "Witch" 1032). Although all three of these characters may occasionally merge into a single figure, the blurring of borders between (step)mothers and witches is particularly striking. In this respect, let us briefly compare "Rapunzel" and "Snow White": though both tales traditionally depict female antagonists driven by a destructive, pseudo-maternal bond with the heroine, the first refers to its villain primarily as a magical being. Depending on the translator, Frau Gothel is thus called a witch, a fairy, a sorceress or an enchantress, her maternal role within the diegesis only being alluded to in passing. In "Snow White", on the other hand, the female nemesis is predominantly defined by her political and familial status: she is a queen and a (step)mother, and her mastery of witchcraft seems almost incidental. As for "Cinderella" narratives, although magic is both anchored within the diegesis and entwined

with maternal power<sup>7</sup>, its ties to the cruel (step)mother are uncanonical, and change depending on the storyteller's intent.

The diegetic blurring of roles between the witch and the wicked (step)mother inevitably leads to questioning the intersections of witchcraft, maternity, and femininity within the Western literary canon. Are all fairy-tale witches monstrous mothers *in potentia*? Conversely, does wicked mothering inevitably turn women into witches? More importantly still, are both these fairy-tale figures essentially—and exclusively—tied to womanhood? In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to interrogate the tension between witch and (step)mother within fairy literature through the dual prism of gender studies and feminist theory. The partial yet crucial overlap between literary and historical witches is also worthy of analysis as it betrays contradictory dynamics of fascination, repulsion, and anxiety towards the figure of the empowered, dangerous woman. Interestingly, these phenomena also apply to mothers and stepmothers within patriarchal cultures and systems, which contributes to maintaining the dyadic identity of female antagonists within the fairy-tale canon.

In order to accurately comment on the continued presence of this gynocentric binary within contemporary fairy-tale revisions, this chapter looks at the emergence—and subsequent transformations—of the figure of the witch within phallogocentric literatures. Thus, after assessing the connections between the persecution of (alleged) witches throughout history and their depiction within fantasy literature, I discuss the case of fairy-tale witches in particular: I suggest that, by embodying the quintessential narrative Other, their destruction becomes intrinsic to the eventual restoration of patriarchal order within the diegesis. In this respect, I refer to Fredric Jameson's definition of Otherness in his 1975 article "Magical Narratives":

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<sup>7</sup> Depending on the variant, the heroine may receive help from her fairy godmother, a wishing tree planted on her mother's grave, or even the mother herself, transfigured into an animal.

In the shrinking world of today, indeed, with its gradual leveling of class and national and racial differences, it is becoming increasingly clear that the concept of evil is at one with the category of Otherness itself: evil characterizes whatever is radically different from me, whatever by virtue of precisely that difference seems to constitute a very real and urgent threat to my existence. So from earliest times, the stranger from another tribe, the “barbarian” who speaks an incomprehensible language and follows “outlandish” customs, or, in our own day, the avenger of cumulated resentments from some oppressed class, or else that alien being ... behind whose apparently human features an intelligence of a malignant and preternatural superiority is thought to lurk—these are some of the figures in which the fundamental identity of the representative of Evil and the Other are visible. The point, however, is not that in such figures the Other is feared because he is evil; rather, he is evil *because* he is Other, alien, different, strange, unclean, and unfamiliar. (140)

Because of the distorted way the witch embodies the feminine, but also affects and transforms the natural world—as well as in light of her ambivalent relationship to the sphere of the maternal—the witch seems an apt illustration of this understanding of Otherness.

I then focus on the dual response of feminist theory and literature to the systematic demonisation of womanhood through the figure of the witch. To do so, I analyse contemporary efforts to reclaim, reframe and (re)empower the literary and cultural witch, so as to transform her into an allegory of alternative power and knowledge. I also underline how rethinking this figure in purely gynocentric terms—as well as essentially female—carries deeply problematic implications with regards to the exclusion of alternative forms of Otherness from feminist literature, theory and spaces—as is the case, for instance, for trans and nonbinary figures. In the final section of this chapter, I look more closely at the character of the witch-mother as a monstrous element of fantasy literature and, more specifically, of the

fairy-tale genre. To do so, I first demonstrate how the fairy-tale witch is constructed as an intrinsically oxymoronic figure which oscillates between serving the queer and the patriarchal, before underlining how monstrous, unnatural, and non-biological (step)mothers recurringly overlap with the trope of the wicked witch. Finally, I propose to reframe the fairy-tale witch as the embodiment of subversive, empowered, and alternative motherhood by discussing the queer potentialities of covens, sisterhood, and post-biological female bonds as they appear within contemporary fairy-tale retellings.

#### **4.1. The Witch in Western Cultures and Literatures**

A noteworthy phenomenon regarding the place of the witch within Western cultures is its dual, synchronous evolution within society and literature. In fact, though the literary canon alludes to the misogynistic nature of the witch archetype—as the embodiment of dangerous, unbridled female power and sexuality—the historical treatment of women accused of knowing and practicing witchcraft has only made these connections much more explicit. When discussing the roots of witch-hunts, trials, and persecutions throughout history, the importance of Heinrich Kramer’s 1486 *Malleus Maleficarum* must not be understated. Thus, in addition to outlining the main beliefs and concerns of Catholicism regarding witches and the practice of witchcraft, this infamous text “[described] the ritual and content of witchcraft per se ... [and documented] how witches injure cattle, cause hailstorms and tempests, illnesses in people and animals, bewitch men, change themselves into animals, change animals into people, commit acts of cannibalism and murder,” as Andrea Dworkin explains in *Woman Hating* (128). In this monograph, Dworkin also stresses the significant—and continued influence—of this work upon Western patriarchal systems:

Before we approach the place of women in this most Christian piece of Western history, the importance of the *Malleus* itself must be understood. In the Dark Ages, few people read and books were hard to come by. Yet the *Malleus* was printed in numerous editions. It was found in every courtroom. It had been read by every judge, each of whom would know it chapter and verse. The *Malleus* had more currency than the Bible. It was theology, it was law. To disregard it, to challenge its authority... was to commit heresy, a capital crime. (128-129)

The *Malleus Maleficarum* thus served to define witchcraft as a set of dangerous subversions of the natural order, and identify it both as the enemy of Catholicism and as an intrinsically female practice.

Many of the elements outlined by the *Malleus Maleficarum* can be identified in cultural and literary depictions of the witch and, on a larger scale, in other markedly female dangerous creatures, such as the succubus, the gorgon or even the wicked (step)mother. In spite of this overlap, however, the literary and the historical witch must only be considered as one and the same to the extent that both embody the subordination of women to a patriarchal order, so as not to disregard the role of historical and cultural context in the (mis)treatment of alleged witches over time:

Despite the invariability which archetypes of femininity display – Sphinx, witch, woman as dangerous sexual monster – this uniform tendency to ontologize and concretize the feminine should not itself become part of its explanation. Because women have been under male domination ever since the destruction of matrilineal society, there actually does exist an unvarying structure, namely that of their inferior social position. But this structure must be analyzed separately for each historical context. (Bovenschen et al. 115)



Historical persecutions of women on the grounds of witchcraft can nonetheless inform our understanding of literary depictions of witches in three significant ways: in both culture and literature, the witch bears undeniable ties with alterity and alienation, as evidenced by her atypical relationship to gender, community and the nature order, to name but a few examples. Indeed, the witch seemingly bears intrinsic ties to the natural world, which she is able to subvert for nefarious purposes. Finally, she occasionally appears to pose a threat to patriarchal and heteronormative systems—through the dual prism of deviant sexuality and motherhood—although this subversive dimension remains predominantly superficial, as we demonstrate in a subsequent section of this chapter. This last element is particularly relevant to the context of this dissertation: indeed, one must note that the intersection between witchcraft and infanticide does not exist solely on a literary level; rather, it stems from existing historical amalgamations between the practice of abortion and accusations of witchcraft and cannibalism, as Mona Chollet explains:

L'infanticide [devient] un *crimen exceptum* – ce que n'est même pas la sorcellerie.

Parmi les accusations portées contre les « sorcières » figurait souvent celle d'avoir fait mourir des enfants ; du sabbat, on disait qu'on y dévorait des cadavres d'enfants. La sorcière est l'« antimère ». Beaucoup d'accusées étaient des guérisseuses qui jouaient le rôle de sage-femme, mais qui aidaient aussi les femmes désireuses d'empêcher ou d'interrompre une grossesse. (35)

As Chollet also states, in spite of contemporary efforts to reclaim the witch within feminist theory, literature, and activism, this figure concurrently continues to be upheld as an allegory of female deviance, and instrumentalised by systems looking to maintain a religious, heteronormative, or patriarchal status quo: “[les] misogynes se montrent eux aussi, comme autrefois, obsédés par la figure de la sorcière. ‘Le féminisme encourage les femmes à quitter leurs maris, à tuer leurs enfants, à pratiquer la sorcellerie, à détruire le capitalisme et à

devenir lesbiennes’, tonnait déjà en 1992 le télévangéliste américain Pat Robertson dans une tirade restée célèbre...” (27). Although the association of witchcraft with feminism, queerness, and infanticide is also thoroughly explored within fantasy literature, some significant differences remain with regards to the portrayal of the prototypical fairy-tale witch: whereas the knowledge of natural phenomena and remedies witches were supposedly holding posed an inherent threat to the power of the church (Bovenschen et al. 97), fairy-tales alternatively present this wisdom as threatening or as highly valuable and necessary to the protagonist’s triumph. The witch and her power may indeed be sought out within the tale without making her explicitly villainous, such as in Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid” or variations on the stories of Baba Yaga (Lee, “Witch” 1032). Emma Donoghue expresses this idea explicitly in “The Tale of the Hair,” in which the protagonist describes her captor—the prototypical witch—in the following terms:

The woman was my store of knowledge, my cache of wisdom. Which was odd, since she had so little to say, and what she spoke was never above a whisper, for fear of disturbing the birds and the beasts. She taught me you only have the right to kill a creature when you know its names and ways. She walked out in all weathers, and never shrank from the cold. Sometimes she spoke of her childhood in a country so frozen that people could walk on water. When she murmured of such things under her breath, it was as if I could see them. (85)

In this tale, the witch is indeed portrayed as the keeper of alternative knowledge traditionally associated to womanhood by the same patriarchal understanding of gender that defines masculine knowledge as pertaining to culture and language, and relegates the feminine to nature, nurture, and preverbal communication. However, it must be underlined that Donoghue deliberately does not present the witch’s teachings as valueless, or ever look down on them from a narrative standpoint. Rather, in part due to her own disability, the protagonist

appears alternatively appreciative and in awe of the knowledge the other woman passes onto her.

According to Ann and Barry Ulanov, the social and geographical alienation of the fairy-tale witch differs greatly from the communal dimension of witch covens as envisioned and depicted within Western cultures (Ulanov and Ulanov 27). The moral and physical isolation of the fairy-tale witch, however, is unsurprising when one considers her connection to Otherness as defined in the context of the diegesis. In fact, Michel Foucault also alludes to this double marginalisation of the witch in his 1974-1975 classes on *Les Anormaux*:

D'ailleurs, ceci se marque immédiatement par le fait que, après tout, la sorcière est essentiellement celle qu'on dénonce, qui est dénoncée de l'extérieur, par les autorités, par les notables. La sorcière est la femme du bord du village ou de la limite de la forêt. La sorcière est la mauvaise chrétienne. (142)

In *Craving Supernatural Creatures* (2019), Claudia Schwabe comments on the physical alienation of the “Snow White” dwarfs as follows:

The dwarfs live in the forest, a marginalized living space far away from court and human society, which ties them to the status of outcasts and undesirable Others. Evocative of the fairy-tale witch, fairy-tale wolf, and other supernatural creatures dwelling in the woods, the seven dwarfs share a little cottage but are otherwise isolated in their habitat behind the seven mountains. Whether or not this isolation is by choice or by necessity can only be speculated upon. Did the dwarfs reject society or did society reject them, and if so, why? (236)

The same questions can be asked with regards to the witch, who appears similarly estranged from the other fairy-tale characters in the tales she inhabits; in this respect, we explore the

contemporary witch's ambivalent relationship to physical and cultural alienation further throughout this chapter.

As I previously mentioned, the witch can be considered as one of the most recurring archetypal monsters of fantasy literature; in fact, the witch is classified by Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* as a subcategory of the ogre motif (1250), and thus likened to all other figures of destruction and violence traditionally roaming the margins of the fairy-tale genre. Therefore, like other literary monsters, she embodies Otherness as implicitly defined by mainstream cultures when referring to anything they deem abnormal and disruptive. In this respect, Rikke Schubart argues that: "'Monster' can be seen as a dynamic site of meaning-making which has different significations in different genres, and also as a method to enter a position of dialogue with what is outside society's norm, what is strange, foreign, 'Other'" (125). However, while discussing the portrayal of evil queens and witches in contemporary American media, Schwabe argues that the traditional connection between witch and Otherness has since been severed, and that "many contemporary retellings of the fairy tale ["Snow White"] significantly alter, distort, and recreate the queen's image, depicting her not as villainous Other, wicked witch, and monstrous woman but as a realistic, tragic, and sometimes likeable character, inviting viewer identification and sympathy" (146).

Although the humanisation of female villains—both intra- and extradiegetically—is a trope that is equally popular within modern fairy-tale revisions, I argue that, rather than dissociating the witch from the Other completely, contemporary retellers reframe her physical and cultural alienation as a source of pride, and often as the result of a deliberate choice. Thus, two short stories within this corpus, while not dealing explicitly with witch-(step)mothers, interestingly echo each other in the way they portray the witch as openly choosing and embracing Otherness:

Remind them of this old crone who lives in the forest, travelling on mortar and pestle, daring to be no one's old widow, no one's grandmother with a house that stands comically on chicken legs, but still more feared than knights and emperors and sorcerers in all of this land.

I turned my wrinkles into badges of honour, welcome their labels of "monster" and "madness" with pride. My mane of silver hair is as good as a thousand soldiers' swords because not a single man has the courage to face me alone, the woman who tames fires and snakes and savours bones. (Gill 87)

So after they buried my mother, I packed up all the herbs in her store and came away.

I found myself a cave on a headland, above a village like this one.... The cave had been lived in before; there was an old blanket, and a water bag, and a dip in the floor hollowed by many small fires ... . There was no one to nurse, no one to feed, no one to listen to but my own self. I thought no one would ever bother me again and I could live out my life like a gull, like a weed, like a drop of water.

What I found instead was power. I never sought it; it was left out for me to stumble over. Only a matter of weeks had gone by before I began to find presents left outside my cave. The first was a clutch of eggs; I thought for a moment some extraordinary chicken had flown up to bring me dinner. Next came a thick slice of meat, wrapped in a cloth to keep the birds off. The villagers left their offerings at first light, before I stirred out of my cave. (Donoghue 208-210)

Additionally, within these passages, Gill and Donoghue both present maternity as an oppressive institution, and the lack thereof as inherently freeing: by rejecting social, marital and genealogical norms, the witch is thus seen finding empowerment and (re)igniting her ties to the natural world.

The paradoxical association of the witch with a notion and its opposite—nature and unnatural phenomena, female attractiveness and repulsiveness, the mother and the child devourer—must also be considered through the prism of the Freudian uncanny, as defined in his 1919 essay of the same name. Indeed, before discussing this concept with regards to fairy-tale depictions of motherhood in a subsequent chapter, it is crucial to question how it intersects with representations of the witch in the Western literary canon. Sigmund Freud defines the uncanny as “that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar” (Freud 220), attributing the difference between the “frightening” (219) and the uncanny to the presence of identifiable ties to the *heimlich*: what was once familiar and known to the self, no longer is. Though Freud argues that the fairy-tale genre is inherently incompatible with the realm of the uncanny due to its lack of anchoring within reality, and the suspension of disbelief therefore required of its readers (246)—I argue in the following chapter that the fairy-tale genre is in fact uncanny in its relation to the maternal womb, a once-familiar organic space which then recurs time and again in a distinctively unsettling fashion, and often through the prism of the mother’s distorted double, as in Neil Gaiman’s *Coraline* and Tanith Lee’s *White as Snow*. Additionally, Schwabe also argues in favour of the uncanny nature of the fairy-tale genre, though her understanding of the concept derives more from Tzvetan Todorov than it does from Freud.

The Otherized supernatural creatures in German Romantic fairy tales can be read as personifications of the uncanny, a term associated since the 1970s with the foundational works on fantasy, or “the fantastic,” of literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov and, since the 1980s, with the works of Rosemary Jackson. In his definition of the fantastic in literature, Todorov draws on the German term *unheimlich*, which translates literally to “unlike home” and, because there is no English equivalent, is referred to as “unfamiliar” or “uncanny.” In *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to*

*a Literary Genre* (1973), Todorov defines “the fantastic” as a moment of hesitation between belief and disbelief of the supernatural. It is a moment of uncertainty between the uncanny and the marvelous. According to Todorov, the uncanny is experienced upon encountering something that is at once both strange and familiar. The marvelous, by contrast, is the more traditional view of fantasy. Todorov claims that the uncanny is characterized by a character’s response—often fear—toward something seemingly inexplicable, or impossible. He argues that the marvelous does not require a response from a character, only that the fantastic event occurs. The suspension between the uncanny and the marvelous makes the literature fantastic. (19)

Besides, Ann and Barry Ulanov present the witch as an intrinsically uncanny literary character. By sharing fundamental characteristics with real-life aging and alienated women, the witch is indeed an unequivocally familiar figure; however, her dangerous and powerful nature—alongside with her ability to alter elemental human traits and natural phenomena—others her from the narrative as well as the reader’s conception of the familiar. As the Ulanovs argue, “witch motifs bring with them the breath of the uncanny, the alien, the cold implacability of Otherness unwarmed by human values or feeling-ties” (25). Furthermore, as we later demonstrate, the witch’s positioning *vis-à-vis* the institution of motherhood is also reminiscent of the Freudian uncanny: the witch indeed always seems to exist adjacently to the mother, either as her increasingly grotesque and menacing double, or as a more elusive maternal presence that constantly threatens to encroach onto the hetero-nuclear family unit. With regards to this, the feeling of strangeness, discomfort and anxiety produced by encountering the witch is for instance illustrated in Lee’s *White as Snow*, where the heroine’s “witch-queen mother” (47) becomes gradually more unrecognisable as her dangerousness and violence towards Coira increase:

Coira knew the slender obdurate back of the witch-queen. Yet, this woman was not the same. Loose black hair rivered over the russet gown. Then she turned about. Her face appeared. And the face of the witch-queen too had altered its shape, as the moon did. Though beautiful, it had become the face of a bird of prey. (116)

The effects and affects of the uncanny as it emerges in the presence of the witch—fear, dread, but also recognition—accounts for the latter’s continued presence as a primary structural element of the fairy-tale diegesis—more often antagonistic than not—as well as an ephemeral obstacle to the eventual resolution of the tale. As established in the previous chapter, Vladimir Propp considers the “punishment” of the villain as a fundamental function of traditional fairy-tales (63): he presents it as directly preceding the “wedding” function (63-64), thus establishing a Manichean counterpoint between the protagonist achieving success and the villain receiving physical or moral punishment, and sometimes being destroyed altogether. Besides, when one considers the aforementioned intersections between the portrayal of the fairy-tale witch and the crimes allegedly perpetrated by real witches throughout history, it becomes evident that the witch embodies—both within literature and culture—the frightening and dangerous feminine that threatens the most intrinsic constructs of patriarchal societies. Therefore, it comes to little surprise that the retribution and eventual annihilation of the witch represents—to the same extent as the character itself—a prototypical element of the traditional fairy-tale plot. The inevitability of the witch’s demise is similarly underlined by Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, in which they argue, while discussing the character of the Queen in “Snow White”:

The cycle of [the Queen’s] fate seems inexorable. Renouncing “contemplative purity,” she must now embark on that life of “significant action” which, for a woman, is defined as a witch’s life because it is so monstrous, so unnatural. Grotesque as Error, Duessa, Lucifera, she will practice false arts in her secret, lonely room.



Suicidal as Lilith and Medea, she will become a murderess bent on the self-slaughter implicit in her murderous attempts against the life of her own child. Finally, in fiery shoes that parody the costumes of femininity as surely as the comb and stays she herself contrived, she will do a silent terrible death-dance out of the story, the looking glass, the transparent coffin of her own image. Her only deed, this death will imply, can be a deed of death, her only action the pernicious action of self-destruction. (42)

In addition to symbolizing unrestrained female power and subversive, marginalised Otherness, Gilbert and Gubar suggest that the witch-queen is eventually punished for rejecting requisite female passivity, as well as for her attempts to instrumentalise the sphere of the feminine to elicit violence within the narrative (40). However, as I previously alluded to, Gilbert and Gubar's argument overall fails to account for the generational dimension of the (step)mother/daughter plot in "Snow White" variants. Thus, in addition to overlooking the intersections of the witch archetype with age, beauty, and power, they fail to consider the triumph over the witch from the standpoint of the child-heroine. In *The Witch Must Die* (1999), Sheldon Cashdan argues that the purpose of fairy stories is primarily didactic: by constructing fairy-tale villains as allegories of sinful, problematic behaviour, their eventual destruction brings about a cathartic resolution to the tale, while simultaneously teaching the child to distinguish right from wrong and check their own impulses and desires:

The encounter with the evil presence in the story forces children to come face to face with unwholesome tendencies in themselves by casting these tendencies as concrete characteristics of the witch. Confronting the witch thus becomes an act of self-recognition, a means by which children are forced to acknowledge parts of themselves that might otherwise be denied or ignored ... .

If the underlying intent of a fairy tale is to cleanse the reader of sinful feelings and shameful thoughts, only an extreme act of ritual purification will do. If the psychological purpose of the story is to scourge every last bit of badness from the self, the reader needs to know that the death of the witch is thorough and complete, even if it means exposing young readers to acts of violence that are extreme by contemporary standards. (Cashdan 45-46)

However, the once systematic demise of the witch—which interestingly echoes that of the maternal imposter<sup>8</sup>—must also be reconsidered through the prism of contemporary fairy-tale revisions. According to Schwabe, the punishment of fairy-tale villains within contemporary media is no longer treated as an inevitable trope: in fact, she argues, wicked antagonists seldom receive retribution in spite of unchanged crimes (Schwabe 148). Building upon the same idea, Cashdan interestingly suggests that avoiding the destruction of the witch might, in fact, be preferable with regards to the sound psychological development of the child:

But [the witch] may not always have to die. As fairy tales evolve, it is likely that accommodation with the witch may become more significant than her elimination. As children become older and more mature, they increasingly come to learn—as do Dr. Jekyll and Dorian Gray—that efforts to eradicate the bad side of the self are doomed to fail, and that eliminating the witch can lead to tragic outcomes. A willingness to engage the witch, not merely dispose of her, may turn out to be a positive development when it comes to psychological growth. (227)

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<sup>8</sup> As previously mentioned, the cyclical aspect of mother/daughter usurpation is perpetuated by the systematic destruction of the maternal villain—a stepmother more often than not—by the end of the tale. Similarly, as far as the witch can be considered as presenting a threat to the patriarchal order, she paradoxically participates in its continued hegemony due to the inherently ephemeral nature of the disruption she epitomises. Like her (step)maternal counterpart, indeed, the witch seldom survives the fairy-tale diegesis. (Sempruch 23)

Although a majority of the works discussed throughout this dissertation do not stray from the trope of the witch-mother's eventual destruction—though they often frame it with much greater ambiguity than earlier variants—writers such as Donoghue choose to thoroughly engage with the subversive survival of the witch and its consequences on the canonical diegesis in a nuanced and ambivalent manner. In “The Tale of the Hair,” for instance, the protagonist and the crone both survive, though their fate is left deliberately ambiguous:

I took her head on my chest and wept over her, salt in her wounded eyes. It was the only way I knew to clean them. I didn't know whether they would heal, or whether she would have to learn the world from me now. We lay there, waiting to see what we would see. (99)

Finally, in “The Dead Queen,” Robert Coover examines the systematic cruelty displayed in the torture and eventual execution of the witch, and exposes how cathartic retributions may serve to veil cruel and sadistic impulses:

At times, she seemed utterly heartless, this child [Snow White], become the very evil she'd been saved from. Had all our watchfulness been in vain, had that good and simple soul been envenomed after all, was it she who'd invited her old tormentor to the ball, commissioned the iron slippers, drawn her vindictively into that ghastly dance? Or did she simply laugh as the righteous must to see the wicked fall?... How she'd squealed to see the old Queen's flailing limbs, how she'd applauded the ringing of those flaming iron clogs against the marble floors! (*A Child Again* 52)

This inversion of moral alignments between Snow White and the Queen—aside from casting doubt over the rightfulness of traditional fairy-tale retributions—indicates the contemporary mutability of diegetic roles and character traits in the fairy-tale genre, in particular across matrilineal lines.

## 4.2. Reclaiming and Empowering the Witch

The aforementioned historical and literary ties between the witch and the natural world, far from being abandoned by contemporary fairy-tale revisions, are regularly instrumentalised and subverted by feminist variations on the fairy-tale canon, so as to transform the othered, alienated woman into an explicit source of alternative power and knowledge. As I previously underlined while discussing Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch*, contemporary portrayals of the witch thus often emphasise the female antagonist's connection to nature, as well as her wisdom regarding the unspoken rules of the natural world—that are framed by the narrative as being generally disregarded by patriarchal society (47). Lee's *White as Snow* actually furthers the association of the wicked queen from “Snow White” to natural phenomena by gradually merging her identity with that of Demetra, the Greek goddess of harvest and agriculture:

“Now I know you,” [Klymeno] said. Then he murmured softly, and pulled her in against him, held her without effort, and she could not struggle. “Beautiful Demetra, my darling wife.” His tone was full of love, of desire, of gladness. She turned once more molten in the fire of it.

“That isn't my name.”

“Yes. By day. When you're with me.”

“I thought—” she said. She sighed. (104-105)

In addition to explicit ties to nature and natural phenomena, the witch-crone is also associated to traditionally feminine crafts and their generational transmission. For instance, the witch in Donoghue's retelling of “Sleeping Beauty”—“The Tale of the Needle”—is defined by her weaving skills and the utter fascination they cause the heroine. Indeed, Donoghue reframes

the traditional pricking of the heroine's finger as an innocuous injury caused by the latter's defiant eagerness to be taught a forbidden craft:

There she sat, an old woman I had never seen before, her hands moving in and out of her song ... .

I cleared my throat. What is that thing that whirls so? I asked, for something to say.

Nothing but a spinning wheel, she answered with some amusement.

And that?

Have you never seen a distaff?

No, I told her.

How do you think thread gets spun, girl?

I don't know ... .

Her face was merry no longer. She put one foot on her stool and leaned closer. Listen, girl, she said, they've tried to stop me teaching any of the things I know. Now they're trying to prevent you from learning all the things you don't. But gifts can only be delayed ... .

I didn't know what to say. I sat down abruptly on her grimy stool. After a while I put my hand to the wheel; she showed me where. I set it in motion. There was a long moment of glorious whirling, and then I felt the needle drive itself into my finger. I screamed like a baby ... .

That always happens the first time, she said ... . Every time ... .

I heard feet pounding the stairs, and a call that sounded like my name. I turned to the door and pulled the bolt across. All of a sudden I felt quite awake.

I bent over for the spinning wheel and set it back in its place. I sat down on the stool and said, Please. Show me how. (166-170)

Throughout this scene, the traditional heroine/witch dyad is reframed through the prism of matrilineal transmission, with Donoghue artfully using the motif of the spindle as a metanarrative illustration of her own authorial attempt at weaving together a countercanon of fairy-tales for and about mothers and daughters.

Similarly, in *Fierce Fairytales*, Gill portrays the transmission of witchcraft as a metaphorical—and inherently female—tradition that ought to be reclaimed and celebrated:

[That] some witch ancestry in me is still left,  
 a few potions still within this heart,  
 to punish without mercy  
 those who had given me lies.

.....

It has taken me some time to learn  
 that although karma exists,  
 you can let your hatred go,  
 not by destroying your own magic  
 but by letting it grow. (147)

As argued by Schubart, this phenomenon is indicative of a contemporary shift from the traditional subplot of female rivalry to the narrative reclaiming of matrilineal nurture and the sharing of skills, craft, and knowledge that comes with it:

Ravenna, Muriel, and Maleficent represent a new and complex evil witch, a new version of the witch as monster, who invites dialogue about what aging and powerful women look like.... Sociologists Dafna Lemish and Varda Muhlbauer suggest that media representations of old women are helpful when “[...] the women behind the characters and the characters themselves serve to confront and re-frame the anxieties, fantasies, and ambitions of many older women” (2012:177). And they warn that the wave metaphor “[...] pits older women, as a tremendously valuable resource of experience, wisdom, and skills, against young women rather than as supportive of them and transferring social capital that might strengthen younger generations of women” (171). (Schubart 133)

Even in stories where witchcraft remains portrayed as fundamentally evil and threatening, the passing of magical traits from mother to daughter is no longer presented solely as a curse, but also as a gift that ultimately strengthens the mother/daughter bond. For instance, in “When the Clock Strikes,” Lee subverts the traditional “Cinderella” tale by turning the heroine into a malevolent witch, and reducing the prototypical stepmother to a harmless, well-intentioned yet ultimately powerless figure:

Now all this while she had not been toiling alone. She had one helper. It was her own daughter, a maid of fourteen, that she had recruited to her service nearly as soon as the infant could walk. At six or seven, the child had been lisping the Satanic rite along with her mother. At fourteen, you may imagine, the girl was well versed in the Black Arts, though she did not have her mother’s natural genius for them.

The girl and her mother were close as gloves in a box. Their games in the old tower bound them closer. (*Red as Blood* 51)

The influence of first and second wave feminism on critical theory and fairy-tales is also noticeable in the profound transformation of the relationship between the witch and female power within contemporary narratives. Thus, while in traditional fairy-tales, the witch traditionally embodies dangerous, uncanny Otherness—and thus represents as “an implacable enemy of the symbolic order” (Creed 104-105)—many contemporary revisions reframe the almost parodic relationship of the witch with traditional markers of femininity as a way to condemn the monolithic, oppressive understanding of gender and gender roles upheld by patriarchal cultures. Rather than disruptive and threatening, the witch’s subversion of female attributes, symbols, and narratives therefore becomes an act of rebellion and empowerment. This idea is explored at length by Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, in which they argue that the (step)mother/(step)daughter dyad in “Snow White” stories illustrates the prototypical Manichean binary of female characters within the genre:

[The] central action of the tale—indeed, its only real action—arises from the relationship between these two women: the one fair, young, pale, the other just as fair, but older, fiercer; the one a daughter, the other a mother; the one sweet, ignorant, passive, the other both artful and active; the one a sort of angel, the other an undeniable witch. (36)

Building upon this idea, they also suggest that the figure of the witch ought to be reclaimed as a literary embodiment of female artistry and creativity that inherently challenges patriarchal constructs on a textual as well as cultural level:

To mention witches, however, is to be reminded once again of the traditional (patriarchally defined) association between creative women and monsters. In projecting their anger and dis-ease into dreadful figures, creating dark doubles for



themselves and their heroines, women writers are both identifying with and revising the self-definitions patriarchal culture has imposed on them. (79)

Rather than rejecting and demonising the fairy-tale witch outright, contemporary retellings thus tend to encourage identification with this imperfect yet empowered allegory of alternative and marginalised femininity, reframing this process as a means to achieve catharsis. In Lee's *White as Snow*, for instance, the witch archetype comes under close scrutiny as the traditional villainess of "Snow White" is elevated to the roles of protagonist and narrative focaliser, in tandem with her daughter Coira. Although the label of witch is initially assigned to Arpazia as a slur (46), the latter subverts it throughout the novel by instrumentalizing the supernatural not only to obtain and preserve her narrative power—as she does in the original tale—but also to shield herself from patriarchal and sexual violence. Thus, the first curse cast by Arpazia within the novel is framed as a traumatic response to a series of sexual assaults culminating in her rape:

When she saw her blood, this moment was when the rape occurred to her. She *felt* it, for it was not the pain or the fear. It was some other thing. It turned her inside out, and she fell again, and kneeling in the snow, and the blood, she cried, in a voice she heard and which was not her own: "May it be bloody on you as that blood, and black on you as the wood. May it be cold white as snow."

Draco paled. He signed himself with the cross.

"You little cunt. Shut your slit. I can have you hanged, like the other dross. What are you, some witch?"

She did not know what she had said.

She did not know where she was, or who she was.

“Black as the wood, white as the snow,” she shrilled, her face white, her eyes all black, “red as your blood that under it flow—” ...

Her nurse’s rhymes, heard all her years, writhed like tangled weaving in her head.  
(45-46)

Similarly, the protagonist of Coover’s *Stepmother* is explicitly portrayed as a witch who, in spite of her extensive (yet waning) magical abilities, struggles to permanently alter the prototypical fairy-tale plot so as to protect her daughters and stepdaughters from patriarchal cruelty under the guise of moral righteousness:

Of course, [my daughter], naked and spread-eagled and shackled to the floor below me, expects me to get her out of this somehow. I’m a witch, I should be able to do something. And it’s true, I do have a few tricks, though in general it’s more useful to be thought a witch than to be one. An aura lingers on, accruing respect, but tricks are only tricks and they come and go. Magic rings and slippers are misplaced or stolen, unbreakable rods get broken, spells collapse for a fault in the grammar or a memory lapse. To which I’m increasingly given, as if my inborn malice were being mocked by my own particulates. (1)

Often, however, modern revisions of fairy-tales portray witches as morally ambivalent and empowered characters, while paradoxically stripping them from their supernatural abilities: in some cases, the witch label is thus only referred to in passing, as in Neil Gaiman’s “Snow, Glass, Apples”: “They call me wise, but I am far from wise, for all that I foresaw fragments of it, frozen moments caught in pools of water or in the cold glass of my mirror.... Wise, and a witch, or so they said, and I’d seen his face in my dreams and in reflections for all my life...” (Smoke and Mirrors 371). Other retellings choose to use the name of the witch as an allegory of the demonisation of female power within patriarchal

cultures, as Gill does in “Scheherazade the Clever”: “The vixen, the vamp, the witch; / they have so many words / to convey their dislike of this woman, / because she holds her own / on a planet clearly not built / for humans like her” (44). Similarly, in Donoghue’s “The Tale of the Apple” the heroine’s stepmother only bears resemblance to the traditional fairy-tale witch to the extent that the heroine believes she might be endangered—and eventually poisoned—by her:

My head was still swimming; I thought I might faint again. But my mouth was full of apple, slippery, still hard, vinegary at the edges. I could feel the marks of my own teeth on the skin. I bit down, and juice ran to the corners of my lips. It was not poisoned. It was the first apple of the year from my father’s orchard. (54)

Feminist efforts to reframe the witch as a sexual, powerful, and unapologetic symbol of womanhood (Chollet 29-30) therefore only apply occasionally to the contemporary fairy-tale countercanon. Interestingly, it is in fact the wicked (step)mother, more so than the witch, that modern revisions endeavours to revisit, reframe, and (re)empower. Besides, the unquestioned association of the witch with the realm of the feminine—in spite of its existing ties other forms of monstrosity and Otherness that exist outside of a gendered understanding of interpersonal power dynamics—strikes one as a reductive and superficial equivalence, which must be questioned in light of similarly excluded, othered, and silenced identities within Western cultures and literatures.

Attempts to reclaim and (re)empower the figure of the witch within literature, popular culture, and activist movements, while not intrinsically problematic, often surmise that the witch exists as an archetype that applies exclusively—and indiscriminately—to women as a gendered category. While dynamics of systematic female subordination and oppression are unquestionably at play within patriarchal systems, I argue that it is both reductive and

misleading to disregard the role of age, ethnicity, and gender nonconformity in the demonisation of individuals and their identification to the witch archetype. As underlined by Chollet, the contemporary witch exists paradoxically as both a symbol of the systemic oppression of women under patriarchy and of their emancipation from these systems, to the point of being regularly instrumentalised by capitalist desires to brand female empowerment (Chollet 29-30). Not only does this phenomenon deeply undermine the subversive potential of the witch as a figure of pride, resistance, and empowerment, it also erases its existing intersections with other forms of alienation from mainstream, phallogocentric Western cultures. As Justyna Sempruch explains, reclaiming the witch as a universal allegory of female empowerment often implicitly furthers problematic essentialist conceptions of womanhood as a uniform gender category:

[The] radical feminist witches “can only represent all oppressed women if we know very little about them. The more witch-history the myth of the Burning Times attempts, the more damage it does to its own mythic status” (Purkiss 13). This *herstorical* blindness to difference in historical and present situatedness of women is characteristic of many radical feminist texts. Their witch figure remains entrapped within the dilemma of a cultural transgressor and negotiator that in history became a convenient scapegoat (the stereotypical frightening witch-woman to be eliminated), and in *herstory* becomes a utopian projection of female power. (15)

For example, the unquestioned whiteness of the witch as contemporary feminist symbol—set in direct opposition to the racist bias of witch-hunts throughout history (McMillan 104; Tucker 628)—is particularly striking when considering this dissertation’s corpus. As Tatar explains in *The Fairest of them All*, while the widespread use of colour symbolism in traditional tales like “Snow White” might not initially have stemmed from internalised white supremacy, many stories gradually shifted towards equating whiteness of

skin with beauty throughout their successive retellings (Tatar x). Consequently, the association of *fairness*—be it literal or metaphorical—with fairy-tale heroines is still extremely prevalent within contemporary fairy-tale revisions, and becomes all the more striking when discussing “Snow White” retellings. The figure of the witch, far from exempt from this phenomenon, brings to the fore the unspoken (and unchallenged) whiteness of the contemporary witch as epitome of womanhood emancipated from patriarchal constructs. Interestingly, the only narrative within this corpus that touches directly on themes of racism and colourism does so not through the figure of the witch, but through that of its mixed-race heroine, whose prototypical nickname—ironically coined here by her wicked stepmother—is turned into an example of bigotry, cruelty, and maternal abuse (Valente 37). One must also note that, although the non-white characters are initially the ones accused of practicing witchcraft (72), the only canonical witch in the novel is in fact the heroine’s stepmother. Valente thus presents witchcraft as an illicit and unnatural means of female empowerment, intrinsically indissociable from the dangerous and malevolent deeds perpetrated by the monstrous (step)mother.

As Sempruch underlines, reclaiming the archetypal witch as a symbol of female resistance and empowerment also feeds into contemporary attempts to (re)conceptualise womanhood as a singular experience, which often happens at the expense of diversity, intersectionality, and inclusion:

Most importantly, I view the radical feminist archetype of the witch as attempting, and to some extent failing, to be “fluid and dynamic, empowering women’s personalities to grow and develop” (Pratt 135). Instead *herstorical* narratives focus hazardously on constructing an identity and therefore a theory of “woman.” And to have a theory of woman “is already to reduce the plurality of woman to the coherent and thus phallogocentric representations of theory” (Gallop, *The Daughter’s*

*Seduction* 134). The false universal of the “white middle class woman” subject and identity ideals, in particular, “had not promoted feminist solidarity – they led on the contrary, to anger and schism, to hurt and mistrust” (Fraser, *Justice Interruptus* 179).

(43)

Indeed, as previously explained, the character of the fairy-tale witch has been used throughout history as an allegory not only of dangerous femininity, but also as one of Otherness in a more general sense. Therefore, transforming the contemporary witch into an unequivocally female figure diverts her from embodying—and similarly empowering—alternative forms of transgression from the norm, as Sempruch deplures: “Although the feminist witch succeeds in subverting her abject identity by converting it into a political fantasy of gender, the ‘category of women for merely “strategic” purposes’ (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 4) remains problematic” (12). In light of this phenomenon, one of the solutions suggested by Sempruch is to reinvest the transgressive dimension of the witch through the triple prism of gender, body, and culture, so as to transform her into a figure of borderlessness and proud “un/belonging” (131) as a response to phallogocentrism:

The witch as a boundless fantasy of gender is thus a fantasy of un/belonging opening ways out of the limiting significations. Although cross-gender, cross-cultural, cross-body identification makes subjects politically vulnerable, it simultaneously allows for re-zoning the tabooed borders and stigmatized territories. In her borderlessness, the witch conveys the permanent deferral of meanings, of linear development of thought, it communicates a paradox of the navel, autonomy engraved with subjugation that is at once refused by and initiated within phallogocentric culture. (131)

In this respect, Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch* briefly touches on the gender nonconforming potential of the witch in "The Tale of the Hair," where the traditional prince is merely another one of the witch's disguises:

She guided my hand over the pieces of horn, common horn. The horn was mine, she said. I knew I would have no peace till I found you a prince. As she spoke her whisper deepened into a hoarse, musical voice, a voice I knew.

I pulled back and threw the sharp fragments in her face, calling her witch, monster, carrion, all the words she ever taught me. (91)

However, as I discuss further throughout Chapter 8, this scene finds its characters caught in a web of intersecting and contradictory tensions resulting in their violent oscillation between queer and maternal forms of kinship. As a consequence, Donoghue finds herself unable to adequately explore the additional stakes that emerge from the encounter of gender nonconformism with the figure of the fairy-tale witch.

### **4.3. The Witch-Mother, a Monstrous Figure?**

Another consequence of the cultural reappropriation of the witch by feminist theory—in an attempt to uproot and topple the supremacy of phallogocentric narratives—is visible in the way it impacts the representation of (step)mothers in contemporary fairy-tale retellings. As I previously stated, traditional female villains within the genre predominantly come in the shape of witches, stepmothers, and ogresses (Lee, *Witch* 1032). These stock characters are all defined by a layered yet antagonistic relationship to patriarchal normativity, as well as abilities—often supernatural—to disturb the preestablished order of nature and culture, as well as conception of women as innate and selfless nurturers. Particularly frequent is the overlap between wicked stepmothers and witches, to the point that these two characters are

regularly used interchangeably, as Dworkin points out in *Woman Hating*: “[The bad mother] is ruthless, brutal, ambitious, a danger to children and other living things. Whether called mother, queen, stepmother, or wicked witch, she is the wicked witch, the content of nightmare, the source of terror” (41). However, as Dworkin explains, the type of motherhood embodied by the fairy-tale witch is, unsurprisingly, inherently monstrous, unnatural and violent in its nature: “[The evil] mother... is repulsive in her cruelty. She is repulsive and she must be destroyed. She is the female protagonist, the nonmale source of power which must be defeated, obliterated, before male power can fully flower. She is repulsive because she is evil. She is evil because she acts” (48). The fairy-tale witch therefore seems permanently condemned to upholding an ambivalent relationship with the maternal—both utterly indissociable from it and representing its worst, most condemnable forms.

The recurring presence of the character of the witch in narratives of maternal villainy leads me to looking at the contemporary fairy-tale witch through the prism of mothering and unmothering<sup>9</sup>. This phenomenon is perhaps most striking in narratives where the witch is not a mother herself, but rather a narrative adjuvant in the wicked (step)mother’s quest to rid herself of her (step)children. Contemporary fairy-tale retellings often explore this phenomenon more explicitly and graphically than their canonical counterparts, by turning the witch into the facilitator—and sometimes performer—of abortion through her knowledge of draughts and curses. For instance, Lee’s *White as Snow* and Donoghue’s *Kissing the Witch* both portray female characters seeking the help of witchy women in order to terminate their pregnancies. While Donoghue’s allusion to abortion is easy to overlook (199), Lee

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<sup>9</sup> In “Abortion, Mothering, and the Liminal Space in Between” (2021), Miriam Rose Brooker uses the term “unmothering” as a way of speaking conjointly of women who have undergone abortions, and mothers who have walked away from their homes and roles as the primary carers of their children (26-27). Expanding this definition through the prism of the fairy-tale genre, I use this term throughout this dissertation as a way of describing any situation where a mother willingly ceases to be one.



interestingly chooses to echo contemporary, real-life debates surrounding the issue of abortion throughout her novel:

Arpazia was reminded of her elderly nurse in the castle. Irritated, dismayed, Arpazia said, “I’m with child. I won’t bear this unlawful thing... Assist me to be rid of it.”

The Smoke Crone said, “I will give you a mixture of herbs, boar’s-tongue that speaks and grows from a boar’s dribblings. Other stuff.”

“Will it hurt?” asked Arpazia. “Will it be quick?”

“You’ll feel no more than with your usual courses. The life is smaller than a grain of sand. It has no soul in it yet, even though a soul comes to watch it through the window of your belly. I must give you heart-leaf, too, to send the soul away, or it may haunt you, after.” (*White as Snow* 114)

If the witch’s central role in fairy-tale representations of abortion stems directly from the historical targeting of female nurses, healers, and midwives in witch-hunts (Chollet 35), it is far from the only intersection between witchcraft and processes of unmothering. Indeed, the fairy-tale witch is also the one who steals and devours children, as exemplified by most versions of “Rapunzel” or “Hansel and Gretel”. Thus, if both tales can easily be read as symbolic depictions of abortion and child abandonment respectively, I argue that the hybrid, simultaneous positioning of the witch as narrative antagonist and motherly presence is far from insignificant. Thus, in spite of the original mother’s shortcomings and cruelty, it is ultimately the witch who becomes the epitome of unmothering in these tales: by embodying the noxious transformation of mothering into smothering and nurture into consumption, the witch not only severs the metaphorical umbilical cord between mother and child, she also takes on the role of grotesque and irredeemable maternal usurper. The fact that the witch is traditionally portrayed as an aging, physically repulsive woman—most often a crone or a

hag—is also worthy of interest, as it underlines and reinforces the cultural bias against post-menopausal women, whose maternal purpose has not been—or can no longer be—exploited, and who are subsequently demonised and alienated from the rest of society. In this respect, Sempruch proposes to look at the fairy-tale witch as a figure of uncanny, empowered “un/belonging”:

Un/belonging, a term designating both the physical location (belonging) and the sociopolitical relation with agency (unbelonging), conveys a decentralized but not disempowering cultural topography. As fugitive from melancholic positions of absence and exclusion, [the witch] draws on her confinement to the “far away land” of collective myths and superstitions, to her expulsion from the “here and now,” and simultaneously her ubiquitous physical presence, her hidden closeness as a neighboring woman, mother, daughter. But her nonconforming physical appearance is ambiguous, because as a phallogentric projection of the feminine it should be familiar (motherly), but it is not. In fact, as argued in the previous chapter, the diasporic image of the witch’s body is marked by the stigma of the monstrous feminine, the castrating vagina, the witch as a grotesque “unfeminine” figure. Her enforced exile or voluntary flight is from this initially marked gender, as she is caught between, rather than supported by, the various laws and languages of the Father. But eventually the exile inscribes her also with “agency.” (95)

The ambiguous place of the fairy-tale witch as embodiment of cultural and literary un/belonging is far from restricted to instances where the witch represents an absence of—or a threat to—pregnancy and motherhood. Indeed, as previously stated, numerous fairy-tale variants choose to merge the witch and the biological mother into a single, antagonistic female figure. In these tales, the dichotomy between witchcraft and motherhood is however still paramount: the witch comes to represent maternity in its most extreme and unsettling

forms, turning the witch-mother into an intrinsically monstrous and uncanny figure. The recurring—and generally unchallenged—equivalence between witch, mother, and monster is often explored explicitly throughout fairy narratives, either by portraying the witch as distinctively non-human, or by depicting her maternal attributes as abnormal and gruesome. For instance, while Catherynne Valente's *Six-Gun Snow White* repeatedly hints at the paranormal nature of the heroine's stepmother, it is undoubtedly when the latter gives birth to a hybrid, non-human child that her monstrousness is depicted most physically and vividly:

The woman in the mirror was pregnant.

The reflection of Mrs. H got big in the belly day by day as the winter wore on.

Mrs. H stayed slim as a pen....

The baby came at night. I watched it happen from my hiding place and if I live a hundred years I will not see anything stranger. Mrs. H stood stock still while the reflection in the mirror cried and struggled and bled. The blood coming from between her legs wasn't red. It was the color of a mirror, like mercury beading out of her. She looked like she would die and the baby would choke on her. Drown in her like a dress. Mrs. H just folded her hands in the museum and never made a sound. She watched. She didn't even fidget. Finally the child spilled out of the woman in the mirror, mirror-blood gushing and a rope of that terrible black wood like stone connecting them. The woman in the mirror cut it with her teeth. The child was a boy.

(58-59)

Gaiman's *Coraline* offers an equally intriguing and equivocal take on the (in)human and disconcerting nature of the witch-mother: although Coraline's original and "other" mothers are never explicitly presented as one and the same, their initial physical resemblance forces the reader to immediately question the existence of two distinct mothers. This initial

doubt is further legitimized by the self-identification of the witch with the term “mother”, as well as by the sense of strange familiarity produced by her first encounter with Coraline:

It sounded like her mother. Coraline went into the kitchen, where the voice had come from. A woman stood in the kitchen with her back to Coraline. She looked a little like Coraline’s mother. Only...

Only her skin was white as paper.

Only she was taller and thinner.

Only her fingers were too long, and they never stopped moving, and her dark red fingernails were curved and sharp.

“Coraline?” the woman said. “Is that you?”

And then she turned around. Her eyes were big black buttons.

“Lunchtime, Coraline,” said the woman.

“Who are you?” asked Coraline.

“I’m your other mother,” said the woman. (38-39)

Coraline’s other mother must be considered as an uncanny maternal figure, seeing as she is in many aspects reminiscent of the biological mother, whilst also being explicitly othered by the narration. Additionally, her behaviour towards the heroine quickly devolves from mother to monster throughout the narrative, which in turn triggers the gradual loss of her human-like appearance:

It was funny, Coraline thought. The other mother did not look anything at all like her own mother. She wondered how she had ever been deceived into imagining a resemblance. The other mother was huge—her head almost brushed the ceiling—and

very pale, the color of a spider's belly. Her hair writhed and twined about her head, and her teeth were sharp as knives.... (94)

Gaiman's uncanny witch-mother, more so than an allegory of unmothering, is therefore a distorted reflection of the elusive good mother, who traditionally seldom survives the incipit of fairy stories. This portrayal interestingly echoes the Ulanovs' understanding of the witch archetype as stemming from the systematic reversal and perversion of maternal constructs:

As a first example, take a woman's interest in developing the ego qualities of a good mother, whether or not she is an actual parent, and take a man seeking maternal tenderness and support from his anima. Here the main theme jumps out at us: the witch reversing the usual order of things. To the mother's nurturing womb, the witch shows a devouring maw. Parodying the maternal attitude of helpful support for the helpless, the witch takes advantage of the helpless and dependent. To the mother's feeding breast, the witch brings her own insatiable hunger. Where mothers give out, the witch takes in. Where mothers are feeders, she is an eater. Where mothers support and hold others, the witch drops them into the pit. Where mothers scent themselves with sweet smells of body-warmth, of food and hearth, the witch stinks of a slimy detritus. Where a mother brings life, the witch faces us with death and decay. Where a mother inspires kindly trust in others, a witch calls forth terror and dread. (32-33)

At this stage, it is necessary to point out that the uncanniness and monstrosity of the witch-mother is often intrinsically related to the representation of cisgender female bodies and reproductive organs within patriarchal literatures and cultures. Throughout this dissertation—and Chapter 5 more specifically—I therefore argue that the maternal body represents a source of entwined fascination and repulsion within phallogocentric narratives, epitomizing both the object and the abject *par excellence*. Thus, although the literary

discomfort for gynocentric representations and narratives is far from restricted to the character of the fairy-tale witch—and in fact impacts most imperfect maternal figures within the Western canon—I suggest that the malevolent and repulsive nature of the witch-mother is often strikingly and vividly linked to depictions of abnormal bodies and threatening genitalia. On this topic, Sempruch likens the religious figure of Lilith to an early incarnation of the witch as monstrous and devouring female body *in potentia*:

Lilith's lack of encumbrances, violence, and unrestrained sexuality can be seen as early manifestations of the Western witch figure, a mouth-dominated female creature in a double understanding of the female labia, the dangerous lips of the speaking female mouth and the uncontrolled lips of the vulva, usually in the form of the *vagina dentata*. (34)

The synecdoche of the witch as a set of unnatural, devouring mouths is for instance illustrated in Coover's *Stepmother*, where the protagonist's daughter—a witch herself—accidentally bites off the phallus of one of the princes during intercourse (55). Similarly, the witch-queen of Lee's *White as Snow* is portrayed as attempting to simultaneously poison and reabsorb her daughter into the womb during their final reunion scene:

And Arpazia held her as if to press her back inside her body, into the warm oven of her womb. And as if to press herself into the womb of Coira.

They had murmured fragments of the past, the dreams. They had eaten the honey-apples from the basket, sharing them. The sweet, sweet taste burned across their lips, closing their throats, gluing their tongues to the ceilings of their mouths. (273)

Interestingly, Lee's novel frames this bodily encounter with the witch-mother as not only life-threatening but also inherently desirable for the heroine, echoing Sempruch's conclusions regarding the ambivalent pull of the maternal womb:

While recalling the phallogocentric construct of the witch as a specific trace of the unencumbered woman, the witch will come to represent a ghost of the repressed, uncanny absence of the archaic (rather than phallic) mother. It is precisely the archaic absence, the mourning for the archaic Thing (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 41) that links the witch with the return of what has been eliminated or repressed.... At the same time, what these narratives also express is our passionate desire of such a frightening return.

(54)

The existence of the literary witch as dangerous aggrandisement of the maternal and the feminine paradoxically explains her contemporary appeal on fairy-tale retellers, as well as her central place within the developing fairy-tale countercanon. Though I have already discussed the extent of her instrumentalisation by feminist literature—as well as the perpetuation of othering and exclusion it may produce—the contemporary witch also exists as an intrinsically queer figure, whose Otherness is now being reclaimed as a means of subverting and dismantling such cultural constructs as heteronormativity, gender binarism, nuclear parentality, and even speciesism. Thus, efforts to reframe Otherness through the figure of the witch are particularly visible in contemporary fairy-tale retellings. As I previously demonstrated, the witch indeed exists as a hybrid figure that is neither fully human nor permanently Other, and whose shapeshifting abilities makes her escape binary classification. For instance, although the true nature of Mrs. H in Valente's *Six-Gun Snow White* is never clearly stated, her biological Otherness is made explicit through mothering when she gives birth to a human-animal hybrid later referred to as "Deer Boy" (58-59, 121). This inhuman form of mothering is interestingly reminiscent of the canonical association of the witch to animals (Birkhäuser-Oeri 48), as well as of her own metamorphic abilities (Bovenschen 97). However, instead of being framed as intrinsically abnormal, this proximity

merely serves to temporarily blur the border between the human and the animal, the biologic and the supernatural, and more importantly, between the self and the Other.

The uncanniness and villainisation of the witch-mother is also particularly interesting because it is often on the failure—or absence—of mothering that the queer turn of contemporary witch stories hinges. As I previously mentioned, the witch-mother is indeed the one who first disrupts the heteronormative nuclear family structure, be it through performing abortion or trading crops for unborn children; in fact, this is yet another trait that she shares with the wicked stepmother. In this respect, Coover's *Stepmother* is once again particularly relevant: thus, not only does Stepmother admit to stealing infants from their families (*Stepmother* 15), she also posits the coven as an alternative to the nuclear family model, presenting it as intrinsically more inclusive than traditional modes of filiation: “[Her] sister from the coven [will] burn at the stake today without hope of mercy or exoneration. A stepsister in the world of Reaper’s Woods, but not in the coven where sisterhood is of the spirit and without degree” (83). Similarly, the pagan rites taking place in the woods of Lee’s *White as Snow* deliberately bear much resemblance to the rituals of witch covens as pictured in Western popular culture:

Arpazia said, “I hear from my servants she—you, too, then—are a sort of law in the town. They are your people, not the king’s.”

“Ah, lady,” said the crone slyly. She denied nothing.

“Your people, then,” said Arpazia, “are too bold. You must reprimand them. I’ve heard talk here of your dancing in the woods. Godless pagans. You make the pious priests angry.” (82-83)



On the subject of covens and kinship between witches, the Ulanovs underline a significant discrepancy between historical accounts of witchcraft practices and their depiction in literature:

One interesting difference between women actually supposed to be witches and the witch figure of fairy tales is the communal nature of the former's activities. According to historical accounts, covens of witches usually consisted of thirteen—a number chosen, it is thought, to parody Christ and his twelve disciples. Despite this communal aspect, the fairy-tale witch usually shows herself to be a lonely, isolated figure, and both the historical covens and the witch figure of literature associate the witch with deserted places far removed from human society. (27)

I argue that contemporary attempts to reclaim the witch as a figure of empowered and unencumbered Otherness stray away from the traditional portrayal of witches as isolated and alienated individuals, choosing instead to represent them as entwined in alternative networks of non-biological, queer kinship, and in so doing retracing the steps of their historical counterparts.

As I previously stated, the uncanny nature of the contemporary witch is not restricted to her paradoxical position as a performer of (un)mothering. Building upon Sempruch's claims, I argue that, rather than an allegory of radical female empowerment, the fairy-tale witch must be reimagined and reclaimed as the epitome of countercultural Otherness within the genre. On the subject, Sempruch declares:

Standing at this crossroads, the witch as a "fantasmatic other" emerges thus as a project for the feminist future. In its futuristic form, she/he will no longer embody any antithetical or previously missing addendum to subjects of feminist research. Instead, formulated as running counter to the subjects of Hegelian dialectics, the "witch" will

represent “cross-thinking, counter-questioning, counter-seeing, contradiction, protest” (Thürmer-Rohr 164). And as long as s/he does not reduce herself to the universal essence of female specificity, she will uncover the phallacy of standardized systems, understandings, and contradictions of the androcentric worldview.... (23)

Although fairy-tale retellings where the witch is unequivocally portrayed as queer remain quite rare, a few works within this corpus nonetheless tackle the subject of gender, romantic, and sexual nonconformity through the prism of the witch. The most striking example of this phenomenon certainly remains Donoghue’s *Kissing the Witch*, whose queer slant is made explicit from the very title of the collection. To cite but two examples, Donoghue’s “The Tale of the Kiss” discusses lesbian desire and its correlation with both witchery and Otherness, the witch protagonist thus declaring that “on the whole [she is] inclined to think that a witch should not kiss. Perhaps it is the not being kissed that makes her a witch; perhaps the source of her power is the breath of loneliness around her. She who takes a kiss can also die of it, can wake into something unimaginable, having turned herself into some new species” (209-210). “The Tale of the Hair,” on the other hand, touches on gender fluidity and transgression through the prism of the witch—albeit in more implicit and ambivalent ways. Thus, in order to provide the heroine with a suitable love interest—a fairy-tale prince—the witch finds herself performing a different gender, transforming her voice and appearance in order to seduce her oblivious protégée (91). Interestingly, “The Tale of the Hair”—similarly to “The Tale of the Apple” and “The Tale of the Shoe”—frames queer desire as stemming directly from the lack of biological bond between younger and older woman; I examine this pattern more thoroughly in the final section of this dissertation.

Throughout this chapter, we have established that the character of the fairy-tale witch is constructed as an inherently uncanny, shape-shifting, and threatening figure. Stemming from the persecution of alleged witches throughout history, literary representations of witches

often emphasise their paradoxical and ambivalent relationship to nature, natural phenomena, and, by extension, the natural order of things as defined by patriarchal systems. In fairy-tales, the witch therefore serves as an allegory of transgressive, supernatural Otherness: by embodying the disruption and potential dismantling of the phallogocentric canon—as well as the return of the alienated Other—it comes to little surprise that the witch can only exist as a temporary narrative antagonist who must be defeated by the end of the tale so as to ensure the preservation of the patriarchal status quo. The character of the witch thus exists—simultaneously and paradoxically—as an agent and a force of disruption of patriarchal systems. However, the subversive potential of the witch as a cultural and literary figure also explains its contemporary (re)appropriation by feminist theory. Indeed, the witch is commonly understood as a fundamentally female figure, an allegorical aggregation the most undesired and dangerous aspects of the empowered feminine. Therefore, for feminist theory and fairy-tale revisions alike, the witch is, at its core, a figure of alternative female power, knowledge, and agency: she is the one who rules over the realm of the (super)natural and the corporeal, as illustrated by her own, deceitful shape-shifting abilities.

However, as I also discussed throughout this chapter, reclaiming the witch as a purely female figure prevents her from representing alternative forms of Otherness that are equally as alienated and silenced by the fairy-tale canon. Additionally, any attempt to turn the witch into the symbol of a universal female experience drastically reduces the multiplicity of perspectives, identities, and experiences that ought to compose the developing feminist fairy-tale countercanon. In this respect, my dissertation chooses to look at the figure of the witch not as a symbol of empowered and emancipated femininity, but rather as one of unnatural and violent mothering. As previously stated, there is indeed such significant overlap between the character of the witch and that of the wicked (step)mother that the two are regularly used interchangeably. This phenomenon is indicative of widespread ambivalence and discomfort

with the institution of motherhood within the fairy-tale genre, as well as culture at large: imperfect mothering has got to be monstrous, and the monstrous woman cannot exist independently from motherhood either. As a consequence, contemporary fairy-tale revisions is interested in subverting this paradoxical dynamic so as to turn the uncanny witch-(step)mother into a figure of non-maternal queer bonding, and the coven into one of many alternatives to the nuclear family model. Indeed, as the following chapters argue, it has become urgent to create more ambivalent and inclusive patterns of fairy-tale mothering, as contemporary theory continues to bring to light the utter impossibility of coexisting as mother and daughter within the fairy-tale canon.



## Chapter 5. Monstrous Maternities and Uncanny Bodies in Patriarchal Tales

While the wicked witch remains the epitome of female villainy as portrayed in traditional fairy-tales, the physical and filial distance alienating her from the protagonists undoubtedly posits her as Other and othered. However, another prototypical female villain of the genre further blurs the line between the familiar and the familial, and is of particular interest to contemporary fairy-tale retellers: the wicked (step)mother. As previously underlined, often the figure of the witch and that of the monstrous mother overlap, but it is not systematic. Sometimes, as in Tanith Lee's *White as Snow*, the witch exists diegetically—and occasionally colludes with the dangerous mother—but the true threat to the female heroine lies closer, and is infinitely more difficult to unmask as she borrows the traits of the desirable, perfect mother. In other tales, such as Catherynne Valente's *Six-Gun Snow White*, the (step)mother is an undeniable witch, but her mastery of crafts and curses only represents part of the danger she embodies: above all, her wickedness stems from the twisted and unnatural way she nurtures her (step)children. Other times still, the (step)mother exists as an inverted and distorted reflection of everything a mother ought to be according to patriarchal Western cultures. Therefore, the way she performs motherhood becomes evidence of her witchy nature to the eyes of her accusers, be it eventually proven or disproven by the narrative. In all of these configurations, however, it is clear that the witch and the mother remain intrinsically inseparable—if not completely interchangeable—figures that stem from similar anxieties surrounding the place, role, and nature of women within phallogocentric systems and literatures. This interconnectedness is in fact explicitly expressed by Iris, the protagonist of Maguire's *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister*, who says of her mother

Margarethe: “*She is a witch*. One might as well say, *She is a mother*, ... that about covers the same terrain, doesn’t it?” (296).

Whether or not the fairy-tale (step)mother is a witch, she remains undoubtedly wicked, functioning as a narrative allegory of culturally-sanctioned motherhood so as to implicitly outline and reassess maternal norms throughout the diegesis. As a consequence, representations of the maternal within the fairy-tale genre are inherently dyadic and Manichean, with angelic and monstrous archetypes successively intervening to progress the plot until the female protagonist eventually comes to face—and often embrace—her own motherhood. Thus, although anglophone fairy-tales traditionally leave the reproductive fate of their female protagonists more open than, for instance, their francophone counterparts, the possibility of progeny is nonetheless seldom discarded. This is especially intriguing when one realises that, according to the dichotomous representations of motherhood in fairy-tales, the heroine-become-mother has only two possible narrative paths: suffering a symbolic, self-sacrificial death shortly after giving birth, or slowly falling prey to vanity and resentment until she becomes a wicked (step)mother in turn. Before looking at the systematic doubling of mother figures within the genre—and the problematic implications it carries with regards to the emergence of non-traditional family configurations in contemporary Western societies—I first consider how fairy-tale depictions of monstrous (step)motherhood are indicative of ambivalent and violent attitudes towards the sphere of the maternal, and the pregnant body in particular. Treated as an object of fascination and repulsion, of desire and destruction, the wicked mother’s narrative presence is indeed both indispensable to the progression of the fairy-tale plot, yet inherently dependent on her eventual destruction to reestablish patriarchal order. Throughout this chapter, I therefore look at the (step)mother and her body as catalysts of heterodiegetic and homodiegetic violence, while attempting to assess how phenomena of abjection and objectification are declined and repeated at the level of the child protagonist.

In the first section of this chapter, I discuss the contemporary return to biological mothers as the quintessential fairy-tale villain, and examine more specifically how the cisgender female body is depicted in contemporary retellings, specifically in the context of pregnancy and childbirth. After looking at the female body as a site of patriarchal and misogynistic violence and abuse, I analyse how child-bearing is represented in recent retellings of beloved fairy-tales, paying particular attention to the discrepancies between narratorial accounts of pregnancy and the way they are experienced and spoken of by pregnant characters themselves. I suggest that the negative and destructive attitudes fairy-tale mothers have towards their own pregnant bodies and children—be they biological or not—stem from the oppression they face when experiencing motherhood as a patriarchal institution. The following section looks at fairy-tale mothering through the prism of applied psychoanalysis, focusing on depictions of the maternal body and the womb as uncanny, threatening, and abject. I argue that fairy-tales posit the mother as the *Other par excellence*, a source of mingled fascination and repulsion that exists solely to be overcome by the pubertal hero or heroine. Looking more particularly at psychoanalytic feminist theory, I then discuss contemporary efforts to reclaim and celebrate the maternal body through the lens of sexual difference, and the problematic implications such concepts have with regards to furthering an essentialist view of gender and reproduction that contemporary retellings reveal as intrinsically fallible and alienating. Finally, I consider the destruction of the wicked (step)mother as a prototypical fairy-tale *scène-à-faire*, catalysing the restoration of patriarchal order and the passage of the hero—or, in the context of this dissertation, the heroine—into adulthood. After examining the narrative erasure of maternal plots and voices within the genre, I argue that part of the systematic violence perpetrated by fairy-tale stepmothers towards their stepchildren must be understood as a defensive reaction to the institutionalisation of matricide by phallogentric cultures and literatures. I suggest that the



perpetuation of maternal violence in contemporary fairy-tale retellings reveals the oppressive nature of maternity as a patriarchal institution. As a consequence, the mother/daughter plot must be reread and reinterpreted as one of impossible coexistence, systematised rivalry, and cyclical objectification culminating in the ritualistic desecration and destruction of mothering and mothered bodies.

### **5.1. Abused Bodies, Undesired Maternities**

Although the most prominent versions of fairy-tales in Western popular culture tend to be the child-oriented, sanitised variants produced by the Grimm brothers, the fairy-tale genre as a whole seldom shies away from depicting scenes of sexual violence and assault—often in vivid and crude detail—be they framed as such or, on the contrary, as romantic acts bringing about the reunion of star-crossed lovers. An interesting dimension of contemporary retellings, in particular those interested in crafting feminist variants to traditional tales, lies in the way they depict these scenes of abuse—most often perpetrated against young female characters—as violent, gritty, and gruesome acts to the point of creating utter discomfort among the readership. Thus, the omnipresence of physical and sexual assaults, rape scenes, and various other forms of patriarchal violence within this dissertation’s corpus underlines the extent of institutionalised misogyny within Western societies, and must therefore be discussed in order to understand its impact on fairy-tale depictions of maternity and matrilineal relationships. Indeed, although the antagonistic relationship between mother and daughter in contemporary fairy-tale retellings cannot be solely attributed to the traumatic circumstances leading to pregnancy, the connection between misogynistic and matrilineal violence is explicitly drawn in, for instance, Tanith Lee’s *White as Snow*, where Arpazia’s pregnancy is foreshadowed directly after her rape: “Arpazia turned, dropping the ring, and

saw her own shape marked gravelike in the white snow, and her brilliant blood running over it from the hem of her broken dress, between the black trees. ‘Go on now,’ [Draco] said. ‘And expect a boy.’ When she saw her blood, this moment was when the rape occurred to her” (45). Shortly after being sexually assaulted, Arpazia therefore develops intense animosity towards the foetus developing within her womb, and this hatred only worsens after she ends up giving birth to a daughter instead of the son she had been repeatedly promised:

“She’s too weak to embrace her child.”

“Too daft. Look at her!” ...

“I don’t want it,” she must have said. Something mewed, insubstantial and far off.

“Take it away.”

Arpazia thought, *They will throw it in a brazier, to burn it. But that will only strengthen the thing.* It was nothing to her, it belonged to pain. (57)

In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich also underlines the connection between misogynistic violence and pregnancy, arguing that motherhood must be understood as a strategy of female subordination and (re)assertion of patriarchal hierarchy:

In a later development of Griffin’s analysis, Susan Brownmiller suggests that enforced, indentured motherhood may originally have been the price paid by women to the men who became their “protectors” (and owners) against the casual violence of other men. If rape had been terrorism, motherhood has been penal servitude. *It needs not be.* (14)

In an attempt to denounce the recurring presence of non-consensual romantic and sexual acts perpetrated against female characters in traditional fairy-tales, contemporary storytellers sometimes go as far as to turning sexual assault—often presented as such, rather than

disguised as a romantic gesture—into its own narrative trope. In so doing, they implement a cyclical and ritualistic objectification of the (pre)pubertal female body passed down from mother to daughter, although not always with malicious intent. While discussing Gregory Frost’s short-story “The Root of the Matter”—in which Mother Gothel regularly molests her foster daughter Rapunzel—Veronica Schanoes explains that:

Mother Gothel is presented as a victim of childhood sexual abuse by her father. ... She views Rapunzel as another self, a younger self untainted by the violence and abuse of her past, and that view leads her to deny Rapunzel’s individuality and thus to abuse her, even while she believes herself to be protecting and caring for her adopted daughter. The language of Gothel’s mother-love is sexual. (24)

According to Schanoes’s interpretation of the tale, the lack of ego boundary between mother and daughter leads to a merging of their identities which, in turn, triggers a traumatic repetition of abuse under the guise of protection and nurture. Interestingly, the generational dimension of incest and rape in Frost’s story is quite reminiscent of Tanith Lee’s “She Sleeps in a Tower,” a retelling merging several fairy stories traditionally featuring imprisoned princesses. In order to highlight the problematic elements often associated to this narrative trope—for instance, the perpetration of non-consensual romantic acts ranging from chaste kisses to repeated rape—Lee examines it through the prism of an abused mother encouraging the prostitution of her underage daughters as a means of survival:

A month later another man came knocking. It was afternoon, and he was pleasant enough. He said he’d heard a girl lay asleep who could be woken by a kiss—that was the story which had gone round apparently, rather like some of the old legends of the wood. And he said that the girl was in a tower.

So I asked my eldest if she'd go up into the west tower. She agreed, and she lay on the old bed there that had been my husband's mother's bed. . . .

It went on from there. And the story became a little more elaborate. And, as time went by, my other girls . . . well, they know the way of it, how life is.

I come out to them in the garden, and I ask, do they know where they've come to. And they don't say, "The brothel," no, they play along, these kinky fellows. They say they've come to the tower. And some of them even say, "Is she sleeping here?" And, of course, she always is. Three shes. One in each tower. I go by how they talk of her youth, whether they want the youngest now, who's ten, or the middle girl of eleven, or my eldest, who's just twelve years. (*Redder than Blood* 72)

As evidenced by Lee's work, contemporary storytellers are intent on pointing out not only the predominance of misogynistic violence and abuse within the fairy-tale genre, but also its intersection with matrilineal genealogies and the way it inevitably impacts and complicates mother/daughter relationships. Their portrayal of sexual abuse, additionally, strikes one as deliberately vivid, crude, and revulsive, in an attempt to distance these new tales from their more apologetic and palatable predecessors. More attention is also brought to the interdependence of misogynistic violence, undesired pregnancies, and maternal objectification through cursed sleep or death. Lee, for instance, weaves a deliberate connection between Arpazia's sexual assault and the sleep-like trance she enters during her pregnancy, and which foreshadows her eventual loss of narrative subjectivity to her daughter Coira: "Arpazia had stayed three hundred and thirteen days in her first trance, until the violence of childbirth, in her fifteenth year, woke her up. Yet after she had given birth, she entered a second trance, unlike the first. This second trance was to last for seven years" (*White as Snow* 54). The loss of subjectivity and bodily autonomy experienced by Lee's

protagonist during each of her pregnancies interestingly echoes Dana Carson's Kristevian reading of maternal objectification and abjection, concepts which are fundamental to my research and which I delve further into in the following section of this chapter. "By changing the threshold of subjectivity to pre-birth," she explains, "the fetus as an object inside the mother as a subject is reversed. The fetus becomes a subject and that subjectivity comes before the mother. The mother becomes a womb, an object to house the fetus. If a mother rejects this role and asserts her subjectivity, she transgresses into abjection" (Carson 99).

However, before discussing the loss of narrative subjectivity mothers experience as they undergo fairy-tale pregnancy—and which has become so inextricable from the institution of motherhood that it is paradoxically seen to affect all kinds of maternal figures including but not limited to wicked stepmothers—it is first necessary to consider how the objectification of the woman-turned-mother serves to uphold misogynistic systems and facilitate the normalisation of abuse and assault by divorcing the mother's body from any sense of self or subjectivity. In this respect, Robert Coover's "The Dead Queen" turns the stepmother into an object of love and misguided desire only after she has been executed, as the tale's protagonist, Charming, deludes himself into thinking that the queen's actions were in fact motivated by her love for him, which he uses as a justification to assault and defile her corpse:

I gazed at [the Queen] in the glass coffin, the coffin that once contained my wife, and thought: if she wakes, she will stare at the glass and discover there her own absence. I was beginning to appreciate her subtlety, and so assumed that this, too, had been part of her artifice, a lingering hope for her own liberation: she'd used the mirror as a door, tried to. . . . Of course, there were difficulties in such a perfect view of things, she was dead, for example, but one revelation was leading to another, and it came to me suddenly that maybe the old Queen had loved me, had died for *me!* I, too,

was too prone to linger at still pools, listen to the flattery of soothsayers, organize my life and others' by threes and sevens—it was as if she'd lived this exemplary life, died this tragic death, to lead me away from the merely visible to vision, from the image to the imaged, from reflections to the projecting miracle itself, the heart, the pure snow white ... !

... The old Queen had me now, everything had fallen into place, I know now the force that had driven her, that had freed me, freed us all, that we light live happily ever after, though we didn't deserve it, weren't even aware of how it had happened, yes, I knew her cause, knew her name—I wrenched open the coffin, threw myself upon her, and kissed her lips.

If I'd expected something, it did not occur. She did not return my kiss, did not even cease grinning. She stank and her blue mouth was cold and rubbery as a dead squid. I'd been wrong about her, wrong about everything...

... Though nauseated, I pitched forward and kissed her again, this time more out of pride and affection than hope. I thought: it would've helped if the old clown had died with her mouth shut.

They tore me away from her body. It tumbled out of the coffin and, limbs awry, obstinately grinning, skidded a few feet down the mountainside. The flesh tore, but did not bleed. The mask fell away from her open eye, now milky white. (*A Child Again* 710-711)

Similarly, Lee's "She Sleeps in a Tower" presents the fairy-tale motif of the underage, sleeping maiden as particularly attractive and desirable to the brothel's visitors, and implies that any female child resulting from these unions might eventually be instrumentalised for the same purpose: "It went on from there. And the story became a little more elaborate. And, as

time went by, my other girls...well, they know the way of it, how life is. ... We never have any trouble, and I've never been short-changed (*Redder than Blood* 72).” This presentation of the dehumanised, soulless female body as an object of desire *par excellence* echoes Diane Jonte-Pace’s controversial discussion of Freudian theory—and its shortcomings—on the topic of mothers: “We find,” she argues, “in each case that [Freud] ‘wanted [his mother] dead’ in both its matricidal and necrophiliac senses: he wanted her to die, and he found her erotic and desirable in death. Feminist theorist Sarah Kofman finds this matricidal material to be evidence of a deep-seated psychoanalytic misogyny. She asserts ‘psychoanalysis can never touch woman except to make a dead body of her...’” (Jonte-Pace 70). Similar conclusions can in fact be drawn from the fairy-tale genre, where the mother’s narrative arc seems destined to always end in death; a death which, paradoxically, only strengthens her sexual desirability and objectification under patriarchal systems.

As a consequence of contemporary storytellers tackling more openly and critically the unchallenged presence of non-consensual sexual encounters within the fairy-tale genre, modern retellings are also increasingly interested in offering more nuanced and realistic depictions of pregnancy, as well as of situations in which female characters refuse to embrace them. As previously mentioned, several of the works analysed throughout this dissertation explore the topic of abortion, albeit more or less sympathetically. For instance, in Lee’s *White as Snow*, Arpazia chooses to abort her second child after having endured an extremely traumatic first pregnancy resulting from a sexual assault. Although her decision is successfully carried out, it remains somewhat frowned upon diegetically, as the crone providing Arpazia with the poisonous draught paradoxically likens her actions to child murder (93). As Schanoes argues, “[*White as Snow*] is profoundly ambivalent about Arpazia’s abortion; on the one hand sympathetic characters proclaim her right to have one, on the other, the abortion ends her idyll with her lover, the only happiness in her short and

miserable life. Nonetheless Arpazia is able to avoid the potential horror of childbirth and its consequences due to her mirror” (105). Additionally, even in cases where undesired pregnancies are not willingly interrupted, the bodily experience of child-bearing is often presented as horrific and traumatizing—not necessarily to the reader but, significantly, to (and *by*) expectant mothers themselves. In so doing, contemporary storytellers openly echo real discourses surrounding the inherently problematic place of maternity within feminist activism, questioning whether it should be reclaimed as an essential female experience or, on the contrary, abandoned in an effort to liberate womanhood from the patriarchal chokehold. Lee and Valente, in particular, depict pregnancy and birth-giving as profoundly uncanny and violent experiences. Arpazia, for instance, describes her pregnant body in the following terms:

Inside her belly was a black bowl, and in the bowl a red apple, but the heart of the apple was white. The flesh of the apple was a white serpent lying coiled there. Like herself, though taking sustenance and sometimes moving, it had been asleep. Now Arpazia saw it had woken, and this in turn had woken her—

Her first scream was of terror. Only the second scream demonstrated pain.

Then her blood poured out of her again, and as the mirror watched, with its strange, apparently callous, crystal eye, Draco’s queen entered the house of agony called childbirth.

“See, lady. It lives—”

*Kill it*, she shrieked in her mind, *kill it as it kills me—* (*White as Snow* 42)

This scene, particularly in light of Arpazia’s relative youth upon entering motherhood, is reminiscent of Simone de Beauvoir’s description of the horror often experienced by young girls as they come to fathom pregnancy:



The magic of motherhood has faded: whether [the little girl] has been informed early or not, she knows, in a more or less coherent manner, that a baby does not appear by chance in the mother's belly and does not come out at the wave of a magic wand; she questions herself anxiously. Often it seems not extraordinary at all but rather horrible that a parasitic body should proliferate inside her body; the idea of this monstrous swelling frightens her. And how will the baby get out? Even if she was never told about the cries and suffering of childbirth, she has overheard things, she has read the words in the Bible: "In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children"; she has the presentiment of tortures she cannot even imagine ... . (360)

The pain and violence that Beauvoir alludes to in this section of *The Second Sex* is also explored in depth by contemporary fairy-tale revisions, with writers like Valente emphasising the alienating and dehumanising dimension of birth giving by splitting Mrs. H and her reflection into two separate characters: the barren yet empowered female subject and her objectified, pregnant, suffering image, entrapped in the mirror.

The woman in the mirror was pregnant.

The reflection of Mrs. H got big in the belly day by day as the winter wore on. Mrs. H stayed slim as a pen. She moved her hand over her flat stomach; in the mirror Mrs. H cradled her roundness in both arms. ... Whenever I looked in the mirror after Mrs. H left, all I saw was the copy of her, humming a song while she let the waists of her dresses out with a quick, clever needle. Once she looked at me, looked out of the mirror and into me. She put her hand on her stomach and whispered: *soon*. (56)

As demonstrated by this scene, the expectant mother cannot coexist with the female subject within the fairy-tale diegesis, which is once again reminiscent of Beauvoir's derogatory

understanding of motherhood. In her comparative analysis of Beauvoirian and Kristevian approaches to the maternal, Linda M. G. Zerilli thus notes that:

If the “impossible syllogism” posed for Kristeva by the “dual and alien space” of maternity presents a postmodern challenge to the humanist idea of a stable, masterful subject, Beauvoir’s discourse of horror articulates an existentialist anxiety about the loss of individual agency and autonomy. Although Beauvoir agrees with Kristeva that “in the mother-to-be the antithesis of subject and object ceases to exist” (1974, 553), she sees in that collapse not cause for joy but clear feminist grounds for women to refuse maternity: it obliterates female subjectivity. (111-112)

Similarly, on the topic of pregnant fairy-tale heroines, Toborg Lundell argues that she “found birth episodes to be charged with dynamics. The heroine is then both an object, in relation to her own mother or mother-in-law, and a subject in her relation to the object of her newborn child. This is the only time the mother is also a heroine” (Lundell 2). While Lundell is correct in assessing that birth-giving is the only moment within the traditional folktale diegesis when the mother can be a heroine—and not a mere narrative tool to be introduced (and discarded) to advance the plot—I argue that she mistakenly attributes subjectivity to the mother, in relation to a child-object. Conversely, I postulate that birth-giving inevitably initialises a process of transfer of subjectivity from mother to child—a phenomenon which becomes particularly striking when considering the mother/daughter dyad, as I endeavour to show throughout this chapter. Birth-giving therefore represents a moment of intense physical suffering for expectant mothers, as well as the catalyst in their eventual narrative instrumentalisation: the mother becomes nothing more than a body, a maternal vessel in service of the child and, occasionally, of necrophiliac male desires. While this generational transfer of narrative subjectivity evidently plays a part in spurring the conflict between biological mothers and daughters, I argue that the same processes are shown to take place in

non-biological (step)families, suggesting that the (step)mother's demotion from subject to object might have more to do with the institution of motherhood as a patriarchal construct than with the biological process of birth-giving itself. With regards to this, Rich defines the institution of motherhood as the oppressive counterpart to mothering as an experience:

Throughout this book I try to distinguish between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that this potential—and all women—shall remain under male control. This institution has been a keystone of the most diverse social and political systems. It has withheld over one half the human species from the decisions affecting their lives; it exonerates men from fatherhood in any authentic sense; it creates the dangerous schism between “private” and “public” life; it calcifies human choices and potentialities. In the most fundamental and bewildering of contradictions, it has alienated women from our bodies by incarcerating us in them. At certain points in history, and in certain cultures, the idea of woman-as-mother has worked to endow all women with respect, even with awe, and to give women some say in the life of a people or a clan. But for most of what we know as the “mainstream” of recorded history, motherhood as an institution has ghettoized and degraded female potentialities. (13)

This distinction, while perfectible, is the one I retain throughout this dissertation.

The prevalence of physical and mental suffering as motifs of motherhood in contemporary fairy-tale retellings inevitably suggests a continued fetishisation of maternal pain and anguish, emphasising the underlying influence of Christian principles and aesthetics upon the genre (Stoloff 212). In “Stabat Mater,” psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva presents birth-

giving as an experience centred on pain, where the newborn child is almost eclipsed by its intensity:

My body is no longer mine, it writhes, suffers, bleeds, catches cold, bites, slavers, coughs, breaks out in a rash, and laughs. Yet when his, my son's, joy returns, his smile cleanses only my eyes. But suffering, his suffering – that I feel inside; that never remains separate or alien but embraces me at once without a moment's respite. As if I had brought not a child but suffering into the world and it, suffering, refused to leave me, insisted on coming back, on haunting me, permanently. One does not bear children in pain, it's pain that one bears: the child is pain's representative and once delivered moves in for good. Obviously you can close your eyes, stop up your ears, teach courses, run errands, clean house, think about things, about ideas. But a mother is also marked by pain, she succumbs to it. "And you, one day a sword will pass through your soul." (138)

Interestingly, Lee's *White as Snow* similarly underlines the pain and violence of childbirth over the newborn child itself, going as far as implying that its sheer existence may become forgotten as a response to trauma:

Arpazia cast a look at her. "What daughter? I have no child. Your hunter helped me kill it, and your crone, ten years ago."

"Oh no, Queen. You bore *this* one, and she lives."

Troubled, frowning, Arpazia tried to think of what that meant. She had a sudden image of giving birth, herself contorted and shrieking, split by agony, and she pressed her hands to her belly to silence the memory of her womb.

"I thought it was dead." (112)

The unquestioned omnipresence of maternal suffering in contemporary fairy narratives is however doubly problematic: not only does it contribute to confining motherhood to the realm of the bodily by underlining its ties to cisgender reproductive organs and heteronormative procreation, it also presents pain and suffering as inherent to the maternal experience, going as far as glorifying it and presenting it as a rite of passage for new (biological) mothers. This supposed sublimation of the female body through pain and violence, culminating with childbirth, is discussed by Liliane Abensour in *L'ombre du maternel*:

Mais quelle est cette loi de l'espèce, plus spécifiquement maternelle, quel est ce savoir transmis inexorablement, attaché à une ombre, qu'il faille magnifier ou sanctifier ? N'est-ce pas celui d'un maternel terrible, pour la femme comme pour l'homme, qui, fait de chair et de sang, délie de la virginité et de la transparence, pour que soit payé le tribut à la vie reçue, en donnant à son tour vie à un être de chair ? ... Celui-là même que Freud passe sous silence, précisément parce qu'il est objet de tabou : la réalité du corps maternel sexué qui, à travers les transformations de la puberté, conduit la fille à la menstruation, à la défloration, à la procréation à la déformation du corps par la grossesse, aux douleurs de l'accouchement, autant de sang versa dans la fierté et la douleur, dans le silence et la honte, pour être enfin transfiguré en gloire de la féminité, de la maternité, en plaisir de relation à l'homme et à l'enfant nouveau-né. (78)

At this stage, it becomes necessary to reassert the influence of applied psychoanalysis on contemporary fairy-tale retellings. Due in part to the concomitance of both movements—as well as to the controversial yet significant impact of Bruno Bettelheim's 1976 *The Uses of Enchantment* on the genre—the importance of psychoanalysis in the contemporary revitalisation of the fairy-tale genre cannot be understated. However, in terms of maternal

representation, this overlap often results in narratives that are increasingly critical of mothers and their shortcomings, presenting them as inherently detrimental. This pattern evidently crystallises in the figure of the wicked (step)mother, but it also impacts literary depictions of maternal nurture by presenting it as an inherently violent, desecrating, and often malevolent process. In this respect, many theorists have suggested that the poisoned apple of “Snow White” stories must be understood as a symbolic representation of the maternal breast in its most noxious form. While Bruno Bettelheim unconvincingly argues that the sharing of the poisoned apple between (step)mother and daughter is indicative of their common “mature sexual desires” (269), both Shuli Barzilai and Donald Winnicott suggest instead that it illustrates the child’s inherently ambivalent relationship to the maternal breast. This breast, in turn, often ends up being apprehended as split between its good and bad side, not unlike the apple Snow White and the wicked queen both bite into:

The baby is sad at times like the weaning-time because circumstances have made anger come and spoil something that was good. In the baby’s dreams the breasts are no longer good, they have been hated, and so now they are felt to be bad, even dangerous. That is why there is a place for the wicked woman in the fairy stories who gives poisoned apples. For the newly-weaned infant it is the really good mother whose breasts have become bad, and so there has to be time allowed for recovery and readjustment. ... Eventually the child grows up and gets to know her just as she really is, neither ideal nor indeed a witch. (Winnicott, *The Child, the Family and the Outside World* 84)

A similar idea is expressed by Barzilai, who goes slightly further by reading Snow White’s giving into temptation as a narrative illustration of her desire to return to the comfort, simplicity, and harmony of childhood:

For the very young child, the mother's breast is, normatively, a good object, representing comfort, connection, and security; for the oedipal child and adolescent, the breast represents a bad object, symbol of transgression and loss ("forbidden fruit"). The apple in "Snow White" conjoins these two trends; that is, it has its good side and its bad. ... The queen extends to her daughter the possibility of a return to infancy or early childhood, and Snow White is unable to resist the temptation. For together with the desire to break away from the mother, Snow White experiences a yearning for the carefree days of childhood, for a symbiotic and nonconflictual relationship with her mother. (533-534)

While I concur with interpretations of the apple as a symbol of the "bad" maternal breast which poisons rather than nourishes the child—when it is not altogether denied, in a faithful illustration of the Kleinian "bad breast" (*Envy and Gratitude* 5)—I however argue that contemporary tales also recurrently depict infantile violence turned against the maternal breast. According to Klein, indeed, breast-feeding allows infants to explore their destructive impulses by performing oral-sadistic aggressions onto the body of the mother:

From the beginning the destructive impulse is turned against the object and is first expressed in phantasied oral-sadistic attacks on the mother's breast, which soon develop into onslaughts on her body by all sadistic means. The persecutory fears arising from the infant's oral-sadistic impulses to rob the mother's body of its good contents, and from the anal-sadistic impulses to put his excrements into her (including the desire to enter her body in order to control her from within) are of great importance for the development of paranoia and schizophrenia. (2)

Gaiman's "Snow, Glass, Apples," for instance, reverses the motif of the bad, poisonous apple/breast by depicting violence as stemming not from the mother's nurturing, but rather from the child's aggressive feeding:

She took the dried apple from me and began to chew it with her sharp yellow teeth.

"Is it good?"

She nodded. I had always been scared of the little princess, but at that moment I warmed to her and, with my fingers, gently, I stroked her cheek. She looked at me and smiled—she smiled but rarely—then she sank her teeth into the base of my thumb, the Mound of Venus, and she drew blood.

I began to shriek, from pain and from surprise, but she looked at me and I fell silent.

The little princess fastened her mouth to my hand and licked and sucked and drank. When she was finished, she left my chamber. ...

I had been frozen by her, owned and dominated. That scared me, more than the blood she had fed on. (362-363)

In this story, the vampiric nature of the (anti)heroine inverts traditional feeding dynamics by displacing violence and poisonous bodily fluids on the side of the daughter, alluding to the aggressive nature of breast-feeding in a manner that is inevitably reminiscent of Klein's argument that "the fear of being devoured by the father derives from the projection of the infant's impulses to devour his objects. In this way, first the mother's breast (and the mother) becomes in the infant's mind a devouring object and these fears soon extend to the father's penis and to the father" (Klein, *Envy and Gratitude* 30). In this respect, she indeed posits the projection of the devouring maternal breast as a by-product of the "vicissitudes of



persecutory anxiety” (68): “At the root of many difficulties over new food is the persecutory fear of being devoured and poisoned by the mother’s bad breast, a fear which derives from the infant’s phantasies of devouring and poisoning the breast” (107). Therefore, by exploring the infant’s impulse to devour the mother through the prism of the maternal breast, Gaiman interestingly implies that the wicked (step)mother might occasionally be nothing more than an abstraction of the child’s own destructive and violent desires.

Finally, it is important to highlight how the institution of motherhood itself is represented as oppressive and violent towards women who choose—or are forced—to become mothers. Whilst I have already spoken at length of the transfer of subjectivity inevitably taking place between mother and daughter in the context of the traditional fairy-tale diegesis, it is also essential to underline how the genre presents the maternal body as distinct from—and utterly incompatible with—the female body as sexually empowered (Abensour 71). In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir denounces the reductive equating of womanhood to cisgender reproductive organs by declaring: “Woman? Very simple, say those who like simple answers: She is a womb, an ovary; she is female: this word is enough to define her” (42). Interestingly, the very language she uses to refer to genitalia is indicative of the deliberate and institutionalised denial of the female body’s potential for sexual desire and pleasure, in favour of considering it solely as a procreative vessel.

Although an in-depth analysis of this tale would not be pertinent within the framework of this dissertation, it must be underlined that Emma Donoghue’s “The Tale of the Kiss” similarly alludes to the contempt patriarchal society directs towards women using their bodies for non-reproductive purposes: “As far as my people were concerned, women like me had no future. I knew what they thought of women past bearing; unless they had sons to honor them and daughters to clean them, they were old rags tossed in the corner. A barren woman was hated even more; the way they saw it, she had never earned a bite of bread”

(208). While commenting on Helene Deutsch's *The Psychology of Women* (1944), Nancy Chodorow condemns this restrictive, heteronormative, and utilitarian understanding of the female body (155-156) before underlining how the enforcement of a binary split between the female body as sexual and as maternal leads to women having to reject the latter in order to embrace the first (203). Two striking examples of this narrative trope within my dissertation's corpus are Tanith Lee's *White as Snow* and "Snow Drop," two variations on "Snow White" in which the wicked (step)mother's sexual awakening leads to her attempting—and sometimes even managing—to dispose of the heroine. While in *White as Snow*, Arpazia's pursuit of her lover Klymeno requires the sacrifice of a daughter she already reviles (98), in "Snow Drop", the wicked stepmother counterpart, dissatisfied with her marital life, seduces and poisons the object of her husband's obsession, a young girl in the exact likeness of the child his first wife had desired yet been unable to conceive (*Redder than Blood* 58-60).

In addition to confining female characters to their supposed biological purpose in the reproduction of heteronormative society, traditional fairy-tales tend to glorify mothers—at the very least, as long as they are not wicked—whose nurturing is rooted in selflessness, devotion, and sacrifice. Whilst contemporary tales do not necessarily depart from this trope, as I discuss in the following section of this dissertation, they nonetheless scrutinise normative discourses surrounding motherhood much more critically than their earlier counterparts. In an attempt to demonstrate how patriarchal capitalism inevitably sets mothers up for failure, Dana Carson argues that:

There is no correct, socially acceptable way of being a mother, of being a maternal body, because the expectations in a capitalist society are constantly in contradiction. Motherhood must involve an element of abjection in the experience. Moreover, to ignore the contradictions and follow one set of expectations, the woman would still be required to be an ideal, a perfection that is not humanly attainable. (44)

Interestingly, the artificial construct of the ideal mother—very prevalent in the fairy-tale genre—encourages the unquestioned perpetuation of maternal binaries, thus denying the very possibility of ambivalence. This phenomenon is particularly acute in the context of (step)mother/daughter dyads, as both characters are expected to conform to the same unreachable, misogynistic standards while simultaneously competing for narrative subjectivity. Nikita Gill’s “Mothers and Daughters” thus underscores the damaging effects unrealistic maternal expectations have on mother and child alike, reiterating the necessity of carving out space for ambivalence: “So she does her best to keep the beast / in her own belly at bay / —be good, be kind, be wise all day, / there is no room for her pain, but at the end of it all / we all forget she is only human” (150). Similarly, the eponymous narrator of Sara Maitland’s “The Wicked Stepmother’s Lament” expresses anguish and anxiety towards the institution of motherhood and, more precisely, the abnegation expected of “good” mothers:

The mother who denied her little one nothing, the good mother, the one we all longed for, pouring herself out into the child. Well, I’ll tell you, I’ve done it too, it is hell caring for a tiny daughter, I know. Everything, everything drags you into hell: the fact that you love and desire her, the fact that she’s so needy and vulnerable, the fact that she never leaves you alone until your dreams are smashed in little piles and shabby with neglect, the fact that pleasure and guilt come so precisely together, as so seldom happens, working towards the same end and sucking your very selfhood out of you.

(30)

Fairy-tale maternity is also made particularly alienating due to its continued reliance on the notion of maternal instinct being an intrinsically—and exclusively—female trait. For instance, in Lee’s *White as Snow*, the development of maternal love is considered as natural and almost inevitable, as shown by the accusations Hadz levels at Arpazia:

Then Hadz, in another place of darkness, bent to Arpazia again. “Your daughter? You were her *mother*? Mothers love their children. Why did you poison her?”

... “Yes, I killed her,” Arpazia murmured. “I came to find her and do it. I didn’t want the child, I never did. It was with herbs I had, in a black cup. She’s dead now. Now there’s only me.” (235)

Interestingly, it is Arpazia’s cruelty towards her daughter that, above all her other crimes, is pointed to as being inadmissible, and used to justify her violent execution:

“Are you still pleased you killed her?”

“Killed whom?”

“Your child, you old beast. Your daughter.”

... Juprum was offended, despised her. Whatever other crimes were committed, mothers must not kill their own children. Even a bribable God would never forgive that. (236-237)

Similarly, Donoghue’s “The Tale of the Spinster” criticises its heroine—and ultimately separates her from her child—due to her occasionally violent behaviour and general lack of interest in her own progeny (Donoghue 127-129). With regards to psychoanalysis, while Donald Winnicott’s maternal theories are overall more sympathetic towards mothers than, for instance, Sigmund Freud or Melanie Klein, his reasoning is still contingent on mothers being instinctively capable of providing their children with adequate mothering. Although he stresses that maternal instincts might occasionally fail to develop in mothers, and that mothering might not solely be the prerogative of mothers, his definition of “good-enough” parenting still overlaps extensively with scenarios of biological maternity:

[The mother is] the one person who can properly introduce the world to the baby in a way that makes sense to the baby. She knows how to do this, not through any training and not through being clever, but just because she is the natural mother. But her natural instincts cannot evolve if she is scared, or if she does not see her baby when it is born, or if the baby is brought to her only at stated times thought by the authorities to be suitable for feeding purposes. (*Babies and their Mothers* 78)

At this stage, Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* can provide us with interesting insights. Thus, not only does she express criticism regarding the unquestioned reliance of psychoanalysts on the concept of maternal instinct (21-22), she also raises valuable questions regarding the nuances between parenting, mothering, and biological motherhood:

To evaluate arguments that women's mothering is natural, we must distinguish among a number of issues which are often confused in the literature. First, we should separate child *care* from *childbearing*, nurturing *as an activity* from pregnancy and parturition. Most accounts assume that a child's primary parent, or mother, is the woman who has borne that child. Second, we want to know if there is a biological basis for biological mothers to care for their own newborn and what this consists in. If there is a biological or instinctual basis for parenting triggered by pregnancy, parturition, or lactation, what is its actual timespan? Does it extend into an infant's first months, years, throughout its childhood? Third, given that there are sometimes "substitute mothers," we want to know whether it is biologically more natural for a woman who has not borne the child in need of care than for a man to provide this child care. Do women have an instinctual propensity, or biological suitedness, for mothering which is not triggered by the experiences of pregnancy, parturition, or lactation? Finally, we want to evaluate the biological-instinctual basis for claims that women ought to

mother. Such claims, again, could argue either that women are harmed by not parenting, or that infants are harmed by not being parented by *women*. (16-17)

Interestingly, with these interrogations, Chodorow offers to carve out a space for alternative, non-biological forms of mothering, whose boundaries might be both more permeable by and inclusive of imperfect fairy-tale (step)mothers.

## 5.2. The Maternal as Abject and Object

As we have already underlined throughout this dissertation, the mother—whether she be good or wicked—occupies a very peculiar and ambivalent place within fairy-tales. While her diegetic presence might be a cornerstone of the genre, I argue that she still remains fundamentally alienated and othered from the narrative core of the story. First, as we previously discussed, the fairy-tale (step)mother is bound to be ultimately excluded from the narrative, either disappearing once her reproductive purpose accomplished, or being overcome as part of the hero's (or, more rarely, the heroine's) character arc. When considering more specifically the character of the wicked stepmother, this phenomenon of othering becomes particularly striking. In practice, the stepmother is always doubly removed from the traditional, nuclear family unit: not only is she the second wife, but also—and often more importantly—she is the other mother, an imperfectible and irredeemable impersonator of the original genitrix. In Gaiman's *Coraline*, for instance, the villainous mother's imposture is underlined through her narrative and metanarrative othering: not only does she exist solely within a parallel dimension mirroring (and distorting) Coraline's real world, she is also systematically referred to as the "other mother" (25), and eventually has to capture Coraline's biological parents in a desperate attempt to legitimise her parenthood in the latter's eyes. Finally, she is alienated on a very fundamental and corporeal level, being a creature that is neither human nor woman, although physically reminiscent of both (44). However, from a

psychoanalytic standpoint, it is not only the maternal impostor who shares characteristics with the Other. According to Jacques Lacan, the mother is indeed the first figure of almightiness the child comes in contact with—*Das Ding*—an embodiment of the primal Other whose power is only limited by the child uncovering its primary lack:

S'il y a quelque chose déjà qui n'est pas – contrairement à ce qu'on croit – dans le sujet : la structure de l'omnipotence, mais qui ... est dans la mère, c'est-à-dire dans l'Autre primitif, c'est l'Autre qui est *tout-puissant*, mais en plus derrière ce *tout-puissant* il y a en effet ce dernier manque auquel est suspendue sa puissance, je veux dire que dès que le sujet aperçoit dans l'objet dont il attend la *toute-puissance*, ce manque qui le fait lui-même un puissant, c'est encore *au-delà* qu'est reporté le dernier ressort de la *toute-puissance*. À savoir là où quelque chose n'existe pas, au maximum : qui en lui n'est rien que le symbolisme du manque, que fragilité, que petitesse, c'est là que le sujet a à situer le secret, le vrai ressort de la *toute-puissance* ... . (Lacan, *La relation d'objet* 186-187)

Whereas for Lacan, the archaic Other remains forever unattainable (Wierzychowska 4), psychoanalysts such as Donald Winnicott and Bracha Ettinger—although they share Lacan's understanding of the mother as the child's primal Other—apprehend the mother/child unit as a transitional space of (partial) Otherness, allowing for the continued negotiation of boundaries between mother and child, Self and Other (7-8). With regards to this hybrid space, Ettinger coins the notion of “matrixial borderspace” to refer to a territory where:

[the] exchange between Other and subject loses its clear-cut borderlines and its one-way direction. The *becoming-mother* (the mother-to-be) and the becoming-subject (baby-to-be) engender an alliance and turn into partial-subjects—(*I(s)* and *non-I(s)*) of the same matrixial time and space. Meaning is then a *transgression of a bordelink*, a

*being transformed by and transforming* each other's phantasies, after their signification were first dispersed and transmitted. (65)

Ettinger's matrixial borderspace however remains intrinsically connected to the maternal body and rooted in the concept of "feminine difference" (65), thus making it inherently problematic in the context of this dissertation: indeed, not only does it further an essentialist understanding of gender, it also excludes non-biological mothers from entering this transformative space of differentiation. Besides, as underlined by Luce Irigaray, phallogocentric identifications of the father with the realm of subjectivity, Selfhood, and language—with the mother epitomising objectification, Otherness, and semiotics—remains intrinsically misogynistic. As Schanoes explains:

Irigaray begins by writing that previous theories of selfhood based on the sharp distinction between "self" and "other" have served to disempower women. She argues that the subject-object split, so essential to sharp distinctions between self and other, is always inherently misogynous, always inherently matrophobic, for the primary fixed object that the subject is defining himself (and for Irigaray, any theory of the subject has always been appropriated by the masculine) against first and foremost is the mother, that figure so disturbing to the binary of self and not-self . . . . (46-47)

Irigaray therefore understands the mother/child dyad as a formerly unified entity having been forcibly split in two, with each party mourning the Other and seeking to be reunited with them: "And the one doesn't stir without the other. But we do not move together. When the one of us comes into the world, the other goes underground. When the one carries life, the other dies. And what I wanted from you, Mother, was this: that in giving me life, you still remain alive" ("And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other" 67) Though Irigaray's argument far from circumvents essentialist rhetorics, her recourse to mythological intertext when



deciphering the mother/daughter relationship is relevant to the extent that it mirrors recurring narrative patterns in matricentric fairy-tale retellings<sup>10</sup>. As Wendy Green explains, at the end of Irigaray's essay, "the daughter finally gives up her obsessive attempts to separate from her mother, to become One without the Other. She begins to identify with the grief of her mother/Demeter, in search of her lost daughter, 'wandering without identity, discharging upon me this endless, and at each step excruciating, wandering of yours.' Recognising that 'what she has lost' is what her mother has lost, Irigaray's daughter can finally mourn. She no longer needs to feed off her mother's body in order to stay alive" (38).

As previously demonstrated, in spite of contemporary attempts to subvert traditional genre constructs through the prism of maternal figures, modern fairy-tale revisions often remain intrinsically binary in their representations of womanhood, opposing the biological mother to the "stepmonster", the aging witch to the ingénue, the father's authority to the (step)mother's disruptive Otherness. In this respect, I argue that the realm of the maternal—particularly when the (step)mother is wicked—stands in for Otherness and objectification, and thus becomes a subject of horror, uncanniness, and abjection. However, before discussing how fairy-tale mothering intersects with the Freudian *Unheimliche*, it is necessary to first look at the monstrous (step)mother as a figure of horror. In a 1992 article, Linda M. G. Zerilli argues that the horror and disgust Beauvoir expresses towards maternity in *The Second Sex* are not indicative of contempt for mothers or internalized tokophobia; rather, they stem from the constant alienation of the (m)Other in and by patriarchal language and culture, which inevitably turns her into a figure of horror:

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<sup>10</sup> This anchoring is particularly striking and deliberate in Lee's *White as Snow*, where the narrative arcs of Arpazia and Coira are woven together from myth and fairy-tale in equal parts, entwining traditional plot points from "Snow White" stories with elements from the myth of Demeter and Persephone.

Taking very seriously the reduction of woman to immanence, to Other, [Beauvoir] exaggerates woman's place as pure existence in existentialist philosophy—not unlike Luce Irigaray does with the castrated woman of psychoanalysis (1985)—to the point where she becomes truly disgusting, truly menacing, indeed so horrific that woman as Other comes to threaten what she ought to uphold: masculine subjectivity.

Disgust and horror, then, are the tropes with which Beauvoir stages this confrontation between man and his Other: “In all civilizations and still in our day woman inspires man with horror; it is the horror of his own carnal contingency, which he projects upon her” (167). Man's dread of the female body is fear of his own corporeal limits, of immanence, of becoming woman-dread, that is to say, of the (m)other. (Zerilli 126)

Once again, the other mother of Gaiman's *Coraline* is a particularly relevant example of this process, as her physical appearance gradually becomes less and less motherly—and more and more monstrous—throughout the novel, eventually morphing into a creature that is much more Other than it is mother:

It was funny, Coraline thought. The other mother did not look anything at all like her own mother. She wondered how she had ever been deceived into imagining a resemblance. The other mother was huge—her head almost brushed the ceiling—and very pale, the color of a spider's belly. Her hair writhed and twined about her head, and her teeth were sharp as knives... . (84)

The horror produced by the (step)mother's Otherness, however, must also be examined through the prism of the uncanny as defined by Freud. Indeed, as previously underlined, the continued popularity of the fairy-tale (step)mother as a narrative antagonist stems from the inherent tension between the mother's central role within the nuclear,

heterosexual family structure, and the twisted, violent and often fatal manner in which she performs traditional acts of mothering and nurture within the diegesis. This tension is interestingly reminiscent of Freud's understanding of the uncanny, which he defines as "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something once known to us, once very familiar" (Freud, "The Uncanny" 219). Indeed, in the context of biological parentage, the mother—and the maternal womb in particular—appears to correspond *par excellence* to his definition of the uncanny as what straddles the border between the familiar and the frightening, the primary *heim* and its unsettling, misshapen double. The connection between cisgender female reproductive organs and the uncanny is even pointed out by Freud himself, who argues:

It often happens that male patients declare that they feel there is something uncanny about the female genital organs. This *unheimlich* place, however, is the entrance to the former *heim* [home] of all human beings, to the place where everyone dwelt once upon a time and in the beginning. There is a humorous saying: "Love is home-sickness"; and whenever a man dreams of a place or a country and says to himself, still in the dream, "this place is familiar to me, I have been there before," we may interpret the place as being his mother's genitals or her body. In this case, too, the *unheimlich* is what was once *heimlich*, homelike, familiar; the prefix "un" is the token of repression. (244)

Freud argues that the fairy-tale genre is exempt for inciting feelings of uncanniness considering that "[in fairy-tales] the world of reality is left behind from the very start, and the animistic system of beliefs is frankly adopted ... wish-fulfillments, secret powers, omnipotence of thoughts, animation of lifeless objects, all the elements so common in fairy-stories, can exert no uncanny influence here" (249). However, I would like to suggest that, on the contrary, the uncanny is in fact a pivotal and recurring element of the fairy-tale diegesis, epitomised and catalysed by the figure of the wicked (step)mother. Thus, writing deliberately

against Freud's claim that, although "catalepsy and the re-animation of the dead have been represented as most uncanny themes ... [few] would be so bold as to call it an uncanny moment, for instance, when Snow-White opens her eyes once more" (245), Jonte-Pace argues that premature burial is an intrinsically uncanny motif in the fairy-tale genre, and that the fear and anguish it incites is partially offset by the fantasy of returning to the familiar, reassuring, and comfortable space of the maternal womb (76-78).

Interestingly, both Lee and Donoghue liken the prototypical glass coffin to the maternal womb in their respective retellings of "Snow White." Thus, in Donoghue's "The Tale of the Apple", the heroine escapes her coffin only to deliberately return to her stepmother's castle (58), while in Lee's *White as Snow*, the poisoning of the heroine is explicitly followed by an attempt to reincorporate her into the maternal womb: "And Arpazia held her as if to press her back inside her body, into the warm oven of her womb" (226). The other two elements which Freud underlines in his outlining of the uncanny are the notion of recurrence ("The Uncanny" 240) and the motif of the double (*der Doppelgänger*):

We must content ourselves with selecting those themes of uncanniness which are most prominent, and seeing whether we can fairly trace them also back to infantile sources. These themes are all concerned with the idea of a "double" in every shape and degree, with persons, therefore, who are to be considered identical by reason of looking alike; Hoffmann accentuates this relation by transferring mental processes from the one person to the other—what we should call telepathy—so that the one possesses knowledge, feeling and experience in common with the other, identifies himself with another person, so that his self becomes confounded, or the foreign self is substituted for his own—in other words, by doubling, dividing and interchanging the self. And finally there is the constant recurrence of similar situations, a same face,

or character-trait, or twist of fortune, or a same crime, or even a same name recurring throughout several consecutive generations. (232-233)

It is essential to point out that, while Freud's is correct in assessing that the suspension of disbelief intrinsic to the fairy-tale genre is inherently hostile to the emergence of the uncanny, the figure of the wicked (step)mother however bears undeniable ties to his definition of the *unheimlich*, on both a textual and metatextual level. Thus, in her existence as a malevolent and deeply unsettling recurring character—as well as in her functioning as a synecdoche of the smothering and devouring womb—the (step)mother is, *par excellence*, the point of entry of the uncanny within the diegesis. The same phenomenon takes place on an intradiegetic level, with the maternal nemesis functioning as a periodic device to advance the plot: in many “Snow White” variants, for instance, the wicked witch visits the cottage three times in order to entice the heroine with poisoned items. Finally, though I discuss the motif of matrilineal doubling in depth throughout the next two chapters, it remains important to point out that the wicked (step)mother almost always has or is a double herself. Thus, when the villainous mother is not the biological one, she usually appears as a distorted and malevolent reflection of the idealised, original genitrix. Conversely, in cases when maternal violence stems from the birth mother herself, it is often her daughter that eventually becomes her double, as underlined several times within this corpus. Lee's *White as Snow* even combines these two processes, by turning Coira and Arpazia into mirror images of each other (120), while the first accuses the latter of having usurped the role of the good, beautiful, “true” mother that Coira desperately seeks throughout her entire infancy (87-88).

The aforementioned correlation between the maternal and Otherness within the fairy-tale genre not only turns the wicked (step)mother into an unsettling, uncanny figure; it also calls on a different concept: that of abjection as residing in—and inseparable from—the maternal body. However, before analysing how this concept intersects with fairy-tale

representations of bodies that mother, it is necessary to underline that the forthcoming considerations intrinsically stem from a cisgender understanding of the female and maternal body, for which the womb functions as a synecdoche. Consequently, although they may inform our perception of maternity in the context of this dissertation, they remain inevitably charged with essentialist undertones and in service of theories of sexual difference.

Therefore, they inherently complicate discussions of transgender and nonbinary parenting, as well as fuels the dichotomy of biological and non-biological mothering. Nevertheless, as I intend to demonstrate, the unquestioned equating of womanhood and motherhood within the fairy-tale genre allows me to argue that literary representations of the maternal as inherently abject extend beyond cisgender biological mothers, and similarly impact, for instance, depictions of adoptive and foster mothers. In *Abjection and the Maternal Body*, Dana Carson explains that:

The most notable intersection between Butler, Kristeva and Bataille concerns a consideration of abjection. Bataille's concept of abjection is centered on the filth, shit, piss and the horror that draws us in and disgusts. ... We have a curiosity that gravitates us towards the abject, but we never want to be immersed on anyone else's terms. ... His focus on corporeality, bodily flows and movement, and how these connect people, are central to his phenomenology. Under current societal structures, "Kristeva argues that without a secular discourse or myth of motherhood that absorbs abjection, abjection is misplaced onto women" (Oliver, 1993, p.104). Women's bodies, women as real subjects, are not represented in the sacred, are not active subjects in the sacred, but are bodies that matter too much. The need to control women's reproductive power, sexuality, and maternity, force women into a space of abjection. (83-84)

As underlined by Carson, Kristeva's understanding of abjection differs slightly from Bataille's, hers being indeed centered—rather than on bodily excretions and the disgust they invoke—on a geographical positioning within the margins, a force of disruption that inherently threatens the supremacy of meaning, the Semiotic, and phallogocentrism (49-50). In this respect, she declares in “Approaching Abjection” (1982):

The abject shares only one quality with the object—that of being opposed to *I*. But if, in being opposed, the object offers me equilibrium within the fragile web of a desire for meaning which in fact makes me indefinitely and infinitely homologous to it, the *abject*, on the contrary, as fallen object, is what is radically excluded, drawing me towards the point where meaning collapses. (126)

Interestingly, both Bataille's and Kristeva's definitions of the abject are related to the maternal, in particular as it comes to be represented in both traditional and contemporary fairy-tale retellings. Indeed, as previously stated, depictions of female bodies within the genre are inherently linked to fluids—such as milk, blood, tears, and placenta—which all relate more or less explicitly to the realm of procreation. In “Snow White” tales, for instance, it is the shedding of the biological mother's blood that seals the conception of the heroine, and her stepmother's soiled maternal milk—represented by the poisoned apple—that destroys her thereafter. Similarly, in Valente's *Six-Gun Snow White*, the scene of Mrs. H's birth-giving focuses extensively on the unsettlingly vivid image of the “blood coming from between her legs [that] wasn't red [but] the color of a mirror, like mercury beading out of her” (54). In these two examples, maternal excretions are simultaneously fascinating and repulsive, desired and reviled by the child and, by extension, by the reader. This paradoxical tension directly echoes Kristeva's understanding of abjection as:

one of those violent and obscure revolts of being against that which threatens it and which seems to it to come from an outside or an exorbitant inside; something that is thrown next to the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It is there, very close, but unassimilable. It solicits, disturbs, fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Fearful, it turns away. Sickened, it rejects. It is protected from the vileness by an absolute of which it is proud, to which it is attached. But at the same time, even so, the *élan*, this spasm, this leap, is attracted towards an elsewhere as much tempting as it is condemned. Tirelessly, like a wild boomerang, a pole of attraction and repulsion draws the one inhabited literally out of himself.

(“Approaching Abjection” 125)

Besides, not only are fairy-tale (step)mothers abject in their connection to desirable yet dangerous maternal fluids, abjection is also created—according to Kristeva—through the inevitable and violent splitting of the mother/child dyad. As Carson clarifies, “the abject subject, though a person is a monstrosity to the social subject. It is described as a violent place, founded on an original trauma which Kristeva states is birthing. The abject then is related to identity separating from the mother, but in a place before language” (50). Kristeva additionally equates this process of separation to a form of necessary matricide, the cultural importance of which she sets out to reclaim throughout this article. Thus, as Alison Stone explains in her 2012 article:

To judge “I am not she,” the infant must viscerally put the mother outside itself, in an act of psychic violence. Borders between selves must be constituted, forcibly, before they can be recognized (relatively) neutrally. Second, as part of her position that the maternal body civilizes us, Kristeva maintains that matricide contributes as much to subject-formation as the parricide that Freud saw as founding civilization (Kristeva



2000, 21). Kristeva's emphasis on matricide thus accords with her concern to recognize the maternal body's cultural contribution. ("Against Matricide" 122)

I argue that Kristeva's understanding of the dynamic between the maternal and abjection is particularly relevant to the fairy-tale genre, as can be inferred from this dissertation's corpus: in fact, many of the retellings discussed in this dissertation perfectly illustrate the violent—and often matricidal—process of individuation taking place between mother and daughter. Although I explore the motif of matricide in further detail in the following section of this chapter, I will briefly show how abjection emerges in Lee's *White as Snow* as a result of the merging of identities between mother and daughter, and their subsequent struggle for narrative subjectivity:

Candacis moved out of the dance<sup>11</sup>, and looked up and down for Ulvit. But Ulvit was not to be seen. the Woman too had left the dance. She stood under a tree and stared on at Candacis, as Candacis stared.

The image and its reflection. But which was which?

An awful sensation, like a well of tears about to burst, but reasonless, for they felt nothing, either of them, for the other, except a confusion worse than heartbreak. (147)

Interestingly, in a reversal of traditional processes of identity formation, it is through the mother's destruction of her daughter—through poisoning—that the separation of bodies and psyches is actualized, as illustrated by the magic mirror "[closing] its single huge eye" (235).

Before looking at contemporary attempts to move away from staunchly misogynistic depictions of the maternal as a figurehead of the uncanny and the abject, it is necessary to first discuss the seemingly paradoxical motifs of the devouring womb and the phallic mother

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<sup>11</sup> "Candacis" is the birth name of the heroine, although she is commonly referred to as "Coira." The narrator actually specifies that only her biological father, King Draco, ever uses it.

as they are defined by psychoanalysis. As explained by Barbara Creed in “Horror and the Monstrous Feminine” (2020) female monstrosity as represented in phallogentric literatures, cultures, and media traditionally espouses one of two opposite—although equally threatening—forms. According to Joseph Campbell, “there is a motif occurring in certain primitive mythologies, as well as in modern surrealist painting and neurotic dream, which is known to folklore as ‘the toothed vagina’— the vagina that castrates. And a counterpart, the other way, is the so-called ‘phallic mother,’ a motif perfectly illustrated in the long fingers and nose of the witch” (83). The parallel he draws between the phallic mother and the figure of the witch is evidently particularly relevant to the study of fairy-tales, although it remains problematic with regards to the perpetuation of misogynistic and transphobic binaries in the construction of gender within the genre. As discussed in the previous chapter, the fear of castration remains a recurring trope of contemporary fairy-tale retellings, often associated to portrayals of the witch as a misandric figure versed in dark and magic. For example, in Coover’s *Stepmother*, the heroine’s daughter—a witch like her mother—expresses her wish to “kill ... or at least deprive [the three princes] of their manhood”; a wish which eventually turns performative as she accidentally castrates one of them during a violent sexual encounter: “They wanted me to take him in my mouth and I did, but then I felt the most terrible stabbing pain entering me suddenly from behind and it made me bite down too hard and I must have bitten it off. There was blood everywhere” (55). As explained by Margaret Whitford:

The womb, unthought in its place of the first sojourn in which we become bodies, is fantasized by many men to be a devouring mouth, a cloaca or anal and urethral outfall, a phallic threat, at best reproductive. And in the absence of valid representations of female sexuality, this womb merges with woman’s sex [*sexe*] as a whole.

There are no words to talk about it, except filthy, mutilating words. The corresponding affects will therefore be anxiety, phobia, disgust, a haunting fear of castration. (Whitford 41)

Besides, the counterpoint of the devouring womb—the threatening figure of the phallic mother—is also a recurring presence of the fairy-tale genre. According to Judith Butler, the phallic mother emerges when castration is deliberately refused, and becomes inherently threatening to the established patriarchal order:

The failure to submit to castration appears capable of producing only its opposite, the spectral figure of the castrator with Holophernes's head in hand. This figure of excessive phallicism, typified by the phallic mother, is devouring and destructive, the negative fate of the phallus when attached to the feminine position. Significant in its misogyny, this construction suggests that “having the phallus” is much more destructive as a feminine operation than as a masculine one, a claim that symptomatizes the displacement of phallic destructiveness and implies that there is no other way for women to assume the phallus except in its most killing modalities.

(*Bodies that Matter* 66)

A few examples of (step)maternal figures within this corpus appear to intersect with Butler's definition of the phallic mother, be it “Snow-Drop's” Cristena—whose refusal to submit to her husband's rule eventually leads her to engaging in a sexual encounter with his underage daughter before disposing of her (Lee, *Redder than Blood* 58-60)—or Donoghue's “The Tale of the Hair,” in which the tower and the horn both function as explicitly phallic symbols that foreshadow the transformation of the mother/daughter pair into an ambiguous, ambivalent, and pseudo-romantic dyad. Interestingly, these two prototypically villainous figures are either hinted or stated to enter into intimate relationships with characters they

would traditionally nurture, therefore equating the phallic mother with a malevolent, queer, and predatory figure that inherently threatens the heterosexual nuclear family model. In this respect, it is relevant to note that Zerilli denounces the misogynistic implications of perpetuating this maternal binary—phallic mother against devouring womb—as it ends up demonising both cisgender reproductive organs and the possibility of transgender bodies, without even offering either of these figures a chance to (re)appropriate a narrative voice of their own. “For it is precisely in the absence of mothers-as-speaking-subjects,” she thus argues, “that we are left with nothing but a ‘delusion’, albeit one with deadly consequences for women: the (mute) phallic mother of infantile fantasy and the (mute) loving mother of masculinist representation” (120).

Applying psychoanalysis to the fairy-tale genre starkly underlines the problematic and ambivalent place occupied by the mother’s body in phallogentric cultures and literatures: uncanny, monstrous, abject, the body of the (m)Other attracts as much as it unsettles and repulses; it is condemned to exist only in the margins, as an object to be instrumentalised, abused and eventually disposed of. However, several retellers within this corpus experiment with more subversive and disruptive ways to (re)frame the maternal body, centered not only on reclaiming it through its otherness and *différence*, but also on celebrating the womb as a space of blissful intrauterine confluence and indistinguishability between mother and daughter. First, works such as Coover’s *Stepmother* (64-69), Lee’s *White as Snow* (77-78), and Gaiman’s “Snow, Glass, Apples” (230-231)—among others—interestingly propose portrayals of (step)maternity that do not erase the existence of female desire and sexuality: instead, these works depict both biological and non-biological mothers who willingly engage in sexual encounters after having become (step)parents, thus countering prototypical representations of the maternal body as a permanently sullied, undesirable object.

Besides, while maternal eroticism is occasionally explored through the taboo prism of mother/daughter abuse and incest, I argue that a majority of matricentric fairy-tale retellings instead focus on carving out new literary space for the exploration of “mother/daughter romances” (Schanoes 37). These revisions thus conceptualise the maternal body not as an essentialist marker of gender, but rather as a space of filiation, indetermination, and ambivalence that does not always overlap with the concrete, tangible body of the biological genitrix. As Kathleen Lennon explains, while first-wave feminist theory and activism were primarily interested in divorcing womanhood from the maternal—and the female body from misogynistic notions of biological purpose—the second-wave was, on the other hand, more concerned with exploring the realm of motherhood through an empowered lens, in an attempt to reclaim pregnancy and birth-giving as essential experiences of female embodiment (Lennon). While these efforts to reappropriate a site and institution so profoundly shaped by patriarchal domination are essential to the rehabilitation of the mother as a potential subject and the expansion of the mother/daughter plot outside of its prototypical tragic resolution, they also run the risk of equating the maternal—and even womanhood as a whole—to the cisgender female body, thus perpetuating the exclusionary definition of motherhood implemented and systematised by phallogocentric systems and cultures. Before discussing these shortcomings, however, it is important to look at how this newfound celebration of the maternal body is declined at the level of contemporary fairy-tales.

“There is no place here for a little girl’s love for her mother, a love which Freud and most analysts probably take for granted, even while talking of hostility” Chodorow argues in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (124). With this statement, she successfully identifies the lack of space dedicated to the exploration of mother/daughter relationships in literature and theory—a gap which translates, at the level of the fairy-tale genre, in growing interest in this previously overlooked dyad. In this respect, it is relevant to point out the many intersections

and echoes between matricentric fairy-tale revisions and Irigaray's work on the mother/child dyad. Thus, her 1979 essay "And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other" lends a voice not only to the child's overwhelming love and need for its mother, but also to its ambivalent relationship to the act of nurturing itself, which it sees as a threat both to the integrity of the maternal subject and to their own:

You've prepared something to eat. You bring it to me. You feed me/yourself. But you feed me/yourself too much, as if you wanted to fill me up completely with your offering. You put yourself in my mouth, and I suffocate. Put yourself less in me, and let me look at you. I'd like to see you while you nurse me; not lose my/your eyes when I open my mouth for you; have you stay near me while I drink you. I'd like you to remain outside, too. Keep yourself/me outside, too. Don't engulf yourself or me in what flows from you into me. I would like both of us to be present. So that the one doesn't disappear in the other, or the other in the one. So that we can taste each other, feel each other, listen to each other, see each other—together. ...

You've gone again. Once more you're assimilated into nourishment. We've again disappeared into this act of eating each other. Hardly do I glimpse you and walk toward you, when you metamorphose into a baby nurse. Again you want to fill my mouth, my belly, to make yourself into a plenitude for mouth and belly. To let nothing pass between us but blood, milk, honey, and meat (but no, no meat; I don't want you dead inside me).

Will there never be love between us other than this filling up of holes? To close up and seal off everything that could happen between us, indefinitely, is that your only desire? To reduce us to consuming and being consumed, is that your only need?  
(61-62)

This ambivalent yet intense craving for an ongoing, non-sacrificial maternal presence is similarly explored by Lee in *White as Snow*, where the young heroine desperately seeks maternal presence, contact, and affection, yet finds her attempts at establishing a mother/daughter romance to be systematically rebuked:

Coira drew in her breath involuntarily. Her eyes were wide.

The queen was rather far away, and so made smaller, and somehow more absolute. She wore a dress of ivory silk, stitched with gold threads. Her hair was not unbound, but held in an openwork golden tower, which showed its glistening darkness. A veil poured from the tower like a soft red flame.

The queen's face was impassive. That is, it was empty. But so beautiful, so fair, so perfect. Less a face than an instant of revelation.

Physically unmoving, rigid as if bolted into chains and shackles, the child's spirit galvanically strained to fly out of her body, to leap and hurl itself at the feet of her queen. ...

Falling to life, they were born on the same day of the same month; they also fell in love at the exact same moment—but not with each other. (53-54)

Building upon this idea, Barzilai defends an alternative interpretation of fairy narratives that centers on the maternal, arguing that, like their daughters, mothers also struggle with the inevitable yet necessary individuation of the child, and react accordingly by attempting to artificially recreate the state of intrauterine bliss and union they experienced pre-birth, but do so through violent and alienating means:

The unnatural mother is therefore seen as desiring to eat rather than to feed her child.

On the queen's part, this same episode is the expression of an entirely different wish.

It represents a preemptive strike: she wants to eat (leave) me; I will eat (make her leave me) first. Conversely, the attempt to incorporate or consume Snow White may also represent a refusal to relinquish the daughter. . . . It is the queen's wish to take the daughter back into herself, to recreate the condition in which her creation was the very flesh of her own flesh. There was no clash of wills in those edenic days when mother and daughter were still an intermingled and undifferentiated unit. (531)

As previously discussed, this desire for maternal reabsorption is most strikingly and explicitly explored in *White as Snow*, where the final reunion of Coira and Arpazia culminates in a (s)mothering embrace, “as if to press [Coira] back inside [Arpazia's] body, into the warm oven of her womb. And as if to press herself into the womb of Coira” (Lee 226).

It must be noted that these attempts to reclaim motherhood and the mother/daughter dyad as a significant part of the contemporary fairy-tale countercanon often relies on the rehabilitation—sometimes leading to the glorification—of the maternal body, as explained by Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born* (1976), who declares:

I have come to believe, as will be clear throughout this book, that female biology—the diffuse, intense sensuality radiating out from clitoris, breasts, uterus, vagina; the lunar cycles of menstruation; the gestation and fruition of life which can take place in the female body—has far more radical implications than we have yet come to appreciate. Patriarchal thought has limited female biology to its own narrow specifications. The feminist vision has recoiled from female biology for these reasons; it will, I believe, come to view our physicality as a resource, rather than a destiny. In order to live a fully human life we require not only control of our bodies (though control is a prerequisite); we must touch the unity and resonance of our physicality; our bond with the natural order, the corporeal ground of our intelligence. (39-40)



While Rich correctly identifies the ongoing, oppressive hold patriarchal systems have over female and maternal bodies alike, the redefinition that she proposes has its own limitations: indeed, it stems from an implicitly essentialist understanding of gender and gendered dynamics, therefore failing to account for the existence of trans and nonbinary bodies altogether. Her conception of motherhood is similarly uterocentric, although she concedes that “[many] of the great mothers have not been biological” (252).

Contemporary attempts to de-abstractify (cisgender) female and maternal bodies often delve further into maternal language and mother/child communication processes. For instance, in an interesting attempt to assure biological mothers of the adequacy of their nurturing gestures and instincts, Winnicott argues that “if the relationship between mother and baby has started, and is developing naturally, then there is no need for feeding techniques, and weighings and all sorts of investigations; the two together know what is just right better than any outsider ever can” (*The Child, the Family* 31-32). For Winnicott, therefore, the maternal body remains the primary site for mother/child bonding, and the interactions and exchanges taking place in this space are foundational to the child’s successful development and individuation. However, it must be noted that, for Winnicott, the maternal body is an abstraction, and therefore ought not to be equated with the physical body of the mother. Similarly, Winnicott argues that maternal instinct is not the prerogative of biological mothers, seeing as it does not in fact stem from the (cisgender) maternal body, but rather from one’s experience of having been mothered. (*Collected Works* vol. 7 333)

Similarly, Kristeva’s *chora* designates a hybrid site between mother and child, where communication precedes phallogocentric language, and relies on the semiotic rather than the symbolic (Carson 35). As previously underlined, the *chora* is presented as equally enticing and destructive, as illustrated by, for instance, in *White as Snow* and *Kissing the Witch*, where narratives of maternal romance simultaneously—and repeatedly—border on the erotic and

the dangerous (Lee 223-227; Donoghue 54-57). However, although Kristeva's *chora* is a very interesting take on the pre-individuation, hybrid space in which mother and child communicate and coexist, it appears once again to overlap significantly with the physical body of the biological mother which—while crucial and urgent to reclaim from patriarchal oppression—should not be equated with motherhood as a whole. Thus, in order to move away from essentialist definitions of the maternal, I suggest looking at mothering dynamics through the prism of language, in addition to that of the body. This strategy is actually proposed by Whitford when discussing Irigaray's "When Our Lips Speak Together" (1980):

I also put forward a political interpretation in *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (Whitford 1991), based on taking the two lips as a figure for metonymy or contiguity. Tracing the itinerary of the idea of contiguity in Irigaray's work, and its reference to a) the mother-daughter relationship, and b) the parental intercourse, or the sexual relation between male and female, I argue that the two lips stand for what has been left out of the social contract: namely the maternal genealogy, and women's relations between and among themselves. (101)

With regards to this process of abstraction of the maternal, Évelyne Sechaud underlines the importance of the "mother tongue" (*langue maternelle*), which she presents as an alternative, inherently more inclusive way to inscribe and discuss filiation:

La langue maternelle désigne ainsi la filiation. Les nouvelles modalités de procréation, mères porteuses notamment, ne permettent plus d'attester exclusivement la maternité sur le corps et la grossesse. Cela renforce le poids du langage qui dit alors la filiation. Il en a toujours été ainsi pour la paternité affirmée par un acte de langage et la transmission du nom, encore que les tests ADN aujourd'hui peuvent donner au

corps le dernier mot ! Entre le symbolique du langage et le réel du corps, la désignation de la filiation oscille aussi bien pour les pères que pour les mères.

Le maternel ce n'est pas seulement le corps à corps, le préverbal, le précœdipien (si tant est que cela existe !). Le petit humain, dans son état de désaide premier, est aussi, par le maternel, un être de langage. (1495)

Expanding upon this idea, I argue that matricentric fairy-tale retellings are interested in exploring, rather than mother tongues *per se*, maternal writing and matrilineal narratives as a strategy of resistance against the systematic erasure and silencing of mothers and daughters within the genre and Western cultures at large.

As I have previously pointed out, while these efforts to tear maternity and the mother's body away from patriarchal constructs and violence are laudable, they often entail a celebration of the birth-giving body as intrinsically different and Other, which in turn furthers a rigid, binary understanding of sex and gender, while cementing the implicit equation between womanhood and maternity. Thus, not only does this definition exclude the sheer possibility of trans and nonbinary parenting—an erasure which is mirrored at the level of the fairy-tale genre in spite of a contemporary increase of queer fairy-tale retellings—it is similarly alienating to women who do not wish to mother, as well as to non-biological mothers as a whole. Criticising the essentialist undertones of Kristeva's work, Zerilli thus explains that

[Passages of "Women's Time" (1981)] have provoked several readers to accuse Kristeva of the very essentialism she claims to find in humanism (Adams and Brown 1979; Jones 1984; Grosz 1989). As Judith Butler puts it, "Kristeva understands the desire to give birth as a species-desire, part of a collective and archaic female libidinal drive that constitutes an ever-recurring metaphysical reality" (1990, 90). Similarly,

Kaja Silverman maintains that Kristeva fails to provide a language for questioning female destiny because she denies the mother the very possibility of speech by relegating her to the silence of the chora: “The mother is either fused or confused with her infant, and in the process comes both to be and to inhabit the chora” (1988, 102).

A female body consigned to such a prelinguistic state can never be radical. (117)

With regards to this, Butler’s understanding of gender as fluctuating and performative (*Gender Trouble* 179) may allow us to craft more permeable and protean definitions of gendered bodies and the maternal. However, Butler’s detractors underline her supposed erasure of (cisgender) female embodiment, as Carson argues:

Butler assumes there is nothing inherent about the body, and that there is nothing stable about identity. For Butler, the body is only ever signified: “There is no body in itself, no natural sexual difference. Rather, sexed bodies are always matters of representation” (Oliver, 1993, p.99). This allows the doors of identity to open to a wide variety of possibilities. However, this also denies feminine corporeality: a concept that allows for female experience to be taken seriously and, in particular, pregnant women. (32)

As a consequence, one may come to believe that inclusivity and bodily empowerment are intrinsically irreconcilable branches of feminist theory, with the legitimacy of the one necessarily requiring the silencing of the other. However, this dissertation argues that only an approach merging an empowered, de-abjectified view of the maternal body with an inclusive (re)definition of motherhood that encompasses non-biological and trans mothering—among other alternative forms of maternity—can allow us to move past the alienating binaries perpetuated by phallogocentric systems, as well as the unquestioned mother-blaming slant of infantile development theories. In fact, many of the upcoming mutations of the epistemology

of sexual difference announced by Paul B. Preciado in *Can the Monster Speak* (2020) are particularly relevant to the topic of the maternal as traditionally apprehended in psychoanalytic theory:

Troisièmement, je voudrais vous dire qu'ébranlée par de profonds changements, l'épistémologie de la différence sexuelle est en mutation et va céder la place, probablement dans les dix ou vingt prochaines années, à une nouvelle épistémologie. Les mouvements transféministes, queer et antiracistes, mais aussi les nouvelles pratiques de filiation, de relations amoureuses, d'identifications de genre, du désir, de la sexualité, de la nomination ne sont que des indices de cette mutation et des expérimentations dans la fabrication collective d'une autre épistémologie du corps humain vivant. (27-28)

Consequently, the final section of this dissertation discusses how these processes are explored and declined—albeit tentatively—in the subgenre of fairy-tale revisions, and to what extent they reflect—or betray—the transformations of motherhood as an institution within contemporary Western societies.

### **5.3. Overcoming the Monstrous Mother**

At this stage of our analysis, we have established that fairy-tale maternity is not only regularly imposed onto female characters—often as a result of sexual violence—but also causes extreme physical and psychic trauma to biological and non-biological mothers alike. As for how motherhood as an institution is depicted within the genre, it remains profoundly shaped by and subjected to patriarchal constructs. The maternal body—and the womb to an even greater extent—is therefore posited as the Other *par excellence*, a site which is simultaneously familiar and threatening, attractive and repulsive. As a consequence, mother

figures in the fairy-tale genre are inherently destined to either be erased from the diegesis once their maternal function is accomplished, or to become villains for their (step)children to overcome as part of their identity formation processes. In this respect, while (step)maternal filicide is a recurring narrative trope of the genre—and is often analysed as such—I argue that attention must also be brought to the unquestioned systematicity of matricide as a ritualistic process of individuation in child-centric fairy-tales and their retellings. In this respect, Bettelheim’s analysis of “Snow White” underlines the necessity for the heroine to overcome her infantile attachment to the maternal breast through matricide:

[Snow White’s] tragedy began with oral incorporative desires: the queen’s wish to eat Snow White’s internal organs. Snow White’s spitting out of the suffocating apple—the bad object she had incorporated—marks her final freedom from primitive orality, which stands for all her immature fixations. ...

But before the “happy” life can begin, the evil and destructive aspects of our personality must be brought under our control. ... In “Snow White” the vain, jealous, and destructive queen is forced to put on red-hot shoes, in which she must dance until she dies. Untrammelled sexual jealousy, which tries to ruin others, destroys itself—as symbolized not only by the fiery red shoes but by death from dancing in them. Symbolically, the story tells that uncontrolled passion must be restrained or it will become one’s undoing. Only the death of the jealous queen (the elimination of all outer and inner turbulence) can make for a happy world. (270)

Interestingly, while traditional versions of “Snow White”, “Rapunzel” and “Cinderella” seldom have the (step)daughter be directly involved in—or even present for—the death of her tormentor, retellers such as Coover and Gaiman instead depict her as a witness of the

stepmother's torture and execution, and while Gaiman's heroine remains stoic, Coover's openly revels in the humiliating and cruel spectacle:

I was bound and kept in a tiny stone cell beneath the palace, and I remained there through the autumn. Today they fetched me out of the cell; they stripped the rags from me, and washed the filth from me, and then they shaved my head and my loins, and they rubbed my skin with goose-grease.

The snow was falling as they carried me—two men at each hand, two men at each leg—utterly exposed, and spread-eagled and cold, through the midwinter crowds, and brought me to this kiln.

My stepdaughter stood there with her prince. She watched me, in my indignity but she said nothing. ...

She was not laughing, or jeering, or talking. She did not sneer at me or turn away. She looked at me, though; and for a moment I saw myself reflected in her eyes.

(Gaiman, *Smoke and Mirrors* 373-374)

My young bride, her cheeks made rosy by the mountain air, smile benignly through the last rites, just as she had laughed with open glee at her stepmother's terrible entertainment at our wedding feast the night before, her cheeks flushed then with wine. I tried to read her outrageous cheerfulness, tried to understand the merriment that such an awesome execution had provoked. At times, she seemed utterly heartless, this child, become the very evil she'd been saved from. (Coover, *A Child Again* 52).

Thus, not only is matricide presented as a fair and natural retribution for the stepmother's cruelty, but the framing employed by both storytellers also underlines the stepdaughter's indifference to her stepmother by contrasting the cruelty of the latter's punishment with the levity of the first's reaction.

Similarly, to Bettelheim, Kristeva presents matricide as an inevitable process of individuation taking place within the *chora* and allowing the child to move from the realm of the maternal semiotic to that of the paternal symbolic, thus successfully incorporating phallogocentrism. In *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (1987) she thus argues that:

For man and for woman the loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity, the first step on the way to becoming autonomous. Matricide is our vital necessity, the sine-qua-non condition of our individuation, provided that it takes place under optimal circumstances and can be eroticized—whether the lost object is recovered as erotic object (as is the case for male heterosexuality or female homosexuality), or it is transposed by means of an unbelievable symbolic effort, the advent of which one can only admire, which eroticizes the *other* (the other sex, in the case of the heterosexual woman) or transforms cultural constructs into a “sublime” erotic object (one thinks of the cathexes, by men and women, in social bonds, intellectual and aesthetic productions, etc.). (27-28)

Likewise, Klein explains that what may be identified by the child as an expression of maternal violence is in reality a displacement of its own destructive impulses, which target the mother and her body through the prism of the synecdochical breast:

We may assume that the struggle between life and death instincts already operates during birth and accentuates the persecutory anxiety aroused by this painful experience. It would seem that this experience has the effect of making the external world, including the first external object, the mother’s breast, appear hostile. To this contributes the fact that the ego turns the destructive impulses against this primary object. The young infant feels that frustration by the breast, which in fact implies



danger to life, is the retaliation for his destructive impulses towards it and that the frustrating breast is persecuting him. (*Envy and Gratitude* 30)

Finally, let us not forget that most versions the tales discussed in this dissertation traditionally begin with a narrative matricide: that of the original mother—so long as she exists and has not been merged with the figure of the villainous, secondary mother. Thus, while the wicked (step)mother’s execution is customarily presented as a literary illustration of successful infantile individuation, the death of the original mother is even more openly patriarchal: thus, not only does it catalyse the hero(ine)s journey, it also presents death as the logical culmination of the self-sacrifice implicitly required of all mothers within patriarchal systems. One is thus led to infer that the only good fairy-tale mother is a dead one, and that the sooner her culturally imposed selflessness leads to her diegetic disappearance, the kindlier she will be remembered and framed by the narrative. Therefore, maternal violence and filicide as they occur in fairy-tales could come to represent, rather than the tragic acme of mother/daughter rivalry, a desperate attempt on the part of the (step)mother to protect herself against the inevitability of matricide.

However, it must also be noted that, under the influence of contemporary feminist theory, fairy-tales have recently become more critical towards the ritualistic dimension of matricide. Returning briefly to Irigaray, not only does she underline the importance of reexamining and reclaiming matricide in “And the One Doesn’t Stir without the Other”, she also shows how the destructiveness and finality of this process harms mother and daughter alike. In fact, I argue that it is to the inevitability of patriarchally sanctioned matricide that Irigaray’s daughter responds in this essay, by verbalising a desperate desire to coexist with her mother without the looming threat of obligatory maternal destruction (67). This statement is inevitably reminiscent of Coira’s unyielding and almost romantic efforts to reunite with her mother in *White as Snow*, as well as of the love-like trance she falls into when confronted to

the one body she has been systematically denied as a result of the patriarchal pitting of female characters against each other. In fact, both Coira and Arpazia appear intimately aware of this phenomenon, as shown by the anxiety they both experience as they become aware of their extreme physical resemblance, which foreshadows the eventual (and inevitable) ousting of the one by the other (147).

Another contemporary variation on “Snow White” by poetess Delia Sherman—not included within this dissertation’s corpus—similarly depicts a fairy-tale daughter recklessly craving for her mother and who, like the unnamed speaker of Irigaray’s essay, refuses to be complicit in narrative matricide, choosing instead to abandon herself—and her life—to destructive nurturing: “Of course I took her poisoned gifts. I wanted / To feel her hands combing out my hair, / To let her lace me up, to take an apple / From her hand, a smile from her lips, / As when I was a child” (41). In this respect, Alison Stone’s analysis of Kristevian matricidal theories is particularly interesting: thus, borrowing from Donald Winnicott and Jessica Benjamin, she argues that, rather than understanding mother/daughter separation as inherently final and fatal, it ought instead to be envisioned as creating a necessary “intersubjective space of thirdness between two subjects” (“Against Matricide” 119):

I propose an alternative, non-matricidal conception of subjectivity, in part by drawing out anti-matricidal strands in Kristeva’s own thought, including her view that early mother–child relations are triangular. Whereas she understands this triangle in terms of a first imaginary father, I re-interpret this triangle using Donald Winnicott’s idea of potential space and Jessica Benjamin’s idea of an intersubjective space of thirdness. I argue that this space provides a maternal third term: a relation of connection and difference between two, a relation that inherits the affective, mobile, generative qualities of the maternal body as the infant (according to Kristeva) imagines it. This

connecting space allows both mothers and children to emerge as subjects in their own right. (118)

While Stone assimilates this potential space to the *chora*, I argue that, within the fairy-tale genre, it may also be embodied by the character of the wicked stepmother: thus, due to her lack of biological ties to the heroine, she functions as a diegetic personification of matrilineal separation. Additionally, the more nuanced portrayals of (step)maternity emanating from contemporary storytellers encourage increasingly mature, realistic, and ambivalent depictions of mother/daughter relationships that are neither fusional to the point of mutual erasure and hybridisation, nor violent to the point of mutual destruction. More and more often, such representations eventually allow both characters to mend their estrangement, renegotiate their assigned narrative of generational hatred, and sometimes even survive the tale altogether, like in Garrison Keillor's "My Stepmother, Myself" in which Cinderella and her stepmother "see each other almost every day ... play tennis ... and reminisce and laugh about [their] little disagreements" (59).

In addition to the unabashed recourse to matricide as a means of progressing traditional fairy-tale plots, we must also note an overwhelming lack of matricentric voices, narratives, and plots within the genre canon. As I discuss further throughout this dissertation, while contemporary retellers strive to progressively palliate this disparity, it remains evident that matricide is also committed symbolically, on a metanarrative level: thus, not only is the fairy-tale (step)mother systematically disposed of within the narrative itself, she is also stripped of any agency and voice she might have been able to reclaim within the metatext. This phenomenon is precisely what the wicked stepmother character of Atwood's "Unpopular Gals" revolts against when she declares: "You can wipe your feet on me, twist my motives around all you like, you can dump millstones on my head and drown me in the river, but you can't get me out of the story. I'm the plot, babe, and don't ever forget it" (*Good*

*Bones* 74). Interestingly, by reclaiming the importance, not of her body, but of her actions within the prototypical fairy-tale plot, the stepmother's words become in a way performative: thus, as she seizes the narrative voice as a means of self-empowerment, she concomitantly writes herself back into the tale, thus resisting matricidal erasure. Additionally, the gradation of violent and destructive behaviours she describes (and denounces) throughout this passage—alongside with the deliberate lack of anchoring of this tale within the genre—suggests that she both functions and speaks out as a representative of her character type as a whole, an *Urstepmother* who survived successive matricides and now reclaims her own narrative arc as a form of resistance.

From a psychoanalytic standpoint, one would argue that this absence of maternal voices and plots within the genre stems directly from the alleged irrepresentability of female reproductive organs and, more specifically, of the vagina. In this respect, Abensour thus explains: “le vagin refoulé est donc irréprésenté. Il est l'irréprésentable de la mère” (21). Similarly, Kristeva's conception of the maternal as inseparable from the *chora* and the semiotic confines both motherhood and daughterhood to the realm of pre-verbal sensation and unspoken communication (Carson 35). However, in addition to reducing the maternal to vaginocentric dynamics, this argument condemns motherhood and, to an even greater extent, the mother/daughter bond to remaining unspoken and, as Rich states, “distorted, misused ... the great unwritten story” (225). In this respect, Amber Jacob's conclusions regarding Irigaray's conception of motherhood and daughterhood are particularly insightful:

For Irigaray, the mother-daughter relationship is rendered pathological under the present symbolic order since this present symbolic order forecloses the possibility of the symbolic mediation of that relation. As a result, the mother-daughter relationship remains the untheorized prototypical site of intense disturbance that is reproduced across both the lateral between women relations and the successive vertical

generations of mothers and daughters. The observed pathologies belonging to the mother-daughter relationship, rather than being considered as inevitable, universal, and therefore impervious to change, need to be thought about critically, politically, and contextually, that is, in relation to the sociosymbolic order that produces them. (Jacobs 177)

To some extent, this is what contemporary feminist retellers endeavour to do by creating a matrilineal fairy-tale countercanon to, as Schanoes declares, “reaffirm a connection with their foremothers, and to advocate an understanding of self that does not turn those who are non-self into objects ...” (139). In this same monograph, Schanoes also suggests that the very act of retelling fairy-tales can be interpreted as a process of matrilineal healing and bonding, an argument which I discuss further in a forthcoming chapter of this dissertation.

In light of the prevalence of the aforementioned phenomena—narrative matricide and metanarrative silencing—within the fairy-tale genre, I endeavour to reread (step)maternal violence as a defence strategy that targets the oppressive institution of motherhood through the prism of the child. Indeed, as previously explained, once a female fairy-tale character assumes—or is assigned—a maternal role, she is promptly stripped of all narrative agency and subjectivity. Inflicting violence upon her (step)children therefore becomes her only means of influencing the fairy-tale plot further in the hope of escaping her prototypical fate. In this respect, Maitland’s “The Wicked Stepmother’s Lament” interestingly illustrates the dangers of maternal self-sacrifice, and underlines how it relates to the development of violence and resentment towards the narrator’s stepdaughter:

[The heroine’s biological mother] equated loving with suffering ... she equated loving with being; as though she did not exist unless she was denying her existence. ...

Yes, yes, one can understand: she had difficulty getting pregnant actually, she had difficulties carrying those babies to term too. ... And yes, of course she looked so lovely, who could have resisted her, propped up in her bed with that tiny lovely child sucking, sucking, sucking? The mother who denied her little one nothing, the good mother, the one we all longed for, pouring herself out into the child. Well, I'll tell you, I've done it too, it is hell caring for a tiny daughter, I know. Everything, everything drags you into hell: the fact that you love and desire her, the fact that she's so needy and vulnerable, the fact that she never leaves you alone until your dreams are smashed in little piles and shabby with neglect, the fact that pleasure and guilt come so precisely together, as so seldom happens, working towards the same end and sucking your very selfhood out of you. It is a perilous time for a woman, that nursing of a daughter, and you can only survive if you cling to yourself with a fierce and passionate love, *and* you back that up with a trained and militant lust for justice *and* you scream at the people around you to meet your needs and desires *and* you do not let them off, *and* when all is said and done you sit back and laugh at yourself with a well-timed and not unmalicious irony. Well, she could not, of course she could not, so she did not survive.

So, when I first married my husband I only meant to tease her a little, to rile her, to make her fight back. I couldn't bear it, that she was so like her mother and would go the same way. ...

There was an insane urge in me, not simply to hurt her, but to have her admit that I had hurt her. I would lie awake at night appalled, and scald myself with contempt, with anger and with self-disgust, but I had only to see her in the morning for my temper to rise and I would start again, start again at her with an unreasonable savagery

that seemed to upset me more than it upset her. Picking, picking and pecking, endlessly. (226)

On the other hand, Barzilai argues that maternal abuse stems from the culturally imposed splitting of the mother/daughter dyad, which represents an act of extreme physical and psychological violence, to which the (step)mother must oppose a “preemptive strike” (531):

The queen’s confrontations with her magic mirror set and keep the plot of “Snow White” in motion. ... She repeatedly turns to the mirror in an attempt to recapture the sense of totality, albeit of an imaginary order, which the birth of her daughter had extended and enriched. Suddenly, the daughter’s otherness is asserted. The mirror refuses to sustain any illusion of identification with the daughter; in its truth function, the specular image shows the mother that her daughter is discordant with her own identity. The mother loses control over the beauty, the creation that seemed an extension of herself. Something is taken from her, a vital part of her is cut off. Symbolically, what she perceives in the mirror is a body-in-pieces. The mirror reflects disintegration without possibility of regeneration. All the king’s horses and all the king’s men cannot put this queen together again. (529-530)

The presence of the magic mirror in numerous versions of “Snow White” therefore acquires a particular resonance in the context of a matrilineal reading of the tale, as illustrated by Lee’s *White as Snow*, in which the confrontation between Arpazia and her adolescent daughter is depicted as a deeply distressing experience that momentarily deprives both characters from their sense of self. Interestingly, in this passage, neither Arpazia’s nor Coira’s body is described as whole or discrete, but rather as fragmented and “in-pieces” (530). This lack of

clear boundaries and distinctions between mother and daughter leads Arpazia to experiencing this encounter as a disintegration of her body to the benefit of her daughter:

Hands met, and parted. Candacis arrived before the woman. They were of equal height. Extraordinary eyes were fixed on her own.

Hands touched. Her hand was narrow and chill, lifeless. It had three rings that clinked together, as if grown slightly too big. ...

Two faces, both the same. The lips drawn in, the eyes wide and set like ice. ...

The image and its reflection. But which was which? (147)

The same pattern is present in Angela Carter's "The Snow Child," in which the Countess is gradually stripped of her garments in order to dress the eponymous Snow Child: "At that, the furs sprang off the Countess's shoulders and twined round the naked girl. ... Then her boots leapt off the Countess's feet and on to the girl's legs. Now the Countess was bare as a bone and the girl furred and booted; the Count felt sorry for his wife" (Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* 92).

It is also relevant to note that (step)maternal violence as a means of resistance and self-preservation often emerges most vividly in situations prototypically associated with mothering and nurturing. While I analyse this narrative pattern as an implicit means of implementing hierarchy between biological and non-biological mother figures in the following chapter of this dissertation, it is equally important to consider this trope through the prism of maternal subversion. In this respect, I argue that contemporary fairy-tale retellers instrumentalise the motif of maternal abuse not only to dismantle the legitimacy of maternal instinct as a concept—by demonstrating that maternal gestures are neither inherently good nor innate, and often have a propensity to turn destructive—but also to denounce the systematic and reductive transformation of female fairy-tale characters into disposable



maternal objects whose obsolescence is unquestioningly inscribed within the genre canon. Indeed, as previously mentioned, the fairy-tale diegesis overwhelmingly fails to accommodate more than one female subject at a time, daughters inevitably coming to replace their wicked (step)mothers as part of the cyclical mother/daughter tragedy.

As a response to this misogynistic literary construct, contemporary fairy-tale retellings suggest that fairy-tale (step)mothers ought to target the institution of motherhood itself by systematically subverting maternal gestures, rendering them violent, alienating, and ultimately fatal. Lundell thus describes the noxious fairy-tale mother as follows: “Her unconscious instincts and conscious activity are inimical to each other. She devours instead of nurtures towards development of independence (her daughter), she suffocates instead of protects (her daughter) and she starves instead of nourishes (the heroine, her step-daughter)” (70). In this respect, a parallel must also be drawn between Irigaray’s work on motherhood and the motif of poisoning, which is particularly central to most versions of “Snow White.” Indeed, Irigaray’s essay “And the One Doesn’t Stir Without the Other” deliberately echoes the aforementioned tale when the narrator denounces her mother’s cruel and painful nurturing, and cries out for non-poisonous maternal fluids instead:

With your milk, Mother, I swallowed ice. And here I am now, my insides frozen. And I walk with even more difficulty than you do, and I move even less. You flowed into me, and that hot liquid became poison, paralyzing me. My blood no longer circulates to my feet or my hands, or as far as my head. It is immobilized, thickened by the cold. Obstructed by icy chunks which resist its flow. My blood coagulates, remains in and near my heart. (60)

In this passage, not only does the daughter’s consumption of noxious fluids deliberately parallel the poisoned, breast-like apple of “Snow White” stories, the paralytic state she

describes is also starkly reminiscent of the heroine's death-like sleep inside a glass—or perhaps even *glace*—coffin<sup>12</sup>. Green's reading of Irigaray is here interesting in that it looks at the motif of “honey/milk” (62) as a desirable replacement for the mother's thick, coagulating ice/milk:

Still, this daughter doesn't want to be re-constituted by Mother. And who can blame her, when Mother leaves her “obstructed by icy chunks” or flowing “unperceived-imperceptible”, Instead she calls for honey/milk. Honey, with its properties of viscosity and resistance, represents a third term that neither obstructs nor flows into oblivion. With honey-milk a daughter and a mother might quench their thirst without danger of further paralysis. But, perhaps Mother can only offer *glace*. (28)

This section once again deliberately echoes Lee's *White as Snow*, in which Arpazia's eventual seduction and later poisoning of her estranged daughter presents—through the metonymic motif of the apple—maternal attraction as honeyed, enticing, and just as paralyzing as ice:

Coira did not move. Her body leaned back against the hard body of the crone—who smelled of honey and apples, of frost and burned wood. Within Coira something moved, darting behind her eyes.

“Are you my mother?”

“Yes, yes. I am your mother.” ...

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<sup>12</sup> The homophony between the French word *glace*—used by Irigaray in the original version this essay—and Snow White's glass coffin may seem incidental, but the properties shared by ice and glass—transparency, reflectiveness, and fragility among others—are too significant to be ignored. Besides, Hans Christian Andersen's fairy-tale “The Snow Queen” similarly makes use of this *glace*/glass ambiguity.

They had murmured fragments of the past, the dreams. They had eaten the honey-apples from the basket, sharing them. The sweet, sweet taste burned across their lips, closing their throats, gluing their tongues to the ceilings of their mouths. ...

*Her hair tastes of the honey. Or of wood. She has the smell of apples. Why do they say not to eat the apple? Oh, because it holds the knowledge of good and evil, of living and dying. And of sleep. (224-227)*

In this respect, it therefore seems that fairy-tale mothers are either destined to (s)mother their children, or to end up narratively smothered themselves.

Throughout this chapter, we have determined that the existence—and more importantly, the narrative persistence—of the wicked (step)mother as a fairy-tale archetype is utterly interwoven with diegetic violence. While maternal violence targeting the (step)daughter has already been discussed extensively within the field of fairy-tale studies, it is equally crucial to demonstrate how violence is systematically perpetrated against fairy-tale mothers, generally as a consequence of ambivalent and deeply misogynistic attitudes towards maternal, pregnant, and female bodies. Thus, not only is motherhood almost systematically imposed upon female characters rather than chosen by them, pregnancy itself is often the direct result of sexual violence inflicted upon young female fairy-tale characters. Additionally, it currently tends to be depicted as an intrinsically violent and parasitic process which culminates in traumatic instances of birth-giving. In fact, the alienation and anguish that typically results from these unvarnished depictions of maternity often serve as catalysts for the crystallisation of violence, resentment, and animosity within the mother/daughter dyad.

Besides, in addition to fairy-tale motherhood being profoundly rooted within patriarchal constructs and other problematic concepts such as the primacy of biological

mothering, the inherence of maternal instincts, and the necessity of abnegation, the body of the mother itself occupies a particularly complex and paradoxical space within the genre: simultaneously abject and desirable, objectified and devouring, the maternal body is depicted similarly to fairy-tale monsters and other uncanny creatures roaming the genre. Indeed, it possesses undeniable ties to the realm of the known and the tangible, while simultaneously—and paradoxically—being systematically misconstrued, demonised, and dreaded by the literary canon. Therefore, as an attempt to go against the prototypical othering of mothers and maternal bodies, contemporary fairy-tale retellers sometimes resort to subversive storytelling tactics, reclaiming and glorifying the maternal body by insisting on its seemingly infinite power of creation, its innate recourse to semiotic language, and its lack of clear boundary between Self and Other. However, this seemingly empowered response to the narrative canon paradoxically tends to further essentialise the realm of the maternal, denying its potential reappropriation to non-cisgender and non-biological mothers alike, while implicitly perpetuating discourses presenting it as the sole destiny of any cisgender woman.

I have consequently suggested that, as a result of the unquestioned perpetuation of matricide as a fairy-tale *scène-à-faire* and the overwhelming lack of matricentric fairy-tale variants within the canon, matrilineal violence continues to be present within even the most subversive and contemporary fairy-tale retellings. However, this pattern no longer points to the inevitability of maternal abuse, but has rather been reclaimed as a means of opposing the cruel and systematic narrative erasure of fairy-tale mothers and stepmothers. The cruel acts perpetrated against fairy-tale heroines therefore evidence, rather than the definite impossibility of positive mother/daughter relationships, the refusal of contemporary (step)mothers to embrace and perform motherhood for as long as it remains a rigid and oppressive patriarchal institution. However, these subversion tactics inevitably intersect with the traditional fairy-tale dichotomy opposing the angelic biological mother to her wicked

foster counterpart. In this respect, the following chapter looks more specifically at the evolution—or lack thereof—of maternal dyads within the genre, focusing more specifically on the way contemporary retellers strive to deconstruct this narrative pair by inverting and intermingling its traditional poles in order to reclaim a de-essentialised, more ambivalent version of mothering.

## Chapter 6. The Monster in the Mirror: Maternal Binaries and Doubling

A central aspect of fairy-tale motherhood that this dissertation has not yet sufficiently accounted for is the way it is enmeshed within several binary systems, in which the wicked stepmother almost systematically stands for the abnormal, threatening Other. Thus, not only is she constructed as a malevolent counterpart to the ingenuous, virginal female protagonist, she also functions as a distorted reflection of the heroine's biological mother, epitomising a perverted form of mothering which rejects the most fundamental aspects of the institution, and is only capable of hatred and violence towards the innocent child. In light of these many intersecting matrilineal binaries, we can therefore posit that mother, daughter, and stepmother are all caught within a triangular diegetic structure where communication and coexistence are inherently discouraged, and where confrontation is, on the other hand, constantly reiterated by underlying patriarchal dynamics that often crystallise in the voice of the magic mirror (Gilbert and Gubar 38). Besides, even in contemporary retellings where mother and stepmother are merged back into a single, antagonistic figure, ambivalence remains a central dimension of its characterisation, often crystallising into violent and abusive displays of parental authority. In this respect, as Rozsika Parker explains in *Torn in Two* (2005), maternal ambivalence designates a mother's oscillation between experiencing love and hatred for her child, and not merely the presence of "mixed feelings"—as it has often been misconstrued to signify (7). Therefore, before discussing the recent mutations of the fairy-tale mother/daughter plot in the final section of this dissertation, it is necessary to delve further into the motifs of splitting and doubling and their intersections with the realm of the maternal and, more specifically, the mother/daughter plot.

The first section of this chapter thus briefly steps away from the mother/daughter dyad and its associated plot in order to confront the figure of the wicked (step)mother to that of the angelic—and often sacrificed—biological mother. I argue that, in spite of contemporary efforts to blur the traditional boundaries between these two archetypal figures, motherhood remains overwhelmingly apprehended and represented as intrinsically binary, and divided alongside rigid Manichean lines. Building upon these conclusions, I then look at how these split representations of the maternal within fairy-tale diegeses intersect with the implicit subordination of all non-biological forms of parentality to the supremacy of biological, heteronormative filiation, underlining how the endurance of such fixed representations goes directly against the contemporary mutations of motherhood as both experience and institution. This chapter then focuses more specifically on the underlying tension between displays of maternal love and hatred within contemporary fairy-tale diegeses, leading me to posit that ambivalence is an integral dimension of matrilineal dynamics, whose systematic cultural and literary erasure disempowers biological and non-biological mothers alike, while simultaneously accelerating the emergence of violence within the mother/daughter plot. Finally, I consider patterns of doubling, splitting, and mirroring through a matrilineal prism, in the hope of establishing how fairy-tale (step)mothers and daughters are constructed as reflections of one another, and that the lack of clear boundaries between their psyches, bodies, and narrative roles inevitably leads them to their mutual, narratively-condoned destruction, condemning the fairy-tale mother/daughter plot to a single, tragic conclusion.

## 6.1. Of Angel Women and (Step)Monsters

As underlined by the first chapters of this dissertation, the original, most recurring female antagonist of the fairy-tale genre was not in fact the wicked stepmother, but rather the child-hero(ine)'s biological mother. However, in an attempt not to damage the cultural construct of motherhood as upheld by patriarchal Western societies, the villainous mother was eventually removed from the nuclear family model, her role being instead thrust upon figures only adjacent to the sphere of the maternal, such as the mother-in-law and, more frequently, the stepmother. In her novel *Other People's Children* (1998), Johanna Trollope crafts a diegetic definition of stepmotherhood that interestingly echoes many of the reasons behind this transformation of wicked fairy-tale mothers into *step*mothers under the Grimms' pen:

It's as if stepmothers have come to represent all the things we fear, most terribly, about motherhood going wrong. We need mothers so badly, so deeply, that the idea of an unnatural mother is, literally, monstrous. So we make the stepmother the target for all these fears – she can carry the can for bad motherhood. You see, if you regard your stepmother as wicked, then you need never feel guilty or angry about your real mother, whom you so desperately need to see as good. (287-288)

As Warner argues in *From the Beast to the Blonde* (1994), the narrative shift from mother to stepmother that the Grimm brothers implemented in 1812 first emerged as part of a larger attempt to transform—and sanitise—traditional fairy-tales in order for the genre canon to appear less disruptive, and overall more aligned with the Christian values and morals favored by Western societies at the time:

The Grimm Brothers worked on the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* in draft after draft after the first edition of 1812, Wilhelm in particular infusing the new editions with his



Christian fervour, emboldening the moral strokes of the plot, meting out penalties to the wicked and rewards to the just, to conform with prevailing Christian and social values. They also softened the harshness — especially in family dramas. They could not make it disappear altogether, but in “Hansel and Gretel”, for example, they added the father’s miserable reluctance to an earlier version in which both parents had proposed the abandonment of their children, and turned the mother into a wicked stepmother. On the whole, they tended towards sparing the father’s villainy, and substituting another wife for the natural mother, who had figured as the villain in the versions they had been told: they felt obliged to deal less harshly with mothers than the female storytellers whose material they were setting down.

The disappearance here of the original mothers forms a response to the harshness of the material: in their romantic idealism, the Grimms 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. (211-212)

While some of the stories considered by this dissertation do maintain the traditional division of female figures according to Manichean standards—with the biological mother unquestionably posited as the “true” and “good” parent, like in Neil Gaiman’s *Coraline* and Catherynne M. Valente’s *Six-Gun Snow White*—contemporary retellings generally aim to deconstruct this narrative pattern instead, be it by returning the villainous plot to the biological mother, or by keeping the maternal figure ambiguous enough that the nature of her filiation to the heroine is never clearly explicated throughout the tale, as is the case in Margaret Atwood’s “Unpopular Gals” and Robert Coover’s *Stepmother*.

The dichotomy between cultural definitions of good and bad mothering is in fact so vivid and deeply rooted within the fairy-tale genre that, rather than making space for literary explorations of matrilineal ambivalence, the maternal figure finds itself systematically fragmented into Manichean archetypes. While this maternal binary has long remained a *status quo* of the genre, it now strikes one as deeply problematic for two main reasons: not only does it erase the existence—as well as the sheer possibility—of imperfect, detrimental, and even violent mothering stemming from biological genetrixes, it also condemns any and all non-biological mothers to a culturally-inscribed narrative of wickedness. These elements are underlined by Warner in *From the Beast to the Blonde*, in which she argues, rather controversially, that not every fairy-tale woman is, or should be, a wicked (step)mother *in potentia*: indeed, Warner argues, this figure can only emerge from the uniquely unstable, non-normative, and often frowned upon position of the stepmother within—or rather, adjacent to—the nuclear family model and society at large:

[This] intense focus on the legitimacy of the maternal bloodline and the flesh bond of mother and child has implications in the reading of fairy tales. Our understanding of the stock villain, the wicked stepmother, has been dangerously attenuated and even misunderstood as a result. In the stories, she may not even be a stepmother, and the evil she does is not intrinsic to her nature, or to the strict maternal relation, or to her particular family position. It cannot and should not be extended to all women, for it arises from the insecurity of her interests in a social and legal context that can be changed, and remedied.

... Nannies use bogeymen to frighten children into obedience, and a woman storyteller might well displace the harsher aspects of her command on to another woman, a rival who can take the blame. But this is a social stratagem, not an ineluctable or Oedipal condition, and mothers or stepmothers today need not be

inculcated *en masse*. As remarriage becomes more and more common, stepmothers find they are tackling a hard crust of bigotry set in the minds of their new children, and refreshed by endless returns of the wicked stepmother in the literature of childhood. (236-237)

While Warner's assessment interestingly brings to the fore the role and importance of sociocultural context in the emergence of literary archetypes and stock characters, I nevertheless argue that her interpretation of the stepmother's narrative role remains fundamentally incomplete, in that it ignores the way it functions as a diegetic epitome of unacceptable femininity and motherhood entwined, existing almost as a "counter-portrait" of the ideal, perfect mother that only briefly inhabits the fairy-tale plot.

In this respect, Shuli Barzilai's analysis of the matricentric narrative within "Snow White" tales underlines how, according to Sandra Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), the stepmother/stepdaughter dyad—similarly to the mother/stepmother dyad—functions as a diegetic confrontation of contrary archetypes of womanhood and femininity, with one being patriarchally sanctioned, and the other embodying a form of aggressive resistance to the first:

In [Gilbert and Gubar's] view, Snow White and the queen become representations in an intrapsychic drama; that is, rather than two people in a nuclear family with its inevitable oedipal problems, for Gilbert and Gubar the female protagonists are dissociated parts of one psyche. In terms of the Jungian symbology suggested by their analysis, Snow White and the queen constitute a house divided against itself.

(Barzilai 520)

As underlined by Barzilai, Sandra Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's interpretation of the conflictual mother/daughter plot rests on the understanding that the two characters represent opposite ends of a singular subject. They thus argue that:

“Little Snow White,” ... should really be called Snow White and Her Wicked Stepmother, for the central action of the tale—indeed, its only real action—arises from the relationship between these two women: the one fair, young, pale, the other just as fair, but older, fiercer; the one a daughter, the other a mother; the one sweet, ignorant, passive, the other both artful and active; the one a sort of angel, the other an undeniable witch.

Significantly, the conflict between these two women is fought out largely in the transparent enclosures into which, like all the other images of women we have been discussing here, both have been locked: a magic looking glass, an enchanted and enchanting glass coffin. Here, wielding as weapons the tools patriarchy suggests that women use to kill themselves into art, the two women literally try to kill each other with art. (36-37)

Aside from alluding to the physical resemblance between mother and daughter—which I delve into further within the final section of this chapter—Gilbert and Gubar's interpretation of the prototypical “Snow White” narrative strikingly lacks a matrifocal component. Instead, it introduces a rather interesting connection between womanhood and artistry by contrasting the passive, objectified, docile fairy-tale heroine to her ostracised, yet infinitely more enticing and creative counterpart, the wicked (step)mother. Building upon this argument, I suggest that the creative potentiality of the villainous (step)mother as a fairy-tale stock character stems primarily from the narrative power and importance she is structurally imbued with, and which has recently been heightened by contemporary efforts to craft matricentric alternatives

to traditional fairy-tales, in which the stepmother often becomes the story's antiheroine. This tendency is perhaps most vividly illustrated by Margaret Atwood's short story "Unpopular Gals," in which the stepmother repeatedly defends the importance of her character and actions within the fairy-tale diegesis, while simultaneously criticising the passive acceptance of the plot that the fairy-tale heroine prototypically demonstrates:

The thing about those good daughters is, they're so *good*. Obedient and passive. Snivelling, I might add. No get-up-and-go. What would become of them if it weren't for me? Nothing, that's what. All they'd ever do is the housework, which seems to feature largely in these stories. They'd marry some peasant, have seventeen kids, and get "A dutiful wife" engraved on their tombstones, if any. Big deal.

I stir things up, I get things moving. "Go play in the traffic," I say to them. "Put on this paper dress and look for strawberries in the snow." It's perverse, but it works. All they have to do is smile and say hello and do a little more housework, for some gnomes or nice ladies or whatever, and bingo, they get the king's son and the palace, and no more dishpan hands.

Whereas all I get is the blame. ...

You can wipe your feet on me, twist my motives around all you like, you can dump millstones on my head and drown me in the river, but you can't get me out of the story. I'm the plot, babe, and don't ever forget it. (*Good Bones* 20)

Returning to Gilbert and Gubar's reading of the "Snow White" plot, it is necessary to also underline how the interpretation they give of the looking glass, while interesting, is in fact quite incomplete: though they correctly identify the mirror's role in evidencing the internalisation of patriarchal law to the point that the father himself is no longer required for its application (37-38), they fail to discuss the significance of the narrative motifs of

reflection, resemblance, and distortion through a matrilineal prism. Similarly, while Gilbert and Gubar brilliantly point out that the wicked Queen's poisonous tools bear undeniable ties to traditional, culturally sanctioned forms of femininity—which the evil Queen perverts to her own advantage (39-40), they scarcely acknowledge that these instruments are equally reminiscent of traditional scenes of mothering and nurture, in spite of this connection often being alluded to within fairy-tales and retellings themselves, as in Delia Sherman's poem "Snow White to the Prince" and Tanith Lee's *White as Snow*:

Do you think I did not know her,  
 Ragged and gnarled and stooped like a wind-bent tree,  
 Her basket full of combs and pins and laces?  
 Of course I took her poisoned gifts. I wanted  
 To feel her hands combing out my hair,  
 To let her lace me up, to take an apple  
 From her hand, a smile from her lips,  
 As when I was a child. (Sherman 41)

Together they curled by the fire, from which a soft heat still came, though it had died an hour before.

"You're my beauty," said Arpazia, "the most beautiful in all the world. Skin like snow and hair like ebony and your lips red as a rose. Oh, you're mine." Arpazia had never known her mother, who had died, they told Arpazia, at Arpazia's birth.

Coira tried to speak, but could not. Her voice, like the dire voice in her mother's head, had gone dumb. This did not matter. Arpazia sang to her. It concerned snow and roses.

Coira's ears sang, too, like the sea. She breathed in tiny shallow gasps and her heart pounded, rattling her breast. But she was happy. So happy at last. She had not lost her love. All love was here. She did not need to trust, only give in.

She held tighter still, but now her fingers had no grip. She did not realize, for Arpazia held her so close, tighter, tight as any loving, clinging child. (Lee, *White as Snow* 226).

A similar argument is also developed in Sibylle Birkhäuser-Oeri's and Marie-Louise von Franz's Jungian reading of maternal fairy-tale archetypes, in which they explain that the figure of the wicked stepmother (*marâtre*) exists, counterpart to the female heroine, as a representation of the dark side of womanhood that women ought to account for in order to successfully develop:

Quand une femme ne connaît pas son côté sombre, son ombre, elle est coupée de ses instincts ; le côté féminin d'un homme, l'anima, peut aussi se scinder de la même manière en une figure lumineuse plus spirituelle et un côté sombre relié aux instincts. De nombreux contes de fées nous montrent une image de la femme déchirée entre une moitié sombre et une moitié lumineuse : c'est une réalité spirituelle particulièrement fréquente dans notre culture patriarcale actuelle. Dans ces conditions, la femme n'a aucune chance de vivre la *totalité* de sa personnalité, ce qu'Erich Neumann a exprimé de manière extrême en affirmant que toutes les femmes étaient névrosées. (65-66)

While these arguments interestingly account for the Manichean binary that dictates and distributes types of female characters across the fairy-tale genre, it however once again fails to account for the matrilineal nature of the (step)mother/(step)daughter narrative dyad (Barzilai 521-522). In this respect, I argue that the conflictual dimension of the mother/daughter plot stems from both the lack of narrative diversity and nuance in the

canonical portrayal of the feminine within the genre, but also from the—institutionalised and internalised—unacceptability of ambivalent filiation within literature and culture as a whole.

Thus, the stark contrast between perfect and wicked displays of mothering as they are represented in the phallogentric literary canon—as well as the utter lack of space for nuance and ambivalence between the two—becomes even more prevalent and invalidating when coupled with the dyad formed by biological and non-biological forms of maternity. In this respect, it may be relevant to return once again to Barzilai’s interpretation of “Snow White.” In fact, I argue that her suggestion that maternal violence may possibly stem from unnatural, artificial attempts at performing motherhood becomes all the more convincing in the context of step- and foster mothering, as if the lack of biological bond between mother and child inherently nullified each and every attempt at emulating traditional scenes and gestures of nurture: “The unnatural mother is therefore seen as desiring to eat rather than to feed her child. On the queen’s part, this same episode is the expression of an entirely different wish. It represents a preemptive strike: she wants to eat (leave) me; I will eat (make her leave me) first” (531). While Barzilai argues that the two aforementioned scenarios are fundamentally different, I conversely suggest that the figure of the wicked stepmother—as she is depicted in contemporary fairy-tale retellings—often appears to combine these two aspects of supposedly defective mothering: not only is her maternity considered “unnatural” due to its non-biological origin, it also manifests as an attempt to imprison the stepdaughter, and keep her as a permanent fixture of childhood. This way, no harm may come to the stepmother or her narrative status, and the cycle of detrimental (step)mothering is forced to repeat.

On the other hand, in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), Nancy Chodorow convincingly argues against the idea that maternal instincts exist, and are rooted within cisgender female bodies; on the contrary, she reminds one that “[the] cross-cultural evidence ties women to primary parenting because of their lactation and pregnancy functions, and not



because of instinctual nurturance beyond these functions. This evidence also suggests that there can be a variety of other participants in child care” (38). A similar position is defended by Donald Winnicott, who argues that, while good-enough mothering ought to be instinctual rather than codified and dictated by medical institutions, motherhood itself is not always the sole prerogative of the biological, cisgender mother. Thus, he defends the legitimacy of adoptive parenting (*Collected Works* vol. 5 188) and attempts to demystify mothering by anchoring it to one’s preexisting experience as a mothered subject, rather than circumscribing it to biological mothers only (*Collected Works* vol. 7 333). These observations seem particularly conspicuous in the context of contemporary fairy-tale retellings, where the posited superiority of biological mothering proves particularly resistant to contemporary feminist discourses attempting to legitimise non-biological forms of parenting while, simultaneously, debunking the premise of mothering as being the biological destiny of every cisgender woman. This is not to say that contemporary retellers never question the culturally internalised supremacy of biological parenting and, to an even greater extent, of mothering: for instance, Lee’s *White as Snow* stresses the fact that biological mothers are equally as likely to become detrimental, wicked parents—even more so when the child has not been desired, and results from traumatic patriarchal violence and abuse. Similarly, Donoghue’s *Kissing the Witch* contains several tales in which traditionally villainous, pseudo-maternal figures mothers are eventually chosen over the biological mother. For instance, in her retelling of “Hansel and Gretel,” Donoghue’s eponymous heroine chooses to remain with the witch’s analogue, with whom she has woven an intriguing and ambiguous relationship that merges maternal dynamics with arguably queer undertones (140-141). As for “The Tale of the Needle,” the presumably dangerous spinner is ultimately revealed as more honest and empowering than the heroine’s overly-protective biological parents:

My parents lavished even more affection on me. My mother stroked my hair as she passed me in the corridors. Every time I came into the room, my father would open his arms and ask whether I had a smile for Papa today.

It was then that I began to fill up with rage. I was like a cloud that, though its face stays white, is slowly collecting its load of thunder and rain. ...

[The old woman's] face was merry no longer. She put one foot on her stool and leaned closer. Listen, girl, she said, they've tried to stop me teaching any of the things I know. Now they're trying to prevent you from learning all the things you don't. But gifts can only be delayed. ...

I stared at her. My eyes were swollen with water. My head felt as if it were about to break open like an egg.

The old woman gave me a most peculiar smile.

I heard feet pounding the stairs, and a call that sounded like my name. I turned to the door and pulled the bolt across. All of a sudden I felt quite awake.

I bent over for the spinning wheel and set it back in its place. I sat down on the stool and said, Please. Show me how. (174-182)

Such contemporary revisions are interesting in the way they concurrently acknowledge the canonical split of maternal figures into Manichean archetypes within the genre, while also echoing earlier tales in which the detrimental dimension of biological maternity was openly explored. As a result, while it would be excessive to argue that the modern-day fairy-tale countercanon abandons the traditional dyad that opposes the “angel mother” to the “stepmonster,” one must nonetheless note that the legitimacy of such dyads is often challenged and occasionally subverted, thusly carving out potential narrative space for more

nuanced portrayals of non-biological mothering, a phenomenon which I discuss at length in the final chapter of this dissertation.

## **6.2. Mother Love, Mother Hate**

In order to palliate the lack of matricentric focus in the aforementioned theories, let us now look at the motif of maternal doubling from a psychoanalytic standpoint, focusing in particular on its interactions with processes of splitting and ambivalence. In *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976), Bruno Bettelheim thus argues for a psychoanalytic interpretation of the mother/stepmother fairy-tale dyad and its seemingly unwavering Manichean alignment. He suggests that the categorical split between good and bad mothering within the fairy-tale genre—alongside with its traditional crystallization into opposite stock characters—allows children to cope with their own, developing ambivalence towards their mothers, as well as with any imperfect display of parenting they may be subjected to, without endangering the cultural construct of motherhood as instinctive, selfless and inherently imperfectible:

Similarly, although Mother is most often the all-giving protector, she can change into the cruel stepmother if she is so evil as to deny the youngster something he wants.

Far from being a device used only by fairy tales, such a splitting up of one person into two to keep the good image uncontaminated occurs to many children as a solution to a relationship too difficult to manage or comprehend. ...

So the typical fairy-tale 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. Thus, the fairy tale suggests how the child may

manage the contradictory feelings which would otherwise overwhelm him at this stage of his barely beginning ability to integrate contradictory emotions. 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 Mother. (90-93)

While Bettelheim's understanding of splitting as a coping process shows little if any interest in the character of the (step)mother beyond her role in the child's developmental processes, it nevertheless resonates particularly well with Gaiman's novel *Coraline*. I thus argue that, in the absence of a definitive explanation—be it fantastical or rational—regarding the other mother's narrative presence, it is relevant to wonder whether this novel may be read as been an extended illustration of this splitting process, triggered by Coraline's own growing resentment towards her neglectful biological mother.

Besides, while the Manichean distribution of maternal figures tends towards being increasingly nuanced or subverted by the developing fairy-tale countercanon, it still appears explicitly throughout this dissertation's corpus, including *Coraline*—with the increasingly uncanny and threatening button-eyed other mother—but also in Lee's *White as Snow*, where the psychoanalytic process of splitting is explored at length, with Coira choosing to believe that her mother had been replaced by a malevolent impostor after Arpazia proves unkind and cruel towards her (86-88). Even Sara Maitland's "Empty Nest Syndrome", while not a fairy-tale retelling per se, remains starkly reminiscent of the genre's dichotomous depictions of motherhood, with the heroine splitting her own psyche into a Good and a Bad Mother inherently at odds with each other, and quarrelling over their respective parenting of their adult daughter (94-98).

While Bettelheim's psychoanalytic approach to fairy diegeses is primarily inspired by Freudian theory, Sibylle Birkhäuser-Oeri's and Marie-Louise von Franz's *La mère dans les contes de fées* (1977) propose a Jungian interpretation of fairy-tales centred on the archetype of the mother and its representation within the genre. Interestingly, they similarly argue for an intrinsically dichotomous categorisation of (step)maternal figures that reflects Jung's "loving and terrible mother" archetype (Jung 158). Before we discuss this literary and cultural figure further, however, it is crucial to reconsider Birkhäuser-Oeri's and von Franz's statement that:

L'étude [des mères dans les contes de fées] met particulièrement en évidence leurs très grandes *différences avec les mères réelles*. Elles ont souvent des attributs qui sont en deçà ou au-delà de l'humain. Elles sont en parties meilleures, mais aussi plus mauvaises, que la femme humaine moyenne, et leur apparence est en général très différente. ... Les contes de fées présentent à l'évidence une réalité qui est beaucoup plus spirituelle et intérieure que concrète et extérieure. Il en va de même pour les figures des mères, et c'est la raison de leur étrangeté. Elles représentent *l'archétype de la mère* sous ses différentes formes, non pas une mère ordinaire mais plutôt son symbole. (19-20)

Although the distinction they introduce between real mothers and their archetypal, literary counterparts is extremely accurate and relevant when considering the fairy-tale canon as a whole, I argue that it must however be reconsidered through the prism of contemporary fairy-tale revisions. In fact, this dissertation aims to establish that the retellings it discusses are strikingly aware of the genre's propensity to unreliability and discrepancy from reality in its portrayals of maternity—as well as its detrimental impact on culture at large and, more specifically, non-traditional family units (Nielsen 120-121)—and strive in response to propose more realistic and relatable portrayals of motherhood that mirror more closely its contemporary mutations as a social institution. Thus, rather than presenting real mothers and

the maternal archetype as completely discrete (Birkhäuser-Oeri and von Franz 26-27), modern-day retellings underline their many intersections and mutual influence on each other. For instance, Maitland's "Empty Nest Syndrome" uses fairy-tale inspired archetypes as an illustration of real mothers' struggles with their own ambivalent feelings for their children, and their frustration over commonplace, mundane scenarios:

The Good Mother moans gently and says, "You might have thought that after all my effort They could at least have offered to help with the washing up. They're so selfish."

The Bad Mother snorts ferociously and says, "You might have thought that They were old enough to know that the last thing I would want for Christmas is kitchen appliances. They're so selfish."

They are agreed on something. This disconcerts them. (Maitland 95)

In addition to being set in a non-fantastical context, this tale interestingly implies that even the Good Mother occasionally experiences negative emotions towards her children, suggesting that ambivalence is inevitable—a premise which we will discuss in greater detail in the final chapter of this dissertation. Besides, several other stories, like Angela Carter's "In Pantoland," borrow tropes from the magical realism genre and inject traditional folklore and fairy-tale archetypes with modern-world scenarios and situations (*American Ghosts* 49). Conversely, tales like Sara Maitland's "The Wicked Stepmother's Lament" and Garrison Keillor's "My Stepmother, Myself" choose to retell traditional fairy-tales through a realistic prism, using this narrative shift to recontextualise and soften displays of maternal violence, thus making them more relatable (Keillor 184-185; Maitland 35).

As previously mentioned, Birkhäuser-Oeri's and von Franz's description of fairy-tale motherhood is itself deeply rooted in C. G. Jung's understanding of the mother archetype, which he presents as intrinsically binary in nature:

The qualities associated with [the mother archetype] are maternal solicitude and sympathy; the magic authority of the female; the wisdom and spiritual exaltation that transcend reason; any helpful instinct or impulse; all that is benign, all that cherishes and sustains, that fosters growth and fertility. The place of magic transformation and rebirth, together with the underworld and its inhabitants, are presided over by the mother. On the negative side the mother archetype may connote anything secret, hidden, dark; the abyss, the world of the dead, anything that devours, seduces, and poisons, that is terrifying and inescapable like fate. All these attributes of the mother archetype have been fully described and documented in my book *Symbols of Transformation*. There I formulated the ambivalence of these attributes as “the loving and the terrible mother.” (Jung 158)

This dichotomous definition of the mother archetype appears to have been strongly shaped by cultural representations of motherhood originating in religion, folklore, fairy-tales, and myth, a connection which Jung himself acknowledges (159). It therefore comes as little surprise that contemporary matricentric fairy-tale revisions still appear to often rely on this dyadic, Manichean archetype. Thus, the internalisation of this maternal pair as a structural element of patriarchal societies, narratives and, according to Jung, the collective unconscious, is all the more interesting as it is often exploited on a metatextual level in contemporary fairy-tale retellings, as evidenced by the works of Tanith Lee and Sara Maitland. Thus, upon a negative and traumatising first encounter with her biological mother, *White as Snow*'s heroine Coira demonstrates full awareness of this archetype, as she immediately theorises the possible

existence of two separate mothers, one good and caring yet absent, and the other wicked, cruel, a mere usurper of the first:

The child thought of her other, topaz-eyed mother, in the dream.

She began to tussel with the two images: the loving, golden, kind mother; the chill, dark, uncaring mother who avoided her always.

Perhaps, after all, the dark witch-queen was not her mother. Coira had heard of such things, and she had heard too of her father's many women. He had had a previous queen, maybe, who had been cast off, or died. Perhaps Coira was that one's baby, and now the other dark queen did not like Coira—not unreasonably, since Coira was not at all her daughter. (Lee, 88-89)

Meanwhile, Maitland underlines the internalisation of this dual archetype on the part of the (step)mother. Thus, the protagonist and narrator of “The Wicked Stepmother’s Lament” defines herself in opposition to her stepchild’s biological mother, dividing their respective traits alongside binary categories clearly implemented by the fairy-tale genre (30-35). More explicitly still, Maitland’s “Empty Nest Syndrome” underscores the prevalence of this two-headed archetype within culture at large, specifically by not being set within a fairy-tale context: thus, as soon as she struggles with her daughter’s individuation, the protagonist divides herself in two figures—the Good Mother and the Bad Mother—as if it were a direct and inevitable result of the emergence of ambivalence within her own maternal experience (94-95).

According to Barbara Almond, the unacceptability of maternal ambivalence in literature stems primarily from a failure of patriarchal societies to recognise the existence of hatred within the realm of motherhood:



If you hate your parents, siblings, spouse, friends, colleagues, or people of the opposite sex, or other races, religions, and nationalities, you are considered unfortunate, unreasonable, bigoted, interpersonally difficult, even seriously disturbed. But if you hate your children, you are considered monstrous—immoral, unnatural, and evil. (Almond 2)

Margo Lowy's *The Maternal Experience* (2021) seems in support of Almond's statement, underlining how the unspeakable nature of maternal ambivalence is indeed indivisible from a widespread taboo surrounding the presence of maternal hate as a counterpart to maternal love. In this respect, we previously demonstrated how failure to develop instant, unwavering love for one's (biological) child is overwhelmingly considered as abnormal, an inadmissible deviation from the sanctioned model of perfect, self-effacing motherhood. The unacceptability of maternal hatred, and its systematic silencing within literature and culture at large, therefore comes as little surprise. However, when Lowy describes maternal hatred as "a primal unconscious fear seems [that seems to] exist in both the social and the maternal imagination, namely, that an acknowledgement of the mother's hating feelings will kill or destroy her child, or expose something monstrous about her true inner nature" (5), she interestingly underlines three specific elements which all resonate with the fairy-tale genre: monstrousness, hidden identities, and the threat of infanticide. In light of this, I argue that the wicked stepmother must be read as a diegetic allegory for the destructive nature of unsuppressed maternal hatred: not only does it endanger the child-hero(ine)'s existence, it also unveils the true nature of the wicked female usurper, revealed as more monster than mother. Besides, it so happens that, in Lee's *White as Snow*, it is infanticide—even a failed attempt at it—that is pointed to as being Arpazia's most repulsive and unforgivable crime:

Then Hadz, in another place of darkness, bent to Arpazia again. "Your daughter? You were her *mother*? Mothers love their children. Why did you poison her?" ...

“Yes, I killed her,” Arpazia murmured. “I came to find her and do it. I didn’t want the child, I never did. It was with herbs I had, in a black cup. She’s dead now. Now there’s only me.” ...

“Are you still pleased you killed her?”

“Killed whom?”

“Your child, you old beast. Your daughter.” ...

Juprum was offended, despised her. Whatever other crimes were committed, mothers must not kill their own children. Even a bribable God would never forgive that. (235-237)

In light of these statements, maternal ambivalence strikes one as a particularly paradoxical phenomenon, integral to the mother/daughter dyad and yet too problematic and objectionable to discuss overtly. In this respect, I argue that, on a metanarrative level, the institution of motherhood itself is discussed and represented in a profoundly ambivalent manner by contemporary fairy-tale retellers. While Marta Segarra’s “Les mères contre les femmes ?” (2010) discusses North African female novelists rather than the fairy-tale genre, the ambivalence the latter identifies as underlying the contemporary (counter)canon deeply resonates with the tales discussed in this dissertation:

[Ces] romans contemporains, en général, dépassent la « dichotomie entre le refus de la maternité en tant que perte de la condition de sujet » (position qu’on assimile souvent à celle de Simone de Beauvoir) et la « célébration de la maternité en tant que source de jouissance ineffable » (selon Julia Kristeva), en accentuant la « contradiction et l’ambivalence » de la maternité et des rapports mère-fille. (102)

We have indeed repeatedly identified such opposed dynamics of vilification and glorification as being at play within the contemporary matricentric fairy-tale countercanon.

Returning to the topic of intradiegetic ambivalence, Darian Leader explains that a mother's sudden awareness of her inability to fulfill her child's every need may serve as a catalyst in the emergence of ambivalence—and even hatred—within a relationship previously perceived as solely loving:

La suite de la satisfaction est une déception douloureuse, quand la mère confronte le fait qu'elle ne peut pas satisfaire tout le temps son bébé, et qu'elle ne lui est pas toujours nécessaire. On parle souvent de l'importance de l'objet transitionnel pour l'enfant, mais là, il faut aussi mettre l'accent sur l'effet de l'existence d'un tel objet pour la mère qui la prive ou la frustre. Cette réalisation peut déchaîner une haine extrême. C'est un échec à compléter l'Autre. L'amour, après tout, contient la demande d'être aimé, demande qui ne peut pas être satisfaite par le bébé. On peut proposer une définition de la haine comme étant exactement cela : le sentiment qu'on ne peut pas satisfaire quelqu'un d'autre. Ici intervient l'*envy* célèbre, décrite par Melanie Klein. (Leader 49)

This theory is particularly relevant to fairy-tale retellings depicting non-biological mothers striving to emulate “true” maternity and being repeatedly confronted to failure, often doubled with the reiteration of their lack of parental legitimacy. Interestingly, in several of the tales considered by this dissertation, the absence of biological bond between stepmother and stepdaughter is alluded to at the apex of their narrative conflict, not only as a means of resisting (step)maternal authority, but also with deliberate intent to be harmful. Thus, the many parallels between the following four passages point to a widespread and unquestioned

belief in the intrinsic inferiority of non-biological motherhood, as well as its culturally sanctioned association to wicked mothering:

I had only just finished when [the prince's] voice rose from the darkness. Will you come down to me? he asked.

I cannot. I'm afraid of waking the woman.

Is she your mother, that you fear to wake her?

No mother nor nothing to me, I said. (Donoghue 92)

But one afternoon in early autumn I was troubled by a whiff of a scent of overpowering sharpness. I could not remember what it was; all I knew was that I could hardly stand it. I turned, and there at the half door my stepmother stood, an apple in her upturned hand.

Stepmother, yes, that was the word, but there was nothing of the mother about her. (56-57)

"You don't own me!" [Ella's] voice cracked with the threat of tears. "I don't have to do as you say. You are not my mother! My mother is dead, and you took my father from me, and now he is dead too, and you are . . ." Tears streamed down her face. "You are simply wicked! I don't care if you are my stepmother, leave me alone!" She pulled her arm back in a swift motion and threw her slipper at me with startling strength. Fortunately, her aim was poor, and the shoe merely grazed my ear. It smashed into the glazed window behind me, and one of the panes fell out with a crash. (Teller 229)

"Mama," says Iris in a careful voice, "don't take Clara's words seriously. She's still suffering herself, and learning how to be a daughter in a new family."

“I know Clara well,” says Margarethe. “I know her type and I know how she deviates from her type. You have nothing to fear from me, Iris, and nor does Clara.” She smiles in a clenched way. “All that stands in the way of harmony at home is an insufficient attention to the Fourth Commandment.”

“But I honor my father and my mother,” says Clara. “I honor my mother’s memory and what she gave to me. And you’re not my mother.”

“The commandment requires that you yield to me as you did to her,” says Margarethe. “I can’t lay a claim to your heart, Clara, and I don’t want to. But your behavior must reflect your understanding of my place in this house. I won’t tolerate your abuse. Is that understood?”

“I understand,” says Clara, “that you will not tolerate it.”

“And you’ll govern your behavior consequent to your understanding?”

“I understand,” says the girl, “that you won’t tolerate abuse. My behavior is a changing thing from hour to hour and day to day. We’ll have to see, won’t we? For there are things that I won’t tolerate either.” (Maguire, *Confessions* 188-189)

Whether one considers ambivalence as intrinsic to motherhood and the mother/daughter bond, or attributes its irruption to ill-fated attempts to perform culturally sanctioned motherhood, its presence remains largely understood as problematic, and inherently detrimental to the child. Thus, aligning herself with the works of Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein, Chodorow argues that a child’s health and wellbeing depend primarily from its relationship to its mother.

The infant’s mental and physical existence depends on its mother, and the infant comes to feel that it does. It experiences a sense of oneness with her and develops a

self only by convincing itself that it is in fact a separate being from her. She is the person whom it loves with egoistic primary love and to whom it becomes attached. She is the person who first imposes on it the demands of reality. Internally she is also important. The infant comes to define itself as a person through its relationship to her, by internalizing the most important aspects of their relationship. Its stance toward itself and the world—its emotions, its quality of self-love (narcissism), or self-hate (depression)—all derive in the first instance from this earliest relationship. (78)

Once again, the binary nature of motherhood as an institution appears particularly striking: indeed, according to Chodorow, mothering can only be actualised through displays of love and hatred, which in turn crystallise within the child's psyche as dynamics of self-love and self-hatred. Melanie Klein's description of paranoid-schizoid mechanisms and states similarly relies the figure of the mother—represented by the maternal breast—being apprehended as split between two antithetical archetypes by the developing child:

I have often expressed my view that object-relations exist from the beginning of life, the first object being the mother's breast which to the child becomes split into a good (gratifying) and bad (frustrating) breast; this splitting results in a severance of love and hate. I have further suggested that the relation to the first object implies its introjection and projection, and thus from the beginning object-relations are moulded by an interaction between introjection and projection, between internal and external objects and situations. These processes participate in the building up of the ego and super-ego and prepare the ground for the onset of the Oedipus complex in the second half of the first year. (*Envy and Gratitude* 15)

This process of maternal splitting is depicted most conscientiously and realistically by Lee's *White as Snow* which, conversely to the other works discussed within this dissertation, not

only presents the figure of the false mother as a mere projection of the child's matricentric anxieties rather than a separate character, but also has her emerge within the diegesis as the direct result of its heroine—a young child at this stage of the novel—being violently confronted to displays of maternal ambivalence and neglect. In fact, Lee underlines the significance of this distressing revelation by presenting splitting as the trigger of physical symptoms:

Candacis burned for five days in the fever. At night she was worse, and became incandescent like her name, so they were afraid to have contact with her for fear of scalding. ...

Not once did [the physician] inquire why her mother, the queen, was never there... .

The child dreamed. She had been laid on burning wood in a brazier. The branches smelled sweet as they burned, and so, presumably, did she. There was pain, though not much; it was the relentless biting heat which frightened her the most. In the dream, her mother, the witch-goddess, bent above her. Her mother smoothed the child's forehead kindly. "There, my dear. Not much longer. Soon my spell will have burned away all your frailty, all the human dross. Then you will be very fine, most beautiful, and you'll live forever, invulnerable to hurt, surviving even death, an immortal."

This was like some story Coira had heard long ago, (even to the adult vocabulary) and as she tossed in distress in the dream, she partly knew it.

Only one question stirred on her burned lips.

"Why did you send me away?"

“Hush, my love. I would never send you away. You’re my own heart born again in flesh. How I love you, Coira, best of all.”

The child exhaled, and the knotting of her muscles relaxed. A vise which had seemed to hold her rigid creaked open, and let her go. Then torrents of fragrant rain burst from her pores. Of course, they put out the fire.

Coira’s mother, Demetra, laughed triumphantly as she plucked her daughter up into her arms. In the dream, it did not puzzle the child that the witch-queen’s hair had become blond, and her eyes like topaz. It was unimportant to Coira, providing she were loved.

Coira had not heard the talk concerning Arpazia, nor had she seen her mother since the fever. Coira had asked after her only once. Then the girl, Julah, replied, “Oh, *she* won’t come in. She doesn’t care at all about you.”

The child thought of her other, topaz-eyed mother, in the dream.

She began to tussel with the two images: the loving, golden, kind mother; the chill, dark, uncaring mother who avoided her always.

Perhaps, after all, the dark witch-queen was not her mother. Coira had heard of such things, and she had heard too of her father’s many women. He had had a previous queen, maybe, who had been cast off, or died. Perhaps Coira was that one’s baby, and now the other dark queen did not like Coira —not unreasonably, since Coira was not at all her daughter. (86-88)

Klein also explains how this splitting process leads the child to experiencing ambivalent, contradictory emotions towards its mother through the prism of the maternal breast, a mechanic which the final chapter of this dissertation delves into further, but which also



explains why such a phenomenon would eventually become crystallised into two discrete figures within the fairy-tale diegesis, as well as literature at large:

The mother, first of all her breast, is the primal object for both the infant's introjective and projective processes. Love and hatred are from the beginning projected on to her, and concurrently she is internalized with both these contrasting primordial emotions, which underlie the infant's feeling that a good and a bad mother (breast) exist. The more the mother and her breast are cathected—and the extent of the cathexis depends on a combination of internal and external factors, among which the inherent capacity for love is of utmost importance—the more securely will the internalized good breast, the prototype of good internal objects, be established in the infant's mind. This in turn influences both the strength and the nature of projections; in particular it determines whether feelings of love or destructive impulses predominate in them. (*Envy and Gratitude* 160-161)

In light of this, this dissertation argues that the survival of matrilineal conflict within the fairy-tale countercanon indicates, rather than continued allegiance to a tradition of matrilineal tragedy within the genre, a desire to explore the ambivalence intrinsic to the experience of motherhood and, most importantly, denounce the deeply unrealistic and unachievable standards it promotes as tokens of positive—or at least non-detrimental—mothering.

Interestingly, Klein's argument also underlines a theoretical imbalance between mother and child, which Rozsika Parker similarly discusses in *Torn in Two*: while the child's ambivalence is considered as natural, a necessary step in the process of individuation allowing it to cope with being imperfectly mothered, maternal ambivalence, on the contrary, remains seemingly impossible to apprehend, systematically being silenced or demonised by

patriarchal cultures. With regards to this discrepancy, Parker states the authorial intent of her monograph as follows:

Throughout [*Torn in Two*] I address the double-edged role of psychoanalysis in relation to maternal ambivalence. Women analysts and psychotherapists both in the past and today ... have produced immensely valuable work on motherhood and on the ubiquity of maternal ambivalence. But where psychoanalysis in general is concerned the clinical focus has more usually been on its negative outcome for the child, rather than on its contribution to maternal thinking.

... In my view, feminists have rightly criticized psychoanalysis for looking at life from the point of view of the child to the detriment of our understanding of maternal development. ... [Mother] and child are presented in a misleadingly symmetrical developmental process. In fact, as [Jane Flax] points out, there are developmental processes specific to both mother and child as well as the mutuality and interaction on which contemporary psychoanalysis has focused. The mother has her own processes of separation, union and reciprocity just as the child does – but the psychological meanings of these moments are particular to her.” (15-16)

Parker’s statement inevitably echoes Nikita Gill’s “Mothers and Daughters,” a poetic foray into the invisibilisation of maternal ambivalence:

Sometimes her mouth will twist  
 into something not a smile, not benevolence.  
 And she will be all the things  
 that you thought only stepmothers can be.  
 Her pain received no outlet.

.....

Forgive her for how her agony  
 reveals itself, child.  
 This is how blood magic works.  
 Unconditional never  
 meant perfect anyway. (Gill 150)

However, when Parker states that “In fairy tales help for the hated daughter comes in the form of magical external intervention. But ... fairy tales focus on the daughter’s well-being and development, and not on the (wicked step-)mother’s” (83), I am forced to argue that this has become less prevalent in contemporary fairy-tale retellings. Thus, the emergence of subversive, matricentric tales like many of the ones discussed in this dissertation has allowed storytellers to carve out space for the voicing and subsequent exploration of maternal ambivalence, albeit confined within the pages of all-too familiar fairy-tales.

Before delving more specifically into the mother/daughter dyad and how their diegetic functioning as opposite doubles condemns them to narratives of violence and mutual destruction, it is necessary to conclude this section by briefly discussing Winnicottian matricentric theories and, in particular, the surprisingly nuanced and exculpating manner in which he presents failure to mother adequately. Thus, Donald W. Winnicott describes “primary maternal preoccupation” as a *sine qua non* condition<sup>13</sup> of good-enough mothering, while also suggesting that, should this condition fail to develop within the new mother, further steps may be taken in order to eventually restore a positive and healthy bond between mother and child:

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<sup>13</sup> The term “condition” has been chosen so as to convey both aspects of Winnicott’s construct: namely, its indispensableness to the establishment of a successful mother/child relationship, and its many similarities to an illness—a connection which Winnicott himself underlines (Winnicott, *Collected Works* 5: 185).

There are certainly many women who are good mothers in every other way and who are capable of a rich and fruitful life but who are not able to achieve this “normal illness” which enables them to adapt delicately and sensitively to the infant’s needs at the very beginning; or they achieve it with one child but not with another. Such women are not able to become preoccupied with their own infant to the exclusion of other interests, in the way that is normal and temporary. ...

In practice the result is that such women, having produced a child, but having missed the boat at the earliest stage, are faced with the task of making up for what has been missed. They have a long period in which they must closely adapt to their growing child’s needs, and it is not certain that they can succeed in mending the early distortion. (*Collected Works 5: 186*)

Winnicott’s theories are particularly compelling in the way they acknowledge the possibility of maternal ambivalence—as well as that of detrimental, insufficient mothering—without ever demonising or condemning the inadequate mother. In light of this, I argue, it may become possible to redeem the figure of the wicked stepmother through contemporary fairy-tale subversion and revision.

### **6.3. The Mother and her Double**

In the final section of this chapter, I discuss the remaining facet of maternal binarism recurrently portrayed within the fairy-tale genre: the mother/daughter dyad. Thus, I argue that these two figures simultaneously function as each other’s doubles and opposites, all the while remaining intrinsically entwined to the point that they seem impossible to permanently sever or divorce from one another. In this respect, let us return momentarily to Barbara Almond’s

discussion of infanticide as representing the acme of maternal ambivalence. In this passage, indeed, she introduces a seemingly minor yet essential nuance when she declares that:

[it] would seem that child murder is the most extreme and shocking manifestation of maternal ambivalence we can imagine. Yet, curiously, it is more understandable and *perhaps* less terrifying than extreme vampyric mothering, where the mother survives by possessing her child's mind and will, creating a death-in-life. (186)

The parallel Almond draws between infanticide and (s)mothering—here referred to as “vampyric mothering”—as resulting from the systematic suppression of ambivalent displays of motherhood is relevant to this dissertation as it suggests that the destruction of the infant by the (step)mother may in fact be more compassionate—and altogether less alienating—than the gradual absorption of the first by the latter. In this respect, we previously underlined the transfer of narrative subjectivity from mother to daughter tacitly required by the patriarchal literary canon. In light of Almond's statement, I now suggest that the crux of narrative matrilineal violence lays in the mother's and daughter's simultaneous existence as separate subjects and a single, undifferentiated unit. Thus, not only does the traditional fairy-tale diegesis only account for a single female subject at a time, motherly and daughterly bodies both also appear as intrinsically porous and lacking proper separation. This constant tension between mother and daughter, interestingly, is not restricted to biologically-related dyads, as illustrated, for instance, by the resemblance between the heroine and her stepmother in Donoghue's “The Tale of the Apple” (47-48). On the contrary, it seems to systematically manifest within the fairy-tale mother/daughter plot, be it through the ominous foreshadowing of the (step)mother's eventual demise and replacement by her (step)daughter, or through her subsequent attempts at violently (s)mothering her daughter—often to the point of metaphorical reabsorption, as depicted by Lee's *White as Snow* (226).

On the subject of the absence of mother/daughter psychological and physical differentiation, Chodorow argues that:

[because] they are the same gender as their daughters and have been girls, mothers of daughters tend not to experience these infant daughters as separate from them in the same way as do mothers of infant sons. In both cases, a mother is likely to experience a sense of oneness and continuity with her infant. However, this sense is stronger, and lasts longer, vis-a-vis daughters. Primary identification and symbiosis with daughters tend to be stronger and cathexis of daughters is more likely to retain and emphasize narcissistic elements, that is, to be based on experiencing a daughter as an extension or double of a mother herself. (109)

As we have repeatedly pointed out, this element is particularly salient within the fairy-tale genre: not only does the motif of the looking glass in “Snow White” variants posit (step)mother and daughter as inverted reflections of each, the physical resemblance often underlined between mother and daughter, daughter and stepmother, and sometimes even mother and stepmother point out the utter physicality of gender and femininity as conceptualised within patriarchal systems. This lack of boundary is also inherently threatening, suggesting that neither psyche nor body is inherently fixed, or can be considered an integral part of subjecthood. In fact, one could go as far as arguing that the recurring nature of this narrative trope points to the impossibility of successful female identification. While several of the works in this dissertation emphasise this dimension, the most relevant example remains *White as Snow*, where the blurring of identities is at its most heightened and daunting, and where identities are inherently plural, provisional, and transferable, as evidenced by the following two passages:

“Drink the ale-cup, Persapheh.”

“Why do you call me that—?” she stammered childishly.

“That is your name, when you’re queen in the wood.”

“No. That isn’t my name.”

“In the wood it is.”

It was the name of the goddess known at Belgra Demitu, who was three-in-one: Coira when a maiden, Demetra when a mother, Persapheh when, robed in hoar-frost and winter snow, she went below and became Queen Death. But Arpazia, who had heard the myth, did not recall. (76-77)

“How often have I tried to be rid of her ... . It is myself, *I* am Coira. A maiden, beautiful—as I was. Let me find her and kill her and be sure, then I am myself. Let me find her, she is my daughter. She and I, in the firelight. Cold white. Golden. We touched hands. She held me in her arms—let me find my only child—” (198-199)

Although her argument does not particularly concern literary depictions of mother/daughter relationships, Chodorow’s *Reproduction of Mothering* can provide us with many interesting insights, in particular regarding the motif of (step)mother/(step)daughter resemblance and, by extension, the inherent permeability of their bodies, psyches, and subjectivities:

Early psychoanalytic findings about the special importance of the preoedipal mother-daughter relationship describe the first stage of a general process in which separation and individuation remain particularly female developmental issues. The cases I describe suggest that there is a tendency in women toward boundary confusion and a lack of sense of separateness from the world. Most women do develop ego boundaries and a sense of separate self. However, women’s ego and object-relational issues are

concerned with this tendency on one level (of potential conflict, of experience of object-relations), even as on another level (in the formation of ego boundaries and the development of a separate identity) the issues are resolved. (109-110)

We have mentioned Lee's *White as Snow* and its explorations of mother/daughter resemblance and merging identities several times throughout this dissertation, yet it is now crucial to demonstrate how her portrayal of matrilineal undefinedness and mutability deliberately echoes matricentric psychoanalytic theory of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. The most striking example of this phenomenon is arguably the final reunion of Coira and Arpazia, which interestingly functions as a rigorous, diegetic illustration of the womb phantasy as defined by Freudian psychoanalysis. Thus, Jacqueline Schaeffer describes this primal phantasy as follows:

Le fantasme de retour à la vie utérine contre-investit, à mon sens, l'horreur de l'inceste par la figure du *paradis perdu*, celle de la période que Freud rapporte à l'*identification primaire*, et qui, chez Florence Guignard renvoie au « maternel primaire ».

On peut concevoir ce mode d'identification primaire, orale, cannibalique, où investissement et identification sont confondus, comme le décrit Freud, comme un premier mouvement psychique d'intériorisation par retournement de ce qui a été transmis à l'enfant par le psychisme maternel du vécu d'incorporation orale d'un enfant dans son ventre, ne faisant qu'un avec elle, et de son désir de prolonger cette complétude narcissique fusionnelle. Cette identification vise, pour l'enfant, à *ne faire qu'un* avec la mère, dans un vécu fusionnel, indifférencié, où dévorer et être dévoré, être la mère ou l'enfant, être et avoir ne se distinguent pas. Freud exprime ce vécu par la formule « je suis le sein ». (“De mère à fille” 42)



Schaeffer's description, I argue, inevitably reminds one of Arpazia's third and final attempt to poison her daughter, which I will cite once more:

[Coira's] mother would not let her go.

*She's smothering me, Coira thought. Her arms round my waist, my neck, her long dusty hair, snow-white now, all over me, in my mouth even. I can hardly breathe.*

Coira would not let Arpazia go. She held on to her, and would not let her stir, even though the fire was out and Tickle's time candle showed the day was almost gone.

*Let her smother me. I want her to. What else is there for me?*

And Arpazia held her as if to press her back inside her body, into the warm oven of her womb. And as if to press herself into the womb of Coira. ...

[Coira] held tighter still, but now her fingers had no grip. She did not realize, for Arpazia held her so close, tighter, tight as any loving, clinging child. (Lee, *White as Snow* 226-227)

A similar argument is developed by Anne Anzieu, who explains how having daughters—more so than having sons—inevitably invites tension within the mother/child dyad, condemning it to constantly oscillate between sameness and otherness, individuation and communion:

La naissance d'une fille fait celle-ci autre et identique. La mère le devient aussi, de ce fait. Qu'en est-il du sexuel dans cette division de l'identité féminine ? Si cette division est essentielle à la constitution d'un moi, le terme d'identité devient équivoque.

Chacune, de la mère et de la fille, est identique et différente. Le problème ne se pose pas de cette manière immédiate à la naissance d'un garçon. (61-62)

Additionally, while the following statement contains deeply problematic undercurrents of uterocentrism and heteronormativity—thus implicitly encouraging the pathologising of homosexuality and transness—it is nevertheless worth considering through the prism of Lee’s *White as Snow*, in which the matrilineal plot, while uniquely nuanced, complex, and ambivalent, still appears to have been profoundly shaped and influenced by psychoanalytic theory. Anzieu’s argument thus goes as follows:

La fille aime le même homme que sa mère. La loi œdipienne introduit la nécessité des clivages, tant dans la participation homosexuelle de l’une à l’autre que dans la séparation nécessaire à l’autonomisation de la fille dans ses choix sexuels. Mais il reste évident que les comportements féminins manifestent une intimité corporelle qui se rattache au savoir envers l’objet contenu. L’emboîtement utérin entre la mère et la fille reste, de toute évidence, l’une des bases de la féminité. (63)

In spite of many parallels between this statement and *White as Snow*, one must however note that Lee’s novel does contain several interesting discrepancies from the aforementioned psychoanalytic model which, while minor, must all the same be acknowledged. Thus, rather than presenting Coira as romantically and sexually attracted to the same figure as her mother, she is instead arbitrarily chosen by him to succeed Arpazia. Besides, whilst the regal statuses assigned to Coira and the Hunter King while in the forest are the same as those previously held by Arpazia and Klymeno—Queen and King of the Woods respectively—Lee repeatedly underlines several differences in identity and appearance between Klymeno and his successor, thus suggesting that a similar distinction may exist between mother and daughter, and that the uncanny dimension of their resemblance may partially stem from their respective anxieties regarding the other (Lee, *White as Snow* 121). Finally, though this dissertation has already repeatedly underlined the ambivalent and fluctuating nature of Coira and Arpazia’s relationship, it must nonetheless be noted that, rather than depicting it as a linear movement

from uterine indiscretion to post-pubertal separation, Lee instead chooses to have it go through several phases, vacillating between hatred and adoration, alienation and (re)union, eroticism and repulsion. Similarly, she presents Arpazia's final attempt against her daughter's life as the unexpected fulfilment of a shared, underlying yearning for love, nurture, and uterine reabsorption, rather than a symbolic representation of the destructiveness of failed matrilineal individuation. In fact, it is through this ambivalent, violent yet romantic return of the daughter to the mother, and the mother to the daughter, that Coira is eventually able to both reconcile with her experiences as the daughter of a wicked mother, and to envision her own upcoming motherhood without hatred or dread (265-266).

One must also note that, in all the aforementioned texts, the lack of definitive boundary between mother and daughter—as well as the daughter's underlying desire to become reincorporated by the maternal womb—is presented as inherently problematic, a phenomenon against which the female child must struggle in order to eventually achieve successful individuation. Jung also defends this pathologising view of matrilineal dynamics in his description of the daughter's "mother-complex":

If a mother-complex in a woman does not produce an overdeveloped Eros, it leads to identification with the mother and to paralysis of the daughter's feminine initiative. A complete projection of her personality on to the mother then takes place, owing to the fact that she is unconscious both of her maternal instinct and of her Eros. Everything which reminds her of motherhood, responsibility, personal relationships, and erotic demands arouses feelings of inferiority and compels her to run away—to her mother, naturally, who lives to perfection everything that seems unattainable to her daughter. (169)

However, I argue that feminist theory and literature have begun to shift away from this univocal pattern, as evidenced by some of the works within our corpus. In her chapter discussing the mutations of the mother/daughter plot within postmodernist literature, Marianne Hirsch thus argues that, while the influence of Freudian psychoanalysis on contemporary portrayals of matrilineal dynamics remains patent, they nevertheless diverge from his model in the way they depict the processes of individuation taking place between mother and (female) child: thus, rather than presenting the separation from one's mother as unequivocally positive and necessary, feminist writers and theorists insist on the violence of this phenomenon—particularly when taking place within the bounds of patriarchal societies—while simultaneously exploring the possibility of maintaining non-violent and emotionally-fulfilling generational bonds between mother and daughter, which Hirsch refers to as “feminist family romance” but which may also be called “mother/daughter romances”:

The “feminist family romance” that emerges in these revisions of psychoanalytic plot and patterns, then, diverges radically both from Freud's family romance and from its female revision, the fantasy of “the-man-who-would-understand.” Where Freud posits, at the basis of all individual development, an opposition between successive generations and the child's break from his parents—a break which dominates the female family romance as well—feminist revisionaries allow for the possibility of a continued inter-relation. This continuity is defined not by repetition or contradiction, but by an attempt at re-vision of the past and of the individual's relation to the past. Whereas for Freud the process of imagination and the activity of fabulation are motivated by loss and by the longing for liberation from familial constraints, for feminist theorists and for some feminist writers of the 1970s, the imagination is fueled either by a longing to reexperience symbiotic union with the mother (by identification with her) or by a struggle against an identification which still reveals a profound and

continued closeness. The content of plot is not a process of successive distancing but, rather, is a struggle with a bond that is powerful and painful, that threatens engulfment and self-loss even while it offers the very basis for self-consciousness. In these writings the pre-oedipal realm figures as a powerful mythic space, not irrevocably lost but continually present because it is recoverable in ideal(ized) female relationships. Pre-symbolic and pre-cultural, it points to an alternative to patriarchy and the logos—a world of shared female knowledge and experience in which subject/object dualism and power relationships might be challenged and redefined (132-133)

Interestingly, the way Hirsch describes this daughterly longing for (re)union with the mother and her body is closely mirrored, once again, by the final encounter between Coira and Arpazia in Lee's *White as Snow* (Lee, 226-227). In addition, Hirsch's mention of "a struggle against ... identification" from the daughter towards the mother—as a possible alternative to desires of maternal reintegration—is another narrative pattern that recurs within this our corpus; we will in fact examine this dynamic further in the final chapter of this dissertation, in parallel with Adrienne Rich's definition of *matrophobia* (Rich 235).

According to Hirsch, therefore, feminist family romances require a degree of indistinction and undefinedness between mother and daughter which, rather than being presented as an unhealthy obstacle set up by the wicked (step)mother to prevent the heroine's individuation, is framed as a unique state of longing, ambivalence, and pre-verbal communication unique to mothers and daughters:

The feminist family romance, as it is voiced in the texts of psychoanalytic feminism<sup>14</sup>, is the romance of the daughter, entangled with her mother through identification and

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<sup>14</sup> By "the texts of psychoanalytic feminism", Hirsch is here referring to the many works discussed throughout Chapter 4 of *The Mother/Daughter Plot* (1989), namely "Jean Baker Miller, Dorothy Dinnerstein, Jane Flax, Evelyn Fox Keller, Jessica Benjamin, and especially of Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan in America, and of Luce Irigaray, Michèle Montrelay, Julia Kristeva, and Hélène Cixous ... " (131).

the struggle against it, increasingly distant from father, brother, and male love, unproblematic only in the connection to her sister or female lover. It is located in the pre-verbal realm of the pre-oedipal, available to the writing consciousness not through memory but through fantasy and projection. The mother who possesses the recollection may well have to be eliminated as subject and maintained in the position of the object of a “sustained quest” if the feminist family romance is to maintain, through fantasy, its imaginative and subversive vision of gender difference. It therefore moves only with extreme ambivalence towards the position of mother. (Hirsch 138)

Similarly, Rich famously describes matrilineality as caught between silence and ambivalence, unable to exist elsewhere than in the margins of patriarchal culture:

This cathexis between mother and daughter—essential, distorted, misused—is the great unwritten story. Probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has labored to give birth to the other. The materials are here for the deepest mutuality and the most painful estrangement. (225-226)

While Hirsch’s and Rich’s understanding of the mother/daughter bond carries problematic connections with essentialist conceptions of gender and difference, it nevertheless seems particularly relevant to the study of matricentric fairy-tale retellings, especially in the way Hirsch connects it to the realm of fantasy, revisioning, and ambivalence towards motherhood. As for Rich’s statement, I have previously argued that, in the specific context of the fairy-tale genre, the mother/daughter cathexis is more often *miswritten* than entirely silenced. In fact, Keillor’s “My Stepmother, Myself” expresses desire to retell the (step)mother/daughter fairy-

tale plot in a more truthful, less sensationalised manner, seemingly echoing as he does the intent of many contemporary story(re)tellers shifting focus towards matricentric tales:

How cruel is the typical stepmother? Not very, according to the report, which examines many cases of alleged cruelty and finds almost all of them untrue. “The media have jumped on every little misunderstanding, and have blown it up to outlandish proportions,” the report finds. Recently, three stepdaughters whose relationships with their stepmothers are well known agreed to speak and set the record straight. (181)

Let us return once more to Irigaray’s “And the One Doesn’t Stir without the Other” (1981). Interestingly, the way it discusses the hybrid nature of the mother/daughter dyad as a unit split—or rather, constantly oscillating—between undefinedness and disunion, nurture and violence, self and Other, is particularly reminiscent of matricentric fairy-tale plots: thus not only does Irigaray depict maternal fluids as potentially poisonous, she also positions mother and daughter as reflections of each other, condemned to simultaneously exist in constant confrontation to—and imposed alienation from—each other, confined to their respective sides of the mirror as if to prevent any and all attempt at matrilineal bonding:

I have a home inside me, another outside, and I take myself from the one to the other, from the one into the other. And I no longer need your belly, your arms, your eyes, or your words to return or to leave. I am still so close to you, and already so far away. It’s morning, my first morning. Hello. You’re there. I’m here. Between us so much air, light, space to share with each other. I no longer kick impatiently, for I’ve got time now.

The day dawns. I’m hungry. I wish I had the energy to walk. To run all by myself, near or far from you. To go toward what I love.

You've prepared something to eat. You bring it to me. You feed me/yourself. But you feed me/yourself too much, as if you wanted to fill me up completely with your offering. You put yourself in my mouth, and I suffocate. Put yourself less in me, and let me look at you. I'd like to see you while you nurse me; not lose my/your eyes when I open my mouth for you; have you stay near me while I drink you. I'd like you to remain outside, too. Keep yourself/me outside, too. Don't engulf yourself or me in what flows from you into me. I would like both of us to be present. So that the one doesn't disappear in the other, or the other in the one. So that we can taste each other, feel each other, listen to each other, see each other—together.

I look like you, you look like me. I look at myself in you, you look at yourself in me. You're already big, I'm still little. But I came out of you, and here, in front of your very eyes, I am another living you.

But, always distracted, you turn away. Furtively, you verify your own continued existence in the mirror, and you return to your cooking. You change yourself according to the clock. You adorn yourself depending upon the time. What time? Time for what? Time for whom? I would like you to break this watch and let me watch you. And look at me. I would like us to play together at being the same and different.: You/I exchanging selves endlessly and each staying herself. Living mirrors.

(61)

In this essay, Irigaray also alludes to the cyclical nature of motherhood and daughterhood, presenting the passage from one to the other as natural, inevitable, but also inherently threatening in the way it seems to engulf any other part of female identity (63). Interestingly, not only is this phenomenon explicitly illustrated within fairy-tales—through the prototypical erasure of the wicked (step)mother by the heroine-become-mother at the end of the story—it



also draws implicit parallels between motherhood and daughterhood and the process of matrilineal story(re)telling. This idea is elaborated upon by Veronica Schanoes in *Fairy Tales, Myth and Psychoanalytic Theory* (2016), in which she discusses the process of fairy-tale revisioning in terms of “mother-stories” and “daughter-stories,” distinct yet utterly inseparable from one another (34); we will discuss this idea in further detail in the following chapter of this dissertation.

Conversely to Irigaray, Alison Stone argues that being-mother-and-daughter does not necessarily represent an insurmountable obstacle to the development of separate, realised, and reconcilable female subjectivities, conversely to what the prototypical resolution of the mother/daughter fairy-tale plot may suggest. Like Winnicott, Stone thus argues that mothering instincts and attitudes stem not from the alleged biological purpose of cisgender female bodies, but rather from the experience of having once been a daughter. However, she adds, the movement from daughterhood to motherhood requires the injection of difference between matrilineal agents:

[For] maternal subjectivity to be possible the *mother* must be able to assume a subject-position distinct from that of the daughter. Mothering is a variation on being a daughter, insofar as the mother replays with her child her own maternal past. Yet this maternal replaying of the past is a replaying *with a difference*. This difference makes the maternal position a distinct one, and brings with it various further implications for the distinctive structure of maternal subjectivity. (*Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and Maternal Subjectivity* 18)

Rich describes her own confrontation to her mother’s body in quite similar terms, portraying her adolescent self as longing for the moment her own physique would finally mirror her mother’s in all its—seemingly innate—sexual and reproductive glory, while simultaneously

wishing to someday experience motherhood for herself. However, in the very same passage, Rich also underlines the importance of rejecting, at least partially, the maternal model, as if to protect herself from merging permanently with her mother—a phenomenon she likely perceives as having affected her own mother, leading to the destruction of the latter's subjectivity and identity beyond the threatening, overarching role of “mother”:

I saw my own mother's menstrual blood before I saw my own. Hers was the first female body I ever looked at, to know what women were, what I was to be. I remember taking baths with her in the hot summers of early childhood, playing with her in the cool water. As a young child I thought how beautiful she was; a print of Botticelli's Venus on the wall, half-smiling, hair flowing, associated itself in my mind with her. In early adolescence I still glanced slyly at my mother's body, vaguely imagining: I too shall have breasts, full hips, hair between my thighs—whatever that meant to me then, and with all the ambivalence of such a thought. And there were other thoughts: I too shall marry, have children—but *not like her*. I shall find a way of doing it all differently. (219)

This phenomenon is most strikingly illustrated by Lee's *White as Snow*, where the initial indistinguishability of Arpazia's and Coira's physiques and narratives crumbles throughout the novel, as the latter's identity gradually crystallises into its own, separate self. As Stone suggests, however, the eventual splitting of the mother/daughter dyad into separate subjects requires not only the reiteration of one's own maternal past, but also the emergence of difference between matrilineal agents. In *White as Snow*, this differentiation is evidenced most vividly by Coira's attitude towards her own pregnancy and upcoming motherhood, which appears as strikingly more hopeful, positive, and appeased than Arpazia's seemingly parasite-induced trances, and this in spite of extended narrative parallels between both characters (59, 266).

Similarly, while Winnicott also describes the interdependency and temporary blurring of egos between mother and child as an inevitable phenomenon, he presents it as a temporary condition which eventually facilitates both the child's individuation, and its recognition of the mother as another self, whole and distinct from its own:

There comes into existence an ego-relatedness between mother and baby, from which the mother recovers, and out of which the infant may eventually build the idea of a person in the mother. From this angle the recognition of the mother as a person comes in a positive way, normally, and not out of the experience of the mother as the symbol of frustration. (*Collected Works* vol. 5 187)

Interestingly, while Stone, Rich, and Winnicott all seem to converge on the assumption that the mother/daughter dyad exists in a hybrid state of pre-verbal, pre-individuation nebulosity where the border between self and Other is inherently porous and polymorphic, they also assign it different temporalities and potential sequelae. In the particular context of the matricentric, contemporary fairy-tale countercanon, such conceptions become all the more interesting in the way they allude to possible alternatives to the consistently tragic mother/daughter plot, in which both subjects can be preserved and allowed to apprehend matrilineal indeterminacy in a more ambivalent manner, acknowledging not only its uncanny nature, but also its potential for blissful matrilineal eroticism—another seemingly controversial concept I discuss at length in Chapter 8.

Throughout this chapter, we have questioned the extent of the binaries structuring patriarchal conceptions of matrilineality, as well as the way these underlying dichotomies precipitate the diegetic conflict between (step)mother and (step)daughter, but also between maternal agents themselves: thus, be they embodied by separate characters or merely facets of a single psyche, maternal archetypes appears strikingly divided alongside Manichean lines:

on the one hand, the “angel mother,” desubjectified to the point of only inhabiting the fairy-tale diegesis as a spectral, disembodied figure; on the other hand, the “wicked (step)monster” whose deficient, artificial mothering is bound to always fall short of patriarchal standards, and eventually devolve into violence, abuse, and even infanticide. While such binary conceptions are inherently problematic in the way they explicitly further a hierarchisation of forms of motherhood according to their biological status, they also contribute to the continued erasure of maternal ambivalence.

In this respect, this dissertation argues that ambivalence—the coexistence of love and hatred for the child within a single maternal subject—is an intrinsic and non-negligible dimension of mother-and-daughterhood, which must urgently be reclaimed in order to move beyond the binary model of split motherhood, and better account for the plurality of maternal experiences. In addition to the desontologisation of maternal binaries, this chapter has been concerned with furthering and reframing our understanding of the hybrid, undifferentiated, and polymorphic nature of the mother/daughter dyad by suggesting that, while excessive (s)mothering may represent an obstacle to female individuation, the realm of the maternal also exerts a unique pull on mother and daughter alike, enticing them with the fantasy of a return to a state of blissful, preverbal communion often bordering on the romantic and the erotic. In this respect, I argue that it is crucial for contemporary fairy-tale retellings to work towards divorcing the mother/daughter dyad—as well as the associated motifs of doubling, repetition, and hybrid identities—from the narrative tropes of rivalry, usurpation, and cyclic destruction to which it is traditionally associated, and which perpetuates the estrangement of mothers and daughters, that Adrienne Rich qualifies as being the “essential female tragedy” (237).



## **Part 3.**

### **Happily Ever After?**

### **Towards a Fairy-Tale Countercanon**



## Chapter 7. Twice Upon a Time: Literary Motherhood and Twisting the Tale

As previously demonstrated, the place of villainous (step)mothers within the fairy-tale canon is inherently unstable and problematic: triply alienated by her identity as woman, mother, and antagonist, the fairy-tale matriarch thus exists only as an ephemeral, uncanny and abject object for phallogocentric systems to abuse, demonise, and eventually suppress. Even feminist revisioning, in spite of its purportedly subversive and empowering nature, seldom strives to rehabilitate fairy-tale (step)mothers or profoundly transform the prototypical mother/daughter tragedy. As a response to the continued silencing and erasure of maternal voices and narratives within the fairy-tale genre, a minor subsection of the emerging countercanon nonetheless demonstrates increased interest in matrifocal fairy stories, often implicitly questioning the legitimacy—or lack thereof—of their tragic dimension. Thus, the sustained presence of violent, self-destructive mother/daughter dyads in the genre does not mean that the mother/daughter plot is entirely static: by retelling traditional tales through the prism of motherhood, daughterhood, and above all, mother-and-daughterhood, matrilineal relationships and dynamics become the narrative core of these new stories, traditional peripeteia and wonder being relegated to the backdrop of the tale. This shift in narrative focus echoes the alternative reading of “Snow White” defended by Shuli Barzilai in her 1990 article “Reading ‘Snow White’: The Mother’s Story”:

The story of Snow White... is also a story about mothers and daughters. This is another source of its enduring appeal. It inscribes the difficulties inherent in the closest of female bonds. It portrays relations gone radically wrong, or what happens



when mothers and daughters cannot work out the problems created by the special, intense bond between them. (522-523)

This new phenomenon, indicative of the growing appeal of matrilineal plots on contemporary readers, interestingly echoes another matricentric trend often present in postmodern fairy-tales: stories being turned upside down so as to create disconcerting yet distinctively familiar narratives running counter to the traditional repartition of roles and structuring of functions in fairy-tales. The wicked, witchy (step)mother being one of the most popular and engaging villains of the genre, it comes to little surprise that she would come to embody the contemporary fairy-tale antiheroine *par excellence*. However, once more, the maternal dimension of the character intrinsically complicates this narrative reversal: if the not-so-wicked mother is to become the heroine of postmodern fairy-tales, what are we to make of her (step)daughter? Could an alternative prototypical enemy emerge from contemporary fairy-tale studies, or must the mother/daughter conflict be maintained at all costs? When confronted to conflicting narratives, voices, and perspectives, who should modern readers be most inclined to sympathise with? Indeed, the lack of a properly defined matrifocal literary canon profoundly affects the directions taken by contemporary storytellers when tackling narratives of maternal villainy and inadequacy. Throughout this chapter, I therefore argue that the slow yet undeniable emergence of matricentric fairy-tale retellings must be understood as a dual phenomenon, seeking to combat the systematic silencing of female and, more importantly still, maternal voices and writing in the Western literary canon, while also setting out to construct alternative, hybrid, and empathetic models of literary matrilineality.

Although not all the works discussed throughout this dissertation explore the mother/daughter fairy-tale plot as thoroughly or subversively, they all intersect in the way they present the realm of the maternal as intrinsically unstable and tension-ridden. In doing

so, they also indirectly question the extradiegetic implications of establishing matricentric narratives, such as the existence of maternal writing as a distinct literary and stylistic category, or the intersection of matrilineal dynamics with processes of literary retelling and revisioning. In the first section of this chapter, I therefore look at the diegetic transformations embraced and endured by contemporary (step)mothers, and how they affect the structure of traditional fairy-tale plots. I also pay attention to the implications Manichean reversals between villain and heroine have on literary depictions of motherhood and daughterhood, whilst acknowledging the contemporary shift in interest from daughter-centric to matricentric narrative perspectives. The second section focuses more specifically on maternal voices—or the lack thereof—within phallogocentric literatures, and proposes to look at emerging matrifocal fairy-tales as an attempt to conceptualise and canonise maternal writing against the systematic silencing and disempowerment suffered by literary mothers. The last section examines the underlying tension between motherhood as an oppressive yet idealised patriarchal construct imposed onto women, and new narratives aiming to (re)define mothering as an experience centred on dynamics of loss, longing and reunion. To do so, I look more specifically at the figure of the non-biological (step)mother as a potential source of new forms of literary mothering seeking to embrace hybridity, Otherness and ambivalence, which I propose to call “othermothering.”

### **7.1. Not-So-Wicked Stepmothers**

Before delving into the intricate and ambiguous positioning of the wicked (step)mother as postmodern fairy-tale heroine, it is necessary to assess the evolution of the prototypical mother/daughter dyad within contemporary revisions and, more specifically, the frequent transformations and reversals of its traditional diegetic roles. As argued by Sharon

R. Wilson, structural inversions are one of the many ways postmodernist storytellers set out to unsettle and undermine the authority of the patriarchal fairy-tale canon:

Postmodern novelists who embed fairy-tale intertexts generally “revise” or deconstruct them, using parody, and sometimes satire of these intertexts alongside the tales’ original character types, themes, motifs, and images. Often turning fairy-tale plots upside down, reversing outcomes, and using unreliable narrators, anti-heroes/heroines, and magical realism, the texts generally exist in a romance mode and may still depict transformation and metamorphosis. (99-100)

In the case of the fairy-tale (step)mother, this phenomenon often translates into a complexification and partial justification of her motives—often stemming directly from her own violent relationship to motherhood, as illustrated in the previous chapter—as well as into greater narrative ambiguity regarding the latter’s wickedness. Nonetheless, some contemporary narratives instead decide to maintain the Manichean nature of the matrilineal binary. For instance, Robert Coover’s *Stepmother* and Emma Donoghue’s “The Tale of the Apple” both displace the source of narrative violence away from the mother/daughter dyad, thus chipping away at the traditionally antagonistic nature of their relationship. Whereas Donoghue chooses to only hint at the benevolent nature of the stepmother by (re)establishing the apple as a symbol of genuine desire for matrilineal bonding rather than one of motherly violence (Donoghue 56-57, 58), Coover explicitly posits his heroine as the ally and protector of “daughters, stepdaughters, whatever” (Coover, *Stepmother* 7). Interestingly, these two narratives also implicitly point to patriarchal law as being the catalyst of narrative conflict, be it represented by the voice of the father himself (Donoghue 47), or by Coover’s diegetic embodiment of the phallogocentric literary canon, the Reaper (Williams 267).

If, in the aforementioned tales, the stepmother is not presented as an inherently nefarious figure, some contemporary retellers however envision actantial inversion in a completely opposite manner: maternal villainy is thus not avoided, but rather reframed and subverted by portraying the heroine as just as wicked as her stepmother, if not more. For example, Coover's short story "The Dead Queen", while calling into question the true nature of the queen's feelings towards her stepdaughter, does not shy away from the darkest aspects of the tale's maternal plot:

Perhaps it was this that had made the old Queen hate [Snow White] so.

If hate was the word. Perhaps she'd loved her. Or more likely, she'd had no feelings towards her at all. She'd found her unconscious and so useful. Did Snow White really believe she was the fairest in the land? Perhaps she did; she had a gift for the absurd. And thereby her stepmother had hatched a plot, and the rest, as my father would say, is history. (*A Child Again* 53)

However, as previously mentioned, Coover's retelling also brings to the fore Snow White's own wickedness, made evident in her sadistic and gleeful enjoyment of the queen's torture:

My young bride, her cheeks made rosy by the mountain air, smiled benignly through the last rites, just as she had laughed with open glee at her stepmother's terrible entertainment at our wedding feast the night before, her cheeks flushed then with wine. I tried to read her outrageous cheerfulness, tried to understand the merriment that such an awesome execution had provoked. At times, she seemed utterly heartless, this child, become the very evil she'd been saved from. (52-53)

It is interesting that Coover chooses to hint at the matrilineal passing down of wickedness in this passage, as it both underlines the contemporary reversibility of actantial fairy-tale roles

(Cimmino 59) whilst also contributing to the traditional cyclicity of the mother/daughter plot: in every heroic stepdaughter thus lives a wicked stepmother *in potentia*.

The final—and perhaps most widespread—configuration regularly explored by postmodern matrifocal fairy-tales is that of the Manichean reversal of diegetic roles between (step)mother and (step)daughter. Whilst this movement maintains the prototypical binary that opposes female goodness to wickedness, it is nonetheless profoundly disruptive in that it subverts the implicit mother-blaming message furthered by traditional wicked stepmother tales. Two of the most striking examples of this phenomenon are Tanith Lee’s “When the Clock Strikes” (1983)—a retelling of “Cinderella” in which the silk merchant’s “deranged daughter” refuses to be turned away from Satanism by “the epitome of generosity and kindness” that is her stepmother (*Red as Blood* 55)—and Neil Gaiman’s “Snow, Glass, Apples” (1994), in which the queen’s desperate attempts to protect herself and her people from her vampiric stepdaughter are twisted into a tale of “lies and half-truths [falling] like snow, covering the things that [she remembers], the things [she saw]. A landscape, unrecognisable after a snowfall ... ” (*Smoke and Mirrors* 374). Acknowledging the fallibility of literary (step)daughters and, more importantly, choosing to confront their voices and perspectives to that of their allegedly villainous (step)mothers reveals increasing interest in maternal fairy-tales and narratives, as well as widespread desire for more ambivalent, morally “grey” depictions of maternal antagonists (Schwabe 91). On the subject of this current tendency, Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O’Reilly argue that, while feminist literary revisioning was initially centered on daughterly narratives, one must note a contemporary shift towards the reclaiming of matrifocal stories:

The overarching goal of *Textual Mothers / Maternal Texts* is to map shifts from the daughter-centric stories (those which privilege the daughter’s voice) that have, to be

sure, dominated maternal traditions, to the matrilineal and matrifocal perspectives that have emerged over the last few decades as the mother's voice—in all its rhythms and ranges—has moved slowly, as [Marianne] Hirsch describes, from silence to speech.

(16)

The emerging interest of revisionists for wicked (step)mothers and their narratives is part of a broader strategy that sets out to develop a countercanon of traditional tales retold through new prisms. These “old tales in new skins”, to quote Emma Donoghue, often seek out the voices and perspectives of traditionally alienated characters—amongst which monsters, villains, unheroic siblings, and (step)mothers (Schwabe 149). Whilst this tendency is much more prevalent in adaptations for the screen than in literary retellings—as evidenced by the popularity of such villain-centric franchises as *Maleficent* (2014-2019) and *Once Upon a Time* (2011-2018)—several of the works discussed within this dissertation also explicitly aspire to craft competing variants to popular fairy-tales. To cite but two examples, Gregory Maguire's *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister* (1999) and Danielle Teller's *All the Ever-After's: The Untold Story of Cinderella's Stepmother* (2018) perfectly illustrate what Claudia Schwabe calls the “trend of revealing the ‘true story’ about villains’ backgrounds, which thrives on the tensions between the traditional fairy-tale canon and novel retellings ... ” (149). Positing the wicked (step)mother as an alternative storyteller, whose version of events has been erased or twisted by time and patriarchal consensus however raises questions regarding the coexistence of conflicting fairy-tale variants. Upon discussing the works of Sara Maitland, Anna Fisk declares that:

If feminist revisioning seeks to *replace* the traditional tales, then this project is doomed to failure; however, many contemporary retellings do not aim either to supersede the original or to uncover meanings that are authentic to a monolithic

conception of women's experience . . . . Most feminist revisionists do not portray their telling of the story as "one 'true' version for all time"; rather they stress that their revisioned tale "is only one version of the many possible versions. They encourage the reader to see the new telling as a *version*, as one, but not the only, way to tell the tale" (Harries 2003: 102; emphasis in original). (17)

While this may be true on an extradiegetic level, this tension between truth and fiction is a recurring element of many contemporary matricentric tales, and usually stems from the systematic demonisation and condemnation of the (step)mother's attempts at mothering. Margaret Atwood's "Unpopular Gals" and Sara Maitland's "The Wicked Stepmother's Lament" thus reframe prototypical (step)maternal violence by presenting it through the prism of maternal narration: rather than erasing the violent matrilineal plot, Atwood and Maitland depict it as an extreme, misguided strategy of resistance against patriarchal demands for female passivity (Fisk 26):

The thing about those good daughters is, they're so *good*. Obedient and passive. Snivelling, I might add. No get-up-and-go. What would become of them if it weren't for me? Nothing, that's what. (Atwood, *Good Bones* 24)

So yes, in the end I was cruel. I don't know how to explain it and I do not attempt to justify it. Her *wetness* infuriated me . . . .

All I wanted was for her to grow up, to grow up and realise that life was not a bed of roses and that she had to take some responsibility for her own life, to take some action on her own behalf, instead of waiting and waiting and waiting for something or someone to come shining out of the dark and force safety on her as I forced pain. (Maitland 33-34)

While both these passages closely echo Gilbert and Gubar's reading of "Snow White" as a story of violent confrontation between opposed female archetypes—one representing empowerment and the other submission to patriarchy (38-39)—they also further the problematic association of female independence to maternal abuse and violence, which in turn reinforces the idea that the mother/daughter plot can only ever be tragic.

On the subject of the (mis)representation of mother-and-daughterhood within the Western literary canon, Adrienne Rich famously declares that "the cathexis between mother and daughter—essential, distorted, misused—is the great unwritten story" (225). In this dissertation, I argue that the restriction of matrilineal narratives to a unique, tragic plot—in spite of a growing fairy-tale countercanon—stems from the apparent incompatibility of empowered mothers as literary subjects and the preservation of motherhood as an institution. Thus, it comes to little surprise that contemporary matrifocal fairy-tales tend to write maternity solely through the prism of anger and violence. As argued by Marianne Hirsch in *The Mother/Daughter Plot* (1989):

Exploring maternal anger makes it possible to confront both the cultural construction of motherhood—the angry abandoning or abandoned mother has reached the status of a cultural icon—and maternal responses to that construction. I recognize that, in privileging anger, I represent maternal subjectivity from one, limited vantage point, and one that converges with cultural representations of the maternal. Yet I suspect that such a vantage point is unavoidable since anger may well be what defines subjectivity whenever the subjective is denied speech. (170)

However, the reclaiming of maternal anger—as well as the reframing of violence—in contemporary fairy stories also underlines the need for matrilineal literature that adequately acknowledges the oppressive nature of motherhood as a patriarchal institution, and strives to



create an array of more diverse and ambivalent mother/daughter narratives. This dual phenomenon is illustrated, for instance, by the empathy exhibited by the heroines towards their respective stepmothers in Garrison Keillor's "My Stepmother, Myself", as well as by the framing of Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch* as a collection that seeks out the silenced tales of maternal figures specifically:

Each chapter [of *Kissing the Witch*] consists of a female narrator telling her own story to the narrator of the previous tale in response to her interlocutor's question, "Who were you before you ... ?" As a result, the entire collection serves as a record of successive women acknowledging that women of the previous generation each had a private history independent of any mentoring role they may have played for younger women. Each younger woman honors the prominent role another woman has played in her life and invites her to share her own story. In actively speaking and listening, together they embody Adrienne Rich's call for a motherline ... . (Palko 918)

As previously suggested, increased interest in the mother/daughter fairy-tale plot does not necessarily induce a multiplication of matrifocal stories within the contemporary revisionist countercanon. While discussing the emergence of "feminist family romances" (Hirsch 134) as a response to the erasure of female voices and relationships by phallogocentrism, Hirsch indeed argues that these narratives tend to focus almost exclusively on daughterly experience and subjectivity, thus furthering the confinement of mothers to the spectrum of marginalised Otherness:

The feminist family romance of the 1970s is based on the separation not from parents or the past, but from patriarchy and from men in favor of female alliances. Yet, inasmuch as this romance is centered almost entirely on the experience of daughters, with mothers no more than objects supporting and underlying their daughters' process

of individuation, this very rejection, this very isolation of a female realm creates an uncomfortable position for mothers themselves. It is the woman *as daughter* who occupies the center of the global reconstruction of subjectivity and subject-object relation. The woman *as mother* remains in the position of *other* and the emergence of feminine-daughterly subjectivity rests and depends on that continued and repeated process of *othering* the mother. (136)

I argue that the same phenomenon prevails in contemporary fairy-tale retellings, which tends to systematically favour the interests and stories of daughters when crafting feminist alternatives to traditional tales. In fact, this extradiegetic process of maternal alienation closely mirrors the inevitable replacement of the wicked (step)mother by the heroine as sole female subject of the fairy-tale diegesis. In spite of this, some contemporary retellings do demonstrate interest in reversing prototypical narrative roles by turning the wicked (step)mother into a fairy-tale (anti)heroine. Unlike with previously discussed stories, this literary strategy seldom impacts the wicked nature of the (step)mother; rather, it is around her perspective, interests, and narration that the revised tale is structured and reframed.

Maitland's "The Wicked Stepmother's Lament", for instance, is an interesting example of how turning the nefarious stepmother into a postmodern fairy-tale protagonist can happen independently of any transformation or suppression of maternal violence: although the tale's narrator attempts to recontextualise her systematic abuse of her stepdaughter, she also explicitly rejects any intent of self-justification that might be ascribed to her:

I'm not exactly looking for self-justification. There's this thing going on at the moment where women tell all the old stories again and turn them inside-out and back-to-front—so the characters you always thought were the goodies turn out to be the baddies, and vice versa, and a whole lot of guilt is laid to rest. ... Anyway, it would be

hard to find a version of this story where I would come out a shiny new-style heroine: no true version, anyway. All I want to say is that it's more complicated, more complex, than it's told, and the reasons why it's told the way it is are complex too.

(28)

On the subject of the moral hybridisation of contemporary fairy-tale antagonists, Cimmino declares: “les personnages des *villains* apparaissent de plus en plus sympathiques, grâce à la reconstruction, toujours plus fréquente, de leur passé, et, par conséquent, grâce à l'explication des raisons et des passions qui les ont amenés à devenir ‘méchants’. Cette tendance provoque chez le public une empathie et une identification nouvelle” (54). While this argument doesn't appear quite as convincing when looking specifically at fairy-tale (step)mothers—as the systematic demonisation and condemnation of fallible mothers greatly overpowers any empathetic impulse the contemporary reader might experience—I however suggest that many of the wicked (step)mothers discussed in this dissertation correspond to her definition of antiheroine:

Étant donné que le passage de la condition de méchant à celle de héros (et vice-versa) a été ouvert, les personnages se mettent à glisser d'un côté à l'autre et maints d'entre eux résident sur la frontière. Spivey et Knowlton décrivent ainsi cette figure ambiguë, cet enfant du relativisme : « trop bon pour être un méchant, trop méchant pour être un héros, l'anti-héros occupe une zone grise même trop réaliste entre ces pôles idéalisés. » (59)

Transforming the wicked stepmother into a contemporary fairy-tale antiheroine is also particularly significant in light of our previous conclusions regarding the necessity—and inevitability—of expressing maternal anger through literature. According to Hirsch, indeed, “a mother cannot articulate anger *as a mother*; to do so she must step out of a culturally

circumscribed role which commands mothers to be caring and nurturing to others, even at the expense of themselves” (Hirsch 170). This statement implicitly posits the wicked stepmother as the ideal character through which to reclaim maternal anger, and thus attain—or rather, regain—subjectivity. Indeed, this literary figure paradoxically exists as an allegory of female anger, violence and destruction, and as the embodiment of motherhood in its worst, most despicable and unnatural forms. Inherently alienated from such fundamental maternal constructs as nurture and selflessness—and often even from the sovereignty of biological motherhood itself—the stepmother thus embodies the voice not only of maternal hatred, but of a hatred *for* motherhood. This is, for instance, particularly visible in Atwood’s “Unpopular Gals”, in which the stepmother’s self-justification is lined with resentment for the traditional fairy-tale plot and its idealisation of female passivity and selflessness:

I stir things up, I get things moving. ... It’s perverse, but it works. All they have to do is smile and say hello and do a little more housework, for some gnomes or nice ladies or whatever, and bingo, they get the king’s son and the palace, and no more dishpan hands. Whereas all I get is the blame. ...

You can wipe your feet on me, twist my motives around all you like, you can dump millstones on my head and drown me in the river, but you can’t get me out of the story. I’m the plot, babe, and don’t ever forget it. (*Good Bones* 23-24)

It is however crucial to reconsider the target of maternal anger in contemporary fairy-tale retellings. I thus argue that, although most recent retellings preserve the violent matrilineal plot as a structural narrative element, the hatred expressed through the voice of the mother tends to target patriarchal constructs—and their oppressive definitions of womanhood and motherhood—rather than the character of the (step)daughter itself. The most interesting and significant example of this phenomenon is undoubtedly *Stepmother*, in which Coover

entwines two conflicting narrative voices—that of Stepmother and her foil, the Reaper—as an allegory of the tension between the contemporary fairy-tale antiheroine and the patriarchal order against which she struggles. Besides, the conflicting accounts and agendas of Stepmother and the Reaper underline the fundamental unreliability of both narrators, thus calling into question the very concept of narrative authority in postmodern tales. Thus, in attempting to “undo the master narratives that make her daughters victims [and to] change the rules [of the genre]” (Williams 257), not only does the character of Stepmother reveal their artificiality, but also calls into question her own traditional narrative identification as maternal antagonist. As Christy Williams points out, by setting out to “[disassociate] ‘wicked’ from ‘stepmother’” (265), Coover implicitly leads his readers to discussing the underlying yet central question at the heart of matrifocal fairy-tale revisioning: “Who decides that the stepmother is wicked?” (262).

## 7.2. Reinviting Silenced Voices

The recentring of contemporary fairy-tale narratives on antagonistic female actants and voices must also be analysed through the prism of writing—and, more specifically, that of gendered writing—seeing as a majority of the texts discussed throughout this dissertation stem from female writers and storytellers. As suggested by Haifaa A-Hadid, feminist fairy-tale revisioning thus strives to create a literary countercanon based on the empowerment and “[celebration of] female power, female sexuality and female freedom” (163). While this phenomenon may tend to alienate matrilineal narratives due to the complex and conflictual relationship between feminist literature and motherhood as an institution, it is nonetheless interesting to discuss its impact on the representation of female dualism within the fairy-tale diegesis. As argued by Gilbert and Gubar, for instance, the character of the wicked

stepmother—when taken aside from the mother/daughter plot—functions as a diegetic analogue for female artists and storytellers:

For the Queen, as we come to see more clearly in the course of the story, is a plotter, a plot-maker, a schemer, a witch, an artist, an impersonator, a woman of almost infinite creative energy, witty, wily, and self-absorbed as all artists traditionally are. On the other hand, in her absolute chastity, her frozen innocence, her sweet nullity, Snow White represents precisely the ideal of “contemplative purity” we have already discussed, an ideal that could quite literally kill the Queen. An angel in the house of myth, Snow White is not only a child but (as female angels always are) childlike, docile, submissive, the heroine of a life that *has no story*. But the Queen, adult and demonic, plainly wants a life of “significant action,” by definition an “unfeminine” life of stories and story-telling. And therefore, to the extent that Snow White, as her daughter, is a part of herself, she wants to kill the Snow White *in herself*, the angel who would keep deeds and dramas out of her own house. (38-39)

Reading the wicked stepmother as a diegetic representation of insurgent female storytelling is particularly significant when one considers how, by its very nature, this stock character also functions as a symbol of the objectification of female subjects within the fairy-tale genre. As I discuss further throughout this chapter, the silencing of monstrous mothers in literature is especially pregnant as their alienation is made double by their dual nature as dangerous women and noxious mothers. As a consequence, attempts to reclaim and (re)write the fairy-tale canon through the wicked stepmother’s prism must be understood as feminist tactics of resistance against the silencing and suppression of the realm of the feminine within patriarchal literature, which Hélène Cixous designates as the “Dark Continent” of language (880, 884-885).

In “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976), Cixous establishes a connection between the policing of female bodies and the nature of *écriture féminine*, which furthers the preexisting association of womanhood to the realm of the bodily, most vividly through female genitalia, gestation, and maternity. For Cixous, thus, “a woman is never far from ‘mother’... as nonname and as source of goods. There is always within her at least a little of that good mother’s milk. She writes in white ink” (881). Cixous’s likening of maternal milk to the ink of *écriture féminine* is particularly interesting in the context of this dissertation, seeing as matricentric fairy-tale retellings are laden with references to maternal fluids—milk and blood in particular—that can either nourish or poison the child. Extending this metaphor to the metanarrative level only heightens the centrality of the maternal within these new tales: it is the wicked (step)mother’s milk, turned poisonous by her violent rejection of patriarchal order, which infects the (step)daughter while allowing the witch-mother to regain—and protect—her own subjectivity. Interestingly, Catherynne M. Valente’s *Six-Gun Snow White* explicitly draws upon Cixous’s analogy by equating maternal milk to female silence and speech: “In the evening, I could hear Mrs. H playing the pianoforte. She was very good at it. She sang as well, and was particularly fond of strange old songs like *Hymn to the Evening Star* and *Fairies of the Hill*. I lay against the floor and listened every night. I drank her voice up like milk” (30). In this passage, not only does the stepmother’s voice possess the desirable and nurturing quality of maternal milk, it is also associated to song and musicality—a tie which Cixous herself presents as intrinsic to the reclaiming of women’s language as unique, distinct, Other: “In women’s speech, as in their writing, that element which never stops resonating, which, once we’ve been permeated by it, profoundly and imperceptibly touched by it, retains the power of moving us—that element is the song: first music from the first voice of love which is alive in every woman” (881).

In order to nuance Cixous's argument, however, it is crucial to point out that the maternal she discusses in "The Laugh of the Medusa" does not correspond to real, concrete experiences of mothering. Rather, Cixous's theory of the maternal functions as a metaphor for the body and the symbolic, which have been forcefully severed from women by phallogocentrism, and which can only be reclaimed through *écriture féminine* (887). As Crowder points out in her 1983 article, "[despite] occasional disclaimers, Cixous views motherhood as a primary trait of women... . But is maternity a metaphor or a biological act for Cixous? A hesitation between metaphor and reality, the symbolic and the lived, permeates her writings" (132). A similar reading of Cixous's *écriture féminine* is defended by Marta Segarra, who claims that:

[by the] expression, "feminine writing", Hélène Cixous did not refer to "women's writing"—as some readers, still today, misunderstand it—nor to a specific way in which women would write, a set of traits that would encompass texts written by women in a special field, which could even be considered a ghetto, within "literature". "Feminine writing" would, instead, stand as an alternative of mainstream writing, which "has been run by a libidinal and cultural—hence political, typically masculine—economy". In other words, most of the texts that form what is called "literature" are, for Cixous,—in the Derridean idiom—"phallogocentric"; only some "poets" engage in a "feminine practice of writing". This practice is difficult to describe, and doing that would entail a regrettable oversimplification of the notion; through the examples given by Cixous, which range from Heinrich von Kleist to Marguerite Duras, Jean Genet or Clarice Lispector, the reader understands that this is not (only) a "modern"—nor a "postmodern" or avant-garde—writing, and that "feminine writing" does not correspond to a precise "style". (Segarra, "Derrida, Cixous, and Feminine Writing" 3)



Building upon Crowder's and Segarra's remarks, I argue that the motif of maternal milk in fairy-tales—be it symbolic or literal—cannot function as feminine ink while simultaneously conserving its nurturing role. On the contrary, it is necessary to systematically strip maternal attributes and motifs from their practical, biologically-assigned functions before endeavouring to transform them into tools for the empowerment and resistance of female subjects within phallogocentric systems. In Valente's novel for instance, the motif of milk—albeit extremely prevalent—is never explicitly maternal nor nourishing. Thus, although it undoubtedly maintains some ties to the realm of mothering, it is used not to nurture, but rather to shame, torture, and violently enforce whiteness upon the heroine:

Mrs. H bathed me in milk on Sundays. She poured ice into that milk like sugar and the cream got so cold it burned me like fire. I lay in there trying not to quake or shiver none as Mrs. H called that a weakness. My toes got so [sic] you could stick pins in them and I'd never know it. The bathtub was black, from Hungary which is a place I only know the name of. White milk and black stone and me in the middle of it like a cork.

Mrs. H said it would turn my skin white. She said it would wash out my dark parts and [sic] better than any soap. (51)

Similarly, in Lee's *White as Snow*, maternal milk is kept away from the female child, and instead redirected towards the witch-mother's nefarious purposes: "In a way, they instinctively segregated the child from her mother for the child's own good. And the witch besides made no effort to commune with her child, and had borne no others—it was said she had refused even to suckle the baby, and that instead imps had feasted on her milk" (61). This is precisely where Gilbert's and Gubar's reading of "Snow White" as a confrontation between antithetical female archetypes strikes one as insufficient: indeed, it is not simply

traditional markers of femininity that the Queen subverts to obtain narrative power (40), but maternal ones specifically.

Building upon Freudian theory, Lucy Irigaray also explores the intersection of female language, maternity, and the body through the prism of paranoia and, more specifically, the fear of being poisoned by one's own mother:

The system structuring paranoia—and theory too perhaps—seems indeed like a play to achieve mastery through an organized set of signifiers that surround, besiege, cleave, out circle, and outflank the dangerous, the embracing, the aggressive mother/body. A set that has passed and passes, now and forever, in and by language. Oral. Language which, like and yet quite unlike the mother's breast or her milk, is able to nourish but also to kill, rape, or poison the sexuate body of the child.

*(Speculum 37)*

As we have already established in previous chapters, contemporary fairy-tale revisions depict these very facets of maternal violence even more vividly than their traditional counterparts. Ambivalence towards the mother and the maternal body is therefore not only explored within the diegesis itself, but also at the level of language, through the spectral presence of the mother within female speech. Additionally, Irigaray presents language as constantly underpinned by a proscribed desire of regression to preverbal forms of communication that are the preserve of the maternal womb:

The ban upon returning, regressing to the womb, as well as to the language and dreams shared with the mother, this is indeed the point, the line, the surface upon which the “subject” will continue to stand, to advance, to unfold his discourse, even to make it whirl. Though he has barely escaped the ring, the vault, the snare of reconciling his end and his archives, those calls, resurgent, of his beginnings. Though

that he-who-is-the-cause is barely keeping his balance. But since he now knows the reason for his wobbling ... . And, after all, the acquisition of new riches is certainly part of this? Overdetermination, deferred action, dreams, fantasies, puns ... .

Language, by adopting its/these “annexes”—also ocular, uterine, embryonic—adds to its wealth, gains “depth,” consistency, diversity, and multiplication of its processes and techniques. Was language once believed threatened? Here it is dancing, playing, writing itself more than ever. It is even claimed that language is “truer” than in the past, reimpregnated with its childhood. A consciousness yet more consciously pregnant with its relationship with the mother. (140)

Interestingly, once again, the metaphorical longing for the maternal womb described by Irigaray is closely mirrored by contemporary fairy-tale diegeses, in which the search for the absent, alienated, “true” mother tends to supplant previous narratives of mutual destruction. Most strikingly, Lee’s *White as Snow* echoes Irigaray in the way it rewrites the mother/daughter plot as one of thwarted matrilineal desire in which the mother’s womb and words are simultaneously familiar, enticing, and deadly:

*Let her smother me. I want her to. What else is there for me?*

And Arpazia held her as if to press her back inside her body, into the warm oven of her womb. And as if to press herself into the womb of Coira.

They had murmured fragments of the past, the dreams. They had eaten the honey-apples from the basket, sharing them. The sweet, sweet taste burned across their lips, closing their throats, gluing their tongues to the ceilings of their mouths. (273)

Similarly to Irigaray, Julia Kristeva considers that language inherently stems from the maternal, and argues that its inevitable movement from the realm of the semiotic to that of the symbolic is enforced by the repression of the maternal and the instinctual:

The semiotic activity, which introduces wandering or fuzziness into language and, *a fortiori*, into poetic language is, from a synchronic point of view, a mark of the workings of drives (appropriation/rejection, orality/analality, love/hate, life/death) and, from a diachronic point of view, stems from the archaisms of the semiotic body. Before recognizing itself as identical in a mirror and, consequently, as signifying, this body is dependent vis-à-vis the mother. At the same time instinctual and maternal, semiotic processes prepare the future speaker for entrance into meaning and signification (the symbolic). But the symbolic (i.e., language as nomination, sign, and syntax) constitutes itself only by breaking with this anteriority, which is retrieved as “signifier,” “primary processes,” displacement and condensation, metaphor and metonymy, rhetorical figures—but which always remains subordinate—subjacent to the principal function of naming-predicating. Language as symbolic function constitutes itself at the cost of repressing instinctual drive and continuous relation to the mother. (*Desire in Language* 136)

Kristeva’s understanding of the causal relationship between the emergence of symbolic language and the repression of the pull towards the semiotic space of the maternal body can be interestingly furthered by Sylvie Bauer’s work on body poetics in literature. Bauer thus argues that:

[on peut] considérer l’acte d’écriture et l’acte de lecture comme un corps à corps, dans un rapport réciproque de tension et de désir. La question de l’écriture, indissociable de celle de la lecture, serait alors à comprendre comme l’émergence du désir ... . Dans

cette perspective, la lecture peut être envisagée comme plaisir de ce qui excède le texte, touche aux sens, dans un rapport qui reste à élucider ... (5)

Bauer's interpretation of reading and writing as bodily encounters—inevitably reminiscent of Irigaray's "Bodily Encounter with the Mother" (1981)<sup>15</sup>—thus seems to intersect with the concept of maternal writing<sup>16</sup>. Indeed, rethinking literary acts through the prism of the body would allow us to bridge the gap between the mother and the maternal body as a lost site of pre-verbal bliss. Besides, Bauer's argument applies particularly aptly to the mother/child dyad, positing maternal writing as a potential response to the constant pull of the repressed maternal, and taking the shape of textual encounters rooted in desire, pleasure, and sensoriality—so many themes that are also shared by Irigaray's "And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other". Finally, and to further Bauer's own play on words (5), reframing storytelling—a situation which organically entwines reading, writing, filiation, and the fairy-tale—as an intrinsically corporeal experience would allow us to substitute the mother's body (*corps*) with a body of maternal texts (*corpus*). Here, we are once again reminded of Veronica Schanoes's matrilineal interpretation of story(re)telling as a constant exchange and dialogue between mother-stories and daughter-stories. (34)

This brief look at *écriture féminine* reveals its inherently ambiguous positioning *vis-à-vis* the maternal. Thus, though feminine writing never directly addresses the mother or maternal writing, the different concepts we have contrasted throughout this section all display some thematic and symbolic connections to the maternal, from Cixous' white ink to the forbidden semiotic space of the maternal womb for Irigaray and Kristeva. However, it is crucial to note that thinking of writing as a gendered and intrinsically maternal—or

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<sup>15</sup> Originally titled "Le corps-à-corps avec la mère."

<sup>16</sup> A term I use here to speak conjointly of texts emanating from mothers, and works concerned with the maternal.

paternal—process remains problematic in quite significant ways. As has been pointed out by several critics of Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva, establishing parallels between women's writing, sexed bodies, and maternal experiences implicitly furthers essentialist conceptions of gender, which queer theorists like Judith Butler and Monique Wittig warn against in their own writing. For instance, not only does Butler dispute biological definitions of womanhood by constructing her own theory of gender as performance (*Gender Trouble* 33), she also underlines how theorising *écriture féminine* as intrinsically separate—and centred on difference—fails to challenge the underlying gender binary within phallogentric languages and systems (Gambaudo 29). Besides, while comparing Hélène Cixous's and Monique Wittig's approaches to gendered writing, Chowder remarks that:

The rapport between women and language within an androcentric culture is especially problematic in the works of Monique Wittig. While she feels it is imperative to write female experience in order to bring it to consciousness and so insert it into symbolic discourse, she aims ultimately to eliminate the very notion of “woman.” To create a “woman's writing” or “woman's language” would perpetuate the very duality “man/woman” which maintains women as an oppressed class. Writing as a function of a female subject's relation to language must confront the structures of masculine culture, including the very structure that defines humans in terms of two castes – “men” and “women.” (118)

While Kristeva does argue that *écriture féminine* exists *per se* and can, in fact, be produced by writers of any gender (*Desire in Language* 30), the recurring identification of women's writing with female genitalia, pregnancy, and motherhood strikes one as inherently reductive and exclusionary: thus, not only does it disregard the possibility of exploring the maternal through non-maternal voices, narratives, and languages, it also alienates non-

mothers from reclaiming and appropriating language through *écriture féminine*. As Ann Rosalind Jones explains:

[When Cixous] speaks of a drive toward gestation, I begin to hear echoes of the coercive glorification of motherhood that has plagued women for centuries. If we define female subjectivity through universal biological/libidinal givens, what happens to the project of changing the world in feminist directions? Further, is women's sexuality so monolithic that a notion of a shared, typical femininity does justice to it? What about variations in class, in race, and in culture among women? What about changes over time in one woman's sexuality (with men, with women, by herself)? How can one libidinal voice—or the two vulval lips so startlingly presented by Irigaray—speak for all women? (137)

Finally—and this leads me to my next part—while these theories posit the mother as the epitome of preverbal semiotic unity, very little attention is paradoxically paid to the place of maternal writing within either phallogocentric literatures or *écritures féminines*. In the following section, I therefore look more closely at maternal writing not as a linguistic and stylistic process, but rather as an emerging subgenre of feminist literature centred on the writing *of* and *from* the maternal rather than on writing *as* maternal. Thus, in addition to deciphering maternal patterns and structures within female writing, I argue that it is crucial to discuss how mothers and non-mothers write motherhood.

As previously stated, the fairy-tale revisions discussed throughout this dissertation serve as an example of the contemporary recentring of the genre on maternal voices, agendas, and narratives. In spite of this phenomenon, however, maternal writing as a literary form remains profoundly suffused with phallogocentric constructs, and struggles to disjoint motherhood as a patriarchal institution from mothering as an experience. As Barzilai

underlines, the majority of matrifocal fairy-tales—while significantly fleshing out female characters and turning the mother/daughter bond into the narrative core of the story—remains inherently pessimistic, and seldom offers alternatives to the prototypical tragic resolution of this dyad. “It portrays relations gone radically wrong, or what happens when mothers and daughters cannot work out the problems created by the special, intense bond between them,” Barzilai thus explains (522-523), echoing Rich’s remarks about the “distorted [and] misused” mother/daughter cathexis within Western societies (225). In this respect, Hirsch highlights that this phenomenon is far from restricted to fairy-tale retellings; instead, she argues, feminist matrilineal literature is underpinned by ambivalence towards the sphere of the maternal:

Whereas for Freud the process of imagination and the activity of fabulation are motivated by loss and by the longing for liberation from familial constraints, for feminist theorists and for some feminists writers of the 1970s, the imagination is fueled either by a longing to reexperience symbiotic union with the mother (by identification with her) or by a struggle against an identification which still reveals a profound and continued closeness. The content of plot is not a process of successive distancing, but rather, a struggle with a bond that is powerful and painful, that threatens engulfment and self-loss while it offers the very basis for self-consciousness. (133)

Building upon Hirsch’s remark, I argue that fairy-tale retellings are particularly relevant to these phenomena insofar as they often merge the two aforementioned scenarios within a single diegesis, thus bringing to the fore the importance and inevitability of ambivalence within mother/daughter dyads. For instance, the character of Coira in Lee’s *White as Snow* balances throughout the entire novel between longing for her mother (61-62) and attempting



to disavow their relationship (109, 117). Besides, while Hirsch focuses on daughter-centric narratives and ambivalence in this passage—a phenomenon I discuss further throughout the following chapter—similar processes of longing and rejection are identifiable within many matricentric narratives. Looking once again at *White as Snow*, the contradictory emotions expressed by Coira regarding her mother are indeed recurringly echoed by Arpazia, and the sincerity of her eventual attachment to her daughter remains ambiguous until the very end of the novel:

“Why did you hate me then?” she said, in her child’s voice. “Why did you—did you try—to kill me—”

“Oh, I never did. I could never do that. You’re myself born again in flesh. His and mine. All made of love. How I love you, Coira, best of all.”

Coira turned in her mother’s arms. She clung to Arpazia, and the torrents burst from her. She wept, clinging to this woman who was her mother, and her mother held her close.

Coira thought, *What is this that I’m doing? Fool—fool—who is she?*

It made no difference.

And she could hear that the woman cried too, long, hoarse sobs that were full of emptiness becoming filled, and silence finding how to make a sound. (271-272)

According to Hirsch, “maternal discourse (and plot), *when it can be spoken*, is always repetitive, literal, hopelessly representational. It is rooted in the body which shivers, hurts, bleeds, suffers, burns, rather than in the eyes or in the voice which can utter its cries of pain” (185). While her assimilation of maternal writing with cisgender female bodies furthers

problematic notions of gender essentialism, it is nonetheless particularly relevant in the context of contemporary fairy-tale retellings. Thus, as this dissertation previously established, the mother/daughter plot continues to be inherently interwoven with—and indissociable from—the maternal body as nurturer and poisoner, life giver and taker, same and Other. Therefore, attempting to make a case for a purely feminist reclaiming of matrifocal fairy-tales would appear as inherently counterintuitive. However, Hirsch also suggests that uprooting motherhood from the realm of the unspoken to that of the “speakable” is not only crucial to “the child’s process of subject-formation” (197), but also helps carve out space for maternal subjects within contemporary literature. This remark brings us back to Schanoes’s apprehension of fairy-tale revisioning as an intrinsically matrilineal metanarrative process:

The author reads and incorporates the mother-story, and out of that experience, creates a daughter-story, a revision, which both is and is not the mother-story. Just as the mother-daughter relationship is often characterized by permeable ego boundaries, a revision and its traditional tales of origin will also have permeable boundaries. ... Where does the fairy tale leave off and the revision begin? Once a revision is created, is there any way of definitively and completely separating out what belongs to the daughter story and what to the mother story? ... [Daughter-story] and mother-story are simultaneously the same and not the same, just as, in second-wave thought, mother and daughter learn to understand each other as being simultaneously self and not-self. (34)

Schanoes’s argument seems particularly convincing in light of the omnipresence of the trope of physical resemblance between (step)mother and (step)daughter within the genre: this pattern can indeed easily be likened to the similarity—and partial overlap—between original tales and their successive retellings. Besides, if one considers that “[the] daughter-story is

continuous with the mother-story... and the mother-story contains the daughter-story *in potentia* or *in utero*" (34) mother-tale and daughter-tale become, like their diegetic counterparts, both indissociable from one another and, simultaneously, pitted against each other in an eternal struggle for power and authority within patriarchal systems. However, Schanoes's reading of the dynamic between traditional tale and contemporary retelling exhibits less pessimism and more nuance: according to her, the countercanon does not set out to topple the original tale, but rather to complete it, to transform and reframe it in non-destructive yet intrinsically ambivalent ways (33-34)—a process which, I argue, also applies to the contemporary mother/daughter fairy-tale plot. This is evidenced, for instance, in the way the successive narrators of Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch* weave the collection together through a shared desire to reclaim silenced mother-tales (Palko 918), but also through the intradiegetic merging of matrilineal narrative voices in Lee's *White as Snow*, or the confrontation of conflicting generational perspectives on the genre in Atwood's "Unpopular Gals" and Maitland's "The Wicked Stepmother's Lament." To conclude, one can consider that matricentric fairy-tale retellings—in spite of its many shortcomings and patriarchal remnants—can serve to establish what Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly call "a matrilineal tradition formed in dialogue between children ... and mothers ..." (20).

### **7.3. From Motherhood to Othermothering**

The reclaiming of silenced voices through matricentric fairy-tale retellings, though it allows for the exploring of maternity and mother-and-daughterhood through subversive narrative, stylistic, and linguistic prisms, is however not without shortcomings. Most notably, it sustains the unquestioned association of womanhood and maternity—be it presented as a biological ideal or as inherently oppressive—thus implicitly encouraging the demonisation of

childless women. Indeed, with the exception of retellings instrumentalizing the non-biological nature of the stepmother/stepdaughter dyad to craft queer variants to the traditional matrilineal plot—a narrative trend I discuss further in the final chapter of this dissertation—the fairy-tale countercanon not only maintains the tragic denouement of the mother/daughter subplot, but also perpetuates the cycle of matrilineality by regularly turning daughters into mothers. Thus, Lee’s *White as Snow*, Maguire’s *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister* and Teller’s *All the Ever Afters* all conclude on the heroine enthusiastically embracing motherhood in spite of her ambivalent relationship to her own (step)mother (Lee, *White as Snow* 318-319; Maguire, *Confessions* 361; Teller 38). Lee’s treatment of Coira’s pregnancy in *White as Snow* is particularly intriguing seeing as she engages explicitly with the motif of motherhood as a destructive yet inescapable cycle. Indeed, it is the torture and eventual destruction of her mother that seemingly triggers Coira’s sudden awareness of her own pregnancy: “And when he did that—to—my mother—I *felt* the child’s life in me, its breath, its heartbeat. It’s curled up inside me—it’s *mine*—it’s me—another me, myself born again in flesh, yet new and unlike and changed—I’m not a grave—I can give it the world. And I want my child. My motherhood. I want that” (317). The reader is therefore left to wonder whether Coira’s eager and enthusiastic embracing of motherhood represents a point of definitive rupture from the cyclical mother/daughter tragedy, or whether Lee’s insistence on the merging of bodies and identities between mother and foetus foreshadows another repetition of the traditional, violent plot.

Presenting the passage from daughterhood to motherhood as a consensual, desired, and even thrilling transformation is interesting because it carves out an alternative to the traditional, violent matrilineal plot that stems directly from the acceptance and embracing of ambivalence within the mother/daughter bond—a phenomenon which Coira herself hints at when reminiscing her mother in the following terms: “She meant no harm. No, she meant

harm. But she was mine” (317). However, this literary phenomenon overlaps with another contemporary trope of matrifocal tales which, I argue, is much more deeply rooted within motherhood as a patriarchal construct: the redemption of the female villain or—female-coded monster—*through* successful mothering. Thus, presenting maternity as redemptive *per se* is a widespread motif across all fairy-tale mediums, but is especially prevalent in contemporary adaptations of wondertales for the screen. This trend is exemplified, for instance, by the character of Regina—the counterpart to the wicked queen of “Snow White” in the television series *Once Upon a Time*—or that of Maleficent in the eponymous film franchise. Indeed, these two traditionally nefarious figures are eventually redeemed by the earnestness of the maternal love they display for their adoptive children (Cimmino 61; Schwabe 151-152). Several of the fairy-tale retellings discussed throughout this dissertation similarly embrace the pattern of female redemption through mothering: thus, the most unambiguously sympathetic trait displayed by the heroine of Coover’s *Stepmother* is certainly her futile determination to protect her daughters and stepdaughters from the violent, misogynistic denouement of the traditional fairy-tale plot. As Schwabe underlines, while this pattern contributes to undermining the primacy of (step)maternal villainy within fairy-tales, it simultaneously furthers romantic patriarchal representations of mothering as instinctive, self-sacrificial, and all-absolving:

Thus, instead of perpetuating the traditional notion of the villainous fairy-tale stepmother, postmodern retellings present audiences with highly romanticized images of rehabilitated “new moms” whose motherly devotion and love for children leads them back from the path of darkness to the path of light. Whereas the concept of redemption for mischievous villains is appealing to many viewers because it offers the sense of hope people may crave in real life, the popular trend of foregrounding

motherhood as the only imaginable approach to redemption and salvation for women remains unsettling. (152-153)

In addition to reinforcing the indissociability of motherhood and womanhood, the use of maternal love as a redemptive motif in contemporary fairy-tale media is also particularly problematic when looked at through the prism of non-biological maternities, as is the case with the wicked stepmother archetype. Thus, not only does this trope usually uphold a culturally acceptable, patriarchal view of motherhood as innate, intuitive, and inherently selfless, it also often relies on the non-biological mother earning narrative redemption through successfully performing a symbolic motherly deed. For instance, in both *Maleficent* and *Once Upon a Time*, the maternal antagonist is redeemed—as well as narratively recognised as a “true” mother—only after reviving her (step)child through a “true love’s kiss”. While this contemporary focus on the tension between truth and artifice in mothering is less striking in literary fairy-tale revisioning, it occasionally appears in an inverted way: it is the biological mother who, if deemed inadequate as a parent according to patriarchal standards, has her mothering delegitimised by the narrative. This is evidenced, for instance, in Nikita Gill’s “Mothers and Daughters”:

Sometimes her mouth will twist  
 into something not a smile, not benevolence.  
 And she will be all the things  
 that you thought only stepmothers can be. (134)

It is also Arpazia’s failure to provide maternal nurture that leads Coira to questioning their kinship—a process which culminates, as previously discussed, in the splitting of Arpazia into Manichean opposites: the absent “loving, golden, kind mother” and her usurper, the “dark witch-queen” (Lee, *White as Snow* 109). This continued confrontation of mothering

narratives to preexisting, unrealistic images of maternal perfection is in fact reminiscent of what Podnieks and O'Reilly call "the mask of motherhood":

[The] mask of motherhood confers an idealized and hence unattainable image of motherhood that causes women to feel guilt and anxiety about their own (often messy and muddled) experiences of mothering. ... The unmasking of motherhood thus necessitates what may be termed "an archaeology of maternity": an excavation of the truths of motherhood disguised and distorted beneath the mask. (3)

While the multiplication of maternal redemption narratives within the genre signals a desire to treat antagonistic mothers more ambivalently than the canon dictates—as well as to disrupt the fixedness of actantial fairy-tale roles—it also sustains problematic and damaging patriarchal notions of maternal perfectibility. In this respect, it must be pointed out that wicked stepmothers who successfully achieve narrative redemption through mothering often end up meeting the same fate as their biological counterparts, thus reinforcing the idea that selflessness and self-sacrifice are utterly indissociable from "true" motherhood, and that the only good mother is a dead one.

Maternal redemption is however not the only contemporary variation on the traditional mother/daughter plot brought to the fore by this dissertation. Thus, I argue that the emerging fairy-tale countercanon develops an alternative to the prototypical matrilineal narrative by shifting away from rivalry and antagonism to explore more ambivalent emotions such as a loss, mutual alienation, and longing. The central place of loss within antagonistic mother/daughter fairy-tale is thus underlined by Barzilai in her rereading of "Snow White" through a maternal prism—although it must be noted that she focuses solely on the loss of the daughter by the mother:

“Snow White,” then, is the story of two women, a mother and a daughter: a mother who cannot grow up and a daughter who must. Hate rather than love becomes the keynote of their story. The conclusion of this tale, like the narrative in its entirety, could be read as the product of two perspectives. From the mother’s perspective, the wish she held most dear has turned into a tale of loss and fragmentation. There is no resolution in sight for the relationship, only hostility and conflict. (534)

While Barzilai successfully identifies the pivotal role of loss in catalysing matrilineal conflict in contemporary fairy-tales, she mistakenly rejects the possibility of a nonviolent, non-destructive resolution to the mother/daughter plot—an alternative which I explore further throughout this chapter. For Barzilai, therefore, maternal antagonism in fairy-tales stems from two paradoxical yet indissociable phenomena: the lack of clear ego boundary between mother and daughter, and the inevitable loss of the child by the mother post-adolescence. In this respect, she explains that:

Corresponding to separation anxiety in children, to the fear of being cut off from parental love and protection, there is a comparable anxiety in adults: a fear of being cut off from the child’s proximity and dependence, a fear of freedom from the thousand and one tasks that structure the life of a mother. However, the rewards for overcoming separation anxiety in the child are increased independence, a sense of selfhood and progress. For the adult the implications are radically different: a passage from ascendancy to decline, from omnipotence or, at least, control to a dwindling of authority. This process is inseparable from aging. (527)

However, as evidenced most strikingly by Lee’s *White as Snow*, contemporary female protagonists are no longer solely depicted as gaining selfhood and independence from abandoning their mothers; instead, loss tends to be presented as a bidirectional matrilineal



phenomenon triggered neither by aging nor generational hatred, but rather by the impossible coexistence of mothers and daughters within phallographic languages and diegeses. This culturally enforced loss is thus depicted as alienating and damaging for mothers and daughters alike, albeit often asynchronously. For instance, Lee's *White as Snow* and Maitland's "The Wicked Stepmother's Lament" both emphasise the (step)daughter's longing for her (step)mother to a degree that forces her to accept, legitimise, and even cherish abuse in lieu of mothering:

But then [Arpazia] felt something rest against her leg, as a tall dog might do. It was this girl-child again, leaning on her, staring up.

Whose was she? *Oh, she's mine. Oh. His.*

"Where is your nurse?" said the queen. ...

Coira knew better than to say where the nurse was. ... She wanted her mother to take her hand. Coira reached up and instead took hold of the tips of the queen's jeweled fingers.

"Let go of me," said the queen, not loudly, not even cruelly. "Why are you here and not with your nurse? You must go away at once. ..."

Coira's heart also cracked.

It was not to let love in but to let it out, like venom from the bite of a snake.

(Lee, *White as Snow* 58-59)

And nothing worked. I could not make her angry. I could not make her hate me. I could not stop her loving me with a depth and a generosity and a forgivingness that were the final blow. Nothing moved her to more than a simper. Nothing penetrated

the fantasies and day-dreams with which her head was stuffed so full I'm surprised she didn't slur her consonants. She was locked into perpetual passivity and gratitude and love. Even when she was beaten she covered her bruises to protect me; even when she was hungry she would not take food from my cupboards to feed herself; even when I mocked her she smiled at me tenderly. (Maitland 34)

Contrarily, in Coover's *Stepmother*, it is the maternal figure who struggles in vain against the narratively imposed loss of her (step)daughters (7-8). Similarly, Donoghue's "The Tale of the Apple" portrays a stepmother who repeatedly voices the suffering caused by the loss of her stepdaughter: "This time, [my stepmother] knelt beside me, and there was nothing of the queen about her. I haven't had a night's sleep since you left, she said; it feels like dancing in shoes of red-hot iron. Will you come home now?" (54-55). The antithetical struggle between loss, longing, and alienation taking place between mother and daughter in contemporary fairy-tales is explained by Schanoes as follows:

In revisions of fairy tales and myths, portrayals of the mother-daughter trope illustrate the issues of fusion, identification, and violent desire for individuation that inform so much 1970s and 1990s work on the relationship. These mothers and daughters have hazy, permeable ego boundaries, often not knowing where one leaves off and the other begins. Mothers such as Sethe from *Beloved* and Arpazia from *White as Snow* often treat their daughters as bodily extensions; daughters such as Beloved and Coira desire to become their mothers or they simply desire their mothers; mothers desire to become their daughters; mothers desire their daughters while simultaneously wishing them dead. These dynamics of the second-wave mother-daughter romance are closely associated with folklore, story-telling, and revision. (37)

The association of mother/daughter romance and fantasy story(re)telling that Schanoes points to in this passage seems to indicate a predisposition of the fairy-tale genre—and, more so, the form of the retelling—for explorations of the mother/daughter dyad through the prism of romance. In this respect, Jean-Michel Ganteau underlines similar formal and thematic connections between romance and the fairy-tale genre in his 2003 article “Fantastic, but Truthful: The Ethics of Romance”:

The themes most exploited by romance are mystery, love, the quest, the agon, and the past. Formally, romance is associated with emphatic closure, loosely strung, episodic plots, shallow characterisation and a general bias in favour of polarisation and simplification (use of archetypes, allegories, etc.), along with a preference for congruence (some detractors might call that cheapness) and expressionism. ... In other words, romance is concerned with things foreign, foreign in more than just the obvious sense of the term. The foreign is what is outside the walls of the city, what escapes common experience. It is the realm of the other. (226-227)

While Ganteau’s definition of romance seems to correspond more closely to the fairy-tale canon than to its contemporary revisions, I argue that the way he defines the defamiliarisation of romance at play in the works of Jeanette Winterson applies to the contemporary fairy-tale countercanon as well as to its ongoing drift from heterosexual romance to the much more disruptive—and potentially problematic—mother/daughter romance and eroticism:

Defamiliarising romance is tantamount to both breaking it open and breaking away from its canonical versions. The lever used to effect such refraction is excess: excess as continuous with the abovementioned openness and hybridity; but also excess of a more inflexible, prescriptive dimension. [Jeanette Winterson’s] *The PowerBook* is not only a text about narrative odds and ends and fraying. It is—as all of Jeanette

Winterson's texts are—of a much more intransigent nature in its shamelessness and obscenity, two categories that are meant to throw the conservatively magical elements of traditional romance into perspective. The refraction of the canon is essentially a subversion of the canon whose purity is swamped by non canonical, impure representations of untamed love. (“Heart Objects” 173-174)

Besides, the contemporary recentring of the mother/daughter fairy-tale plot from matrilineal antagonism and violence to the exploring of mutual, culturally imposed loss between mothers and daughters, while pre-eminently framed as a destructive and alienating experience, occasionally follows more optimistic and restorative paths that wander away from the traditional, tragic resolution of family romances within the genre. In this respect, I argue that the emerging matricentric fairy-tale countercanon presents generational violence as stemming directly from the inevitable alienation of mothers and daughters within patriarchal systems and narratives, and sets out to explore how reclaiming ambivalence, hybridity, and empathy can bring about a long-awaited happy ending to the mother/daughter plot. Keillor's “My Stepmother, Myself” and Teller's *All the Ever Afters*, for instance, both explicitly explore matrilineal reconciliation through ambivalence in their “Cinderella” retellings:

We see each other almost every day ... and we often reminisce and laugh about our little disagreements. She is one of my best friends. Other people treat me like royalty but she treats me like a real person. My husband won't let me touch a broom, but I go to her house and she puts me to work! I love it. I tell her, “Mother, you're the only one who yells at me. Don't ever stop.” (Keillor 59)

“You are my family,” Ella said simply. “We have had our differences, but I never doubted your love.”

My soul shrank within me as I remembered shameful lapses in my love for Ella.  
My affections had never flown to her naturally . . . .

“Thank you,” I said, bowing to Ella again. “You are far more kind than I deserve.”  
(Teller 243)

While the maternal plot of Lee’s *White as Snow* resolves in a much more ambiguous manner than its aforementioned counterparts, it must be underlined that the denouement of its mythologic intertext—present in the form of an interwoven retelling of the tale of Demeter and Persephone—culminates in a scene of intense emotional and bodily reconciliation between mother and daughter (271-273). This blissful—if belated and ephemeral—moment of matrilineal (re)union, bonding, and nurture strikes one as a direct response to the motif of generational loss and longing spun throughout the novel, and interestingly echoes Cixous’s appeal in “The Laugh of the Medusa”:

Let us defetishize. Let’s get away from the dialectic which has it that the only good father is a dead one, or that the child is the death of his parents. The child is the other, but the other without violence, bypassing loss, struggle. We’re fed up with the reuniting of bonds forever to be severed, with the litany of castration that’s handed down and genealogized. (890-891)

Contrarily to traditional narratives, therefore, the mother is not only the starting point of the heroine’s journey, but also its final destination, as Podnieks and O’Reilly argue in *Textual Mothers/Maternal Texts* (2010):

It is only in the beginnings of the late twentieth century that the rebellious daughter finds a way back to the mother, reclaiming her through an acceptance of and celebration of generational—or matrilineal—bonds registered especially in the

literatures of minority women who, participating in the oral traditions of their communities, give voice to their often silenced mothers: hence “the lost mother is found” ([Davidson] 254). However, this search for the mother has been daughter-centric in that she is positioned almost entirely in terms of her relations with, and as perceived by, the daughter. (Podnieks and O’Reilly 8)

Some nuance must however be brought to Podnieks’s and O’Reilly’s statement in the context of contemporary fairy-tale retellings: indeed, to the daughter’s movement back to her (step)mother often corresponds an eventual, inverted return of the mother to her estranged (step)child, as illustrated by Coover’s *Stepmother* and Lee’s *White as Snow* among other works. Be it on a diegetic or metatextual level, contemporary fairy-tales are therefore imbued with mother-and-daughterhood, and strive to explore alternate matrilineal dynamics that do not require the generational erasure of female texts, voices, and narratives. Rather, these revised tales draw upon the ambivalence and uniqueness of the mother/daughter bond to construct a subversive, matricentric fairy-tale countercanon woven together from daughter-texts and mother-texts.

This chapter has thus far focused on the reclaiming of maternal voices, writing, and narratives through the prism of contemporary fairy-tale revisioning; little attention has therefore been paid to the discrepancy between maternal and stepmaternal fairy-tale retellings. However, I argue that the institutionalised hierarchy of biological and non-biological mothering within patriarchal cultures—while being disrupted and challenged by subversive fairy stories—still vividly imbues contemporary mother/daughter plots. As previously pointed out, indeed, maternal writing and matricentric fairy-tale plots are often intrinsically gynocentric, locating the core of the mother/daughter bond within the maternal womb, and representing postnatal separation as a violent process that inevitably catalyses

alienation and violence within this dyad. Looking back to Barzilai's claim that "it is the queen's wish to take the daughter back into herself, to recreate the condition in which her creation was the very flesh of her own flesh... those edenic days when mother and daughter were still an intermingled and undifferentiated unit" (531), it is striking that her matricentric reading "Snow White" deeply overlooks the non-biological dimension of the wicked queen's maternity, which is still overwhelmingly present in contemporary versions of the tale. In the context of non-biological maternal figures, indeed, the mother's wish to be (re)united with her stepdaughter cannot stem from a desire to recreate prenatal uterine unity; rather, I argue that this (re)absorption fantasy indicates a biased attempt to emulate "true" maternity, and thus mend an intrinsically problematic and violent relationship. As previously demonstrated, indeed, the lack of biological bond between stepmother and stepdaughter is often pointed to as being the cause of the degradation and eventual destruction of the mother/daughter dyad. In Donoghue's "The Tale of the Hair" and Maguire's *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister*, for example, the traditional heroine justifies her refusal to obey her mother figure through this lack of primary biological connection:

I cannot. I'm afraid of waking the woman.

Is she your mother, that you fear to wake her?

No mother nor nothing to me, I said. (Donoghue 92)

"But I honor my father and my mother," says Clara. "I honor my mother's memory and what she gave to me. And you're not my mother." (Maguire, *Confessions* 188)

The narrator of Teller's *All the Ever Afters* similarly echoes this sentiment, which she uses to justify her lack of innate maternal connection—and occasional cruelty—towards her stepdaughter Ella:

My soul shrank within me as I remembered shameful lapses in my love for Ella. My affections had never flown to her naturally; I had needed to push and shove my heart toward my stepdaughter, and I had, at times, turned a blind eye to my heart's obstinacy. I made excuses, telling myself that Ella was strange, and that anyone would find her difficult. That Charlotte and Matilda were more inherently amiable. That I was not Ella's real mother. (Teller 243)

However, Donoghue's "The Tale of the Shoe"—which interestingly erases the (step)maternal antagonist from the diegesis altogether to focus instead on the ambiguous relationship between the heroine and her fairy godmother—suggests that the lack of biological connection between (non-)mothers and (non-)daughters may also create a positive space for the exploration of other, similarly silenced bonds between women. While I discuss the queer turn of stepmother/stepdaughter dyads in contemporary fairy-tales further in the final chapter of this dissertation, it remains necessary to underline that it is precisely the absence of kinship between heroine and godmother that triggers the transformation of their relationship from a maternal one to a queer one: "What about me? she asked very low. I'm old enough to be your mother. ... You're not my mother, I said. I'm old enough to know that" (8). Subverting the ambivalence of contemporary matrilineal fairy-tale plots in order to explore alternatives to motherhood and daughterhood as patriarchal institutions inevitably leads to questioning the nature—and potential uniqueness—of the stepmother/stepdaughter dyad as an atypical form of female bonding. In this respect, it is relevant to return to the distinction Rich establishes between motherhood as an experience and as an institution: "Throughout this book I try to distinguish between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential—



and all women—shall remain under male control” (13). Building upon this distinction, O’Reilly explains that:

Within motherhood studies the term “motherhood” is used to signify the patriarchal institution of motherhood, while “mothering” refers to women’s lived experiences of mothering as they seek to resist the patriarchal institution of motherhood and its oppressive ideology. An empowered practice/theory of mothering, therefore, functions as a counter-narrative of motherhood: it seeks to interrupt the master narrative of motherhood to imagine and implement a view of mothering that is empowering to women. (“Stories to Live By” 369-370)

Therefore, whereas contemporary stepmothers define themselves against motherhood as an oppressive and misogynistic gender role, they can paradoxically also be reclaimed as subversive figures of (other)mothering. Othermothers are defined by Julie Pfeiffer as “single, adult women, either relatives or teachers” with whom the female protagonists of *Backfisch* novels live after having exited their biological mothers’ homes (63-64). In addition to applying to several of the stepmothers discussed throughout this dissertation, Pfeiffer’s definition closely echoes the Richian concept of “counter-mothering” (247-248), whose intersection with the wicked stepmother archetype I examine in the following chapter. Thus, if the stepmother can be reclaimed through contemporary fairy-tale revisioning as a non-destructive, ambivalent figure of (other)mothering, one is led to wondering whether the genre as a whole may be capable of un-silencing and empowering (other)mothers through encouraging intertextual dialogue between female voices while undermining the centrality of bodies and genitalia in maternal writing.

While many of the works discussed in this dissertation end with the destruction of at least one—if not both—members of the mother/daughter dyad, contemporary storytellers like

Donoghue, Keillor, and Teller explore othermothering as a more ambivalent, less destructive alternative to the traditional matrilineal plot. Indeed, the presence of dyads with dynamics adjacent or comparable to that of mothers and daughters—alongside with the inherently revisionist nature of its canon—makes fairy-tales into an ideal literary genre for the exploration of non-biological generational relationships between women, and “othermothering” in particular. With regards to this, Pfeiffer argues that “ultimately, the ‘romance’ that illuminates [*Backfisch* novels] is not a heterosexual romance or a Christian romance, but a romance of othermothering, as girls learn to mother one another without the distractions of husbands and children” (73). Once again, this statement can also be applied to matricentric fairy-tale retellings and, to an even greater extent, to those that deliberately stray away from the traditional heterosexual and nuclear models flaunted by the genre as the only paths to a “happily ever after.” For instance, Donoghue’s entire collection explores the intersection—and partial overlap—between mothering, othermothering, and queer female desires. Thus, the resolution of many of her tales, like “The Tale of the Hair” and “The Tale of the Apple”, wanders away from prototypical narrative patterns to instead center on the establishment of an ambivalent, queer-coded relationship between a younger and an older woman, whose traditionally maternal nature is repeatedly and explicitly disavowed (57, 92).

By virtue of not being rooted in biological filiation, othermothering is thus able to navigate between—and intersect with—other forms of female bonding, like sisterhood and lesbianism, more frequently and freely. As argued by Abigail Palko, “[in ‘The Tale of the Hair,’] the female relationship is spotlighted, both in its maternal and erotic potential, and the dyad formed by the narrator (Rapunzel) and the woman (Mother Gothel) proves nearly impenetrable in the tale” (922). Finally, I argue that, in addition to functioning as a dialogue between mother-texts and daughter-texts (Schanoes 34), contemporary fairy-tale revisioning mirrors the evolution of diegetic representations of motherhood and mothering, with the

countercanon responding to literary constructs that have become oppressive and obsolete by exploring alternative, ambivalent, hybrid forms of filiation through the recurring figure of the othermother (Smith-Fullerton 29): it is precisely through the (step/other)mother's violent rejection of traditional, patriarchally-defined motherhood that the redefinition of literary matrilineality becomes possible.

In spite of the ubiquity of the mother/daughter dyad in the fairy-tale genre, few contemporary narratives deliberately part with prototypical representations of matrilineality as the “essential female tragedy” (Rich 237): mother-and-daughterhood thus remains overwhelmingly represented as intrinsically violent, alienating, and mutually destructive. Notwithstanding the resistance of this trope, the emerging fairy-tale countercanon is visibly shaped by efforts to empower female voices and perspectives by subverting prototypical narrative roles and revisiting traditional diegeses through new prisms. Focusing more particularly on female lineage within the genre, feminist efforts to provide traditional fairy-tale heroines with increased narrative agency are increasingly being mirrored by tales trading daughter-centric stories in favour of matrifocal retellings. This contemporary phenomenon is generally established through the following structural shifts: the wicked (step)mother being raised to the role of focaliser—and sometimes narrator—of her own tale, and the Manichean inversion of diegetic roles between mother and daughter. Thus, by turning traditional female protagonists into wicked daughters and dangerous monsters, contemporary fairy-tale retellings subsequently reframes (step)mothers as misunderstood, well-meaning, self-sacrificial figures. In this respect, wondertales contribute to bringing previously silenced and marginalised perspectives to the forefront of the diegesis, a phenomenon which is often mirrored at a metanarrative level as the fairy-tale genre becomes instrumental to the exploration of the intersection between womanhood, motherhood, and *écriture féminine*.

While contradicting conceptions of *écriture(s) féminine(s)* cannot be applied unquestioningly to the corpus of this dissertation—at the risk of furthering essentialist views of gender, alienating other forms of matricentric writing, and equating the maternal as a semiotic space with the mother *per se*—it is nonetheless important to underline that women’s writing is largely conceptualised as an inherently maternal process, and therefore apprehended as indissociable from (cisgender) female bodies and reproductive organs. As previously underlined, the positioning of feminist theory regarding motherhood as an institution is particularly layered and contradictory, and this instability becomes all the more prevalent when looking at the contemporary fairy-tale countercanon. Indeed, while it is both crucial and urgent to reclaim the place of maternal voices, narratives, and writing within Western literature at large, the systematic equating of women’s writing with the is far from unproblematic, especially as it implicitly furthers a phallographic understanding of motherhood as the essential female experience *par excellence*. Besides, as outlined repeatedly throughout this dissertation, any conception of matrifocal fairy-tales as inherently gynocentric inevitably alienates a number of atypical approaches to literary mothering: thus, in addition to delegitimising transgender mothering, uterocentric approaches to writing also implicitly exclude non-biological mothers from the matricentric fairy-tale countercanon. Additionally, all the aforementioned types of *écriture féminine*, while theoretically not restricted to women or mothers, necessarily problematises the place of any female writing that deliberately sets itself apart from the maternal—as well as, conversely, that of matricentric narratives stemming from non-mothers. As a consequence, in attempting to reclaim silenced maternal voices and narratives through writing, contemporary fairy-tale revisioning tends to paradoxically reinstate oppressive equivalences between womanhood, maternity, and patriarchal approaches to female bodies as sites of literary production and biological reproduction.

In light of these theoretical shortcomings, this chapter has attempted to explore alternate forms of fairy-tale mothering that set out to deliberately destabilise motherhood as a phallogocentric institution. Thus, by proposing subversive definitions of mothering as an inclusive, hybrid and ambivalent experience, the contemporary fairy-tale countercanon (re)invites a variety of silenced and othered voices within the genre, whilst simultaneously questioning and desystematising the association of womanhood with the realm of the maternal. This profound disruption of patriarchal conceptions of motherhood, maternal writing, and women's writing *as* maternal also leads fairy-tale revisioning to questioning the continued presence of the mother/daughter dyad as a site of literary violence, conflict, and confrontation. Indeed, while contemporary subversions of the wicked (step)mother's prototypical role lead to an increased presence of matrifocal stories within the genre, they often fail to undermine the predominance of generational conflict between mother and daughter within these tales. As a response, some contemporary retellers choose to instrumentalise these inclusive (re)definitions of mothering to explore alternatives forms of matrilineal bonding, and spin together new resolutions to the mother/daughter plot. Rather than violence and rivalry, it is therefore love, loss, and longing that become the core of the matrilineal narrative, turning the climaxes of these tales from attempted murders to ambivalent reunions and tentative reconciliations. Finally, the reclaiming of hybridity, otherness, and empathy within matrilineal relationships also encourages the exploration of marginalised, taboo, and silenced forms of female bonding. Thus, in addition to denouncing the oppressive nature of motherhood as an institution, several of the tales within this corpus explore non-biological "othermothering" as a complementary—rather than opposed—alternative to traditional maternity, and questions its intersections with female queerness, which I discuss further in the final chapter of this dissertation.

## **Chapter 8. Queering the Canon: Inviting Ambivalence and Ambiguity within the Mother/Daughter Plot**

In the previous chapter, I established that the contemporary fairy-tale countercanon often plays around with the conventions of the genre in the hope of challenging and subverting canonical depictions of motherhood and daughterhood: thus, while tales such as Neil Gaiman's "Snow, Glass, Apples" reverse the traditional moral alignment of matrilineal characters—turning the stepmother into a benevolent, empowered protagonist, and her stepdaughter into a dangerous, inhuman creature—others instead choose to preserve the stepmother's wickedness but rework her narrative through a matricentric lens, subsequently exploring her motivations and diegetic arc as the tale's new (anti)heroine. However, in addition to these straightforward narrative mutations, contemporary storytellers also appear particularly interested in transforming their representations of the (step)mother/(step)daughter plot, albeit through more implicit means. In light of this postulate, this chapter discusses contemporary attempts to pluralise fairy-tale depictions of motherhood so as to render its institution more inclusive of non-traditional forms of filiation, but also—and perhaps more importantly—to alter and queer our understanding of mothering as an experience through the reclaiming of matrilineal ambivalence, romance, eroticism, and other taboo dynamics previously confined to the margins of the genre. Evidently, this chapter is also concerned with assessing the limits of such attempts, and endeavours to delineate possible directions for upcoming fairy-tale retellings to continue their desontologisation of motherhood as a binary, patriarchal, Western construct.

In this respect, the first section of this chapter analyses the role of the daughter in the emergence of a diegetic conflict between herself and the (step)mother, suggesting that not just the mother must be blamed for the continued presence of matrilineal violence within the

fairy-tale genre. Thus, by discussing infantile psychological processes such as ambivalence, splitting, and matrophobia (Rich 235), I intend to show that contemporary fairy-tales demonstrate heightened awareness of the role of the child in the emergence of mother/daughter violence and antagonism, and subsequently argue for greater recognition of the necessity of daughterly ambivalence. Building upon these conclusions, the following section suggests that reciprocal ambivalence must not only be destigmatised and reclaimed as an integral part of matrilineality, but also embraced as a means of overcoming biased, alienating definitions of the maternal as dichotomous, and instead (re)invite other—and othered—forms of filiation under the aegis of motherhood. To conclude, the final section of this chapter focuses on the underlying yet distinctively queer subtext woven through many of the tales discussed in this dissertation, in order to suggest that queerness has become inseparable from contemporary (re)definitions of motherhood and mothering through the medium of the fairy-tale. In this respect, I therefore argue that a comprehensive and inclusive approach to queer(ed) maternities may allow us on the one hand to successfully pluralise and hybridise our understanding of motherhood as a whole, while reclaiming on the other hand such prototypically ambiguous and uncanny figures as that of the wicked stepmother as literary epitomes of alternative (other)mothering.

### **8.1. Wicked Daughters and Matrophobia**

In her seminal 1990 article entitled “Reading ‘Snow White’: The Mother’s Story,” Shuli Barzilai declares that:

“Snow White” ... is the story of two women, a mother and a daughter: a mother who cannot grow up and a daughter who must. Hate rather than love becomes the keynote of their story. ... There is no resolution in sight for the relationship, only hostility and

conflict. In the end, the queen dies of grief. From the daughter's perspective, the old nurturing gestures—be it grooming or feeding—are threatening. Mother always smothers, as when “[she] pulled the lace so tight that Snow White's breath was cut off and she fell down as though dead.” Snow White would like, therefore, nothing better than to get this interfering older woman, this deadly dragon-mother, out of her life.

The conflict is finally resolved, and the daughter's wish fulfilled. (Barzilai 534)

Beyond pointing to the irresolvable, tragic nature of the fairy-tale mother/daughter plot, Barzilai's statement hints at another facet of matrilineal violence within the genre, which we have seldom discussed at this stage of our analysis: violence and cruelty emanating from the daughter. Thus, in addition to narratives openly depicting malevolent and monstrous daughters in a deliberate reversal of traditional diegetic dynamics—as in, for instance, Gaiman's “Snow, Glass, Apples”—some contemporary fairy-tale retellings weave together a secondary, embedded matrilineal plot where violence stems from misguided and increasingly desperate attempts from (step)mothers to nurture and protect their daughters, attempts to which the latter respond with violent rejection, often going as far as destroying their own smothering mothers in order to exist as independent subjects. These dynamics are inevitably reminiscent of Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1976) and, more specifically, of its exploration of matrophobia, a violent process of matrilineal individuation which Rich defines as:

[the] fear not of one's mother or of motherhood but of *becoming one's mother*.

Thousands of daughters see their mothers as having taught a compromise and self-hatred they are struggling to win free of, the one through whom the restrictions and degradations of a female existence were perforce transmitted. Easier by far to hate and reject a mother outright than to see beyond her to the forces acting upon her. But where a mother is hated to the point of matrophobia there may also be a deep



underlying pull toward her, a dread that if one relaxes one's guard one will identify with her completely. (235)

Rich's remark strikes one as particularly relevant to the fairy-tale genre, where the omnipresent threat of eventually becoming one's mother is reiterated constantly, both within and outside of the diegesis. Furthermore, the prototypical usurpation of the (step)mother's place by the heroine at the end of the tale is often portrayed as having fatal consequences on the mother/daughter dyad: thus, not only does it lead to the (step)mother's annihilation, it also comes with an underlying threat of sexual violence, domestic imprisonment, and eventual erasure. For instance, in Emma Donoghue's "The Tale of the Apple," it is implied that the heroine's father chose his second wife in part for her resemblance to his daughter, as a way to symbolically couple with her without resorting to committing incest. In addition, the heroine's stepmother is described as being gradually stripped of her autonomy, power, and identity as she fails to become pregnant, implicitly suggesting that prototypical narrative dynamics of maternal desubjectification are already at play:

Two such fair ladies, [the King] remarked, have never been seen on one bed. But which of you is the fairest of them all?

We looked at each other, she and I, and chimed in the chorus of his laughter. Am I imagining in retrospect that our voices rang a little out of tune? ...

He let out another guffaw. Tell me, he asked, how am I to judge between two such beauties?

I looked at my stepmother, and she stared back at me, and our eyes were like mirrors set opposite each other, making a corridor of reflections, infinitely hollow.

My father grinned as he kissed me on the forehead, and pushed me gently out of the room, and bolted the door behind me.

But as the full of a year went by and my stepmother stayed as thin as the day he had first brought her to the castle, my father's mouth began to stiffen. He questioned every doctor who passed through the mountains. He made his young wife drink cow's blood, to strengthen her, though it turned her stomach. Finally he forbade her to go walking in the orchard with me, or lift a hand, or do anything except lie on her back and wait to find herself with child, the child who would be his longed-for son. (48-49)

Similarly, in Carter's "The Snow Child," this process is illustrated by the Count's wife being progressively stripped off her garments to the benefit of his daughter—the eponymous snow child—until the latter abruptly dies, and has her corpse immediately and violently defiled by her own father, before it is left to melt in the snow (*The Bloody Chamber* 91-92).

Elaborating upon Rich's argument in *White Feminists and Contemporary Maternity* (2010), D. Lynn O'Brien Hallstein concisely sheds light on the intersection between matrophobia and the processes of disidentification at play in—but not limited to—mother/daughter dyads:

[Disidentification] is a negative process of identifying against something or someone, or as not like something or someone. ...

[It] shares with matrophobia the fear of making an identification one does not want to make but has already made and, as a result, is an identification against something that is a negative identificatory process one does not want and/or does not like about the person, role being disavowed, and/or theoretical and political positions.

(*White Feminists* 28)

Hallstein also discusses the evolution of matrophobia within feminist theory and activism, from the complete rejection of motherhood advocated by first-wave feminism, to the subsequent reclaiming of motherhood—and, more importantly, daughterhood—as

cornerstones of the empowered feminine. In this respect, she convincingly argues that the contemporary focus on daughter-centric experiences encourages, rather than dismantles, the matrophobic dynamics that underly the feminist movement as a whole:

Interestingly, in “writing” and “righting” the mother-daughter relationship, then, feminists did shift from a sisterly to a daughterly subject position because they wrote daughters’ side of the mother-daughter relationship and shifted from equality feminism to difference feminism. While this shift in analytic foci and feminist subject position might suggest that these feminists began to “correct” the matrophobia within white second wave feminism, the rereading makes clear that the shift did not do so because of the exclusive focus on daughters’ lives and experiences of the relationship. Moreover, again, [Marianne] Hirsch was the first feminist to argue that this feminist location of critique was also matrophobic. (38)

Hallstein also suggests that the distinction between motherhood as experience and institution, first introduced by Rich in *Of Woman Born* (41-42), has become overly polarised, and therefore fails to acknowledge the tension and anguish that still stem from the coexistence of these two aspects of the maternal:

[Another] important matrophobic consequence of splitting apart institutionalized motherhood and empowered mothering is that both feminist analyses of contemporary maternity are simultaneously important but limited rhetorically because each fails to recognize what Rich so powerfully argued about maternity over thirty years ago. Maternity is constituted by *both* institutionalized motherhood *and* a potentially empowering relationship. In today’s terms this means that contemporary maternity entails *both* backlash and second-wave feminist gains. As such, each text presents a limited, almost paradoxical view of contemporary feminist issues in relation to

maternity that limits feminist understandings of the contemporary maternal context.

(“Matrophobic Sisters and Daughters” 292)

Hallstein’s analysis of the consequences of the continued splitting of the institution of motherhood from the experience of mothering is also particularly interesting in that it reveals the underlying presence of seemingly unwavering binary structures within the maternal, and this even within contemporary feminist theory. By failing to reconcile the negative and positive aspects of contemporary motherhood from which maternal ambivalence stems, Hallstein explains, feminist theory tends to fall into patterns of maternal glorification—which has been repeatedly proven problematic throughout this dissertation—or unquestioned rejection of previous maternal models, thus unwittingly perpetuating the matrophobic and mother-blaming dynamics that still permeate modern-day feminist theory (291). The resistance of such internal tensions within contemporary attempts to redefine motherhood is, I argue, very much mirrored by the deeply ambivalent portrayals of (step)maternity present within the emerging fairy-tale countercanon.

Rich’s analysis of matrophobia in *Of Woman Born* also alludes to its intrinsically violent nature, and to the way that, under the guise of allowing for the daughter’s individuation and empowerment, it often precipitates the disavowal of matrilineal genealogies as a whole:

Matrophobia can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mothers’ bondage, to become individuated and free. The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr. Our personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mothers’; and, in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery. (236)

Interestingly, the “radical surgery” mentioned by Rich finds itself illustrated in Donoghue’s “The Tale of the Hair,” where the heroine, after learning of her foster mother’s deception, cuts her own hair both as an act of empowerment and rebellion, but also as a practical means of escape:

I wept into my hair. I wept enough to fill up another whole body, until the plaits grew heavy and matted. Weighing them between my hands, I realized that my hair was my own to do what I would with. The small paring knife was slow in my hand, but it sawed through the plaits one by one. I had never cut my hair before; I expected something like pain or blood, but all I felt was lightness, like a deer must feel at the shedding of antlers.

Knotted together, end by end, the plaits made the strangest rope; it flowed over my hands like a giant snake. I speared it on a jagged stone and let myself out the window. (96-97)

In addition to matrophobia, several other psychological processes stemming from the child can further exacerbate the diegetic conflict between fairy-tale (step)mother and (step)daughter. Arguably, the most relevant and prevalent of these phenomena is the splitting of the mother into Manichean archetypes onto which the child projects its own anxiety and ambivalence. In this respect, while Bruno Bettelheim’s work has been rightfully criticised by many fairy-tale scholars and psychoanalysts alike, I nevertheless argue that his *Uses of Enchantment* (1976) accurately causes us to take into consideration the narrative framing of fairy stories, doing so by discussing the underlying purpose of depictions of maternal violence in the fairy-tales targetting child readers specifically. “If a child cannot permit himself to feel his jealousy of a parent (this is very threatening to his security), he projects his feelings onto this parent. Then ‘I am jealous of all the advantages and prerogatives of

Mother' turns into the wishful thought: 'Mother is jealous of me.' The feeling of inferiority is defensively turned into a feeling of superiority" (260). While I believe that this interpretation remains overly simplistic in light of the many intricacies inherent to depicting mother/daughter relationships within phallogentric literature, it nevertheless points to a possible distortion of children's perceptions of being parented which, I argue, has become one of the cornerstones of contemporary matricentric fairy-tale retellings. In fact, Bettelheim points to similar dynamics of displacement in his interpretation of "Cinderella", where he argues that:

Cinderella's wish to eliminate Mother is completely repressed in the modern versions and replaced by a displacement and a projection: it is not Mother who overtly plays a crucial role in the girl's life, but a stepmother; Mother is displaced by a substitute. And it is not the girl who wants to debase Mother so that she will be able to play a much bigger role in her father's life, but, in a projection, it is the stepmother who wants to see the girl replaced. (313)

While this interpretation of the tale regrettably fails to account for the full prism of dynamics at play between mother and daughter—which we have been alluding to throughout this thesis—it at least touches on the possibility of a reversal of diegetic matrilineal violence from the daughter and towards the (step)mother.

Returning momentarily to psychoanalytic discourses on the topic of maternal ambivalence, it is necessary to look at Michèle Benhaïm's 2011 *L'ambivalence de la mère*, and the way it rightfully underlines the structuring and crucial nature of matrilineal displays of ambivalence, and suggests that, rather than attempting to suppress ambivalence, it ought to be acknowledged and instrumentalised within the mother/child relationship:

L'ambivalence maternelle n'est pas un accident de la relation de la mère à l'enfant mais une nécessité structurante dont le manque induit lui-même une pathologie et qui peut lui-même évoluer vers une pathologie. La démarche clinique ne vise donc pas à « supprimer » l'ambivalence mais à en permettre une certaine reconnaissance, élaboration qui ferait qu'elle s'exerce de façon structurante et pour la mère et pour l'enfant.

L'ambivalence s'avérera « négative » ou « positive » ou encore la haine sera « destructrice » et mortifère ou vitale et « structurante ». Cette haine, nous en supposerons le point d'origine du côté de la mère et non du côté de l'enfant. À partir de là se pose alors la question de savoir ce qui se noue psychiquement dans la relation d'une mère à son enfant et qui verra cette haine originaire se résoudre soit en haine vitale, c'est-à-dire se symboliser en amour maternel, soit en haine pathologique, c'est-à-dire évoluer dans le registre de « l'abandon ». (Benhaïm 19)

While arguing for the necessity of a “hateful-enough mother” (*mère suffisamment haineuse*) to balance out the “good-enough mother” posited by Donald D. Winnicott, she also convincingly suggests that matrilineal ambivalence may be necessary to facilitate the eventual, post-pubertal split between mother and child:

La mère « suffisamment haineuse » fait lien dans le partage : celui de la femme et de la mère et, à l'intérieur de ce second champ, de la nourrice et de la mère. Le « suffisamment » impliquerait que de la haine soit nécessaire à toute séparation. Comment et pourquoi laisser partir quelqu'un qu'on ne saurait qu'aimer ? Pour se mettre à le haïr, il faut qu'à l'origine on l'ait aimé et pour s'en séparer il faut que malgré cet amour on puisse le haïr. (31)

This linear movement from love to hatred is explored, for instance, in Lee's *White as Snow*, where Coira's blind adoration and idolatry of her mother turns into anguish and hatred after the latter violently rejects her affection:

The queen's face was impassive. That is, it was empty. But so beautiful, so fair, so perfect. Less a face than an instant of revelation.

Physically unmoving, rigid as if bolted into chains and shackles, the child's spirit galvanically strained to fly out of her body, to leap and hurl itself at the feet of her queen.

And suddenly, exactly then, evidently the goddess Arpazia became fiercely aware of this intensity of worship. (53)

"Behave properly. Ask me nothing. Don't talk at all, or I shall be angry." Arpazia spoke without emphasis. She needed to employ none. Coira was already overmastered by total horror.

Not even an unmother. A fiend.

The fiend's eyes gleamed pale. Narrow fingers with three rings emerged from the crow-wing of hair and sleeve. "Take my hand."

Coira did as she was told.

In the past, sometimes, she had been allowed to ceremonially touch this hand. Now it did not feel as it had before. It was hot, bony and hard, like the talons of the dreadful bird the woman now resembled. (95)

Interestingly, the degradation of Coira's feelings for her mother is echoed by a stark shift in the way Arpazia's appearance is described, as if illustrating the process of splitting on the level of the diegesis. Thus, instead of a fairy godmother turning rags into ballgowns, Arpazia



is cursed to transform into a monstrous creature by the heartbreak and horror her wickedness caused her daughter. Besides, one must note Lee's use of the word "unmother", a term which we previously used to define the witch's function in the maternal fairy-tale plot, and which, when juxtaposed with "fiend", implicitly (re)assesses the antagonistic nature of any female character refusing to embrace her alleged maternal role.

Returning to Benhaïm, we must note two significant shortcomings in her argument: not only does her conception of ambivalence remain inherently binary, manifesting itself as either positive or negative, destructive or structuring, it is also said to always stem from the mother. However, as this section sets out to prove, while it is crucial and urgent to reclaim maternal ambivalence as a natural part of parental experiences, it is similarly essential to discuss ambivalence emanating from the child towards its mother. On this topic, Melanie Klein insightfully argues that the constantly fluctuating relationship infants have with the maternal breast inevitably leads them to experiencing ambivalence towards the figure of the mother, apprehended as a container of both the "good" and the "bad" object/breast:

Synthesis between feelings of love and destructive impulses towards one and the same object—the breast—gives rise to depressive anxiety, guilt and the urge to make reparation to the injured loved object, the good breast. This implies that ambivalence is at times experienced in relation to a part-object—the mother's breast. During the first few months of life, such states of integration are short-lived. At this stage the ego's capacity to achieve integration is naturally still very limited and to this contributes the strength of persecutory anxiety and of the splitting processes which are at their height. It seems that, as development proceeds, experiences of synthesis and, in consequence, of depressive anxiety, become more frequent and last longer; all this forms part of the growth of integration. With progress in integration and synthesis of the contrasting emotions towards the object, mitigation of destructive impulses by

libido becomes possible. This however leads to an *actual diminution* of anxiety which is a fundamental condition for normal development. (*Envy and Gratitude* 80-81)

While Klein's precise, clinical approach to infantile ambivalence is unlikely to appear as such within contemporary fairy-tale retellings, I nevertheless suggest that the motif of the poisoned apple—when considered as a symbolic representation of the maternal breast, split in the middle between its “good” and “bad” (poisoned) side—is often regarded with the same ambivalence than that which Klein attributes to children struggling to envision the mother/breast as simultaneously capable of care and cruelty, nurture and deprivation, healing and poisoning. Thus, the first two following passages both present the poisoned apple as a distinctively maternal symbol that is equally as enticing as it is menacing to the heroine. As for the third excerpt, taken from Gaiman's “Snow, Glass, Apples,” it conversely uses the same motif to demonstrate how maternal nurture is inseparable from the production of violence, implying in so doing that the consumption of maternal fluids may be apprehended as an act of aggression emanating from the child and targetting the body of the (step)mother:

[Coira and Arpazia] had eaten the honey-apples from the basket, sharing them. The sweet, sweet taste burned across their lips, closing their throats, gluing their tongues to the ceilings of their mouths. (Lee, *White as Snow* 226)

I took the apple from [my stepmother] without a word, bit into the red side, and began to choke. Fear and excitement locked in struggle in my throat, and blackness seeped across my eyes. I fell to the ground.

My head was still swimming; I thought I might faint again. But my mouth was full of apple, slippery, still hard, vinegary at the edges. I could feel the marks of my own teeth on the skin. I bit down, and juice ran to the corners of my lips. It was not

poisoned. It was the first apple of the year from my father's orchard. (Donoghue 57-58)

[The princess] took the dried apple from me and began to chew it with her sharp yellow teeth.

“Is it good?”

She nodded. I had always been scared of the little princess, but at that moment I warmed to her and, with my fingers, gently, I stroked her cheek. She looked at me and smiled — she smiled but rarely — then she sank her teeth into the base of my thumb, the Mound of Venus, and she drew blood. (Gaiman, *Smoke and Mirrors* 225)

Thus, though the source of the child's and the mother's ambivalence are not at all comparable, I argue that contemporary retellings show interest not only in reclaiming ambivalence as part of matrilineality and mother/child bonding, but also in simultaneously exploring this phenomenon through the prism of the mother as well as that of the daughter.

## 8.2. Reframing Matrilineal Ambivalence

Up to this point, we have attempted to (re)define maternal ambivalence and reclaim it as a natural, organic phenomenon that is not the sole preserve of the most monstrous and illegitimate mothers, and whose culturally enforced silencing only serves to polarise further the already Manichean understanding patriarchal systems have of motherhood. Therefore, my intent throughout this final chapter is to put forward a less pathologising and incriminating definition of matrilineal ambivalence, as well as to examine how contemporary fairy stories explore and subvert this hybrid state in order to craft a genre countercanon in which the theretofore silenced mother/daughter pair is given a central yet layered and complex narrative

role. In this respect, Barbara Almond's *The Monster Within* (2010) defines ambivalence as “a combination of the loving and hating feelings we experience toward those who are important to us. Maternal ambivalence is a normal phenomenon. It is ubiquitous. It is not a crime or a failing” (1). Interestingly, in an attempt to destigmatise this phenomenon, she also explains that, while often distressing, ambivalence may also have some positive consequences on the matrilineal bond:

Although [there] is a wide spectrum of disturbance in mother-child relationships, ... there can also be movement in the direction of healthier functioning. Even in the most dysfunctional situations, there may be islands of strong mothering. At different times of life and under different stresses, areas of strength and weakness may come to the fore. If unconscious identifications and memories of a negative quality can wreck relationships, those of a positive quality can also rescue them. In all but the most extreme cases, substantial motherlove survives at the core of the relationship. (21)

A very similar notion is put forward by Winnicott in his analysis of primary maternal preoccupation. He thus argues that “[there] is such a thing as an environment that is not good enough, and which distorts infant development, just as there can be a good-enough environment, one that enables the infant to reach, at each stage, the appropriate innate satisfactions and anxieties and conflicts” (*Collected Works* 5: 183-184). This seemingly inherent tension between mother and child—as well as the constant oscillation between mother-love and mother-hate—is recurrently explored by contemporary story(re)tellers through the prism of the fairy-tale, as evidenced most strikingly by Garrison Keillor's “My Stepmother, Myself” and Sara Maitland's “The Wicked Stepmother's Lament.” Thus, both these revisions of “Cinderella” emphasise the normalcy of maternal ambivalence—sometimes to the point of legitimising extreme forms of moral and physical abuse against the

child—but also the love and forgiveness that prevail within the mother/daughter dyad in spite of, and perhaps as a means of coping with, these ambivalent experiences:

Often I find myself longing for the “good old days” when my stepmother made me sweep the hearth.

We see each other almost every day—she comes up here and we play tennis or I go down there for lunch—and we often reminisce and laugh about our little disagreements. She is one of my best friends. Other people treat me like royalty but she treats me like a real person. ... I love it. I tell her, “Mother, you’re the only one who yells at me. Don’t ever stop.” And I mean it. Anger is real. It’s honest.

(Keillor 185)

We plod on together, because we always have. Sweetly she keeps at it, smile, smile, dream, hope, wait, love, forgive, smile, smile, bloody smile. Tiredly, I keep at it too: “Sweep that grate.” “Tidy your room.” ... “Wake up, hurry up, stop daydreaming, no you can’t, yes you must, get a move on, don’t be so stupid.” And “You’re not going to the ball, or party, or disco, or over your Nan’s, dressed like *that*.”

She calls it nagging.

She calls me Mummy. (Maitland 227)

Thus, as important as it is to consider displays of infantile violence emanating—however unwittingly—from fairy-tale heroines and targetting their (step)mothers, it is just as crucial, in our effort to carve back space for ambivalence and hybridity within the realm of the maternal experience, not to confine this very ambivalence solely to mothers. While in some branches of psychoanalysis, ambivalence emanating from children is most often discussed with regards to the splitting of the parent into opposite figures—a concept which

we have already explored at length several times throughout this thesis—Nancy Chodorow presents it as a cyclical phenomenon that mother and daughter both engage in:

Mothers feel ambivalent toward their daughters, and react to their daughters' ambivalence toward them. They desire both to keep daughters close and to push them into adulthood. This ambivalence in turn creates more anxiety in their daughters and provokes attempts by these daughters to break away. Deutsch suggests that this spiral, laden as it is with ambivalence, leaves mother and daughter convinced that any separation between them will bring disaster to both. (135)

As previously argued by this dissertation, the utter lack of benignant and unprejudiced spaces—both physical and theoretical—for the exploration of female and, more specifically, matrilineal ambivalence leads to inevitable escalations of conflict between mothers and daughters. One may therefore argue that the “disaster” Chodorow mentions does not solely result from the inevitability of matrilineal ambivalence, but also stems from a deep-rooted lack of interest for the mother/daughter dyad within phallogentric literatures and criticism. Furthermore, it is important to underline that, of the small array of matricentric narratives that are acknowledged by the Western literary canon, very few diverge from the prototypical mother/daughter plot structure ending in tragedy and mutual destruction.

Conversely to Chodorow's rather pessimistic view of mother/daughter relationships, Rozsika Parker defends the importance of maternal ambivalence by underlining its potentially positive outcome in the maintaining of the mother's sense of self:

Once again what I want to consider is the impact of the experience of maternal ambivalence on a mother's evolving capacity to mother. The issue is not so much that *mothers need to be conscious of ambivalence*, but rather that *ambivalence itself can provoke consciousness* of what is going on between mother and baby. It is the unruly,

unacceptable nature of hatred that breeds thought and concern; the aggressive fantasies, the violent impulses bring women face to face with themselves – and with their children. Some can bear it. Some find it unbearable. ...

I am suggesting that it is the experience of maternal ambivalence that provides a woman with a sense of her independent identity. The pain of ambivalence, the distress in recognizing that the child hates her for frustrating its desires, and that she hates the child for frustrating her independent needs, can be a force for affirming her independent identity. Both mother and child need the mother's affirmation of her own needs, desires, opinions, rage, love and hatred if separateness is to be established – and thus relationship. (169-170)

Borrowing from Freud, Benhaïm similarly presents ambivalence as a dynamic integral to the mother/child dyad, which must be resolved through a symbolic shift from love to hatred for the (m)other:

Cependant, l'amour se réfère au fait de surmonter une *ambivalence inévitable à l'origine* que nous traduisons par aimer, c'est bien se séparer de l'objet d'amour d'une part, la *haine symbolique* est vitale pour la mère et pour l'enfant, d'autre part.

Si l'un des destins de la pulsion est *la transformation de l'amour en haine*, nous voici au cœur de *l'ambivalence*, celle que Freud nomme « ambivalence du sentiment », reposant sur l'existence de souhaits contradictoires. Ambivalence et non opposition car l'amour ne s'oppose pas à la haine mais à l'indifférence. (54)

In light of this, and in an effort to move away from the structural binaries ruling and regulating our understanding of the mother/daughter bond, I argue that we must move past the pathologising definitions of ambivalence put forward by psychoanalytic theory, in order to instead frame this phenomenon as a core component of filiation that is neither particularly

healthy nor inherently destructive, rather than as a process which ought to be navigated to a single specific ending. In this respect, several contemporary retellers like Emma Donoghue, Garrison Keillor, Tanith Lee, and Sara Maitland notably present ambivalence not only as a ubiquitous experience, but also as a positive outcome of the mother/daughter conflict. Thus, the heroines of Donoghue's "The Tale of the Apple" and "The Tale of the Hair" eventually choose to return to—or remain with—their once antagonistic mother figures<sup>17</sup> (Donoghue 58, 98-99), while Keillor's and Maitland's Cinderella-inspired characters choose to minimise the violence and abuse they were subjected to, dismissing these phenomena as normal displays of matrilineal ambivalence and choosing to treat their (step)mothers with patience and magnanimity instead (Keillor 184-185; Maitland 33-35). As for Lee's *White as Snow*, the mother/daughter plot is resolved in a strikingly nuanced and ambivalent manner: after having repeatedly emphasised the imbalance between Coira's blind adoration of and devotion to her mother—and the latter's equally blind disgust and hatred for her daughter—their eventual reunion is depicted as intensely emotional, simultaneously bordering on the maternal, the erotic, and the lethal. Thus, while in this scene, Arpazia still attempts to murder her daughter one final time, she does so through uncharacteristically tender and maternal means:

Together [Coira and Arpazia] curled by the fire, from which a soft heat still came, though it had died an hour before.

“You're my beauty,” said Arpazia, “the most beautiful in all the world. Skin like snow and hair like ebony and your lips red as a rose. Oh, you're mine.” Arpazia had never known her mother, who had died, they told Arpazia, at Arpazia's birth.

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<sup>17</sup> While both these stories end on the potential reconciliation of their respective versions of the mother/daughter dyad, one must however note that they also suggest that, like in most other tales in this collection, these ambivalent relationships will inevitably have to be renegotiated, transformed, and even queered in order to successfully transcend the oppressive confines of prototypical maternal structures. In light of this, this dissertation looks at the interactions and intersections between matrilineality and queerness in the following section of this chapter.



Coira tried to speak, but could not. Her voice, like the dire voice in her mother's head, had gone dumb. This did not matter. Arpazia sang to her. It concerned snow and roses.

Coira's ears sang, too, like the sea. She breathed in tiny shallow gasps and her heart pounded, rattling her breast. But she was happy. So happy at last. She had not lost her love. All love was here. She did not need to trust, only give in.

She held tighter still, but now her fingers had no grip. She did not realize, for Arpazia held her so close, tighter, tight as any loving, clinging child. (226)

Additionally, Coira's final assessment of her mother's parenting interestingly neither negates nor condemns its intrinsically violent and destructive nature; on the contrary, it leads her to contemplating her own upcoming motherhood<sup>18</sup> with hope and eagerness (265-266).

However, these attempts to redefine motherhood in the hope of reclaiming matrilineal ambivalence and instating less polarised, more relatable archetypes of maternity are inherently complicated by the concurrent discouragement of empathetic bonding between mothers, as well as the absence of a literary and theoretical canon allowing mothers to discuss such experiences outside of dynamics of competition and mutual incrimination. Thus, while Winnicott's concept of the "good-enough mother" is particularly interesting in the way it carves out a more sympathetic and accessible alternative to the culturally sanctioned figure of the infallible, utterly devoted (biological) mother, Alison Stone argues that—although it may not have been Winnicott's intention—this theoretical figure is inevitably bound to become yet another standard for mothers and maternal carers to measure themselves—and each other—to:

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<sup>18</sup> Similarly to her mother, Coira's pregnancy is the direct result of the unconsented sexual assaults she suffered at the hands of her captor, Hadz.

There are ambiguities in the concept of the good-enough mother which shed light on the power relations between mothers and parenting experts. Winnicott sought merely to lend a voice to the practical, everyday wisdom of the so-called “ordinary devoted mother”, who facilitates and promotes her child’s development and well-being. However, Winnicott takes it that this kind of mother acts instinctively, not from rational principles (Segal 1992, 4). Specifically, she acts from her unconscious, and it is precisely by doing so that she can assist her child towards gradual individuation. This is because each mother more-or-less unconsciously harbors ambivalent feelings towards her child—she feels love and hatred together... .

Because ambivalence is difficult to deal with, the “good-enough mother” remains an ideal—the ideal through which Winnicott articulates the principles underlying mother-child interactions. As Naomi Segal concludes, “‘good enough’ is not so much a reassuring minimum as an exact, indefinable measure” (1992, 5). Thus, although Winnicott aimed merely to describe everyday mothering practice and not to prescribe to mothers, his ideal becomes one to which mothers aspire and by which they measure and judge themselves and one another. (*Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and Maternal Subjectivity* 33-34)

This phenomenon is for instance illustrated by Nikita Gill’s “Mothers and Daughters,” which underlines how even the ordinary devoted mother of Winnicottian theory may be inaccessible to some (step)mothers:

She will not always be compassionate.  
 Sometimes the brush will pull your hair  
 too hard on purpose when running through it.

Sometimes her voice will be loud, so incensed  
 your palms will turn clammy, icy with fear.

Sometimes her mouth will twist  
 into something not a smile, not benevolence.

And she will be all the things  
 that you thought only stepmothers can be.

Her pain received no outlet.

Her injuries healed wrong,  
 and she had to drink her own wounds  
 to continue to exist,  
 no one ever taught her  
 she would have to do this. (150)

Parker expresses a very similar idea in the introduction of her seminal work on maternal ambivalence, *Torn in Two* (2005):

[The] ever-changing, contradictory prescriptions for “perfect” motherhood are a manifestation of an underlying awareness of the “imperfect” impulses in all mothers provoked by the conflicts engendered by maternal ambivalence – magnified by persecutory ideals. But, to return to mothers mirroring mothers, mothers both do and do not provide each other with comforting reflections and a place of safety in a society even more critical of mothers than they are of themselves. (3)

The regret Parker expresses regarding the generalised lack of empathy and support between fellow mothers reveals a significant gap within this dissertation’s corpus: by nature of the plot, very few of these stories allow the two archetypal fairy-tale mothers—the genitrix and the wicked stepmother—to interact with one another, or even to know of the other. Aside

from emphasising, once again, the impossibility for female characters to coexist more than fleetingly within the fairy-tale diegesis, this pattern underlines how motherhood as an institution actively discourages any and all forms of maternal bonding, be it with female peers or one's own children: by normalising adherence to impossible maternal standards, mothers are all implicitly placed in competition with one another. This is illustrated, for instance, by Margarethe's and Henrika<sup>19</sup>'s feud in Gregory Maguire's *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister*:

“No child of mine ever screamed like a hellcat,” observes Margarethe to the butter churn.

“That'll do, Clara,” says Henrika, but it's clear she's speaking to Margarethe. ...

Henrika turns her back to Margarethe. By habit Iris glances into the mirror, hoping to snatch a view of some peppery household spirit, but instead she sees the corner of Henrika's face. Henrika is vexed: both angry and anxious. The beautiful brow is furrowed, and Henrika pinches her lower lip between her teeth, thinking.

“A good dose of chamomile will settle her down,” says Margarethe nonchalantly.

“Don't lecture me on the management of my own child,” says Henrika in a cold voice, and she sweeps from the room.

“I was trying to *assist*,” says Margarethe after her, with exaggerated politeness.

“Mama,” says Iris, “you're not minding your tongue.”

“Who are you to tell me to mind my tongue?” says Margarethe, languorously. ...

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<sup>19</sup> Henrika is Clara's biological mother and Cornelius van den Meer's first spouse, and dies halfway through the novel while pregnant with her second child. Cornelius promptly remarries Margarethe after Henrika's passing, turning her into Clara's *de facto* stepmother.

Iris doesn't answer. She doesn't like her mother to be fawning, but for her mother to be impertinent is equally upsetting. "She's our hostess and our protector," says Iris at last. Can't you like her?"

"Like her? And what is there of her to like? That her father did handsomely in business? That she has pretensions toward a well-shaped mind? That she coddles her daughter and swaddles her into an unusual infancy? That she does the girl no good? The girl is rotten, or can't you see it?" (112-114)

Notably, only Maitland's "The Wicked Stepmother's Lament" presents the wicked stepmother and Cinderella's biological mother as former friends, and points to the institution of motherhood as having precipitated the latter's demise:

I knew her mother very well, you see; we grew up together. I loved her mother. Really. With so much hope and fondness and awareness of her worth. But – and I don't know how to explain this without sounding like an embittered old bitch, which I probably am – she was too good. Too giving. She gave herself away, indiscriminately. ...

And it was just the same with that child. ... And yes, of course she looked so lovely, who could have resisted her, propped up in her bed with that tiny lovely child sucking, sucking, sucking? The mother who denied her little one nothing, the good mother, the one we all longed for, pouring herself into the child. Well, I'll tell you, I've done it too, it is hell caring for a tiny daughter, I know. ... It is a perilous time for a woman, that nursing of a daughter, and you can only survive if you cling to yourself with a fierce and passionate love .... Well, she could not, of course she could not, so she did not survive. (29-31)

Interestingly, while in such narratives the mother/stepmother dyad is almost systematically depicted as a Manichean binary—with the stepmother seldom getting to embody the more positive of these two figures—both Chodorow and Rich put forward models of split maternities in which the non-biologic, pseudo-maternal figure is the one most ardently admired and sought after by the child, while the original mother finds herself deliberately and repeatedly alienated by a daughter who strives to be neither associated to nor assimilated by her genitrix:

A girl often becomes very critical of her family, especially of her mother, and may idealize the mother or the family of a friend. As earlier, she tries to solve her ambivalent dependence and sense of oneness by projection and by splitting the good and bad aspects of objects; her mother and home represent bad, the extrafamilial world, good. Alternatively, she may try in every way to be unlike her mother. (She may idealize a woman teacher, another adult woman or older girl, or characters in books and films, and contrast them to her mother.) In this case her solution again involves defensive splitting, along with projection, introjection, and the creation of arbitrary boundaries by negative identification (I am what she is not). In both cases she has fled to intense identification-idealization-object loves, trying to merge herself with anyone other than her mother, all the while expressing her feelings of dependence on and primary identification with this mother. (137)

Evidently, this model remains intrinsically problematic and fallible in that it perpetuates a dichotomous understanding of maternity and a systematic labelling of mothering behaviours as either “good” (perfect) or “bad” (wicked). Nevertheless, I wish to suggest that such theories may in fact help us carve out space for the subversion of fairy-tale stepmaternity: in fact, as we have repeatedly pointed out throughout this dissertation, the character of the wicked stepmother is often constructed as an inverted reflection of the biological mother,

who herself functions as the incarnation of culturally sanctioned maternity. I therefore argue that, rather than being unquestioningly demonised for her defiant divergence from the patriarchal model, the wicked stepmother could instead serve as the narrative embodiment of alternative forms of maternity, deliberately intent on disrupting, queering, and eventually desontologising the institution of motherhood. This way, fairy-tale heroines could be confronted to multiple forms of mothering—canonical and not—rather than restrained to the single example of the biological mother, whose accession to maternity coincides more often than not with her narrative destruction.

Besides, in addition to the capacity fairy-tale stepmothers may have to subvert the patriarchal understanding of maternity, Winnicott underlines that non-biological mothers are entirely—and equally—capable of successfully performing the role of the “ordinary devoted mother”:

We can now say why we think the baby’s mother is the most suitable person for the care of that baby; it is she who can reach this special state of primary maternal preoccupation without being ill. But an adoptive mother, or any woman who can be ill in the sense of “primary maternal preoccupation”, may be in a position to adapt well enough, on account of having some capacity for identification with the baby.

*(Collected Works 5: 187)*

In fact, in spite of the central place of instinct in his understanding of motherhood, which we underscored and criticised throughout Chapter 5, Winnicott argues that the mother’s ability to perform the aforementioned “ordinary devotion” stems neither from the body or the biologic, nor even from being entrusted with a child to parent, but rather from having herself experienced being a mothered child:

I suggest, as you know I do, and I suppose everyone agrees, that ordinarily the woman enters into a phase, a phase from which she ordinarily recovers in the weeks and months after the baby's birth, in which to a large extent she is the baby and the baby is her. There is nothing mystical about this. After all, she was a baby once, and she has in her the memories of being a baby; she also has memories of being cared for, and these memories either help or hinder her in her own experiences as a mother.

*(Collected Works 7: 333)*

This argument, I believe, may be illustrated by the way Coira envisions her upcoming motherhood in the conclusion of Lee's *White as Snow*: thus, in spite of the deeply violent, ambivalent, and traumatic nature of her relationship to her mother, Coira is able to express confidence regarding her own future ability to mother, as well as to describe the lack of identity boundary between her self and her child's in positive terms: “[When Hadz] did that—to—my mother—I *felt* the child's life in me, its breath, its heartbeat. It's curled up inside me—it's *mine*—it's me—another me, myself born again in flesh, yet new and unlike and changed—I'm not a grave—I can give it the world. And I want my child. My motherhood. I want that” (266).

In light of the previous arguments and the contemporary efforts to desontologise fairy-tale motherhood, it is also necessary to briefly reconsider our previous comments regarding the recurring motif of poisonous maternal fluids. Indeed, while I previously defended a synecdochical reading of this motif as a symbol of the noxious mothering provided by “false” mothers, I would like to suggest here that it may also be interpreted as a critique of breastfeeding being regarded as an integral and imperative part of motherhood, thus furthering its connections to cisgender reproductive organs. For instance, Donoghue's “The Tale of the Apple” uses the motif of the apple as an analogy for the maternal breast, and while the stepmother's attempts to feed the heroine apples initially seem to result in the



latter's poisoning, it eventually is revealed to have been a benign gesture solely intended to emulate bonding between mother and child, which the heroine had misconstrued as an act of aggression (56-58). By questioning the internalised association of good mothering with breastfeeding, contemporary retellings thus force us to dismantle the idea of maternity as being the natural purpose of cisgender female bodies, which is, according to a 2013 article by Marjolaine Héon and Patrick Martin, entirely aligned with contemporary efforts to destigmatise alternatives to the institutionalised, bodily-centric model of maternity still endorsed by contemporary healthcare systems (21-22). However, these tentative attempts by contemporary storytellers to desontologise motherhood through the medium of the fairy-tale also serve to facilitate our exploration of the margins of maternity, and to question its boundaries with other, similarly alienated forms of female bonding. In this respect, the final section of this chapter focuses on the intersection of motherhood and queerness, so as to demonstrate how the contemporary queering of the mother/daughter fairy-tale plot allows the genre not only to embrace emerging forms of alternative filiation, but also to divorce the experience of mothering from the quintessential figure of the biological mother, expanding it in so doing to other systems of female relatedness and kinship.

### **8.3. Kissing the Witch, Loving the Monster**

Although this dissertation's corpus was selected specifically for its matricentric focus and subversive portrayal of the traditional mother/daughter fairy-tale plot, few of the works discussed in this thesis can in fact be labelled as unambiguously queer variations on traditional fairy-tales. The most striking exception to this assessment is, of course, Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch*, the very title of which already foreshadows the queer slant of the entire collection. As underlined by Abilail L. Palko, however, Donoghue's collection is

neither exclusively queer nor entirely matricentric; instead, it seeks to establish a matrilineal literary countercanon through the medium of the fairy-tale, encouraging its female readers to “[kiss] a witch” with impunity (Donoghue 225), be it as an act of filial recognition, sapphic desire or, more metaphorically, a means for the aforementioned witch to “leave [her story] on [the reader’s] mouth,” for them to pass along (228):

Donoghue’s structural innovation lies in the way she connects the protagonist from each story to that of the story that precedes hers as well as that of the one that follows, thereby crafting a subtle genealogy of women. Each story thus ultimately takes us further back into a mythical past in which women were free to “kiss the witch,” which I take as a metaphor for exploring the cathexis of the mother-daughter relationship that Adrienne Rich has argued is the great unwritten story (Rich 225). (Palko 919)

However, in the final section of this chapter, I argue that queerness must all the same be considered as inseparable from the many dynamics of subversion and desontologisation that shape the representation of motherhood and daughterhood within this corpus. It must also be pointed out that, evidencing the continued impact of the amalgamation of queerness and sexual deviancy within the patriarchal literary canon—many of the stories discussed in this dissertation explore same-sex desire and homoromantic attraction through the lens of violence, abuse, manipulation, and sometimes even incest. We must therefore acknowledge both the positive, sympathetic depictions of female queerness in the genre, and the much more biased and problematic representations of non-normative female desires and sexual practices it also contains. Thus, through this dyadic analysis of female queerness, I will not only demonstrate the gradual diegetic transformation of non-maternal, norm-defying female figures from antagonists into romantic prospects, but also underline how the subversion of traditional matrilineal dynamics of violence and mutual alienation may lead to the reclaiming of additional forms of Otherness and monstrosity within the fairy-tale genre.

While several of the works discussed in this dissertation openly portray female queerness, one must nonetheless take note of the prevailing absence of portrayals of transness and trans parenting, particularly noticeable among such deliberately provocative subversions of the fairy-tale canon. This narrative disinterest becomes even more striking in light of the genre's otherwise particularly vast gallery of non-biological mother figures and nurturers. Thus, the generalised lack of interest for the many interactions between transness, parentality, and the fairy-tale as a literary genre particularly prone to transformations and transgressions of every genre—and gender—is particularly regrettable, especially as the desontologisation of motherhood has arguably become one of the main concerns of the contemporary fairy-tale counter canon. Additionally, as I mention in the concluding remarks, gender fluidity and transidentity have become increasingly common topics in modern-day fairy-tales targeting children and young adults, particularly in works postdating the ones discussed in this dissertation. This can be evidenced, for instance, by works like Jen Wang's graphic novel *The Prince and the Dressmaker* (2018), Sundra Mitchell's collection of queer fairy-tales *All Out: The No-Longer Secret Stories of Queer Teens throughout the Ages* (2018), and Melanie Gillman's newly-published graphic fairy-tale collection *Other Ever Afters: New Queer Fairy-Tales* (2022).

However, increased representation of minority groups in any cultural canon is bound to also shed light on the most enduring biases and misconceptions these group continue to face. Thus, Helen Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014)—one of the first fairy-tale novelisations to prominently feature a transgender parent—has for instance been harshly criticised for, among many other elements, its depiction of transness as resulting primarily from sexual trauma, as well as its portrayal of the story's eponymous heroine, Boy, vehemently refusing to resort to the appropriate name and pronouns when discussing her biological progenitor. On this topic, Jeana Jorgensen explains that:

[trauma] bookends the abuse that Frank, the rat catcher, experienced in his former life as Frances, and the abuse that Frank inflicts on his daughter Boy (whose name, indeed, could be read as wishful thinking on Frank's part: a performative utterance shifting the daughter's identity into more masculine territory). Thanks to Mia's investigation, Boy is able to learn about how after the rape, Frances "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" (303). Frances became Frank, traumatized into a social transition, though notably Frank sought but never followed through with medical transition, due to being "afraid of dying on the physician's table" (304). As a trans man, Frank's demeanor was cruel and vicious. Before Boy decides to move out, she recalls the constant unprovoked assaults: "He'd hit me when I didn't flinch at the raising of his arm, and he'd hit me when I cowered" (7). The physical abuse characterized Boy's childhood and influenced her decision to move out. Frank was especially punitive when Boy went out with a boy, or asserted herself; in retrospect, the reader might wonder if Frank was trying to protect Boy from the fate of Frances, who was raped. Thus, Frank is presented as steeped in trauma: his identity originates from it, and he perpetuates it. ("A Tale of Two Trans Men" 185)

While I have chosen not to discuss Oyeyemi's depiction of mothering and trans parenting in this dissertation as her novel did not meet the requirements of my corpus, the few elements mentioned by Jorgensen appear to deliberately parallel traditional tropes of "Snow White" stories, among which the perpetration of parental abuse against the heroine, the motif of the (magic) mirror, and even the title of the novel itself. Evidently, it is infinitely more problematic to unquestioningly perpetuate such fairy-tale tropes when the wicked parent—rather than a mother or a stepmother—is in fact a transgender father, who nonetheless appears just as abusive and cruel as his female counterpart. This is not, of course, to suggest

that transgender individuals can never experience parental ambivalence or display abusive and violent behaviours; but this portrayal being one of the most notable examples of a contemporary retelling featuring a transgender parent carries particularly harmful implications regarding transidentity.

Returning to the corpus of this dissertation, we can also mention Donoghue's "The Tale of the Hair" which similarly—albeit more implicitly—hints at a possible gender fluidity on the part of the heroine's captor, nurturer, and unwitting love interest (96). However, not only is this fluidity never framed as other than a ploy to deceive the heroine, but the tale also suggests that a romantic—and potentially sexual—encounter has taken place between these characters, an encounter which becomes all the more problematic in light of the pseudo-parental relationship that unites the heroine to her *de facto* caretaker:

I tried to ask, What do I feel like? but [the prince's] mouth was stopping my mouth.

...

You should have known better than to give me what I asked for, I whispered, tears creeping down my face. Now the wind is scented with lavender, and the wolves howl because they cannot have him, and when he blows his royal horn, I will go to him.

There was a long silence. Nothing less royal, [the woman] said at last, smashing something down on the slab between us.

She guided my hand over the pieces of horn, common horn. The horn was mine, she said. I knew I would have no peace till I found you a prince. As she spoke her whisper deepened into a hoarse, musical voice, a voice I knew.

I pulled back and threw the sharp fragments in her face, calling her witch, monster, carrion, all the words she ever taught me. (94-96)

Therefore, while this tale contains an interesting exploration of the permeable boundary between non-biological parentality and female queerness, it also regrettably furthers the existing amalgamations between transness, queer relationships, and predatory attitudes towards women and children. In a similar manner, Angela Carter's "In Pantoland" discusses an archetypal figure of fantasy literature—the Dame—who distinctively resembles the fairy-tale's wicked stepmother, while simultaneously being portrayed as a transgressively genderfluid persona:

Double-sexed and self-sufficient, the Dame, the sacred transvestite of Pantoland, manifests him/herself in a number of guises. ...

She/he stars as Mother Goose. In Cinderella, you get two for the price of one with the Ugly Sisters. If they throw in Cinders' stepmother, that's a bonanza, that's three. Then there is Jack's Mum in Jack and the Beanstalk where the presence of cow and stem in close proximity rams home the "phallic mother" aspect of the Dame.

*(American Ghosts 50)*

Once again, these representations of ambiguously gendered parental figures are far from faultless, often leaning into overly literal illustrations of contemporary psychoanalytic theories, as demonstrated by the aforementioned passage. Nevertheless, they point to potential areas of intersection and interaction between the wicked parent in its intrinsic and disruptive Otherness, and other kinds of subversion of equally essential and internalised patriarchal constructs.

Besides, though few of the stories discussed in this dissertation overtly explore queer topics, I nonetheless believe that, as suggested by Damien W. Riggs and Sujay Kentlyn in their chapter on "Transgender Women, Parenting, and Experiences of Ageing" (2014),

queerness can be considered as an intrinsic dimension of any and all non-normative forms of maternity, regardless of the parent's and the child's own relationships to queerness:

[KrysAnne's]<sup>20</sup> story queers notions of motherhood not because she herself identified as queer, but rather due to the fact that her relationship to normative notions of motherhood and family challenges commonplace assumptions about what it means to parent as a woman. The chapter explores the experiences that some transgender women may have with the category "mother" that are in many ways incommensurate with the experiences of mothers who were assigned female at birth. (221-222)

What Riggs and Kentlyn convincingly suggest here is that, beyond making motherhood more inclusive of non-cis, non-heterosexual mother figures, the queering of contemporary motherhood—both as an experience and an institution—may allow us to move beyond hegemonic, exclusionary definitions of motherhood that inevitably uphold a binary understanding of gender, reject the existence of ambivalence within the mother/child dyad, and implicitly bolster the supremacy of biological filiation over any other alternative parental model. In this respect, Margaret F. Gibson clarifies that

[it] is a mistake to think that queering motherhood is only and inevitably a matter of addition, of bringing parents who identify as "queer" and/or "trans" into existing, unyielding frameworks. Motherhood is such a closely monitored and prevalent identity, such a fundamental component of social ideology, that there is ample territory for "queering": academic concepts, political movements, cultural representations, and institutional arrangements, to name a few options. The parenting experiences and insights of those who do not identify as "queer" can also queer motherhood. ... Queering motherhood can therefore start where any of the central

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<sup>20</sup> KrysAnne is a transgender woman and mother whose story is explored in the 2010 documentary film *Gen Silent*, directed by Stu Maddux.

gendered, sexual, relational, political, and/or symbolic components of “expected” motherhood are challenged. These challenges can be experiential, empirical, or theoretical. (5-6)

The queering of fairy-tale motherhood, I argue, would therefore allow us—in addition to reclaiming previously silenced mother/daughter myths and stories—to craft new models of matrilineal narratives to function as alternatives to the prototypical mother/daughter plot and its consistently tragic resolution. In this respect, Amber Jacobs declares:

While I can understand the motivation or desire to find myths that appear to hold “traces” of a so-called benign mother-daughter relationship that can, in turn, be used to enrich a potential female imaginary, my own approach to myth with regard to rethinking the mother-daughter relationship differs considerably from such projects. Rather than attempting to recover or re-find something “lost” that is perceived to be essentially harmonious and benign and thus perpetuating a nostalgic utopian fantasy, I am more concerned with working within myth to undo the projections of the male imaginary with a view to reorganizing the very foundations of its structures. Myth must be used to effect the emergence of *new* structures that can bring to representation and theory unconscious fantasies that have hitherto been rendered mute. (182)

Building upon the same idea, Joani and Luke Mortenson propose enticing new alternatives to socially sanctioned forms of mothering, which they present as imbued with queerness, otherness, and plurality:

Imagine a (m)other kind of journey. Imagine mothering as full, juicy living; as wild, luxuriant relationships; as an attitude, as an orientation towards a specific person; an intentional relational consciousness; and a consciousness that extends beyond that person, beyond the self, into the wider cultural and temporal contexts. Imagine



mothering as messy texts, as embodied “mistakes,” as servitude and terror, as surprise and as mundane. Imagine mothering as revolutionary, as transcendental, as meditation, as devotional, as praxis. Imagine releasing the tropes of mother as self-sacrificing, chaste, and able to demonstrate that her children are the centre of her life (Reich 47). Imagine mothering as erotic. Imagine mothering as a site of identity constitution, and paradoxically, as constitutional in the construction of dis/identification. (Mortenson and Mortenson 190)

The very same objective is, once again, put forward by Gibson in the introduction of *Queering Motherhood* (2014), in which she asks:

What might “queering motherhood” then mean? Reproduction, sexuality, culture, kinship, race, embodiment — all have intimate and expected connections to motherhood. When any of these are pulled outside of expectation, are “queered,” can any aspect of motherhood remain untouched? There are unstable boundaries to what can be queered, and how. What is seen as “not yet queer” is vulnerable from multiple oblique angles, as Ahmed observes. ... In this light, queering motherhood becomes a truly expansive project, an endeavor that might profoundly destabilize existing social relations, institutions, and discourses. (1-2)

Interestingly, while a number of works within this dissertation’s corpus lean towards this queer redefinition of mothering, Lee and Donoghue strike one as particularly concerned with the devotional, formidable, and erotic potential of motherhood as described by the Mortensons. Thus, as previously underlined, Donoghue’s “The Tale of the Apple” and Lee’s *White as Snow* both present being-mother-and-daughter as inherently awe-inducing, in both senses of the word. For instance, upon wittingly biting into the poisoned apple, the protagonist of Donoghue’s retelling of “Snow White” narrates the scene as follows: “I took

the apple from [my stepmother's hand] without a word, bit into the red side, and began to choke. Fear and excitement locked in struggle in my throat, and blackness seeped across my eyes. I fell to the ground" (57). Similarly, in *White as Snow*, Coira's encounters with her mother—although rare—all have distinctively religious overtones:

Coira drew in her breath involuntarily. Her eyes were wide.

The queen was rather far away, and so made smaller, and somehow more absolute. She wore a dress of ivory silk, stitched with gold threads. Her hair was not unbound, but held in an openwork golden tower, which showed its glistening darkness. A veil poured from the tower like a soft red flame. ...

And suddenly, exactly then, evidently the goddess Arpazia became fiercely aware of this intensity of worship. (52)

Both writers also explore the customarily taboo intersections between the maternal and the erotic in a variety of scenarios, some undeniably abusive and some less so. Thus, Donoghue's "The Tale of the Apple" and "The Tale of the Hair" both end on ambiguous, potentially romantic reunions between non-mother and non-daughter, that stem directly from the dismantling of the traditional female conflict, which has been revealed as artificial and hollow (54-58, 98-99). As for Lee, we have already discussed the erotic undertones of Coira's and Arpazia's final reunion in *White as Snow*; however, the theme of female queerness is tackled a lot more explicitly in her story "Snow-Drop," where the wicked stepmother analogue—and this retelling's antiheroine—seduces the eponymous Snow-Drop into sexual intercourse, before promptly poisoning her and disposing of her body. One must nevertheless note that, far from being framed as romantic, this tale borders simultaneously on mother/daughter incest and paedophilia: thus, while Snow-Drop's age is never clearly stated

within the tale, her youthful appearance is repeatedly underlined, in particular in the scene of her somewhat violent coupling with Cristena:

In the mirror, Cristena saw, the beautiful doll with its bosom popping from the frills, its hands-span waist, and its naked lower limbs, wriggling. Snow-Drop's eyes were shut and her red lips parted.

Cristena pulled the girl backward against her body. She caressed her breasts, sought the V of coal-black fur. She watched in the mirror. Snow-Drop writhed. She parted her legs and thrust her buttocks into Cristena's belly. She uttered tiny shrill squeaks.

Fire engulfed Cristena. She pinioned Snow-Drop, rubbing, tickling, squeezing, choked by the perfume of roses and cinnamon, hair and skin, drunken and furious, and the girl was screaming, in the glass a demon of black and white and red.

Cristena felt the climax roll up between her thighs, turning her inner life, her soul, over and over in blind ecstasy, as Snow-Drop wailed in her grip and the room exploded.

When Cristena came to herself, Snow-Drop was sitting cross-legged on the floor. She sucked her thumb and played with the ribbons of the corset, like a spoiled child which knows it has been naughty, but that this will not matter. (58-59)

Interestingly, the incestuous undertones of this scene—coupled with Lee's stylistic insistence on excessive, uncontrolled pleasure and sexual ecstasy—are starkly reminiscent of the way Lacan articulates *jouissance*, incest, and the law. Thus, Lacan posits that the prohibition of incest is implemented by the Law of the Father, which emerges as a way to divert the child from its desire for the Mother (Chaboudez 67-83). With regards to this, Isabelle Alfandary argues that an infant's mere contact with its primary object of desire—the Mother—may in

fact provoke a dangerous excess of pleasure—which is why the Father’s prohibitive role is so decisive:

Le principe de plaisir est défini par Freud comme l’un des principes qui régit le fonctionnement de l’activité psychique et vise l’évitement du déplaisir qui peut résulter d’une excitation excessive

Or Lacan soutient que l’objet par rapport à quoi s’organise l’expérience originaire — la mère — est un objet qui, dans certains cas, « littéralement, apporte trop de plaisir ». Le « profond plaisir » dont parle l’analysante et qui peut s’entendre aussi comme une alliance de mots, qu’elle relie à une expérience infantile, fait signe vers l’excès, le trop-de-plaisir que représente pour le nourrisson le contact avec la mère. Le fait qu’un sujet rapporte ce « profond plaisir » à la question de son déplacement géographique, de son exil volontaire, s’éclaire du rapport à la chose (*das Ding*). En tant qu’il se structure et advient à lui-même dans son lien à la chose, comme l’appelle Lacan, le sujet doit d’autant plus s’en protéger qu’il se sent profondément attiré par elle. *Das Ding*, telle que la conçoit Lacan après Freud, a une fonction de structuration et de régulation psychique qui s’avère déterminante : les structures subjectives, qu’on appelle névroses, peuvent se déduire de la relation de chaque sujet à cet Autre qualifié de « préhistorique, inoubliable ». (400-401)

Alfandary’s argument seems particularly relevant to Lee’s “Snow-Drop”, as the fulfilment of maternal incest—represented by the sexual intercourse of Cristena and Snow-Drop—leads to such excesses of *jouissance* that it becomes inherently threatening, eventually resulting in the Snow-Drop’s death. Besides, it is only in the absence of Cristena’s husband—the diegetic embodiment of the Law of the Father—that the desire for the Mother is able to come to the fore.

Finally, although matrilineal dynamics are not quite as central in Gregory Maguire's "Snow White" novelisation *Mirror, Mirror* (2003), it remains relevant to underline how his version of the wicked stepmother—loosely based on the historical figure of Lucrezia Borgia—also partially feeds into this contemporary eroticisation of the (step)maternal: thus, though Maguire follows the prototypical fairy-tale pattern of having Lucrezia attempt to murder her stepdaughter Bianca three times after learning of the hunter's deception, he diverges from traditional tropes for the second attempted murder: instead of having Lucrezia disguise herself as a peddler woman selling lace, she resorts to using a crude and distinctively phallic disguise to sexually threaten Bianca:

Lucrezia Borgia marveled at how musical a girl's scream could sound. She tossed her head like a horse as it nickers, and the thread-haired scrotum and the half-erect member (cheesecloth wrapped around a length of toweling) flopped menacingly down over her nose.

[Bianca] couldn't speak and couldn't breathe. Lucrezia advanced upon her into the room, and put her hand as roughly upon the girl's waist as she could manage. She pushed Bianca against a post in the middle of the room, and flipped the girl's long apron up, as if intending to forage between the girl's legs.

But instead she caught the corners of the apron and pulled them back around the post, and she ducked behind and tied the corners together, so the girl was caught, at least momentarily, tied like Saint Sebastian at the pillar, and in nearly as lusciously fainting a state. (204)

While one could argue that Maguire's intent was to transform a scene of perverted mothering into a parody of male sexual aggression, I believe that this scene may be another reference to the psychoanalytic figure of the phallic mother and her sexual ambiguity and castrative

nature. Either way, however, Maguire's portrayal—like many other aforementioned examples—implicitly depicts both female queerness and gender non-conformism as inherently sexual, threatening, and unnatural.

Conversely to these deeply problematic examples, other tales contain more positive and progressive depictions of queerness, and show acute interest in exploring its subversive and emancipating potential in interaction with motherhood—albeit often more implicitly. For instance—although the maternal figure in this tale is a fairy-godmother rather than a wicked stepmother—Donoghue's "The Tale of the Shoe" discards the traditional, heteronormative ending of "Cinderella" stories in favour of a sapphic conclusion in which the heroine readily chooses her godmother over the prince, and by so doing acknowledges the queer potentialities of non-biological, matrilineal-adjacent kinship between women:

What about the prince? she asked.

He'll find someone to fit, if he looks long enough.

What about me? she asked very low. I'm old enough to be your mother. ...

You're not my mother, I said. I'm old enough to know that. ...

So then she took me home, or I took her home, or we were both somehow taken to the closest thing. (8)

Interestingly, Sara Maitland's "On Becoming a Fairy Godmother" also depicts an openly queer maternal figure—the eponymous and self-appointed Fairy Godmother—who does not, actually have a biological daughter, but rather cares for "a mother who [is] still a child," with whom she fell in love (114). Throughout the tale, the reader thus comes to understand that the "princess" the protagonist looks after is herself a mother, and has been forcibly labelled as a bad and dangerous one due to a variety of tragic internal and external circumstances. In fact,

the story's protagonist is revealed to be her assigned Child Protection Officer, although she rapidly oversteps this role as she endeavours to systematically empower and protect her protégée and her child, eventually assigning herself the role of modern-day Fairy Godmother (113-130). Rather than exploring an actualised queer relationship, Maitland's tale therefore offers an interesting foray into the blurred frontier between motherhood, daughterhood, and womanhood, care and mothering, but also maternal and romantic love. Finally, albeit more implicitly, Danielle Teller's *All the Ever Afters* (2018) presents its heroine's relationship to the abbess, Mother Elfilda, as inherently queer and ambiguous, weaving together dynamics of admiration, devotion, attraction, filiation and, eventually, hatred (59, 65, 71, 74, 76). While this dynamic is incidental to the novel as a whole, it nonetheless represents an interesting attempt by Teller to flesh out the character of Cinderella's wicked stepmother beyond her relationship to her daughters and stepdaughter, as well as to interrogate her understanding of queerness and non-biological filiation.

Besides, even the previously mentioned—and admittedly questionable—forays into (step)mother/(step)daughter eroticism, while crude and overly reliant on shock factor, do echo another interesting point underlined by the Mortensons: that of the unquestioned patriarchal taboo surrounding the topic of maternal eroticism. Thus, according to them, the lack of acknowledgment of the erotic dimension of motherhood inevitably leads to its vilification and pathologisation, as it does with ambivalence:

[Audrey] Lorde suggests a feminist understanding of the erotic might reconfigure eroticism as a form of social and personal “power” (Lorde 53-55). I believe that in order to conceptualize a maternal eroticism, the “menu” of mothering—how to be a mother and how *to* mother—must be artfully widened to include a Cixousian *jouissance*; an exhilarating kind of joy that is born out of the loins of corporeal desire. But this kind of unconventional mothering runs antithetical to the discursive

discourses of motherhood that script all women's lives (O'Reilly 15-16), given that the sexual/maternal dichotomy presupposes that these roles are mutually exclusive. The tabooed sensual/erotic behaviours and feelings that mothers may experience in relationship with their children are forced under erasure by pervasive cultural norms that suggest the best mother is an asexual mother who has been sanitized from all sensuality and sexuality, outside of her presumed physical relationship with her husband. The erotic mother is "forged in the crucibles of difference" (Lorde 112) and must claim her own space within the field of "mother". This creates an unnecessary burden, and also opportunity, for the mother who wishes to privilege the felt-sense of her body in relationship to herself and her children. (195-196)

This systematised erasure of maternal eroticism may therefore partially explain why fairy-tale depictions of abnormal, queer maternal behaviours leans quite so frequently into aggressive and predatory behaviours, just as ambivalence manifests in a much more heightened and violent manner within fairy-tale diegeses than in real societies.

While the central place of the mother's body in the reclaiming of maternal eroticism may initially appear to exclude the figure of the stepmother from contemporary efforts to queering of fairy-tale matrilineality, it is in fact far from the case. In this respect, I argue that, by virtue of her inherently peripheral role within nuclear family structures, the stepmother can already be considered a queer and queering figure, and that her diegetic presence within contemporary fairy-tale revisions is often instrumental to the pluralisation and hybridisation of the maternal. In this regard, Laura Pigozzi suggests that, because of this marginal positioning in relation to both the maternal and the hetero-nuclear family, the stepmother is imbued with great potential for the subversion of motherhood as an institution, as she allows children to experiment with alternative types of mothering and intergenerational bonding, whilst simultaneously confronting them to non-normative forms of maternity:



Si nous considérons que les unités de mesure anglaises sont exprimées en pouces et en pieds, nous pouvons penser le mot *step* aussi dans le sens de pas, marche, étape évolutive. Le mot *stepmother* pourrait donc être interprété comme « mère avec mesure », une mère qui, n'ayant jamais été corps fusionnel pour l'enfant peut être une mère moins collante et, pour rester dans une métaphore musicale, plus tempérée. (48)

Although this suggestion may be anecdotal to Pigozzi, I argue that it represents a particularly pertinent and promising alternative to the traditional supremacy of biological parenting and subsequent demonisation of all other alternatives. Additionally, Pigozzi also presents stepmotherhood as a positive opportunity to circumvent the destructive and unrealistic standards that patriarchy imposes onto the institution of motherhood, suggesting instead to reclaim and embrace ambivalence as being a natural component of parent/child dynamics:

La belle-mère devrait donc considérer comme précieuse l'ambivalence que traduit cette dénomination si loin d'une fausse perfection dangereusement idéalisée qui d'ailleurs n'existe pas. Que ce terme de marâtre soit perturbant est fécond parce que cela n'éluide pas l'imperfection tout en mettant à mal l'image fautive de la belle-mère qui, parfois, dépasse, sur le plan de la perfection, la mère ! Elle est imparfaite et parler de marâtre soutient à la fois l'ambivalence comme ressource et le manque structurel de chaque être humain que l'image de la mère parfaite voudrait nier. ...

L'étoffe des relations humaines est l'imperfection, et les belles-mères en sont l'éloge. (56)

Interestingly, several stories within this corpus present wicked stepmothers as more proactive and empowered than the heroines' biological mothers, and portray them as attempting—albeit in cruel and misguided ways—to protect their stepchildren from the hardships of the world by unteaching them kindness and passivity. This is the case, for

instance, in Maitland's "The Wicked Stepmother's Lament" (31-35) and Keillor's "My Stepmother, Myself" (184-185) but also in Nikita Gill's "Lessons from the Not-So-Wicked Witch for Dorothy," an alternative take on L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* (1900) in which the Wicked Witch endeavours to pass some hard-earned lessons onto the kind and naive Dorothy (97-98). Even Maguire's *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister* follows this trope in its portrayal of Margarethe: thus, in spite of repeatedly mistreating her stepdaughter—as well as, occasionally, her own biological daughters—throughout the novel, Margarethe sincerely strives to teach them how to use life to their own advantage, often through means of questionable honesty:

"This is what stalks you," says Margarethe as the girls hurry after her. "This is the devil's work. There's nothing to anticipate but the broad scythe of the reaper that will cut you down. Only jump when it passes, and perhaps you may save yourself until the next sweep. If you don't jump, you don't save yourself." ...

"How high do you jump?" says Iris to her mother.

"Just you watch me," says Margarethe. "I've jumped from the fens of England to the threshold of the poorhouse of Haarlem, and then jumped again. Just you watch me, and you'll learn what there is to learn. Give me room to cast my eel spear, and let follow what may."

Iris watches. Day after day she watches. ... She watches Clara alternately sulk and cozy up to Margarethe. She watches van den Meer's face grow longer as, with every passing week, the shipment of bulbs doesn't arrive.

Then she watches as Margarethe waits, and waits, and chooses the right moment to jump again. (158-159)

Anecdotally, this is also in these very terms that Margarethe's decision to seduce Clara's widowed father in order to secure her position with the van den Meer household is framed:

Iris brings the [good] news into the kitchen, and Margarethe takes stock of the situation at once. She removes her apron and she hangs it on a peg in the larder. She pinches her cheeks and fixes a few wisps of hair firmly beneath her bonnet. "Iris," she says, "see to the pancakes. Hold the dog away from the sausage in that pot. Don't let Ruth sit near with her backside to the fire for long or she'll get hives. Keep Clara here for fifteen minutes and then send her in with three glasses of gin. Afterward, put yourself and the girls to bed. Do you understand me?"

"What are you doing?" says Iris.

"Jumping," says Margarethe. (172-173)

Pigozzi goes even further in her attempts to undermine the supremacy of biological motherhood and hetero-nuclear family units by suggesting that filiation is, first and foremost, a social construct that has been erroneously subordinated to the alleged primacy of biological truth:

La filiation est une donnée sociale, et non biologique. Freud, dans *Totem et Tabou*, parle d'un interdit de l'inceste chez les primitifs dans le sens d'une interdiction de rapports à l'intérieur du clan parce que la parenté y est *totémique* : on ne peut pas avoir des rapports avec des personnes appartenant au même *totem*, au même clan, celui-ci n'étant pas composé seulement de personnes consanguines.

Si donc la filiation est une donnée sociale, la parenté biologique n'est qu'une de ses formes. (72-73)

Pigozzi's definition of filiation becomes particularly relevant when considered through the prism of contemporary fairy-tale retellings, seeing as it carves out potential space for the inclusion of atypical forms of care and nurturing under the aegis of motherhood, in an attempt to move away from patriarchal conceptions of maternity. This subversive trope illustrates particularly aptly the phenomenon of split identification Rich describes in *Of Woman Born*:

Many women have been caught—have split themselves—between two mothers: one, usually the biological one, who represents the culture of domesticity, of male-centeredness, of conventional expectations, and another, perhaps a woman artist or teacher, who becomes the countervailing figure. Often this “counter-mother” is an athletics teacher who exemplifies strength and pride in her body, a freer way of being in the world; or an unmarried woman professor, alive with ideas, who represents the choice of a vigorous work life, of “living alone and liking it.” This splitting may allow the young woman to fantasize alternately living as one or the other “mother,” to test out two different identifications. ...

Many of the great mothers have not been biological. ... For centuries, daughters have been strengthened and energized by nonbiological mothers, who have combined a care for the practical values of survival with an incitement toward further horizons, a compassion for vulnerability with an insistence on our buried strengths... .

We are, none of us, “either” mothers or daughters; to our amazement, confusion, and greater complexity, we are both. Women, mothers or not, who feel committed to other women, are increasingly giving each other a quality of caring filled with the diffuse kinds of identification that exist between actual mothers and daughters. Into the mere notion of “mothering” we may carry, as daughters, negative echoes of our own mothers' martyrdom, the burden of their valiant, necessarily limited efforts on

our behalf, the confusion of their double messages. But it is a timidity of the imagination which urges that we can be “daughters”—therefore free spirits—rather than “mothers”—defined as eternal givers. Mothering and nonmothering have been such charged concepts for us, precisely because *whichever we did has been turned against us*.

To accept and integrate and strengthen both the mother and the daughter in ourselves is no easy matter, because patriarchal attitudes have encouraged us to split, to polarize, these images, and to project all unwanted guilt, anger, shame, power, freedom, onto the “other” woman. But any radical vision of sisterhood demands that we reintegrate them. (247-253)

Several tales discussed in this dissertation lend themselves to this phenomenon by depicting figures traditionally adjacent to biological motherhood—such as witches, wicked stepmothers, and fairy godmothers—and suggesting that they ought to be considered as *de facto* mothers, imperfect as their parenting might be. For instance, Donoghue’s *Kissing the Witch* and Maitland’s *On Becoming a Fairy Godmother* both place these new forms of non-biological mothering at the centre of their collections: Donoghue’s “The Tale of the Hair”, “The Tale of the Brother”, “The Tale of the Cottage” and “The Tale of the Needle” all portray their story’s prototypical female villain as a distinctively maternal figure able to provide, as discussed in Chapter 4, alternative knowledge and empowerment that stems from their own relationship to Otherness (85, 113-14, 138-141, 178-182). Similarly, “The Tale of the Spinster” reverses the traditional division of maternal roles between biological and foster parent, by portraying a neglectful and violent mother having her first-born stolen by Little Sister, an uncanny, witch-like figure whose concern and love for the child is depicted as much more natural and evident (124-129). As for Maitland, she openly centres two of her stories on fairy-tale stock characters traditionally associated to the realm of motherhood

without being biological mothers—the wicked stepmother and the fairy godmother—and similarly portrays them as distinctively maternal figures. In “The Wicked Stepmother’s Lament,” as previously discussed, the violence and abuse targetting the narrator’s stepdaughter is presented as well-intentioned yet terribly misguided, and eventually minimised by its very victim (Maitland 35). Meanwhile, the narrator of “On Becoming a Fairy Godmother” assigns this role to herself in her final letter to her protégée, describing it as such:

I could fill in the whole sociology – the wicked stepmother, the ice queen, the little mermaid, the faithful nurse, the ugly stepsister. But I, I am the fairy godmother, and I come and go between the worlds, according to my own whim. I have no obligations, only gifts. My generosity is chancy – you cannot call or re-call me, I cannot be relied on. I have things to do and stories to be in that you know nothing about. I’m off now about my own business. You have to do some of the work yourselves. (130)

Queering the maternal through the prism of the fairy-tale, therefore, serves not only to expand our understanding of motherhood beyond the traditional binary upheld by the genre canon so as to better reflect its many mutations within contemporary societies; it also hints at mothering being an inherently inclusive experience that cannot be confined to a specific gender, body, or type of filiation, and that overlaps with other non-traditional forms of female kinship<sup>21</sup>, queerness, and care. Therefore, even a stepmother who still occasionally proves

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<sup>21</sup> My use of the term “kinship” in this context of maternal queering and pluralisation stems from Marta Segarra’s comments on its etymological origins: “Les réactions contre [les] changements concernant le genre et la parenté se sont systématiquement appuyées sur un critère principal, la défense de ce qui serait non seulement traditionnel mais « naturel », confronté aux innovations « antinaturelles ». Ce qui est alors jugé naturel, c’est la division binaire des individus en deux sexes-genres, ainsi que leur regroupement dans la cellule familiale « normale », celle basée sur les liens du sang. Signalons par ailleurs que le terme français « parenté » évoque bien plus clairement cette naturalité que son équivalent habituel en anglais, *kinship*. Les racines de ces deux termes révèlent leurs nuances sémantiques distinctes : en anglais, *kin* se référerait, à l’origine, à la race, la classe et le genre – étant apparenté au mot latin *genus* –, tandis que « parenté » procède du latin *parens*, de *pario*, en rapport avec la naissance. Si les deux termes, *kinship* et *parenté*, ont fini par être associés à la « famille », dans le sens des personnes partageant des liens de sang, le terme anglais est étymologiquement moins proche de cette signification biologisante” (“Nouvelles formes de parenté” 204-205).

wicked can be reclaimed as an empowering, alternative model of female subjecthood, a “counter-mother” (Rich 247) whose diegetic presence serves to alleviate the patriarchal pressure normally placed upon the biological mother, while also placing the child within a multiplicity of embedded maternal structures able to provide it with the necessary care, nurture, and developmental models.

Throughout this chapter we have proven that, while the wicked stepmother remains a central figure of the contemporary fairy-tale countercanon, her narrative arc now serves a completely different purpose: thus, by retelling traditional stories through a matricentric lens, contemporary storytellers demonstrate acute interest in motherhood, daughterhood, and mother-and-daughterhood, paying particular attention to the many atypical forms in which these identities manifest within the genre canon. For instance, in addition to making the wicked (step)mother the narrative centre of these retellings, contemporary writers endeavour to examine the causes behind the emergence of matrilineal violence within the diegesis. While some of these causes stem directly from motherhood—be it from the institution as it is forced to exist within phallogocentric systems, or from the experience itself—it is necessary to also reassess the role of the daughter in this acceleration of narrative conflict. In this respect, this chapter has argued that the binary polarisation of maternal archetypes in fairy-tales stems in part from the developing child’s need to split their mother into two opposite figures in order to cope with displays of maternal ambivalence, and thus be able to mature into fully individuated subjects. Similarly, due to the oppressive and alienating nature of institutionalised motherhood, the (step)daughter—forced to exist in constant confrontation with her (step)mother and being repeatedly denied psychological and bodily integrity—is bound to develop acute matrophobic impulses, which manifest through violent efforts to reject the mother figure and all that she embodies.

In light of these conclusions, it may seem that the mother/daughter dyad is condemned to never be granted its fairy-tale ending, in which mother and daughter could “come to relearn [themselves] and each other, in order to become women, and mothers, again and again” (Irigaray, “And the One” 67). However, as we have demonstrated throughout this chapter, the retellings considered by this dissertation do provide us with several tentative ways of subverting the prescribed matrilineal tragedy: thus, by reclaiming the ambivalence inherent to motherhood and daughterhood alike, the individuation of female subjects is rendered intrinsically less violent and more accessible. Besides, the normalisation of this experience allows each member of the mother/daughter dyad to respond to manifestations of ambivalence—from the other as well as from themselves—with empathy, care, and understanding, thus avoiding unnecessary escalations of diegetic violence. Finally, this chapter has also suggested that the figure of the non-biological mother—who remains the predominant antagonist of the contemporary fairy-tale canon—has, by virtue of the intrinsic otherness of her position within the hetero-nuclear family and the fairy-tale diegesis, the potential to subvert our understanding of motherhood. Thus, the lack of biological ties between the heroine and her stepmother allows contemporary retellers to explore the margins of the maternal and question its interactions with other silenced forms of female kinship and bonding. Through the character of the non-biological (step)mother, therefore, these new tales are able to queer and pluralise their relationship to mothering as an experience, expanding its definition not only to become inclusive of all alternative forms of filiation, but also to embrace and celebrate otherness as a whole, creating in so doing a subversive counterpart to the patriarchally sanctioned institution of motherhood. As a consequence, the new mother/daughter plot(s) outlined by contemporary fairy-tale retellings appears intent on portraying motherhood as a motley experience interlaced with care, empathy, and



ambivalence, but also one that invites and celebrates queerness and Otherness as well as hybridity between bodies, psyches, and forms of kinship.

## Conclusion: Out of the Woods

From the onset of this doctoral project, the figure of the wicked stepmother has been—and still continues to be—one of the most beloved and recurring antagonists of the fairy-tale genre in all its declinations, regardless of the medium. However, as I underlined in the introduction of this dissertation, the most overtly subversive transformations this figure goes through tend to take place on the screen rather than on the page. Thus, building upon the trend introduced by, among others, the television series *Once Upon a Time* (2011-2018) and the *Maleficent* film franchise (2014, 2019)—which elevate the non-biological mother to the role of protagonist and (anti)heroine, and unfurl narratives deliberately focused on maternal issues and mother/child relationships—numerous films, television series, and literary works appear to have embraced the wicked stepmother as an intriguingly apt prism for the subversion of traditional fairy-tales and folklore. These attempts, however, are generally successful to various degrees, tackling the stakes and intricacies of matrilineality through a diverse array of biases. Thus, as the retelling format has become increasingly regarded as an integral part of the fairy-tale canon by virtue of its popularity with contemporary audiences, so have these revisions become increasingly formulaic, often transforming the original tale in one of two ways: either the maternal antagonist becomes the story's focaliser and narrator, allowing her to reframe the prototypical plot through a different prism and craft her own alternative version of the tale, or it is malevolence itself that is presented as purely contextual or displaced onto another character, allowing for the mother/daughter dyad to be depicted under a more sympathetic light.

This is evidenced, for instance, by the Disney-instigated book series *Villains* (2012-2022), an ongoing collection of novels where each of the most memorable Disney villains is given an expanded, often sympathetic backstory, with its villainous motivations delved into.

However, the contemporary popularity of this exact type of fairy-tale subversion raises several significant questions: once all its villains are transformed into rounded characters—and their wickedness accounted for by a tragic backstory—does the fairy-tale genre still have an appeal? Similarly, does the villain remain as enticing and fascinating as in the original tale? It is also necessary to point out that, in both aforementioned scenarios, the resulting tales still appear to be firmly divided into traditional Manichean categories rather than presenting any hybridity or transferability between the genre's narrative roles. In this respect, the recently released trailer for the upcoming sequel to Disney's *Enchanted* (2007)—aptly titled *Disenchanted* (2023)—similarly illustrates the resistance of conventional mother-and-daughter fairy-tale narratives. Thus, throughout the first film, the protagonist and princess-to-be Giselle functions as a caring and distinctively maternal presence for Morgan, the daughter of Giselle's eventual love interest, Edward. At the end of the film, Giselle also triumphs over her scheming and nefarious mother-in-law Narissa, interestingly hinting at a potential way out of the prototypical matrilineal conflict. However, based upon the latest trailers, the sequel is set to portray a cursed Giselle forced to assume the role of the cruel wicked stepmother in turn, her previously constructive relationship to a now-teenage Morgan depicted as degrading rapidly. Anecdotally, this film franchise also totals no less than four different wicked (step)mothers, all constructed quite explicitly from common fairy-tale tropes and archetypes, evidencing the continued appeal of such tropes and figures onto contemporary Western audiences.

However, the main issue with the multiplication of such retellings is that, in addition to becoming increasingly formulaic and profit-driven, inevitably hollowing out any subversive message such matricentric tales may initially have had, it paradoxically normalises a traditional understanding of filiation, confining these revisions to easily digestible narratives brimming with hetero-nuclear families and simple “good” and “wicked”

dyads, leaving little space for ambivalence, ambiguity, or queerness of any kind.

Additionally, mainstream fairy-tale revisions have often become the vehicle of pseudo-feminist empowerment narratives which, on the level of the matrilineal conflict, either erase the complexities of the mother/daughter dyad by reducing it to a Manichean dichotomy between opposed forms of womanhood, or craft predictable tales where the mother is arbitrarily placed within a non-specific context of empowerment.

Surprisingly, some of the most subversive and complex contemporary revisions of the prototypical mother/daughter plot adhere only partially to the fairy-tale genre. For instance—to name but a few examples omitted yet concurrent to this dissertation’s corpus—thematics of non-biological parenthood and ambivalent parent/child relationships are explored particularly thoroughly throughout Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995-2000), in which Lyra and Marisa Coulter are deliberately constructed as a subversive reflection of the traditional wicked stepmother/heroic stepdaughter dyad<sup>22</sup>. Similarly, Daniel Handler<sup>23</sup>’s *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (1999-2006), while not solely centred on female characters, presents a vast array of ambivalent relationships between biological and non-biological kin alike, in a deliberate attempt to destabilise the accepted supremacy of biological filiation. This is arguably evidenced most strikingly by the character of Esmé Squalor, who initially represents a very faithful transposition of the wicked stepmother archetype into a non-magical setting, but whose relationship to motherhood is later complicated as she decides to foster—and proceeds to excessively dote over—the equally malevolent Carmelita Spats.

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<sup>22</sup> While Pullman’s mother/daughter dyad is initially particularly reminiscent of traditional fairy-tales—going as far as to delay the reveal of Lyra’s and Mrs Coulter’s biological filiation to parallel the figure of the wicked stepmother even more closely, the matrilineal plot is quickly complicated, and altogether presented as much more ambivalent than its fairy-tale counterparts.

<sup>23</sup> The *Series of Unfortunate Events* novels were written by Daniel Handler, under the intradiegetic penname Lemony Snicket.

Going back to the works considered by this dissertation, I must again underline that this corpus cannot, in light of its limited scope, be considered as accurately representative of contemporary fairy-tale motherhood as a whole. For instance, by only discussing anglophone retellings and revisions produced between 1979 and 2019, my argument does little to challenge the implicit whiteness and Western-centredness inherent to the recognised fairy-tale canon. Similarly, while I previously argued that anglophone fairy-tale revisions deploy particularly intriguing and subversive tropes in their representations of motherhood and daughterhood, it must be noted that such a focus inevitably removes many equally relevant retellings from our consideration. For instance, Pierre Fleutiaux's *Métamorphoses de la reine* (1985), which I analysed as part of my Master's dissertation, provides its readers with a feminocentric variant of "Snow White" in which the traditional male dwarves are replaced by seven giantesses, and the eventual destruction of magic mirrors allows the (step)mother/daughter duo to escape their traditional narrative fate. Similarly, Joël Pommerat's play *Cendrillon* (2012) would have provided us with particularly irreverent ways of portraying generational conflict and the challenges of matrilineal mourning. Besides, even within the context of this dissertation, it must be underlined that all selected works have not been explored in equal depths; in light of this, further analysis will be required in the future so as to palliate these gaps and account for possible missing perspectives. However, any such additional research would inevitably exceed the scope of this dissertation, and run the risk of either diluting or diverting from the conclusions established throughout this analysis. Furthermore, this thesis does not aim to account for all types of representation of maternity in contemporary fairy-tale retellings; in fact, one of the main theoretical concerns of my work has been to distance it from any pretension of exhaustiveness or universalism. Indeed, like we suggested in the penultimate chapter, this dissertation's corpus is constructed as an extension of its subject-matter, that is to say as a motley of mother-tales and daughter-tales,

simultaneously unique and overlapping in themes and plots to the point of endangering the very notion of finite subjects and narratives. Thus, this corpus reflects the inherent plurality of new motherhoods as well as the large spectrum of experiences and affects they entail, with narratives that simultaneously answer each other and conflict with one another, resulting in a countercanon deliberately interlaced with maternal dynamics, structures, and concerns.

In fact, this dissertation's interest in pluralised and hybridised fairy-tale depictions of genders and genres is also at the root of its interdisciplinary theoretical approach. Indeed, rather than focusing solely on a single discipline—a method which would certainly have allowed us to delve further into some of the issues we merely allude to—we have instead chosen to weave together several critical approaches in order not only to better account for all aspects of contemporary matrilineal representations, but also to take into consideration the metatextual influence critical theory arguably has over the retelling as a literary subgenre. This intertextual dimension, in fact, is particularly salient in many contemporary matricentric retellings, as repeatedly underlined by my analyses of Sara Maitland's "The Wicked Stepmother's Lament" and "On Becoming a Fairy Godmother," and Garrison Keillor's tongue-in-cheek "My Stepmother, Myself." Moreover, this phenomenon continues to be visible in contemporary retellings not discussed in this dissertation, such as Danielle Wood's "The Good Mother", included in Cristina Bacchilega's and Jennifer Orme's intermedia fairy-tale and folklore collection *Inviting Interruptions* (2021):

Literary scholars treat it as a mystery to be solved by careful textual analysis.

Psychoanalysts propose theories that involve words like *splitting* and *internalisation*.

But you could give them a much simpler explanation.

Yes, you could tell them, couldn't you?

There is no mystery for you.

You could tell them exactly why it is, in fairy tales, that the Good Mother is always dead. (Wood 154)

In light of the metatextual awareness that postmodern story(re)tellers regularly demonstrate in these tales, it therefore stands to reason that a similarly interdisciplinary approach would be required—or at least preferable—in order to accurately account for contemporary mutations of the mother/daughter plot. However, this is not to suggest that this dissertation has identified all the theoretical influences and inspirations at play within the emerging matrilineal fairy-tale countercanon. Indeed, the critical theory I have used throughout this thesis shares many of the biases of its primary corpus, stemming primarily from mainstream anglophone thinkers, and regrettably imbued with patriarchal and essentialist constructs. In light of this, I believe that the joint study of—to give but one example—Black fairy-tales and postcolonial theory would bring invaluable perspectives and insights to my conclusions; this is in fact something I endeavour to do in the wake of this doctoral project.

Pending such further research, however, some enlightening conclusions can already be drawn from this analysis. Throughout the first section, therefore, I have established how the wicked stepmother first emerged as a stock character of the genre, and how she has since been understood and interpreted by successive waves of critical theory. The first chapter served as a thematic review of the existing literature on the subject, where I first pointed to the anthropological roots of the wicked stepmother character underlined by, among others, fairy-tale scholars Maria Tatar and Marina Warner. We thus concluded that, alongside any didactic, psychoanalytic, or feminist reading of matrilineal fairy-tale intrigues, a more concrete interpretation of the wicked stepmother must exist, in which she functions as the embodiment of the historically precarious living conditions and social positioning of real-world stepmothers, as well as of the acts of ostensible cruelty—such as child abandonment

and infanticide—that sometimes resulted from such situations. We then argued that such an interpretation nevertheless denied the nature of the fairy-tale as its own, unique genre. Thus, as a consequence of being considered “low,” child-oriented literature, the fairy-tale genre has therefore often been imbued with a didactic purpose, itself rooted within phallogentric and patriarchal social structures. In light of this, the existence of the character of the wicked stepmother comes as little surprise: it serves to reiterate the importance of parental authority and the dire consequences of refusing them or rebelling against them, while simultaneously weaving together a definition of culturally sanctioned womanhood, inferred from everything the stepmother is not. This chapter then discussed how this didactic approach to fairy-tales made way for applied psychoanalysis, a discipline which considers the wicked stepmother as the narrative embodiment of the imaginary mother, a devouring, uncanny, and castrative figure that the child must separate from in order to successfully become individuated. Finally, I argued that, as a response to this increasingly popularised psychoanalytic reading of the maternal plot, feminist theory put forward an interpretation of the wicked stepmother as a figure meant to disrupt patriarchal hegemony by refusing to conform to its understanding of womanhood and motherhood in light of its oppressive, violent, and disempowering nature. From these four branches of fairy-tale scholarship, I posited an important lack of discourse focusing on the sphere of the maternal and, more specifically, acknowledging the specificities of the mother/daughter dyad and its representation through the prism of the fairy-tale; this is therefore the theoretical gap that this dissertation has endeavoured to begin palliating.

To so do, Chapter 2 focused on the fairy-tale genre and its unique relationship to its own canon. I thus argued that the process of retelling—often undertaken by real-life mothers—has always been an integral part of the genre, allowing for the establishment of a genealogy of folklore and wonder tales which, unfortunately and paradoxically, demonstrated the same lack of interest for the sphere of the maternal than the cultures it emerged from. I



also underlined how this process allowed the genre to reflect the successive social and structural mutations within these very cultures, and how contemporary retellings in particular demonstrate a deliberate disregard for the most structural tropes and constructs of the genre, making the continued presence of the wicked stepmother and the traditional mother/daughter plot all the more intriguing and antithetical. Finally, I concluded that, rather than such mutations foreshadowing entropy within the fairy-tale genre, they instead served to temporarily disenchant its canon in order to question its most foundational tropes, messages, and narrative models, only to eventually re-enchant it through new prisms, at the twelfth stroke of midnight. This led me to arguing that the central place of the mother/daughter plot within contemporary fairy-tale revisionism is in fact far from surprising, and stems from the very process of story(re)telling being itself akin to motherhood on a metaphorical level. Thus, as brilliantly underlined by Veronica Schanoes, original tales and their successive variants are simultaneously distinct and inseparable from one another, with the “daughter-story ... [being] continuous with the mother-story, incorporating those traditional stories as a vital part of its identity, necessary for full understanding, and the mother-story [containing] the daughter-story *in potentia* or *in utero*, as it were” (34).

The following chapter dealt more specifically with the role of the wicked (step)mother on a narrative and diegetic level: through a dual lens combining structuralism and poststructuralism, we indeed attempted to establish how this stock character functions within the diverse models proposed by Vladimir Propp, Claude Lévi-Strauss and, more recently, Antti Aarne, Stith Thompson and Hans-Jörg Uther with the Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) Index. Our conclusions, however, revealed that contemporary fairy-tales often abandoned a plot-centric structure in favour of character-driven explorations, with recurring attempts to destabilise the most fundamental constructs of the fairy-tale form, or even to collapse them until only the core of the genre remains. In this respect, I demonstrated the necessity to

construct a fairy-tale morphology specific to contemporary matricentric retellings—which I proposed to include within the ATU Index under the type name “The (Step) Mother Who Abuses her Daughter”—so as to facilitate a comparative approach to stories of this type, and thus uncover the structural binaries and ternaries governing ongoing depictions of mother-and-daughterhood within fairy-tale worlds.

As the outcome of this first section, we concluded that, while the act of retelling represents an integral part of the fairy-tale genre, the stock character of the wicked (step)mother not only remains a central character of the genre’s countercanon—in spite of efforts to subvert and disrupt its most fundamental elements—but also continues to intrigue and interest several branches of critical theory, which all propose competing yet insufficient interpretations of this figure and its role within the mother/daughter plot. In light of this, we posited that the widespread, contemporary interest in mothers and matrilineal narratives required the creation of a new tale type, allowing us to draw parallels between all these works in spite of the different stories they may be retelling or borrowing from. But what appeared most strikingly throughout this first section was that the fairy-tale genre and the wicked (step)mother cannot function adequately without one another, and that the latter continues to exert vivid fascination onto contemporary audiences. In light of this, the claim of Margaret Atwood’s unnamed stepmother that “[she’s] the plot ... and don’t [we] ever forget it” strikes one as more relevant than ever (Atwood, *Good Bones* 20).

The second section of this dissertation was concerned with contemporary portrayals of wicked (step)mothers, and whether their modern mutations impacted the genre’s preestablished mother/daughter plot of mutual destruction. In this respect, Chapter 4 delved into the overlap between the figure of the wicked witch and that of the malevolent mother, essential to our accurate understanding of the latter’s relationship to womanhood, Otherness,

and diegetic power dynamics. Throughout this chapter, we determined that the witch and the (step)mother are similar in many respects, from their ambivalent relationship to motherhood, to their vilification by patriarchal systems and narratives, through to their diegetic functioning as the embodiment of the dangers of unrestrained, patriarchy-opposing femininity. Thus, while the figure of the fairy-tale witch first emerged as the literary counterpart to alleged historical witches—similar in their connection to nature and their ability to instrumentalise it for nefarious purposes—her contemporary portrayals appear more concerned with her place within heteronormative, phallographic systems and, in particular, the institution of motherhood. With regards to this, I explained that the witch occupies an intrinsically paradoxical place within patriarchal systems and literatures, where she simultaneously embodies Otherness in her deviancy and exclusion from the norm, but also contributes to reinforcing these very structures, particularly in the way she embodies a temporary disruption of order that will be overcome by the end of the tale. In fact, we demonstrated that, in spite of efforts from white feminists to reclaim (and appropriate) the figure of the witch as an empowerment symbol, she remains fundamentally dependent on—and subordinated to—patriarchal systems. This is evidenced most strikingly by her inseparability from the figure of the monstrous fairy-tale mother, itself an oppressive construction defined and dictated by phallogentrism. Indeed, as Iris states in Gregory Maguire’s *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister*: “*She is a witch. One might as well say, She is a mother...*; that about covers the same terrain, doesn’t it?” (296).

Chapter 6 built upon the many traits and narratives shared by the witch and the wicked (step)mother to propose an analysis of the way contemporary fairy-tale retellings craft their own critiques of motherhood as an experience and institution (Rich 41-42) through the prism of contemporary matrilineal narratives. Thus, we first replaced maternal abuse and hatred for the daughter within a context where violence targeting women and their bodies is not only unchallenged but institutionalised. By forcing female fairy-tale characters into

motherhood, indeed, the mother/daughter conflict becomes inevitable, often impacting the experience of pregnancy itself, which contemporary retellers have increasingly taken to depicting it as a horrific and monstrous process, as if to balance its traditional representation as a revelatory experience of harmony and oneness with the foetus. We then discussed the intersection of fairy-tale maternity with the concept of abjection as defined by Julia Kristeva (“Approaching Abjection” 126), which posits the mother as an uncanny figure, familiar yet inevitably threatening, desirable yet inherently repulsive. After criticising the essentialist slant of many attempts to reclaim the maternal body as an almost fetishistic space of preverbal bliss and infinite creation, we demonstrated how both patriarchal discourses and feminist counter-discourses on motherhood paradoxically further its portrayal as a smothering, all-encompassing identity that reduces women to a single function, and forces daughters to commit matricide to not succumb to the same dynamics of oppression, perpetuating what Rich calls “the loss of the mother to the daughter, the daughter to the mother, ... the essential female tragedy” (237).

From the tension inherent to uncanny depictions of motherhood—be they ascribable to the patriarchal canon or, paradoxically, to feminist scholars themselves—we posited the binary nature of contemporary depictions of fairy-tale motherhood, evidenced most overtly by the recurring presence of mother/daughter and mother/stepmother dyads, as well as by their seemingly impossible diegetic coexistence. After denouncing the vilification of non-biological mothering encouraged by Manichean dichotomies opposing angel mother to stepmonster, I attributed this phenomenon to the systematic suppression of maternal ambivalence, demonstrating how it contributes to the intensification of matrilineal violence by simultaneously disparaging (step)mothers who fail to adequately perform their assigned role, and shielding children from the existence of imperfect mothering which, in turn,

inevitably dramatises the moment when the child first becomes confronted to displays of maternal anger, violence, or hatred.

With regards to the mother/daughter plot, this chapter finally argued that the matrilineal fairy-tale conflict is also catalysed and exacerbated by the construction of this dyad as a pair of inverted doubles in a diegesis only able to accommodate one female character at a time. Indeed, the undefined, permeable nature of matrilineal egos and bodies—one of the most striking and recurring tropes of the contemporary mother/daughter fairy-tale plot—places female characters in constant confrontation with one another, with each one regarding its own self as the endangered, abnormal, alienated Other, whose very selfhood becomes threatened by the other woman's narrative presence. "I keep breaking mirrors," declares the stepmother in Emma Donoghue's "The Tale of the Apple" (55), rightfully suggesting that only by ridding themselves not only of the patriarchal gaze, but also of any evidence of their resemblance, can mother and daughter ever hope to escape the prototypical ending of their assigned plot.

The second section of this dissertation served to confirm the increased interest of anglophone fairy-tale retellings not only for the figure of the antagonistic (step)mother and her diegetic arc, but for motherhood itself: by reframing this experience through the prism of the inadequate mother, fairy-tale maternity appears as strikingly disenchanting, brimming with violence and trauma ready to be passed on to the daughter. But if fairy-tale daughterhood must necessarily coexist with (step)maternal hatred and abuse, and if the mother/daughter tragedy is bound to repeat itself endlessly as daughters become mothers in turn, one may come to doubt whether there is any potential way out of this "essential female tragedy" (Rich 237).

In the introduction of Marina Warner's chapter on "Absent Mothers" in *From the Beast to the Blonde* (1995), poetess Ruth Padel writes:

*What happened to the mother  
who looked at the snow? I don't say  
(you don't know this grammar yet)  
how mothers and stepmothers change,  
looking, and being looked at.*

*It takes a long time ...*

.....

*These pages lurk in the mind,  
speak of your sister,  
her mother, and me. Perhaps,  
already, of you. (201)*

This poem implicitly posits mothers and stepmothers as shape-shifting, transformative figures, whose subversion is instrumental to the writing of what Rich calls the "great unwritten story" (225)—namely, a matrilineal literary countercanon, in which "mother-story" and "daughter-story" (Schanoes 34) are able to coexist and dialogue with one another.

Throughout Chapter 7, I discussed this very phenomenon through the prism of matricentric fairy-tale retellings. I therefore argued that, in addition to transforming the narrative arc of the wicked stepmother—be it by altering her diegetic role, making her the new tale's (anti)heroine, or retelling traditional stories through her narratorial lens—contemporary storytellers demonstrate deliberate intent to provide mothers with their own literary voice and carve out some space for ambivalence, imperfection, anguish, and even hatred to be reclaimed as part of the maternal experience, thus fundamentally challenging the previously untouchable ideal of the infallible, silent, self-sacrificial mother. After establishing the

inadequacies and pitfalls of *écriture féminine* as a literary concept, I argued that the contemporary fairy-tale canon advocates not for a reclaiming of this essentialist understanding of gendered writing, but rather defends the existence of maternal writing—i.e. writing stemming from mothers as well as writings concerned with motherhood—and of its fundamental role in ongoing efforts to reclaim and rehabilitate the mother/daughter plot, as well as other atypical, traditionally discredited forms of (other)mothering.

Chapter 8 elaborated upon this idea, pointing to the figure of the wicked (step)mother as the cornerstone of the queering dynamics evidenced by an in-depth reading of contemporary matrilineal plots. We thus argued that, while (re)inviting queerness and marginalised female desires within the fairy-tale genre is an integral part of such a phenomenon, the current queering of fairy stories also encompasses the reclaiming of motherly and daughterly ambivalence, as well as the normalisation of traditionally vilified and silenced phenomena such as maternal splitting and matrophobia. Indeed, in order to circumvent the “radical surgery” (Rich 236) daughters operate *vis-a-vis* their mothers to protect their own subjecthood and resist their seemingly inevitable transformation into wicked (step)mothers, it is indeed essential to carve out literary space for the exploration of maternal ambivalence—a process that the traditional fairy-tale mother/daughter plot perfectly lends itself to. Additionally, it is necessary to pluralise mother/daughter relationships through the narrative presence of hybrid figures whose mothering is perhaps more atypical or contrasted than that of the biological mother, but who are conversely able provide their (step)daughters with alternative models of subjecthood, womanhood, and female filiation.

Once again, the figure of the wicked stepmother emerged as particularly suited for any such subversions, by virtue of the Otherness and disruption of the patriarchal order that her diegetic presence traditionally embodies. We therefore surmised that these attempts to

queer the mother/daughter fairy-tale plot would allow future storytellers to openly question and challenge the borders between different types of female kinship, doing so by crafting new poetics of mother/daughter romance, and the exploring erotic potential of mothering outside of its literal, incestuous interpretation. Only by kissing the witch and loving—while also hating—the (step)monster is it possible to envision a definitive way out of the cycle of matrilineal tragedy and mutual destruction, and in so doing to answer Irigaray’s wish that “in giving [the daughter] life, [the mother] still remain alive” (“And the One” 67).

The third and final section of this dissertation therefore established that, in spite of the resistance of many detrimental and antiquated tropes in their depictions of (step)mothers, (step)daughters, and being-mother-and-daughter, contemporary fairy-tale revisions strive to desontologise the experience and the institution of motherhood. Instead, they prefer to explore previously silenced maternal narratives where ambivalence has become the dynamic core of the tale, and where the mother/daughter plot mirrors the myth of Demeter and Persephone, alternating between necessary alienation and intensely euphoric, romantic, and sometimes erotic reunions between mothers and daughters. In light of these conclusions, we argued that contemporary story(re)tellers deliberately distance themselves from conceptions of the maternal as a binary, patriarchally enforced construct, choosing instead to reclaim the uniquely hybrid and protean nature of mothering. Under their pen, motherhood and daughterhood become represented as inherently inclusive, hybrid, and empathetic experiences in female kinship that can be just as winding, tortuous and disorienting—but also just as desirable and enticing—as the paths treaded by fairy-tale heroines who wander the woods of the genre, sometimes in search of their mothers, sometimes in flight of them.

From the research undertaken throughout this dissertation, we are able to posit the following conclusions which, far from exhaustive or definitive, will nevertheless serve to



guide future research on this topic, and will be able to evolve alongside the genre. First, the survival of the wicked (step)mother as the preeminent antagonist of contemporary fairy-tale retellings—all the more noticeable and intriguing when contrasted to an increasingly subversive and feminist fairy-tale countercanon—is not, as we initially posited, an anomaly. Rather, it points to the multiplicity of embedded, intersecting tensions surrounding contemporary motherhood, both as a patriarchally-bridled institution and as an experience regarded with profound ambivalence by phallographic systems. Without ever endangering her diegetic indispensability, the retellers considered by this dissertation demonstrate acute interest in the wicked stepmother as a character, rather than as the mere incarnation of a narrative function. As a result, they deliberately craft variants to canonical fairy stories in which the maternal antagonist is fleshed out and her backstory, motivations, and experiences delved into in depth, sometimes to the detriment of the heroine's portrayal as an ideal for young readers to emulate. More importantly, however, these tales profoundly disrupt the genre by displacing the (step)maternal plot from the margins to the centre of the narrative. This acute interest and ambivalent relationship *vis-a-vis* matrilineal stakes and dynamics inevitably crystallise around the mother/daughter plot, which appears successively challenged, overturned, transformed, queered, reclaimed, decried, and sometimes even mended by the subversive variants woven together by contemporary storytellers from the motley rags of matrilineal tragedies.

The intent behind such sustained interest and diverse productions appears to be triple, much like the triad formed by the heroine, her biological mother, and the wicked stepmother who eventually usurps her maternal status. Thus, not only do postmodern storytellers instrumentalise prototypical fairy-tale tropes in order to deconstruct the genre and its understanding of the maternal—revealing it to be a profoundly violent patriarchal construct which female subjects seldom survive—they also propose an alternative, inherently queer

definition of (other)mothering that subverts its uncanny nature and ties to monstrosity and Otherness, so as to detach it from its traditional subordination to gender, biological filiation, Manichean categories, and hetero-nuclear models of parentality. Instead, they offer to reunite (non-)mothers and (non-)daughters by (re)inviting ambivalence, hybridity, queerness, and plurality within the realm of the maternal, crystallising this new institution around politics and poetics of care, kinship, inclusivity and empathetic nurture. In addition to this dual phenomenon, the metanarrative slant of fairy-tale retellings towards matrilineal thematics also serves to craft a counter-canon to phallogocentric literature, where the maternal is no longer confined to the corporeal, the natural, and the pre-verbal—although it still enthusiastically embraces these ties—but also has its own distinctive voice(s), language(s), and literary genealogies. In this alternative canon, mother-tales and daughter-tales always answer each other, alternatively completing and contradicting one another's narratives, yet always including the (m)Other in its happiest endings.

As previously discussed, while the accuracy of these conclusions remains dependent on future story(re)tellers, they also require further development which will only be achieved through the subsequent inclusion of other alienated and silenced perspectives. For instance, while this thesis focused solely on written productions, a comparison with other contemporary mediums exploring matrilineality through the prism of the fairy-tale would bring invaluable insights to our analysis. For instance, Stephen Sondheim's and James Lapine's 1986 musical *Into the Woods* explores fairy-tale maternity in particularly interesting ways, weaving together the narratives of several generational dyads belonging to the fairy-tale genre within a single diegetic unit centred on thematics of filiation and contrasting several types of family structures. Thus, while Rapunzel and the Witch follow rather closely the plot of their traditional tale—albeit making the dangers of excessive maternal love and (s)mothering much more pivotal and explicit than in the Grimms' version—the Baker's Wife

explores maternity through the prism of unfulfilled desires, as she is unable to conceive a child of her own. Meanwhile, Cinderella eventually chooses to reject the bounds of heteronormative filiation—embodied by the character of the Prince—seemingly finding fulfillment in her newfound role of foster parent to the Baker’s son.

In a completely different genre, the television series *Fleabag* (2016-2019) interestingly uproots the stock character of the wicked stepmother and transplants her within a realistic, modern-day context. The series is also set in motion by the protagonist’s loss of her mother and subsequent grieving process, and spurred on by the sororal bond that develops between herself and her sister Claire as they are repeatedly antagonised by the aptly named Stepmother. The entire narrative is thus arguably shaped by dynamics of matrilineal love, loss, and hatred, explored in their vividness and overlap with other forms of female kinship in a manner very reminiscent of contemporary fairy-tales, which is why a comparative analysis of both formats would, I believe, prove particularly enlightening and fruitful.

Finally, the 2022 film *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, while centred on a biological mother/daughter dyad and not belonging to the fairy-tale genre *per se*, still borrows many of its motifs and diegetic elements from popular culture and fantasy, including but not limited to fairy-tales. More importantly, the very careful and nuanced discourse it crafts around the ambivalence inherent to mother/daughter relationships—and the way they are heightened by the constant strain of cultural, generational and identity conflicts and trauma—corroborates many of the arguments developed throughout this dissertation, while also brilliantly encapsulating the crux of the contemporary mother/daughter fairy-tale plot, from the violence of its most cruel outbursts, to its ambivalent relationship to queerness, through to its veiled references to the myth of Demeter and Persephone, seeking each other out time and time again.

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## **Belles-mères et reines-sorcières : ambivalence, violence et subversion de l'intrigue mère/fille dans les réécritures contemporaines de contes de fées**

Alors que les contes de fées cherchent désormais à émanciper leurs héroïnes du carcan des genres, le maternel se distingue par son immuabilité, prisonnier de dyades manichéennes et d'intrigues monosémiques comme Blanche-Neige de son cercueil. Cette thèse propose donc une relecture contemporaine du rôle de la belle-mère, centrée sur son rapport ambivalent à la maternité. La résistance de cette figure à toute subversion révèle en effet un enracinement profond de la violence matrilinéaire dans le genre : l'ubiquité de cette mauvaise mère – qui emprisonne et empoisonne – est symbolique d'un maternel en tension, où l'intrigue mère/fille ne peut qu'être tragique. La coexistence narrative de cette dyade est ainsi rendue impossible par l'indifférenciation des corps et sujets féminins imposée par le canon patriarcal, toute existence du Soi impliquant nécessairement un évincement de l'Autre. Dès lors, les rapports matrilinéaires se trouvent compliqués par l'apparition de dynamiques destructrices dans la diégèse : la marâtre désire ingérer – et ainsi (ré)absorber – le corps de la fille ; celle-ci réagit en adoptant une attitude matrophobe. C'est alors que réapparaît la mère originelle, qui se place en double inversé de la marâtre, permettant ainsi le clivage des figures maternelles. Le reflet de cette autre-mère inquiète et aliène la marâtre, pour qui l'absence de lien biologique avec l'héroïne est preuve de son infériorité. C'est cependant par le prisme de cette non-filiation qu'une subversion de la tragédie matrilinéaire est possible, l'hybridité du rôle de la belle-mère permettant la création d'alternatives protéiformes, ambivalentes et inclusives à l'intrigue matrilinéaire.

**Mots-clés :** ambivalence, clivage, conte de fées, genre, maternité, matrilinéarité, réécriture, relation mère/fille.

## **Bad Mothers and Wicked (Step)Monsters: Ambivalence, Violence, and Subversion of the Mother/Daughter Plot in Contemporary Fairy-Tale Retellings**

While fairy-tales now strive to emancipate their heroines from the constraints of gender and genre, the maternal remains strikingly immutable, confined by Manichean dyads and monosemic plots like Snow White by her coffin. Therefore, this thesis proposes a contemporary interpretation of the wicked stepmother's role through the prism of her ambivalent relationship to the maternal. The resistance of this figure to subversion attempts reveals a profound anchoring of matrilineal violence within the genre: the ubiquity of this cruel mother—who poisons and imprisons—is indeed evidence of a tension-laden institution where the mother/daughter plot can only ever be tragic. The diegetic coexistence of this dyad is rendered impossible by the lack of borders between female bodies and subjects within the patriarchal canon, any existence of a Self inevitably requiring the erasure of the Other. Matrilineal relations are further complicated by the emergence of destructive dynamics within the diegesis: the stepmother wishes to ingest—and thus (re)absorb—the daughter's body, and the latter reacts by assuming a matrophobic attitude. It is then that the biological mother reappears, functioning as the stepmother's inverted double and implementing the splitting of maternal figures. The reflection of this other-mother unsettles and alienates the stepmother, for whom the absence of biological bond with the heroine is evidence of her utter inferiority. However, it is also through the prism of non-filiation that a subversion of the mother/daughter tragedy becomes possible, the hybridity of the stepmother allowing the creation of protean, ambivalent and inclusive alternatives to the maternal plot.

**Keywords:** ambivalence, fairy-tale, gender, matrilineality, mother/daughter relationship, motherhood, retelling, splitting.

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