

Wanting (To Be) Animal: Fairy-Tale Transbiology in *The StoryTeller*¹

Pauline Greenhill

*Fairy tales are not conventionally understood as manifesting unconventional desires. Their reputation of quintessential, uncritical support of heteropatriarchy and its sexual strictures belies the fact that desire in them commonly extends beyond species boundaries. Where pleasure and danger meet—as with human desires for, or to be, non-human animals—allusive, symbolic, metaphorical communications thrive. Relationships between humans and non-human animals, particularly when they supersede those between humans, and embodied or costumed transformations between humans and non-human animals, offer fundamentally transgressive pleasures. I address the three episodes of the television anthology show *The StoryTeller* that include human/non-human hybrids and/or transformations.*

Fairy tales are not conventionally understood as manifesting unconventional desires. Their reputation, bolstered by Walt Disney films, is of quintessential and uncritical support of heteropatriarchy and its sexual strictures. Yet even in Disney films, queer desires manifest. Alexander Doty proposed that understanding queer (in all its possibilities) in films does not involve necessarily reading *against* the always-present heterosexual, presumptively primary meaning; multiple divergent meanings *always* inhere in any (cinematic) text. Take, for example, those seven dwarves (in “Snow White,” ATU 709),² particularly their choice to cohabit. Inferring asexuality or celibacy—let alone heterosexuality—on the basis of their seven single beds seems a bit naive, even prescribing sexual monogamy and privacy (not necessary suppositions), when the forest and mines are always so available for trysts.³ Ableist presumptions also prevail in the alleged impossibility that Snow White could be sexually attracted to any of those seven men—that she sleeps chastely in the same room with them, night after night (Solis). And why be certain that Belle is entirely happy that Beast turns into a handsome man? After all, she fell in love with his Beast form (ATU 425C). In Jean Cocteau’s classic live-action *La belle et la bête*,⁴ Belle famously looks disappointed when her Beast takes the form of a sparkly version of her suitor Avenant. Crippling Beast, in Robert McRuer’s sense of envisioning alternatives to “compulsory ablebodiedness” (2), these films underline a profound sexiness in disability—understood in terms of non-normative embodiment—while their endings deny its ongoing expression.

As in “Beauty and the Beast,” desire in fairy-tales commonly extends beyond apparently confined boundaries of ability and species. Often an implicit alibi suggests that the non-human creature who loves or is loved by a human is actually also human, but magically transformed. “The Frog King” (ATU 440, see Zipes “What”) for example, enchanted, returns to human form at the tale’s closing. Yet the majority of the story explores the vagaries of a human/non-human relationship. Queer theorists dispute the need to write off an entire work on the basis of an apparently heteronormative ending (see e.g. Elliott, Abate). So the conclusion need

not divert audiences/readers permanently from exploring representation of the often violent love/hate between frog and human. Further, that the creature is not human, but wishes to be, does not permanently install normativity. The desire for bodily transformation grounds many identities, including transsexuality (see e.g. Prosser). In allusive, symbolic, metaphorical fairy tales, there is no need to presume that change from non-human to human (or vice-versa) is the only referent. Where pleasure and danger meet, as with human desires for, or to be, non-human animals, coded communications—allusive, symbolic, metaphorical—thrive (Radner). I take as a priori that relationships between humans and non-human animals, particularly when they supersede those between humans; and transformations, whether embodied or costumed, between humans and non-human animals, offer the possibility of deeply transgressive pleasures.⁵

Sadly, no text is inherently transgressive. But some become so heavily overburdened with heteronormative, sexist, ableist, racist, colonialist readings that those perspectives are difficult to dislodge. Many cogent readings demonstrate Disney films' shameful legacies of encoding (hetero)sexist, racist, fat-shaming images of evil non-White characters (like Ursula in *The Little Mermaid*), and (hetero)sexist, racist, colonialist images of First Nations folks (the "Indians" in *Peter Pan* and *Pocahontas*), among other criticisms (see e.g. Giroux, *Zipes Fairy Tale*). Because of these conventional stories' cultural baggage, I see more flexibility in less-known fairy tales. Thus, in a move to "complicate, untame, queer and radicalize tumultuous legacies of pleasure and unpleasure" ("CFP"), I address three episodes of *The StoryTeller* which include human/non-human hybrids and/or transformations. I choose to focus mainly on the transgressive, perverse, even revolutionary possibilities these relatively unfamiliar tale versions offer, though I return to critique in the conclusion.

Combining live action with puppetry, the television anthology show *The StoryTeller*, an American/British co-production first aired in 1988, was created and produced by Jim Henson. The same year also saw a storybook featuring somewhat redacted versions from the Anthony Minghella screenplays. Using the framing device of a fireside storyteller (John Hurt) narrating with help (and sometimes hindrance) from his loquacious dog (Brian Henson, puppeteer and voice), this series related nine less well-known folktales:

The storyteller, a wizened, gray-haired man, sits by a fireplace and tells tales to a puppet dog, who skeptically poses questions and even intervenes during the storytelling. The dog as listener keeps the storyteller honest and on his toes, and when the story is finished, the dog expresses disbelief about the authenticity of the teller's sources. (*Zipes Happily*, 100)

The StoryTeller has received far less than its due attention from fairy-tale scholars. Jill Terry Rudy's work is an exception, dealing with the series' complex intermedial representations as artistic play with reality and wonder.⁶ Here, I draw on the emerging scholarship around transbiology to work through each relevant episode—

The Three Ravens (ATU 451), *Sapsorrow* (ATU 510B), and *Hans My Hedgehog* (ATU 441/425/425A)—as it exemplifies transgressive and deviant desires. I use these TV fairy-tale versions because of the possibilities their intermedial form, using both visual and auditory channels, allows for manifesting transbiology. But I begin with some background on fairy tales, transbiology, and their connections.

The concept of transbiology has a critical legacy of addressing organisms and ideas on the interstices of the allegedly natural and real. In an early reference, G. Becht notes, “Biology is...above all, the doctrine of ‘real’ intra-individual living systems. Transbiology, therefore, becomes the doctrine of extra- and interindividual living systems” (573). Linking the term with Donna Haraway’s famous cyborg manifesto, Sarah Franklin calls transbiology “the field of science most indebted to the cyborg embryo” (174) and “a mix of control and rogue, or trickster, elements” (175):

Like the cyborg, transbiology is also made up out of the complex intersection of the pure and the impure....Like the cyborg, the transbiological is not just about new mixtures, playful recombinations of parts or new assemblages....It is a world of cyborgs, but also of mixtures in which it is the symmetry of parts that allows translation, so that the mouse, the sheep, the cow, the pig and the dog move together as animal models susceptible to re-engineering and improvement. (176)

Franklin calls transbiology’s “defining hallmark” a “queer lineage” (177), linking to Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird’s *Queering the Non/Human*, with contributions addressing social as well as physical human/non-human relationships and combinations. A special thematic issue of *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, “The Transbiological Body” (Vaccaro), includes Mel Y. Chen’s exploration of a film about a woman who falls in love with a chimpanzee. In taking these concepts into the realm of fairy-tale studies, I extend their geographical and temporal purview, given the vast range of locations and time periods in which fairy tales have been collected (Teverson). Feminist and queer scholars have long argued against the biological necessity of current North American and European concepts of sex and sexuality. Fairy tales exemplify this view, but add evidence that specific modes of ableism, racism, and speciecism are equally malleable.

As already indicated, transbiological relations expressed in fairy tales include attractions of various kinds, including friendly and erotic, between humans and non-human animals, transformations between human and non-human in dress and physical manifestation, and sometimes combinations thereof. Though human/non-human animal hybrids, for example, may seem entirely fictional, they manifest historically (see e.g. Hoffman) and today—not only in art but also in biology (see e.g. Scala). Here I restrict (fairy-tale) transbiology to (imagined) social and biological linkages between human and non-human animals, but I assert the potentially world-changing implications of such connections within discourses of cultural criticism, in narrating perhaps otherwise unimaginable transgressive embodiments and the relations they engender.

Fairy tales can be oral/traditional (told by people in different geographical locations and at various historical times up to the present) and/or literary (written by known

authors). All concern the fantastic, magical, dark, dreamy, wishful, and wonderful. Literary fairy tales with known authors like Hans Christian Andersen or Edith (Bland) Nesbit are based primarily in an individual writer's creativity. Oral fairy tales—like those discussed here—can be found in written forms (such as the Grimm brothers' collections) and the actual differences are not always that clear. Some fairy tales come in both traditional and literary forms. Andersen's "The Princess and the Pea" is based on the traditional folktale type "The Princess on the Pea" (ATU 704). The two forms are rarely discrete in the popular imagination; Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" is generally seen as the same kind of story as the traditional "Little Red Riding Hood" (ATU 333). Note that the former tale pertains to a human/fish hybrid and the latter includes transbiological as well as transgender disguise, when the male wolf dresses as Red Riding Hood's grandmother (see e.g. Garber, 375-390).

Marina Warner argues "Metamorphosis is a defining dynamic of...wonder tales [and] fairy stories." She notes that its forms include "a prodigious interruption of natural development" and "an organic process of life itself" (18). She addresses shape-shifting, which "breaks the rules of time, place, of human reproduction and personal uniqueness" (27). Fairy tales' perennial popularity may have a great deal to do with their imagination of the apparently impossible—or once-impossible—transformations or metamorphoses Warner discusses, including from female to male (see Greenhill and Anderson-Grégoire). Scholarship on fairy tales incorporating transbiology which attends to their erotic and sexual identity implications includes work on "Fitcher's Bird," in which a woman rolls in honey and feather to disguise herself as a bird to escape a homicidal sorcerer husband (ATU 311, see Greenhill, Tosenberger "The True") and on "Snow White and Rose Red" (ATU 426, see Friedenthal), about the relationship between a bear and woman/women, as well as about two tale-types dramatised in *The StoryTeller* (Jorgensen, Warner). Some 80 traditional tale-types include human/non-human animal transformation, human/non-human animal cross-dressing, and/or biological transformation (e.g. human to flower or human to fruit) (see Turner and Greenhill, 303-305).

The Three Ravens (ATU 451)

This *StoryTeller* episode offers a congeries of three Grimm tales: *KHM* 9 "The Twelve Brothers," *KHM* 25 "The Seven Ravens," and *KHM* 49 "The Six Swans," themselves versions of ATU 451 "The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers" (Uther 267-268; Zipes *The Complete*; see also Bottigheimer, 75; 35-39).⁷ Ruth Bottigheimer notes that these stories

share a common core plot: the birth of a daughter directly or indirectly causes her brothers' departure from home; and the brothers turn into birds, an enchantment from which their sister's efforts directly or indirectly release them....and the narrative association of motifs in each suggests a consistent ordering of symbols congruent with assessments of women ranging from inherently powerful to utterly enfeebled. (37)



In the *StoryTeller* version (see Minghella, 5-20), a widower King (Jonathan Pryce) with three sons and a daughter (Joely Richardson) marries a Witch (Miranda Richardson). She makes magical shirts that turn the boys into ravens. Their sister flees, and the ravens tell her that to break the curse she must remain silent for three years, three months, three weeks, and three days. She nevertheless meets and marries a Prince (Robert Hines), whose stepmother is the same Witch—she has poisoned Princess's father. She spirits away Princess's three sons immediately after their birth. Witch denounces Princess as a witch, and the young woman cannot defend herself without breaking her vow of silence. She is tied to the stake just as the curse is ending. The brothers return, kill Witch, and transform back into human form. Princess's three stolen children appear. But because she spoke three minutes too early, her youngest brother is left with one raven's-wing arm.

On one level, the story explores the imposition of silence on girls and women (Jorgensen 85). The transbiological significance of speech comes from multiple (generally unsuccessful) attempts to assert the allegedly unique human capacity for language (see e.g. de Waal). Silencing women culturally renders them less-than-fully human. Even *Storyteller's* Dog speaks, though apparently the ravens cannot. But further, “[t]he images associated with muted girls and women clearly establish the relationship between language and autonomy....Sexual vulnerability also permeates tales of muteness” (Bottigheimer 77). Warner suggests the fundamental conservatism of this perspective: “Women’s capacity for love and action tragically exceeded the boundaries of their lives—this self-immolatory heroism was one of the few chivalrous enterprises open to them” (393).

Woman-blaming—making Witch responsible for the brothers’ plight and requiring that their sister redress the situation, though she fails in part, clearly evident in the *StoryTeller* version, is not as overdetermined in the Grimm versions. In “The Twelve Brothers,” the *father* wants to kill his twelve sons so that his daughter will inherit—a distinctly non-normative arrangement. The sister *inadvertently* turns the boys into ravens, and then must transform them back again (Zipes *The Complete*, 32-36). In “The Seven Ravens,” the father “merely curses his sons out of pique at what he believes to be their carelessness” (Bottigheimer, 38; see Zipes *The Complete*, 91-93). Here as elsewhere in *The StoryTeller*, potentially resistant elements in some traditional versions are tamed or muted in the TV production. For example, the symbolically interchangeable stepmother and mother-in-law (Tatar, 144) from “The Six Swans” (see Zipes *The Complete*, 168-171)—the closest to the *StoryTeller* version—become literally interchangeable in it.

Transbiology manifests visually as well as aurally. The episode opens with the camera closing in on *Storyteller*, sitting on a chair with Dog at his feet looking up at him. The scene appears conventional; however, when Dog talks, after only a few minutes, the arrangement becomes much less so. As already indicated, a talking dog appears at least partially culturally human, and thus a hybrid creature. Further (cultural) connections between *Storyteller* and Dog via the story are underlined, for example, when a spinning wheel in the foreground during a conversation between Witch and



King resolves into Storyteller winding a ball of yarn. The camera pulls out to reveal that the skein is held on Dog's ears, then moves back to Storyteller's ball of yarn and then to a magic ball of yarn in Witch's hand. The male Storyteller and male-voiced Dog may have a more than simply companionable relationship; Dog appears as Storyteller's only friend. In only one episode, discussed below, does Storyteller interact with any other humans or creatures.

When the boys don the magic shirts, glimpses of their transformation are shot from above, as if they are already becoming smaller. For three brief shots the human-ravens are represented by human actor/puppets in costume and facial makeup, but they next appear as realistic ravens. When Princess encounters the ravens, they caw; Storyteller's voice represents their speech, instructing that she must not speak for three years/months/weeks/days. Further play with notions of (human/non-human) communication comes in an interlude with Storyteller; Dog questions the rules of Princess's silence, asking if, for example, she could write a note. Storyteller answers not to Dog but directly to the camera, thus representing further play around transbiology, rendering unclear whether the audience should understand Dog's speech as diegetically real or in Storyteller's imagination. Indeed, the audience may also question the rule of silence or non-speech because, when her children are stolen, Princess "went to the garden and dug with her hands in the ground, a small hole, and bending to the earth, screamed with all her heart. Screamed and screamed her pain into the hole until morning. And it was better" (Minghella 15). Perhaps this cry does not break the proscription because, allegedly like the pain vocalisations of non-human animals, it is expressive more than communicative; a reflex more than a transmission.

The primary transbiological relationship in *The Three Ravens* is between the sister and the three ravens. (A perhaps less magical transbiological substitution happens when Queen replaces Princess's second son with a piglet.) The connection between Princess and her three brothers is implicitly desexualised; for example, she is clearly a young woman while the Princes are boys, the eldest in his early teens. Of course, neither kinship proximity nor age difference precludes a sexual relationship, but the representation may serve to render it unlikely for most viewers. The story, then, is less about sexualising an interspecific relationship, and more about exploring the implications of human manifestation in non-human bodies.

At the episode's closing, though, Dog's statement that he thought Witch had killed the babies leads to representation of yet another kind of interspecific relationship—parenting. Storyteller explains that the ravens took care of the three babies after the Witch cast them down a well. Jeana Jorgensen argues that these Grimm tales "queer kinship" by "rendering heterosexual relationships...explicitly adversarial, dangerous, even murderous" (Greenhill 150), and offer unconventional family structures. This opening of possibilities extends to issues of ability. When Storyteller reveals that Princess's too-early speech means that her youngest brother "kept one wing forever" he immediately continues: "But, he didn't mind and I don't mind and nor, my dear, should you!" (*The StoryTeller*). This offers a clear and explicit affirmation of a potentially pleasurable non-normative embodiment. The value of representing such

alternative, even revolutionary views, in fairy tales, always literally and figuratively presumed innocent, in the context of a series suggested as “family viewing,” can offer not only the pleasure, but also the political potential of a freed mind (discussed in Collins).

Sapsorrow (ATU 510B)

In this version, a widower King (Geoffrey Bayldon) must marry anyone whose finger fits a ring. His daughter Sapsorrow (Alison Doody)—so named by her “Bad Sisters” (Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders)—friend to many animals, accidentally discovers it fits her. She demands three impossible/unusual dresses: “the colour of the moon;” “sparkling with stars,” and “gold as the sun” (Minghella, 119-120). But when they are complete, she flees disguised as “a strange creature or fur and feathers,” interpreted as a large cat, a dog, and a seal (Ibid. 212). King dies. As Straggletag, the Princess works in another king’s garden and kitchen. When she meets the Prince (James Wilby), their relationship develops from mutual contempt to some respect, due to Straggletag’s quick-witted quips and verbal facility. Prince fails to recognise Straggletag as she attends balls in the unusual dresses and he falls in love with her there. At the last ball she leaves behind a golden slipper. Prince vows to marry the woman who fits it. When it matches the untransformed Straggletag’s foot, Prince agrees to keep his promise, and her animal friends come to change her into Sapsorrow, wearing the gold dress (see Minghella, 116-130).

The StoryTeller episode links to “Cinderella” (ATU 510A) by including the stepsisters and shoe test, not always present in ATU 510B (see Cox). The narrative “openly deals with the shame of incest that most filmmakers of fairy tales are unwilling to address” (Zipes *The Enchanted*, 221).⁸ Nevertheless, incest “makes a strong showing in fairy tale” (Warner, 320). In another rare discussion of transbiology and sexuality, Warner argues that in ATU 510B, “The fairytale princess wears a skin of shame, but the pathetic degradation of her condition contains a kind of Christian grace of humility, forbearance and lack of vanity....She becomes a beast, after her father has behaved like one” (325). Further:

the animal disguise of the heroine equips her to enter a new territory of choice and speech; the apparent degradation works for her, not against her. Being a beast...can be preferable as a temporary measure to the constrictions of a woman’s shape. Animal form marks a threshold she passes over, before she can take control of her own identity. (354)

Warner contends that taking on animal disguise, for girls, “stood not for the rejection of sexuality but the condition of it....Although they have suffered wrong in all innocence in the fairy tales, they accept the taint and enact it on their own persons” they act as “penitents” (358). *Sapsorrow* clearly manifests this ontology; the character Sapsorrow/Straggletag is profoundly sexualised.

Sapsorrow’s visuals offer distinct advantages for exploring transformations and their implications. Unlike in *The Three Ravens*, where the mutated raven-boys are

depicted simply as realistic birds, Sapsorrow's Straggletag disguise is makeup and costume donned by the human actor. It includes some minor gender bending, giving the quasi-historical architextual, chronotopic fairy-tale setting/environment (see Smith, 10); all women wear skirts, except Straggletag, who wears trouser overalls. She also has an extensive beard, generally but not exclusively a male trait. The fact that these manifestations differ from her non-costume/non-disguise underlines that as Straggletag, but also crucially as the Princess attending the balls in the moon/stars/sun dresses, this human masquerades (see Riviere). Explicitly both celestial dresses and Straggletag-look offer modes of drag—garments shaping encultured views that apparently do not map directly upon the wearer's person or personality.⁹

The interspecific relationship between beast-woman Straggletag and human Prince is prefigured, compared, and contrasted with Sapsorrow's friendship with animals. Straggletag, for example, does not eat geese because she likes them. Her animal friends care for Sapsorrow and bring her food (not vice versa). They are not her pets; by all appearances, she is theirs. They craft her Straggletag disguise and they are the ones who remove it and re-dress her in her sun gown at the episode's end.

Symbolic impossibles invoke Straggletag's transbiological position. At the second ball Prince asks where she lives and she says "I live where hens catch mice and cats lay eggs" (*The StoryTeller*). When Prince claims he would love the Princess "Were she in the humblest rags, were she the poorest, absolutely" (*Ibid.*), his imagination cannot extend to Straggletag's actual situation. In the end, he proves honourable and thus worthy when he agrees to keep his promise and marry Straggletag. He accepts the transbiological relationship, and is rewarded when she transforms into a beautiful human woman (see also Greenhill, Best, and Anderson-Grégoire). But I cannot help reflecting that the Prince-Princess relationship is saccharine-sweet, while the interactions between the Prince and Straggletag suggest two intellectual and emotional—if not social—equals. Though the version ends hetero- and bio-normatively, the story's transgressive middle offers greater satisfaction.

Though I focus generally on transgressive aspects, I note this episode's more-than-somewhat problematic instantiation of equivalence between dark skin and ugliness, and light skin and beauty. In becoming beautiful, transforming from Straggletag to Sapsorrow, the character becomes White. As Sara Hines eloquently demonstrates, sometimes visuals can uncomfortably establish raced notions absent from the actual words of fairy tales. Nothing inherent in the tale types make Straggletag necessarily dark-skinned; the skin colour of Catherine Deneuve as Demy's *Peau d'âne*, for example, remains unaltered. Yet Straggletag's transformation to "beauty" includes relinquishing brownface makeup, not only tattered clothes. The colonialist association of beastliness with subalterns of colour further complicates and problematises this representation.

Hans My Hedgehog (ATU 441 with “The Search for the Lost Husband” ATU 425 and “The Animal Bridegroom” ATU 425A)

Hans My Hedgehog may be the most transgressive, complicated, queer, wild, radical episode of *The Storyteller*. Fairy-tale scholar Jack Zipes argues that unlike “Beauty and the Beast” versions, in which “[t]he heroine is supposed to sacrifice herself for the welfare of her father or parents, and she is generally rewarded for being docile, virtuous, and obedient” (*Happily*, 100), *Hans My Hedgehog* in *The StoryTeller* is about “the hedgehog’s personal struggle to overcome his bestial shape and form his own whole identity, the conflict with his father that leads to his mother’s death, the betrayal by the princess, and the suffering he endures because of his split personality” (*Ibid.*, 100-101). The tale not only exemplifies transbiology, but also “the way in which fairy tales dwell on pain and suffering rather than on blissful happiness” (Tatar, xxi).

The narrative involves implicit class struggle. The Grimms “used typical names such as Hans, Heinz, Lise, Else, and Gretel to stress the common quality of their protagonist as a type of simple person, everyman, or lazy person” (Zipes “The Enchanted”, 70) and “[t]he appeal of the[se] male protagonists...is that they demonstrate a distinct willingness to rectify social injustices, particularly when they are class related” (*Ibid.*, 73). Yet this story the farmers’ son who marries a princess offers a plethora of complications.

A woman (Maggie Wilkinson) wants a child so desperately she “wouldn’t care if it were a strange thing made of marzipan or porridge, if it were ugly as a hedgehog” (Minghella, 22).¹⁰ She accepts her offspring, Hans (Ailsa Berk, puppeteer), with a hedgehog upper and human lower body, but the humiliated father (Eric Richard) hates him. Hans makes friends with the animals on the farm, and eventually asks for a saddle for his rooster,¹¹ and for some pigs, sheep, and cattle, and leaves. Twenty years later a King (David Swift) lost in the forest comes upon Hans’s palace. He stays the night and insists on rewarding Hans, who eventually asks for the first thing that greets King on his return. King expects it will be his dog, but the Princess (Abigail Cruttenden) arrives first. When Hans comes for Princess, she agrees to marry him, but discovers that he transforms into a man (Jason Carter) at night. He enjoins her not to tell anyone and after three days he will become human permanently, but she confides in her mother, who tells her to burn his skin.¹² The untransformed Hans leaves and Princess follows, wearing out three pairs of iron shoes before she finds him. She hugs him and refuses to let go until he transforms into human shape.

When first seen, Hans is a small puppet–human-baby sized, not hedgehog-baby sized. His face more closely resembles a human’s than a hedgehog’s. In his representation as a boy/adolescent, a human actor inside manipulates the puppet. His hedgehog snout is more pronounced, but not as much as when he becomes an adult. He eats directly from a bowl on the table with his mouth, making grunting hog-like sounds. Otherwise, he has human speech, unlike the ravens in *The Three Ravens*, underlining his human affiliation. When he opens the palace door to King, he has a decidedly hedgehog-like snout, but his torso is human.

This beast bridegroom, whose bottom half is human, explicitly has patriarchal beastliness on the brain. Several ATU 441 tales involve serial Kings and Princesses, with at least one of the latter raped and rejected by Hans, apparently because *her father* tries to save her from the marriage. In the Grimms:

When they had gone a little way, Hans My Hedgehog took off her beautiful clothes and stuck her with his quills until she was covered with blood. “This is what you get for being so deceitful!” he said. “Go back home. I don’t want you.” Then he sent her away, and she lived in disgrace for the rest of her life. (Zipes *The Complete*, 363-364)

Though this aspect of patriarchy is (not surprisingly) absent from the *StoryTeller* version, in the Grimms it is transgressively the father, not the mother, who makes the rash wish for a hedgehog child. *The Storyteller* also uncommonly blames a (bio) mother not stepmother for bad advice,¹³ and otherwise deviates from the Grimm story, in which throwing the skin on the fire *is* the way to transform Hans to human.¹⁴ Instructed by Hans, four of the King’s men perform the transformative action. Thus, there is no need for Princess’s quest as in *The StoryTeller*, which incorporates ATU 425, “The Search for the Lost Husband,” specifically ATU 425A, “The Animal as Bridegroom,” and makes Princess both Hans’s betrayer and saviour.

Dog makes an extended intervention into the storytelling, interrupting Storyteller who has apparently forgotten to narrate the crucial King’s promise scene. Dog’s usual role in *The StoryTeller* is to make comments and asides. In no other episode does he intervene as narrator. It may not be coincidental that this takes place in a story wherein a dog’s action (arriving after Princess to greet King) drives the story. When Storyteller talks about the farmer’s dog, Dog asks what kind it is, and Storyteller says he does not know. But narrating his section, Dog gives King’s dog a name—the loyal woof-woof Wagger. In this episode, too, Storyteller appears, along with Dog, in the story he is telling (as a storyteller entertaining King’s court).

Hans’s physical transformation from hedgehog creature to fully human appears to involve nothing more than the actor removing his upper body costume over his head. There is no direct sexual interaction depicted between Hans and Princess, but erotic moments emerge on the first night when Princess caresses the left-behind Hedgehog skin, “soft and warm and remarkable.” On the second night,

Storyteller: the same scene: her husband standing over her as she pretended to sleep, the tender touch on her arm. Not prickly, but so smooth she felt an ache when he left her. And she found herself going to the skin and lying against it, and how comfortable she found it. And she felt drowsy, lying there by the fire so peaceful. She felt herself drifting off, and knew she mustn’t, knew she mustn’t, but really couldn’t help herself.

Princess: Sir, I woke and you had gone! And left behind you your coat of quills.

Hans: Which would you have for husband? The man or the creature?

Princess: I have a husband, sir, and he is what he is. No more and no less.

Hans: Then forgive him, madam, if he returns to his skin. For I am enchanted and cannot leave it. But if you say nothing of this for a third night, then loyal love will break the spell forever. (*The StoryTeller*)

When Princess throws the skin on the fire, she hears screaming and looks out the window. Unlike the previous nights when she has seen a human, the hedgehog hybrid manifests instead. He rides away on his giant rooster, followed by the animals.

Princess's ordeal in seeking her husband physically transforms also; her hair turns white during her search, but is restored to red after they return. But Hans has also changed, apparently now having the capacity to turn into different creatures. The first view of Hans when Princess finds him is of a raven who flies into the window, then morphs into Hans My Hedgehog. The change from Hedgehog form has a transitional phase of a human with large flapping raven wings, then finally to fully human.

Further trans complications arise because the hybrid hedgehog/human Hans is played by female puppeteer Ailsa Berk, but human Hans by male actor Jason Carter. Across cultures, the same tale-type offers a feast of transbiological possibilities beyond human/hedgehog. In India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, the hybrid creature can partake of frog, jackal, caterpillar, fish, crab, snake, dog, monkey, tortoise, gourd, turtle, lizard, crocodile, or tiger, or be a disembodied head (Thompson and Roberts). The "genetic imagination" in thus "blur[ring] the boundaries between human and [non-human] animal...express[es] the fluid nature of identity" (Scala, 1). As Mark W. Scala argues in the introduction to his exhibit "Fairy Tales, Monsters, and the Genetic Imagination," such fantasies (and others like them in other artistic modes and genres) "carry us into the future" in terms of "transgenics, the actual moving of genes across species" (1). They challenge beliefs in human exceptionalism and dispute human-centred hierarchies.

Transbiological Transformations

"While fairy tales have often been seen as reflection, encoding, or subversion of the cultural structures in which they occur, the reverse—the impact of fairy tales on the cultural matrix—has received far less attention" (Hoffmann, 79-80). In this essay's introduction, I contended that fairy-tale discourses like these three television episodes offer world-changing possibilities within cultural criticism in opening feminist, queer, and trans theory to literally fantastic perspectives on human relations to non-human animals. The interactions between fairy tales—and, indeed, any fantasy form—and realities are complex. But at the risk of appearing naive, or grossly simplifying, I suggest that fictional creations may prefigure actual possibilities—or they may reflect both unattainable and realistic alternatives. For example, Kathryn A. Hoffman sees links between anomalous embodiment and fairy tales "sliding fairy-tale theorizing into broad disciplinary intersections where natural history collection, medical philosophy and practice, zoology, art, court, and fairground display share unstable



borders.” She discusses Madame D’Aulnoy’s “Babiolo,” a literary fairy tale “of a princess long desired by her mother who is transformed into a monkey moments after her birth, under the spell of a disgruntled fairy” (69), and works through a range of other human/non-human metamorphoses. She sees fairy-tale discourses as “part of a vast, early modern European world of anomalous and marvelous human bodies. It is a world of real dwarfs and giants, conjoined twins, horned ladies and gentlemen, people without arms or legs or with too many, hermaphrodites, and cat eaters” (68). She notes that “[n]one of the fairy-tale characters in d’Aulnoy’s tale may have ever before seen a speaking, harpsichord-playing monkey treated as a collectible court rarity. Yet in the real world of early modern Europe, several multilingual, internationally portraited, and even harpsichord-playing hairy girls had already achieved enormous international fame” (70) and argues that these were “implausible plausibles...caught at one of the real but rarely encountered points of human genetic variation” (72). Similarly, the transbiological *Storyteller* episodes discursively work with, and play, sociocultural boundaries.

Of course, as Hoffmann clearly recognises, usual practices related to actual liminal humans were to turn them into cultural monsters, and display them in carnivals or museums. The connection to racist practices of similar—and worse—treatment of Aboriginal and other peoples encountered in the processes of colonisation is unavoidable. Nevertheless, the representation of human/non-human animal hybrids as (sometimes quite literally) more fundamentally human than animal offers potential for alternatives that do not demonise, or even simply other, non-normative embodiments. With similar discourses, they offer substitutions for biomedical models and paradigms predominating in a global North “too preoccupied with virtual realities, networks and identities,” and they do so by “opening up fresh approaches to dilemmas of embodiment” (Connell, 1378). The affirmation in *The Storyteller* that Straggletag is not only human but loveably so; that a young man with one raven’s wing arm should not raise objections; and that the beastly Hans is literally and figuratively a beautiful man beneath offer positive evaluations of transgressive embodiments. Substituting for the conventional bombardment by normativity in dominant epistemologies, especially in simply taking for granted cross-species affinities, these stories render transgressive embodiments as a range of possibilities, not a present-day sociocultural error. Fairy-tale transbiological discourses can be appropriated to profoundly conservative agendas, as when Andersen’s “Ugly Duckling” bolsters fat shaming and encourages life-threatening surgeries to allegedly correct abjected physicalities and create “technoswans” (Morgan). But fairy tales in their multiple transcultural and transhistorical versions and manifestations can also offer not the anodyne fare of Disneyfied American capitalism, but the prospect of a literally unlimited world.

Notes

1. This research was supported by a SSHRC Standard Research Grant. I thank Marcie Fehr for research assistance, and Jill Rudy, the issue's editors, and the anonymous reviewers for productive critique.
2. ATU designations refer to the Aarne-Thompson-Uther tale type index (see Uther).
3. Much fan fiction relating to films and television presents similar readings, making explicit sexual relationships between *Star Trek's* Spock and Kirk, *Supernatural's* Sam and Dean, and so on (see e.g. Penley, Tosenberger "The Epic").
4. Fairy-tale and tale-type titles appear in quotation marks; film or television episode titles in italics.
5. Context is crucial. Costume parties, cosplay, and ritual days like Halloween demonstrate that costuming as a non-human animal is not necessarily transgressive.
6. Intermediality "refers to the participation of more than one medium--or sensory channel--in a given work" (Grishakova and Ryan, 3).
7. *KHM* refers to the Grimm brothers' collection of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*.
8. North American squeamishness about incest is not universal; Jacques Demy's *Donkey Skin* (Peau d'âne, 1970), also ATU 510B, is a children's film in France (see Duggan).
9. Similarly, transformations of actor Charlize Theron in *Monster* (see e.g. Cavanagh) and *Snow White and the Huntsman* demonstrate the constructedness of female monstrosity and beauty alike.
10. Actually, hedgehogs are extremely cute!
11. As elsewhere in fairy tales, transbiological hybrids transcend size; a hedgehog might be compatible with a rooster steed, but only a giant rooster would fit a human (see also Fairfield).
12. "Skins of animals...are evidence of an unredeemed nature" (von Franz, 161), and rituals of transformation by fire are common in fairy tales (Ibid., 103-108, see also Greenhill, Best, and Anderson-Grégoire).
13. "Stepmothers stand as an abiding source of evil in countless fairy tales....Folklorists would be hard pressed to name a single good stepmother, for in fairy tales the very title... pins the badge of iniquity on a figure....[T]he phrase *wicked stepmother*, which has a nearly formulaic ring to it, is pleonastic" (Tatar, 141; see e.g. Greenhill and Brydon).



14. Sometimes "the girl succeeds in disenchanting the monster from his animal or supernatural form by means of a kiss or tears, or by burning the animal skin, or sometimes by cutting off his head. But in Cupid and Psyche she always loses her supernatural husband because she fails in some way to obey instructions. It may be that she burns his animal skin too soon, but frequently she learns and reveals the secret of his unusual form" (Thompson 98).

Works Cited

- Abate, Michelle Ann. "Trans/Forming Girlhood: Transgenderism, the Tomboy Formula, and Gender Identity Disorder in Sharon Dennis Wyeth's *Tomboy Trouble*." *The Lion and the Unicorn* 32.1 (2008): 40-60. Print.
- Becht, G. "Systems Theory, The Key to Holism and Reductionism." *BioScience* 24.10 (1974): 569-579. Print.
- Bottigheimer, Ruth B. *Grimms' Bad Girls and Bold Boys: The Moral and Social Vision of the Tales*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1987. Print.
- Cavanagh, Sheila L. "'White Trash': Abject Skin in Film Reviews." *Skin, Culture and Psychoanalysis*. Eds. Sheila L. Cavanagh, Angela Failler, and Rachel Alpha Johnston Hurst. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 215-239. Print.
- "CFP ISSUE II – Feminist Un/Pleasure: Reflections on Perversity, BDSM, and Desire." *Feral Feminisms*. Web. 23 October 2013.
- Chen, Mel Y. "Animals Without Genitals: Race and Transsubstantiation." *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 20.3 (2010): 285-297. Print.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- Connell, Raewyn. "Southern Bodies and Disability: Re-thinking Concepts." *Third World Quarterly* 32.8 (2011): 1369-1381. Print.
- Cox, Marian Roalfe. *Cinderella; three hundred and forty-five variants of Cinderella, Catskin, and Cap O' Rushes, abstracted and tabulated, with a discussion of mediaeval analogues, and notes*. London: The Folk-Lore Society, 1892. Print.
- de Waal, Frans. *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved*. Princeton: Princeton UP. Print.
- Doty, Alexander. *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon*. New York: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- Duggan, Anne E. *Queer Enchantments: Gender, Sexuality, and Class in the Fairy-Tale Cinema of Jacques Demy*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2013. Print.
- Elliott, Mary. "When Girls Will Be Boys: 'Bad' Endings and Subversive Middles in Nineteenth-Century Tomboy Narratives and Twentieth-Century Lesbian Pulp Novels." *Legacy* 15.1 (1998): 92-97.
- Fairfield, Joy. Becoming-Mouse, Becoming-Man: The Sideways Growth of Princess Mouseskin. *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms*. Eds. Kay Turner and Pauline Greenhill. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2012. 223-243. Print.
- Franklin, Sarah. "The Cyborg Embryo: Our Path To Transbiology." *Theory, Culture and Society* 23.7-8 (2006): 167-187. Print.



- Friedenthal, Andrew. "The Lost Sister: Lesbian Eroticism and Female Empowerment in 'Snow White and Rose Red.'" *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms*. Eds. Kay Turner and Pauline Greenhill. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2012. 161-178. Print.
- Garber, Marjorie. *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety*. New York: Routledge, 1992. Print.
- Giffney, Noreen and Myra J. Hird, eds. *Queering the Non/Human*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008. Print.
- Giroux, Henry A. *The mouse that roared: Disney and the end of innocence*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001. Print.
- Greenhill, Pauline. "Fitcher's (Queer) Bird: A Fairy-Tale Heroine and Her Avatars." *Marvels & Tales* 22.1 (2008): 143-167. Print.
- Greenhill, Pauline and Emilie Anderson-Grégoire. "'The Shift of Sex:' ATU 514 as Transsexual Imagination." *Unsettling Assumptions: Tradition, Gender, Drag*. Logan: Utah UP, forthcoming. Print.
- Greenhill, Pauline, Anita Best, and Emilie Anderson-Grégoire. "Queering Gender: Transformations in 'Peg Bearskin,' 'La Poiluse,' and Related Tales." *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms*. Eds. Kay Turner and Pauline Greenhill. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2012. 181-205. Print.
- Greenhill, Pauline and Anne Brydon. "Mourning Mothers and Seeing Siblings: Feminism and Place in The Juniper Tree." *Fairy Tale Films: Visions of Ambiguity*. Eds. Pauline Greenhill and Sidney Eve Matrix. Logan: Utah State UP, 2010. 116-136. Print.
- Grishakova, Marina and Marie-Laure Ryan. *Intermediality and Storytelling*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010. Print.
- Haraway, Donna. "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, technology, and socialist feminism in the 1980s." *Australian Feminist Studies* 2.4 (1987): 1-42. Print.
- Hines, Sara. "Collecting the Empire: Andrew Lang's Fairy Books (1889-1910)." *Marvels & Tales* 24.1 (2010): 39-56. Print.
- Hoffman, Kathryn A. "Of Monkey Girls and a Hog-Faced Gentlewoman: Marvel in Fairy Tales, Fairgrounds, and Cabinets of Curiosities." *Marvels & Tales* 19.1 (2005): 67-85. Print.
- Jorgensen, Jeana. "Queering Kinship in 'The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers.'" *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms*. Eds. Kay Turner and Pauline Greenhill. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2012. 69-89. Print
- La belle et la bête*. Dir. Jean Cocteau. DisCina, 1946. Film.
- The Little Mermaid*. Dir. Ron Clements and John Musker. Walt Disney Pictures, 1989. Film.
- McRuer, Robert. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. New York: New York University Press, 2006. Print.
- Minghella, Anthony. *Jim Henson's The StoryTeller*. London: Boxtree, 1988. Print.
- Monster*. Dir. Patty Jenkins. Media 8 Entertainment. Film.
- Morgan, Kathryn Pauly. "Foucault, Ugly Ducklings, and Technoswans: Analyzing Fat Hatred, Weight-Loss Surgery, and Compulsory Biomedicalized Aesthetics in America." *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics* 4.1 (2011): 188-220.



- Peau d'âne*. Dir. Jacques Demy. Marianne Productions, 1970. Film.
- Peter Pan*. Dir. Jack Kinney, Wilfred Jackson, Clyde Geronimi, and Hamilton Luske. Walt Disney Productions, 1953. Film.
- Pocahontas*. Dir. Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg. Walt Disney Productions, 1995. Film.
- Penley, Constance. *NASA/TREK: Popular Science and Sex in America*. New York: Verso, 1997. Print.
- Prosser, Jay. *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. Print.
- Radner, Joan N., ed. *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1993. Print.
- Riviere, Joan. "Womanliness as a Masquerade." *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 9 (1929): 303-313. Print.
- Rudy, Jill Terry. "Things Jim Henson Showed Us: Intermediality and the Artistic Making of The StoryTeller." *Channeling Wonder: Fairy Tales on Television*. Eds. Pauline Greenhill and Jill Terry Rudy. Detroit: Wayne State UP, forthcoming. Print.
- Scala, Mark W., ed. *Fairy Tales, Monsters, and the Genetic Imagination*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2012. Print.
- Smith, Kevin Paul. *The Postmodern Fairytale: Folkloric Intertexts in Contemporary Fiction*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Print.
- Snow White and the Huntsman*. Dir. Rupert Sanders. Roth Films, 2012. Film.
- Solis, Santiago. "Snow White and the Seven 'Dwarfs'—Queercrippled." *Hypatia* 22.1 (2007): 114-131. Print.
- Tatar, Maria. *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987.
- Teverson, Andrew. *Fairy Tale: New Critical Idiom*. Oxford: Routledge, 2013. Print.
- The StoryTeller*. Dir. Jim Henson. Henson Associates, 1988. Television.
- Thompson, Stith. *The Folktale*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1946. Print.
- Thompson, Stith and Warren E. Roberts. *Types of Indic Oral Tales: India, Pakistan, and Ceylon*. Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1960. Print.
- Tosenberger, Catherine. "'The Epic Love Story of Sam and Dean': Supernatural, Queer Readings, and the Romance of Incestuous Fan Fiction." *Transformative Works and Cultures* 1 (2008) n. pag. Web. 23 October 2013.
- . "The True (False) Bride and the False (True) Bridegroom: 'Fitcher's Bird' and Gendered Virtue and Villany." *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms*. Eds. Kay Turner and Pauline Greenhill. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2012. 207-221. Print.
- Turner, Kay and Pauline Greenhill, eds. *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2012. Print.
- Uther, Hans-Jorg. *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography* (3 vols). Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2004. Print.
- Vaccaro, Jeanne, ed. "Special Issue: The Transbiological Body." *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 20.3 (2010): 221-353. Print.
- von Franz, Marie-Louise. *The Interpretation of Fairy Tales*. rev. ed. Boston: Shambhala, 1996. Print.
- Warner, Marina. *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*. London: Vintage, 1994. Print.



- Zipes, Jack. "The Enchanted Forest of the Brothers Grimm: New Modes of Approaching the Grimms' Fairy Tales." *Germanic Review* 62.2 (1987): 66-74. Print.
- . *Fairy tale as myth/myth as fairy tale*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994. Print.
- . *Happily Ever After: Fairy Tales, Children, and the Culture Industry*. New York: Routledge, 1997. Print.
- , ed. and trans. *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*. New York: Bantam Books, 2002. Print.
- . "What Makes a Repulsive Frog so Appealing: Memetics and Fairy Tales." *Journal of Folklore Research* 45.2 (2008): 109-143. Print.
- . *The Enchanted Screen: The Unknown History of Fairy-Tale Films*. New York: Routledge, 2011. Print.

PAULINE GREENHILL is Professor of Women's and Gender Studies at University of Winnipeg, Canada. Her most recent books are *Make the Night Hideous: Four English-Canadian Charivaris* (U Toronto P, 2010); *Fairy Tale Films: Visions of Ambiguity* (with Sidney Eve Matrix, co-editor, Utah State UP, 2010); and *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms* (with Kay Turner, co-editor, Wayne State UP, 2012). *Channeling Wonder: Fairy Tales on Television* (with Jill Terry Rudy, co-editor, Wayne State UP, 2014) and *Unsettling Assumptions: Tradition, Gender, Drag* (with Diane Tye, co-editor, Utah State UP, 2014) are forthcoming.