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Snow White's Apple: femininity, fine art and other readings.

Since the time of ancient Greece, the apple has come to represent femininity, more specifically, female sexuality. From the biblical role of the apple (or fruit) in the story of Eve, the mythical prize of the apple in the judgement of Paris, the distracting of Atalanta by the throwing of fruits, and the marriage proposal in the myth of Acontius and Cydippe, the apple features as an emblem of love, heterosexual union, temptation, beauty, and fundamentally female sexuality and fertility. Its role is not reserved only for use in myth. It also has a weighty history in folklore: again in a proposal of marriage, as a prophesier of heterosexual union, as the simple indicator of love. Bruno Bettelheim, psychoanalyst of the literary fairy tale states *“In *Snow White* mother and daughter share the apple. That which is symbolised by the apple in *Snow White* is something mother and daughter have in common which runs even deeper than their jealousy of each other – their mature sexual desires”*.¹ From a psychoanalytical perspective Bettelheim identifies female sexuality as symbolised as and apple; the fruit to be consumed can also be interpreted to stand for the consuming of women, a relatively common trope in fairy tales. Therefore the apple as a food historically connected to womanhood and sexuality, will be the medium by which the construction and performance of femininity, its relation to food and its place in fairy tales, will be explored in this paper.



In what follows, I intend to examine the role of food or eating in fairy tales as a shaper and measure of femininity, and how, in the contemporary visual representation of these tales, a strand of resistance can be identified. The resistance I refer to is against a traditional reading of femininity and what that means in terms of gender performance. In the works I address, food or eating is used to provide a tool to instigate an alternative reading of femininity, a reading that resists traditional concepts of conventional gender

appropriate behaviour. Historical illustrations will be interrogated to reveal a reading of food in relation to feminine qualities and gendered assumptions, and contemporary representations will be examined that shift the emphasis from the traditionally conventional to the resistant and offer alternative and far more culturally pertinent concerns related to constructions of femininity.

In fairy tales femininity has long been measured by a series of apparently innate qualities. These qualities confer an index of value on the beholder within the fairy tale narrative, and, I would argue, in culture more broadly. The fairy tale is both repository and conveyer of societal values. As a result of this, coupled with the overriding popularity of those tales featuring the innocent persecuted heroine propagated by Disney amongst others, the internalisation of these standards of feminine behaviour is extremely effective in educating girls into very specific and traditionally gendered performances. In short, the fairy tale, particularly in its moving image incarnation is educating swathes of girls (and boys' perceptions of girls) into unrealistic expectations of who and how to be in the twenty-first century. According to traditional fairy tale standards of ideal femininity girls must be beautiful, innocent, passive and good in order to be rewarded (after their survival of various tribulations) with husband (ideally a prince), riches, and reinstatement to their rightful position (generally a princess). A heterosexual vibe is implicit within these standards as is whiteness and middle-class, if not aristocratic, bearing. The expectation, once true love has saved the day, is maternal efficacy, and with that, ideal femininity can be achieved (although the latter is problematic as sexual innocence and maternity are mutually exclusive for most with the exception of the Madonna).

Many fairy tales are premised on the supply or lack of food; *Jack and the Beanstalk* and the *Princess and the Pea* both feature food as a signal to social ascendancy or recognition of social status; *Rapunzel* is premised on the pregnant mother's craving for rapunzel, a type of lettuce; the expectant father, in an act of desperation, swaps the unborn child for a supply of the foodstuff from the witch's garden. In *Cinderella*, a pumpkin provides the mode of transport to the ball. In twentieth-century re-tellings of the tale the pumpkin magically transforms into a coach that will carry the protagonist to the ball, a fairy godmother is all that it takes. However, Gustave Doré's 1867 illustration Charles Perrault's tale of 1697 shows a grandmother figure replete with pince-nez and mop cap demonstrating

to Cinderella how to hollow out a pumpkin that it might be made into a carriage. The onus of this illustration is most definitely on the teaching of domestic kitchen skills rather than of preening oneself to perfection. At this time, Cinderella was being encouraged to become self-reliant and efficient in terms of domestic skills, skills likely to win her a husband. The preparation of food and the implicit association with housekeeping communicates the qualities and skills deemed feminine at this time.



Fig.1 Gustave Dore Illustration for Cinderella 1867

The association of femininity and food has developed, in the contemporary period beyond the domestic arts of housekeeping and the nurturing qualities of motherhood. Food has come to define women, and their relationship with food further defines their femininity. Over- and under-eating in women is a preoccupation for the modernised world in terms of physical and mental health, the economy and fashion capitalism, as well as the ideology of beauty. The female can be seen as both consumer and consumed. From a feminist perspective this convention of femininity is problematic. As provider and consumer of food woman is perpetually identified as belonging in the domestic sphere, as the object consumed she becomes sexual currency; both of these positions rely on the woman successfully performing a set of feminine ideals. In sum, the woman has little control over her own identity so governed is it by specific and patriarchal expectations of femininity.

Gustave Doré's Victorian illustration of *Cinderella*, her fairy godmother and the pumpkin is representative of food, femininity and the domestic sphere as defining a woman's role. However, in light of the social conditions that governed expressions of

gender at that time, Doré's fairy godmother elucidating on the skills of running a household and managing one's fate confers a degree of autonomy on the woman of the house and is almost liberated in comparison to one reading of the 2011 work of Adrien Broom. Taking as a starting point the tale of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, Broom devises a series of narrative images that depict Goldilocks invading the home of the bears. In this work she depicts the episode of the broken chair. The work is ostensibly more of a fashion shoot as Goldilocks sits immaculately dressed and made-up like a marionette whose strings have been cut.



Fig. 2 Adrien Broom *Goldilocks and a Broken Chair* c2011

Behind her the smallest chair is broken and she is surrounded by cakes and tasty morsels. The presence of the cakes and fashion styling distracts the viewer from identifying the tale immediately. It is difficult to read Broom's intentions with this work. In one reading she places Goldilocks on the same level as the cakes, both are flawless, passive and waiting to be consumed. However, that same reading can serve to expose the artifice of such conditions of ideal femininity. By exaggerating the construct of the image, equating women with food, Broom also brings into focus the absurdity of traditional notions of such ideals. Here, Goldilocks becomes the embodiment of beauty and passivity, an inanimate offering to be consumed. However, she is not completely inanimate. By returning the gaze of the viewer Goldilocks retains some individuality and autonomy. This is both an inviting and challenging look that at once resists her objectification whilst also being complicit in the consuming of the image.

The recent move by visual artists to resist traditional and conventional readings of femininity in fairy tales is becoming more common place, see Princess Fiona in the *Shrek* films and Queen Elsa rejects her position and exiles herself in favour of embracing her icy solitary freedom in Disney's film *Frozen*. The autonomous and active female protagonist is gaining more strength indicating a broader cultural acceptance of a shift in the norms of femininity. These contemporary heroines are finding a new sisterhood with other fairy tale heroines that have not been adopted in to the popular collective consciousness, such as Donkeyskin (a princess who exiled herself, disguised in a donkey's pelt, rather than marry her father). These women have taken control of their own fate.

In response to the *Snow White* narrative, London-based, Portuguese contemporary artist Paula Rego re-presents the popular fairy tale as capturing all the themes of the literary fairy tale: innocence, temptation, knowledge, and sexuality. Here Rego examines the psycho-sexual maturation of the female protagonist. In *Snow White Swallows the Poisoned Apple* (1995), the death scene is played out to its murderous conclusion. Imaged upside down and clutching her throat and skirt, Snow White confuses our usual knowledge of her as dainty, pretty and pure. Snow White is dressed in a costume made familiar through Disney's 1937 filmic interpretation of the Grimm's fairy tale, yet her extreme posturing does not match the common accounts relating the final (albeit simulated) death of the heroine. This scene draws from the fourth attempt made on Snow White's life by her stepmother—the gift of the poisoned apple, which induces death. For the Grimms, Snow White merely falls to the floor in a death-like state; for Rego, an ambiguous set of readings are introduced. Snow White can be seen falling from the couch clutching her skirt in modesty, a reading confirmed by Rego who states that “even when they fall, they cover their knickers so they don't show their bums. She's more worried about showing herself than having swallowed the apple and choking.”²

Another reading suggests that she clutches her skirt and throat in a physical reaction of pain experienced from the effects of the poison, or, alternatively, from a more adult and sexual reading: “the strangulating ecstasy of orgasm.”³ Drawing on Freud's theory of female sexuality, this image subscribes to his account of the female child exploring her own sexuality via masturbation. For Freud, this is an active phase of female psycho-sexual maturation. Rego explores this aspect of auto-eroticism in this work in order to assert Snow White's physical independence of mother and father.⁴



Fig. 3 Paula Rego *Snow White Swallows the Poisoned Apple* 1995

Here, Snow White is credible, far removed from the pristine presentation of Disney's 1937 interpretation. Rego has chosen to depict the moment of death; Snow White is contorted, fighting against the workings of the treacherous poisoned apple. The scene is, in terms of fairy tales, historically dramatic. Rego has exploited a number of pictorial devices such as the closely cropped frame, the dishevelled arrangement, the inversion of the reclining female figure, thus emphasising the horror and destruction of the allegedly final act of Snow White's life. As the cushions and coverings fall from the couch, Snow White falls from life into death. At the same time, she also falls from grace, her origins as princess denied through the ill-kempt surroundings and undignified pose.

Violence is intrinsic to this work, as it is to the fairy tale written by the Brothers Grimm. The intensely worked pastel surfaces suggest a tactility that contributes to the passion and agony depicted. Snow White's end is convincing. The sexual undercurrents to this piece, drawn from the literary tale, coexist with the violence. The red ribbon has fallen from her hair as a result of her writhing contortions; perhaps the lost ribbon references a loss of innocence: the loss of blood either through menstruation or the breaking of the hymen, and more broadly, the symbolic casting off of restraint and conformity as represented in clichéd media representations of women discarding spectacles and loosening their hair as a sign of their sexual availability. Snow White's pose holds the viewer in a

similar tension, unsure of the nature of violence and sexuality depicted (which is, of course, recalled from the Grimm tale).

Snow White tells a tale of power and weakness (this can be read as the trait of passivity in fairy tale terms), the protagonist is powerless in contrast to the stepmother and, to a certain extent, the prince who claims her. Food renders her thus, on consuming the apple she succumbs to a deathlike state until a prince can revive her by either a jostle of the coffin that dislodges the fruit from her throat, or by true love's first kiss (and by this we can read the consummation of a relationship, an altogether *other* kind of consuming). It is this kind of consuming that allegedly takes place in the tale of *Little Red Riding Hood*. Once more the innocent and obedient heroine is powerless and in the end game consumed by the wolf.



Fig. 4 Walter Crane *Little Red Riding Hood* 1875

As cautionary tales go, this tale crystallises the moral and behavioural expectations of femininity, and highlights the knife edge that separates the virgin and the fallen woman. *Little Red Riding Hood* is one of the most popular and critically analysed tales in terms of constructions of femininity and female sexuality. In contrast to her innocent cousin Snow White, Little Red Riding Hood has received accusations of being a temptress and that the tale is one of sexual maturation (by force) for the girl, her encounter with the wolf in the woods and his subsequent consuming of her stands for her transition to adulthood via a sexual encounter. Susan Brownmiller, in her book *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975), describes *Little Red Riding Hood* as "a parable of rape".⁵ The wolf's engagement of the girl in the woods to the rendezvous at her grandmother's house and the subsequent

consuming of the girl can be read as a process of sexual maturation, and the manner in which the tale has been illustrated over the centuries implies Little Red Riding Hood's willing participation. Brownmiller identifies three aspects about the male myths of rape: "(1) they tend to make the women willing participants in their own defeat; (2) they obscure the true nature of rape by implying that women *want* to be raped; (3) they assert the supreme rightness of male power either as offender or protector."⁶

Brownmiller's observations supplemented by an analysis of *Little Red Riding Hood* illustrations historically, offer a convincing reading of the popular fairy tale; a reading that places the girl in a position of weakness in relation to the male wolf/sex, and a reading that has been perpetuated and overtly sexualised in the twentieth century. However, resistance to this reading of the tale can be found in contemporary visualisations. The trope of food in terms of Little Red Riding Hood as foodstuff runs through the plot of the film *Hard Candy*



Fig 4. *Hard Candy* Promotional film poster 2005

and is conveyed visually through the promotional poster. The 2005 film takes *Little Red Riding Hood* as an originating narrative but quickly undermines our expectations of the traditional plot. Hayley, as the Little Red Riding Hood character is a street savvy androgynous hoodie who uses herself as bait to entrap and torture Jeff, a putative paedophile and murderer. As the narrative plays out it is unclear which character is predator and which prey, an uncertainty that is echoed in the poster.

In this image Hayley stands with her red hood up, her back to the viewer and bag over her shoulder. She stands in a bear trap. In this image one can read her as prey, already

in the jaws of the wolf. An alternative reading is more in keeping with the film's plot where she is bait used to capture a wolf. She is at once in a position of vulnerability and power. In this image the traditional index of femininity is undermined and reconstructed as an active, aggressive, morally ambiguous figure of androgynous appearance. Beauty, innocence, goodness and passivity are subverted in this character. Hayley initially plays the innocent victim, allowing Jeff to take her to his home; once there, however, she turns the tables on him and so follows a cat and mouse narrative with a dark and ambiguous conclusion.

Morality and moral ambiguity are driving undercurrents of this film that successfully throws off the victimhood of the innocent persecuted heroine. By placing herself as bait Hayley references her ancestry but rather than giving herself over for the male aggressor to consume, she, instead, entraps him, toys with him and reduces him to the position of victim.

As a rich fairy tale narrative, *Little Red Riding Hood* is also dealt with by Canadian photographic artist Dina Goldstein. In her 2008 work *Red*, she deals with more contemporary concerns that revolve around over-eating and the relationship of this to femininity. Here Little Red Riding Hood is imaged walking through the woods eating the contents of the basket intended for her grandmother. It is clear that she has been eating the food for some time; no longer is she a dainty little girl but an overweight adolescent. Taken from the *Fallen Princesses* series, this image suggests an alternative to the popular narrative and resists the plot whereby the girl becomes the food. Goldstein, through the *Fallen Princesses* works, explores what might have been the fate of popular fairy tale heroines had they not received their happy ending. In her rendering of *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Red* resists (whether by design or otherwise) the trappings of traditional femininity – of obedience, beauty and passivity.



Fig 5. Dina Goldstein *Red*, from the *Fallen Princesses* series 2007

This work deals with complex and troubling issues concerning both traditional and contemporary demands of ideal femininity, Red is tempted and succumbs, the food fulfils a lack however also serves to exaggerate that lack – the more she eats the further she moves away from traditional feminine constructs of beauty, and the more difficult it becomes to return to those ideals. Here the passivity and innocence of the traditional fairy tale heroine has multiple possible re-readings and all concomitant on societal and cultural issues such as anxiety, boredom, apathy, peer pressure, atrophy, complacency and consumerism; the physical response of this disquiet is here manifest in eating. There is no happy ending for Red, and Goldstein's work is a timely reminder that happy endings are the stuff of fantasy; that said and once realised, the acceptance of the not so happy ending opens the possibility of a better understanding of femininity in its myriad incarnations.

Resistance. Food in fairy tales is an ever-present trope, the lack of it or the overflowing of it communicates an index of wealth, provision of food confirms domesticity, food can seal a fate as in the tale of *Rapunzel*, food can act as lure to entrap as in *Hansel and Gretel*, and the apple, as I have illustrated can stand for sexuality, and by extension, femininity. Food, of course, is central to human existence and so it makes sense for it to have such a prominent role in fairy tales that were written in times when food was scarce and unequally distributed. Nowadays, food represents something different. Implications of wealth and poverty remain, but different social discourses are attendant on the subject. My concern with this paper was to address how food or eating has become a vehicle to explore the possibility of alternative femininities. Fairy tale values of innocence, passivity, beauty and good moral standing as representative of ideal femininity are no longer relevant to the same degree. Today, women are active, intelligent, autonomous individuals with a measure of morality that, at best, can be described as in flux. The fairy tale innocent persecuted heroines of old have been recast in the artworks addressed here as self-sufficient and autonomous heroines. Their resistance lies in their relationship to food. Autoeroticism factors out the necessity of the heterosexual matrix, the many seeded fruit as a symbol of fertility is taken for women alone; in Rego's work Snow White takes the apple and fulfils her own sexual maturation, a contemporary Eve – no need of Adam or the serpent. Little Red Riding Hood side-steps her fate as a consumable and turns the tables on the wolf. Recognising her own status as food she lures him just as her morally ambiguous

predecessors did. Goldilocks is aware of her position as foodstuff, but returns our gaze in recognition of the absurdity of it; and Goldstein's *Red* opts out, for good or ill, of ideal femininity based on physical appearance. These heroines resist traditional readings of femininity

¹ Bettelheim, B. (1975) *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. Hammersmith: Penguin Books.

² Simon Hattenstone, "'You Punish People With Drawings'" *The Guardian Weekend Supplement* 22 August 2009: 28.

³ Ruth Rosengarten, "Home Truths: The Work of Paula Rego," in *Paula Rego* (London: Tate Gallery, 1997), 117. Orgasm seems a likely narrative for this image due to Snow White's raised skirt, bare legs and contorted pose.

⁴ Freud, 315-6.

⁵ Zipes, J. (1986) *Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England*. London, Routledge. p232

⁶ *Ibid.*