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An Examination of Feminist Rewrites of the Fairy Tale,  
Utilizing Robert Coover's *The Briar Rose*  
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This paper will examine the emergence of the genre of feminist rewrites of fairy tales that began in the latter quarter of the twentieth century with particular attention to the impact of the women's movement on the development of the genre. The paper will review the work of notable feminist fairy tale scholars and examine the text of Robert Coover's The Briar Rose for the impact of feminist themes in authorship on cognitions, identity, gender roles, values/ethics, passivity/aggression, relationships, and sexuality.

Feminist rewrites were one of several iterations of rewrites of fairy tales prior to the twentieth century. Bottigheimer notes that Perrault's 1697 Mother Goose Tales was actually England's third generation of fairies but they are "the basis for the modern canon of fairy tales" (Misperceived Perceptions par 8). Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's Children's and Household Tales followed in 1812 (Encyclopedia 144). Both the Perrault and Grimm Brothers' fairy tales were rewrites for children (Bacchilega 3) and the genre followed the German folktales' tradition of the quest with rewards for goodness (Encyclopedia 144). Bottigheimer notes that they were different from prior tales because they omitted sex, limited violence to bad characters, and had "virtuous" heroes or heroines and a moral (Misperceived Perceptions par 8-9). She also noted the absence of sex (Rev. of Clever Maids par 1). Thus, the tales were used to define conduct, especially in Perrault's 17<sup>th</sup> century when these tales popular with the bourgeois (Rubinson 152). Fairy tales set boundaries and thus acted to socialize children and deliver "wisdom" (Bacchilega 2-10). Bruno Bettelheim noted that fairy tales teach about conflicts and offer "correct solutions . . . in ways that children can understand." "He believes it is vital that characters are 'wholly good or wholly bad'" rather than both so that children can understand. (Bettelheim qtd. in Sellers 11). He

believes that fairy tales should end happily. Though feminists criticize this, he feels it essential for hope that conflicts will be negotiated (Sellers 12).

Zipes suggests that fairy tales are not intended solely for children, that they have a purpose in “socializing [all] readers” (Zipes qtd. in Brown par 2). Fairy tales may have begun as entertainment but Carter agreed with Zipes that they often served historical uses such as German unification, providing “common cultural scripts - a collective mythology” (Carter in Rubinson 151, Russell citing Paradiz par 3). The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw fairy tales as “expressions of nationhood, evidence of unbroken connection with the childhood of mankind, and proof of a sacred social cohesion that transcended class boundaries” . . . . (Bottigheimer, *Misperceived Perceptions* par 44). But Zipes also recognized the “subversive power of tales past and present that question the ways of the world” (Zipes qtd. in Brown par 2).

Why have fairy tales endured in popularity? To answer this, one must look at the scholarship of myths. Paradiz states that tales speak to the “deepest human emotions and needs” (qtd. in Russell par 3). In her chapter in *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women’s Fiction* Sellers states,

This book is about the power of myth in giving expression to our common experiences and the role of narrative in enabling us to undergo, shape and survive those experiences. It takes the view that stories play a formative part in creating who we are since they present a medium through which we can organize, communicate and remember our experiences, proffering ready-made schemata that equip us to understand and evaluate our lives by connecting what happens to us to a wider community and other points of view” (vii).

Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung’s theory of the collective unconscious composed of archetypes, “typical forms of behavior that manifest themselves as ideas and images to the conscious mind” best displays the function of myth and fairy tales (Jung cited in Sellers 4). Sellers notes that

Jung's theory of archetypes explains the reoccurrence of similar themes in multiple cultures and in dreams of persons who are unaware of folklore and myths. Jung sees myths as "the symbols of inner, unconscious drama which only become accessible through projection and telling" thus, provide "messages," "insights," and "warnings" (Jung cited in Sellers 5). Jung explains the archetypes are the "deposits of the constantly repeating experiences of humanity" and suggests that as experiences change, so may archetypes (qtd. in Sellers 5). Barthes notes that "there is no fixity in mythical concepts: they can come into being, alter, disintegrate, disappear completely,' and that around the meaning of every myth, 'there is a halo of virtualities where other possible meanings are floating'" (Barthes qtd. in Sellers 7). For fairy tale scholar Marina Warner "it is the openness of myth, allowing for the weaving of new meanings and patterns that creates its ongoing potency" (Warner cited in Sellers 2). It is this hope of changing archetypes that inspired feminists to undertake the reexamination and revision of fairy tales.

According to Goodwin and Bradley, in the 1960s babyboomers entered adolescence and young adulthood at a time when African Americans, Hispanic farm workers, American Indians and women were fighting for recognition and equality. The assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King increased the sense of urgency for change. In 1961 President Kennedy established the Presidential Commission on the Status of Women and in 1963, Betty Friedan published The Feminine Mystique, widely considered the rallying call of the Women's' Movement. In 1964 The Civil Right Act was passed which also forbade job discrimination on the basis of sex. In 1966 the National Organization for Women was established (Historic Events and Technology par 1). Gillis notes that in the 1970s, ideas that were radical in the 60s became mainstream (par 1). The Vietnam War continued and women became more involved in politics, tripling the number of women in state legislatures (Gillis Events and People par 1). Abortion was legalized and Nixon was impeached (Gillis Important Historical And

Cultural Events par 1). In 1971-72 the House and Senate ratified the Equal Rights Amendment (A Few Good Women par 1).

Against this historical, political, social, and cultural backdrop, the genre of feminist rewrites of fairy tales emerged in the 1970s (Mortensen 125). The rallying shot that galvanized the debate was the assertion by Lurie in her 1970 “Fairy Tale Liberation” and 1971 “Witches and Fairies” that strong female characters could be found in fairy tales (Haase 1). In 1972 Marcia R. Lieberman’s issued a “forceful rebuttal” in “Some Day my Prince Will come: Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale”(Haase 1). Haase asserts that this exchange marked the beginning of modern fairy tale studies, exploring political and historical contexts, including canonization and institutional control of them as well as recovery of alternative narratives and the location of the female voice in them (1-2).

A reading of Haase’s excellent chapter “Feminist Fairy-Tale Scholarship” reveals that the scholarship falls within three non-discreet, sometimes overlapping stages. During the first stage, scholars began to examine the gender roles embedded in the tales in order to consider what parts of these were culturally determined. In this first stage also, scholars were looking at the ways in which images of the feminine had been changed or “edited” over time. During the second stage, scholarship focuses on the investigation of the female voice in folklore and fairy tales and looks at ways that fairy tales have served as hypotexts for other genres. In the third stage, feminist fairy tale scholars and writers enter into revisionist myth-making, re-interpreting or revising previously misogynist themes (1-36). Discussion of the historicity of female authorship and voice in the original folktales/fairy tales is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, the paper will focus on excavated images and messages from stage one and examples of notable revisions from stage three.

According to Haase, feminist scholars encouraged women to study the tales for purposes of liberation and constructing new identities (7). Feminists re-reading of fairy tales identified

problematic themes of unrealistic standards for women, female passivity, and restriction of roles for women to marriage and motherhood (Encyclopedia 145). Bacchilega noted themes of “repression” and “man-made constructs of ‘Woman’” (6, 9). Maria Tatar identifies gender-based themes of males who are rewarded and females who suffer “humiliation . . . loss of pride . . . and power” (cited in Sellers 9). Ruth Bottigheimer’s 1980-1985 study showed how Grimm’s revisions “weakened once strong female characters, demonized male power, imposed a male perspective on stories voicing women’s discontents, and rendered heroines powerless by depriving them of speech, all in accord with the social values of their time”(cited in Haase 11). Even more problematic was the realization that these “common cultural metaphors and narratives [were being] imprinted on the child’s mind while very young” (Palma 1). Chandler noted that “Texts are instrumental in not only the construction of other texts but in the construction of experiences” (Chandler par. na). Feminists rightly feared that repetitive models of female passivity could disable scores of children exposed to them at a young age. Thus it became imperative to rewrite fairy tales to reflect more appropriate coping behaviors for females.

In 1978 Heather Lyons introduced the idea of alternative versions of women in some of the lesser known tales and several collections were introduced between 1975 – 1981 which had female heroines or demonstrated the strength of woman (cited in Haase 7). On closer reading Bottigheimer noted that there were “competing views of gender” inherent in the tales’ sources (cited in Haase 12). Gilbert and Gubar recognized the “egotistically assertive” stepmother and the passive Snow White and identified the “controlling voice” of the narrative as a patriarchal voice, that of the mirror (cited in Haase 12-13).

Feminist scholar Marina Warner cautions against reading fairy tales as anti-feminist since many, in the context of the time they were written, embodied feminist objectives such as a happy marriage based on choice and love (Sellers 14). Paradiz notes that marriage was, in many cases, “women’s only realistic economic option” (Bottigheimer 128, Russell par 4).

In 1979 Carolyn G. Heilbrun called for reinterpretation of the tales to include the “emerging female self” and called for women to identify with male attributes in the tales so that she could find within them alternative parts of themselves (qtd in Haase 5-6). Karen Rowe acknowledged the negative impact of fairy tales; however, she noted that the tales had “lost their potency” as women were now aware of the gap between tales and reality, leaving women with an “ambiguity” about enacting change or adhering to prescribed roles (qtd. in Haase 5). Feminist scholars such as Zipes rejected the idea of tales as myth and began to see them more as “culturally determined and ultimately illusory” (Encyclopedia 145).

Ostriker, writing about women’s poetry and noting the presence of a multiplicity of voices and a diversity of selves, suggests that “the idea of revisionist mythmaking . . . may offer us one significant means of redefining ourselves and consequently our culture” (Ostriker qtd. in Haase 22). Sellers and Warner believe in “reworking,” “rehabilitating,” and “deleting” some myths (Sellers 8). Sellers sees the fairy tale as an “inherently feminist genre” because the genre itself allowed for “dreaming alternatives” (15). She noted that fairy tales teach about boundaries but model refusal of limits [i.e. Cinderella]. She felt that the familiarity of the old in tales “reassures” and evokes the security necessary “to go to the ball” (14). Beckett too felt that re-tellings contain “new messages” about modern problems especially relative to gender, technology, and ecology but use the “archetypes, characters, motifs, and narrative structures of an age-old genre” (Beckett 489). She felt that re-tellings transmit a “cultural heritage” and provide “cultural memory” with “the security of a cultural past” (Beckett 489). Canadian Margaret Atwood addressed themes of “sexual ‘power politics’” and created “metafairy tales” that “lead beyond them in a movement toward liberation of imagery, metamorphosis, and healing” (Encyclopedia 144-145). According to Haase the period from 1980 – 2000 ushered in a second wave of revisions “emphasizing the breadth and diversity of women in fairy tales” from multiple cultures (8). Included were a number of anthologies of fairy tales by and about women

published in the 1980s-1990s including 1983 and 1993 editions of The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood by Jack Zipes (8-9). Zipes tracks the development of over thirty different versions demonstrating variant attitudes toward sexuality, gender roles, and power (Haase 9). Also included in this group was Angela Carter who published The Old Wives' Fairy Tale Book (1990) which “centered around a female protagonist” and highlighted multiple identities for women (Carter qtd. in Haase 8). By changing form and content, she [Carter] forces us to reexamine our ideology and “her stories function as a kind of social criticism through literature,” challenges the perception of women as “passive, powerless, and subservient” (Rubinson 153). Haase notes that she focused on those elements that male editors had suppressed, including sexuality. Marina Warner said about her work, “she continues [in this collection], one of her original and effective strategies, snatching out of the jaws of misogyny itself, ‘useful stories’ for women . . . . [H]ere she turns topsy-turvy some cautionary folk tales and shakes out the fear and dislike of women they once expressed to create a new set of values, about strong, outspoken, zestful, sexual women who can’t be kept down” (Warner) qtd. in Haase 9).

According to Haase, the major metaphor used to describe the female mythmakers of this period is that of the magic mirror offered by Gilbert and Gubar earlier in 1979. The tale is the mirror which holds up before women a patriarchally defined identity (Gilbert and Gubar cited in Haase 23). Bacchilega states, “Within a feminist frame . . . , fairy tales are sites of competing, historically and socially framed desires.” Tales “make the mirroring visible to the point of transforming its effects” (Bacchilega 10). In 1983 Ellen Cronan Rose’s Through the Looking Glass: When Women Tell Fairy Tales examined three works by feminist authors with the purpose of understanding what happens when the mirror reflecting the patriarchally defined identity is broken and women strike out independently to find their own identities (Haase 23) Haase notes that Christina Bacchilega’s Post Modern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies (1997) focused on the “multivocality” of the original texts and the rewrites and

focused on what was left unexplored. She understood that what is seen in a mirror is mediated – “As it [the fairy tale] images our potential for transformation, the fairy tale refracts what we wish or fear to become. . . . Who is holding the mirror and whose desires does it represent and contain?” (Bacchilega qtd. in Haase 24). Her work was not simply a reaction or response to the dominant view but a fresh examination of alternative possibilities. Kate Bernheimer’s Mirror, Mirror on the Wall (1998) asked women to think about how fairy tales have impacted ““thinking about emotion, the self, gender, and culture”” (Bernheimer qtd. in Haase 25).

#### Examination of *The Briar Rose*

Zipes discusses two types of re-writes: 1) those that include similar elements in an unfamiliar manner to expose the negative elements of tales and provoke thought and rejection, and 2) those with traditional elements in contemporary settings and alternative plots engendering new points of view and options (Zipes cited in Sellars 13-14). Robert Coover’s *The Briar Rose* contains elements of both types. It is a rewrite of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm’s *Little Briar-Rose* and Charles Perrault’s *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood* with a similar cast of characters in all three tales to include the good or virtuous princess, the rescuing prince, and good fairies that protect with old crones that seek to do harm. It begins with the same gender role assignment as the original tales: a Princess will need rescue by a Prince. Thereafter, however, the tale focuses on the intrapsychic and interpersonal processes surrounding several problematic areas targeted by feminist fairy tale scholars –cognitions, identity, gender roles, feminine passivity, relationships, and sexuality. Also, this revision is intriguing because of the impact of its male authorship on the characterization of the Princess and Prince.

#### Cognitions Leading to Self-Narrative

In *The Briar Rose*, Coover offers an extensive exploration of the intrapsychic processes of both the Prince and the Princess unavailable in previous versions, “memories, thoughts,

musings, and conversations with [themselves]” (Gupta 1). We have access to their cognitions and interior dialogue.

Coover reveals the complexity of the interior life in his descriptions of events, dreams, fantasies and he uses the literary device of deliberating obscuring which of these is actually taking place at the time. The process signifies the thin line that separates perception, interpretation, and behavior. One clear example of this occurs in Lexia 32. The Prince breaks through the thorn hedge but then begins to doubt his own perceptions of reality and “though no hedge is visible,” “ground[ing] his actions in his old reality,” he continues to battle the thorn hedge (Gupta 3). In the same lexia, the Princess “also is seduced [back] into an old reality – back to the room with the crone and the spinning wheel where the old crone tells her this story of the prince” (Gupta 3). It is this ambivalence to believe what she sees, to trust her own experience that chains her to fear and to reluctance to act. Coover illuminates this disabling process in the unconscious, challenging the old beliefs and enabling the reader to see the potential for change.

Coover also challenges the dichotomy in traditional fairy tales between good and bad characters, i.e. fairy godmothers, wicked witches, cruel stepmothers. He helps us to understand that each of us possesses parts of ourselves that are good and bad and shows us how to repair these splits by having both the Prince and Princess “reckon with their own forbidden thoughts and feelings. To the extent that they are able to own these disowned parts of themselves and take responsibility for their actions, they free themselves to choose their futures rather than reenact their pasts.” (Gupta 4). Jungian analysts call this work “meeting the shadow” and it is a precedent for a woman’s initiation into intuition, individuation, and agency.

Coover debunks the “happily ever after” myth with a series of violent sexual stories/fantasies/events told to the Princess by the old crone. Afterwards he has Rose [the Princess] exclaim “real stories aren’t like that” . . . [r]eal princes aren’t” (26) (Coover qtd. in

Gupta 3). Rose echoes the dismay of feminists in the 1960s and 1970s who began to speak aloud their frustration, rage, disappointment, and despair. Carter called these myths “bankrupt enchantments” and “fraudulent magic” (Carter qtd. in Sage 68). Lieberman noted that these myths not only affected self-concept but beliefs about agency and about what behaviors would be rewarded and what the rewards would be (cited in Haase 3).

### Identity

In *The Briar Rose* Coover introduces us to a multifaceted concept of identity and does so for both male and female characters. He introduces self-doubt; the Prince “doubt[s] his chosenness- ‘Perhaps I am not the one’ (Coover (12) qtd. in Gupta 7).

Coover also explicates the Princess’ struggles with her identity. Repeatedly she asks the fairy “who she is, what she is, as she has no memory” (Gupta 10). Again, however, Coover suggests that the Princess may not be who she appeared at first glance – “more captor than captive, more briar than blossom . . . “ (16). He has the fairy tell her that she is a “still creature, waiting silently for your hapless prey . . . the rose and thorn” (8). Beneath her ostensible helplessness, he sees a predator. Andrea Dworkin’s *Woman Hating* identified norms in tales that depicted women as “wicked, beautiful, and passive” (qtd. in Haase 8).

Later Coover suggests that the Princess sees herself as a victim. She is “organizing her psyche around her pain” (Gupta 10). Her victimization is becoming part of her identity – the “stabbing pain of the spindle prick . . . anchors her and locates a self” (Coover 4 qtd. in Gupta 10). She is “excited by his excitement and *by her own feeling of helplessness*” (23). “She has been erotized toward passivity and it will be very difficult now for her to relinquish the role of the victim” (Gupta 10).

Coover again approaches the issue of identity, specifically the Prince’s need for validation of his desirability, by introducing the affair with a younger woman. “It is only important to him that he recaptures the ability to see himself in this light – ‘I am he who awakens

Beauty” (Coover 41 qtd in Gupta 11). As for the Princess, one outcome offered by Coover is that she perpetually seeking, reenacting the dream of being awakened by an enchanted prince. In Lexia 40 Coover has her “drift ‘through the castle of her childhood’ in search of . . . ‘distraction from her lonely fears . . . of abandonment, of not knowing who she is.’ . . . She is ‘waiting for she knows not what in the name of waiting for her prince to come.’”(Coover 40 qtd. in Gupta 12).

It is significant that in all of the outcomes Coover offers his wreader, the Princess never finds the ability to create a fulfilling life for herself. Had this been an Angela Carter rewrite, one might expect the Princess to jump from her dais, whip in hand, to command subjugation to her needs. The power she does achieve, as a manipulative predator or numbing queen, remains dependent upon others and she continues to turn to others for her definition of herself.

### Gender roles

Coover assigns traditional gender roles to both the Princess and Prince. He is to rescue her and she is to wait. We have the introduction of the male voice of the Prince and thereby the animus with which the woman can identify. The animus is the archetype in a woman’s psyche representing her masculine qualities. But the only roles forecast for her are wife and mother.

### The Passivity/Aggression/Assertion Continuum

A close reading of Coover’s tale reveals occasional feminine agency as opposed to passivity. The Princess pricks her finger when she is “exploring.” The good fairy and the old crone cast spells with powerful effects (a 100 year sleep, the ability to awaken). In the Grimm and Perrault versions the Princess is passive until the time she is awakened by the Prince. But Coover’s Prince *wants* the Princess to act – “No! he cries. Don’t just lie there! Get up! Come help!” (21). This suggests a change in male expectations of female gender role in a relationship as well as a change in the norm about voicing male vulnerability. Also, Coover interjects change into the male gender role. The Prince is at times the savior and at times, the lacerated victim, once even asking the Princess for help.

The Princess vacillates between her passivity and rage, helplessness and control – but not assertiveness. Coover makes a muted attempt to introduce some female agency in her introspection and planning and within the area of sexuality. He has the Princess “voyeuristically observe her power to excite them” [various Princes], meaning that there is some manipulative power in her lying still, waiting, pretending to be asleep (Gupta 4). Also, she eventually acts to take multiple lovers. However, this is mentioned only in passing, in sharp contrast to multiple, detailed scenes of sexual violation during which she is passive.

Coover introduces multiple possible outcomes and the literary device of hypertext mirrors these choices. “He *may* eventually find the princess, he *may* be amazed at her beauty, he *may* kiss her, she *may* awaken along with all others in the castle, they *may* marry, they *may* live “happily ever after,” . . . or *not*” (Gupta 2). Coover’s introduction of choice into the narrative is significant feminist element as it brings about an awareness that the characters may or may not choose to live out the script written for them.

### Relationships

Coover’s description of the relationship between the Prince and Princess is complex and psychologically sophisticated. Coover enables us to hear the complexity through the multivocality in the Prince and Princess “engaged in an internal battle of conflicting needs and desires” within themselves and between each other (Gupta 5). Here his male authorship provides a unique window into the intrapsychic processes of the Prince. He describes that process that may occur in a relationship when one loses him/herself in meeting the needs of another. His Prince does not respect his own needs and boundaries. He has been wounded, “tricked, seduced, managed, and coerced into being what she [the Princess] thinks she needs . . .” (Gupta 9). Surprisingly he is equally insightful in elaborating the Princess’ response to their relationship. She, too, loses her way. She “depart[s] . . . to a scatter of confused intentions;” there is a “scurry of vermin in the rubble of her remote defenses” (2) (Coover qtd. in Gupta 10). She also is

searching for something “to make her whole again” (2) (Coover qtd. in Gupta 10). She is preoccupied with the reflection of herself in his eyes because in “the bewitching power of desire . . . she is beautiful . . .” (Coover 5). She . . . “uses him to reflect a more desirable self than she can currently locate within herself” (Gupta 10).

Also, Coover explores in depth several potential outcomes for the relationship other than the traditional “happily ever after” marriage. Each of the outcomes apprises us of realistic possibilities/challenges in relationships. One outcome is that they share an underwhelming kiss, But he ““realizes that he is ‘hopelessly enmeshed’ . . . and ‘consoles himself with the thought of what might have been’” (Coover 24 qtd. in Gupta 8). A second outcome is that the Prince stops himself from going in by his caring for her, fearing that he will doom her to a life of ordinariness. A third outcome is that they do marry and proceed to live out what can only be described as a numbing existence. Now as the King he says, “It’s never quite like you imagine it” and she has to hold her head up lest her heavy crown drag her head into her food (Coover 37).

### Sexuality

Coover’s tale contains scenes of blatant sexuality, although darkened by their exploitation and violence. “She is raped by a band of drunken peasants (15), taken by her father’s household knights, taken by a wild bear who is married and whose wife tries to bite her (19), abandoned by one prince who leaves the room with onlookers (23), aroused by a monkey who fondles and paws her while “her parents and others laugh uproariously” (25) (Coover qtd. in Gupta 3). She is even said to have “been visited by her own father, couched speculatively between her thighs, . . . as, with velvety thrusts, he searches out the spindle” (7) (Coover qtd. in Gupta 6). It is worth noting here that almost every scene regarding sexuality has violent overtones. Susan Brownmiller alleged that fairy tales train women to be rape victims (cited in Haase 3) and these scenes prove Maria Tatar’s assertions of the gender-based themes of humiliation and loss of power in fairy tales (cited in Sellers 9). One wonders whether a female author might include a wider

repertoire of sexual experiences – scenes of tenderness, of play, of seduction or other acts involving agency on the part of the Princess.

### Conclusion

The ending chosen by the wreader in this tale determines his/her assessment of the degree of liberation experienced by the Prince and Princess. This author contends that Coover's rewrite, while complex and psychologically sophisticated, reveals characters who stop short of the self-actualization and agency envisioned by feminists. The Prince and Princess do have choices, but they are not entirely willing to embrace them and to accept the consequences for them, whatever they may be. Neither is able to maintain a stance of agency and both relapse into compromise rather than work towards self-actualization with or independent of each other. However, both develop awareness of their disowned parts, struggle to face and embrace them, contemplate new behaviors, and risk change. The tale is a realistic portrayal of the process and the deep psychic work that must be undertaken to achieve this feminist recovery of self.

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