

FAIRY TALES AND NECROPHILIA: A NEW CULTURAL CONTEXT FOR
ANTEBELLUM AMERICAN SENSATIONALISM

By

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My dissertation investigates an understudied area of American sensational fiction in the antebellum period—the influence of fairy tales. I trace the development of a literary fascination with women’s bodies from the fairy tales of Giambattista Basile, Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm through the media coverage of the 1836 murder of prostitute Helen Jewett, through the short fiction and poetry of Edgar Allan Poe, and finally through the “porno-gothic” literature of George Lippard and George Thompson. I argue that the English translations of Basile’s, Perrault’s and Grimms’ fairy tales laid the cultural groundwork that encouraged a fascination with women’s dead bodies and the seemingly necrophilic, incestuous, and pedophilic desires demonstrated in the American public’s fascination with Jewett’s murder and the popularity of antebellum sensational fiction.

My argument maintains that each subsequent author contributes something new to the tradition of the fairy tale princesses by building upon the adaptations of previous

authors and twisting the plots and descriptions to suit his immediate purpose. James Gordon Bennett adapts the tradition of the Sleeping Beauty to evoke erotic desire for a murdered prostitute and further encourage passivity among women in Antebellum America, whereas Edgar Allan Poe combines the sleeping beauty motif with active women, like Jewett, who refuse the ultimate passivity of death and return to terrorize their male oppressors. George Lippard mixes the fairy tale descriptions with Bennett's sensational reporting style and Poe's Gothicism to create apocalyptic, anti-capitalist fairy tales that work to reveal the excesses of the ruling elite. George Thompson, seeing the success of the politically and socially subversive fiction of Lippard, couches his nearly pornographic adaptation of fairy tale themes and descriptions in mock subversion.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

America's fascination with fairy tales is seemingly never-ending. From the 1729 English translation of Charles Perrault's *Contes du Ma Mere L' Oye* to the 2005 movie *The Brothers Grimm*, Americans have engaged in a love affair with anything fairy tale related. Americans' other passion seems to be reality television and crime dramas, the gorier and more sensational the better. In fact, sex crimes and political scandals, most of the time a mixture of the two, dominate the story lines of the highest rated non-reality shows on television.

Writers on shows such as *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* have capitalized on American's love of fairy tales and sensational storylines by creating an amalgam that keeps their ratings high enough to survive in a forum where viewers' tastes change rapidly. From "Blue Beard" to "Sleeping Beauty" and "Snow White" to "Cinderella," The *Law and Order* franchise has referenced fairy tales too many times to count. Even shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* have used "Sleeping Beauty" and "Blue Beard" in at least two story lines, and reality shows such as *What Not to Wear* and *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* have incorporated elements of "Cinderella" into their very premises. Each of these shows reinforces America's capitalist ideology that deserving people get to move up the socio-economic ladder and live happily ever after, whereas criminals receive their due punishment.

This amalgamation of fairy tale motifs with more risqué fare is not new. In the early nineteenth century, the antebellum American authors of sensationalism saw the

popularity of the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm, Giambattista Basile, and Charles Perrault and seized upon the opportunity to capitalize on their popularity by incorporating fairy tale motifs into the sensational news and fiction of the day. That the authors of sensational works wrote to evoke sensations, shock, and thrills from their readers, purported to uncover “the miseries and mysteries” of various urban centers, and used their work as forum for their own political and social views worked well with the themes and messages of the fairy tales.¹ In fact, the use of popular fairy tale motifs helped establish the *New York Herald* and catapult George Lippard’s *The Quaker City* and George Thompson’s work to bestselling status. Even Edgar Allan Poe, who strove for success throughout his career, wrote stories filled with references to fairy tales.

This dissertation will examine the works of each of these men, paying attention to the ways in which each builds upon the work of his predecessor by incorporating Snow Whites, Sleeping Beauties, and Cinderellas and adding his own take on the meaning and place of the passive woman in Antebellum America. These writers did not simply use fairy tales as they were; each transformed them and built upon the work of his predecessor to further his personal agenda and enter into the antebellum debate about American women’s roles. This debate occurred among women and men alike, and “some nineteenth-century women channeled their frustration with women’s restricted roles combined with a sense of superior rightness legitimized by the Cult of True Womanhood

¹ For more on the content or the political and social work of antebellum sensationalism, see Stephen John Hartnett, *Democratic Dissent and the Cultural Fictions of Antebellum America* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002); Shelley Streeby, *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002); and Isabelle Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page: Popular Print Media in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

into the reform movements of the first half of the nineteenth century.”² These women’s increased activity concerned many men and many other women, who encouraged the piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity that the reformists rejected. Reformist women worked within their prescribed roles, but their increased political and social activity demonstrated their displeasure with an America that promised freedom but oppressed over half its citizens.

Herald editor James Gordon Bennett’s agenda was simply to sell more papers by toying with both sides of the debate and creating sensational news stories that appealed to the public’s baser desires; Poe, like Bennett, catered to “the mob’s” desires, but he twisted the formula to demonstrate the horror of active women who refuse passivity. Lippard had a more social and political motive in that he twisted the formula of the fairy tale to further a socialist critique of the capitalist city in his sensational novels. Thompson masked his nearly pornographic work by pretending to offer an anti-capitalist critique like Lippard’s, but the way in which he uses fairy tales simply reinforces the repressive state structures that it pretends to subvert.

Chapter 2 begins by introducing the popularity and prevalence of fairy tales in nineteenth-century America. Charles Perrault's *Fairy Tales or Histories of Past Times* was translated to English in 1727, and Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's *German Popular Stories, translated from the Kinder und Hans Marchen* was translated in 1823. Both went through several reprintings and editions throughout the Nineteenth-Century. I incorporate statements from Edgar Taylor, the English translator of the Grimms' stories, magazine articles, and research on the number of translations and editions of these works

² Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 109.

to establish the American popularity of Taylor's translations. The popularity of the tales prompted Taylor to re-edit the tales, making them more suitable to British and American culture. American writers tried their hands at both writing their own fairy tales, as Nathaniel Hawthorne did with his *Wonder Book*, and at adapting fairy tales to American settings, as Lydia Maria Francis Child did with her *Evenings in New England*.

I also discuss the political and social implications of the tales, especially those of the Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, and Cinderella tale types. Each tale underscores and reinforces patriarchal authority, even when that authority dictates a daughter marry her father. Too, any woman who dares to assert her independence suffers severe punishment and, often, death. The tales do not restrict their punishment to evil stepmothers. Though Snow White and Cinderella's stepmothers suffer by the end of those tales, in many others, the heroines themselves suffer before they find happiness. Their suffering clearly results from their refusal to abide by their father's wishes, even when that wish is incestuous. In each of these tales, the young woman has to disguise herself and become a servant in another kingdom, where other servants and the king mock and abuse her. The ending of these tales has the girl marrying the very king who has mocked and abused her throughout her time as a servant, thus reestablishing the patriarchal authority that she had subverted by running from her incestuous father.

After the discussion of fairy tales, Chapter 3 turns to the 1836 murder of New York City prostitute Helen Jewett. I begin with a discussion of James Gordon Bennett's descriptions of the scene and Helen Jewett's body. Bennett fails to include the autopsy incisions, the charred nature of the body, and the gashes in her head. Had he described a mutilated corpse, Bennett could not have talked of Jewett's "body" as "white" or of her

“perfect figure.” Jewett had been mutilated not only by the murderer's axe, but also by the autopsy knife before Bennett viewed the murder scene. Yet Bennett never mentions these details, choosing, instead, to portray her as a modern version of Snow White or Sleeping Beauty. Bennett positions himself as the prince who has discovered a “sleeping beauty”: “It was the most remarkable sight I ever beheld—I never have, and never expect to see such another. ‘My God,’ exclaimed I, ‘how like a statue! I can scarcely conceive that form to be a corpse.’ . . . For a few moments I was lost in admiration at this extraordinary sight—a beautiful female corpse.” Like the fairy tale princes created by Perrault and the Grimms, Bennett is compelled to look upon the dead “beauty.”

Bennett's sensational reporting was not the end of the country's fascination with Jewett's murder. I also examine the pamphlets and novels based upon the case. As late as 1982, authors were continuing to focus their attentions on the case, and in each popular pamphlet or novelization, Bennett's reports make up the foundation for the ending. Each author literally reprints Bennett's articles with nearly no commentary or description of his own. Obviously, this incorporation of “factual” reporting lends some authority or credence to each fictionalized account, but it also demonstrates the importance of Bennett's authorial voice in constructing *the* account of Helen Jewett's life and death. Bennett and each successive author of Jewett's story incorporates details and motifs from fairy tales to create an acceptably sympathetic figure out of a prostitute. They also uncover the latent sexuality of the fairy tales in overtly emphasizing the erotic appeal of a “sleeping beauty.”

After Chapter 3 establishes the similarities between fairy tales and Bennett's reporting of the Jewett murder, Chapter 4 examines the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe,

comparing and contrasting them to Grimms' and Perrault's fairy tales and Bennett's descriptions of Jewett's corpse. Once I establish this connection between Poe, Bennett, and necrophilic desire, I show how Poe's stories use and twist fairy tales. Indicating an indirect relationship between Poe and the fairy tales, Francine Prose argues in her essay "Sleeping Beauty," "By now it's probably clear that what I'm talking about is a sort of modified necrophilia . . . And yet it can be imagined, and *has been* imagined, again and again, by the likes of Basile and Charles Perrault (the original authors, transcribers—or whatever—of "Sleeping Beauty), by Edgar Allan Poe . . . and, more recently, by Alfred Hitchcock." Prose only mentions that Poe "imagined" necrophilia, as did Basile and Perrault; she never suggests that fairy tales served as an impetus for Poe's literary necrophilia. I build upon Prose's indirect association, establishing a direct correlation between fairy tales and Poe's sensational fiction. In his reviews, Poe mentions the fairy tales of the Grimms, Perrault, and even Giambattista Basile several times.

This section focuses on the stories in which Poe's male narrators are drawn to the corpses of dead women, describing the dead bodies in terms such as "the mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and the face," "marble hand," "skin rivalling the purest ivory," and "raven-black, the glossy, the luxuriant and naturally curling tresses." The analysis of Poe's stories also considers the actions of the primary male characters and narrators. In "The Premature Burial," a woman's male lover travels to her grave with "the purpose of disinterring the corpse and possessing himself of its luxuriant tresses." Once he has unearthed his lover's corpse, he discovers, "In fact, the lady had been buried alive. Vitality had not altogether departed; and she was aroused, by the caresses of her lover, from the lethargy which had been mistaken for death." Not only are the

descriptions of the women in Poe's stories similar to those of the fairy tale princesses, but his male characters' actions parallel those of the fairy tale princes who awaken their princesses with kisses.

I also detail the similarities between the settings of Poe's stories and those of the fairy tales. In "Fall of the House of Usher," for example, the narrator describes the house as being infused with "a sense of insufferable gloom," possessing "bleak walls," being surrounded by "decayed trees," and evoking in the observer "an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart." The narrator's descriptions of the House of Usher are in keeping with the descriptions of the homes in which the sleeping beauty of the fairy tales is imprisoned. Both narrators describe the scenes in terms of "horror" and "silence." Scenes of "gloom" or "death" are everywhere in both the House of Usher and the palace in which Sleeping Beauty lies. The narrator of "Usher" never actually uses the word "death" to describe the scenery, yet the "decayed trees," "insufferable gloom," and "bleak walls" of the Usher home are as much the "image of death" as what the prince in Perrault's tale encounters. Moreover, both Poe's narrator and Perrault's prince experience a feeling of "iciness" or being "frozen with terror" upon first confronting the house or palace.

At this point in the chapter, I look at the differences between Poe's stories and those of the fairy tales. Whereas the fairy tales separate good and evil women into different characters like the wicked stepmother, the wicked witch, the fairy godmother, and the kind-hearted princess, Poe creates more complex female characters, combining good and evil in one character. Drawing on Dawn Keetley's study "Victim and Victimizer: Female Fiends and Unease over Marriage in Antebellum Sensational

Fiction,” I read Poe's *Ligeia*, *Morella*, and *Lady Usher* as fiends and not just fairy-tale-like heroines.³ In fact, Poe's stories, rather than emphasizing or encouraging passivity in women, demonstrate men's terror of the active woman who refuses to remain dead. Instead of instructing women to be passive, pious, pure, and domestic by encouraging identification with a heroine who embodies these traits, Poe's stories encourage identification with mentally ill narrators who fear active, unholy, tainted, and worldly women who return from the dead to exact revenge on the men who sought to imprison them within the confines of the home.

Chapter 5 considers the sensational works of Poe's contemporary and friend George Lippard. Looking at Lippard's *The Quaker City, or The Monks of Monk-Hall: a Romance of Philadelphia Life, Mystery, and Crime*, I compare and contrast Lippard's work with Poe's stories by examining the descriptions of female corpses, the actions of the male characters, and the settings of the stories. Moreover, I investigate Lippard's reliance upon the popular fairy tales of the Grimms, Perrault, and Basile, Bennett's reporting style, and Poe's dark romanticism as a means of gaining popularity. Since Lippard was also a reformer, he incorporates these themes in a more politically subversive manner than Poe's work does. Lippard's novel condemns those men who would take advantage of women's passivity and piety and the very idea that women should be passive.

The Quaker City repeatedly subverts the belief that woman's nature was passive by depicting her “slumbering animal nature.” In doing so, the novel also demonstrates the dangers that the capitalist city poses to the True Woman. Thus, Lippard condemned

³ Dawn Keetley, “Victim and Victimizer: Female Fiends and Unease over Marriage in Antebellum Sensational Fiction,” *American Quarterly* 15.2 (1999), 344-384.

not only patriarchal control over women, but also the entirety of the cult of domesticity. Equally important, his sensational and sexual novel builds upon those fairy tales that depict father-daughter incestuous desire, by incorporating a reverend who attempts to rape his daughter. The text, unlike those of the fairy tales and Poe, condemns incestuous desire, demonstrating that a father's complete control over his family leads to ruin. Throughout Lippard, he develops the motifs from fairy tales, Bennett, and Poe to further his anti-capitalist agenda, pointing out the faults of the various repressive structures of capitalism.

Turning to George Thompson, Chapter 6 demonstrates that Thompson used the techniques of each subsequent author to help his novels *Venus in Boston* and *City Crimes* get past the censors. I explore Thompson's relationship with publishers who were known pornographers and argue that, contrary to the assertions of scholars such as David Reynolds, Thompson was no radical democrat with a goal of subverting social norms and political views. Indeed, Thompson masks his work in the language of subversion; he mimics Lippard in pretending to subvert Christian ideology, the cult of domesticity, and classism. Yet in every instance, Thompson's work immediately undoes any subversion by reinforcing the notion that the evil capitalist who refuses to help the poor will be punished in the afterlife, allowing only the pure and passive women to lead happy lives whereas their active counterparts receive cruel punishments and death, and ensuring that hardworking and honest poor men move up in society on their own merits and become successful professionals.

Chapter 7 revisits women's social reform movements, exploring the reasons that male writers like Bennett, Poe, and Thompson would turn to sensational depictions of sex

and violence to reinforce the Cult of True Womanhood. Looking backward to Susanna Rowson's poem "The Rights of Woman," I reflect upon male writers' desire to encourage women to see their duties in a more favorable light. Bennett's and Thompson's works emphasize the belief that when women succumb to the temptations of the world and neglect their rights to piety, submissiveness, domesticity, and purity, they end up abandoned, punished, or dead; In Thompson's work, it is all three. Poe's work takes a different approach, forcing his reader to feel the terror of his male narrators when active women refuse death and the ultimate passivity. Lippard approaches the issue of women's rights and liberties in a different manner altogether, showing that capitalism gives women few choices other than selling their bodies—through prostitution or marriage—to secure stable futures for themselves.

Each point in my argument depends upon an understanding of and familiarity with fairy tales from seventeenth century Italy and France and nineteenth century Germany. These tales were the sensational fiction of their day, featuring familial violence, death, incest, and what looks to us like pedophilia. Thus, it is no wonder that the sensational authors of antebellum America turned to the fairy tales for inspiration and thematic content. Like Basile, Perrault, and the Brothers Grimm, American sensational writers used their art to instruct society on the proper behaviors for women—piety, purity, domesticity, and passivity. Unlike the fairy tale authors, however, American sensational writers' messages were complex and often contradictory, exposing the conflict over gender roles and ideologies in the antebellum period.

CHAPTER 2
BEFORE DISNEY: READING PEDOPHILIA, INCEST, AND NECROPHILIA IN
CLASSIC FAIRY TALES

In 1937, Disney released *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the first full-length animated film. Since then, it has been re-released to theatres an unprecedented nine times and remains a favorite of children and adults everywhere. Disney used Jacob and Wilhelm Grimms' 1812 version of "Little Snow White" as their guide, but watching the film, one would never know how violent and strangely erotic the Grimms' tale is. The Grimms' version of the "Snow White" tale, like all of the tales Disney adapted into animated features, deals with far more adult themes than its more contemporary counterpart. Motifs of what we now consider pedophilia, incest, and necrophilia are not anomalies; they are intricately woven into many versions of the fairy tales across countries.

These themes cross over into nineteenth century American popular culture after the English translations of the fairy tales become widely available. This chapter will address the role of the English translations of Giambattista Basile's *Il Pentamerone*, Charles Perrault's *Tales of Passed Times by Mother Goose with Morals*, and Jacob and Wilhelm Grimms' *German Fairy Tales and Popular Stories as Told by Gammer Grethel* in socializing readers to Victorian models of gender-appropriate behavior, at the same time weaving in overtly erotic material. It argues that the translations of these tales helped to lay the cultural groundwork for and encouraged a fascination with women's dead bodies—a necrophilic desire—incestuous relationships, and pedophilia—and that these

subjects, certainly taboo in antebellum America, contributed to solidifying the power of men over women and the notion that “good” women were innately pious, pure, submissive, and domestic.¹

The authors of fairy tales did not simply collect the tales and publish them as they were. Basile wrote his tales in the Neapolitan dialect, fashioning them according to his own tastes. Nancy L. Canepa explores theories relating to Basile’s use of dialect: “many critics view the use of dialect in literary form as part of the general phenomenon of political and cultural decentralization and the ensuing regionalistic or municipalistic fervor. Moreover . . . its use implied a questioning of both literary predecessors and the contemporary advocates of tradition.”² More importantly, Canepa explains, “[Dialect] was almost automatically relegated to the domain of ‘low’ literary forms . . . it could serve the function of signaling that the work . . . was not to be taken seriously and . . . any ‘message’ contained therein could pose no significant threat to literary or social institutions.”³ Though Canepa’s assertions that Basile’s use of dialect serves to undermine the authority of both literary and social institutions, she neglects an important

¹ Many books and articles have been published about fairy tales and their interpretation and influence on literature, but to my knowledge, there has been nothing written on fairy tales as one of sensationalism’s influences. See James M. McGlathery, *Fairy Tale Romance: The Grimms, Basile, and Perrault* (Urbana, IL: Illinois UP, 1991); Nancy L. Canepa, *From Court to Forest: Giambattista Basile’s Lo cunto de li cunti and the Birth of the Literary Fairy Tale* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1999); Maria Tatar, *Off with Their Heads! Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1992); Jack Zipes, *Victorian Fairy Tales: the Revolt of the Fairies and Elves* (New York: Routledge, 1987) and *When Dreams Came True: Classical Fairy Tales and Their Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Jennifer Schacker, *National Dreams: The Remaking of Fairy Tales in Nineteenth-Century England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); and *Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Women Writers Explore their Favorite Fairy Tales*, ed. Kate Bernheimer (New York: Anchor Books, 1998). See also the Norton Critical Editions of Maria Tatar’s *The Classic Fairy Tales* (New York: Norton, 1999); and Jack Zipes’s *The Great Fairy Tale Tradition from Straparola and Basile to the Brothers Grimm* (New York: Norton, 2001).

² Canepa, 67.

³ Canepa, 69.

facet of the tales—the inherent messages about the evils of talkative, active women. Yet her assertions about the use of dialect in literature bring to light aspects of George Lippard’s antebellum city novels, which will be discussed in Chapter Five, that might otherwise be obscured.

Perrault, too, adapted the tales he collected to fit his agenda. The morals appended to the end of each tale serve to socialize women to be less curious, more passive, and less talkative. At the end of “The Blue Beard,” the moral blames the curiosity of Blue Beard’s wife for upsetting him and, thus, putting herself in a dangerous situation: “O, Curiosity, thou mortal bane! / Spit of thy charms, thou causest often pain . . . And always costs, alas! too dear the prize, / Which, in the moment of possession dies.”⁴ That Blue Beard murdered his previous wives and planned to do the same to the heroine of the tale is overlooked in this moral. The woman in the tale bears the sole blame in its final moral. Perrault added a second moral to the tale after readers’ complaints revealed they were unhappy with the fact that the original moral ignored Blue Beard’s crimes. The narrator takes on a more tongue-in-cheek tone in the second moral, asserting that the tale takes place in the past and that husbands no longer behave so “terribly.”

The first part of the three-part moral of Perrault’s “The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood” remains true to the author’s patten of encouraging women to passively obey their husbands. It proclaims:

To get a husband rich, genteel and gay,
Of humour sweet, some time to stay,
Is natural enough, ‘tis true.
But then to wait an hundred years,
And all that while asleep, appears

⁴ Perrault, Charles, “The Blue Beard,” *Histories or Tales of Past Times with Morals*, trans. Robert Samber (London: J. Pote & R. Montagu, 1729), 30.

A thing intirely [sic] new.
 Now at this time of day,
 Not one of all the sex we see
 To sleep with such profound tranquility.⁵

The story lauds the passivity of the story's main character over "the sex" "at this time of day." She waited with "profound tranquility" for the perfect man rather than pursuing him. Perrault clearly promotes the sleeping beauty's passive role in her relationship with her rescuer and future husband. Perrault's addition of the morals and his removal of "offensive" elements like rape is in keeping with his desire to make the tales useful and instructional.⁶

The Grimms too edited their tales from their original oral forms. Ruth B. Bottigheimer clarifies the Grimms' similar role: "Despite the ancient and international lineage of many of the tales, the process of editing, codifying, and translating them produced a distinctly nineteenth-century text, incorporating the gender-related assumptions of Grimms' informants and of Wilhelm Grimm himself."⁷ Feminist critics have gone further in explaining the messages inherent in the Grimms' tales: "Most popular fairy tales, like 'Cinderella' and 'Snow White' and 'Sleeping Beauty,' had heroines who were passive, apparently dead or sleepwalking, dependent on the arrival of

⁵ Charles Perrault, "The Sleeping Beauty in the Woods," *Tales of Passed Times by Mother Goose with Morals* Trans. R. S. Gent (New York: J. Rivington, 1795), 57-58.

⁶ See Philip Lewis, *Seeing Through the Mother Goose Tales: Visual Turns in the Writings of Charles Perrault* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1996), 5, 149, & 168-170; and Ruth B. Bottigheimer, *Grimms' Bad Girls and Bold Boys: The Moral and Social Vision of the Tales* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1987), 3. See also Ruth B. Bottigheimer, "Silenced Women in Grimms' Tales: The 'Fit' between Fairy Tales and Society in Their Historical Context," *Fairy Tales and Society: Illusion, Allusion, and Paradigm* ed. Ruth B. Bottigheimer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986).

⁷ Ruth B. Bottigheimer, "Silenced Women in Grimms' Tales," 117.

the prince for any animation and for entry into a real life.”⁸ In compiling and publishing their *Kinder- und Hausmarchen*, the Grimms brought together a collection of stories that encouraged women and girls to be passive, silent, and nearly lifeless. In the Grimms’ tales, the only perfect women are dead women. The nineteenth century American public’s fascination with Jewett’s corpse and the female corpses in sensational fiction reinforces this premise, as I will discuss in the following chapters.

Just as Basile, Perrault, and the Grimms did not simply record the tales from their oral sources, the men who translated the tales into English worked to make the tales more appealing and acceptable to English and American readers. In fact, Edgar Taylor’s 1823 translation of the Grimms’ tales, along with George Cruikshank’s illustrations for Taylor’s edition, “fully transformed the tales into a popular and commercially viable form of reading material.”⁹ Jennifer Schacker maintains that like the Grimms, whose aim was partly that their volumes “become a manual of manners,” Taylor translated and edited the tales with an eye to the customs and beliefs of his English and American readers. Taylor’s work clearly helped catapult the tales in the popular imagination. Whereas the Grimms’ tales were never best sellers (there were still 350 copies of the second volume of the first edition on the shelf when the second edition was released, and that took twenty years to sell 1500 copies), Taylor’s translation proved popular with the masses.¹⁰ In the September 1881 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*, in “Koschei the Deathless; or, the Diffusion of Fairy Tales,” John Fiske discusses the immense popularity of the

⁸ Elizabeth Harries, *Twice upon a Time: Women Writers and the History of the Fairy Tale* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2001), 137.

⁹ Schacker, 13.

¹⁰ Schacker, 24-25.

fairy tales of Straparola, Basile, Perrault, Grimm, and *The Arabian Nights* in the Western world, specifically focusing on American reception from the time of the first translations. Fiske argues that they were so popular that each new translation led to demand for fairy tales from other authors and regions.¹¹

In the preface to his 1856 translation of the Grimms' tales, Edgar Taylor (also the translator of the 1823 version on which this essay relies) presents as justification for a new edition of the tales that he was “first induced to compile this little work by the eager relish with which a few of the tales were received by the young friends to whom they were narrated.”¹² He continues, “Popular fictions and traditions are somewhat gone out of fashion; yet most will own them to be associated with the brightest recollections of their youth.”¹³ Taylor’s production of a new edition of the tales and his assertions in the preface to the 1856 edition, as well as Fiske’s comments about fairy tales in the Western world, an 1846 translation by John Edward Taylor, and numerous “unauthorized” translations and editions, further establish the popularity of the Grimms' tales.

The literary fairy tales written by Basile and Perrault enjoyed immense popularity as well, though Basile presented a challenge to his early translators, who were wary of his ribald humor and overt sexual references. Basile’s *Il Pentamerone* proved a popular source for folklorists as soon as the popularity of the Grimms’ tales became evident. In

¹¹ John Fiske, “Koschei the Deathless; or, the Diffusion of Fairy Tales,” *Atlantic Monthly* 48.287 (September 1881), 310-321. See also Siegfried Neumann’s “The Brothers Grimm as Collectors and Editors of German Folktales,” Donald Haase’s “Response and Responsibility in Reading Grimms’ Fairy Tales,” and Ruth B. Bottigheimer’s “The Publishing History of Grimms’ Tales” all in *The Reception of Grimms’ Fairy Tales: Responses. Reactions. Revisions*, ed. Donald Haase (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1993).

¹² Edgar Taylor, “Preface,” *German Fairy Tales and Popular Stories, as Told by Gammer Grethel* (London: H. G. Bohn, 1856), iv.

¹³ Edgar Taylor, iv.

1828, Thomas Keightley included several of Basile's more risqué tales in his *Fairy Mythology*, and he later included others in his 1834 *Tales and Popular Fictions*. The first English translation of *Il Pentamerone* by John Edward Taylor in 1848 includes an expansive preface explaining the process of translating and editing the tales for a nineteenth century audience and placing the tome in the larger emerging body of folklore studies. Taylor chose only thirty of Basile's fifty stories for publication, changing even those he included to omit "matter of offense." Taylor justified his changes as necessary for the English and American cultures of the day: "The gross license in which Basile allows his humour to indulge is wholly inadmissible in a work intended for the general reader; the moral sense of our age is happily too refined and elevated to tolerate indelicacy."¹⁴ Writing just six years after the publication of George Lippard's best-selling *Quaker City*, Taylor seems to have overlooked the immense popularity of the penny presses and sensational fiction like Lippard's that featured humor and indulged in immoral scenes of rape, incest, and murder.

Or, perhaps Taylor's reasons went further than he wanted to admit; perhaps he realized that the tales' scenes of fatherly incest, rape and domestic abuse go unpunished and uncritiqued, in contrast to those in Lippard and the sensational presses. Given the success of such "indelicate" material as that frequently reported in the press, it is unlikely that the masses' tastes were "too refined and elevated" to be able to handle Basile's tales. More probably, John Edward Taylor recognized that the rewarding of what his nineteenth century readers frowned upon would have left a strange, if not disgusting, taste in their mouths.

¹⁴ John Edward Taylor, "Preface," *Il Pentamerone* (London: David Bogue and J. Cundall, 1848), xv.

Charles Perrault's tales also proved popular, if the number of translations is any indication. In 1729, Robert Samber translated *Contes du Ma Mere L' Oye* for the first time into English. After this initial introduction to the English speaking world, translators produced editions of both the full book and the individual tales, selling them as small, cheap pamphlets.¹⁵ Because of the nature of the printing of the pamphlets with cheap materials, there is no record of sales or of the actual number of different editions in circulation in the nineteenth century. Yet this mass production in an affordable medium suggests that they would have been widely read and circulated. Perrault also presented fewer problems to his translators, since his stories rely on implication and subtext to hint at "objectionable" or "offensive" elements; thus, even more than John Edward Taylor's translation of Basile, these tales appealed to both adults and children.

In the same way that Basile, Perrault, the Grimms, and their translators did not write down the tales as they were told them, Disney did not create a film that simply reiterated the Grimms' tale. Disney's *Snow White* bears little resemblance to the tale on which the company claims to have relied. Disney asserts that they made changes in order to tone down the violence in their film, yet many of the changes have nothing to do with the level of violence in the Grimms' original tale and everything to do with erotic elements. Though Disney does not explicitly state Snow White's age, visual cues, such as the character's height and fully developed body, hint that she is in her late teens or early adulthood. In the first few minutes of the film, Snow White meets her prince at a wall on the very day her stepmother decides to have her murdered.

¹⁵ Between the time of the first English translation of Perrault's tales in 1729 to 1850, there were at least nineteen publications of individual stories and one grouping of three stories. In the same period, there were at least twelve different editions of the entire collection.

Later, after Snow White eats the apple and falls into a deathlike sleep, the dwarfs place her body on a pedestal. The dwarfs then chase the wicked stepmother, who accidentally runs off the side of a cliff, plunging to her death in the raging water below. A short time later, Prince Charming arrives, grief-stricken at the sight of his beloved Snow White in her “sleeping death.” He kisses her, she magically awakens, and they ride off into the sunset to live happily ever after. Obviously, Disney’s assertions that it removed or changed the more violent episodes of the original tale suggest that their intent was to make the story more appropriate for an audience of young children. Yet, they also removed or changed episodes that have nothing to do with violence, episodes that deal with erotic themes and that depict Snow White as vain and vengeful.

Though Wilhelm Grimm went back to the *Kinder –und Hausmarchen*, editing it so that subsequent versions were more appropriate for children, the first version published in 1812 was intended to serve as a record of German folklore, reflecting the adult themes inherent in the tales. Their “Snow White” of 1812 is far more violent than their final version of 1857 and certainly more “adult” than Disney’s film. Early in the story, the narrator tells us, “ Now Snow White grew up, and when she was seven years old, she was so beautiful, that she surpassed even the queen herself.”¹⁶ The queen of the story is not Snow White’s stepmother; she is the girl’s biological mother, the woman who is supposed to love and put her well being above all others.

The major conflict in this story, and in many fairy tales, occurs because of female jealousy. Here, Snow White’s mother’s jealousy overrides her love for her own daughter; in all versions of the “Cinderella” tale, the heroine’s stepmother and stepsisters

¹⁶ Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, “Snow-White,” *German Fairy Tales and Popular Stories, as Told by Gammer Grethel* trans. Edgar Taylor (London: H. G. Boh, 1823), 152.

torment the girl only because they envy her youth and beauty. Female jealousy or vanity sets many of these tales in motion. The archetype of the “evil stepmother” or “evil stepsister” pervades antebellum American sensationalism, prompting James Gordon Bennett to speculate that the “true” murderer of Helen Jewett was one of her housemates who had become jealous of the girl’s beauty, charms, and success with men.

The Grimms’ Snow White presents an element of the tale that is as strange as her mother trying to kill her; the heroine is but seven years old. The age of the heroine creates a pedophilic air about the text that also persists in sensationalism. The major events that lead to her death occur over a four-day period, and though “she lay there in the coffin a long, long time,” “she did not decay . . . She lay there as if asleep.”¹⁷ The narrator implies that the girl not only does not decay, but also does not age as she appears “as if asleep.” Thus, when the prince, whom she has never met, finds her and seems to fall in love with her, he falls in love with a child, an element even more disturbingly evoked in the tales of Edgar Allan Poe.

The narrator affirms that although she looks as though she is living, Snow White is really dead: “There came no breath out of her mouth, and she was dead . . . They would have buried her, but that she looked still as if she were living, with her beautiful blooming cheeks.”¹⁸ Unlike the Disney version, in which Snow White has fallen down in a deep slumber, the Grimm version makes it clear that “she was dead.” Rather than falling down “as if” dead, Snow White looks “as if she were living.” When the prince looks upon Snow White’s body in her glass coffin, he declares, “I beseech you to give it

¹⁷ Grimm, “Snow-White,” 155.

¹⁸ Grimm, “Snow-White,” 155.

to me, for I cannot live without looking upon Snow White.”¹⁹ The prince does not express love for Snow White; her “beautiful female corpse,” an “it” to possess, enthralls him. A man’s obsession with the beautiful corpse of a woman appears continuously in American fiction of the nineteenth century in the penny presses, Poe’s fiction, and the sensation fiction of writers such as George Lippard and George Thompson.

Though Disney omits the prince’s obsession with Snow White’s corpse from their film, in Grimms’ tale it readily presents itself. The narrator explains that when the prince first sees Snow White in the glass coffin, he is so struck by her beauty that “he cannot get enough.” More importantly, the narrator describes the depth of the prince’s interest in the girl’s body:

He read the golden inscription and saw that she was the daughter of a king. He asked the dwarfs to sell him the coffin with the dead Snow-White, but they would not do this for any amount of gold. The he asked them to give her to him, for he could not live without being able to see her, and he would keep her, and honor her as his most cherished thing on earth. Then the dwarfs took pity on him and gave him the coffin.

The prince had it carried to his castle, and had it placed in a room where he sat by it the whole day, never taking his eyes from it. Whenever he had to go out and was unable to see Snow-White, he became sad. And he could not eat a bit, unless the coffin was standing next to him.²⁰

Here, unlike in Disney’s version, the prince obsesses over the object of his lust—Snow White. He has never met her, and he falls in love not with a dearly departed love but with the corpse of a child upon whom he has never before laid eyes. Moreover, he does not see her as someone with whom he can have a relationship, nor can he since she is dead. He sees her as a gaze-object to be bought and sold, offering the dwarfs “any amount of gold” for her. When they refuse to sell here, he begs them to let him have her

¹⁹ Grimm, “Snow-White,” 156.

²⁰ Grimm, “Snow-White,” 156-7.

so that he can “see her,” assuring them that he will treat her as “his most cherished thing on earth.” He does not love her; he does not even see her as a person. He refers to her as a “thing” to be cherished, and much like a horse, she has exquisite breeding.

The prince’s insistence that he be able to view Snow White’s body at all times seems at best neurotic, but it also points to his power over her. The prince’s power directly correlates with his ability to gaze at the girl’s body. Elizabeth Bronfen explains the prince’s need to “see” the coffin and Snow White: “Seeing means possession and pleasure while the act of idealizing annuls both the femininity of the adored dead object and its insertion in temporality.”²¹ Snow White’s prince can possess her in death in a way that he cannot in life. He has full control over her and laments if he has to be away from her body because it reminds him of the limits of his power. Death and the prince’s idealization of her corpse annul Snow White’s femininity, that part of her that holds power over men. Because she is dead and because the prince can look upon her with rare interruption and no censure, Snow White presents no challenge to his authority. She cannot object or fight back; she cannot say that she does not want to go with him. The prince has her as his complete command; thus Snow White is the perfect woman by antebellum standards.

Even though the narrator of Basile’s “The Young Slave” never gives a detailed description of Lisa when she is dead, the queen’s reasons for disguising Lisa as a slave reveal an awareness of men’s necrophilic desires. When Lisa’s mother dies, she gives her brother, the king, the key to the room in which Lisa’s corpse lies seven crystal coffins, one inside another. She never tells him what is inside the room; she only asks

²¹ Elizabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 100.

him to swear not to enter it. He leaves his new wife in charge of the key while he travels, telling her, as Blue Beard tells his wife, not to enter the room. Of course, she enters it and finds the “beauteous” dead body of Lisa.²²

Not knowing Lisa’s identity, the queen reacts violently:

‘Bravo, my priest; key in waistband, and ram within; this is the reason why I was so earnestly begged not to open this door, so that I should not behold Mohammed, whom he worshippeth within these chests.’ Thus saying, she pulled her out by the hair of her head . . . she at once cut off the damsel’s hair, and gave her a good drubbing, and arrayed her in rags.²³

The queen believes that the king kept her from the room because he “worshippeth” Lisa. At the very least, she believes that he admires the “beauteous” corpse lying within the chests. Likely, she believes her husband has been having sex with the corpse, releasing the “ram within.” The queen’s violent behavior upon finding the girl evinces her jealousy. If she merely thought that the king was looking at Lisa’s corpse, her reaction would have been less violent toward the girl. The queen’s actions indicate her keen awareness of male desire for a lifeless woman with whom to engage in intimate intercourse.

The male gaze functions in other fairy tales as well, pointing to the hero’s power over the subjugated, dead female body. The narrator of Charles Perrault’s “Sleeping Beauty” describes the prince’s reactions upon entering the palace, saying that what he sees is enough to “freeze his blood with terror” and that “Death seemed to be everywhere.”²⁴ Despite the “death” that seems to be around him, the prince presses

²² Giambattista Basile, “The Young Slave,” *Il Pentamerone, or The Tale of Tales*. trans. Sir Richard Burton (New York: Boni & Lieveright, 1927), 117. Reprint of the 1893 edition.

²³ Basile, “The Young Slave,” 117.

²⁴ Charles Perrault, “The Sleeping Beauty in the Woods,” *Histories or Tales of Past Times with Morals*, trans. Robert Samber (London: J. Pote & R. Montagu, 1729), 20.

onward and encounters the sleeping princess, who possesses “radiant charms” that make her appearance “luminous and supernatural.”²⁵ In their “Brier Rose,” Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm’s narrator explains the prince’s reaction upon finding the sleeping princess after encountering seeming death: “There she lay, and her beauty was so marvelous that he could not take his eyes off her.”²⁶ Similarly, in the Grimms’ less familiar “The Glass Coffin,” the narrator describes the hero’s reaction upon finding a “glass coffin” in which lay a seemingly dead woman: “How his admiration increased when he saw therein a maiden of the greatest beauty!”²⁷

Sexual imagery figures more prominently in the texts of both Perrault’s and the Grimms’ fairy tales. In Perrault’s “Sleeping Beauty,” the narrator explains, “great trees and brambles and thorns opened of their own accord and allowed [the prince] to pass through.”²⁸ Similarly, in Grimms’ “Brier Rose,” “Beautiful flowers that opened of their own accord, let him through, and then closed again like a hedge.”²⁹ By describing the prince’s penetration of the barrier that had grown up around the castle, the narrator alludes to the prince’s penetration of the “sleeping beauty.” Because the “trees and brambles and thorns” and “beautiful flowers” “opened of their own accord” in both Perrault’s and the Grimms’ versions of the tale, the reader understands that the prince’s penetration of the sleeping beauty is consensual.

²⁵ Perrault, “The Sleeping Beauty in the Woods,” 20.

²⁶ Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, “Brier Rose,” *German Fairy Tales and Popular Stories, as Told by Gammer Grethel* trans. Edgar Taylor (London: H. G. Bohn, 1823), 30.

²⁷ Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, “The Glass Coffin,” *The Complete Tales of the Brothers Grimm* ed. Jack Zipes, 3rd edition, (New York: Bantam, 2003), 483.

²⁸ Perrault, 19.

²⁹ Grimm, “Brier Rose,” 29-30.

In an earlier version of the “sleeping beauty” tale, Giambattista Basile’s “Sun, Moon, and Talia,” penetration is literal rather than figurative, and it is not consensual.³⁰ In this tale, “Unfortunately, one of the chips of the flax entered her nail, and Talia fell dead upon the ground.”³¹ The princess is not a “sleeping beauty” but a “dead” beauty. When the hero of the tale finds the “dead” woman, “he believed that she slept, and he called her, but she remained insensible, and crying aloud, he felt his blood course hotly through his veins in contemplation of so many charms; and he lifted her in his arms, and carried her to a bed, whereon he gathered the first fruits of love.”³² The king of this tale “believed” the princess was sleeping, but he cannot wake her. He “called her,” and still she did not respond. Though the reader knows that the princess is dead, the king “gathered the first fruits of love.” He does not hesitate to put out the fire that “her charms” had set, and the fact that she was dead may have been part of the allure. As a corpse, the princess does not possess the ability to reject the king's advances. Basile also includes a hint of realism in his tale when the king returned to his kingdom and “for a time thought no more of this incident.”³³ Instead of Talia waking up and living “happily ever after” with the king, Talia remains dead or asleep, and the king forgets all about her for nearly a year.

³⁰ In his preface to the 1856 English translation of Grimms' tales, Edgar Taylor discusses the similarities between Basile's story and both Perrault's and Grimms' versions. Thus, even though Basile was not yet translated into English it is possible that his stories were also widely known.

³¹ Giambattista Basile, “Sun, Moon, and Talia,” *Il Pentamerone, or The Tale of Tales*. trans. Sir Richard Burton (New York: Boni & Lieveright, 1927), 420. Reprint of the 1893 edition.

³² Basile, “Sun, Moon, and Talia,” 421-422.

³³ Basile, “Sun, Moon, and Talia,” 422.

Though Basile had not yet been translated into English, English and American readers likely knew the tale well, since Poe and his contemporaries reference this tale on several occasions prior to John Edward Taylor's edition of 1848. In his edition, Taylor includes the tale but removes the rape. Instead, the king "admired her beauty a while," and nine months later Talia gives birth to twins. Clearly, a sexual encounter must have taken place, but Taylor takes great pains to obscure it. Even so, the sexual aspect of the tale must have been widely known. In his 1823 translation of the Grimms' tales, Edgar Taylor footnotes his translation "Brier Rose" to explain that Basile's version was one source that the brothers used in writing their own tale. Taylor summarizes the plot of Basile's version, touching upon the prince's sexual encounter with the sleeping woman. This explanation functions to further highlight the latent sexuality in the Grimms' tale. Taylor's summary adeptly hints at the appeal of the more sanitized tales of the Grimms by pointing to Basile as the repressed ground from which the Grimms' stories grew.

The illustrations of Perrault's and Grimms' "Sleeping Beauty" tales further point to both the power of the male gaze and the tales' latent sexuality. In R. S. Gent's 1795 translation of Perrault's *Tales of Passed Times by Mother Goose with Morals*, the picture of Sleeping Beauty shows the princess asleep with her head turned slightly to the side, facing the reader (Figure 2-1). A light shines in upon the young woman's body, illuminating only her and her servant girl even though a third, faceless and seemingly sexless figure appears to be slumped over in the floor next to the bed. Though Sleeping Beauty is fully clothed, the dress of her servant seems to have slipped off the shoulder; moreover, the neckline of the servant's dress plunges, and she sits with legs spread in a most unladylike manner.



Figure 2-1. Illustration for “Sleeping Beauty” from R. S. Gent’s 1795 translation of Perrault’s *Tales of Passed Times with Morals by Mother Goose*³⁴

Though this drawing obviously conveys less overt sexuality than Alfred M. Hoffy’s pornographic depiction of the dead prostitute Helen Jewett, the servant girl’s slightly revealing dress and splayed legs are certainly suggestive. By associating the more sexual components with the servant girl, the illustration preserves the piety and chastity of Sleeping Beauty while still incorporating a sexual element.³⁵ That the girls are depicted

³⁴ From Perrault, 14.

³⁵ None of the critics who have examined fairy tales mentions this aspect of the tale.

as sleeping gives the presumed male viewer power. Though they are turned toward the viewer, the girls do not gaze out. They sleep the sleep of death, completely passive and vulnerable to the desires and power of the viewer, who sees them just as the prince of the story does. Neither prince nor reader risk rejection from the sleeping, or dead, girls.

In George Cruikshank's illustration for Taylor's 1823 translation of the Grimms' tales, Brier Rose is alone, lying on her side with her head turned toward the reader (Figure 1-2). A light shines on her. In addition, even though this portrait presents a fully clothed and less sexualized sleeping woman, the bed linens are pulled slightly down, revealing Brier Rose's upper torso. The illustration demonstrates her voluptuous figure, again giving the reader an experience similar to that of the story's prince. Both reader and prince are again in a position of power over the lifeless girl, who cannot look out of the picture. She cannot wield any power, nor can she actively participate in choosing her own future; she is at the mercy of the reader and the prince.

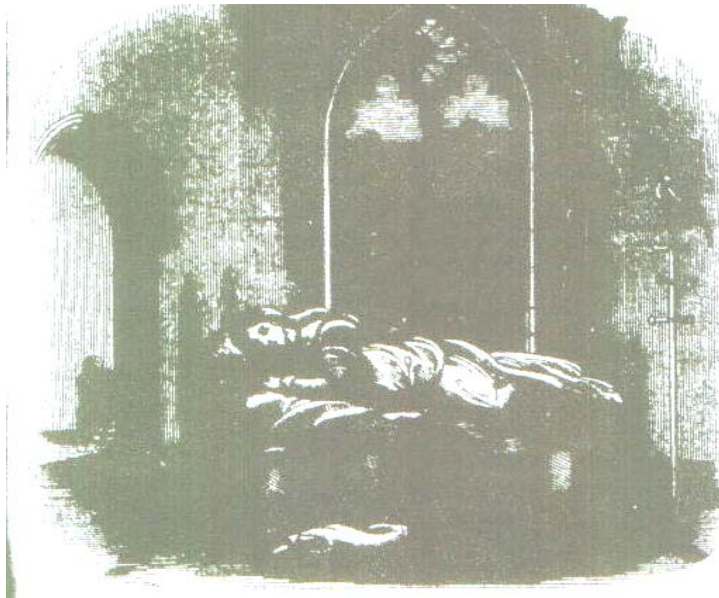


Figure 2-2. George Cruikshank's illustration for the Grimms' "Brier Rose"³⁶

³⁶ From Grimm, 25.

Many fairy tale heroines are at the mercy of the people who should have their best interests at heart—their parents. As mentioned earlier, her own mother tortures and kills a seven-year-old Snow White in the Grimms' 1812 version of the tale. Another parental villain poses a threat to the heroines of tales such as Basile's "The She-Bear," Perrault's "Donkey-Skin," and the Grimms' "All-Fur." In each of these tales, after the main character's mother dies, her father commands her to marry him to satisfy both his desires and his wife's dying wish that he not marry until he finds a woman who surpasses her in beauty. Though incestuous marriage between a father and daughter seems an odd subject for a fairy tale, the theme runs through many tales from different cultures. The frequency with which the subject of incest occurs in fairy tales suggest that it may have been an all too common reality for many women.³⁷ Maria Tatar explains that there was "no distinct dividing line between the fiction of fairy tales and the facts of everyday life, or at least the most sensational aspects of everyday life."³⁸ Thus, fairy tales likely functioned in much the same way as today's tabloids and antebellum America's penny presses, as a means of entertaining their audiences with the sensational.

In each of these tales, the motivational force behind the incest is the mother's dying wish that her husband only remarry when he finds a woman who surpasses her beauty. When the father overcomes his grief, he succumbs to the need to produce a male heir, but fearing a curse from his dead wife, he searches for a woman to fulfill her wish. In each tale, the only woman who even comes close to surpassing the wife's beauty is the

³⁷ Threatened or actual incest occurs in at least eight tale types on the Aarne-Thompson scale. See types 313E, 510B, 706, 706A, 706B, 706C, 712, and 883A.

³⁸ Maria Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1987), 140.

daughter. Rather than trying to fight the incestuous desire to marry his own daughter, the father in each tale commands her to marry him.

The dying wish of the queen makes clear that she does not wish to be replaced; she wants to remain the sole object of her husband's affection. The wish also clarifies the queen's vanity. The queen in Basile's "The She-Bear" threatens her husband: "Show unto me a proof of thy love and give me a promise that thou wilt never marry, unless thou meetest one beautiful as I have been; and if thou wilt not do so, I will leave thee a curse, and I will hate thee even in the other world."³⁹ The queen's threatened curse weighs heavily on the king's mind and, in fact, is the only thing keeping him from remarrying quickly. In Perrault's tale, the queen takes a gentler approach, making no threats but executing what the narrator later explains is an impossible wish: "Wait [to remarry] until you have found a woman more beautiful and better formed than myself."⁴⁰ The queen in the Grimms' tale, like most of their female characters, has no dialogue, but the narrator tells us of her dying wish: "[She] asked him not to marry anyone following her death, unless she was just as beautiful as she, and unless her hair was just as golden as hers."⁴¹

The king's search for a woman to fulfill his wife's conditions yields no fruit until he discovers that his daughter possesses every required characteristic. The narrator refers to the girl as "made from the same mould as her mother," possessing "a charm and beauty which even the queen had not," and "as beautiful as her mother, and she had the

³⁹ Giambattista Basile, "The She-Bear," *Il Pentamerone, or The Tale of Tales*. trans. Sir Richard Burton (New York: Boni & Lieveright, 1927), 151. Reprint of the 1893 edition.

⁴⁰ Charles Perrault, "Donkey-Skin," *The Grey Fairy Book* ed. Andrew Lang. (Longmans, Green, & Co., 1900), 1.

⁴¹ Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, "All Fur," *The Great Fairy Tale Tradition from Straparola and Basile of the Brothers Grimm* ed. Jack Zipes (New York: Norton, 2001), 47.

same golden hair” in Basile, Perrault, and the Grimms, respectively.⁴² The girl becomes a replacement for her mother, with the narrator referring to her only in terms of comparison with her mother. She has no true identity of her own; Perrault and the Grimms don’t even give her character a name. Her father sees only her mother in her, a motif that will recur in Poe’s “Morella” and Lippard’s *Quaker City*.

Basile’s “The She-Bear” serves as an exemplar of his incest tales. The tale, along with Perrault’s “Donkey Skin” and the Grimms’ “All Fur,” is actually classified as type 510B (“A King Tries to Marry His Daughter”) on the Aarne-Thompson scale of folktale classification. Certainly, the tale involves this motif, but Basile’s tale also hints of bestiality. In Basile’s version, the king’s desire goes further than simply wanting to marry his daughter, reaching to the overtly incestuously sexual: “The king made his way to [his daughter Preziosa’s] bed chamber, and called to the bride to come and fulfill his desire.”⁴³ Even though the father’s insistence that his daughter “fulfill his desire” in her bed chamber disturbs the modern reader, most of the tale focuses on another man’s disturbing attraction to Preziosa.

With the help of an old woman, Preziosa turns herself into a bear to escape her father. When she arrives in the woods, a handsome prince comes upon her, and she puts her head down for him to stroke. He takes her home to live in his garden and becomes so obsessed with her, even though she remains in bear form, that he brings her inside to cook, clean, and take care of him. Still in bear form, Preziosa performs her domestic duties to perfection, an implication that gender roles are innate, and the prince’s

⁴² Basile, “The She-Bear,” 153; Perrault, “Donkey-Skin,” 3; Grimm, “All Fur,” 48.

⁴³ Basile, “The She-Bear,” 153.

obsession with her grows: “If he had been consumed himself in a slow fire before, he burned with intense heat now . . . Then the bear obediently neared the prince, who taking her cheeks between his fingers, could not leave off kissing her on the lips.”⁴⁴ It is not until after the prince has kissed the bear that she changes back into the princess.

Basile’s story hints at bestiality, brining the reader to the point at which the prince begins to consummate his attraction to the bear and stopping just short of that consummation. That the bear is really a princess serves to obviate the bestiality at play in this tale, making it part of the overall love story. This trick of titillation and obviation is one that Lippard uses in *The Empire City* to titillate his reader with a seemingly homosexual, pedophilic relationship between a minister and his student. We learn several pages into the scene that the minister lavishes his affections not on a boy but on a young woman in disguise. Just as in Lippard’s novel, where the true identity of the young woman masks an erotically homosexual encounter, the reader knows the bear’s true identity, and the narrative almost masks the prince’s bestial desire. Yet the story makes clear that the prince desires the bear.

Perrault’s “Donkey Skin” takes the incestuous desire to a different level. The tale includes a moral that characteristically encourages women’s obedience and virtue. The narrator explains: “It is not hard to see that the moral of this tale is that it is better to undergo the greatest hardships rather than to fail in one’s duty, that virtue may sometimes seem ill-fated but will always triumph in the end.”⁴⁵ The moral presents a puzzle to the careful reader: are the “greatest hardships” related to the incestuous advances of the

⁴⁴ Basile, “The She-Bear,” 157.

⁴⁵ Perrault, “Donkey-Skin,” 15.

father or to her life as a “poor wretch” who cleans pig troughs? Might the narrator want the reader to equate the two? Could cleaning pig troughs be as horrible as being proposed to by one’s own father?

The story presents other difficulties to the reader. When the princess’s father proposes marriage, her godmother urges her that she must not disobey but must ask for gifts that the king cannot possibly acquire—a dress “the color of the sky,” then a dress “the color of the moon,” then one “as shining as the sun,” and finally, the skin of a donkey who, instead of dung, “dropped a great load of gold coins.”⁴⁶ As the king acquires each item, the princess’s resistance to marriage with her father diminishes. With each request, she is “filled now with both happiness and fear,” is “again delighted with its beauty,” and “did not know how to thank the king.”⁴⁷ The princess’s resolve wavers in proportion to the beauty of the gifts her father bestows upon her. It’s as though she sees shiny dresses and is ready to marry her father. More significantly, when the marriage does not take place, the people at court are heartbroken because there will be no feast or grand party.

That the girl’s flight from her father works, at first, to her disadvantage further complicates the story: “She looked so unattractive and indeed so repulsive in her Donkey Skin disguise that no one would have anything to do with such a creature . . . she was exposed to the low jokes and ridicule of all the other servants.”⁴⁸ Her treatment after fleeing her father functions as a sort of punishment for her disobedience. Rather than

⁴⁶ Perrault, “Donkey-Skin,” 2-6.

⁴⁷ Perrault, “Donkey-Skin,” 2-8.

⁴⁸ Perrault, “Donkey-Skin,” 13.

being lauded for her high moral character, the young woman loses her family, her friends, and her beauty. She must work in filth and face the scorn of even the lowest of the low. Only after a long time in her life as a servant, after she has been fully punished, does she find happiness with the prince.

Grimms' "All Fur" features motifs and action nearly identical to "The She-Bear" and "Donkey Skin." Yet this story, unlike those of Basile and Perrault, features domestic violence that appears both acceptable and an inherent part of a love relationship. She must pull off the king's boots before he gets into bed at night. Every night, "when she had pulled them off, he always threw them at her head."⁴⁹ This abuse does not occur only once; it "always" happens. That king abuses her in her role as his servant would not be at all strange if the girl does not go to great lengths to arouse the king's notice and a marriage proposal. More importantly, the Grimms actually toned down the abuse. In many versions of the tale, the prince's abuse of his future bride takes a far more violent track, featuring frequent beatings, as well as, in one instance, rape.⁵⁰ The young woman's pursuing the king with an eye to marriage says to the reader that this type of domestic abuse was not only acceptable, but possibly desired.

In none of these tales does the father receive any sort of punishment. His authority over his child remains unchecked even when he clearly does not have her best interests in mind. In fact, D. L. Ashlimann performed a study whose results indicate that modern readers frequently read these tales thinking the king that the girl meets in the forest (or for whom she goes to work) is, in fact, her father. Ashlimann argues that it is likely people

⁴⁹ Grimm, "All Fur," 49.

⁵⁰ D. L. Ashliman, "Incest in Indo-European Fairy Tales," 14 November 1997 *D. L. Ashliman's Homepage*. 22 February 2006 <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/incest.html>.

hearing the stories in the days preceding their recording and people who read the stories communally after their literary publication read them as stories about the consummation of a father's incestuous desire.⁵¹ Thus, the ending pairs the princess with her father, living happily ever after.

These fairy tales in their original languages and in their English translations serve to encourage the traits of what came to be known as the Cult of True Womanhood—purity, piety, submissiveness, and domesticity—in an age when the “woman question” began to rage. They maintain paternal authority when a father is present, and the primary conflicts in stories where a father is absent occur between women competing for male attention. The authors literalize active women as ogresses, who die tortuous deaths in snake pits and red-hot iron shoes. The function of socialization has a prominent place in these texts, but the proliferation of the motifs of necrophilia, incest, and pedophilia remains most striking.

These motifs became staples of the sensational press. As we will see in the next chapter, James Gordon Bennett and other editors institutionalized their papers with the sensational news coverage of the 1836 murder of Helen Jewett, a prostitute in New York. Bennett and others transformed Jewett into various fairy tale characters, evoking sympathy for her and simultaneously warning others of the dangers of the female fiend. Jewett's corpse becomes a sleeping beauty, and the owner of the brothel where Jewett resided and conducted business becomes a wicked stepmother envious of the young woman's charms

⁵¹ D. L. Ashlimann, “Incest in Indo-European Fairy Tales.”

CHAPTER 3
FROM THE FAIRY TALE PRINCESS TO THE NEW YORK PROSTITUTE:
SLEEPING BEAUTY AND THE BIG CITY

On 10 April 1836, New York City brothel owner Rosina Townsend and one of her prostitutes discovered Helen Jewett's murdered and charred body. The murder instantly became a sensation, with the city's men lining up to see the body of the young woman; moreover, it helped put the penny presses, particularly *The New York Herald*, on the map. Newspapers and subsequent fictional accounts printed in pamphlets covered not only the events surrounding the murder and subsequent trial, but also Jewett's background, the background of alleged murderer Richard P. Robinson, the relationship between the two, and the crime scene, specifically the body of the murder victim.¹ Scholars such as Patricia Cline Cohen and David Anthony believe this case to be the primary catalyst for sensationalism.² The press coverage of the case reached proportions previously unheard of. Complete transcripts of Richard P. Robinson's five-day trial ran in several major papers, at least six pamphlets about the murder and trial were published, and local artists distributed lithographs of "Jewett on her bed in various states of undress."³

¹ David Anthony, "The Helen Jewett Panic: Tabloids, Men and the Sensational Public Sphere in Antebellum New York," *American Literature* 69.3 (1997). Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett: the Life and Death of a Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

² Anthony explains that the penny presses anticipated "the representational politics of much of the sensational fiction being produced during the period, including not only Gothic and detective narratives by Poe in the 1830s and 1840s but also neo-Gothics of the mid 1840s and early 1850s ... such works resemble the tabloid coverage of the Jewett case" (491). See also Patricia Cline Cohen, "The Mystery of Helen Jewett: Romantic Fiction and the Eroticization of Violence," *Legal Studies Forum* 17.2 (1993).

³ Anthony, 489.

As Cohen argues more directly, “In fact, the genre (sensationalism) dates precisely from the antebellum years of the Jewett murder, and the sensation and popularity of murder mystery and detective fiction, whose literary conventions were pioneered by Edgar Allan Poe, a resident of New York City in the year 1837.”⁴ Cohen implies that even though Poe moved to New York City after Jewett’s murder, he may well have been inspired by the crime and the public sensation it caused. Indeed, it would have been difficult for Poe, or anyone living in the United States in the years immediately succeeding the murder and trial, to avoid knowing about the case. It was covered in newspapers across the country, including the *Cincinnati Mirror* and *Saturday Evening Post*, and was still a fixture in the penny presses for years after the trial.⁵ One hundred and fifty years after the murder, an historical novel made the Jewett murder its focus. As we will see in later chapters, fiction of the period alluded to both Bennett’s coverage and the pamphlets that fictionalized the case.

The descriptions distributed in the penny presses and pamphlet fiction based on the murder echo those of the fairy tales. Still, while the accounts of Jewett’s life and murder, like the fairy tales before them, demonstrate society’s desire to warn women of the dangers of life outside of marriage and family, they betray a competing desire for access to women’s bodies and sex lives. These accounts leave little to the reader’s imagination when they detail Jewett’s relationships with men; they allow the reader full access to the life and the body of the dead woman, access they would not be granted to the body of a

⁴ Cohen, “The Mystery of Helen Jewett: Romantic Fiction and the Eroticization of Violence,” 133.

⁵ *The Cincinnati Mirror*. Cincinnati, OH, June 18, 1836. Page 1; *Atkinson’s Saturday Evening Post*. New York, June 25, 1836 and July 16, 1836.

living woman or of a virtuous woman. But why were readers so interested in this case, in the life and body of a prostitute, for so long?

Discussing death and desire in the Nineteenth Century, Russ Castronovo explains, “Dead women are politically erotic for men, bearing a privacy invulnerable to the claims of the past and needs of the present . . . The female corpse’s passivity offers comfort.”⁶ Later Castronovo links the political eroticism of the female corpse to literary eroticism: “Perhaps Poe best appreciated women’s death as an occasion of male cathexis in his 1846 remark that ‘the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world.’”⁷ Castronovo’s assessment of female corpses as political and Poe’s assessment of them as poetical touch on aspects of the fairy tales of Giambattista Basile, Charles Perrault, and the Brothers Grimm—all of whom created poetical, political tales that encouraged passivity in women, with many of the tales centering on female corpses.

Jewett’s murder helped establish the penny presses within the world of journalism. Andie Tucher explores the rise of the penny press in her *Froth and Scum: Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and the Axe Murder in America’s First Mass Medium*, asserting that their development and evolution contributed to objectivity in reporting. Tucher examines the differences in reporting styles of the 1836 murder of Helen Jewett and the 1841 murder of Samuel Adams. Asserting that James Gordon Bennett’s style had changed in the five years between the Jewett and Adams cases, Tucher claims that Bennett reported on all

⁶ Russ Castronovo, *Necro Citizenship: Death, Eroticism, and the Public Sphere in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2001), 130.

⁷ Castronovo, 149.

aspects of both cases, but in the Adams case, he created no fictions and called for the blood of the perpetrator.⁸

In her analysis of Bennett's changing style, Tucher looks only at the Jewett and Adams cases; she looks at none of Bennett's reporting in the five years between the murders, nor does she look at Bennett's other stories that appeared at the same time or after the Adams case. In fact, my research demonstrates that Bennett continued his periodic reporting and speculation on the Jewett case for several years. He focused especially on the lives of Robinson and the prostitutes who testified against him.⁹ On November 21, 1839, Bennett wrote about the authorities' failure to find and punish Jewett's murderer: "The blood of Ellen Jewett continually cries from the ground for vengeance on her murderer, and though he has escaped by the force and influence of the foulest corruption from the justice of the law, he is not beyond the justice of Heaven."¹⁰ Bennett's anonymous biographer explains that Bennett's reference to the justice of Heaven alludes to a report that Robinson had been wounded in Texas, which is a dramatic shift from Bennett's earlier assertion of Robinson's innocence. Each of his reports through the years continues to speculate about the guilt and innocence of the major players in the case. Upon hearing of the suicide of Robert Furlong, one of Robinson's alibi witnesses, Bennett writes in 1838: "What ought those person's do, who knew Robinson's guilt, and yet aided to defeat the laws during that trial? Ought they not

⁸ Andie Tucher, *Froth and Scum: Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and the Axe Murder in America's First Mass Medium* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

⁹ *The Life of James Gordon Bennett*, Editor of the New York Herald (New York: NA, 1844).

¹⁰ *The Life of James Gordon Bennett*, 22.

in justice to go and hang themselves also?"¹¹ Again, Bennett accuses Robinson of the murder outright, neglecting to mention that he had declared the young man innocent and supported his case in the pages of the *Herald*.

Bennett's reports on the murders of other women are in keeping with his reports on the Jewett murder and further clarify that Bennett's reporting style changed not with time but with the sex of the victim. According to Amy Gilman Srebnick, when reporting the disappearance of Mary Rogers in 1841, Bennett also speculated about the particulars of the crime and its victim.¹² More importantly, Bennett's description of the corpse "allow[ed] what was not permissible in life—the full physical exposure of the female form. Presenting Rogers as a corpse, a female body no longer private, but instead totally exposed, the necrophilic descriptions of Mary with lace petticoat strips around her neck and blood leaking from her mouth, were pictorial, dramatic, and erotic." Again, Bennett portrays the female corpse as an object of desire.

So why did Bennett fabricate the details of the deaths of Jewett and Rogers? In the Adams case, John C. Colt confessed to the murder; there was little about which to speculate. On the other hand, in the Jewett case, Robinson maintained his innocence and was subsequently acquitted, and Mary Rogers' case had no perpetrator on whom to place blame. Yet, the most important differences between these cases and that of Adams are the gender of the victims and the relevance of sexual intercourse to the circumstances surrounding their deaths. Bennett never described the corpse of Samuel Adams in terms

¹¹ *The Life of James Gordon Bennett*, 22.

¹² Bennett speculated that Rogers had been "violated by several rowdies, and ultimately strangled." Since witnesses later revealed that Rogers had died during an abortion and that they had arranged the scene to look like murder, Bennett's version of the crime is clearly fiction. Quoted in Amy Gilman Srebnick, *The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers: Sex and Culture in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995), 28-29.

of how it aroused him sexually, whereas implicit lasciviousness characterizes his descriptions of the corpses of Jewett and Rogers. The deaths of these women allowed Bennett and his readers access to their bodies that they were not allowed in life.

The fact of their deaths makes them desirable because they are completely passive, completely incapable of refusing these men access to their bodies. Equally important, the sexual nature of the women's deaths removes the usual decorum and propriety that social relations between men and women dictated. Helen Jewett was a prostitute murdered in a brothel. Mary Rogers died in the middle of an abortion. Clearly, these women refused to abide by societal dictates in life. They were sexually active, and at least one of them was active in determining if and when she would become a mother. Their deaths rendered them inactive. They became sleeping beauties whom men could view and desire freely.

When we look closely at news reports and illustrations of Jewett's murder in conjunction with the tales of Basile, Perrault, and the Grimms, similarities in the descriptions of the dead women and their surroundings become obvious. Close readings of Basile's, Perrault's, and the Grimms' versions of "Sleeping Beauty," the Grimms' "Snow White," and Basile's "The Young Slave" alongside descriptions of Helen Jewett's body and the circumstances of her downfall and murder illustrate the striking correlations among them. More importantly, close readings illustrate the ways in which each nineteenth century reporter or author transforms fairy tale motifs so that the female corpse becomes more indicative of the consolidation of the ideology of domesticity with the cautionary tale in antebellum America.

That New Yorkers were interested in the Jewett case from the minute the word of her murder spread is evident. James Gordon Bennett's account of his "visit to the scene" describes the mob that stood outside Townsend's home and filled the parlor inside:

A large crowd of young men stood around the door, No. 41, and several groups along the street in various directions. The excitement among the young men throughout the city was beginning to spread in all directions. . . .

A Police officer opened it [the door], stealthily. I told him who I was. "Mr. B. you can enter," said he, with great politeness. The crowds rushed from behind seeking also an entrance.

"No more comes in," said the Police officer.

"Why do you let that man in?" asked one of the crowd.

"He is an editor—he is on public duty."

I entered—I pressed forward to the sitting room or parlor. There I found another Police officer in charge of that apartment. The old lady of the house, Mrs. Townsend, was sitting on a sofa, talking to several young men, in a great state of excitement.¹³

That "a large crowd of young men," including a young George Thompson, stood in line to look at Jewett's body is telling.¹⁴ One gets the impression that they lined up in the same manner that people today line up for an amusement park ride. Just as people today wait in line to get a kind of thrill from a roller coaster, men and boys in 1836 New York anticipated the thrill of seeing what James Gordon Bennett later described as "a beautiful female corpse."¹⁵ Many of them had likely been rebuffed by Helen when she was alive, as she had a reputation of being "choosy" with her partners, but in her death, they had full visual access to that which she had denied them in life.

¹³ James Gordon Bennett, "Visit to the Scene," *The Herald*. New York, April 12, 1836. Page 4. The article was originally published in the April 11, 1836 edition, but a problem with the steam engine attached to the press limited the number printed, and Bennett reprinted the article in this issue.

¹⁴ See *George Thompson, My Life: Or the Adventures of Geo. Thompson. Being the Auto-Biography of an Author. Written by Himself* (Boston: Federhen & Co., 1854). Reprinted in *Venus in Boston and Other Tales of Nineteenth-Century Life*. Ed. David S. Reynolds and Kimberly R. Gladman. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002). 315-317.

¹⁵ Bennett, "Visit to the Scene," 4.

In this passage, Bennett attempts to distinguish himself from the throng of thrill seekers by establishing that the police officer recognizes that he is there “on public duty” unlike the others. Like the mob who lined up outside the brothel, Bennett’s readers experienced an excitement in reading his reports. Whereas Bennett markets his own persona as more restrained and observant, he builds the readers’ “excitement” by providing them with the exciting access of the mob. When he enters the brothel, he must “press forward” through the crowd to arrive at the parlor where Rosina Townsend recounts the tragedy with much detail, bringing her male listeners to a “great state of excitement.” They are not appalled or saddened by Jewett’s death, even though many likely knew her or had at least seen her walking up Broadway in her infamous green dress; rather, they become aroused by the details. Clearly, the men who lined up to view Jewett’s corpse and Bennett adhered to what Karen Halttunen refers to as “the Romantic tendency” to see dead bodies as “object[s] of beauty and desire.”¹⁶

Though the authorities allowed Bennett to view both the corpse and Jewett’s room at length, his description of the scene strays from the facts and relies on romance. Jewett’s murderer had struck her in the head with an axe three times and set her on fire. The body had been autopsied. Yet Bennett describes what he saw upon entering Jewett’s room:

What a sight burst upon me! . . . I looked around for the object of my curiosity . . .
 “Here” said the Police officer, “here is the poor creature.”
 He half uncovered the ghastly corpse. I could scarcely look at it for a second or two. Slowly I began to discover the lineaments of the corpse as one

¹⁶ Karen Halttunen, *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1998), 66.

would the beauties of a statue of marble. It was the most remarkable sight I ever beheld.¹⁷

Though he attempts to set himself up as an objective observer, the thrill Bennett gets from viewing the body is evident from the beginning. The mere sight of Helen's room, the scene of both her sexual escapades and her murder, elicits an exclamation—"What a sight burst upon me!" Immediately, he terms Jewett as not "the body" or "the victim" but "the object of [his] curiosity." Even the officer refers to her as a "creature." She is not a person; she is simply an object on display.

Apparently forgetting the "ghastly" nature of the corpse he'd been unable to look at for a moment, Bennett goes on to describe the object of his arousal:

How like a statue! I can scarcely conceive that form to be a corpse. Not a vein was to be seen. The body looked as white—as full—as polished as the purest Parian marble. The perfect figure—the exquisite limbs—the fine face—the full arms—the beautiful bust—all—all surpassing in every respect the Venus de Medici according to the casts generally given of her. [sic] . . . I was lost in admiration at this extraordinary sight—a beautiful female corpse that surpassed the finest statue of antiquity."¹⁸

Despite the fact that one side of Jewett's body was charred, Bennett sexualizes her as "a beautiful female corpse." Though he notes the "burnt pieces of linen, blankets, pillows, black as cinders" in the beginning of his description, Bennett omits all evidence that she was set on fire to depict her as "snow white." She is certainly like a statue in that neither can move, but detailing her "perfect figure" and "beautiful bust" as "white as the purest Parian marble" is more than just hyperbole.

The dashes betray Bennett's and his readers' desire for the dead woman's body. Bennett creates a fantasy Venus with no visible imperfections and certainly no burns or

¹⁷ Bennett, "Visit to the Scene," 4.

¹⁸ Bennett, "Visit to the Scene," 4.

incisions. One can almost hear Bennett's heavy breathing: "as white—as full—as the purest Parian marble . . . the exquisite limbs—the fine fact—the full arms—the beautiful bust." His excitement builds with each dash. At last, unable to contain himself, he releases this build up as he declares himself lost in the "extraordinary sight" of "a beautiful female corpse." Bennett, and therefore his readers, forget his original hesitance to look at the "ghastly corpse." Indeed, as described in Bennett's account there is nothing ghastly about her. Finally, Bennett returns to reality when he sees "the dreadful bloody gashes on the right temple, which must have caused instantaneous dissolution."¹⁹ Strangely, for minutes, Bennett misses the one detail that would stand out to any observer. He spends nearly a full column of newsprint describing the body before he mentions the gashes that killed her. He is clearly more interested in cataloging the beauties of "the object" in view than in the fact that she'd been murdered. Equally telling is that Jewett had been mutilated not only by the murderer's axe, but also by the autopsy knife. Yet, Bennett never mentions this last detail at all; it would have impeded him from describing her "beautiful bust." Clearly, Jewett's body bore little resemblance to Bennett's description.²⁰

Bennett plays with and builds upon a set of descriptions that recur in fairy tales, a set of descriptions that any reader would likely recognize as evoking Snow White and Sleeping Beauty. Given the tales' popularity, it is probable that both Bennett and his reading public were familiar with them.²¹ Where Bennett exclaims, "What a sight burst

¹⁹ Bennett, "Visit to the Scene," 4.

²⁰ See Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett*, 17 and Anthony, 504.

²¹ In the September 1881 issue of *Atlantic Monthly* (48.287: 310-321), in "Koschei the Deathless; or, the Diffusion of Fairy Tales," John Fiske discusses the immense popularity of the fairy tales (Straparola,

upon me, in their “Brier Rose,” the Grimms’ prince finds that the sleeping princess’s “beauty was so marvelous that he could not take his eyes off her.”²² Similarly, in the Grimms’ “Snow White,” the narrator affirms, “There came no breath out of her mouth, and she was dead . . . They would have buried her, but that she looked still as if she were living, with her beautiful blooming cheeks.”²³ Similarly, Jewett’s white, statue-like form echoes the Grimms’ description of their Snow White. Indeed, Bennett’s picture of Jewett’s corpse allows his reader to forget that the object of his voyeurism is a corpse, just as the princes in the fairy tales forget that the women upon whom they stumble are dead.

“Beautiful female corpses” and sexuality figure prominently in the illustration found alongside Bennett’s first report. The illustration by Alfred M. Hoffy published in *The New York Herald* shows Jewett’s body with the sheet pulled far enough down to expose her breasts, nipples erect (Figure 3-1). Her legs are exposed and bear no marks of the body’s actual condition. In fact, she looks as though she were sleeping peacefully. Not only is Jewett’s body free of any signs of brutal murder, fire, and autopsy, but her bed and linens are also free of these signs. As in the illustrations of Sleeping Beauty discussed in Chapter 2, a light shines in the room, illuminating only Jewett’s body so that the onlooker may see its details. David Anthony discusses this lithograph and its overt

Basile, Perrault, Grimm, and Arabian Nights) in the western world, specifically focusing on American reception from the time of the first translations. The article argues that they were so popular that each new translation led to demand for fairy tales from other authors and regions.

²² Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, “Brier Rose,” *German Fairy Tales and Popular Stories, as Told by Gammer Grethel*, trans. Edgar Taylor (London: H. G. Bohn, 1823), 30.

²³ Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, “Snow-White,” *German Fairy Tales and Popular Stories, as Told by Gammer Grethel* trans. Edgar Taylor (London: H. G. Bohn, 1823).¹⁵⁵

sexualization of the corpse: “Even more than in Bennett's written description, the viewer is invited to indulge not only in the pleasure of gazing at Jewett's body but also of gaining imaginary access to it.”²⁴ Like Bennett’s sexualized description of the body, Hoffy’s illustration sexualizes the corpse and arouses the audience, stimulating desire and fantasies of access to satisfy that desire.



Figure 3-1. “Ellen Jewett.” Alfred M. Hoffy’s rendering of Helen Jewett’s corpse.²⁵

Certainly, Patricia Cline Cohen’s assertion that this particular crime created a sensation because of the sheer novelty of murder and because the victim was an infamous prostitute holds truth, but it does not account for the fact that people remained interested in the affair for nearly a century and a half. To be sure, Robinson’s acquittal fed into the frenzy, creating further mystery. Yet, the fact that George Wilkes, editor of the *National Police Gazette*, penned *The Lives of Helen Jewett and Richard P. Robinson* in 1849—

²⁴ Anthony, 507.

²⁵ New York Historical Society.

thirteen years after Robinson's acquittal— alludes to something more at work in this story. That Wilkes was a news editor lends authority to his text being a product of the “news,” a feat that later texts attempt to imitate.

Wilkes' novel was popular enough that after publishing it serially in the *Gazette*, he published it as a complete volume. In 1878, parts of it were copied by an anonymous “author” and published as *The Truly Remarkable Life of the Beautiful Helen Jewett, Who Was so Mysteriously Murdered*. In 1932, Nearly one hundred years after the murder, Manuel Komroff penned *A New York Tempest*, a novelization of the murder and trial, as well as the events leading up to them. Even more striking is that in 1982, nearly one hundred fifty years after Jewett was murdered, Raymond Paul wrote the historical novel *The Thomas Street Horror*, narrated by a fledgling *Sun* reporter investigating Jewett's murder and including multiple articles from Bennett's *Herald*, *The Sun*, and competing papers. How did these reporters and authors convince their readers that Jewett was worth their sympathies, that she was worthy of their lust, especially after so many years?

Each subsequent author builds upon the narrative created by Bennett; though Komroff uses the murder and trial only as an inspiration for his novel, Wilkes and Paul go so far as to incorporate the actual news reports from the *Herald* into their novelizations. Thus, it is important to understand the ways in which Bennett made Jewett an acceptable object of sympathy and lust. Perhaps to justify his desire for and fascination with this woman of ill repute, Bennett seeks to create a sort of Cinderella out of Jewett. Bennett's story of Jewett's childhood moves her class status upward toward the backgrounds of many of the heroines in fairy tales. According to Bennett, Jewett's real name was Dorcas Doyen. Her mother had passed away, and her father remarried.

He claims that she was taken in by a neighboring judge and his family, who pitied her situation with her stepmother: “At that time Dorcas was young, beautiful, innocent, modest, and ingenuous. Her good qualities and sprightly temper won the good feelings of the Judge’s family.”²⁶ This story ignores Jewett’s lower class status, claiming her to be a playmate and best friend of the judge’s daughters when she was, in fact, one of their servants. In presenting an “evil stepmother” and Jewett’s “sprightly temper” in the face of reduced circumstances, Bennett sets up her background to mirror that of Snow White and Cinderella.

Surprisingly, authors writing after Bennett also sought to establish Jewett as a middle to upper class girl. Wilkes writes of the Westons’ interest in the young woman: “Dorcas Doyen soon became a general favorite of the family which had adopted her, and instead of being allowed to remain in a condition of servitude, she was promoted to the more comfortable dependence of companionship.”²⁷ Her intellectual capabilities further evinced her natural upper-class status: “Her quickness of apprehension and extraordinary proficiency soon exceeded all calculation . . . her conduct was precise and exemplary, and . . . she merited by her demeanor and her studious habits, all the encomiums and kindly feeling, which were extended to her by her teachers and her friends.”²⁸ This description of Dorcas contrasts with an earlier description in the same novel that depicts her as a seductive eleven-year-old (possibly an eight-year-old, as Wilkes’s date would indicate)

²⁶ Quoted in Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett*, 49.

²⁷ George Wilkes, *The Lives of Helen Jewett and Richard P. Robinson*, (New York: George Wilkes), 1849. 6.

²⁸ Wilkes, 6.

who loses her virginity to a fifteen-year-old boy.²⁹ Of course, attempts to blame her “intemperate” father’s influence help to salvage Dorcas in the reader’s mind.³⁰

Many fairy tales are about girls who have been stripped of their class position and fallen into desperate circumstances. This plot is true of “Snow White,” “The Young Slave,” and most famously “Cinderella.” Snow White’s “innocent heart” and “lovely” disposition keep the huntsman from carrying out her stepmother’s command that he murder the girl and cut out her heart.³¹ The stepmother is not deterred, however. She continues to seek the girl out and try to kill her with lace, a poisoned comb, and an apple. Even though Snow White no longer lives as a princess and performs domestic chores for the dwarfs, her class shows through in her beauty and charm. Lisa, the heroine of “The Young Slave,” is forced into slavery by her wicked aunt, the queen. The king realizes that Lisa is his niece once he converses with her because her manner of speaking reveals her royal background, though she is disguised in the rags of a slave. Cinderella’s upper-class status also shines even though her envious stepmother and stepsisters force her to wear rags and serve them.³²

Corresponding even further to fairy tales, James Gordon Bennett’s attempt to place the blame for Jewett’s murder on another woman in the brothel parallels “Sleeping Beauty,” “Brier Rose,” “Sun, Moon, and Talia,” “Snow White,” and “The Cat

²⁹ The first page of the novel says that Dorcas was born in 1813. After a passage of two years from the time of Dorcas’ losing her virginity, she is said to be thirteen, but the date Wilkes provides, 1823, makes her only ten. If the date is correct, then Dorcas was but eight years old when she had her first sexual encounter.

³⁰ Wilkes, 6.

³¹ Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, “Snow White,” 100.

³² Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, “Cinderella,” *German Fairy Tales and Popular Stories, as Told by Gammer Grethel* trans. Edgar Taylor (London: H. G. Bohn, 1823).

Cinderella.” In both Perrault’s “Sleeping Beauty” and Grimms’ “Brier Rose,” an old fairy curses the infant princess because she is jealous of the favor shown to the other fairies and feels slighted at not being invited to the child’s christening. An old lady is also the one who presents the princess with the opportunity for pricking her finger. In Basile’s “Sun, Moon, and Talia,” the hero’s wife discovers her husband’s infidelity and in a jealous rage attempts to feed his children to him and to burn Talia alive. In “Snow White,” the princess’s stepmother repeatedly attempts to kill Snow White because the older woman is jealous of the girl’s beauty. Basile’s “The Cat Cinderella” further reinforces that women are jealous and conniving. When Zezolla, the heroine of the story, complains to her governess about the evil treatment she receives at the hands of her stepmother, the governess encourages Zezolla to murder the stepmother. Soon after the murder, the governess convinces Zezolla’s father to marry her and begins to mistreat Zezolla in favor of her own children. The governess tempts Zezolla to commit murder and tricks the girl into believing that she has Zezolla’s best interest at heart.

Like the fairy tale narrators, Bennett invents a female villain. Discussing possible suspects and motives for Jewett’s murder, he claims, “It cannot be possible that [Richard P.] Robinson was the person! How could a young man perpetrate so brutal an act? Is it not more like the work of a woman? Are not the whole train of circumstances within the ingenuity of a female, abandoned and desperate?”³³ Bennett suggests that Jewett had money and costly jewelry of which her coworkers were likely jealous. Just as the beauty of the princesses in fairy tales evoked desperation in the hearts of other women, Bennett argues that Jewett’s beauty and fortune spurred another woman to “desperate” measures.

³³ Quoted in Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett*, 18.

Like Snow White's stepmother, who feared that her beauty had "abandoned" her, another woman may have been so jealous of Jewett that she killed the girl.

George Wilkes' novel takes the villainess ploy a step further, bringing in numerous "evil" women who sabotage any chance that Helen has at making an honest life for herself. First, there is Nancy, a "negress" and former servant in the home of the paramour of Dorcas' youth, who for a bit of money offers up her home first for the clandestine meetings of Dorcas and the young Sumner, and later encourages Dorcas's rendezvous with other suitors by pretending to be interested only in Dorcas's well being. Dorcas repays Nancy's kindness with small gifts of money when she can, and truly believes that the old woman is her friend.³⁴

Yet, when Dorcas is expelled from the home in which she had been "adopted," she goes to Nancy's cottage for solace, but Nancy rebukes her: "It amused [me], it did, to see some people put on airs; people, too, who was no better than any other people, and who, if the truth came to the truth was only servants at last!"³⁵ Nancy's true feelings toward Dorcas become clearer still:

She was astonished, she was, to say the least, that a person who had seduced and ruined an innocent young man, and sent him off to sea, should talk about being ruined herself! For her part, she was sick of such characters, and she had made up her mind to have nothing more to do with them. They had made her sinful enough already, and if she harbored or countenanced 'em any longer, she would expect some judgment of the Lord to fall upon her.³⁶

Poor Dorcas is so taken aback and outraged that she verbally attacks Nancy and leaves the cottage with no notion of where to go next. Her ruin comes at the hands of one who

³⁴ Wilkes, 7-12.

³⁵ Wilkes, 12.

³⁶ Wilkes, 12-13.

was interested only in self gain and putting Dorcas in her rightful place. Wilkes' portrayal of Nancy adheres to the fairy tales, which place the blame for young women's troubles squarely on the shoulders of their mother figures. Since Dorcas had no mother figure, Nancy fills that void, but she uses her power and influence to coerce Dorcas into a life of degradation. When Dorcas's degradation becomes public, Nancy turns her back on the young girl, literally turning her out to the woods like Snow White.

Dorcas never learns wariness in her dealings with women attempting to fill the mother role in her life, and the "wicked stepmother" reappears multiple times. In her first foray into city life, Dorcas ventures to Portland and begins to look for work as a seamstress. When she encounters a kind woman, Mrs. Burras, who offers to give her work as a personal seamstress for her and her "nieces" complete with salary and room and board, Dorcas jumps at the offer. Upon arrival at Mrs. Burras's home, Dorcas quickly realizes that she's trapped inside a brothel and is tricked into prostitution again by the other young women's implications that her first love Sumner is a regular customer. They revel in her downfall because they are jealous of her beauty³⁷ This is not the last time that Helen will be tricked by a woman who professes to have her best interest at heart. Like Snow White, Wilkes' Helen Jewett encounters many such women without ever learning to discern their real intentions.

Even after years as a prostitute, Helen's naivety about the women she chooses as mother figures continues, contradicting her otherwise worldly nature. In the next city into which Jewett enters, Boston, she passes out on the street at the sight of one of her former lovers. She is "rescued" by an African American family who practically holds her

³⁷ Wilkes, 13-18.

hostage while they sell off her personal property. When the authorities rescue her from her “rescuers,” one of the men takes her to live with his family. There, as Maria Benson, she begins a new life, complete with fiancé and the prospect of respectability. Later, the local brothel owner, Mrs. Bryant, discovers Helen’s true identity. She offers to “help” Helen if the latter’s background should ever be discovered and if the family who has so lovingly taken her in should cast her out as a result. Helen sees this not for what it is—a threat—but as an honest offer of shelter in dire circumstances.

Soon after Mrs. Bryant offers to help Helen, an anonymous letter to the kind family reveals that Helen had been both a prostitute and a mistress. Immediately, the family casts her from their doors, and Helen goes straight to Mrs. Bryant with no thought that her confidant might be the anonymous person who tipped off the family.³⁸ Repeatedly, Helen, like Snow White before her, naively falls victim to the same betrayer. Mrs. Bryant later sabotages Helen’s attempts to make a match with an impressionable youth who cares nothing about her past. Again, even though Mrs. Bryant has hinted that someone might tell the boy’s father about Helen, the young woman never imagines that her “friend” would sabotage her hopes.³⁹

Mrs. Bryant, like Nancy, fills a motherly role in the young woman’s life, a role that had been unfilled since her own mother’s death when she was only nine years old. Just as a young Snow White seeks female companionship in the old hag who visits the dwarves’ home and turns out to be her stepmother, Helen seeks a mother-daughter relationship with older women because of a sense of abandonment by her mother’s death.

³⁸ Wilkes, 27-30.

³⁹ Wilkes, 30-33.

Nancy, Mrs. Burras, and Mrs. Bryant are motherly figures, comforting Helen at the most crucial times and giving her motherly advice just when she needs it most. Unfortunately, Helen seeks a mother figure in the wrong women. None of these women has her best interest at heart. Two are jealous of her—Nancy that Helen has risen above her caste and Mrs. Bryant that Helen’s beauty and grace allow her to pass as a member of the upper classes. Mrs. Burras, like Nancy, sees only monetary profit for herself in her relationship with Helen, not caring that she is “ruining” a young woman forever. Like her mother before them, Helen’s “mother figures” abandon her emotionally and sometimes physically, leaving her to fend for herself in a society that cares little about what becomes of immoral women.

In Wilkes’ version, Jewett’s story clearly diverges from that of the fairy tales in that her downfall is overtly sexual. Rather than eating an apple that symbolizes “forbidden fruit” as did Snow White, Jewett becomes sexually active. More importantly, after being tricked three times by a “wicked witch” in disguise, Helen comes to understand and use her sexuality as power. She refused to

shrink from publicity, she wore always one description of rich green silk dress, and carried a letter in her hand, that her appearance might be indicated without mistake by those who had seen her to those who had not, but who might so desire . . .

In this manner did she make profit out of her pastime, and pastime out of her talents, while her companions were lolling upon sofas or stuffing themselves with cake or confectionary through live-long hours of continual eating.⁴⁰

She walks up the promenade alone, dressed to garner attention. She is a self-sufficient business woman, and her entire life is centered on attracting more business for herself.

⁴⁰ Wilkes, 54.

Rather than lazily lying about filling up on confections and hiding in the brothels, waiting for men to come to her, she makes herself known so as to increase her “sales.”

Helen’s independence and self-promotion conflicts with the tenets advanced by the Cult of True Womanhood, and her behavior and attitude so contradict the dominant beliefs of the age that it stuns her when people look down upon her. Helen’s confidence and strength is so powerful that she does not hesitate to have one of her johns arrested when, in a jealous rage, he commenced “cutting her most costly dresses into shreds . . . He likewise had strangled her canary bird . . . and had wound up his exploit, by writing a ribald couplet in her album, that was intended as an insult to her person.”⁴¹ Confident in herself and her station, Helen is shocked when the magistrate throws out the complaint once the gentleman promises to pay the value of the property he’d destroyed. She’s even more taken aback when she only receives half of the award because of “the immense trouble [the officer] had incurred in hunting the Captain up, and the superior sum he had refused from that gentleman, as a bribe to let him leave the city.”⁴² Though one could read her reaction as naivety on Helen’s part, previous scenes in the novel demonstrate that she would have been intimately familiar with the corruption in local government.

Upon entering Mrs. Burras’s establishment, she had received a visit from a magistrate who had been sent to “save her” from the clutches of the prostitutes in the house, but instead of performing his official duty, he partook of Helen’s wares as a bribe by Mrs. Burras.⁴³ Later, upon her earliest arrival in New York, she was let out of jail

⁴¹ Wilkes, 51.

⁴² Wilkes, 52.

⁴³ Wilkes, 17-18.

because the magistrate takes liberties with her.⁴⁴ Since Helen is already well acquainted with the corruption of law enforcement, she would have no reason to expect fair treatment from them. In fact, she does not expect fair treatment; she expects that because of her position as a “high class” prostitute and because of her first-hand knowledge of police corruption, she’ll have the upper-hand. That her status as a prostitute works against her, making the magistrate view her complaint as frivolous, offends her. When the officer steals her money, she has no choice but to recognize that her degradation has indeed placed her in a class to which she feels superior.

Wilkes’ narrator constantly establishes Helen’s superiority over the other prostitutes with whom she comes into contact. Unlike the behavior of her peers, “there was, however, nothing gaudy or vulgar in her manner. She was always lady-like and elegant, and though her carriage was self-assured and free, it was devoid of flashy ostentation or pert parade.”⁴⁵ Moreover, when Richard Robinson first encounters Helen, he is taken with her because “her attire evinced a cultivated taste,” and her appearance demonstrates that she possesses a “cultivated intellect” and is “well-bred.”⁴⁶ Just as Cinderella’s rags cannot hide her natural grace and poise, Jewett’s occupation does not interfere with her natural elegance and intellect. That Jewett’s appearance belied her occupation and actual status makes her most appealing. Had she been “gaudy or vulgar” or dressed less fashionably and more flashily, there would have been no intrigue. Wilkes

⁴⁴ Wilkes, 36-37.

⁴⁵ Wilkes, 54.

⁴⁶ Wilkes, 63.

has either forgotten Jewett's green dress or views it as part of what marks her as above other prostitutes.

Perhaps, in Wilkes' narrative, that Jewett seemed a walking contradiction was part of the attraction. As it was, her paramours, especially Robinson, could maintain the fantasy of the virgin while having sex with the Magdalene.⁴⁷ This fascination of the contradictory nature of one woman also fed the frenzy surrounding her murder and the subsequent trial for years after. While Bennett, Wilkes, and others certainly fabricated the details of Helen's life, they captured her appeal perfectly.⁴⁸

Jewett's charm and the combination of the virgin and the whore in one figure were not the only aspects of the case that elicited attention. The coverage of the murder and subsequent trial diverge from the fairy tale motifs in that the male protagonist of the story holds a contradictory appeal for readers. He is not the nameless rescuer of the princess about whom the reader knows little or nothing. Robinson intrigued readers because of the seeming contradictions in his outward appearance and his inner self. Though he had practically pronounced Robinson guilty but two days earlier, on Wednesday, April 13, 1836, and would later denounce the justice system that acquitted him, Bennett questions: "Is it possible for a youth, hitherto unimpeached and unimpeachable in his character, to have engendered and perpetrated so diabolical an act as the death of Ellen Jewett was? Is

⁴⁷ It is important to note that throughout Wilkes' and Bennett's narratives, the reader is reminded that Jewett is not a virgin (even though both take great pains to establish her as "worthy") by referring to her as "the Magdalene."

⁴⁸ Judge Weston, the head of the family who took Dorcas in as a servant when she was a child, was so outraged by the false accounts of her being like a sister to his children and like a daughter to his wife and himself, that he wrote a letter to the major newspapers to set the record straight. Still, proof exists of Helen's dual personality. See Cohen *The Murder of Helen Jewett*; Ann Royall, *The Black Book; or, a Continuation of Travels in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: NA, 1828) and testimony from the trial collected from and based on transcripts in various New York newspapers and published in *The Trial of Richard P. Robinson, Before the Court of Oyer and Terminer on the 2nd of June, 1836, for the Murder of Ellen Jewett, on the Night of the 9th of April, 1836* (New York: George Wilkes, 1849).

it the character of crime to jump at once from the heights of virtue to the depths of vice?”⁴⁹ Bennett quickly establishes Robinson as a virtuous young man, a noble prince who has been caught up in a situation beyond his control, who has been framed for a crime he couldn't have committed. His dealings with a prostitute contradicted everything Bennett's readers knew about Robinson. Thus, describing Robinson as simply led astray by the attractions and temptations of the city worked to Bennett's advantage. Indeed, the figure of Robinson must have struck at the very core of readers; their brothers and sons were similarly situated.

Wilkes seems to recognize the appeal of Robinson's contradictory character too. Wilkes' novel introduces Robinson about half way through, after the reader has already formed an attachment to Jewett. The narrator's first mention of Robinson plays upon the reputation described in Bennett:

He was of the middle size, rather below it if anything, and there was to his gait and general carriage, a litheness and an elasticity which indicated extreme youth . . . he was manifestly genteel . . . he was a very handsome youth, of not more than eighteen years of age, [with] damask cheek expansive blue eye, handsome mouth, and hair of golden brown, which curled about his temples.⁵⁰

This description forces an impression of innocence—the “extreme youth,” the blonde hair, the blue eyes, all of his features conjure images of a handsome prince, not of a licentious murderer.

The narrator of Wilkes' novel begins to contradict this first impression with a tale of Robinson's seduction of an innocent orphan girl who lives with relatives. At the same

⁴⁹ Quoted in *The Life and Writings of James Gordon Bennett, Editor of the New York Herald*. New York: NA, 1844. 17.

⁵⁰ Wilkes, 57.

time, the tale immediately questions whether Robinson and other young men like him are actually responsible for their actions:

What else could be expected of him? What else could be expected of the majority of youths similarly situated, and who, like him, are brought from the quiet routine of country life, to be plunged into the midst of all the intoxicating pleasures and dazzling temptations of this great Vanity Fair? . . . Having the appearance of a gentleman; being evidently taken for a gentleman; knowing what a gentleman should be, he of course, resolves to behave as much like a gentleman as possible; and liberality being necessary to the assumed character, he is tempted to sustain it, by slight loans from the till, which being repeated, settle into methodized speculation.⁵¹

The narrator excuses Robinson's conduct by blaming the temptations of the city. It's not his fault that the temptations are there; it's not his fault that he must steal to preserve his appearance. In fact, the narrator doesn't refer to Robinson's actions as stealing; he takes "slight loans from the till." Presenting these thefts as loans instead of small robberies again excuses Robinson from any real wrong-doing.

Time after time, Wilkes defends Robinson's character from his own actions.

When he sees Helen at the theatre, he does nothing to stop the two ruffians who accost her: "Though not deficient in courage, he was not created for a knight-errant . . . Had he interfered, he might have been very well beaten without contributing any aid or comfort to his unknown flame."⁵² Here the narrator leads his reader to believe that Robinson's creator is at fault for his not being a "knight-errant." More importantly, the rational explanation that he may have been so badly beaten as to be useless in offering aid is so reasonable as to again remove the spot from his character. Whereas Perrault includes a moral at the end of his "Blue Beard" to make it clear to his readers that the blame in the

⁵¹ Wilkes, 60.

⁵² Wilkes, 65.

story lies with the woman and not with her murderous husband, Wilkes creates a conflicted male figure, who is, like his female counterpart, neither wholly good nor wholly evil, and uses that conflict to its full advantage.

After establishing the tensions within Robinson's character, the narrator takes the reader a few steps further into the young man's sensibility. When the narrator describes Robinson's journal entries cursing his employer, who has made Robinson a veritable member of his family, the reader sees into his true character.⁵³ Much later, the novel depicts Robinson's treatment of the young woman whom he had seduced when he first arrived in New York. Not only does he repeatedly coax her from her family, he also attempts many times to set her up in a brothel. Finally, once she has finally understood that his intent is to leave her for good rather than to marry such a degraded creature, she takes ill. Robinson visits the home of her nurse, and he dropped something into the medicinal brew that had been prepared for the ill woman. We later discover through Helen that what he dropped in was "Arsenic!"⁵⁴ Robinson's actions toward Emma anticipate his relationship with and subsequent murder of Helen Jewett. Here, Wilkes diverges from the fairy tales' and Bennett's motif of blaming women for the harm done to other women. While he is clear that women are to blame for Helen's downfall, Wilkes does not shy from depicting the wrongs done to women at the hands of Robinson, in spite of the earlier rationalization of his thievery and lack of chivalry.

⁵³ The narrator describes Robinson's journal: "This was the record of course thoughts . . . but what showed in the most striking light his demoniac disposition was an entry which he mad on salary day, in relation to his income. After remarking at some length, on the insufficiency of this sum for his expensive course of life, he bestowed upon his employer . . . all the vulgar appellations within the range of confumelious epithet, ending with the malediction—"Cursed be he, twice, and all his family, forever!" Wilkes, 67.

⁵⁴ Wilkes, 59-62; 80-84; 96-97; 101-105.

Robinson's diabolical personality emerges toward the end of Wilkes' novel.

When Helen is out of town, Robinson cavorts with various women about town. A confrontation between Robinson and one of Helen's friends ensues when she makes him aware that she knows of his infidelity:

“Why you don't think that I've forgotten Hester Preston and Elizabeth Salters, do you?”

“Mere harmless visits, I assure you . . .”

“Well, if they were harmless visits . . . what will you tell me of the young lady at Mrs. Stewart's . . .”

Robinson paused a minute and . . . then made an earnest request that his fair informer would not spread the circumstance any further. . . .

[she told him] that he would have no right to complain if she (Helen) had revenge upon him, by exposing his licentious and extravagant habits to his employer. . . .

“Why, I would blow her brains out!” slowly and resolutely, through his teeth.⁵⁵

Robinson's demeanor and threat foreshadow Jewett's murder. His threats come as no real surprise. Though found not guilty at trial, by the time of Wilkes' novel, Robinson was presumed guilty by many, including James Gordon Bennett, both in and out of the city.

Surprisingly, Wilkes' novel depicts a scene where but a few short weeks prior to murdering her, Robinson stops Helen from killing herself. Though Robinson's rescue of Helen seems like the heroic act of a lover, the narrator makes it clear that Robinson is anything but heroic, describing it as a “performance.”⁵⁶ The narrator details the effect on Robinson:

He had been disturbed for the moment, but the prospect of Helen's death brought with it no real alarm, for it had long been the subject of his thoughts. When, therefore, she was declared convalescent, he felt as if his fortunes had miscarried

⁵⁵ Wilkes, 99.

⁵⁶ Wilkes, 111.

and his brain, almost without intention, was driven to conjecture how the miscarriage might be remedied.⁵⁷

Robinson cares nothing for Helen. He performs the role of the dutiful lover, but his thoughts have long entertained her demise. He feels no sadness that he's the source of her unhappiness that caused her suicide attempt. He only regrets that he saved her, revealing that he deserves none of the sentiment expressed by other authors and by the jury in his trial.

When Wilkes addresses the murder and Robinson's trial, he provides none of the speculation that has filled the pages of his novelization. Instead, he paraphrases the reports of James Gordon Bennett, including Bennett's articles in his footnotes. In fact the amount of text that Wilkes uses from Bennett is so large that the difference between footnote and novel becomes difficult, if not impossible to discern.⁵⁸ This confusion of fiction with Bennett's reality allows Wilkes to imply that his story is not a novel, but a real account of the lives of these young people. The mere inclusion of Bennett's reporting confuses the line between novelization and news, as Bennett changes opinions about the crime with each article he writes. By incorporating the reports into the novel in a manner that renders them almost indistinguishable from one another, Wilkes establishes his novel as the definitive history of Helen Jewett and Richard Robinson.

Indeed, Wilkes constructs the entire novel as though it is a factual representation of facts rather than a fictional account of the lives of Jewett and Robinson. In addition to presenting its author as the editor of the *National Police Gazette* to give the novel the appearance of "news," the story has many footnotes that work to establish the events in

⁵⁷ Wilkes, 111.

⁵⁸ See Wilkes, 120-130.

the story as fact. On the fourth page of the text, Wilkes includes the following note about how young Dorcas lost her virginity:

This story of the lover is not, as some will be ready to suspect, the production of the imagination of the writer. It is related in a series of epistles which Dorcas Doyen, when shame made her heiress of another name, directed in a friend. Their original draft, or copies, were found transcribed in a large scrap-book taken from the trunk at the time of her murder. In the reproduction of this portion of its contents, nothing is altered but the style. The letters were probably written during her career in Boston, as they are signed "Helen Mar." They are, without doubt, accurate records, as far as they go, of her earliest attachment.⁵⁹

Though Wilkes claims that the letters are locked in his newspaper office, no other source corroborates even the existence of these letters. Still, Wilkes uses this footnote and many others throughout the text to establish his story as fact rather than fiction. Some of his notes even provide "citations," though those works he cites cannot be found. It is possible that given the more than 150 years separating Wilkes's period from our own, these works no longer exist. However, extensive archival research has found no sources that even remotely resemble those he references, making it likely that the author fabricated them all.

Another device that Wilkes uses to establish the truthfulness of his tale is the inclusion of Helen's letters to various paramours and their letters to her. Again, that these letters exist anywhere but in the mind of the author cannot be corroborated, yet because Wilkes claimed to have them in his possession, their placement in the text establishes the events therein as "fact."

Wilkes also builds on Bennett's reporting, by using Bennett's articles to build his novel. Yet Bennett was not the only influence at work. The immense popularity of fairy tales in America at this time spoke to the public's desire for literature that encouraged

⁵⁹ Wilkes, 8.

domesticity, passivity, domesticity, and submission in women and gave the public access to women's bodies. Bennett realized that the public's desire was a conflicted one. True, they wanted their wives and daughters to remain chaste outside of marriage and passive in all matters outside the realm of the home. Yet the access that fairy tales granted to women's bodies did not satisfy a competing, voyeuristic desire for knowledge of women who refuse to adhere to such stifling roles as the Cult of True Womanhood demanded of women. Unlike the fairy tale princesses before her, Helen Jewett was a woman of the world, a prostitute, which granted the public full access to her sexual exploits and body without the guilt that would have been associated with a chaste woman.

Bennett uses the fairy tales to create an acceptable object of desire for his readers. He describes her in terms of Sleeping Beauty and Snow White as well as Cinderella, to make her a sympathetic victim. Too, he uses her position as a prostitute to provide his readers with access to an intensely erotic subject. Bennett walked a narrow line in his conflicted depiction of Helen Jewett, but so did her other biographers. Wilkes' novelization of Jewett's life takes the fairy tale Cinderella and imbues her with a natural, animalistic sexuality. In Wilkes' novel, at eleven (or eight), Helen's sexual nature has been awakened, and because of a few evil stepmother figures, she is unable to tame it. Helen's Snow-White-like naivety furthers the image created in making her a Cinderella, making the reader sympathize with her even as she turns her back on propriety.

Bennett and Wilkes also create a conflicted Richard P. Robinson. Bennett's changing position on the guilt and innocence of Robinson, while motivated by monetary gain, mirrors the public's wavering about the young man's culpability. Similarly, Wilkes creates a Robinson who is both innocent and evil. He is not to blame because his creator

did not instill a character of strength and fortitude, according to Wilkes' novel, but he undeniably commits robbery and murder. In other words, Robinson is a Prince Charming who happens upon the good fortune of meeting the princess, and a Blue Beard who murders all of his wives. The novel tells its reader that yes, Robinson likely murdered Helen Jewett, but no, it wasn't entirely his fault. In the end, Helen's death is both punishment for and recognition of her licentious nature. A young woman who paraded about town in an infamous green dress and always carried a letter to attract attention and elicit remembrances from passersby, Helen likely would have enjoyed the attention that her dead body held for the public. The lover of romance and fiction in her would have been proud that she helped to inspire a new genre that continued to feature versions of the beautiful young prostitute years after her murder.

CHAPTER 4
NECROPHILIA AND INCEST IN POE: THE REVENGE OF THE DEAD-UNDEAD
WOMAN

The odd syndrome of child-love, necrophilia, and incest in Poe is too personal and pathological to shed much light on the general meaning of the latter theme in American literature and life. It is not without interest, however, to reflect that the tales of Poe have come to be thought of as a children's classic."

—Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*¹

As demonstrated in the Chapter 2, nineteenth century American translations of fairy tales—also considered “children’s classics”—combined “child-love, necrophilia, and incest,” achieving immense popularity and remaining staples of American childhood for nearly two centuries. Edgar Allan Poe, too, combines these elements, and as Leslie Fiedler points out, his stories and poetry are deemed perfectly suitable for children. This chapter contends that, contrary to Fiedler’s assertion, the “odd syndrome” at play in Edgar Allan Poe’s fiction does indeed shed light on its “general meaning” in American culture.

I will begin by establishing Poe's familiarity with fairy tales and the striking similarities among his tales, James Gordon Bennett's descriptions of Helen Jewett's corpse, and the fairy tales of Basile, Perrault, and the Grimms. Then I will examine the ways in which Poe's tales diverge from the fairy tales, creating horror alongside necrophilic desire. In his tales, Poe twists the familiar formula of the fairy tales into something new. His sleeping beauties such as Lady Madeline Usher and Ligeia return

¹ Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Criterion Books, 1960).

from the grave, abjecting their male counterparts. In “The Fall of the House of Usher” and other tales, such as “Morella,” Poe incorporates incest to both titillate and repulse his readers, whereas in yet other stories and his poems, he uses a strange combination of necrophilia and child-love. Whereas the sentimental novels of the period identify with and appropriate the victim’s suffering,² Poe’s tales twist that by having the victim appropriate the master by putting him in an abject position. Twisting fairy tales and the sentimental, Poe uses the Gothic to both appropriate those genres and undermine them.

Poe worked to increase his readership. As such, he was forced to cater to “the mob” that he detested. Terence Whalen explains, “Poe discovered that the mass audience could not *read* pure novelty. Dependent on the common knowledge of the masses, yet driven by the onward rush of information, writers attempted to construct new effects out of old materials.”³ Accordingly, Poe gave the mass audience what it wanted—an “odd syndrome” of “child-love, necrophilia, and incest.” Though these elements exist in the earliest versions of fairy tales and continue to play subtle role in even our current versions, Poe takes this combination to more extreme limits and in a culture very different from those that were first introduced to fairy tales.

In the nineteenth century, children were first recognized as a category of person separate from adults. When the Grimms first published their fairy tales, the stories were full of incest, as in “The Maiden without Hands,” and sexualized portrayals of young

² Paula Bennett, *Poets in the Public Sphere: The Emancipatory Project of American Women’s Poetry, 1800-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 54-56.

³ Whalen continues, “For the mass audience, in other words, the use-value of reading consists not in intimations of unreachable bliss but in appeals to common fancies and desires. This means that the writer—especially the writer of genius—should occupy a middle ground between absolute novelty and common knowledge.” Terence Whalen, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses: the Political Economy of Literature in Antebellum America*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 46, 101.

girls, as in “Snow White.” In subsequent editions, the Grimms toned down their tales to be more suitable for children, a concern they did not have in 1812.⁴ Poe’s time was only a few years removed from a time when children were seen as little adults and their sexuality seen as a given. He plays with contemporary taboos of incest and child-love, knowing that his audience’s reaction will mingle dread with desire. Too, Poe plays with the emerging categories of child/adult, subject/object, and living/dead, and his tales play with the ways in which crossing these boundaries threatens patriarchal control.

There is a direct relationship between Poe’s works and the fairy tales. As early as 1823, Sir Walter Scott wrote to Taylor of the public’s interest in the Grimms’ tales: “There is also a sort of wild fairy interest in them.” This “wild” interest was not confined to the *Kinder- und Hausmarchen*. A few sentences later, Scott tells Taylor that he and his friends have editions of tales from other countries, including Perrault.⁵ Like Sir Walter Scott and his friends, Poe knew the fairy tales well. In his *Arabian Nights: a Companion*, Robert Irwin discusses the influence that *The Thousand and One Nights* had on Western authors, mentioning Poe’s satire “The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade” as evidence.⁶ Poe was familiar not only with the versions of fairy tales in *Arabian Nights*, but also with the popular fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm, Charles Perrault, and Giambattista Basile. In August 1836, writing “Pinakidia” for the *Southern Literary Messenger*, Poe explains a comparison of a particular work to “The slipper of Cinderella”: “Cinderella is a tale of universal currency. An ancient Danish ballad has

⁴ See *Fairy Tales and Society: Illusion, Allusion, and Paradigm*, ed. Ruth B. Bottigheimer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986). See also *The Reception of Grimms’ Fairy Tales: Responses, Reactions, Revisions*, ed. Donald Haase (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1993).

⁵ Quoted in Ruth Michaelis-Jena, *The Brothers Grimm* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 173-175.

⁶ Robert Irwin, “Children of the Nights,” *Arabian Nights: a Companion* (New York: Penguin, 1996).

some of the incidents. It is popular among the Welch—also among the Poles—in Hesse and Sweden . . . It is in the Italian *Pentamerone* under the title of Cenerentola.”⁷

Poe’s awareness of Basile’s *Il Pentamerone* signals that he was likely familiar with the more accessible tales of the Grimms and Perrault. He knew enough about George Cruickshank, the artist who illustrated Taylor’s translation of the *Kinder –und Hausmarchen*, to comment about his artistic contribution to Henry Cockton’s *Stanley Thorn*. Speaking about Cruickshank and a fellow contributor named Leech, Poe claims, “It is observable that those of the latter [Leech] are more effective in every respect than those of the former and far more celebrated artist.”⁸ Cruickshank’s illustrations for the English translation of the Grimms’ tales were included in a collection of his work in 1827; thus, it is unlikely that Poe could be aware of this “celebrated artist” and not his fairy tale artwork.

Poe’s awareness of and familiarity with fairy tales become apparent in his short stories. Several, especially those featuring a dead or supposedly dead woman and her surroundings, bear remarkable likenesses to Grimms’, Perrault’s, and even Basile’s versions of the “Sleeping Beauty” story, as well as to the Grimms’ “Snow White” and “The Glass Coffin.”⁹ Poe’s reviewers and critics noted this similarity as early as 1885

⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, “Pinakidia,” *Southern Literary Messenger* (August 1836), 577-578.

⁸ Edgar Allan Poe, Review of *Stanley Thorn*, *Graham’s Magazine* (January 1842), xx.

⁹ Poe’s poetry demonstrates these same characteristics. See especially the fairy-tale-like beginning of “Annabel Lee” and the obvious necrophilia in this poem. See also “The Raven” in which the speaker laments his lost love Lenore and Poe’s “Lenore” in which the speaker speaks of the “life upon her yellow hair.”

when one critic refers to Poe's works as "his fairy tales."¹⁰ Even earlier, an 1836 review for the *Richmond Compiler* questions, "Why will he [Poe] not disentrall himself from the spells of German enchantment and supernatural imagery?"¹¹

Although this earlier review of Poe could be read as relating Poe to the German Romantics or even Gothics, its references to "spells," "enchantment," and "supernatural imagery" more closely resemble the German fairy tales collected by the Grimms. Though Poe does not directly address fairy tales as an influence, he mentions them numerous times in reviews, referencing "Sleeping Beauty" in a review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* and referring to Christopher Pease Cranch's style as "Cinderella Fancy."¹² More importantly, Poe's reviewers refer to his stories as "fairy tales," an aspect that needs further exploration. Poe recognized an opportunity to increase readership by incorporating elements of popular fairy tales into his own works. Perhaps he took advantage of the "particular demand" for fairy tales, supplying the public's "unstable and perhaps unfathomable tastes" by incorporating the more macabre elements of the tales such as female corpses and necrophilia and twisting them into terror.¹³

¹⁰ Quoted in Lubov Breit Keefer, "Poe in Russia," *Poe in Foreign Lands and Tongues*, ed. Jeanne Rosselet, Lubov Keefer, Herbert Schaumann and Pedro Salinas (Baltimore: The Edgar Allan Poe Society, 1941): 17.

¹¹ *Richmond Compiler*, (February 1836), "Bits and Pieces—II," E. A. Poe Society of Baltimore. 23 May 2003.

¹² Edgar Allan Poe, "Tale-Writing—Nathaniel Hawthorne," *Godey's Lady's Book* (November 1847), 252-256. and Edgar Allan Poe, "The Literati—Part III," *The Works of the Late Edgar Allan Poe*, vol. III (1850): 70.

¹³ As Terence Whalen argues, "Since he could not support himself by writing poetry, he had to adapt his talents to the unstable and perhaps unfathomable tastes of a distant mass audience. Some of his most extravagant tales were, by his own admission, composed 'to supply a particular demand.'" Whalen, 7.

“The Oblong Box” shares obvious themes in common with both “Snow-White” and “The Glass Coffin.” In Poe’s story, the narrator tells of hearing the main character after his “wife” had left the room each night. He recounts:

I fancied I could distinguish the precise moment when he fairly disengaged the lid—also, that I could determine when he removed it altogether, and when he deposited it upon the lower berth in his room . . . After this there was a dead stillness, and I heard nothing more, upon either occasion, until nearly daybreak; unless, perhaps, I may mention a low sobbing, or murmuring sound . . . I say it seemed to *resemble* sobbing or sighing . . . He had opened his oblong box, in order to feast his eyes on the pictorial treasure within . . . Just before dawn, on each of the two nights of which I speak, I distinctly heard Mr. Wyatt replace the lid of the oblong box, and force the nails into their old places, by means of the muffled mallet.¹⁴

At the end of the story, the reader finds out that Mr. Wyatt’s dead wife—not a painting as the narrator supposes—is the “pictorial treasure within” the oblong box. Because the reader now knows that it is Mrs. Wyatt’s corpse in the box, this portion of the narrative takes on a new meaning. Every night Mr. Wyatt “disengaged the lid,” “removed it altogether,” and “deposited it upon the lower berth in his room.” The narrator surmises that Mr. Wyatt puts the lid on the “lower berth,” or bunk, because there was so little room in his cabin. Given the ending of the story, the reader can suppose that Mr. Wyatt actually places it upon the bunk because he is not sleeping there, sleeping, instead, inside the oblong box with his deceased wife. His “sobbing, or murmuring sound,” is now obviously attributable to the fact that his wife is dead and that he opens up her makeshift coffin to sleep with or, at least, “feast his eyes on” her each night.

Poe’s “Sleeping Beauty” motif is most evident in one of the cases his narrator relates in “The Premature Burial.” Monsieur Rénelle and “every one who saw her”

¹⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Oblong Box,” *Poe: Poetry, Tales, and Selected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1984): 649-650.

suppose his wife dead; thus, Monsieur Rénelle has her buried. Her former lover “journeys from the capital to the remote province in which the village lies, with the romantic purpose of disinterring the corpse and possessing himself of its luxuriant tresses.” When he unearths the coffin, he discovers that “the lady had been buried alive. Vitality had not altogether departed; and she was aroused, by the caresses of her lover, from the lethargy which had been mistaken for death.”¹⁵ Poe’s tale builds upon and adapts the themes in Grimm and Perrault. The woman’s former lover, much like Bennett and the fairy tale princes, does not care that the woman is dead; rather, her corpse is just as (and possibly more) desirable than the woman was when she was alive. Like Bennett, the dwarfs, and the princes, the lover yearns to have one final look at her and to possess her or something that was once a part of her. In the fairy tales, especially “Snow White,” the men possess the heroine’s dead body; here, the lover wishes to possess the dead woman’s “luxuriant tresses.” In contrast to the fairy tales, “Premature Burial” is more overt in its intentions. The “lover” has a “romantic purpose” and he “caresses” her. Here Poe presents a more adult and overtly erotic theme than do either the Grimms or Perrault, while still centering the story in the overtly necrophilic.

In both Perrault’s and the Grimms’ versions of the “sleeping beauty” tale, only a certain, preordained prince can pass through the brambles surrounding the palace to awaken her. As the Grimms’ narrator explains, “He stooped down and gave her a kiss. But the moment he kissed her she opened her eyes and awoke, and smiled upon him.” In Poe’s story, even though “vitality had not altogether departed,” the prematurely buried

¹⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Premature Burial,” *Poe: Poetry, Tales, and Selected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1984): 668.

woman regains full consciousness only after the lover kisses and “caresses” her.¹⁶ In “Sleeping Beauty” and “Brier Rose,” the brambles and thorns that part “of their own accord” signal a mutual encounter between the prince and the sleeping beauty. In Poe’s tale, the woman’s subsequent relationship with her lover is also mutual. Not only does she only awaken after he arrives at her grave, but she also leaves with him, refusing to tell her husband that she is alive. More importantly, the story ends “happily ever after” with the woman fleeing with her lover and living out the rest of her days with him.¹⁷

Though it does not provide a happy ending, “The Fall of the House of Usher” also parallels the fairy tales. When read alongside “Snow White,” a description of Lady Madeline is noticeably similar to that of the fairy tale heroine. The narrator of the Grimms’ story explains, “They (the dwarfs) would have buried her, but that she looked still as if she were living, with her beautiful blooming cheeks.”¹⁸ The narrators of both Poe’s and the Grimms’ stories note that the woman is dead but looks alive. Lady Madeline has a “mockery of a faint blush” rather than simply a “faint blush,” thus implying that the blush is not real because she is dead.¹⁹ Snow White “looked still as if she were living.” Both descriptions allow the narrator to let his audience know that the woman in question seems dead but may not be. Moreover, because of the appearance of

¹⁶ Grimm, “Brier Rose,” *German Fairy Tales and Popular Stories, as Told by Gammer Grethel* trans. Edgar Taylor (London: H. G. Bohn, 1823), 30.

¹⁷ Before the woman and her lover can live “happily ever after,” they encounter her husband on the street many years after her burial and resurrection, and she must sever her ties to her husband in a court of law. Nevertheless, the “happily ever after” motif survives as the woman’s plea to have her marriage ended by the court is granted and she and her lover continue to live with one another.

¹⁸ Grimm, “Snow White,” *German Fairy Tales and Popular Stories, as Told by Gammer Grethel* trans. Edgar Taylor (London: H. G. Bohn, 1823), 155.

¹⁹ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher,” *Poe: Poetry, Tales, and Selected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1984): 329.

life that the dead women possess, neither Usher nor the dwarfs can bring themselves to bury them. Though Usher claims that he does not want scientists to dig up his sister to investigate her ailment, not burying her serves the same plot function as does the dwarfs' refusal to bury Snow White—both women come back to life.

An even more striking similarity is the voyeurism that the tales dramatize and induce. As previously explained, James Gordon Bennett's voyeurism mirrors the voyeurism of the prince in Snow White. Similarly, Usher and the narrator of Poe's story contribute to what David Reynolds describes as "social voyeurism."²⁰ They do not simply take Lady Madeline to her tomb; they remove the lid of her coffin "and looked upon the face of the tenant."²¹ Though there is no explicit sex in this passage, sexual desire is inherent. Why must they remove the lid? That Poe places the scene at this point in the text demonstrates that the two men cannot leave without one final look at what Bennett called Jewett, the "beautiful female corpse." Moreover, placing Lady Madeline's body in a room "lying, at great depth, immediately beneath that portion of the building in which was my own sleeping apartment" means that the narrator literally lies on top of the corpse every night.

As with Bennett's account of Helen Jewett, the description of the home in Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" resembles the home described in Perrault's "Sleeping Beauty." In Poe's tale, the narrator describes the house as being infused with "a sense of insufferable gloom," possessing "bleak walls," being surrounded by "decayed trees," and

²⁰ David Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1988), 215.

²¹ Edgar Allan Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher," 329.

evoking in the narrator “an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart.”²² A valet takes him to see Usher in complete “silence.”²³ These descriptions serve to let the reader know that the house is a place filled with death and decay. Later, the narrator describes the lower parts of the house where they lay Lady Madeline to rest as “a region of horror” and the rest of the home as “the scarcely less gloomy apartments of the upper portion of the house.”²⁴ Here, the narrator sets up the house as a place of “horror,” thus foreshadowing the return of Lady Madeline.

The narrator's descriptions in “The Fall of the House of Usher” are in keeping with the descriptions of the homes in which the sleeping beauty of the fairy tales is imprisoned. In Perrault's tale, the narrator recounts the hero's reaction to the scenery of the home: “He came into a spacious outward court, where every thing he saw might have frozen up the most fearless person with horror. There reigned all over a most frightful silence; the image of death every where shewed itself; and there was nothing to be seen but stretched out bodies of men and animals all seeming to be dead.”²⁵ Both narrators describe the scenes in terms of “horror” and “silence.” Scenes of “gloom” or “death” are everywhere in both the House of Usher and the palace in which Sleeping Beauty lies. The narrator of “The Fall of the House of Usher” never actually uses the word “death” to describe the scenery, yet “decayed trees,” “insufferable gloom,” and “bleak walls” of the Usher home are as much the “image of death” as what the prince in Perrault's tale

²² Ibid, 317.

²³ Ibid, 320.

²⁴ Ibid, 329.

²⁵ Charles Perrault, “The Sleeping Beauty in the Woods,” *Histories or Tales of Past Times with Morals*, trans. Robert Samber (London: J. Pote & R. Montagu, 1729), 20.

encounters. Moreover, both Poe's narrator and Perrault's prince experience a feeling of “iciness” or being “frozen with terror” upon first confronting the house or palace.

In the “sleeping beauty” tale, the death and reanimation of the castle is inextricably linked to that of the heroine. When she dies, the castle dies; all work ceases and the entire structure exudes death. Upon the princess’s awakening, the castle too awakens. Poe’s tale of the Usher family and house plays with the notion that the home and its inhabitants are tied together. Yet, Poe’s story takes an already traditional characteristic of the Gothic—that the existence of the familial home is linked to that of the family itself—and twists it as he does other aspects of the Gothic and fairy tale traditions. The Usher home serves not only as a symbol of the deterioration of the Usher family, but the home serves as antagonist, possessing self-awareness and causing the family’s deterioration (and, finally, their deaths).

Clearly, the narrator questions how much the “House of Usher” (meaning home) had affected the “House of Usher” (meaning the family). He speaks of “the perfect keeping of the character of the premises with the accredited character of the people, and . . . [speculates] upon the possible influence which the one, in the long lapse of centuries, might have exercised upon the other.” He goes on to explain that “the original title of the estate . . . “House of Usher” [was] an appellation which seemed to include, in the minds of the peasantry who used it, both the family and the family mansion.”²⁶ Thus, the narrator recognizes the not only the ties between house and family, but also the power of the ancestral home over the Usher line.

²⁶ Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher,” 319.

In Poe's tale, the narrator and Roderick discuss that the house seems sentient. Roderick insists that the "evidence" and "result" of the house's sentience is "discoverable . . . in that silent, yet importunate and terrible influence which for centuries had moulded the destinies of his family, and which made him what I [the narrator] now saw him."²⁷ The narrator's choice of the word "moulded" to describe the house's effect on the Usher family holds a dual meaning. On the surface of the statement, the home shapes the family. As the home "moulded" and decayed, so did the family. But, "mould" also means "to deteriorate" and "to soil." And although the use of "moulded" as a transitive verb does not usually carry either of these meanings, as an affective force upon the family, the home, according to Roderick, contributes to the deterioration of the family, soiling and destroying them until they are no more.²⁸

Just as "The Fall of the House of Usher" is similar to the Grimms' and Perrault's fairy tales, Poe's "Ligeia" resembles both "Snow White" and "Sleeping Beauty" and "Brier Rose." The narrator tells us that Ligeia is characterized by a "marble hand," "skin rivaling the purest ivory," and hair that is "Raven-black, the glossy, the luxuriant and naturally curling tresses."²⁹ Much as Bennett describes Jewett's corpse as the whitest "Parian marble," the narrator of "Ligeia" uses the image of "purest ivory" to describe Ligeia's skin, summoning visions of Snow White's skin that "was as white as snow."

²⁷ Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher," 327-328.

²⁸ Roger Corman's 1960 movie version interprets Poe's story in such a way that the house literally tries to kill the family. When the characters attempt to leave the house, chandeliers fall, nearly killing them, and the house collapses around the dying Usher family at the closing of the movie.

²⁹ Edgar Allan Poe, "Ligeia," *Poe: Poetry, Tales, and Selected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1984): 263.

The added image of Ligeia's "raven-black" hair furthers the comparison to Snow-White in that the latter's hair is "as black as ebony."³⁰

"Ligeia" also bears a strong resemblance to Perrault's "Sleeping Beauty" in that the narrators of both tales describe the heroine's beauty in terms of spectrality or divinity. Ligeia's beauty was "the radiance of an opium dream—an airy and spirit-lifting vision more wildly divine than the phantasies which hovered about the slumbering souls of the daughters of Delos."³¹ Thus, Ligeia's beauty is more than "divine;" it is far above that conceived of by even the gods. Perrault's *Sleeping Beauty* is described in a similar fashion. The narrator represents *Sleeping Beauty* as possessing "bright, and in a manner resplendent beauty, [that] had something in it divine."³² The word "divine" tells the reader that the women are superior to any other woman, an idea taken even further in "Ligeia" when the narrator marries a woman he grows to hate because she is so unlike Ligeia.

The story's ending recalls Bennett's sexually aroused description of Helen Jewett's corpse. Upon the transformation of Lady Rowena's corpse into Ligeia, the narrator exclaims, "Here then, at least, can I never—can I never be mistaken—these are the full, and the black, and the wild eyes—of my lost love—of the lady—of the LADY LIGEIA!"³³ Just as in the earlier passage by Bennett, the dashes evoke the heavy

³⁰ Grimm, "Snow-White," 148.

³¹ Poe, "Ligeia," 263. In Greek myth, Asteria, one of the Titanades, transformed herself into a meteor and threw herself into the ocean, becoming the island of Delos in an attempt to escape Zeus. Her sister Leto came to this island seeking refuge and gave birth to Apollo—god of music, medicine, prophecy, and poetry—and Artemis—goddess of childbirth, harvest, and hunting. *Bullfinch's Mythology* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1979).

³² Perrault, 20.

³³ Poe, "Ligeia," 277.

breathing of the narrator as he looks over the corpse. His excitement builds with each dash. At last, unable to contain himself, he releases this build-up as he shouts the name “LADY LIGEIA!” Yet, while Bennett’s desire is more restrained, Poe’s narrator communicates a desire mingled with horror. Unlike Jewett, Ligeia comes back from the dead to confront her voyeur, and though his desire has not dissipated, it is now mixed with dread.

More so than in his inclusion of sexual overtones in “The Oblong Box” and “The Premature Burial,” Poe adapts the motifs of the fairy tales in both “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “Ligeia.” While ill or dead, the women in Poe’s stories cannot resist the violence perpetuated by the male protagonists, but when they return from the grave, they frequently become a source of terror for the male narrators, who become the passive objects of the tales. Unlike Lady Madeline, Ligeia displays not only a “violent” passion, but also intellect while alive. The narrator explains, “I was sufficiently aware of her infinite supremacy to resign my self, with a child-like confidence, to her guidance through the chaotic world of metaphysical investigation at which I was most busily occupied during the earlier years of our marriage.”³⁴ Ligeia acts as loving and patient teacher to the “child-like” narrator. On her deathbed, Ligeia does not complain of her discomfort. Rather, with a passion that “amounted to idolatry,” she dwells upon her love for her husband.³⁵ Ligeia controls her husband so much that she infantilizes him, which is why she must die. Her assertiveness takes too much power from her husband, and the only path to passivity is death.

³⁴ Ibid, 265-266.

³⁵ Ibid, 267.

Moreover, the narrator of “Ligeia” not only mistreats his new wife, Lady Rowena, but also may have killed both wives, the objects of his desire.³⁶ The passivity of death cannot contain the active will of Ligeia. In her return from the grave, Ligeia no longer lovingly teaches her husband; instead, she becomes an active terror for both the narrator and his audience. As Karen Weekes suggests, “The narrator is terrified by Ligeia’s reappearance not so much because it means she has conquered death but because she does it through an act of vehement will, a powerful volition that renders him prostrate.”³⁷ Leland S. Person similarly argues that Ligeia’s return “also explodes the Angel in the House ideology.”³⁸ Whereas Snow White and Sleeping Beauty awake to marry their princes and live “happily ever after” likely as domestic goddesses, Ligeia returns to wreak terror upon her husband.

Women writers like Charlotte Perkins Gillman in “The Yellow Wallpaper” used the gothic to demonstrate the horrors of domestic ideology. Poe’s gothic tales undo any pretended subversion that they offer of that domestic ideology. Like the poetry of women in the antebellum period, Poe’s tales “cleave to the figure of the Angel nonetheless, ignoring the price paid by ‘living’ women forced to ‘die’ into this role.”³⁹ Though Poe’s tales do demonstrate that women die to become the pious, passive objects that men desired, the dead, passive woman is desirable. Even still, his focus is not on the

³⁶ Cynthia Jordan, *Second Stories: The Politics of Language Form and Gender in Early American Fiction*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 135-139.

³⁷ Karen Weekes, “Poe’s Feminine Ideal,” *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002): 159.

³⁸ Leland Person, “Poe and Nineteenth-Century Gender Constructions,” *A Historical Guide to Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. J. Gerald Kennedy (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), 145.

³⁹ Paula Bernat Bennett, 116.

price the women have paid to conform to societal expectations about domesticity and become desirable. When his women characters transgress the boundaries between masculine and feminine norms, they wreak havoc on their male counterparts, with whom the reader sympathizes because the male is the teller of the tale. While dead, she is “the most poetical topic in the world,” but when reawakened, she becomes more than an object.⁴⁰ She is an active force that creates terror in the heart of her husband because she steps outside of her role as a passive object and firmly places him in that role.

Similarly, in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Roderick Usher does not attempt to rescue his sister from her premature entombment even though he comes to know that she is still alive. When Lady Madeline arises from the depths of her tomb, she kills her brother: “For a moment she remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold—then, with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated.”⁴¹ Though Lady Madeline also dies in this scene, she is entirely active. She “fell,” but she also “*bore* [Roderick] to the floor.” Because Usher has been “anticipating” Lady Madeline’s rising from her tomb, she is the “terror” to which he becomes the “victim.”

Because Madeline and Ligeia refuse to die, they refuse to accept their subordinate positions. Elizabeth Bronfen explains, “Death is not just the end of organic existence, but also the removal of a social being from society.”⁴² Upon the assumed deaths of Ligeia

⁴⁰ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition,” *Poe: Poetry, Tales, and Selected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1984): 1379.

⁴¹ Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher,” 335.

⁴² Elizabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and The Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 1992): 77.

and Madeline, the narrator of “Ligeia” and Roderick Usher “stand erect, imbued with a feeling of superiority” over the supposedly dead woman who “is in the passive, horizontal position, cut down, fallen.”⁴³ The narrators of these two stories attempt to remove Ligeia and Madeline from society, to retain their power, but the women's returns from their graves illustrate men's fear that this is an impossible feat. The abjection of the narrator conveys an important message of fear to others—Beware the willful woman; she is dangerous.

In the fairy tales of the Grimms, Perrault, and Basile, in Bennett’s descriptions of Jewett’s Corpse, and in Poe’s short stories, men control the narratives. In “The Oblong Box” and “The Premature Burial,” Poe retains these formulas, twisting them by making them more overtly necrophilic. In other tales, Poe twists these formulas even more, ending them with the return of the dead woman. But Poe’s reanimated women are no “Sleeping Beauties” or “Snow Whites,” content to live “happily ever after” with whoever is standing close by when she awakens. When she reappears, as in “Ligeia” and “The Fall of the House of Usher,” she functions to demonstrate men’s fear of women who refuse passivity, instead asserting their own will. Whereas scholars like Person suggest that the tale can “be read from a woman’s point of view for its depiction of the domestic Angel’s revenge,” the fact that the narration is first-person presents a serious difficulty to reading it from a woman’s point of view.⁴⁴ The reader has no insight into the female characters, no insight into their motives for reappearing after their deaths. The “I” of the male narrator places the reader solely within his perspective. It is the man’s terror, men’s

⁴³ Bronfen, 65.

⁴⁴ Person, 145.

fear of the truly active woman, that the reader experiences. If the Grimms encouraged passivity in women through their tales, Poe demonstrated the terror that active women created.

Most critics have overlooked the mingling of terror of and desire for a female corpse, the inherent necrophilia, at work in Poe's tales.⁴⁵ Even when scholars mention necrophilia, it is frequently in relation to the erotic fiction of the time, not to Poe. David Reynolds, who notes that "Antebellum erotic novels, most of which fall into the Dark Adventure or Subversive categories, commonly included scenes with necrophilic undertones," later differentiates this popular genre from what he calls "the major literature."⁴⁶ In contrast, in Leslie Fiedler's discussion of the theme of incest in Poe's work, he refers to "The Fall of the House of Usher" and Lady Madeline's return from the grave:

It is the most horrific of *Liebestods*, the ultimate expression of Poe's obsessive dream of being possessed by the dead, raped by a cadaverous sister-beloved, elsewhere projected in the story of Ligeia, who returns from death to take over the body of a second bride. But there is in Poe a complementary desire to possess the dead, to return embrace for embrace, violation for violation. At its mildest and most conventional, this longing is satisfied in fantasies of lovers joined as fellow ghosts beyond the grave or chatting cozily after the cataclysmic destruction of the world. . . . Occasionally, however, Poe's necrophiliac heroes descend living into the tomb . . .⁴⁷

Here Fiedler recognizes the necrophilia inherent in Poe's works, but he does so in the context of incest, quickly moving from Poe to incest in the works of Hawthorne and

⁴⁵ In addition to Terence Whalen, see J. Gerald Kennedy, *Poe, Death, and the Life of Writing* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1987) and David Leverenz, "Spanking The Master: Mind-Body crossings in Poe's Sensationalism," *A Historical Guide to Edgar Allan Poe* ed. J. Gerald Kennedy (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), 106.

⁴⁶ Reynolds, 221, 222.

⁴⁷ Fiedler, 399-400.

Melville. In his other discussions of Poe, Fiedler focuses on the biography and popularity of the author without any further mention of necrophilia.

Even in works where necrophilia in nineteenth century America is central, critics gloss over Poe. For example, Russ Castronovo's *Necro Citizenship: Death, Eroticism, and the Public Sphere in the Nineteenth-Century United States* fails to fully engage Poe's use of necrophilia. Investigating the intersections between death, citizenship, and the public sphere, Castronovo argues that "necro ideology" presents a means of going "beyond thematic readings of death by drawing attention to knowledges and discourses that produce dead citizens. That is, necro ideology offers a point of intervention in a public sphere that fears radically democratic and contestatory politics as overly vibrant and animated."⁴⁸ In his book, Castronovo discusses mediums, mesmerism, and ghostwriting alongside the literary works of Emerson, Hawthorne, and Harriet Jacobs. It would seem that any argument dealing with necrophilia, especially one that includes discussions of mesmerism, would have to discuss Poe. Yet in his argument, Castronovo never launches into a discussion of any length about the author.⁴⁹

Moreover, in writing about the specific tales that I am examining, scholars tend to focus their attentions on other aspects of the texts such as the reliability of Poe's narrators, psychological breakdown in "The Fall of the House of Usher," Ligeia's race, or the patterns of death and resurrection that recur in Poe's fiction. Some critics have attempted to fashion Poe into a male feminist ahead of his time. Cynthia Jordan argues for this vision of Poe, claiming that there are, in fact, three phases evident in Poe's

⁴⁸ Russ Castronovo, *Necro Citizenship: Death, Eroticism, and the Public Sphere in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2001), 14-15.

⁴⁹ Only five pages of text and two notes even mention him.

fiction, and that the second and third phases progress toward a “reject[ion of] one-sided male authored fictions and to a new fictional form—a second story that provides a text for female experience.” In the third phase, the detection stories featuring “androgynous” Auguste Dupin, Jordan argues, “Poe created a new and unquestionably heroic caretaker of social and political order, and Dupin fulfills these responsibilities by going beyond the imaginative limits of the male storytellers around him and fully recovering the second story—the woman’s story—that has previously gone untold.”⁵⁰ Jordan’s argument is an interesting one, but it overlooks one important detail of Poe’s work—a female narrator tells only one story, a satire of sensation fiction and women writers titled “How to Write a Blackwood Article.” Every other Poe tale is narrated by a man.

“The Fall of the House of Usher,” the tale Jordan singles out as representative of Poe’s second phase, all but ignores the female point of view. The narrator and Roderick Usher bury the lone female character, Lady Madeline, alive. Seconds before Lady Madeline reappears, her brother proclaims, “*We have put her living in the tomb! Said I not that my senses were acute! I now tell you that I heard her first feeble movements in the hollow coffin. I heard them—many, many days ago.*” If the “androgynous” Usher does, as Jordan argues, clear a space for female experience, why is it that he does not set his sister free upon hearing her trying to escape from her coffin? Why is he only *now*,—a word emphasized in Poe’s text—“many, many days” later, telling the narrator that they buried Lady Madeline alive? Clearly, Usher’s true intent is not to reveal a second story; he wishes to bury Lady Madeline, to rid himself of the feminine completely. Yet, Usher

⁵⁰ Jordan, 135. Similarly, Leland S. Person argues, “Even as male characters work to transform women into aesthetic objects, female characters resist that effort . . . Poe criticizes the objectifying tendencies of his male characters.” See *Aesthetic Headaches: Women and a Masculine Poetics in Poe, Melville, and Hawthorne* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 23.

vanishes into the “crack” as the house falls apart. Perhaps the true second story of this tale is the revenge of the “dead-undead” woman and the abjection of the male.

As Usher’s twin, Lady Madeline represents his feminine side; her presence disrupts his identity and nineteenth century ideals of femaleness. Usher's attempt to rid himself of his feminine identity exemplifies Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject in works of horror. Kristeva explains that the abject “draws me toward the place where meaning collapses. . . . It lies outside And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master.”⁵¹ Roderick's relationship with Madeline leads him into abjection. Not only are they twins, but the narrator implies that the siblings are also lovers, causing the meaning of his identity as her brother to collapse.⁵² That the Ushers' family structure and Roderick's identity collapse is nothing new in the Gothic. William Patrick Day tells us, “The past that creates fear in the Gothic fantasy is not so much the past of the ancient regime as it is the immediate past of parents and family.”⁵³ Poe's Gothic challenges this past, disrupting and eventually destroying it.

Madeline continues to “challenge” Roderick even after he attempts to bury her and the family curse of incest and insanity, and Usher must die when Madeline returns from the grave. He becomes abject when the “dead-undead” Madeline appears outside the

⁵¹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia UP, 1982), 2.

⁵² The narrator explains early in the story, “I had learned, too, the very remarkable fact, that the stem of the Usher race, all time-honored as it was, had put forth, at no period, any enduring branch; in other words, that the entire family lay in the direct line of descent, and had always, with very trifling and very temporary variation, so lain.” Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher,” 318.

⁵³ William Patrick Day. *In the Circles of Fear and Desire: A Study of Gothic Fantasy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 32.

door to his study. Madeline returns, falls “heavily inward upon [Roderick’s] person.”⁵⁴ Even Madeline’s final action blurs boundaries, collapses meaning, as she gives birth to Usher’s death. Usher “anticipated” Madeline’s return, the return of the abject. He is unable to rid himself of it, and it returns, violently obliterating his person in a final act of revenge.⁵⁵

In a similar act of willful vengeance, Ligeia returns from the dead, abjecting the person of the narrator. From the beginning of his story, the narrator describes his relationship with Ligeia and his grief at her demise and death in ambiguous terms. The very first sentence highlights the ambiguity of their relationship: “I cannot, for my soul, remember how, when, or even precisely where, I first became acquainted with the lady Ligeia.” A few lines later, he explains, “And now, while I write, a recollection flashes upon me that I have *never known* the paternal name of her who was my friend and my betrothed, and who became the partner of my studies, and finally the wife of my bosom.”⁵⁶ Most couples can recount every minute detail of their first meeting, and husbands do not forget their wives’ maiden names. The narrator refers to Ligeia as his “beloved,” yet he knows very little about her. He forgets significant details about her, and his attempts to convey the emotions he experienced during her illness and death are equally uncertain. He recalls, “How poignant, then, must have been the grief” at discovering Ligeia’s waning health. The narrator does not recall that his grief *was* “poignant,” just that it “must have been.”

⁵⁴ Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher,” 335.

⁵⁵ See also Diane Lond Howeveler, “The Hidden God and the Abjected Woman in ‘The Fall of the House of Usher,’” *Studies in Short Fiction*, 29.3 (1992): 385-395.

⁵⁶ Poe, “Ligeia,” 262.

The narrator's seeming forgetfulness is an attempt to rid himself of the abject. If he cannot tell us about Ligeia, then he is free from her power. Yet, like any attempt to rid oneself of the abject, his fails. She returns in Rowena's body, exploding the narrator's assertions that the two women were so different. The narrator's own meaning rests upon the notion that his second wife was so unlike Ligeia that he hates her. When Ligeia returns from the dead in Rowena's body, the reader sees that they are the same and meaning collapses. The strong-willed female refuses to be removed from the story. Ligeia refuses to die. She returns with each retelling and, so, refuses to be forgotten. Contrary to Jordan's argument that this is some sort of feminist move on Poe's part, it, demonstrates the horror of the female will. Ligeia's husband tells the tale; the first person narrative places the reader in a position of empathy with the narrator. His horror (and desire) at her return is our horror.

The horror of Poe's tales does not always lie only in the return of the willful woman from death. Many of his tales incorporate incest among their themes. In "The Fall of the House of Usher," the reader knows little about the incest between Roderick and his sister Madeline; the reader is simply told that their family tree has "no enduring branch." The incest at work in "Berenice" occurs between seemingly consenting parties of similar standing, whereas in "Morella" the narrator's daughter literally becomes a substitute for her deceased mother. The varying degrees of incest in these tales function in different ways. In "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "Berenice," they are symptoms of the narrators' madness and obsession with their female victims. The incest and seeming pedophilia in "Morella," on the other hand, are significant contributors to the actual horror of the tale.

In “Berenice,” a tale of a man’s obsession with his cousin, the narrator, unlike many of Poe’s others, tells the reader his name, Egaeus.⁵⁷ Not only do we know the narrator’s name, but he is the only narrator to admit his mental illness. These factors force the reader into a tenuous relationship with Egaeus. On the one hand, the narrative is in the first-person, so the reader feels complicit as he reads “I” over and over. On the other hand, the addition of personal details about the narrator allows the reader to consciously remember that he is not a participant, that a madman is recounting his misdeeds. While the reader may feel sympathy with Egaeus., the reader is not forced into a position where he is empathetic and understanding.

More importantly, Egaeus points out that he and Berenice, the alleged subject of the tale, were not only cousins, but that they “grew up together in [his] paternal halls.”⁵⁸ When the reader later learn that Egaeus has proposed marriage, the reader is mildly shocked because he has just explained that he “had never loved her;” his proposal comes during “an evil moment.”⁵⁹ Havelock Ellis explains that when people grow up together, they become accustomed to one another, and any incestuous desire that might exist disappears during puberty. Ellis goes on to explain that “examples of really passionate incestuous attraction . . . are nearly always between those persons who have been separated during the pubertal period, so that the dulling effect of familiar life on the development of sexual stimuli has been suspended.”⁶⁰ Assuming Ellis’ assertion is true,

⁵⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, “Berenice,” *Poe: Poetry, Tales, and Selected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1984): 225.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 226.

⁵⁹*Ibid*, 229.

⁶⁰ Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*. Volume III. (New York: Random House, 1936). 507.

why then would Berenice have harbored feelings of love for the narrator? He tells us, “She had loved me long.” If they had indeed grown up together, shouldn’t her love for Egaeus have become more like that of a sister for a brother? Clearly, something is amiss in their relationship and in their development.

That the narrator has never loved Berenice comes as no surprise. He begins his tale discussing Berenice and the illness which had befallen her, yet in the middle of the paragraph he launches into a detailed discussion about himself, continuing for several paragraphs before again mentioning the title character of his tale. When he returns to her, it is only in reference to his perception of her and her disease as caused by his “monomania”: “True to its own character, my disorder reveled in the less important but more startling changes wrought in the *physical* frame of Berenice—in the singular and most appalling distortion of her personal identity.”⁶¹ And while the tale carries Berenice’s name as its title, the entire tale has very little to do with her.

His cataloging Berenice’s features along with his admission that he does not love her demonstrate Egaeus’ perception of her as an object rather than as a lifemate. Like the narrator of “Ligeia,” Egaeus details his object’s features:

My burning glances at length fell upon the face.

The forehead was high, and very pale, and singularly placid; and the once jetty hair fell partially over it, and overshadowed the hollow temples with innumerable ringlets now of a vivid yellow, and jarring discordantly, in their fantastic character, with the reigning melancholy of the countenance. The eyes were lifeless, and lusterless, and seemingly pupil-less.⁶²

⁶¹ Poe, “Berenice,” 229.

⁶² Ibid, 230.

Here and in “Ligeia” and other tales, Poe makes literary use of what Laura Mulvey calls “the male gaze.”⁶³ Though Mulvey coined the term specifically in reference to film, Poe’s works clearly lend themselves to similar discussion.

Each of Poe’s tales that is told by a male narrator forces the reader into a position where he is “viewing” the story and the woman from a male point of view. As mentioned earlier, the tales refuse to incorporate the female experience. Like Ligeia, Berenice is no longer a person to either the narrator or the reader. She is only a composite of her features. In fact, Egaeus does not even acknowledge that these features belong to her. They are merely “the forehead,” “the eyes,” “the once jetty hair.” The reader does not really become complicit in Egaeus’ actions, but he revels not only in the narrator’s objectification of the woman, but also in his perversions, which range from incest to murder to violation. Still, Egaeus, in telling “Berenice,” involves the reader in his “monomania.” As he becomes fixated on Berenice’s teeth, so too does his reader. Because he can think of nothing more, the reader can think of nothing more. His confusion about his violation of Berenice’s grave is the reader’s confusion, and his horror is the reader’s horror.

Unlike the narrator of “Ligeia” and Roderick Usher, Egaeus never suffers abjection at the hands of his victim. He violates Berenice, rather than her returning to violate him. Berenice is buried, and though the reader can infer that she was not really dead when Egaeus pulled out all of her teeth, she does not return. Since she never played a large role in the tale that bears her name, it is not surprising that the tale ends without even a glimpse at her reanimated form. More importantly, Egaeus is so unsure himself of

⁶³ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Macmillan, 1989).

the events of the tale that the reader cannot be certain that Berenice was alive. The ending is ambiguous, yet it is clear that Egaeus has succeeded of ridding himself of the female completely, at least as far as his narrative is concerned. Even when the servant comes in to speak to him “of a wild cry disturbing the silence of the night . . . of a violated grave—of a disfigured body enshrouded, yet still breathing, still palpitating, still alive!”⁶⁴ he never mentions Berenice by name. She has become a “disfigured body” without name and without gender.

Whereas the incest in “Berenice” seems mostly consensual and its horror lies in the monomania of its narrator, in “Morella” the narrator is in a position of authority over his daughter; thus, a part of the horror of the tale lies in the implication of incest between father and daughter. Here is another of Poe’s “un-fairy tales.” Taking off from the “incest” tales of Basile, Perrault, and the Grimms, Poe incorporates the basic elements of the 510b tale type, which is characterized by a father who wishes to marry his daughter. Morella the mother sets the events of the tale in motion by cursing her husband as she breathes her last breath: “The days have never been when thou couldst love me—but her whom in life thou didst abhor, in death thou shalt adore.”⁶⁵ Morella goes on to explain that she is pregnant and that after her death, her child will live, but “the hours of thy happiness are over; and joy is not gathered twice in a life.”⁶⁶ The narrator is confused by Morella’s words, but soon, the reader learns that her curse has dire consequences for her daughter.

⁶⁴ Poe, “Berenice,” 232.

⁶⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, “Morella,” *Poe: Poetry, Tales, and Selected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1984): 236.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 236.

The first person narration forces a partial obliteration of the reader-narrator boundary, thus placing the reader in the position of the lecherous father. Poe's tale does not include the father demanding that his daughter marry him, but the narrator demonstrates that he has complete control over her. The narrator tells the reader that after the death of his wife and birth of their daughter, "And she [his daughter] grew strangely in stature and in intellect, and was the perfect resemblance of her who had departed, and I loved her with a love more fervent than I had believed it possible to feel for any denizen of earth."⁶⁷ Although most parents talk about loving their child more than they thought it was possible to love anyone, few would describe that love as "fervent."

The narrator continues, "but terrible, oh! terrible were the tumultuous thoughts which crowded upon me while watching the development of her mental being."⁶⁸ What, the reader wonders, were these "terrible" thoughts? The narrator provides more clues: "And, as years rolled away, and I gazed, day after day, upon her holy, and mild, and eloquent face, and pored over her maturing form, day after day did I discover new points of resemblance in the child to her mother, the melancholy and the dead."⁶⁹ Again, the male gaze is important to this tale. Because it is told from the male point of view, the reader is not allowed to sympathize with either Morella or her daughter. The reader's sympathy lies with the narrator, and part of the horror of the tale results directly from this

⁶⁷ Ibid, 237.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 237.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 237.

aspect. The narrator “gaze(s)” at his daughter’s “maturing form.” There is no mention of her gazing at her father; this is a strictly one-sided power relationship.

The father holds the power to name his daughter, waiting to name her until she has matured. He tells the reader that his daughter “remained nameless upon the earth” for “two lustra,” or ten years. Because she has no name, she has no identity separate from that of her father. The narrator refers to her in terms of his ownership of her, calling her “my child” and “my love” alternately. These references not only demonstrate the narrator’s possession of and power over his daughter, they also hint further at an inappropriate relationship with her. Whereas “my child” is innocent enough, “my love” is often reserved for one’s lovers. Because of the girl’s resemblance to her mother, the narrator “snatched from the scrutiny of the world a being whom destiny compelled me to adore, and in the rigorous seclusion of my home, watched with an agonizing anxiety over all which concerned the beloved.”⁷⁰ Another of Poe’s narrators seems unable to recognize a woman as a person; she is a “being” or “the beloved.” The narrator’s objectification of his daughter further complicates the fact that the girl has no name. He refers to her only in terms that demonstrate his possession of her, in terms that make her an object. Then, he locks her away from the rest of the world so that she is his and only his.

The ending of the tale symbolizes the father’s incestuous relationship with the daughter. When it is time for his daughter’s baptism, the narrator must name her. The only name that he can utter is the name of his deceased wife, Morella. Immediately following the utterance, the new Morella becomes her mother, the original source of her

⁷⁰ Ibid, 237.

father's obsession.⁷¹ The narrator becomes obsessed with his daughter because she grows to resemble her mother so closely; in naming her Morella, the narrator has completed the inevitable. He has denied her an identity of her own until this point when he gives her the identity of her mother. This moment literalizes what has been happening throughout the story.

Because the narrator has recounted his wife's dying words, the reader, who is put in the position of sympathizing and empathizing with the narrator, sees the mother as being entirely at fault. Her words, like those of the mothers in the type 510b fairy tales, cause her husband to fall in love with their daughter, a mere ten-year-old child. In Poe's tale, as in the fairy tales, the father suffers no real punishment. Diverging from the fairy tales, however, Poe creates another un-fairy tale in which there is no happy ending. The girl is struck down dead, rather than living through a series of hardships to marry a prince. And whereas the prince in the fairy tales may, in fact, have abused the princess prior to their marriage, at least she is alive and seems happy. In Poe's horror tales, there are no happy endings. The narrator christens his ten-year-old, nameless child with the name of her mother, and she immediately suffers the same fate as her mother. Before the narrator can find happiness, Morella's curse comes to fruition.

Again, a willful woman wreaks havoc on her family, disrupting the domestic sphere. She refuses the "angel in the house" role of caretaker and spiritual guardian, opting instead to seek vengeance on a husband who has shown her little affection and much loathing. Morella, unlike the "true woman" of the nineteenth century, exhibits a powerful and "profound" intellect. She even goes so far as to teach her husband about

⁷¹ Ibid, 238.

literature, philosophy, and religion early in their marriage. Something, the narrator claims to know not what, causes him to loathe her—the sight of her, her touch, the sound of her voice, and the look in her eyes. Perhaps the narrator’s infatuation with the uniqueness of Morella had faded into abhorrence of one who so brazenly flaunted her disregard for the rules of proper ladies. Morella seems to understand his disgust with her far more than he does. Her intellect and her will combine to seek vengeance upon him. Her willful vengeance and its effects horrify both the narrator and the reader. The reader does not feel any empathy for Morella, or even for her daughter. The reader’s empathy lies with the narrator only, creating another un-fairy tale in which no one lives “happily ever after.”

The narrator of this tale, however troubled, is spared abjection. Unlike Egaeus and the other narrators and Roderick Usher, the narrator of “Morella” even seems sane. In the other tales, the return of the dead woman poses a danger to the male who has attempted to rid himself of the female. Here, Morella’s return only results in her death for a second time. The female is completely erased; thus, the narrator does not have to face that which blurs boundaries and forces the questioning of meaning. He is spared abjection because the erasure of the female is complete.

Poe’s use of the incest motif mirrors his use of necrophilia in recycling plots from popular fairy tales. In his necrophilic tales of women’s returning from their graves, Poe takes advantage of the public’s knowledge of the “Sleeping Beauty” and “Snow White” tales. In the incest tales, Poe takes advantage of the public’s knowledge of “incest” fairy tales like “All Fur” and “Donkey-Skin.” In each of these tales, a widowed king can find no woman who is as perfect as his own daughter. Thus, he plans to marry her, making

her his queen and the replacement for her mother much as the narrator of “Morella” does with his daughter. Poe recycles this familiar formula, creating something quite different—tales of madness and obsession.

Tales of madness recounted by mad men, Poe's stories borrow from the familiar, yet they are novel in their own right. Poe delivers necrophilia and incest to titillate his readers. Then he turns their desire into horror as the male becomes abjected and descends further into madness. He delivers tales that repeatedly disrupt and then reinforce antebellum America's fear of independent, intelligent women who dared to transgress gender roles. Whereas “How to Write a Blackwood Article” does this through humor, the tales that have become the most famous are the ones that do this through the mingling of desire and horror.

CHAPTER 5
SUBVERTING CAPITALISM, SUBVERTING FAIRY TALES: WICKED WITCHES
AND LIBIDINOUS BEAUTIES IN GEORGE LIPPARD’S THE QUAKER CITY

The book actually is no more sensational than Lippard’s other works, but only more impressively fantastic. Its elaborate devices for pure deviltry place it among gothic probings of the nerve, and the extravagant emotional tone of Lippard’s shockers as well as Freudian and metaphysical suggestiveness make him more interesting as an explorer of the dark underside of man’s nature. But his reforming intent is clear both from biographical evidence and from details of believable urban corruption—lechery and prostitution, hypocrisy, slums and other manifestations of economic injustice—that operate on the level of exaggerated fact suitable to expose.

—Janis P. Stout, *Sodoms in Eden: The City in American Fiction before 1860*¹

Both a contemporary and a descendant of Edgar Allan Poe, George Lippard received inspiration from material similar to that which inspired Poe. Using a “ripped from the headlines” approach in *The Quaker City, or, The Monks of Monk Hall* (1845), Lippard builds upon Poe’s use of real crime stories and fairy tales motifs, as well as alluding to some of Poe’s actual work. Unlike Poe’s work, however, Lippard levels a pseudo-Marxist critique of capitalism and all of its repressive structures. Still, the novel’s ideology is a conflicted one. To catapult *The Quaker City* to bestselling status, Lippard opposes capitalism while manipulating it by appealing to the public’s taste for sensationalism. Lippard uses the popular tropes of incest, necrophilia, greed, and murder to create an apocalyptic fairy tale promoting the destruction of capitalism.

George Lippard’s adult life reveals much about his literary pursuits. He entered seminary to become a Methodist minister, but before completing his education, Lippard

¹ Janis P. Stout, *Sodoms in Eden: The City in American Fiction before 1860* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1976), 39.

dropped out of school, later citing the hypocrisy of the clergy as the reason. Lippard then turned to unionizing workers and other oppressed Americans. He founded the Brotherhood of the Union, an organization dedicated to pursuing safe working conditions and fair pay for laborers, and he founded and edited the *Quaker City Weekly* newspaper, which devoted itself to the same cause, pursuing “social reform through the medium of popular literature.”² In it, he maintained, “There are only two nations in the world—the OPPRESSED and the OPPRESSORS. All other distinctions are vain.”³ The literature published in the *Quaker City Weekly*, reflected this belief, and it clung to George Washington’s assertion that fictional literature was one of the most powerful avenues for true social and political change.⁴

In his allegorical writings for the *Quaker City Weekly*, Lippard’s claims against capitalism resemble those of Karl Marx, though the two presumably had never met nor read each other’s work:

The present system of Capital and Labor, which regards wealth as the sole object of legislation and sends by a slow death at least one hundred thousand human beings to their graves every year. This system regards men and women and children, immortal souls born of God and redeemed by Christ—as of less value than a bit of dumb machinery. It makes laws for those who have Money at the expense of those who do not have Money.⁵

Lippard’s weekly also addressed issues relating to the forced sale of Indian lands and the politicians who “swindled them out of the miserable pittance which was offered as a price,” both “white slavery” in the factories and black slavery, the double standard by

² *Quaker City Weekly* (June, 23, 1849).

³ Qtd in *George Lippard: An Anthology*, ed. David S. Reynolds (New York: Peter Lang, 1986), 45.

⁴ Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985), 45.

⁵ *Quaker City Weekly*, (February 16, 1850).

which women were condemned for failing to maintain their purity but men were simply being men, and the hypocrisy and licentiousness of members of the clergy who swindled their congregants out of money they didn't have to give and seduced women who leaned on clergymen for spiritual guidance.⁶

Still, Lippard believed in both the principles of Christianity and America. He created many of the American myths about Revolutionary heroes, including the ringing of the Liberty Bell after the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the "Speech of the Unknown" and its rallying effect in influencing the founders to sign the Declaration in his *Washington and His Generals; or, Legends of the Revolution* (1847). The book, intended for children and youth, works to build a sense of patriotism with its stories of heroism and morality among the founders of America, and it was so immediately influential that Reverend Joel T. Headley "borrowed" Lippard's book in constructing his 1847 book of the same name.⁷

Although David S. Reynolds argues that Lippard directed the sensational "against the values of home, church, family, and purity that were central to the sentimental-domestic sphere," Lippard actually directs his fiction against the hypocrisy of the authority figures who misapplied and misused these values to oppress others and keep themselves in power.⁸ Though a seminary dropout, Lippard never wavered in his faith, a

⁶ Shelley Streeby writes about Lippard's activism: "In Lippard's hands the story paper was a popular form with close ties to active communities such as the antebellum labor and land reform movements: Lippard addresses a diverse and internally divided print community as he 'hails' male and female workers, promotes new working class institutions, and comments on local and national politics." *American Sensations: Class Empire and Popular Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 41.

⁷ Burton R. Pollin, "More on Lippard and Poe," *Poe Studies* 7.1 (1974), 22-23.

⁸ David S. Reynolds, Introduction, *The Quaker City; or, The Monks of Monk Hall. A Romance of Philadelphia Life, Mystery, and Crime* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), xxii.

fact evident in his writing. In fact, Lippard uses his fiction to critique the classist, capitalist America of the mid-nineteenth century and to encourage pure patriotism and Christianity that embrace people of all races, classes, and sexes and urges true equality among all people. Yet, in order for his message to reach the widest possible audience, Lippard recognized that he needed to write in a medium that would appeal to the largest number of consumers.

Lippard read the works of Edgar Allan Poe and corresponded with the author frequently. In a letter dated February 18, 1844, Poe even addresses him as “My Dear Lippard” before launching into a short but flattering review of Lippard’s novel *The Ladye Annabel*, offering advice to Lippard on how to handle a personal problem involving some sort of slight by “personal enemies,” and granting permission for Lippard to publish his review of *The Ladye Annabel* if the latter “may deem proper.”⁹ In an 1849 letter to his mother-in-law Mrs. Clemm, Poe references recent difficulties he had in Philadelphia, where Lippard, John Sartain, and Reverend Chauncy Burr cared for him, gave him money they had collected from friends, and put him on a train to Baltimore a few weeks before he died in that city: “To L— and to C— B— (and in some measure, also, to Mr. S—) I am indebted for more than life. They remained with me (L— and B—) all day on Friday last, comforted me and aided me in coming to my senses. L— saw G—, who said everything kind of me, and sent me five dollars; and P— sent another five.”¹⁰

⁹ In fact, the review did appear in subsequent copies of the novel and in advertising for it. See “Edgar Allan Poe to George Lippard—February 18, 1844,” E. A. Poe Society of Baltimore, 28 February 2006 <<http://www.eapoe.org/works/letters/p4402180.htm>>

¹⁰ Letter dated July 19, 1849. See “Edgar Allan Poe to M. Clemm—July 19, 1849,” E. A. Poe Society of Baltimore, 28 February 2006 <<http://www.eapoe.org/works/letters/p4907190.htm>>

Lippard's worship of Poe and Poe's influence on Lippard reveal themselves in Lippard's writings for weekly papers. In the *Citizen Soldier*, Lippard announced Poe's impending "Lecture on the American Poets":

Poe was born a poet, his mind is stamped with the impress of genius. He is, perhaps, the most original writer that ever existed in America. Delighting in the wild and visionary, his mind penetrates the inmost recesses of the human soul, creating vast and magnificent dreams, eloquent fancies and terrible mysteries . . . he constructs such works as 'Arthur Gordon Pym,' which disclose perceptive powers that rival De Foe, combined with an analytical depth of reasoning in no manner inferior to Godwin or Brockden Brown.¹¹

Two weeks after Poe's death, Lippard published a tribute to his late friend. Lippard remarks, "we are conscious that words are fruitless to express our feelings in relation to his death." Still, Lippard goes on, "That Poe had faults we do not deny. He was a harsh, a bitter and sometimes an unjust critic. But he was a man of genius—a man of high honor—a man of good heart . . . As an author his name will live, while three-fourths of the bastard critics and mongrel authors of the present day go down to nothingness and night."¹² Lippard proved right in his estimation of Poe.

Like the penny press coverage of and many fictionalized pamphlets based on Helen Jewett's life and murder, as well as Poe's short fiction, Lippard's novel *The Quaker City* references fairy tales and historical incidents with which his readers were familiar. Lippard makes use of many of the same descriptive elements that one finds in the fairy tales. The novel even goes so far as to reference the *Arabian Nights* by name when Dora Livingstone describes her incredible plans to leave her husband, commit bigamy, and gain a title in Europe (184). What's more, just as Poe combined De Foe with Godwin and

¹¹ *Citizen Soldier* (November 15, 1843).

¹² *Quaker City Weekly* (October 20, 1849).

Brockden Brown, Lippard combined Poe with fairy tales and the penny presses to create Gothic fiction that develops a burgeoning literary tradition in American and works toward political and social change. Lippard did not simply “fumblingly imitate” Poe, as Emilio De Grazia charges. Rather, he built upon the tradition begun in James Gordon Bennett’s accounts of Helen Jewett’s murder and continued in Poe. Believing “Gothic medium [to be] fundamentally a medium for the reformation and expose of scandal and corruption,” he used women’s bodies as a canvas to comment upon society, and unlike Poe, Lippard’s message was overtly political and direct.¹³

Similar to the pamphlet fiction based on the Jewett murder and Poe’s “The Mystery of Marie Roget,” Lippard appropriates contemporary scandals in relating his narrative. *The Quaker City*’s preface tells the reader that it was inspired by a deathbed confession and that the pages of the novel were written by one who had lived them. In fact, Lippard based his tale on the 1843 Singleton Mercer case in which Mercer was acquitted of the murder of Mahlon Heberton, who had seduced Mercer’s sister.¹⁴ Clearly, *The Quaker City* is not the first novel to exploit a trial or to claim to be based upon a deathbed confession, but unlike its predecessors it purports to be neither cautionary nor wholly porno-gothic. Too, while Poe uses real events for detective stories, Lippard’s novel only mildly incorporates the detective element. In fact, Lippard combines the sensational, the sentimental seduction tale, the gothic, and the news in a manner mirrored three years later in George Wilkes’ *The Lives of Helen Jewett and Richard P. Robinson*, discussed in Chapter Two. By combining these genres, Lippard capitalizes on the popularity of each

¹³ Hewyard Ehrlich, “The ‘Mysteries’ of Philadelphia: Lippard’s *Quaker City* and ‘Urban’ Gothic,” *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 66 (1972): 51.

¹⁴ David S. Reynolds, “Introduction,” xii.

form to sell his novel to a mass audience. In other words, Lippard uses capitalism to critique capitalism.

The gothic elements of *The Quaker City* greet the reader from the cover page of the novel. Announcing what lies within the “greatest American Romance ever Published,” the cover of the 1845 edition contains two illustrations. The top picture depicts a misshapen, hunchbacked creature who resembles a man holding a lantern above what appears to be an open grave. The creature (whom we soon discover is Devil-Bug) stands between decaying stone pillars, looking into the open grave with a smirk on his deformed face. The bottom picture depicts the same creature sitting atop a coffin and floating in a body of water. A city sits in the distant background, and the words “Wo Unto Sodom” are emblazoned across the sky. At the bottom, the reader is greeted with “We advise all persons to read carefully the three other pages of the cover.”

These other three “cover” pages, one assumes are the three pages following the title page. In other words, “the three other pages of the cover” consist of another engraving and the two-page “The Origin and Object of this Book.” The frontispiece engraving depicts a tearful young woman (Mary Arlington) in the grasp of a young man (her brother Byrnewood). The young man’s brow is furrowed, and he holds his fist in the air as though swearing vengeance upon whoever wronged the young woman. From behind a massive curtain, a crowd of onlookers watches as another man (Lorrimer) enters the room and gazes with a frantic look in his eyes at the scene. This illustration clearly intends to influence the reader’s perception of the purpose of the novel and, since there is no crowd of men watching the interaction among Mary, Byrnewood, and Lorrimer, it clearly depicts the voyeurism of its readers.

Directly following the frontispiece is the author's explanation of this purpose. At the top of the first page of "The Origin and Object of this Book," the book is "Inscribed to the Memory of Charles Brockden Brown," further anticipating the Gothic and fantastic elements that will follow. He explains that the story is based upon the contents of a package of records given to him by "a dying friend" who had been a lawyer. The "pacquet of papers" is "endorsed, REVELATIONS OF THE SECRET LIFE OF PHILADELPHIA, *being the records of thirty years practice as a councillor, by *** K—*." Most scholars take this stated intent at face value. In fact, Michael Denning in categorizing this novel as one of "Lippard's anachronistic seduction tales" argues, "The centrality of the seduction-rape plot distinguishes Lippard from other writers of the 'mysteries of the city,' who built their narrative around the story of the prostitute . . . Lippard, on the other hand, avoids the narrative of the 'fallen woman' by telling the story of the 'fall'—the seduction-rape—over and over again."¹⁵

On the contrary, a careful reading of the novel reveals that the seduction-rape plot appears only once in any detail; the other two instances are recounted with little detail, and the central element of one is not the seduction but the woman murdering her seducer. Certainly, one would not want to categorize the entire novel as a seduction tale. Unlike the seduction novels of Susanna Rowson, William Hill Brown and others, Lippard's novel speaks against the oppression of women in capitalist society, including little that one would call instruction in virtue to young women. In fact, the two most powerful, and exciting female characters are the ones who defy the tenets of the Cult of True Womanhood, and though they die before the end of the novel as do the heroines in

¹⁵ Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Crime Novels and Working Class Culture in America*, Revised edition, (New York: Verso, 1998), 96; 94.

seduction novels, both women's influences in the novel are so strong that their deaths do not undo their prior subversion. Like Brockden Brown, in whose memory the novel is dedicated, Lippard creates a text in which women control the narrative and "warrior women" are the only interesting women.¹⁶

The Quaker City's subversion of capitalism focuses in part on gender roles. The women in the novel range from a fallen woman whose role in her own seduction is ambiguous, a wholly pure minister's daughter, a prostitute who gains agency through the revenge murder of her seducer, to a merchant-prince's young wife whose sexual indiscretions symbolize all that Lippard detested about capitalism. The text's depiction of these women subverts societal norms reflected in the translations of European fairy tales and developed in the penny press coverage of Jewett's murder. Lippard uses the imagery of the "Sleeping Beauty" and "Snow White" stories, but he shows his reader that this fantasy is inherently dangerous to women.

Mary Arlington, whose story mirrors that of the Mercer case, is one of the two fairy tale princesses in Lippard's novel. Gus Lorrimer even alludes to the fairy tales when he tells Mary a fantastic story, using fairy tale imagery to seduce her: "All around me were massive trees with thick branches, and gnarled trunks, bearing witness of the storms of an hundred years . . . Green shrubs swept circling around, enclosing [the rock on which he stood] like a fairy bower."¹⁷ Just as in "Sleeping Beauty," the forest has been growing for one hundred years, enclosing a "fairy bower." Even the mansion to which Mary has

¹⁶ Paul Lewis, "Attaining Masculinity: Charles Brockden Brown and Woman Warriors of the 1790s," *Early American Literature* 40.1 (2005), 37-55.

¹⁷ George Lippard, *The Quaker City; or, The Monks of Monk Hall. A Romance of Philadelphia Life, Mystery, and Crime* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 127.

been lured is described as being surrounded by a “grove of impenetrable trees” as to bring the “Sleeping Beauty” story to the reader’s mind. Likewise, a “fairy bower” is again invoked in Lippard’s conclusion to describe the scenery surrounding a “fair young” “maiden form” whom we later discover to be Mary.¹⁸

Seduced with promises of marriage and romantic fairy tales by Gus Lorrimer, Mary does not simply fall into ruin as so many young women in seduction novels; she “is the instrument of her own ruin.”¹⁹ Early in the novel, the narrator ruminates on woman’s true nature: “Unlike man her animal nature is a *passive* thing, that must be roused ere it will develop itself in action.”²⁰ Though Lorrimer rouses her nature with his promises and fairy tales, the novel makes it clear that woman’s, and thus Mary’s, nature is animal. Later, Lorrimer ponders his role in seducing Mary: “While the story fell from my lips, I aroused her slumbering woman’s nature. Talk of force—ha, ha—She rests on my bosom as though she would grow there.”²¹ Lorrimer does not rape Mary; the sleeping beauty awakens, and she willingly obeys her own animal nature and gives in to Lorrimer’s sweet caresses.

Mary’s seduction is ambiguous. She both begs for salvation and returns her seducer’s every passionate touch and kiss. The animal within her has been awakened, and controlling her passions and urges is impossible. Even that she begs “Save me, oh Lorraine—Save me!” is ambiguous in that she does not beg God for salvation or pray for inner strength, but begs her seducer to save her from himself while flashing upon him her

¹⁸ Lippard, *The Quaker City*, 568.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 127.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 85.

²¹ *Ibid*, 131.

“humid eye, [her] heaving bosom, and [her] burning cheek.”²² Had Mary been serious in her pleas for salvation, one would expect to hear her beg him to stop, beg him to leave her, anything but begging her seducer to “save” her. Indeed, Lippard’s novel presents its reader with a conflicted seduction scene. On the one hand, Mary is seduced with the promise of marriage; on the other, even after she discovers there is to be no marriage, she responds willingly to her seducer’s advances. Mary is no Charlotte Temple who “falls asleep or unconscious” at the most inopportune times; no, Mary enjoys her awakened sexuality as much as Lorrimer enjoys his.²³

The novel builds upon the conflict between Mary’s enjoyment of being seduced and the notion that the tenets of true womanhood were the natural state of women. If woman’s nature is as pure as fairy tales and sentimental novels would have us believe, why do Mary and the other women in the novel possess an animal nature? If “animal” is part of women’s nature, should they, then, bear sole responsibility for their “ruin”?²⁴ The novel asks its reader, “And shall we heap shame on woman, because man, neglecting her holiest nature, may devote all the energies which God has given him, to rouse her gross and earthy powers into action? On whose head is the shame, or whose the wrong?”²⁵ Mary faces ostracism by her family and must mourn the loss of her virginity for the rest

²² Ibid, 133.

²³ For a full discussion of Charlotte’s inactivity, indeciveness, and inability to respond in any way as the reasons for her fall, see Marion Rust, “What’s Wrong with Charlotte Temple?” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 60.1 (2003), 99-118.

²⁴ J. V. Ridgely asks similar questions and similarly argues that Mary’s ruin is not her fault but that “society’s double standard makes it so,” though he focuses on Lippard’s novel remaining “just above the level of sheer pornography” and contradicts his original claim only a few pages later. “George Lippard’s *The Quaker City*: The World of the American Porno-Gothic,” *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 7.1 (1974), 77-94.

²⁵ Lippard, *The Quaker City*, 85.

of her life simply because she succumbs not only to Lorrimer, but also to her own animal nature.

If these tenets make up the true nature of women, the text asks, why is it that woman receives all of the punishment? J. V. Ridgely argues that Lippard's description of women's animal nature plays into society's clichés wherein the fallen woman "is no longer a marketable commodity."²⁶ On the contrary, Lippard's text points to the hypocrisy of these clichés. Lorrimer fears no retribution for his deed. He has done nothing wrong in the eyes of society. In fact, he abided by:

the law which the Lady and Gentleman of Christian Society recognize with tacit reverence. Seduce a rich maiden? Wrong the Daughter of a good family? Oh, this is horrible; it is a crime only paralleled by the blasphemy of God's name. But a poor girl, a servant, a domestic? Oh, no! These are fair game for the gentleman of fashionable society; upon the wrongs of such as these the fine lady looks with a light laugh and supercilious smile.²⁷

In fact, he later laughs off Mary's father's and brother's pleas that he should marry her, with a similar "supercilious" smile: "Your daughter was weak and foolish—I was but a—man! . . . This affair is quite unpleasant and—your family and mine, are quite different in their style. You are not of our 'set.'"²⁸ Lorrimer expects Mary's family to abide by accepted customs and "law." It astonishes him that they would even suggest that he marry Mary after he has seduced her.

That Mary's father "has not a hope that does not hang on his daughter's life" and, like all those who hope to maintain or improve their class status, believes "better death than dishonor" indicates the heavy value Mary's family places on her purity. Everything

²⁶ Ridgely, 91

²⁷ Lippard, *The Quaker City*, 417.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 547.

depends upon it. Yet Lorrimer expects to walk away from the situation unscathed, underestimating the value Mary's family places upon her honor. Mary's brother refuses to allow Lorrimer to go unpunished and kills him. Just as in the well publicized real-life crime on which Lippard bases his tale, Byrnewood is acquitted of the murder because the jurors realize that Lorrimer had stolen far more than just a woman's virtue; he had stolen their livelihood.

Later, Annie, the servant girl whom Byrnewood seduced and impregnated, is described in similar terms to those used for the form of Mary, though they even more strikingly allude to the Grimms' "Snow White" and both the Grimms' and Perrault's "Sleeping Beauty" tales. Presuming Annie dead, the narrator describes "beauty in that corpse." She is "White yes as the stainless snow!" with "the light stream[ing] warmly over the marble whiteness of that uncovered form, revealing beauties on which the worms were soon to riot. Over the round limbs, over the white bosom, over the beaming face the worms would crawl."²⁹ The description here of Annie's "marble whiteness" and her "round limbs [and] white bosom" call to mind the illustrations of Helen Jewett, Perrault's Sleeping Beauty, and the Grimms' "Brier Rose," who were all depicted by their artists as white as snow with a light streaming in upon their bodies so that all of their "beauties" were visible. Unlike the artists of the fairy tale and Jewett narratives and illustrations, Lippard's narrator combines the erotic description of the corpse with the grim reality that it will soon be anything but desirous as the worms feast upon it. Here, we see Lippard creating a conflicted description of the female corpse. It is beautiful, but it will soon be ravaged by worms as the woman was, in life, by Byrnewood. This

²⁹ Ibid, 450.

conflicted description betrays a conflict at work throughout the novel: men desire utterly passive women, but utterly passive women are at risk of destruction from the “worms” of society and from their own devouring animal natures.

Annie’s presence in the text is little more than a plot device to demonstrate the similarities between Byrnewood and his sister’s seducer. Both Byrnewood and Lorrimer seduce young women, and Lorrimer is quick to remind Byrnewood of their similarity when Byrnewood first confronts him about seducing Mary: Devilish odd, ain’t it? That little affair of yours, with *Annie*? Wonder if she has any *brother*?”³⁰ The doubling of these two men creates a doubling effect that Michael Denning refers to: “the focus of the Lippard plot is less on the story of the ‘fallen’ woman than on the struggle between good and evil men over that woman . . . Though he will never exculpate the seducer, his doubling of plots allows him to create heroes much like the seducer villains themselves.”³¹ Lippard, however, less doubles plots than he doubles characters. We know nothing about the manner in which Byrnewood seduced Annie, whereas we know every detail of Lorrimer’s seduction of Mary. The Byrnewood-Annie subplot ends with the two of them married and living together with their child; the Lorrimer-Mary subplot ends with Lorrimer dead and Mary insane. The only doubling in the plot is the fact that both men seduced women.

That Byrnewood and Lorrimer are doubles is not in doubt, but the way in which Lippard plays this doubling not only undercuts capitalism, but also employs psychological elements like transference and projection common in gothic novels. The

³⁰ Ibid, 100.

³¹ Denning, 98.

first indication that Byrnewood feels remorse for seducing Annie comes early in the novel when he reads the letter she has sent: “egad! There’s the stain of a tear—”³² Still, Byrnewood goes about his evening without going to see Annie and soon forgets about her. After Lorrimer has reminded Byrnewood of Annie, Byrnewood begins to transfer his feelings about her onto his sister, creating a scene of seemingly incestuous desire: “He took her small white hand—now cold as marble—within his own, he swept the unbound tresses back from her palid brow . . . He raised her form in his arms, and kissed her cold lips again and again. No tear trickled from his eyelids; no sigh heaved his bosom; no deep muttered execration manifested the agitation of his soul.”³³ Upon finding his sister’s dishonored body, Byrnewood expresses none of the emotions that one might expect; there is no expression of anger or sorrow. Instead, he reacts as though he is attracted to the seemingly dead body of his sister, sweeping her hair away from her face and kissing her “again and again.”

Armed with the knowledge that Byrnewood too had seduced a young woman, we can safely conjecture that Byrnewood sees Annie rather than Mary in his sister. He has transferred his emotions about his own role as seducer onto Lorrimer and Mary, and he reacts accordingly. That he projects his own guilt over Annie onto Lorrimer comes as no surprise. When Byrnewood kills Lorrimer, he kills the man he once was. And at the end of the novel, we see that he keeps a portrait of Lorrimer in a secret room, which he enters every day: “The Avenger knew that he was right in the sight of God, in the execution of the fearful deed with had been death to the Libertine, but still there was one thought,

³² Lippard, *The Quaker City*, 24.

³³ *Ibid*, 145.

never absent from his soul.”³⁴ We are told that the “scenes he has witnessed in Monk-Hall, in the parlor of his father’s house, in the streets of the Quaker City, or on the broad river dwelt like a shadow on his soul.”³⁵ Yet, those are many thoughts, not one. The thought that remained always on Byrnewood’s soul must have been the fact that he too had committed the same crime that Lorrimer did, and had Annie had a brother, Lorrimer’s fate could just have easily have been his own. He enters the secret chamber each day to reflect upon his actions and project his self-loathing onto Lorrimer’s portrait.

Mabel Pyne is the other fairy tale princess, and she manages to avoid not only ruin, but also the pseudo-incestuous desire of her adoptive father, the Reverend Doctor F. A. T. Pyne. Her appearance is like that of both Helen Jewett and the sleeping beauties of the fairy tales; the narrator refers to her complexion as “white as marble” or “white as snow” numerous times and to her being “like a marble statue” at least twice.³⁶ Mabel, unlike Mary, correlates to not only the “Sleeping Beauty” and “Snow White” heroines, but also those of some of the “Cinderella” tale types. For the majority of the novel, Mabel thinks that the reverend is her father; it is not until over halfway through the novel that Mabel discovers that she was adopted. As she lay sleeping, the reverend gazes upon his daughter’s form. He takes notice of her “skin white as alabaster” (later “white as marble”) and “lips red and ripe” and notes: “As she lay reclining in the arm-chair she looked for all the world, like a marble statue of an intellectual and voluptuous maiden.”³⁷ Indeed, like the various Cinderella incest tale types, this subplot focuses on a widower’s

³⁴ Ibid, 574.

³⁵ Ibid, 575.

³⁶ Ibid, 292; 293; 294; 320; 323.

³⁷ Ibid, 292-293.

desire for his own adopted daughter and the daughter's attempts to resist her father's advances.

In this subplot with Mabel and Reverend Pyne, Lippard takes the tales of incest from the fairy tales and uses them to expose "the rottenness of America's ruling class . . . The portrayal of sexual aberration was an especially potent weapon against the upper classes, whose pretensions to virtue could most readily be exploded by recording their private sexual misdeeds."³⁸ Throughout the novel, the reader hears Mabel protest the reverend's advances thus: "My father, ha, ha, ha! It is night again and his hand is upon my bosom, his hot breath on my cheek . . . Father, have mercy . . . Your hands first raised mine to God as we prayed together, and now father those hands—oh God! Oh God!"³⁹ Reverend Pyne even plays to his position as Mabel's father in order to seduce her, telling her, "Come kiss your father," as he approaches her nearly senseless form.⁴⁰ Even as Pyne's goal seems to have been reached, even as he begins to engage in kissing Mabel passionately and undressing her, he continues to refer to himself as her "papa": "Come and kiss your papa, Mabel! It was a good girl, that it was, and it must kiss its papa! . . . It is a good child, so it is, . . . And it will come and sit on papa's knee, so it will!"⁴¹ Again, the reverend uses his position as Mabel's father and the obedience that position requires from her to further his lecherous designs.

³⁸ David Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1988), 223.

³⁹ Lippard, *The Quaker City*, 293.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 321.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 322.

Yet in addition to the incestuous desire, this passage reveals that Pyne views Mabel not as a daughter, but as a possession, an “it.” He refers to her by name only once here, using “it” in the rest of his persuasive speech. Perhaps, if the reverend can persuade Mabel that she is not a person but an it, he can persuade her to leave off her “intellect,” that part of her nature that makes her human rather than animal, and succumb to her “animal nature” and his base, incestuous desires. Here, Lippard takes the common “reverend rake” to a different extreme by having him involved not “with one of his parishioners” but with his daughter. He even declares it his right, as “the care and trouble of seventeen years will be well repaid.”⁴² The novel depicts the reverend as more than a rake, as an incestuous lecher who thinks that his fatherly duties should be repaid through a sexual relationship with the girl who has lived as his daughter since she was an infant.

Like the Arlingtons, Mabel’s biological father also stakes his future on his daughter’s purity. The reader learns that Devil Bug is Mabel’s real father, but he works to establish that the rich merchant Livingstone is her father. That Devil Bug has a strong love for his daughter is evident as he speaks to her: “I’m ugly as the devil—I know it! But for you, gal, for *you*, my heart feels warm!”⁴³ Yet when he has the chance to tell her that he is her biological father, he stops himself. He tells her instead, “Parson Pyne ain’t yer father—not a bit o’ it! Yer father has gold enough to buy ye a row o’ houses!”⁴⁴ Later, he allows Bess to find the false documentation that claims that Livingstone is Mabel’s father so that Bess will reveal the information to Mabel.

⁴² Ibid, 320.

⁴³ Ibid, 333.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 334.

Devil Bug could easily have told the truth, and one might think that he withholds it because he loves her and does not want her future to be ruined because her father is such a vile creature. Nonetheless, Devil-Bug reveals his true purpose when moments later he revels in the notion that his daughter will be the heiress to Livingstone's fortune: "Ha! ha! ha! Old Devil-Bug's darter shall ride in her carriage, and wear silks an' satins—that she shall!"⁴⁵ Later, as he commits suicide, Devil-Bug's last thoughts are of Mabel: "The g-a-l shall roll in wealth, dress in silks an' satin's, and be a lady all her life, old Devil-Bug's daughter . . . among the grandees o' th' Quaker City!"⁴⁶ He does not express appreciation in knowing the Mabel will be safe, protected, and without want. Instead, Devil-Bug delights in knowing that his daughter will walk among Philadelphia's elite, that *his* daughter, and thus a part of him, will have the trappings that go along with the upper class lifestyle. Too, Devil Bug's joy comes from disrupting a system that dictates that his daughter should live and die not only poor, but also likely degraded into a life of prostitution. Instead, his daughter will live a life that by all rights belongs to another.

Lest the reader forget the intended exposure of the evils of the city's elite, he interrupts the narrative repeatedly to remind the reader of "that Justice, which in the Quaker City, unbars the jail to the Great Swindlers, while it sends the honest Poor Man into the grave of the Suicide."⁴⁷ The author later interrupts his description of "lovely women" of the mad-house to elucidate its evils:

Let me point your vision, to the grim cells of that Legal Mad-House, where a reckless Charlton administers his brutal rule, in damp cells, littered by straw,

⁴⁵ Ibid, 335.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 556.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 404.

amid the glorious panoply of chains and bolts and bars! Let me picture to you, this pitiless Quack, standing lash in hand, over the prostrate body of some insane wretch, while his band of brutal ruffians, stand ready to do his will, even though that will be slow and deliberate murder . . . that this Quack and his Mad-House are both the creatures of your Statute-Books.⁴⁸

Before his reader can revel in the heaving bosoms and undulating forms, Lippard reminds him that the purpose is not enjoyment, but rather exposé or criticism. The authorial intrusion comes prior to the sexual and sensual depictions, setting the tone for how the reader will reflect upon the scenes to follow. Thus, the intrusion does not attempt to undo the enjoyment and eroticism that the reader has already taken from the text; it comes before the scenes to instruct the reader in how to read the passages, thus effectively framing the reader's erotic enjoyment within the context of social criticism.

The prostitute and "wicked witch" of the novel is Bess, whose story demonstrates that women, even after succumbing to their animal nature, can gain power and redemption through a reclamation of their names and bodies. Born Emily Walraven, Bess loses even the illusion of power in purity that women cling to when she loses her virginity to Paul Western after he seduces her through the promise of marriage. Emily is powerless after her seduction, and Boyd Merrivale must save her from a ruffian on the street: "I recognized Emily Walraven in the degraded yet beautiful woman who stood before me. Springing forward, with one blow I felled the bully to the floor, and in another moment, seizing Emily by the arm, I hurried down stairs [sic], evaded the constables, who were about to arrest her . . . I had to walk her home."⁴⁹ Emily's ruin causes her to beg Merrivale to leave, to avoid even speaking to her.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 527.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 62.

Though she says that she wishes to be “happy” in her degradation, Emily lives at the mercy of her customers and is afraid to walk home alone. She has no recourse against the man from whom Merrivale saves her, starkly starkly contrasting Bess’s actions later in the novel. As Merrivale continues his tale, he relates that he heard of Paul Western’s murder at the hands of Devil Bug (the proprietor of Monk Hall) and Emily. Merrivale speculates that revenge was Emily’s motive for the murder, and after that night, he declares, “Never since that night has Emily Walraven been seen in this breathing world,” assuming her dead.⁵⁰ Merrivale is partially correct in his assumption that Emily died that night. Though Devil Bug did not murder Emily, as Merrivale assumes, the timid girl who needs rescuing no longer lives.

Emily gains agency through her revenge killing of Paul Western and figuratively becomes a different person. As Helen Jewett reinvented herself with each alias in real life, the fictional Emily Walraven reinvents herself, changes her name to Bess, and begins helping the Monks of Monk Hall seduce other young women. She brags about her skill to the Abbess of Monk Hall, declaring herself “an expert in such things.”⁵¹ Like Snow White’s stepmother, Bess disguises herself as a friend to Mary Arlington to convince the girl to go to Monk Hall to meet Gus Lorrimer, the libertine who has disguised himself as a suitor and intended fiancé to the young woman. The young woman, like Snow White, misses every sign that her “friend” is deceiving her, first the “hint” “that our friendship would be more romantic if concealed from all intrusive eyes,” then the chance meetings on successive evening walks with her eventual seducer, and finally the “secret wedding.”

⁵⁰ Ibid, 62.

⁵¹ Ibid, 78.

Whereas in “Snow White” the disguised stepmother desires Snow White’s death because the young girl is fairer than she, Bess desires “a fate worse than death” for Mary simply because she is “happy—aye happy—when [she] can drag another woman, into the same foul pit, where I am doomed to lie and rot—”⁵²

Yet when she sees something of her old self in Mary Arlington and Mabel Pyne, Bess again reinvents herself and takes it upon herself to help save the young women and Mary’s brother Byrnewood. Unlike Emily, Bess not only does not need to be rescued. Instead, she rescues Mary’s brother from Devil Bug by practically carrying him through the labyrinths of Monk Hall: “Supporting the head of Byrnewood on her shoulder, while her arm encircled his waist, [she] endeavored to lead the half-conscious man . . . up the lofty stairs . . . Here his strength seemed to fail him, but the brave woman gathered her arm yet tighter around his waist, and hurried him along the stairs.”⁵³

When she encounters Devil Bug, Bess expresses no fear and does not shrink from her purpose, “calmly” folding her arms as Devil Bug attempts to assert his power over her.⁵⁴ Not only does she declare, “Even yet I will foil ye, monster and devil that you are,” she also encourages Devil Bug’s guilt-ridden hallucinations by telling him that she can see the skeleton of Paul Western with his “long bony fingers . . . gripping for [Devil Bug’s] throat.”⁵⁵ Emily Walraven would have been terrified of both Devil Bug and Monk Hall. Bess has no such fears. She even brings up the name of her seducer and murder victim without so much as a flinch. The power she gained in murdering Western

⁵² Ibid, 80.

⁵³ Ibid, 315.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 317.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 318.

is the same power that she asserts over Devil Bug, and her description of Western's skeleton attempting to choke Devil Bug demonstrates that it is Devil Bug who feels remorse for his part in the murder and that Bess feels nothing.

Bess's assertion of her newfound power extends to helping Mary and Mabel avoid the same fate that befell Emily Walraven. In taking the girls from Monk Hall, Bess must defeat Mabel's adopted father, the Reverend F. A. T. Pyne: "Her eyes flashing fire, Bess sprang forward, and struck the Parson on the forehead with the massive iron key."⁵⁶ Unlike Emily, Bess is an active, assertive woman. She does not hesitate in her actions, and the quickness of them surprises a "fat" man accustomed to the passive, submissive women in his congregation. Bess also uses her sexuality to secure the young women and herself a hiding place. She recognizes that women's power lies in their sexuality, whether guarding it from men or seducing men to bend to a woman's will. Though the young women are stunned at Bess's "familiarity" with the watchman who guards a murder scene, it this familiarity that secures them from both Mabel's adoptive father and Mary's seducer Lorrimer.⁵⁷ Too, hiding in the murder scene protected by the watchman gives her the opportunity to show Mabel a picture of her biological mother and to tell the young woman that she is really the granddaughter of the murdered woman and an heiress to the fortune of the rich merchant Livingstone. Without Bess's ability to convince the guard to let her and her charges into the murder scene, Mabel might never have acquired Livingstone's vast fortune. Thus, Bess's sexuality is the key to not only saving the other

⁵⁶ Ibid, 345.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 350-352.

young women from their seducers, but also to making sure that Mabel becomes a powerful woman in her own right.

Even though the central female characters of the novel are supposed to be Mary Arlington and Mabel, Dora Livingstone's name is the title of pirated English copies of *The Quaker City*. Though Book the First bears Mary's name and Book the Third bears Mabel's, only one of five chapters containing the name of a woman contains Mabel's name, and none Mary's. Dora's name is mentioned earlier than any other female character save Annie, the servant girl whom Byrnewood Arlington seduced. In fact, Dora's name is the title or part of the chapter title of the fifth chapter of Book the First, the fourth chapter of Book the Second, and the second and fifth chapters of Book the Third. Of the main female characters, only Dora uses her sexuality as power from the start of the novel, making the description of her eventual death the most alluring of all, as evinced in the numerous times her name appears as the title of a chapter. The narrator of *The Quaker City* describes a seemingly dead Dora Livingstone in terms similar to the descriptions of Sleeping Beauty and Snow White. Yet, the narrator twists the description into that of a "female fiend": "there she lay, her cheeks pale as death, her lips parted . . . but the Fiend was locked within that faultless form; within the snowy whiteness of that bosom, now gleaming coldly in the light was Hell."⁵⁸

Mrs. Livingstone embodies capitalist greed. Dora concerns herself chiefly with rising in status and class; she dreams of possessing a title and wearing a coronet, a mixture of the American dream and the European, fairy tale princess dream of happily-ever-after. More importantly, Dora understands that whereas men may improve their

⁵⁸ Ibid, 259.

stations by improving their fortunes, women can improve their stations only through marriage and sex. As such, she stands as a comment against the cult of true womanhood and other societal restrictions that made it impossible for a woman to improve her station except through marriage. Antebellum America clung to the tenets of true womanhood:

Woman, in the cult of True Womanhood presented by the women's magazines, gift annuals, and religious literature of the nineteenth century, was the hostage in the home. In a society where values changed frequently, where fortunes rose and fell with frightening rapidity, where social and economic mobility provided instability as well as hope, one thing at least remained the same—a true woman was a true woman, wherever she was found.⁵⁹

Though she appears to her husband to adhere to the tenets of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, Dora Livingstone violates them all.

In her bedroom, two conflicting images symbolize the conflicting images that Dora projects. First, there is “a statue of the Venus de Medici, sculptured by a master hand, in snow-white marble,” which associates Dora with both the goddess and Helen Jewett. Second, Dora keeps “an image of the Virgin Mary, her eyes raised upward to heaven, and her hands clasped over the crucifix, resting upon her bosom,” as a testament to the submissive and pious woman her husband expects her to be.⁶⁰ Yet Dora possesses characteristics more like those of Venus and Helen Jewett than those of the Virgin. Unlike Mary and Mabel, whose dialogue consists primarily of lamentations over the various unhappy situations in which they find themselves seemingly destined to lose their virginity, Dora glories in the possibilities that her adultery presents. She glories in the pursuit of wealth and a title and enjoys the process of planning her ascent.

⁵⁹ Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” *American Quarterly*, 18 (Summer 1966), 151-152.

⁶⁰ Lippard, *The Quaker City*, 179.

Unworried that her actions put her eternal soul in peril, she focuses instead on the promises of a royal title Fitz-Cowles falsely promises her will come with a marriage to him:

That were a boon, worth the peril of a soul to win! . . . A coronet, yes, yes, a coronet! . . . A coronet! But one short year ago, a poor girl, clad in [a] threadbare costume . . . Now that poor girl, is the wife of one of the merchant-princes of the city, rolls in wealth, almost without limit, and of course moves among the first circles of the Aristocracy of this good city! Such Aristocracy ha, ha! Like a specimen of paste-board statuary, giving but a grotesque outline, of the reality which it is intended to represent . . . Another year and this same poor girl, may, no, no, will stand among the glittering circles of a royal Court, with the blaze of rank and beauty flashing all around her, with the smile of a Queen, beaming upon her face, while a coronet, that tells the ancestral glories of a thousand years, rests brightly upon her brow!—⁶¹

That Dora has risen from poverty to the “aristocracy” of Philadelphia, where she “rolls in wealth” does not satisfy her. Her husband is a “merchant-prince” rather than a true prince, and the “taint of the Shop” that “merchant” attaches to prince sickens her.⁶² She wants a royal title and crown, something she can never obtain in America where the aristocracy is “but a grotesque outline” of that in Europe. Focusing on her past and impending rise in fortune and class, Dora forgets momentarily that her marriage to Livingstone prevents her marriage to another man, a problem for which Dora has a ready solution when prompted by her lover. Thus, Dora symbolizes capitalist greed and the hypocrisy of a system that promises classlessness but honors even a grotesque aristocracy. Dora wants more than she can ever have in America.

Not only is Dora licentious and greedy, we quickly learn that she is also murderous. When Fitz-Cowles asks how Dora intends “to overcome the—the

⁶¹ Ibid, 181-182.

⁶² Ibid, 182.

difficulty—” of her husband, Dora does not hesitate in her response: “Suppose Livingstone should *die* . . . Livingstone has been for years the victim of a secret and insidious disease . . . [The doctor] told me that the main arteries of *my husband’s* heart were now almost entirely ossified; that I must take every care in the world of him, for any sudden excitement, *would kill him in an instant—*”⁶³ To ensure Livingstone’s death comes sooner rather than later, Dora plans to reveal her indiscretions, knowing “To the ear of the man who loves his wife as man never loved wife before . . . without a moments [*sic*] delay, he would fall from his chair, a stiffened corse [*sic*].”⁶⁴ Unlike the Virgin Mary, whose image prominently graces the walls of Dora’s bedroom, Dora not only ignores her duty as wife, but has also thought so seriously about how to remove the obstacle her husband presents to her coronet that she decisively and without delay reveals her plan. Whereas Poe’s fiendish women return from the grave to exact revenge upon their oppressors, Lippard’s Dora does not wait for Livingstone to wrong her. She plans his murder not as retribution for some wrong he has committed, but as a means to further raise her status and fortune. Poe’s women return from the grave as fiends, but Dora Livingstone is a ferocious, female fiend throughout her life.

In fact, unlike the women in Poe’s stories, Dora does not limit her wicked actions to her husband or closest relation. Further demonstrating that “capitalism is not only hypocritical and irrational, but also murderous,” she also actively plots the murder of Luke Harvey for his threats to reveal her affair, using herself as a down payment for the

⁶³ Ibid, 184-185.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 186-187.

crime.⁶⁵ At first, the reader knows only that “a young man with a figure somewhat below the middle height, whose elegance of shape and beauty of proportion, was disclosed to every advantage . . . It was, indeed a fair face, almost effeminate” who has entered Monk Hall to hire Devil Bug to murder Luke Harvey.⁶⁶ The young “man” wants a violent death for Harvey, telling Devil Bug, “Kill him, for me, kill him by the pistol or the knife, by fire or by the sword, any way you like.”⁶⁷ Dora could have easily murdered Luke Harvey by poisoning his tea any time when he visited her husband at home. Instead, she disguises herself as a young man and hires Devil Bug to murder him. Devil Bug delights in savage violence. He even daydreams about various tortures he can inflict on people, wondering aloud many times throughout the novel “Vonders how that ‘ill vork?”⁶⁸ Everyone who has any contact with Devil Bug knows that he revels in killing people in violent ways, and Dora implies that she is well aware of this by going to Devil Bug and by suggesting only methods of murder that include violence.

Dora’s original plan is to pay Devil Bug with gold and to allow him to keep Luke’s gold ring after he presents it as proof of Luke’s death, but her disguise does not fool Devil Bug. He requests another form of payment, “a kiss from a red lip; a little love you know, ,and a good deal o’ fondness!”⁶⁹ Though at first reluctant to sleep with Devil Bug because of his hideous form, Dora relents, promising “Bring me the ring, and you

⁶⁵ Gary Ashwill, “The Mysteries of Capitalism in George Lippard’s City Novels,” *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 40.4 (1994): 305.

⁶⁶ Lippard, *The Quaker City*, 278.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 279.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 290. See also pages 119 and 554.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 288.

shall revel in wealth—”⁷⁰ When she wants to hire Devil Bug to murder Luke Harvey, she knows that she must disguise herself as a man to avoid having to pay with her body. When Devil Bug recognizes her and demands to be paid with the “wealth” that is Dora’s body, she knows she must pay the price or Devil Bug will not render his services.

The history of Luke Harvey presents a stark contrast to that of Dora and demonstrates that men had different and more varied options for upward mobility than did women. Luke grew up in the same neighborhood as Dora and was her former fiancé. Like Dora, he moves up in society, but he does so through hard work and virtue. First, he apprentices in Livingstone’s father’s warehouse, and when “Old Liv. died . . . Luke Harvey rose to a clerkship. Began to be a fine fellow—well-dressed, and of course virtuous . . . Last year [Luke was] taken into partnership . . . Firm now Livingstone, Harvey, & Co.”⁷¹ Luke maintains his virtue and moves from poverty to a partnership in one of the most successful business in Philadelphia. Later, he succeeds in securing the safety of Mabel and is rewarded, we learn at the end of the novel, by accompanying her overseas with a likely marriage to her and her fortune in the offing. Luke gains the success that Dora craves, but his path to that success is up a different road because he is a man. Lippard recognizes the double-standard and oppression of women inherent in a capitalist society, and he uses Dora as a means of depicting the worst aspects of capitalist hypocrisy and greed.

Dora symbolizes all that Lippard detests about capitalism in America. She is not happy with what she has and craves more. Because she is a woman, the only way for her

⁷⁰ Ibid, 289.

⁷¹ Ibid, 34.

to gain the fortune and title she viciously desires is to use her body as capital. Her beauty captivates Livingstone, who marries her and makes her part of the Philadelphia aristocracy. Her beauty then attracts the attention of Fitz-Cowles, who wants nothing more than her body. Knowing that Dora will not risk losing her current place in society by having an affair with him, he promises her that he is the heir of a royal title in Europe. Thus, Dora sees the path to more riches and higher status through her body. Like Helen Jewett, Dora lives in a capitalist economy and must use the capital she has to gain the wealth she wants.

Lippard does not just build upon the tradition of Helen Jewett; he contributes to it as well. Following only Dora, Mary, and Byrnewood to the end of their stories, the text recounts the conclusion of the other subplots and minor details of Byrnewood and Mary's story through a series of news reports from a fictional Philadelphia newspaper, presumably *The Daily Blackmail* that is discussed in some length in Book the Second. Mirroring *The New York Herald's* coverage of Helen Jewett's murder and Richard P. Robinson's trial, the fictional news stories at the end of *The Quaker City* offer conflicting accounts of some characters' lives. For instance, in describing the "facts" of how Mabel came to inherit Livingstone's fortune, the paper states, "Stolen in infancy from her father's arms, she was, after the lapse of seventeen years recognized and restored to her home, through the kind exertions of our distinguished Divine, the Rev. Dr. Pyne."⁷² Later, the same paper reports, "one of our first clergymen has been guilty of a most daring and atrocious act of perfidy. As the case will shortly be brought to trial, we refrain from giving the particulars. Suffice to say, that the *victim* is the daughter of one of our

⁷² Ibid, 571.

wealthiest merchants, the heartless seducer, none other than the *Reverend Doctor F. A. T. Pyne*.”⁷³

Neither the intrusive authorial voice nor the narrator comments on the conflict in these two accounts of the same event. Did the reverend restore Mabel to her true family through “kind exertions,” or did he try to seduce her? Is he the “distinguished Divine” or “the heartless seducer”? The reader knows that the latter account bears a closer relationship with the truth, but Lippard’s incorporation of these conflicting accounts and the failure of the authorial voice to correct them are intriguing. Lippard and his readers would have been familiar with the tactics of the penny presses. Bennett famously recounted or “corrected” his reports if offered enough money, and Buzby Poodle, the editor of *The Daily Blackmail*, is a clear caricature of the *Herald* editor. Poodle explains to Fitz-Cowles how he “manages” his paper: “A big motto at the paper’s head—‘*Fiat justitia*’—you know the rest. Do I want the cash? I stick in an article charging some well-known citizen with theft, or seduction, or some more delightful crime. Citizen comes down in a rage—wants the article contradicted in the next day’s paper. He pays for the contradiction, of course.”⁷⁴

In response to Fitz-Cowles’ concern that the city has been dull recently, Poodle demonstrates that he prefers the sensational: “O, Lord, yes! Hasn’t been a suicide for a week. Not even a murder down town, nor a nigger baby killed. I do wish something lively would spring up for Christmas—now an ‘abduction case’ with the proper

⁷³ Ibid, 572.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 163.

trimmings, would go it with a rush!”⁷⁵ Poodle gets his “abduction case” three-fold, reporting on Byrnewood’s trial and acquittal for the murder of Lorrimer, the discovery of “the dead body of a woman . . . laying beside the grave of Mr. Walraven,” and Reverend Pyne’s attempted seduction of Mabel, and only fleetingly hesitates to report the truth in the case of Rev. Pyne. Given Poodle’s conversation with Fitz-Cowles, the reader can only assume that the Reverend was no longer able to pay for Poodle’s silence.

Lippard’s inclusion of fictional news accounts to conclude several of his storylines not only mimics Bennett’s reporting style, it also anticipates the construction of future narratives about Helen Jewett discussed in Chapter Two. Four years after the publication of *The Quaker City*, George Wilkes adopts this style to conclude his *The Lives of Helen Jewett and Richard P. Robinson* with the news reports of Bennett’s *Herald*, and the formula of ending the Jewett narrative with news articles will remain a key element in novelizations of the story into the late twentieth century.

Lippard uses the popularity of the penny press, the fairy tales, and the sensational gothic to sell his novel to a wider audience, but his critique of capitalism remains the focus of the novel. Though many critics would have us believe that in Lippard’s use of the sensational to reveal the inequities of capitalism and the dark underbelly of the city, “time and again sensationalism becomes an end in itself,” *The Quaker City* maintains its critique.⁷⁶ While the tale is fantastic and sensational, never does the text neglect its purpose of unmasking the city’s elite. Should the reader begin to forget, the authorial voice interrupts to remind the reader that the horrors being depicted result from

⁷⁵ Ibid, 163.

⁷⁶ Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, 207.

capitalism, from a system set up to encourage greed. That the elite's activities are "downright disgusting" underscores Lippard's "anticapitalist rhetoric" rather than hindering it.⁷⁷ The penny press, fairy tales, Gothicism, and anticapitalism combine in Lippard in ways that influence and anticipate the combination in other narratives as well.

George Thompson attempts to construct his *City Crimes* in a fashion similar to that of Lippard's *Quaker City*, even including overt criticisms of capitalism. Unlike Lippard, however, Thompson uses the political and social criticism as a cloak for what is otherwise soft-core pornography, as evidenced in his biography.

⁷⁷ Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, 206.

CHAPTER 6
REINFORCING THE FAIRY TALE: PRETENDED SUBVERSION IN GEORGE
THOMPSON'S FICTION

George Thompson was one of antebellum America's most prolific authors of erotic sensation fiction and wrote some of the first readily available pornographic texts in America. He has been all but ignored by scholars. Taking note of Thompson's ambiguous status as pornographer and sensationalist, Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz briefly explores the relationship between these two aspects of his career in her *Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America*. In addition to his erotic novels, his city mysteries novels were some of the more popular of the period, exploring the most seedy sides of city life. Yet Horowitz is one of the rare scholars to recognize Thompson. Janis Stout's *Sodoms in Eden: The City in American Fiction Before 1860* fleetingly mentions only one of Thompson's novels, *The House Breaker*. David Loth's *The Erotic in Literature: A Historical Survey of Pornography as Delightful as It Is Indiscreet*, in a chapter devoted to the rise of pornography in America, fails even to mention the author, as does Leslie Fiedler in his *Love and Death in the American Novel*. And, while David S. Reynolds spends quite a bit of time on Thompson in his *Beneath the American Renaissance*, he limits his reading of *City Crimes* to but one passage of note and misreads or misrepresents several scenes from both *City Crimes* and *Venus in Boston*.

Like recent scholarship on George Lippard, with one rare exception, the scant criticism of George Thompson's fiction maintains that his texts subvert social and

political norms of the era. In his introduction to a collection of three of Thompson's works—*Venus in Boston*, *City Crimes*, and the autobiographical *My Life*—Reynolds argues, “Along with sexual adventurousness and social satire, his novels have an undercurrent of ambiguity. His fictional world is one in which goodness often falters and wickedness often succeeds.”¹ Indeed Thompson's *Venus in Boston* (1849) appears to subvert social norms and to carry its subversion through to the end of the short novel. The text abruptly ends with a summary of how the tale ends for each character, with its most unabashedly subversive character, the Duchess, living a “happily-ever-after” life. Yet every other criminal character either experiences a change of heart and turns his or her life around or suffers some form of punishment—a sadistically tortured death or an even more painful existence on the edges of society.

Similarly, Thompson's more fully developed *City Crimes* (1849) appears to support Christopher Looby's assertion that Thompson's fiction tries to subvert political and social structures at the same time that it reinforces them.² I maintain, however, that *City Crimes*, and Thompson's other works do not actually try to subvert dominant ideologies of antebellum America; they only pretend to do so. Thompson would have been familiar with the popularity of George Lippard's politically and socially subversive novels, and he used the trappings of subversion to disguise novels that simply revel in the grotesque and the erotic for the sake of thrills. Although the novel uncovers the corruption of the

¹ David Reynolds, “Introduction,” in George Thompson, *Venus in Boston and Other Tales of Nineteenth-Century City Life*, eds. David S. Reynolds and Kimberly R. Gladman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), xlix.

² Christopher Looby, “George Thompson's ‘Romance of the Real’: Transgression and Taboo in American Sensation Fiction,” *American Literature* 65.4 (1993), 651-672. Looby focuses on Thompson's *The House Breaker*, arguing, “he wants both to mount a powerful critique of the status quo and to endorse some of its fundamental values; he wants to affirm sentimental domestic norms even as he violates them, expose moral hypocrisy even as his fiction succumbs to it.”

judicial system and the injustices endured by those in poverty, in nearly every instance the revelation of poverty and injustice is followed immediately by the reinforcement of the very dominant ideologies and repressive structures it pretends to subvert.

Thompson's novels create worlds in which the only women who survive to the end of his novels are pure, domestic, passive, and submissive, in which honest, hard working poor people are rewarded with happy middle-class lives, and in which organized religion encourages meekness and humility in the poor by promising that they will be rewarded in heaven while their oppressors will be punished with eternal damnation.

Unlike Lippard and Poe, Thompson makes use not of the "Sleeping Beauty" or "Snow White" motifs, but of "Cinderella," in which the chaste heroine marries her prince while those who conspired against her suffer brutal punishment. Just as the fairy tale instructs its readers in proper behaviors and social norms, Thompson's fiction reinforces the capitalism, classism, and sexism of the culture in which it was produced. The fairy tale presents women who break the boundaries of the roles that society expects them to fill, yet, in the end, these women—Cinderella's stepsisters and stepmother—suffer harsh punishments, and Cinderella—the "dish rag" of the tale—lives "happily ever after."

Thompson too incorporates active women characters, ones who transgress every boundary set by society. Though Reynolds argues that Thompson's fiction mocks domesticity and presents women who "enact the rejection, and even inversion, of the maternal and nurturing female roles promoted by the cult of true womanhood," the archetypal wicked witches in Thompson's works endure sadistically violent punishments as the active women of "Cinderella" do, while the chaste, domestic heroines survive,

flourish, and achieve the “happy ever after” life that comes only to those who are passive, patient, and pure.³

This chapter argues for a new interpretation of Thompson’s fiction, focusing on both *Venus in Boston* and *City Crimes*. In both novels, Thompson develops the “Cinderella” motif, incorporating murder, crime, and incest to spice up each story and create a spectacle of the excesses consuming the antebellum city. Currently accepted readings of Thompson as a subversive author writing to undermine the status quo by revealing its inequities overlook the narrative effect of Thompson’s novels. Although *City Crimes* uncovers the corruption of the judicial system and the injustices endured by those in poverty and pretends to critique them, in the end, the novel reinforces that America’s capitalist government and society successfully represents and protects all citizens. Thompson’s erotic fiction hides behind the guise of reform, bringing its readers licentiousness and debauchery without the burden of serious evaluation and condemnation of the corruption of the capitalist city. Because the hero reaps the benefits of the corrupt system, the reader only vaguely senses the injustice. Similarly, the reader only glimpses the injustice of poverty, as Frank Sydney and the narrator exploit the nameless hordes living beneath the city for effect and quickly forget about them.

Equally important is Thompson’s reinforcement of dominant gender ideology, especially the cult of true womanhood. Male criminals whose activities result from the necessity of poverty accept help from no one, yet they turn away from crime, building happy, middle-class lives, with successful careers and families. On the other hand, women who reject the cult of true womanhood are sadistically murdered. In fact, in *City*

³ Reynolds, “Introduction,” xxxvii-xxxix.

Crimes, only one female character survives—the only woman in the entirety of the novel who embodies the characteristics of true womanhood. And, while the novel points to the hypocrisy of licentious clergy, it blames women for their own seduction immediately thereafter, even when the woman in question is no more than a girl. The novel, therefore, does little to undermine the apparatuses of state control. It reinforces the notions that the clergy is virtuous at heart and that the systems of law and labor work for those who want to better their own lives.

George Thompson recognized the importance of creating a sympathetic heroine, and he further understood that no woman is as sympathetic as one who does her duty by embodying all the attributes of the “perfect woman” even under the harshest of conditions, one who never loses her sweet disposition even when those around her abuse her daily. In short, Thompson recognized that Cinderella is the exemplary true woman of the nineteenth century, and he used this motif in both *Venus in Boston* and *City Crimes*.

Thompson’s understanding of the market in which he was writing goes back to his childhood. In his *My Life: Or the Adventures of Geo. Thompson. Being the Autobiography of an Author*, Thompson waits only three pages to mention:

I lived at that time [about age twelve] in Thomas street, very near the famous brothel of Rosina Townsend, in whose house that dreadful murder [of Helen Jewett] was committed which the New York public will still remember with a thrill of horror . . . With many others, I entered the room in which lay the body of Ellen [sic], and never shall I forget the horrid spectacle that met my gaze!⁴

Whether a boy of just twelve years would have been allowed to enter Jewett’s room and view the corpse, and whether Thompson himself actually participated have been

⁴ George Thompson, *My Life: Or the Adventures of Geo. Thompson. Being the Auto-Biography of an Author*, In *Venus in Boston And Other Tales of Nineteenth Century Life*, eds. David S. Reynolds and Kimberly R. Gladman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 315-316.

contested by both Patricia Cline Cohen and David Reynolds, who argue that this statement, like so much of his autobiography, is likely exaggeration. Yet Thompson did live with an uncle and aunt in New York City near the brothel. Given the excessive press coverage that Jewett's mysterious death and the subsequent trial of Richard P. Robinson received, it is likely that the young Thompson would have come into contact with much of the information that was being circulated. That years later he recognizes the importance of the crime in the history of New York and the credibility that its proximity lends him as a writer of "city mysteries" speaks volumes about Thompson's understanding of the market. His novels, like the press coverage of Jewett's murder and Robinson's trial, seek to effect that "thrill of horror" in readers by bringing to light the "horrid spectacle" of the evils of the city.

Thompson could hardly have missed James Gordon Bennett's attempts to make Helen Jewett into a Cinderella character, whose stepmother so mistreated her that she was forced into servitude at Judge Weston's home. In Bennett's version of Jewett's life story, Jewett is Cinderella, and Judge Weston and his family are her fairy godmothers. Unfortunately, Jewett's Cinderella story did not have as happy an ending as the fairy tale. Still, Bennett recognized the need to create a victim with whom the consumer could sympathize. She could not be just another prostitute; she had to be someone who resembled the daughters and sisters of his readers.

Thompson seized upon Bennett's reports of Jewett's murder and the Cinderella fairy tale for guidance in writing his novels. In *City Crimes*, he even incorporates a fictional news report about the murder of a prostitute that bears striking similarities to those of Bennett. The headline from Thompson's fictitious report on Frank Sydney's

arrest for the murder reads “Atrocious Murder,” whereas Bennett’s headline on the day he first reported Jewett’s murder reads “Most Atrocious Murder.” Like Richard Robinson’s, Frank Sydney’s “appearance and behavior after his arrest proved his guilt.” Even the method of murder recalls the murder of Helen Jewett; the prostitute’s landlady finds the corpse “lying upon the sofa, her throat cut.”⁵ Though Jewett had been attacked with a hatchet to her brow, the level of violence in both murders, the fact that both are prostitutes, and the “immense excitement” that ran throughout New York after both murders makes it impossible not to think of Jewett when reading Thompson’s novel.⁶

Since Thompson’s novel appeared but a short time after the serialization of George Wilkes’ popular novelization of Jewett’s life and murder, it would have been even more likely that readers in 1849 immediately recognized Jewett’s story in that of Thompson’s fictional prostitute. That Frank Sydney, whose very name recalls Robinson’s alias Frank Rivers, is innocent of the crime indicates the possibility that Thompson thought the latter man innocent of the murder of Jewett. Thus, Thompson’s belief in the notion that reputable young men from good families do not murder prostitutes becomes evident, and his adherence to the ideals of classism and true womanhood manifests itself.

Though Thompson presents many women characters who refuse to conform to the rules of true womanhood, it is the women who are exemplars of the angel in the house, even when faced with imminent harm from strangers or with excessive emotional abuse from their families, with whom the reader alternately identifies and sympathizes. In

⁵ George Thompson, *City Crimes*. In *Venus in Boston And Other Tales of Nineteenth Century Life*, eds. David S. Reynolds and Kimberly R. Gladman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 172.

⁶ Thompson, *City Crimes*, 171.

Venus in Boston, Thompson creates Fanny Aubrey as the Cinderella figure, whereas in the longer *City Crimes* Sophia Franklin fills this role.

Fanny Aubrey is a classic Cinderella in all aspects—motherless, dutiful and kind, obviously from a higher class than her present means indicate, and mistreated by her “sisters.” Fanny and her brother are actually both motherless and fatherless in the biological sense, as their “aged” grandfather is their caretaker. As such, the grandfather’s presence serves the essential function of “father.” As the tale opens, however, we learn, “it had been a happy home . . . but alas! sickness had laid its heavy hand upon the aged man, and want and wretchedness had become their portion.”⁷ When her grandfather becomes unable to provide for the family, Fanny takes it upon herself not only to tend to the ill, old man and her younger brother as she has been doing anyway as the only female in the household, but also to work to provide subsistence for the family. In both instances, Fanny does what she must to ensure her family’s well-being.

Despite the family’s present circumstances and the necessity for Fanny to sell produce on the street, the reader’s first encounter with her indicates her inherent upper class status: “There was something in the appearance of the pale, sad girl, as, in her scant attire she shivered in the biting wind, not often met with in the humble disciples of poverty—a certain subdued, gentle air, partaking of much unconscious grace, that whispered of better days gone by.”⁸ That Fanny is “unconscious” of her “grace” and “subdued, gentle air” is important. She simply goes about her day attempting to sell fruit

⁷ George Thompson, *Venus in Boston*, In *Venus in Boston And Other Tales of Nineteenth Century Life*, eds. David S. Reynolds and Kimberly R. Gladman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

to passersby; yet her entire being exudes the aura of one who is fit for better things than selling fruit. As one generous customer, who we later find out to be her future friend and benefactress Alice Goldworthy, remarks to her, “You are much too pretty for such an employment.”⁹ Alice, herself of the upper classes, recognizes Fanny’s inherent class status, and as soon as the opportunity presents itself, Alice and her father take it upon themselves to take in Fanny and her brother, training them in the ways of the upper class.

While the other girls selling fruit appear “squalid and dirty,” Fanny is pretty, clean, and dignified. Her speech alone signifies that she belongs to a class above that in which she currently resides. The other girls’ “profanity and obscenity” along with their improper English mark them as the lowest of the lower class, while Fanny’s polite manners and perfect English—she uses “pray,” “may,” and “good sir” while the other girls say “I wants” and “Them has got”—mark her as being completely different. Yet, Fanny attempts in no way to appear better than her station as a poor fruit vender; these characteristics are natural and “unconscious,” a fact which marks her as a target of the other girls on the street—the “apple girls.”

The “apple girls” inhabit a station much different from that of Fanny. They are effectively prostitutes disguised as fruit vendors, “proverbial for their vicious propensities and dishonesty,” stealing from anyone who is not alert.¹⁰ Although they are sisters in poverty, they treat her most unkindly. They act much as Cinderella’s stepsisters do when the fairy tale heroine wishes to attend the ball, mocking Fanny: “ha, ha! Here is my fine lady, with her smooth face and clean gown, who disdains to keep company with us, and

⁹ Ibid, 9.

¹⁰ Ibid, 9.

do as we do! Let us tear off her clothes and roll her in the mire!”¹¹ Fanny has done nothing to these girls. Yet, much as Cinderella’s stepsisters hate her and humiliate her simply because they envy her beauty and her domestic nature, the apple girls taunt and abuse Fanny because of her natural beauty and grace, “naturally” belonging to someone in a class high above that of the apple girls. The signs that Fanny belongs in a higher class than that to which she currently belongs and the envy of the apple girls reinforce dominant conservative ideals of upper-class entitlement and superiority.

Fanny’s social class is also determined by fate. We know from the first couple of pages that her family had fallen on hard times; thus, we assume from Fanny’s disposition and actions that they were indeed of a social class higher than that in which they currently find themselves. Fanny’s inherent class status becomes more apparent when Fanny goes to live with Alice and Mr. Goldworthy. Fanny’s maid insists upon helping her change every night, and Fanny protests, “You are very silly, Matilda, to insist upon waiting on *me*; I, that am as poor as yourself, and was brought up as nothing but a fruit girl.” Matilda’s horrified response is telling: “‘Lor, Miss!’ cried Matilda, holding up her hands with a sort of pious horror—‘how can you compare yourself with the likes of me? You were born to be a lady, and I am so happy to be your servant—your own ladies’ maid!’”¹² Though Fanny is correct that she and Matilda share similar economic backgrounds, Matilda is quite right that Fanny was “born to be a lady.”

Fanny’s remarks to Matilda hint that she too understands the differences that stand between them. She rebukes Matilda as soon as Matilda becomes too familiar: “You vex

¹¹ Ibid, 10.

¹² Ibid, 94.

me to death with your nonsense, Matilda,” cried Fanny—“how tiresome you are! Pray be silent.”¹³ Fanny would not have dared speak to Alice or anyone whom she considered an equal in such a commanding way, but Matilda is her servant. Importantly, Fanny feels no remorse for rebuking Matilda so harshly; never does Fanny apologize for calling Matilda “tiresome” or saying that she was vexed to death with Matilda’s “nonsense.” Instead, she later smiles at Matilda, and Matilda seems to soak in this gift.

Further reinforcing classism, *Venus in Boston* connects one’s social and political class to his or her moral class. One of the apple girls, known only as Sow Nance, so envies Fanny that she tricks her by leading her to the home of Mr. Tickle, a famous and respected politician and seducer of adolescent girls. Nance knows that Mr. Tickle wants nothing of the apple girls who sell their persons to the highest bidder; he wants a girl from a respectable family who remains virtuous. When he asks Nance who Fanny is, “‘Not *one of us*,’ was the reply, ‘she sells fruit, and is poor, but her folks are respectable;- -you must pay me well for bringing her here, for she’s handsome.’”¹⁴ Nance emphasizes that Fanny differs from herself and the other apple girls; yes, Fanny appears to be like them—“she sells fruit, and is poor.” Yet Fanny differs in one important way—“her folks are respectable”—denoting that she falls in a class somewhere above the average fruit vendor. Equally important, the text maintains that one’s personal moral status and respectability relate directly to that of her parents. Nance implies that she herself is not respectable because her parents are not, and in fact, we later learn that her entire family either has been hanged for murder or sits in prison awaiting execution. As Sow Nance

¹³ Ibid, 94.

¹⁴ Ibid, 11.

explains, she had little choice in becoming an “honor” to her family as a child murderer, prostitute, thief, and pimp.¹⁵ Sow Nance’s social and moral class dictates that she lives among “the lower orders (for even in crime there is an aristocracy).”¹⁶

The famed Mr. Tickle and other rich men who perpetrate various crimes mostly keep themselves out of the muck of true crime and refuse to fully associate with those like Sow Nance, who do anything for the right price and who come from the poorest parents. That Mr. Tickle is a publicly respected politician and a corrupt rapist of young women in no way subverts the ideals that those of the upper classes live more moral lives than the lower classes; in fact, Mr. Tickle’s perversions work to strengthen the reader’s belief in the underpinnings of class and morality. Tickle is “one of those wealthy beasts whose lusts run riot on the innocence of young females—whose crimes outnumbered the gray hairs upon his head, and whose riches were devoted to no other purpose than the procurement of victims for his appetite, and the gratification of his abominable passions.”¹⁷

Though the public persona of this man is that of a venerable gentleman with the best interests of his constituents at heart, Fanny immediately finds herself uneasy and fearful in his presence. The narration momentarily switches to Fanny’s perspective; she sees Tickle’s “two rows of teeth not unlike the fangs of a wolf,” evoking “Red Riding Hood.” Just as the reader of the fairy tale knows that it is really the wolf in Grandmother’s clothing because of his big eyes and teeth, the reader of *Venus and Boston*

¹⁵ Ibid, 47-48.

¹⁶ Ibid, 21.

¹⁷ Ibid, 11.

and Fanny know that Mr. Tickles is a “wolf” in disguise. That his lechery is obvious comforts the reader that he or she will know a pervert when he or she sees one.

In keeping with this comforting of the reader, the text unmasks the libertine, known as the Chevalier Duvall, who becomes engaged to Alice Goldworthy almost from the moment that the reader encounters him. Whereas Alice remains unaware of her fiancé’s true character, again, Fanny and the reader recognize him as a thief and a liar immediately. The narrator tells the reader of the Chevalier: he “was supposed to be a foreigner of distinguished birth . . . [Alice’s] lover was a man possessing no visible resources, and was besides very unwilling to allude to his former history, which was involved in much obscurity.”¹⁸ This introduction reveals the Chevalier to the reader as a fraud. He is “supposed” to be of noble lineage, yet he has no capital or property.

Should there be any question about the Chevalier’s lack of social status, the narrator follows his insinuation that the Chevalier is not who he claims to be with a revelation that the Chevalier’s moral class status equals that of the lower orders. Immediately after the introductory description of the Chevalier, the narrator tells the reader of the Chevalier’s sister, the Duchess. When her brother brings Mr. Tickles to meet her, the Duchess “was prepared to receive her brother and his friend in her *boudoir*.”¹⁹ A true woman, regardless of infirmity, would never receive men in her boudoir; Thompson even italicizes the word, emphasizing the depravity to come. That she possesses a low moral standing becomes clear immediately after Mr. Tickles enters

¹⁸ Ibid, 56.

¹⁹ Ibid, 57.

her bedroom. Rather than having dressed to receive guests or having even put on a robe to cover her nightgown, the Duchess receives the men in a thin gauze-like covering.

The narrator's description of the scene demonstrates Thompson's indebtedness to the New York Herald's coverage of the Jewett murder:

Truly, she was the VENUS OF BOSTON! . . . Her limbs (once the mold of a renowned sculptor at Athens,) would have crazed Canova, and made Powers break his "Greek Slave" into a thousand fragments; and those limbs—how visible they were beneath the light, transparent gauze . . . Her leg, with its exquisite ankle and swelling calf,—faultless in symmetry,—was terminated by a tiny foot which coquettishly played with a satin slipper on the carpet, a slipper that would have driven Cinderella to the commission of suicide.²⁰

Though the Duchess's slipper might have driven Cinderella to suicide, there is nothing about the Duchess herself that the famed fairy tale heroine would envy. The Duchess's actions in accepting a male caller into her boudoir while in a state of "*dishabille*" indicate that she is no lady; the descriptors, excited dashes, capitalized words and exclamation points that evoke James Gordon Bennett's eroticized account of Helen Jewett's corpse and murder scene solidify that she is a fallen woman. The slipper with which the Duchess plays possibly further symbolizes her licentiousness. According to Freud, shoes are symbols of female genitalia as they symbolize the lost phallus; Cinderella's lost shoe in Freudian terms symbolizes her lost virginity.²¹ Here the Duchess fully possesses and controls her slipper and plays with it just as she plays with her sexuality, using it to manipulate and control Tickles.

Through the corrupt Mr. Tickles, the Chevalier, the Duchess, and other obviously morally corrupt characters such as the licentious Lady Hawley, the reader experiences the

²⁰ Ibid, 58.

²¹ Sigmund Freud, "Symbolism in Dreams," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XV, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1963), 158.

thrills of the underworld of the city. We see the Chevalier and Duchess kissing passionately before we learn that they are not siblings but lovers; we see and hear Mr. Tickles and the Duchess role-playing a father-daughter sexual encounter.²² We learn from Jew Mike about Lady Hawley and her lover cross-dressing during their sexual encounters.²³ Perhaps the text's reveling in the outlandish sexual escapades of its characters is one reason that so many critics view the works of Thompson as subversive. The reader is exposed to the corruption and sexuality in which these lower orders engage; however, this exposure does nothing to counter the dominant ideologies at work in antebellum America. It simply reinforces them. Fanny, and thus the reader are not fooled by the outer appearances of Mr. Tickles and the Chevalier, and the description of the Duchess immediately signals that she is a wretched woman. Their indulgence in such acts as extramarital sex, pseudo-incest, and seduction allow the reader to indulge in these erotic acts, but it also assures the reader that he or she is not as depraved as these characters and that he or she will immediately recognize lecherous men and those men and women who try to pass for a higher status.

Unlike Fanny Aubrey, the Cinderella figure in *City Crimes*, Sophia Franklin fits the fairy tale's motif almost identically. Sophia's father is dead (we later learn that he was murdered by her mother), and her mother Lucretia and sister Josephine pay attention to her only when they think she can benefit them in some way. The sisters differ as much as do Cinderella and her stepsisters:

²² Ibid, 65-66.

²³ Ibid, 36.

Josephine was tall and majestic; her walk and gestures were imperative and commanding. Sophia's form was slight and sylph-like; her every movement was characterized by exquisite modesty and grace . . .

In mind and disposition they were as dissimilar Josephine was passionate, fiery and haughty to an eminent degree; Sophia, on the contrary, possessed an angelic placidity of temper, and a sweetness of disposition which, like a fragrant flower, shed its grateful perfume upon the lowly and humble, as upon the wealthy and proud.²⁴

In spite of their being sisters, Josephine and Sophia have nothing in common, possessing attributes of opposite natures. Whereas Josephine's qualities contradict every aspect of true womanhood, Sophia's every characteristic embodies it. She is full of "modesty and grace" and bestowed her good nature and "angelic" qualities upon everyone whether "lowly and humble" or "wealthy and proud."

They differ dramatically not only in character, but also in the way they feel about and treat each other. Sophia's sweet disposition embraces her "commanding" sister, while Josephine conspires with their mother to sell Sophia as a sex slave. When Sophia learns of their plot, she protests, "Must you have money at the expense of my honor . . . my poor, dead father-- . . . he seems to look down on me from Heaven, and tell me to commit no sin." Her mother replies, "Must we starve on account of your silly notions about virtue, and such humbug? Your sister and I have long since learned to dispose of our persons for pecuniary benefit, as well as for our sensual gratification—for it is as pleasurable as profitable, and you must do the same, now that you are old enough."²⁵ Rather than encouraging Sophia to adhere to the accepted path and save her virginity for her future husband, Lucretia Franklin sees her daughter's virtue as a means to support her own perverted habits. Though she seems to attempt to soften the blow by adding that

²⁴ George Thompson, *City Crimes*, 156.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 276-277.

sexual encounters can be “as pleasurable as profitable,” this really only reinforces that she is herself a woman of illicit behaviors and ill morals who will sell her daughter for profit.

That Josephine aids her mother in selling her sister reinforces the glimpses of Josephine’s licentiousness that the novel has previously allowed. Earlier, Josephine’s illicit behavior comes to light immediately after the reader encounters her. She dresses as a boy for a masquerade, thinking that “men will all run distracted after a pretty woman in male attire.”²⁶ Josephine has no qualms about cross-dressing to attract men; she exploits what she perceives as an obvious male proclivity. It is important to note, however, that when a man mistakes her for an actual boy and proposes a clandestine encounter, Josephine is furious. She calls it “unnatural” and threatens to expose him.²⁷ Later, on a steamer to Boston, Josephine engages in a ménage-a-trois with the captain and her mother. There is little sexually in which Josephine will not participate, and her attempt to sell her sister is not an attempt to avoid starvation but an attempt to continue her licentious lifestyle without having to take lovers of a lower class.

In Thompson’s works as in the fairy tale versions of “Cinderella,” those who conspire against the heroines suffer indescribably painful punishments. In “Cinderella” a pair of doves peck out the stepsisters’ eyes after the stepsisters have mutilated themselves trying to fit into “the” shoe. Scholars such as David Reynolds and Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz interpret Thompson’s fiction as depicting active women who subvert gender norms and appeal to women readers. Horowitz goes so far as to argue, “women trade

²⁶ Ibid, 158.

²⁷ Ibid, 169-170.

their sexual endowments for men's money and thereby gain a better position from which to enact their deadly punishments. At a time when many voices called for female subordination and piety, these dangerous vixens may have held an allure."²⁸ Horowitz makes it appear that Thompson presents women characters who successfully transgress the boundaries of subordination and piety. Yet the fact remains that in *City Crimes* every woman who refuses subordination and piety suffers by the end of that work, with most dying painful deaths. The lone survivor in *Venus in Boston* is the Duchess, who allows Mr. Tickles to indulge in incestuous fantasies with her and whose only other transgression is posing as the sister of a con artist. Rather than creating alluringly active women characters, Thompson pretends to subvert the era's rigid gender roles and, in reality, simply reinforces those roles by creating heroines who embody them.

In *Venus in Boston*, Sow Nance and Mr. Tickles suffer even more cruel punishments than those meted out in the more overt fairy tale. Sow Nance's punishment, the narrator implies, occurs as a direct result of her actions against Fanny. The narrator summarizes Sow Nance's fate in just one simple sentence: "Sow Nance has become the most abandoned prostitute in Ann Street."²⁹ While this sentence seems straightforward, it actually conveys much more than it states. As one of the apple girls, Nance depends upon her ability to attract men. She creates opportunities to steal from men when they pay for sex with her, and her pimping of unsuspecting girls results directly from her work as a prostitute. That she has become the "most abandoned" on Ann Street, a street known for prostitution, speaks volumes about her state—she has so degraded herself that she will

²⁸ Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 231.

²⁹ George Thompson, *City Crimes*, 104.

perform any of a variety of perversions that other prostitutes who retain some of their dignity refuse to do. On the other hand, “abandoned” may mean that she has no customers, that she has no means of existing even in the barest sense. She will eventually either succumb to more dangerous types of thievery for an income and end up in prison, or die by starvation or exposure. Sow Nance is not allowed any sympathy in spite of her immoral family life and the fact that she entered into prostitution as a result of a rape when she was only eleven years old. Because of her actions against the “Cinderella” heroine, she must suffer as punishment.

Mr. Tickle, the man who goes to extraordinary lengths—even hiring an escaped felon to kidnap her—to seduce Fanny, experiences a punishment in which the reader is allowed to revel. As Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz points out, “In George Thompson’s fictional works, the primary force is violence and sadomasochism. The books dwell on the details of violent mutilations and deaths.”³⁰ What Horowitz misses is that the violence in Thompson’s texts functions as justice. In this novel, as in others, the sadistically violent justice occurs at the hand of one of the more heinous characters.

Jew Mike, Fanny’s kidnapper, experiences a change of heart when Tickle refuses to pay him for his services and helps to rescue the young woman. Upon her rescue, he sends her home and proceeds to carry out the punishment he and Fanny’s mysterious savior Corporal Grimsby have arranged for Tickle: “Mike needed no light to guide his footsteps, he traversed the dark passage, he seized the iron ring, and drew up the trap door of the ‘Coal Hole,’ . . . Then with a deep curse, he cast the old libertine into the dark

³⁰ Horowitz, 230

abyss, closed the entrance, and departed.”³¹ Jew Mike obviously wants to punish Tickle because the latter did not pay him for kidnapping Fanny, but the punishment itself is concocted by Corporal Grimsby, who has nothing but Fanny’s safety in mind. Like the doves who punish Cinderella’s stepsisters, Corporal Grimsby and Jew Mike cause Tickle to suffer physical pain; he lasts for days, calling out for help, and perishes “miserably,” with no one to even comfort him. Like Sow Nance’s, Tickle’s punishment takes the form of abandonment.

Just as Cinderella’s stepsisters and Sow Nance were punished for their actions against the heroines of those stories, Josephine and her mother suffer for the actions they take against Sophia in *City Crimes*, yet they are subjected to far harsher and more sadistic punishments, likely because this novel is more fully developed than the former. Similar to the way that Tickle’s punishment in *Venus in Boston* occurs at the hands of the most heinous criminal, Josephine’s punishment comes at the hands of the novel’s “avenging angel” and vilest criminal, The Dead Man. Though he partakes in the most horrendous crimes that occur in the novel, The Dead Man functions as the hand of justice, meting out punishments against every active woman in the novel. When Josephine refuses his advances, The Dead Man throws Vitriol at her, which “ran in her eyes and down her face, burning her flesh in the most horrible manner.” A bystander is able to save her life, but cannot “restore her lost eyesight, or remove the horrible disfigurement of her burned and scarred visage.”³² Whereas Cinderella’s stepsisters lose only their eyes, Josephine loses

³¹ Thompson, *Venus in Boston*, 103.

³² *Ibid*, 298.

both her eyes and her physical beauty. Because Josephine's livelihood and that of her mother depend upon her ability to attract men, her life is effectively over.

Indeed, though she does trick a suitor into marriage by wearing a veil covering her "horrible disfigurement," as soon as he sees her face in the "nuptial chamber," "after bitterly reproaching her, [he] drove her from his presence, bidding her never to let him see her again, and refusing to make the smallest provision for her support."³³ Josephine, seeing her life as over, poisons herself. It is important to note that Josephine does not just commit suicide after *The Dead Man* disfigures her. Rather, she suffers. First physical pain, then blindness, then the indignity of having her husband of a few hours throw her out without a penny to her name. Suicide is a welcome respite from her suffering.

Even more sadistic is the punishment of Frank Sydney's wife Julia. Julia transgresses every societal expectation of a true woman possible: she has an affair with Nero, her black menial; becomes pregnant with his baby; murders the baby so that no one will find out; then marries Frank Sydney, discards Nero, and plots Frank's murder. When Frank discovers her infidelity and miscegenation and throws her out of his home, her reaction is far from expected: "You cast me off forever!—I thank you for those words; they release me from a painful thralldom. Now am I mistress of my own actions—free to indulge to my heart's content in delightful amours!—I will not return to my father's house—no, . . . I prefer liberty to follow my own inclinations, to the restraint of my parent's house." She continues, "My future career is plainly marked out: I shall become an abandoned and licentious woman, yielding myself up unreservedly to the

³³ Ibid, 308-309.

voluptuous promptings of my ardent soul. I part from you without regret.”³⁴ Again, though this speech might be read mistakenly as subverting the cult of domesticity, Frank Sydney focalizes this scene. His disdain and shock at Julia’s actions and her reaction to being abandoned by her husband are the reader’s shock and disdain. The text sympathizes with Frank and condemns Julia’s immorality in the same way that George Wilkes’ *The Lives of Helen Jewett and Richard P. Robinson* condemns the “freedom” that the divorced prostitute Mrs. Bryant hails as her reason for abandoning her husband. Certainly, these characters oppose the boundaries set upon their sex, but in every instance, they are condemned for doing so and eventually punished for their wrongdoing.

Perhaps because of her transgression of racial taboos in addition to her sexual conquests and infanticide, Julia suffers the cruelest punishments the text dispenses. She takes the name Mrs. Belmont and assumes the identity of a widow, enabling her to rent a home without attracting attention to her wanton ways. The Dead Man, who has murdered children, driven their mother insane, stolen, and raped, finds Julia and blackmails her into entertaining him with her sexual charms. Whereas Julia would likely encourage attentions from most men, the Dead Man’s disfigured face repulses her, and his power to reveal her previous miscegenation forces her into a subservient position. The Dead Man views himself as “the destroying angel” sent to mete out “a terrible retribution” for her crimes.³⁵ In carrying out his function as the destroying angel, The Dead Man forces Julia to act as servant to both him and Nero. At one point, the Dead Man requires her to clean

³⁴ Ibid, 152.

³⁵ Ibid, 233.

his muddy shoes in her good china bowl and to dry them with a fine handkerchief. At any point where she considers disobeying, the Dead Man beats her “violently in the face,” her only true asset as a woman alone in the city.³⁶

More disturbing and sadistic is Frank Sydney’s personal revenge against Julia. She remarries and moves to Boston. Sydney finds her, disguises himself, and tricks Julia into falling in love with him. Disguised as the Signor Montori, Frank convinces Julia to poison her husband. After the husband is dead, Frank reveals himself to Julia, who “woke to a full consciousness of her guilt and wretchedness.”³⁷ Frank escapes unscathed for his role in the murder; in fact, the text only mentions his role once. After the murder, Frank appears as the bringer of justice rather than as the conspirator. Julia, on the other hand, is forced into the streets, where passersby assume her to be an intoxicated courtesan, and assault her. Finally, “much fatigued” and uncertain of what to do or where to go, she comes upon the Charlestown bridge and throws herself into the water below. Julia endures literally years of punishment at the hands of the Dead Man and Frank Sydney. Rather than having her arrested for either the infanticide or the murder of her second husband, Frank Sydney enacts his own revenge, ensuring that Julia’s suffering will be more than she can endure.

Whereas women who transgress societal norms are punished sadistically, Thompson’s male villains, with rare exceptions, redeem themselves and go on to live productive, middle-class lives. Of the male villains in *Venus in Boston*, only Mr. Tickle receives any type of punishment, and his is at the hand of the other criminal in the

³⁶ Ibid, 235.

³⁷ Ibid, 293.

novella. Likewise, in almost every instance in *City Crimes*, men redeem themselves. Only two villains receive any punishment—the Dead Man and Reverend Doctor Sinclair—and even these do not get punished as severely as are Josephine and Lucretia.

The immoral behavior of Frank Sydney stands as a startling example. During his engagement to Julia and prior to his knowledge of her illicit actions, Mr. Sydney tours the city dressed as a beggar, ostensibly to help the poor. What he really does is revel in the excesses that the poor offer to him. When he runs across Maria, a prostitute who tells him of her life's horrors, which include seduction by the family minister and marrying a man who forces her to sell herself, he begins to listen to her story. The text implies that he wants to help her overcome her many misfortunes, yet the moment he sits down with her, he is overtaken with her beauty. When she pauses her narrative to look at him, "he did precisely what ninety-nine out every one hundred young men in existence would have done, in the same circumstances—he encircled her slender waist with his arm, drew her to his throbbing breast, and tasted the nectar of her lips." He does not stop with a kiss, he fondles her "ivory globes" and "bathes in a sea of rapturous delight!"³⁸ In contrast to its condemnation of Josephine's and Julia's infidelities, the text excuses Frank's behavior, saying "he was not an angel. No he was *human*." It even speaks to him and encourages his advances on the young woman: "Ah Frank, Frank! thou hast gone too far to retract now!"³⁹

Maria's story includes plenty of sex, but her narration makes it clear that she gained no joy from what she witnessed. Mistakenly ascribing it to *Venus in Boston*, David

³⁸ Ibid, 112.

³⁹ Ibid, 111.

Reynolds describes this scene as “a striking scene of reverend lechery . . . in which a young girl is aroused to sexual frenzy when she peeps through a keyhole and sees her mother having sex with their clergyman, who later in the novel casts lustful glances at the girl herself.”⁴⁰ Maria dwells upon her reaction to her mother’s transgression; she describes feeling “mortified and enraged,” “horrified and sick,” even “shame and grief.” Never does Maria talk about being aroused, and she certainly experiences no frenzy when she “shed many bitter tears” immediately after witnessing her mother’s affair.⁴¹ Thus, no matter how one tries to justify Frank Sydney’s advances, Maria does nothing to encourage his sexual advances, and his leaving “a large sum of money” as he departs fully demonstrates that, like the rest of society, he sees her as no more than a common whore.

On the other hand, when the Reverend Doctor Sinclair dies because of his licentious actions, a woman receives the blame for his misdeeds. The narrator moralizes:

Why are ministers of the gospel so prone to licentiousness? is a question often asked, and is often answered thus—Because they are a set of hypocritical libertines. But we may say, may not we see the reason in this: the female members of a church are apt to regard their minister with the highest degree of affectionate admiration . . . The “sister,” instead of maintaining a proper reserve, grows too communicative and too familiar, and the minister, who is but a man, subject to all the weaknesses and frailties of humanity, often in an unguarded moment forgets his sacred calling, and becomes the seducer—though we question if literal *seduction* be involved, where the female so readily *complies* with voluptuous wishes, which perchance, she responds to with as much fervor as the other party entertains them.⁴²

⁴⁰ David Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1988), 262. As there is no such scene in *Venus in Boston*, Reynolds must be referring to *City Crimes*.

⁴¹ Thompson, *City Crimes*, 113.

⁴² *Ibid*, 213.

Though Reynolds tells us that Thompson coined the term “reverend rake,” this scene epitomizes the novel’s, and Thompson’s, pretended subversion. While it points out the licentiousness of Reverend Sinclair, it absolves him of his crimes by blaming his conduct on his female parishioners. More importantly, the text undoes its earlier criticism of the clergyman who seduced Maria by questioning “if literal seduction be involved” and suggesting that she and other young women willingly comply with “fervor” to the clergy’s advances, even though Maria has already explained that she became the object of her reverend’s attention as a retaliation for her revealing her knowledge of his affair with her mother.

Similarly, the novel points to the corruption of the police and court systems, but because the character with whom the reader comes to identify—Frank Sydney—benefits from this corruption, the reader and Sydney soon forget it. One notable scene takes place at the watch-house. The watch captain asks each detainee for a name and decides his or her fate. The captain locks one man up “not for any crime, but because he did not belong to *our* party,” while a group of “negroes . . . were then summarily disposed of” without being asked for names. When the captain discovers the identity of Frank Archer, the novel’s upper-class hero, the captain apologizes, adding “that if [my men] had known who you were, they would not have molested you had they found you demolishing all the houses on the Points.”⁴³ This passage epitomizes the novel’s first half, which pretends to subvert repressive structures of state control by revealing the corruption and biases of them. Again, the reader senses the injustices of the city, but the novel immediately undoes that sense of injustice by the reinforcement of the ideals of capitalism. The

⁴³ Ibid, 196.

system of justice literally works for Frank Sydney, granting him all of the privileges that come with his upper class status.

The Dead Man's stint in the prison workhouse seems to subvert this institution. We learn from the proprietor of one of the workhouses the *real* reasons prison workhouses exist: "This system of convict labor is a glorious thing for us master mechanics, though it plays the devil with the journeymen. Why, I formerly employed fifty workmen, who earned on an average two dollars a day; but since I contracted with the State to employ its convicts, the work which cost me one hundred dollars a day I now get for *fifteen* dollars."⁴⁴ When the proprietor is reminded of the "honest mechanics" who lose employment because of this system, he laughs: "if the *honest mechanics*, as you call them, wish to work for me, they must commit a crime and be sent to Sing Sing, where they can enjoy that satisfaction—ha, ha, ha."⁴⁵ This section of the text appears subversive as it points out the corruption of the proprietor and the inherent injustices of capitalism. This subversion seems to be furthered as the proprietor refuses to aid a starving woman whose husband had been discharged from his job at the factory when the prison workers were hired. He mocks her, while a lowly porter gives her "all the money I've got in the world."

Yet, the text only pretends this subversion, as only a few lines later, the reader glimpses a scene in heaven:

The recording angel above opened the great Book wherein all human actions are written, and affixed another *black mark* to the name of the wealthy proprietor. There were many black marks attached to that name already.

⁴⁴ Ibid 182.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 183.

The angel then sought out another name, and upon it impressed the stamp of a celestial seal. It was the name of the poor laborer.⁴⁶

This glimpse of the recording angel and the Book of Names reinforces the ideology that those who do evil in this life will be punished in the next, whereas those who do good will be rewarded. In other words, this particular scene sets the proprietor's wrongs right again. Armed with the knowledge that the proprietor and those like him will be punished by God, the reader moves on to guiltless enjoyment of scenes of debauchery.

Thompson's pretended subversion goes further, as these scenes of debauchery seem to subvert heterosexist ideology, while only reinforcing those same views. Earlier, I mentioned Josephine's dressing as a boy to attract male attention at the masquerade.

When a man mistakes her for an actual boy, she furiously rebukes him:

I am a woman. I did but pretend, in accordance with a suddenly conceived notion, to deceive you for a while, but that deception has developed an iniquity in the human character, the existence of which I have heard before, but never fully believe till today. Your unnatural iniquity inspires me with abhorrence; leave me instantly and attempt not to follow me, or I shall expose you to the guests.⁴⁷

Josephine, who has no problem engaging in a *ménage-a-trois* with her mother, abhors the man's suggestion. Her dressing as a boy to attract men hints that she and her mother are privy to a proclivity among men to admire the form of boys. Yet her reaction to encountering a man who wants her as a boy signals that even she is not able to accept a sexuality that differs so dramatically from the heterosexual norm. On the other hand, when Dr. Sinclair enjoys the appearance of Josephine dressed as a boy, she does nothing but encourage his advances because he does not want a boy but a woman dressed as one.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 183.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 170.

Furthering the reinforcement of heterosexist and capitalist ideologies in the text is the ending. The Doctor kills the Dead Man rather uneventfully; Josephine and Julia have been sadistically killed. Because Sophia represents the pure Cinderella, she, unlike the other women in the novel, survives to a “happy ending.” She and Frank Sydney marry and prosper in their life together. The Doctor, a former thief and murderer instrumental in the destruction of Julia and the Dead Man, receives an offer of reward from Frank. Frank offers, “You shall share my fortune, and move in a sphere of respectability and worth.” The Doctor refuses, saying “My ambition is, to build up a fortune of my own,”⁴⁸ and by the end of the text, he has become a respected physician with a happy and respectable family.⁴⁹ In short, the Doctor achieves the American Dream. Even Nero, Julia’s black lover, opens a barbershop in Boston. The novel’s ending moral, “honesty is the best policy” and “virtue is its own reward,” reinforces the capitalist notion that one can rise in class if one but works hard and adheres to the moral standards of the time.⁵⁰

George Thompson takes the fairy tale tradition, the sensational reporting of Bennett, and the subversive tactics of Lippard and mixes them with his own pornographic style. In doing so, Thompson eludes the censors. He disguises what would otherwise have resulted in his arrest in a mask of acceptability by employing the various trappings of fairy tale, news, and political criticism. Thompson no more intends to subvert the classist, sexist, and heterosexist ideologies of the day than he intends to write children’s stories. William Berry, known for specializing “in racy or indecent titles,” published

⁴⁸ Ibid, 300.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 309.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 310.

Thompson's *City Crimes*. Nearly all of his other novels were published by wholesalers who would later be prosecuted for obscenity or indecency under the Comstock law and the earlier postal obscenity laws that forbade obscene or indecent material from being carried in the mail.⁵¹ Thompson would have been aware of the reputation of his publishers, who marketed his books alongside their more overtly indecent books and periodicals. His subversion of capitalism, sexism, and other societal norms simply does not exist. The pretension of social critique merely masks what those readers who bought books from Berry and Thompson's other publishers really wanted: cold, hard, erotic fiction that reminded them that their America, their capitalism would reward them for hard work and long-suffering morality.

⁵¹ Haven Hawley, "Bad man, Bad Business, Bad Habits, Bad Character . . ."; or, America's Homegrown Publishers of 'Indecent' Books, 1840-1890. SHARP Annual Meeting, 2001.

CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION

Are fathers, brothers, friends, oppress'd with care—
We claim a right in every grief to share;

...

While man abroad for happiness may roam,
'Tis ours to make a paradise at home.
As 'tis our right, oh, be it still our praise,
To gild the eve of our dear parents' days;

...

Next 'tis our right, to watch the sick man's bed,
Bathe the swoln limb, or bind the aching head;
Present each nauseous draught with tenderness,
And hide the anxious teas, we can't repress;
On tiptoe glide around the darken'd room,
And strive by smiles to dissipate its gloom.

—Susannah Rowson's "Rights of Woman" in *Miscellaneous Poems* (1804)

The writers examined in this dissertation enter into the debate about women's roles by employing those motifs that they knew would appeal to the largest audience. We know that "transactions between cultural buyer and seller, producer and consumer shaped both content and form."¹ So what were James Gordon Bennett, George Wilkes, Edgar Allan Poe, George Lippard, and George Thompson selling? Like so many novels, newspapers, magazines, television shows, and movies today, they sold their own sometimes conflicted ideologies packaged in sex and violence, and repackaged in fairy tale motifs. The translation of European fairy tales into English influenced sensationalism and Gothicism in antebellum America. Fairy tales enabled these authors

¹ Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 84.

to build upon a familiar tradition to comment on American debates about women, patriarchy, and capitalism.

Susannah Rowson's poem stresses that women's rights to share in grief, "make a paradise at home," take care of their parents, and to care for the sick are rights and not duties. She encourages women to stay out of the arenas of politics, divinity, and law, or face "deserved ridicule." This poem appears in 1804, amid a growing debate about women's roles in the republic. Ann Douglas describes the instruction that women received in antebellum America: "Stay within your confines, and you will be worshipped . . . step outside and you will cease to exist."² Women writers and editors such as Maria Cummins and Sarah Hale, editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*, encouraged adherence to the Cult of True Womanhood. Yet women authors such as Fanny Fern and E. D. E. N. Southworth mocked the tenets of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity in their novels. In the antebellum period and before, American women, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg tells us, exhibited anger because they were "caught between the promises of political power and social equality that Jacksonian society held out to all Americans and the restrictions the Cult of True Womanhood placed on all women."³

Still, women found ways to express themselves within the confines of the Cult of True Womanhood, and they often effected great change or, at least, caught the attention of the "superior" sex. They played upon the "rights" described in Rowson's poem and founded reform societies such as the New York Moral Reform Society, which focused on converting prostitutes to evangelical Protestantism and establishing "[women's] right to

² Douglas, 44.

³ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 21.

define—and limit—men’s sexual behavior.”⁴ In the 1840s, women began receiving their first university degrees.⁵ Men must have been concerned that women were encroaching upon the public sphere and the double standard that had existed for so long. If women wanted to limit men’s sexual behavior and, thus, their sexual power, what would be next?

The work of Poe, Lippard, and Thompson entered into this debate over women’s proper place in America, as did Bennett and Wilkes. James Gordon Bennett played into the public’s growing concern about prostitution and urban corruption, creating a tale of a prostitute that, on the surface, meant to caution about the dangers of the city. We find, however, that Bennett’s fantastic reporting actually made the city more appealing to both young men and young women. On June 25, 1836, *Atkinson’s Saturday Evening Post* writes about the effects:

It is a melancholy fact that since the murder of Ellen Jewett, and the consequent publicity given to her dashing, expensive, and gay style of living, a number of young females have come from the country—enticed by the artificial blandishments and quick finding pleasures of a prostitute’s life—and thrown themselves upon the town, victims to vile profligates, mercenary, unprincipled brothel keepers, and their own depraved and licentious passions.⁶

Bennett masked his sensational reporting in the style and motifs of the fairy tales, relying on descriptions that recollect “Sleeping Beauty” and “Snow White,” to purport to warn young people against the dangers that befell Helen Jewett and Richard Robinson.

⁴ Smith-Rosenberg, 109-110.

⁵ Ellen M. Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America: A Social History* (New York: Facts on File, 1997), ix.

⁶ “Police Office—A Melancholy Fact,” *Atkinson’s Saturday Evening Post*, New York, June 25, 1836, Col. 6.

Writing in 1836, Bennett was well familiar with the New York Moral Reform Society, which had been founded only two years prior. He played both sides against one another, creating a sensational story that told of the dangers of prostitution while implying that Richard Robinson was a victim of the sexual aggressions of Jewett. Thus, Bennett's reports played both into female reformers' claims of the dangers of prostitution and against their assertion that men's sexual behavior and aggressiveness was to blame for women's downfalls.

Edgar Allan Poe takes a different route to expounding upon women's role in America. Instead of demonstrating the dangers of prostitution or overt sexuality, Poe's short stories illustrate the terror created by educated and assertive women. A first-person narrator relates each of Poe's short stories; thus, the male narrator's horror is the reader's horror. In each tale, the narrator tells his reader that he adores his wife or sister for her intelligence and her ability to guide him to more intellectual pursuits. He learns from her, but not about how to be a good Christian; rather, he learns about science, literature, and other worldly pursuits. Soon, he becomes frightened of his love, though he never provides a reason, and after the woman in the tale dies, she refuses to remain dead.

The male narrators are not frightened by the impending death of the women. In several instances, if the narrators are to be believed, they are not even aware that the women's deaths are imminent. The narrators are terrified of what is to come after the women in their stories die. Death symbolizes the ultimate passivity and submission, but the women in these tales have so resisted the typical female role that the narrators of Poe's tales realize that even death cannot subdue the active woman. Thus, rather than depicting the ruin or death of women who transgress the boundaries set up for them, Poe

depicts the terror that these women create in the hearts of men and, thus, society. Active women's refusal of their "natural" place in society results not only in horror, but also in insanity. The rational, male mind cannot coexist with active women.

George Lippard, himself a social reformer and founder of a workers' union, saw women's roles differently from his contemporaries. He viewed the Cult of True Womanhood as just one of the many repressive ideological structures that ensured capitalism's hold would not waver. Rather than positing the virgin as opposed to the whore, Lippard creates women who see their sexuality as their only commodity and a society that agrees. Mary's parents' lives center on her virginity and ability to marry well, but Mary's nature is part animal; Dora Livingstone wants the upward mobility that American capitalism promises, but she cannot work hard to obtain it and so must marry up. The novel depicts neither woman as wholly good or wholly evil. Rather, as Gary Ashwill argues, it "takes a slight step toward the refastening of referents, the rethinking of the relations between binary oppositions; he completes the first deconstructive gesture and points toward the possibility of the second."⁷ Whereas Ashwill focuses on the "city mysteries" and sensational aspects of Lippard's critique of capitalism without much discussion of the depiction of women's roles, I argue that Lippard's text consciously undermines the Cult of True Womanhood by demonstrating that its tenets put women in grave danger. By reversing the messages of the fairy tales from which he borrows, Lippard upends the ideology of domesticity and separate spheres upon which men's power depends.

⁷ Gary Ashwill, "The Mysteries of Capitalism in George Lippard's City Novels," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 40.4 (1994), 313.

Seeing the unprecedented success of Lippard's *The Quaker City*, George Thompson pretended to critique the conditions in America's urban industrial centers. Yet, just as fairy tales simply provided a means to appeal to the largest possible audience for his contemporaries, political and social commentary merely provided a screen for Thompson's nearly pornographic reinforcement of the dominant capitalist and domestic ideologies of antebellum America. In every instance where Thompson's texts appear to subvert domesticity or capitalism, they undo that subversion. *City Crimes* points out the licentiousness of ministers and immediately follows with a diatribe on the ways in which female parishioners seduce them. The same novel demonstrates the hard-hearted hypocrisy of capitalist proprietors while instantaneously asserting that they will reap their punishments at Judgment. Thompson's works use the motifs of fairy tales to reinforce and cement the messages contained in the original English translations. Women should be seen and not heard; they should remain in the domestic sphere, pious, chaste, and attentive to their husbands and children and wanting nothing to do with the outside world.

Bennett, Wilkes, Poe, Lippard, and Thompson no more agreed upon the proper place for women in America than did their female counterparts. These men did agree, however, about the best way to ensure that their works appealed to the largest number of consumers. Fairy tales gave each author a means to link his work to that of an ages-old tradition and to capitalize upon already popular and familiar material. Each author could enter into the debate over American women's roles with the authority of familiarity and tradition in their works.

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